

THE COURT MARTIAL OF THE *RENEGAT* RENEGADES

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch tells us, “In Spring of 2021, I did a Kickstarter to kick start the next books in my Fey series. I couldn’t get to them on my own, so I asked the readers for help. They contributed for a novella, which I knew would start me on that road. I wrote it. It’s out now, *The Reflection on Mount Vitaki*. And then I went right into some background history novels set in that world. I finished the first, *The Kirilli Matter*, in March, and it’ll be out in early 2023. By the time folks read this, I will have finished the second, *Barkson’s Journey*, and started the third. During this same period, I wrote a nonfiction book about the process called *Lessons From The Writing of The Fey*, which will be out by the time this issue is published. I’m taking breaks between the books to write in my other series, like *Diving*, or to commit short fiction.” The author’s latest work has haunted her since she finished her gigantic book—*The Renegat*. The court martial didn’t fit in that novel, and she wanted to write about the trial. We couldn’t squeeze the entire short novel into this issue, so it will conclude in our November/December 2022 issue.

PART ONE

1

A hand slapped the side of her desk, jarring Lucinda Arias awake. She had drool on her left cheek, which she wiped off with a knuckle that wasn’t entirely clean. She couldn’t remember the last time she took a shower.

"Hey, Arias," a male voice said near her. "Snap to."

God, she hated that old phrase. And the fact that someone had used it meant she was dealing with the Old Man.

She blinked, wiped off her mouth, wished her hair was combed, and sat up. The office was mostly empty. It was a cavernous room that no one had bothered to fix up. Some of the protective tiles had fallen off the ceiling when she was a young lawyer, and they hadn't been replaced in decades.

The office also had a distinctive odor of burned coffee and human sweat. Sometimes she thought that scent was baked in. She really didn't smell the coffee right now, and she suspected the smell of sweat came from her.

The nighttime lights were on, which hadn't caused her to fall asleep—nope, the entire place had been bathed in light when she had returned from court—but the nighttime lighting had probably made her sleep so deeply she had forgotten where she was.

Of course, she slept here often, catching a nap on one of the ancient uncomfortable couches scattered around the large room. She wasn't the only lawyer who occasionally slept here. Just at the edge of her line of sight were the dirty bottoms of a pair of men's dress shoes, poking up on the arm of the closest couch. She didn't lean over to see who was sleeping there, because she really didn't care. She was too concerned with sorting out her own mental state.

Usually, she fell asleep here in the middle of a case, not at the end. She had gone to her desk—which she only used to store things like her proprietary devices and actual physical evidence—and sat down to officially record her side of the case. She'd won, which made the closing assessment a lot more fun to compile, but her win had come at the cost of nearly two weeks of three hours of sleep per night.

She hadn't realized how tired she was until right now, when it felt like her eyes couldn't get unglued.

And in front of the Old Man.

"Sir," she said, rubbing the inside of her eyes with her thumbs. "Sorry about my appearance—"

"I don't give a crap about your appearance, Arias. I need you on this." A proprietary tablet appeared in front of her.

God, another classified case. The kind she would have to guard with her life. The kind she would have to be careful to touch the right controls, because otherwise she would delete everything of importance. The kind that would eat her life just like this last one had.

"Sir," she said. "I still have to close the file on the Herron case."

She didn't look up at him, not yet, because she wasn't sure she could mask the irritation. Lawyers weren't supposed to work this hard once they reached her level. She was the best in the Starbase Sigma office, with a higher percentage of wins at her age than the Old Man had.

She deserved time off. She deserved some kind of commendation.

She deserved . . .

Ah, hell, he knew that. And he wasn't going to care. She could almost mouth his next words with him.

"Have your second chair do it. What was his name? Stevens?"

"Stephan, sir," she said. "And that's his first name. His last name is Rorrbutan."

"Right," the Old Man said in his driest voice, "because that's easy to remember."

She glanced over at him in surprise, no longer caring how she looked. The Old Man was sarcastic and difficult, but he rarely insulted his team, especially since he had handpicked them based on their skill. He believed in all of them.

But the Old Man looked exhausted, too. She had no idea how old he actually was. Marciela Kublis, who had been in the office nearly fifty years (please God, don't let

Arias be in the office fifty years) said he had been called the Old Man from the moment he took the job, back when he had his own hair.

Hair was the Old Man's only vanity. He had thick silver hair, layered and styled to perfection. His hair wouldn't have become a joke if he hadn't brought the whole office in on the decision-making, fifteen years before Arias arrived, trying to figure out what kind of hair would most impress the panels of judges the cases were most often heard before.

The joke got carried down through prosecutor after prosecutor, even as the older ones—the ones who had actually been consulted—left. And through it all, the Old Man remained consistent.

He displayed no vanity anywhere else, or he would have worked on his face. It had deep worry lines carved around his mouth, nose, and eyes. The skin had wrinkled everywhere else, rather like nanobits that had started to decay.

As the worry lines around his eyes grew deeper, they bulged forward, making him seem even more intense than he was—and he was very, very intense.

Especially the way he looked right now.

He waved the tablet at her. "We got it. The dog of a case. And you're prosecuting."

The dog of a case. She blinked again, trying to remember. There had been some discussion in the office about upcoming cases, but she had ignored most of it, too busy with the Herron case to pay attention to anything else.

"Sir?" she asked.

"The *Renegat*," he said. "We get to try the bastards for mutiny."

* * *

2

Mutiny.

Sounded straightforward, and it usually was. Some idiot got it in his head that the command structure on board a Fleet vessel not only didn't apply to him, but it also shouldn't apply to anyone else. Or that he knew better than everyone else how to run the ship, even though he was—pick your poison—a navigator or a med tech or (once that she knew of) a chef in the captain's mess.

But the *Renegat* case: there was nothing straightforward about it.

The ship had limped back to the Fleet with only a third of her original crew. Someone had overthrown the captain, but there was a dispute as to who and whether or not that person was still on the ship.

And then there was the sympathy factor.

The survivors of the *Renegat* had traveled back to the Fleet in a damaged ship, enduring at least one battle with a hostile force, and arrived, against all odds, just as the ship had been on its last legs.

Not to mention the time factor.

The *Renegat* had either gotten trapped in foldspace or discovered some kind of new foldspace bubble (depending on which expert was talking about it), and the crew lost a hundred years. Foldspace made even the most jaded Fleet officer nervous. It was a convenient way to travel—crossing what some compared to a fold in a blanket—but it was fraught with dangers. The *Renegat* had encountered one of them.

The rescue of the *Renegat* had been dramatic and traumatic, and half of the Fleet thought the survivors, no matter what they had done, should be allowed to retire somewhere nice and neat and on land.

Arias was one of those people who thought the survivors should just vanish onto some about-to-be closed sector base and not be worried about again. But she didn't dare admit that to her boss.

Although he was giving her the strangest look she had ever seen, as if he was gauging her reaction. So she'd give him as negative a reaction as she could without being political about it.

"It's a dog of a case, sir," she said, repeating his words back to him. "It'll mess up the win record of anyone who takes it."

The wrinkles in his face smoothed out ever so slightly, almost as if he were going to smile and then thought better of it.

"So," he said, "you think whoever takes the case will lose."

The sleeping person on the nearby couch snorted. Arias couldn't tell if that was a snore or a chortle. Not that it mattered. Her reaction was the same. A sad feeling of resignation, one that forced her to put her real opinion on the record—at least with the Old Man.

"Yes, sir," she said. "Based on what I know, I think whoever takes this case will lose."

"And what do you know?" he asked, starting one of those lawyerly dances.

"That everyone who travels with the Fleet is terrified of two things," she said. "Going backward and getting trapped in foldspace. The survivors of the *Renegat* experienced both."

"We're trying in front of judges, not a jury," the Old Man said.

She knew he was making an argument, but she hated that he stated the obvious to do so.

"And you think judges are any less afraid of getting trapped in foldspace?" she asked, too tired to be politic any more.

"I think judges on a starbase have the luxury of not worrying about it," the Old Man said.

Just like they did. She had graduated at the top of her class, fielded offers from a variety of firms, and finally chose the prosecutor's office at Starbase Sigma because Starbase Sigma was the newest starbase. It would remain operational long after she was dead. She wouldn't have to be moved from one base to another, as the office moved forward with the Fleet.

"They understand the threat," she said.

"They also understand the threat to the hierarchy if we don't punish those who decide to take matters into their own hands just because they're on a difficult mission," the Old Man said.

And in those words, she finally understood what was happening. He had been ordered to take this case. The Old Man didn't take orders from many people, and those who could order him didn't do so often.

"Did you try to say no?" she asked him, deciding not to play any of the lawyerly games any more.

He glanced at the couch. Arias could see it out of the corner of her eye. The shoes twitched, almost as if their owner was a dog dreaming doggy dreams.

Then the Old Man smiled. It made him look younger, made his silver hair and its unique style look stylish rather than like an older man's vanity. He was almost handsome when he smiled, especially when the smile was real, and not the feral smile he got when he was pursuing a particularly tough case.

"I told them it was a dog of a case," he said. "I said it would hurt the win record of whoever took it."

"And they asked you why you thought you'd lose," she said.

"No," he said. "They told me it was one of the highest profile cases of mutiny to ever occur in the Fleet and if we ignored it we would be inciting anyone trapped in foldspace or on a dangerous mission to stop following protocol. They told me that it would seem like we are condoning the behavior by ignoring it."

"So we should take a case we're going to lose," she said.

“No,” he said. “We should take a case that everyone thinks we’re going to lose, and then we should prove them wrong.”

“I should prove them wrong,” she said with a sigh.

“Get over yourself, Arias,” the Old Man said. “We are going to prove them wrong. You are sitting second chair.”

She felt a chill run through her. She couldn’t remember the last time the Old Man took a case like this.

“You’re taking this case?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “They’re sending in someone special. Danitra Carbone.”

One of the best attorneys in the Fleet. A legend. One of the few attorneys who didn’t have an office, but who went to the various spots throughout the Fleet and the sectors it crossed to handle important Fleet cases.

Arias had studied Carbone’s most famous cases (up to that point) in law school. Arias had once modeled herself on Carbone, until Arias had enough faith in herself that she didn’t need to model herself on anyone.

“I’d rather not be second on this, sir,” Arias said. She hadn’t been out of control of a case in more than a decade.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather not give this to you,” the Old Man said. “But again, not my choice. If it makes you feel better, any loss in this case goes on her record, not yours.”

“No,” Arias said quietly. “It doesn’t make me feel better at all.”

* * *

3

Eun Ae Mukasey stared at the information the acting captain of the *Renegat*, Raina Serpell, had sent her. Their conversation had been short; Mukasey did not like interacting with potential clients much. Every client had two things: a personality and a story. Some personalities were stronger than the stories. Some stories were stronger than the personalities.

Cases were won with strong stories, not strong personalities, so Mukasey preferred to see the story first and assess the personality second.

She paced around her small office on Starbase Sigma. The office was on a lower level, away from the shops and the restaurants and the hotels, away from the business sector of the starbase, and closer to the docking rings than most people liked to be.

The courts were sixteen levels up, off in their own wing. Most lawyers had offices near there, and while she thought that convenient, she did not need the convenience.

This case intrigued her. The story was fascinating and already in the media—at least the media around Starbase Sigma. That could work to her advantage if she took the case. Survivors against all odds, now being prosecuted by the very people they had tried to return to.

They had no real defenders because they had no friends or family left. They had returned one hundred years into their future to find the future more unwelcoming than they had expected.

She could argue that. She wove her way around the five chairs scattered through the small space. This room served as a work area and as an interview room. She had one tiny closet-sized room through an unmarked door where she kept the physical evidence she needed for a case, as well as anything else proprietary, like tablets and case-sensitive files on a non-networked system. She had several non-networked systems, because she had several cases at the moment.

She would have to jettison a few of them or hand them off to the assistants who floated between her office and three other defense attorneys’ offices. She had started

that system when she didn't earn enough to pay a junior lawyer or a law clerk; but that system worked so well for her that now that she could afford several junior lawyers on staff, she didn't hire any of them.

Everyone still thought she was worth nearly nothing, and she kept it that way. She liked the perception that she lived a hardscrabble life because she had to, not because she wanted to.

And there was really no one to contradict her. She didn't have time for close friends, and she wasn't in any kind of relationship right now.

She scanned the information, looking for more. Serpell had been honest with her in that brief conversation; she said she had already talked to a dozen defense attorneys and they had turned the case down.

Mukasey hadn't asked why the attorneys turned the case down or even who they were. She had a hunch she already knew. Everyone went to the defense attorneys with the spotless records first, not realizing that those records were cherry-picked, along with the cases, to show how great the lawyer was, rather than being someone who worked with the client's best interest at heart.

But that thought of the client stopped her for a moment. She studied the faces of the potential clients, which she had in a flat, two-dimensional clear screen. The faces looked like they were some kind of art installation floating against her undecorated far wall.

She often did that to get a sense of people—not just the ones she might represent, but potential witnesses as well.

She usually didn't study the faces. She usually let them scroll, figuring her peripheral vision would tell her much more than any direct study would.

These people seemed ordinary. They seemed like people she would have passed in the corridors of the most public section of the starbase, heading to the shops or the restaurants or making it through their daily routines.

They didn't look like hardened criminals, and they certainly didn't look like people who would overthrow their captain, take control of a ship, disgorge much of its crew (or whatever happened to them) and travel back over a long distance and one hundred years just to get arrested.

They didn't look like adventurers either.

They looked unremarkable, even Serpell with her thin brown hair and roundish face. The only one who looked like trouble was Yusef Kabac, who had a thick black scruffy beard and uncut black hair and what seemed to Mukasey to be wild eyes.

If she were running the prosecution's case, she would make Kabac the face of the defendants. She touched the image and moved it off the scrolling list onto its own little screen. Yeah, he looked like a crazed maniac, one of those messianic types who showed up every generation or two and led the spineless on some kind of half-assed mission that ended up badly for everyone.

Mukasey stuck her hands in the back pockets of the black pants she wore on non-court days, and rocked backward on her flat shoes.

If she took the case, she would have to isolate crazy-seeming guy or marginalize him or something.

But she still wasn't certain if she would take the case. The prosecution wanted this one to be a big deal. They had brought in Danitra Carbone to head the team. Carbone had a reputation as big as the sector, and she deserved it.

Mukasey had never gone head to head with her, and Mukasey wanted to. But she couldn't just take the case because she wanted to best the best in the business. She had to take a *good* case to face off with Carbone.

Mukasey had lost a lot, but she had gained a lot from her losses. Not just experience, but a reputation as a fighter, someone who actually cared about her clients and wouldn't leave them in any kind of lurch.

The problem with this case wasn't Carbone or the massive publicity this case would generate. Nor was the problem the story. The story helped a great deal. The problem wasn't even crazy-eyes Kabac.

The problem was that she would be representing 193 people at the same time, all of whom would believe they deserved a bit of her time.

She did not have the resources to handle all of them. She wasn't sure she even wanted to *talk* with all of them. If she took this case, she would have to hire help for the duration, which would be a problem.

The case already looked like a financial loser. Even though these people had salaries in escrow, they couldn't tap the salaries until the case was over. And then, if she lost (if *they* lost), they'd lose any salary that they would have received on this journey.

Although . . . she frowned at the faces scrolling on that continual loop. They should have been entitled to other money. Inheritances from family and people left behind.

About twenty years after the *Renegat* disappeared, the crew on that ship should have been declared dead, their assets (if they had any not on a ship) would have been sent to others, and any family wealth would have gone to the wrong heirs.

There might be money here after all.

But she had to test that first.

She selected crazy-eyed Kabac for her first search.

It only took a few minutes to research his family background, because he had none. His parents had died when he was young. He had no siblings, and he had never married.

Which probably explained the look of desperation that was etched on his face.

So Mukasey looked up another face—a woman named Jorja Lakinas who had sustained serious injuries while defending the captain. That information was right at the top of her file, and it made her sympathetic. She had returned to the Fleet, after trying to prevent a mutiny. She should not have been tried for it.

Mukasey made a mental note of that, then looked for Lakinas's family.

She had none either. Parents dead, siblings dead, divorced, no children. No distant cousins either—and all of this had happened *before* Lakinas had joined the *Renegat*.

Mukasey picked four more random faces, found similar stories for all of them. No family. No friends. No one who really missed them.

This was too common among the *Renegat* crew to be a coincidence.

She froze the scrolling faces and tapped her hand against her side.

Why would the Fleet staff a single vessel with crew who had no family to leave behind? Why, in fact, would the Fleet staff a security vessel and send it—*alone*—on a top-secret mission *backward* and across such a great distance that no Fleet vessel had ever traveled it before?

She sank into one of the chairs, half-smiling at herself.

She was hooked. Not so much on the story of the rescue or anything else that had hit the media around Starbase Sigma.

But hooked on the mystery of the *Renegat* and her crew.

Hooked on the idea that there was a great deal more here than could be found in a simple search, a great deal more than she had expected when she spoke to Serpell.

Mukasey cursed good-naturedly. This case was going to cost her in both time and money.

But it would do something more for her. It would keep her interested, keep her sharp, and keep her thinking.

She needed that. Every now and then, a woman needed both a mission and a mystery to keep her going.

Looked like she had found both.

* * *

Danitra Carbone sat in the gigantic suite at the back of her private runabout. She had information sprawled across the three bolted-in couches, two tables, and four chairs. All of them doubled as screens, and usually she liked that, walking from bits of furniture to other bits of furniture to get her information.

But on this day, she felt overwhelmed by all of it.

Not to mention the fact that she was furious.

She hadn't been assigned a case in nearly a decade. She had been *offered* cases, told that they might benefit her, or that they might improve her already spectacular career. Sometimes she would be nudged—hard—by her superiors. Sometimes she would be discouraged just as hard by those same superiors.

But they always let her choose. And she usually ignored the nudging, believing that she knew what she could handle better than anyone else.

This time, though, she hadn't been nudged. She'd been shoved into this case, told she couldn't refuse it. She had actually asked what would happen if she did, and the response was swift:

You know what happens to a Fleet officer who disobeys a direct order.

Sometimes she forgot she was an officer in the Fleet. She had acted without supervision for so long that she felt like an independent contractor, just like the attorneys she often faced in court.

She had never envied them before, thinking of them instead with just a bit of pity, since they had to not only compete for cases, they also had to fund their own offices. They had to assemble their own resources when she had all of the resources in the Fleet at her fingertips.

Normally, she would have turned this case down. It looked like one of the worst cases she had ever been offered, because it was a loser no matter what happened.

If she lost, well, then she would have that on her quite spectacular record.

But if she won, she would still lose, because she would be responsible for imprisoning two hundred people who had apparently wanted nothing more than to return home to their friends and family. And who could blame them, really? It sounded like they had all gone through hell to get back to the Fleet, and then the Fleet was going to punish them for being successful.

Her greatest frustration, after two days of digging into this damn thing, was that she couldn't find a middle ground. She needed to either vilify these people or somehow make the Fleet's needs paramount to the survivors', and she wasn't sure how to do either.

There had to be another way out of this bind, but even after looking, she couldn't find it.

It wouldn't matter if the court gagged the proceedings. All that meant was that the media in this sector would not cover the case detail by detail. The results, no matter what they were, would become big news.

And she would be vilified for prosecuting these people or she would be ridiculed for losing something that seemed so easy. Or both.

Of course, she was probably already being vilified. She wasn't yet at Starbase Sigma, but she would be arriving soon.

Then she would get to meet the locals on her team. They had been chosen for her as well, something that also irritated her. She normally would get to choose who would sit beside her on a case this important, but of course she wasn't even getting that courtesy.

Although she didn't want to complain too loudly, because she would have probably

chosen Lucinda Arias no matter what. Arias was good, and some day might be spectacular.

Maybe someone in the Fleet wanted Carbone to train Arias. But hidden in that idea was the thought that Carbone was past her prime, when she felt like she had just hit it.

She sighed and hoped that the locals would have provided a space for her inside the prosecutor's office. She needed a place to settle in, one that would allow her to run her war boards and her mock trials and maybe even depose all of the witnesses she needed.

She ran a hand through her hair, trying to beat the frustration back. She couldn't go into this case angry. Nor could she go into it thinking she would lose.

She had to go into it like she went into every other case in her career. She had to go into it to win.

And not just win.

In this one, she needed to convince everyone—not just the court—that these people were guilty of the highest crime in the Fleet. They were guilty of attempting to murder the leader of their small universe.

They were guilty of upending the Fleet itself.

* * *

5

They gave Danitra Carbone the biggest private office in the prosecutor's wing. Arias had been coveting that office. Hell, she'd been coveting any office. She still sat in the bullpen with all of the other prosecutors.

Before Carbone arrived, though, the Old Man asked Arias to set up Carbone's office, which gave Arias a chance to wander through it. And as she did, she discovered the smaller private office through a set of double doors.

She supposed that smaller office was for personal use for the Great Being who worked in the larger room. But she didn't care. She moved all of her stuff to that private office, figuring she was going to be Carbone's second, so she was going to be as close to Carbone as she possibly could.

The Old Man caught Arias moving her stuff about an hour in. He watched, then followed her into the private office. She braced herself for a massive tongue-lashing.

Instead, he pushed a small button on the wall opposite the larger office, and a single door formed on the outside wall of the small office. That door opened into the corridor. Now the office that Arias stole looked more like a personal office rather than the private room it had been designed as.

She had given him a grateful look. He had grinned, that look that made him look young and impish, and made her wonder again what he had been like back in the day.

He didn't say a word otherwise. He left after a few minutes, and she didn't even see him go.

Arias settled into the new office, working as if it were her own. Over the next day or so, she did make it her own. She loved the privacy, the lack of conversation, that smell of sweat and nerves that always came with anyone entering the bullpen.

Her job actually felt like something she could grasp and hold rather than a fighter ship she was grabbing onto as it flew out on a mission.

It got easier because Carbone hadn't shown up as expected. Oh, she was on the starbase, but after her runabout docked, she didn't come to the office. She hadn't shown up the next morning either, and for a while, Arias assumed (hoped) that she would have both offices to herself.

Then she came back after a late dinner, only to find all of the lights blazing in the inside office. She wandered in, and saw the great woman in the flesh, both smaller and wider than Arias had expected, as if Carbone's skin couldn't quite contain the force of her personality.

Carbone didn't hear Arias arrive, or at least, Carbone hadn't acknowledged her arrival. Carbone had brought in half a dozen tablets, black with silver trim, which made them much sleeker than anything Arias had seen on the starbase. Carbone had her graying hair piled on top of her head, held there with some kind of comb. The hair's tight curls, which had always exploded outward in the holos Arias had seen of Carbone's court appearances, seemed like they were going to burst out of the combs at any moment.

In fact, everything about Carbone looked like contained energy. She moved slowly, but as if she were holding back, as if moving fast would somehow ruin everything she was trying to do.

"I'm assuming you're Lucinda Arias," Carbone said, still looking down at her desk. "And if you're going to work with me, then work with me. Don't stare, and don't wait for me to tell you what to do."

Arias swallowed hard, annoyed at herself. She was a full professional, someone who had done this job for decades, and she was good at it.

Yet she still felt like a beginner as she stood there, like someone who needed full instruction on everything she had ever done.

"I *am* Lucinda Arias," she said, glad her voice remained under her control. She crossed the room, extending her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"Yeah, yeah," Carbone said. "I don't do handshakes. They're a cultural relic. I don't do formal introductions either. You know who I am, I know who you are, we've already formed opinions on each other, and now that we're going to work together, we'll see if those opinions are right or wrong. So, let's get started."

Arias couldn't tell if the speech was planned and designed to intimidate her, or if that was just an unintended consequence of Carbone's focus.

Arias stopped in front of the desk, saw even more tablets, wondered if they were all for this case.

"Look," she said. "I know you were assigned me as a second, and I know you need someone local to help with the customs here, but if you want someone else—"

"I would have asked." Carbone lifted her head. "I don't want to be here anymore than you do. Your boss already told me you think this case is a loser. And, on its face, it's not going to help either one of us. To ease your mind, I would have chosen you as my local no matter what. I don't compliment people to make them feel better, so you can trust what I said here. Okay? Now, let's get to work. I assume you've already investigated some approaches here . . . ?"

"I have," Arias said. "We have a surprising amount of information about the mutiny, given the fact that the *Renegat* blew up a few hours after it arrived near the *Aiszargs*."

"Yeah, yeah," Carbone said. "The *Aiszargs* was extremely efficient, which actually works against us. Half the people we're prosecuting were nowhere near the captain when he was murdered."

So she had already looked at the data. Arias let out a small breath of relief and hoped Carbone hadn't seen it. Arias had been afraid that Carbone would slough off all of the hard work on her.

Nice to see that wasn't what was going to happen.

"Worse," Arias said, "at least six of them, maybe more, fought at the captain's side that day."

"Saw that." Carbone fell into her chair as if her legs had given out. She actually let out a small *woof* as if sitting had knocked some of the wind out of her. "I'm thinking

of separating them out, maybe giving them a plea or having them testify against the others.”

“We can’t separate them out,” Arias said. “We have strict orders to treat them all as a single entity.”

Carbone’s dark eyes flashed, and her lips turned up slightly. “I looked at your record,” she said. “I would never have thought you would be the kind of person who would let someone else dictate your case.”

“I’m a prosecutor,” Arias said. “I don’t always get to pick.”

Carbone turned her head, as if Arias’s words hit her harder than expected.

Then she nodded, as if she had just had a private conversation with herself.

“Our case,” she said. “We get to build it. And those six are going to force us to lose. We take control of that. We don’t ask the court’s permission. We just do.”

Arias had done that a few times, but never on a case as important or visible as this one. Usually on cases she didn’t want to bring to trial, especially a trial before a panel of judges.

“You don’t like that idea,” Carbone said.

“I haven’t thought about it enough to have an opinion,” Arias said.

“Don’t lie to me, girl,” Carbone said. “You don’t like it.”

Great. Carbone could read her, and only after a few minutes. Very few people could read Arias that well, and usually that happened after months, maybe years.

“I was thinking of a different tactic,” Arias said. “Everyone on that ship knew that Nadim Crowe and his engineers were unhappy, and their unhappiness provoked the crisis. *Everyone*. And no one did anything about it. I was thinking of arguing that the six should have acted sooner, and it was their guilty consciences that made them stand beside Preemas, not because they believed in him, but because they were afraid they’d be blamed for the actions of Crowe and his friends.”

“Convoluting,” Carbone said. “Convoluting is hard to argue.”

“Maybe,” Arias said. “But the whole case is convoluted. All these people wanted to come home. The *Renegat* was a last chance career builder for them, in theory anyway, a way of recouping all the screw-ups in their careers. We show what they did as another screw-up. Especially since everyone on that ship had an escape route built in.”

Carbone raised her head, eyes hooded. She seemed intrigued. Arias wished she could read Carbone as well as Carbone already read her.

“Preemas made an unscheduled stop at Sector Base Z. He let anyone who wanted to go leave the ship for good, and he brought in new crew members while there,” Arias said.

“Yeah,” Carbone said. “If they didn’t like how he was running the ship or the mission, they could have left. Seems their defense will argue that.”

Arias shook her head. “There was no career path for anyone who got off on Sector Base Z. They were officially done.”

“Maybe that’s what happened, but they couldn’t have known that.”

“Oh, but they did,” Arias said. “The leader, this Raina Serpell, she nearly stayed at Sector Base Z. But she knew her career would be over. She talked to a number of people about it, especially after her wife died.”

“Her wife fought at Preemas’s side,” Carbone said.

“Stupidly,” Arias said. “And got even more people killed.”

Carbone stared at her. “Your argument is confusing me.”

“This was a ship headed for disaster,” Arias said. “Preemas knew it. There was unrest from the start, but none of these people left. They all knew something bad was going to happen. They stayed.”

“Thin,” Carbone said. “We need the six.”

“If we separate them,” Arias said, feeling some frustration, “then the court’s wish

that these people be seen as one unit gets broken. They'll be individuals, and we'll spend days arguing 193 different cases."

Carbone moved some of the tablets aside. She appeared to be thinking.

"If I were stuck with this case by myself," Arias said, "I would argue that these 193 people were opposed to being led by Nadim Crowe, not that they were supporting Preemas. I would argue that they were complicit in his death, because that was the only way they would get any credit when they returned to the Fleet."

Carbone frowned at her.

"They thought they were returning to their time," Arias said. "They were supposed to bring back information about that Scrapheap. Relevant information to the Fleet of one hundred years ago, not irrelevant information to the Fleet we know now. They might have been hailed as heroes. They could blame Crowe for Preemas's death, something they really did not try to prevent, most of them, and then they could claim success on the mission itself."

Carbone made a *humph* sound. She clearly hadn't thought of any of that.

Then she nodded. "You're right. We can't look at this in the context of the Fleet now. We have to look at it in the context of the Fleet then."

Arias tried not to smile in triumph.

"I'm not sure if I agree with your argument," Carbone said. "But it gives us a place to start. You research the Fleet. Let's figure out if we were different people one hundred years ago."

That sounded like dismissive makework. Arias's triumph fled.

"And what will you do?" she asked.

"Interview the six, of course," Carbone said. "If we can kill this case in its crib, I want to do so, and I want to do so now."

* * *

6

Before Mukasey conducted any interviews with her new clients, before she looked at the resumes of the additional help that she would need to run this case, before she even tried to build the case, she researched the judges.

The panel was set. The timeline was in place, which sometimes happened with big cases. The Fleet didn't like deep dives into cases. The Fleet didn't like cases to run for months, let alone years, as a case like this could have.

So the judges were assigned, the calendars were in place, and the lawyers knew what points they had to hit when.

Twelve judges, all of whom coordinated their schedules with each other before anyone had even contacted Danitra Carbone.

But as Mukasey started to research them, she found something interesting. Three judges had recused themselves from this case.

One had a family emergency that took her to Sector Base AA. She couldn't guarantee that she would be able to sit on the case at all.

The other wanted to retire as a judge. Apparently, he didn't like the workload, and this case would have guaranteed months of hard work for him, something he loathed.

The third gave no reason at all for her recusal except a conflict of interest.

Conflict of interest. On a ship that had emerged from foldspace a hundred years after it had entered.

Mukasey was intrigued. She had won cases before by investigating bits and pieces outside the usual scope of the case.

This was something she might be able to use.

She placed it at the top of the pile to investigate, and because it involved a long-time judge, she would do the investigation herself.

* * *

7

Someone had repaired Jorja Lakinas poorly. If Carbone had been a different kind of attorney, she would have gone after the medical professional who left Lakinas in this state.

Instead, Carbone sat across from Lakinas in a private meeting room in the tower that housed the survivors of the *Renegat*. The tower had been built on the starbase's eleventh level and looked like it had been grafted onto the walls accidentally. The tower was tall and narrow and had no windows overlooking the rest of the level—at least that Carbone could see.

She had come in a side door and taken a private elevator down two floors. She had to use a code to do so. Apparently, Lakinas did not want anyone to know she was meeting with one of the prosecutors, and Carbone couldn't blame her.

Carbone couldn't even request that Lakinas come to the prosecutor's offices, because that would take court involvement, and a special order. The *Renegat* survivors weren't supposed to leave this small section of the starbase.

Carbone hadn't told Arias or anyone else in the office that she was coming. Arias didn't approve of separating out the six, but Carbone felt she had to try. The six who had fought with Preemas would tank her case if just one judge thought that detail important.

Besides, Carbone was a bit leery of the attorney the survivors had hired. Unlike most defendants facing a case like this, the survivors had not chosen an attorney with a perfect win record. Instead, the attorney's record balanced wins and losses, which meant she actually thought about her cases.

Carbone was going to have to study this attorney's methods, because the win/loss ratio suggested an occasionally outside-of-the-box approach to defense. Which meant that Carbone would not be able to run the court the way she usually did.

At the moment, though, Carbone was studying Lakinas. The poor woman had been shot several times in the battle on the *Renegat*, she had gotten terrible medical care on the *Renegat* itself, and by the time she had gotten back to the Fleet, her wounds had healed improperly. The Fleet let her get some surgery to repair the wounds that threatened her life, but they had done little else.

Carbone was going to argue for the cosmetic work—if she couldn't persuade Lakinas and the other five to turn on their friends. The last thing Carbone wanted was for the judges to see this face. This face might make them sympathetic to the defense's cause.

At first glance, the face looked like any other. Then the light would catch it, and the skin would seem too stretched over the cheekbones, too shiny. Lakinas's eyes were recessed into that face, making her look gravely ill. Under her hairline, a white scar was visible, the kind of scar that usually only showed up when someone was in the middle of procedures, not when procedures were over.

The edges of Lakinas's mouth were uneven, and her nose looked crooked. Taken together, the parts worked at a distance, but up close Lakinas looked like a ship that had been built out of mismatched parts.

Lakinas had been sitting in a chair when Carbone arrived. The woman had pushed a table aside so that Carbone could see Lakinas's entire body. Her feet were twisted inward, her left hand was clawed nearly shut, and her torso hunched forward. She

couldn't have been comfortable in the chair she sat in, but Carbone wasn't sure if Lakinas could stand for long periods of time.

A cart that could carry Lakinas from place to place leaned against the wall, but Carbone wasn't sure if that was for emergencies or if Lakinas actually used it all the time.

As Carbone entered, Lakinas watched her. Carbone could see the defiance in that face.

Carbone met Lakinas's gaze head on, then deliberately looked Lakinas up and down, assessing her. Carbone had met seriously injured people before, albeit usually before they had been repaired, and they were used to others looking away.

Carbone had learned there was a lot of power in looking at the injured directly.

"I'm not supposed to be meeting with you," Lakinas said after a minute.

Carbone made a mental note of that: Lakinas was impatient. She didn't try to stare back at Carbone and make this some kind of competition. She needed to get the meeting underway.

"I asked you to bring your attorney," Carbone said.

"I don't have an attorney who is just mine," Lakinas said. "I have the group attorney, and I didn't think it was wise to bring her."

So Lakinas was a bit cannier than Carbone had given her credit for.

"I understand you fought side by side with Captain Preemas in the battle for the *Renegat*," Carbone said.

"Is that what they're calling it now?" Lakinas said. "The battle for the *Renegat*?"

Carbone had made the phrase up herself, but she wasn't going to admit that. "Some are, yes," she said.

"I fought with him," Lakinas said.

"Is that where you got the injuries?" Carbone said.

"Some of them," Lakinas said.

Carbone hadn't expected that response. "Some of them?"

"They put me in the brig, injured," she said. "I tried to get out."

"They?" Carbone asked.

"Crowe's people." Lakinas's lips turned downward. "They won, you know."

Carbone nodded. She knew the outlines of all of this, but the actual details were not at her fingertips yet. She knew that Crowe and his people had sent some of the people who had fought with Preemas to the med bay and the rest to the brig, but she hadn't realized that some of the injured went to the brig, too.

"Did they know you were injured?" Carbone asked.

Lakinas let out a bitter laugh. "Kinda hard to miss."

"And they didn't offer you medical attention?" Carbone asked.

"Nope," Lakinas said. Then she shifted in her chair. The movement looked painful, and it took all of Carbone's control to prevent a wince.

But apparently that didn't work, because Lakinas gave her a withering look, a kind of *don't pity me, don't think you understand me* look. Carbone silently cursed herself.

She didn't want to be that readable, but it was hard, particularly with someone as damaged as Lakinas. Lakinas didn't easily fit into the kinds of categories that Carbone was used to putting people into, so Lakinas had an advantage.

Carbone hated it when someone else had an advantage.

"Look," Lakinas said, "you want to question me, you do it formally. This is some kind of sideways crap, isn't it? You want something from me."

Carbone had to give it to her: Lakinas was bright and canny and shouldn't be underestimated.

"I'd like to make you an offer," Carbone said. "We handle your medical care, get you as fixed up as possible, give you some reparations for your time and effort on the *Renegat*, and remove all of the mutiny charges."

“In exchange for what?” Lakinas said.

“Testimony if we need it,” Carbone said. “Testimony about the other defendants.”

“You think I have something nasty to say about them?” Lakinas asked.

“Do you?” Carbone asked.

Lakinas let out a small snort. “As people? Yeah, I do. As mutineers—as you’re calling them—no. They’re just ignorant idiots who did their best to return here.”

Carbone felt a bit of shock at Lakinas’s bitterness. “And you? Why did you come back?”

“You think I would have joined up with the people who tried to kill me?” she asked. “What are you, nuts? And why are you going after everyone anyway? They didn’t do anything.”

Carbone suppressed a sigh. She wasn’t sure if Lakinas was still playing her. If she was, it was a smart move. Because Lakinas could get everything Carbone offered, and not testify. Lakinas would get her life back for simply removing herself from the case.

Maybe Lakinas didn’t need an attorney. Maybe she was smart enough to handle all of this on her own.

That too wasn’t something Carbone was used to.

“The offer lasts for the duration of this conversation,” Carbone said.

“I haven’t got anything bad to say about the others on the *Renegat*,” Lakinas said. “The ones who brought me back here. I got nothing bad to say.”

Carbone almost said, *I don’t want bad*, but she did. She needed it.

“I understand,” she said. “You can provide context though.”

“You have me testify,” Lakinas said, “and I’ll defend everyone you’re trying to prosecute. They kept me alive.”

“I understand,” Carbone repeated. She wouldn’t make Lakinas testify—at least, not in front of the judges. But she might see if she could manipulate a deposition, and get part of it admitted into the record. If the defense attorney did not get a chance to ask Lakinas how she felt about the others, or if Carbone could manage that response, keep it from the judges, then she would be able to use things Lakinas told her.

“You want something else,” Lakinas said.

Initially, Carbone had. She had wanted Lakinas to talk to the other five who had fought alongside Preemas. But now Carbone didn’t want her to. Carbone wanted to know if any of them had information she could use against the remaining defendants. She would do the interviews herself.

“I want an answer,” Carbone said. “Because this initial conversation is nearly over.”

Lakinas’s broken mouth twisted into a bitter smile. “You want me to betray the people who got me home, maybe even saved my life. If I leave—if those of us who fought at the captain’s side—leave this case, then you have a shot of winning it, don’t you?”

Carbone’s heartbeat increased. This woman somehow understood how the law worked. That surprised Carbone. She wasn’t used to dealing with someone on the other side of the table who understood what she was doing.

“The offer,” Carbone said. “Your time is running out.”

“It’s a good offer for me,” Lakinas said. “If I take it, I prove to myself that I’m the asshole I think I am.”

The self-loathing nearly took Carbone’s breath away.

“You got five others to talk with,” Lakinas said. “They all have to leave for you to be successful.”

Carbone did not move. It was fascinating to listen to this woman consider her options in real time.

“You came to me first. I’m the most injured, the easiest mark. You thought you could get me to talk to them, right? And now you’re not asking me because you understand

that I won't." Lakinas shifted in her chair again, that flicker of pain crossing her face one more time.

Carbone did not move. She didn't dare. This was her best chance of winning the case, and she wasn't going to let it go easily. But she knew better than to try to persuade Lakinas. Lakinas was the kind of woman who would strengthen under pressure, not bow to it.

"Money, possible repair, a life." Lakinas nodded. "You have a lot riding on this to offer so much without asking for anything in return."

She hit it in one. She knew exactly what she was talking about.

"So I have to figure out what my own interests are," Lakinas said. "Can I continue living like this to stick it to you and people like you? The ones who care about winning more than they care about what's right?"

Her mouth twisted even more.

"And worse," she said, "if I say no and the others say yes, you're never going to offer this to me again."

It was her only miss. Carbone would have to offer it again, because Lakinas could sink the case all by herself.

"What would I have to do?" Lakinas asked. "Agree to never testify? Refuse to talk to the defense? Not give my story?"

All of the above, Carbone thought, but did not say.

"You're not going to answer that, are you?" Lakinas asked. "Because if you did, then you would tip your hand even more."

Lakinas let out a sigh, then brought up her cramped hand and stared at it, as if she had never seen it before.

Then she let her hand drop back to her lap.

"The ironic thing is," she said, "I can't live with either choice. I betray everything I believe in to get my health back or I remain like this, at least until the *Renegat* renegades win their case. If they win their case."

She shook her head, then winced. Carbone tried to ignore the woman's obvious pain, but it wasn't working. It was almost impossible to ignore.

"I fought at Preemas's side because it was the right thing to do even though he was an egotistical idiot who was probably going to get us killed. *All of us* fought at his side because it was the right thing to do. All six of us, the ones you want to turn."

Lakinas's gaze met Carbone's.

"We put the Fleet above our own self-interest. And now the Fleet is screwing with us." Lakinas raised her chin slightly. The movement put an obvious strain on the muscles in her neck. "You know what, Danitra Carbone? You're a lawyer. You're supposed to respect the rules. Yet here you are, meeting with me against most of the rules, trying to make a side deal that will benefit you. You care about the win, not about what's right."

And that sentence made Carbone's heart sink.

"You found a bunch of believers," Lakinas said. "We know that the system is screwed up, but it's what we've got, and we fought nearly to the death to defend it. You're a representative of that system. You should have fought, too. You should have told your idiot superiors that this case wasn't worth taking. You shouldn't have put your name on it."

Carbone almost—almost—opened her mouth to defend herself. She caught herself just in time.

But Lakinas seemed to notice. "Yeah, they ordered you to take it. They're making it hard for you. But you're that person who needs an even greater challenge each and every time to tackle something. And this is a big challenge, isn't it?"

Carbone did not answer. Lakinas was right, but she didn't need the verbal confirmation.

“So . . .” Lakinas said, that broken mouth forming a full smile. The full smile made her face seem even more mismatched. “I’m going to make it harder for you. You’re the representative of everything I dislike about the Fleet. I’m a true believer in all we do, in the rules and the regulations and the systems we’ve set up from the beginning. And I hate people like you who circumvent it.”

Hate. That was a word Carbone could hang onto. She’d been hated by people on the other side before. She didn’t mind being hated.

“I’m going to say no to your generous self-serving offer. And even if my five colleagues say yes, you’re still screwed. Because I will testify, and I will show those judges that we were fighting *for* the Fleet, not against it.”

Lakinas put her good hand on the table.

“And when this is all over,” she said, “and you’ve lost, I’m going to make sure that the Fleet does all the things you offered. They’re going to repair me, they’re going to give me a good place to live, and they’re going to take care of me.”

Carbone sat perfectly still.

Lakinas’s hand wobbled, then that wobble went up her arm. Carbone realized too late that Lakinas was trying to stand.

Something must have crossed Carbone’s face, because Lakinas gave her a warning look.

“In fact,” Lakinas said as she struggled to her feet. “You’ve inspired me. I will hire my own attorney. To get what I need now. How will that sit with your judges? To know that I’m fighting to get the medical care I’ve deserved all along?”

She clawed at the cart and it floated over to her, lowering to chair height.

She sat on the edge of it and stared at Carbone. Lakinas’s eyes glittered with so much anger that Carbone sat back in her seat.

“Thank you,” Lakinas said. “I had lost focus since we returned. I was staring at a life filled with painful medical procedures and a lot of misunderstanding. A life that wasn’t about me, not really. A life outside my control.”

She laughed. The sound chilled Carbone all the way to her soul.

“I have a focus now, Danitra,” Lakinas said, not even trying to be respectful. “I’m going to make sure you lose the biggest case of your life. Consider yourself notified. And if you screw with me, I’ll screw with you right back.”

Somehow the cart helped her swing her legs onto it. Then she drove it out of the room, the door opening as the cart reached it.

Carbone sat at the table for a long, long moment, staring at the slowly closing door.

She had been threatened by defendants and witnesses before. She’d faced hatred before.

But she had never misread a case like this one.

Arias hadn’t wanted to talk to the six. Arias had a finger on the pulse of this case. And Carbone didn’t know how.

She wondered if it was too late to back out.

And what would hurt her reputation more? Leaving the case now, or losing it.

Because she didn’t think she had any other options.

Not anymore.

* * *

The Old Man didn’t have an office, so Arias had to chase him all over the building. Old Man sightings seemed more like vague promises than reality after a half an hour. Either that, or he was avoiding her.

Probably avoiding her, since he had to know how furious she was.

The biggest screw-up of her career, and she didn't do it. She had argued against it. But she was second on this case, without control of it, and she had no rights here. So she was going to change that.

She finally returned to her desk in the bullpen to find the Old Man leaning against it, arms crossed, looking vaguely amused. His legs were crossed at the ankles, one knee bent, so that he seemed relaxed. Maybe he was.

"You were looking for me?" he asked.

"Don't play games with me," she snapped. "I need to talk to you and you know why."

"So talk," he said.

She looked around the bullpen. The nearest lawyer was five desks back, struggling to pick up a stack of tablets and some files.

"Not in public," she said.

"This isn't public," he said.

"Well," she said, "we can't go to the office I stole."

The one near Danitra Carbone's office. Arias didn't trust Carbone to let them talk in private.

"Give us the room," the Old Man shouted.

Three lawyers sat up on couches. Arias hadn't even seen them. One, a young man she didn't recognize, had to be new. His hair stuck up in tufts. He'd clearly been sleeping.

The other two were used to being yelled at by the Old Man. They rolled off their couches, grabbed the bags with their stuff and stumbled out. The woman who'd been fighting with her tablets took one off the top and glared at all of them before stomping off.

The need for privacy was probably interfering with her work on a case.

Arias waited until the room was empty, then said, "You know what she did."

Arias didn't even have to use Carbone's name. The Old Man would know what Arias was talking about.

"Talked to a defendant without the defendant's lawyer's presence. For the record, the defendant waived her right—"

"I don't care," Arias said. "She tried to separate the defendant from the group. The court ordered that the group *be* a group. And she ignored the court's order, trying to bargain separately. The court has noticed, and—"

"And you got your hand slapped," the Old Man said. "You've experienced worse."

Arias's eyes narrowed. "She pissed off the defendant, and she gave the other side notice that we're afraid of the fact that six of those defendants can demonstrably prove that they fought at Preemas's side."

The Old Man's gaze was flat.

"We've lost the case before we even go in," Arias said.

"And you want me to, what, exactly?" he asked, all trace of amusement gone.

"Vacate the case," she said. "Refuse to play anymore. Let those poor people alone."

"Because you're going to lose?" His voice held a trace of sarcasm. "Or because you're going to lose due to someone else's mistake?"

Her face warmed, but not because he shamed her. He infuriated her.

"Prosecuting them is wrong. So let's just stop here," she said.

He nodded. "We're under orders."

"I. Don't. Care," she said.

He pushed off her desk. "If I get rid of Carbone, can you win this?"

"No," she said. "Not without getting rid of those six people."

He nodded, then studied her. “I never heard you admit defeat before you even started.”

“I’ve started,” Arias said. “I’m deep into this case. The evidence is a mess, the situation is strange, and these people struggled to rejoin the Fleet after foldspace issues, so they are sympathetic.”

“Have you ever asked why?” he asked.

“Why what?” she asked.

“Why they struggled to come back. Wouldn’t it have been wiser to remain near that Scrapheap? The *Renegat* wasn’t functioning properly back there, and none of them—not a single one—had real engineering experience.”

“Kabac did,” she muttered.

“And he was fired from his engineering positions.”

She lifted her head, seeing the Old Man clearly for the first time this day. He had been studying the evidence. He knew this case.

He knew how to prosecute it.

“What’s your theory of the case?” she asked.

He clearly noted her different tone. He smiled.

“I’m so glad you asked,” he said.

* * *

9

Mukasey did not trust good news. Not when she was working on a case. The fact that Danitra Carbone had talked to Jorja Lakinas and had essentially bribed her to leave the case—without an attorney present—was a gift, especially since Lakinas had refused. But it wasn’t the kind of gift that Mukasey wanted. She had already planned on using the six Preemas defenders in her argument. She would have used them even if they accepted Carbone’s bribe and left the group in the first place.

The case suddenly felt like a winner, and that bothered her. She’d lost more sure winners than any other kind of case.

So she was working sixteen-hour days and dreaming the case at night. She had assistants. She had them going through the footage she’d managed to get through discovery, footage of the security feeds on the *Renegat*. She had them work the day-to-day, starting with the communications back to the Fleet.

The assistants had found a lot more than she’d expected. The communications had been scrubbed, and not recently. Not even after the *Renegat* left the Scrapheap.

Before.

Well before.

Mukasey had been working the battle itself, trying to figure out who was where, before she launched the client interviews. They were going to be a lot of work, and she wasn’t looking forward to it. She didn’t dare miss a single client, either, because the one she missed might be the one with the most important story, the one with the telling detail.

And she’d been trying to track down the judge who recused herself. The judge was a former admiral—and this judge had once been in charge of Scrapheaps for the Fleet. And her name did appear in the file for the *Renegat*.

She had been a vice-admiral at the time, and she had been the one who put together the initial mission.

Her name was Bella Gão.

She was older than the stars themselves.

And she probably had a lot of secrets to tell, if only she would be willing to talk.

* * *

The Old Man put his hands on Arias's desk. He was leaning again, but he didn't have his arms crossed. His entire body was open, relaxed, as if he had been waiting for someone to ask him what he thought of the entire case.

Maybe he had been. Although Arias didn't know why. He could have told her from the start.

"The *Renegat* was a rogue ship," he said.

She frowned at him. She had no idea what he meant.

"The moment that Captain Preemas stopped following the orders he had received, the entire crew should have reported him," the Old Man said. "They had many opportunities. They could have said something at Sector Base Z, which was an unauthorized stop. A few of the crew who left the ship had done so, but it had proven too late. No one spoke up, at least that I could see from the record. And Preemas headed to the Scrapheap anyway. No one tried to stop him."

The Old Man seemed proud of himself, but Arias couldn't tell why.

"I'm not sure how that matters," she said.

The Old Man gave her a pitying look. "Have you examined the rescue interviews? They're uniform. Nadim Crowe and his people offered everyone on the *Renegat* the chance to stay in that faraway sector, near the Scrapheap, the opportunity to join him in building a new Fleet."

"And the people who came back did not want to join," she said. She hadn't really gone over all of the interviews yet, but she would. She had been a bit busy.

"How do we know?" the Old Man said. "We only have their word. How do we know that they're not here to infiltrate the Fleet itself, overthrow the leadership, and make it easy for Crowe's newly repaired ships to return to us from foldspace?"

She felt a little cold. It sounded weirdly convincing, even though it wasn't at all logical.

"Because they didn't try it," Arias said. "And because they told us what Crowe had intended to do, why he left the *Renegat* in the first place."

"The first rule of deception," the Old Man said. "Tell as much of the truth as possible."

Her frown deepened. She knew that. She'd prosecuted a lot of cases.

"But they didn't try to infiltrate the Fleet," she said.

"They couldn't," the Old Man said. "They lost a hundred years. You've been looking at the history of the Fleet. You've been trying to put this return into that context."

He had been monitoring everything. She was stunned by that.

"You know that they would have been heroes if they had returned then," he said. "They had some information about that Scrapheap that the admirals wanted. They had theories and they had worked their asses off to return. They were ready to be rehabilitated. They would have fought for it."

"That doesn't mean they would have risen in the ranks," Arias said.

"Doesn't it?" he asked.

She stared at him. She honestly didn't know the answer to that. She doubted anyone did. Not many people from that period were still alive, despite the advances in technology that lengthened human life. Humans still lived lives that shortened their existences. Just because living nearly two hundred years was possible didn't mean that most people made it.

"All we have to do is argue it," the Old Man said. "We don't have to prove it."

The frown left her face. She could feel it. The tension was gone from her forehead.

"You want to fight this case, don't you?" she asked. "You want to be part of it."

"I'm fascinated by it," he said.

She had never heard the Old Man say that.

“And,” he added, “it’s the only way to get rid of Carbone.”

He was right. Just because Carbone had screwed up didn’t mean the Fleet would remove her from the case. But if they replaced her with the Old Man, who was legendary in his approach to cases, and his unwillingness to take on anything but the most challenging work, they might consider letting her go.

“You’ve already talked to her,” Arias said. “She won’t step down.”

He grinned, then he shrugged, as if to say that what he had done wouldn’t matter.

“Well, I didn’t tell her my intention,” he said. “Because if I take the case—”

“She becomes second,” Arias said, unable to repress her own grin.

“Technically,” he said, “I would get to choose my second. I would choose you. She would be third.”

The assistant, essentially. Running the research, getting coffee, being told where to sit, where to stand, and how to behave.

Arias would bet that Carbone hadn’t been in that position in decades.

Arias couldn’t stop her grin from growing. She finally felt a bit of hope on this case.

“You’re going to send her home,” she said.

“Unless you want a high-profile loss on your record,” he said. “She could stay. The loss would be the ugliest this office has experienced in decades.”

“You’re going to tell her that, too,” Arias said.

“Naw,” he said quietly. “After she goes, I’m going to mention it to the media. That boneheaded woman is all reputation and bluster. We need actual lawyers on the case. And we have you.”

Arias’s breath caught. He had never said anything like that to her before.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Never thank me for telling the truth,” he said. “It makes truth-telling unusual. I just tell it like I see it.”

Then he rapped his hand on the desk, and stood up.

“Let’s get the others back in here,” he said. “We lost days to Carbone’s stupidity. If we’re going to win this case, we need to get to work.”

Arias smiled. It had been a long time since she worked with the Old Man. But she had done so many times as a young lawyer, and she knew how he operated. He wouldn’t try to hog the limelight. He wouldn’t take credit for something he did not do.

And, most importantly, he wouldn’t make a major decision behind her back. He would consult with her.

They would work as a team.

“Lucinda?” he said, catching her attention. Apparently she hadn’t heard his last question. “You do realize that this is pro forma, right?”

This. He wasn’t being clear.

“What is, sir?” she asked.

“My heading this prosecution,” he said. “You’ll head it. After the mess with Carbone settles down.”

Arias’s smile faded. “Are you sure, sir?” she asked. The last thing she wanted was to think this case was hers only to lose it to him.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I don’t have time to head a major prosecution like this one and run this office. If anything, I’ll be second. I’ll keep up on the details, and advise, but you’ll lead.”

She felt a heady moment of joy, and tamped it down before it interfered with her concentration.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

He waved a hand at her dismissively. “That’s how it should have been in the first place,” he said. “Glad we can finally make it right.”

Then he rapped the desk one last time, stood, and grinned at her.

"We're going to win this one, Arias," he said as he walked away. "I can feel it."

The joy she had felt a moment earlier dissipated. She wished he hadn't said that. Not because she was superstitious—she wasn't. Because she didn't want the expectation.

Then she sighed. She couldn't control how he felt about the case. She could only control how she dealt with the case.

It still felt like a dog of a case to her. She doubted she would win.

But with the Old Man's confidence—and with the fact that she had somehow bested Danitra Carbone without even really trying—Arias at least had a leg up.

She would do everything she could to win—and everything she could was one whole heck of a lot.

* * *

11

Dismissed.

Danitra Carbone sat in the office they had assigned her on this backwater starbase and stared at the pile of tablets in front of her. She had been given twelve hours to vacate the office, and even then, someone would double-check everything she had done to make certain she didn't walk off with evidence or files or equipment she wasn't entitled to.

Dismissed.

She had never been dismissed from a case before. Not in her entire history as a lawyer. Not even as an associate. Not even when she was interning.

No judge had ever taken her off a case, no one had ever requested that she leave.

She had always, always finished what she started—even if she hadn't wanted the case, like this one.

She should have gone directly to her private runabout and let one of her assistants clean up this mess. Even though no one on her staff had been cleared to handle all of the details in this case. She hadn't brought a lot onto the base; she had planned to work on the runabout, away from prying eyes.

The assistant could have cleaned up in no time. *She* could clean up in no time.

But she was just sitting at the desk, thinking thoughts she never normally had.

Like quitting the prosecutor's office altogether. Opening up her own defense practice. Starting with Jorja Lakinis, even though Lakinis had betrayed her. Maybe even stealing the defense case from whatsername Mukasey, just to show the upstarts here on this backwater starbase how real law was practiced.

Although Carbone probably wouldn't have been able to litigate that part of the case. She had seen the prosecution's files after all, and knew their strategy—or what they considered to be a strategy.

But she could take on Lakinis's medical case, and make the prosecution case a living nightmare, figuring out ways to block anything the prosecution tried to do without being involved at all.

Then she let out a breath, put her hands in her hair and leaned forward, feeling exhausted.

She was being petty. Revenge usually wasn't her style—outside of the courtroom.

They had let her go, when she had fought against being removed as the lead on this case. She could fight the dismissal or she could acquiesce. If she fought it, then the case would be delayed, the judges would be annoyed, and she still had to litigate a case she would probably lose because of Lakinis and the five other defendants.

Carbone stood. She shouldn't have come. She should have said no in the first

place. She had known this case would be dangerous for her. She should have listened to her own internal voice.

Instead, she had allowed herself to be persuaded. And that carefully cultivated reputation of hers was going to take a major hit.

Then she smiled. It would take a major hit if they controlled the message.

But she would do that. And she would do it with the truth.

They didn't like her plan for tackling the case. She had the only winning strategy, and they had turned it down.

She was going to wish them luck, while making sure that everyone knew the only person who could have won this case for the prosecution was Danitra Carbone—and they had let her go.

* * *

12

The interviews were difficult and gave her a headache. Mukasey insisted on doing the in-depth interviews herself; she wanted to make sure she didn't miss anything.

But she wasn't sure what she was missing. She listened to more than a hundred *Renegat* survivors, and the first thing she learned was that these people had complaints about everything. Their accommodations, the fact that they had no real freedom, the way the Fleet was treating them.

She had hoped that talking to her assistants had gotten the complaints out of the defendants' systems, but no. Once they had a new audience, they began all over again.

And unless she wanted to piss them off, she had to listen, even though she didn't want to.

She conducted the interviews in a small conference room off her office. She probably should have conducted the interviews in the tower where the defendants were housed, but her assistants recommended that she give each defendant an outing. She had listened, and that, at least, had brought some gratitude.

Along with the food and beverages she had provided, which were different and apparently better than the food they could get onsite, she at least had some of the defendants smiling.

The rest were angry. Furiously angry. The kind of angry that radiated from the room outward.

She sat alone with them in the small room, and wished it was larger to let all of that emotion have some space. She sat on one side of a table that was nothing more than a table—no console for any kind of computer system, nothing that allowed her to record the conversations, no food delivery system built in. Not even a modified dumbwaiter to remove dishes.

The table always threw interviewees for a loop, since they expected her to have more tech inside the room. She did—on the walls, three different systems recording every deposition, every interview—but none of the systems were visible. Not even her assistants knew about one of the systems. That one was just for her, and she often used it for staff relations.

The rest, though, usually had someone monitoring them. She liked having two pairs of eyes on a conversation—that way she didn't have to rewatch it, which she always felt was a waste of time. Two pairs of eyes, both familiar with the case, could often discover several different things, and she found that helpful.

Especially in this case, in which none of the defendants were telling the same story. They all had had different experiences on the *Renegat*, and all of them were—as all defendants usually were—innocent, at least according to them.

She was inclined to believe that they had not participated in Nadim Crowe's actual mutiny. It seemed to have come from the engineering department, and with the exception of Kabac, who could prove he had been fired by Crowe as an engineer long before either of them ever made it onto the *Renegat*, not a single one of the 193 people who had survived ever served in engineering—even before Preemas had messed with everyone's job descriptions.

Most of the defendants so far had told tales of hiding during the worst of the fighting, or helping with the cleanup. A few claimed they had told Crowe no when he asked them to join him on the old Fleet ships he was refurbishing.

One person had told her that Crowe believed the *Renegat* would not make it back to the Fleet, ever, and he had tried to convince her to stay, based on that alone.

She had said he seemed panicked about it, but no one else had mentioned that Crowe was anxious.

Maybe Nadim Crowe was one of those people who played favorites. Maybe he had made that offer to a few people, but not all of them.

If he—as the chief engineer of the *Renegat*—believed the ship could not safely return to the Fleet, then why did he let them go?

As she worked her way through the interviews, she ended up with many more questions than answers. She had no sense of Preemas, for example. Most everyone said he was mercurial, but some thought he was a visionary while others believed he didn't care about anyone but himself.

She had dealt with other cases involving captains, and she knew that a lot of the perceptions were filtered through the interviewee's relationship to authority. Unfortunately, everyone on the *Renegat* had had bad experiences with authority, so they were all damaged in that area.

She saw it in the anger against the Fleet. She also saw it in anger against Preemas, for some of them, and for others, anger against Crowe.

This case was large, and she was having trouble finding the right angle on it.

And then there were the six people that Carbone had tried to break off from the investigation. They weren't quite Mukasey's ace in the hole, but they did negate the charges that the Fleet was trying to bring. They tried to prevent the mutiny. They tried to keep the *Renegat* alive.

No matter what information the six of them had, Carbone wouldn't have been able to use it in court.

But they didn't have to announce her dismissal. They could have just sent her home, elevated Arias, and claimed that a different case had taken Carbone out of the jurisdiction. Or maybe since the case was being tried in Starbase Sigma's court, they could have lied and said that Arias's experience in that court would have been sufficient for the case.

Instead, they were making a big deal out of the fact that Danitra Carbone was leaving and Abram Yglesias, whom everyone called The Old Man, had taken over.

That did make Mukasey sit up and take notice, because she couldn't remember the last time Yglesias had tried a case. She had no idea what his style was, although legend had it that once upon a time, he made Carbone look like an amateur.

Mukasey didn't think Carbone had made a big mistake. Not a firing mistake. She should have contacted Mukasey, of course, because she was meeting with one of Mukasey's clients. And the client should have notified her before the fact, not after. Carbone had also defied the order of the court that the defendants had to stay together.

But if Lakinias and the others had taken the pleas, the court would not have vacated them, based on procedure. The court would have looked the other way, and Mukasey's case would have been weakened.

That would have made a win for the prosecution almost inevitable.

And yet, they fired the most famous prosecutor in the Fleet.

Mukasey's brain was already filled with too many details. She didn't need this added wrinkle. It made her feel paranoid. It made her feel like she was missing something very, very important.

So she buried herself in the details from the defendants. The battle for the *Renegat*, the overuse of the brig. The ultimate investigation of the Scrapheap itself—what the *Renegat* had initially been assigned to do—along with the discovery that hundreds, maybe thousands, of ships had gone missing during the Scrapheap's lifetime.

That probably should not have been a surprise, but it was to some on the *Renegat*—and probably was to the Fleet now. The Scrapheaps were considered protected space, filled with ruined and outmoded ships. The Scrapheaps were supposed to be impenetrable, and this one had not been. Its forcefield had been open to space, and a lot of items, not just ships, had gone missing.

And then, apparently, Crowe and his cronies had gone into the Scrapheap and found even more working ships. They had taken *anacapa* drives off of those ships, with the idea that the drives would replace damaged drives on the *Renegat*.

Then there had been some kind of meeting, in which Crowe demanded that everyone stay in that sector and never return to the Fleet. Some of the defendants said that Crowe had been belligerent when the crew told him they wanted to return to the Fleet.

Others claimed that he had replaced the *Renegat's* *anacapa* drive with a working drive, and wished them luck.

Mukasey wasn't sure she believed either story. She wasn't sure she believed *any* of the stories, not really. Something in the way the stories got told made her think everyone was lying.

Everyone except Lakinas. Lakinas had said she hadn't known how decisions were made to return to the Fleet. She had been in the brig, along with her five compatriots. Others had been in the brig as well—at least that was the sense that Mukasey got from a few of the interviews she had conducted.

And then the speaker—whoever it was (and it didn't seem to matter who)—would give her a sideways look. They were lying, covering up something big—as if this case wasn't big enough—and she wasn't sure what that was.

She hoped her assistants would find something in the files she had received from the Fleet, files that had come from the *Renegat* before she exploded, but Mukasey wasn't holding her breath.

She wasn't sure if the ship continued to update its records after the knowledgeable crew left. That was the thing that shocked her the most about the *Renegat* defendants. They made it back without a lot of what the Fleet considered essential personnel.

And that was going to be front and center in her arguments against the mutiny charge. These people fought every step of the way to return home, so they should be allowed to live their lives.

She still had a lot of work to do before she made any arguments. Her nightmare was that she would still have mountains of data to go through the night before she had to give opening arguments. She couldn't afford to hire enough staff to go through everything rapidly. She didn't trust any specialized program to look for key concepts, incidents, or words—although she might be able to use that later. And she wasn't sure she trusted anyone else to figure out what she needed.

Yes, she had caught a break now that Carbone was gone. But it didn't feel like a win. It felt like a trap.

And she wasn't sure why.

She just needed to figure out what—if anything—the defendants were hiding, and how—if possible—she could use that information to win the case.

* * *

He wouldn't look at her. Not directly.

Jorja Lakinas hunched in her special chair and put her crabbed hand front and center. She had taken her time entering this office, her monitoring chip blinking green because she had permission to be in this part of Starbase Sigma.

This part was so different from the section she was currently living in.

After living mostly on what this culture she found herself in would consider "old" ships, and after spending so much time on the *Renegat*, which even by her time's standard was an out-of-date vessel, the section of Starbase Sigma where she had been living seemed very modern.

But this section, with its recessed lighting and the way that the walls dampened sound unless she set her own internal controls to have certain sounds elevated—well, everything about this part of Starbase Sigma felt beyond modern. It felt almost unfamiliar, as if she had entered an alien culture.

Or it would have, if humans weren't the same everywhere.

And this attorney, this Oscar Vaas, he acted like everyone else who saw her for the first time. His first and only direct look began with eye contact and the beginning of a smile, and then he realized what he was seeing. His gaze slithered away, but not far enough away. He saw her crabbed hand, the cart, the way her body twisted, and then he realized that she had seen him look away, and that he would embarrass himself if he looked even farther away, but he couldn't stop himself.

His gaze found the floor, then the wall, then maybe the door, as he hoped someone, anyone, would save him from this meeting. But he had no one, because he had no human assistant. He only had the system he had set up to give his clients privacy, or so his information had said.

When Jorja researched him she found his interest in privacy perfectly suited to her. She didn't want to answer questions from other people about why she was getting her own attorney. She didn't want to answer to the Fleet or to her so-called colleagues.

She wanted to take care of herself.

"You know who I am, right?" she asked in the most forceful voice she had.

His shoulders straightened. She could actually see him pull himself together. The office was small, but tastefully decorated—lots of holographic depictions of mountains from places she did not recognize as well as some images of mountain lakes rotating in and out. The office itself smelled faintly of fresh pine and lake water, something he must have paid dearly for.

At least he had room for her cart. The chairs he had for clients had moved to the side of the wall as she wheeled herself into the antechamber.

That little move alone led her to believe that he had represented someone like her before.

But she shouldn't assume.

His gaze met hers. He had very green eyes that looked like emeralds in his light brown skin. He had tight black curls that fell against his face as if he had designed them that way—and maybe he had.

He was the kind of man who knew he was handsome, and she suspected he was the kind of lawyer who used his good looks to his advantage.

The power of his gaze held her—or maybe it wasn't the power of his gaze at all. Maybe it was the fact that almost no one in this godforsaken place ever looked her in the face.

The novelty of it hit her like a blow.

“I know who you are,” he said. “I researched you. And if you’re here to have me work with Eun Ae Mukasey, I won’t, not without her permission.”

“That’s a different case,” Jorja said.

His eyebrows went up, a movement she suspected was deliberate, because he had a great reputation as a lawyer. Most lawyers she met could hide their emotions completely.

“I’m here because I want to sue the Fleet,” she said.

He tilted his head a little, as if he hadn’t expected that. He was a good actor, she would have to give him that. Or maybe he really was surprised at everything she was saying.

He had expected her to hire him to represent her on the mutiny charges, after all.

“Do you mind if I sit?” He waved a hand toward a small desk that had been lost in the pile of furniture in the corner.

“It’s your office.” She didn’t want to give an opinion on what he could or couldn’t do. Nor did she want to reveal everything she was feeling.

She hated it when people stood over her. They *loomed*, and she hated that more than almost anything. But she’d learned to hide it, because when people saw that she was uncomfortable, they assumed she was in pain.

He waved a hand, and the desk, along with one of the chairs, glided toward him. Jorja couldn’t see the rails or whatever they were that brought the pieces of furniture close, but she did feel the floor vibrate slightly.

This man had made a lot of money in his work; she knew that because he hadn’t come from money. All that he had, he had earned himself.

That was encouraging.

“People don’t generally sue the Fleet,” he said. “The Fleet provides our lives, our homes, our income. We live here, and we are subject to them and what they do. Any lawsuits against the Fleet generally come from sector bases, where people can go off and live on their own, without Fleet contact.”

She felt a slight surge of irritation. She should have been used to this kind of over-explaining by now. It had started when she had gotten injured, and it never stopped.

“People don’t generally get denied medical care, not once, not twice, but three times, by the Fleet.” She let just a bit of the anger she was feeling into her voice.

His gaze went up and down her entire body. This time, there was no shame in his look and no judgment. There was just a clear assessment of everything he was looking at.

“Your injuries come from the *Renegat*?” he asked. “From the rescue?”

“From what that woman they fired from the prosecution case . . .” she took a deliberate breath to see if he knew who she was referring to.

“Danitra Carbone,” he said.

Jorja inclined her head once. An acknowledgment, nothing more.

“ . . . what she called the battle for the *Renegat*. When we were fighting to prevent Nadim Crowe from taking over the ship.”

“You were on the side of the dead captain, Preemas?” Vaas asked.

“I fought for the ship, yes,” she said, being very careful. She hadn’t liked Preemas. By the end, no one had. But she had believed that he was the only one who could get them to the Scrapheap, and then get them home.

She had been wrong.

“We lost,” she said fairly quickly, because she didn’t want to discuss the “battle for the *Renegat*” or Carbone or Preemas for that matter. “While others got taken to the med bay, I was sent to the brig. No one took care of my wounds.”

“Do you mind if I record?” he asked.

“I thought you already were,” she said.

"Not without express permission." He smiled at her. "You learn in my profession that if you follow the rules to the letter, you usually can't get nailed on technicalities."

She smiled in return. Her skin stretched painfully across her jawline and cheekbones. She didn't smile often, not only because she looked horrible doing so, but because it hurt.

His fingers moved across the top of his desk. "Repeat what you just said."

She did.

"Do you have any idea why you were not taken to the med bay?" he asked.

"Someone told me later they were triaging. But even after the triage ended, no one took care of me," she said. "I got some minor treatment, but it wasn't until Crowe had left the ship that I actually got real medical care."

Vaas raised his head. "I'm not up on the details of what happened at that Scrapheap," he said.

"I'm not going to go into them right now," she said. "Not until I know you can represent me."

"Suing the Fleet . . ." He let the words hang. "That's a tall order."

She nodded. "I'm not done."

"All right," he said.

"I got some care from the team after we started back home," she said. "But we didn't have any real medical experts. They could just use the equipment to patch me up. No real repair."

He nodded.

"Then we got rescued—" and she wasn't going to tell him about that.

Everyone, it seemed, knew about the rescue of the *Renegat*. It had happened quickly and efficiently, saving a lot of lives, because the *Renegat's anacapa* drive had finally failed, and the ship blew up. There was footage of the rescue. There was a lot of interest in it, and the survivors. The news stories never stopped. The requests for interviews never ended.

But once the Fleet decided to sue the entire surviving crew for mutiny, then the Fleet also denied access to the crewmembers.

"—and I thought that was when I'd get real medical care," she said.

"Were you injured in the rescue?" he asked.

The question made her furious. What did it matter? But it probably did. She was hiring a lawyer, not a mental health consultant.

"How am I supposed to know?" she asked. "I was already injured. Did it get worse? I don't know. Did it hurt, that rescue? Like hell."

He tilted his head. The assessment was clearly continuing.

"And when I got here, I asked for repair. Everyone gets repair. *Everyone* who serves with the Fleet knows that their injuries get repaired after something awful. But no. I got some minor treatment, but no repair. I was given this—" She waved her hand at the cart. "—and a room designed for people who aren't really mobile, and that's it."

His eyes had become hooded, probably so that she couldn't see his emotional reaction. She leaned forward, even though it hurt her twisted spine.

"I am a *loyal* member of the Fleet. I deserve proper medical care. It is clear to me that they decided *before* they opened the mutiny case that I was guilty of something, so they did not even try to make me better." She lowered her voice, so that her fury wasn't quite as evident. "I deserve to be better."

"Fascinating," he said.

Now her anger rose, almost uncontrollably. "Fascinating? This is my life we're discussing."

"It is," he said. "But 'want,' 'need,' 'deserve,' those are words that aren't going to get us anywhere."

“Us?” she asked. Did that mean he was going to take the case? She felt a little glimmer of hope, something she hadn’t felt since they emerged from foldspace near Sector Base Z just before the *Renegat* blew up.

“Us,” he said. “I’ll take the case.”

She let out a small sigh. “I have a lot of data on what I need—”

“Need,” he repeated. “That’s irrelevant.”

She bristled.

“They’re not going to listen to what someone needs, particularly when they’ve made up their minds about you.” He waved a hand. “I believe that. I’ve believed that since I started following the mutiny case.”

“You’re following it?” she asked. “Why?”

“Because the legal community here is small,” he said, “and I have learned on high-profile cases, that it’s best to pay attention in case you’re called in at the last minute to take over for someone else.”

She blinked, thought, then nodded. That made sense to her.

“Do I have to sign something?” she asked.

“We’ve recorded the agreement,” he said. “We’ll do more, but right now, that’ll cover both of us.”

“Except that you have the recording,” she said.

“I’ll make sure you have a copy,” he said.

Her heart started pounding, hard. She didn’t want to wait.

“You’re going to have to trust me if we work together,” he said. “And I understand. After all that’s happened to you, you don’t trust easily.”

She had been about to say that, but she wasn’t going to admit it.

“What about ‘obligation?’” she asked. “Will that get the Fleet to take care of me?”

“That and publicity might be the route a lesser lawyer would take,” he said. “And we might have to. But I’m looking at this with a slightly different eye.”

She frowned. That movement didn’t hurt as much as smiling did.

“Meaning what?” she asked.

“Meaning we need leverage, and they have a high profile case against you *Renegat* survivors, a case they want to win,” he said.

A chill ran down her aching back. She didn’t trust him, not really. She could barely breathe, afraid he was going to say something stupid.

“Do you have something?” he asked. “Information? Anything that would help the Fleet win their case?”

She closed her eyes. Betrayal. All these lawyers wanted was to get someone to betray their friends.

She opened her eyes. She sighed, and was about to tell him he’d been fired, when he raised a hand.

“Listen to me,” he said. “The information has to be true. It needs to be verifiable. And it can remain secret.”

That caught her. “What do you mean, secret?” she asked.

“We will negotiate with them. They will provide you with medical care in exchange for some major piece of verifiable—from another source, verifiable—information. We will ask that your case be dealt with privately. There will be signed nondisclosure agreements, binding on them as well as us.”

“They’ll do that?” she asked.

He nodded.

“What if I have to testify?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t,” he said. “That’s why it’s verifiable. We’d ask them to drop the charges against you, based on your medical condition. You’re in no shape to go to a Fleet penitentiary.”

Another shiver ran down her spine. She hadn't even thought about what might happen to her if everyone was found guilty.

"You'd be separated out. We'd send you to a different starbase to get medical care, and then no one would see you again." He folded his hands in front of him. "Would that work for you?"

She took a deep breath. They weren't really her friends. Not close friends, anyway. And she wanted a new life. And, damn, she wanted the pain to end. She wanted people to look her in the face. She wanted to move easily, without reaching for something to brace herself with every step.

Was it betrayal if they didn't know she had done it?

"Yes," she said quietly. "That would work for me."

He gave her a small smile. "We'll need to solidify our relationship," he said. "I'll set it up for the Fleet to pay me, if we can get them to agree."

"If?" she asked.

"If," he said. "Because what they'll do will depend on the quality of your information. If it will change the case or move it in their favor, then they'll be a lot more willing to give us everything we want. Would the information you have do that?"

She smiled again, despite the pain. What she had would shake the case from top to bottom. Would it help the Fleet? She didn't know. She wasn't a lawyer. But it certainly would not help the crewmembers of the now-defunct *Renegat*.

"Yes," she said. "The information I have will change everything."

* * *

14

Mukasey paced her small office, holoscreens floating around her. She had nearly fallen asleep at her desk while working on this case, so she had taken to standing now. She was used to working hard, but what she had to do here was nearly impossible, especially with her few resources.

She'd spent the week interviewing the defendants and had learned nothing, except one thing she didn't want to learn.

They were hiding something, something that had happened at that Scrapheap. Whenever she pushed them about the events that sent them back to Sector Z, they changed the subject or looked away or gave her vague answers.

She might have left it alone if it weren't for the fact that the decision to return seemed crucial. Half, or maybe more, of the crew remained at that Scrapheap. This crew came back with the *Renegat*.

She didn't believe the amiable split story, but she couldn't find anything to disprove it—well, except for the battle for the *Renegat*. But that happened long before the crew split and half remained.

She needed to pressure them, but the only way she knew how to do that was with evidence, which meant she had to comb through the records pulled off the *Renegat* before it was destroyed. There was so much information, even though some of it had been scrubbed.

Usually, though, in her experience, she had learned that scrubbing left traces. Normally, she would hire someone to go through the material with her, to figure out what was missing. She had a service that could find the bits and pieces from the scrubblings.

In theory, that service kept confidentiality, but she wasn't sure it would on this case. The case was too big, and there were media outlets that were willing to pay to get all kinds of information on the *Renegat* renegades. Her meager payments

wouldn't counteract someone else's greed, particularly if that person could cover their tracks well enough. Since she would be hiring the service to comb through databases, she figured leaking the information without a trace would be in their skill set.

She couldn't take the risk.

She was doing so much of this alone that she was skimping on sleep. She had done that as a young lawyer, but it was harder as an older one. Hence the pacing. It kept her from dozing off.

She would have to sleep soon enough, though.

Mukasey pulled the screen toward herself. On it was the judge who had recused herself. She had a strong chin, clear eyes, and papery skin covered with faint lines.

An old woman, then, without a lot of vanity. Her black hair was streaked with silver. Something in her expression made her seem ageless, but Mukasey knew she had to be older. She had had a conflict of interest in the *Renegat* case, after all.

The image had biographical information attached, but Mukasey's eyes had gone too blurry to read it. She really would have to sleep soon. She wasn't making much progress at all anymore.

She commanded the holoscreen to read the information to her.

A programmed gender-neutral voice read in a flat tone.

Admiral Bella Gão, Retired, is well known throughout the sector for her charitable works. The work includes . . .

"Skip the charities," Mukasey said. Being tired also made her impatient. If there was something in that information, she would look later.

Since her retirement, Admiral Gão has taken a second career as a tribunal judge. She sits on two or more tribunals per year, and her opinions are quoted throughout—

"Skip the tribunals," Mukasey said. Most of the judges had gone to school for this second career. The language she had heard in that section was similar to the information about the other judges.

Before her retirement, Admiral Gão spent almost one hundred years in active duty for the Fleet.

That caught Mukasey's attention. One hundred years?

The changes Admiral Gão championed saved hundreds of lives. She also influenced the way that Scrapheaps were run, updated the program, and made it more efficient. Her work—

"Wait," Mukasey said. "Pause."

She leaned into the screen, no longer as tired as she had been. She scanned the information, looking for the words Scrapheap. Some of the changes were so high level that she couldn't access them, but some were common sense.

Such as this: Gão stopped the practice of sending a single ship back to investigate problems with a Scrapheap. Gão ultimately managed to get the Fleet to send a small group of ships to any Scrapheap in distress. She also set up a team to facilitate communication across long distances, and through foldspace itself.

The hair stood up on the back of Mukasey's neck.

Mukasey put in a request for Gão's personnel record, and that request was immediately denied.

Mukasey took a deep breath. She needed to do this slowly, and by the book. There was something here; that was obvious. She just had to figure out what it was, without putting her clients in any jeopardy, without hurting her case, and without tipping off the Fleet itself.

Tall order. Tall enough that she couldn't do it on no sleep. She would make possibly fatal mistakes.

She needed to get some sleep. Then she needed to track down information on Admiral Bella Gão, Retired.

Because Gão knew something. Something important.
And Mukasey needed to know it as well.

* * *

15

One of the defendants wanted to talk to the Old Man. That piqued Arias's interest. Apparently, it piqued the Old Man's, too, because he was going to hold the meeting in the office he had initially set aside for Carbone.

Arias still worked in the side office. Both she and the Old Man used Carbone's old office for evidence, files, locked tablets, and the ever-mushrooming data from this never-ending case.

And, of course, the Old Man had moved an ancient, rather cruddy, couch in here. Arias had slept on it too many times already. Her back complained each and every time.

She brought a cup of coffee into the office. They were going to meet with the lawyer first—the Old Man's strategy. He really didn't want to see the defendant first, poke around and try to figure out what that person had to offer.

When Arias asked why, the Old Man's answer was simple. *We're trying a case against 193 people. I think of them as a unit. I don't want to see individuals.*

She had nodded, then thought about that for nearly a day afterward. That was the better strategy. Individual parts of that unit might have done something—the way a hand grasped a weapon—but that hand still belonged to the body as a whole.

His simple statement had transformed the way she had been looking at this case. It had been complex enough, just trying to figure out who had done what, when, and how.

While she had dug through the information, she had worried that she might put too much blame on one individual, not enough on another. She had worried that the tribunal would force her to separate the cases, which meant she would have to make deals with some and try some of the worst actors.

But if she rigidly held to the fact that they were all a unit, she had a greater chance of winning this thing.

She wished that the Old Man had told her that strategy from the start. Then she realized why he hadn't. He had thought she already knew it.

The more she worked with him, the more she realized that he thought her more capable than she thought herself.

He was sitting behind the desk, almost still. The Old Man was never still. His chair was tilted backward, and his feet were crossed on top of the desk. He had a tablet before him, and he was scrolling through it.

His right forefingers tapped a slight rhythm on the chair's arm. She half-smiled when she saw the movement. Never still.

"They want something from us," he said without looking up.

"Obviously," Arias said.

"No, not obvious," the Old Man said. "I've been looking up this lawyer, this Vaas. You know him?"

"Yeah," Arias said. "I won a personal injury against him."

It was rare for prosecutors in her office to take on a personal injury case. She had acted as the defendant's attorney in this one, since the accused was the Fleet.

Usually, personal injury cases didn't happen on bases like Starbase Sigma. Injuries and the complaints were handled inside the Fleet. But this had been a civilian who had fallen off a ramp in the docking bay, and had slammed his head against a railing, resulting in actual brain damage. The injury was repairable, even though

the civilian had lingering symptoms. The Fleet had even paid for the medical, just as a matter of course, but the civilian wanted personal damages.

The Fleet didn't do damages. The Fleet rarely thought about money at all. That was for non-Fleet bases and other cultures. The civilian hadn't realized that—and Vaas had clearly taken the case to see if he could open a small hole in the Fleet's very firm stance against damage payments for civilians.

It hadn't worked, primarily because Arias had argued to that tribunal that opening the door would change the very heart of the Fleet itself. Privately, she had always thought the civilian had a real argument. Not that real arguments mattered in a court of law.

"I remember that thing," the Old Man said, without looking up from his tablet. "Well argued on both sides. Aspirational on his part. This guy is ambitious."

The Old Man didn't say that in admiration, but instead, like it was something they could use.

"He's not working with Mukasey," the Old Man said. "He's on his own."

"He wants something specific for his client," Arias said. "I suspect I even know who the client is."

"Lakinas?" the Old Man asked.

Arias nodded. "I think Carbone put an idea in her head, and she went after a good attorney to get whatever she needs."

"Let's see what she's got to trade," the Old Man said. He set the tablet down.

"You handling the negotiation or am I?" Arias asked.

He looked at her sideways. "You think she has something?"

Arias shrugged one shoulder. "Vaas does. If she didn't, he would have sent her back to Mukasey."

"Good point," the Old Man said. "He thinks he's meeting with me, but I'll defer to you. He'll probably think you're my second—"

"That's all right," Arias said. "Everyone's terrified of you."

The Old Man barked a laugh. Then a small chime rang. Someone who didn't belong in the office had arrived.

"You ready for this?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," she said. She took the chair he had placed at the corner of the desk, on his side. There was one more chair in front of the desk, because they had expressly told Vaas not to bring his client.

The nice thing about Vaas was that he didn't play games. He would play by the rules, knowing that most attorneys lost by aggravating their opponents and forcing rules violations to become issues, rather than handling something on its merits.

The door opened, and Vaas stepped inside. He was a ridiculously handsome man, whose square chin accented not just his entire face, but the broadness of his shoulders and the military trim to his body. He had been Fleet—they had all been Fleet—but he had left the Fleet so that he could practice the kind of law he liked.

His gaze met Arias's first. Those green eyes always startled her. They were serious now, and he seemed just a bit nervous. There was actual gel in his black curls. It glistened. He wore a silver-gray tunic that looked almost martial over black pants. It made him look official, which he might have needed for his own confidence.

Yes indeed. The Old Man intimidated everyone.

The Old Man pretended not to notice. He waved a hand at the empty chair. "Have a seat."

Vaas nodded, then sat, almost like a child expecting to be disciplined. He clutched a single tablet and set it gingerly on his lap. He almost seemed nervous.

The Old Man said nothing. He just waited. It was an old tactic of his, one that Arias had stolen years ago. Most people were very uncomfortable with silence.

Because she had worked with the Old Man her entire career, she was not. So she sat beside him, and waited.

Vaas glanced at her. She raised her eyebrows, encouraging him to speak.

"I'm . . . ah . . . representing Jorja Lakinis," he said.

So they were right. The woman that Carbone had tried to turn to their side now wanted something, through her own lawyer.

"Why isn't Mukasey here?" Arias asked.

Vaas shot her an irritated glance. Apparently, he thought that he would talk only to the Old Man.

"Because I'm Jorja's lawyer," he said.

"So is she," Arias said. "At least, last we heard."

"This is a different issue," Vaas said.

"Then it has nothing to do with us," Arias said.

"It has to do with her injuries." Vaas turned slightly away from her and spoke directly to the Old Man. "She wants compensation."

The Old Man made a small movement with his right hand, so small that Arias doubted Vaas could see it. It meant: Let me talk.

"This office offered her the opportunity to have her injuries repaired," the Old Man said. "She declined."

"Hmmm," Vaas said. "I hadn't realized that she had spoken to your office. I thought Danitra Carbone had spoken to her personally."

"Danitra Carbone represented our office at the time," the Old Man said.

Arias had to work not to smile. The Old Man had been furious with Carbone when the offer happened. He wouldn't have acknowledged her work then.

"That offer," the Old Man said, "had a shelf life. It lasted for the duration of that particular meeting."

"And I'm not here about that offer." Vaas's voice had grown stronger. He was getting more comfortable. "Jorja Lakinis hired me to help her force the Fleet to meet its obligations and care for her health."

The Old Man made that ever so slight movement again, this time giving Arias permission to take over the meeting again.

"Again," Arias said. "That's not our issue. You'll have to bring the suit, and see what happens with whatever tribunal you get assigned."

"I would rather avoid a tribunal," Vaas said.

"Most of us would," Arias said. "But we usually don't get what we want."

"I told Jorja that I would talk to you before I brought any action against the Fleet," Vaas said.

"Now you have," Arias said. "You can return to your client with a clear conscience."

Vaas shot her another irritated glance. "We would like to bargain with you."

"Our theory of the case has changed," the Old Man said. He spoke before Arias could. Apparently he wasn't going to be as silent as he had said he would. "Danitra Carbone was pursuing leads that no longer interest us."

"I am aware of that," Vaas said. "We don't want that deal. We would like to trade crucial information for Jorja's repair and rehabilitation. We would also like to have her salary reinstated, and give her the retirement benefits promised to anyone who voluntarily leaves the Fleet."

"No," the Old Man said.

"You haven't even heard what she has to offer," Vaas said.

"I don't need to," the Old Man said. "We will not give her a salary or retirement. Nor will we reinstate her. Not for any reason."

Arias noted that he had left out the health benefits, and if she noticed, she was sure Vaas had as well.

She also understood why the Old Man was so adamant about not reinstating Lakinas. That would set a precedent. It would treat Lakinas like an individual instead of part of the unit. Giving her health benefits could be argued as compassionate care, something that Fleet regulations allowed under many circumstances, although none as extreme as this one.

"You might, after you hear what she has to offer," Vaas said.

"No," the Old Man said. "We will not. If that's what brought you, then thank you, but we're not interested. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a case to work on—"

"You'll want her information." Vaas sounded a little desperate. He thought whatever she had was good. He clearly hadn't expected to be shut down immediately.

"We don't need it," Arias said. "We have images of the battle for the *Renegat*. We have witness logs and medical histories. We have interviews and more information than we can actually use at trial."

"I'm sure you do." Vaas's lips moved in a perfunctory smile, one that didn't reach those amazing green eyes. "However, you don't have what she can give you."

Before she spoke, Arias made sure she sounded very dismissive. "Oh?" she asked. "And what's that?"

"The fate of Nadim Crowe," Vaas said. "The true fate, not the lies you're being told."

Arias's heart rate jumped. She hoped her surprise didn't show on her face.

"What happened to him?" she asked, keeping her voice flat.

"No," Vaas said, and this time, he looked at the Old Man. In fact, Vaas had imitated the Old Man's tone. "This time, I get to draw the line. You will make an agreement with me and then you will hear Lakinas's statement."

"No." The Old Man swung his legs off the desk. "It doesn't work that way. We hear what she says, we corroborate it, and if it we think we can use it, *then* we make a deal."

Vaas was shaking his head.

"That's all you get," the Old Man said. "Jorja Lakinas and her colleagues have lied to us from the beginning of this case. We have no reason to believe anything she says. We will not make a deal with someone we know to be a serial liar, not without the opportunity to verify her information."

"There's no way to verify," Vaas said. "The records are gone. Which is why you're having trouble on this very point, aren't you?"

"It's no good to us if we can't verify," Arias said.

"Oh, don't give me that, Lucinda," Vaas said. "I've stood toe to toe with you. You're a better lawyer than that."

A surge of anger flooded her, which was probably what he wanted. But she managed to keep her face impassive.

"You use this information against any of the *Renegat* renegades in court, and they will crack," Vaas said.

"They're not going to be placed on the stand," Arias said. "You know that."

"They will if you call them," Vaas said. "We want Jorja's health benefits, repair and rehabilitation, as promised to every Fleet cadet from time immemorial. And she will not testify. She will give you the information under oath, but she won't speak in front of the court."

"No," the Old Man said.

Vaas's cheeks grew noticeably darker. He was getting angry. "Then we have no choice but to sue the Fleet."

"Good luck with that," the Old Man said. "You will lose. The case will wait until ours is done, and when we win, she will get nothing."

He placed his feet ostentatiously on the desk again, then crossed his hands over his stomach.

"Good day," he said.

Vaas stood. He started for the door, then stopped. "You'll want this information."

"We don't need it," Arias said.

"Oh, but you do," Vaas said. His eyes moved ever so slightly. It was a tell. He was thinking about how to salvage this interview. "Crowe and his colleagues are most likely dead."

Arias's heart rate increased again. She hoped she didn't have as obvious a tell as Vaas.

"Of course they are," she said. "They are at least a hundred years in the past. Some of them would be well past two hundred now."

Vaas shook his head. "No. They most likely died shortly after the *Renegat* left that Scrapheap."

"Most likely is not the same as definitely," Arias said.

The Old Man raised that hand, this time so that Vaas could see it. "How can she assume that they're dead?"

Vaas almost smiled, but caught himself before the smile had room to grow. Still, Arias saw it, and if she had, then the Old Man had, too.

"Because they didn't have enough supplies to make it for very long," Vaas said.

"I thought they chose to leave the *Renegat*," Arias said.

"Who told you that?" Vaas asked. "The *Renegat* renegades?"

Yes. They had told everyone that story. Or a version of it. But she didn't answer.

"Jorja has that information. She knows what happened. She's willing to tell you in granular detail. She has personal notes from the *Renegat*, which were rescued with her. You might be able to confirm some of the information, just by comparing the ship's stores before they arrived at the Scrapheap with the stores after they left. You have that information, right?"

Probably not. But Arias wasn't going to tell him about the gaps in the records. Although most of those records had vanished from the logs. Would the defendants have been smart enough to delete information such as the amount of food stores? She doubted it.

"This is vague," the Old Man said. "She would have to testify."

"No," Vaas said. "She's adamant about not testifying."

The Old Man shrugged. "Then she won't get her repair and rehabilitation."

"She doesn't want the others to know that she spoke to you about this," Vaas said.

"Then we'll see which part of her wins," the Old Man said. "We'll listen to her. If we like what we hear, then we will make an offer. That offer will include testimony."

Vaas shook his head. "She won't."

"Too bad," the Old Man said. "Thank you so much for your time."

Vaas didn't move. The Old Man made a small dismissive wave with his right hand.

"What if I can convince her to testify?" Vaas said.

"Then she gets repair and physical rehabilitation. Nothing more."

"What about the mutiny charges?" Vaas asked. "Would they be dropped? She fought alongside Captain Preemas, after all."

"We'd have to hear what she has to offer," the Old Man said. "We might let her serve her time in some kind of rehab facility, instead of prison."

"I'll take it to her," Vaas said. He sounded almost excited.

"You do that," the Old Man said.

Arias stood. She was going to escort Vaas out that door, if he wouldn't leave on his own.

But he got the hint. He left, pulling the door closed behind him.

"Your office," the Old Man said before Arias could speak. "We haven't swept this place."

He actually thought Vaas might try to bug the office of the prosecutors? Vaas was

too good a lawyer for that. But, Arias knew, the Old Man had seen a lot in his time, so she humored him.

She walked into her office. He followed her, and pulled the door closed.

The office felt tiny in comparison to the main room, especially with the Old Man's large presence filling it.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"We can verify supplies," Arias said. "I doubt they were savvy enough to fix that."

"It's not enough," the Old Man said. "We would need her testimony to lay the groundwork."

"It might be enough," Arias said. "If we play it right. We'd have to wait for the right moment."

Then she smiled at him.

"But I've worked opposite Vaas," she said. "He wanted to leave with a deal. She wants to talk to us."

"You think she will?" the Old Man asked.

"If I tell Vaas that I'm going to leak his involvement to the other defendants, she just might," Arias said. "She knows they'd see her as a betrayer in either case."

The Old Man nodded slowly. "Don't you find it fascinating that she is worried about being perceived as a betrayer? She has already betrayed her oath to the Fleet, and she helped make war against her crewmates."

Arias hadn't thought of that. But Lakinas had paid a huge price for her fight against her crewmates. Her entire body no longer functioned the way it had before.

Maybe she was terrified of being hurt again.

"You think that'll be enough to get her to talk with us, then?" the Old Man asked.

"I'm not sure it matters," Arias said.

He looked at her, his eyes alight with interest. "You have an idea."

"Yes, I do," she said. "Vaas is right; all we have to do is call one or two of their people to testify. I can accuse, especially if we have information about the stores or some other supplies. We could see what happens there."

"I doubt we'll be able to get any of them to testify," the Old Man said.

"Let's see what happens," Arias said. "We might not need any of them."

"You think Lakinas wants to talk with us," the Old Man said.

"She had time to think about Carbone's offer. Lakinas knows she can be a lot healthier with the Fleet's help. She has a huge incentive to help us and very little incentive to remain with that group." Arias nodded, feeling a confidence she hadn't felt before. "Yes, I think she'll talk with us. And if we can prove any part of what she says, then we have more than enough to win this case."

"A group murder," the Old Man said. "Who would have thought?"

"Murder will be hard to prove," Arias said. "But a careless disregard for others? That won't be hard at all."

"We haven't won this thing yet," the Old Man cautioned.

"I know," Arias said with a bit of a smile. "But we're a whole lot closer than we were."

* * *

Admiral Bella Gão, Retired, stared at the summons that flashed red on her screen. She could deny it. She was a sitting judge who handled several cases every year. She had already cited conflict of interest as her reason for refusing to sit on the *Renegat* case. She simply needed a point of privilege to refuse now, and the sitting twelve-judge panel would grant it to her.

She stood in the living room of her large apartment in a private sector of Starbase Sigma. She had had this apartment for eighty years. She'd redecorated twice, the last time ten years ago, moving most of her important items to the lower level. She'd added a bedroom down there as well.

She was ancient—her word, not anyone else's. She had retired from her admiralty position over eighty-five years ago, after a long and full career. She had then returned to school with the Fleet's permission, learning the ins and outs of Fleet law so that she could sit on tribunals. She'd sat on hundreds of them in the intervening years. These days, she only took two or three cases per year, but in the early years of her retirement, after she had completed her schooling, she had sat on as many tribunals as possible.

She had liked the work—she still liked the work—and she was good at it. Yes, she was deciding life or death issues, but not in the same way that she had as an admiral. Now, she dealt with problems after they occurred. Before, she often caused some of the problems herself.

And that was one reason why she didn't even want to think about the *Renegat*.

She had been the one to staff up the ship, she had approved Captain Ivan Preemas for that mission, and she was the one who had believed Nadim Crowe when he had come to her with his concerns. The *Renegat* still haunted her, even now that it had returned.

Epecially now that it had returned, with only part of its crew intact—and none of the people she had met before the ship went on its ill-fated mission.

She hadn't been surprised that it arrived one hundred years in its future. She had been worried about the effect of foldspace on that ship from the beginning. For years, she thought it had been lost in a foldspace bubble, its crew gone.

When the ship arrived and promptly blew up, part of her wondered if that explosion had been planned. She had researched enough to discover that it had not been planned; the ship was in such severe distress that it wouldn't have survived another foldspace jump. The crew had been lucky to make it.

Lucky and unlucky. They certainly hadn't planned on the time loss, nor had they foreseen the reaction to their arrival.

The *Renegat* had been a doomed ship from the start, and she had been part of that, even though she had regretted that involvement almost from the beginning.

She sat in the small study near the "new" bedroom. The study was the only room that hadn't been touched in the last redesign. The study was still modeled on her study on the *Správa*, where she had last served as admiral. She had loved that study.

She loved this one as well, although not as much. It was smaller here, and the furniture was a little too comfortable. She had a large overstuffed chair that had molded itself to her body. A pullout desk that appeared when she needed it, and holographic tools that had been state of the art when she had first moved into this apartment.

She had newer equipment in her living room/kitchen area. State-of-the-art equipment, in fact, but she preferred the older equipment. She also needed it because she still sometimes reviewed the files she had brought with her from the *Správa*. Maybe she had always known this moment would come for her.

The *Renegat* was her biggest mistake—and her biggest regret.

She could have stopped this entire trial, citing the original classification of the mission. It had been top secret back in its day. Now, no one cared, but then, that had been important.

Top-secret missions were rarely the subject of show trials, which was what this seemed to be trending to. Not because of the lawyers involved: they were all good at their jobs, at least now that Danitra Carbone was off the case. That woman had destroyed more good decisions with her bad ones than any other lawyer of Gão's acquaintance.

The quality of the lawyers was what kept Gão silent. There needed to be a true investigation of the *Renegat*, and the only way to get that at this late date was through the rigors of a trial. Otherwise, the Fleet had no reason to look at yet another failure, particularly one that involved foldspace and Scrapheaps.

Her involvement with the *Renegat* had allowed her to change a lot of policies to deal with Scrapheaps. She'd finally got the Fleet to remove Ready Vessels from the Scrapheaps. There was no reason to leave high-end ships in a hard-to-find protected area of any Scrapheap. The Fleet rarely retraced its steps, almost always moving forward. The people left behind on Sector Bases were on those bases voluntarily, preferring to live planetside. Even if a major war started in the sector, they would never again take to space.

The Ready Vessels were, in her opinion then and now, a danger to the Fleet. Some rogue operatives could find them, access them, and use them to come after the Fleet.

Part of her wondered if that was why Nadim Crowe had chosen to stay behind. He could build his own Fleet with the Ready Vessels in that abandoned Scrapheap.

Or so she hoped.

But from what little she had discovered through the media reports, the idea that Crowe had voluntarily stayed behind seemed shaky at best. No one really talked about it.

In fact, there weren't a lot of details at all.

She would get all the details she needed if she testified. The lawyer for the defense, Mukasey, was fishing right now; she wanted to know why Gão had recused herself. It could be easily explained by Gão's involvement in choosing the crew, and sending them all to that ancient Scrapheap, even though she had never believed in the mission.

She stared at the summons, thinking about her choices. She could refuse, but she wouldn't. She could simply answer questions and not provide much information at all.

She could tell this Mukasey why her clients were chosen to crew that ship, and what the expectations were. Gão could also tell Mukasey what changes the loss of the *Renegat* had wrought throughout the Fleet.

Or Gão could give her all of the information, the last images of Nadim Crowe, the discussions with Ivan Preemas, the logs she had made as her own nervousness grew. She could show the information she had received decades later from the Scrapheap itself.

She could confess to her mistakes in a public forum, and maybe, just maybe that would take some of the guilt from her shoulders.

Or maybe it would destroy the reputation she had painstakingly built over her very long life.

She sank into her overstuffed chair, tempted to call up that old holo of Nadim Crowe. But she had watched it so many times she had it memorized.

She leaned forward. She really didn't care about her reputation. Maybe if she was still a young woman, or still had a career in the admiralty, she might care.

She sighed. She owed Nadim Crowe one last hearing. His words needed to become public. He was being tried without the ability to defend himself—and everyone was entitled to a strong defense.

She let herself out of her study, and answered the request for the interview. Although she told Mukasey that the discussion would take place in Gão's apartment. That way, Gão could show Mukasey the recordings. All of them.

Let Mukasey decide how to use them.

That was how trials worked, after all.

* * *

(Conclusion in next issue.)