

# THE RESCUE OF THE *RENEGAT*

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The author has been very busy under pseudonyms. Kris Nelscott, her mystery pen name, has just published a new novel, the first in two years. *A Gym of Her Own*, a non-series book set in 1969, has ebook, trade paper, hardcover, and limited editions (with some interior art). Kristine Grayson, her romance pen name, has a new novel and a newly edited anthology to coming out this year. Under her own name, Kristine Kathryn Rusch continues to act as series editor for Fiction River, with two anthologies that she edited out in 2018–2019—the cross genre volumes, *Editors Save*, and *Spies*. Her SF novel, *The Runabout*, was published in September in ebook, paper, and audio editions. The novel, which first appeared in full in *Asimov's*, received a great deal of critical acclaim. Readers who want to jump into the author's Diving series can start with an ebook collection of the first three novels, *The Diving Series Starter Bundle*. "The Rescue of the *Renegat*" is in the Diving Universe, but doesn't follow the usual characters. The next Diving novel, *Searching for the Fleet*, featuring some favorite characters, will be out in the fall.

## 1

The ship appeared out of foldspace, leaking atmosphere on both sides. Captain Kim Dauber caught the white edges of the ship before her bridge crew even noticed. She had been staring at the wall screen, trying to see the planet Vostrim as a whole, wondering if she needed to run a sector-wide diagnostic to make sure no part of the just-closed sector base was noticeable even when a ship was not in orbit.

Then the ship appeared, close and in trouble.

The wall screen had been set on two dimensions, and was scanning for anomalies in nearby space, which was why she even saw the white edges around the ship. Sometimes, through the right screen set-up, that transition between foldspace and regular space made a ship of any color look like it had been outlined in white.

The white faded around the edges, but the gray of the leak did not.

"We've got a ship in trouble," she said, without turning around.

With those words, her bridge staff would refocus and take action.

"Got it," said Nazira Almadi, Dauber's first officer. Almadi was working on a secondary console, her long black hair wrapped in a bun on the top of her head, her gaze focused downward, probably on readings on the console.

Usually Dauber and Almadi weren't on the bridge of the *Aizsargs* together, because Dauber trusted her first officer to handle the bridge as well or better than Dauber herself did.

But, fortunately for that damaged ship, Dauber had all of her best officers manning their posts today.

She was in charge of closing down this section of space for the Fleet, making sure that the people who remained on Vostrim, where Sector Base Z had been located, wanted to leave the Fleet and continue their lives in Z-City after the base closed.

She also needed to make sure that every Fleet ship had left the area, that no random ships had been assigned elsewhere and were returning, incorrectly, to the closed sector base.

"The ship's one of ours," said Brett Ullman. He stood stiffly near his console, his features half hidden by screens opaqued and floating around him. He usually worked navigation, but he was handling dataflow right at the moment.

"You sound surprised," Dauber said, without turning around. She wasn't as surprised. The ship had come out of foldspace, after all.

But the ship did look odd.

"Configuration's odd," he said. "We have nothing in active use that looks like that ship."

She nodded, taking in the information, but not willing to examine it until later.

"Whatever that ship is," she said, "it doesn't matter. It's leaking atmosphere, and it needs help."

"I'm reading about two hundred life signs on board," Ullman said.

"Let's get them off the vessel," Dauber said. "We'll tow the ship, but I don't want it near us."

She had learned that lesson years ago. Ships with foldspace capability could be touchy when they were in distress. Particularly after they had emerged from foldspace. *Anacapa* drives were delicate things that could malfunction. And sometimes ships brought back all kinds of other problems from that great beyond.

"The great beyond" was how she thought of foldspace, even though the description was incorrect. Foldspace wasn't beyond anything. It was something else entirely. The way she had learned it, foldspace was created when an *anacapa* drive created a fold in space, making it easier for a ship to traverse impossible distances in a short period of time. But the science around foldspace was constantly changing. Some believed it was a different region of the Universe, a region that the Fleet had somehow tapped with its *anacapa* capabilities. That seemed as unlikely to her as a ship creating foldspace.

All she knew was that ships could use the *anacapa* to jump to foldspace and then return to the same spot in regular space hours later. She had used that technique in battle a dozen times.

She had also traveled through foldspace more times than she could count during her entire career. She didn't think about foldspace or how it worked; she just used it.

"I've been trying to contact them," said Josephine Ornitz. Ornitz was short and

round. She was reaching upward on a new console, one she hadn't even bothered to reconfigure for her height. She headed Dauber's communications department and hadn't worked on the bridge in months.

But Dauber had needed Ornitz for the sector base closure, so she was currently on the bridge. Which was lucky. Because, if Ornitz couldn't contact the ship, then no one could.

"Anything from them at all?" Dauber asked. "Distress signal? Anything?"

"No," Ornitz said.

"It looks like a number of major systems are down, sir," said Massai Ribisi, the *Aizsargs'* chief engineer. He wore a non-regulation hat over his bald head, and was still in black exercise clothes. She had taken him from his daily personal routine to help her find any evidence of the closed base. "I'm not sure they can contact us."

Dauber frowned at the ship, no longer outlined in white. Any indication of fold-space had disappeared altogether, leaving the familiar pattern of stars—some of them faded and some of them glowing brightly against the darkness of space.

"Get a rescue vehicle, and tell them to be prepared for anything," she said. "Send fighters to escort it."

"You expect that ship to attack us?" Ullman asked.

"I expect nothing," Dauber said. "I'm preparing for everything."

Then she turned, faced the best bridge crew she had ever worked with. They were each handling a different aspect of this emergency, heads bent, fingers moving. Two security team members, who weren't part of the bridge crew, stood near the door. They were a necessary but unusual addition because the *Aizsargs* had been dealing with the final closure of a sector base (and final closures sometimes made the locals crazy). The security team were the only ones looking directly at Dauber.

Then she realized they weren't looking at her at all. They too were looking at the large 2-D screen imagery, watching the ship leak atmosphere as it wobbled forward.

"Prepare Deck Seven for the survivors," she said to her Chief of Security, Vilma Lauritz. "I want that deck sealed off from the rest of the *Aizsargs*."

"Right away, Captain." Lauritz had been working one of the stations near the door. She didn't head below decks, the way that Dauber would have. Instead, Lauritz's hands started moving rapidly as she isolated the deck.

First order of business for Lauritz, Dauber knew, was to establish a route from the docking bay to the deck, without passing crucial systems.

That was why Dauber had picked Deck Seven. It was the closest personnel deck to the docking bay. Lower level personnel decks had individual cabins for single crew members, a large mess, and two recreational areas, but no essential services and, more importantly, no access to them.

Even better, Decks Seven and Eight had been cleared before this last pass around the sector base, in case the *Aizsargs* had to pick up stragglers. Dauber wasn't displacing any of her crewmembers.

"Let's move," Dauber said. "At the rate that ship's venting atmosphere, it only has a few hours left."

She was guessing, based on the ship's size and its layout. She was also assuming that the atmosphere was venting at an even rate throughout the ship.

For all she knew, the ship had lost a lot of crew already. It looked pretty large to only have two hundred people on board.

"What kind of ship is that, anyway?" she asked Ullman.

"I've been trying to match it so that the rescue vessel knows how to access it," he said.

She smiled to herself. She knew he was doing that work, because he was just that good.

"I'm not finding anything current," he said. "It looks like a Security Class vessel from about a hundred years ago."

She wasn't sure how that could be. SC vessels had a very specific design. "It looks nothing like a Security Class vessel to me," she said.

"I know. It threw me too at first," Ullman said. "The SC-designations went through a complete redesign about fifty years ago. In theory, they're more efficient now."

"In theory?" she asked.

He shrugged. "There are always complainers."

And he said nothing else.

She turned, looking at the ship. It appeared dark, except for the leaking gray atmosphere. Had some of the whiteness she'd seen earlier been the ship's lights?

"They did have *anacapa* drives in the SC ships back then, right?" she asked. She wasn't certain. It would be logical for the ships to have *anacapa* drives, but Fleet policy wasn't always logical.

"Yes, sir," Ullman said. "This ship has an *anacapa* drive."

He didn't have to say that. The ship wouldn't have gone through foldspace without one.

"What are the major differences between this SC ship and the current ones?" she asked.

"Too many to list," Ullman said. "I'm sending specs to the *Aizsargs Rescue One*, because they're not going to know how to get around this thing."

*Aizsargs Rescue One* was their newest rescue vehicle. It had been replaced just before this mission. She almost belayed the order to send *Rescue One*, almost told Ullman to send *Rescue Five* because it was the oldest rescue vessel, and she didn't want to risk the new one.

But, depending on what was happening here, that ship's survivors might need all the upgraded tech on *Rescue One*.

The thought of both rescue vessels made her realize something.

"Was it standard practice for an SC vessel to work alone a hundred years ago?" she asked Ullman.

He raised his head, looked at her, and blinked, clearly surprised. He hadn't thought of that either.

But both of them knew how SC vessels worked now.

SC-class ships were security ships. They were sent to the scene of a crisis, usually in twos or threes, and they handled the emergency. If the SC-class ships went out alone, it was almost always on a forward mission or somewhere planetside, to do some preliminary research.

SC-Class vessels rarely did solitary work for longer than a few days, maybe a week. And generally the planetside work was at sector bases, or a planet that might house a sector base.

The work SC-Class vessels did was dicey and dangerous, but in fits and starts, and almost always recorded, monitored, and catalogued in one way or another. She'd never heard of an SC vessel operating alone this far from the Fleet.

"I have no idea," Ullman said. "My understanding of systems and practices is that they remain the same."

"Until they don't," Ornitz muttered.

Dauber tilted her head a little, conceding that point.

But Almadi got to the heart of the matter. She squinted at the 2-D representation as if it could tell her everything, then said, "Systems and practices now means that we'd see dozens more of these ships coming out of foldspace."

Everyone on the bridge looked at her. Dauber frowned.

"Or," Ullman said, "they're still in foldspace."

Fortunately, he didn't use the word *stuck*, which was something everyone who ever traveled through foldspace worried about, whether they admitted it aloud or not.

Dauber had set that worry aside, just like she had set every other worry aside. She was going to die someday, and she wanted it to be on her ship, doing her work. Whether that was because they were stuck in foldspace or because they were in a battle or because they had traveled too far from the Fleet and couldn't easily return, she didn't care.

She wanted to be doing something important when she died.

Almadi's fingers hovered over her work screen. She was probably waiting to calibrate what the *Aizsargs* should do, depending on Dauber.

"I'm hoping nothing else comes out of foldspace while we're working on this ship. After that, we'll talk to them—" Dauber hoped "—and find out if they were part of a group. Let's just get over there now."

Almadi nodded, then bent her head over the screen, fingers moving

Dauber said, "Tell *Rescue One* to have its shields set and make sure someone monitors the area around the damaged ship and *Rescue One*. I don't want a ship to emerge from foldspace right near our vessels and fighters. Got that?"

"Already on it," Almadi said.

"Good," Dauber said.

That ship, whatever it was, was lucky. It had caught the *Aizsargs* at the right moment, when she was staffed with her best personnel, doing their best work. Had the injured ship arrived two days from now, it would have been alone in this sector. The base would have been shut down, and even though a lot of people still on the surface of Vostrim knew how to help a disabled ship, they no longer had the tools or capacity to do so.

"The ship is still not answering us," Ornitz said.

"Willfully?" Dauber asked.

"I can't tell," Ornitz said. "But I would be remiss if I didn't inform you that they might be deliberately avoiding replying to our hails."

"Why would they do that?" Ullman asked. He sounded a little preoccupied. Or maybe Dauber thought he was. Because he should have known the answer.

"That ship is by itself. It's old, and it's not working well," Dauber said. "There's a good chance it's been stolen."

One of the security team guarding the door to the bridge looked at her sharply. No one else seemed surprised.

Ullman's skin flushed. "Sorry, Captain. Wasn't thinking. Although where would someone pick up a vessel like that? Wouldn't we know if one was lost?"

"We lose ships all the time," Almadi said. "We keep track, but who pays attention to each and every one?"

"Something else to gather data on, then," Ullman said. He didn't sound discouraged at all. He sounded intrigued by the challenge.

Dauber had a hunch they all were. After all, they had thought this entire mission would be routine, and so far it had been. No DV-class ship—the largest and most important vessels in the Fleet—liked being at the tail end of Fleet space.

The Fleet moved forward, always. That was its motto and the way it lived. Sector bases moved as the Fleet moved out of a sector. The main part of the Fleet itself hadn't been in this sector in over five hundred years.

Dauber hadn't protested the assignment—she had been too professional for that—but she had chafed when she'd received it. No DV captain wanted to take her ship backward, not even for a few months.

She would rather have been on the front edge of known space, or even exploring the next sector, looking for whatever lay ahead.

She didn't like being in a sector that was well known, that held no surprises, and was, in fact, so unimportant the Fleet was pulling away from it. Although she had been wrong, hadn't she, about the no surprises. That crippled ship out there was something new and different. "We have one other thing to find out," she said to her bridge crew. General order, not to someone specific. "We are going to need to know what got that ship out of foldspace. Did it travel here of its own volition? Come out of foldspace here because that was what it had been programmed to do? Or has it somehow attached to the signal of our *anacapa* or a dying signal out of Sector Base Z?"

"I'll make sure *Rescue One* has that question front and center," said Almadi.

Good. Dauber was glad that Almadi was communicating with *Rescue One* on that matter. Because the way the ship got here would have a direct impact on how the *Aizsargs* helped it. And what they needed to do with the *anacapa* drive on the ship.

Dauber straightened her shoulders, then moved to her own station. She had no captain's chair on the bridge, unlike many of her compatriots. The bridge was no place to sit down, although of late, a chair wouldn't have hurt.

Things had moved too slowly here for the past few months. She was happy for the distraction. She only hoped that the distraction remained simply that—a distraction. Because she didn't want this incident to become something bigger.

Not now.

Not ever.

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## 2

Raina Serpell's environmental suit was damaged. The damn thing kept telling her about all the leaks it was plugging up, and then giving her a timeline as to how long the plugs would last.

*Advise leaving hostile environment as soon as possible*, it was saying every fifteen minutes.

She was floating on the bridge of the *Renegat* because about four hours ago, the artificial gravity shut off, and the gravity in her damn boots wasn't working the way it was supposed to. Or maybe she hadn't figured out how to turn it on.

Whatever was going on with her boots didn't matter, because she had bigger problems. The ship wasn't responding to voice commands either, now that she was wearing the super tight helmet that came with this suit.

It had taken her nearly five minutes, but she'd finally figured out how to toggle that warning to infrequent, but she couldn't shut the damn thing off. She couldn't do much of anything technical. She was a damn linguist, for god's sake. She'd learned enough to survive in the harshness of space. She knew how to use her environmental suit—when the damn suit worked—and she knew how to program a computer to learn a new language.

She did not know how to program *herself* to learn a new skill, not on the fly.

The only other person on the bridge, Yusef Kubac, had gotten his boots to work immediately. That wouldn't have surprised her two months ago, because he had been the *Renegat's* chief navigation officer. But the fact he had gotten the boots to work so fast surprised her now. Because he was having trouble with everything—including navigation.

She had trusted him from the moment they took over the *Renegat*, but just a few days ago, she had started wondering if she should have trusted him at all. He wasn't a hard worker and he talked a lot. He hadn't seemed scared, though, until they went into foldspace this last time. Now, he seemed more scared than she was.

Of course, he had reason: he couldn't get the helm to respond, not since the attack. He had managed the *anacapa* drive kinda sorta. Then he had taken a risk without her permission and had sent them on the longest trip through foldspace that she had ever heard of. She didn't like foldspace in the first place, and after the attack, she really thought traveling through foldspace was a bad idea. She hadn't thought the *Renegat* would make it through foldspace, not with a hole in the hull. But, Yusef said, the nanobits would patch the hole and the environment would hold.

Only the nanobits had stopped repairing everything in foldspace, and something else had gone wrong, something she hadn't been prepared for. The *Renegat's* environmental system was compromised, and she wasn't sure why.

Yusef had asked her to search for the problem, and she had tried. But she wasn't set up for this. She had no idea what she was doing.

When they took over the ship, she had planned on searching through the personnel records to see who else on board had enough training to help on the bridge. She had compiled a preliminary list when the *Renegat* went into foldspace the first time, but then she lost focus, worrying about other things. And once she had realized she needed to look again, she couldn't, not with the attacks, foldspace, and the slow leak of the atmosphere.

She had just been about to do a shipwide hail for help when the artificial gravity gave out. Followed by the lights.

Emergency lighting was dim at best. She could have turned on the lights on the exterior of her suit, but Yusef had asked her not to when she put the suit on.

"I'm going to be doing some delicate work," he had said, "and I don't want any distractions."

She had put the suit on when they were still in foldspace. So had he. She had sent a shipwide order for everyone to don their environmental suits just in case, but she knew only a handful of people had listened to her. She hoped to hell they had put on their environmental suits before the environmental system shut off to "conserve energy."

She wasn't the captain. That was the problem. There was no captain, and that was her fault. For some stupid reason, she had thought they could head home without a hierarchy. She figured the remaining crew was on the same page. After all, they had said so, clearly.

They wanted to go back to the Fleet as soon as possible.

With the same goal, she figured they really didn't need someone to run the ship. But everyone came to her for questions. Everyone thought she should know what to do next, maybe because she had taken point back at the Scrapheap.

She should have simply accepted the leadership role then. But she hadn't wanted it—still didn't want it. She didn't know what she was doing, and that was completely clear by the mess the *Renegat* was in.

But Yusef didn't know what the hell they were doing either. By rights, he should have been running the ship. He was the ranking officer here. If they went by ranking officers.

But she also knew that no one trusted him. He had been on the bridge crew when the *Renegat* left on the original mission, and he had gotten demoted halfway to the Scrapheap. Then he had bitched about the demotion and acted so unprofessional during the initial arrival at the Scrapheap that, when the trouble started, she hoped he would leave.

Of course, Yusef had stayed. And, Raina thought, he had probably thought he could waltz back into the Fleet, claim he was the one who brought the *Renegat* back, and get a promotion he had not earned.

Although, if he got them out of this now, maybe he would have earned a promotion. Especially considering he had lied to her, and he was still managing to make do.

He had said he knew how all the ship's systems worked.

She had learned over the last two months that he didn't know how *all* of the systems worked. He just knew how they *should* work, which was, two months ago, more than she had known. He knew what part of the ship did what, and how it looked when it functioned properly.

And until they had come out of foldspace into regular space the second time, until they encountered that swarm of whatever the hell it had been from the only planet they tried to orbit, everything *had* functioned properly.

She shouldn't have listened to the remaining crew's panic about supplies. She should have simply reminded everyone that they had left over half the crew back at the Scrapheap, and the supplies that they had needed to feed fewer people.

She had made that argument, of course, but not very forcefully. It had been pretty obvious that no one had been comfortable with the supply levels, even though the *Renegat* had more than enough to get the crew home.

She had found herself on a ship filled with people who were scared to enter foldspace, but who wanted to return to the Fleet. There was no returning without foldspace.

When the *Renegat* had traveled to that ancient Scrapheap, it had made the longest known journey away from the Fleet in the Fleet's history. So she figured the trip back wouldn't bother anyone. But there were rumors about lost time and strange occurrences that Captain Preemas hadn't bothered to tell anyone about, and those rumors had scared everyone.

Then, everything that had happened on the trip back had scared everyone as well.

Somehow, she had thought they would bond in their fright, rather than take action based on that fright. Again, her fault for not taking command.

Although she didn't want command, particularly after she realized that most of the rumors were true. She hadn't found that out, though, until the *Renegat* was on its way back to the Fleet, when she broke into Preemas's logs to see his insights about the remaining crew.

Breaking in had been another thing she wished she hadn't done. Maybe if she had remained naïve about what they were facing, maybe if she hadn't given it any thought at all, she wouldn't have listened to the crew about supplies, the *Renegat* wouldn't have gone into orbit around that stupid planet, and the ship would be all right.

They would be all right.

But they weren't. They were losing atmosphere, the environmental systems had shut down, the lights were going out, and no one on the ship had the technical skill to repair anything at that level.

She wanted to curl into a little ball and hide away, but if she curled up, she'd be banging all over the walls and the ceiling, and her damn suit would leak even worse.

She was going to die here, and she didn't even know where here was. The *Renegat* had used the comm system inside her helmet to announce that the ship, of its own accord, was leaving foldspace. Yusef was trying to stop the *Renegat* from doing so. He thought they hadn't traveled far enough, that the ship wasn't following his navigation points.

But he also admitted that the navigation system had been compromised during the attack along with all the other major systems. So, she had asked him—screamed at him, really—*how do you know the ship wasn't following instructions?*

And he had screamed back that he hadn't known anything for sure, and she should have let him captain the ship, and she had said that he didn't have the temperament to be captain, and he had said look at where her temperament had gotten them, and then she thought about the nights she had spent in her cabin—in her solitary cabin, with her wife India gone—and wondered if he wasn't right.

Raina used to have such an even temperament, and now, without India, she was all over the map—angry one moment, nearly in tears the next, panicked a moment later. No one had ever seen her like this—she had never *been* like this, and it was driving her crazy.

The whole situation was driving her crazy.

And it wouldn't matter soon. Because in just a few hours she'd be dead.

Or maybe less than that, if her suit was to be believed.

*Advise leaving hostile environment as soon as possible*, it said, as if on cue.

"Shut up," she whispered. "Shutupshutupshutupshutup."

And, for the moment, it did.

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3

Nothing had attacked Rescue One yet. Attacks were common during rescues. Raul Zarges always braced for attacks first.

But he wasn't even sure anyone on that distressed ship realized that *Rescue One* had just pulled alongside them. The ship, which was marked the *Renegat*, with an SC designation, looked even worse up close.

Its hull was pockmarked and scarred, either by heat weapons or some kind of fire. Patched holes reflected blackly in the lights from *Rescue One*, showing that the *Renegat's* nanobit repair system still worked.

Up close, Zarges could tell this was a Fleet vessel, albeit of a kind he had never seen before. The smooth hull, the rounded edges, even the shape of the exterior doors, looked familiar.

But the layout wasn't, and his team was going to struggle with that.

He hated going blind into another ship. "Hail them again," he said to Sufia Khusru.

She was already suited up, ready to board the *Renegat*, but she leaned over him and sent another hail. Her movement was ostentatious, a clear rebuke. He could have sent the hail, but he hadn't.

He wouldn't be joining the teams on the *Renegat*, either. He was better off here, both guarding and maintaining *Rescue One*. Khusru would argue that the entire team needed him, that the half dozen fighter ships launched with *Rescue One* would protect it, but he didn't think they could—not once *Rescue One* grappled onto the *Renegat*.

He made himself take a deep breath. The goddamn counselor was right; he had come back to work too soon, and of course, he only realized that now. He would get past it. One step at a time.

He would be the one remaining on *Rescue One*.

"Not getting a damn thing," Khusru said, as if he couldn't see that for himself. Of course, she owed him that little dig. He had asked her to send the hail as if he couldn't touch the board. "The ship looks dead."

He thought so too, but he had seen the scans. Two hundred people were alive on the *Renegat*—or had been fifteen minutes ago. And they were scattered all over the ship. The *Renegat* was larger than he wanted it to be, which meant his team had to cover a lot of ground.

That thought made him calmer. Maybe he had been right: maybe he was ready for this mission, counselor be damned.

He took a deep breath and changed his mind.

"We have to get to the bridge of that ship," he said.

"We?" she asked.

He looked at her. "We," he said, and set the hook-up in motion.

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4

The Renegat rocked. The ship shouldn't be rocking, should it? It didn't have power, and it was huge, and there was nothing in space that would cause anything to rock.

Raina only knew it rocked because she was clinging to the control panel. Bits of the panel floated around her, which she was convinced wasn't normal, not even in an emergency situation.

Yusef had rocked too, looked up, then put his head back down, focusing on his work.

She wanted to scream at him again—hadn't he noticed the rocking? Ships didn't rock—but screaming at him never seemed to work. *Talking* to him didn't work either, so she was better off just keeping quiet.

She wanted the displays back on. She wanted to touch something or ask a question, and get an answer.

A question like: why would a ship drifting in space suddenly rock?

*Advise leaving hostile environment as soon as possible*, her suit said.

"Fuck you," she said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" Yusef sounded shocked. He had heard that? Everything else was going wrong on this damn ship and her communication link to his suit was set on *exceedingly touchy*? Great. Good. What else had he heard in the past several hours?

The back-up power was sending pale yellow light everywhere, clashing with the white light coming from the arms of Yusef's suit.

He was using that light to poke at the equipment, trying to fix it—she hoped. Or at least, not screw it up.

"Something's happening," she said.

"No kidding." His voice was dry and filled with contempt. Damn near everything he said to her was filled with contempt.

She had accepted the contempt back at the Scrapheap—hell, she might even have deserved that contempt—but now she knew the limits of Yusef's expertise. He wasn't that much better at anything than she was.

She deserved some kind of respect—or at least a hearing. Particularly now, when everything was going wrong.

"I mean it," she said. "The ship's moving."

"E-yeah." That contempt again.

"It's drifting. It shouldn't be rocking." She sounded strident. She wished she didn't care about how she sounded. But she did care. "Something's going wrong."

He lifted his head and sighed audibly. "You realize you're interrupting my work."

"What work?" she asked. "It's not work. What are you even doing?"

"Trying to get the power back on," he said, and bowed his head again. He had told her more than once he knew nothing about engineering and now he was trying to get the power back on? Maybe he was the one who was causing the rocking.

And what was he even working on? None of the control panels worked. Not even the control panel near the captain's chair worked, and it should have, right?

At least Yusef had tools out and was doing something. All she was doing was poking at the dark control panels, hoping something would spring to life.

*Advise leaving hostile environment as soon as possible*, her suit said.

That couldn't have been fifteen minutes. Was the warning's timing accelerating? Had the stupid suit overridden the commands she had given? Programming only got overridden like that when something was about to go catastrophically wrong.

She pushed off the control panel and headed to one of the utility closets built into the wall of the conference area just behind the bridge. She had to push off a lot of equipment to get there—her traveling skills in zero-G had devolved to damn near nothing.

“You’re not leaving me up here, are you?” Yusef asked, a bite to the words. It took her a second to hear what was beneath the bite.

Terror. He was as scared as she was—maybe more frightened, because she figured she was going to die. Figuring that out was both calming and motivating.

She wasn’t panicking about staying alive, per se, but she was focused on staying alive *longer*; maybe until they could get the ship’s systems back up and running.

“My suit’s dying,” she said. *Dying* was an interesting word choice, when she could have used so many other words—*failing*, *been compromised*, *leaking*.

But she had said *dying*.

“I’ve got over twenty-four hours of oxygen,” he said. “I can share.”

She had no idea how. These stupid suits were supposed to be self-contained. And then there was the matter of the leaks in her suit. The pinprick leaks everywhere.

“Won’t help,” she said, and didn’t explain.

Her suit was leaking. The ship was leaking. She was screwed. *They* were screwed.

All she could hope for at the moment was that someone on some lower level figured out how to get into engineering and get the systems back online.

Because she had a hunch that getting anything back online was beyond Yusef’s skills.

Just like it was beyond hers.

\* \* \*

5

Dauber was monitoring the rescue from the bridge, along with her crew. Deck Seven had already been cleared and was waiting for the evacuees.

It wouldn’t be long now. *Rescue One* had reached the disabled ship. The fighters stayed back, monitoring.

Ullman was watching the readings coming from the ship. So far, all two hundred people on board remained visible. He was using thermal imaging as well as some kind of system that allowed him to monitor movement. She had no idea if he could penetrate the hull well enough to do the standard heart-rate monitor that so many Fleet ships used to keep track of personnel on board.

She didn’t ask, either.

Instead, she was focused on *Rescue One*. It had deployed two grapplers and was extending a spacebridge. The bridge would attach to a door, provide a small environment just in case the door opened directly into a ship without airlocks, and then her team could go inside.

The spacebridge wasn’t designed for Fleet-to-Fleet rescues. In theory, a Fleet ship could easily tow another Fleet ship or bring that ship into the docking bay (if the larger rescuing vehicle was a DV-class vessel).

She was also monitoring the space around the rescue. She was deeply worried that more ships would appear from foldspace. The *Aizsargs* was a little more vulnerable than she would have liked.

*Rescue One* was quite vulnerable, particularly if the *Renegat* had been traveling in a tight formation with other ships. Those other ships might arrive out of foldspace an hour or two later, but still close to the *Renegat*. Which meant that the new ships could easily hit *Rescue One*.

If this rescue turned into a disaster, she had fewer resources at her disposal than usual. Most of the Fleet ships had left the sector, since almost everyone from Sector Base Z was gone. There were no large ships left at the Sector Base, either.

She could send for assistance, and it would arrive within hours. But she'd been in battles that had lasted less than fifteen minutes and had more casualties than fights that had lasted for days. Everything was unpredictable, particularly when there was a surprise attack.

And this had some of the hallmarks of a surprise attack. Not all of the hallmarks. The age of the ship had taken the rescue from routine to strange right from the start.

And she was going to be prepared for anything. Because, out here, anything could happen, and often did.

\* \* \*

## 6

Zarges decided that he would start the rescue with two small teams. The first—the one he was leading—would head to engineering, since that was closer to the door they'd attached to than the bridge was.

At least in theory.

He wasn't sure if the specs for this old SC-class vessel that the *Aizsargs* had provided were at all accurate. He was going to operate as if they were, but he wasn't going to trust them.

The second team would head to the bridge. He would deploy the rest of his people, and pull everyone off the ship only if he couldn't get the damn thing working again.

The spacebridge had already attached itself to the nearest door. The seal had been confirmed, and atmosphere had filled the small area.

But both teams still shut off the gravity on their boots, because it was easier to navigate the bridge in zero-G. The bridge was actually a tunnel, made of black nanobits just like the ships, only the tunnel was thinner and a lot more pliable than any ship.

His team and Khusru's held the straps near the tunnel/bridge's entrance, waiting for Zarges' order.

He didn't speak it aloud. He just nodded at his team, because they were going in first.

They entered single file. Dortha Iqbar, as the second most experienced member of his team, led, followed by Zarges, with Stanley Palmer bringing up the rear. They would use that formation as they made their way through the ship.

As Zarges pushed himself into the tunnel, using an old skill that made sure his pace matched Iqbar's, his environmental suit felt a little too tight. Sweat pooled under his arms and along his back. He had already double- and triple-checked the system, so he knew the problem wasn't the suit.

The problem was him.

The last mission he had gone on had ended in catastrophe, with only five survivors out of a team of thirty. They had managed to save over a hundred people, but as the *Aizsargs*' counselor had pointed out, he never saw that as a victory. Too many lives had been lost for him to ever consider that mission a success.

And that mission was the last thing he should have been thinking about in this narrow passageway. He felt as if he were surrounded by a layer so thin that he could poke it out with his finger, even though he knew that wasn't true.

There were no lights in the tunnel except the lights from the gloves on their suits. Iqbar pointed her hands forward to illuminate the darkness ahead of them, Zarges kept his hands trained downward to illuminate the path, and Palmer had his hands pointed behind him.

When his lights changed direction, the next team—Khusru’s team—would start their way through the tunnel.

The journey only took about twenty seconds, but it felt like an entire lifetime had gone by.

Iqbar stopped only a few seconds before Zarges arrived. She tapped the edge of the door. It had an old Fleet marking, one that meant the controls for the door were ninety degrees to the left of that point.

She looked at Zarges. As she did, Palmer arrived.

Zarges nodded, silently giving her approval to try the controls before they opened the door either manually or with weapons.

Iqbar slid her gloved hand to the exact spot on the hull, then pressed her palm against it. The glove had a chip that ran all the known security override entry codes for every ship registered with the Fleet, starting with the most current and working backward.

Palmer had just reached for his tool belt to pry the door when the door eased open. That relaxed movement surprised Zarges. For some reason, he had thought opening the door would be a fight—especially since the ship had just emerged from foldspace.

Sometimes, in some of the Fleet ship models, the doors sealed tightly for hours after the activation of an *anacapa* drive. That was to protect the integrity of the ship’s interior, in case the ship unexpectedly found itself in a truly hostile environment.

Blackness extended beyond the door’s interior. Palmer stuck his fist inside, exploring with the knuckle lights on his glove.

The interior was black and small. An airlock built to an old design, one Zarges had never liked. In this design, only one or two people could use the airlock at the same time.

In the past, the Fleet had kept small airlocks near doors that were designed to be used sparingly. More recent designs put full airlocks on all doors—the changing regulations mandating that at least five people be able to fit into the airlocks at one time.

Zarges knew the reason for the rules change, and it was as ugly as the change implied. People had died outside a ship because their team members hadn’t made it through the airlock at a rapid enough clip to allow those waiting to get inside the ship. Sometimes those waiting suffocated as their oxygen levels decreased; sometimes they were killed by an outside force; sometimes the deaths were unexplained.

Palmer’s light caught the edge of another control panel. By the time the light found that, Iqbar had rejoined them.

“I don’t know how long that door will remain open on its own,” she said. “Better go inside.”

“If the power’s out,” Zarges said, “we need to be ready to open the interior door ourselves.”

Exterior doors usually worked on a mechanical system if the power was out, but on some of the larger ships, that system had not been designed into the airlock door. That door wasn’t supposed to open until the environment in the airlock matched the environment in the ship.

Zarges put his hand on his tool belt and Iqbar did the same. Palmer used his free hand to propel himself into the airlock. He examined every part of the airlock again, then encouraged both of them to join him.

Zarges went in next, followed by Iqbar as per protocol. They squeezed tight enough to fit in the small space. As the door eased shut, he saw bobbing lights at the other end of the tunnel.

Khusru’s team was on their way.

Then the exterior door closed, and he was shoved against the other two members of his team, so tightly that it was almost impossible to move.

If they had to open the interior door from inside this airlock, it would take a lot of negotiation and work.

He had to brace himself for that. He had to be ready.

But he wasn't. His heart hammered against his chest, and he willed his entire system to settle down. It wouldn't do to have an attack of nerves in the middle of a mission. He had to focus on what was ahead of them rather than what had happened in his past.

"How long do we wait for the door to disengage?" Palmer asked.

As he did, the interior door opened. All three of them shifted in surprise. Then Iqbar floated in, followed by Zarges. He half expected to tumble to the floor as gravity engaged, but there didn't appear to be any.

"I guess the environment in the airlock matched the environment on the ship," he said, feeling no small sense of irony. The airlock wasn't designed for the vacuum of space; it had been designed to protect an atmosphere that had apparently already vented out of this place.

"This does not look promising," Iqbar said as she moved to the side of the interior door.

Zarges entered and moved to the other side. Palmer entered, and as he activated the gravity on his boots, pulling him downward, the door behind him closed.

He looked over his shoulder—nervously, Zarges thought, although he could have been projecting.

"We've only got a few minutes before the other team joins us," Zarges said.

He really didn't want to waste time joining up. His team needed to go to engineering to see if they could stop the atmosphere dump.

Khusru's team had the tougher task: they were to go to the bridge and try to work controls from there. The scans had shown that there were two people on the bridge, which meant that Khusru's team might have to deal with personnel first, and rescue second.

That would give Zarges time to determine if the ship was salvageable. If not, then he would let Khusru's team know, and she would try to access the bridge communications system to inform the two hundred survivors that help was here, and that they would all be rescued.

He did not want to evacuate the ship one person at a time. He wasn't sure they could. There was a clock here, although he wasn't sure exactly what it was.

Not yet, anyway.

Iqbar pointed one fist down the long hallway. The light didn't illuminate much. A shiny path on the side.

"No interior lights back here," Palmer said. "They're losing power as well as atmosphere."

Zarges double-checked the specs that he had uploaded to his system. They weren't that far from engineering. Since engineering was so close, they could move faster without gravity.

"Follow me," he said, and propelled himself forward.

He turned on the light on the top of his helmet, kept his knuckle lights on, but shut off the lights on his palm and on the bottom of his boots.

The corridor was dark. But as he passed doors, he realized that the team had entered the ship right-side-up for the interior design.

Which was good. He always hated reorienting himself.

The corridor to engineering looked wider in the darkness than it did on the specs. He turned right, just like he was supposed to, and pushed through the wider corridor.

He was probably moving too fast. But he couldn't slow down entirely. Some of that was his elevated heart rate, and some of it was the small clock he had installed under

his right eye. He had to keep track of time, because he knew they didn't have a lot of it.

The doors to engineering were open, which surprised him. Modern Fleet rules said that doors to major areas should remain closed at all times, particularly if no one was in one of the major areas. That had to be an old procedure. It couldn't have been one that changed in the past century—could it? Because keeping doors closed was just common sense. He didn't have time for speculation, and he certainly didn't have time for that itchy feeling on the back of his neck, making him feel as if something besides the failing systems was wrong here.

The interior of engineering glowed blue. The emergency lighting worked in this section, which meant that the power system was triaging. Only important areas were getting any kind of emergency power at all.

He changed the specs to engineering only and superimposed a clear image over what he could see through his helmet's visor. The general control panel was deeper inside engineering, in an alcove behind some of the equipment.

Not logical, but then, a lot of the Fleet's smaller ships did not have a logical build, especially in ships that didn't have the array of defensive equipment and weaponry that a DV-class vessel had.

He propelled himself toward the alcove, careful to avoid equipment jutting out at him. He was having trouble identifying what it all was in the weird lighting.

There were no sharp edges on Fleet ships (at least the ships he was familiar with), partly for moments just like this. The rounded edges made sure nothing punctured an environmental suit. But banging something too hard could also damage a suit. He didn't want to become part of the emergency himself.

Lights bobbed behind him, letting him know that Iqbar and Palmer were close. Technically, Iqbar should have gone ahead of him, even here, but he didn't care. They had limited time, and the fact that the doors to this engineering area had been open bothered him more than he could say.

The alcove was exactly where it was supposed to be, with enough room for all three of his team. He took the center panel, and they took the side panels.

The center panel looked like it was not functioning. He put his glove on the surface, hoping that perhaps codes would work or perhaps his identification as a member of the Fleet.

The panel sputtered to life. For a moment it glowed red—caution lights everywhere—and then they faded out, leaving only a pale white glow around a few of the command functions.

The illustrations were older—clearly from another era. And try as he might, he couldn't get the virtual screen working. He would have to do any work on the control panel itself.

He ran his glove along the edge, hoping to funnel more energy into the panel.

"Is yours working?" Iqbar asked.

"Barely," he said.

"Mine isn't working at all," Palmer said. Without being asked, he dove underneath the panels and opened the controls from underneath. "It's getting power. There just isn't enough to operate this equipment."

Iqbar crouched beside him and handed him a short-term energy pack from her belt. Zarges waited in front of the main panel.

The team had done this drill a hundred times, but never on a ship this old, and never under this kind of time-crunch.

Still, they worked like it was an everyday mission. Calmly. In control.

The panel powered to life in front of him, nearly blinding him with the layers of red blaring everywhere.

"Got it," he said.

"There's a flaw in the system," Palmer said. "Something's draining the energy at double time. That means we only have two hours, tops."

"If we're still here two hours from now, we've failed." Zarges didn't like the red. Caution lights everywhere.

"I need you over here, Dortha," Zarges said calmly.

She stood beside him, and gasped. He had never heard her gasp during a mission before. If he had been asked just a few moments ago, he would have said that of all of them, Iqbar was the most unflappable.

Her hand hovered over the panel, as if she was afraid to touch it.

"What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Help me figure out which of these caution lights is the most critical." But just as he said it, he saw which of the lights was the most critical.

Something was wrong with the *anacapa* drive.

He touched that caution light, and, for once, the virtual screen appeared. It had even more caution lights and something he had never seen in a ship this large—an ice-blue flare.

*Evacuate immediately.*

"What the hell?" Iqbar asked.

"Someone's tampered with the *anacapa* drive," he said.

"I see that," she said. "But it's not—"

"Looks like they started it incorrectly, then taxed it. If I could figure out what they did, then maybe—"

"That's not reversible." Palmer spoke from behind him. He was leaning over Zarges' shoulder.

The reason Palmer had gone under the control panels was that he was the most adept at handling unfamiliar equipment. He could process information faster than anyone else Zarges had ever worked with.

"Can we forestall it?" Zarges asked. "Maybe buy ourselves more time?"

"Maybe," Palmer said. "I think we're better served getting everyone off this ship and getting as far away from it as possible."

Zarges was afraid he would say that. "I'll let the other teams know they're on point. Dortha, contact the *Aizsargs*. Tell them that they're going to have to move as far away from this ship as possible."

"Yes, sir." Iqbar toggled her comm system so that she contacted the *Aizsargs* directly.

Zarges contacted Khusru.

"Sufia," he said, "we have to evacuate. And our timeline just got a lot tighter. This ship isn't going to last much longer."

He didn't want to explain the *anacapa*. It would be too complicated.

"Got it," she said. And he felt a small measure of relief.

She knew what to do. She had to get to the bridge and begin evacuation procedures from there. She would also do a shipwide announcement if she could.

After he contacted *Rescue One*, he would see if he could find the shipwide coms from down here.

It was always better to have an announcement come from the bridge, though. It gave the order more authority, and often guaranteed faster compliance.

They needed fast compliance. They were going to need every single minute they had. And even then, he wasn't sure they would be able to save everyone.

Just his luck. Another impossible mission.

Because nothing was ever easy in this job.

Nothing at all.

“Captain,” Ullman said. “I found some of the files.”

Dauber moved her gaze away from the screen rising in front of her. She had been watching small golden dots representing her teams from *Rescue One*, moving through the schematics of the old ship. So far, the schematics Ullman had found in the Fleet records matched what they were seeing.

She hadn't monitored communications in real time, though, because she'd learned long ago that doing so gave her the wrong focus. It made her remember that those gold dots represented human beings she knew and cared about, rather than people upon whom the success or failure of a mission rested.

The rest of the bridge crew continued to work the rescue. She walked over to Ullman's side, surprised as always that even when he was sitting down he was nearly as tall as she was.

“Where?” she asked, leaning over his shoulder.

“Here,” Ullman said, expanding the screen he was working on so that she could see the information scrolling by. He processed data faster than she did, which was one reason she liked having him on navigation: he could change directions and figure out if there was a problem faster than anyone on the team. He often saw discrepancies before the computers figured them out.

He was gifted, in a way that she didn't entirely understand.

“Summarize for me,” she said, knowing she wouldn't be able to see half of what he had already absorbed.

“The *Renegat* is, like we thought, an SC-class vessel. It has an undistinguished service record.” He pointed a finger at the three-dimensional image of the ship, spinning in its little informational cocoon.

She couldn't help herself. She looked through his screen at the screen where Almadi was working. The structure of the ship was exactly the same—at least from here.

“So,” she said, “what's the story?”

Because there had to be one. An SC-class vessel didn't just disappear. Fighters sometimes did. Runabouts got stolen. Smaller ships always had troubles. But an SC-class ship usually had a crew of four to five hundred, and an important mission.

“More than a hundred years ago,” Ullman said, “the *Renegat* went on some kind of secret mission, and never returned.”

“What kind of secret mission?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I have no idea. It's still blocked off. I need higher clearance than I have to find out what the *Renegat* was working on.”

That made her frown. Missions over a hundred years old shouldn't have that level of classification.

“Let me try,” she said, and called up her own screen. She opaqued it, put in all of her identification, and looked up the *Renegat*.

She found a bit more about the ship—it had apparently reported in for the first half of its assignment. But once it arrived on site, communication slowed and then vanished.

“Huh,” she said, studying the information in front of her, wondering if she could let Ullman look at the file. A peek would be a small breach of protocol, but her superiors might overlook that in this situation.

“What did you find?” he asked.

“A lot of foldspace travel,” she said. “To where I don't know. And for what reason, I have yet to ascertain. But there are notations on this file that there were time discrepancies appearing in the communications with the Fleet.”

“Time discrepancies?” Ribisi raised his head from his workstation. “From foldspace?”

He'd always cautioned her about letting smaller ships use their *anacapa* drives. His studies of the ships he had engineered for showed that time discrepancies often showed up first in smaller ships. He had once threatened to retire from active duty and move to one of the science ships so that he could study foldspace more thoroughly.

Dauber had never had a better engineer, so she discouraged that thought as subtly as she could.

"I'm not sure what caused the discrepancies," she said. "But there's a notation on the file that the time discrepancies were growing worse each time the *Renegat* traveled through foldspace. The officers in charge of the mission wanted the *Renegat* to return to the Fleet, but the captain—one Ivan Preemas—said that he had arrived at his destination, so returning was just plain silly. That was his last communication."

"And they blamed the silence on time discrepancies?" Almadi asked, sounding skeptical. The entire bridge crew was listening now.

Dauber couldn't discuss too much, now that everyone was listening, not on the open bridge.

"The log doesn't say. But that's the implication," she said. "It was taking them weeks to travel through foldspace."

"Weeks?" Ribisi and Ullman repeated the word at the same time. Everyone else looked just as stunned.

The Fleet did its best to have short foldspace runs, not long ones.

"Yeah," Dauber said. "That's what it looks like. And I can't tell from the information that I have if the weeks to travel through foldspace were unusual or business as usual."

"They sent a single ship on a long foldspace run?" asked Lauritz. "A *Security Class* ship?"

Lauritz's tone reinforced Dauber's surprise. But the fact that Lauritz *was* surprised was even more important, because she had served on SC-class vessels and had briefly captained one during her training to become Chief of Security on a DV-class ship.

Dauber glanced at the image of the darkened ship, her own ships surrounding it, then back. The *Renegat's* mission was a hundred years old, and the ship was clearly in distress. She needed to share this classified information.

Still, she would have to limit it. She would give the information to Almadi and to Ullman, or maybe to Ribisi, Almadi, and Ullman. The key was Ullman. He needed to see this.

"It says here that the *Renegat* left with a new crew. It started out with a complement of 487, but added anywhere from twenty to thirty new crewmembers during two different sector base stops."

"Two sector base stops?" Almadi asked. "How far was this ship traveling?"

Dauber shook her head. "That I can't tell."

"And why the uncertainty on the crew complement?" Ribisi said. "Either there were 507 crewmembers or 517."

"Or something in between," Ullman said.

The vague number was unusual. Everything about this mission was unusual.

"Captain, *Rescue One* is running into some difficulties." Ornitz clearly hadn't been paying any attention to the conversation on the bridge. She had been monitoring *Rescue One's* chatter. "They're saying the *anacapa* drive on the ship is failing. They want us to get as far from the ship as possible. They'll come back to us, if and when they have the crew."

The entire bridge was silent for a half second. The *Renegat* had traveled alone through long swatches of foldspace. It had lost time, and had now appeared a hundred years after it was lost, here, at the edge of a nearly closed sector.

And the *anacapa* drive was in distress.

“Let me see what I can do for that *anacapa* drive,” Ribisi said.

“From a distance,” Dauber said. “We’re moving the *Aizsargs* as far from this as we can and still provide support to *Rescue One*.”

She had never been near an *anacapa* explosion, but she had heard about them. Entire DV-class vessels got destroyed in those kinds of disasters.

Even when an *anacapa* went critical and *didn’t* explode, the energy waves could catapult another ship with a similar drive into foldspace, or destroy the other ship’s drive.

She tapped Ullman’s screen that showed information on the *Renegat*. The screen vanished.

He looked at her, surprised.

“Plot the fastest course without using foldspace,” she said. “We need to move. Now.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and got to work.

Dauber sent the *Renegat’s* crew list to Ornitz.

“Isolate the bridge crew and the heads of departments,” Dauber said. “Send those names to *Rescue One*. Rescues go smoother when you can call someone by name.”

She hoped. Because there was no way to know if the people on board were crew or someone else, no idea if the ship had been stolen or if it had limped home.

All she did know was that the *Renegat* had left the Fleet with about five hundred people and had returned, damaged, a hundred years later, with only two hundred people on board.

She had no idea what she was facing—what her people were facing—and she almost smiled.

An enigma, an adventure, and a challenge, all in one.

She hadn’t realized just how much she had needed all three.

\* \* \*

8

Raina felt stupid being on the bridge. What could she do here, anyway? The power was gone, the atmosphere was leaking, and her suit was dying. The best thing she could do was save herself. There were escape pods somewhere on this vessel. All she needed was to carry a new environmental suit with her, and she was good to go.

Let Yusef continue frantically slapping panels and cursing the dwindling power. He wasn’t asking for her help. He wouldn’t want it if she offered it. He thought he knew what he was doing, and it was pretty clear to her this catastrophe was beyond his meager skills.

He probably wouldn’t even notice if she propelled herself out of this bridge, maybe wouldn’t even notice if she took one of the escape pods.

So she got off the ship. Then what? A pod, a month, maybe, of life support, as she drifted—where? And what did she know about escape pods anyway? Her training in escape pods had been DV training, nearly a decade ago, before she gave up her career to follow the downward spiral that had been India’s lot.

India.

Raina’s heart clenched, and she forced herself to think about something else. Because India would want her to survive.

Right?

Or would she? India had shown a completely different side of herself in those last few hours. India had sided with Captain Preemas—

“You know,” Yusef said. “You could try to fix something.”

Raina could. And she could fail.

"I'm going for a new suit first," she said. "Do you know of any extras close?"

"I'd be able to find you something if the ship's computers were up and running," he said.

She could have too. They could do anything with computers. That was the beauty of it. That was why she thought the *Renegat* would be able to make the trip back. Hell, the ship did 90 percent of the work—most of the time.

When the ship was functioning. Before it had gotten attacked.

A beam of light hit Yusef, outlining his shadow against the dead screen on the wall.

"You did something," she said, feeling excited for the first time. "You got partial lights—"

"That's not me," he said. "I'm not working the lights at the moment."

She would have snapped at him, she *should* have snapped at him, because the lights were part of the environmental system, and if he could fix that, then the atmosphere would return and it would buy them time.

Another light hit him, and then a third. Suddenly light blinded her.

She had to turn sideways to get it out of her eyes.

"What the hell?" Yusef snapped. He looked up and cursed.

She looked over, saw three people in unfamiliar environmental suits near the entrance to the bridge, glowing in the darkness.

"Captain Preemas?" a woman's voice said. It sounded thin and crackly, as if it were coming from very far away.

Raina glanced at Yusef, but couldn't see his face through his helmet. He was staring at the three people like he couldn't believe they were there.

Raina couldn't either. They were looking for *Captain Preemas*? He wasn't on the ship. If the woman were part of the crew flying home, she would know that.

"Who are you?" Raina asked, because Yusef hadn't done anything—not since he'd looked up and cursed. It was as if his brain had stopped working.

"I'm Sufia Khusru," the woman said. Raina couldn't tell which of them was speaking. With the way the lights fell on the environmental suits, Raina couldn't even tell if all three of the people facing her were women or if only one of them was.

"I'm from the *Aizsargs*," the woman was saying. "We saw you, saw your distress, and are here to get you off this ship."

Raina hadn't heard of the *Aizsargs*, but she wasn't sure that meant anything. She wasn't sure she could recite the names of all the ships in the Fleet.

Still, it should have sounded familiar, right?

She swallowed hard. "What's the *Aizsargs*?"

The newcomers glanced at each other, or rather, at the person in the middle. That had to be who was speaking.

"It's a Fleet vessel," the woman said, and she sounded a bit cautious, as if she wasn't sure Raina would know what the Fleet was. "DV-class. We have enough room for everyone on board, but we have limited time to get you to our ship."

Fleet vessel. DV-class. The biggest the Fleet had to offer outside of a few warships—at least these days. Raina's eyes filled with tears, and she willed them away. Someone who knew what they were doing. How had that happened? How had they found a Fleet vessel?

"How do we know you're who you say you are?" Yusef said.

The woman held up the palm of her hand and an image flared, showing a woman's face, and something that looked like a file about her and the Fleet.

Raina had seen such things buried in the personnel files, but never attached to an environmental suit.

"We're with the rescue unit," the woman—Khusru—said. "We need to hurry. And we need to let everyone on the ship know they need to evacuate. We want to use the bridge systems to do that."

"This is too fast," Yusef said. "We don't know who you are—"

"Shut up," Raina snapped. She didn't care if these people were lying about being Fleet. It didn't matter at all. They had come from outside the *Renegat*, they clearly had a ship, and they were offering rescue. "Control panels aren't working here."

"Cayden can handle that," Khusru said, as if Raina knew who this Cayden was. She guessed it didn't matter. He—she?—would do what needed to be done.

One of the newcomers detached from the others and entered the bridge. He—?—moved toward the communications panel. The third member headed toward Yusef, who held up his hands like he was trying to stop that person.

"Can we help?" Raina asked, trying to forestall any crisis. She didn't care what Yusef wanted. Raina wanted—she *needed*—to get off this ship.

"Get me the captain," Khusru said. "We need him to verify the evacuation."

Raina's face grew warm. She was trembling. If they were Fleet like they said they were, then they would want to know what happened to him.

"Um." God, Raina had no idea how to handle this. Not that she had had any idea how to handle any of it in any way all along. "He's not . . . he's not . . . a lot of . . . we're . . ."

She looked at Yusef, who was watching the third new person. Yusef stood near the *anacapa* and that person was heading toward it.

Raina tried again. "We're . . . just trying to get home."

"Home?" Khusru asked.

"Back to the Fleet," Raina said.

"Well," Khusru's tone was all business. "You've done that. Now head to the cargo bay on, I believe, Deck Four. Right? You have a cargo bay on Deck Four?"

Raina swallowed. Her mouth was dry. Her heart was hammering so hard that she could feel it throughout her system. Maybe that was because the suit was failing, not because she was scared.

"We have a cargo bay on four," she confirmed. "Um, and I don't know how you're getting us out of here, but you should know my suit's failing."

"Are there other suits on board that you could use?" Khusru asked.

"I don't know," Raina said. "I was just going to look."

"I'd rather have you evacuate than search for a new suit," Khusru said. "Can you make it to Deck Four without assistance?"

Raina dry-swallowed again, an involuntary movement. God, she was scared.

"Yeah," she said.

"Good. I need both of you off this bridge," Khusru said.

"We have no idea you are who you say you are." Yusef finally found his voice. "We're not leaving the bridge to you."

"Then die with the ship," snapped someone else—another woman. "Because that's what'll happen if you stay here. The problem is, if you don't let us use the comms, the rest of your crew will die too."

"Yusef," Raina said. "Let's go."

"I'm not leaving the bridge," he said. "I'm the only bridge officer left. It would be wrong—"

"You were demoted," Raina said, because she felt she had to. "You were asked to leave the bridge before we even made it to the Scrapheap. You are only up here because I needed the help."

The Cayden person wasn't paying attention to anything she was saying. He—?—was doing something to the comm center.

"Arguing won't help anyone," Khusru said. "Our people have determined that this ship will blow, and it'll be an *anacapa*-based explosion. None of us will survive that."

She pushed herself further into the bridge, heading toward Yusef as well.

"You can choose to stay," Khusru said. "I have no authority over whether or not you evacuate. Only your captain had that, and I assume he's no longer with the ship. So it's your choice. But stay the hell out of the way of my people."

Raina didn't want to hear any more. She wasn't cut out for any of this. She wasn't heroic. That was why she had come home in the first place.

She swallowed a third time. Dammit, that was irritating.

"Deck Four, Cargo Bay One," she said. "Someone will be there?"

"My team knows what to do." Khusru's tone alone dismissed Raina. And Raina didn't care.

She pushed her way out of the bridge, heading toward Deck Four. It was dark in the corridors, although there was some emergency lighting still glowing along the floor.

"Suit," she said. "I need lights."

*Advise leaving hostile environment as soon as possible*, her suit responded.

"I'm trying, please," she said to the suit, as if it were a person, as if it would respond to begging. "Just a few lights, so I can find a new suit."

But none of the lights in this suit worked. The emergency lighting extended through this section. She had a hunch it would be gone below.

Then lights flared around her, casting her shadow, large and imposing, on the closed black door of the elevator to bridge level. Her heart continued to pound much too hard. It was nerves *and* the suit. It had to be.

When she got to the cargo bay—if she got to the cargo bay—she would grab a different suit.

And how would she change into it?

The lights got brighter. She propelled herself forward, not sure what or who was following her.

"Raina," Yusef said in her ear. "Hold up. I'm coming with you."

She wasn't sure if she should be relieved he was joining her or worried that he was no longer on the bridge. Her emotions were catapulting all over the place.

She didn't stop or even slow down.

"Can't," she said. "My suit . . ."

And she let her voice trail off so that he would think that the problem with her suit was causing her to hurry along. Maybe it was. Maybe they could save her in that cargo bay.

Or maybe she would die there, while three strangers took over the *Renegat*.

"They're trying to steal the ship," Yusef said as he caught up to her.

"You don't know that," Raina said. "And why do you care? The ship is falling apart."

She should care too because it was trained into her. She should always care about the ship. The ship was more important than the crew. The ship would outlast the crew. That was what she had learned over all the years.

Protect the ship.

"They pulled me away from the *anacapa*," he said. "They lied. They say it's going to explode."

"I thought you didn't know anything about *anacapa* drives." Her throat constricted, making it hard to get the words out. The three had said that on the bridge. What if they were right?

"I know enough to know that alarms would have deafened us by now if the *anacapa* was malfunctioning," Yusef said.

He moved ahead of her and grabbed her arm, using his momentum to pull her forward. She was getting lightheaded. Was the suit finally completely compromised?

“Even with the power gone?” she asked.

He didn’t answer, and she had worked with him enough these past few weeks to realize that when he didn’t know the answer, he often remained silent rather than firmly stating something that could later be proven wrong.

“Let’s just get to the cargo bay,” she said. “We’ll find out soon enough if they’re telling us the truth.”

She wasn’t sure how they would find that out, exactly, because cargo bays could be locked off from the rest of the *Renegat*. That much she knew.

But she had to trust, just a little.

“We’re going to die, you know,” Yusef said softly.

“I know,” she said, just as softly. “Believe me, I know.”

\* \* \*

9

The *Renegat* had two different cargo bays on two different levels of the ship—at least according to the schematics. The crew of *Rescue One* was trusting the schematics on everything. If the schematics were wrong, two hundred people would die.

The crew of *Rescue One* was trained not to think about those things. Instead, the crew worked the rescue quickly and efficiently. They deployed the large slow ships nicknamed life rafts to the doors of the two cargo bays. The first life raft attached to the main cargo bay door so that when it opened, fifty of the *Renegat’s* crew could get inside. Then *Rescue One* would pull the life raft into its own docking bay.

The timing on this part of the mission had to be precise, because the *Renegat* was going to explode. But the crew of *Rescue One* had done quick and frightening work before and had long ago learned how to compartmentalize.

The second life raft had attached to a different cargo bay door.

Everything was ready.

Now all they needed were the people inside the *Renegat* to open the doors—and escape.

\* \* \*

10

Zarges had found the communications array in the little engineering alcove. Palmer was transferring power to it when the announcement, tagged with a captain’s code, came through Zarges’ helmet, blaringly loud.

*This is the bridge: Evacuate the Renegat immediately. Head to both cargo bays. Follow instructions once you arrive.*

Zarges let out a small sigh of relief. He didn’t have to contact the *Renegat’s* crew from down here, where he wasn’t even certain such a contact was possible.

He hoped the *Renegat’s* crew obeyed the announcement, because Khusru hadn’t cited the captain as her source. Starting with *this is the bridge* wasn’t standard protocol.

“All right,” Zarges said to his team. “We can’t do anything else here. Let’s help with the evacuations.”

Palmer pushed away from the alcove. Iqbar palmed, saying, “I have dibs on Cargo Bay Two.”

Zarges loved her tone, adventurous and light.

It wasn’t that they were having fun, but they were doing a job that they loved, a job that they didn’t want to leave even when given the chance to do so.

They couldn't enjoy it, at least in the moment, or, at least, they couldn't say they were enjoying it.

But this was what they were good at. This was what they were built for.

They should, at least, get some pleasure out of the knowledge that they were doing it well.

\* \* \*

11

The announcement was strange. It sounded official, but it wasn't official. An official announcement would have had more identifiers—who was talking, who was issuing the orders—or it would have had none at all.

Still, Justine Breaux felt a tiny thread of relief.

She was wearing her environmental suit, her boots clamped to the floor of the third deck recreation room. She wasn't alone. Five other people were here, although she didn't know most of them except by their determined faces.

All six of them exercised at the same time every day, using one of the treadmills built into the floor. Only, since the battle (and who thought she would ever experience a battle?), the treadmills hadn't worked.

A lot of things hadn't worked, and she hadn't complained, because she still believed, deep down, that she would get home.

Not that she had ever thought of Sector Base Z as home. She had always hoped for more adventure than she ever would have gotten on a sector base, so she had joined the crew of the *Renegat* when Captain Preemas made a plea for researchers and specialists in foldspace.

It had seemed like a grand plan, like something that would grant her entry into a completely different part of the Fleet. But she should have thought it through.

Almost two dozen Fleet-trained personnel left the *Renegat* at Sector Base Z. Some of them even quit the Fleet. They didn't apply for jobs at the sector base at all.

And they could have. Captain Preemas hadn't reprimanded them, so they hadn't lost their status. Although the status most of them had was tainted. Their service on the *Renegat* was more punishment than promotion. Everyone she had talked to had ended up on this ship, not chosen to be here.

And that had made her feel uncomfortable too.

But after Captain Preemas had recruited her, she had felt good. Captain Preemas had been clear: He needed help for this strange mission he was on, and he hadn't been afraid to ask for it.

She had liked that. She had been a fool.

Particularly since she'd only had rudimentary drills in procedures that everyone else seemed to know from birth.

Like how to deal with a loss of atmosphere, and how to evacuate the damn ship.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked hard, willing the tears away. She was not going to be that person, the one who panicked when faced with something new.

She had put on her own environmental suit when the ship had told them to do so, and she had even helped a couple of the other people. And then she had calmly waited for more instructions, convinced there would be more instructions—or that someone would fix the problem.

She had waited and waited, and she was almost ready to give up, find an escape pod even if that wasn't normal procedure, when the additional instructions came.

And surprisingly—unsurprisingly. Both, really—the additional instructions were to evacuate.

She knew exactly where one of the cargo bays was, because she had entered the ship on that level all those months ago. But finding that bay in the cold and the dark was a whole other matter.

*This is the bridge: Evacuate the Renegat immediately. Head to both cargo bays. Follow instructions once you arrive.*

The repeated announcement jolted her. Whoever was making the announcements—Raina? One of the old bridge crew?—was completely serious about it.

Justine flicked on her suit lights, nearly blinding herself. She had to shut off the lights around her shoulders, but she left the helmet lights on.

The other five people did the same thing.

They were doing what she was doing, which irritated her more than she could say.

Not only was she responsible for herself, she was going to end up being responsible for them too.

The announcement gave no timeline. Just said *immediately*. Which she was taking to mean *yesterday*.

She started forward, realized walking in gravity boots when she was in a hurry was just plain stupid, and hoped she still had the zero-g skills she had acquired at school as a child.

If not, she could always turn the gravity back on and try to run. That would be hard enough.

She had to clear the negative thoughts from her mind.

She could do this.

She walked to the door, the gravity boots making her feel like she was walking underwater, and then grabbed the edges of the doorframe.

With a single voice command, she shut off the gravity in her boots.

Her hands remained gripped on the frame, but her feet lifted. She felt like she was floating on air, even though she knew she wasn't.

"Okay," she said, more to herself than her little flock of followers. "Here goes nothing."

And then she pushed off into the darkened corridor.

\* \* \*

## 12

A dozen people were already in Cargo Bay One when Raina and Yusef arrived. Everyone wore regulation environmental suits, and most had their knuckle lights on. Most were standing on the floor, which meant the gravity in their boots was working.

The lights illuminated the space where everyone was standing. The light was focused and small, rather than the bright lights that usually revealed every part of the cargo bay.

Beyond that cluster of people, the bay was dark and a lot more dangerous than it usually was. All of the cargo that didn't have its own little artificial gravity built into its container or hadn't been tied down in one way or another floated. Raina had to be careful as she moved past boxes and round metal containers. As she floated in closer to the group of people illuminating the center of the bay, she saw another group huddled near the extra-wide bay doors. A few of them had helmet lights trained on the bay doors.

The lights formed competing circles that barely overlapped, leaving parts of the doors in darkness.

She had no idea if standing so close to the bay doors was a good idea or not. There was no airlock in this bay. If those doors opened, then everyone could be sucked into space.

If the doors opened, in theory, the door to the corridor would seal shut, and the rest of the ship would be protected. But she had no idea if that would work now that everything else had failed.

Both groups were eerily quiet. There was no chatter like there had been when the *Renegat* left the Scrapheap, or even in the aftermath of the attack. Maybe everyone knew this was their last chance at survival.

Or maybe they had already given up.

At least there was one blessing in these weird little gatherings of people. At least they couldn't see each other through the helmets. No one would recognize her if she didn't identify herself. If everyone inside the cargo bay knew Raina had arrived, they would start peppering her with questions she couldn't answer.

Now she wished she had told Yusef not to mention her name.

He hadn't said anything so far, but he was the kind of man who would screw something up just because he touched it.

Which made her wonder about the *anacapa* comments the rescuers had made. Was the problem the drive? Had it been hit like Yusef had said? Shouldn't it have exploded if it had?

Or had he screwed it up by trying to fix it?

Her stomach hurt. She didn't know if that was due to the slowly leaking oxygen or because her entire body knew Yusef had screwed up, and she simply didn't want to admit it to herself.

*This is the bridge: Evacuate the Renegat immediately. Head to both cargo bays. Follow instructions once you arrive.*

Third announcement. This was serious.

And then she realized: she had arrived in the cargo bay. Where were the extra instructions?

She glanced at Yusef, an unsettled feeling making her cold.

Were there only three intruders, not three rescuers? Space pirates, come to kill everyone on the *Renegat* by leaving them in the bay, hoping for rescue? Somehow that would be so much worse than actually killing everyone.

Raina glanced at the closed bay doors. The rest of the rescuers just weren't here yet, that was all.

She was going to be fine.

They were going to be fine.

She had to believe it, because if she didn't, she would go completely mad.

\* \* \*

### 13

Zarges took Cargo Bay One. Iqbar was already at Cargo Bay Two. They only had about fifteen minutes left to engineer a rapid evaluation.

He hoped that Palmer's time estimate was off, because Zarges could tell just from the number of people still arriving that nowhere near two hundred people had reached the cargo bays.

"Sufia," he said to Khusru through the suit's comm link, "you need to change the announcement. Tell everyone they have less than five minutes to get here."

"Or what?" she asked. "We leave them behind?"

"If we have to put it that way, yes," he said.

Then he pushed himself inside Cargo Bay One. His suit lights illuminated floating cargo, some right in front of his face. Two groups of people looked like beacons in the darkness. One group stood a little too close to the cargo bay doors.

He had to get to them first.

“You’ve got forty to fifty people inside that bay,” Palmer said. He was still in engineering, still trying to see if he could buy them all more time. “You want me to contact one of the life rafts?”

Zarges felt a surge of irritation. Why was Palmer looking at the number of people in the bay, rather than working on stopping the upcoming explosion?

“I’ve got this,” Zarges said. “You finish up.”

“I have,” Palmer said. “There’s nothing I can do. I’m heading to your bay now. You’re the one with the crowd.”

Zarges didn’t respond. Instead, he threaded his way through the floating cargo to the cargo bay doors. He illuminated his face ever so slightly so that the group of people could see him and toggled his communications link so that it broadcasted on all frequencies.

“My name is Raul Zarges,” he said. “I am with the Fleet.”

Someone moved their hands together, and then everyone did. White gloves slapped against white gloves, but of course, he couldn’t hear anything.

For a half second, he wondered if this was some strange custom that he had never heard of, and then he realized they were applauding him. Even though they knew he couldn’t hear them.

He felt a small rush of relief. He had been wondering if the people on board this ship had stolen it or if they even knew what the Fleet was.

Maybe they didn’t. Maybe they were just applauding the fact that he was an outsider. Those details didn’t matter, though. What mattered was getting these people off this ship.

“I need the group nearest the doors to move to the middle of the bay. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the Fleet’s rescue technology, but in case you aren’t, we’re attaching ships we call ‘life rafts’ to the side of the ship. In a few minutes, you’ll be able to step through the doors onto the life raft.”

Everyone was facing him. He couldn’t see through their helmets. All he could see were images of his face, illuminated in pale brown light, reflected back at him.

“The raft can only hold fifty people.”

He paused there, and he shouldn’t have, because they stirred, as if they were afraid a large number of people would be left behind.

“Our scans show that there are about two hundred people on this ship,” he said. “Is that right?”

No one answered him. On the far end of the bay, he saw more lighted figures entering.

And then another announcement:

*You have less than five minutes to get to the cargo bays. We are beginning evacuations, and we are on a clock. The ship is falling apart. You have to hurry.*

The group in front of him stirred again. He was beginning to think they were Fleet, because if they weren’t they would have already started pushing and shoving to get as close to the door as possible.

“I need to know,” he said as the announcement ended. “Are there two hundred people on this ship? Or are there more in some area that my scans can’t reach? The brig, maybe, or some kind of container in one of the medical bays?”

Again, no one answered him. He was beginning to wonder if they could communicate through the comm links.

“I’m not starting the evacuation until someone answers me,” he said, even though that wasn’t true.

“We have 199 people on board,” said a woman’s voice. She sounded like an authority. The farthest group parted slightly, as she used the shoulders and helmets of her

colleagues to propel herself forward. "No one is in the brig, and there's nothing in the medical bay that should block a Fleet scan."

"Good," Zarges said. "Thank you. Then we're starting the evacuation."

The woman was only a few feet from him. He reached up, grabbed her arm, and pulled her closer.

She struggled.

"My suit . . ." she said. "Please."

"This won't hurt your suit," he said. "Stand near me."

"My suit is failing," she said. "Please let go of it."

Instead of letting go, he pulled her with him toward the bay doors. If her suit was failing that meant others probably were as well.

"*Rescue One*," he said on a private channel, "prepare the life rafts. I will be opening the bay door and sending evacuees to you."

"Copy that," came the response.

"Do you know how to operate the bay doors manually?" he asked the woman he was holding.

"No," she said. "And please, let me go."

He did, since it was causing her so much distress. "Does anyone know how to manually operate the bay doors?"

Someone toward the back raised a hand, with palm light on, nearly blinding him. He turned away because he had to.

"You, then," he said, sounding as authoritarian as he could. "Help me open the doors. The rest of you step through them in a *calm* and *orderly* fashion. I will be informed when we reach the fifty-person limit. At that moment, I will close the bay doors while the first life raft leaves and a second takes its place."

He couldn't ask them if they understood. He wouldn't be able to see their responses and he didn't want the comm links filled with chatter.

The person who had raised his—her?—hand was already heading to the wall nearest the doors. Zarges followed, just as another announcement resounded through the comm links.

*You have less than three minutes to get to the cargo bays. We are beginning evacuations, and we are on a clock. The ship is falling apart. You have to hurry.*

The person who knew how to work the doors was hanging onto a handle near an open panel.

"Now?" he asked.

"Yes," Zarges said.

The panel looked familiar, but Zarges was glad he had asked for help. His new assistant hit two different buttons, then pulled a small lever. If this panel worked the way similar manual controls worked, the lever activated some pulleys and the doors would slide on the built-in rails as smoothly as if the computers had guided them.

For a half second, the doors remained closed, and Zarges' heart started hammering. He didn't know if he could wedge doors that large open, and he didn't want to fire on them, not with people this close, and not with the life raft attached to the outside of the ship.

Then the doors wobbled. They opened unevenly—the door closest to him moving faster than the door on the other side.

Light from the life raft poured into the bay. The life raft looked surprisingly small compared to the bay, but it didn't matter. Evacuees poured onto the life raft before he could even give the order.

He hadn't even set up his counting system.

On the private channel, he asked, "You're monitoring the numbers?"

"We have it," came the reply.

Which was good, because he didn't.

In less than a minute, the evacuees closest to the life raft had already entered it. A handful more stepped across the threshold when a voice said, "That's it. Make them stand back."

"That's it," he repeated on the comms. "That raft is at maximum capacity. We have another waiting. Step back and we'll set up."

Those who had started into the raft continued forward as if he hadn't spoken, but the next group of people did stop, thank heavens. He'd conducted rescues where he'd had to hold off the evacuees with weapons, just to keep things orderly.

He was glad that wasn't happening here. Looking up, he saw that no one stood in the actual doors, and he said to his helper, "Close the doors."

The helper hit another button that Zarges hadn't seen, and then pushed up on the lever. The doors closed much more easily than they had opened.

More people lined up, some leaving their head and shoulder lights on. The junk floating around the bay seemed like it was aiming at the lights, when he knew it wasn't.

The evacuees shifted again. He recognized their movements. They were on the edge of panic. It wouldn't take much to tip them over.

The last thing he wanted was another announcement. That would frighten them worse, particularly since they had probably passed the time deadline that Iqbar had set.

He switched to the private *Rescue One* channel. "Dorthea, no more announcements. We need to finish the evacuation."

"Already ahead of you," she said. "We left the bridge a few minutes ago. There was no way to make that announcement automated. Do we know if everyone has arrived at the cargo bays?"

"I don't," he said. "*Rescue One*, do you have the figures?"

"There are sixty-eight people in Cargo Bay One, and twenty-three remaining in Cargo Bay Two."

*Great*, he thought but didn't say; they would have to move people from this bay to the next one over.

"Can we make three stops here?" he asked.

"We can, but that doesn't solve one issue. Nine people have not yet arrived at either bay."

He felt cold. Either he could send some team members to find the remaining evacuees or he could abandon them. He'd never abandoned people in a rescue before, although with this kind of emergency, the Fleet policy was to abandon those who hadn't arrived before the time limit.

"Are they on their way?" Zarges asked.

"Looks like it."

"Then I'll wait for them," he said. "I'll get them off this ship."

Somehow. After he evacuated 91 more people.

Before the exploding ship killed them all.

\* \* \*

Everything looked the same in the dark. The walls, the floor, the ceiling. The doors weren't even labeled. Not with real printing. When the power was working, all Justine had to do was touch a door, and the name of the department would flare at her.

She hadn't memorized the ship, not in that unconscious way that would have allowed her to get around it in the dark and the cold, leading five other people, none of whom had corrected her, and said, *You're going the wrong way*.

She was, though. She had to be. Because she should have been to Deck Four by now. Had she gone down too far? Not far enough? Taken the wrong ladder? Turned the wrong direction?

She had no idea, and her suit—the regulation, ill-fitting suit she had pulled out of the recreation room—had no map. What kind of suit had no built-in map?

“Does anyone know where we are?” she asked. “Does anyone have a map?”

One of the others brushed against the wall and tapped it, as if expecting one of the built-in maps to appear. But of course it didn't. The *power* was off. Hadn't these people realized that? There wasn't even enough atmosphere for them, because otherwise they wouldn't have to wear the damn suits.

Those tears that had been threatening came back and she blinked them away.

Had she missed the opportunity? Had the rescuers, whoever they were, already gotten everyone else off the *Renegat*?

Was she going to die here, with five people whose names she didn't even know, on a failing ship because she got turned around?

Because she never bothered, in all the time she'd been here, to learn how to find her way around without electronic help?

What was wrong with her, anyway?

She was panicking. That was what was wrong.

If she continued to panic, she *would* die. And these hangers-on, these people who couldn't think for themselves, they would die too.

And she would have them on her conscience.

She giggled. She wouldn't have a conscience. She would be dead. And dead people didn't have a conscience.

Or at least, she didn't think they did.

She stopped, patted her damn suit, then pushed on the fingertips of her gloves. Some suits she'd used, some of the really sophisticated new ones, brought up maps that way.

But of course this one didn't.

“Suit,” she said, “can you put a map of the *Renegat* on my visor?”

She hoped she wasn't broadcasting to the others. But then what did it matter if she *was* broadcasting? She was trying to save all of them. And if she didn't say anything, she would literally—*literally*—die of embarrassment.

No map appeared.

And no one else stepped up or said anything. These people were starting to drive her crazy. She could only try one more thing.

“Suit,” she said, “show me how to get to Cargo Bay One from here.”

Lights flared around her eyes. A red trail led to her right. She turned, then spun. She had limited zero-G skills, and that movement hadn't helped. In fact, it had probably contributed to her getting turned around.

She grabbed part of the wall, saw a hand on her leg, and realized she hadn't even felt it. She looked over, and someone—one of the others, another woman—was holding onto her, helping her out of the spin.

The red trail was now behind Justine. She had no idea exactly how that had happened. And to make matters worse, she was dizzy.

But there was a red trail. And it led down a corridor. And even if the damn trail was wrong, it was a chance.

She couldn't let a chance go by. She just couldn't.

“Thank you,” she said to the person who stabilized her. “Thank you.”

And then she eased herself around, using the wall as a brace. When she faced the corridor exactly, she pushed off, careened a little to the side, had to push off that wall, and forced herself forward.

*Like swimming*, her father had told her all those years ago. He had actually served on a Fleet ship. Maybe she had joined the *Renegat* because she had been emulating him. *Think of it like swimming but without the force of the water pushing against you.*

She hadn't understood that until now. She could handle swimming. She would use the walls like water, using them to propel herself forward when she needed to.

And she needed to.

Because that *be here in five minutes* announcement had occurred at least ten minutes ago.

*Please don't leave without us*, she thought, forcing herself not to whisper the words out loud. *Please. Please don't leave without us. We'll be right there. We're trying. We just got lost. Please. Please don't leave us behind.*

The knot in her stomach told her that she didn't believe she would make it to the cargo bay in time. She would die here.

But at least she would die trying.

\* \* \*

15

The man, the rescuer in charge, the one who had said he was from the Fleet, had shoved Raina into the thing he called the life raft. Maybe he had this misguided impression that she would stay behind and help the others.

But her suit was dying. She wasn't going to be any good to anyone if she couldn't help herself.

Other people were also shoved into the life raft. Lights were on—and she hadn't realized just how much she had missed lights. Good lights, lights that illuminated everything.

And everything here was just soft walls on all sides. Designed, probably, for people who had no environmental suits or who had been injured. There were straps on each wall and there appeared to be built in sleeping compartments, like bags attached to the walls.

It took her a moment to realize those bags were for people who were unconscious or injured or unable to hold onto straps themselves.

Things could be a lot worse. Everyone could have been so damaged they wouldn't have been able to move on their own.

She swallowed, still too lightheaded for her own good.

The cargo bay door closed and then a film covered the opening. Now she was really inside some kind of cube, even though it wasn't dark.

Yay! It wasn't dark. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to handle the dark again.

*Welcome*, said an androgynous voice in her helmet. *You are on a small rescue vessel on its way to Aizsargs Rescue One, a large rescue ship that will take you to the Aizsargs, a vessel in service to the Fleet. In less than a minute, the atmosphere will reestablish itself inside this vessel. You will be able to remove your environmental suit's helmet, should you be wearing one. You do not have to remove the helmet if you are more comfortable with it on.*

Raina let out a small sigh of thanks. She would be all right after all.

She felt heavier than she had in hours, maybe days, and she realized that the gravity had reestablished itself too. Her feet actually touched the part of this vessel that was currently serving as the floor.

Everyone around her had hit that part of the floor too. A few people hadn't held straps and had fallen onto the floor. No wonder it was made of soft material. She wondered how long it had taken the Fleet to realize it needed soft interiors on its

rescue rafts for just this moment, when gravity reasserted itself, and some people fell so hard that in any other environment they would have been injured.

*There, the voice said, as if it had heard her thought. Atmosphere has been reestablished. You may now remove your helmets if you are so inclined.*

Raina clawed at hers, her gloved hands unable to find purchase for a moment, before she remembered she had to unhook from the inside, with a very simple command. Her brain wasn't functioning well—probably due to diminished oxygen.

She pulled off her helmet and felt cool air on her face. She took a deep *deep* breath, and realized just how long it had been since her lungs had truly been filled with air.

A couple of other people removed their helmets as well, and shook their heads like they were getting rid of dust. Maybe they were. All of them had hair matted to their scalps, which told her that their environmental suits hadn't worked well either.

Apparently no one had tested the damn suits in some time, if ever, and that was wrong all by itself. She took another deep breath, enjoying it, not realizing until now how much she had feared never being able to breathe like this again.

*Your journey to Aizsargs Rescue One will not take long.*

The voice clearly wasn't just playing in helmets. It was also being broadcast into this little ship. Into the *atmosphere* of this little ship, where sound waves actually had something to vibrate through.

She wanted to clasp her hands together in another spontaneous applause moment, but she didn't. No one else would understand it if she did.

*Once we have docked, you will be able to step off this vessel onto Aizsargs Rescue One. From there, you will receive instructions on where you will go next. Please exit quickly upon arrival. This vessel is designed to return to the site of the rescue to remove more survivors. The quicker you exit, the more likely we will be able to help your friends, family, and colleagues.*

Raina leaned against the wall, but she still couldn't let go of the strap that had been holding her up. Nor did she completely set aside the helmet, just in case something else went wrong.

*Again, welcome aboard.*

She didn't care that the words came from a recording. They comforted her, and they seemed to calm the others—at least the others who had their helmets on.

Everyone still seemed tense though, and no one let go of the straps. The people who had never grabbed them in the first place just sat where they had landed on the floor, as if they were afraid to move.

It didn't quite seem real, this rescue. And maybe it wasn't. Maybe she had died.

But she didn't think so. Because she was breathing. And that, all by itself, was the greatest thing she had experienced in weeks.

One breath in, one breath out, gave her a feeling of safety that she would have scoffed at months ago.

One breath in. One breath out. Safe.

Finally.

Safe.

\* \* \*

Three more stragglers had found their way to Cargo Bay Two just as Iqbar prepared to close her life raft. She contacted Zarges, asked him if the remaining six people had arrived in his Cargo Bay.

"Not yet," he said. But Palmer had. And so had Khusru and her team.

He was loading the last of his evacuees onto the life raft. He didn't see any lights coming through the doors.

But he couldn't leave six people behind.

"This ship is pretty unstable," Palmer said. "We can't wait."

"I know," Zarges said to him. "Here's what I want to do. I want you and the rest of the team to get into the life rafts and go back to *Rescue One*. Disconnect the bridge remotely."

Palmer brought his head up as the others, listening in on the comm, made noises of protest. "What will you do?" He asked.

"I'm going to find the missing six," Zarges said. "Get the life raft back to *Rescue One*, then send one last life raft here."

What he didn't add was that if the ship blew, they might lose a life raft. But he didn't really care. He was willing to risk losing one life raft to save six lives.

Besides, if it didn't work, he would not be around to face the consequences. If the Fleet got pissy about the loss of equipment, everyone could blame him.

Rightfully.

"I'll stay too," Palmer said.

"No," Zarges said. "They're probably not that far from here. I just have to wait and get them onboard. I know how to work the doors now, and I can do this without help."

"Are they nearby?" Palmer asked *Rescue One*.

"They are not. But they will arrive within ten minutes."

Palmer flicked his light on inside his helmet so that Zarges could see his face. Palmer shook his head, his mouth a thin line.

His message was clear. He didn't believe they had ten minutes.

But he wasn't going to say that because, like Zarges, he didn't want someone to overrule them and keep the life raft away from the *Renegat*.

Those six people needed a chance.

"I'll wait for them," Zarges said. "You need to go. I want *Rescue One* as far from this ship as possible. Once the life raft disengages from this ship, then *Rescue One* can come get us. Not a moment sooner."

Palmer closed his eyes for just a moment, the blink long and slow and deliberate. They both knew the timing would be dicey at best. Life rafts were slow things, without a lot of power. Even though Zarges could control it from the inside, he wouldn't be able to get it out of the blast radius quickly if the ship followed the projected schedule.

*Rescue One* might decide it was too dangerous to pull the final life raft to safety.

And that was a decision he would be fine with. They all would, in different circumstances.

Even waiting for these six people was probably a bad idea. But he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't. He couldn't. He would always imagine them arriving just as the bay doors closed a final time, waiting in the dark and cold for a rescue that was never, ever going to come.

He couldn't be responsible for that.

He wouldn't be.

Not after the last time. He had lost dozens of people on that rescue.

He wasn't about to lose six more.

\* \* \*

"He's going to do what?" Dauber said. She looked at the kaleidoscope of images rising about her tablet, all in three dimensions. *Rescue One* hung back, two life rafts heading toward it, with a third making a repeat visit to the disabled vessel.

The trail of atmosphere had finally ceased, and she didn't like that. She also didn't like the look of the telemetry she had scrolling on one side.

There was an increase in energy. Unstable energy, the kind she'd seen coming out of foldspace in the past.

She had ordered the fighters away from the ship almost an hour ago, and she'd been sweating *Rescue One*. The readings from the *Renegat's anacapa* drive showed that it was terribly unstable, and the resulting explosion would be catastrophic.

*Rescue One* already had one hundred survivors on board. She could order *Rescue One* to return to the *Aizsargs* now, but that bordered on cruel. She had—she hoped—the extra few minutes for the remaining two life rafts to dock with *Rescue One*.

But the third one? That was a wish. Not even a prayer. It wasn't going to survive.

"He thinks the missing six passengers will arrive in time," Ornitz said.

"I knew I shouldn't have sent him," Dauber said. "He's gotten soft."

"It's not soft to try to rescue six people," said Lauritz.

"It is when it will cost more lives and equipment," Dauber snapped. "Zarges knows that. He knows what the regulations are. Throughout his entire career, he's made the right call. This is the first time he hasn't."

"The first time he's been out in almost a year," Almadi said softly. "Perhaps he wasn't ready."

"Or perhaps," Ullman said just as softly, "he decided he didn't want to lose anyone again."

"He doesn't get to make that decision," Dauber said.

But Zarges had. Because she couldn't recall the life raft. It was nearly to the ship. And he had already stayed behind.

One of her best officers, and he was on a suicide mission to save six people he didn't even know, people who might have nothing to do with the Fleet, people who could be thieves or murderers, people who didn't deserve his sacrifice.

She folded her hands together, then squeezed them tight. Damn him.

Damn him for taking the choice away from her.

Damn him for making her watch this, even when she knew it was going to go all wrong.

\* \* \*

18

Finally, Cargo Bay One.

Justine let out a small breath, feeling the relief. She was here. *They* were here.

And the doors leading into the cargo bay were open.

She pushed off the corridor's wall with a little more force than she had planned. She was so *thrilled* to be here. She fairly flew into the bay, and then ducked, because something floated by her. The duck caused her to spin, and she was losing control, so she activated the gravity on her boots, hoping they would find the floor, not a wall.

They found a wall. She was jutting out just like a badly designed light fixture. And she felt stupid, because the rest of the crew would see her like this.

She walked down the wall, put a tentative foot on the floor, and saw the rest of her little troop float in. Their lights illuminated the floating cargo, and just a small section of the bay. And that was when she realized there were no other lights. She couldn't see other people in environmental suits. She didn't see anyone else.

Her heart sank. They were too late. They had missed the rescue because she had gotten lost, because she hadn't known how to get to the cargo bays in the dark. Maybe this was the wrong bay. Maybe this was something else. But the map had led

her here, and this *looked* like a cargo bay. It had to be a cargo bay, right? It couldn't be anything else. She turned, slowly, picking up her sticky gravity boots and moving. No. No one. No other lights.

And she had no idea how to get around the ship, let alone find the escape pods.

If there were any left.

Then she saw a lighted figure directly ahead of her. For a moment, she thought she had imagined it. It looked like an angel. A glowing, beautiful, human-shaped angel.

"Hello?" she said tentatively.

"Hurry up," the angel said. "Get to the cargo bay doors. We have one last life raft coming to get us. How many are with you?"

"There are five," she said, then looked around her. The others were pushing forward, trying to get to the angel. "Six, counting me. I'm not sure if their comms work properly. They haven't said anything to me since we started."

"Can you hear me?" the angel asked them.

A couple of people nodded. Of course. She should have asked that.

"Can you respond?" he asked, and no one did.

Justine felt her cheeks heat. At least there was a reason they had glommed onto her. She could communicate with them. She walked in her boots, and when that worked as poorly as it had back in the rec room, she shut off the gravity. She pushed off the floor with her feet, aiming her body at the angel.

He had moved to the side of the bay doors, and was doing something over there. Then the doors rose and a lighted room appeared.

Light, with a lot of empty space. A rescue vehicle, just like he had said.

She entered it with the other five. They bounced in, and he followed.

"Where's everyone else?" she asked.

"You're the last," he said, then did something with his hand. The door they had come in sealed up.

"Who are you?" she asked, feeling stupid that she hadn't done that before. She had been panicked and not thinking, and even though the panic was fading, she still felt a little on edge, as if she couldn't quite believe she was rescued.

"My name is Raul Zarges," he said. "I'm with the rescue team. I'm taking you to our ship. It'll take a little longer than usual. But you're safe now."

Safe. She wanted to hug him. She wanted to scream with relief. Instead, she felt herself get heavier as gravity came on.

Then an androgynous voice said, *Welcome. You are on a small rescue vessel on its way to Aizsargs Rescue One, a large rescue ship. . . .*

And she felt herself relax.

She was safe. *They* were safe.

They had been rescued.

And it was over.

\* \* \*

If Dauber had less training, she would have been watching events unfold in real time with her hands covering her mouth. As it was, she had to thread her hands together so that she wouldn't show the tension that had woven its way through her body.

*Rescue One* had 193 of the people from the *Renegat* safe and sound in the hold designed especially for that purpose. The crewmembers were not allowed to mingle with the evacuees, because they had arrived from foldspace, with some kind of time differential.

Fleet rules: anyone who had gone through some kind of time change like that needed to be informed of that change slowly. In the past, the Fleet had simply told the ship's crew of the change and expected them to deal with it. But most hadn't dealt with it at all. The Fleet had lost valuable crew that way. Some had quit, others had spiraled downward, losing their ability to function in any capacity that required them to travel in and out of foldspace.

Dauber was following regulations, even if Zarges wasn't.

She watched the life raft leave the dying *Renegat*, moving much too slowly. At least all the other vessels were nowhere near the *Renegat*. The energy spikes were getting more and more frequent and erratic. She didn't like what she was seeing.

She had a hunch her team didn't either, although they weren't saying anything.

Everyone was waiting for that damn raft to get as far from the *Renegat* as possible.

When this was over, she would recommend to the brass that any future rafts built by the Fleet have some kind of faster engine built in. She knew the rafts didn't have them because they were designed to be operated from a distance or by injured survivors.

The Fleet had learned the hard way not to give the inexperienced a lot of choices.

But they had needed this choice right now.

"How far is safe for that life raft?" Ornitz asked, breaking the unofficial silence.

"Dunno," Ribisi said, and if the Chief Engineer didn't know, then no one did.

The life raft moved at an excruciating pace no matter what image Dauber looked at.

In two dimensions, the life raft seemed like a flat rectangle that wasn't moving at all. In three dimensions it was a cube that barely inched forward—which she could only tell by the stars and planets behind it, appearing or disappearing as the cube blocked them.

Only in telemetry could she really see how well the life raft was gaining on *Rescue One*.

"At this pace, it'll take them about twenty minutes," Ullman said, but for whose benefit Dauber didn't know. She had seen the timing, and she was sure the rest of this bridge crew could see it too.

Twenty excruciating minutes, as the energy spiked and whipped like something she had never seen before. Twenty excruciating minutes—

Ribisi cursed.

Dauber raised her head, searched the images for an anomaly, saw it on the sensors first. Something was actually registering as hot on the far end of the *Renegat*.

"Where is that coming from?" she asked Ribisi.

"Bridge," he said.

And she knew. She *knew* it was all over.

She knew it before that heat image engulfed that entire part of the *Renegat*, before the anomaly became light on the two- and three-dimensional images she was monitoring, before the light spread outward like hands clawing at the edges of space.

Before the light engulfed the life raft and it disappeared completely.

She should have ordered *Rescue One* to move as far from the anomaly as they could, but she didn't. Because she knew they would ignore that order, and it would be on the record, and she didn't want their disobedience on the record.

Because they were waiting—hoping—Zarges would get out.

The light spread outward, the edges of it reaching—reaching—reaching—toward *Rescue One*, and then falling off, as if the edges couldn't maintain.

The light faded and disappeared almost as a unit.

She glanced at the area where the *Renegat* had been, half expecting to see debris, but she saw nothing. She also expected to see the edges of a foldspace opening, but she didn't see that either. It was as if the *Renegat* had not existed.

And there was no life raft.

She would have sunk into her chair if she had allowed herself a captain's chair. But these sorts of moments were exactly why she didn't.

She had to be strong for her crew.

"Any sign of the life raft?" she asked, sounding much calmer than she expected. It sounded like she had had no emotional reaction at all.

"No." Ullman's voice shook. "They're gone."

"Did that explosion send them into foldspace?" Lauritz asked. She clearly wasn't used to seeing other ships go into foldspace.

Dauber was. She knew the answer before Ullman spoke up.

A ship gave off a certain signature when it headed into foldspace. There was no signature here.

"No," Ullman said. "The ship—the derelict ship, and the life raft. They're gone." Then he cleared his throat. "Destroyed."

That last word reverberated into a growing silence.

That word would demoralize the crew if Dauber wasn't careful. She had to handle it correctly, right now.

"One hundred and ninety-three survivors will arrive on this ship within the hour," she said. "We need to prepare for them. We lost Raul Zarges, but these survivors have lost their home and their friends. Follow protocol. Let me handle the difficult information. And remember one thing."

Everyone was looking at her, their expressions bland, but their eyes filled with anguish.

"We *rescued* 193 people we hadn't even known about when we got out of bed this morning. 193 lives. Saved. Keep that close to your heart as you mourn Raul."

She didn't add the one thing that might also have given them comfort. He had *chosen* to go back, chosen to violate her orders, chosen to take a risk that she knew—they all probably knew—wouldn't pay off.

If she had mentioned that, it would seem like she approved of his actions in retrospect, and she did not. His heroics cost her a good crewman and one life raft.

And would interrupt her sleep for years.

The bridge crew was still looking at her. For a moment, she wondered if those thoughts had floated across her face. But she hadn't felt like she moved at all.

She took a deep breath and said softly, "After we get the newcomers settled, we will plan a memorial for Raul. But we have work to do first."

That settled it. Heads bent, fingers moved, Lauritz left the bridge to coordinate the arrival of the survivors of the *Renegat*.

And Dauber wished for a big, welcoming captain's chair, to enfold her and support her, just for a few minutes.

But she didn't have one. So she stood, and moved through the rest of her day.

Just like she was supposed to.

\* \* \*

Raina stood in the middle of a crew cabin like none she had ever seen before. It was small, but it had a sleeping alcove that had an optional pocket door, a couch, and a comfortable chair near the wall screen that was showing space images right now, a small dining table near an even smaller galley kitchen, designed more for automated food than cooking anything. The bathroom had a full-sized shower with a sonic and a water option.

Opulent, by *Renegat* standards.

By any standards.

And yet, it was clear that she was now aboard another Fleet vessel. The *Aizsargs*, a ship she had never heard of. That had initially bothered her, but the efficiency with which the rescuers had taken the *Renegat* survivors from the life rafts to the rescue ship to this ship to already-set-up quarters had been nothing short of stunning.

Four hours ago, she thought she was going to die horribly.

Now she sat in a crew cabin that would be hers until the *Aizsargs* rejoined the Fleet.

No one would tell her when that was, or what mission the *Aizsargs* was on. She was told there would be a briefing later, but she needed to rest first, maybe eat something from that small kitchen.

Maybe test out the shower.

The closet had clothes, loose ones that fit most people, and two environmental suits. She had checked for environmental suits right away.

This had been close. And she knew, without anyone telling her, that the *Renegat* was gone. It was in their eyes, the way they danced around the subject, the fact that there would be a briefing later.

She didn't blame them for withholding information. She was so grateful to be here and be alive.

She would owe these people forever.

She sat in one of the chairs near the table, resting her arms on the smooth surface. Gravity. Air. Light. She had taken it all for granted.

She would never do so again.

\* \* \*

## 21

Dauber gave the survivors of the *Renegat* three days to settle. She had parsed out the information about the loss of the ship slowly and still hadn't told them about the time differential. That she might leave to the Fleet. She didn't have enough counselors on board to deal with 193 people who just found out that they had lost one hundred years of their own history.

Still, Dauber needed information. She wasn't sure what she had here. She knew enough now to understand that all the survivors had served on the *Renegat* in one capacity or another. But she didn't know if they had mutinied or stolen the ship. There was talk of a battle, but she didn't know what that was about.

So she went to see the person everyone called their leader. A woman by the name of Raina Serpell, who had come up in the records as one of the best linguists in the Fleet. Her file had been tagged as noteworthy only in that she had been married to a real screw-up and had followed the screw-up onto the *Renegat*.

From what Dauber could tell, everyone on the *Renegat* had been demoted or given one last chance, except Raina Serpell. And then the *Renegat* had been sent on a top-secret mission.

Dauber met Raina Serpell in Raina's small cabin. Dauber hated these kinds of tasks. She had found honesty worked the best.

"I need to know something before I bring you back to the Fleet," she said. "What happened to your captain and the other three hundred crew members?"

She was braced for the answer—grievances, the difficulties of being so far from home, the anger building, and then . . . something awful, maybe even murder. Although she doubted Raina would admit to murder.

Raina swallowed hard. She looked sad, which Dauber had expected.

And then Raina said, "He left us."

Dauber had also expected euphemisms. So she nodded. “How did he leave, exactly?”

“We were sent to a Scrapheap,” Raina said. “He took a ship from the Scrapheap itself, took most of the crew, and said he was never coming back to the Fleet. He held a vote. We chose between going home or following him. He expected everyone to follow him. And most of them did. Most of the *competent* ones did. The rest of us thought—I thought—we *all* thought—it would be so easy to get home. But it wasn’t.”

She ended that almost in a whisper.

Dauber froze. If it was a lie, it was a creative one. But something told her that it wasn’t a lie.

“Why didn’t Preemas and the others want to come back to the Fleet?” she asked.

“All the regulations,” Raina said. “They chafed against the regulations, claimed the regulations didn’t let them make the right choices, do the right jobs—they hated the Fleet. All of them. And then they found some working ships in the Scrapheap, and were far enough away that the Fleet couldn’t go after them easily, and they . . . left us.”

She swallowed hard again, eyes filling with tears. But she took a deep breath, as if she were steeling herself to say more.

“They didn’t think the Fleet cared about them.” She didn’t blink, so the tears hovered. “They thought the Fleet would let others die to save equipment and more important personnel. They were clearly wrong.”

Years of captaining and keeping her emotions to herself kept Dauber from reacting.

The missing crew of the *Renegat* had been right. She had spent the last three days angry with Zarges for not following orders.

For sacrificing himself and a life raft, on a stupid attempt to save six lives that would have been lost anyway.

Dauber had to ask. “And your wife?”

Raina closed her eyes. The tears finally escaped. “She chose to go with Captain Preemas.”

And in that sentence, an entire lifetime. Heartache. A story that Dauber wasn’t sure she ever wanted to hear.

Then Raina opened her eyes. “Thank you for saving us.”

Dauber made herself smile.

“My pleasure,” she said, and as the words came out, she realized they were true. It was her pleasure to save the survivors of the *Renegat*. No matter who they were or what they had done.

The rescue was one of the few bright spots in a routine mission.

Dauber had to remember, just like her crew did, that 193 lives had been saved.

A victory that no one could take away from her, no matter what the future held.

A victory her entire crew had all won. Including Zarges.

Maybe even especially Zarges.

Because he had been right: they had to try, against all odds.

Dauber needed to remember that in her future. Sometimes the gamble didn’t pay off and people died.

But sometimes the gamble did pay off.

And lives were saved.

It was a victory, with a hell of a cost. But a victory all the same.

Dauber smiled at Raina, and stood.

They both had a lot of thinking to do. Thinking, adjustments, and changes.

But the two of them could make those changes—because of Zarges.

Dauber, and everyone from the *Renegat*, could move forward. Like the Fleet always did.

Forward.

Forever.