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*They've manipulated our DNA and our destiny.*

*Now, the experiment's over.*

*Will any of us survive*

# EVOLUTION'S END?

From the author of *The Coming* & *The DarkLight*  
[www.thecjdaniels.com](http://www.thecjdaniels.com)



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*Will any of us survive Evolution's End?*

“What do we want?” Stevens finally responded, answering the question with the same question. “We want you, your ship, your planet—everything. In fact, the only reason we exist right now is for you. All of you will be N'Torr, servants of the Jek'Tan.”

“Who the hell are the Jek'Tan?” Marshall asked, his gun never wavering.

With both hands, Stevens reached to the black circle burnt into his chest. He looked around and regarded everyone like a child regarding an anthill before stepping on it. “The Jek'Tan are the true gods, the masters of the heavens. They created us, and we serve their will. We are the hand and the fist of God!”

Kristin felt her gun coming up as well, like a knee-jerk reaction to that fear that sickened her. “Why?” she demanded.

Stevens laughed, as if she was a fool. “Because everyone deserves to eat,” he said as the spiders began moving again.

# EVOLUTION'S END

*C.J. Daniels*

Thank you for reading. In the event that you appreciate this book, please consider sharing the good word(s) by leaving a review, or connect with the author at [www.thecjdaniels.com](http://www.thecjdaniels.com).

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## Chapter 1

The party was a never-ending journey into tedium and self-indulgence, a boring, repetitive stroking of the host's ego to the point of farce. Of course, considering who the host was, this came as no surprise. Admiral Nicholas Dante reached a finger into the tight collar of his dress uniform and tugged on the fabric, a very noticeable attempt to get the blood and oxygen flowing back into his brain. The flute of expensive champagne contributed a bit to the numbness in his head; their host made sure there was a constant flow of bubbly for his roomful of VIPs and dignitaries. As a fleet admiral, he was no authority on wine, certainly no sommelier, but he knew enough about the vintage to realize that it had to be several centuries old, quite possibly a remnant from pre-Alliance Earth. He tasted it again before placing the fine crystal glass on a server's tray as it moved past him. Dante shook his head. *Sad that it has to be wasted on such a crowd*, he thought, but there was nothing their host wouldn't do for his flock of sycophantic admirers, and, if Dante's suspicions proved true, co-conspirators.

Their host was Ethan Striker, the CEO and president of Striker Industries. Striker was, perhaps, one of the wealthiest egotists in the Alliance; the massive penthouse at pinnacle of the Striker Industries corporate offices was a testament to that. It was designed in an old Earth motif. From the finely framed and lit Van Goghs and Monets that adorned the walls to the eighteenth-century piano that dominated the center of the huge hardwood dance floor, there seemed no end to the decadence that Striker had surrounded himself with.

He could certainly afford to live in that museum he'd built for himself. Striker Industries Consumer Division products occupied the homes of people throughout the system and the colonies from the sun to the outer rim, and his military contracts made him the chief supplier of ships and weapons to the Earth military and their Starfleet. In some respects, Dante owed his

career to Striker and men like him—not bad for a third-rate manufacturer of consumer goods, who somehow found a way to rebuild the planet after a nuclear holocaust.

“God bless war,” he said quietly to himself beneath the murmur of the noisy room. He glanced out the thick windows of the penthouse to the new New York City skyline. *Funny*, he thought. Up there, there really wasn’t much of a difference from the old skyscrapers that made what was once the Big Apple, the Mecca of the world just centuries before. At least that was what they had strived for during the reconstruction. A few centuries prior, it was little more than a radioactive heap, and now it was the capital city of the Alliance. *Go figure*.

It was the third “war to end all wars,” and, as most wars did, it had left destruction in its wake: billions dead and the planet in shambles. If anything good came from all those deaths, it was only that it had helped to bring the rest of the planet together. Countries and cultures that had been at odds with their neighbors for a millennium finally found common ground, as guns were traded for tools and killing for rebuilding. Like anything else that required the participation of human beings, the effort was wrought with glitches and did not go well at first, but ultimately, it happened. Science and medicine made substantial forward leaps as shareable knowledge became available. At that point, the long-awaited achievement of humankind’s expansion out into the stars was simply a matter of time.

Spaceship drive systems improved over the years, and the moon was the first heavenly body to be colonized. Each advance in technology was another stepping stone that led farther out into the cosmos. The lunar landscape was divided by the corporations who funded those advances; no longer were nations involved in the endeavor, especially after it was discovered that the moon was a virtual goldmine of mineralogical riches there for the taking. Mining settlements were the first to stake their claims. Reminiscent of the California Gold Rush of the

late nineteenth century, the brave and the wealthy mined the lunar dirt, on a quest for profit and power, that elusive fortune and glory. Those settlements soon grew in size, as more and more people journeyed there, spurred on by their high hopes. In time, and with plenty of support and funding from Striker Industries, Stratton Systems helped construct Lunar One. With a population of more than 500,000, it represented man's first off-world success.

With a functional model in place, the next step was Mars. Rather than a barren moon, it was actually a planet, one large and temperate enough that it had supported an atmosphere and liquid water in its past. Scientists theorized that Mars could be terraformed to a more hospitable environment over a period of forty to fifty years. With that as the goal, both colonization and terraforming began, and ships arrived with personnel and equipment to begin converting the atmosphere to something a bit more breathable. The long procedure of melting the Martian icecaps added moisture to the dry atmosphere, while huge atmospheric generators absorbed carbon dioxide and other gases, simultaneously giving off needed oxygen.

Similar to the situation with the moon, the colonization of Mars was a gradual process. Settlements for the researchers and scientists were constructed, housing the technical personnel necessary for construction and terraforming. Forty-three years after the switch was first thrown on the very first oxygen generator, the surface was proclaimed habitable, without the need for life support equipment. It was the dawn of a new age for a tired Earth. Immigration to Mars—or New Earth, as some referred to it—already had a waiting list years long, and special large transports were built to carry the colony builders to the new frontier. In cramped quarters and with few luxuries, they bravely made the thirteen-month journey, hoping for a new start in a brand new world. In less than fifty years, the red planet had become a paradise for those looking to flee the war-ravaged Earth of their origins. Oceans were now visible from orbit, refreshed

from the rains brought by the seeded clouds. The first city, New Earth City, once enclosed in a protective dome, was now open to the environment most of the time.

The major difference between Earth and Mars was surface temperature. If Earth had an advantage over what many considered its planetary twin, it had to be that it orbited the sun more closely. Due to the distance of Mars from the sun, the planet was much colder, despite the cloud cover and atmosphere that tended to keep the daytime warmth from dissipating at night. At the equator, it was a balmy eighteen degrees Celsius, while the poles stood at a frigid minus eighty-seven.

There were other factors at play across the surface. The process of terraforming wasn't perfect. Violent storms periodically raged, as the ancient Martian ecosystem looked to reclaim its past. Heavy winds blew across the landscape, chasing the human population inside for a time. Still, even these occasional environmental imperfections did very little to halt the masses from immigrating. Eventually, the storms became nothing more than a distraction, though they did point out the necessity of maintaining the protective dome.

Eventually, research and exploration led to manned settlements on Venus and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, continuing man's expansion into the void. Space was at a premium, quite literally. Space stations, floating cities of steel and precious life-preserving gases had risen outside the orbits of Earth and Mars, as well as beyond the asteroid belt. Initiated as research and communications relay stations, they soon morphed into waypoints for settlers, providing maintenance and recreation facilities on the way to the outer planets. Some thought they were turning into floating bordellos, one last shot for crewmembers to lose whatever money they had before moving deeper into space. Later, with advances in propulsion pushing vessels closer and



closer to the speed of light, these stations became obsolete; too many were in need of repair, and they were eventually abandoned, left to remain as relics, symbols of time gone by.

Earth looked to her colonies for trade and resources, while the military needed their eyes and ears in space for intelligence-gathering and refueling bases for its growing fleet of FTL starships. One thing the Alliance realized early on was that there were distinct similarities between mankind's colonial expansion into space and the exploration of Earth oceans centuries earlier. For one thing, pirating could not be denied and had to be dealt with. The colonies had their own ships, but they were stretched thin with their own planetary duties, so Earth became the local cop and EMT. Pirates were not the most worrisome threat for the Alliance though; that was the unknown. Attacks on the Alliance by unidentified ships were on the rise. Either someone had created a new class of ship, or else there was a new player entering the game, an alien player at that.

Dante knew the Alliance had never suspected that the cost of doing business with the colonials would be closer to extortion. It reminded him of the caustic, uneasy relationship between a drug user and dealer. Energy was transmitted by Striker-owned transmitters orbiting Mercury, while most of the minerals that were used to build ships and cities of the overpopulated mother world came from mining equipment run by both Striker and Rosten. When Earth allowed the corporations to take the lead during the early years of expansion, they lost control of how those assets were managed. In a way, just as his kinfolk had before him, Ethan Striker held the deed to the sky and all the stars within it.

The charter of each colony was the same: They were all to be governed by democratic elections and responsible to the Alliance Council on the Earth. However, that charter proved to be more difficult to enforce than anyone had anticipated. In reality, they were governed by the

same wealthy families to whom Striker had granted the initial contracts centuries before. The colonies on the moon and Mars put on a good show for Election Day, but when it was over, the results were always the same. There was no question as to who sat on the throne, nor did anyone wonder who the power was behind all those little kingdoms.

Dante stared across the crowded floor, casting his gaze on the emperor, who was toasting one of his few rivals; no one held that position very long, for taking any stand against Striker was somewhat of a death wish.

Dante—and many others—were well aware that crime was running rampant in the colonies. Drug use, prostitution, pirating, and smuggling were problems, but the crime only worsened in intensity, danger, and frequency the farther out in the system one went. He suspected that Striker was at the top of the pyramid when it came to illegal goings-on, but none of those accusations could be proven. Even if relatively solid evidence was available, the man and his company were legal Teflon; nothing would ever stick to them, and no one had the courage to make the attempt in the first place. Striker just walked the floor; a living god, just as generations of Strikers had done before him. Dante knew Striker would do whatever necessary to maintain his powerbase, even if it came down to murder. In the grand scheme of things, for Striker, the only life that really mattered was his own.

Dante pulled his eyes off of Striker and looked around at the other guests, all dressed in their Sunday finest. They were disguised as champions of industry and heroes of the downtrodden masses, but he knew better. Businessmen, politicians, and the rising stars of the military were all present, mingling with their counterparts as if their successes could be claimed by them at the touch of a handshake. It was strange to see so many naval officers in attendance. He knew most of the ships were built at Striker-owned shipyards, and there were rumors that

Striker was even building his own private warships and looking to crew them with fresh recruits who would be well paid. Dante was sure that would not sit well with the admiralty, or at least he hoped so; from the looks of it, most of them were busy enjoying the party and had no problem schmoozing the devil himself.

The Alliance military tended to look the other way, as long as the weapons they purchased from Striker were supreme to the ones he sold to their enemies. Dante didn't care if the weapons were better or not; in his estimation, they all killed just the same. There were countless reports from the outer colonies of people suffering massive burn holes caused by the allegedly "inferior" weapons. *If it was only that simple...*

One simple glance at his fellow partygoers told Dante that Striker's powerbase was growing. The number of fleet admirals and Alliance politicians in the room was enough to scare the crap out of him. The influence and power Striker was able to buy offered him a sizable buffer between himself and any legal or military prosecution. There was no one he could take his suspicions to without word getting back to Striker, and Dante was sure that if Striker caught wind of that, it wouldn't be long before an accident would find him dead somewhere.

He knew there was something else going on, something even more sinister beyond the arms dealing and political payoffs. Fleet patrol routes were altered without reason. Attacks increased on both colonial planets and commercial shipping, totally unwarranted and with motives unknown, and with that onslaught came an increase in body counts. Some of the victims' wounds were inconsistent with weapons available to the Alliance, like those burn holes that even the most rookie forensics team wouldn't believe, and the energy signatures were completely unknown.

When Dante inquired about the attacks, his superior informed him that the information was classified and looked at him in disdain for even having the audacity to ask. After that came his transfer and the honor of endless piles of paperwork, a leaning tower of forms that would last until his retirement or death offered the tranquility of an escape. Time passed, but he still had contacts within Fleet Operations. Things seemed to be getting worse daily, especially toward the outer rim, but that was nothing compared to the insanity taking place back on Earth.

The mishaps began innocently enough: a car accident here or a malfunction in an airlock at the orbital station there, but it was obviously no coincidence that every victim was a person of influence, with ties to Striker. On Earth, Mars, and in the outer colonies, Striker's opponents were dropping like flies. The causes and the deaths themselves were so random that it was seemingly impossible to draw any connection between them. Basically, every case was closed or had to be put on ice. Whatever Striker was planning, it was clandestine and ugly. Dante desperately wanted to bring this to the attention of his superiors, but he had no way to know who was on Striker's payroll, nor did he have any desire to end up as the next casualty in that invisible, ugly war. He could only trust his family, but most of them had determined that he was nuts. It had already cost him his children and marriage, but he knew there was far more at stake than his personal problems.

Michael and Kristin were both commanders in the Alliance fleet; Michael served in naval intelligence, while his sister worked as an executive officer onboard the newest Alliance starship, the *Bonaventure*. Then there was Katherine. He had no idea where his eldest daughter had disappeared to. The most recent reports placed her on Mars, but he'd given up any hope of finding her or trying to keep track of his wayward offspring. Once, she had been the shining star of the intelligence community, even on the fast track to the admiralty herself, but that stellar path

was cut short when Katherine was arrested and charged with smuggling weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to a fringe colony. The case was dismissed due to lack of evidence, and she was dishonorably discharged and disappeared soon after. Dante had a feeling that the Rosten family on Mars had something to do with it, as it was well known that Kate was involved with Marcus Rosten, the son and heir to the current colonial governor for life, Clayton Rosten.

Dante surmised that the WMDs were probably Rosten's and that his daughter had attached herself to Marcus on purpose. Rosten certainly had enough pull with both Striker and the Alliance to get the charges reduced or dropped. According to the grapevine, the Striker and Rosten families were close and had been since the days before the last big war; it was impossible to put a value on that kind of loyalty. The court sentenced Katherine with five years in prison, but when all charges were mysteriously dropped, she simply fell off the radar. Dante felt it was a true shame they were no longer speaking, because he could have used her skill set, along with her connections with Rosten and his son. Mars was crucially important in the grand scheme of his plans.

Striker had a secret communications relay station on the red planet, and any sensitive communiqués would be stored on the data drives there. Dante was sure the relay connected Striker on Earth with Rosten on Mars and Stratton on the moon, in some sort of conspiracy-filled party line. If his suspicions were correct, there could also be a connection to whatever or whoever was attacking the Alliance ships out on the rim. *Maybe it would also throw some light on the mystery ships we observed outside the orbit of Neptune*, he conjectured. *Was it alien or just a hallucination brought on by deep space travel?* One thing was certain: The burn marks on the debris found out there was no hallucination; it was real enough to be a concern.

Dante looked at the antique watch he still wore on his wrist. He understood Striker's passion for antiques, as a love for the past was a weakness they shared. The timepiece had been in his family for generations, and he hoped Michael would wear it once he was gone.

"Sentimentality," he whispered softly to himself, shaking his head. "There's no place for it in this lie." In many ways, things were now far more complicated than they were when the watch was worn by its original owner so many decades before. Remarkably, it still kept perfect time, and at the moment, the hands were pointing to the hour when Michael's transport was scheduled to set down in New Earth City on Mars. It should have bothered Dante more that he was putting his own son in harm's way, but he had little choice. Something bad was about to happen, and there was little he could do to stop it.

Dante stared out the window and allowed himself a moment to enjoy the view. He felt a little guilty for enjoying it as much as he did, and he harbored a deep anger at Striker for taking such splendor for granted. Regardless of those feelings, though, he had to head back to his office to monitor his son and his mission. When he turned from the window, he found himself face to face with Ethan Striker, the man himself, and he realized by the angst in Striker's gaze that there was a very good chance he'd overstayed his welcome.

It was that sardonic smile that hit him first, framed in that blond, handsome package. Dante had to admit that the evil bastard could charm a thunderstorm into a sunny day. Striker played the role of the charismatic playboy exceptionally well, but Dante knew better. Inside that loveable shell lurked a demon from the pits of Hell.

"Admiral Dante," Striker said cheerfully, sticking his hand out. "How nice of you to make our little soiree."

Dante looked at the outstretched hand and decided it was in his best interest to shake it. He had to act as star struck as the rest of Striker's mindless, loyal minions. "I'm having a wonderful time, Mr. Striker. Your home is very impressive."

Striker look past him, toward the window. "Yes, it's a great view, Admiral. It gives me a perspective on the future...and what we need to do to get there."

Dante nodded and forced a smile. It was chilling to think about the future Striker had in mind, but he had to play along. "You and your family have done such amazing things to revitalize this planet since the war," he said, nauseating himself. "We all owe you a great debt. What can you possibly accomplish now, to surpass all this?" Dante asked, gesturing to the panoramic scene beyond the glass.

Striker turned back to him and nodded. "There's always more to do. One needs to create truth and beauty out of chaos, no matter the cost."

Dante could hear the conviction in Striker's voice, his main source of power over others. His tone was almost hypnotizing, almost mesmerizing, like the dreamy gaze of a cobra about to strike. He knew then that he had to get out of the snake's vicinity while he still could. Michael would be on mission shortly, and he needed time to review any intel he'd discovered. Not only that, but if he didn't get out of Striker's earshot, he was sure he'd say something they would both regret. "It's getting late, Mr. Striker," Dante finally said, nodding to the aged bauble on his wrist, "and I've got a long day ahead of me tomorrow. You've been very...enlightening."

Striker stared down at the watch and nodded. "Pre-Alliance?"

"Yes."

"Very nice. As you can see," he said with a gesture that encompassed his penthouse apartment, "I have a love of antiques from that time, no pun intended."

“Family heirloom.” Dante stuck his hand out and grasped Striker’s. “Again, sir, many thanks for the invitation. It’s been a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Admiral. Do have a safe trip.”

Something about Striker’s last two words and the almost sarcastic way they rolled off his tongue stopped Dante in his tracks. “Thank you. An accident would certainly spoil what has been a wonderful evening,” Dante said but regretted the proclamation almost as soon as the words waltzed off his lips. He made a mental note to himself: *For the love of God, skip the expensive champagne next time. The last thing your mouth needs in this guy’s presence is stupidity disguised as liquid courage.*

“Keep in touch, Admiral,” Striker added from behind him as the lift doors finally whooshed opened.

Dante walked in and turned to look back at his host. He wasn’t at all surprised to see that Striker had disappeared. As soon as the door slid shut and the lift started its downward journey, he felt perspiration dripping down his back, saturating his uniform. For the first time, he realized that his legs felt a little weak, and he leaned against the lift wall for support. “Hold it together,” he told himself, “at least till you get back to the damn office.” One way or another, it was going to be a very long night.



## Chapter 2

Commander Michael Dante watched as Mars grew larger outside the window of the passenger transport he'd booked passage on a few days earlier. Usually, he could count on a military ship of some sort to take him off-world, but his father, the almighty Admiral Dante, had insisted he go in undercover.

He suspected that paranoia was because of Kate and her connection to the Rosten family. Knowing his father and the relationship he shared with his eldest daughter, Michael wasn't really sure where his sister's loyalty lay. She had always been Daddy's little girl, but after the trouble she got herself into and the people she chose to associate with, the admiral had wisely kept his distance. The old man had trust issues to begin with, but he felt especially betrayed by Kate. Michael wholeheartedly believed that it was that perceived crack in her loyalty that had him approaching the mission under a false identity. Michael knew Kate, though, and he was sure his sister would never betray him.

The fact was that he and his two sisters shared a bond that went beyond whatever problems threatened to blow them apart. It was easy, really, as it was how their father raised them to be. He had taught them all that healthy paranoia wasn't a bad thing, and that when there was no one else, family could be trusted with one's life. Nicholas Dante never did anything without a reason, a well-thought motive. For this reason, Michael assumed there was a reason why he and his sisters were only two years apart; their parents left time between them so each of them could establish their own identity, yet they were close enough in age that they could enjoy a tight sibling bond.

The admiral's number-one rule was that he would give advice when asked, but he would never use his position to help any of them in their careers. Their failure or success was entirely

dependent on their own efforts. With that in mind, they all entered the military. For Kristin, it was the space force, but Michael and Kate took the same military career path, Alliance Intelligence. Maybe it was all those years playing spy with his older sister, using the old man's scout ship as their headquarters, or maybe it just made him happy to follow in her footsteps on a path counter to their father's. There might have been an even simpler explanation, one their mother told them one day, the real reason they chose the world of cloak and dagger: They were the two most affected by the admiral's conspiracy theories and his lack of trust in the universe. Three days later, Michael discovered that his mother had filed for divorce, citing his obsession as part of the complaint. In all the twenty-nine years of his life, Michael couldn't find a single reason to argue her point. He loved her even more after the separation and continued to, even after cancer killed her. The admiral missed her, too, probably even more than his children did, and he mourned her passing in the same way he handled everything else in life: alone and in silence.

Michael followed Kate through the academy and graduated two years after his sister. After she graduated, he felt very much alone for the first time. Kate was reassigned, and while he followed her exploits as well as he could, their own personal contact was rare to say the least, and that only grew worse after his own graduation.

Kristin was the free spirit of the family, and she had no time for the crap that came out of their father. In fact, she looked forward to being out on her own and often said, "The farther out, the better." After her graduation, she entered flight training school and graduated at the top of her class. Immediately following that, she was assigned to the *USS Bonaventure*, a posting that Michael was sure the admiral had something to do with. The *Bonaventure* was the newest, most powerful ship in the Alliance, and she was assigned to it even before construction was finished.

He found it funny that as much as Kristin claimed she couldn't stand the old man, she grew up to be just like him. He was proud of her, but he still played favorites with Kate. His disappointment in Kristin poisoned his relationships with all of them, to a certain extent. *Funny*, Michael thought, *because it sure didn't stop Dad from drafting me for this insane plan.* The *Bonaventure* was out of system, eliminating Kristin's participation, and his lack of trust in Kate, especially in light of her relationship to Marcus Rosten, made her a liability. It appeared that Michael had won the chore by default, but it certainly didn't feel like a victory or prize of any sort.

The transport shook as it was buffeted in the Martian atmosphere, and the turbulence drew Michael's attention back to the present. He turned to see the viewports, engulfed in flames from the friction of reentry. It was a big show for the passengers, who stared at the lightshow, practically clinging to their seats. It was easy to understand their excitement; the three-day trip from Earth was a bore for most of them, so from the time they had left Earth orbit till now, this was their only entertainment, other than the lackluster video entertainment centers furnished at each seat. The transport offered no cabins and very little privacy. The seats folded back into makeshift beds for an uncomfortable attempt at sleeping, and there was a small, cramped lounge that attempted to keep the thirty-five passengers and crew happy. Now, at least they could amuse themselves by ooh-ing and ah-ing at the pre-landing fireworks.

It took three minutes for the flames to dissipate into the air, and only then did the flight crew announce that they were making final descent into New Earth City. The ship buffeted once again, this time from the high winds that swept the planet. For the passengers who were on their first trip, the excitement of the fiery reentry was replaced with fear as they struggled in their seats, making sure their safety harnesses were all locked into position.

Michael knew they were on final approach when they passed over the directional markers leading to the city. He'd taken that same route more times than he could count, sometimes as a passenger and several times as a pilot. There had been a few high-altitude drops as well, but those were best left in the past.

The city came up quickly on the left side of the transport. Twelve miles wide and covered by a retractable pressure dome, it housed more than 100,000 men, women, and children. The transport passed over the city and dipped its starboard wing and then the port, to give the passengers a better look. Finally, it headed to one of the docking facilities located on the edge of the city, just outside the dome.

The pad was under them as the forward thrusters slowed the ship. Once the vessel's forward progress stopped, the landing thrusters activated, and the transport slowly settled to the pad. After powering down, the pad lowered the transport under the surface, into a spacious hangar bay. The journey continued as a conveyor system carried the transport to the terminal where they would disembark. When the transport came to a final halt, a boarding tube moved into position and locked against the outer airlock. The restraints automatically released and everyone exited the airlock, with luggage in hand, dispersing out into the terminal on the other side of the heavy door.

Michael traveled light and had only the small carryon bag he'd brought on the flight with him. The contents were not for the eyes of airport security and were specially shielded; he was confident that his military I.D. would allow him to avoid any prying eyes. From there, it would be easy to just blend in with the general population. His trip to the Striker Communications Center would be a little more difficult, but it was nothing he hadn't done before.

The admiral wanted him to tap the communications relay and record any relevant data he found bouncing around in the system. He was sure Striker, Rosten, and Stratton had something planned against the Alliance and that all those deaths surrounding Striker and the others were no accidents. The victims were politicians and military, all having held positions of power, and they were all working on things that were counterintuitive to the goals of Ethan Striker. While Michael didn't usually pay much attention to his father's conspiracy theories, that one made him stand up and take notice. He didn't report to the admiral, but he did have some leave time coming and decided this would be the best time to take it. His only competition would be Kate, his sister, and he sincerely hoped she'd steer clear of it entirely.

Michael made his way through the streets. The air smelled fresh, but there was a chill in it. When the weather permitted and the winds were weak, the dome was opened to the atmosphere to ventilate the accumulated gases. No matter how many times he'd been there, he was still taken aback by how well they were able to terraform that red ball of blowing, poisonous dust into another livable rock in the cosmos.

The city itself never ceased to amaze him. From ground level, it could have been New York, London, or any other major city on Earth. Even if the Rostens were on his father's hit list, he had to hand it to them: They and their ancestors had managed to create a slice of Heaven in the middle of Hell. He also agreed with the admiral's assessment about the interesting coincidence that they were the winners of every election, or at least supported the winning candidate. Regardless, they always managed to stay in control.

There was a disturbing similarity between the Mars cities and the cities on Earth, in that they managed to contain a fair amount of homeless and poor as well. This bothered Michael, but

he wasn't on Mars now to crush poverty. If Admiral Dante was correct—and he usually was—lack of housing would ultimately prove to be the least of their problems.

He checked the time and noted that his father was likely still attending Striker's party. The old man couldn't afford to offend Striker at that point in his investigation. He knew a vehicle would be waiting for him outside the city, so he had time to stop for a bite to eat before the trip to the relay station. Michael expected five hours of travel time and another two inside the station to attach the taps and download whatever data was available. There was a military transport departing late that night and he intended to be on it. Before all that, though, he needed to refuel his body and mind with some form of sustenance.

Michael cleverly opted for a restaurant he had not frequented in the past. His identification and passport carried a different name, but there was not enough time to make any significant changes to his appearance, other than to change the color of his hair. He thought the blond locks suited him, but he still planned to change it back to its natural dark brown as soon as the mission was over.

The restaurant was a small, out-of-the-way eatery, and he really didn't stand out from any of the people on the street. The hat and glasses conspicuously hid enough of his features, and the old, dirty camouflage coat he wore was everyman's garb. He had learned many things from his wise father, not the last of which was that the secret in the intelligence field was to stay unpredictable. "The more you understand that fact," the admiral had told him more than once, "the longer you'll survive."

There wasn't much of a crowd at that time of day. The lighting was muted, an effort to conserve power from the grid. Michael was happy with the shadows that played across the tables and chairs, thankful for the additional cover. The sign on the door read "Utopia Planitia Pub,"

and from what he could see, the place was patterned after any Earth pub, complete with an ample supply of liquor occupying one whole wall, manned by the prerequisite bored bartender. He made a beeline to a corner table that would provide him with the necessary view of the entrance. As he slid into the seat, he found that it was some sort of immense comfort to have his back against the wall. His rumbling stomach called to attention that he hadn't eaten in more than a day, and, depending on the outcome of the mission, there was no guarantee when he'd have the opportunity to eat again. It was the perfect time to grab a meal, but first he had to grab the attention of a waitress.

Finally, a pretty girl with an apron tied around her thin waist walked over to his table. She laid out a knife, fork, and napkin, then handed him a surprisingly well-worn menu. She seemed to be in her late teens or early twenties and would have been pretty if her blonde hair wasn't in such a dire need of a brushing. She wore the same bored expression as the bartender, which amused Michael to no end. He nodded and, without saying a word, opened the menu and scanned the list of food choices. From what he could see, the menu was a pretty authentic representation of Earthside pub fare.

"Well? What can I get you?" the waitress asked, somewhat impatiently, in a demeanor that wasn't half as sweet as her face. She sighed, looking as if she would have preferred to be anywhere but there.

Michael looked up at her from behind the menu and smiled. "I just need a minute. Never been here before."

"Suit yourself," she said, then turned and headed to the bar to chat with the bartender.

Michael perused the menu again, and the beef burger caught his eye. His only issue was where the beef actually came from; the closest cow he knew of was more than thirty-four million

miles away. He was a little pissed at the waitress for not taking his drink order or even offering him a glass of water, and he intended to mention that to her. A second later, he could feel her standing over him, so he muttered, "I'll take the burger and fries."

"How do you want it cooked?"

It surprised him that the voice didn't belong to the waitress. It sounded almost too familiar, ominously so, and he cautiously looked over the menu at the person standing over him.

"Hello, Michael."

"Kate?" he asked, aghast. There she was, his MIA sister, standing right in front of him, wearing the uniform of Mars Security Forces. The thing that worried him the most, though, was the imposing sidearm strapped to her hip. It was odd to see anyone armed in that city, as weapons were only distributed out on an as-needed basis. Her long, dark hair framed a beautiful face, but it did nothing to hide the anger she felt.

"Yes, Michael...Kate," she said, with a slow nod of her head. "What the hell are you doing here, and why are you dressed like that? Did the admiral send you?"

Michael smiled and gestured to the chair facing him. He knew he had to guard every word he spoke to her. Yes, she was family, but her loyalty to her bloodline was truly unknown. She also knew him too well for him to get away with lying to her. Kate was far superior to him when it came to reading people, something that gave her a distinct edge in the cat-and-mouse games she so expertly played. She paused for a quick second before pulling out the chair and settling into it. Her tight red and white uniform resisted the move at first, but the adaptable synthetic fibers of the fabric eventually gave in.

"How did you know you'd find me here?" he asked. His eyes met hers in the same game they'd been playing since they were kids. It was almost as if they both had some sort of built-in,



genetically passed-down lie detector, and it was one of the reasons they were so close. Truly, it was almost impossible for either of them to lie to the other without getting caught in their fib. Now, there was an extra layer of danger, due to the training they'd received from Alliance Intelligence. Both were in the business of lying, and they did so with great expertise. In the past, a lie would catch one of them detention from the admiral; now, it could mean catching a bullet.

Without answering, Kate pulled the menu out of her brother's hand and held two fingers in the air.

Within seconds, the waitress hurried back to the table with two beers and a sudden, newfound enthusiasm for her job. "What can I get you, Captain Dante?" she asked excitedly.

Michael shook his head. *Really? All it took was a security officer's uniform to get decent customer service in here?*

Before answering, Kate turned to her stunned brother and smiled. "You really shouldn't have ordered that burger. The beef was either raised here, which isn't a good thing, or some artificial, generic meat substitute shipped here more than a year ago." Before the waitress or Michael could say anything in protest, Kate looked back up at the waitress and said, "We'll have two Number Fives, thanks."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And make sure the mucha is fresh this time," Kate called to the waitress as she scurried off.

Michael could see the sweat on the girl's face as she made the notation on her data-padd; she was happy to finally leave the table. "Mucha?" Michael asked. "What the hell is mucha?"

"It's what the locals call the livestock up here. It's more or less chicken, only with less gravity. They feed them special nutrients, and things grow as large as turkeys back home.

Personally, it's the only thing I trust in these places, the closest thing you're going to get to Earth food. Trust me. This dive isn't like the places you've been to here before." She stopped talking to take a long swallow from her tall beer glass. She could see her brother was about to say something, so as she had done since childhood, she interrupted. "As for how I found you," she threw back at him, "I've got friends all over. I'm pretty sure you know that. I knew you took some time off from the service to visit the admiral. A couple days later, you hopped a transport for Mars. I've been tracking you ever since you landed."

"You have?" he asked, arching a curious brow at her.

"Don't misunderstand me, Michael. I've missed you, and I'm thrilled to see you, but I have to ask again, both as a sister and the chief of security of this city... *Why* are you here?"

Michael picked up the glass of amber liquid and took a long gulp from it. He was surprised to find that the local brew was quite tasty.

Before he could answer his sister's very official inquiry, the waitress returned with two plates and placed their meals gently in front of them: a tossed salad of local produce, topped with strips of white meat. To the side of each plate was a small cup, which Michael assumed to be dressing for the salad.

Michael watched as his sister stuffed a forkful in her mouth. He looked at the *mucha* for a moment before shoving a sample into his own mouth. Kate was right; it tasted like chicken back on Earth. "This is really good," he finally said as he followed the next forkful with another drink. He knew his sister was hoping the alcohol would make him more talkative, but flapping his lips too much was not in his plans. When he looked back up at Kate, he could see she was back to her staring game, her eyes locked on his. "I'm contracting for the Martian Museum," he said, "but to be honest with you, I came because Dad is...worried about you."

The parental designation seemed to catch her off guard, as none of them ever referred to their father by anything other than his fleet rank, at least not since their mother left. Any reference to his paternal title was a term of endearment, and she hadn't heard anyone use the word "Dad" to refer to him. That alone made her uneasy about the direction the conversation was about to take. "I know what you're trying to do," she snapped. "I'm not going to fall for this damn Daddy dearest thing, Michael. He wasn't a dad then, and he goddamn sure isn't one now. What the hell is going on, and why did he really send you here?"

Michael downed the rest of the beer and put his military cred-card on the table. "Listen, Kate. The admiral is going through another one of his delusions, overcome by some conspiracy theory, convinced that we're on the precipice of the end of mankind as we know it. He sent me here to make sure you're okay. Really. That's all there is to it. Do you have to be so goddamn suspicious and paranoid all the freakin' time? I swear, you're worse than he is."

"If he wanted to check up on me, he could have just called and asked."

Michael could see his sister's attitude rising to the surface. She and the old man really weren't much alike, except in their paranoia and their ability to be so stubborn and pigheaded, and he was sure that was why they didn't get along. "He tried. He claims you never pick up when he calls."

"No," she said, her face softening a bit in introspective reflection, "I guess I don't. Maybe I would if he was more like a father and less like a friggin' admiral!"

Michael shook his head, clearly understanding the root of the issue. "Are you still pissed that he didn't throw his weight around for you at your hearing?"

"His weight?" she snapped, then smirked. Kate was well aware she was dealing with some major anger management problems, but her brother had picked the wrong time to dig up

family history. A half-dozen military psych officers had tried to unravel her daddy issues, without much success. The fact that he had held his tongue while he sat on the tribunal that had kicked her out of the service only added to her anger. “His input was weightless. He sat in judgment of me and said nothing as they took my rank and commission and sent me on my merry way.”

Michael shook his head again. He felt bad for letting the lie dredge up crap from the past. She was right about their father saying and doing nothing to get her out of hot water, but there was really nothing he could have done anyway. “He did what he had to. The evidence against you was too solid, and—”

“Solid? Pssh. It was circumstantial at best!” she interrupted, punctuating her statement with a kick to the chair next to her, sending it skidding across the pub floor.

“Calm down, Kate,” Michael said slowly. “The last thing we need to do is cause a scene in here. The admiral is worried about your relationship with Marcus Reston, and he sent me here to make sure everything is okay. You may not believe me, but you’re family, and we all still care about you.”

Kate stood up from her seat and noted the cred-card on the table. “Aw. How nice that you still have that Alliance expense account to buy your meals for you. Put it back in your pocket though. This is my treat, little brother.”

“Thanks,” he said, withdrawing the card, “but what do you want me to tell him?” Michael cast a cursory glance around the pub, realizing he’d already spent more time than he could afford to with Kate. He needed to let her get the rest of all that drama out of her system, then get on with his mission.

“Tell the nosy old bastard that everything’s fine here,” she snapped. “You can also tell him that any relationship I may or may not have with Marcus—or anyone else, for that matter—is really none of his business. If that’s really why you came to Mars, which I highly doubt it is in that ridiculous outfit of yours, you can hop on the next transport and haul ass back to Earth. Michael, please save the archeology research for someone who cares.”

“Tell me, sis, is that suggestion for me to leave an official request from the Mars head of security or merely advice from a concerned relative?”

“Baby brother, you are an officer in the Alliance military, regardless of your paperwork. I would need a really good excuse to make you to leave this planet, so please take this as a friendly word of advice from your big sister. Go home, Michael. You don’t want to be here. Trust me on that.” With that, Kate turned to walk to the pub exit but stopped after a few steps and threw over her shoulder, “If I really wanted you off the planet, I could have officially arrested you before your first bite of mucha, your first slug of beer. Take care...and say hi to the admiral for me.”

Michael watched as his sister turned and walked out of the pub. He was well aware by her tone and the untrusting look in her eyes that Kate knew he was up to something, but if the admiral was right, he needed to find out how bad things were. He had to elude his tail and make his way out of the city, but playing spy versus spy with his eyes-like-a-hawk’s sister was no easy feat for anyone, not even him. *My odds aren’t good*, he thought as he put his cred-card away. *Matter fact, I don’t think I’ve ever won that game with her. I’m not sure anyone can.*

\* \* \*

Kate walked out of the pub without even looking back at her brother. She felt horrible for playing the victim, the poor little girl-turned-bitch by her long-suffered daddy issues, but that role-playing was a necessary evil if she wanted to protect her family. She’d learned that lies were

much easier when they were layered with a tinge of truth and lots of anger. Michael was a bit more transparent when he attempted to veil the truth in some ill-conceived fib. She knew he was on Mars for a reason far loftier than checking up on the wayward daughter, and she was certain the reason had something to do with their father. The admiral had sent his son there, and she wanted to know the motive behind it.

As far back as she could remember, their father had held tight to a particular theory of his, one regarding the colonization of the solar system and the exploration of the interstellar space beyond. After the war, the world was in chaos. Billions were dead, and civilization was in ruins. Rising from the ashes like a cosmic phoenix of legend, Striker Industries took the lead and rebuilt the infrastructure from the ground up. They brought Rosten Corporation and Stratton Systems in as major contractors to handle the rebuilding. Rosten offered immense pre-war construction and energy resources, while Stratton's specialty consisted of electronics, computers, and communications systems. Somehow, all three companies survived the battle and remained relatively intact, a trifecta that managed to reassemble a planet that was on the brink of crumbling, to put it all back together again like some enormous Humpty Dumpty. Other subcontractors were recruited, but it was always the big three, with Striker forever at the point, leading the way.

Eventually, when mankind made the leap to the stars, it was again Striker, Rosten, and Stratton leading the push. They financed, built, marketed, and eventually, several centuries and generations later, reaped the rewards. Now, they controlled Mars and the moon and had their hands in everything, from trade and military to deep space exploration. In the process, though, the attacks on shipments of resources from the outer colonies beyond Jupiter began to rise. The assailants were unknown, and the only evidence of the attacks was ship debris; while deaths were

presumed, not a body was ever found. Not only that, but reports were also coming in of something else roaming the outer rim, though no evidence on any non-terrestrial thing was ever found.

Admiral Dante wasn't crazy. In spite of some personal opinions about him, it could not be denied that he was a strategist, historian, and architect of the Alliance space fleet, as well as a damn smart man. He spent years trying to draw criminal connections between Striker and what he called "the family dictatorships," on both the moon and Mars. There was just too much to attribute to coincidence, and if there was one thing the admiral refused to believe in, it was coincidence. There was just enough to create suspicion that Striker and the others had some kind of power play in progress, but he could never drum up enough solid evidence to involve the authorities. Kate knew her father had trust issues, and that explained why he'd chosen to recruit his own son for such a clandestine undertaking, as obvious as it was. *The question is, what orders did he give Michael?* she had to wonder. There was one thing she did know for sure: If Rosten's security caught her brother doing anything counter to their family business, he would return to Earth in a body bag, if he returned at all. She would do everything in her power to keep that from happening, but her ability to protect Michael depended deeply on Michael and his real plans on Mars.

She thought about following him, but that would only lead the agents following her right to Michael. It wasn't like Clayton Rosten didn't trust her; she'd bled for the family more than once. It was his son, Marcus, who decided to have her followed. The heir to the throne was a jealous bastard who regarded everything that didn't belong to his father as his property, or at least an inheritable asset. That was the one and only reason she didn't leave with her brother; if Marcus knew she'd met with him, with anyone not listed on her schedule and especially

someone with ties to the military, he would throw a fit. Kate wasn't ready for that, at least not yet.

The next stop on her daily rounds was back at the security shack. Kate had a feeling she was in for a long night, and she wanted to be where she would do the most good. It would also ensure that no one would be on her tail if she needed to bolt. She knew they were following her, and they knew she knew it. As if to make a point of it, she occasionally waved to them before moving on.

As if on cue, the comm in her ear buzzed to life, and Kate brought it online with a tap. "Dante," she said, then listened carefully as she walked to the listless voice of the dispatcher, informing her that there was a domestic dispute in one of the lower-rent districts. They wanted her there because it had disintegrated into a hostage situation, and for some reason she couldn't fathom, they thought her qualified to handle it.

*Damn it. This isn't in my freakin' job description,* she silently fumed. They had made her head of security, and though she retained her rank of captain, she seemed to be viewed as little more than a beat cop at best and a nuisance at worst. There was nothing wrong with law enforcement, in general, but they had lied to her, shortchanged her with an old bait-and-switch tactic. That alone would have bothered her in the past, but now, even though it was occasionally irritating, it just brought a smile to her pretty face. The truth was, she had lied to them long before the job offer. In fact, it was all a complete and total fabrication, everything single thing about her position and her post. She was quite the actress, and that worked to her benefit and had likely kept her alive thus far.

The charges, her dishonorable discharge from the military, and her alleged loyalty to Striker and Rosten were nothing but a well-written work of fiction, created so high in the black



ops section of Intelligence that not even the Alliance president knew the truth. There were well-constructed lies, lies, and more lies, and only two people in the universe—Colonels Evers and Tobias—knew she wasn't the traitor and criminal everyone else thought her to be.

It took a long time to set the whole ruse up, and all the pieces of the jigsaw had to fit together perfectly. First, she had to find and attract Marcus Rosten, all while making it appear that her prey was actually her predator. Then she had to allow the sneaky, selfish bastard to manipulate her and let him think she was falling for him. *When this is all over*, she thought, *I'm going to need a very long, very hot shower*, but she knew that getting his psychological stench off her would be almost impossible.

In the beginning, Marcus just used her for information. It was simple, with very little damage potential. Soon, though, the simple morphed into something a bit more complicated and more restricted. She provided Rosten with ship movements and timetables for transports, all while her cover pulled her deeper and deeper into the darkness. She took illegal payments and used her rank to move contraband all over the system, making sure cameras were running to record all of her illegal activities. She had to, for it was a test of her loyalty to Rosten, who managed to stay in the background, well away from the recording devices that helped turn an Alliance hero into a criminal.

Marcus had passed word to her that his father, Clayton Rosten, wanted her to smuggle two low-yield nuclear weapons into New Earth City. There was nothing like a nuke or two to quiet an angry populace. Kate could not bear to see nukes in the hands of a heartless monster like Rosten, even if refusing meant blowing her cover, so she implored her handlers to finally arrest her before she put weapons of mass destruction within the reach of a madman. Thankfully, they agreed, and she was taken into custody before he could blow the world to smithereens.

Kristin was already on the *Bonaventure*, and Kate's father was too angry with her to visit while she was awaiting trial, so only Michael came to see her. The cover story demanded that no one knew the truth, not even her family. It wasn't an easy time for any of them. The military trial lasted more than two weeks, and all the evidence that was introduced left little in the way of reasonable doubt about her guilt. The Board of Inquiry was comprised of three ranking admirals, one of whom was her father.

The ruling was unanimous: She was guilty. She would be immediately discharged from the service, and her ten years in a military prison would somehow be commuted to time served. The plan was for her superiors to step in to help her escape and find her way to Mars, but she seemed to have friends in even higher places. Both Ethan Striker and Clayton Rosten made a deal, defined as large payoff, to have her removed to Mars. Her friends in Intelligence were thrilled they didn't need to stage something that might literally blow up in their faces.

Unfortunately, her father didn't speak a word to her, not during or after the trial. She wanted to bring him aboard, to reveal the true role she'd played in it all, but she was told that in order to make the illusion as solid as possible, no one could be told. Thus, she stood there alone, with a bad reputation her only payment for doing her job so damn well. In the eyes of her family, she was treasonous, and to the criminals on the moon and Mars, she was just like them: dirty, damaged, and dangerous. She was a traitor, a smuggler, and almost a mass murderer. They hated her on Earth and feared her on Mars, and the only people who knew the truth were two black ops officers. She was promised that when it was all over, they would come forward and clear her name. Kate just hoped she'd still be breathing to enjoy that day.

Now, there she was, playing cop on Planet Mars. *Who'da thunk it?* she thought, almost in amusement as she looked up at the Martian sky and increased her pace. The dome had been

rolled back, since the wind outside the city was calm. She enjoyed the privilege of gazing up at the natural cloud cover that seemed to be present most of the time. At that distance from the sun, the natural light was about half of that on Earth, and the day remained overcast till the clouds broke to reveal the distant sun. The atmosphere machines had done their job well, almost too well, to bring about a breathable atmosphere. Sometimes, she preferred the dome to be shut, because it made the city more alien and less like the trash heap she called home.

Kate liked to take the extra time to walk the city streets, her only semblance of freedom as of late, even if she did have to constantly look over her shoulder. The hopelessness in the faces of the poor and indigent that peppered the dirty streets and alleys, begging for morsels of food, helped to keep her centered on her important mission. Most of those poor souls had made their original pilgrimages there in high hopes, mistakenly assuming it would be an opportunity to start over after the wars took so much from them. Those dreams died quickly as Rosten and his family sucked the life out of everyone and everything that dared to wander into their world.

Kate noted the time and realized she had wasted enough of it. As much as they wanted her to tend to some ridiculous domestic disturbance, she was sure there were enough of her trigger-happy comrades already on the scene to handle it. The whole stunt reeked of Marcus. She was the queen of the chessboard, but he preferred her to be a pawn and desired the freedom to move her wherever the hell he pleased. She hoped her tail would report her failure to report directly to him. For Kate, pleasure was a rare commodity, and she had to take what little she could get, whenever she could. Upsetting him always made her day.

When she finally located a transport tube, Michael crept back into her thoughts. The underground monorail system would carry her into the heart of the city and her office at Mars Security. Kate knew she needed to find out why her brother was really there, for her sake as well

as his. If her brother died, the admiral would blame her. If Rosten, Striker, or anyone else got between her and her family, they would all pay. Many had questions about where her loyalties lay, but Kate would always protect her family.

## Chapter 3

The *USS Bonaventure* was an enormous vessel by any standards. At a shade over 720 meters, she easily dwarfed any ship in the Alliance. The prototype cruiser, built at the Striker Orbital Shipyards high above the Earth, was created as the newest warship. With torpedo tubes fore and aft and state-of-the-art plasma cannons offering 360 degrees of coverage, the *Bonaventure* was certainly every inch the predator she was designed to be. Sleek and deadly, she was also the fastest ship in the fleet, as well as temporary home to more than 200 souls.

Out between the orbits of Neptune and Pluto the *Bonaventure* was on a search-and-rescue mission. She was also tasked with hunting down whatever had necessitated the mission in the first place. Like hunter-killer submarines of the past, she prowled space, her powerful sensors reaching out for any sign of a ship in distress or its yet-unknown attacker. In spite of all her bells and whistles, though, after hours of scanning they still had nothing to show for it.

Captain Henry Brady paced the spacious bridge, trying to hide the impatience and frustration that always overtook him in such scenarios. His comfortable command chair sat in the center of the bridge, offering views of every station and the large forward view screen, all accessible by the rotating chair. Its design was borrowed from an old, pre-war TV show; some had found that what worked well in fiction appeared to work equally well in reality. The men referred to the chair as his “La-Z-boy,” and Brady truly hoped it was merely a reference to the history of that brand of furniture than it was to his command skills. He had to admit that they had a point, for all the chair was missing was the recliner and footrest.

After more than twenty years in space, commanding everything from transports to cruisers, the *Bonaventure* captured the skilled captain’s attention like none before. She was equipped with every technological advancement the Alliance could throw into her, including the

ridiculously exaggerated captain's chair. At the moment, the chair was empty, as he stared out the view screen and into space.

"Simpson," Captain Brady said as he walked over the tactical officer, "are you sure these are the coordinates of the distress call?"

Simpson studied the incoming sensor reading on the tactical console one last time before looking up at his captain. He hesitated before giving an answer. Not only was he new to the ship, but he'd only graduated from the academy a little more than a year ago, and it was definitely not a good time in his career to give anything but perfectly accurate information. "Sir, the transmission definitely came from this approximate position."

"You don't sound so sure about that, Simpson," Brady said, detecting a bit of nerves in the young man's voice. "Maybe they could have drifted into Neptune's gravity well."

Simpson straightened his white and blue military jumpsuit and punched a few more buttons on his control console. He was rewarded with a bell and a tweet and nothing more. When he dared a look back up at his superior, he saw that the captain was not at all pleased. Nevertheless, he mustered his courage and answered, "No, sir, I don't think so. There would have been residue from weapons fire or debris. We've got nothing here."

Brady nodded, proud of the boy, and turned back to the view screen.

"Maybe the message was faked," Kristin Dante suggested from her ops station.

Brady shook his head at the thought before responding to his second-in-command. "Why would anyone falsify a distress call out here?"

Kristin mirrored the head shake, then transferred the sensor display over to her ops console. She smiled at the fact that the newfangled ship gave her the ability to clone any other station on the bridge. She wanted to go over the readings herself. It wasn't that she didn't trust

the young lieutenant, but she had to be sure he hadn't missed anything. "Wait," she finally said, without looking up. "Don't you see it, Simpson?"

Brady looked back at the tactical officer, who was staring in disbelief at the sensor display Kristin had transferred to his console.

"Uh, yes, Commander. I-I see it now," Simpson stuttered. "There's a signal, twenty-three degrees to port. It's the transport, sir."

"How far away is she?" Brady asked as he took his seat at the center of the bridge.

"She's about 62,000 kilometers out, sir."

"Helm, take us in, one-quarter, sub-light."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman responded, and the ship started to pick up speed.

"Tactical," Kristin added from ops, "keep an eye on those sensor scans."

"Yes, ma'am."

As the ship came into view, the black scarring on her hull was a sure sign of an attack. Considering the fresh carbon scoring, they knew the attacker might still be in the vicinity. Any ship capable of that type of blast damage was not something to be taken lightly, and they certainly didn't want it sneaking up on them.

"Anything from that ship?"

"No, sir," Kristin answered, already pulling up a schematic of the transport.

"Sensors are detecting minimal life support," reported Simpson. "Main power is out, but auxiliary is functioning at a low level."

Brady nodded and stared as the transport began to fill the view screen. He could see the breaches along the hull. The metal was twisted, blown inward in some sections and outward in

others, due to explosive decompression. He knew it would have taken a miracle for any living thing to survive that, but he had to make sure.

“Kristin, take a shuttle over there with an engineering and medical team. See if there’s anyone left to rescue.”

“Yes, sir.” Kristin waited for her relief to take her ops station before she headed for the bridge exit. She stopped just short of the door and turned back to the captain. “Sir, do you mind if I take Simpson with me?”

“What for?” Brady asked, a bit surprised by the odd request. When he glanced over at the young lieutenant, he saw that Simpson’s face reflected his own surprise as well.

“I’m going to need him for tactical data analysis, if there’s any worth recovering,” she said with a smile, knowing that the lieutenant needed a break and that a quick shuttle trip would help take the training wheels off.

Brady turned back to Simpson and answered with a sigh and a nod of his head. “Go ahead. It’s about time he learned something.”

Simpson’s smile went from ear to ear. “Thank you, sir!”

Brady smiled back before taking his seat in his fully equipped easy chair and turning to face the image of the transport that filled the screen in front of them. “Go now, before I change my mind. And Kristin...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Please bring Junior back alive.”

Kristin flashed a full smile as she grabbed Simpson and hustled him to the double-doors to exit the bridge. “You heard the captain, Simpson. C’mon.”



The lift ride to the hangar bay took only a few moments. They arrived outside the pressure doors and saw the engineering and medical teams loading their gear aboard the shuttle while it was being prepped for the short trip to the damaged transport.

“Hey, Commander. Our teams are ready to board. Johnson and I will run shotgun on security for you.” Marshall was a big, fearsome sort of guy, but deep down and off duty, Kristin knew he had the disposition of a teddy bear. On duty though, she was sure there was very little Marshall and Johnson couldn’t handle.

“Thanks, Marshall,” she said with a smile. “You certainly do build one’s confidence. Simpson, get whatever equipment you need and get onboard.”

“Yes, sir...er, ma’am,” Simpson said gleefully as he began pulling equipment from the supply room outside the hangar.

Kristin had other plans in regard to her equipment. Instead of electronics, she entered her code into the armory door control and went inside. She was only inside for a moment before she emerged with twin plasma pistols at her hip and a broad grin on her face.

The shuttle was ready to go, so she entered it, then reached behind her to shut the hatch. She took a seat right behind the flight crew, where she could keep an eye on things. She adjusted the seat and pulled the harness across her chest, then snapped the buckle into place. “Jakes, whenever you’re ready,” she said to the pilot.

“You got it, ma’am,” Jakes said before activating the engines. “Flight Control, Falcon 129, ready for flight.”

“Roger, Falcon 129,” came the voice from Flight Control, who was overlooking the hangar deck.

Not another word was spoken before everyone onboard felt the atmosphere being sucked out of the bay and into space. When the process was completed, the twin doors opened, revealing wide open space. Jakes adjusted the helm, and the shuttle rose into flight position. Thrusters were used at the rear of the ship to move it away from the *Bonaventure*. After they cleared the bay, Jakes brought the engines online, and the thrust accelerated the shuttle toward the transport.

“Take us around it,” Kristin ordered from over the pilot’s shoulder. “I need to record the damage and compare any energy signatures to what’s in our databanks.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Simpson pulled his sensor panel over from the wall to his right.

“Recording now.”

The shuttle banked around the transport so they could record the attack damage. It then settled over the airlock and docked with a heavy *thud*.

“Clamps are locked on, and pressure’s in the green. Ready to move out, Commander Dante,” Jakes added as he powered the engines down.

“Great. Good job, Jakes,” Kristin said to the pilot as she removed her harness. “Alert the *Bonaventure* that we are entering the ship and will advise on status. Marshall,” she said to the big security chief as he checked his weapon, “you and Johnson lead the way. Everyone else, the transport schematics are programmed into your padds. Medical, you come with me. We’re heading to the bridge. Engineering teams, take a med tech with you and comb the ship on the way to the engine room. If you spot any survivors, I want to know about it immediately. Remember to stay clear of sections open to vacuum. We don’t need any of you floating around out there like space debris.”

Everyone nodded, and the two teams set out in opposite directions. Kristin and her team saw their first body on the way to the bridge, shortly after leaving the airlock where the shuttle

was parked. The corpses they did come upon were bloody and torn to shreds. She shook her head and tried to imagine what could possibly have slashed and ripped a human body like that.

Amazingly, most of the damage appeared to have happened from the inside out, and that made even less sense.

“What the...? Something about this just doesn’t add up,” Kristin said.

Marshall knelt by a body and turned it over; it was barely recognizable as human. “What could do this, ma’am?” he asked.

The flesh had been torn from the person’s head, revealing a bloody skull. Interestingly enough, the lips were mostly in place, still frozen in the scream of what must have been the crewmember’s last agonizing moments. One arm was missing, and the other was only holding on by stringy, bloody strands of muscle and flesh, but even that wasn’t the most shocking thing about the body. Right in the center of the chest cavity was a hole, the size of a fist. It was perfectly circular, a contrast to the rest of the mutilated mess. Surrounding the large wound were eight smaller ones, about a half-inch or so outside the middle circle.

Kristin knelt by the bodies as one of the forensics personnel of the team took readings and skin samples. “I don’t know. It couldn’t be pirates, right? Tolliver?” The body looked like as if it had been dropped into spinning fan blades more than once. No matter who they represented, it wasn’t the pirate *m.o.*, and none of them were that criminally insane. Something else had committed this heinous act; she was sure of it.

Lieutenant Tolliver graduated first in his class from Harvard Medical and had interned as a medical examiner in one of the more violent sections of Detroit, but he found it hard to think of a body being in worse shape. He knelt by the corpse and pulled a pair of latex gloves and metal

forceps out of his bag. He examined the other damage before turning his attention to the circular hole in the dead man's chest. "It's hard to say which of these wounds actually killed him, but I can say for certain that it wasn't this round hole burned through his chest."

"Burned?"

"Yes, Commander," Tolliver replied as he poked the probe deeper into the cavity. "It's not a heat burn though. This was...like some sort of acid. The smaller wounds around it appear to be punctures of some sort."

Kristin watched him poke a little deeper, then noticed his expression change to one resembling surprise. "What is it?"

Tolliver shook his head. "I don't know, ma'am. Feels like small nodules. I'm going to remove a sample." He reached in with the forceps, grabbed hold of one of the round objects lodged deep in the body, and pulled it out. "Simpson, can you reach in my case and get one of those small specimen jars?"

Simpson nodded, happy to help in any capacity, then reached into the forensics case and pulled out the specimen bottle Tolliver had asked for. He unscrewed the top of the small cylindrical container, about the size of a prescription bottle, and handed it to Tolliver. "This one?"

"Perfect. Thanks," Tolliver said. He placed the silvery nodule into it, then put the lid back on and twisted it shut.

"What is that?" Marshall asked, as curious as Kristin was.

"No idea." Tolliver answered coolly. "Shiny though."

"There are more down here!" one of the engineers called from farther down the corridor.

“Let’s go,” Kristin said quietly as she slowly ambled to her feet. “We’ve got a lot to do and not much time to do them. For starters, we need to get to that bridge.”

Everyone nodded, with the exception of Simpson, who appeared to be about to lose his lunch. She knew things were beginning to get too real for the young lieutenant, and she worried that perhaps she’d made a mistake in bringing him along.

The complement of a transport of that size was twenty-four men and women. They found at least half of them, reduced to piles of dead flesh, before they reached the bridge. They were all like the first, torn to shreds, with holes burned in their chests.

Kristin led the way, but as they neared the bridge door, Marshall raised his plasma rifle and, with a nod and smile to his commander, took the lead. He pulled a small instrument from the belt at his waist and held it in front of the door. It beeped and chirped for a few seconds before he pulled it back and looked at the readout on the screen. “We’ve got some atmosphere on the other side of the door.” He glanced down at the door control and noted that it was shorted out. “Moss, get your butt up here.”

Ensign Moss, another of the young crewmembers of the *Bonaventure*, came forward with his engineering toolkit. “Excuse me, sir,” he said timidly, trying to get around Marshall’s muscular form. He knelt by the door and, without even looking, reached into his tool pouch and pulled out a probe. He moved it over the lock, corner to corner, before looking at the readings. The look on his face screamed confusion as he glanced from Marshall to Kristin and back again.

“Ensign, you got something to say?” Kristin finally said, in no mood for dramatic pauses.

“Yeah, what is it, Moss?” Marshall demanded.

Disproving the old adage that size doesn't matter, Moss turned to Marshall and held up the probe. "You might wanna take a look at this, sir. The door was shorted out from the bridge side, like they were trying to keep someone or something out."

"Can you open it?" Kristin asked, sensing the beginnings of an anxiety attack. *The admiral probably woulda pulled out his gun and shot the poor bastard by now*, she thought.

He turned to her and actually looked a little hurt by her lack of faith in him. "Yes, ma'am," he said with just a tinge of anger in his timid voice.

Kristin and the rest watched as he pulled off the panel and reached in with the probe. She could see the sweat glistening on his brow as he removed the probe and replaced it with his right hand. Moss pushed his hand deeper into the door circuitry, trying to reach the emergency bypass circuit that would allow them to open the door from the outside. They could blast it, but they all knew that might prove deadly to any survivors on the bridge side of the door.

A beeping from her headset alerted her to a call. "Yes?" Kristin said, expecting to hear from the engineering team at the aft end of the ship. "Understood," she said in response to their report that they'd found more bodies on the way to engineering but not a survivor among them. It really came as no surprise to her; after what she'd seen, she doubted they'd find anyone alive onboard.

"More of the same?" Marshall grimly asked, fearing they were in for more carnage when they finally got the bridge doors opened.

"Yep. The engines are damaged as well," replied Kristin. "Moss, any progress with that damn door?"

"Almost got it," the young ensign croaked. "There!"

With a *hiss* followed by a groaning, the door slid open, not all the way ajar, but it gave them more than enough room to gain entry to the command deck of the ship.

Marshall squeezed in first and realized immediately how wrong he was in his preliminary assessment of the bridge. The bridge crew wasn't butchered like the crewmembers they'd found strewn about the corridor. They had similar round holes in their chests, but they looked used up somehow, like ancient remains, almost mummified, as if they'd been dead for years rather than days or hours. They were all still seated at their stations, as if nothing had happened to them. "Geez..." he said, unable to mutter anything more.

"Simpson, pull the sensor tapes. There's got to be something on them about...all this," Kristin said.

Completely taken aback, Simpson seemed rooted in place like a tree, swaying a bit but not moving from his spot.

"Now!" Kristin snapped, hoping to knock him out of the shocked paralysis. "You too, Moss." Brady would be calling from the *Bonaventure* soon, and she needed some solid information for her captain.

They both seemed to snap out of it at the same time. Without a word, Simpson went to the tactical and sensor console, while Moss made his way to the science station.

"Commander?"

"Yes, Tolliver?" Kristin said, thankful that she'd at least have something to send back to the *Bonaventure*. "Report."

"They're all dead, but now I'll at least have a chance to examine a relatively whole body." Tolliver looked down at his scans before continuing, "My best guess is that something

attached to them, sucked the life force out, and eventually found its way out through their chests.”

“Sucked their life force?” Kristin asked, shaking his head. “Are you crazy, Tolliver, or did you just watch too much sci-fi as a kid? Are you telling me some kind of extraterrestrial lifeform killed the crew?”

“Much that used to be considered science fiction is now reality, Commander,” he retorted.

“Touché,” Kristin answered, thinking back to her captain’s *Enterprise*-inspired chair.

“What I’m saying, Commander Dante, is that this is my best guess.” He handed her the data-padd and pointed to the wounds around the hole. “Something grabbed these poor bastards and burned their way in. This is all I can surmise. Whether you believe it or not is entirely up to you.”

“Yeah, great.”

“What do you want to do, Boss?” Marshall asked.

“Contact *Bonaventure* for orders,” Kristin decided. “I want to get the hell off this flying tomb.”

“Ma’am!” came the call from one of Tolliver’s team. “You need to see this...now!”

Kristin could see that they were standing in front of an open vent, pulling out someone, a woman in uniform. Based on her rank insignia, she appeared to be the second-in-command. She was obviously alive, because she had found a crawlspace to hide in. That was the good news. The bad news was that she seemed catatonic. “Doc, we need you!”

Tolliver came running with his medical bag and dropped down next to woman with a diagnostic scanner in hand. “Her nametag says, ‘STACK,’” he said, peering up at Kristin.



“Marshall, have you reached the *Bonaventure* yet?”

“No, Commander. All I’m getting is static.”

Kristin tapped her headset and listened. To her horror, she realized that it was more than just static. On the contrary, someone was jamming their signal. “Team Two, drop everything and head back to the shuttle...now!” She received her affirmative before turning back to address her own team. “Collect whatever you can. We’re outta here.”

Simpson seemed to be standing still, with his head cocked to the side, like a dog listening to an odd noise. “You hear that?” he asked no one in particular.

Kristin stopped and listened. Sure enough, there was a metallic tapping sound coming from the ventilation system above their heads. “Yes, I hear it. What the hell is it?”

Marshall pointed his gun at the sound, and his finger tensed on the trigger. “I don’t know, but I’ve got a really bad feeling about this.”

The sound had an interesting effect on Stack. Her eyes opened, and she started screaming. “They’re back! They’re back! Oh my God! I won’t let them take me! Nooo!”

Tolliver attempted to restrain her, but it took three of them to hold her still while he administered a tranquillizer.

“Crap,” Moss said weakly, pointing to the command chair.

Everyone looked to where Moss was pointing. The captain was moving, or at least something was moving him. Out of the hole in his chest crawled something horrible. It resembled a large black spider, about the size of a man’s fist, but its legs were razor sharp. It was followed by another and another.

Marshall reacted with amazing speed for a man caught in a state of terror. Without hesitation, he fired bolts of plasma energy at the captain’s body and into the things that seemed

to be feeding off it. He only stopped when there was nothing left of either the captain or the arachnid-looking nightmares that were devouring him. “That should take care of them.”

The clicking sound in the walls grew louder, but that was not the worst thing. Tolliver pointed to the other bodies. They were all disgorging the same creatures as the captain, and they looked hungry. Kristin pulled both her weapons out and began shooting at them, and Marshall followed suit. When the ceiling gave way, the bridge was suddenly filled with them.

“Everybody, back to the shuttle...now!”

They ran for the corridor, and Simpson and Moss even found strength in their terror.

“Jakes!” Kristin called into her headset. “Prep for emergency departure the second we’re all onboard.”

“Affirmative,” came the reply from her headset.

She turned and managed to get a few shots off, even while running. The leggy creatures were closing the gap, but Kristin was relieved to look ahead and see that they were almost back at the airlock. “Run!” she screamed. “Team Two, report!”

“Two, here,” a breathless voice answered. “What the hell is going on, ma’am?”

Kristin was about to respond when she heard a scream coming from behind her. “Stevens?” she questioned, believing that was the name of the medical team member who was down on the floor, with a hungry space spider latched onto his chest. The other menaces stopped at the body as the thing on Stevens’s changed into a circular black disk and began to eat into his chest. As furious as she was horrified, Kristin brought up her weapon to stop his suffering, but she didn’t have to; his screaming suddenly stopped. At that moment, the spiders stopped pursuing the rest of them, and what appeared to be hundreds of them gathered near Stevens, as if

protecting him. The remainder of her team, all farther down the corridor, slowed and finally stopped at the airlock hatch.

She turned and saw Marshall standing by her side.

Marshall's face was a blank mask as he pointed at Stevens. "No freaking way."

Stevens was busy pushing himself to his feet. The top of his uniform was burned away, revealing the black creature, with eight wiry legs anchoring it in place. When Stevens finally stood straight, he reached to his chest with both hands. Upon feeling the disk-like creature, he suddenly went rigid.

"Stevens?" Kristin asked, revolted by what she saw. Her weapon was in hand, pointed right at the head of what was once her shipmate.

"My... Oh my God! It's in my head!" he snapped out. "Get out of my head!" Then, without another word, Stevens stopped struggling and fell to the deck, as if an invisible puppeteer had cut his strings. After a moment, his eyes opened, and he stood again to face everyone, this time with a smile on his face as he stretched out his arms. "Yes and no, Commander Dante," he said calmly, the sickening grin never straying from his face, "less and more."

"Fuck you," Marshall snapped as he brought up his gun.

"Not yet." Kristin put her hand out to push the barrel of the energy weapon down. They needed to find out what was going on, why the spiders stopped. "Riddles all you got? What are you?"

"No, not riddles. It is simply the truth—or at least enough of it for your infantile minds to grasp." Stevens looked down at the spiders around him and closed his eyes. The creatures moved

en masse, about a foot behind him. When he opened his eyes, he looked down at them again. “Better. *We* are the N’Torr, and I know everything this Stevens knows, Commander Dante.”

“And what does Stevens get out of this...joining?”

“Bliss,” Stevens replied with a smile, “at least for now.”

Marshall shook his head. “Bliss? You killed everyone here, and I’m guessing Stevens will end up just like them,” he said, inching his gun back up little by little.

“What do you want?” Kristin asked, trying to stifle the tremble in her voice. She was usually capable of pushing fear out of her mind. The admiral had taught his children that fear could make them weak, and that the weak often ended up as the losers. There were no prizes in the admiral’s world for second place or weakness, but Kristin couldn’t deny that she felt it now. An irrational fear began to creep into her psyche, like that of a child imagining a monster in the closet or under her bed. It was innate fear, the same terror that stretched back to the early days, when cavemen imagined dinosaurs lurking outside their cave. Within seconds, Kristin literally felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“What do we want?” Stevens finally responded, answering the question with the same question. “We want you, your ship, your planet—everything. In fact, the only reason we exist right now is for you. All of you will be N’Torr, servants of the Jek’Tan.”

“Who the hell are the Jek’Tan?” Marshall asked, his gun never wavering.

With both hands, Stevens reached to the black circle burnt into his chest. He looked around and regarded everyone like a child regarding an anthill before stepping on it. “The Jek’Tan are the true gods, the masters of the heavens. They created us, and we serve their will. We are the hand and the fist of God!”

Kristin felt her gun coming up as well, like a knee-jerk reaction to that fear that sickened her. “Why?” she demanded.

Stevens laughed, as if she was a fool. “Because everyone deserves to eat,” he said as the spiders began moving again.

“Now?” Marshall asked.

“Now!”

With that, they both began to fire. Marshall’s first blast struck Stevens in the shoulder, spinning him into range of Kristin; her shot hit its mark and blasted off the top of his head. His half-decapitated body stumbled back but somehow manage to stand its ground. From what was left of the mouth came an unearthly, high-pitched scream.

Kristin and Marshall bristled at the ear-shattering echo, then fired again, finally blasting it to the ground in several chunks of smoldering flesh and bone. They were shocked to see the spider remove itself from the destroyed body and advance on them, with the arm of eight-legged nightmares in tow.

Marshall kept firing, blast after blast, to little avail. “There are just too damn many!” he yelled.

“Back to the shuttle!” Kristin snapped. The large security man seemed locked in a rage as he mindlessly continued fire.

Kristin punched him in the back of his head to get his attention. “Run! That’s an order!”

Marshall blinked twice, as if he’d been awakened by a trance, and they both took off down the corridor, urged on by the clicking sounds that grew ever louder behind them. When they reached the airlock door, both Moss and Simpson popped out into the corridor, each holding a heavy MK-8 assault rifle. They opened fire on the spiders, covering Kristin and Marshall as

they ran through the doors and into the shuttle. Noting that they were safe inside, Moss and Simpson followed suit and sealed the airlock behind them.

“Jakes, get us the hell outta here...now! Everyone strap in!” Kristin hurried to her seat and buckled in. She relaxed a bit when she heard the engines whirring to life, but they didn’t seem to be building power fast enough. “Why aren’t we moving?”

Jakes was working frantically over his flight controls and didn’t bother to turn to respond. “The transport docking clamps are refusing to release.”

“Commander...” Moss said, standing by the inner shuttle airlock door.

“Moss, you need to sit down,” Kristin scolded. “We’re about to take off.”

“Commander, you need to see this.”

“What now?” With a sigh, Kristin unbuckled and ran to the port to see what had sidetracked Moss enough to keep him out of his seat.

“Look at that,” he said in awe, pointing.

The spiders had all joined together and now formed a large black mass. They worked in unison, trying to melt the airlock door with the same alien heat that had scalded through the chests of the crew.

Kristin was entranced by it but managed to pull Moss away from his vantage point and shove him toward his empty seat. She then ran to the pilot console and stuck her face right in Jakes’s. “You need to break us free right now. I don’t care how you do it.”

“I know you usually give the orders around here, but you’d best sit down, Commander,” Jakes said with a smile, pushing her back. “It’s gonna get bumpy.”

Kristin landed into her seat with a *thud* that jarred her teeth. She watched as Jakes moved like a man possessed, his hands flying over the controls like those of a mad concert pianist. The

sound of the engines grew louder as Jakes applied more and more power from the maneuvering thrusters. The thrusters twisted the shuttle back and forth as it attempted to break the death grip the transport had on them.

“Commander!” Moss yelled from his seat at the rear of the shuttle. “The airlock port is...black.”

Kristin looked out in horror and saw that he was right. The spiders had burned their way through the transport airlock and were now attempting to gain entry to the shuttle. She knew if that happened, they’d have nowhere left to run. “Jakes, you need to do it now!” she said. She’d already decided that she’d die before she’d let herself be turned into what Stevens had become, but she certainly preferred to get out of there in one piece.

“Hold on to your panties,” Jakes said calmly. “Here we go!”

Kristin heard the sound of metal tearing and was relieved when she felt motion. She held on tightly to one of the cooling pipes as Jakes fought to regain maneuvering control. As the deck righted itself, she made her way back to the airlock port. The only blackness there was peppered with bright stars.

“Course?” Jakes asked when he finally got the ship under control.

Kristin looked at his hands as they brought the engines back under control, the hands of a hero. She couldn’t believe it, but he’d somehow managed to save them all. The decision was pretty simple in her mind. “We need to get back to the *Bonaventure*.”

“Aye-aye, ma’am. Setting course. ETA thirty-two minutes.”

Kristin felt drained, almost like one of the bodies on the transport. She thought of her father and wondered how the admiral would have handled it. *He would have gone down to the last man, sacrificing even himself, to destroy the ship and the creatures onboard*, she finally

surmised. She valued life and loyalty a great deal more than her father did, and their command preferences were at the heart of their differences. “Admiral,” she said quietly to herself, “you certainly got your conspiracy. I hope you like it.” Then, exhausted, she allowed her eyes to close.

Some indeterminable amount of time later, Simpson interrupted her catnap.

“Commander...”

“What is it?” she asked in a daze, her sleeping eyes fluttering open. At that moment, she would have killed Simpson in his sleep for a good cup of coffee.

“I’m not getting any further jamming. I think we can reach the *Bonaventure*.”

The thought of that pushed the need for coffee out of her mind and made her focus on the task at hand: giving the captain the information he needed about their visit to the transport. She went to the communications panel and switched it to the right frequency. “*Bonaventure*, this is Dante. Come in please.”

The response was almost immediate: “This is Brady. What’s your status?”

Kristin didn’t know where to begin. “Sir, there were these...creatures on the transport. The crew is all dead. We need to go back there and destroy the transport before it’s too late.”

“There’s plenty of time for that, Kristin. Just get back to the ship, and we can discuss it.”

“Commander, get up here fast!” Marshall said in a panicked whisper from his place at the flight station.

“What’s that I hear, Commander?” Brady inquired over the speaker.

“Hang on, sir.” She moved to the pilot station and gave Marshall the most pissed-off look she could manage. “You do know I’m talking to the captain, right? What the hell is it?”

Marshall didn’t say a word, but Jakes pointed out the window toward the *Bonaventure*.



Kristin took a look and instantly felt acid creeping from her stomach up her esophagus, carrying the remainder of her breakfast with it. “Sir, we have a bit of an emergency. I’ll get right back to you.” With that, she closed the connection with Brady and looked out into space at her ship. What should have been a welcome sight only intensified the horror she felt. The *Bonaventure* was docked by a large alien vessel of some kind. She was sure it had to be the same ship that had attacked the transport.

“What now, Commander?” Marshall asked.

“All stop! Hold position.” Kristin stared, unblinking, at the two ships, joined in some perverted embrace. The alien ship was huge, at least four or five miles in length, and it dwarfed the ship she’d come from.

“We are so screwed,” Jakes added as he throttled back on the engines.

Kristin dropped into the co-pilot seat and let out another huge sigh, this time more from defeat than relief or exasperation. She wasn’t sure how the alien ship was able to dock with the *Bonaventure*, but she knew one thing: She did not plan to return to her ship anytime soon. She also had to admit that Jakes was right about them being screwed. Not only that, but she was the commander onboard, and if she didn’t think of a way out, they’d soon have plenty of company.

***TO BE CONTINUED.....***

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