

A STEP INTO THE UNKNOWN

THE DARK SHADOW of the starship filled the viewing screen, the sheer size of it rivaling many space stations. The white glow from the tractor beam cast a ghostly haze on the visual, and all the old space-bar tales about a massive ghost ship roaming the galaxy and preying on unsuspecting star travelers flooded back to me. Back when I'd heard the stories, I dismissed them without a thought, chalking them up to space dementia. Now that I was caught in the tractor beam of this bar tale come to life, I wish I'd paid more attention.

"Iris!" I called out. If a ghost ship of death was after me, I wasn't going down without a fight. "Get us out of here. Full reverse!"

"Glint?" Iris spoke in a feeble voice. "Is that you? You sound so far away."

Unfortunately, my ship had just suffered tremendous damage, care of Mar Mar the Unthinkable's level-twelve quadrant seekers. Truth be told, we were lucky to be in one piece. We'd been powerless and adrift in space the very

moment the ghost ship emerged. Whether it was better to float helplessly through deep space or be captured by a ship of doom was still up for debate.

“We’re on reserves, Captain.” Blix turned to me from the engineering station, a resigned look on his scaled face. “There’s not much we can do.”

“What do they want with us?” Nelvan’s voice trembled.

“I guess we’re about to find out.” Jasette swiveled her chair to face me. “Any ideas?”

“Let’s just sit tight for a while. Watch for any vulnerabilities.” It was one of the safe answers they taught in star pilot school. It answered a question without giving specific information, calmed the nerves of your crew, and gave you time to come up with a real plan.

Jasette narrowed her gaze and swiveled back around in her chair. She didn’t buy it.

The beam drew us into the dark shadow of the ship, and a wide steel hatch opened like a hungry robot ready to devour us. My ship floated through the opening into a landing bay, and though it was difficult to make out the specific features and potential threats waiting for us inside, one thing was clear: it was a huge space capable of snaring much larger vessels than mine.

My ship came to a stop with a sudden jolt, and a tremor ran under my feet. We were grounded in an alien landing bay, at the mercy of the ship’s inhabitants.

No one spoke as the viewing screen displayed the dark steel door of the hatch lowering, closing off the distant stars. It shut with a loud metal clang, and it felt like watching my tomb close. I found it hard to swallow.

“Captain?” Nelvan whispered.

I held a finger to my lips and drew the DEMOTER X. Then I unbuckled the shoulder straps of my chair as quietly as I could and crept over to Blix at the engineering station. He was focused on the visual readouts and scrolling information.

“How bad?” I whispered.

His slivered eyes studied the screen for a moment before turning to me. “Either our systems are blocked, or this alien technology is beyond our scanning parameters.”

I frowned. “So you’re saying you know nothing.”

His reptilian lips parted, giving a warning hint of sharp teeth.

“It means we have to investigate ourselves.” Jasette stood to the other side of Blix. Her expression was set, as if we were out of options.

It was hard not to be impressed with her catlike ability to sneak up on us. That natural agility, coupled with the tech-enhanced stealth mode of her form-fitting power suit, made for a lethal combination.

As if to counter her silent approach, the noise of clattering metal came from Nelvan as he struggled to unlatch his shoulder straps and hurry over. “What are you guys talking about?” His nervous eyes darted between us. “Are we prisoners?”

Blix placed a reassuring hand on Nelvan’s shoulder. “Our situation is unclear. What would you recommend, Nelvan?”

The boy steadied a little, thin lines forming on his teenage forehead as he stared off in thought.

“Why are you asking him?” I said.

Blix gave me a patronizing look. “I am merely seeking

crew input. As the Scriptures say, in a multitude of counselors there is safety."

I huffed out a laugh. "He's a boy from a century-old world. We need the plan of an experienced space traveler."

Blix crossed his arms. "Fine. What's your plan?"

My mind went blank. I paused for a moment, scrambling for something clever.

"We're waiting." Blix arched his brow.

I gave him a dark look. "My plans are complicated. I need to run some theoreticals through the computer first."

He grinned. "Well, while we're waiting for your genius to reveal itself, let's hear what Nelvan has to say."

Nelvan folded his hands. "We should definitely pray first."

Blix nodded. I threw up my hands. "Great, that'll fix everything."

Nelvan gave a sour look. "I never said that. I just think we need guidance."

"How 'bout you, Jasette?" I said. "You want to sit here and pray all day?"

She cast a studied look at the walls of the bridge, as if a creature lurked outside, waiting to attack. "We're in unknown territory here. I'm up for anything."

A faint blue flicker went through the lights of the bridge.

"Glint?" Iris sounded like she'd been drugged. "Where are you?"

"Right here, computer. Time to wake up and help us get out of here."

"I'm so sleepy," Iris said. "Are we floating?"

"No, we're trapped in some weird ghost ship."

"Oh." Iris gave a long sigh. "I know that song. It's so sad . . . but beautiful too."

“It’s not a song. Now, listen—”

The soft tones of ethereal harps played through the intercom, and Iris sang in a dreamlike voice. “My crew has gone and I’m alone. The ghost ship has me, O my soul . . .”

“No! No singing. Snap out of it!”

“The march of vapor, cloud, and mist. The touch of death, the demon’s kiss . . .”

Nelvan cast a sour look at the ceiling. “This isn’t helping things.”

I marched toward the lift. “Fine. I’ll handle this myself.” The lift doors opened, and I stepped inside.

“Wait,” Blix said. “What are you going to do?”

“Someone has to take charge around here.”

The lift doors closed, and I headed to the lower level. All too soon I was at the landing-bay door. I forced myself to take slow breaths and not think about the potential horrors that waited beyond. Interstellar thugs and space pirates were one thing. At least I knew what I was getting with that kind of space trash. But this was the unknown—a giant, floating nightmare that we were trapped inside of.

Iris’s demented dirge continued to echo through the halls of the ship. “Forlorn, we walked through somber moons, whispered tales of woe and gloom . . .”

“Iris, knock off that singing!”

She continued the depressing tune, lost in her electronic haze. I took a deep breath and tightened my grip on the DEMOTER X. Sooner or later I’d have to face this mystery, and I didn’t want to sit around worrying about it. Better to just dive right in.

I hit the blue control panel beside the landing ramp. The air lock hissed open and the ramp lowered. The dim interior

of the large ship was bathed in blue light, illuminating it like a cloudy night sky. At least I wouldn't face the unknown in utter darkness.

A few tentative steps took me down the ramp for a better look. I stooped low and held my pistol at the ready as a cavernous landing bay emerged from the gloom before me, big enough to house a ship ten times the size of mine. The construction was of a dark metal replete with geometric patterns. Occasionally, thin lines of multicolored, glowing energy ran along the complex patterns as if trying to escape, but there were no awaiting space monsters, so I proceeded to the base of the ramp.

Footsteps sounded behind me as my crew assembled.

"Captain," Blix spoke in a scolding tone. "How could you open the ship without consulting us first?"

"I don't need to ask permission."

He let out a short hiss. "Well, it's incredibly rude."

"Not to mention pigheaded," Jasette said. "You could have got us all killed."

"Hey, somebody had to do something." I took another scan of the room to make sure it was clear. "Besides, nothing's down here."

An ascending series of blips sounded from Blix's communicator as he joined me at the base of the ramp. "Oxygen-rich environment. No life forms detected nearby. Quite fortunate."

Jasette walked down with her silver pistols drawn. "Somebody's trying to give us a false sense of security."

Blix gave a thoughtful nod. "Pessimistic, but possible."

"Captain?" Nelvan called down, still at the top of the ramp. "Have you set foot on the ship yet?"

Curse that kid. He'd pinpointed my fear.

"I was just waiting till everyone got here," I lied.

"Of course you were, Captain." Blix gave a knowing smile. "But since you are the one who, as you put it, 'takes charge around here,' why don't you take the first step?"

I gave him a steely look. "Fine."

The multicolored lines flowed through the geometric patterns on the floor as if to prompt my hesitant entry to the strange ship. Before I moved, I needed to check for pressure and motion-activated defenses. I grabbed a vibe from my pocket and tossed it onto the floor, where it bounced harmlessly along, making small clinking sounds.

Blix chuckled. "Not exactly a scientific test, Captain."

"It's the best I could think of."

Since no further delaying tactics were coming to me, it was time to take the plunge. I squared my shoulders and stepped onto the dark metal of the landing bay.

No death rays or motion disintegrators.

Emboldened by my consequence-free actions, I took a few broad strides forward and spun around to face my crew. "There, you see? Perfectly fine."

Nelvan pointed behind me. "What's that?"

I whirled. A small figure moved through the shadowy corners of the room, walking on all fours and making no sounds. I aimed the DEMOTER and prepared to fire.

"Who's there?" I called out. "Friend or foe?"

The creature paused and cocked its head to the side as if listening. It was still hidden in the shadows, so I couldn't make out what type of animal it was. It was small, but with the wide variety of deadly creatures in space, that was little reassurance.

“What is it, Blix?” I said.

Blix held his com scanner forward and tapped a few controls. A series of staccato beeps sounded. “I’m not detecting a life form. I need time to isolate the energy. This odd ship is creating a tremendous amount of interference.”

A tiny sound, like gas escaping from a punctured tube, reached our ears, and the creature headed forward. It moved as though it was charging us.

“Freeze!” I warned. “Not another step!”

The creature continued its forward motion, a full covering of caramel-colored fur coming into view. I decided I couldn’t risk it; there were too many unknown variables heading straight for us. Taking careful aim, I squeezed off a shot from the DEMOTER.

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