

## Chapter 1

### Unexpected Present

What happened? What am I looking at? Why can't I move my legs? Who am I? *Focus, moron . . .*

My scattered wits slowly returned. Judging by the view out of my faceplate, I was flat on my back, on the sharply tilted deck. Let's see, we had just run through the orbital maneuvering checklist. Drives, to half power . . . check. Attitude controls, to neutral . . . check. Antimissile defense shields . . . Ah ha, missed that one . . . like we had any.

The emergency lighting cast an eerie red glow over the cabin. Turning my head to the right brought Fi into view. On the other side . . . ouch, that hurt . . . was where Marie was supposed to be.

In spite of the increasing pain, I continued turning my head until she showed up in my field of vision. She was standing next to Brain, 'course, I don't remember his seat being that far back against the bulkhead.

"Fi?" No answer. "Are you okay?"

"She is fine, Ice, her Comm is out. How are you feeling?" Marie answered.

"Head hurts, legs won't move, everything else seems okay. How's Brain?"

"Breathing regularly but not conscious," she replied, concern reflected in her voice.

I craned forward, as far as my suit would bend, trying to see what was holding me down. A pinnacle of dark material rose through the deck, between my legs, and pierced the ceiling.

The good news . . . It had kept us from falling any further down the slope. The bad news . . . Puncture Sealer had oozed from the ruptured hull and hardened, gluing me to the deck. And, considering the size of the puncture, it was a sure bet, there wasn't any air in here.

"Any contact with Orion?"

"Fionna is working on that. I am connecting Alphonse's suit to the ship's air. He is pinned in the seat and I cannot move him to change his tanks," she replied.

Great, when it rains . . . "Okay, when you get a chance, give me a status report." I looked at my legs. "It looks like I'm gonna be stuck here for a while."

"Ha, Ha," she answered, with a strained laugh.

Landing on this small airless moon should have been easy. The four of us had taken Spider, the auxiliary spaceship, to set up a forward listening post. The planet below was inhabited and I didn't want to risk Orion in a first contact situation. I had been making a textbook approach, right up until something hit us . . . hard. Spider lost power and using every ounce of my piloting skills, we *almost* missed the mountains.

Fire came over and plugged her intercom line into my suit. "Hey, Captain Honey, nice landing."

"Well, you know what they say about landings, Fire of my Heart. Are you okay?"

"A bruise here and there but I'll live. The Comm gear is trashed. We're going to have to put an emergency beacon on top of the mountains."

I mulled this over. Brain was out cold and it was obvious I wasn't going anywhere. That only left the girls.

"Be careful, Sweetheart. Whoever shot us down might come out to check. In fact, maybe you should maintain radio silence. How far from the top do you think we are?"

"A few hundred feet," she replied.

"See if you can find a cable to jack into the beacon. That way you can come back here to wait." I had another thought. "Check the tool box for something to use as a hammer and chisel. I'll work on chipping myself free while you're gone."

They got the gear together and, after a goodbye hand squeeze, left. Marie

had connected my suit with Brain's so I was able to monitor his vitals but there wasn't a whole lot I could do if he had problems. As I started chipping at the sealant near my waist, my thoughts drifted back over the past couple of years.

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When Orion began decelerating on Inertial Drives, I breathed a sigh of relief . . . and not just because the Torch was shut down. Our double trip to Alpha C had been a strain on the whole crew. Now we were safe in home space and could relax a little . . .

**“Captain, I have been tracking an anomaly for the past two days. At first I believed it to be an equipment malfunction. However, subsequent diagnostic data indicates that was not the case.”**

Ever since he had become sentient, Orion tended to over verbalize. Like a kid who just learned how to string more than two sentences together. “Just give me the quick version, Orion. Is there any danger to the ship?”

**“We are not in any immediate danger, but my extrapolations indicate a 70% chance of problems in the future. Forty-eight hours ago, I detected an asteroid on our projected course. I altered our trajectory to avoid it. Four hours later, we were once again on a collision course. After modifying our trajectory again, I began a diagnostic of the radar system. There was a slight alignment problem, which I reported to Don. Ten point seven hours later, the object . . .”**

This is the short version? “You don't have to give me a detailed explanation, Orion, just summarize it.”

**“But Captain, this is the summary. I have left out all the radar diagnostic readings and Don's report. In addition . . .”**

I cut him off again. “Let me see if I can guess where this is going. When we change course to avoid it, it modifies its own trajectory to intercept our new one.”

**“Yes, but you have left out much information.”**

“Are you sure it's a rock and not a ship?”

**“Of course, I am certain. It is too large to be a ship. Are you questioning my ability to tell the difference between an Asteroid and a Spaceship? I am quite capable of distinguishing the . . .”**

Maybe we were better off when he was only the ship's computer and just answered questions. “We'll talk about that later, Orion. Put a feed from the telescope on the main screen, please.” The view appeared showing . . . empty space. “The asteroid, Orion.” Like he didn't know what I wanted to look at.

He skewed the 'scope around and centered on the rock. It was a stunningly average chunk of preplanetary debris showing no obvious oddities, other than

the course changes. That alone was enough to get my little voice all riled up.

“Orion, alter course for Mars,” I commanded.

**“Why, Captain? I thought our destination was Luna?”**

Apparently, we had a *lot* to talk about. “Just do it, Orion.”

**“Course set.”**

Do I detect an attitude there? “Inertiate!”

**“Complying, Captain.”**

Yup, definite attitude. “Maintain this heading for four hours and track the asteroid.” I sharpened my voice a bit. “You missed a ‘Captain’ in there, Orion.”

**“Sorry.”**

Yeah, he sounds like it.

“Ah, quit pickin’ on him Iceman. Everybody forgets to call you Captain, sometimes,” Brain said, from his seat at the Engineering Console. “He probably doesn’t understand why you did it, that’s all.”

“That’s *Captain* Iceman, to you.” Points of discipline have to be enforced. It says so in the Captain’s Manual under Mutiny, Prevention of.

Fire turned in his direction. “Ooh, I think Captain Honey got up on the wrong side of bed this morning, Brain.” She turned her head and blew me a kiss. I give up. Nobody ever listens to me. It’s a miracle the ship hasn’t descended into total chaos. Grunting, I crossed my arms and concentrated on the screen in front of me.

Four, pointedly silent, hours later, I had Orion put us back on track to Luna.

**“Captain, I do not understand why we performed this maneuver. It was already apparent that the object was attempting to intercept us.”**

Maybe I *had* been a little hard on him. After all, he is just a kid. “You did a good job figuring that out, Orion. What I was trying to find out was just how serious the asteroid is in meeting up with us.”

**“Oh! I understand. It is apparently very serious. When we diverted to Mars, it performed a severe course correction back to intercept. It is now in the process of another correction.”**

“Well, that tears it. When will we intercept and at what velocity?”

**“Fifteen hours, twenty-seven minutes. Relative velocity will be ninety thousand miles per hour.”** We should be able to ‘sidestep’ it, Orion was more maneuverable. It was just a matter of timing. The real question was, why would anyone be throwing rocks at us?

“You got any thoughts on this, Brain?” I asked.

“It’s obvious that it isn’t coming to meet us and say hello, not at that closing speed. It has to be some kind of attack.”

“But why an asteroid?” I asked, scratching my head.

“Well, if someone wanted to destroy Orion, they might want to make it look like an accident,” he answered.

Good point. If we hit a rock, it could be chalked up to a tragic twist of fate. ‘Intrepid Interstellar Explorers Nailed by Rogue Asteroid, Just Weeks From Home’.

“It cannot be only that, Alphonse. We could easily avoid an asteroid. There must be something else,” Marie speculated.

“Yeah, Glitch, but what? Orion, can you detect any emissions coming from it?”

**“No, Alphonse, it is not radiating anything, not even infrared.”**

That’s to be expected I guess, it’s cold out here. “Okay, keep an eye on it and let us know if anything changes,” I said, stating the obvious for . . . uh . . . disciplinary reasons.

**“Yes, Captain.”**

Fifteen hours later, all hands were at battle stations and the passengers were strapped down. Orion’s weapons were fully manned. If this was another Pirate attack, they were going to be brutally surprised.

Ten minutes from intercept, I was about to give Orion the word to shift left, at two g’s over compensation. That hunk of rock couldn’t possibly change direction fast enough to hit us, but my little voice wasn’t keeping still. It felt like I was missing something. Let’s see, the only ways to attack, with any hope of success, were to stage an ambush or sneak up on us . . . Hmm. The rock *had* been performing subtle course corrections. If Orion hadn’t taken an interest in it, then we wouldn’t have been had any advanced warning. Even so, by itself, the asteroid didn’t pose a hazard unless . . . yikes!

“Orion, take out that asteroid with the I-Bore, full power, now!”

Even before I finished the last word, three plasma bolts shot from the front of the ship in rapid succession. They seemed to be moving in slow motion, then . . . impact!

The explosion was stupendous . . . way bigger than three plasma bolts should have made! A bright white glare flooded into the Bridge, momentarily blinding us. I grabbed the helm control stick and began rotating the ship to put the Torch shield plate in front.

By the time the light level returned to normal, and our vision cleared, what was left of the asteroid began striking the rear of the ship. Orion was ringing, like a Church Bell on Easter, from the impacts and alarms.

“Orion, status report!” I yelled over the din. “And shut down those alarms!”

**“The target is gone, Captain. Vital systems appear to be intact, but I have no sensor readings from the Aft section beyond emergency hatch 21. Aft section Fusion Units have shut down. The Torch Maintenance Corridor is open to space. Main Drives are not responding. I am using the Ball Drives to stabilize the ship.”**

“What about the asteroid debris, are we clear of it?”

**“Yes, Captain.”**

“Okay, everybody, damage check. Comm . . . Lindsey, get your people together and make sure the folks are all right.”

“We’re on it, Captain. What’d we hit?” She asked.

“Rocks. Fi, you have the Bridge. Brain, let’s go take a look,” I said, rising.

“What do the external cameras show?” He asked.

I turned back to my screen and punched a few keys. “What external cameras?”

“Oh.”

**“Captain, the Bridge received a large dose of radiation from the blast.”**

Oh, spiffy. “Lethal levels, Orion?”

**“No, but high enough that medical attention may be required.”**

“Inform Doc so he can get set up, in case there are more than us that need it.”

As we made our way to the rear, my buddy had a grim look on his face. The emergency hatch to corridor one was shut. We made it three quarters of the way down corridor two before we were stopped by another closed hatch. We stood there for a minute, staring at it.

“Ya know, Ice, whoever did this is toast,” Brain commented in a deadly level voice.

I echoed his sentiments. “When we get through with them, they’re gonna *wish* they were Toast. Being Toast will seem like heaven. What kind of jerks are they . . . throwing *Nukes* around?” We walked back to an emergency locker, put on suits and returned to the closed hatch.

“Orion, close E-hatch 20 and open 21.” Our lights revealed a cloud of wreckage floating beyond.

“Orion, can you turn the emergency lights on?”

**“No, Captain, I have no control beyond this point.”**

We gingerly made our way through the jagged debris. The back end of the ship looked like a war zone. There were large holes ripped through the hull and even into the Torch. The Shield Plate was bent forward, like an umbrella in a windstorm.

Keeping an eye on our Rad sensors, we floated up to the edge to get a look

past it. There was no sign of the Nozzle.

“All the water back here is gone, the tanks are shredded,” Brain reported.

“Well, that shouldn’t be a problem. We have enough in the Ball to last until we get to Luna. I’m more worried about all this loose garbage. It’s gonna make maneuvering a real pain,” I said, pointing to a Drive housing, drifting nearby.

“We have time to figure it out. A major course correction isn’t due for a few more days.”

“Yeah, maybe we could let the Aft Section coast on in. Then we can deal with it later.”

When we reentered the Ball, Doc was waiting. “Well, my boys, how does it look?”

“It’s a mess back there, Doc. That asteroid really plastered us.”

“Are we in any immediate danger?”

“No . . .”

“Excellent,” he said, grabbing us by the arms, “then the two of you will be coming with me, to Sickbay.”

“But, Doc, we have work to do,” Brain objected.

“The only work you have is to get into the Scanner, my boy, Doctor’s orders. I’ve already checked the rest of the Bridge crew and now it is your turn.”

“What’s their status?”

He continued propelling us along. For a guy his age, he was pretty strong. “Tut, tut. First the Scanner, then we’ll all have a nice chat.” Now, I was worried. Doc usually didn’t beat around the bush like this.

After he finished the examination, Brain and I must have looked as pale as ghosts. Out here, radiation is the most dangerous part of the environment. Injuries and diseases can be handled fairly easily and decompression can be protected against. Getting overdosed on Rads can cause *real* problems.

“Now boys, relax,” he said with a smile. “You aren’t going to die, but there are some things we will have to discuss later.”

That’s a relief . . . I think. “You were right about Orion, Doc. He saved our behinds today. If he hadn’t become curious about that rock, we probably would have been vaporized.”

“Yes, well, curiosity *is* closely linked to self awareness.” With that, he let us go back to work.

An all-ship meeting brought everyone up to speed on the situation. Our proposal to disconnect from the Aft section wasn’t well received. The Scientists were understandably unhappy about leaving all their important work,

what was left of it, to drift alone through space. Untended, the wreckage would be a tempting target for Pirates. Fido and Argo-C were worth the trouble, all by themselves. What we had in the holds was . . . priceless. So, I came up with a plan . . . okay, *we* came up with a plan.

“What if we put a remote-controlled beacon on it. That way it won’t be on until we’re looking for it.”

“Oh, that’ll work,” Brain commented, dryly. “When we get to Luna and the System finds out what happened, every Pirate and salvage hunter in the Belt, will be out here looking for it beacon or not.”

“Well, maybe we could rig up living quarters and somebody could stay with it,” I said.

“That’s an idea. The guards could use a Lander and the small ship for life support,” Fi suggested. A good idea, but it would be a long trip.

“Couldn’t we just clean up the mess and secure the debris?” Lindsey asked.

“It will take more time to clean that mess up than it will to get home. It’s bad back there,” I answered her. “Orion, what’s our travel time to Luna and then back to retrieve the Aft section?”

**“About six weeks, Captain, we would intercept it at Mars Orbit. There might be another way. Using Fido and Argo-C as tugs, the Aft Section can be redirected toward Belt Central. With help, retrieval time would be greatly reduced.”**

“Yes!” Marie exclaimed. “Daddy and the Lonetree crews could recover it for us! Outstanding idea, Orion.”

**“Thank you, Marie. It is nice to be appreciated.”**

The hard part was asking for volunteers. It was going to be a long, and hopefully, boring, trip. The first ones were Don and Irene.

“Are you sure you guys want to do this? You’ve done your share of ‘above and beyond’ already.”

They looked at each other and Don nodded. “My help will be needed securing the equipment and assessing damage, Captain.”

“That’s true, but if anyone unexpected shows up, it could get dangerous.”

“Don’t worry about that, Captain. A few of the guys will make sure nothing happens,” Lindsey said. “After all, what could be worse than Raptors?” Well, the Nuclear trap we just narrowly avoided, for one . . . I didn’t say out loud.

Half of the Security people, Don, Irene and a MedTech were going. After transferring supplies, extra oxygen and personal belongings, we disengaged the Ball and sent the wreckage on it’s way. It wasn’t possible to secure Fido to the

Ball, so Brain linked its Nav computer to Orion and it flew alongside.

Doc met with all of us who were on the Bridge when the asteroid exploded. While his news wasn't terminal, it was grim, nonetheless.

"Your scans showed sufficient cellular damage for me to advise that you should all return to Earth and begin genetic antiradiation treatments as soon as possible," he instructed.

"How long is this gonna take, Doc? Me and Ice got an appointment with some vermin."

Doc frowned, slightly. "The treatment itself will only take a month or two. However, for a long period afterward, your systems will be highly susceptible to radiation damage. I want all of you to spend at least a year on Earth, protected, as it were."

Fire gave my hand a squeeze. "That's not so bad, Honey. It'll give us time to do the other thing we've been talking about." I smiled back, but Doc wasn't through.

"Yes, my dear, I am afraid you are going to have to put that on hold for a while. Until your DNA is fully repaired, children are out of the question."

Marie's sharp intake of breath made me look up.

"It's okay, Glitch. It's only a year," Brain said, but the disappointment in his voice was clear.

"Hey, we're going to be pretty busy for at least a year, guys. Orion's a mess and we still have to figure out where the Atlanteans went," I said.

"But, that means it will be at least three or four years, before . . .," Marie said.

Doc cleared his throat. "Ahem, let us see how the treatment goes. If everything looks good, we can discuss options later."

That night, Fi wasn't in a very good mood. I tried to cheer her up but was failing, miserably. I shut my yap and after she went to sleep, made a midnight raid on the galley. Brain was already there, staring distractedly at the drink in his hand.

"Hey, you too?" I asked, sitting across from him.

"Yeah, this really hit Marie hard." He looked up, angrily. "Ice, there's only one crowd who'd try something like this."

"Uh huh, and Logan is their boss." We sat in silence for a while, digesting the implications.

"We need to do somethin' about that, Iceman. He's been causin' us trouble, in one form or another, for almost ten years."

"It's time for a plan, I guess," I said, with a deep sigh. "Orion, display a System map with our position and course, Belt Central, Earth and Logan's

Hole.”

**“Yes, Captain.”**

The map appeared on the galley screen. At first glance, it looked like we could intercept the Hole with only a small correction to our present trajectory.

Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to cram an I-Bore bolt down Logan’s throat, we had other responsibilities. “Well, if we didn’t have a ship full of people, it would be easy,” I said.

“Piece of cake. But, by the time we drop them off on Luna and word gets out that we’re still alive, Logan will be ready for us,” Brain observed.

“It would have been nice to sneak up on him. For all he knows, we’re a cloud of radioactive dust. I guess we’ll have to do it the hard way. Speaking of cake, is there any left in the fridge?”

He got up to check. “Yeah, chocolate.”

“Sounds good.” He brought it over with some plates.

We were still talking tactics when the girls came in.

“So this is where you got to,” Fi said, sitting next to me. “And eating between meals. Bad boy.”

“Alphonse, I thought we were going on a diet?” Marie asked him, one eyebrow raised.

“We were sitting here, figuring out what to do about Logan, and needed the sugar, Glitch. Here, have some,” he said, feeding her a piece of his cake.

Fi reached over and took my plate. “She’s right, you should probably be on a diet too, I’ll just remove this temptation for you.”

I grabbed the plate and growled, “my cake, get your own.”

She leaned over and kissed me. Letting go of the plate, I reached for her . . . too late. She jerked back, with the cake. I sighed and went to get another plate and fork.

“So, you believe Logan had something to do with this, Alphonse?” Marie asked, looking at the display.

“Yeah, that’s what we figure. He’s the only one, out here, with the resources and the motive.”

“It appears to be more of a guess than a conclusion. You are lacking in information,” Marie noted.

“Wha about ta Ert oonies?” Fi asked, around a mouthful of ill-gotten gains.

“You wanna repeat that in English, Cake Thief?” I asked, sitting next to her.

She swallowed, glaring at me. “I said, what about the Earth loonies?”

“You mean, OWE? Well, they might have something to do with it, but Logan’s the guy who runs things at the Hole. That’d be a weird partnership.”

“True, Iceman, but no weirder than Sylvia and him. Their only commonality was an extreme dislike of us,” Brain responded.

I had a sudden, horrible, thought. “You don’t think she has any more psycho family, do you?”

Fi patted my hand. “Don’t worry, Captain Honey. If she does, I’ll protect you.”

Turning to her with a smile, I slide my other hand toward her plate.

Her eyes flared. “But there won’t be anybody to protect *you* from *me* if you don’t pull that back . . . Sweetheart,” she finished, sternly.

“Perhaps you should attempt to determine Logan’s complicity before jumping on him,” Marie said.

“I know,” Brain said, having an inspiration. “Orion, can you extrapolate the asteroid’s probable origin point from the data you gathered before we changed course for Mars?”

**“Yes, Alphonse, I can.”** A plot appeared on the display, an arrow appeared on the line. **“The arrow indicates the probable position of the asteroid, at the time we Transitioned from Ospace. This makes the assumption that it was launched when our Torch flare was detected.”**

Brain turned to his wife. “Proof enough, Glitch?” The arrow was in close proximity to Logan’s Hole.

She nodded. “So, what is the plan, Big Chief Alphonse?” Marie asked. “It will be difficult to sneak up on the Hole with the Orion.”

“Not as hard as you might think. If we maintain communication silence, they’ll assume we’ve been vaporized. I can rig something using the Grav-bubble plates to distort radar so they might have a problem seeing us coming.”

“But, what about optical detection?” Fi asked.

“Ah, that explosion blasted a coating of asteroid dust onto us. Our albedo must be pretty low. By the time they do spot us, we would have already gotten into the Hole and nabbed His Sliminess. With Orion covering, there wouldn’t be any problems getting away.” Our conversation started attracting the night crew, and before you knew it, we had a crowd in the galley, enjoying a midnight snack, discussing recent events and our plan. When I explained that it wasn’t going to happen because we had to drop them off, opinions were voiced about how they had been gone from home for so long that a few more weeks didn’t seem too big a deal. And besides, somebody had tried to kill them too and it just wouldn’t be right to let it go unpunished.

Next morning, at a ship wide meeting in the park, I outlined our plan. All of the crew and most of the passengers were behind it.

“I appreciate your backing, folks, but this has got to be unanimous. We

won't force anyone into a dangerous situation against their wishes. Taking on Logan and his thugs won't be easy. Especially in his home space," I explained.

"I don't expect we'll need help storming the Hole, but the ship might need to be defended. So, think about it for a day or so and then we'll take a vote."

"What about outside contact, Captain?" Someone asked.

"We should maintain a Comm blackout, regardless of what we decide to do. If the bad guys think they got us, we might not have any more surprises," Brain answered. "Lonetree Enterprises will be contacted, at the appropriate time, to tell them about the Aft section, but that will be a short laser burst."

A day later, when the vote was taken, it was unanimous. We were going to pay Logan a visit he would never forget, as long as he lived. Which, if I had my way, wouldn't be very long at all.

"Well, it's decided. Now here's what we plan to do . . . "

"No, it isn't, Captain Honey, you forgot someone."

I was confused. Forgot? Who? *Orion, numbskull.* My little voice said. "Sorry. Orion, how do you vote?"

There was a long silence, electronically speaking. **"I was not aware I had a vote, Captain."**

"Oh, Orion. Of course you do!" Fi exclaimed. "In fact, yours is the most important vote because you *are* the ship, after all."

**"Then, no. I have no wish to become even more damaged. Furthermore, I think all you people are crazy just for suggesting it."** You could have heard a pin drop on the Bridge . . . **"Just kidding, I vote to also go along with the Captain's plan. I do not like being hit by rocks."** I exhaled. That was almost scary. Having an intelligent ship was going to be a real chore.

**"You are not laughing. Was that not humorous?"**

"Uh, it wasn't that funny, Orion," I said. "Right now, we have work to do. Lindsey, get a group together and run some of the folks through training simulations. We're going to need help on the weapons. Brain, we better pull up some layout data on the Hole so we can figure out how to do this."

"If we use the Combat Suits, we increase our firepower a hundred times," Fi said. It took me a few seconds to process the 'we' part of the statement.

Brain was a little faster. "I think you and Marie ought to stay with the ship, Fire. We might need to be pulled out of there."

It didn't take a genius to read the expressions on their faces, but this needed to be hashed out in private. "We should discuss it later, Brain. So far, the boarding party is just you and I, but we'll need help. Not even the two of us . . . as mighty as we are . . . could handle it alone," I stated, half seriously. A loud groan arose from the crowd, accompanied by much shaking of heads.

The Laser Comm to Lonetree was acknowledged by someone I didn't recognize and when I told Marie, she got worried. It meant her Dad wasn't around. Apparently, someone was filling in for him but there was no clue as to why.

Our preparations continued, dredging up a lot of uneasy memories. The last time we had tangled with the Pirates, it had gotten pretty dicey for a while. My own feelings were mixed. On the one hand, Logan had to be dealt with, once and for all. On the other, I just hoped I wasn't blowing it, again. Regardless of what the tally was, I think more than a few of them had been voting out of sheer loyalty. It's easy to be convinced you're right when the people around you think so. But, as I'd told Orion a while back, sometimes you have to flip a coin.

On a whole other level, were Fi and Marie. They both wanted to come and weren't taking no for an answer.

"Jeff, I can't believe you're fighting me on this. After Halcyon, I thought we were going to adventure together," Fi said, defiantly.

"If we were exploring a new planet, or braving the perils of unknown space, it would be an adventure, Fionna. This is going to be more like pest control, and they're the most dangerous pests in the universe."

"And that's why I want to be at your side. If you get killed, my whole world will end. I've *been* through that feeling and once was enough."

I gave her a hug. "I know, Fire of my Heart, but I've had more practice at this sort of thing than I have at exploring new planets. I'll come back, I promise."

"Sure, you say that, but what if . . ."

"Hey, if a whole planet full of Raptors, not to mention falling to the center of Halcyon, couldn't keep me from you, then a rat's nest of mere Pirates hasn't got a chance."

She looked up at me, one eyebrow raised. "Let's see, as far as the Raptors go, we had to rescue you, as I recall."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"And, I wasn't aware that Halcyon was only 400 feet across."

"Well . . ."

"See, this is why I should go, just to keep the facts straight," she said, a tone of finality in her voice. I was being outmaneuvered, there was only one thing to do. Tickle attack!

"Heee haaa aha haa . . . stop!" She retaliated by pinching me, really hard.

"Ow . . ."

“You’re not changing the subject, that easily, Jefferson.” Oops, now she was sounding like Mom.

“Well, it was worth a try. Look, if you go then Marie is going too, right?”

“I guess so.”

“So who do we leave in charge of the ship? Doc? As a Doctor, he’s the best but . . .”

“Lindsey could take command or even Orion.”

“Sure, you go, Marie goes and Lindsey cheerfully stays aboard. Orion? He’s smart enough, but I don’t know if he’s ready for command yet.” I looked into her eyes. “Please, Fionna, for the sake of our future family, stay aboard where I know you’ll be safe.”

“Well, our family won’t have a future if something happens to you.”

“Er, that’s not necessarily true, Fi. I wasn’t going to mention this but, before I left for space, Dad made me bank some sperm, on the off chance that I got radiation damage. Of course, that was before Anti-Rad treatments had been developed.”

Her expression made me uneasy because I hadn’t ever seen one quite like it before. “That’s . . . interesting.” I wasn’t sure if I should hug her or run for cover.

“Uh, yeah. Another thing is, if I’m worrying about you, I might not be in top form, then we both could die.”

She sank back into the pillows staring straight ahead for a few seconds. Then she put her head on my shoulder.

“All right, I’ll stay, but only if you wear a Combat Suit.”

“That was a given, my love. I may be a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but I’m not stupid.”

“And if you don’t come back to me, I will be . . . very upset.” Her tone was as unreadable as her expression had been.

Brain got it sorted out with Marie, at least I hoped so. Lindsey put up a squawk, but followed orders.

I had some special instructions for Orion, which I gave him in private. “Orion, if you come under fire and the situation looks bad, I want you to retreat at top speed.”

**“But, Captain, Fionna will be in charge. I will have to follow her orders.”**

“That’s true, and I expect you to. But remember, the lives of the people aboard are far more important than winning a fight or even retrieving the infiltration party.”

**“How will I know when to implement your command?”**

“You’re a computer, Orion. Keep an eye on the situation and figure the odds. At some point, the information . . . and your gut . . . will tell you it’s time to bug out.”

**“I should remind you that my ‘guts’ are drifting toward Belt Central. Also, I believe I resent the implication that I have ‘bugs’.”**

“Not bad, but your delivery could use some work,” I said, with a chuckle. “Do you understand what I’m asking you to do?”

**“Yes, Captain. You can count on me.”**

“Thanks, Orion. I knew I could . . . after all, you *are* a computer.”

**“Yes, I am . . . oh. Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha . . .”**

“Okay, okay, it wasn’t that funny.” Delivery wasn’t the only thing needing work, his laugh didn’t sound quite right.