

Chapter 1

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To Jalia her first week in space appeared to pass in the blink of an eye. She didn't get too personal with the crew because they seemed constantly busy. However, there was a mechanic named Jonathon who was always doing maintenance inside the ship and she found herself talking to a lot. She usually came across him sticking out of a crawlspace tinkering with the wiring or doing "God knows what".

Jonathon Bits was much older than Jalia. He was starting to gray in places and had a rough appearance. She didn't find him attractive, just a fun person to talk to. He had served on several types of ships throughout the years and always had some crazy story about his past service with the Draconis Empire or some good tips on wiring up systems, although she saw him as the type who would make up something just to keep the conversation going.

Most of Jalia's spare time was spent studying alone in her quarters. She was planning on entering the field of defense technology like her father and shield technology was her favorite subject. She found it easy to understand although the average person usually got dizzy just reading about it. She chalked it up to watching her father work on schematics at home. He had taught her a lot of the basics years ago and she enjoyed it enough to keep it fresh in her mind.

She still had a day left until her arrival at Viridis Pulcher and was currently in her quarters doodling on her computer. For the past three hours she had been creating and testing shield simulations. None of which worked, they were just theories that she had made up off the top her head and programmed in quickly. In the science community that would be considered a huge waste of time, but Jalia had nothing else better to do. She was fed up with the books she had brought with her, although she hadn't fully read them, and her computer had limited literature. She planned on downloading some new material during her first layover.

Jalia looked up at her travel clock on the nightstand (which doubled as a dresser in her cramped quarters). It was 1000 hours, not quite lunchtime, but close enough for her.

She got up and stretched. A quick search for Jonathon should kill some time before lunch. And just maybe she could pry him away from his work so she'd have somebody to eat with.

The door was only a step away from the bed. Jalia tapped a green button on the pad next to it and the door slid open with a hiss. She stuck her head out and looked both ways before stepping into the corridor. The ship's crew was small, but she had ran into the ensign while he was rushing to his shift earlier in the week and that taught her to keep a "heads up" from then on.

The crew deck looked and sounded empty. Everybody was probably working elsewhere on the ship or asleep in his or her quarters. Jonathon had once mentioned that there were people on board that she hadn't even met because of the shift differences.

She turned left and headed towards the stairwell, passing the ship's bronze plaque on her right. She had stopped to read it once before.

S.S. Majestic
Commissioned: April 2068
Sub light Cargo Class
"A light heart and heavy hand"

She followed the corridor past a right turn and peeked into the mess hall. It was a tiny room with only two tables, about a dozen chairs, and a few framed sketches of large sailboats adorning the wall. A doorway on the opposite wall opened into a small kitchen. The cook was probably in there preparing lunch.

Jonathon wasn't in there yet; she'd have to search for him. Luckily, it was a small ship so she wouldn't have to search far.

Jalia made her way to the stairwell and went up to the next deck. This was the command deck, she was allowed on it by the captain himself as long as she wasn't loud and stayed out of the way. The door between it and the stairwell was airtight and always closed. She tapped the green button next to it and it hissed quickly open.

The room before her was the command room. The walls were covered in monitors and computers. Some displayed the ship both inside and out, others showed the area of space they were currently in. In the center of the room was a large table with a computer screen as the tabletop. Currently it was dark with a coffee mug and a few papers strewn about on it, but Jalia had seen it active before. Beyond the command room through another door was the bridge.

An ensign was sitting in one of the few chairs with her legs propped up on a computer console. Jalia recognized her as the girl who had nearly mowed her down earlier in the week. She was reading from a fairly thick hardback book and occasionally highlighting passages.

"Hey, have you seen Jonathon anywhere?"

She looked up at Jalia and quickly surveyed the room. "He was in here a minute ago. I didn't notice him leave so check the bridge."

"Thanks." Jalia walked around the center table/display and stopped short of the bridge door. She turned back to the ensign, "Pardon my asking, but what's that book about?"

"Slipstream Dynamics and Tachyon Theory."

Jalia grimaced; "Looks like a lot to read."

The ensign chuckled; "I'm studying to become an engineer. I have to commit a lot of this to memory."

A silent "Yikes" was all that Jalia could muster as she turned and tapped the door controls for the bridge.

The bridge of the Majestic wasn't exactly a grand sight to Jalia. It was much more cramped than what she was used to seeing on TV or in the movies. The whole room was probably only about 16 feet long, 8 feet wide, and just tall enough for her to stand up straight in. The forward wall of the room was slanted about 45 degrees at a down angle because of the design of the ship, the upper half of which was occupied by a thick glass window. That window extended past the front of the room and halfway down either side. Currently all there was to see were stars that hadn't seemed to move in the past couple of days.

Two stations, one for navigation and one for piloting occupied the front of the bridge. This area was referred to as the pilot station. Each seat had an identical console and dual-monitor setup. From what Jalia understood the controls for both functions could be switched at the push of a button. Currently, only one ensign sat in the front. The captain only scheduled one per shift during long transits; another was always "on call" elsewhere on the ship in case of emergencies.

A single rotating chair behind the pilot station was reserved for the captain or the officer in charge at the time. It had a small monitor on either arm for displaying anything the captain needed and it looked quite comfortable to Jalia. Currently the caption was sitting there studying the monitor by his left arm. From the angle that she walked in she could tell it was a chessboard.

To Jalia's left was a single chair and computer console attached to the back wall. She didn't really know what it was for but it was empty now.

Jalia cleared her throat and spoke softly, "Captain J?" The captain's name was Quincy and he didn't mind her calling him that but she didn't want to show any disrespect on the bridge. Although his last name was Jacobson everyone referred to him as Captain J. Jalia didn't now who started calling him that, but apparently he didn't mind.

Quincy looked up from the chess display and spun his chair around to face Jalia. He was about 61, black, and balding, what little hair he had left was light gray. His dark skin was rough in appearance but starting to wrinkle in places. He wore his age well, and Jalia could tell he was aware of it. She didn't really see him as a "ladies man", but could tell that he never had trouble talking to the opposite sex. "Yes, young lady."

"Have you seen Jonathon sir?"

Quincy smiled, "Jalia, I don't mind you calling me captain, but don't call me sir unless I start giving you orders." He gave her a quick wink. "I sent him down to the port airlock to run a few diagnostics."

"Thank you si... Errr... Cap'n." Jalia quickly turned to walk out, "Never mind, I'm going to split before you give me an assignment."

As the door closed behind her she heard Quincy chuckling quietly to himself.

Jalia hopped down the stairwell, skipping steps as she went. The airlocks were on deck 4, which was the lowest deck on the ship. Jalia liked visiting that deck because gravity was a little lighter there. It reminded her of home. Although she wasn't having much trouble with the higher gravity she noticed that she was always a little more out of breath than everyone else on board.

She reached the bottom of the stairwell and peaked through the open doorway leading into the deck. All she saw was a 50-meter hallway ahead of her that ran from the stairwell to the rear of that deck. 3 doors lined either side for a total of 6. Each door had a small, thick window and a sign labeling what it contained.

Jalia knew that what compartments existed on this deck. The first two doors led to both Avionics and the weapons/defense systems. Both rooms went around either side of the stairwell and extended to the front of the ship. Although a small cargo ship like this one didn't have much to offer in firepower or shielding a large room was dedicated to what it needed.

The next two doors led to both airlocks on either side of the ship. Both airlock compartments contained a few small rooms besides the airlocks themselves. Space suits and tools for working outside of the ship were stored there. Since she was facing the rear of the ship Jonathon would be in the room to her right.

The last two doors were computer and storage control. The main computer for the ship was stored on the left and the controls for stowing and monitoring the cargo pods were on the right.

Jalia stopped at the second door on the right, peeked in its small window, but couldn't see Jonathon. So she tapped the controls next to the door and it hissed opened. There was a storage locker to the left of her but she doubted he'd be in there; it would be crammed with suits and equipment. The door in front of her was the actual airlock and it was nearly closed. The light above it was red, which indicated that it was, locked offline and a broom handle was jammed in the door to keep it from closing completely. Jonathon would've done that to prevent accidents if he was working inside.

She walked up to the airlock and peered in the window. Jonathon was kneeling in the left corner. A panel in front of him was open, exposing pipes and a few wires. He was waving some kind of instrument over the pipes.

Jalia tapped on glass and yelled; "WHATCHA UP TO!"

Jonathon's head jerked back obviously startled. "DAMN'IT JALIA!" He stilled for a second, trying to calm his racing heart. Jalia opened the airlock door, walked in, and collapsed giggling on the floor behind him. "I'm too old for excitement like that!"

"Ahh, if you didn't want excitement you wouldn't be jetting through space at near light speeds."

Jonathon looked down and focused back on his work. "Have you noticed anything exciting about this trip sweetheart?"

Jalia stopped giggling but continued to smile. "This is my first time away from Nova Domus. Everything up till now has been exciting." She sat up and looked over his shoulder, "You still haven't told me what you're doing."

"Checking the pipes for vacuum leaks. Cap'n asked me to run a full diagnostic." He laid down the instrument that he'd been using, picked up his clipboard, and jotted down a few notes.

"Got time for lunch?"

"Yea, I can finish this afterwards." Jonathon stood and reached down to help Jalia up. "Could you grab that scanner for me?"

"Sure." She grabbed the instrument and took his hand. Standing easily in the low gravity.

On the way out of the airlock Jonathon lifted the broom that held the door open and leaned it against the wall of the ready room. Jalia followed and the airlock door slid shut behind her. The light over the door turned green, meaning that it was back in service and safe to enter. Jonathon motioned towards the other door leading back to the rest of the ship, "After you, madam."

Lunch was relatively uneventful. Jalia sat across from Jonathon and next to the head engineer. The two of them had entered a heated debate on what movies a particular famous actress had been in. Jalia noticed that they had arguments similar to this one every few days yet they appeared to be the best of friends.

Grilled cheese was on the menu today. There appeared to be a trend towards solid food. Jalia figured that whole foods would be easier to deal with if the gravity plating ever failed. Drinks were served in plastic cups, but weren't allowed outside of the mess hall.

"You ok kiddo?"

Jalia had been staring at the sandwich in her hand from different angles. She didn't notice her actions herself, but it must've looked weird to the others. Looking up at Jonathon with an embarrassed look on her face she replied, "Yeah. I was just figuring out why you guys are always serving solid food."

Jonathon smiled, "Trust me hon, if the power burps you'll be glad that's not hot soup on your plate"

The head engineer jokingly butt in with, "My power does not 'BURP'."

"Oh, so sorry. Let me rephrase that. If the power 'fails' solid food is the safest food to have out. Plus it's easier to clean up." Jonathon held up his cup of ice water, "We're not even allowed to take unsealed liquids out've here or our quarters. Not that I'm complaining. Since I is always the one left repairing any equipment that would short out if wet." With that last statement Jonathon cocked his head and stared at his supervisor with a humorous blank look on his face.

The lead engineer pushed his chair back from the table. "I've been insulted by better Jalia. He's just upset because I'm cuter."

"Cuter than what?" Jonathan quipped.

"I've had enough abuse for one afternoon." The Lead engineer stood to return to his duties. "Remember you guys, we're reversing engines at 2100." And then he strolled out.

Jalia looked back at Jonathon. "Do I need to be somewhere special at 2100?"

"No, but I have to monitor the gravity plating. You can watch if you'd like, but if everything works like it should I shouldn't have to touch a single button." Jonathon glanced up at the digital clock on the wall. "I have to be getting back to the airlocks soon, but first there's something I want you to see."

Jonathon led Jalia back down to deck 4 but instead of continuing to the airlocks he stopped at the first door on the left and readied his hand over the doors control panel.

"Close your eyes. You're not supposed to see this."

Jalia chuckled, but understood the need for secrecy. If the ships defenses were through this door then they wouldn't want anyone to be in there who didn't need to be. She turned her head, "I'm not looking."

Jonathon tapped a few buttons and door hissed open. He took her hand "Come on. You can look now."

She turned her head back as Jonathon pulled her into the new room. To her it resembled the command room on the top deck except the center table was not a flat display, but two small opposing monitor/keyboard combinations. No one was at any of the stations. The only signs of life besides Jalia and Jonathon was the occasional beep from one of the monitors somewhere off to her right.

"It seems quite now, but it gets frantic in here when we need the shields." Jonathon let go of her hand and walked past her to the right side of the room. A very narrow hallway existed there. "This leads to the front of the ship. I know this hallway is small, but it hugs the stairway on the left." He turned slightly sideways and started down the passage "This is why it's good to exercise on a starship. Come on, what I want you to see is through here."

The slim passageway opened into a room that was smaller than the previous but looked similar. There were no seats, but the walls were adored with monitors, controls, and removable panels. In the center of the room stood what appeared to be a round support beam that was about 1 foot in diameter and stretched from ceiling to floor. Jon pointed to it and walked to a small blank panel on the far wall.

"Stand in front of that pole," He then tapped the panel. It lifted and slid up, revealing a small keypad underneath.

Jalia didn't note the combination he entered, but the result was apparent. The lights in the room went out and were replaced by a faint red glow. Then a hiss emanated from the base of what Jalia had assumed was a support beam and it began to retract towards the ceiling, revealing a glass pole nearly as wide that pulsed with a brilliant blue light.

"That's the vacuum capacitor that routes to the shields. That glass is tented 70% to solid so you can get an idea of how bright the static flow must be."

Jalia stood in awe for a moment. The flashes coming from the capacitor in the center of the room border lined on blinding but were quite easy to bear. Maybe it was the bluish hue, but she believed that she could easily become hypnotized if left alone.

"Can I touch it?"

"Sure, it's insulated. Just don't stare too close for too long."

Jalia slowly reached out and rested her hands the glass-like insulation between her and the power flow. It was enough electricity to instantly kill her and potentially destroy any evidence of what she once was. The glass was only slightly warm, little more than room temperature. "Why is it on if the shields aren't up?"

"It would take at least 2 whole minutes to warm up from a dead start. Watch your fingers." Jon tapped the controls again and the shielding began to lower. "That much time is an eternity when lives are at stake."

The rest of the trip was relatively uneventful. About 15 hours from Viridis Pulcher the Majestic began its deceleration burn. Jalia sat with Jonathon and played chess for a few hours and then retired to bed.

She awoke around 0830 the next day and the deceleration burn was still in progress. Jon had been relieved and was in his quarters (most likely asleep). Breakfast for the crew had been delayed during the burn for safety reasons, but Jalia was able to sweet-talk the cook into a snack.

At 0900 the Majestic made its first pass of Viridis Pulcher. It continued its deceleration burn while heading away from the colony and used the planets gravity to continue slowing. A couple of hours later the ship circled back and settled into a low orbit.

Jalia was a little disappointed that she didn't get a very good view of the planet during their approach. The only real view was from the bridge and the captain didn't offer any invitations during such a busy time. A few monitors throughout the ship offered a real-time view, but it wasn't the same. The resolution was so bad that it was difficult to see anything but cloud cover and blue ocean.

The Majestic docked with a small transport shuttle that took Jalia down to the colony. Jon was the only one there to see her off. Everyone else was either sleeping or helping lock down the ship.

Her last view of the ship was during its unloading before her shuttle detached. A small fleet of around 6 shuttles had lined up for its arrival. The Majestic would release one of its large octagon cargo pods, a small shuttle would grab it with a slender mechanical arm, move aside for the next shuttle, and then begin securing it for the trip down.

Soon after the second Shuttle lined up for the next pod, her ship angled down for the descent. It'd be years before she was to see the Majestic again.