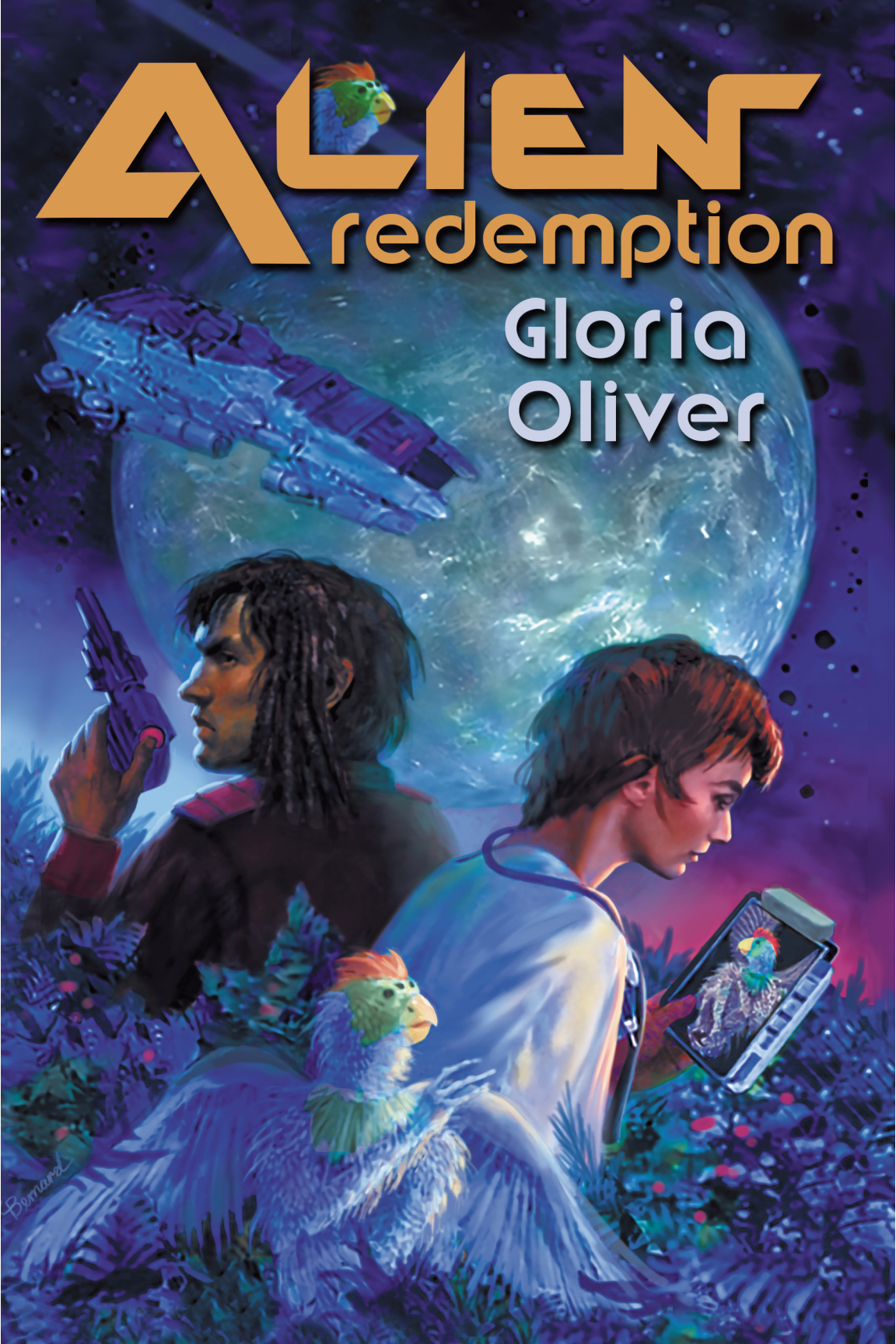


ALIEN

redemption

Gloria
Oliver



“ANOTHER ACCIDENT, I PRESUME?”

A flash of something crossed Stevens' eyes. Whether it was good or bad, Claudia couldn't tell. Instead of answering the question, the first mate placed the unconscious woman she was carrying onto the scanner bed. Her patient had a large lump on the side of the head, and her nose looked broken.

Claudia had just activated the bed and was checking the unconscious woman's vitals when Stevens broke the silence.

“The captain doesn't tolerate failure or disobedience well.”

Cold fury flared inside Claudia, her suspicions of abuse by the one who commanded them confirmed. She was amazed her hands didn't shake as she programmed the scanner. Now there was a medic onboard, was Bennet showing less restraint than usual? It would make her being here a boon and a bane to everyone on board. If the captain took things too far one too many times, might the crew decide the downside was worse than the benefits and turn on her?

Claudia shook her head. “You still work for him.” It wasn't quite an accusation.

Stevens came up close. Claudia held her ground and didn't step away.

“We all have our reasons for being here. Whether we like it or not.”



ALSO BY GLORIA OLIVER

In the Service of Samurai

Vassal of El

Willing Sacrifice

The Price of Mercy

Jewel of the Gods

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ALIEN REDEMPTION

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To Ethan Nahté

You came through when no one else would. This book would not have been possible without you. Thank you!

And to P.N. Elrod's mini-brick in the face.

Chapter 1

Claudia entered the seedy station bar. She wasn't encouraged by her possible employer's choice of a meeting place. The lighting was subdued, making it hard to see details aside from what was immediately around her. A slow beat vibrated the air accompanied by wailing reeds. She could feel it through the deck and the soles of her shoes. Her nose itched from smoke, and her eyes tried to water. Another law blatantly disregarded at Turbic Station. No wonder the air recycling fees were so high. And this was only the edge of the Fringes. How much worse would it be out in the unexplored regions beyond the United Dominion's influence?

But she had no other options. Not if she wanted to stay in anything resembling the medical field. The one open job at the station she qualified for required high-level background checks. Background checks she couldn't afford to have done. Despite her old patient's skills, he'd been quite insistent the ID wouldn't hold up if scrutinized too closely. Since Turbic Station was run by a former admiral of the United Dominion Fleet, he most likely had resources that would punch through her subterfuge in seconds.

A job on a ship was her best bet—one where they didn't ask a lot of questions. So, it was this or nothing. The chance anything better would come along before her funds ran out was slim to none. If she had no money, they'd force her to indenture herself, an ugly and barbaric practice the info she'd dug up about this station didn't even *hint* about. It stank of a system put in place to ensnare the ignorant and those down on their luck.

Claudia studied the listless dancers, who were separated from the patrons by thick tubes of clear plastic. The large blinking collars around their necks proclaimed them as indentured. The collars covered more of them than the skimpy costumes they were wearing. Had they, too, come here hoping for a fresh start? If so, now their dreams lay shattered.

She made her way deeper inside, trying not to choke on the tobacco smoke and the smell of desperation.

The fact the *Holiday* was even in this region, and her captain able to come meet about the job, had been a stroke of luck. From the chatter at the food dispensary, she'd learned some ships didn't return to the station or be heard from for months at a time.

In the back of the bar, a man sat in one of the bolted-down chair and table sets, his attention focused on a tablet. A large woman held up the wall behind him, arms crossed, her gaze scouring the room. The tables around them were conspicuously empty. Claudia headed toward them, they being the only ones in the bar not drinking or watching the slow gyrations of the dancers.

"Excuse me, are you Ricardo Bennet?"

The man looked up; dark dreadlocks on the right side of his head swayed and clinked with the movement. The hair on the left side was cropped close. Hard eyes studied her, a slight frown creasing his eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm Captain Bennet. You're my fourteen-hundred?"

He didn't move to stand, offer her his hand, or even motion for her to sit. He just studied her.

Claudia ignored his rudeness, as well as his insinuation there might be others vying for the job.

"I'm Aya Maynard. I'm interested in your open position for ship's medical officer."

Bennet made no reply, just continued to scrutinize her. Claudia glanced up at the woman behind him but realized there would be no help forthcoming from that direction. If anything, the woman looked even less friendly than the captain. She stood over two meters tall, stout, with close-cropped white-blond hair.

Claudia sat down without waiting to be asked.

"New to the Fringes, I see." Bennet waved his hand in her general direction. Chains rattled at his neck. His clothes were a darker brown than his hair and looked well worn. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, exposing white scars crisscrossing his dark skin.

Claudia kept her mouth shut, the statement needing no additional comment from her. If he thought he could get a rise out of her by calling her a newcomer, he would be disappointed. Not the first time she'd had to contend with that attitude.

He looked her up and down again. "Educated, entitled, moral," He made the three words sound like stigmas. "Never spent a single hour doing hard labor in your life."

Again she had no intention of giving a response. It was all true. She'd lived her entire life on Ellos, one of the founding planets of the United Dominion. Her parents had done well for themselves, so she'd not wanted for anything as an only child. Her world had a well-established infrastructure, transportation

systems, anything anyone might need. Not like some of the newer planets in the United Dominion, colonized by the sweat, hard work, and sacrifice of those sent there.

"I didn't get to pick where I was born, Captain, and physical labor isn't the only way to work hard." She hadn't gotten her position at Clonos Labs, mapping and marking ncRNAs as well as finding ways to change genomic 'dark matter', by doing nothing.

A flicker of a smile came and went. Bennet sat forward, leaning his scarred arms on the table. "I know you."

Claudia stiffened, those words the last she expected.

"You looked familiar when I first saw you, but I wasn't sure." He leaned back again. "I hardly ever forget a face. Plus, after that little rebuttal, I know exactly where I've seen you before. I liked you better as a blonde."

She looked away, knowing there'd always been the possibility someone might recognize her. She'd just never thought it would happen so soon or out here in the middle of nowhere.

"I'm sorry, you must be mistaken. As you pointed out, I'm new around here."

"I never said I saw you *here*."

He sounded so sure. But then, who but the desperate ever came out this far? This could be a ploy.

Not many people got as much news coverage as Com News had decided to give her, however. Damn them. Still, that had been almost a year ago. Dare she risk it? Better to try to find something else, even if it wasn't in the medical field.

"Sorry, I can see this isn't going to work out." Claudia stood. "I apologize for wasting your time. If you'll excuse me."

"One more step, and I'll yell out your name for everyone to hear."

The threat, voiced in no more than a whisper, made her stop. She didn't move, but she didn't turn around, either. She refused to be the one to take the next step. She could be playing right into Bennet's hands if she did. He was most likely bluffing.

"Despite what your ID says, 'Aya Maynard', you're way overqualified for the open position on my ship. Which means I'll be getting a bargain if I take you on. I like bargains."

Claudia could hear the smile in his words. He would dare to blackmail her to become his ship's medic? Despite herself, she turned around. There was still no proof he had any idea who she really was.

"Sir, this might not be prudent." The woman against the wall didn't shift position or expression, but her disapproval was palpable.

"Now, now, Stevens, this was your idea, remember?" He gave the woman a cocked smile. "Good for the crew, less expensive than bringing them here

for care, less downtime, yadda yadda yadda.” He twirled his hand during the last part, then pointed at himself. “My ship, my crew, my choice.”

“As always, sir. But if she’s not who she says she is, there could be trouble.”

“That’s why I keep *you* around.” He stood up, his gaze having remained on Claudia throughout the entire discussion. “In case you have any doubts about what I might or might not know, ‘Aya Maynard’ on the ship, you’ll be known as Doc Z.”

Claudia’s mouth went dry. Bennet did know who she was. The smirk on his face declared bluntly that if she didn’t play along, he would expose her and have fun doing it. Child killers weren’t welcome anywhere.

Although she didn’t have a collar, she might have just become no less indentured than the rest of the desperate souls who got trapped here.

Chapter 2

The captain left with a nicely worded command for her to show up at the ship ASAP, as if he had no doubt at all she would. Stevens informed her of the dock and slip number, her expression still stubbornly neutral.

Claudia was sure Bennet only wanted her to report immediately so she wouldn't have time to figure a way out of the situation. Except, what options *did* she have? None. If he let the station know who she was, no one would hire her. Who knew what would happen to her then? Like it or not, the *Holiday* was her only choice. For now.

Gathering her things took only minutes. She stared around the tiny station berth, as if it could have come to mean anything to her in the few days she'd spent in it. She knew she was only wasting time, unhappy about Bennet, his sour companion, and what might happen next.

It felt strange heading toward the dock level, especially after having arrived but a handful of days before. With the help of the virtual map tied to her Identi-All, she was able to locate the *Holiday's* slip without too much trouble.

What she could see of the hull through the plasteel windows was covered in old paint and pitted but looked to be in otherwise good condition. What caught her gaze and held it were its Drexon laser cannons. Armaments on a non-military ship, and the station didn't mind?

"Z!"

She jerked half-around, not having expected that voice blaring into the hallway. A small screen lit up next to the station's permanent airlock. Bennet's image gave her a lopsided grin.

"About time you made it here."

The seals on the station airlock hissed as they opened. Several green lights on the board below the screen started blinking.

"Get inside, then cycle on through. Stevens will be waiting for you."

The screen went blank.

Claudia took a deep breath, one full of anticipation and a smidge of apprehension, then pulled the airlock door open enough to squeeze through. Hitting the close button on the other side, she heard the door seal behind her. She walked the short length of the airlock to where it joined the *Holiday's*.

"Prepare to be scanned." Stevens' clipped tones blared from the unit at the door. The screen there remained dark. Purple light washed down on Claudia from above with a hum.

The scan was unexpected, especially just to enter a small ship like this. What was Bennet hoping to find? Weapons? Although, if he'd endeared himself to others as he had with her, he might actually have cause to be a little paranoid.

Less than twenty seconds later, the scan shut off, and green lights lit up on the console. The door gave a soft pop and opened, a similar door doing the same on the other side of the small airlock of the ship.

"Welcome to the *Holiday*. My name is Emma Stevens. I'm second in command. If you have any problems or issues, you'll come to me."

Despite the "welcome", the tight expression on the woman's face wasn't welcoming at all. Claudia couldn't fathom why the first mate thought anyone would willingly come to her for anything. She was off-putting, to say the least.

"Thank you."

Stevens actually nodded at that. Claudia was surprised to see her defrost half a degree.

"Come, I'll show you your cabin and work area." Stevens set off at a brisk pace. "We're only here for another day. So, do a quick inventory and send me a list of what's lacking or what needs replacing, I'll see what I can do before we leave."

Claudia's eyebrows went up with honest disbelief; she was glad the woman had already turned away and didn't see it. Efficiency and communication weren't exactly what she'd been expecting.

"The *Holiday* is a class-three Endine merchant cargo ship with mods. Two decks, six pressurized cargo storage units, and a large non-pressurized area. Carries a maximum crew of thirty-five. Currently, we're only at twenty-three..." She hesitated a moment. "Twenty-four."

They left the airlock zone behind and emerged into what looked like a main passageway. It didn't escape Claudia's notice that thick metal doors had been added at the junction to cut off the space, if necessary. A prudent move, since the Fringes didn't exactly have safe shipping lanes.

One unexpected thing she noticed was how clean the ship's interior was. From Bennet's scarred arms and hoodlum look, she'd not anticipated his ship would be this tidy. For the first time, she found a definite positive point in her current circumstances.

“Only officers are allowed armaments aboard ship,” Stevens continued. “Weapons are dispensed to crew on an as-needed basis only. Since you’re the sole member of your department, and an unknown quantity, you’ll be treated as they are where weaponry is concerned.”

That was fine with Claudia. She had no experience with weapons and would be more than happy to keep it that way.

“Bulkhead doors are to remain open at all times; they’re only closed on captain’s orders or mine, except for those in the holds. Gravity generators remain active under those same conditions. The medbay has a separate unit for emergency use only.”

After that, Stevens led Claudia through the two decks—the bridge, the recreation room/mess hall, the lift. Curious looks raked her as she walked past, but only when they thought Stevens wasn’t looking. Of Bennet, Claudia saw no sign, although she was shown the door leading to his quarters/office.

Claudia hadn’t been sure what she’d expected with regard to Bennet and the information he’d implied he had on her. Being ignored completely after being ordered aboard hadn’t been it.

They stopped by her assigned berth only long enough for her to throw her duffel inside and key her thumbprint on the lock. It looked to be the same size as the one on the station. At least, it didn’t appear she’d have to share it.

Their last destination was what Claudia had been waiting to see since the moment she’d stepped aboard—the medbay.

That was when she understood she’d definitely hit bottom.

Chapter 3

“Th–this is the medbay?”

Claudia tried, but it was impossible to keep the horror out of her voice. The equipment looked to be the original installed when the ship was first built. So, it was a good twenty to thirty years out of date. It had been there so long the white plastic surfaces had yellowed, and all the colored stripes were a dull gray. Bonding tape covered up places where the plastic had cracked. Although clean, the room smelled stale.

The back wall was storage, and housed the medical computer, sanitizers, and other necessities. A full-body scanner/examination/operating table was on the left, with two, currently folded, patient beds on the far right wall.

She hadn’t been deluded enough to expect to have the same cutting-edge equipment she’d had access to at Clonos Labs; but she’d still not expected this.

“Do the units even work?”

Stevens opened an already-loosened panel on the ceiling and flipped something inside. An audible jolt swept through the room, and lights flickered across the different boards and machinery. Most were green, but a few blinked orange or red.

“We haven’t had a medic for a while, so the unit was shut down to conserve power. Doctors and their equipment have been low on the captain’s priority list.”

Her tone was too even, almost mechanical, for Claudia to be able to make much of it. Something subtle was being implied...or hidden. She couldn’t tell which.

“What does he consider more important than the health of the crew?”

“The ship—her engines, her armament, her hull. The crew is a necessity he puts up with.”

This was all said matter-of-factly, which somehow made it worse. This was the man who knew her secret?

Claudia felt her shoulders tighten. "I see."

"All the manuals for the equipment are in the database. They'll be your responsibility. Though, if you run into something you can't fix, let me know, and I'll find someone to take a look at it. If they can't do a workaround, and it's not something critical, you can put in a requisition for parts for the next time we make port. Just don't expect anything right away."

Stevens' stance appeared relaxed but also ready, as if she expected Claudia to throw a tantrum. Claudia sighed, not surprised by either the news or the attitude at this point. Bennet could make her life very difficult if he chose, so it wasn't like she had the freedom to complain about anything. It brought her some relief, however, that it looked like he'd not shared her shame with the tour guide. Stevens was being straight with her, as well. She couldn't fault the woman for that.

"Anything you could do would be greatly appreciated." She surveyed the room again. "Any idea when the crew had their last physicals?"

The pained expression on the woman's face when Claudia turned back to her said it all. At least she would be quite busy for a while. It was something. Not much, but something.

"We can work on a timetable to get each crew member to see you," Stevens said. "It'll have to be on their down time, so there'll be grumbling about that. If any of them give you trouble, or don't show, tell me immediately." Her hard expression said she'd brook no excuses, in either case. It gave Claudia a touch of hope. The first mate looked to be someone she'd definitely want on her side if she could manage it.

"There should be some files on at least part of the crew in the database." Stevens nodded toward the medbay's computer. "Permissions should feed through momentarily. You'll also need to rekey all the cabinet locks to your thumbprint or Identi-All. It'd be best not to present the crew with any temptations."

"Temptations?"

Stevens' brow rose. "Medicinals."

Claudia looked away, feeling like an idiot. Not like she hadn't heard of such a thing before. She'd even done a paper on addiction once.

"Yes, of course. I'll do that before anything else."

The first mate nodded. "Also, the sooner you can get those requisitions to me the better. Ship's time is the same as the station's. Shifts, mealtimes, etcetera, can be downloaded to your Identi-All, tablet, or your cabin's console from the computer."

Claudia nodded, trying to take it all in. "Why the rush? Surely, this isn't the only port of call for supplies?"

Stevens gave her a hard look. "Not for the kind of supplies you're looking for. So, make sure to send me that list. We won't be back for several months or longer."

The weight of her words settled heavily on Claudia's shoulders. They were in the Fringes, so goods taken for granted in the United Dominion might be hard to come by here.

"I have other duties to attend to, so I'll leave you to it." Stevens headed for the door.

"Wait!"

The older woman half-turned in surprise. "Yes?"

Feeling her face flush with embarrassment at the impulsive outburst, Claudia didn't meet Stevens' gaze.

"Do I need to worry about Bennet?"

Stevens faced her, impassive, studying her for several moments before she spoke.

"If you do as you're told and don't cause any trouble, you'll be okay. As long as the captain has no reason to be displeased, he won't bother to take the time to bother you."

Somehow, that didn't sound all that comforting.

"Thank you."

Stevens nodded and left her to her thoughts.

Chapter 4

Claudia made a thorough inventory of the medbay and changed all the locks. Most of the supplies were nonperishables, so only a few exceptions went into the disposal unit. Never having had to worry about being unable to get supplies when she needed them, she tried to err on the side of caution on the requisitions. Whether any would get approved and filled would be something else entirely.

The medical database was as old as the medbay, and only covered humans. As humanity expanded into the galaxy, they'd stumbled over three other sentient species—the Solarians, the Thespicians, and the Wakiorans. Only the pink, slug-like Solarians possessed technology advanced enough to compare to humanity's. Although mixed-species ships were unheard-of, she searched the crew roster to make sure they were all the same race; she had zero experience with non-humans. At any other time, she would have been thrilled at the opportunity, but not here, not with this equipment.

Relief made her nearly giddy as she found the entire crew was human—or almost. Several of the crew had DNA enhancements—the captain, for one. Even back on Ellos, there'd been purity movements to ban the use of such techniques. The enhancements themselves weren't without risk—there were multiple case studies showing unexpected side effects, or damage that could be passed on to progeny. It was one of the reasons grants had been available to find, identify, and change the orders retained and carried out by ncRNA. Knowing how—and which—could be safely changed would have an enormous impact.

Still, there had been rumors that on outer-rim worlds having your DNA changed wasn't a choice. That some of the corporations funding mining and colonizing efforts made it more of a demand.

She closed the data files and pulled up the manuals for the medbay's equipment. Luckily, she learned there were several diagnostic programs she could run, and with the help of the handbooks, she was able to clear several of the

warning lights. Most signaled the need for new fluids or slight readjustments. The few problems she could do nothing about she wrote up and sent off to Stevens along with her inventory requests.

Folded up in one of the drawers she found a well-used lab coat. Like the walls, it had once been white but was now more of a washed-out yellow. Still, when she put it on, the reminder of past achievements and yet undiscovered future possibilities brought tears to her eyes. She'd missed this simple thing, missed what it implied about the education and status of those who wore one. Like a soldier's or patrolman's uniform, it was an identifier, separating the wearer into a group, a skillset, and certain expectations. If this one was a size too large and somewhat threadbare, it was still a little like coming home, even if what passed for home was a rundown small space in the belly of a modified merchant ship.

"Are you the new doc?"

Claudia jerked, not having heard the door slide open. A stooped old man was framed in the doorway, a ratty Stellar Navy cap in his hands. His lips were slightly curved down, his face pale, eyes pinched—all signs of someone in pain.

She stood up, and just as when she'd put on the old lab coat, she felt another layer of who she was settle on her shoulders. All doubts about her future, about how she'd make this work, were shoved back out of sight. She shifted her expression to the welcoming neutral that had served her so well so many times before.

"Yes, yes, I am. How can I help you?"

"Names Dubrai, ma'am. Engineer."

"Pleased to meet you." Claudia waited, but he said nothing else. He still hadn't moved from the doorway. "Won't you come in?"

Nodding, Dubrai shuffled in. "I know you just got in and all, but I'm going to be mighty busy soon, so this was my only chance to come see you."

"Not a problem. What can I do for you?" Claudia sat back down, to encourage him to come closer. She reached for the switch to lower the scan table and convert it into a chair. It hiccuped, gave a pop, then shifted normally, although it didn't quite complete the transformation.

"I can probably fix, that if you like."

"Yes, please. I'd appreciate it."

Dubrai pulled a beat-up scanner from his back pocket and approached, a bit sprier than before. While he fiddled with the table, Claudia searched for his file and also pulled the medical scanner from the charging holder. It looked only a little less beat-up than Dubrai's, although his was a newer, more compact model. The captain loved his ship more than his crew, indeed.

She was here now. She'd have to see what she could do about that.

Claudia sat up ramrod-straight. She shouldn't get carried away. She would do her job. Just her job. She must avoid growing too invested in her patients. Getting intimately involved hadn't worked well in the past.

She didn't find a file for him, so she had the sneaking suspicion he'd only come to see her because he was desperate. She scanned while he worked—the table scanner would have given her more in-depth information, but this would do for the moment. Especially since the engineer didn't seem eager to tell her what was wrong.

Her brow rose as she studied the results. Dubrai's joints were inflamed, and he had a significant amount of calcification. Bone density and muscle mass were below normal thresholds, despite the ship having artificial gravity. That he was in pain was a definite yes—it was a miracle he could work at all.

Yet how unnecessary it was for him to suffer. There were plenty of medications that could help his condition, preventing the calcium buildup and his current discomfort. There were food supplements that would help as well.

Biting her lip, she turned to call up her inventory of medications and compounds. She'd only scanned it quickly before, making sure she at least had the basics. Despite all the advances in medicine, would most have made it out this far? The need would be there, sure, but would the money?

She might have been naïve about a few things in life, but she wasn't a total fool.

"It's now right as rain, as the old saying goes." Dubrai had a smile on his face as he tested the buttons on the examination table.

"Thank you. That'll be a great help. Now, let me return the favor."

Claudia got up and invited him to sit on her stool rather than the bed. He seemed puzzled at first but then looked relieved. He sat down.

"Are you on any medications at the moment? Something prescribed at the station?"

He snorted. "No way. Don't like my judgment to be impaired and couldn't afford the docs anyway."

Claudia nodded slowly. "I noticed there's no medical file on you here. Did you never visit the former medic on board?"

He met her gaze, then looked away and shrugged. She felt a kernel of anger, suspicions forming at his hesitation.

"Thought about it, but then I seen some of his work and didn't want to have anything to do with him. Got Johnny messed up and on the captain's bad side, which got him messed up worse. Couldn't take the risk."

The kernel sprouted, but she kept it in check. It wasn't aimed at her patient, after all.

"An anti-inflammatory won't cause any issues and will give you some relief right away. Your other problems will require medications I don't have, but I can

come up with some comparable substitutes. They'll take longer to do the job, but they *will* help. We can meet again in a day or two so we can make sure you're not having any adverse reactions and verify the meds are not impairing you or your ability to do your job."

She made several selections on the terminal. A couple of minutes later, it spat out a set of pills inside a plastic baggie with instructions printed on the front and back. She scanned the bag to verify the pills were what she'd requested, not quite yet trusting the equipment.

"The spray injector needs some of the fluids and tubings replaced, so I'm going to prescribe pills for now."

The old man stared at the baggie but didn't take it. "And you're sure they won't affect my work?"

"They shouldn't. Take them with food and follow the instructions, and everything should be okay. Come back and see me in a few days, and I'll do another scan. But if you have the slightest problem come right away, and we can go from there. All right?"

He gave her a grin as he finally took the meds. "Been a pleasure, Doc." He tucked the bag into a pocket and placed the ratty cap on his head as he headed out.

Her first satisfied customer in her new, unexpected life. Maybe she'd get through this after all.

Chapter 5

A chime from the computer and her Identi-All begged for Claudia's attention. She put down the reading tablet; a light headache had begun gnawing at her as she'd continued to pore over the manuals for the different machines in the medbay. Now, the computer screen showed the ship's chronometer and an alert it was dinnertime. Her stomach growled, verifying the information. With a sigh, she realized she'd missed lunch.

She stood, then stretched to work out the kinks in her back. She slipped the tablet into one of the lab coat's deep pockets and took a look around to make sure all the cabinets were closed. After thumbing the computer into standby mode, she stepped into the corridor and locked the door as well. She'd already programmed the buzzer to alert her via Identi-All if anyone showed up needing medical attention while she was out.

A touch of nervousness flavored her hunger as she tried to remember the way to the messhall. This would be her first time interacting with the crew, and she'd never been much of a social butterfly, preferring solitude, her books, and her research.

She followed a couple of people on the last stretch, then tried to unobtrusively enter the room and get in line. A few heads turned to her, followed by a slow-rolling wave of sound as friends elbowed others to tell them she was there. Was it that unusual to have a new crewmate? Surely the captain hadn't been stupid enough to spill her secret while they were still in port.

Metal cafeteria tables were set randomly around the room, locked down by magnetic locks to the deck. The tables looked like they could be folded flat and removed at short notice. They were as beat-up and old as the medbay but in good repair. The crew comprised both men and women, most with a hard look about them, as if life had ridden them hard. Still, they were lively enough, talking, laughing, and joking with each other.

The cook and her assistant scooped some kind of mystery goulash into a bowl and gave Claudia a piece of pre-buttered bread. It didn't smell half-bad.

The rehydrator must be a newer model—you could hardly tell the vegetables had been processed at all. Bennet might not like his crew, but it seemed the captain enjoyed eating well, so everyone benefited. Good food had always raised the morale of the patients at the hospital attached to Clonos Labs.

Now, if she could only find some coffee to go with her dinner...

"Z, over here!"

Startled, she glanced to her right and saw Bennet standing by a table in the corner. Stevens was there, as well as a couple of others Claudia didn't recognize. The room grew quiet, and everyone stared at her, something she'd hoped to avoid.

Looking at no one, she made her way over to the captain's table.

"Sir."

He flashed her a devilish grin, as if he knew he'd made her uncomfortable, then turned his attention to the rest of the room.

"In case you maggots haven't figured it out by now, this is Doc Z." He gave them all a wink. "The medbay is back in business. So, if you had any plans on faking some illness to get extra sleep anytime soon, you might as well forget about it."

His smile encouraged them to laugh, but his eyes were serious.

"It also means there'll be someone to patch you up after missions, so you'd better be grateful."

Nods all around even as the mood grew subdued.

Claudia sat down. A weaponized merchant ship that went on missions. Just what had she gotten herself into?

Bennet followed her a moment later with a thump. "This might all just work out fine." He dug into his dinner, his appetite hearty. "By the way, you already met Stevens. These are Bebbins and Scogs."

Claudia nodded at each of them. "Pleased to meet you."

The stockier of the two snorted and slapped his leg.

Bennet grew a lopsided grin. "Told you." He held his hand out toward the man. "Pay up, Scogs."

Scogs sent her a scathing look, as if she'd personally arranged for him to lose. Claudia felt her face grow hot, not impressed by his and Bennet's little bet. She could well imagine the terms.

She passed a glance at Stevens, but the first mate's expression was as impassive as always. Claudia shoved a spoonful of the goulash in her mouth before she said something she might regret.

It worked better than she'd hoped. The food actually tasted as good as it smelled—an unexpected perk.

"By the way, Z..."

The hair at the back of her neck prickled as the captain leaned toward her, the beads in his dreadlocks clinking. He spoke in lowered tones.

“Saw Dubrai. The old codger was almost dancing at his station. Whatever you did for him, keep it up. I already told Stevens to get the things you asked for, and not all of them were cheap. But it’s only just this once, so don’t waste any of it. I may not feel so generous next time. Understand?”

She’d faced down the media, lawyers, corporate accountants, but this man exuded such force, it took more effort than it should for her to look him in the eye. Her confidence and self-assurance had been beaten and battered, but damn if she’d look weak to the likes of him.

“Yes, Captain.”

He grinned at her, his eyes dancing. “Good.”

She felt no relief at all.

Chapter 6

As Claudia returned to her cabin, memory of Bennet's predatory gaze haunted her. She had the persistent feeling he thought of her as a mouse and he the cat. He was playing with her, amusing himself at her expense. He'd soon realize she wouldn't break that easily. This mouse had teeth.

But would that just up the excitement for him? Only time would tell.

She'd never cultivated a lot of friends. There'd always been something more important to do, like school, her research, practicing medicine. But there'd been colleagues, quarterly parties, medical conventions, company functions—human interaction. She missed it. Missed it terribly.

She'd always considered herself somewhat a loner. Being totally cut off, however, had been harder than she'd expected. Always surrounded by strangers, rubbed raw by the lingering concern she might be recognized and exposed. She'd moved from place to place, trying to outrun her notoriety. Never staying anywhere long enough to feel comfortable. Not letting anyone get close.

Now, Bennet was holding the knowledge of who she was as a weapon against her. There had to be a way to get around that.

She didn't sleep well.

As she dragged herself to breakfast, she noticed the captain wasn't present. More relieved than she was willing to admit, she got in line. Then, a miracle happened—the scent of brewed coffee wafted over her, perking her up as she got her share of reconstituted eggs and toast. She knew it would be a sorry excuse compared to her own special roast, and most likely a synthetic brand, but to imbibe anything resembling coffee would be heavenly. In the last year, she'd had no choice but to get used to the substitutes or do without. On the other hand, the caffeine content was higher than the real thing, so there were benefits.

As she poured a cup, she breathed the aroma in deep. She craved for the coffee's magic to run through her more than anything else. Glancing toward the exit, she felt an impulse to take her tray back to the medbay. To eat her break-

fast there so she could drown in the scent of fresh coffee before destroying the illusion with an actual sip.

She resisted the urge. Her loneliness wouldn't get cured if she hid away like an addict. She needed to reach out. Pretend, if nothing else. Delusions did have their uses.

So, instead of leaving, she surveyed the room for a likely someone. Most of the crew were gathered in clumps of two or more. Only one person sat and ate alone—Stevens. Not letting herself think about it, she headed to the first mate's table.

"Mind if I sit here?"

The second-in-command looked up from the tablet she'd been scouring. A hint of surprise, quickly dispatched, crossed her face.

"As you wish." Her gaze dropped back to the pad.

"Thank you." Claudia sat down. She allowed the syntha-coffee's aroma to wrap around her again for a minute, closing her eyes in momentary contentment. Then, with a slight grimace, she took a sip.

The bitterness wasn't as sharp as she'd expected. It was almost...tolerable. Grateful to have found something else to brighten her future, she ate her breakfast.

She took the opportunity to toss the occasional glance at Stevens; it was her first real chance to study the other woman. Aside from her stout form and close-cropped blond hair, everything else about her seemed as neutral as her expression. Her clothes were in good condition, made of thick fabrics that would withstand abuse, and they looked well cared-for. Dark-brown pants, a cream short-sleeved shirt, a brown vest and a thick belt—it seemed almost like a uniform.

Stevens held herself in such a way as to imply a military background. She wasn't like Dubrai, however, old enough to have retired from service. Claudia doubted the first mate was older than thirty-five. It was best not to assume—between cosmetics and DNA manipulation, only a scan could say how old she was for certain. That square jaw and her bearing screamed no-nonsense and utter confidence. It seemed odd she was here at all.

Despite Claudia's rising curiosity, she wouldn't ask. Stevens might have some questions of her own, and Claudia didn't want the scrutiny.

At least she wasn't eating alone, and the silence didn't bother her...much.

She pulled her own tablet from her pocket. Scanning her options, she discovered there was an extensive if somewhat outdated media library on board. Another bit of brightness to add to her situation.

She had just about finished with her meal when Stevens spoke.

"Your supplies should be here in the next hour. I'll have them sent down when they arrive." The first mate stood up. "We'll be leaving the station at ten

hundred hours. You'll be able to start your physicals tomorrow. We should be in L-space by then."

"Thank you. I'll be ready."

With a nod, Stevens grabbed up her tray.

Claudia expected the first mate to go on her way, but instead the woman stood watching her, her face as unreadable as ever. Just when the moment began to stretch toward awkwardness, Stevens spoke again.

"The captain rarely dines with the crew, but I'm here most of the time. I'd not be averse to us sharing a table again."

Before Claudia could figure out something to say, the first mate was gone. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who felt lonely.

However, it was knowing Bennet didn't frequent the mess deck that gave Claudia the most excitement. For better or worse, she'd caught his notice. She was one-hundred percent sure it'd be in her best interest to interact with him as little as humanly possible.

Finishing her breakfast, she nodded to a couple of the crew who looked a little less raw than some of the others on her way out.

The supplies arrived as promised, giving her something with which to fill her time other than running more diagnostics. A warning bell rang through the ship a few minutes before the tenth hour. Bennet's voice reverberated from the communication speakers throughout the ship.

"All hands, prepare for departure."

There was a slight hum and a brief sensation of sideways movement as the *Holiday* smoothly left the station. The process was even smoother than on the cruise lines she'd boarded on medical retreats. She might not think much of Bennet as a person, but he seemed more than capable of piloting his ship.

Chapter 7

Claudia stared at the readings from her latest patient and shook her head.

Just how long was it since the *Holiday* had had medical personnel? Of the twenty-three crewmembers, only a handful had records in the medbay computer, and those left much to be desired. She couldn't tell if the equipment had been faulty at the time or if there'd been a total incompetent at the controls.

Well, that would all be changing. In exile or not, she wasn't going to do a half-assed job. It was the one point of pride no one could ever take away. So, despite a lot of grumbling and complaining, she forced each of her new patients to submit to full, detailed, multi-level scans.

Aside from old broken bones, burn scars, and some vitamin deficiencies, she'd not found much wrong with the half she'd worked through so far. With any luck, Dubrai would be the only one with any significant health issues, and she was already taking care of that as best as her resources allowed.

On her to-do list was a chat with the cook to see if she'd mind adding some supplements to the meals. Sometimes the best way to keep people healthy was by not letting them know you were doing something to keep them that way.

"Hey, there."

Claudia's brow rose as she looked up from her tablet and found a wiry crewman leaning in the doorway. She had no other physicals scheduled for today so hadn't been expecting anyone.

"May I help you?"

The thin man gave her a pale imitation of Bennet's sideways grin. "Yes, Doc, as a matter of fact, you can help me...a lot." He looked her up and down, the grin growing more robust and seedy. It made her prickle inside.

"Sorry, but my shift's up. So, if it's not a medical emergency, it'll have to wait."

At first, she'd thought the location of the medbay ideal, tucked away as it was from the main flows of traffic. It made the area quiet, private. Now, she wondered if it might be a little *too* out of the way.

"No can do, Doc. So sorry." Leaning against the doorframe pretending to study a fingernail, he didn't seem remorseful in the least. "If you cooperate, though, I'll be out of here before you know it." The grin came back as he sent her a leering glance. "But I'm good either way. It's up to you."

Yes, just a little too private. "What, exactly, do you want?"

"I heard the captain actually spent some credits to get this place running again. That means you got some stock. Stock you can share." He sauntered into the room and reached for the nearest cabinet door. It was locked. They all were.

Stevens' comment about temptation for the crew had been taken seriously.

"If you leave now, I won't report you."

The man snorted. "I don't think you quite understand the position you're in, Doc." He slowly drew a dinner knife from his pocket. One sharpened to give it a pointed tip rather than the original rounded one. "I can make it so *you're* the one needing a medic...Doc."

A ripple of fear slid up her back. Why had she ever thought she'd be safe anywhere in the Fringes? The bastard was standing between her and the door, so she couldn't run. If she screamed, would anyone hear her? If they did, would they care enough to investigate?

"Hurry up and show me what you've got in here." He tapped the knife against the closest cabinet. "And no skipping past the good stuff, either."

She didn't move. This was *her* place, her sanctum. She'd be spending every day here for who knew how long. She wasn't going to just give in and let this bastard ruin it for her. It was all she had.

"You need to *leave*."

His eyes turned hard, the corner of his lips pulling downwards, all previous signs of playfulness gone.

"I don't think you're *hearing* me."

"Oh, I believe she heard you fine, Rowanil."

Claudia and her visitor both turned toward the medbay's entrance. Bennet was there, with Stevens behind him. He was holding a stunner.

"Captain!" The knife disappeared as if it'd never been. "Was just greeting the doc and all before turning in."

Bennet smiled. "Oh, I think it was a little more than that." He relaxed against the doorway, but his weapon never wavered. "I wondered how long it would take for one of you to get ideas. I pegged the shift, but Stevens pegged the who. You cost me *credits*."

He made it sound as if that was more of a transgression than trying to strong-arm the medical officer and stealing drugs. For all Claudia knew, he really felt that way.

Rowanil barked a laugh and sidled closer to Claudia at the same time. She realized what he hoped to do and slipped to the side to put the scanner bed between them.

"Captain, honest, there's been some kind of misunderstanding." Rowanil's voice turned uneven. The stink of his fear filled the room. "I wasn't up to anything. I swear!"

Bennet's grin grew, calling him a liar.

Stevens piped in. "Stand down, Rowanil. Don't make this any worse for yourself."

Bennet held up a hand. "No. Let him make his play. *If* he has one. Let's see how much more of an idiot he'll decide to prove he is."

"Can't we just let this go? I'm sure he won't try it again." Claudia cursed herself as the words escaped her lips. She wasn't supposed to get involved, yet something in Bennet's eyes told her matters would turn ugly soon, and she'd not been able to help herself. Would she always be a fool?

Bennet laughed. "Z, you might know medicine, but you sure don't know anything about people. Especially *nasty* people."

The way he said it, she wasn't sure he wasn't speaking about himself. Rowanil took the opportunity to inch closer to her while pretending to be doing no such thing.

"So, Row, what's it going to be? You going to make a move or not? I don't have all shift."

"Captain, I don't know what you're talking about." Rowanil lunged over the table to grab at Claudia, the knife coming back out into view. Claudia jumped away until she smacked against the wall. The back of her head hit one of the cabinets, making her skull ring.

There was a loud buzzing sound. Before he could reach her, Rowanil's body jerked then slumped to the floor in an uneven heap.

"Idiot." Bennet's contempt was thick. He pushed from the doorway and walked over to the unconscious crewman, then gave him a hefty kick in the ribs. Claudia flinched at his viciousness, her mouth filling with protests; but a warning look from Stevens made her hold her tongue.

The captain bent to pick up the modified knife, and while he was at it, he punched Rowanil in the face. This time she was sure she heard something pop. Bennet's DNA modifications were in strength and stamina. She didn't doubt he could break whatever bones he chose.

She shoved her hands into her lab coat pockets to hide the fact they were shaking. She'd never seen violence done to another person before.

"Throw him into his bunk and seal the door. If he's still alive by the end of the regular shift, he's free to drag himself back to the medbay. Then the doc can give him some of those drugs he so desperately wanted." Bennet flashed

Claudia a wicked grin. "I'll leave it up to you, Z, on whether he survives after that or not." He left with a swagger.

Claudia stumbled to her vacated stool before her legs gave out. The scene kept playing over and over in her mind, and she couldn't shut it out.

"Are you all right?"

Claudia jumped, having forgotten all about Stevens. "I..." Her mouth felt horribly dry, but she couldn't seem to make herself swallow.

"It's over now. You're safe."

She stared up at the second-in-command, wondering how the woman could actually believe that. For the first time, she saw emotion on Stevens' face—pity and resignation.

"There are live cameras throughout the ship. The captain entertains himself by keeping an eye on the crew."

If the words were supposed to be comforting, the first mate had botched the job. Bennet looked to be the kind of man who enjoyed letting things happen just to see where they'd go. He wasn't one to act and put a stop to things unless they inconvenienced him.

"This will discourage the rest of them. Make the crew think twice before greed gets the better of them. It's amazing how they forget they've nowhere else to go once we've left port."

There seemed to be layers of meaning in her words, but Claudia was in no shape to try and decipher them.

"Thank you."

"I can get someone to escort you back to your quarters, if you want."

Claudia shook her head. She couldn't afford to appear weak to these people. "No, I'm alright."

Stevens nodded, taking her at her word. She grabbed the unconscious Rowanil by the scruff of his collar and dragged him from the room.

Claudia jumped to the door once they were gone, palmed it closed, and locked it. Rubbing her arms, she looked wearily around medbay. There had to be a way to keep this from happening again. Or at least some way to give herself an edge in case Bennet decided to let matters play out rather than come rescue her again.

Then it came to her.

After several frenzied minutes putting what she wanted together, Claudia made her way back to her cabin at a leisurely pace. One of her lab coat pockets was heavier than before.

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