

Bryanna peeked through the cargo hatch viewport. “They’re here.”

A towering, commanding man cut through the formation of guards as they broke to surround the ship. His dark, imposing presence captivated her attention—the black, shoulder-length hair and trimmed beard, bronzed skin, a deep-set scowl frozen on his face, the coldness of his eyes. Muscles rippled beneath his shirt and pants as he moved. A dagger hilt stuck out of his boot and caught the light. But it was the sword strapped to his side and the neural-electrical disruptor pistol resting on his hip that riveted her.

Bryanna’s hands trembled as she hugged herself and shivered. “They have NED pistols and rifles ... and Bastion has his sword.”

“Let me do the talking,” T’Laan said. “Stay behind me and try not to draw attention to yourself.”

“I hope we know what we’re doing.”

“So do I.”

T’Laan opened the hatch door that extended out and down to form a ramp. He stepped out and stopped at the bottom. Bryanna followed, coming to stand behind him.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the approaching admiral. “May I ask who is in charge?”

“I am.” Bastion motioned for two of his men to go up the ramp. They brushed past Bryanna and stood between her and the *Wolverine*.

“Greetings.” T’Laan smiled. “May I ask why we’re being detained? We’re traveling under a Triad authorization for interstellar commerce, in accordance with the Triad’s merchant contract with the empire. We would be pleased to produce authenticating documentation to that effect if you so desire.”

The admiral stared past T’Laan at Bryanna. “I am Admiral Devon Bastion, commander of the *Maelstrom*. I’m detaining you for violating Imperial Well quarantine and for the destruction of Imperial property, specifically a sleeper drone.”

As Bastion started up the ramp, T’Laan blocked his path. “Hold on. We are civilians. You can’t detain us on a military vessel.”

Bastion arched an eyebrow. “I am detaining you, android. What condition you’re in during that detention is up to you.”

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Bryanna put herself between them. “When did the empire start harassing merchant civilians? I’m sure you’ve heard of the transport contract with the Triad Merchant Guild. It’s been in effect for nearly a hundred years.”

Hands on hips and glaring at the admiral, she fought a growing unease as his eyes moved over her body. She held his gaze when he returned it to her face.

“A contractual merchant agreement doesn’t absolve your culpability in the destruction of the drone, nor does it negate the quarantine order,” Bastion said. “You violated Well space and you took out the drone. That’s sufficient grounds for your detention.”

“A navigation error on my part landed us in Well space,” T’Laan said. “Glitch in my system.”

Bastion glanced at him. “A navigation error didn’t take out a sleeper drone.”

“The drone was an accident—a misfire of an old missile,” Bryanna said. “We entered Well space by mistake and were trying to get out. That’s all. Search the ship if you like. We have nothing to hide.”

“I doubt that. Guards.”

Bryanna searched his steel-gray eyes. *He knows.*

She wheeled as the guard moved up behind her. Magic surged inside her, like a jolt of electricity, feeding off her fear and anger. “No, no, no! Not now,” she whispered.

“Bryanna!” T’Laan’s shout reverberated through a tunnel as a silver light engulfed her in a brilliant cocoon. It undulated around her in a gossamer cloud with pinpoint pulses of glittering platinum.

She cried out when a bolt of energy flashed from her aura and recoiled as it struck a guard. It engulfed him in a web of lightning, then settled on the NED-rifle in his hands. The weapon disintegrated in an instant, and the guard staggered back, crying out. The stench of seared flesh assailed her.

Bryanna whirled away, her stomach heaving, when her jaw exploded with pain. The taste of blood filled her mouth, and her head spun. Knocked off her feet, she landed squarely on her back. Bastion stood over her, his sword centimeters from her throat. Blood marred the knuckles of his other hand.

His eyes were as cold as the depths of space. “Power down, my lady, or I will kill you.”