

THE BREAK-IN

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Kristine Kathryn Rusch <https://kriswrites.com> writes a lot of standalone novellas in her Diving universe. Sometimes those novellas turn into novels, as in the case of “The Court-Martial of the *Renegat Renegades*,” which won last year’s Reader’s Choice Award for best novella. “The Break-in” takes place in a different part of the Diving universe, one tangentially explored in “The Death Hole Bunker” (July/August 2023). *The Court-Martial of the Renegat Renegades* just appeared as a standalone novel. Kris is also working in several of her other series, including The Fey. The latest novel in that universe, *The Kirilli Matter*, appeared in February. In her newest tale, readers will enter a universe where nothing is simple . . . or exactly as it seems.

1

Olina preached respect. Respect for the culture, respect for the people, respect for the problems that might lie ahead. She had headed dozens of recovery teams, successful and unsuccessful. The successful ones succeeded because they practiced respect.

She stood in the darkness at the end of a street filled with warehouses. What lights there were seemed to have a harsh white edge, which she had not expected. She had thought the lighting in this part of Vaycehn would be yellowish gold, like the lighting she had seen in the center of town.

That was the problem with a job like this. Planned in a hurry to be executed in a hurry. Those jobs always brought their own trouble.

She liked to say she hated them, but a challenge was a challenge, although this job was more challenging than most.

Starting with the team. They surrounded her, except for the three she had already sent to a warehouse. A dozen people, all in environmental suits at her insistence.

They had argued with her from the start, because they didn’t know her. She didn’t know them either. They were all names and resumes, unproven, at least to her. A couple of them had military experience, but most did not. They were, like her, experts in raiding buildings and ships in a variety of cultures. Only some members of the team had very little expertise, which worried her.

They were the only people available when Khelan Māhoe contacted the Amnthran authorities. He’d discovered a cache of weapons so large that it scared him, and he needed people to recover them immediately. Normally, he discovered weaponry or stolen items, and he would purchase them.

Apparently, he had tried to do that here, and had been unable. The weapons were about to be scattered throughout the Enterran Empire. The Enterrans thought the items they had were ancient and collectible artifacts, not knowing that they were, in fact, weaponry that could destroy the entire city without a lot of effort.

Olina had no idea how much her team knew. She had briefed them and Māhoe had briefed them, but no one had ever worked together before. It even showed in how they stood.

They weren't clustered in small groups, the way that a long-time team would have been. They stood apart from each other, backs to each other as they surveyed the area.

She had taken a few steps away from them, so she was as guilty as they were. She didn't have time to unify this team. She had only a few hours to get this job done.

Right now, they were doing reconnaissance. By the end of the evening, she should know how much work it would be to remove the weaponry.

The way that Māhoe had described it, it sounded like it would take days.

Olina wasn't sure they had days.

Māhoe had discovered this cache when an organization called Corporate Treasures had contacted one of his aliases with an invitation to a closed auction. Māhoe had lived in the Enterran Empire for two decades now, building up aliases and contacts, which had paid off here.

Usually, using the money from the Amthran government, he would swoop in and buy every artifact at a closed auction. But the owner of these had decided to give some to universities and museums and sell the rest piecemeal. No matter what Māhoe had tried, and he claimed he had tried a lot, he was unable to buy everything.

So he had sent for a team who needed to arrive immediately. And that was why Olina was here, leading a group of people she didn't know at all.

Right now, Māhoe and Idil Palakiko orbited the planet in a cargo ship that didn't have quite as much speed as Olina would have liked. She had asked for a getaway vehicle, not a vehicle so large that it could be seen on all kinds of technology, old-fashioned or not.

But, if Māhoe was to be believed, they also needed a reinforced vessel made for carrying vast amounts of weaponry in its hold. She had left the purchase of the vehicle to him, because he knew how to buy things in the Enterran Empire; he also had enough identities and money to make certain that the delivery would happen quickly.

She had emphasized speed. He had gotten her the fastest cargo ship built in the Empire, with a reinforced hull.

The man didn't listen, which meant that he had less respect for her than she would have liked.

But she tried to chalk all of that up to his experiences with previous recovery teams. She had known some of them. They had been lucky in their work, returning to Amnthra with the bits of the Spire that he had found.

Or maybe they hadn't been lucky at all. There was an argument to be made that what she considered luck on the recovery teams' part was simply experience on Māhoe's.

Olina needed to respect him, too. He had found this amazing cache of weapons all on his own and had tried to purchase all of it. Corporate Treasures had thwarted him. Nothing Māhoe had tried had changed their course. He'd also done his best, in the two weeks since he'd discovered the cache, to track down the owner of it all.

He had been unsuccessful. Or at least, unsuccessful from Olina's point of view. Māhoe had information, but it was old, and it wasn't possible to track down the owner in the time frame that the team had.

Her team had to recover all of the items before they were removed from a large central warehouse two city blocks away. That warehouse had been the subject of intense

study for the entire team since they had arrived from Amnthra seven days before.

That was another problem. They were sliding into this operation with limited knowledge and research done by the two local agents, not basing much of it on research done by the team.

The third problem, though, was the one that worried her the most. The Enterran Empire was centuries behind Amnthra in its tech. The Empire believed that *anacapa* drives weren't drives at all, but something it called stealth tech. They'd been trying to reverse engineer the stealth tech for decades, if not more, not seeing the other capabilities of the technology.

Amnthra had used *anacapa* drives for thousands of years. Amnthra's tech had been based on the *anacapa*, left behind by an organization called the Fleet a long, long, long time ago. The Fleet had built a city and a sector base on Amnthra, and then abandoned it, as they did with all of their planet-based tech.

Amnthra's research and study, based on Fleet technology, had placed Amnthra at the forefront of its sector on technological know-how, if not the forefront of the colonized universe.

Even the Armada, another culture similar to the Fleet (some say even derived from disaffected Fleet members), had failed to get their hands on Amnthran technology. There had been hundreds of battles fought over the tech, and each time, the Armada had lost.

At first, Olina thought perhaps this cache that Māhoe had found had been left behind by the Armada as it searched for a place to conduct research into Amnthran tech.

But Māhoe disabused her of that notion. He had shown her images of mummified dead bodies found near the cache. Those bodies wore ancient Amnthran uniforms.

Māhoe claimed there had been a theft centuries ago of Amnthran tech, by Amnthrans, who had taken it with an eye to selling it to other cultures. The items stolen had never been recovered.

He believed those items were what he had found.

Olina had no idea if any of that was true, since she hadn't heard of that theft before she arrived here. Yet another thing she hadn't had time to research.

No one on this cobbled-together team had any kind of expertise in the Enterran Empire. Half of them had never worked in the Empire before, and those that had had nothing but contempt for this backward militaristic culture that believed itself to be the strongest and most advanced power in the sector.

Not that the Empire had traveled far inside its own sector. It didn't have the benefit of using a proper *anacapa* drive. So they couldn't travel through foldspace. While the Empire's drives were quick enough, they couldn't handle the vast distances that the Fleet, the Armada, and the Amnthrans traveled often within days.

And that was pretty much what Olina knew about the Enterrans as well. She was as ignorant as her team, although she had spent the short trip here studying what she could. She had worked in the Empire before, but she had been a green recruit, following orders and avoiding the locals.

She was avoiding the locals now, as well, but now she was in charge—and not entirely happy about it. She was also worried about the local tech. Once again, it was all about respect. Her new team didn't respect the Enterran tech.

Theory suggested that Amnthran tech would easily conquer Enterran tech. The team should be able to open any door, shut off any technology, and convince anything around them that nothing had happened during the theft itself.

But theory didn't always work well in practice. And Olina had learned that just because other tech was outmoded or less advanced, that didn't mean it was less effective.

Sometimes, in fact, it was harder to understand, which made it harder to overcome.

She had sent three of her tech experts (and boy, did she hope they were truly *experts*) to examine the exterior of the warehouse. They had already scanned it from the cargo ship, and Māhoe had readings from the space yacht he had used when he posed as a collector to examine and authenticate the collection.

Olina had also taken scans as she brought the skips to the surface. Māhoe had bought the best skips available. They traveled from the cargo bay of the cargo ship in orbit and were able to land anywhere on the surface. The skips were Enterran tech as well, but quite intuitive.

Olina had used the skip sensors to examine the warehouse tech, knowing full well that the skip sensors might trigger the tech. She hadn't told Māhoe she was going to do that.

He didn't need to know.

Most people didn't understand her methodology. She *wanted* to trigger early rather than later. If something set off the tech, then she wanted it to happen before her people were anywhere near the target.

The skips had landed on an empty field just outside the warehouse district. The skips came with floating carts that could travel the short distance, with some cargo. There was no way she could park the skips near the warehouse (nor would she, even if she had the ability).

Over Māhoe protests, she had also brought one of her own orbit-to-land vehicles, the *Manu*. She needed Amnthran tech. She needed a ship with an *anacapa* drive, in case she and the team needed to make a quick getaway.

The *Manu* was faster than anything built by the Empire. The ship could also open a foldspace window inside the planet's atmosphere. The timing would be difficult, but Olina had done it all before.

She wasn't going to lose a team member to the Empire, unless she had *planned* to lose a team member.

She had scanned the warehouse with the *Manu's* sensors as well, and found a few . . . well, what she could only call holes. She didn't know if that meant there were gaps in the security system—gaps that she and the team could use to their advantage—or if those gaps were some kind of tech she didn't understand.

The scans done by all of the ships showed that the warehouse had extreme security, just like Māhoe had assumed. He had learned, through the course of his ruse, that this warehouse had been built by the Enterran military. The Empire was run by the military, and the military got the best tech.

It also had a lot of secret tech, the kind that wasn't easy to research, the kind that every military in every sector guarded as jealously as it guarded its territory.

The theory (there was that word again) was that *all* Empire tech wasn't as advanced as Amnthran tech, but since some of the Empire's tech was secret, there was no way to verify this theory.

That was why Olina had sent three team members to scout. They each had different skills and were looking for different things.

What she didn't tell those team members was this: she was using them as bait. If there was external tech that she hadn't found, that Māhoe's examination hadn't found either, then these three might activate it.

The one thing she really feared, though, was that there would be eyes on the exterior. Older cultures often used people to back up the tech.

She had found, in her decades of doing this work, that people—some people, anyway; *competent* people—didn't let a shadow on the tech go by without an investigation.

And then there was one other factor that she had seen over and over again: Military cultures were paranoid cultures. They had a history of assuming the worst and punishing the offenders. Some people liked finding an anomaly. If that anomaly was

a person, then the anomaly would be investigated and punished, no matter what the crime or even if there was a crime.

So, this moment, while her people literally walked around the building, doing what they could to find tech that hadn't shown up in the scans from orbit, she was probably the most nervous she ever got on a job.

She could lose three members of her small team right here, and then she would have to recalibrate everything she had planned.

She had already designed the recalibration, even though she hadn't told Māhoe about it.

She hadn't told the team about it either.

If they had been her usual team, they would have already known. A handful of them would have volunteered, thinking themselves invincible. Sometimes she had believed that they were.

That had bitten some of her teams, more than once.

She hoped this method wouldn't bite her again.

* * *

2

Delores Lebede sat in her tiny tower on top of the apartment complex just outside the warehouse district. She called the little guardroom a tiny tower because it popped up on the roof, surrounded by the doors to the stairwell and another door to what the apartment manager ostentatiously called the "physical plant."

All that area did was house the controls for heating and cooling units, as well as for the water that flowed through the building. The entire system was nearly a hundred years old, and Lebede worried that it would fall apart while she was here.

It creaked that much.

She had received this assignment three months before, when some gigantic shipment entered the warehouse in the very center of the warehouse district. She had been told that the center warehouse was to be the main focus of her entire attention.

So far, there hadn't been a lot of activity. Sure, there had been some when the shipments were delivered. She'd actually had some representative from a pretentious auction house that was selling most of the items being stored in the warehouse join her for a short time.

That had been annoying.

The representative, a man in an inappropriately expensive suit that he had described as his "dressed down" look, had examined the interior of the tower with its four chairs, its open-door bathroom, and its one-table kitchen and had given Lebede a look of absolute horror.

For the entire three nights he had "assisted" her in monitoring the warehouse, he had sat at the edge of his chair as if he feared getting his stupidly expensive clothing filthy.

He had worn more appropriate pants and a button-down shirt the following two nights, but even those looked like they would cost Lebede's entire salary. He had barely spoken to her either, just monitored the deliveries on a handheld that he had brought.

She had had to keep her own screens shaded and not use the holographic imagery at all because of his presence. He didn't have clearance to see all of the tech in the room, a fact she had argued when the big boss, Oliver Fernsby, wanted representatives from the high-end auction house inside the tower.

She had lost this fight, as had her daytime counterpart. She and her counterpart

had actually had a discussion about this at shift change—outside the building, where they couldn't be recorded.

Because the presence of the representatives, with their tiny and inadequate (but expensive!) handhelds, actually made the tower less effective rather than more so.

Lebede hadn't been able to see half of what was going on while the visitor was in her tower, which, after the second night, she suspected was the entire point. She (and her daytime counterpart) weren't supposed to see what was being loaded into the warehouse.

She didn't really give a crap about items that rich people wanted to buy. She assumed it was either old military technology or some discontinued (but secret) environmental suits or something. Or maybe it was *new* technology, and they were sharing it with some private brokers.

She didn't know, and she didn't care. She just cared about doing her job and doing it well. No one had broken into the warehouses on her shift. No one had even lurked around them. No one had even pretended to visit them, or she would shut them all down.

Not that she'd had much of a chance to do so. She'd moved here from an outpost closer to the primary armory near Vaycehn to this dumb little tower. It had been, ostensibly, a promotion.

She was getting paid more, and she had been bumped up ever so slightly in rank. She had been told that six months guarding this sleepy little district would move her even higher on the food chain, maybe take her out of this kind of security altogether.

She couldn't wait. Most people loved postings like this, where they had almost nothing to do, but she hated it. Lebede loved being in the middle of the action.

She had thwarted several theft attempts at the armory. The last one had been particularly notable because she had—singlehandedly, mind you—brought down an entire theft ring, which operated from inside the armory. They'd thought they were so clever, reworking the security tech and altering the delivery schedules.

They'd also changed some of the inventory and made it seem as if nothing was missing at all.

All of her predecessors in the previous four years hadn't noticed that particular ring, but she had wondered why there had been so much activity at night. The activity had been small—the same people going in and out of the building—but that had been the problem: there had been no reason to go in and out of the building. Once someone had shown up for work, they had no reason to leave until the shift was over.

Of course, she had verified that assumption before deeming the activity as suspicious. And even then, she hadn't told anyone, because to speak might have been to alert someone. So she hadn't done that either.

Her investigation had been slow and methodical and had resulted in a lot of arrests and recovery of stolen weaponry. Her reward had been this tower.

That wasn't entirely fair, of course. Her reward had been this tower, the promotion, and a chance to pick whatever job she wanted in the future. Or at least, that was what Fernsby was telling her right now. How it would actually end up, she didn't know.

This night had started out like any other night. She had made herself some of the best coffee in the city, eaten a quiet dinner, and reveled in her alone time. Those few days with the representative from the auction house had been a nightmare, not just because of his attitude, but because of that open-door bathroom. They'd had to negotiate their bathroom usage, which also took eyes off the security equipment.

This night, though, had gotten strange early. She had a sense that something was off from the moment she arrived at work. Usually the neighborhoods around the warehouse district were empty. She might pass a pedestrian or an aircar, but rarely

did she see other vehicles or even lights on in nearby buildings.

The apartment complex that housed the tower was one of the few in the area. Other apartment complexes had been developed closer to the foot of the mountains, after a death hole destroyed an entire city block not far from here.

Experts claimed this complex was fine, even though Lebede didn't believe them. No one knew what made a death hole blow, so how could anyone predict that the complex was fine?

But her odds of getting trapped in a death hole were the same no matter where she was, as long as she was in Vaycehn—maybe as long as she was on Wyr.

The residents of the building seemed to have made the same calculation. It remained full of young professionals and families that weren't certain which part of Vaycehn their employment would take them to. Lebede didn't interact with them much because the tower had its own elevator. When that wasn't working, though, she could take the main elevator, which she did once a week anyway. She wanted the residents to think she was a resident, too, in case something odd was going on in the neighborhood. She hoped she would learn something from gossip before whatever that something was became a problem.

She had come to recognize the locals' vehicles and the rhythm of the public transport that would drop off children from their various schools and adults who chose not to own a vehicle.

The vehicles were parked beneath the building, several stories underneath. Because (and she thought this odd), despite the tendency to have streets collapse and energy explode outward from deep underground, the building designers around Vaycehn loved going deep into the ground as much as they loved going up.

On this night, she saw some things that really bothered her. At least a dozen people on foot heading into the warehouse district.

She couldn't remember when she had ever seen a dozen people walking in this neighborhood, let alone doing so together.

But there had been a lot of strange activity around that warehouse ever since the auction house had loaded in its goods. So she monitored, and made note, but didn't mark any of it as suspicious.

Finally, as she poured her very good cup of coffee and settled in her work chair, the holographic map of the area flagged a major change. She had zoomed in and was startled to note that the old landing strip built for the apartment complexes that had been destroyed by the death hole was back in use.

Three brand-new skips had arrived at twilight. And near them was a ship of a make that Lebede didn't recognize.

Before searching for the make of the ship, she examined the skips. They belonged to some corporation she had never heard of, and it would take more digging than she had time for to find out who owned that corporation.

She did a quick scan, though, to see if the corporation had holdings in the warehouse district, and quickly discovered that it didn't. She looked for holdings in the area, and found none.

She told herself that it didn't mean anything, that corporations could be layered—one owning another, which then owned another. But she had seen corporate skips in the area only twice before. The first time had been when the big and important shipment arrived.

The second time had been when there had been some kind of viewing of that shipment. She had received a list of cleared vehicles, which was shorter than she had expected. Corporate Treasures preferred to bring in the participants on their own skip, far from the warehouse, and drive each participant in via aircart.

So the new skips and the strange ship bothered her. Not to mention the fact that

no one local would have put heavy equipment on that old landing strip. Locals didn't tempt fate. Yes, the death hole had blown several years ago, and yes, the engineers had come in to make sure all of the buildings (and roads) in the area were properly shored up, but locals had learned, maybe at birth, that doing anything near an old death hole could be a death sentence in and of itself.

She tried to tell herself that the death-hole destruction had occurred so long ago that locals would shrug off the danger, but she didn't find herself convincing.

Something was odd about those skips. Not to mention the ship her system couldn't identify.

She had reversed the various recordings, searching for more information. The ships had landed, one after another, as the sky grayed. Clouds had been moving in, making twilight even grimmer than usual.

Unless someone had been monitoring the area, no one would have noticed the skips' arrival. She had only seen them because she had set up the system to flag anything that occurred within thirty miles of the district, something she was certain Fernsby would tell her was unnecessary.

It didn't feel unnecessary at the moment, particularly when the recorded imagery showed more than a dozen people descending off the skips.

The number of people was suspicious, considering who was walking around the neighborhood. They were all dressed in black, and they had hoods covering their heads.

Lebede couldn't tell if those hoods were part of an environmental suit or not. But the more she looked through all of this, the more uncomfortable she got.

Lebede couldn't tell from this distance, though, and she didn't scroll in. She was watching behavior first. She'd get the details of what had happened later.

The people gathered in front of the unidentifiable ship. A woman, who walked with military precision, had emerged from the unidentifiable ship's far side. She had stepped into the group of people and gestured.

The people were mostly vague figures, grayed and diffuse because of the darkness and the misty rain that had started about thirty minutes after the skips arrived.

The people put packs over their shoulders. A few had long thin items under their arms—some kind of weapon, perhaps? Or something else? And some people walked slowly, heads down, as if they were monitoring the area around them.

She watched two holoscreens—the old one, of the events that happened not long ago, and the current one. The current one was even harder to see.

Darkness had fallen, and there wasn't a lot of good light in the warehouse district. As far as she could tell, those dozen-plus people (and it irritated her that she couldn't get a good count) had become about ten, all of them still diffuse due to the mist and the bad lighting.

She was going by shape now, not by any real readings. The group stayed outside of the monitoring area, away from all of the tracking equipment, as if someone knew where the holes in the tech were.

Surely, Fernsby would tell her that she was being overly sensitive. People stood in strange places all the time, and it wasn't because they were trying to do something nefarious. It was because they were doing whatever it was they usually did.

But these folks seemed to be waiting and monitoring, not actually doing something innocuous.

The other holoscreen wasn't moving quickly enough for her. She could fast forward through the imagery, but she didn't want to. She wanted to see if she could figure out what this group had been doing.

She didn't adjust what she was watching to make the group clearer. Not yet, anyway. So as they walked as a group toward the warehouse district, the people in the center clumped together into a gigantic blob. They didn't quite walk in lockstep, but

they didn't separate themselves out much either.

They passed two different warehouses, the two closest to that old landing strip. The group didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry. Nor did they look around much either, which caught her attention.

People in an unfamiliar place often swiveled their heads, trying to see what they could.

That argued for the hoods being part of environmental suits, which would give the wearer a 360-degree view, should they want it.

Which, again, made her a lot more suspicious than she had been earlier.

They reached the edge of the access road that separated the central warehouse from the warehouses that the group had passed earlier. The group stopped, seemingly without consultation (unless it was through environmental suits).

Then three members of the group peeled off, running in three different directions toward the central warehouse. One ran to the right, the other to the left, and, at least according to the imagery Lebede was getting, the third one went around to the far side.

So far, they hadn't tripped any alarms. They seemed to know where the blind spots were, the spots she had complained about from the moment she'd started here.

Then very little happened. The remaining members of the group stayed stationary. She checked the time stamp and realized she was now watching the same imagery she had seen in real time.

So she shrank the hologram of the past to the size of her fist. She couldn't see any of it, but she had it there, just to remind her that something odd was going on, and she was keeping track of it.

Then she looked at the main group.

She focused on the remaining image, clearing it up, getting rid of the fuzziness caused by what had become real rain. The exterior lights all had rings around them, caused by the moisture. She cleared up those rings first, as a way of making sure that her work was correct.

Then she went to the group. They still seemed diffuse. She could no longer blame that strange imagery on the rain or the twilight or the lack of excellent lighting in the warehouse area.

They had to be causing it somehow.

Her heart started pounding. This was definitely out of the ordinary. She weighed the options of what it could be. It could be a test, either by Fernsby or by Corporate Treasures themselves, just to see how good the security was.

But she didn't think that was the case. Corporate Treasures knew as much about the security as it could, thanks to the monitors. And Fernsby usually did that kind of test early in someone's tenure at a new office rather than later.

Plus, tests were not something this people-heavy. People cost money, and there were too many here for some kind of random test.

She had to try to count them. She adjusted the settings on her imagery as best she could, screening out the blurred edges, more or less, trying to separate each individual. She thought she managed. The group in the center still seemed like a blob, but she had the system track each individual by movement.

It took a few minutes, but she ended up with what she hoped was an accurate count.

Fifteen.

She hadn't expected that many at all. She had undercounted significantly. Counting the three that had peeled off, she had missed a full third of the group.

She was feeling deeply uncomfortable about this. She now faced something new for this job. She was going to have to decide whether or not to flag the suspicious activity.

And she was going to have to figure out how to flag it. As an emergency? Something she could handle? Something she needed assistance on?

She had a two-pronged risk. The first was that she didn't respond quickly or strongly enough, and this turned out to be something serious.

The second was that she responded with too high a call—an emergency when this wasn't serious at all—and got a reputation as an over-reactor.

But she had just gotten a promotion. She had a reputation already for being someone who found thieves.

And what was she protecting here? A job that marked time in the tiny tower, watching empty warehouses with the occasional jerk at her side?

She scanned the third file, compared it to the events that occurred at the same time the night before. The file showed nothing different yet, but she had a feeling she would see something soon.

Lebede took a deep breath and let it out slowly, making herself think. They could demote her for doing too much or doing too little.

She would rather be demoted for doing too much.

She rubbed her hands together nervously. Her palms were sweating, so she dried them off on the front of her uniform.

Then she launched into the emergency system.

Immediately, it gave her a choice—a silent alarm and increased monitoring while she waited for back-up, or an audible designed to scare off intruders.

She doubted the audible would scare off this group. It might embolden them.

She was going with the silent alarm. She made her choice, and watched as another screen lit up.

More choices. More to do.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her uniform again, and settled in for a long, and possibly consequential, night.

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3

The door was old-fashioned, with an actual lock and a pull handle. There was an automated lock as well, and some kind of code panel on the right. The light above the door shed pale white light on the rust-colored metal surface.

Iokua slid his laser rifle over his shoulder, hoping the damn thing would stay on his back. He hadn't wanted to carry a weapon, particularly since Khelan Māhoe had said there were probably bits of a Spire inside this warehouse, but Olina had insisted—and right now, she was the head of this mission.

Iokua had run dozens of missions in the past two years, and was as qualified as she was, if not more qualified, since he knew most of this team and she didn't.

But she had been on missions in the Enterran Empire, and he hadn't. For that reason, she got to lead this team.

He thought of Māhoe as the leader of this mission, though, and Māhoe knew the Empire better than Olina did. Iokua would have preferred to have the knowledgeable one—the one with decades of experience with the culture—as the overall head, while someone who could run missions was on the ground.

Iokua wouldn't have had the team in full environmental suits with the individual shields on. He would have thought that such clothing would have seemed suspicious to anyone in the nearby community.

Not, he had to admit, that they had seen anyone in the community since they had arrived.

He would have also done more to hide the skips, and he certainly wouldn't have brought an Amnthan ship with its advanced tech—even though Olina had explained

her reasoning. She had thought they would need a quick getaway vehicle.

He had figured the skips were enough, but she hadn't listened.

So he had (angrily, he had to admit) decided to volunteer to be on the first team. That way, he could see what was inside, and he could decide if they needed more time.

Olina had decided to hang back. Olina was waiting, something that he believed team leaders should never do.

And now, the door. He hadn't realized there would be an actual physical handle and a physical lock. Māhoe had said nothing about that, and neither had the schematics.

Physical locks would slow the team down. They didn't carry the equipment to pick one of those locks, which meant either using the rifle (not a choice, in his opinion) or somehow figure out how to jiggle the damn thing open.

He didn't use the comms to contact Olina. He wouldn't do that until he had a chance to try the lock.

He was going to ignore the physical part first. That keypad was probably the security part of the entrance. Even if he managed to make the physical lock work, he'd have to contend with the keypad at one point or another. Or, if he failed to deal with the keypad, he would probably end up setting off some kind of alarm.

The environmental suit aided him in all that he needed to do, much as he didn't like wearing one on a job like this. He didn't like wearing it because it was skin-tight and made him feel like he was being compressed all over, a sensation he didn't have when he wore the suit in zero gravity.

But the suit had a lot of built-in tools, including the comm units that the team used on this mission. He did appreciate not having to carry scanners or any kind of pad, as well as lights and stun weaponry, which were built into various parts of the suit. He was carrying enough in his belt. He was one of the few who chose not to use a backpack.

He had a few doorjammers, and a knife, and a handful of other practical items, should something physically go wrong, but little else.

The suit weapons, lights, and scanners were activated with either a look or a code word or a quick touch. He preferred the code word, so his suit was set up that way. Which meant he had to keep his comms toggled off much of the time, otherwise the team (and anyone else monitoring) would hear him mumble a bunch of nonsense phrases.

He mumbled one now, as he held his gloved hand over the keypad. The phrase activated the scanner built into the fingertips and palm of the glove. The slight blue light it sent to the keypad was undetectable on systems built by the Armada or with any kind of security on Amntha. But he had no idea how this would register here in the Empire—or if the light would register at all.

The mechanisms behind the keypad were simple. They showed up on one side of his visor, as a schematic with recommendations about what to do next. He had no idea what the recommendations were based on, only that they existed and that they had rarely failed him in the past.

One thing that did catch his eye, though, were the wires that extended along the back of the keypad and down the side of the doorframe.

Could he be that lucky? Could the door open when the keypad was disengaged?

He didn't ask for more clarification from the computer system built into his suit. If he had been working with a large crew and a team that remained on board a ship, he would send the schematic to them for a second opinion.

But the bulk of the team here was on the ground, waiting to find out what he and the other two team members discovered.

He inhaled slowly. The reason he and the other two were sent out was to scout, yes,

but also to trigger the security systems around this warehouse. If the systems could be easily triggered, then the mission would either be called off—or it would become bloody.

The direction this would go wasn't his call. He just had to make the best decision he could, using his own judgment.

He moved his hand away from the keypad, keeping the scanner on, and let it penetrate the doorframe.

He had been right: the wire went all the way to the back of the lock, which was on the wall-side of the doorframe.

So the physical lock had two mechanisms, one in the door and one in the frame. And unlike some physical locks he had encountered, this one's locking mechanism was in the frame.

Or so it seemed.

Only one way to find out.

He shut off the scanner in his gloves but left the recommendation and its instructions on his visor. If the recommendation was correct, he wouldn't have to do a lot. He would simply have to push a few buttons on the keypad and step back.

He let out a slow exhale, then followed the instructions before him. He pressed six keys in the order that the scan recommended, biting his lower lip as he did so.

The keypad gave him no hints as to whether or not what he was doing was correct. The keys didn't seem more or less sticky as he worked them. They felt like normal keys.

He pressed the larger key at the bottom, which he assumed was some kind of final key—an enter key or an "OK" key or something—and pulled his hand back.

Nothing happened. The light above him did not change color. Nothing indicated that anything had changed at all.

He was about to turn his scanner back on when he decided to try the door handle.

He grabbed it with his left hand and tugged down.

And the door popped open.

He leaned his head back slightly, second-guessing himself. Should he have tried the door first? Or did the keypad give him permission to try the door without activating anything?

He had no idea, and he wasn't about to do another scan to find out. Instead, he pulled the door toward him.

A light went on inside, but it wasn't much of a light. More of a companion to the thready white light that was currently illuminating the exterior.

If anything, the interior light masked what was beyond it, which, at the moment, looked like a lot of inky darkness.

This was the moment he could make a decision that might impact the team. He could call for more team members to come here, or he could step inside and explore a little, just to see what they were facing.

That wasn't much of a decision. He wasn't a call-for-backup kinda guy.

He pulled the door open as wide as it went, and, not willing to use one of his jammers, braced the door with a small rock that seemed to be set near it for just that purpose.

Then he stepped inside.

* * *

The main entry on the far side of the warehouse had been breached. Lebede felt vindicated and panicked at the same time. When she had caught the thieves at her

previous site, she had done so from a distance, with evidence and a presentation to her bosses.

Not as some kind of crime actually started.

The emergency procedures at this site were not automated. She actually had to reach someone, which was a whole different level of communication. First, she checked to see where the initial response team was.

They hadn't left the other side of the city. She wasn't even sure they had been notified yet.

Then another notification flared on the hologram of the warehouse. A blinking light appeared on the left side of the building, then another on the right.

Two more doors had been breached.

Those three people she had seen peel off were now inside the warehouse.

She had no idea if they were going in to steal what was inside or if they were going in because they wanted to commit some kind of destruction.

She fumbled with the controls, the ones she usually handled so well, searching for the correct dashboard on the correct machine.

Her heart rate had gone way up. As she sorted through her unusually messy desktop, she nearly knocked over the half-full cup of coffee—which had once promised a great night of quiet, instead of this strangeness she was dealing with.

She finally found the correct handheld and hit the button that put her in immediate contact with the head of security, a man she didn't know.

His face appeared, florid and too wide, which she placed on top of the hologram of the warehouse and the area around it. Through his reddish-white skin, she could see the grayness of the night, the lamps around the warehouses and those flaring lights, as well as the blurry figures of the people still standing several meters away from that central warehouse.

"Yes?" he said into her silence.

"We have a breach," she said, naming the central warehouse by using its numerical designation. That at least had been easy to find. "I activated an alarm ten minutes ago, but the security team hasn't left yet. We need someone there now. There are three people inside the warehouse, with at least a dozen more outside."

She said at least a dozen because she didn't want to have a potential overcount on her record.

"Take your team in there," he said. "Do what you can until backup arrives."

"I do not have a team, sir," she said, pleased that she could sound so calm when his stupid statement caused a flare of anger. "I'm several buildings away in a security silo, monitoring the building."

"Well, then switch to the inside monitors and start blaring alarms," he said. "That'll slow these people down."

"I don't have clearance for that," she said. She did for all the other buildings, but not for this one. Because of whatever was being stored in there.

He cursed, then said, "Let me see what I can do."

An entire screen flared up beside him on the hologram, making everything muddy. She had to find what device he was sending it through, which made her scramble, even as she was trying to read it all.

She found the device, another handheld—hadn't anyone told them their emergency system sucked?—and slid the screen he had sent off to her left, so it no longer covered his face.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "I'll do as you suggest, but we need someone here now. I don't know what these people are going to do, but—"

"You let me worry about that," he said. "Activate the alarms."

And then he vanished.

She swallowed, hard. Before she used the screen he'd sent, she tried one thing on her own devices.

She checked to see if that supervisor she had reached had given her access on this machine. He should have, but she didn't know him and therefore didn't trust that he would do the right thing.

She saw a flaring light on her control panel that she hadn't seen before. She touched it, and sure enough, it showed the breached areas. She could pick and choose which ones she wanted to see.

She wanted to see them all, so she set them up as holograms and scattered them around her.

What bothered her the most was that each door was propped open. She could see white light from the exterior on all three of them, and then a matching white light inside.

But no people.

They had already moved deep inside the building in the short time she had been fighting a system made for monitoring, not for responding.

If she got through this and still had a job when it was over, she was going to volunteer to overhaul the entire system. Because this was stupid, and she was suffering for it.

She found the alarms control and set off the interior alarms. For good measure, she set off all of them, not just the ones near the door.

Surely, there had to be more she could do from here.

She just had to figure out what it all was.

* * *

5

A siren suddenly went off, blaring and echoing inside the warehouse, followed by maybe a dozen other sirens. The sound was piercing and so loud that it actually hurt Iokua's ears, before he did the very thing he didn't want to do, and shut off all exterior sound coming into his environmental suit.

He had only gone several meters inside the warehouse, surprised that the place looked empty, at least over here. There was no dust, though, and no indication that it had been abandoned. Maybe this part just hadn't been in use.

Then thirty seconds after the sirens started, bright white and silver lights flashed. They had the benefit of clarifying the length of the room—which was longer and wider than he expected—but they would effectively blind him if he wasn't careful.

He had to change the settings on his suit to filter out the rotating bright lights. He did so, cursing silently because that meant Olina had been right to have him wear the suit. He hadn't thought it necessary.

He knew the alarms were meant to get him out of the building, but he didn't know what would follow them, if anything. The sirens and the lights didn't tell him that.

Most storage places did not have anything like foam or gas that would take intruders down, because that might damage what was stored here. For that, he was grateful, considering the weapons poorly stored on the premises.

But some places, particularly militaristic ones, followed with actual people—some kind of security detail or something, and he had no warning on that either.

So he also set his suit to monitor for other humans on the premises.

Immediately, he discovered that his two teammates had gotten into the warehouse as well. He didn't want to contact them yet to find out how they were doing. He figured they would let him know if they were in trouble.

He made himself focus despite the lights and the sound. Switching to a setting that filtered out the bright lights had taken a moment to adjust to. Everything was slightly darker. He used a feature of the suit to create a small two-dimensional image of the room he was in, and he placed it on the lower right side of his visor.

That way, he could double-check what he thought he was seeing.

What he thought he was seeing was a large empty space, with no sign anything had ever been in it. That was not what Māhoe had described.

Māhoe had seen staged artifacts, like mummified bodies that, strangely, the people of the Empire sold. He had also seen several other items on this floor, items he didn't exactly specify because he hadn't been that interested in them.

There had been an auditorium filled with chairs in front of a stage, where someone had actually put on a presentation.

Iokua saw none of that, but perhaps it was not on this side of the warehouse. He remained stationary as he tried to parse the information that was coming at him, but he thought he saw very little.

The image that the suit created of the room (filtering out that bright light) was the same. This was a large empty space that looked like it hadn't been used in a long time.

Māhoe had drawn a map, though, of the layout as he had experienced it, and that more or less corresponded to what Iokua was seeing. There was a long wall to his left.

He decided to head that way, because the wall had to contain the doors that Māhoe had mentioned.

Doors, and behind them, elevators, which would take people to the lower floors.

Iokua did not want to go near an elevator, particularly with alarms going off, so he needed to find the stairs.

He headed toward that wall, walking at a good clip. So far, no one else had entered the warehouse, at least that his suit could monitor.

His teammates remained closer to their doors, maybe figuring out how to deal with the alarms there, or maybe just investigating something nearby.

He wasn't going to investigate much. Those alarms said that the system or someone or something had figured out that the warehouse had been breached, so the team only had a short time to figure out exactly where the weapons were and how to remove them from the building.

The wall was farther away than he expected. According to the information scrolling along the bottom of his visor, at least two of the sound alarms were blaring from that area. The decibel level was extremely high, probably ear-shattering if he hadn't been wearing the visor with the sound off.

Even if he hadn't known where the materials had been stored, he would have guessed that they were somewhere behind that wall, simply because of the protection and the noise.

He scanned, using both the small image and the visor's information, and saw a single door not too far from him.

He hurried toward it. It had a downward handle, and did not appear to be locked.

But before he grabbed the handle, he examined it, trying to see if there was another alarm attached. He used every scan in his suit to examine the area, and saw nothing—which, he knew, meant nothing as well.

Still, he grabbed the handle and pulled it down, expecting the suit to tell him that he had initiated another alarm.

But the suit remained silent. As far as he could tell, nothing else happened.

He couldn't see any way to prop the door open, so he had to use one of the jammers he had brought. He opened the door wide enough to slide through, clutching the jammer in one hand. With the other, he scanned, trying to see if there were any traps beyond.

The suit found none, which didn't mean that the traps weren't there. It just meant that the traps weren't visible to his tech.

He slipped through the door, then placed the jammer as tight as he could underneath it. Then he stepped aside and used the palm lights on his suit to inspect the room.

Oddly, according to the scans, there were no bright lights or blaring sirens in here. There was residual noise from the sirens in the main area, but nothing new. Which meant exactly nothing.

Those warnings were for someone who had entered the warehouse, not for someone determined to breach it further.

He made sure his suit's seals were tight. He hadn't paid a lot of attention earlier, because he had thought wearing the suit was a joke.

He didn't think so now.

Then he looked around, saw the antechamber room that Māhoe had described, and saw several elevators. Iokua saw no other doors, though, and nothing to indicate that there was a stairwell. It might not be anywhere near the elevators.

The scanner on his suit could penetrate some walls, so he tried here.

These walls were reinforced with some kind of material that his suit couldn't identify.

That meant nothing, of course. The suit was designed for Amnthrans, using Amnthran tech, built to find Amnthran materials. Every culture had different ways of building things.

He had seen that in the past, and had found that his scanners weren't always able to penetrate new material, even if it was thin.

Still, it disturbed him here, on some deep level.

That meant that this part of the warehouse was designed to store items that needed added protection of some type.

For a moment, he wondered if he should go down alone, if he shouldn't contact the others who had arrived with him to see if they wanted to accompany him to the lower level.

But they had all agreed on this initial visit that they would explore as much as they could on their own. That would bring the team more information.

It would also help them figure out where the alarms were.

He moved closer to the blank wall before him and tapped it, hoping to see if whatever was behind it was hollow. He had his sound settings on his suit set up to recognize differences.

And the suit found one almost directly in front of him. But there was no door around that area, not even a carefully camouflaged door.

He was about to give up when he had an inspiration.

He felt along the wall to the right of the hollow area, looking for a hidden keypad.

His fingertips found one. It was recessed ever so slightly. There were no obvious keys or anything that told him it was a keypad, but it was the same size and shape as the one outside the building.

He had the suit superimpose the image of the outside keypad on this one, and he used the same code that he had discovered for the outside door.

The wall opened inward. The opening was as wide as two doors, and reached almost to the ceiling.

There was no way to prop this thing open, so he either had to notify his colleagues that he was going in, or risk getting trapped in a place that no one knew existed.

He opted for a compromise: He sent both of his colleagues a map of the area, with

the door open and the keypad visible, the code highlighted.

Then he took a deep breath, and entered, hoping he would find the stairs.

* * *

6

Lieutenant-Coronet Felicity Dunstan piloted the flightwing herself. The twelve members of her tiny unit sat in the back, Tegan Thatcher, the usual pilot, peering over her seat at the work Dunstan was doing.

The flightwing was a small craft, shaped like a tube with wings. The back end opened so that anyone inside could leave while the flightwing was in the air. There were side doors as well, and a nearly useless screen that could separate the cockpit from the area in back.

Dunstan kept that screen open, so that her unit could see what was happening. The cockpit had the only windows in the craft, on all three sides. The windows were reinforced, but there was no way to barricade them, making the pilot vulnerable should someone try to shoot one out.

That had never happened to Dunstan, but she was always keenly aware of it.

Before she had been promoted, Dunstan had been a pilot, and she didn't believe that anyone else was as good as she was at finding their way around Wyr. She knew the mountains (and had had no incidents flying through them, even with larger craft), and she knew Vaycehn extremely well—from its air currents to the vagaries of the ground.

The ground had a lot of vagaries. Some parts of its crust were thin, covered over by dirt and debris after an ancient death hole. Others were so thick that she had no qualms setting a very heavy machine on top of them.

She had a map in her head of all the good landing spots around the city, and by good, she meant safe as well as hidden.

She had worked this warehouse area before, primarily when it had been a central storage facility for the military. Now, though, some commander, with a much much much higher rank than she, had determined that storage facilities within the city limits should not hold anything dangerous like weaponry or explosives.

Dunstan had been part of a much larger corps that had moved all of the equipment and a full armory to a supposedly more secure facility in the foothills of the mountains outside of Vaycehn.

These city warehouses were porous, which, she understood, was a problem when they stored valuables, but they were also easy to access in an emergency—the kind of emergency that the armories around Vaycehn had been designed for.

If Vaycehn were under attack by an enemy unknown, then the military could easily access a wide variety of equipment, weaponry, and explosives. Or could have done so, in the past.

Now, it wasn't so easy.

Something she thought ironic, considering there had been an eyes-only report of a strange attack on the city, about six years ago.

Now this.

She didn't know what this was, but she did know that it was unusual. Skips, along with a ship of unknown origin, on an unused landing pad (with a surface too thin to carry a lot of weight) near the remaining apartment complexes not far from the warehouse district.

Eighteen people also of unknown origin, impossible to scan properly, apparently waiting in one of the lots outside of the central warehouse, the one built to store the most dangerous weapons of the Empire.

And three of those people peeling off to breach the facility, in a fascinating maneuver, designed to draw someone like her out.

For what reason, she did not know. Testing the system? Trying to figure out where the weaknesses were?

Three people couldn't remove all the artifacts in the warehouse. She had been given a list of them when she received the assignment. The list had more than a thousand items, separated by worth.

Which did her exactly no good, because she needed to know how big the items were and how easy they were to carry. If this was a theft, then three people wouldn't complete it unless it was targeted.

Unless they wanted only a few items.

That left a bunch of other options.

Maybe this group wanted to seize the warehouse itself, for what purpose she had no idea.

Or maybe they wanted to draw out the authorities, whether that be building security or law enforcement or the military.

Although she had no idea how anyone who wasn't affiliated with these warehouses, either now or in the past, would know that the response team to a breach in this building would be military.

She had been surprised when her unit was called up. The warehouses were no longer being run by the military. Civilians handled all of the rentals and security now.

But, apparently, any kind of emergency response had remained with the Vaycehn branch of the Imperial Combat Corps. She wasn't sure why, and her commander told her not to question the assignment.

He said it didn't matter.

She had a hunch it did.

But hunches weren't going to get the job done, and that was what she was here for—getting the job done.

And the job, right now, as she had been told, was to get these interlopers out of the warehouse before they did any damage.

She would do that, and she might do a few other things as well.

She might figure out what that strange ship was, what its defenses were, and whether or not she could capture it.

* * *

7

Olina shifted impatiently. Twilight was gone and night had officially fallen. The lights in this warehouse district were a harsh white, which cast strange shadows along the road and the hardened ground. Rain was falling intermittently, sometimes making the area even dimmer.

Her team waited, motionless, for her next order. They stood in a square, facing outward.

Normally, she would have stood in the center of that square, but a few minutes ago, she had walked closer to the target warehouse.

She could hear sirens whooping in the distance, and on the side farthest from here, red, blue, and yellow lights flashed and flared.

They were far enough away from her that they looked like a light show, designed for entertainment. She doubted there was anyone in this neighborhood who could see them, except maybe a handful of people who lived in the upper floors of that remaining apartment building.

So far, there was no other response to the breach, which bothered her. She had expected something—maybe even a *help* notification from one of her people inside.

They weren't incapacitated. She was monitoring their vitals as they went through the building. She didn't have accurate schematics of the place, but she was able to have her suit's scanners create a makeshift floorplan of the ground level, based on the building's size, exterior configuration, and the information Māhoe had given them.

What she worried about—what she had mentioned to her team before sending them in—was that when they went to the lower level, they might lose contact.

She had told them she would give them two hours before she sent a rescue squad inside.

If she sent a rescue squad inside. She might send a demolition team.

She had not told this to Māhoe, who was set on recovering the bits of the Spires and sending them home.

She might actually destroy them.

Her comm chirruped to life, which made her heart rate increase, even though she didn't want it to. She was a bit more tense about the team than she had thought she was.

"Hey, Olina."

The voice did not belong to any of the three team members who had breached the warehouse. It belonged to Halia, the pilot she had left behind on the *Manu*.

"Yeah," Olina said tersely. Halia was sometimes prone to impatience, asking for a timetable when there was none or wondering what was going on with the rest of the team.

To prevent that, Olina had asked her to monitor the operation from the ship.

Apparently that hadn't worked.

"We have a low-flying air vehicle of some kind, heading toward us. It's maybe forty kilometers out, but it's closing the distance rapidly."

"You think it's heading here?" Olina asked.

She was surprised. She figured if there was any human response to the breach, it would be a ground response.

"It seems to be," Halia said. "There's no communication from the craft, and it has rudimentary stealth technology."

"Based on the *anacapa*?" Olina asked, since most of the Empire's stealth technology was a misuse of the *anacapa* drive.

"Clunkier than that. Something that might have predated it maybe." Halia sounded distracted. "Or maybe their *anacapa*-based stealth tech doesn't work in atmosphere."

That was possible. The *anacapa* drives could be used in atmosphere, but they worked best in space itself. Olina had only used a ship-based *anacapa* drive inside a planet's atmosphere a few times, although she had used a ground-based drive often throughout her career.

"They coming to us or you?" Olina asked.

"That I'm not sure of," Halia said. "I'm not even sure they'll arrive here or if they'll register our presence. But I know you like to be prepared, and we did just set off some alarms, so the timing is suspicious."

The timing was very suspicious. Halia had been right to contact her.

"Put your shields up if you haven't already," Olina said.

"What about the skips?" Halia asked. She wouldn't be able to shield them remotely, unless she put the *Manu*'s shield over them.

If the incoming craft was monitoring the *Manu* and the skips, it would find the disappearance of all of them suspicious.

"No, leave them be," Olina said. "I'm less worried about them than I am about the *Manu*. I don't want it—and its technology—to fall into Empire hands."

"It won't." Halia was clearly bristling at the idea that she would let someone capture one of their ships.

"See that it doesn't," Olina said, and signed off.

Then she opened the comm link to the team around her. She purposely didn't include the three in the warehouse. They had enough to deal with.

"Some kind of craft is flying in," Olina said. "I'm guessing that we're going to have a human response to the breaches at the warehouse. Brace yourselves."

She got nods from the team. No need to continue chatter. They were in a defensive position already. They knew what to do. The people in the corners would switch to heat vision, so they could see anyone approaching. It could be distracting, because random bypassers would show up, but that didn't matter now.

The entire team slid their weapons into position.

Olina scanned the area while her team prepared. They were in the open and vulnerable to any attack from above. They were already using the shields built into their environmental suits, but on the lowest setting, mostly so that they wouldn't easily be picked up by any surrounding security tech.

"Olina." Halia again, sounding breathless. "That craft coming in? It's got Imperial military insignia."

That was odd. Olina knew this wasn't a military facility. Perhaps there was one nearby that they were worried about.

The fact that the craft was military was also a problem. Olina could handle local authorities. They usually didn't know what they were doing. But a military response in a military culture? She and her team were not skilled enough or large enough to handle anything to do with the Enterran military.

"You shielded?" she asked.

"Yes," Halia said.

Olina's heart rate had slowed. She felt an odd little quiver of joy, and hoped it didn't turn up on any of her bio readings. She loved being in the middle of action. It was one of her favorite things, and one of her biggest secrets.

As a trainee, she had been kicked out of the Amnthran military because she admitted to loving the fight. They believed that someone like her would be too reckless, initiating fights rather than following orders.

She had been that woman once, but she wasn't now. She had learned how to tamp the emotions down, except for that whisper of joy.

"Personal shields on maximum," she said to her team as she adjusted hers.

Then she braced herself for whatever was coming next.

* * *

8

They disappeared. Fifteen people vanished off her monitoring equipment. There was a visible hole in the main hologram that Lebede had been monitoring.

She pushed her chair back and rubbed her chin, breathing shallowly through her mouth. The small tower room felt too warm, almost sticky, but she suspected it was as comfortable as usual.

She had changed. Her nerves were getting to her.

That hole in the hologram was weird and floaty. She had been looking at the entire district on that hologram, all of the warehouses and the roads leading into it, with a focus on the fifteen people outside.

They had been standing in a box-like square, with one of their people roaming around it, when suddenly, they just winked out.

But they left a perceptual hole. The air where they had been didn't look black, it didn't look like a night sky with light filtering through it—both of which she would have expected.

No, instead, it looked like there was a flaw in the data. She could see her own wall through that little carved-out section.

She opened a second, smaller hologram and changed the settings on that, not wanting to do it with the one she was monitoring, in case she screwed things up.

The changed settings did not zero in on that group, as she had thought might happen. Instead, the hologram slowly filled in the gap with what had been there before, thinking it had a flaw in its own program.

She deleted that hologram, then swiveled her chair slightly and looked at the landing area near the apartment complex.

The strange ship was gone. The skips remained, but the larger ship seemed to have completely vanished.

She opened another hologram of that area, and this time, she changed the settings to reflect the one that was showing emptiness.

Sure enough, she saw the same kind of gap in the imagery that she got where the fifteen people had been standing.

These people—whoever they were—were using some kind of weird stealth technology. Something her systems couldn't translate.

She had to let Fernsby know. She wasn't sure how to explain this without sounding crazy. No one had that kind of personal stealth technology, at least that she knew about.

But maybe, just maybe, her clearance wasn't high enough. Maybe this was common tech for the Combat Corps.

Still, she had a duty to warn.

A bead of sweat ran down her back. She rubbed her palms on her pants. She hadn't been this nervous in a long time.

Usually she could make informed guesses as to what was going on, but right now, she had none.

Except that this might be bigger than some kind of simple breach. That tech suggested that these weren't common thieves.

Did they think the warehouse was still owned by the military? Were they trying some kind of raid of military equipment?

Or was something else happening here? Was there something in that building that warranted a major military intervention?

She didn't know.

But she did know that something could go very, very wrong.

* * *

9

The strange ship vanished from Dunstan's control panel. One moment it was there, and the next gone.

Some kind of shield?

Even though her flightwing was closing in on the site rapidly, she was still too far away to eyeball the landing area. Right now, the sky was dusty gray with unhelpful rain making everything look fuzzy through the windshields.

"I need someone next to me," she said.

The flightwing's regular pilot moved from the seat behind Dunstan to the copilot seat beside her. Tegan Thatcher was slight and wizened. In her off time, she climbed mountains using little more than ropes, so her skin had the look of old worn-out shoes.

Only her eyes were alive, with both intelligence and attitude. Dunstan loved the intelligence and hated the attitude.

"The strange ship just vanished," Dunstan said, "and that group of people seems to have disappeared as well."

"Personal shields?" Thatcher asked. "Do we have that technology?"

"We don't," Dunstan said. "Whether the Empire does or someone in the private sector is anyone's guess."

And Dunstan didn't have time for guessing. She didn't even want to think about that. Her mission was to focus on the breach at the warehouse, and she would do that.

"I need you to do three things," she said to Thatcher. "I need you to find that group of people and see if the ship is still there or if it has taken off with its little shield on. I also need you to contact headquarters and tell them we need one more unit. Because we really should be going after those ships as well as guarding that warehouse."

Thatcher's lips thinned, as if she was clamping them together. She got that expression when she disagreed with orders.

Dunstan didn't care. She rarely consulted with her people. They were *her* unit, and when they had their own command (however small, like hers) they could do what they thought important.

Right now, she knew where her priorities were.

"Gear up, people," she said to the remaining eleven. "I'm going to bring us down just outside that warehouse, and we're going to go in, 1-2-3 formation."

If she had more time to do this right, she would have dropped one third of her group on one side, another third on the other, and the remaining third on yet another, before bringing the flightwing down all the way.

But she didn't have that kind of time.

"What kind of back-up do we need?" Thatcher asked, her voice a little harsh, as if the words were coming reluctantly.

"Two more flightwings where those skips are. One of the flightwings needs to have tracking capability in case that ship . . ." Dunstan paused.

She wasn't sure what the right word was. She didn't want to put ideas in anyone's heads, but she had been serving as part of Combat Corps on the *Daystar*, which had responded, with its squadron, to disaster at The Room of Lost Souls. The squadron had prepared for battle, but there had been none. Just the remains of Imperial vessels. The attacking ships had vanished, according to the classified footage she'd watched. The ships opened a little door in space, and seemed to go through it. Then they weren't visible any more.

More than that—they weren't *there* anymore. They weren't anywhere. They had left the area using a propellant that she (and others) had never seen before.

" . . . left," she finished. "In case that ship left and we somehow missed it."

Thatcher gave her a sideways look, as if she didn't know what Dunstan meant or why Dunstan was being so coy.

"*Now, Thatcher,*" Dunstan said. She had more than enough to concentrate on without dealing with Thatcher's moods.

Dunstan had to make a quick decision on where she would land the flightwing. And she finally decided, with a half second of consideration, that she would land it where that group of people had been.

She smiled.

If they were still there—if they did have personal shields—well then, this would test them. And scatter them.

And give her a hell of an advantage.

* * *

Iokua's environmental suit told him that the area behind the hidden door was six degrees cooler than the rest of the warehouse. He wasn't sure what to do with that information except note it. He had no idea if that was because the door wasn't opened much or because something below needed to be stored in cooler temperatures or if there even was something below.

The area back here was inky black. No lights came on as he entered, unlike the other parts of the warehouse.

He had the feeling that the people in charge of this place did not want any visitors at all.

He turned on some of his exterior suit lights—the ones on his palms and the one that he rarely used on the top of his helmet. That light fell around him diffusely, making him feel like some kind of standing lamp. He'd seen it with his compatriots in the past and always thought it strange.

But it was the best way to light up this place.

Not that the place was much. It was like the room he had just left, only without the elevators. It was a place that was a stopping point on the way to another place.

And just ahead of him was a flight of stairs, heading down.

The stairs were wider than he expected, making him wonder what their initial purpose had been. They looked utilitarian, without much decoration.

The sirens and lights from the alarms weren't back here either, and didn't appear to have been activated on the lower level of the staircase. More confirmation that those alarms were designed to scare someone away from this place, not to warn a person inside the building that something was wrong.

Iokua approached the stairs. They had handrails on one side only. The other side was open, maybe so that items too big for the elevators could be carried to the lower level.

He was making assumptions, something he tried not to do on jobs like this.

He trained his palm lights below, trying to see what was down there. Māhoe had gone down an elevator on his visits below, so he had no real sense of how deep underground this warehouse went.

Iokua almost sent another image of the floorplan to his colleagues inside the building, and then stopped himself. Time to contact them directly, since the building's security already knew they were here.

He sent a map of his trail from the door to here, and then said, out loud through the comm system, "I'm going to head down a flight of stairs. I'm hoping it'll take me to the items."

He waited almost a minute, peering down the stairs like a kid forbidden to go below. Just when he was about to give up on hearing from his colleagues, Leimomi answered. Her voice sounded faint, and he had to concentrate to hear her.

"I found stairs, too," she said, then sent coordinates. "I'm also heading down."

There was no response from Akamu. Iokua hoped that meant he was out of range, rather than unable to respond.

They probably should have done some kind of check, back when they had entered. But no one had suggested it, and no one had been in charge.

Besides, for some reason, Iokua had thought this would be easy, even though they were supposed to trigger the security systems.

Maybe Olina had a point. Maybe he hadn't respected the Enterrans enough.

Then he grinned at himself. Lights and sirens? Those were silly ways to scare off serious intruders.

"I'm heading down, too," he said. He wasn't going to wait any longer, and letting

Leimomi know that he had gone down was enough.

Maybe Akamu just hadn't answered. Maybe he saw no reason.

Iokua moved to the farthest side of the stairwell so that he could grab the handrailing if necessary. He didn't hold it, though, because he wanted to keep his palm lights ahead of him.

The stairs were long and flat, not at the height he had been trained to anticipate on Amntha. These were shallow, only about ten centimeters high. He could easily trip if he wasn't careful.

He didn't count the stairs, though. They seemed to go on forever, heading forward. He had no idea how deep he had gone before there was a wide landing, with a high ceiling.

He had the sense—again—that this was all built for transporting large materials. He admonished himself for the assumption, though, knowing it might have come from his paltry knowledge of this place.

Māhoe had told him about the materials on the lower level, many of them large—especially the parts of the Spires. Iokua hadn't gone into the elevators, but few would be wide enough or tall enough to handle large tree-sized Spire parts.

He followed the landing around, and then headed down the next section of stairway, which went beneath the section he had just climbed down. So the stairwell was built into one large space, that headed down a lot farther than he expected.

His suit told him that the temperature had dipped again. He wasn't sure what to make of that knowledge, although it did reassure him just a bit.

It meant that the Spires wouldn't activate themselves accidentally. They weren't as easily triggered in cooler temperatures.

There was no way that the Enterrans could know that, right? He would make a point of letting Olina or Māhoe know when this job was over, though. It suggested there could be some kind of knowledge about the items.

Iokua finally reached the lowest level. The inky blackness seemed even thicker here. The area where he landed was wider than it had been above.

He didn't see any elevator entrances, though. Just the opening to a wide corridor with a very high ceiling.

He used his suit to orient himself, because he felt turned around. He didn't know what direction he faced.

The suit told him that the building entrance he had used was behind him. He would have guessed it was to his side.

Enough caution now. They had to get through this quicker than he was going, anyway. So he pinged Leimomi, and asked, "You hit the lower level yet?"

The ping seemed to echo. He got no response, and he wasn't going to wait for one.

He hoped that she heard him, but she might not have.

He set up the scanners in his suit so that they could monitor the materials in the walls around him. He had to assume now that the walls were made of something that was blocking his comms.

He also needed to know this to see if there was any way to get the rest of the team down here quicker.

He stepped into that corridor and walked quickly forward, feeling like he was on some kind of track, that he had no choice in the direction he was taking.

What he did know was this: there would be no easy way to get the materials out of this lower level. The team would have to cart them out up the stairs, which was possible, since they had brought air carts. But someone would have to drive the cart, and someone else would have to monitor it.

And if there were thousands of items like Māhoe had claimed, then it would take more than hours to liberate anything from this place.

It might take days.

Iokua wasn't sure anyone was prepared for that.

He sighed and continued forward, picking up his pace. He felt very alone down here, and he didn't like the feeling.

He didn't like it at all.

* * *

11

Ethel Hazleberg had found a bar in this corner of Vaycehn that suited her. It was smallish, with one main area, and a few private rooms off to the side. The bar was quiet, but not too quiet. It was usually full, except in the afternoon, but she wasn't an afternoon drinker. She had too much to do. Her job at Corporate Treasures kept her busier than she liked, particularly at this stage of a job.

The auction was over, the money was made and/or promised, and the delivery companies were hired. She had to supervise them and plan a route to deliver all of the artifacts, which usually wasn't as big a job as it had been on this one.

Thousands of items, all of them going to different parts of the Empire. Her head spun just thinking about it all.

She sat at the bar, not because she wanted to meet anyone, but because she didn't. The bar was made of some kind of honey-colored local wood, polished to a glossy sheen that didn't completely cover the grooves and the edges that proved this wood had once been some kind of tree.

As a woman who specialized in knowing what each piece she had ever sold was made of and where that material had come from, even down to the date it was harvested (when that information was available to her), she found it almost decadent not to know the provenance of something she touched.

Her long fingers were wrapped around a glass filled with three different kinds of local liquors, all made from the same berry at different stages of its existence. The bar sold each liquor individually, and she'd tried all of them, finding the young version too sour, the middle one too bland, and the aged version too sweet.

Combined, they were tart and rich and almost chewy, something she could linger over and relax before heading to the corporate apartment only two blocks away. There she would find some meal waiting for her, made for her and the other members of the auction team. The other members usually gathered in the community area to eat theirs, but she had asked that hers be delivered in a manner that allowed her to reheat it (if necessary) because she needed to decompress, and talking to her colleagues never allowed her to relax.

They didn't know about this bar, and she was going to keep it that way.

She sipped the drink, and watched the other patrons in the large mirror behind the bar. A handful of women, most of them in skirts and some kind of military tunic, all of them sitting at tables. A slightly larger handful of men, some of whom circled the bar, drinks in hand, as if looking for a table.

It was a nice gambit, but a silly one, because several tables were open. Ethel had placed her own bag, filled with the traveling tablet and a scarf and the remains of her lunch, on the chair to her right. There was no chair to her left, so no one would even think of sitting near her.

She felt, and not for the first time, relief that this place did not have a regular bartender. No one to inquire about her day. No one to remember her drink. No one to smile knowingly at her when they thought they understood what she was thinking.

The bar had a rotating group of employees who apparently worked at other bars

in the chain. The owners seemed to believe that relationships with the customers led to a little bit of price shaving and too many free drinks.

Ethel was glad that her employer did not try to shave fractions off each interaction, and that Corporate Treasures liked to pamper its employees. She was in such high demand as a managing auctioneer that she could work for dozens of rival companies or have a position at the universities that needed someone to head their museum and acquisitions departments.

Corporate Treasures knew that, and did everything to hang onto her and her people.

As if registering that thought, the tiny band on her wrist vibrated. She looked down and—surprisingly—saw a code red.

Emergency contact. She needed to get somewhere private immediately so that she could find out what was going on.

She bit back some irritation—she had wanted to nurse this drink for another thirty minutes at least. Instead, she downed half of it in two large gulps—suspecting she would need the fortification—and then grabbed her bag and hurried out the door.

The night was darker than any she'd seen in the month she'd been working this job. The air was damp with an annoying mist, the kind that seeped into clothing and hair as if she was standing in some kind of high-end steam bath—without the heat, that is. Because this air was cold.

More people than she expected walked the street, most of them going home. Their heads were bent down, as if the rain was defeating them. There had to be at least twenty people nearby, and that wasn't counting any vehicles passing.

Everyone was strangely quiet, though, or maybe the mist was muting the noise.

She didn't have the secure tablet, just the one the team used to plan routes and handle the non-proprietary parts of the work. Still, an emergency contact was an emergency contact, and if she lost even five minutes to a quick walk home, she might screw something up.

She pulled the tablet out of the bag and punched the emergency light, hitting the secure channel setting as she did so. The channel wasn't really secure, and out here anyone could listen in, but that was the best she could do.

Then she started to walk as the system hooked her up to whoever thought interrupting her evening was a good idea.

Her boss's face filled the screen. Bertram Blasingale had a round face that was smooshed flat in two dimensions, and made his eyes seem a little too small. Somehow, though, the look made him seem even snobbier than he was. She felt a smidge of amusement, and tamped it down. This was some kind of emergency, and with him in two dimensions, no one else would be able to see him unless they looked over her shoulder.

"Ethel." His voice sounded watery and she hoped to hell that he wouldn't notice that she wasn't using the links that would enable them to converse privately.

Then his eyes sharpened, and he seemed to look right at her.

"Where are you?" he asked.

Damn. He noticed. She made herself smile, and wondered if it worked. It felt more like a grimace.

"I'm about a block from home," she said, exaggerating by a half a block. "Figured this couldn't wait, whatever it was."

"Yeah," he said. "You figured right. We've had a break-in at the central warehouse."

She almost stopped walking. She was shocked. They had chosen that warehouse to store the exceptionally valuable art and artifacts because the warehouse had been built for the Imperial military.

There were top-secret security features in that warehouse that even she didn't understand.

She had no idea how someone had broken into the place. She'd been assured that no one could.

Three people walked past her, and she realized that she had stopped moving forward, which was the opposite of what she needed to do. She needed to hurry. She needed to figure out what was going on and what needed to be done.

She forced herself to walk, holding the tablet slightly to one side so that she could see past it. The last thing she needed to do was trip.

"When was the break-in?" she asked.

"It's ongoing," he said, and she stopped again. Apparently her involuntary reaction to surprise was to stop moving.

She forced herself forward.

"Now?" she asked. "We were guaranteed rapid response from the warehouse's security team. Is that happening?"

"I don't know," Blasingale said. "I only just got the notification. You're the one with quick access. You need to activate our security."

He was right; she did need to activate that. But they had paid a fortune for the venue and that had included military-level security.

"We were promised a quick response," she repeated. "We need to know if it's happening. I'll activate our security, but you need to get the warehouse's security people on board right now."

She didn't care that he was her boss. The fact that he contacted her without checking the status of the project led her to believe he had no idea how much money was at stake.

Those artifacts were worth more than three times their annual budget. This auction had been the largest the company had ever held.

He had trusted her to handle it, but he should have known how much liability they had. If they lost the artifacts . . .

She didn't want to think about that.

"They should act automatically," he said, and she felt a surge of fury.

She knew he was used to delegating, but this time, he needed to get his hands dirty.

"They should, but that doesn't mean they are." She reached the street in front of her corporate apartment building. It was square, with long balconies jutting off each side. It seemed like an oversized cube with too many fiddly design elements on the side.

She didn't quite hate the place, but it certainly wasn't somewhere she would have chosen to spend three months of her life.

"Good point," he said. "I'll check."

And because he seemed so lackadaisical about his role, she couldn't help herself. She said, "If we don't solve this, we could lose millions and be sued for even more. They'd have a case, too, because we guaranteed the items' safety."

She looked down at his flat face as she said that, and it seemed to change from a slightly mottled ivory to reddish gray. If that wasn't some trick of the golden light spilling from the corporate apartment building, then she truly had gotten through to him.

"Quickly," she pushed, then severed the connection. She dumped the tablet back in her bag and hurried to the front of the building.

The building had automated security augmented by two people who greeted the tenants. Apparently, someone (or several someones) in the past had managed to take the infinitesimally small identification chip, embedded in each person when they arrived, and give it to someone else.

She had no idea how anyone accomplished that, and she suspected it had been part of an earlier and less effective security system, but she found that she didn't

mind the added human touch to the security.

One of the two people was stationed outside. Today it was a young man who wore his long hair in a single braid that he kept tucked into his blue uniform shirt. His eyes twinkled when he saw her, and he greeted her warmly while tagging her with his handheld.

When she first moved in, she had bristled at the constant checking. Now, she anticipated it. She hadn't changed her opinion about it as much as she had gotten used to it.

She greeted him with a nod and hurried through the automated doors.

The lobby was filled with the building's trademark golden light. The light was supposed to lift someone's mood when they arrived home.

The light wasn't lifting her mood now. She wasn't sure what could. On the surface, she was quite calm, but she could feel a bubble of panic underneath.

If this went wrong . . .

She made herself breathe as she nodded at the second security greeter, without really seeing who it was. Then she wove her way through the thick chairs, all chosen for comfort, as if residents would rather spend their time in the lobby than in their apartments, and headed to the private elevator that took her to the top floor.

Once inside the elevator, which could uncomfortably hold maybe three people, she leaned against the golden wall, and closed her eyes for just a moment.

She couldn't quite get the idea that this was all a big disaster out of her mind. But she had to. She had to focus.

The elevator doors opened before she could get ahold of herself, but she did a reasonable facsimile thereof. She needed to take care of this problem and then she could deal with the fallout, if there was any.

Not that anyone was going to see her. This elevator opened directly into the apartment.

The corporation actually owned this apartment. They had bought it specifically for this job, with the idea that they would use that warehouse on several future auctions.

The apartment took up a full quarter of the floor, and had windows on three sides. It was colder than she liked, and had brown monotone furniture that looked drab on the tan tile floor. There was a second floor, which she could take the elevator to, but that was the "private" floor, with the bedrooms (five) and the bathrooms. There was one bathroom on this level, a catering kitchen, and a kitchen for the non-cook.

She kept that kitchen stocked, but she didn't go there now. Instead, she went to the main sitting area. She usually worked there, because she wouldn't arrive home until darkness fell. If she sat on the long loveseat, she could watch the city, which she found as beautiful as an ancient painting.

She had left her most important equipment on a gigantic ottoman in the center, the protected tablets and the business handhelds, the ones that connected her directly to the various auctions she was overseeing.

She set her bag beside the loveseat, grabbed the handheld for the central warehouse, and flopped onto the loveseat, kicking off her shoes. In a flurry of commands, she turned up the heat, shut down the lights, and set the security system in the apartment at its highest level.

Then she had the catering kitchen serve her some hot tea and buttered scones. She wasn't sure she would have time for actual dinner, but she could munch while she worked.

She opened the tablet that led her directly into the security for the warehouse. She had minimal access to the actual warehouse security, the one that had notified her boss, but she didn't have access to the security controls in this tablet.

Still, what she saw made her heart race. Three breaches on the exterior doors, which she had been assured had unbreakable security. She could see that part of the

warehouse, so she knew that lights and sirens had been activated, which should have driven away any casual thief.

She'd been in this business long enough to know that any thief who could get into this warehouse—who even knew what it stored—was not casual.

She grabbed a handheld and tapped it, opening the list she had made of potential buyers who seemed a little off to her. She didn't really look at the list—not yet—but she wanted it open so that she could reference it quickly.

Then she grabbed another tablet, the one that held the security *she* had installed in the warehouse. She had told the operators of that warehouse that she would not store items worth multimillions without having her own security around them.

Those items filled the lower level. She had been told that the security had to be approved through the warehouse security, and the low-level security was approved. But she added security around each grouping of artifacts, security that didn't touch anything owned by the warehouse except the air around the items.

That level of security had been a failsafe on nearly a dozen jobs. There were thieves that worked high-end auctions, and she had always thwarted them.

She would thwart these as well—she hoped. Her damn boss had brought this to her much too late.

Because she couldn't open the warehouse security on the lower level, she was more or less flying blind when it came to lower level access. Three stairways that regular people used, and several elevators, none of which she could access.

She really hated the fact that she couldn't access the service elevators or the maintenance stairways. She'd only seen those things once, and, at the time, she had only seen them from the doors leading into those areas.

She had complained to Blasingale, but he was new to this kind of auction. He had no real idea how dangerous storing millions in artifacts could be.

When this was over, if she managed to save the artifacts, it would be time to talk to the head of the company. She didn't need a boss. Bosses had always been her problem.

She needed free rein to handle whatever auctions she got assigned.

Something bumped her left arm, and she looked over. A serving tray backed away slightly. It held her scones (four of them, because she hadn't specified), some jellies and jams and honey, and a teapot with two mugs on the side. She knew without checking that the pot was brewing her favorite tea, which actually came from a small bitter plant in the mountains nearby.

She commanded the tray to remain stationary so she didn't have to move anything. It immediately moved slightly forward and to the side, so that she wouldn't bump it.

She moved the security tablet closer to her and shielded it from prying eyes, in case someone had altered the programming in the simple items around the apartment, like the serving tray. Then she quickly put in half a dozen commands, making yet another mental note that while the commands were lovely and protective, they were also time-consuming.

Finally, she activated the hidden cameras around the artifacts.

So far, it looked like no one had entered the exceptionally large room with all of the valuables. That would give her time.

She worked backward from the most expensive items to the cheapest. Normally, she would have worked from those closest to the door to the ones in the center, but the thieves were already in the building.

She needed to protect the investment first.

Silently she cursed how many items this auction had. She had tried to talk the owner into getting rid of them in several auctions, but he refused.

He had been traumatized by gathering them—apparently, he'd lost a colleague and

got hurt himself—so he wanted these things gone. He didn't care about the money.

She had to convince him to set the prices appropriately and still, he insisted on giving away too many of the items to institutions. She had had to facilitate that, which cut into the profit margin, so she put the minimums higher than usual—which she was happy about now, because they would have the added cost of either a lawsuit (if this went seriously awry) or additional security.

She couldn't think about that right now. She needed to move quickly. She would have to select the security information for the most expensive items, and begin to switch it on, one group at a time.

She had no one to blame but herself for the clunky way of doing this. So many auctions that she facilitated had a handful of extremely expensive items and the rest were there to entice buyers to start spending money.

She had never thought—until this auction—that she would need to go through the items quickly. There simply was no way to do it.

But there was a way to slow down whoever had broken into the warehouse.

She turned on the security she had set up with the permission of warehouse management. That probably wouldn't stop someone with the ability to get through the warehouse's military-grade security, but her security might force them to move slower.

She leaned back and let out a breath. Even that short of a pause reminded her how stressed she was. She didn't have a minute or even a second to take care of herself.

So she leaned forward and continued to work, hoping that whoever had broken in wasn't smart enough to figure out that she was guarding the most expensive items first.

Or rather, she hoped they weren't able to figure it out before she finished.

She had to assume that they had better tech than she did. She had to assume that they had better tech than the military.

And that scared her a great deal.

* * *

12

Something screeched above Olina at the very moment her environmental suit warned her of danger. She looked up, saw the craft that Halia had warned her about, and saw that it was coming in fast.

It wasn't just coming in. It was plummeting downward in a controlled descent.

"Move! Move! Move!" she said to her team. Two looked up. The rest ran across the flat area around the warehouse, scattering in several different directions.

She body-slammed the two who looked up, pushing them out of the way.

Her suit warned her that she was too close to that craft, so she veered to the right, away from the two who were too stupid to follow instructions.

She had learned long ago that she had to save herself first.

The craft's engine sent out some kind of backdraft that made the air look hot and wavy. She couldn't feel it, but the suit warned her that the temperature around her had risen to dangerous levels.

"Get to the warehouse," she shouted at her team through the comms. "Find a door."

Screw doing this the proper way. She was going to do it her way.

Her heart rate had not increased. She felt ridiculously calm. Her brain was moving quickly though.

The craft—a military craft from the Enterran Empire—shouldn't have broken through their shields. There should have been no way that the craft could have seen them.

The problem was on her. She should have moved her team.

The craft must have seen some kind of hole in their security. And they had headed for the hole.

Which meant they were flying blind.

She moved closer to the warehouse and contacted Idil on the cargo ship in orbit.

“Got active weaponry in that beast?” Olina asked.

“Yeah,” Idil said.

“I hope you see this mess,” Olina said. “I need you to take out the craft.”

“I don’t have any way to finesse this,” Idil said. “Your people have to get as close to the warehouse as possible.”

“We’re shooting from orbit,” Olina said through the comms to her team. “The incoming craft will explode. You need to run as far from that craft as you can. Head to the far side of the warehouse.”

And then she peeled out, running at top speed toward the warehouse.

Behind her, she heard actual gunfire, the kind that came with projectile weapons.

The environmental suits did not have much protection against projectiles shot with extreme force. And it was too late to tell the team to augment their shields to explosion levels, so that shrapnel wouldn’t penetrate.

She hoped the team was smart enough to consider that, given what they were facing.

She doubted the two that she already saved were that smart, but what did she know? She hadn’t worked with most of this team before.

She headed to the far corner of the gigantic warehouse and hoped she would make it before the explosion added its strength to the projectile weapons.

No one had expected a military level of security here, particularly military that used weapons so old-fashioned that the environmental suits weren’t designed for it.

Shots pinged around her. She could see puffs of dirt rising, but she knew the shots were landing too far away.

Were they coming from the craft? Because so far, no one had exited.

She didn’t turn to look. She needed to get as far as she could from that descending craft.

She didn’t look back at it. She didn’t want to slow down.

And then she heard it—a warning sound, like a hum. She didn’t stop until she reached the far side of the warehouse, where three of her team were already huddling, weapons out.

She turned now, and saw the craft illuminated in red, one of the doors open, and a woman in uniform leaning out of it, a rifle of some kind on her shoulder.

They seemed to freeze, the woman’s concentration etched on her face. Olina had a half second to wonder why the Imperial military was responding to a security call, and then the entire craft seemed to expand.

The woman turned, clearly shouting, and tumbled or was pulled inside of the craft, which suddenly reversed direction. It was trying to get away.

But its shield wasn’t good enough to fight Amntran weapons—if the craft even had its shield activated with someone leaning out a door. If the craft even had a shield.

The craft moved slightly up and forward, but it was expanding. It had to be unbearably hot inside. Everyone was roasting to death, and they probably didn’t know it. They had probably passed out already.

Then the craft came apart, first in large segments, and then the large segments became smaller segments. The segmentation continued with each succeeding piece, a visible disassembly.

“We have to move farther away,” Olina said. Because once this explosion ceased to

be contained by whatever field kept it in place—a field created by the weapon from Māhoe's ship or a field created by the craft itself—once that field disappeared, the tiny bits would go hurtling with great force in all directions.

Olina ran along the side of the warehouse. She didn't look to see if the others were following her or not. She didn't care.

She hadn't expected this level of response. From what she had heard from Māhoe, he hadn't either.

Military.

That meant the team was on an even tighter timeline, or they would have to abandon this mission.

She had three people inside.

She didn't want to abandon them.

But she had no idea how they would accomplish the job now.

Shrapnel started pelting the warehouse, sounding like hard rain. She thought maybe she heard a grunt through the comms, but she wasn't sure.

She kept running until she had the warehouse between her and the explosion.

Then she stopped, grabbed her knees, and gasped for air. She hadn't run like that in years.

She hadn't expected to do it here.

* * *

13

After going through the endless corridor, Iokua finally found a door. He pulled it open easily, which stunned him.

What stunned him even more was a room—if he wanted to call it that—filled to the brim with Amnthran artifacts. Pieces of the Spires stood everywhere, set up to look like branches or, in some cases, actual trees. The writing on the sides was displayed.

Scattered around them were smaller weapons, little bombs designed to look like rocks, and even smaller pieces of actual ammunition. Then there were the handheld lasers, designed just like the Spires, with the white exterior and instructional writing on the side.

This place looked like an armory stocked with ancient weapons to him, but he could understand why the Enterrans believed these were some kind of art.

Displayed this way, the pieces did look lovely.

What the Enterrans didn't seem to understand—and why would they?—was that the Amnthrans designed everything with an eye to beauty.

The breadth of this room, the number of items, the display, so confident in the artistry, took his breath away.

He actually couldn't see the end of it all. He saw the walls to his right and left—and there were more items attached, from daggers (how did anyone even hang those? The sides of the blade were so sharp they would slice skin at a single touch) to actual clubs with flat ends. The Amnthrans no longer used the clubs, but they were potent weapons, something that a person could put some real power behind.

Unless he missed his guess, there were enough pieces of Spire here to build a working Spire, one that could defend a section of this planet from whatever came at it, in orbit or on the ground.

The thought chilled him.

He took a step deeper inside, and as he did, a wave hit him, pushing him forward. His suit notified him that some kind of force field went up around the door.

Apparently, he had been noticed. He didn't try to flee, not immediately. Instead he let his suit probe the field.

It was rudimentary and badly designed, filled with flaws. He would have no trouble going through it when the time came.

If he could go through it.

Māhoe had been wrong: there were too many items here to remove in a quick and dirty grab. His estimation of a thousand items was low. Considering how dangerous each item was, even carrying one or two things out of here put everyone at risk, without the proper equipment.

And right now, they did not have the proper equipment.

Iokua turned on his exterior comms. It was time to contact Olina, if he could from this depth.

He realized at that moment that Leimomi hadn't responded to his question, the one he had asked before going through that long corridor, and he wasn't sure if that was because of where she was, or because the comms didn't work in this part of the warehouse.

As he started to send the message, the mummies in the center of the room—or what he thought might be the center—lit up, a faint blue.

Their uniforms, so familiar from Amnthran history, made him feel sick: he was looking at remains of real people, not some statue or random display.

Those real people had stolen—or at least were guarding—enough parts of a Spire to make a full-blown weapon. What in the hell had they been planning?

He shook himself. He had been told the mummies would be in the room, but the reality of them stunned him. And the faint blue bothered him.

Near them, a giant piece of Spire, which looked like some kind of tree with branches going in all directions, also turned blue. He scanned the blue, trying to figure out what it was, then let out a breath.

Those were security fields. Strong ones. Not like the one near him at all.

If he had to guess, he would assume that the security fields were covering what the Enterrans believed to be the expensive items.

His stomach turned again, at the thought that the mummies were the first thing protected, not because they were being honored, but because they would be sold at a great price.

To hell with this. He was going to be trapped in here if he wasn't careful, and for what? A theft that couldn't happen.

This was an impossible job. Māhoe should have known that. He shouldn't have brought them here for this.

He should have destroyed the artifacts when he had the chance.

Iokua pivoted, and as he did so, the room shook. He had to grab the wall just to keep his balance.

He now felt isolated, without his hearing to tell him what was going on. So he asked the suit.

It had no idea. Only that something had made a large explosive noise outside, and the concussion had shuddered through the entire building.

A concussion. And he was in a room with weapons.

He needed to leave.

He turned around and started picking at the newly added security feature. He had to get through that door, through that corridor, and onto an upper level before the entire building came down around him.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself, making himself slow down.

And then he got to work.

* * *

Lebede was on her feet. She had no idea when she had stood up. Her hands were over her mouth as she stared at the holos in front of her. Fires burned across the entire acreage where the warehouses were.

Fires from the exploded flightwing.

She had just watched a lot of people die.

She backed away from her equipment, slamming into her chair and nearly losing her balance. All that calm that she prided herself on—it was gone. She wanted to flee, but she was afraid to go outside.

She didn't want to be alone, but she didn't know who to contact.

Then that thought registered, and she stopped.

Of course she knew who to contact. She was the one who had gotten the flightwing here in the first place.

She let out a small whimper. They would all be alive if she hadn't asked for more security.

Then she clenched her fist. She did not kill those people. She did not try to get into that warehouse.

She was just doing her job.

And she needed to continue doing it.

Those people, those *attackers*, they needed to be stopped.

She walked to her set-up and stared at the holos, made herself look at them in depth, so she saw the destruction.

She did not do that. The attackers did. If they hadn't been here, everyone would still be alive.

Once she had that thought clearly in her head, then she leaned forward.

She cleared her throat, and spoke before she sent the message. A simple hello, which sounded like a croak. She practiced hello three times before it sounded like an actual word.

Then she contacted Fernsby.

She asked for a visual, even though she probably looked a fright. A small holo popped up over the burning ground.

Fernsby, hair sticking up as if he had put his hands through it, his eyes wild, snapped, "What?"

"The flightwing you sent," she said. "It blew up."

"We just got notification," he said. "This is the military's problem now."

"You should let them know . . ." She swallowed hard, feeling that croak return. Then she started again. "You should let them know that whatever destroyed that flightwing—it came from above."

"Above?" he said. "What the hell? Do these attackers have a craft above ground?"

"I looked." She was sure the flightwing's commander had as well, not that it mattered.

The only reason Lebede had looked was because she had been told that a military craft was coming. She hadn't wanted to be in the middle of some kind of fight.

"I haven't found any other air vehicle," she said to Fernsby. "Something could be cloaked though. Maybe the military has a way to see something, but I don't."

"So where is above?" he snapped, as if it was her fault that she didn't have all the answers.

"I'm worried," she said, "that they might have something really powerful in orbit."

He rocked backward. Clearly he hadn't thought of that, but to be fair, the man ran ground security on *warehouses*. He didn't think about what was going on around the

planet.

“I’ll let them know,” he said and signed off.

Nothing more. No condolences, no kind words. Just a curt dismissal, as if she was unimportant.

She sank into her chair. She *was* unimportant. She had set events into motion because she had found the ships, the people, the situation. But she couldn’t do anything more here.

Then she let out a breath.

Except her job.

She could monitor. Maybe she would see more. She had no idea who to contact if she did, because her boss clearly didn’t want to hear from her. But she would figure that out when she saw something.

If she saw something.

Then her hands paused over the controls. She had just misinformed her boss.

She hadn’t checked for that strange ship. It had vanished, yes, but that didn’t mean it was still parked like those skips.

Her fingers shook. She was going to have to figure out if it was still in place, but camouflaged like those people had been. The ones who had run as the flightwing descended.

All of them had appeared on her monitors when the flightwing’s exhaust hit them. A few had disappeared again, but the others hadn’t.

Maybe that ship had gone above the others. Maybe that mysterious ship had placed the killing shot.

If so, then everyone was still in danger.

Including her.

* * *

15

As Olina caught her breath, her planning mind returned, along with a coldness she hadn’t felt in years. She stood upright and peered around the building.

That craft—that Imperial military craft—was in small burning pieces on the ground. There was damage in all directions, including a hole where the craft had been—where it had tried to attack *her* people, and maybe had done so.

Part of her team still huddled against the warehouse. Some were inside. She couldn’t see at least six of her people.

She felt the ragged edge of fury—she had *told* Māhoe that they needed prep time. He hadn’t known that the military would be here. The *military*. And the Enterran Empire was all about its military.

She tamped down the fury and contacted Halia.

“We lost two,” Halia said before Olina could even speak.

That ragged edge of fury became something stronger. Olina clenched her own fists to keep herself from telling Halia to shut the hell up.

“They hadn’t moved when that craft descended. That was ugly, Olina—”

“Shut up,” Olina said. Time for recriminations later—her own at Māhoe and Halia’s at . . . whomever. Maybe even at Olina. “We need to be extracted *right now*.”

Halia didn’t respond immediately. Time had slowed down, and that delayed response seemed to take hours, which was making Olina even angrier.

“We still have three in the warehouse and—”

“I don’t care,” Olina said. “We’ll get them out.”

She wasn’t sure if that part was true or not. She didn’t care about that either. All

of the casualties were going to have to be on Māhoe.

"Can one of those skips be operated remotely?" Olina asked.

"Yes," Halia said in a tone that had an undercurrent of *I thought you knew that*. "But I can come—"

"You will come," Olina said. "You're getting us out of here. But first, send those skips away. They're beacons, proving that we're here."

"I think the owners of that warehouse already know you're there," Halia said.

Olina had to tamp back fury. Working with her own handpicked team was better. They didn't talk back. They didn't have opinions, or, if they did, they kept those opinions to themselves.

"Get those skips out of here," Olina said tightly, "and then get yourself here immediately. I'm going to gather whomever I can and we'll meet you on the far side of the warehouse." In case that wasn't clear, she added, "On the opposite side of the craft that we destroyed."

"Yeah, got it. Be there shortly. How are you going to get everyone from inside the warehouse?"

First, it was none of Halia's business. And second, Olina probably wasn't. They might be on their own.

But she would try, without going in.

"Just get here," Olina said.

Then she signed off and leaned against the building for a half second. She was more fatigued than she should have been. So she had the suit run a diagnostic.

Nothing had punctured it. She was not visibly injured. But she was in some kind of mild shock, which irritated her.

Or maybe the irritation was that ragged edge of fury, some of it from the beginning of this job, at the way that Māhoe figured everyone could handle something that should have been impossible from the get-go.

She opened a channel to her surviving team members. All of them, including the ones inside the warehouse.

"We're meeting the ship on the far side of the building—" which she identified using the coordinates they had started with. "We have to leave within ten minutes. If you're not here by then, use the tactics we taught to blend into the area. We will find you later."

If they could. If they weren't captured.

Maybe she would take control of her own ship and just destroy that warehouse. It would be best, after all. Then no one would have the weaponry.

But who knew how many people would be killed in that explosion. If there were as many weapons as Māhoe thought there were, an entire section of the city might be leveled.

Olina wasn't sure she was that angry. She wasn't sure she could have the deaths of thousands on her conscience.

She ran toward the far side of the building, following the three who had accompanied her. She didn't hear any real response on her comms, not that she had asked for any.

She realized as she ran that she hadn't asked who had died in the initial disaster. She hadn't been close enough to this team to really get to know them with anything but contempt.

And people who couldn't save themselves from an obvious threat? They truly did deserve her contempt.

She reached the edge of the building, heart rate too high, breath coming too fast. She was sucking oxygen out of the suit, which was telling her that the air in the area was filled with chemicals and smoke and a toxic stew of plastics or something, stuff

that was either banned or not even made on Amnthra.

People would be damaged by this day no matter what she did.

She saw that for the rationalization it was.

She didn't care. She had reached the point where she needed to get through this part of the day.

Once she did, she would take matters into her own hands.

Whatever that meant.

* * *

16

Five flightwings took off from the base on the south side of Vaycehn. Combat Captain Henry Chester flew in the first flightwing, leading the v-shaped formation.

He sat in the back of the flightwing, studying what little they had on the situation. The back was wide and slightly oval shaped, with a backend that opened and doors on the side as well. He could evacuate from any direction, not that he wanted to.

Instead, he was sitting just to the right of the cockpit, so he could see through the windshields as the flightwing hurried through the mostly empty night sky.

The flightwings had taken off even before anyone had a complete handle on the mission. A single flightwing had been preparing to respond to a call for backup from a flightwing commanded by Lieutenant-Coronet Felicity Dunstan, but that mission had changed suddenly when her flightwing was destroyed.

Now, the mission had expanded to five flightwings, and more might follow, considering they were going to a former military warehouse in the warehouse district.

His own commander had no idea why anyone would attack a warehouse that the military had vacated fifteen years ago. The military still protected it, primarily because some of the tech built into its walls was still proprietary. No one in charge wanted any other entity to understand what kind of security technology the military actually had.

Other than that, the military had nothing to do with the entire area. And hadn't in years.

The flight across the city would only take a few minutes, not really enough time to watch the vids, get up to speed, and figure out exactly what was going on.

Chester had been ordered to take out any interlopers in the area, but he was loath to do that. He used to live in that warehouse district.

There were apartment buildings nearby, filled with civilians.

If he did this wrong, then it would haunt him for the rest of his career.

The problem was there wasn't a lot of time for caution—and there certainly wasn't a lot of room for error.

For anyone.

* * *

17

The ground had just rumbled beneath Ethel, as if a death hole had exploded somewhere in the vicinity.

Her loveseat had actually traveled across the floor, bumping and sliding with the rumble. The other furniture danced as well, and the lights above her had swayed precariously.

The only thing that hadn't moved had been the serving tray. It still waited patiently beside the space where the loveseat had been, hoping she would finish her drink. If, of course, a serving tray hoped. Or even waited patiently.

Ethel gave the corporate apartment scant attention. She had been assured when she moved in that it had been built recently enough to have all of the proper death hole precautions.

As if building codes could prevent a death hole from opening underneath this place.

Instead, she was staring at the images before her, images of the storage area on the lower level of the warehouse. The security cameras were shaking, and debris was falling in front of them. The artifacts—all of them—seemed to wiggle.

Maybe a death hole had opened underneath the warehouse. More debris was raining from the ceiling, at least on the working cameras. She now realized that at least two had quit.

She had warned Blasingale not to store so many precious artifacts below ground, but he had asked her *What does it matter? If a death hole blows, it'll take out everything nearby. One has to hope that the military knew what was beneath this warehouse when they built it.*

One did have to hope, but that didn't mean a whole heck of a lot. Death holes sometimes went straight up, sometimes they went sideways, sometimes they seemed to come out of nowhere.

And Blasingale should have known that. He probably did know it and didn't care. He had probably thought that a former military facility was the safest place he could find for a haul like this one.

Ethel couldn't change the locations now. She had two things to focus on—the breach in the storage area itself, and now, the rumble of the possible death hole.

When the death hole had blown, she had been watching a man in an environmental suit. He had broken into the storage area. She wished he wasn't wearing an environmental suit, because she wanted to see his face. No matter how she tried to change the cameras, though, she hadn't been able to peer through his helmet.

Somehow he had gotten through the normal security to that room, even though he wasn't supposed to. There were two other people in the warehouse, but none of them were as close as he was.

She had actually stopped watching them. She had been more concerned with the man.

Somehow he had gotten through the locked door and stepped inside just as she was activating her own protocol. She had stopped, startled to see him.

He was thin, his suit dark and of a make she had never seen before. She had no idea why anyone would be wearing an environmental suit in a warehouse, but she worried about it.

And now it niggled at her.

Maybe he had planned to tamper with the environmental systems. Was he there to destroy the artifacts? Because one man certainly couldn't steal all of them.

When he entered, he had stopped, clearly surprised at what he saw. And after she spent a good minute trying to figure out who he was—*what* he was—she went back to activating the security protocols.

What she wanted, more than anything, was for those protocols to trap him inside that room. Then someone could question him. And since the security protocols had gone off, that "someone" was going to be the Enterran military.

She would tell Blasingale that she needed to be part of that interrogation. She was the only one who knew what questions to ask, the primary one being how this man in his strange suit knew that there were artifacts on the lower level of that warehouse.

And now none of it seemed relevant.

The rumble—whatever it had been—had moved the cameras, and she had to move them back to see him.

He was carving his way through her security field near the door. Carving was the only word she could come up with, because he was using his hands to part the field as if it was water.

He didn't seem panicked. He moved with an almost military precision, which worried her.

He was getting through her security, and she had no idea how to make it stronger. At least he wasn't focusing on the artifacts—yet.

She hoped that beneath that military precision was just a spark of adrenaline, one that was demanding he escape the room quickly before the death hole opened up around him.

He grabbed the door handle, which shouldn't have been able to happen, and then flung the door open. He staggered out, without taking a single artifact, and staggered into the corridor—which, from the tiny vantage that Ethel got, seemed undamaged.

Then the door slammed closed, dislodging more ceiling debris around all of her cameras.

She didn't have access to the security cameras owned by the building. Now that he'd moved out of the storage area, she was effectively blind.

She needed to contact Blasingale. She didn't have the right codes to get her to track the man in the environmental suit, and he was probably getting away.

She cursed as she stabbed at her equipment with her right forefinger, ignoring a shaky feeling that came from her proximity to a death hole.

She hated working on Wyr. In the future, when she held events, she would hold them in space, so that there wouldn't be death holes or environmental problems—no outside access either.

She would be able to vet anyone who came on a ship, and she would deal with any problems that arose. Enough of this working with other people. She was going to have complete control or she was going to quit.

She grabbed the tablet. It shook as she activated it. Blasingale had better answer, because they were running out of time.

His face filled the screen, just like it had earlier, and, if anything, he looked worse than he had before. His eyes had sunken into his face.

"This better be important, Ethel, because—"

"We have a runner," she said.

He blinked and frowned at her. He had clearly thought she was going to say something else.

"Someone in an environmental suit breached the artifact room," she said. "I thought I trapped him in our security, but he got out just a minute ago. You need to let the military know that he's coming out. We need to know who these people are—"

"There's no one," her boss said.

"What?" she asked.

"They—the intruders—they blew up the military flightwing that had come in to clear them out. They're some kind of attackers, Ethel. They're after the items in the warehouse."

He sounded terrified. His eyes glistened through the screen.

She had to look away. The panic that had threaded through her when the death hole blew—except that wasn't a death hole, was it? It was some kind of explosion, and she had felt it all the way here.

She straightened her shoulders, then stood, carrying the tablet as she walked to the windows. She didn't care what Blasingale was seeing right now. Probably sideways

views of the uncomfortable furniture.

She saw the rows and rows and rows of buildings that stood between her and the warehouse district. The buildings looked like toys from this height. They were all surrounded by mountains.

In the distance, near the warehouses, she could see smoke rising.

She'd seen similar things here before, rising smoke from someone else's tragedy. Only this time, it might be hers.

If that had actually been a death hole, there would have been smoke and dust and debris as far as the eye could see. The buildings would have disappeared into the maw of the hole, and the edges would have been visible even now.

Some kind of attack. She wasn't sure how to process that, but she was sure of one thing—reacting out of terror would help neither of them.

She moved the tablet so that she could see him. He was sweating, his eyes darting from side to side.

He was a panicker. That wasn't going to help at all.

She used her calmest voice on him. "You need to let the military know that there are people in environmental suits around the warehouse, that one of them breached that artifact room, and they need to catch him. They need to cover all the doors. They need to hurry."

"I think they're hurrying, Ethel," he said tiredly.

"He knows what's in that room," she said. "He might be making plans. We need—"

"Ethel, I'm not military," he said.

She made herself look at that smoke. It was floating with the wind, heading toward the mountains, a trail of black like a finger, pointing away from the district.

"Give me the information. I'll tell them," she said.

"All right," he said. "I'm sending it to you." Then he signed off.

It was as if he had already given up. Maybe he couldn't deal with the loss of life, but she suspected it was more like he couldn't deal with the potential loss of money. If these people had blown up a military vessel, did that mean they were going to blow up the warehouse?

Was that why the man in the environmental suit had been so eager to escape?

She hadn't looked to see if he had planted anything or dropped anything or done anything. And if he had done so outside of the room, she had no access to that.

The tablet buzzed as the contact information appeared.

Her stupid boss. His passivity was going to cost them precious seconds as she explained her way into the chain of command.

But it was either that or try to make Blasingale do it. And that would waste even more time.

She pivoted, so that the cityscape appeared behind her, the smoke a beacon of the destruction and death around her artifacts.

Then she activated the contact that Blasingale had sent her.

She would get through, no matter what. She would make sure of it.

* * *

Lebede couldn't sit down. She couldn't stay still. She paced and worked and paced and worked, trying different consoles, kicking the chairs aside. There were only four, but each one had seen her wrath more than once now, because they always seemed to be in the way.

She knew what she was doing, or, at least, what she was trying to do. She was

trying to locate that weird ship, doing everything she could with the systems she had. Technically, the area where the ship had been, and where the skips still were, wasn't in her jurisdiction at all. She was piggybacking on city systems, and hoping no one was going to care, considering what had just happened.

The office had a faint stink of smoke, which she hoped was her imagination. But her burning eyes were telling her that maybe it wasn't. Maybe she was smelling the smoke from the explosion—the smoke from the deaths.

She had turned on the cooling system, even though it was cold outside. She thought that moving the air might help, but the smoke smell seemed to grow stronger. Who knew from where the tiny tower drew its air.

It would be just her luck that it came from outside.

So she shut off the cooling with a simple voice command, and immediately everything felt stifling. But she pretended she didn't care.

The holos before her were filled with smoke and she had to scrub the imagery. She made herself focus on that strange ship.

The readings still suggested a gap where the ship should have been. And she hoped to hell she could trust those readings.

She contacted Fernsby as she continued to work.

His answer was curt. "What now?"

"I told you before that there were skips parked on the landing area not far from here," she said, not caring whether or not she sounded political. "Next to them was a strange ship, and it's vanished."

"So it was the ship that attacked our flightwing," he said, his voice trembling with fury. "You said the shot came from above. You said—"

"And I was right." She wasn't looking at his image, superimposed on all of the holograms. She was looking at the data. The skips were powering up. "That's not why I contacted you. I contacted you because the ship is missing."

"You expect me to glean something from that?" he said. "And I don't have time for riddles—"

"Sir." She stood up and this time she made eye contact. She had just watched a group of people die horribly and her office stank of the smoke, maybe from their deaths, and he was just being obtuse.

The last thing she needed right now was obtuse.

"There were three ships, those people came from the strange one, then it vanished, like they did—some kind of stealth tech," she said. "I don't know, but I was tracking them, and then the flightwing came down and someone attacked it, and now I can see just a handful of those people on the far side of the warehouse, and I'm pretty sure they're waiting for pickup. From that strange ship. You have to let the military know. They might be walking into another ambush. Sir, it's on us if they do."

"It is now," he said, and signed off, leaving her breathless. What the hell was that?

And then she understood. Everything they communicated was recorded. She had just put it all on the record, and he didn't want it to be.

She had thought she was being protective of her job, but he was really protective of his. Too protective.

The skips hovered, then rose, the way skips did when they were on autopilot.

She set up a tracker to keep an eye on them, even though that wasn't her job, but maybe they would tell her something. Maybe they would tell the company something. Maybe they would tell everyone something.

If they were moving, then that ship was probably moving, too. She wondered how she could find it.

She was going to have to look for gaps in the light, just like she had done before. If the ship was picking up those people, then it wouldn't go far.

If it wasn't—if it was coming in to defend them, to attack again—then she had no idea where it was going to go.

She split the holograms into two extra, one to monitor the strangers gathering on the far side of that warehouse, the other to monitor the area where the ship had been. Then she used the center hologram to work the gap, to see if the data gave her any information at all.

The system was not designed for this, but she was bending it to her will.

Her back sent a spasm through her and she had to stand up, so she moved the hologram she was working on up to her line of sight.

And as she did, something registered.

There was a gap, a small one, in the light. It was ship-shaped and it was moving toward the warehouse.

"I'm tracking it," she said, for what good that did anyone. She tried to reach Fernsby, but he wasn't responding. She didn't even have a public contact for the authorities.

Except the one posted all over the apartment building for the residents. The emergency contact, complete with security video.

She opened the contact on her personal handheld, gave her address, and said, "I'm running security on the warehouse district, and I see a strange ship heading toward the central warehouse where there was an explosion of a flightwing earlier. I need someone there to reach the response team before it arrives, so they can patch into my systems."

The response she got was not automated. It was a person, sounding as adrenaline-filled as she felt.

"Who are you again? What do you have?"

"We don't have a lot of time," she said, as she repeated her message. "Please contact them right away."

"Already on it," the voice said. "I just need . . ."

Lebede let her fall into the list of needs, into the directions of someone who might be able to help. For the first time that night, she didn't feel alone.

She worked to patch the locals into her system, her boss be damned, and hoped to hell that all of this work would be finished in time to save lives.

* * *

19

Iokua ran through that ridiculously long corridor. The lights were fading in and out, and debris was falling from the ceiling. He had no idea what had just happened—he couldn't roust anyone on comms—but something bad had.

All he could think about was the history that Māhoe had told them. Something about malfunctioning *anacapa* drives underground that were causing violent disruptions in the planet itself. The locals called those disruptions death holes for a reason.

That shaking could have been one of those disruptions. Whatever it was, it nearly knocked over parts of the Spire, and all he could think about was being trapped in that gigantic room with a thousand weapons and an unstable wall and the ceiling collapsing—

It was a tribute to his own quick thinking that he didn't start panicking until he started running. He got out of that security field with a minimum of fuss, doing the delicate work to extract himself, and then he bolted when he entered the corridor.

The run felt uncoordinated, headlong, with his limbs pinwheeling and his breath so ragged his suit was warning him that he was overtaxing himself.

Being underground in this place was the stupidest thing. He wished he could tell his suit that, but it was inanimate, even if it acted concerned about him.

Then, as he emerged, as the stairs rose above him like a beacon, blissfully intact (oh, he had been worried about that, badly worried, in fact), a message filtered its way through his comms.

A message Olina had sent seven minutes earlier.

A message that sounded . . . not panicked, but breathless nonetheless, as if something horrid had happened, and just getting the words out was taking too much time.

She started with coordinates, and then added, *We have to leave within ten minutes. If you're not here by then, use the tactics we taught to blend into the area. We will find you later.*

He cursed and started running again. The coordinates she had sent him were for the very door he had breached what seemed like a long time ago. It had taken him a while to make his way to this spot.

Even running, he wasn't sure he would get out of this hellish warehouse in three minutes.

Ten would have been hard, but three.

It seemed impossible.

Still, he had to try.

He sprinted up the stairs, two at a time, a little shallower than he would have liked, but the idea of tripping, of hurting himself, and taking *any* chance away made him even more cautious.

Olina knew what had happened. And she was willing to sacrifice everyone on the team to get away.

Maybe not one of those *anacapa* malfunctions, then. Maybe something else.

Something human-caused?

He didn't have time to speculate.

He just had to get out.

* * *

20

The flightwings were one minute out, and Henry Chester was receiving contradictory information. A possible attack from orbit, mixed with a concealed ship, as well as some kind of notification that a man in an environmental suit had breached the lower levels of that central warehouse, a man that the client—whoever that was (and why was there a client?)—wanted.

“Sir.” Coronet Debra Bleeker spoke up from the middle of the flightwing. She had been assigned to monitor the security vids of the warehouse area.

Three other members of the team looked at her, as if they hadn't expected her to speak. Which was probably a fair expectation, since Bleeker rarely said a word.

“The two skips on that landing area?” she said, her soft-spoken voice carrying in the wing's belly. “They're taking off.”

“Leaving?” he asked. He wasn't going to confirm on his own equipment.

“Leaving,” she said, nodding her head as she spoke. She was looking down at her equipment, her blondish-brown hair, wrapped in braids around her skull, catching the light. He hadn't realized until that moment that she wasn't wearing a regulation cap. “And they're empty.”

“Flying on autopilot,” said Ensign Rufus Rutherford, garnering him a series of annoyed looks. Rutherford was new to the crew, and he had annoying habit of correcting everyone sideways, trying to prove that he belonged.

Technically, he didn't outrank Bleeker—since they were both the lowest level of combat troop—but her title made it clear she came from a military family, which

gave her certain privileges that he was not entitled to.

Chester hated it when the enlisted tried to prove themselves. So he wasted a precious half-second to put Rutherford in his place.

"Is that true, Bleeker?" Chester asked.

"It seems so, sir." She gave Rutherford a sideways glance, as if expecting him to correct her. Chester would have to deal with this at some point, but not now.

He suspected the skips were some kind of diversion, but he wasn't certain.

"What about that mystery ship?" Chester asked. "Has it followed them?"

"We have no readings on it, sir," Bleeker said. "But there's a security feed that I'm told we can tap into—"

"Do so," he snapped. They were now less than a minute out. Less than a minute to decide if he wanted to break formation and have flightwings follow the skips.

But skips, as far as he knew, had no stealth tech. They couldn't vanish from equipment. They could be tracked now or later.

His mission was to get to that warehouse and stop whatever this was. If those skips had taken off without personnel, then that meant the people he was after were still in the area.

"Let headquarters know about the skips," he said. "Do we still have visuals on those intruders?"

He asked this of the whole team, but only Rutherford responded. Of course.

"Yes, sir. They appear to be gathering on one side of the warehouse."

"Then that's where we're going."

Chester sent a revised attack formation to the other flightwings. They would go in, spread out, and get as close as they could, but not close enough that some random shot from orbit could take them all out quickly.

That wasn't going to happen again.

"Gear up," he said to his crew. "Our mission is to get these people alive."

Or, at least, as many of them as possible. Headquarters needed to know who was behind this threat, and what it all meant.

And he was the one in charge of the answers.

* * *

21

The roar of five craft drowned out every noise in the district, shaking the ground with the power of their old-fashioned engines. The crafts were coming in quickly in a v-shaped formation, but just as Olina thought that, the formation split apart.

They were moving from a v to a rectangle, which meant they were going to try to surround either the warehouse or the district.

The timer running in the corner of Olina's visor gave the team thirty seconds to arrive, and those thirty seconds might be too many. The *Manu* wasn't here, though.

"Halia, where are you?" Olina said.

"Landing now," Halia said, and it suddenly became obvious. Dust and dirt rose from the downward pressure of the ship.

Leimomi ran around the corner of the building, her thin arms waving, screaming, "Wait for me! Wait for me!" so loudly that Olina could hear her over the roar of the craft.

Two of the three who had breached the warehouse were here.

They were now missing only one person.

Leimomi shoved her way into the group, as if she was willing to shove them all aside to get out of this area.

“Where’s Iokua?” Olina asked.

“Thought he was with you.” Leimomi was breathless, but that didn’t hide the fact that she also didn’t seem to care.

The crafts were spreading out, except for one that was slightly larger than the others. It was coming directly for them.

“Get to the *Manu*,” Olina said.

They didn’t have far to go, maybe two dozen meters, maybe less, but it seemed forever. And Halia was going to have to shut off the shield for just a moment to let everyone board.

“Halia,” Olina said as she ran, “you’ll need to use the *anacapa* drive to get us out of here.”

“Already have it prepped,” Halia said.

She was the only one who sounded calm.

The *Manu* appeared, watery and unclear in the darkness. That meant Halia had partial shields up, away from the doors. If the team got into the ship quickly, the Imperial craft wouldn’t have the opportunity to target and shoot—if Olina’s understanding of their tech was correct.

Four members of the team had already reached the *Manu* and were climbing the emergency ladder to the small emergency exit. Another entrance had opened, and Halia had released a ramp, which was taking its sweet time descending.

The rest of the team headed for that.

Shots—actual propellants again—starting firing around them. That slightly larger craft was above them.

Olina finished her sprint, then glanced over her shoulder.

No sign of Iokua.

She hoped he got the message. She hoped he had the right kind of training, so that he knew how to blend into this community.

She doubted he did. None of them really had Empire training. But he was a smart guy. Maybe he would figure it out.

“Pull up the ramp,” she said as the last of her people went up it. The damn thing was taking so long to maneuver that she didn’t want to wait for it any longer.

Then she headed for the ladder.

She was the last one to climb it, the last one to slide into the ship, the last one to get out of that stupid area.

She hoped that Halia had seen her, and hoped that the shield was back in place.

Because those propellant weapons were weirdly powerful. She didn’t know if the propellants had other properties—some ships allowed shrapnel to embed, for example, but if these propellants had explosives that activated when they had embedded into a target—

She didn’t want to think about it.

The airlock was open, and she rolled into it, then bounded up onto her feet. The other four were still there, their helmets down, but they all looked slightly green.

She thought that was from the run until she pulled her helmet up. The air, which had filtered in from the outside, stank of smoke and chemicals.

She brought her helmet back down.

“We have to get out of here, Halia,” Olina said through her comms.

“Already on it,” Halia said. “Brace yourselves.”

And then the ship bounced and jostled and vibrated as if it was running across a road made of large stones.

Olina hated it when an *anacapa* got activated in atmosphere. The entry into foldspace was always unpleasant and hard and often took an unnecessary bit of ground with it. But the jostling stopped. She had both hands on the nearby walls,

a movement she didn't remember making.

Then she let out a puff of air, and made herself breathe.

They had escaped. Not with everyone, but that failure was on Māhoe.

She would deal with that later, when they rendezvoused with him. He had called this—the use of an *anacapa*—unnecessary. He had said it was a violation of his mission parameters. He had said that they would be revealing the wrong kind of tech to a backward community.

She also had a sense that she had been right about the problem all along. It wasn't just her team that lacked the proper respect for the Enterran Empire.

It was Māhoe. He thought them backward, unable to handle a small incursion like this.

Yet he was the only one who knew how vast the array of artifacts had been. He thought that some private corporation wouldn't secure them very well, and he had been wrong.

A hundred people should have been involved in this recovery. There should have been a dozen ships, maybe more, trying to get the items.

Or maybe Māhoe should have had ships stationed all around Wyr, monitoring shipments and destroying them as they left the planet's orbit.

Anything but this.

This was the largest loss Olina had suffered in years. Two team members dead, another missing.

There was going to be a reckoning.

And she was going to make sure it all landed on Māhoe.

* * *

22

In the last three seconds, Chester had moved to the pilot's board, sitting next to Lieutenant-Coronet Gert Talbot. She was the better pilot, fast and efficient, but he had to be in charge now, and ready to take controls if need be.

His flightwing was coming in low and tight over the warehouse. Through the windshield, the entire area had become clear. On his right, a group of people were huddled against the side of the building. On the other side, little fires still burned from the remains of the first flightwing. He saw it, but didn't acknowledge it. He'd had friends on that vehicle, but he'd deal with the emotions later.

A person ran toward the group, waving arms, clearly shouting. But the group didn't really look in that direction. Instead, they were looking to their right. Dust and debris started moving, and the air seemed to vibrate.

He made a quick double-check. He was not looking at a hologram.

"Target that dust storm," he said, and then, when Talbot didn't respond, he did it himself.

As he started to fire, something appeared at the edge of the dirt, half of a ship, the rest fading into nothingness. A shield of a kind he didn't recognize, then.

Several people ran underneath the ship's giant nose, but several others ran to the side. A ramp was descending, and he targeted that.

His shots weren't bouncing off the front like he expected. They were hitting the ground full force.

"We land near that," he said. Then he opened comms to the other four flightwings. "When that ship takes off, shoot it out of the sky."

He didn't have to hear the acknowledgements. He knew that the other commanders were as furious about this as he was. They'd take that ship down.

The ramp slowly eased up. There were no more people on the ground. The ship would take off now, and he was ready.

It rose maybe a meter, and then a door opened in the air in front of the ship's nose.

A door. His brain tried to compute that. Double doors, more like, with a blackness inside them.

The ship lurched slightly and then eased through the door.

"Go after it!" he said to Talbot.

She took the flightwing into a dive, but as it reached the ground, that door—those doors—whatever the hell it was—vanished, as if it had never been.

He fired a shot in that direction, and the round slammed into a warehouse nearly a kilometer away.

There was nothing in front of him, not a ship, not a door, not anything.

"Anyone know what the hell that was?" he asked—and no one answered.

* * *

23

Lebede saw it. That partial ship, that weird doorway. She had been sitting in her chair, believing that the military finally had this, that the interlopers would be caught and this incident was about to end.

The skips were gone, and she had thought the strange ship was, too, until it appeared. Partially appeared.

She had trained all of her equipment on that ship, trying to figure out what it was and how to read it.

Then that doorway opened—ship-sized, like a window into another world.

The ship went through, and now it was gone.

The first flightwing landed. Then another, and another.

A handful of people got out in full uniform, helmets, weapons, body armor making them all look larger than they were.

And they walked toward that divot in the ground where the ship had clearly been.

It was gone.

That window was gone.

Lebede leaned back in the chair. She had no idea what had just happened, but she had recorded it all.

And she was going to make a personal copy of everything, because there was a good chance she'd be fired tonight. The bad guys got away, after all, an entire ship blown up, lives lost, maybe items inside destroyed.

The people in charge would need someone to blame, and she was the lowest-ranking person in this chain. Who was she kidding? She didn't have a rank.

She was disposable, an easy target.

She had no idea how she would use all of the tech information, or if she would need to, but she knew she needed it.

Even if nothing happened to her, she would need proof of what she had seen. If only to convince herself.

She leaned forward again, peering at everything.

For the first time that evening, she didn't feel the urge to contact anyone. This was going to have to play out.

And she was going to get through it.

She always did.

* * *

Five minutes. It had taken Iokua five minutes to get up the stairs and across that damn warehouse. The white and silver lights were still strobing, and his suit told him the sirens were still wailing.

Iokua was trying to reach Olina—had been since he crested that top step, sending warnings and messages and yes, pleas to wait for him.

Nothing seemed to be getting through, and he had no idea why.

The top floor of this place seemed dimmer even with the rotating lights, and he didn't know, because he didn't take the time to do more than glance, whether or not that lurking shadow he saw in the direction he was not supposed to go was simply a shadow or some kind of destruction.

He reached the door and grabbed the handle, terrified it would stick, terrified it wouldn't work, terrified he would be trapped here.

He had placed the words *I'm coming!* on a loop, and as he pulled on that handle, he blared those words even louder through the comm system. Still no response.

He yanked the door open—and took a step backward in horror.

A person stood in front of him, wearing some kind of thick body armor and cradling some kind of long weapon, a rifle of some kind.

Iokua nearly turned around and fled deeper into the warehouse, but what would that get him? Caught a few minutes later, and even more out of breath.

He opened his hands, showing that he held nothing, and ran scenarios through his mind.

They spoke Standard, these Enterrans, so there was that. He would have to tell them part of the truth. He had been hired to test the security systems here, but he wouldn't be able to say anything.

The person stepped to one side, and another person appeared beside them. Then another, and another. Even if Iokua had thought of escaping—which he hadn't—it would have been impossible.

He moved slowly and nonthreateningly, trying to remember the little he knew about the culture. Was smiling a threat or was it considered reassuring?

He didn't even know that.

So he would ride this through.

He was on his own. Olina had made that clear.

Maybe, if he lied well enough, he would be able to get out of this entire mess.

Or maybe someone would rescue him.

He almost snorted a laugh. He'd been told he was expendable from the start.

Maybe he should have listened.