LIEUTENANT TIGHTASS

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Searching for the Fleet, the next book in Kristine Kathryn Rusch's Diving series, will be released in September by WMG Publishing and Audible. In addition to her appearances in **Asimov's** this year, the author's work has been published in **Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Fiction River, Pulphouse,** and various nonfiction venues. Kris blogs every Thursday on business matters and puts up a free short story every Monday on her website, **www.kriswrites.com.** A Fleet character we've come to know well is introduced to us in . . .

LIEUTENANT TIGHTASS

1

Overdue by fifteen hours. Too long, really. The Voimakas was in serious trouble. A ship lost in foldspace almost never came back, especially after the twenty-four hour window.

Lieutenant Jonathan "Coop" Cooper felt the urgency, but he was beginning to think no one else on the *Arama* did. Seven others worked on the *Arama's* bridge this afternoon, but none of them did their work with any kind of haste. They had even refused Coop's request to notify the captain of their new mission.

"Standard procedure," Lieutenant Leontyne Heyek said after Coop made his request. "We execute new orders and inform the captain when she returns to the bridge."

Which, he thought, was exactly backward of the way things ran in the Fleet. But he hadn't served on a foldspace search vessel before. He had been taught that time was of the essence in a foldspace grid search, so responding to commands from headquarters immediately made sense to him.

What didn't make sense was no one on the bridge crew wanted to let the captain know when the new orders arrived.

The *Arama* would meet four other foldspace search vessels at the exact point where the *Voimakas,* the ship they would be searching for, had entered foldspace. The search would commence according to procedures developed less than ten years ago.

Because the foldspace search program was so new, Coop had expected the *Arama* to be a much more sophisticated vessel, maybe something like the search-and-rescue

ships he had worked on shortly after his graduation from officer training.

Instead, this ship was smaller than he had expected, and had a counterintuitive design that bothered him every time he reported for duty.

The bridge was circular, and the floor slanted downward. The command officers worked in the bottom of the circle, with their subordinates at stations on each level above.

There were no portals on this bridge, and the wall of screens that he had thought standard to all Fleet ships, no matter the size, did not exist here. Instead the circular walls of this bridge were covered with equipment, much of it lashed down. There were no lockers on this bridge either, no real storage.

His first thought when he had received his tour of the *Arama* was that the bridge was the most dangerous space on the ship. If something went awry and loosened all that equipment, the bridge crew would be in danger of injury just from flying debris.

Had he been running this ship—and of course he wasn't—he would have requested a bridge redesign at the next sector base stop. The designers there wouldn't have been able to put in portals because this bridge was in the exact center of the *Arama,* but the designers would have been able to build better storage, and that alone would have made him more comfortable here.

Although he doubted anything could have made him completely comfortable here.

Usually he worked at the back of the bridge near the entrance, but this afternoon, he stood in the bridge's exact center, six screens floating around him. He had set them up like a barrier, even though it was an ineffective barrier at best. He could see the other seven crew members only because they stood higher than he did. They could see him as well, but they couldn't see what was on the screens he was monitoring.

He was capturing all the information coming from headquarters, from other ships that had served in the area near the *Voimakas,* and the last information from the *Voimakas* itself. He was trying to reconstruct the *Voimakas's* last hour or so.

Heyek had told him that a reconstruction was a waste of time: the *Arama* had never found a ship in foldspace because of a reconstruction. He would have listened to her had the *Arama* already been onsite and ready to start the search—time was of the essence, after all—but the *Arama* had to get to the location, and while they were speeding toward those coordinates, he saw no harm in following procedure.

Or rather, he felt compelled to follow procedure.

He was beginning to think he was the only one here who was.

He stood slightly to the right of the tattered captain's chair. The *Arama's* captain, Debbie Nisen, refused to let the chair be replaced or recovered, claiming that it fit her the way that it was. The cushions did retain the shape of her body, because she wouldn't allow anyone to change them out.

Nor did she allow anyone else to sit in that chair. Not even someone who had to command the *Arama* when she wasn't on the bridge. It made for an awkward work environment. Coop had had the comm more than once since he arrived, and each time, he had stood behind the chair and worked the controls on its arms while standing up.

He hadn't wanted to sit in the thing—he thought he detected the faint smell of ancient sweat and unwashed bodies—but he did wish that Captain Nisen followed at least some of the procedures mandated by headquarters. Especially the ones concerning bridge and day-to-day operations.

Someone, probably Coop's predecessor, had built a small console to the right of the captain's chair. Coop knew that a crew member had built that console because it didn't conform to modern regulations. It had more flaws than anything he had ever worked on.

Rather like the *Arama*.

He didn't complain, though. He had learned at previous postings to remain silent

about the different ways that captains ran their ships. As his advisor on the officer training track had told him more than once, Coop would be learning from example—and sometimes those examples weren't pretty.

The *Arama* wasn't pretty at all. It didn't even feel like a Fleet ship, not in design and certainly not in crew behavior. The crew had a startling lack of discipline, which made him as (or maybe more) uncomfortable than the bridge's strange design.

He was disciplined, and focused, which was why he stood down here now, coordinating all of the information. Lieutenant Heyek, who was nominally in charge this afternoon, hadn't even assigned him the work; she had simply assumed he would do it.

Or perhaps she assumed he would do something else, and the fact that he hadn't intuited what that something else was would get him a reprimand on the record.

He didn't know, and at the moment, he didn't care. His focus was on the rescue of the *Voimakas.* The *Arama* had failed to rescue the last nine ships it had gone after in foldspace, something he had learned before he came here.

He had been told that it was pretty common to fail at foldspace search and rescue. One of his instructors had told him that foldspace search and rescue was a fool's mission, but that someone important in Command Operations had lost family to foldspace and felt the new procedures were worth the investment in time, ships, and personnel.

Another former instructor had smiled when she learned that Coop was joining the crew of the *Arama. Someone thinks you need to learn humility,* she had said with a chuckle.

Maybe Coop needed to learn humility or maybe the crew of the *Arama* needed to remember the importance of procedure. Or maybe it was just a random assignment. Those happened as well.

All that really mattered was that Coop was the new guy, automatically transferred because he had done so well on his previous assignment. When he arrived on the *Arama,* he learned that he had supplanted a popular officer who had been transferred as well, which would have made the crew irritated at him no matter what, but Captain Nisen had compounded his unpopularity right from the start.

She had announced that Coop was on a captain's trajectory and wouldn't be with the ship that long. Her introduction to the officer corps on the *Arama* made him sound like a grasping opportunist, rather than a man who wanted to work and learn how to command.

Coop hadn't understood why she had done that to him on the very first day. She had to know that the introduction would hurt his chances of working well with the crew. But she hadn't seemed to care about crew relations.

When he had asked her why she had informed the crew about his career trajectory in his introduction, trying as hard as he could to keep his tone neutral, she had squinted up at him, and said, *Better they know now you're a short-timer,* and then had walked away.

Her response had startled him. He had no idea if he was a short-timer or not. Officers on his career path often served for years on the same vessel. Besides, his projected tenure on this vessel shouldn't have mattered. Crews were supposed to work together whether they knew each other well or not.

For a week or two, he wondered if the captain had made that introduction in that manner because he was married, and she was warning off anyone interested in some kind of hook-up. He'd had captains do that before when he'd come onboard a ship, but usually during leisure hours, and always with a joking tone.

He would have understood that admonition; some married officers had trouble maintaining their vows after months (or years) apart from their spouses.

But Coop followed regulation and procedure assiduously, and that meant with his marriage as well. He and Mae had discussed their continual separations before they

decided to marry, debating whether the marriage was necessary while they were both building their careers. Ultimately, they decided it was. The Fleet gave preferences to spouses who indicated the desire to start a family. If those spouses could share a ship or a mission, then they would. Mae was a linguist, and once Coop became captain, he could request her presence on any ship he commanded.

He missed her more than he wanted to contemplate, particularly while he was on this ship. He couldn't complain about his treatment here when he contacted her; he knew that there was a distinct possibility that his communications were monitored. He figured they could talk freely when they got together on leave.

He wished he had leave now. He didn't want to perform another foldspace grid search. The first two he had participated in had been cleanup efforts, mapping a part of foldspace with no real hope of finding the missing vessels. He had no idea if this mission would be the same, but given Heyek's lack of interest in following procedure, he had a hunch she believed that the *Voimakas* was already lost.

That defeatist attitude was the thing he hated the most about serving on the *Arama*. They were supposed to be a search-and-rescue vehicle. Instead, they were more of a cover-your-ass vehicle—at least that was how it seemed to him. Which was why he was personally reviewing every bit of information on the *Voimakas* that he could find.

The *Voimakas* was a new DV-class vessel with an upgraded *anacapa* drive. The *anacapa* drive was what enabled the Fleet to enter foldspace. Without the *anacapa* drive, the Fleet would not be able to travel the long distances that kept it moving forever forward.

Some parts of the Fleet trailed light-years behind the rest of the Fleet. Those trailing ships would catch up, using the drives to create a fold in space. During officer training, one of Coop's instructors on *anacapa* usage had actually taken a blanket, folded it kitty-corner, touching two opposite edges together.

Think of that when you think of traveling through foldspace, he had said. Then he had continued to fold the blanket, showing that sometimes a vessel had to make many trips into and out of foldspace to get to the proper part of the Universe.

Foldspace science instructors thought that example silly, and sometimes said so. But that was the image Coop kept in his head, particularly when the instructors in foldspace science couldn't say exactly what foldspace was. Was it an actual fold in space? An interdimensional way to travel? Or another part of the universe that the *anacapa* drive somehow sent the ships to for a brief moment, before returning them to specified coordinates?

He had thought of it all as theory until he had joined the crew of the *Arama*. At that moment, foldspace ceased to be a tool that a starship sometimes used to travel long distances, and became an actual place where ships disappeared, never to be seen again.

Like the *Voimakas.* It was one of three DV-class vessels assigned to a new sector. They were to travel to that new sector to search for the best location for a sector base.

The *Voimakas* went into foldspace first. The other two ships followed. When they arrived in the new sector, they didn't see the *Voimakas.* It should have arrived before them.

But foldspace could be tricky. A minute in foldspace might actually be an hour in what the Fleet called "real space." It wasn't unusual for three ships to go into foldspace at roughly the same time and arrive at the new coordinates half an hour apart.

The other two ships waited the requisite hour. Then two. And after that, they had to contact the Fleet to let them know that the *Voimakas* might be trapped in foldspace.

At that point, the Fleet sent another ship to the coordinates where the *Voimakas* had gone into foldspace. Sometimes ships rebounded out of foldspace, unable to travel the distance across the fold.

But the *Voimakas* wasn't there either. It didn't respond to hails. Seven hours in, the Fleet declared the *Voimakas* missing. If the Fleet waited longer than that to declare a ship missing, the Fleet would miss the best rescue window.

That early declaration meant that the missing ships might appear just as the investigation got started. That had happened on Coop's first mission with the *Arama.* The so-called missing ship hadn't been missing at all. It had arrived at the coordinates on the other side of the sector ten hours after the ship had entered foldspace.

When the news of the ship's appearance hit, Kyle Rettig, one of the engineers who had been manning the bridge alongside Coop, had leaned over to him and said, *Get used to this. We get sent back all the time. Sometimes I think all we do is crisscross the sector on made-up assignments.*

Coop hadn't known how to respond, so he hadn't. But he hadn't forgotten it. He had no idea if Rettig had been goading him or had been simply being kind, and Coop had no way to find out.

But so far, Coop's experience on the *Arama* had been arriving at coordinates, doing a grid search inside foldspace, and then giving up much too early, declaring the ship lost.

This time he was determined that the *Arama* wouldn't lose the *Voimakas.* If the ship still existed, the *Arama* would find it.

The bridge doors hissed open, and Captain Nisen entered. She was a short square woman with spiky blond hair and a muscular frame. Her black and gray uniform was rumpled as if she had slept in it, or stored it in a ball at the foot of her bed. Her boots were dull and stained.

She certainly wasn't setting an example for her crew—or rather, she was setting the wrong kind of example. Coop only gave her a quick glance, because if he looked longer, his disapproving expression would become obvious.

"Brief me," she said to Heyek as she passed.

Heyek gave a succinct timeline of the notification of the missing *Voimakas,* and then let Nisen know they were less than thirty minutes from the coordinates where the ship was last seen.

"And what's the new guy doing?" Nisen asked, as if Coop wasn't there—or couldn't hear her.

"He seems to think we should review all the information the Fleet sent," Heyek said. "As if the four other ships aren't doing the same thing."

Maybe they're blowing off procedure too, Coop wanted to say but didn't. *Maybe your laziness in relying on your colleagues is what ensured that the other ships we searched for never got found.*

He bit the inside of his lower lip so that he wouldn't speak up. His mouth tasted faintly of blood. He had bitten down too hard.

"Rookie moves," Nisen said with a laugh. "But we'll put it in the report anyway. The Fleet'll think we actually followed procedure for once in our lives."

Coop filtered the information into one screen, so that he had an accurate map of the *Voimakas's* last journey. He had the coordinates where the ship entered foldspace down to the most precise measurement possible.

Nisen tripped over nothing as she reached the command circle, grabbing the edge of her chair and chuckling to herself. The sour smell of last night's brandy mixed with old sweat rose off her like a cloud.

Coop kept his head down and started breathing through his mouth, making a mental note of the time. He would write her behavior into a mission report, which he would file when the *Arama* reached the next sector base.

He would report that Nisen was still drunk from the night before. The senior staff had found a table in the *Arama's* only bar, grabbed two bottles of whiskey and

proceeded to drink hard. When Nisen arrived, she had grabbed a bottle of brandy from the stash under one of the counters and drank it all herself.

Coop had sat at the edge of the group, nursing a single glass of whiskey while the rest of the senior staff polished off the bottles. Heyek hadn't gotten drunk, as far as he could tell, but Nisen had become embarrassing. She grew louder with each glass, laughing so hard that at one point Coop thought she was going to laugh herself sick.

She had staggered out of the bar around midnight, taking a second bottle of brandy with her back to the captain's quarters.

He must have had a disapproving expression on his face as he watched her go, because Heyek had said, "We drink here, Cooper. Nothing in regulations prevents it. So stop being so damned straitlaced and join the party."

After that, Coop hadn't been able to leave. He stayed for a half hour before he felt comfortable enough to slip away. He hadn't even finished his first glass of whiskey, let alone the five or six the rest of the senior staff had downed.

He had gotten to his quarters, a tiny single room with a bed that folded out of the wall, and had laid awake for nearly an hour, wondering what he had gotten himself into. He had seen the crew drink before, but he hadn't paid attention to the amount until last night.

And he hadn't liked what he saw.

"How you doing, Lieutenant Tightass?" Nisen asked him as she flopped into the captain's chair.

Coop didn't acknowledge her at all. He wasn't going to start answering to insults, because if he did, the name would stick, not just on this ship, but on future assignments as well.

"Underwear's too tight for the second day in a row," she muttered, leaning back in the ruined chair. "We need to get you one size up, Lieutenant Tightass. The pressure on your balls is making you rigid everywhere."

He tapped one of the screens, working hard to concentrate on the numbers before him.

She chuckled. "Okay," she said, "probably not *everywhere. . . .*"

He kept his head bent downward, and closed his eyes for a brief second, hoping no one else could see his response. He had to learn how to train his face to remain impassive while his emotions whipsawed inside of him. He usually managed impassive when there was a crisis, but he hadn't quite hit impassive when he was feeling humiliated.

"Good God, Lieutenant Cooper, you really are a tight-ass," Nisen said. "I always find it suspicious when a man can't laugh at himself."

And I always find it difficult to laugh when someone confuses bullying with humor, he nearly said. He had to bite the inside of his lip again, so that the words wouldn't leave.

"All right," she said in a slightly different tone. "Report to me, Lieutenant Cooper. What are you finding in all your research?"

He raised his head. His gaze met hers. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"I'm finding nothing unusual, sir," he said in his most formal voice.

"Told you it was a waste of time," Heyek said from behind him.

Nisen grinned, then put her hand on the edge of the control arm of the captain's chair.

"I don't agree with Lieutenant Heyek," Coop said. "I don't believe that looking at the data was a waste of time in this instance."

Nisen leaned her head back, then tilted it toward him, clearly surprised. "Even though you found nothing different?"

"Especially because I found nothing different." He lowered the screen between him and her. That single movement made it feel like he had taken a step closer to her

when he hadn't.

"Intriguing, Lieutenant," Nisen said. "You want to explain that logic?"

"I compared the *Voimakas's* actions with her sister ships. The *Voimakas* performed the exact same calculations as the other ships. The *Voimakas* followed procedure to the letter."

"Foldspace is a crapshoot, Lieutenant," Heyek said. "Hasn't anyone told you that?"

Is that why you all drink to excess? he thought but did not say. *Because your job entails entering foldspace dozens of times searching for someone who got lost by entering it once?*

"The only differences are slight." Coop continued as if Heyek hadn't spoken at all. "The other two ships entered foldspace from slightly different grid coordinates. They weren't at the same coordinates at all, nor did they move to those coordinates."

"Close enough, though," said Heyek. Apparently Nisen was letting the lieutenant do her dirty work for her.

This time, Coop looked directly at Heyek. She, at least, didn't look like she had slept in her uniform. It was crisp and clean, just like she was. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly from her face. There was no sign that she had been drinking the night before with Nisen.

"Close enough," he repeated, letting just a hint of sarcasm into his voice. "Apparently, they were not 'close enough,' Lieutenant. They entered foldspace and then exited with no problem at all. The *Voimakas* did not."

Heyek had her arms crossed. She was looking down on him from her perch three rows up. "And you think it was because of the entry point?"

"I am looking for anomalies," he said.

"It's not an anomaly for a ship to enter foldspace from a slightly different coordinate than her sister ships," Heyek said. "That's how we do it when more than one ship enters foldspace at the same time."

"That's right," Coop said, making sure his voice held no irritation at the fact that she had just explained procedure to him as if he were an ensign on his first assignment.

Heyek frowned at him. "We—and the experts back on the *Pasteur*—don't think the *anacapa* drives of the ships interact when they all head to foldspace at the same time. We've run experiments—"

"I know," Coop said, cutting her off. "I've studied them."

"Then you're wasting all of our time," Heyek said.

Coop exhaled through his teeth, making sure there was no sound of irritation.

"Ships vanish into foldspace when no other ship surrounds them," Heyek said, as if she couldn't let it go. "We don't always get close up information from nearby ships. That's a luxury in this case. And it proves nothing."

"I agree," Coop said. "It *proves* nothing. But—"

"But nothing." Heyek glanced at Nisen, and said to her, "I told you, we don't need to do this kind of fussy—"

"Actually, Captain, we do," Coop said.

Nisen raised her eyebrows at him. "You have a theory, Lieutenant Tightass?"

She was trying to shut him up.

"Lieutenant Cooper, sir," he said. "In case you'd forgotten."

Isaak Li, the comm officer just inside Coop's line of sight behind the captain, snickered, and ducked behind a nearby console. Li was a small man, so he could hide easily.

"Lieutenant *Cooper,*" Nisen said. "You have a theory?"

Every word dripped with sarcasm, with a lack of respect that he found breathtaking. If he ever became lucky enough to run his own ship, this kind of treatment would not happen—especially from a superior officer to a subordinate.

"I do, Captain," Coop said. "I think those slightly different coordinates make all of

the difference. The ships are not entering foldspace from the same point. They're entering at different points. Foldspace is tricky, particularly when it comes to time. Perhaps it is just as tricky with its entry points."

"You don't think the experts have been studying that?" Heyek snapped.

Coop gave her a slow, measured look. "I suspect they have," he said. "And I suspect that's why they're always asking us for more information. Have you ever thought that the procedure might not be about *our* search, but about future searches?"

Heyek's eyes narrowed. Two of the bridge officers behind her grinned openly, as if they were pleased that Coop had taken her on.

Nisen hadn't noticed any of that. Instead, she pursed her lips and nodded. "Lieutenant Tightass might have a point," she said.

Coop felt a surge of irritation that he kept off his face. He didn't correct her this time, because correcting her again would show her that she was getting under his skin.

"I don't think they take any of that into account," Heyek said, "any more than they look at the build and design of the ship. Every ship is different, even if it is the same class of vessel as the other ships that didn't get lost. *Anacapa* drives have anomalies, command structures vary—"

"Information is information, Lieutenant," Nisen snapped, "and the scientists probably use all of it. Sometimes we cut too many corners. I think Lieutenant Tightass is right: we shouldn't cut any on these rescues."

Heyek opened her mouth to argue, then seemed to think better of it, and closed her mouth again.

"I want to give some thought to the entry point thing," Nisen said. "Who are we working with at the site?"

"The *Soeker,* the *Traga,* the *Iarrthóir,* and the *Ofuna,"* Li said. He had spoken up quickly as if he wanted a change of subject. Until he snickered at the interchange, Coop hadn't paid a lot of attention to him, thinking him just another of the bridge officers who marched in lockstep with Nisen.

But Li looked over a nearby console at Coop and gave him a thumbs-up so quick that Coop barely had time to register it.

Heyek shot Li a dirty look. "They were close to the coordinates, just like we were," she said, taking over the narrative again. "That's why they were chosen to work with us."

"We'll arrive first," Li said, head down. Coop wondered if Li was smiling. He seemed to be enjoying poking at Heyek.

"We're about ten minutes out," Heyek said.

"Good," Nisen said. "Because I want to look at Lieutenant Tightass's findings." She propelled herself out of her chair as if it had an eject button.

The captain stood just outside Coop's screen barrier, looked at all of them, which were, for her, eye-height, grinned, and said, "Tightass, permission to come aboard."

The phrase sounded vaguely dirty, which she probably intended. It also acknowledged the separation he had built from the rest of the crew. And then there was that nickname again. He was going to be stuck with it, no matter what he did.

"Permission granted, Captain," Coop said as formally as he could. He stepped away from the jury-rigged console so that she could enter his little protected space.

As she did, he bowed ever so slightly.

"Welcome aboard," he said, and set to work.

* * *

2

The math was complicated, but the information it communicated wasn't. The Voimakas entered foldspace one-point-two seconds ahead of the Mandela, one of its sister ships, and two-point-five seconds ahead of the other ship, the Krachtige. The Mandela arrived at the new coordinates seventeen minutes later, the Krachtige five minutes after that. They waited, as per procedure, for the Voimakas, which never arrived.

The *Krachtige* did the first round of investigation, checking to see if the *Voimakas* ended up at a starbase or a sector base. Sometimes, a malfunctioning *anacapa* drive sent a ship back to the place where the drive had last been repaired or replaced.

None of the nearby bases reported anything. Once the Fleet got involved, they double-checked that same information, and did not find the *Voimakas*. Nor was it near any coordinates where it had entered or exited foldspace before.

The one thing none of these reports addressed, the one thing Coop didn't know how to address either, was the fact that sometimes foldspace sent a ship to a different time period. Usually the differences were small—a few hours, maybe a few days. But sometimes they were vast, ten, twenty, thirty years into the future.

If the *Voimakas* ended up a few days in its future, everyone would know soon enough. It would arrive on some future date, and let the entire Fleet know about the return. But if the *Voimakas* ended up years in the future—or, God forbid—in the past, then there was no way to know without a records search.

And records searches in Fleet records were difficult at best. The Fleet didn't keep a lot of information about its past. Only the history ships attached to the various universities even had the capability for such storage, and their storage facilities were haphazard. A few sector bases also kept information—or they were supposed to. Whether or not that information got moved when the sector bases shut down was something no one seemed to know.

After Coop made his small presentation to Nisen, as quietly as he could even though he knew the rest of the bridge listened in, he said, "Let me ask one question. You've done many foldspace grid searches involving multiple ships just like we're going to do here."

Nisen raised her head and looked up at him. She was nearly a foot shorter than he was, something he only noticed at moments like this. Her outsized personality made her seem much taller.

"When ships coordinate pieces of the grid, there's overlap in the map, right?" he asked.

She frowned, then blinked, as if she didn't know how to answer him. Coop found that interesting all by itself.

"Yes." Rettig walked down the aisle from his perch near the exit. He had kept a low profile in the discussions until now. "Usually, there's a lot of overlap."

Rettig was the one person on the bridge crew that Coop liked. He was a wiry man with arms like sticks, the kind that training hard in zero-g often gave an athlete. Coop had no idea what (if anything) Rettig trained for, but Coop suspected it was some kind of intership competition.

"Usually?" Coop asked.

"Sometimes there isn't." Rettig stepped into the same protected space that Coop and Nisen were in, as if it were a separate conference room and he had been invited to join them. "If there is no overlap, we abort the mission."

"That's not protocol," Coop said.

Nisen straightened, as if his words irritated her, but Rettig nodded.

"We developed it," he said. "Or rather, I did, and the captain agreed. What freaks us all out is that the star maps don't coordinate."

Coop looked from him to Nisen. Her entire demeanor had changed. She seemed

larger, stronger, more in control than she had just five minutes before.

"We never find the ship we're looking for if the star maps don't coordinate," she said softly.

"The ship you're looking for," Coop repeated. "You find ships though."

Rettig nodded. "That's what freaked me out. All of us, really."

"The ships we find are old." Nisen's voice was very soft now. Coop doubted anyone else could hear this. "Fifty, sixty, seventy years old."

A chill ran through him. "Abandoned?"

"Not always," Rettig said. "You wish they were, though."

"Before you ask," Nisen said, "no one's alive on them either."

The words hung in the air around them.

Then Nisen turned, and tapped one of the holoscreens. It winked out and returned, looking exactly the same.

"We usually do twenty, twenty-five trips into foldspace during a grid search," she said in a louder voice.

"Sometimes as many as fifty." Rettig was looking at Coop, as if Coop should understand.

He finally did. They were losing their nerve. All of them. They were diving into and out of foldspace like it was regular space, aware that each trip, no matter how short, might trap them there.

"We're going to arrive first," Nisen said, more to the screen than to Coop or Rettig. "We should go in first."

Coop nearly blurted, *That's not procedure,* but of course, she knew that.

"What are you thinking, Captain?" Heyek had come down another aisle and was peering over one of the screens. Apparently she didn't like being left out of the discussions either.

"I'd like to see if Lieutenant Cooper's hypothesis is correct. If we enter foldspace at the *exact* coordinates that the *Voimakas* used, then maybe we'll see the ship." Nisen wasn't looking at any of them, which was probably good, because Rettig paled, and Heyek winced.

Coop froze ever so slightly. He was aware that the captain had just used his real name, as a sign of respect. He was probably going to lose that respect with his next question. He tried to keep his tone non-confrontational. "I thought when the grid search started, it always started from the entry point."

"We go in and out at the same spot as four other ships, we'll pile on top of each other," Heyek said, treating him as if this were his first time into foldspace ever. Apparently, she *had* heard the question as confrontational.

Coop gave her a withering glance. "I would have thought at least one ship went in at the precise coordinates."

"We never have," Rettig said. "I think the fear is we'd appear in foldspace on top of the ship we're looking for."

"Unstated fear," Nisen said. "Not in the manuals, of course. But the thought is there."

"We're always close," Heyek said, as if she had come up with the grid search method herself.

"But not precise," Rettig said, "not down to the fifteenth decimal, like you found, Coop."

Coop. Was that the first time someone on this ship had deliberately used his nickname? He suspected it was.

"How far out are we from the others?" Nisen wasn't talking to the three inside Coop's little protective barrier. She was looking at Li.

"The first ship will join us about fifteen minutes after we arrive," Li said.

Nisen braced her hands on the jury-rigged console. "Fifteen minutes. We can try your method, then, Lieutenant."

Coop wanted to say it wasn't his method. But he didn't. Let her blame him if something went wrong.

"We'll let the other ships know that we're going in before they arrive," Nisen said. "We'll do what we can, then we'll be the ones in charge of organizing the grid search after the others turn up. I'll argue that the *Arama* go in at those coordinates every time we have a turn."

"Unless the star maps don't match." Heyek said that softly, her gaze on Nisen.

Nisen looked over at her, as if they shared a secret. Then Nisen nodded. She didn't say yes, though. She didn't go on the record, which Coop found interesting.

He found the entire discussion interesting. He had thought this was a shoddy crew, lax and undisciplined. He hadn't realized that this was a terrified crew, determined to do their jobs despite the fear they had for their own lives.

That put all of the behavior he had seen into a different context, including the captain's bullying. She wanted to make it unpleasant for him to stay, maybe even get him to request a transfer before the time was right. Had she forced other candidates on the captain track off the ship in the past?

Nisen had moved closer to him. She was so close, in fact, that it took all of his personal strength not to step backward.

"If your theory is correct," she said, "we're taking a large risk going in at those exact coordinates. We might end up as lost as the *Voimakas.*"

"Isn't that always the risk?" Coop asked.

Nisen's expression hardened. "Spoken like someone who doesn't understand the risk," she said, and pushed past Rettig to leave the little protected area.

She flopped back into her captain's chair.

Heyek shook her head and went back to her station. Only Rettig remained.

"You stay onboard long enough," he said quietly, "and you'll understand why that was probably not the most politic response you could have made."

"It's that bad?" Coop asked, speaking as softly as Rettig had.

"No," Rettig said. "It's worse."

* * *

3

The *Arama* arrived at the area of space where the *Voimakas* entered foldspace at the exact moment Heyek said they would. This was one of those regions of space that felt far away from anything. A star glimmered in the distance, with a dozen planets in its habitable zone. But those were all far enough away to make them points of light on the small two-dimensional holoscreen he kept open below one of the larger screens.

He hated not having portals on the bridge, so he created his own. He felt vaguely insubordinate doing so, but no one had told him not to. In fact, he doubted that anyone had even noticed.

The crew had gone from the slapdash organization that Coop had seen on the previous missions to a focused, if slightly uncomfortable, group. They seemed ready to take on the challenges the change in procedure presented.

Nisen sat upright in her chair, a holoscreen floating in front of her. Coop couldn't see what was on that screen. She had asked him to double-check his coordinates, and then had Rettig monitor them as well. She told the other ships that the *Arama* would go in first, then cut off the protests she got in response.

She did not tell Command Operations her plans.

"I am changing our procedure inside foldspace slightly," she said to the bridge crew. She had her back to them, which Coop thought odd, but she was staring at that screen as if it held the secrets of the universe.

Maybe it did.

"We will enter and remain for three minutes, rather than the usual one. We will conduct a normal high-speed scan along with mapping, but we will take a little extra time." Her voice was flat and unemotional. "If all goes well, we should emerge from foldspace around the time that the other ships arrive."

She didn't have to say what might happen if things did not go well.

Coop's mouth had gone dry. Fear, apparently, was contagious, and there was a lot of fear on this bridge. He was used to ignoring his emotions as he worked, concentrating on getting the job done. But the worry around him made him question his own plan. Perhaps he was going to get them lost in foldspace.

Then he forced himself to take a deep breath. The risk of getting lost in foldspace did not change just because of the entry coordinates. The entire ship might get lost anyway. Or it might not. The odds remained the same each time a ship traveled into or out of foldspace. He had seen nothing in the research that suggested otherwise. And he had to believe that if there was research that showed an increased danger when a ship executed certain actions, the Fleet would issue a caution or would prevent ships from taking those actions.

It was expensive to lose ships, both in materiel and in personnel.

"We will gather as much information as we can as rapidly as we can," Nisen said. "Then we will return. The only change will be the time limit. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Heyek, apparently speaking for all of them.

No one else looked ready. Li grabbed the edges of his console. Rettig stood stiffly behind his workstation. One of the officers closest to the exit actually looked at it, as if it might provide an escape.

Coop opened three small screens—one that read heat signatures, one that would give a three-D rendering of whatever was outside the ship, and one that ran the data stream of every bit of telemetry coming into his console. On any other ship, he would have assumed that someone else was running the same kind of three-screen scan, but he wasn't going to assume anything here—even though the crew had shaped up, just a little.

It really irritated him that the captain did not monitor all of the information she had available. She was unlike any other captain he had ever served with. That alone made him continually uneasy.

Nisen opened the left arm of her chair, revealing a small command module. She pressed two fingers on the tiny screen.

The *Arama* stuttered and bumped as if it were a ground vehicle that had hit holes in a road. The *anacapa* drive had been engaged.

Coop should have been used to that stutter-bump feeling by now—he had gone in and out of foldspace enough with the *Arama*—but he wasn't. The *Arama's* entry into foldspace always felt a little too hard, as if something had gone vaguely wrong.

The shift into foldspace took only a few seconds, and then the stutter-bump stopped. The *Arama* eased into position. Another ship loomed much too close to her starboard side. So close, in fact, that it was pretty clear the *Arama* had just barely missed hitting it.

"The hell," Nisen said as Heyek said, "Good God."

Coop bit back a curse as well. Everyone else looked at the captain and her second in command, as if they had done something wrong.

Which meant that only three people on the bridge even knew how close they had come to hitting that other ship.

Using his right hand, Coop adjusted his two-dimensional screen so that the image

zoomed outward. He wished it were as easy to adjust his heart. It was pounding, hard.

"That's the *Voimakas,*" he said, relieved that his voice sounded calm.

"If that's true," Heyek said, annoying him, "then this will be the easiest rescue we've ever had."

"You haven't looked at her clearly, then, have you, Lieutenant?" Nisen asked. The Lieutenant she referred to was Heyek, not Coop.

Coop hadn't looked at the ship clearly either. He had simply found her ship's signature, and compared it to the *Voimakas.* Now, he looked.

She listed, as if her attitude controls weren't working. Her escape pods were gone, leaving small holes in her side. The holes would have looked like part of the design to anyone who had never seen a DV-class ship before, but to someone like Coop who studied the ships continually, the *Voimakas* looked denuded.

There were no other ships nearby. Stars winked in the distance, and a milky white smudge appeared on the port side. Coop didn't even investigate what that smudge was. It was too far away to consider as anything more than a point on a grid map.

That thought made him realize everyone was focused on the *Voimakas,* and not on the grid map. He hit three controls and had three different systems map the area. He also recorded as much of the information he had taken from the *Voimakas* as he could.

"We've got life signs," said Li. "But not a lot of them."

"And weirdly," Rettig said, "it looks like all the ship bays are empty."

Nisen stood, then looked at Coop. Her glance was measuring, and for one brief, insecure moment, he thought she was blaming him for something. Then he realized she was looking to see if he understood what had happened here.

He did not. He could guess, but he didn't believe in guessing. He shrugged ever so slightly.

She sighed, and turned away from him. Then she raised her single holoscreen, glanced at it, and shook her head.

"Hail them," she said to the screen as if it were part of her bridge crew.

"Already have, sir," Li said. "There's an open channel, but I'm not getting any response."

Coop found that surprising. He would have responded immediately.

"No one is on their bridge, sir," Rettig said.

Nisen nodded as if she expected that. "Can you access their system enough to open a ship wide channel?" she asked Li.

The timer in front of Coop said that a minute had gone by. If they continued to follow the original plan, they only had two more minutes before they had to jump back to regular space.

"Yes, sir, I can," Li said. "It's done. Go ahead."

Coop looked at him in surprise. On other ships, the captain usually had to tell the comm officer her exact plan. Apparently not here. Li had known what she intended to do.

Maybe Coop had too, but he wouldn't have presumed.

"This is the *Arama,*" Nisen said, in a somewhat louder and more formal voice than she usually used. "We are part of a five-ship rescue team sent to pull you out of foldspace. I would like to speak to Captain Golan."

There was a pause that ran seconds too long for Coop's taste. Nisen didn't move, but Rettig shifted, as if the silence made him nervous.

"This is Captain Golan," said a tired female voice. "Who am I speaking to?"

"Captain Debbie Nisen of the *Arama.*"

"That's not possible," Golan said. "Please leave. We will defend this ship if need be."

Coop glanced at Rettig, who shrugged. Li's head was bent over the console, as if he were working at something.

Coop went back to his screens, looking for a way to penetrate the *Voimakas's* hull, to see if he could identify the two heat signatures.

"Why is that not possible?" Nisen asked.

"Just leave," the female voice said.

"We can't," Nisen said. "We're here to bring you back to real space. Where's the rest of your crew?"

Golan let out a bitter laugh. "I gave them permission to leave the ship five years ago."

Rettig raised his head, looking startled.

"Captain," Heyek said, speaking softly, "we only have thirty seconds."

"We're staying a moment longer, Lieutenant."

Not, Coop noted, an exact time. A vague time. The nerves he had felt earlier rose again.

"Can you recall your crew quickly?" Nisen asked.

"I have no fucking idea where they ended up." Golan let out another half-laugh. "You really are Debbie Nisen, aren't you?"

"I am." Nisen sounded surprisingly calm, even after the mention of five years and Golan's earlier disbelief.

"Goddammit," Golan said. "God-fucking-dammit."

"I need you to activate your *anacapa* drive," Nisen said.

Coop looked at her in surprise. He hadn't realized the *Voimakas's anacapa* drive wasn't operational. But Nisen had clearly checked.

"We're going to hook to it, and pull you back through foldspace," Nisen said.

"There's only two of us left," Golan said. "It's not worth it. Go back before you can't."

"I don't have time to argue with you, Captain," Nisen said. "Activate the drive."

"We think it malfunctioned," Golan said.

"You don't know?" Heyek asked. Nisen whipped her head around and glared at Heyek, but the damage was done.

Coop folded his hands behind his back, watching and listening.

"We inspected it several times," Golan said. "It seemed fine, but something wasn't engaging."

Past tense. They hadn't tried for a long time.

"Captain." Rettig spoke softly to Nisen. "If I may . . . ?"

She nodded at him.

"Captain Golan." Rettig spoke louder this time. "I'm Kyle Rettig, chief engineer on the *Arama*. You don't have to fully activate the *anacapa*. Just toggle it to rest mode. Can you do that?"

"It might blow us all to hell, but I can try," she said.

"Please do," he said, *and hurry,* he mouthed.

The bridge crew watched each other, as if they were the ones taking action. All except Nisen, who stared at her screen.

Coop looked back at his. He shifted the telemetry to focus on readings from the *Voimakas.* He saw the exact moment they activated their *anacapa*.

Apparently, so did Nisen.

"Now!" she ordered.

The *Arama* shuddered and bumped. A light glowed from the *anacapa* drive half-hidden under a panel in the wall directly across from Coop. He'd never seen a drive do that.

His heart rate increased, and he forced himself to look away. The bumping and shuddering felt stronger than it had when the *Arama* had left real space. The bumping and shuddering also went on longer.

Now, no one made eye contact. Everyone was either studying their consoles or had their eyes completely closed.

Coop had the odd sense that some of them were praying. The nerves on the bridge were palpable. He made himself focus on the telemetry screen. The numbers helped him focus and stay calm. Even when the screen blanked for five seconds, he remained calm.

That data stream blank was normal. It happened whenever a ship traveled into or out of foldspace. *Normal,* he repeated to himself, so that he wouldn't focus on what could go wrong. Or what had gone wrong for the *Voimakas.*

Five years in foldspace. The crew gone. The captain and one other person remaining.

The shuddering eased. The *Arama* bumped two more times, then the telemetry reappeared on Coop's screen. As did all the other images on his other screens.

The bridge crew burst into spontaneous applause, although Coop didn't join in. Neither did Nisen. She remained standing, head bent toward her screen.

Coop examined the two-dimensional images, and saw the *Voimakas* appear beside the *Arama.* They were surrounded by four other ships: The *Soeker,* the *Traga,* the *Iarrthóir,* and the *Ofuna.*

Either they had arrived at record speed, or the *Arama* had been inside foldspace longer than anticipated.

"Captain," Li said, "you're getting congratulations from the other ships. Would you like me to put those on speaker?"

"Nice of them to show up," Nisen said. "And no, I don't want to hear it. I'm heading to my quarters. I'll deal with this mess there."

Then she shut down the screen in front of her, whirled, and marched up the aisle. She had nearly reached the exit when Heyek said, "Captain? What would you like from us?"

"Fifteen minutes of peace," Nisen said, and left the bridge.

The rest of the bridge crew stood very still, as if she had told them not to move a muscle. The euphoria from a few minutes ago had completely disappeared.

They had completed a successful mission—they had brought the *Voimakas* out of foldspace—but not in the way anyone anticipated. It would be impossible to call this a victory, really. The entire crew, minus two people, was lost.

"Li," Heyek said. "Coordinate with the *Traga.* Find out how long we were in foldspace."

"Already done, Lieutenant," Li said. His voice sounded thin and reedy. "We've been gone for two hours."

Two hours. Coop gripped the edge of the makeshift console. Time really had operated differently in that part of foldspace.

"Why hadn't they started the search, then?" Heyek said. "That's procedure. If the other ship—"

"They had, Lieutenant." Li spoke softly. "They started mapping the grid ninety minutes ago."

"But they didn't see us?" Heyek asked.

"No, sir," Li said.

"Tell them I have a grid map and imagery of where we ended up," Coop said. "I also have coordinates from inside foldspace."

"So do I," Rettig said. "I would like to compare our grid map with theirs."

"I'm sure the captain is working all of that out," someone from the back said, somewhat primly.

"I'm sure she hasn't gotten to that yet," Heyek said. "They're going to have to figure out what to do with the *Voimakas.*"

Her words resounded on the bridge. What to do with a ship that had been missing only a day, but whose crew was gone—five years gone—and whose captain and someone else had remained on board to . . . what? Guard the ship?

Coop couldn't imagine what they were feeling at the moment. Elation to be back?

The pressure of the loss and lost time? Something else, something he couldn't even understand?

He supposed he would find out eventually. He was feeling a little unnerved having lost hours.

The *Voimakas* had lost *years.*

"So share the information," Heyek said. "It's something we all need to know, after all."

Coop glanced at her over the screens. She looked no different than she always had—except for her eyes. They seemed smaller, as if she was trying to keep them open somehow.

Her gaze met his and, for the first time, he felt no hostility from her. Then she looked away.

He gathered the information and forwarded it to Li in a form someone else could easily understand. As he did that, a grid map arrived on one of his screens. He didn't recognize it.

"Is that the grid map from the *Traga?*" he asked.

"Compiled by them and the other three ships," Li said. "They were in and out of foldspace nearly twenty times before we came back."

Twenty times. Coop didn't want to consider that. It did mean that his theory was right, though. The *Arama* had gone into foldspace at the exact coordinates the *Voimakas* had. Not close to the same coordinates. The same ones.

And had ended up nearly on top of the *Voimakas.* But not anywhere near the other ships.

At least their maps would be extensive. Maybe they had entered that part of foldspace some distance from the *Voimakas.*

He was breathing shallowly, working on the information in front of him. He couldn't stop himself from thinking about the fact that the *Arama* had come close to getting lost as well.

The *Arama* hadn't been in foldspace long—maybe five minutes—and had lost two hours. Yet the ship managed to bring itself back and the *Voimakas* back as well.

The *Arama* had a functioning *anacapa* drive; Captain Golan believed that the *Voimakas'* drive had malfunctioned.

Not believed. If she had been in foldspace for more than five years, then she would have known that the drive wasn't functioning properly.

She had been worried that activating it, even minimally, would damage both ships. It hadn't, though.

The *Voimakas* was just fine—or as fine as a ship could be, considering.

Coop swallowed hard and focused on the maps before him. He took the grid map from the four sister ships and overlaid it on the grid map he had made.

He wished he had more than a grid map from the other ships. He'd like to see what features the space around that area had. The other ships' grid map didn't seem to extend far enough.

He hadn't had time when he'd been in foldspace to find what was unique about that nearby planet. But he had seen that milky white smudge. He hadn't identified that either. From his perspective in space, without focusing any telescopes or other scanning equipment on that area, he had no idea if he was looking at a distant galaxy, a dense asteroid belt, the remains of a planet, or something else entirely. If he had known exactly what that milky white smudge was, he would have been able to look for it with more precision. But he didn't know, and he wasn't sure what he was seeing.

That's why comprehensive mapping was important to finding lost ships in foldspace. Most rescue ships didn't stumble on their targets. Most rescue ships found the

lost ship through thorough and detailed mapping, covering vast areas of foldspace small sections at a time.

The other ships' map had a lot more detail than his did. His was a one-time capture, the beginning of a search—and not a very good beginning at that.

Theirs followed procedure, the map precise, accurate, and clear.

Still, he should have been able to find something. That planet, *something*.

"I'm not working with a lot of data here," Coop said, "but I'm not finding any points in common."

"Me, either," Rettig said. Apparently, he had been working on this as well.

Of course he had. He was clearly as curious about these things as Coop was.

The entire bridge was silent. Then Heyek cleared her throat.

"We'll deal with that later," she said. "I'm sure the *Voimakas* has extensive maps of that sector of foldspace. We'll get better answers when they're ready to work with us."

Answers. No one had actually spoken the question out loud. That question was: Had the *Arama* and the *Voimakas* been in a completely different sector of foldspace than the four other rescue ships?

Based on what he was seeing right now, Coop would have said yes. But he had more than enough science training to know that he didn't have enough data to make that determination with any kind of accuracy.

Just a gut sense.

A gut sense he didn't entirely like.

* * *

4

For the rest of the day, senior officials went in and out of the captain's quarters. Even though Coop's rank placed him higher than some of the people Nisen was talking with, he was not invited into her quarters.

When his duty shift ended, he headed to the mess for a meal. He wanted information, but he couldn't get any more than he already had.

It wasn't that the senior staff had locked him out; it was simply that he wasn't entitled to know more than he already did.

Usually, he didn't mind the segregation of information. He understood the chain of command and the need-to-know basis of all information that came through a ship daily.

But this experience had been so unusual that he was curious about what had happened to the *Voimakas* and what would happen next. If he had made any close friends among the crew, he would have asked if they had lost time in foldspace before, but he didn't know anyone well enough.

He supposed he could go through the records, but that felt like he was taking the wrong matters into his own hands. He would learn what he needed to learn when he needed to learn it.

As frustrating as that was.

His stomach growled as he arrived on the recreation deck. He passed the empty recreation room. The smell of seared beef, peppers, and onion came out of the mess and made him even hungrier. He would indulge in a high-calorie meal, just because he had nothing better to do.

He passed the ship's only bar as he headed toward the mess's open doors. The bar was a large room with no windows. It had an actual bar in the center of the room. The bar itself, which had a shiny black surface, ran in an oval, with only one way to get behind it. Whoever stepped into that oval and got caught became bartender for the night.

Someone always had to step inside, too, because all the alcohol was stored in cases below the bar's surface. Coop had learned that the hard way on his first visit to the bar on his second night. He had wanted a drink, and he had not received it, because he had spent the entire night making drinks for everyone else.

He glanced inside as he walked past and was startled to see the captain sitting near the door, her feet up on a black table, an overflowing pilsner glass in her hand.

"Lieutenant Tightass!" she shouted. "Come in here."

She'd shouted at him as he'd walked by the bar in the past, usually telling him to join the group or to have a drink. Answering her summons had been how he'd gotten trapped behind the bar on that second night.

"Thank you, Captain. May I have my dinner first?" he said, stopping.

"This is not a request, Tightass. I need your shapely buns in this chair across from me right now." She set the pilsner glass down and did not signal for a drink for him, also a change from the other times she had brought him inside.

He let out a sigh that he knew she couldn't hear. A dozen people were scattered at various tables around the bar, and Li stood behind the bar, mixing a bright blue concoction that fizzed and popped.

Coop stepped inside, pulled back the molded black chair and sat down. Heyek came over, holding a glass half full of the blue fizzy stuff.

"I gotta have a private conversation with Tightass," Nisen said to Heyek. "Make sure no one gets close for the next ten minutes, all right?"

Heyek nodded, then clapped her hands together, getting the patrons' attention. "Door's off limits for the next ten," she said. "You gotta leave, do so in the next thirty seconds."

Rettig sprinted from the far side of the room to the corridor. He gave Coop a thumbs up as he went by. No one else left.

In fact, the remaining patrons moved as far from the captain's table as they could get. Coop had seen this before. The captain liked to have private meetings here, no matter who it inconvenienced.

Heyek sauntered to the edge of the actual bar, and sat on a stool, far enough away that she couldn't hear the conversation, but not so far that she couldn't get up and block anyone who came too close.

Nisen swung her feet off the tabletop. She leaned forward, close enough to Coop that he could see her eyes. They were no longer red. She might've been drinking, but she wasn't drunk.

"You think I've been picking on you, don't you, Lieutenant Cooper?" she asked.

"What I think is immaterial, Captain," he said.

"From anyone else, I'd call that a 'yes.' But you're one cautious man, aren't you, Lieutenant?" She shoved the pilsner glass out of her way. "You keep all of your opinions to yourself."

When he didn't know anyone well, he did. And he knew no one well enough to trust them on this vessel.

"You performed amazingly today," Nisen said. "I was impressed."

He hadn't expected her to say that. "Thank you, sir."

She nodded. "You beginning to understand what it's like to serve on a foldspace rescue vehicle?"

"I think so, sir."

"Because it's not all fun and games and high level math."

"Clearly, sir."

Her eyes narrowed. "Today was a victory. We found two people alive. We lost over five hundred, but we got two. By their reckoning, they've been gone six years. The captain and her first officer remained to protect the ship and guard the *anacapa*. They weren't trying to get back. They'd given up on that. But they knew someone

would be searching for them. As soon as their supplies ran out—and they had another six months—they would have destroyed the ship. That's why we find so many exploded ships in foldspace. It's procedure after it looks like no rescue will come. Did you know that, Lieutenant?"

He felt cold. "No," he said.

"Yeah, you probably haven't hit that level of command training. And so what you probably don't know is that we rarely find ships with living crews. Sometimes they die before they can blow the ship. Sometimes, I think, they refuse to do so."

He didn't know how to respond to that. This entire conversation was making him feel off-balance.

"Our mission really isn't rescue. It's recovery. We're supposed to pull vessels out of foldspace and return them to the main part of the Fleet for scrubbing. We also use any information gathered to learn more about foldspace." Her hand moved to the pilsner glass, then moved away as if she had thought better of it.

Heyek was watching from the stool, her eyes glittering. Coop couldn't tell if she knew what Nisen was talking to him about.

The remaining crew was conversing and laughing in their corner, thumping fists on tables, and occasionally shouting insults. Everyone seemed to be working hard at ignoring this conversation he was having with Nisen. Everyone except Heyek.

"Working these ships is life-threatening and ugly," Nisen said. Then she leaned back in her chair and folded her hands across her stomach. "This is where anyone else would ask me why we do it. But you're not going to, are you, Coop?"

He started. She had used his nickname. She had never done that before.

"You really are a tight-ass. One of those regulations-are-regulations guys." She made that sound like a fault.

He had no idea how to respond. He had never had a conversation like this in his career.

"I know you think I'm a drunk and a fuck-up," she said. "You also probably assume I've been assigned here, and I'm just waiting until my retirement."

He had to hold himself very still so that he wouldn't nod.

"I volunteered for this assignment," she said.

"Sir?" He couldn't prevent the word from escaping. He was surprised.

"Not this rescue of the *Voimakas,*" she said, as if that was the question he was asking. He wasn't sure if it was or not. "I volunteered to captain a foldspace rescue vehicle. And your poker face isn't as good as you think, you know. You're wondering why anyone would volunteer."

He had been wondering that.

"I volunteered because I was waiting for you, Tightass," she said.

He didn't move. She wasn't hitting on him, was she? Because it sounded like she was, but it didn't feel like she was.

"I knew you were coming," she said.

"Me, sir?" he asked. Because this wasn't making sense. She had been captain of the *Arama* for eight years. He had checked the ship's records before he had come on board. He had done that on every vessel he'd been assigned to.

"Not you, exactly," Nisen said, sliding down in her chair. "But someone like you. I was beginning to think that I wouldn't find you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir," Coop said.

"No, I don't suppose you do," she said. "You're a natural leader, Lieutenant. On top of that, you're bright and you're an original thinker, when you let yourself relax. You could be one of the great captains of the Fleet. Don't let them promote you higher."

He frowned, not sure what she was telling him.

"But your regulations-are-regulations attitudes are going to get in the way of you

doing your job," she said. "You couldn't run this ship."

"I'd like to think I can, sir," he said.

"I know you'd like to think that," she said. "And maybe, ten or fifteen years from now, if your ass loosens up, you'll be able to. But now? You'd have a ship full of failed officers, or suicides, or you'd face a mutiny. Running a foldspace rescue vehicle is a delicate balance. Your crew will see everything and anything. They'll have to be reckless enough to enter foldspace repeatedly without freezing up, and they'll have to be compassionate enough to handle people like Captain Golan and her first officer upon the return from hell, and they'll have to be willing to fail almost continually."

Coop wished now he'd gotten a drink before this conversation started. He at least wanted something to do with his hands. Instead, he folded them together.

"They can't be the brightest officers in the Fleet, but they have to creative enough to take whatever is thrown at them. They need to be a good crew, but not a great crew. You understand?"

He was beginning to think he did.

She leaned forward and put an elbow on the table. "I've processed a lot of captain candidates through here. I was starting to think that I had made up this idea that there were great captains in waiting. I was starting to think that there were good candidates and horseshit candidates and nothing beyond that and nothing in between."

Coop frowned.

She nodded toward the crew in the corner. "They're going to get drunk tonight. And tomorrow night. And the night after that, if we don't get a new assignment. And the other shifts, they'll get drunk in their off duty hours or they'll screw like insane teenagers. I'd like to say I don't care, but I do. I picked them because they can blow off steam, and I let them do it. They're not going anywhere. This is their past, present, and future. When they leave the *Arama,* they'll retire. If experience is a judge, they'll retire as far from *anacapa* drives as they can get."

Coop resisted the urge to glance at the crew. Some of the people at the far end of the room were still in their twenties. And she had already written them off.

"This job ruins you for extended time in foldspace," she said. "And yet we require all of our captain candidates to serve on a foldspace rescue vehicle."

"To understand what happens in foldspace," he said.

She shook her head. "To see if it breaks them. Half the candidates we get here leave the career captain track when they leave the *Arama. If* they leave. Heyek didn't."

Coop's gaze flicked toward Heyek, and then he silently cursed himself. He was usually better than that.

"Why did she stay?" he asked.

"Because she realized she had only a few years to spend around foldspace. She decided she would be useful instead of fearing the jump every time. She's almost at the end of her service, and she knows it. I know it, too."

Coop swallowed. "But you're not?"

Nisen's mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "Foldspace already destroyed my life. I lost everyone I cared about decades ago, and it wasn't even my fault. I wasn't on that ship. I was heading home from another assignment."

He waited, immobile, trying to see what else she would say.

"I insisted on doing the grid search," she said. "I found the ship. And I'm not going to describe to you what I found inside—what *we* found inside. But I will tell you that the captain's chair you look at with barely concealed contempt came off that ship. It's my reminder of the stakes here."

"The stakes," he repeated, not quite a question, but not quite a statement either.

"Yeah." Her voice took on an edge he had never heard before. "Everyone on that ship died because their captain followed regulations to the letter. The original tight-ass,

unwilling to bend a regulation to save three hundred lives."

Coop opened his mouth to respond, then realized he had no idea what to say.

"So, I monitor captain candidates. I wash out the ones who would strand their crews in foldspace because the rules are too important." She was staring at him.

"And that's what you think I am," he said.

"Hell, no," she said. "You could be, if you don't fix that ass of yours. But you're also bright, and you'll listen. You know how to conquer your fear—don't think I didn't see it in your face this afternoon—and get the job done. And you only question your assumptions when it's worthwhile to do so, not in the middle of the work."

He sat stiffly.

"Which makes you," she said, "the first captain candidate in eight years that I didn't send back for more training, keep on this ship in a different capacity, or wash out entirely. I'm transferring you out of here, Lieutenant, and I'm sending you with a commendation."

He frowned. "Not to sound ungrateful, sir," he said, "but I didn't do anything worthy of a recommendation."

She laughed. The laugh was big and brash, and it filled the room. The laugh also stopped all conversation, and everyone looked at their table, which made it clear the laugh was as unusual as Coop thought it was.

She waved her hand dismissively, and Heyek turned to the crew. They turned away, without Heyek having to say anything.

Nisen said, "You found us a ship that we wouldn't have found without you. You didn't balk when you realized you were sending us into a dangerous situation, and you didn't apologize when you realized you nearly got us trapped as well. You reminded me that I needed to follow some regulations, not because of my ship, but because the Fleet might need those regulations followed for other reasons. You changed a lot of things today, Lieutenant, and you did so as a matter of course, not because you were gunning for a promotion."

He didn't gun for promotions. He never had. But he didn't say that. He had a hunch she already knew it.

"I am going to recommend one thing, though," she said, her eyes glinting with humor. It transformed her. She looked younger when she smiled, even when the smile was a bit feral. "I'm going to send a request with your transfer. For the first month in your new posting, I'm going to demand as a condition of your service that your C.O. call you Lieutenant Tightass."

His cheeks heated.

"It sounds frivolous," she said. "But it's not. Because if that nickname sticks after that month, then you're going to end up being a danger to whatever crew you lead. But if the nickname vanishes within six months because it no longer applies, then you'll be as good a captain as I think you can be."

He stared at her, feeling like he was in between foldspace and real space, stuttering along, hoping he'd get by.

"Now," she said, "get the hell out of here. You look like a man who needs a meal."

"I actually think I'm a man who needs a drink," he said.

She grinned. "Amateurs who drink on an empty stomach get drunk."

He grinned back. "But I'm no amateur."

Although he might be, compared to her. And compared to the rest of the crew of the *Arama*. He only drank when he was on leave.

He let his grin fade. "Thank you, sir," he said.

"Don't thank me," she said. "You just make sure that when something goes horribly, terribly wrong in your command—and it will. You'll walk into one of those impossible situations where there are no good results—you'll do the best you can by your crew,

even if it means breaking all the rules. Can you promise me that, Tightass?"

He thought about it for a moment, thought about being trapped for years in fold-space, about staying on the ship even though it meant sacrificing his life, his future, while the rest of the crew went to places unknown to start again.

That probably broke some rules. Just like bringing a ratty captain's chair into a pristine new vessel probably broke rules.

He needed to pay more attention. He needed to see what leaders were doing, when they chose to follow regulations, and when they chose not to. He needed to figure out whether a break with regulations meant something good for the crew or not.

Nisen tilted her head. He had been silent long enough to catch her attention.

"I can make you that promise, Captain," he said. "Even though at this moment, I'm not sure I understand all the implications of it."

She smiled and grabbed her beer.

"That's spot on, Coop," she said. "You don't understand the implications of it. You won't, until the day comes. I'd like to say you'll think about me in that moment, but you won't. I'll be a distant memory, if you think of me at all. I want this all to be second nature to you."

She raised her glass to him.

"And I'm pretty sure it will," she said. Then she downed the contents. "You're one behind, Tightass. I'm buying. Catch up."

Then she signaled Heyek, who went behind the bar and poured Coop a pale ale. Not his usual drink of choice, but he didn't say anything.

Heyek brought the drink over and handed it to him, without a change in expression, leading him to believe this was how the meetings with the captain candidates and Nisen always ended.

Heyek went back to the bar, and Coop raised his glass to Nisen.

"To you, Captain," he said, "and your crew."

She grinned at him. "For God's sake, Tightass. Let's just drink."

And so they did.