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Other books by this author

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A Guide to Climate Change Lunacy (Connor Court, 2010)

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Dedicated to Charles, in memory of the discussions on terra forming we have had over the years, and in the hope that he finally finished his doctorate.

The Zards professed peace but attacked and defeated Earth's navy at the star system known as Crossroads, and claimed the human planet as their own. Those humans not enslaved were forced into a secondary site known as Earth Station, or into mining stations along the galactic arm originally built to house just a few miners.

CHAPTER ONE

A blast of chilled air startled Suzanne out of the doze she had fallen into during her long wait, huddled in one corner of the bar on Lucifer III. A tall, broad-shouldered man in an old naval engineering officer's great coat stripped of any insignias, opened the bar hatch – they were hatches not doors, as Suzanne had discovered – letting in the frigid air. He stood before the bar, hands deep in the pockets of his coat, evidently in a foul mood.

"It's freezing outside Matt," he snapped to the bar tender. "Can't they keep the dome heated?"

"Saving energy, Rods," said Matt, and Suzanne knew that the bad-tempered stranger was the person she had travelled three weeks to see. "We need another generating unit on our grid, we need everything."

Rods grunted, said "beer" and slumped into a stool at the opposite end of the tiny bar from Suzanne, not even looking at her although, except for Matt and an older man nursing a drink along the back wall, she was the only other person in the establishment. Both Matt and the man at the back watched with interest as Suzanne levered herself off her stool and approached the trader.

"Excuse me Rods, is it?" she said as Matt, a beefy, balding man who had previously declared himself to be a friend of Rods, slammed a glass in front of the trader and squirted some beer into with a bar gun.

"Uh," said Rods without turning around.

"My sister was on the Dawn Treader."

Rods finally looked around. Suzanne saw steady, grey eyes set in an unshaven face of regular features marred by a long scar that ran from beside the right eye down his cheek. For his part, Rods saw a girl with green eyes, slim build, fine features and short brown hair, but in his recent, bitter experience, good looking girls in bars meant trouble, and he was in no mood for trouble.

"Sorry for your loss," he said, and turned back to his beer.

"You were in charge of the search for the Dawn?"

“‘In charge of’ sounds official,” said the trader without looking around. “I coordinated the search with two others and the heads of settlements. No luck, and it’s been six months. As I said, sorry for your loss. Now, pardon me, but I’ve some serious brooding to do.”

During her long wait, Suzanne had been encouraged by Matt and Matt’s wife Emma who had stood in at the bar for a time, to approach Rods and to plough on regardless of her initial reception. He was, she had been told, a difficult study, but fine once you got past the gruffness.

“I sent you this.” Suzanne opened up the screen of her digital assistant and laid it on the bar beside the trader, who glanced sideways at it.

“You were the one who sent those notes?”

“In here is where the Dawn Treader went.”

Matt leaned forward for a better look; the older man who had been there when Rods arrived abandoned his pretense of not listening to the conversation to sidle up to the bar and peer at the screen.

They read:

‘Replicant quoting Blake plus Tiger – 136746622211131’.

“I see you’ve attracted an audience,” said Rods, finally turning on his stool.

“Those cryptic notes don’t add up to star catalogue numbers. We tried a cryptographic analysis on those numbers and came up with nothing, Ma’m..”

“Suzanne.”

“Suzanne. This must’ve cost you a tidy sum to send over the squeezed light link, but it makes as much sense here as in Earth Station. You’ve come from Earth Station, right?”

Suzanne nodded.

“So, you came up three weeks by freighter just to point out these notes again?”

“Eve, my sister, said everyone had been sworn to secrecy, but the captain had told her more than the others and I wasn’t to write it down or tell anyone. She said they knew where El Dorado was.”

Matt and the older man looked startled, Rods looked bored.

“El Dorado, really?” he said.

“Yes, the legendary city of gold.”

“I know what El Dorado was supposed to mean way back on Earth,” snapped Rods, “but it has a local meaning – a planet where you can walk on the surface.”

“And Eve said her group knew where it was.”

“How did her group find it and why did they tell her? While we’re on the subject, where is it?”

“The people who got her to come said they’d found the site in old records. Both humans and Zards had been there but no Zards now as it’s too far out and they have Earth now...”

“Yes, they have earth,” interjected Matt, and we’ve got nothing.”

“...They needed someone with medical training, and they had trouble because they wanted to keep it secret. They told Eve to get her and her partner to come along, on condition that she didn’t tell anyone else, but she left this.”

“Clues her own sister doesn’t understand,” said Rods.

“I thought it must mean something,” Suzanne said, faltering. Suzanne had come a long way convinced that she held the key to her sister’s disappearance, if only she could get those looking for Eve’s group to pay attention. She had thought there would be some form of government and the search would be in the hands of officials. Instead she had found a lone trader who had given up.

“I looked at these clues every which way I could think of,” said Rods. “I found the replicant poem thing.”

“Replicant poem thing?” Suzanne had been baffled by that reference.

“Sure, in a film a made a very long time ago a sort-of bio soldier called a replicant who’s turned killer walks into an eye shop, where this guy makes eyes for these replicants and quotes Blake.”

Who’s Blake?” asked Matt.

“Late 18th century English poet,” said Rods, before Suzanne could speak. “Here – these are the lines.” He fiddled with his own digital assistant and showed the screen to Suzanne.

She read:

*Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll’d
Around their shores indignant burning with the fires of Orc
And Bostons Angel cried aloud as they flew thro’ the dark night.*

“It’s from ‘America A Prophecy’, – load of total drivel as far as I’m concerned, but I’m an engineer so what do I know. I preferred Blake’s poem ‘The Tiger’ better.

“Is it a famous poem?” asked the older man.

“Everyone knows the first line, Geoff” said Rods, “and that’s all I can remember ‘Tiger, tiger burning bright’”.

“In the forests of the night,” continued Suzanne,
“What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

They all looked at her.

“I teach English,” she said lamely.

“Right, now the English lesson is over,” said Rods, “we need a seven-digit catalogue number or local name, otherwise the lost expedition is going to stay lost. Last they were heard of they were heading towards Bell’s Curve.”

“Bell’s Curve has planets,” said Matt.

“A planet,” said Rods, “and it’s a gas giant; no good at all for human settlement. The captain, Rob, said he was heading towards that system but wouldn’t say anything else. Probably misdirection now that I think of it.”

“You met them?”

“Some of ‘em came here for a drink, when I was here.”

“Right in this bar,” commented Matt.

“Sorry I don’t remember your sister,” said Rods, “it was only a few of them and there were more than 50, right?”

“Fifty-three.”

“They had food for three months and it’s been more than six, not to mention problems with water and oxygen giving out. Recycling systems can need serious love to keep going.”

“But if they did find this El Dorado,” said Suzanne uncertainly, “and there was some life, then they could have foraged, they could have survived longer...”

“Oh sure, anything’s possible I suppose,” said Rods. “I could become a big time trader, defeat the Zards single handed and win the girl of my dreams. That’s also possible. Wherever these guys are they don’t have comms up as we’ve scanned the likely systems around Bell’s Curve, and we don’t have the equipment to check for stuff like small domes that might be inhabited. There’s certainly no planet with an atmosphere.”

Suzanne had no reply. She had counted on meeting Rods and was now left with nothing. She found herself blinking back tears.

Rods pushed his beer away in irritation and stood up.

“So much for brooding. No one wants to find El Dorado more than me, but we’re at a dead end. Sorry about your sister.” He turned to go.

“Rods, wait,” said Matt. “Suzanne here’s got nowhere to go – she’s been sitting at my bar for 12 hours with just some of my snacks. Why not hire her as your cruise director?” Matt and Emma, who had taken a shine to Suzanne during her long wait, had both said that they would ask Rods to do this, or at least ask him to take her on board, as one way out of the bar.

“You’re joking, right? I am not in the mood for a new cruise director, and Suzanne here teaches English – no offence.”

“None taken,” said Suzanne, blessing Matt.

“When have qualifications been important for your cruise director?” said Matt. “You get your cruise directors from Stacey’s, mostly, an’ then they try to jack the ship.”

“Must you remind me,” growled Rods.

“Hey, Suzanne here is a sensible girl,” said Matt.

“Very sensible.” Suzanne thought she should say something at this job interview.

“She’s in a different league from your other cruise directors and, you know, she’ll add class to your operations.”

“Now I need a marketing presence? I’m turning customers away.”

“Not exactly that,” said Matt, “but your other cruise directors didn’t really reflect well on the ship; use to get up to all sorts of stuff, you know. People look up to you, but you need someone who’s not crazy or dealing on the side to front for you.”

“Dealing on the side? I don’t think I want to know about this.”

“Hey, I’m just saying. Suzanne here is respectable; English teacher, out here because her sister was in the Dawn Treader, mum’s a school principal, dad in navy.”

Rods turned to Suzanne.

“Your dad was in the navy?”

She nodded. “And you must’ve been a naval engineer.”

“How do you know that?” There was sharp edge of suspicion in Rods voice.

“You’re wearing an engineer’s coat without the insignias.”

Rod looked down. “Hmm. What’s your last name?”

“Clark. Dad made captain just before Crossroads.”

“You lost him at Crossroads?”

“And some of my friends.”

The Earth’s navy, painfully rebuilt following an earlier defeat, had been wiped out at the Crossroads system after agreeing to a cease fire. The crews of the few ships that surrendered were executed by the Zards.

“Sorry about your dad, too.”

“We weren’t the only ones affected.”

“Take Suzanne,” said Matt. “She’s lost her dad, let her look for her sister and deal with the passengers. She won’t play them.”

Rods looked at Matt and then at Suzanne, who tried to look sensible.

“Do you know anything about star ships?”

“I recognized an engineer’s coat when I saw one, didn’t I, and I just spent three weeks in a star ship.”

“And she’s been nowhere near Stacey’s,” said Matt.

Rods glared at Matt then at Suzanne. “I’m in no mood for this.” He muttered to himself. “Voluntary basis,” he said to Suzanne. “You can tag along but the work of the ship comes first, before looking for your sister.”

“Okay,” said Suzanne meekly.

“That your stuff?” he said, pointing to Suzanne’s bag on the floor. “Give it to Igor outside.”

He turned to go, but Matt grabbed his arm and whispered to him.

“What?” said Rods, then “How much? Oh, take it off the amount you owe.”

He stalked out of the bar, letting in another blast of chill air.

Suzanne picked up her bag.

“Thanks for all that,” she said to Matt. “I can’t thank you enough, and Emma. I hope to see you both again, soon.”

“You will. The Maxwell, that’s Rods’ ship, comes here often.”

There was another, delicate question. “About the bar tab..”

“Never mind about that now, just go.”

“Oh, okay, but just one question, what is Stacey’s?”

“Um, well, it’s an establishment for men. Those two girls you spoke to who were in here. They didn’t say they were from Stacey’s?”

“Oh,” said Suzanne, then “OH!” as the full implications struck her.

“You’ll be fine,” said Matt, “just go quickly, Rods can be impatient. We’ll talk later.”

Bag in hand, Suzanne dashed out of the bar.

CHAPTER TWO

The cold air of the dome hit Suzanne as she emerged from the bar into one of the narrow, enclosed alleys that served as streets in that colony. Rods was waiting for her, hands thrust deep in his coat pockets.

“‘bout time you came.”

“Sorry. I just had a last word to Matt. Said I didn’t have to worry about the bar bill. That was nice of him.” Suzanne smiled, thinking that she had found common ground with Rods in praising Matt.

“Nice, porcine rear end,” was Rods’ bitter response. “He stuck me with your tab. No wonder he was so keen for me to take you on.”

“Oh!” was all Suzanne could think to say.

“Give your bag to Igor,” he said, jerking his thumb at a short, stocky figure that Suzanne now realized had been standing by the door. The figure was dressed improbably in a trench coat that reached almost to the ground and a hat that gave it a

passing resemblance to an actor in an old film about detectives. "Igor, this is our new cruise director."

"Another cruise director?"

"Don't you start."

The figure turned towards Suzanne, raising one arm to take her bag. The newly appointed cruise director opened her mouth to give a cherry greeting to this new person but stopped when she realized that Igor was a robot. Its face was a metal mask with two big lenses for eyes, and a speaker for a mouth. The hand which took her bag with ease had three fingers and a thumb, covered by a glove. She had dealt with machines all her life, as everyone had, but had never met an autonomous robot before. There were so many people on Earth Station that there had been no need of them.

"Hello Igor." It seemed the only thing to say.

"Hello cruise director," said Igor formally, in a youngish male voice. "I am Igor - Integrated Ground Operating Robot. I go behind Rods in this dome. Other places I go in front."

"Oh that's... nice." Again, it was all Suzanne could think of to say.

"Stop gabbing you two and come."

Rods stalked off down the alley.

Suzanne was very tired, extremely hungry and quite curious about what she was meant to do as cruise director. But for now, all she could do was follow Rods, walking besides Igor as Rods did not seem to want company.

"Is it far to the ship?" she asked Igor.

"Not far. At the port."

"It is cold."

"Yes, cold."

The robot was not a sparkling conversationalist, but Suzanne thought that Rods' conversation would be no better. They walked down the alley into the slightly wider alley that served as the main thoroughfare. She thrust her hands deep into her pockets and shivered. On one corner, underneath the 'to spaceport' sign was tall, bearded man who smiled nastily at them.

"Druggie!" he said. "Hey, druggie."

Rods stiffened, then shock his head slightly and moved on. The bearded man, who was taller, wider and grimmer looking than Suzanne's new employer, stepped in front of Rods.

"Ben, are we really going to do this again?" said Rods. "You know what happened last time."

"Druggie! So where are your drugs, eh?"

Suzanne noted with alarm that there were two more, rough looking men behind the tall man. One was carrying a short club that looked like the leg of a stool. The other was eyeing her. Rods noticed them too.

"Igor front," he said, without turning around, "face the two men there". The trader pointed. Igor dropped Suzanne's bag and edged around the tall man, who eyed the robot curiously, to square up to the other two men. They also did not know quite

what to make of Igor but the club man taped his weapon on his open hand meaningfully.

“So, what’s this about, Ben?” said Rods to the bearded man. “You planning on getting lucky this time?”

“Any time druggie,” said the big man, and he lashed out at Rods. Suzanne barely saw the motion, but Rods moved his head slightly and Ben’s fist struck air. At the same time the two men in front of Igor lunged, intending to brush the robot to one side. The first man smashed his improvised club on Igor’s hat with an audible clunk, but the robot’s only response was to clamp his hand around his assailant’s wrist and keep it there. The other man tried to shove past the robot but Igor grabbed his wrist as well and held on despite desperate pulling and shoving, causing the robot’s servo-motors to whine audible. A rain of blows from the club, had no noticeable effect.

While Igor was delaying the support squad, Ben tried two more swings, which also hit air. Rods conceded a little ground, leading Ben on, and then hit him twice on the jaw making him stagger. The trader jumped forward, drove another blow home just above the heart, and another on the jaw. His opponent keeled over. Rods caught him before his head hit the alley-way’s concrete floor then lowered him, none too gently, the rest of the way. He stepped over Ben and pulled up the big man’s jacket and shirt.

“Hey, what?” said Ben groggily. He tried to push Rods away. The trader thumped him hard on the side of the head and then tore a square piece of metal from the man’s clothing.

“Plate steel,” said Rods stepping away and rapping the piece of metal. “I thought your stomach looked weird - and you were really confident. A steel plate right where I belted you last time. You were hoping I’d break my hand.” Rods waved the plate in front of Ben who was in no condition to listen. “It’s not that easy, my friend.”

The other two men had stopped struggling after their champion had gone down.

“Igor, release them. Behind me.”

The stocky robot obligingly walked away, while his opponents glared uncertainly at Rods, to pick up Suzanne’s bag and stand by her again.

“Are you alright?” asked Suzanne.

The robot looked up at her – he was a little shorter than the new cruise director – and his face might have registered surprise if it had been capable of displaying emotion.

“Fine,” he said.

“Were you hurt when they hit you?”

“No... armoured.”

Another man arrived from behind Ben’s two assistants. He was thickset, his balding head hidden under a peaked cap and he carried a badge prominently on the vest pocket of his coat. The club man hurriedly dropped his weapon.

“Stan!” said Rods. “My friends and I were just having some fun.”

“So, I see,” said the newcomer. “Geoff, pick up that whatever it is and toss it over here.”

Geoff picked up the club he had just dropped without comment and tossed to the lawman, who put it against the side of the wall at an angle and stomped on it, smashing it in two. He threw the pieces back.

"You know the rules," he told Geoff. "Lucky for you I can't be bothered with any paperwork tonight. Now what about Ben there? It's too cold for a nap."

"We were having a friendly tussle."

"Is he still breathing?"

"Yep."

"Shame! You two," said Stan to the two men who were sidling away, "take Ben back to his cubicle".

"Bane of my life, that man," muttered Stan, as Ben was dragged past, having recovered enough to glare at the trader and police officer. "What's that bit of metal, you've got?" He nodded at the plate Rods had taken from Ben.

"Just something for repairs to Igor."

"And you're carrying it here?"

"I get enthusiastic," said Rods handing the plate to Igor who put it in a pouch concealed in his trench coat. "What brings you down here, anyway? You hear Ben was prowling around?"

"It wasn't that. I got a complaint about a young woman stealing a coat from a remainder bin."

Both men turned to look at Suzanne who was doing her best to hide behind Igor.

"The missing coat is black, I am told. The same color as the coat worn by that young lady."

Rods sighed. "My new cruise director."

"Another cruise director?"

"Everyone's a critic. Matt forced her on me. Her sister was in the Dawn Trader. She teaches English. Her mum was a high school principal; dad a captain in the navy. He says I need to go respectable."

"That's right, he asked me about it, and I agreed." Stan jabbed his index finger at Rods. "I also come down to tell you the same thing. You and The Max are key here; vital even, and times are hard. A few of the traders asked me to speak to you about Sylvia."

"A few?"

"Well, all of them. Time to stop recruiting from Stacey's, and keep your hands off the cruise directors. Matt said this girl, the one behind Igor I take it, has personality."

"So much so that he stuck me with her bar bill."

"See, she's already helping trade here. Now if we can work out this problem of the coat."

They both looked at Suzanne who was trying to pretend she wasn't there, and that she wasn't freezing.

Rod sighed. "All of them?"

"Had a meeting. Everyone was happy to hear that she'd fallen from favor. She is somewhere far away from here?"

"Mining colony; Ozarks III."

“She might’ve preferred my jail. She had confederates?”

“Maybe she did, but I wouldn’t concern yourself over the details.”

“Uh huh. A lot of police work is details. Are those details going to be a problem in the future?”

“Doubt it. They’ve moved on a long way, as I understand it.”

“Not sure I want to know any more.”

“I wasn’t planning on saying anything more.”

“Whatever – now the coat.”

“The traders had a meeting about Sylvia?”

“Everyone complained.”

Rods sighed again. “Tell ‘em I’ll stick with Suzanne - that’s her name. Whose coat is it?”

“Jenny’s.”

“Jenny! She owes me money. Tell her to take the cost of the jacket off the amount owed and we’ll settle up next time around. Once she hears that she’ll shut up.”

Stan shrugged. “Problem solved. You leaving now? With Sylvia out of the way Caitlin will want you for dinner. The invitation would extend to Suzanne.”

“I’m in no mood to be told anything more about Sylvia. Next time round, I’ll be happy to. But that reminds me.” He took a small parcel out of his greatcoat pocket. “I was going to leave this at the port office for you and Caitlin. It’s medicine for William’s skin.”

Stan ripped open the package, read the box’s label and nodded.

“How much do we owe you?”

“Invoice is in the package. I talked them down to a 10 per cent mark up.”

“Stars!” said Stan after seeing the amount. “We don’t have this just now.”

“Let’s sort it out when I swing by again; there may be a discount for dinner. May not be for more than a week.”

“Done.”

Stan walked up to an apprehensive-looking Suzanne, and touched his cap.

“Congratulations on your new job, Madam.” Suzanne’s apprehensive look turned into a sweet smile. “I’m Stan Williams, colony police officer. If you do have any trouble with Rods,” he said loudly, “you can come to me”.

“Oh great,” muttered Rods.

“Thank you,” said Suzanne then scuttled after Rods who had stalked off. “Nice to meet you.”

Officer Stan waved.

Suzanne’s first impression of the James Clerk Maxwell was of the space ship’s size. She had been travelling in star ships for weeks, but had been literally herded onto each vessel then held in cramped quarters, forbidden to go beyond a set area. She had never seen the outside of the ships. But the docking airlock which connected to the Maxwell was partly transparent. She could see she was to be a cruise director, whatever

that might mean, of a grey ship that was three storeys tall and maybe 150 meters long. She craned her head to try to read the markings on the side.

Rods gave her no time to take in the sights. He punched in a key code, took a retinal scan and led them into a narrow airlock.

“Incoming Max,” Rods called out. “A new cruise director.”

“So soon!” The voice of a female.

“Will everyone stop commenting. Her name is Suzanne Clark. We’ll clear her, then you can brief her on her duties.”

“Very well.”

“Was that the ship AI?” asked Suzanne.

“This ship is the James Clerk Maxwell – scientist who first wrote out the equations for electromagnetic waves - so the AI is Max. Now..” He unhooked a folding table from the bulkhead and banged it down in front of Suzanne so hard that she jumped, then pulled a screen on an extendable arm out of the bulkhead. “One of the main concerns of my life is people trying to jack the ship.”

“You mean pirate the ship?”

“We say jacking and I’m not just crazy about the issue I’m full-blown paranoid and I’m in a bad mood, and the last person to try jacking the ship was your predecessor. You’re coming through the crew quarters so that means a full security check. Your pack; let’s see it. Dump it on the table. Also, your shoes, and socks. And I want to be able to see your hands at all times.”

Suzanne complied. Rods spread her meagre possessions on the table, ran a hand scanner over them, then scanned the heels of the shoes. She handed over her jacket – at least it was warmer in the airlock - and Rods checked the pockets, then scanned it.

“Thirty credits!” said Rods, finding a price tag. “I had to buy this so that Stan wouldn’t haul you off to his cell.”

“You were talking about the jacket. I was freezing and I thought it had been dumped. It was just on this pile.”

“That’s Jenny’s shop. Piles of stuff. It came off what she owes me, but you could have shop lifted something cheaper.”

Rods scowl made Suzanne think better of smiling.

Rods checked the screen which, Suzanne later found out, showed the view from a whole-person scanner. “Okay, the rest. Pants, top and underwear on the counter.”

“What?”

“You heard me! Come on, come on. Oh, for stars sake!” He grabbed a large towel from a locker beside the table and threw it at her, hitting her so hard, that she staggered back. “Tuck that under your chin to preserve your modesty, but I still have to see your hands. The main scanner shows that you’ve got stuff in your panties. Let’s see it all.”

“There’s nothing worth seeing.”

“I’ll decide if it’s nothing.”

Suzanne did as she was told but felt her eyes getting wet. She threw her top on the table, trying not to cry. She did not want to cry in front of Rods, but she was tired and hungry, and upset that she should be reduced to this, and that secrets would be

revealed. When she dropped her panties a small item fell to the floor with tinkle; a card fell with a click and another item fluttered.

“Grab those Igor.” The robot move forward, extended one arm by several times its length to pick up the objects and placed them on the table.

Suzanne sobbed.

“For star’s sake. You know the Replicant in that film misquotes Blake.”

Suzanne looked up, wiping her eyes.

“Where the angel goes up he says down. The original line is fiery the angels rose.”

“So, it’s fiery the angels fell?”

“Yes, fell.” Rods picked up the item that had tinkled – a ring - with a small laser pointer he also kept in the locker.

“This looks like an engagement ring?” He did not add the adjective “cheap” but he thought it. “Are you engaged?” She nodded. “And where is your fiance now?”

“Earth Station.”

“Does he know you’ve taken a job in a distant part of the galaxy?”

“He knows I had to come out here. He’s waiting for me.”

“So how come I had to make you strip to get this?”

“The girls I met suggested it. Said you’d be much more likely to take me.”

“Who were the girls?”

“A Stacy and an Anne. Anne had red hair and ..”

“I know them,” snapped Rods.

“They said you were a gentleman.”

“I am – a gentleman who does not like to charge round the galaxy with other people’s fiances. There have been past misunderstandings. But as it happens, considering the way that Matt and Stan have been lecturing me, it’s just as well. Put the ring back on when we’ve finished and keep it on.”

He picked up the item that had fluttered. “A twenty-credit note. Don’t often see the actual paper. Did you steal this too?”

She shook her head.

“Emergency money.”

She nodded.

“Wouldn’t have got you far.” He dropped it on the table. “And last item is an Earth Station identity card which has a different name entirely and...” Rods looked at the photo and then at Suzanne twice. “This isn’t your photo. You’re the same physical type but it’s not you. What’s going on?”

“I swapped with another girl who had to come out to a place called Basher’s Find,” said Suzanne in a small voice. “She was picked to go there but didn’t want to go.”

“That’s how you managed to get all the way out here on no money?”

Another nod.

“But you got off here.”

“Slipped out. No real controls on the gates.”

“But how did you get on the ship in the first place? Don’t these cards have biometric checks?”

She shook her head. They just do bar scans for the people coming out to these colonies.

“I’m not surprised. Basher’s Find is no career move.”

“Bad is it?”

“Penal colony that has room to take people. Fortunately for you I can sort something out with the managers. One less person isn’t going to bother them.” He dropped the card on the table. “Max!

“Yes.”

“Suzanne has standard entry to the crew quarters. Cabin three. Turn off surveillance in the entry airlock for three minutes.” He turned to Suzanne. “Get dressed. The cameras are off. And put the table back up. Igor will lead you through. Igor wait outside for our cruise director.”

She reached out to grab her underwear. He turned to go.

“But wait, what am I supposed to do as cruise director?”

“Your job will be to deal with the creatures that I hate and fear the most in all the galaxy.”

“Goodness, what creatures?” said Suzanne trying to imagine what in all of space her new employer would find so horrible.

“Passengers! They whine; they want me to fix the coffee machine; they try jacking the ship. I don’t like them. Dealing with them is your job, and good luck to you. We pick up a new load in about three days – about 40 of the horrors, I think.”

“Forty people! Three days! But where am I to put them? Am I to feed them anything?” Suzanne had imagined a nameless horde of passengers mobbing her, demanding food. She had never even hosted a dinner party – a point she had not mentioned in her job interview.

“It’s all in the files, all written with newcomers in mind, just ask Max when you get to your cabin. She will have the schedules to follow; just don’t bother me about the passengers unless they start jacking the ship.”

He left, slamming the airlock hatch.

CHAPTER THREE

Igor took Suzanne's bag when she emerged from the airlock and led the way down a short corridor to a lift, which took them up two decks. Less stressed, Suzanne could take note of her surroundings. She could see that the fittings bore signs of wear. The lift, which took them to the top, or A deck, which contained the crew quarters, functioned well enough but the carpet was threadbare. Mirrors in the lift had blotches on the edges. But then Suzanne could not recall seeing carpet on the floors of any of the ships she had been in, and had never used any lifts in them.

"This seems like a large ship," she said to Igor. "How many crew are there?"

"Two humans; two robots – and Max."

"What? So just me and Rods and you and another robot."

"IRA – Integrated Robotic Assistant. We do the work, you tell us what to do."

"I do?" It had not occurred to Suzanne she might have assistance. But what was she going to do with this assistance? Then the lift doors opened and she forgot, for the moment, her new concerns about being a cruise director.

In past Eras, a real estate agent would have described the crew quarters as compact. A better adjective was "cramped". But to Suzanne, used to the overcrowding of Earth Station and to sharing bunks on transports, it was palatial. Igor showed her to a tiny cabin fitted with two bunks, with a postage-stamp sized en-suite, tiny closet and fold down work station which, she quickly realized, was all hers. It was acres of space. It was paradise. She quickly found she could fold up the top bunk for additional vistas. She thought of Richard, her absent fiancé, and how privacy was all but impossible on Earth Station. He had to come out. Then her stomach rumbled. An inquiry about food and meals led her to a small but well-stocked galley with a programmable auto-cook unit. She made herself a sandwich, eating half of it then and there, then found some biscuits on which she spread a substance described as butter on the container but would have not been within many light years of an actual cow. There was juice. Suzanne left some.

Then she noticed the background music. She was used to constant, quiet background music at Earth Station and on the ships she had been in, but that had been anodyne – designed to sooth. This music was different.

*I polished up that handle so carefully
That now I am the Ruler of the Queen's Navy
He polished up that handle so carefully
That now he is the Ruler of the Queen's Navy*

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