

Chapter One

The superliner *MSL Istraulis* cruised past the Glimmerocks as part of its Gems of the Galaxy Tour. The Glimmerocks asteroid field was a large gathering of massive chunks of icy rocks, comprised mainly of magnesium silicate with a variety of frozen gases. The bright magnesium and the frozen surfaces reflected and bounced the light from a bright quasar that was a little over ten parsecs away. The result was a stunning kaleidoscope of colorful sparkles, flashes, and rainbows that glimmered and shifted as the intense light moved through the asteroid field. The Glimmerocks was one of the most popular, and one of the most remote, tourist destinations in the galaxy. The distance from any established spaceport and the extravagance of the Merilee tour package made the Gems of the Galaxy Tour a cruise for only the very wealthy.

The *MSL Istraulis* was the largest luxury superliner in the pleasure and recreation division of the Merilee Travel & Transport company. If extravagance was what was needed, then the *Istraulis* was the ship that was called for. She had dozens of decks alone for entertainment, as well as luxurious shops and spas to cater to every need, no matter what the cost. Concerts, comedies, and theatre performances from the latest groups were booked for every cruise. Gaming stations and simulator booths provided hours of fun and adventure for cruise goers of all ages. Conference halls and meeting chambers gave personal and professional groups places to hold ceremonies and gatherings. Gambling rooms hosted tournaments that offered the chance to risk all or nothing on the turn of fate. Bars and nightclubs were always open and

kept the party going around the clock. All of it was wrapped up in one shiny, smiling, eager-to-please, space-going, happy-to-say-yes package.

Cater to the rich and the rich will come to eat. So it was on the *Istraulis*; but where the rich come to feed, others will come to feed upon the rich. Merilee Travel & Transport had their own security force that provided escort and emergency response for all MT&T services. Merilee's security was unsurpassed when it came to private companies. In fact, there were some military groups in the galaxy that wouldn't risk a confrontation with an MT&T armada. The transport division of the company moved goods for clients, including the banking and medical guilds, which required strong security measures. Long- and short-range sensors, as well as defensive systems ensured that even superliners such as the *Istraulis* were well protected against armed attacks or from being boarded.

All Merilee superliners like the *Istraulis* had a blind spot though, one that MT&T was apparently unaware of. A secondary cargo loading port was located at the aft docking area just above the dorsal hull plating, providing an opportunity for the ship to approach undetected if it could maneuver without its thrusters or main engines. There weren't a whole lot of ships out there that had those kinds of capabilities. It was theoretically possible that a ship with a dark matter ionizing thruster system and sensor distorting burst transmitter might just be able to sidle right up to the hull and hang there, with no one the wiser.

In fact, that's what Captain Boss Keltzer had done aboard the *Altered Moon* several times before this one. The *Altered Moon* was a prototype vessel built by Nelson Moon, the former chief of design for Bascher Shipwrights. The

Altered Moon's Dark Matter Ionizing Thruster System (DMITS) continuously collected dark matter particles as it moved through space. When the DMITS was activated, a static charge was released to flow across the DMITS collector screens. The ionized dark matter particles emitted a discharge of subatomic energy. The discharge was channeled through the system's thruster ports, which were located throughout the ship and provided the propulsion.

The DMITS required only enough energy to activate the thruster port, which was undetectable even to a high-level scanning sensor. Combined with a distortion burst to black out the other ship's sensors, the DMITS allowed the *Altered Moon* to simply power down and slip away when the need arose. The DMITS was designed and built in secret by Nelson Moon, and the current captain and crew of the *Altered Moon* wanted to keep it that way.

The *Moon's* main propulsion system was a standard ISE central drive port surrounded by twelve secondary drive ports. The Inner System Engine created and manufactured by FBZ Power Systems, was a pulse-jet propulsion system based on a hydrogen fuel source. Hydrogen fuel plates stored and released hydrogen using a microscopic bacterium matrix infused with nickel-tin nano particles.

The nano particles and the bacterium matrix would undergo an oxygen fusion process in the propulsion system, annihilating each other during the reaction, while they released hydrogen to be used as fuel and produced only water and heat as by-products. There were other types of stellar drive engines in existence, but the efficiency and benefits of the FBZ Inner System Engine made it the best choice for ships of every size.

The *Altered Moon* was also equipped with a String Field Drive of its own, which was uncommon for a ship of its size. Cuhrsha Spatial Technologies discovered the process of matching quantum signatures while they researched matter-to-energy teleportation. While the teleportation program failed due to high cost and resource requirements, the String Field Drive itself was an instant success and quite the cash cow for Cuhrsha.

The String Field Drive, or jump engine as it's commonly known, operated by identifying quantum string pathways that exist in between the physical dimensions of the universe and then plotted a course among them to the desired destination. Cloning and adopting the energy signature of the quantum wave particle pulls the *Altered Moon* out of normal space to travel along the chosen quantum pathway and then emerge back into normal space at the intended destination. The effect of the quantum slip was like a wave of invisible viscous liquid that moved over the hull of the ship from bow to stern until the ship vanished completely. No bright light, no power surge, no bulky contraption, the ship was just gone.

Nelson Moon designed four Special Tactic Options, or STOs, for the *Altered Moon* based on the engine designs and dark matter technology.

The Moonshine STO was designed for defense or counterattack. It worked by emitting a high-intensity light blast combined with sensor- and communication-jamming pulses from four emitter pods that were located on the ventral hull and on the ends of the three wing tips; this enabled the *Moon* to pull a quick position change and sneak attack before the visual and electronic sensors of the target ship could recover.

The Dark Moon STO, designed for stealth or surveillance operations, provided a complete electronic and communications blackout with standard engine shutdown. The dark matter thruster system was then used to maneuver the ship, rendering the *Moon* invisible to short- or long-range sensors.

The Full Moon STO was designed for escape purposes; it used an immediate Moonshine STO plus full forward burn. *The Altered Moon's* ISE was a system of engines that could be burned one at a time in small groups or all at once. One oversized main engine was at the center of a group of twelve smaller engines. The main engine was burned only when all of the Full Moon STO's engines were burned at the same time.

The Moonbeam STO was designed to channel the gathered dark matter particles from the DMITS and direct them out of the beam emitters mounted on the front of the ship. The focused dark matter that came in contact with a physical- or energy-based obstruction began to erode the obstruction at the molecular level. The molecules of the target would separate as the dark matter opened a hole that a missile or particle cannon could fire through.

The unique combination of propulsion systems, special options, shielded thermal ports, and low-signature hull plating made the *Altered Moon* the perfect ship for, shall we say...clandestine trading. How the *Moon* ended up in Boss Keltzer's hands is a story that has not yet been told.

Boss Keltzer had captained the *Moon* for eight years now and had managed to put together a pretty decent crew of like-minded traders. Boss and his crew ran a cover business under the name West Becreth Trading Company, a company that traded artifacts from ancient civilizations and alien cultures from the border systems. The reality was they were a

close-knit crew of thieves that ran high-credit heists they jokingly called games.

Today's game was going to be played on the *Istraulis*. Boss was able to get intel that the superliner carried an extra load of medical supplies for the Imperial medical center on Saishin V. Knowing it would have to be unloaded early, MT&T's logistics division parked the shipment right next to none other than the door of the aft secondary cargo port. After all, no one would dare go up against the biggest private security force in the galaxy.

So, the game was this: park the *Moon* in a dark area of the Glimmerocks asteroid field, one of the *Istraulis'* tourist stops; power down and use the DMITS to maneuver; and wait for the *Istraulis* to cruise by. Boss and the flight crew would bring the *Moon* up undetected to the cargo port. The game squad would then soft seal the airlock, bypass the security system alarm, manually open the cargo port hatch, slip in, secure the goods, and slip out. The flight crew used the DMITS to drift off and let the *Istraulis* continue on its Merilee way. They'd wait awhile then power up and trade off their ill-gotten goods. The clandestine heist would be a piece a cake for the experienced privateer crew.

The idea changed into a plan, the plan turned to action, and the action led to now. The *Altered Moon* settled into a shadow on the dark side of an asteroid and waited for the *Istraulis* to tour the Glimmerocks.

"Position achieved, Captain. Powering down ISE systems and engaging the DMITS," said Star Pilot Gina Riley.

"Very well, thank you, G—a smooth ride, as always," answered Boss. "JP, get a fix on our position and lock it into the nav comp."

“Aye, Captain. Locking it in now,” said Jordan Patrick, the navigator and jump pilot for the *Altered Moon*.

“Mister Treesh,” Boss called out.

“Yes, sir?” answered First Mate Dylan “Trigger” Treesh.

“Let the game begin,” Boss said with a nod.

Trigger agreed with a glint in his eye. “Attention all hands, it is now twelve-zero-nine hours. Game time is fourteen hundred. Flight crew, remain at action stations. Mister Gribbons, ready the game squad and make your report to the bridge.”

“Aye, sir,” came the reply from the intercom.

Hurry-up-and-wait situations like these could be tough to take. The anxious thrill of doing something illegal, coupled with the need to remain calm and quiet, was like downing a sleeping pill with a pot of coffee. Getting the jitters in this line of work could, literally, get you terminated. The seconds ticked by as the crew of the *Altered Moon* made the final preparations to start the game.

“Game time, now plus...twenty-two minutes, Captain,” Trigger announced. “All systems remain good to go.”

“Thank you, Trigger. You can count on Merilee Travel & Transport to ‘Merilee Go’ as their slogan says, just not to be on time about it.”

The hard thing about staying powered down was not having access to the sensors, so they just had to sit and wait until the *Istraulis* came into visual range. The wait wasn’t a long one, however, as the bulk of the MT&T superliner finally came into view.

“All right, people, the game is on...take your positions and get ready to go on my mark,” Boss said with mild

excitement. “Okay, G, as soon as she shows us her most sizable ass, you sneak us right in behind her.”

“Roger that.” Gina re-settled herself into the pilot’s seat and was ready to move on his command.

Just as the crew prepared to start the game, another ship appeared just outside of the Glimmerocks. The newcomer was a huge ship, easily two-thirds the size of the superliner. The unknown vessel quickly closed in on the *Istraulis*.

“Stand down, stand down!” cried Boss. “Everybody, stand down! What the hell kinda ship is that? Engineer Wilks, to the bridge!”

The invading ship immediately opened fire on the liner’s engines and the main bridge. The unprovoked attack left the superliner crippled and drifting without main power, communications, or defensive capabilities. The attacking ship disabled the *Istraulis* before it pulled up beside her. Large grappling arms extended and crunched into the hull, which held the superliner in place. Docking platforms from the attacker cut into the crippled ship at different levels.

Tamara Wilkinson came through the main hatch onto the bridge of the *Altered Moon*. “You called, Boss? What’s goin’ on?”

“Wilks, take a look at this ship. Ever seen anything like it?” Tamara’s knowledge of ship design and space flight history reached far into the super annoying.

“WHOA! Look at that! It punched right through the hull! Do you know how much force it takes t—?”

“Wilks!” Trigger said, reining her in a little. “Physics lesson later, okay? What about the design?”

“Right, right, sorry Trigger.” She looked out the window again. “Ahhh—No way, Cap. That’s not a design from any of the systems I know of.”

The idea that an actual alien vessel was here in this system and right in front of them and the fact that it had just ripped into a superliner with apparent ease, settled over them like a damp chill. Only five non-Human races were ever discovered after quantum jumping opened up the galaxy. Humankind learned early never to go into those areas of space again.

Boss kept the *Altered Moon* hidden to avoid the risk of being destroyed as well. All was quiet for a short time before the attackers broke away from the *Istraulis* and began to veer off. Their inner system engines powered up to open the distance from the disabled superliner. A quantum jump interface began to form in front of the ship as the attackers launched three slow-moving missiles that slammed into the side of the liner.

Parts of the *Istraulis* seemed to just rot away as explosions cascaded through the luxury vessel and caused heavy damage. Passenger life pods began to eject out of the liner from several areas. The multiple explosions merged together as the luxury liner was both consumed and blown apart by a fireball from within the ship. Four life pods escaped from the ship before the blast, but they were hurled off into space. The fire dissipated silently as pieces of framing and hull plating spun away, trailing streams of sparks and plasma fire.

“Crew, this is the captain. We’re giving up the game. Prepare for immediate departure and stand by,” Boss called into the comms. “Trigger, any sign that we’ve been picked up?”

“Negative, Captain. The marauder jumped away just as the missiles hit the liner.”

There was silence on the bridge of *the Altered Moon* as the chilling reality settled over them that over one hundred thousand crewmembers and passengers had just died in the few seconds that it took *the Istraulis* to blast apart and disintegrate.

“G, power up the main drive and move us out of the asteroid field. Trigger, scan for any life pods. Wilks, back to engineering and make sure my ship is ready for anything,” ordered Boss.

“Aye, Captain,” said Gina.

“You got it, Boss” said Wilks, who was already halfway out the hatch.

Status indicators, power gauges, and readout screens all came to life with flashes and beeps as the *Altered Moon’s* systems began to power up.

“Powering down the DMITS and engaging the main drive,” Gina said, as she moved the *Moon* out of the Glimmerocks and away from the still-expanding debris field.

Garavel Gribbons stepped onto the bridge and over to the nav console. “Game gear is secured, Captain. What the hell happened out there?”

“Three high-order detonations and adios *Istraulis*,” said JP.

“Sensors are picking up four life pods, Captain, but I read only one life sign,” said Trigger. “Position is twenty-seven degrees by one-thirty-five spinning away at one hundred-eighty-two kph. Life pod is venting atmosphere. Readings indicate less than one hour of life support and dropping. MT&T search and rescue will never get here in time.”

“Damn!” Boss exclaimed after a short silence.

“Boss”—Trigger turned from his screens to look at the captain—“we should go. We should leave right now and let that pod just drift away. We don’t even know who’s in there. It could be MT&T personnel. How would we explain the fact that we were close enough to the *Istraulis* when she blew to mount an immediate rescue?”

“Triggers right, Cap’n,” said Gar. “Those Imperial bastards will throw us in the clink just for being out here in the commercial lanes.”

“Ahh...shit,” Boss said with a heavy sigh. *Can I turn away and leave someone to die? No*, was his answer. “G, my love, intercept that life pod.”

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Chapter Two

The captain and crew of the MSL *Istraulis* had their hands full with the preparations in order to get the ship ready for the Gems of the Galaxy Tour. Personnel with supplies hurried off in a hundred different directions, while a hundred different crewmembers were busy going over a hundred different checklists. The Gems Tour was the biggest tour package of its kind, with five high-profile sites in eight weeks. The *Istraulis* would stop at the five “Gems of the Galaxy,” which included the Qune Star Cluster, the Campton Stellar Nursery, the Cat’s Paw Nebula, the Glimmerocks asteroid field, and the Shining Sisters, twin binary star systems orbiting each other. Muster for the support crew was under way at the aft loading dock of the MSL *Istraulis*.

“Evermore, CJ Evermore,” said a young man who had finally made it to the front of the line of the crew muster for the engineering department.

“Step up to the console for identification, crewman,” said the MT&T security officer at the crew boarding station.

The young man stepped up to the ID console, placed his right hand on a hand-shaped module, and put his right eye up to a cupped lens. The module scanned the handprint and took a pinprick blood sample, while the lens took a scan of the retina pattern of his eye. The data was compared to what was on the MT&T security files for an identity match. If the data matched up, the crewmember was cleared to board the ship.

“Evermore, CJ, Engineer’s Third Mate, employee number eight-six-four-eight-two...your access badge clears you for engineering and crew decks only. Report to the Officer of the Watch, on deck fifty-two for bunk assignment and duty schedule,” the security officer said, already turned

to the next person in line. "Step up for identification, crewman."

"Yes, sir!" CJ called out. He came to attention and snapped a crisp salute. It was a very respectful gesture, except for the slight tone of mockery, which earned him a return glare from the officer and the focus of several of the other guards.

CJ just backed up, gave a short wave and the 'oops...sorry' facial expression, until he could slip around the corner and out of sight. *Shitheads* he thought to himself. *Okay, here we go. Deck fifty-two, wherever that is.* He followed the flow of obvious newbies until they all came to an intersection of walkways and transtubes. *Ah, a map,* he thought and counted off the number of decks. *Let's see, deck fifty-two...where are we...twenty...thirty...forty...fifty...*

"Aww, crap...I'm on the bottom deck?" he said out loud. "They're gonna have me scrubbing sensor leads and purging waste bins. Great!"

"Yeah, I know...me too. That smooth-talking recruiter didn't mention a thing about not being able to *see* the great cruise that I was going to be along for, *because* there are *no view ports* on the engineering decks!" said a woman who stood next to him. "Hi. I'm Katy...Katy Latimer." She offered her hand in greeting. "Or should I say: 'Latimer, Katherine , Engineer's Third Mate, employee number so and so...'" she made a mock stern security face as she said it. "I saw how well you got along with our friends from security back there at the check-in."

CJ looked over to see a shapely woman dressed in an MT&T engineering uniform with a third mate insignia at the left shoulder. She was about a hundred-fifty-five cm tall, fifty-

eight kilograms or so, with brown eyes and dark blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“Well hello, Katy...it’s a pleasure. I’m CJ Evermore, but my friends call me ‘Seedge.’” He took her hand and gave it a warm shake. “Yeah, those Imperial Ironpants, they have noooo sense of humor at all. Good thing though, I guess you wouldn’t want a security goon laughing and cracking jokes as he’s bustin’ on ya. That would just be rude.” He gave a little head nod and eyebrow lift to emphasize his point.

“Yes it would, CJ Evermore. Yes it would indeed.” She laughed and locked eyes with him for a moment.

“So, *deck fifty-two*, here we come. Can I carry anything for you?” he asked.

“Thanks, Seedge, but not a chance.” She waved off his assistance and shouldered her flight bag. “This crew member carries her own weight. Come on. Transtube nine is just around the corner and that will take us down to fifty-two.”

Mmm...she’s cute...in a sassy kinda way...the uniform fits well too... He followed her down the corridor.

They stepped into transtube nine. CJ tapped the deck fifty-two indicator. The crew-level transtube bustled with personnel, equipment, and supplies that went from one place to another. By the time they passed deck forty-five, the traffic had dropped to a crawl. At deck fifty, they saw no one else at all. The transtube stopped at deck fifty-two and the door slid open to reveal a deserted, semi-lit corridor that stretched into the distance. Sounds of dripping liquids and venting gases could be heard in the distance from various unseen places.

“Huh...cheery kinda place isn’t it?” asked CJ.

“Yeah it is. Straight outta Brigs & Dungeons E-gazine,” she replied sarcastically and they both laughed.

“The Officer of the Watch will most likely be in operations. The deck map shows it down the corridor to the left. We should check in there,” said CJ, as he stepped out of the transtube.

They went down the left corridor and saw the operations office immediately to the right. CJ grabbed the locking wheel and spun it counterclockwise to open the pressure door. Four people, gathered around a central operations console, stopped their discussion and looked up as Katy and CJ stepped into the room.

“Engineer’s Mates Katy Latimer and CJ Evermore reporting for duty, sir. We’re looking for the Officer of the Watch,” Katy said.

“I’m Petty Officer Walt Stevens, Officer of the Watch for first rotation,” said one of the men as he walked up. “This is Engineer’s First Mate Mike Rawly and Third Mates Missy James and Paul Conelly.” Nods and hellos went around the group.

“Tap your ID cards on the roster screen and we’ll pull up your billet and duty assignments,” Mike Rawly indicated the screen on the end of the main operations desk.

“Here we are, Katherine Latimer, CJ Evermore, both in crew billet fifty-two-c, assigned to third rotation,” Mike read from the crew report. “Okay, to get to the billet, you go left out of operations, go down to the next intersection, take another left, and that will lead you straight to fifty-two-c common room. Pick any open bunk and stow your gear. Take some time and get to know the layout. Mandatory orientation meeting for third rotation is at fourteen hundred hours in the forward prep room. Officer of the Third Watch is Petty Officer Carlton Stern. Report to him in the prep room before your orientation. Got all that?”

“Oh, yeah...clear as a bell. Take two lefts and a nap, right?” teased CJ.

“Great, a smart-ass. Carlton’s gonna love you. Ha haa,” joked Walt Stevens.

“Thank you, gentlemen and lady, for your help. It was a pleasure to meet you all,” said Katy, as she gathered up her gear. “We’ll see ya around the ship.”

Katy and CJ took the left at the intersection. They saw a room with a table and billet stations a ways down the corridor. The unmistakable ‘glow any time’ green-of-life pod hatches lined the corridor, five on each side. The look of the peeled paint and corroded metal created a shadow of doubt about whether the pod would even launch. The *Istraulis* may have been a superliner on the outside, but inside she was just another tub that needed her bilge scrubbed.

“Well, we made it. Home, Space, Home,” CJ joked, as they entered the fifty-two-c crew common room.

A round table with ten chairs sat in the middle of an octagonal room. Five billet stations with two bunks and lockers each lined the walls, along with four unisex heads, and a personnel station. All the billet stations were unlocked, which meant they were the first, and maybe the only ones to arrive for third rotation engineering duty.

“It gives a whole new meaning to ‘Be it ever so humble,’” scoffed Katy.

“No joke there. I didn’t think a ship this big could even have a room this small.” CJ threw his bag on a bed and studied the ship layout diagram mounted on the wall.

“Ha, right! It’s almost zero-nine-thirty. That gives us four and a half hours to orientation, and then third rotation starts at eighteen hundred hours. That’s gonna end up being a

long first day. I'm gonna get some rack time so I'm not dead on my feet by the end of the shift."

"Righty then, Miss Katy, off to bed with ya," said CJ. "As for myself, I sense mischief aboard this vessel and I'm just the one to get into it."

"Well don't bring it back with you. I want to start this job off *without* a bang, thank you," she replied.

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Chapter Three

The passengers of the *MSL Istraulis* may have sat in the lap of luxury for the Gems of the Galaxy Tour, but the ride was not quite the same for the support crews of the superliner. The hard thing about engineering and maintenance jobs on any star craft was that you were only paid for the time that you were on duty. The benefits, however, could balance things out in most jobs: room and board was provided by the employer, there was travel to different star systems, free training programs, and good pay, but the pay came at the end of the trip and you were bound by the terms of the contract until then.

The MT&T engineer and maintenance contracts stated that employees were restricted to their assigned decks and compartments for the duration of the trip. For Katy, CJ, and the third member of their crew, Engineer's Second Mate Antje Martine that meant engineering deck fifty-two was their home for the eight-week tour of the galaxy. The petty officer billets and the rest of 'officer country' were on deck forty-one, between Main Engineering on deck forty and the Power and Propulsion decks that ran from forty-two to fifty. Decks fifty-one and fifty-two housed the processing systems that handled all of the waste from the *Istraulis*, her crew, and her passengers.

The thirty-hour workday was split into one twelve-hour work rotation followed by eighteen hours of eating, sleeping, card playing, and watching the timeworn vids of the Public Streamcasting Systems. Routine became routine and off-duty time slowed to a crawl. Third rotation crew even challenged the other rotation crews to off-duty betting games and contests to pass the time. CJ's favorite was 'Catwalk

Parkour,' where the object was to race along the catwalk and surrounding machinery in a specified time without affecting critical systems or breaking your neck in the process. The petty officers tended to look the other way as long as things remained civil and the work was done on schedule.

Merilee did pipe a wide selection of visual feeds to all crew decks in an attempt to make up for the lack of a view port or access to an observation deck. The ship's PR staff always made a big production of the main attractions along the tour. Merilee put on special programs, hosted shows, viewing sessions, grand dinners, and galas, all of which were streamcasted for the enjoyment of both passengers and crewmembers alike. Katy would sit glued to the vid screen and watch every time the *Istraulis* passed by a point of interest. She would make her favorite snack that she called 'popped corn' to eat during the streamcast.

"It is an ancient Earth custom and it's bad luck for those who don't observe it," she would say, and pointedly munched on the crunchy yet soft morsels of heated corn kernels. "Hand me the salt, will ya?"

By the fifth week of the tour, it had become a deck fifty-two custom to gather around the common room monitor to watch the show and munch on popped corn. The crews of first and third rotations had just wrapped up a show on the third tour stop, the Cat's Paw Nebula. They were talking and joking about the streamcast when alarms suddenly blared out, emergency lights flashed on, and alerts sounded that a life pod had been activated in the waste processing compartment.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Mike Rawly screamed to be heard over the alarms.

“Life pod launch in processing!” yelled back Antje. “Come on, let’s get down there!”

“CJ!” called Katy, throwing him a comms unit. “I’m heading to operations! I’ll call you from there!”

“Copy that!” he hollered over his shoulder, already on his way to processing.

CJ and Antje, with Mike Rawly and Missy James of first crew, arrived at the processing compartment hatch just as the blaring of the alarms cut off. Petty Officer Dan Miller and two members of the second rotation crew stood around one of the life pod hatches looking anxious. The super green perimeter lights of the hatch flashed on and off, which indicated launch preparation. Dan Miller was at the intercom trying to reason with the man inside.

“Come on, Frank, think about what you’re doing,” said Dan. He held his hand up to signal the others to slow down and keep quiet.

“No way! I’d rather die floating in space than work this effing job anymore!” Frank’s distraught voice came over the comms panel.

“That’s not gonna happen, Frank,” Dan reasoned with him. “The pod is locked down, it won’t launch. The order to abandon ship hasn’t been given. Security is on the way, Frank, and if they have to disable the pod to get you out, you’ll be charged with desertion of duty aboard a starship. That’s a ten-year sentence.”

The silence was almost encouraging. It seemed wrong somehow even to breathe.

“CJ, it’s Katy...command officers and security just passed operations and are heading your way,” came out of the comms unit.

“Copy that, Katy,” CJ replied quietly.

“Come out now on your own, and it’s just some time in medical under observation,” said Dan. “Please Frank. Think about Sally and the boys. How’s getting yourself locked up going to help them?”

The thoughts of his family must have cut through Frank’s mania and restored at least some amount of reason. The life pod systems powered down and the hatch slid open to reveal an angry yet shamed man covered completely in Human feces. Frank stepped out of the pod and surrendered to Dan Miller just as the command officers and the security team entered the processing compartment.

“Rawly and James, take E.M. Costas and get him cleaned up. Escort him to medical when that’s done. Report to CMO Chuley. He will be informed by the time you get there,” said Petty Officer Walt Stevens.

“Aye, sir,” they said in unison.

“Come on, Frank, let’s get you cleaned up buddy,” said Mike.

Mike Rawly and Missy James gathered Frank up and took him in the direction of the nearest head. The security team stood down and returned to their post. The petty officers of all three duty rotations had a hushed meeting with the command officers in the corridor.

The command officers left and the engineering officers came back into the room after the quick meeting.

“Where is Latimer?” asked third rotation Petty Officer Carlton Stern, looking around.

“Here I am, sir,” said Katy as she and Paul Conelly came through the hatch. “I was in operations with E.M. Conelly.”

“Evermore, Latimer, and Martine, you lot come on duty now. Help second rotation square away this mess and

resume normal duties at eighteen hundred hours. P.O. Miller is going to pitch in here and I'll take over in operations," said third rotation Petty Officer Stern.

"Second rotation, you're with me. Let's get this cleaned up and make repairs on the blown out piping," said Petty Officer Miller.

Everyone acknowledged the orders and went on their assigned ways.

"It's a bitch when your machines take a crap on ya," CJ joked. They laughed just a little bit.

Yeah ol' Frank got the shit end of that stick," added Engineer's Mate Second Class Dave Schoen of second rotation. They laughed a little more.

"I guess Frank really had to go 'pod-dy' after that," said Katy. They laughed again.

"Hey! None of what happened here today is funny!" Petty Officer Dan Miller scolded the junior officers. "We have a hazardous material spill to handle, major repairs to be done, and the well-being of a crewmate is in question. So stow the standup routines and focus on the job at hand."

"Yes, sir!" they all said.

"Sorry, sir," added CJ.

"The system is shut down. We need to clean the damaged area first. First rotation will finish the cleanup and commence regular operations. Second rotation will stay on duty until the repairs have been completed. Let's move like we have a purpose, people!" Dan said.

The different rotation crews worked together to get the mess cleaned up and the equipment back online before things got out of control. The excitement of the day waned over the next couple of weeks. Frank Costas was released from medical and returned to work. Routine once again

slowed to the snail's pace of a commercial starship mechanic. CJ and Katy began to find reasons to wander off alone together and soon became more than just crewmates.

The *Istraulis'* crew was in full tilt to get her ready for the Glimmerocks stop of the Gems of the Galaxy Tour. The most spectacular stop of the tour required the grandest productions of them all. Elegant galas and prestigious viewings were held in the domed ballroom on the top deck of the ship. The view of the Glimmerocks was indeed spectacular. The colors swam and shifted as they reflected and bounced among the icy asteroids. Everyone on board had a clear view as a strange ship suddenly appeared from the envelope of a quantum jump and opened fire on the *Istraulis*.

Fear and panic erupted into the ballroom as two explosions rocked the MT&T superliner. People fled madly, scattering everywhere when the attacking ship grabbed onto the *Istraulis* and slammed boarding ramps into the side of the superliner. Massive seals around the ends of the ramps attached to the hull as the shafts penetrated into the inner decks. Giant alien creatures swarmed in through the boarding ramps and began to shoot anything that moved with a strange yellow light that crackled with orange energy. Anyone hit fell immediately to the deck and was picked up and taken away by a group of the aliens that followed behind the leading edge of the assault group.

CJ, Katy, and Antje were in the deck fifty-two common room to watch the streamcast of the Glimmerocks and sat

munching on popped corn when the view screen showed an alien ship slip into normal space right beside them.

“What the hell?” exclaimed CJ.

“Hold on!” Katy yelled as they saw the ship fire two missiles toward the *Istraulis*. The view screen went to static as the *Istraulis* was hit. The ship shook violently as power circuits overloaded and steam pipes ruptured. Alarms went off immediately and emergency broadcasts blared over the PA. The *Istraulis* shuddered several times as all three deck fifty-two duty rotations scrambled to their emergency stations.

“Communications are down!” they could hear Dan Miller yelling from the operations room. “Initiate fire control procedures, NOW! Evermore, bypass primary electrical systems and bring up auxiliary power!”

“Yes, sir!” CJ said and ran down the corridor to the power control room.

“Martine, get me some communications!” Dan barked. “Latimer, seal off that leak!”

“Aye, sir!” they both replied as they moved to do as they were ordered.

They no sooner cleared the door when Antje went down from the hit of a yellow-and-orange energy ball. Katy looked up and screamed as a huge alien creature grabbed her by the right arm and lifted her off the deck. The creature looked like a mix of mammal, reptile, and something else completely unknown. The massive paw crushed Katy’s arm; flesh, muscle, and bone into a bloody mess. Barbs in the alien’s paw hooked into her flesh and ripped out small chunks of skin and muscle. Katy screamed in pain as she kicked and

punched at the monster with no effect. Two other aliens came around the corner and shot anyone they saw with the strange weapons.

“KAAATTTYYYYY!” CJ yelled when he came back out of the power control room as he heard the commotion in the corridor. He was horrified when he saw Katy struggling to get away from the monster. One of the alien creatures shot its energy weapon at him. CJ dove aside at the last moment and the energy ball hit the primary power buffer causing an explosion that filled the room and the corridor outside of it with flame and smoke. The blast threw CJ across the corridor and into the bulkhead. The impact ripped a gash in his head and knocked him senseless. He came to just a few moments later to several spots of intense pain and his uniform on fire.

He slapped out the flames as he struggled to his feet and ran down the corridor. No one was left in the operations room. He turned to go to the transtube when the *Istraulis* shook and rumbled. He could feel the ship tilt as she began to list to starboard. The abandon ship klaxon blared and the life pods opened and began to flash the countdown sequence. Explosions rocked the deck and fireballs filled the corridors as the MT&T superliner *Istraulis* came to a fiery end.

CJ half threw himself and was half thrown by the explosion into a life pod and hit the jettison button. The pod shot out of the escape tube and straight into a bulkhead fragment that had been blown from the *Istraulis*. The wall of the pod cracked and the electrical system overloaded as the pod and the bulkhead collided.

“Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Not good!” CJ cursed, as he tried to stop the precious air from leaking into space. He could feel

the pod wobbling in its trajectory as he fought to stabilize the situation. The minutes passed like seconds while the oxygen levels continued to drop. CJ felt the effects of hypoxia set in. He found it harder to think straight and his mind began to fill with thoughts of Katy and a peaceful spot on a beautiful planet.

“I...I’m...sorry...Katy...that I...never told you...I love you...” CJ said, as the black veil of unconsciousness began to settle over him.

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