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## PROLOGUE

As a city in space, Newport Station served many bizarre denizens of various shapes and sizes, but none of them was as fundamentally unusual, from Marcus Welder's point of view, as its commander, Tyler Raiz. Welder was an ambassador and diplomat, and in that capacity performed much the same role as Raiz, whose primary duty was to deal with interspecies issues in Earth's space. That similarity aside, the two of them could not have handled their duties more differently. Welder prided himself on his deductive logic and cool-headed ability to assess situations, while Raiz was charismatic, a tad flamboyant, and confident in his handling of anything that came his way. There was deep reasoning behind his madness, but he treated it as if it was an unwelcome necessity. Perhaps the age difference was the fundamental factor. Raiz was at least twenty years younger than Welder, and had thus avoided the tumultuous years when humans were first emerging as a spacefaring species.

What grated on Welder was Raiz's image as a genius; a prodigy with computers who somehow managed to make certain everything went his way. That reputation was even more annoying because it was well deserved. Called for a meeting with the station commander, the retiring ambassador anticipated some intricate plot, in which Raiz would use him indiscriminately for whatever purpose might improve Earth's standing in the Interstellar Community. There was no point trying to resist Raiz, since the commander had already accounted for all his possible reactions as part of the plan. It could be entertaining to try to make a move capable of surprising Raiz, but Welder was a utilitarian at heart, and did nothing frivolously. He would play it

normally, trust that Raiz's goals really would benefit the human race, and hope that the maniac would not get him killed.

Newport Station was a collection of towers, each individually launched into space in sections, and linked together with enclosed roads exactly like their Earth counterparts except, from the exterior, they were cylindrical tubes. On approach to the station, it looked like a typical maze of metal, and gave no hint of its hidden charm. On board, only the lack of gravity and stunning view of the stars reminded visitors and residents that they were in a unique city. It had grown steadily over the past century, augmented regularly to match the demands for new services.

The commander's office stood at the very top of the station's tall central tower. Welder ignored the peculiarities of Raiz's décor choices as he entered, aiming straight for the man himself, who was dressed in a surprisingly conservative shirt with rolled up sleeves and khaki slacks. In the privacy of his office, Raiz typically looked as if he was at the beach, though he managed to be more presentable whenever television cameras and reporters were in proximity.

"Ambassador Welder, how are you?" the commander greeted with open arms, practically bouncing up to his guest, bubbling with energy. Tall and lanky, he strode forward with an imprecise rhythmless walk perfectly suited to him, magnetic soles on his shoes keeping him from floating. His black hair was predictably tossed about with reckless abandon. Considering his lofty position, his look and demeanor were disturbingly at ease. "I hope this meeting wasn't too inconvenient for you."

"No, no. I was on my way through the station to Eldrand, Raiz, as I'm sure you already knew," he answered in a gruff voice, his tone having both the natural gravel of years and a layer of casual irritation he reserved for people undeterred by it.

Raiz grinned. "I hope you don't mind holding off on your trip a little while. There's been some interesting activity on the hyperspace relays recently, and —"

"Unless this interesting activity has something to do with Eldrand, Commander, I'm not interested. This trip is sort of a farewell tour for me. I even have my wife along. I'm not looking to get into anything . . . difficult. Just going around to the worlds I've visited in my time to

say goodbye to old friends and that sort of thing.”

“It might have something to do with Eldrand, but I don’t know for sure. Let’s say that it did. Could you hold off on leaving for a week and a half, maybe two weeks?”

Welder stroked his chin, appreciating the cluster of white stubble developing there. “I was planning to anyway. My wife and assistants are still on Earth. They’ll be coming on a shuttle in a few days. I still haven’t made travel arrangements with one of our local captains. Business must be pretty good around here, because every one of them I’ve talked to already has commitments. Just recently, I seem to remember half the local boys just waiting here for something to turn up. I don’t suppose you have something to do with this . . . shift, do you?”

“Well, you know me, Welder,” Raiz said unabashedly. “I see my duty as —”

“— ensuring Earth an improved position in space. Yes, I understand that. You’ve only mentioned it as a talking point a hundred times. And I’m sure you do as much as you can to get our people trading runs. I mean have you deliberately —”

“No. I don’t work that way, Marcus.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Not for one person,” Raiz said, smiling broadly. “Now, do you want to hear what I know so far, or have you lost all sense of curiosity?”

Welder sighed. The tone of the invitation made it all too obvious that, for sheer self-preservation, he should just walk out now. Fortunately, his survival instinct had never prevented him from prying into perilous affairs and seeking information he had no right to. He was too old to change his ways now. “Go on, then.”

Not bothering to offer the veteran a seat, knowing that it would be refused anyway, Raiz plunged on, now with grave seriousness. “There is a planet we have been picking up a lot of buzz about. A mysterious and unnamed planet kept under a semi-official non-interference rule, like the one Earth was under for millennia. I have a contact on Ina Cur who says that there is evidence a group of Asparii mages has interest in it, and might try to . . . well, interfere. The location and name of the world isn’t mentioned, but decades ago, Earth forces helped Asparii

refugees reach a planet they said would be a safe haven, and this may be the same world. According to the people we helped, it has been populated by refugees from various worlds for ages, and it's one of the planets on the Interstellar Community's non-interference list, though we have no idea why it was put on the ISC list in the first place."

"So?"

"We've had word from that refugee world, Selparis, recently. Some of our people stayed with the refugees and have become part of the local culture, which doesn't get too surprised by newcomers, I guess. They say that there has been a discovery – an underground city containing ancient documents. Now, which ancient people was famous for its underground cities?"

Nodding to acknowledge that Raiz did, indeed, have an interesting piece of news there, Welder said, "And these Asparii magic users are after the information this . . . cache might contain?"

"It seems like it."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Raiz," Welder growled. "There could be anything down there, and the ISC will be up in arms if we break the non-interference rule, assuming your communication with the world hasn't done that already. You'll have to make certain these Asparii mages get there first, use them as an excuse to step in, and then try to get ahead of them. That's a mess in the making. Who are you going to send in? Wilson's got reliability on his side, and this is not the sort of thing you want to entrust to someone questionable. It's too bad Captain Pierce died recently, otherwise he could bring guts and inventiveness to the mission, and that might be just as important. Who got his ship, by the way?"

A concerned look on his face, Raiz answered, "I think you've hit it there. I thought about Wilson at first, but then it turned out my Inana friend had other plans. He hired Captain Pierce."

"What?"

"Captain Emily Pierce, the old captain's granddaughter. He had used his wealth to buy the ship in the first place, and he wanted to pass it on, and decided she was fit to inherit it."

Welder was aghast. "But she's . . . how old is she?"

"In her early twenties, I think. She just hired her new crew here a week ago, and she's heading to Ina Cur as we speak. The crew's a bit

on the inexperienced side, but it's a solidly qualified crew."

"Led by an incompetent captain."

"I don't know about that," Raiz said offhandedly. "Anyway, the Inana has brought her into the equation, so she'll have to play her part. I will arrange for her to get a job that will bring her here. I would appreciate it if you delayed your departure until then, and perhaps we can get her to deliver you to Eldrand."

"What's the point?"

The commander put on an indulgent lopsided smile to indicate that his guest was being a bit denser than usual. "At the very least, I would like you to pretend that you know nothing about this, and to hear what she knows – what she might not be willing to tell me when I meet her. My Inana friend will definitely tell her more than he told me, and every nugget could be vital. I'm sure you'll be able to give her advice as well. You usually do that without any prompting."

"Pretend. I don't –"

"Yes, you do. This is just diplomacy, sir, and I'm sure you would have played the exact same game to get information even if I hadn't asked you to."

Now a tinge unnerved, the ambassador gave up. "I'll consider it. I don't like any of this, though."

Raiz shrugged. "We're behind of the other species in the space game. We have to take some risks if we want equal standing. Thank you for your time."

Welder nodded. After shaking the commander's hand, he left without another word.

Making his way to his rarely used oak desk, Raiz pressed the speaker button and said into the grill, "Olivia, go ahead and send that message to Jason Parell."

“What do you mean the ship’s orbit’s deteriorating?” Emily shouted over the comm as the landing pod descended to the surface of Ina Cur. The pilot at her side glanced at her with a worried expression, but then turned back to the work of landing on the planet safely. Emily tried to keep the panic out of her voice, as much to imitate the attitude expected from a good captain as to avoid distracting the pod’s pilot. On the bright side, the crew could not blame her this time. She was out doing the real work.

“Reason unknown,” Liam, the ship’s communications officer, relayed. “Kaz says that there’re no errors in the orbit, and Brian followed the projection before he cut the main engines. It’s not bad, though. Kaz says we’ll be all right for a day.”

After bearing snide remarks from Kaz, the navigator, on her bungling of their first job, Emily felt she had some license to bite back. “You mean you’re using the maneuvering thrusters, and the orbit’s still decaying?”

“Yeah, and at this rate we’ve got a day’s worth of maneuvering fuel left. Then we’ll have to light the main engines to regenerate our supply.”

Emily saw the face of Kaz in her mind’s eye, and it was sneering at her. Even though Kaz showed a full range of expressions, the sneer somehow fit him best. He had well-hidden venom in him, not far from the surface of his sallow face, but now it was her turn to be vicious. “And there’s nothing obvious pulling on the ship except the planet’s gravity?”

“No,” Liam responded, seeing where the conversation was headed, and trying his best to slip out from between the two combatants. Kaz had just stood up, and was now striding across the bridge to the communication officer’s station.

“Then do you think we’ve discovered some sort of new species that knocks space ships out of orbit? Or maybe Kaz made a mistake and doesn’t want to admit it.”

“A new species is entirely possible, Captain,” this time it was Kaz’s voice slithering coolly through the headset. Emily pictured him pushing Liam aside to take over the comm panel, even though Liam had almost certainly surrendered his post without prompting. “But the point is that you’ll need to hurry and get the goods aboard ship, or we’ll have to fire up the mains early. That’ll be expensive fuel being spent to get us into a higher orbit.”

There was a concealed barb in his words, and she felt it. The implication was that she had no idea where her priorities should be, and by extension lacked the acumen to captain a ship. As if she was unaware that fuel for the main engines was expensive. Her recent failure in their first trade run left her defensive and sensitive to even the mildest criticism. She was inexperienced, Kaz knew it, and wanted her to know he knew it, though he kept his points subtle. Since she looked and acted a few years short of her actual twenty-two, she surprised no one with her lack of expertise. Her parents had pointed out this likely pitfall, trying to convince her to sell the ship as soon as they had discovered the contents of her grandfather’s will. Every reason why she should abandon his legacy had been articulated, even the possibility that he had not written his will in his right mind. The condescending and often insulting conversations had only hardened her thirst for independence, and the ship was her revolution. A part of her had to agree with her parents, though – someone who had done nothing since narrowly graduating high school had no place running a starship. Still, the chance to be her own boss, to answer to no one, and to make a fortune, thrilled every atom in her. It was hard to pass that up. Unfortunately, her grandfather’s stories were her primary source for how to captain a starship, and none of them mentioned how to assert authority when a member of the crew was quietly undermining it. Either he had never dealt with such insubordination or she was

being far too touchy.

“Should I take the fuel cost out of your cut, Kaz? Captain, out.” Getting the last word was the best way to end the verbal sparring.

The landing pod was a small craft that took ten trips to fill the ship’s cargo bay. It was actually a five-person escape pod converted for transport duty. A pilot and the ship’s cultural specialist accompanied Emily to the surface. The latter was her friend Ethan, who had trouble articulating himself in English, much less any interstellar language, though he had a sharp mind, phenomenal memory, and was an excellent guitarist. While awkward with words in normal social situations, he could deliver the answer to complicated questions with bookish precision.

They landed roughly on a spot of developed land – a rare bit of paved ground on this planet of amphibious ocean dwellers. The Inanas were an odd race to be dealing with, but Emily was in no position to be picky. At least their planet had an Earth-like atmosphere that negated the need for breathing equipment. Once it was clear that the landing pod had settled, she headed for the hatchway, swapping the ship comm headset for a translator headset from the cabinet on the way out. Ethan pushed his glasses further up his nose and followed her, not entirely sure he would be contributing anything by doing so. The pilot remained in the pod, glad to be spared any criticism for the rough landing, leaving Emily to do the heavy lifting on Ina Cur.

Walking onto the parking apron alongside a mile-long runway, Emily mused that most Inana atmospheric craft must be like Earth aircraft – incapable of vertical landings. That was where the similarities between the two species and their worlds ended. The land itself was unfamiliar. The bare soil nearby was an oversaturated dark brown, and in some patches pitch black. The foliage in the distance was a wall of jungle – all of it a tangle and none of it in the distinct form of trees. Some unknown force held the wall in check. Even the paving of the runway was unusual, with a dark blue hue instead of a grey. Then there were the Inanas themselves.

Three scaly-skinned Inanas approached them, crawling on all fours. Their powerful forelegs and tails did most of the work, while they dragged their hind legs along. When they reached the trading captain and her associate, they perched themselves up to a standing position

using their hind legs as pivots and their tails as counterbalance. Their forelegs – now arms – brought large backpacks forward, and all three simultaneously fished out translator modules, set the translators on their heads, and returned the packs to their backs. One stood well aside from the other two, and took out some kind of weapon. The whole maneuver was so comical that Emily almost burst out laughing. She smoothed the creases in her tee-shirt, glanced at her black cargo pants for spots, and checked her thigh pocket for her handheld computer as the two parties neared each other – her equivalent to a businessperson straightening out her necktie. Maybe her gestures looked as odd to the Inanas as their preparations did to her.

These Inanas were about six feet from head to tail, about half the length of the Great Inanas who never left the sea. Stretched full length, they had two or three inches advantage on Emily, but standing with their tails tensed for balance behind them, they were about four feet tall. They were olive green and sported a lizard-like surface. Their heads were frog-shaped, though a bit more streamlined. In the water, they no doubt swam like eels, since even while standing they had a slight side-to-side oscillating motion in their upper bodies. They looked weak to Emily, but it was difficult to tell. She instinctively sized them up in pragmatic terms, and decided she could fight two, maybe all three of them if necessary. Ethan might be able to handle the third, but he was a bit of an eel himself.

“You are . . . Captain Pierce?” a high-pitched whine was translated in the earpiece of her headset. Since she had not spoken yet, the output of the Inana’s headset was uncalibrated, but after receiving the Inana language, her own device was now ready. Though slightly cumbersome, the translators were thoroughly programmed, and able to adjust grammar after a slight delay and even decode contractions as long as the source was in the standard form of one of the installed languages. Dialects and colorful phrases, especially those Emily preferred to use, tended to make the device buzz and choke, limiting her range of expression lest she risk misinterpretations.

Into her mic, Emily answered with forced formality, “Yes. I heard from a contact on Plani that you had a job for me.”

“Welcome to Freeman’s Canal, Captain. This is Ariki of Channel,” the Inana said, gesturing to his companion. ‘Ariki’ was

only the translator's approximation of the tinny name. "He will be your passenger. I am Aya . . . trade representative in Channel. It is important Arika reach Plani safe. Land at Dael so our people can take him to Interstellar Community Headquarters. Does your ship have weapons?"

Ethan looked at Emily ominously, but the captain answered confidently, "One pulse cannon for defense." Whatever diplomatic mission Arika had in ISC headquarters no doubt had its opponents.

"Turret?"

"No, fixed." Now that he asked, she wished it was a turret.

Aya and Arika turned off their translators and murmured to each other, inaudible to Emily's own device. Arika was clearly calming the negotiator and assuring him that a fixed pulse cannon would be enough. She wondered whether they were concerned about trouble from the Inanas or from the Plani. From her own bias, she assumed the Plani were the threat. Then again, she remembered how little she knew about Inana politics – or any politics. The contact had described Arika as a religious leader, but provided no details. She had been quick to take the chance, and still shunned second thoughts now.

Arika turned on his translator and addressed her for the first time. "My room . . . will have place for me to go in water? Cover in water?"

A bathtub. "Yes. It is this big." She outlined its dimensions with her hands.

"And your ship – a fast ship in normal space?"

Emily smiled. On that account, her ship was solid. "We can get from zero to a thousandth of the speed of light in an hour," she quoted from her grandfather's last letter to her, which had been a bit of an exaggeration, but not by much. Unfortunately, the word 'hour' failed to translate. The device beeped and repeated the word back to her to indicate this. The Inanas were left puzzled.

"Damn," she said. That also failed. "Ethan, you're the linguistics and culture person. Any help?" she asked in desperation.

"It is well," Arika said, understanding the problem. "You are confident in its speed. That is enough. Aya, pay them first money and show them where cargo is. Captain, I will board your ship after you have taken up cargo. When I am on board, I expect we leave

quickly.”

“Okay.”

Aya showed them the cargo – rare foods according to the job description. The boxes were piled on top of transport pads, which were nothing more than motorized carts of a standardized size. Without extra seating, the landing pod had enough space for one pad. Five were standing on the pavement, waiting for loading.

“Maximum temperature for goods is halfway point between freezing and boiling of water,” Aya said, clearly having done his homework. “Of course, it should not be close to this. Also, it should not be frozen. We apologize for not giving temperature control boxes, but it would make cost too much. Cannot do business.”

“No problem. Our cargo hold is set to –” she looked imploringly at Ethan, who whispered the conversion to her, “a quarter of the way between the freezing and boiling point of water. Should be perfect for the cargo.”

Aya nodded. He brought his pack around again, and took out a handheld computer. Punching up the ISC banking system, he handed the computer to her. “Your account number, please.”

It was displaying the transfer-to screen. She made it a point to check before typing her account number and pressing the confirmation button. The computer keypad used ISC standard digits, which Earth students now studied in school alongside the old Arabic numerals. It was odd that the ISC had standard numbers, but not standard time or temperature measures. Must have been politics. Giving Aya his computer back, she brought out her own from her right cargo pocket. It was all there – a million credits up front. The transaction remained incomplete until the information reached Plani through hyperspace, but the exchange was final as far as Aya and she were concerned. She could spend the million right now, and the signal would arrive at Plani after the first one, so there would be no financial complications. By the time she actually reached Plani with Ariki and the cargo, there would be another Inana ready to transfer another million into her account. That part went badly last time, though. Still, the Inana were not Plani, and the money they were offering for this simple mission would cover fuel and other costs while leaving a tidy sum for a few days’ work.

She nodded to Aya, and he left – probably to attend to Ariki. Ethan

turned to her and noted, “The planet doesn’t smell that bad.”

It was true. Before embarking on her space venture, she had recounted all her grandfather’s spacefaring stories to Ethan, and they had always included vivid descriptions of the foul scents of each planet, and how visitors invariably got used to it after a few minutes. Plani was the exception, of course. It was sterile. Ina Cur, though, was not unpleasant smelling, just intensely salty. Maybe her grandfather had exaggerated.

Bringing out her communicator while still musing at the increased balance of her credit account, she commed the landing pod. “Pilot, we’ve got cargo coming on board. Make sure there isn’t anything on the floor that could give the pads problems. We don’t need them tipping over or anything.”

They managed to get everything aboard ship before the day was up. When the main engines fired up, it was in preparation for their de-orbit and jump. Emily entered the corridor to the bridge with a deep breath, passing her hand through her short dyed-black hair. For someone who had never planned to be a space trader, she was getting along fairly well. The ship was still in one piece, after all.

She ran her hand along the panels at the side of the corridor, careful to avoid activating anything sensitive. The Eldrandii, the ancient species who held exclusive rights to hyperspace technology, had built the ship, but her grandfather had designed the interior. He had taken the money from his solar energy business, pouring it into this dream. The way the ship oozed his rebellious personality had made it impossible for her to sell it after he had willed it to her. She had thought about it, though. It would have fetched almost a billion dollars, but selling the ship would have been letting her grandfather down when he had shown her incredible confidence. As a result, even though she was unsuited to be the responsible captain-type, she was resolved to justify his trust in her.

Taking some comfort in the fact that a successful space trader had thought she would be a good captain for his ship, she stepped onto the bridge. There were no “Captain on deck” announcements or salutes. She had made it clear in her first speech to the crew that this was a merchant ship, not a military operation, and she was not

an egomaniacal know-it-all who they had to obey blindly. Now, less secure in her ability to command, she regretted that particular speech, as a few signs to remind everybody that she was in charge would have helped.

The bridge crew was composed of herself at the center, Brian at the pilot controls up front, and Liam with Kaz on the consoles in the back. It was a spare bridge, and nothing like the glorified techno-mazes of some imaginings. Her chair, though, had more indicators and panels than she had names for. It was designed for a captain who liked to know exactly what was going on, and to take control in an emergency. Unfortunately, that described Kaz more than it did her. In only a week, Kaz had augmented his own panel, writing programs to aid him in his quest to act as a de facto captain for every second Emily was away from the bridge. She had disliked him from the start. She could get along with Brian, who was downright gorgeous and shot a charming smile at her every time he managed to do something right for the first time. Liam was too busy listening to communications to bother anybody, though he had a sharp wit and a good idea of what to say, and what not to say. Kaz was constantly serious, and always spoke his mind. There was no questioning that he knew his stuff, otherwise she would have given the job to someone with more . . . personality. He would make a decent captain eventually, though probably not a well-liked one like her grandfather had been. He had more experience on ships than the other three bridge crew members combined – though that wasn't hard since she had none, Brian had spent two years on a ship as the hyperspace backup pilot, and Liam had five years. Practically coming of age on spaceships, Kaz had a definite sense of entitlement that was stifled by Emily's deliberate reluctance to name a second-in-command. That was the crux of the cold war between them.

She flopped into the captain's seat and tapped open the general comm with her elbow. "Ethan, is Ariki fine in his room?"

It took a moment for Ethan to find a panel to comm back from. "Yeah, he says it's fine."

"Cargo Bay, is the cargo secure?"

"Yes," came the gruff answer. There might have been a tone of disrespect there, but it could also have been an attempt to sound weary. Always good to give the captain an impression of exertion.

“All right. Heat it up, engine room. You have control, Brian. Kaz, plot for the Sirius system.”

“Anywhere in the Sirius system?” Kaz asked testily, still agitated from the way Emily had cut him off at the end of their last discussion. He projected the course he had plotted hours ago onto the main screen. “Maybe an orbit of Sirius A? I’ve always wanted to see how close we could get to a star that hot. Or did you mean a course for Plani?”

“Just Plani, Kaz,” Emily answered, not biting. “You have it, Brian.”

The pilot nodded. “Taking us out of orbit.”

Briefly, Emily wondered what had been causing their deteriorating orbit, and whether it would cause complications as they left Ina Cur. Those worries faded as they accelerated out to the jump point, which was set safely away from the gravity of Epsilon Indi and its planets – a direct descent from the system’s plane.

“Accelerating at minimum,” Brian announced, “with jump point ETA at six hours.”

“Go to maximum – the money from this job will be more than worth it.”

“If we get a dime this time –” Kaz murmured so that only Liam could hear.

“Our ETA should be half, right?”

“Yeah,” Kaz admitted grudgingly, “three hours.”

Examining the waypoints on the screen, she said, “Making one and a half million miles in three hours sounds good to me.” She leaped out of her seat. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.” She had to admit that, except for being held-up at gunpoint on the first job, captaining had been a breeze. The trick was delegation.

She had attempted to move all her belongings into the captain’s quarters without luck, and left most of her accumulation on Earth. As far as she was concerned, what she had taken with her was essential, but she actually wore little of the wardrobe she had brought on board, and almost everything remained packed in boxes. Most of her posters featured bands out of favor, and her extensive music collection, condensed down to essentials, was on her handheld computer, so those boxes were still unopened. Part of a well-connected family, she had collected a horde of gifts and never felt right about throwing them

away. They helped her remember all the people she cared about. All she really needed in her regular business were a few sets of jeans, some tee-shirts, her trenchcoat, the hair-dye that helped her realize the look she preferred, her computer, and the necessities of hygiene. The rest was home – as much a part of her environment as the walls – even if it was all hidden inside cardboard.

Home, though, was a place you occupied with people you knew. Her only friend on board was Ethan, and their conversations since the departure from Newport Station had been limited. In contrast, camaraderie between her grandfather and his crew filled his stories. She wished she knew how to create that same atmosphere, but as it was, she seemed to live in a different world than most of the crew. Maybe the obstacle was cultural. She was a nouveau punk rocker that had almost dropped out of high school, and they were a bunch of engineers or highly trained . . . whatevers. Nothing in common. She tried to start conversations, but only Brian and Ethan listened to the same music as far as she knew, or share the same generational touchpoints. Getting to parts of the crew was difficult, since they often kept to themselves when not on duty. All the cargo and engineering people ever talked about in the rec room was football, auto racing, and maybe basketball. She was athletic, but in an individual and unorganized way. Team sports were a foreign land filled with regimentation and structure that she found abhorrent. Therefore, since the inhabitants of the rest of the ship spoke an alien tongue, she tried to carve out this little home in her quarters.

“Captain,” the comm blazed through just as she was settling down on her bed. The female voice was unknown to Emily, and the lack of recognition seemed a logical continuation of her uncomfortable thoughts. “We’ve got blips trying to follow us.”

It was the signal officer, then. The signal officer worked in a quiet room directly behind the bridge, and usually sent anything important to Liam. Emily went to her desk console and opened the general comm so the entire ship could hear what was going on. “You’ve got blips – how many and can they catch up?”

“Can’t tell – maybe two. They don’t seem to be accelerating fast enough to get to us, but we have to keep the engines burning.”

“So anything less than full acceleration would be a bad idea.”

“That’s right, Captain.”

She pumped her fist. There was nothing better than making the right call. Too bad Kaz had stayed silent about wasting fuel when she had ordered full power – this would have been good payback. “Okay, keep me posted if anything changes. I’ll stay in my quarters.”

The blips rekindled her earlier questions, though. Who was this Ariki, and who wanted him this bad, to tail a ship in the openness of space? The pursuers had clearly been caught off guard, since the best intercept would have been while they were orbiting Ina Cur. Or was this just for show? Trying to intercept in open space was a hopeless cause. Of course, they could be trying to beat them to Plani. Maybe there were even ships already waiting at the other end, and these were only following to box them in.

“Damn,” she said. Well, she could only beat out the ones definitely chasing them, and that meant jumping before they did. Opening the comm, she said, “Kaz, try to get us a closer jump point. I’m heading to the bridge. Oh . . . signals, make sure you tell me if you see any jumps anywhere. Not just the ships close by.” She would really have to get the signals officer’s name down sometime.

Back through the corridor, she passed the four-member exterior repair crew, who were off-duty and looking the part. They had picked up on the concern her orders had broadcast, but would get ready for work only when ordered to. She didn’t blame them. Just the idea of a mid-space intercept was crazy. On top of that, the repair crew would be able to do little about an attack until it started. They handled the normal maintenance while the ship was in orbit.

If there was any planet that would allow piracy to happen in its orbit, it was Plani. The Plani had too many ships to deal with, and focused mainly on preventing ships from crashing into important parts of the planet’s surface – any inch of the densely populated northern continent. Assuming their pursuers knew their business, they had a flock of ships waiting around Plani, covering as many trajectories as possible. Moreover, having so many ships meant that they either had government backing, or were a phenomenally successful bunch of bounty hunters.

Kaz was infuriated, and showed his alarm when she walked onto the bridge. “What do you mean ‘get us a closer jump point?’ Do you

really think they could intercept us?”

She should have been upset at the shouting, but was instead comforted to see a natural reaction from Kaz. “I don’t want to find out. They think they can. So, how soon can we jump?”

Kaz got to work. “Well, the whole distance from gravity thing is just regulation. The Inanas won’t be happy with it, but I could plot us a jump point one minute ahead. But how do they think they can find us in Plani orbit? There’re thousands of ships there. It’s not like we’re unique. We’re an Eldrandii ship, just like the rest.”

“Don’t know. Just know they’re chasing us. I don’t think jumping close to Ina Cur will piss the Inanas off more than carrying our passenger already has.” She finally reached the captain’s seat, and tapped the code for a direct comm to the signal officer. “Signals, are there any blips chasing the ones chasing us?”

“No, Captain. Unless it’s a close chase.”

Emily looked at Kaz. “Can’t be sure, but I get the feeling that this is official.”

“You mean we’ve got an entire planet coming after us?” Kaz asked incredulously.

Shrugging, Emily had to admit to herself that she liked the idea. At least, a part of her did. The more practical part responded, “Maybe just one country.”

This information distracted Kaz from his calculations. Trying to contribute, Liam piped in, “we can clear it up after we finish this job. I mean all we have to do is tell them the truth – we didn’t know the passenger or cargo was not supposed to leave Ina Cur. I have our comm log to prove it.”

“Even better – once we get to Plani, we’ll complain to the Ina Cur embassy that we were chased, and put it on them,” Emily decided. “Anyway, we have to get there first. Kaz, how’s the plotting coming along?”

Kaz tapped a final key with a thump and the course showed up on the screen. “One minute to jump. Already sent the message to the engine room.”

“Okay. Brian, looks like a tough turn to the jump point. You got it?” Actually, practically any turn would be difficult with their momentum as it was.

“Got it,” the pilot responded, firing the maneuvering thrusters.

“Jumping in five,” Brian announced, turning on the warning sign for the rest of the crew. Panels around the ship lit up. Emily gripped the corners of her armrests for no particular reason. They entered hyperspace without fanfare, but also without any idea how it happened. The mystery of hyperspace entry made the process consistently nerve-racking despite a long history of safe transit. Folded space, as it was also called, was as bright as day, like a blue-greenish sky with a few dark patches not unlike clouds. Emily could not describe it any better, but instinctively balked at any comparison between it and the features of Earth. Hyperspace was a world all its own.

No course plot appeared on screen while they were in hyperspace, and Brian locked the controls. Changing course in hyperspace was the stuff of legends. The Eldrandii might be able to do it with predictable results, since they had created the jump systems and knew how it all worked. Maybe a bright physicist on Earth could manage it eventually, somehow. As far as Emily knew, no one had tried it. No reason to. Hoping Kaz had done the job right was harrowing enough without trying anything fancy.

“How long in hyperspace?” she asked.

“Fifteen hours. Time to get some sleep,” Kaz suggested hopefully. He didn’t look like he would be able to shut his eyes. Emily had been awake for far too long, though, and this was no party.

“All right,” she said, and then addressed the ship. “Hyperspace crew to the deck. You’ll take over for ten hours.” It seemed like a long time, but you could rely on the alternate crew to sort out their shifts and breaks. They were only keeping the seats warm and standing ready to wake her up if anything went wrong, anyway.

Leaving the bridge with plenty of worries on her mind, she stepped by the signal room and peeked in.

“Hi. Good job spotting those blips. You should probably get some rest. Need you to be wide awake once we get to Plani.”

“Yes, Captain,” the signal officer said, rising from her seat – a cushion on the floor – amidst a hoard of detection hardware. It was an indecipherable mess from the look of it, but the signals officer managed to make it work for her, so Emily did not mind. Actually, she was thrilled. Her choice for signal officer had turned out to be a pro.

A bit embarrassed, but never showing it, Emily said, “what’s your name, by the way? You’ve been so quiet –”

“Jessica Scott, Captain,” the signal officer said, smiling. She was used to going unnoticed. “You can call me Jess, if you want. People always do.”

“Thanks.” Now that Jess was clear of the hardware, Emily saw that the signal officer was plump, but not unattractive. She had a patient look – the kind that bordered on dullness and made her easy to forget. Her workpants and collared shirt were both olive green, and her hair was tied back in a ponytail. Ready for action. Old enough to have some experience, too. Maybe more than Kaz had, in her own specialized way. Emily was no judge of aptitude in this area, but so far, so good.

Emily found it tough getting to sleep, and even more difficult staying asleep. Thanks to all her tossing and turning, her blanket had ended up on the floor. She didn’t have the energy to rise and pick it up. Her mind was working overtime, taking the opportunity to use every ounce of energy while she was prone, stealing it from her muscles. The thoughts seemed to race by, but since they came mixed with dreams and bouts of real sleep, they might have taken hours to form. One involved her talking their way out of the situation if their pursuers actually caught up. Spacing the cargo and passenger was a last resort, but that troubling possibility floated across her mind as well. Ariki might even be noble enough to agree to give himself up. He was religious, so maybe he was prone to martyrdom. It was popular on Earth, after all. That last resort would cost her any chance at keeping up this space venture, though. It would be straight back to Earth with or without her consent.

Her dreams were increasingly more disastrous variations on what might happen in the Sirius system. Pretty vague and unrealistic, though – they were full of odd monstrosities and figures from her past popping up out of nowhere. She considered them illegitimate and less than satisfactory nightmares, since her mind could come up with far more convincing horror plots. One dream nevertheless managed to stick in her mind after she gave up trying to go back to sleep. In a brief gem of clairvoyance, she saw, from the point of view of a spacewalker, a huge lump tangled with wires fastened onto her ship. As the view

moved backward, away from the device, she saw it spew out like a volcano in regular bursts. The view continued to move away, so that the ship became a nearby star. That star then went nova to end the dream. Emily leaped out of bed, recognizing the reality of the situation for the first time.

Not wanting to wake anyone up prematurely on this nocturnal hunch, she took the time to freshen up and to make sure she was thinking clearly. That meant consuming every sugary substance in the vicinity and following it up with some cold bottled coffee kept in the room for just this sort of occasion. Then she donned her battlegear – solid black jeans, tee-shirt, trenchcoat, and boots – and headed out with the kind of unfounded confidence she had shown to her peers while failing miserably in school. Whatever the scorecard said, she was in control of the game.

To her surprise, Kaz, Brian, and Liam were already on the bridge when she arrived. Brian had his seat turned toward the rest of the bridge, and he was clearly facing Kaz, waiting for some instructions. Working hard to keep to her established course, Emily opened the comm without sitting in the captain's seat. "External repair crew, to the bridge," she called into it. Then, to the bridge crew, she said, "I have an idea," and explained her dream and the reason for the course deviations.

Kaz tried to keep his eye on his work, but was forced to look at her in surprise. "I called the others to the bridge a few minutes ago, getting the idea that we had been sabotaged. I've asked the repair crews rig up a drone with a camera so we can take a look outside. Brian will control it from his console. Since the hyperspace crew was awake, we're having them check the interior. Liam's coordinating them. From your . . . dream . . . you're pretty certain the thing's on the outside. Makes sense."

"And you decided to do this . . . without telling me?" Emily struggled to say, ready to punch her presumptuous nav officer. Kaz's smug face was ripe for a shiner.

"You were asleep and there wasn't anything certain yet. It would have taken some time just to get the drone ready, and you wouldn't have been able to help with that, anyway. You needed your sleep, and it sounds like you were . . . productive," Kaz tried to explain. "On

top of the engine section, you said? From your . . . dream, I mean.” His face was expressionless, but he was aware that he was testing her line. He couldn’t help doubting the usefulness of the captain’s dreams while giving better estimation to his own efforts, but wasn’t looking for an embarrassing confrontation. Being pummeled by a female would qualify as embarrassing.

Emily was visibly reddening, and her voice growled with threats underneath each word. “I give orders. I decide what to do. You wake me up.” She was irritated both by the nav officer’s steps to check for sabotage and his ridicule of her dreams. No matter how far-fetched they were, she relied on and trusted her intuition, and opposed anyone who berated her for that faith. It was her magic, and she would not have dared as much as she had without them.

“All right, Captain. What do you want us to do?” Kaz said, knowing that any command she could conceive of would only duplicate his own orders, at least until they had more information.

She shook her head stiffly, recognizing the ploy. “No, don’t try that on me. You have an idea, you tell me. This is my crew. Clear?”

Kaz felt secure that he had won this round. The captain could not exactly go around to the crew and tell them not to take his orders – that sort of thing would only show them how insecure she was. Therefore, as far as they were concerned, he was still a legitimate authority. The captain simply failed to appreciate how much he did to keep the ship running smoothly. If she had to worry her ditsy head about it, she would not know where to start. It was only out of childish spite that she had resisted declaring him first officer, as if she could do without one. Anyway, he had tested the waters and found them just a bit too hot for now. “Clear, Captain.”

“I’m warning you.”

“Understood . . . sir.”

She was still on the verge of a fit, and would have had trouble calming herself down, but the exterior repair crew arrived, and looked uniformly concerned. These four were the spacewalkers, the ones that took care of basic repairs and maintenance while the ship was in orbit. They looked fresh, but worried that they would be blamed for Kaz’s proposed device. Emily had given that angle no thought, only calling them up because she needed someone to check out her theory. Fear

of responsibility was written all over their faces. Judging from how they gave Kaz sheepish glances, he had already questioned them while preparing the bots. Only the cargo crew could claim to have more muscle and stature than these four, so it was odd seeing the ominous looks they gave the frail navigation officer.

“Okay,” Emily said, taking a deep self-righteous breath, “Okay. So we might have some sort of device attached to us that knocks us off course . . . wait a minute,” she looked at Kaz again, this time with panic, “doesn’t that mean we’re off course in hyperspace?”

Kaz sighed. Case and point. “No, I set up a program for the maneuvering thrusters to fire regularly. I had noticed the deviations in our course even after we left orbit, and saw that it was all regular, so setting up a program to deal with it was no problem. Otherwise, I would have told you and jumping would have been out of the question.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It’s normal procedure for the navigator to deal with those problems,” Kaz lied. “Besides, you didn’t take it very well when I told you about the problem in the first place, while we were in orbit. I chose to save us both the trouble of another one of those . . . conversations.”

She bit her lip. “So since it’s normal for you to do that, this thing can’t be just trying to knock us off course in hyperspace. What’s it trying to do, then? Any ideas?”

Silence. She ended it quickly. Taking her seat in an attempt to reassure herself, she decided to talk to the crew, explaining the circumstances over the comm system. She made clear how little they knew for sure, and that she would appreciate suggestions. It took a few moments, but the first clue came in from the engineering room. Emily rarely got down to engineering to check things out, and Kaz had more interaction with them than she did. They seemed willing to take his orders, at least.

“Captain,” the engineering officer said, “Whatever it is, we think it’s knocking us off course because it vents regularly. If it’s strong enough to do that, then closing the vents will make it overload and explode.”

Emily was instinctively puzzled. “Why wouldn’t they just use a normal bomb? Oh, wait —”

“They want us to know it’s there,” Kaz said, beating Emily to it. “Which means they think we can’t remove it. They’ll meet us around Plani, threaten us to get our passenger, and probably blow us up after we turn him over. Good news is, they want him alive. Then again, maybe they won’t take much time to blow him up if we try to stall.”

Having heard the captain’s announcement, Ariki had made his way to the bridge and entered walking upright. Without waiting to be noticed, as if used to having himself heard wherever he went, he said, “Captain, we need to talk about situation.” His translator buzzed the words, cutting through the collective thoughts of those in the room.

“Go ahead,” she snapped back, with obvious irritation. Taking the opportunity, Kaz went up to Brian, and they started piloting the prepared drone out of its small vacuum chamber. The exterior repair crew waited uncertainly.

Ariki looked around at the many disheveled forms on the bridge, some having nothing better to do than to listen in. “Not in private, Captain?”

“No. Go ahead. We don’t have much time before we exit jump into Plani space.”

Ariki was standing as tall as his form would allow, and was rigid in his height. His words were going to be impossible for the crew to take seriously, but he did his best to back them with as much dignity as he could muster. “I am . . . prophet to major religious sect on Ina Cur. Opposition sect, you might say. In serious danger. Fleeing for sanctuary elsewhere – Plani first, no knowing where after. My pursuers will kill me if necessary, but do not want . . . martyrdom. Powerful ones would like to capture me and force public . . . recantation.”

“But they won’t wait to kill you, will they?”

“Perhaps for a moment. They will not risk me surviving free.”

Emily sighed. “Kinda guessed that. Well, you know what we’re dealing with. We know what’s going to happen once we get out of hyperspace—” She paused as the drone’s camera, filling the view screen with images of the ship’s exterior, caught sight of an anomalous body in the distance, on top of the engine pod. As the drone proceeded, the complexity of the device became clear. It seemed to have a hundred wires attached to the ship’s hull. It was exactly as she dreamed it, and the sight of her ship exploding popped into her mind. Emily briefly

considered how she missed it on all her trips between the surface of Ina Cur and the ship, but her trajectory had been totally wrong. The device was at the top of the ship, and she had approached from below.

“Well, I can see why they weren’t worried about us finding the thing,” Kaz said, looking up to the view screen while standing next to Brian. “They definitely want us to know we’ve been screwed. Pretty effective, I’d say.”

“Don’t know about that,” Ben, the head of the repair crew, piped in. “Not very sure, but it looks like a Plani device – something they stick onto ships carrying extremely sensitive material. They tell everyone about it. The idea is that if someone hijacks the ship, the captain will ditch in the escape pod, and then detonate the thing with the bad guys on board.”

“Weird,” Emily decided. “So, any idea about what to do with it?”

“Can’t do anything in here. We’ll have to wait until we’re in normal space.”

Walk softly, Emily reminded herself. “You can’t go out and check right now? Just take a look and see if you can figure anything out about it?” She was asking them to violate one of the chief superstitions of space travel. There were no spacewalks in hyperspace. No leaving the ship whatsoever. It was silly – in theory, nothing could happen. However, people rarely held up their beliefs to the scrutiny of logic.

One look at Ben and his comrades made it clear that they would not yield to her – nor any captain – and they were offended that she would even ask them. “In normal space,” Ben repeated.

“Okay . . . so what other ideas do we have?”

Kaz knew he would be the only one to propose the obvious. “Will our Inana friend be willing to turn himself in to save us? What are the chances that the guys following us will leave us alone if they get him?”

Ariki bowed his head, looking at the floor. “I would be willing, and if it is clear to them that you did not know of my status, they would disable the device. They are bounty hunters, not criminals. My followers, though, would hunt you to death. Lack many ships, though. Main peril for you would be on planets. I will send message to my people on Plani, so they know situation.”

“You’re basically saying that if we turn you over, we’ll be all right,” Emily said incredulously.

“Yes,” Ariki admitted reluctantly. He had come to the bridge to say exactly that, but the word still exited his lips with difficulty.

Emily and Kaz glanced at each other. There was the definite sense between them that average space traders got into far less trouble than they seemed to. Word that the ship was cursed could easily spread like wildfire throughout the crew if they turned Ariki over to bounty hunters, and fanatical Inanas would be hunting them on every planet. They both saw that.

“Kaz, how long till we leave hyperspace?” Emily asked, indicating that she intended to stay silent about Ariki’s words.

“Three hours and a few minutes.”

A member of the exterior repair crew shifted a bit. Emily caught the uncertain movement and looked at the young man questioningly. Clearing his throat, and trying to avoid the looks of his companions, he said, “Captain, I wouldn’t mind going out to look at the thing.”

Responding before the captain because he had guessed what the young man was about to say, Ben hissed, “You don’t know anything about it. What are you trying to do?”

“Trying to help,” the volunteer said, accusingly.

Emily wanted to ask his name, but chose not to. “Are you sure?”

He nodded.

“Kaz, could you show him where the thing is?”

To Emily’s surprise, Kaz shook his head. Usually as levelheaded and calculating as people came, the nav officer now defended the repair crew against this breach of their customs. “Captain, you can’t let him do this.” Emily had no words, so he continued, “there are ways of doing things, and a captain has to make sure that no one disobeys the unwritten rules.”

That was it. She had to confront Kaz. He was only willing to let her play Captain as long as he agreed with her decisions, but otherwise, he felt perfectly comfortable with telling her off as if he was directing her how to act the part. Through grinding teeth, she said, “I’ll talk to you in my ready room. Now.” Turning to the volunteer, she said, “Get ready to head out.”

“But Captain,” Kaz again started to object.

“Do it,” she said, menacingly. She left the bridge, heading for her tiny ready room on the right side of the corridor, immediately outside. It had a bare desk and two chairs, and this was the first time she had used it, so the machined air was stale. Kaz followed, his own temper rising. Resolved to get the first word in, though, she beat him to it. “Who’s captain on this ship?”

“Captain,” he said with emphasis to avoid directly answering, and then continued in a reasoning tone, “it is unlikely that the repair crew can do anything about that device. Asking one of them to do this will cause divisions within the repair crew, and make the rest of the crew dissatisfied with your command. Will you be asking them to go against their beliefs?”

“This is life and death.”

“Not for the crew,” Kaz said coldly, “we can just turn over our passenger –”

“Oh come on. You’ve seen the movies. They always take the guy then kill everyone else anyway.”

“I don’t think these Inanas have seen that movie. Ariki thinks they’ll let us go. The repair crew knows it, so the rest of the crew will soon. You haven’t done anything to show them you’re a good captain, but now you’ve shown them that you don’t respect them. I’m not religious, and I don’t think there’s any reason to worry about spacewalking in hyperspace. I’d go myself, but I have no clue what I’m looking at, just seeing the images the bot sends back.”

“Well, maybe the guy going out isn’t superstitious, either. Did you think of that?”

Kaz’s stared at her, saturated with scorn. “He’s part of a team,” he said slowly, in case she needed the extra time to understand the information, “and you don’t even know his name, do you? The only person on the repair crew I know is Ben Wetzler. He spoke for them, and that means he’s their leader. His decision was theirs. The kid you’re sending out won’t be part of the team anymore. You can figure out what that means on your own. I was just trying to save you the trouble. If you need me, I’ll be on the bridge.”

He turned to leave and Emily thought about stopping him. If she just stood in front of the door, he would not be able to get past – she was easily quicker and stronger. But Kaz had been right, and

as much as she hated to admit it, her decision was going to cause problems. She would have to deal with it later. For now, there were more pressing issues. Kaz could use his cold logic and throw Arika overboard, but that would destroy the crew's confidence in her more than any superstition would. Just as she was about to leave the ready room, heading back to the hostile bridge, Arika himself appeared in the doorway, and waited for permission to come in.

"Well?"

"Captain," the semi-biped addressed, still at full height, "tampering with device will cause disaster. I will surrender myself. You will be safe. I will inform my followers once we exit hyperspace. If pursuers overlook cargo, please deliver as planned. My followers will show gratitude, and pay you."

"It's more complicated than that," she said, a bit too sharply. "I've already botched one job. I don't want a losing streak."

"Losingstreak?" Arika repeated in English, clearly not understanding the meaning of the words.

That was a bit ironic, she suddenly realized. "You're religious. Do you understand superstition?"

"Baseless belief. Coincidence assumed to be pattern. That is not religion," he responded with what might have been a testy tone.

"How about . . . a bad omen?"

"Yes. And you are saying that failing to transport me to Plani will be a bad omen?"

"Yeah. 'Specially after I messed up last time."

"And that you will have trouble controlling crew after omen?"

She flopped into the chair on her side of the desk, propped her boots on the desk theatrically, and said, "I barely control them now. Kaz controls them, I think. But I think you've got the idea."

Arika's physiology prevented him from sitting in the other seat, but he climbed onto it, and perched his forelegs on the desk while leaving his hind legs and tail in the seat. Emily put her own feet down instinctively, feeling that having her boots in his face would only be venting her anger at the wrong target. Her moment of hesitation allowed him to get settled and ready to speak.

"You are not an experienced leader, I see."

"Yeah. Don't have followers, that's for sure," she snapped back.

“As one who does, let me tell you what I discovered.”

“I don’t want followers, Inana. Don’t need followers.”

Ariki ignored her and continued. “You are worried your people will not follow you. Do not be concerned about this. Be a leader, and others will follow. Be strong and confident, and others will trust your judgment. If you fear, your crew will fear. If you are irrational, so will your crew be.”

“So you think I should just magically stop being afraid or worried?”

Ariki thought about this, and then said, “There is rational fear, and irrational fear. After this passes, do not continue fearing. If you are afraid of your crew’s . . . discontent, they will be discontented. If you see this as losing streak, so will they.”

Emily calmed down a bit. She had all too little experience dealing with other species, but Ariki had caught at least two words in her language, even if he voiced them in an eerie high pitched voice. “What should I see it as, then?”

“Unavoidable. How could you have avoided this? You could not. Where is fault? Nowhere unless with me. It is right for me to take responsibility and for you to get reward for the risk taken.”

She still had a pit in her stomach at that thought. “Well, we’ll see what we can do about that device first. I’m not going to call him back in.”

The Inana seemed to slink back a bit. “Hyperspace is a magical place. Many superstitions about it. No good will come from challenging them. Eons of space travel have not shaken them. Ideas have . . . inertia. Be careful of ideas in future. This time should not cause too much trouble.”

“My navigator thinks different.”

“He does not have my experience,” Ariki said pointedly.

There was a blank silence. Sensing that their conference was at an end, Emily rose and sighed, “back to work.” Ariki remained in the room as she exited and stepped onto the bridge.

“Okay, what’s up?”

To her surprise, it was Kaz who answered. The repair crew was still on the bridge, but they kept silent. “He’s still looking. We can see what he sees on the viewscreen.”

An exasperated voice crackled over the comm. “Captain,” the spacewalker called in, his helmet cam aimed at a solid panel with a keypad devoid of symbols, “this is no good.”

“No good as in no chance?”

“No good as in messing with this thing is more of a chance than I’d like to take. I’m pretty sure that the key wires are behind this panel, and it looks like even getting to them in the wrong way’ll set this thing to explode. Could try . . . but —”

Emily felt like slamming something and cursing, and barely contained herself. A glance at the repair crew made her want to punch Ben. They were murmuring to each other, clearly considering this whole hyperspace excursion a transgression without reason. A pointless mistake. She could have sworn they were supposed to find the fix for this. Flushing from her mind the obvious conclusion that their trip was cursed, she cleared her throat and tried not to sound too disappointed. “All right. Come on back. Doesn’t look like that’ll work.”

“It was a long shot anyway, Captain.”

Kaz looked at her, trying to indicate something too subtle for her to catch. Seeing that she was only puzzled, he decided to move in a different direction. “It is looking like we might have to negotiate, Captain.”

“Looks like,” she said with reservations.

“You up to it?”

Once again, it was a cockiness check from Kaz. She had to admire how he was handling all of this. “If I’m not, I guess you’d like to take over from here, wouldn’t you?”

“And be responsible for getting us blown up? It’s all yours, Captain. I’ll be heading for the lander as soon as we hit Plani space.”

That was a bit more of a serious note, and the captain decided to take it as one. It was a good way to shame Ben and his bunch, anyway. Addressing the crew, she said, “Once we reach Plani space, I want everyone ready to bail out. Escape pods by stations – four per pod. If things start to go wacky, I’ll turn on the red alert, and everyone except for the bridge crew should head for the pods. Don’t go before the red alert, or the enemy will destroy your pod assuming that you are our passenger trying to escape,” she remembered that tidbit from

one of her grandfather's stories. It had been one of the more exciting adventures. "Kaz, program the trajectories into the pods now."

"I always do that prior to jump, Captain," Kaz said, with full exasperation. "Regulations."

"Right. Shouldn't come to that, but if things go nasty. On red alert, we'll maneuver the ship to cover the escape." She turned off the comm. and mouthed, voiceless, at Kaz, "can we actually do that?"

Kaz shrugged and said, "Depends. I'll try. The closer we are to Plani, the better. We'll be exiting into normal space in half an hour."

Emily decided to stay on the bridge. She dismissed the repair crew, but worried what they might do to the young volunteer when he got back in. By all rights, he should be considered a hero. Others had probably walked in hyperspace before, but he was definitely the first human. The real issue at hand quickly replaced that concern in her mind. Emily occasionally glanced at the door out to the main corridor, wondering if Ariki was going to come back in to say something useful, but he did not. Ethan popped onto the bridge, though, wondering if he could be of some help, and by the very offer making it clear that he felt powerless in the face of events that threatened his life. Emily sent him to the conference room to talk things over with Ariki – to get all the details. Whatever actually happened, Ethan would get some valuable experience and information. However long he had left to put it to use, she thought unwillingly.

She breathed out heavily. Of course, that was wrong. She was already getting used to the idea that they would be turning Ariki over, and that the Inana hunters would let them go in exchange. They wouldn't want to start an interstellar scandal, after all. As Ariki had said, she would be able to just sail away. With some profit for her troubles, like he had said. It was . . . wrong.

After an eternity of these thoughts chasing after each other in her mind, Brian finally broadcast the hyperspace exit warning. Kaz would have beaten him to it, but the navigator was completely occupied, tapping away like a master organist in a spiritual trance. Emily had no idea what he was doing, and wondered whether he did it all just for show. It was impressive, anyway.

As the ship left hyperspace, Emily instinctively ordered, "Engines full, maintain acceleration until we hit the Plani speed limits."

“Already plotted, Captain.”

“Signals,” she commed, “do you have anything for me, Jessica?”

“Not yet, Captain. Plan space is a mess, you know. Thousands of ships in and out. It’ll take me a minute to see if anything’s moving out of its way to get us.”

In an unpleasant turn, Emily realized that she wanted there to be something chasing them at this point. Otherwise, the signal to detonate the device could be light-minutes away without them knowing it. If the bad guys don’t feel like chasing, they could just push the big red button. To have any chance, she needed to be able to talk to them, if only to surrender.

Trouble was that she was far from a negotiator. She was used to getting her way. The first to admit that she was spoiled as a child, she still got frustrated easily when things went against her. Same with Kaz, when she thought about it. Anyway, she wasn’t eloquent or diplomatic. She was a girl of action. Maybe the language barrier would help mask her inadequacies – especially the way people always thought she was lying when she was trying her best to talk carefully. Maybe physical differences would keep them from reading her face, and seeing if she was bluffing. Reading her face –

“Ethan, to the bridge,” she yelled through the comm.

Ethan ran out of the ready room and onto the bridge. “What?”

“Ask Arika about Inana facial expressions. How do they tell if someone is lying, or angry, or sure of himself. You know, we’ve got shifty eyes, folded arms, and stuff like that. Anything.”

“Got it,” he said. “And you . . . don’t want them to see Arika on the bridge, just in case.”

“Right. And maybe they’ll also think they can bluff us. Not like there’s any reason for them to, but they might anyway. I want them to lie to us about something. It’ll give me something to try.”

Ethan nodded and went back into the conference room. Emily briefly congratulated herself on her ingenuity, and for being a horrible yet frequent poker player, but it was half-hearted. For all she knew, the Inanas could be stone-faced when they wanted to be.

“Captain,” Jessica called up, “I’ve got them. Three blips not trying to hide themselves. They’re coming right after us, already at high speed. They’ll catch us up in half an hour. Their acceleration

can't match ours, though. We'll be able to break away from them eventually."

"They won't let us do that. We'll wait for them to comm us, but if they don't do it in fifteen minutes, Liam, I want you to open a channel. I want some time to talk it over with these guys."

"Yes, Captain."

After fourteen minutes, Ethan returned to the bridge and Liam announced that the pursuing ships were requesting a comm link.

"Let's get a good look at them, then," Emily said, standing firm and gripping the top of the captain's seat to help with the tension. Ethan stood beside her, hoping to find some point to deliver his information.

"Bridge comm or ship comm, Captain?" Liam asked.

"Ship. Want to make sure the crew knows what's happening," she said, eyeing the red alert button.

Two Inanas then appeared on the main screen, obscuring the external view but placed behind the flight path projection so that there was a blue line across the face of the one in the center. Evidently, the Inanas were using a more private screen to transmit the message, so only a minimal amount of their ship's interior was visible. There was some advantage in this for Emily, though, since she could give her opponents any number of false impressions about the state of her ship and crew.

"Captain, by now you know explosive device is on your ship. If not, notice constant course deviations. We want Inana known as Ariki, wanted criminal of our government. If he not delivered, your ship destroyed. If delivered, no hostile action." Emily could not tell one Inana apart from another, but this one's speech translated more roughly than Ariki's.

Just for form, she said, "we don't know any Ariki --"

"You lie." There was no indication of doubt. "You insult us. You die."

She quickly held up her hands in what she hoped was a gesture of submission. "Okay, okay, we have Ariki. Geez."

Ethan whispered to her quickly. "They're bounty hunters. They're not government officials or anything, but they're hired and given a warrant."

Emily doubted that the knowledge changed anything. Maybe she could take a different attitude with them, but they seemed a bit trigger-happy.

At the Inana end, they understood her next words to be, “we did not know of this. We transport passenger peacefully. We do not respond to threats. Company policy. Sabotage of ship leads to legal actions and interstellar crisis. Perhaps we can negotiate, but cargo cannot be transferred under threat.” It was the best ploy she could come up with.

“You have no choice. We mean our threat. You will die.”

Ethan whispered to her, “he’s nervous and not sure about things. The gills are opening wider than usual, and Inanas take in more air when they’re nervous.”

Well, there could be a whole lot of reasons why this Inana could be nervous, but at least this was a start. “We do not understand. We want to cooperate, but cannot under these circumstances. There are regulations.” Hopefully, the Inanas had no clue about the human propensity for violating regulations. She wanted them to think that humans, or at least the captain negotiating with them, blindly followed orders.

Their response gave her hope. “If you wish to show cooperation, decelerate to match our acceleration. Match us as long as we speak.”

Without hesitation, she nodded to Kaz to adjust their thrust. While sending the calculations down to engineering and the new plot to Brian, he also took the liberty to prepare an emergency deceleration. A drop-back maneuver was within the realm of possibility, if necessary. With any luck, it would put their single pulse cannon in position to fire on the enemy ship. Since the Inana would detonate the device in response, he planned to execute the program right before the escape pods launched.

“We’re decelerating,” she said. “Now please tell us, is our passenger dangerous? Is that why you’re chasing him like this? Our regulations make exceptions in special cases, to avoid violence.”

The Inanas talked it over at the other end, turning off the audio as they conferred.

Taking the ideal opportunity to pipe in, Ethan said, “The other one – the first officer, I guess – is looking excited. A bunch of signs,

especially the hand gestures. I think he just wants to blow us up.”

“Their captain knows better,” Kaz advised. “He wants some real proof to show the government. Blowing us up means they have no proof they killed Ariki, except our word for it.”

“Good point. Definitely shouldn’t invite Ariki onto the bridge, then.”

The Inanas opened the comm again. “Your passenger is a religious zealot. It is . . . odd he would accept your help. He blames all things on off-worlders. We believe he seeks to disrupt meeting of Interstellar Community council. May plan terrorist act. He is real threat. Must be captured.”

Out of curiosity, Emily looked at Ethan. He shrugged, indicating that there were no signs. But she knew that the Inana captain was lying. She had talked with Ariki enough to know that. The bluff was good, though, because she could not simply contradict him. She had to work around the lie. The mention of the ISC – the Interstellar Community – had given her an idea.

“Please, give me some time to check the . . . regulations on this. There should be . . . transfer guidelines.” She tapped her side panel, pretending that the ship data LCD was an electronic rulebook. She took the time to think out a plausible counter. Something that would be in the law. The passenger was a criminal or a suspected criminal. Why would someone refuse to turn him over? After a moment’s thought, she had the answer. “Our regulations state that criminals will be handed over to ISC personnel only. We cannot know that you are not accomplices of his. Maybe we are already handing him over to authorities, and you want to rescue him.”

“Nonsense. You will –”

She shouted back, taking charge of the situation. “You have sabotaged my ship. You have threatened my crew even though we are not criminals. You seem to be terrorists to me. I have to be suspicious of you. Anyway, we are in open space. ISC has clear . . . jurisdiction. What do you have to say?”

As she finished, she realized that the push had been too far. The Inana first officer was now openly challenging the authority of the captain. The bounty hunters obviously preferred the more direct approach in place of negotiations. So, the Inana captain returned to

more familiar ground. "Give us Ariki, or you will die."

Her success in the negotiation suddenly turned into a pyrrhic victory. The opposition had a clear upper hand thanks to the obvious and unconcealed device on her ship's hull. Stalling was clearly not going to save them. At least Ariki got a chance to send his message. Just in case, she threw her final stalling tactic at them, knowing that their patience was wearing thin. "Captain," she said in as affronted a tone as she had ever whined in, "I can't trust you if you keep making threats like this. I am trying to work with you. Maybe you have a warrant for Ariki's arrest?"

Another silent conference ensued on the other side, and it ended with the Inana captain ordering his first officer off the bridge. In the meantime, Emily sent Ethan to Ariki. Probably, her passenger had already heard how things were going, but she wanted to be sure that he was ready for the worst, including the bit about sending his message. He returned with confirmation that Ariki's message was sent, but there was no guarantee that it was received. On the bright side, the bounty hunters remained unaware.

"Transmitting order for arrest of Ariki issued by Empire of Most Fair. Will also transmit communications with Empire of Fair to show we represent emperor's will."

"Getting the transmission now," Liam said, "I'll have it displayed in a minute."

Ethan drew closer to Emily and murmured, "the Empire of the Fair's the largest country on Ina Cur, and the one with the largest military." He was reciting from memory.

"Ariki told you about their politics?"

"No," he said, a bit embarrassed, "I just watched a whole lot of Alien Species episodes when I was a kid. My qualifications, remember?"

Never surprised by her friend's memorization of television documentaries, Emily's view was suddenly full of documents tiled on the forward screen. They were all scanned plastic sheets imprinted with Inana writing. Liam pushed the button for a translation overlay, but its results were choppy. Nevertheless, the document on the upper left had all the seals that a person would expect from something official, with Ariki's name rendered in Latin script.

"Cut out audio," she ordered Liam. Once he nodded in her

direction, she continued, “what’re the chances they’re bluffing and we can call them out on it.”

“Won’t do you any good,” Kaz noted, “and they’re past impatient.”

“It might. We could try to contact ISC authorities.”

“By the time the signal got through the bureaucracy, we’d be dead. The bounty hunters might get fined.”

“They’re bounty hunters,” Ethan repeated, “maybe we can pay them better than the Empire of the Fair’s giving them. Maybe Ariki can pay us back.”

Emily sighed. She knew better than that, but Kaz saved her the trouble of telling Ethan. The bounty hunters would have to be paid enough not only to make up for this job, but for all future jobs as well. If any hint got out that they let their target go for money, they could be criminals as well. Anyway, bounty hunting took in a whole lot more money than honest trading. Their price was too high for her. “Open our comm connection.” Emily cleared her throat. This was going to be hard.

Then it got harder. Ariki stepped onto the bridge. “Captain,” he started, “I will surrender myself. There is no choice.”

“Will you get back to the —”

“I am about to fire, Captain,” the translated voice came from the other ship. Then, realizing what he was seeing, the opposing captain said, “seeing my prey . . . makes me impatient.”

“Your guarantee that the device will be disabled,” she said quickly.

“We are locked onto you. We can destroy your ship with a shot. We disable the device now as a sign to you. Do not alter vector or accelerate, or we fire immediately. Device will be released. At a safe distance from you, we will explode it.”

Emily and her crew waited uncertainly. The captain contemplated the red alert button, wondering if the sight of Ariki had driven the Inana captain to explode the device. After all, he now had his proof. She held her finger from the button, though, and when the explosion came, it only rocked the ship slightly. Once Kaz compensated for this, he said, “I’m taking the course correction program off. If the device is really off, we won’t be off course at the interval. I’ll be able to say

for sure in a minute.”

The Inana captain had been true to his word, so there was only one course. Some large cannon was no doubt now locked on to them and ready to fire. “All right, we’ll bring Arika to you using a pod. Please send us a course to your docking bay. Ethan, escort Arika to the cargo bay’s exit chamber.”

“Course received,” Liam said, “sending it over to Kaz.”

“Got it. Programming landing pod one.”

Emily ordered, “Pilot one, please get your pod ready. Course has already been sent.”

After a few minutes, Emily informed the Inana captain that their pod was ready to head over. Receiving a warning that the Inana would convert the pod into energy if it deviated from the course provided, she assured the opposing captain of her good will through gritted teeth.

For all the confrontation that had occurred before, the finale concluded smoothly. As the landing pod was on its return journey, Arika appeared on the bridge of the Inana ship, and met with its captain. Satisfied, the Inana captain declared their business at an end and shut the comm link. His ship and its two escorts decelerated, breaking away for the jump back to Ina Cur.

The bridge crew waited silently for the return of the landing pod. Ethan rejoined them, and did not bother to keep his words to Emily when he said in a choked voice, “Arika wanted me to remind you that the bounty hunters didn’t ask for the cargo. He . . . the last thing he said was that he wanted the cargo delivered as planned. He was real serious about it. I don’t think it’s just rare food.”

“No kidding,” Emily said, irritated at herself, but willing to take on convenient targets as well. “We’re definitely finishing this job off. Not like we have anything to do with the cargo if we don’t.”

Brian turned around from his panel. “You don’t think the cargo’s weapons or bombs or something. I mean, what do we really know about Arika?”

Emily was about to reply sharply, but checked herself. Heck, the Inana was a major religious leader – he could probably dupe people into believing he was a good guy without even trying. She suddenly felt the burden of her continuing naïveté – the fact that she had only ever posed as a rebel. Arika was the real thing. What could she say

about the lengths he would go to for his beliefs? He had already shown a willingness – maybe even eagerness – to sacrifice himself. She had no clue what she had in the cargo bay.

“Yeah, but what difference does that make?” said Emily. “We don’t want his followers chasing us across the galaxy. And what if we break the locks and find out it’s something totally harmless? The best way to get out of this is to deliver the goods without messing with them. That’s what we would have done anyway.”

Thankfully, Kaz had no objections, but Brian persisted, “Captain, what if we end up responsible for a huge disaster? On Plani, that could mean millions of people dying.”

Kaz intervened. “Once we get down there we’ll ask to see what the cargo was. If they refuse, we’ll notify the authorities. That’s the best we can do. If these are bombs, we can’t go around with the crates in our bay. If we turn to weapons dealing, we’ll really be in trouble. We’re in the business of hauling cargo, not law enforcement. No one expects us to inspect the cargo.”

Emily nodded, and added nothing. With the pod docked in the bay, she was eager to get this all behind her so she could work on her relationship with the crew. She already had a couple of things in mind, and had no doubt others would have proposals of their own. She desperately needed to learn some names, for starters.

“Plotting a course for Plani landing, Captain. We will need clearance to dock with the Dael city drop ship.”

“Liam?”

“I’m on it,” the comm. officer confirmed.

“It’s too bad we can’t just leave the cargo in the station for this job. Using the dropship and lifter will cost us,” Kaz noted.

“They paid us enough to make up for it. How long will we have to wait for the drop?”

She waited for the response from Liam. “We’re lucky. Next drop’s in five hours Earth time, they say, and we’ll be on board in three. It could have been three or four days.”

Emily had never experienced a dropship landing on a planet before, but she had every reason to expect that it would be relaxing, or at least more relaxing than bringing the ship to a landing themselves. Her ship could manage an atmospheric landing and takeoff, but it would

be more dangerous and more expensive in fuel.

As it turned out, the rendezvous with the dropship and the journey down was a breeze. The lander carried down all of the trading station's deliveries and at least a dozen other ships. Like with all things, the Plani packed it efficiently, and to the brim. That was impressive, since it was almost a quarter of a mile in each dimension. On its way up, it could serve as a lifter for entire stations, if necessary. It was just a vertical descent pod aimed at a clearing in the city of Dael. Its rockets were primarily directed to slow its approach to the surface, and small maneuvering units maintained its aim. Emily couldn't imagine the thing lifting off – the energy used must be impressive. Nevertheless, the Plani operators made the trip at least fifty times every Plani year. The lifter system was necessary, considering the massive trading volume that the planet handled.

Plani seemed like a mass of metal as they descended. They were treated to a full-on view of the northern continent. Its southern counterpart was mostly a dense rainforest preserved to provide a breathable atmosphere, inhabited by extremely hostile animals and criminals serving life sentences. In the sardine-can cities of the north, the air was painfully thin, and even species for which the nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere was nominally suitable found a portable air supply necessary.

In the key cities, though, clearly marked drop zones, landing strips, and the bullet rail path interrupted the grayness. Around the supersonic rail line, a broad greenway flourished – a forest of sorts. At the side of the slower lines, there were slim stretches of a grass-like plant. The supersonic line crossed the entire northern continent, and was as distinguishable from space as the world's coastlines. Ethan briefly mentioned to Emily that the parks around the rail lines were important to the Plani because they served as spots for social gatherings – especially for the lower classes who felt the world of the gray ignored their interests.

Emily's only experience with the Plani was when one of them took all the profits from her first job at gunpoint, after just having paid her. To rub it in, the bastard had used an Earth handgun – presumably because the station anti-weapons sensors had yet to be programmed to detect them. She had been forced to access her account, transfer the

payment back to his, and then to face her crew with empty hands. She could have put off the explanation to the crew until it came time to split the profits, but that would have caused even more problems. As it was, her failure sparked Kaz's intense disaffection with her command. After she had openly wondered why the Plani had bothered to transfer the money in the first place, and then only asked for the same amount back, Kaz informed her of what everyone supposedly already knew. The Plani had some sort of honor-among-thieves thing, so that the way the Plani swindled her counted as fair. Ethan had pointed out that if she had pulled out a weapon after the Plani had, he would have left without any malice or standoff. If only someone had mentioned all of this to her earlier –

Anyway, this time they were delivering to Inanas living on Plani who, with any luck, were ignorant of Plani trading culture. There were enough complications to deal with as it was. What about Inana culture and the peculiar beliefs of Ariki's cult? Images of chaotic religious rituals and fiery sacrifices flashed through her imagination's eye, and she shuddered, only now realizing the bizarre possibilities that could be awaiting her.

The lander smashed safely onto the surface of the planet. Suddenly they were in the midst of a bustling port with a slot for everything that could come out of the ship. All cargo pods had trains waiting to take them to their final destinations, and all ships had a berth where they could conduct business. Standard transport pads were zipping through the place in every destination, sometimes under remote control. More impressive was when chains of them were rigged together, looking much like the trains that were waiting to haul them out.

The Inanas were already waiting for them at the berth by the time the tow truck released the ship and went out to take care of other business. Their quick arrival was no surprise, since the dropships provided a complete inventory to the port before leaving the orbiting space dock. Screens all over the place displayed ship arrival times for the benefit of those awaiting a passenger transport. The worrying part of the Inana presence was the look on their faces. It was easy to tell that they were angry. Rage flowed right out of the Inana gathering and filled the hangar-like berth. As a more astute student of Inana behavior, Ethan noted the erratic oscillations in their body, and the

tension in their forelegs. They were all standing.

Emily wondered if there were any signs of grieving as the amphibians met Ethan and her at the edge of the open cargo hatch. She would have preferred to see grief. Remaining as close to the ship as they could get without being on it, she and Ethan engaged the Inanas without weapons. If the Inanas had guns hidden in their packs, there would be just enough time to get back into the ship and close the hatch.

“Human captain,” the Inana at the center of the front row of seven called out, “where is Ariki, who paid to be brought here?”

Emily was about to ask whether they had received Ariki’s message, but quickly deduced that all they expected her to do was make the bad news official. They had been expecting the worst even before she had stepped out. Heck, the fate of Ariki had probably been foretold or something. She steeled herself, and got ready to deliver the news in as dignified a way as possible, definitely wanting to make it clear that she respected Ariki.

“The danger was not made clear to me,” she started, all apologies, “and my ship was sabotaged in orbit around Ina Cur. We tried to remove the sabotage device in hyperspace, but failed. After hyperspace exit, we were intercepted by bounty hunters. We tried to negotiate and failed. Ariki chose to surrender himself to save us. He told us to deliver the cargo to you despite the disaster. We obeyed.” She thought the “obeyed” part was a nice touch. Hopefully, the translators caught all of that. She had kept it as simple and clear as she could.

The Inana leader was a bit ambivalent in his silence. The others were clearly looking to him for direction, so the reception was entirely in his hands.

“Have heard of this. Ariki died honorable, then?” the leader finally said, his words translating poorly compared to Ariki’s because he spoke in a more peculiar dialect. “Saving your lives?”

Emily chose to avoid the fact that Ariki was still alive, and only captured, understanding that the difference was, in this case, irrelevant. “Yes, very honorably. My whole crew knows he sacrificed himself to save our lives.”

“Very well. Certainly understand human captain could not have known what would come. Of cargo, Ariki followers will take

possession now.”

The transition had been so quick that Emily had no idea how to broach the subject. She had to try, though. “Umm . . . could we ask what it is? Cargo, I mean.” She tried a different tact. “Was it important to Ariki? Will it help his cause?”

The Inanas were clearly suspicious, but their leader had planned to explain the cargo anyway. He said, “Bring cargo out, and all will be shown. By entering unlock code for crates, Ariki followers show . . . are rightful recipients, then pay rest of fee.”

“You don’t have to pay –”

“Will pay,” the Inana insisted. “Now, cargo.”

Emily signaled the cargo crew, who brought the pallets out. The cargo crew had spared the crates even the slightest damage, but the Inanas conducted a quick check anyway. Satisfied that the exteriors showed no signs of wear, the leader stepped up to a seemingly random crate and entered his code. There was a snap, after which he lifted the lid slowly. Swaying with obvious relief, he set the lid aside, and pulled an object from the crate. Emily had no guess about what it was at first, seeing only a light-greenish box, but then the leader opened it, turning one leaf after another. On the leaves were Inana writing, though in a more elaborate form than on the bounty hunter warrant. The object was obviously a book written on pages formed from an Inana plant. It was a marked contrast from the plastic sheets now practically universal throughout the ISC.

Ethan ventured a guess. “These are . . . Ariki’s writings?”

“Yes. Only copy. Very important. Ariki did not wish copies made until his death. Now, Ariki’s followers will publish.”

Emily was stunned. “All of this? He wrote . . . all of this?”

Agitated at the disrespect implied, the Inana responded with quick words, “This is fraction of Ariki’s wisdom. Time was too short for him to finish. Universal wisdom cannot be kept in crates, no matter how many. Ariki is thanked by all followers for doing his best.”

The other Inanas then intoned something, clearly reciting a formulated thanks to their prophet.

“What’s this all about, anyway?” she said as soon as they finished the chant, hoping she was not interrupting a more elaborate ceremony. “I mean, you put my ship and crew at risk without telling us why. I

know things didn't turn out well, but I'd still like to know what's going on."

The Inanas were predictably flustered, but Emily felt it was time to sound stern – now that it was clear they intended to spare her life. Their leader composed his people, and adjusted to her change in tone. "Apologies for not informing Captain, but would make no difference. A chance Captain was not honorable, not worth such risk. Space travel is difficult to arrange. Ariki followers are persecuted on Ina Cur, against Interstellar Community's freedom of belief, and are here to petition community. Ariki ordered by Empire of Fair not to come here, but he wished to explain our position."

"So, why would the Empire care so much about what you believe?"

The Inana stood proudly. His oscillations were more rigid, as if he was standing at attention. "Because Ariki followers are anarchist, speaking against Empire on Ina Cur. Empire takes over other nations, expands breeding grounds forcefully. In ancient times, Empire coexisted peacefully with others. Outside influence, different from Inana nature and beliefs, influences Empire. Inana are simple species with small populations and low technology. Easy target for outsiders who use Empire to gain control over Ina Cur."

Conspiracy theories. Theirs was a reasonable one, at least, but still vague and virtually impossible to prove. Anarchists, though . . . it took some mental adjustment for her to think of these Inanas as anarchists, but she had no doubt they meant it. Anyway, religious heresy and anarchy went together just as well as religious orthodoxy and autocracy. Emily had the ideas, but lacked the words for them. The religion was clearly a secondary problem for this bunch, but they had to use it to bring their case to the ISC, and Ariki's bible would help prove to the ISC that there was a legitimate religion involved. Suddenly, a great deal was becoming clear.

"All right. But who do you think is causing this outside influence?"

The Inana hesitated, and tried not to tip his hand too much. If his enemies knew the extent of what he knew, there could be consequences. Caution was key here, but so were allies. In a confidential tone – a low pitched whine in contrast to the high pitch with which he made his

more lofty declarations – he said, “Could speak privately?”

“Yeah . . . Yes, follow me.” The Inana leader made his way up the ramp, and Emily led the way to the ship’s conference room. Ethan looked uncertain about which way to go, but decided to stay out with the Inana horde. At least the cargo crew was still nearby, and this way there was minimal suspicion.

In the conference room, with its long table and eight chairs, Emily and the Inana faced each other standing, instead of taking seats. The Inana, almost breathless with eagerness to voice his thought, said, “Surely Captain knows of destruction of Asparis, and of refugee crisis tens of Plani years ago. Earth people were involved, yes?”

Emily nodded. “Yes.” She knew where this was going, but didn’t like the idea that humans were somehow involved in the political plight of the Inanas. Asparis had been a phenomenally powerful aggressor planet, feared and quarantined by the ISC. It had attacked Earth with the living weapons that ruled Asparis – the mancers. Earth had barely survived, but within decades mounted a spectacular retaliation, supported by the rest of the ISC. The cost of Earth’s revenge had been hefty, and had to be additional justified by a desire to free the oppressed majority of Asparis, the mundanes, from the hammer of mancer rule. Asparis was subsequently left barren for reasons too complicated for Emily to understand. All she knew was that it had frozen over, and Earth’s weapons alone had not been the cause of its climatic change. However, in the flood of Asparii mundanes fleeing to other systems, some of the mancers were unaccounted for. Captured mancers had been rocketed to the Andromeda Galaxy on a ship without controls, built to particular specifications preventing the metal manipulators among the captives from applying their abilities to it. Despite this extreme removal of the mancer menace, there were almost certainly still mancers lying low, waiting for an opportune time to regain power. It was a good thing they were instinctively distrustful of each other; otherwise, they could easily unite and become a powerful force again. Still, individual mancers could easily threaten a government into submission, and they would want revenge against Earth, if they could get it –

Emily was immediately skeptical as the Inana described the suspected Asparian interference in Inana affairs. Sure, it was possible,

but it was also too convenient. The Inana had picked the one enemy that a human would be eager to ally against. Then again, it would explain why the Inana wanted her as an ally. It might even explain why they had hired her in the first place, as opposed to a spacious Karisi ship, for instance.

After going over the outline of his theory, the Inana moved on to the point – what he was hoping she would do about all this. It wasn't what she expected. "A planet exists, Captain, outside of ISC control. Few know about it, because only refugees settle there, and for hundreds of Plani years, refugees have kept quiet so former leaders would not chase them. Planet is legendary. Those in fear for lives try to go, not always knowing where to go. Planet has no space travel. Older . . . settlements do not believe space travel possible. Know this because branch of family went to escape famine on Ina Cur. Maintained communication all these years."

"So –"

"Planet is covered with small settlements, developing slowly. ISC maps label system as hostile, but family says planet is safe. Empire of Asparii refugees, a good empire with good Asparii, has peacefully built, ready to begin interstellar trade. No ships, though. Empire may be target for mancercs, for takeover. Earth can provide . . . technological option, and can give defense against mancercs. Bring planet into ISC, and planet will have protection. Asparian empire will welcome you. As a human, say Earth defeated mancercs. Many Asparii mundanes are still afraid of mancercs, and will be interested in hearing of human conquest of Asparis. Excellent trade opportunity, and will close possible haven for our enemies."

At this point, Emily wished she knew more about Earth's conquest of Asparis. All she knew was that Earth didn't really win – Asparis somehow self-destructed. She was therefore hesitant to pose as a vanquisher of mancercs. Of course, this looked like the kind of break that would make her a famous trader. To be the first one to establish a trade run with a planet was the holy grail. Quickly, she saw things from the Inana's angle and was shocked at how clear his purpose suddenly was. Ariki's followers were outcasts, after all. This planet of exiles might soon be their destination if things continued to go badly on Ina Cur, but only if the mancercs weren't secretly taking it over already.

They needed to ensure that it was every bit the sanctuary they hoped it would be. Well, at least things were making sense now, though it gave her a headache trying to think about it all at once.

“And no one else knows about this?”

“Some may know exiles there, but will not have reason or chance to pass information to starship captain. How long until another does? No one may say. Information is on standard data disc.”

“No conditions? Just because I take the disc does not mean I will go there to trade, understand?”

“As Captain says. And Ariki followers have copies to give other captains, if given a chance.”

“How long will you give me before you hand the discs to other captains?”

“Doubt will meet another trustworthy captain in a quarter of a Plani year. And another human captain . . . rare. Asparii will trust humans more than any other species. Earth people look like Asparii. Earth was an Asparian colony, yes? Was Atlantis, yes?”

Emily had always found it troublesome to believe the official ISC account of the origin of humans on Earth. The population of Earth itself was divided on the subject, confused because the idea that humans were descended from an alien species used to be the realm of crackpots, and legends about Atlantis the realm of fantasy. The science of the ISC account was difficult to follow, too, so no help there. She instinctively distrusted the theory, but whatever her own ideas, there was no denying the species resemblance. At the very least, she would not stand out among Asparii the way she did alongside Inanas or Plani.

“All right,” she said, trying to avoid feeling pressured either way, “give it to me.”

The Inana brought his backpack around, and grabbed the disk from one of its smaller pockets. He also took out his computer. Handing her the disk, he said, “your account number, please?”

Emily handed him a prepared slip with the number written on it, and he finalized the transfer. She checked the credits at her end.

“Thank you, Captain Pierce. Ariki group is straightforward in dealings when possible. Hope this experience does not prevent Captain from taking cargo in future.” He said it solemnly. The way Emily read

his words and the high-pitched tone of his actual voice, it seemed to her that all this had been planned ahead of time, even these words. Ariki had prepared for his capture. They had planned for her to feel guilty about it, and all this would lead her to feel obligated to go to the planet of exiles, or to take other jobs from them. Ariki's capture had been inevitable – they had all but admitted it – but this way it would help them in their case in front of the ISC. They had probably recorded her speech about his capture when she was apologizing outside the ship. For the moment, she stood awed by their foresight. It was plans within plans, all over the place. They were as bad as the Plani.

“I’ll have to think about that. I’ll have to think about a lot of things.”