

Galaxion: Chapter One

“You don’t suppose this tube’s sealed, do you?” Aria asked tentatively as Fusella stepped up to the gate console. “If the techs are all using the cargo bay entrance to get straight to the lower levels, wouldn’t they close this one off?”

“No. They keep it open in case of emergency,” Fusella said, pressing a thumb into the soft foam of the print reader. “And for the techs who need access to the bridge. Those lazy bums certainly aren’t going to want to slog all the way up through the ship’s maintenance levels to get to the command deck.” A light flashed, and she tapped out a sequence on the keypad. A few seconds later, the doors opened. “Excellent. I didn’t think it would occur to them to remove my personal access codes, but you never know.”

Although the boarding tube was wide enough for three people to walk abreast, the plain white walls and the lack of any sort of viewport gave Aria a tendency to want to hunch her shoulders. It didn’t appear to bother Fusella, which was no surprise. When she got to the other end of the tube Fusella entered another code on the inner control panel, and tapped her fingernail impatiently while they waited for the air to equalize and the green light to appear. “This thing is too slow,” she said irritably. “Those microlaser-wielding zealots *did* something to it. Do they think they can just walk right in and mess with everything?”

In fact, the pressurization cycle seemed, if anything, faster to Aria, but she wasn’t about to spoil Fusella’s rolling rant. The last time she had been standing here, staring at the scuffed and barely legible insignia plates that greeted all who came aboard (or at least, those who didn’t use the cargo doors), the air cycling seemed to drag on for a week. But that had been a product of nervous excitement, whereas today was... well, an entirely different sort of nervous. But the butterflies in her stomach, those were just the same. *Relax, this isn’t illegal...not precisely, anyway.* She hefted the tool box and tugged at the sleeve of the ill-fitting brown coveralls they had donned in the washroom just outside the boarding lounge. *For crying out loud, we look ridiculous! The chances of us not getting spotted as ringers have to be well below zero*—but before she could point this out Fusella

plowed forward as the thick metal doors slid open. She hurried along behind her into the ship's foyer, gripping the tool box tightly.

The curving walls and elegant, archaically-styled viewports of this unusual little room (she'd never heard of any other TerSA ship, even the massive cruisers, having a *foyer*, for godsake) were mostly blocked by piles of boxed equipment. Fusella snorted disdainfully at these, but quickly moved through the french doors on the opposite side of the room. She stabbed at the call button for the elevator in the small hallway between the foyer and the equally unconventional (and equally useless) 'sun room.'

When she stepped into the elevator car Aria began to feel calmer almost immediately. She'd spent time in this small space with its familiar nubby textures and quiet hum every day for the better part of a year, going from one place to another. It was as comfortable as a well-worn blanket, especially after three weeks of being surrounded by Ares Station's sterile uniformity. She'd only been on the *Galaxion* for a relatively short time, but it was the first place in ten years she'd lived in that genuinely felt like home.

"Where are we going first?" Aria asked. Getting to this point in their little adventure had seemed such an unlikely scenario, she'd never inquired about Fusella's further plans. "I'd suggest the science labs. That whole level will probably be deserted, and the lab terminals will give us access to the ship's whole system file and log, maybe even the work schedules, so we can—"

"We're going to the bridge."

Aria blinked once, twice, before her mouth caught up to the new twist (or rather, sharp decline) in the conversation. "The *bridge*? But that place will be full of... we'll never... are you *insane*?"

Fusella turned and gave her The Look, the green-eyed look that ruthlessly reminded you who was in command here and why. "I'm not about to waste my time pussy-footing around when I know eventually somebody's going to wake up and twig to my codes having been used at the gate. My ship and crew is at stake. We've only got one shot at this, you know."

Aria sighed, and nodded. Strictly speaking, neither Fusella nor Aria had ever been formally denied re-admittance to the *Galaxion*, but the security system installed at the

gate made it implicitly clear that their presence was not welcome. It was pure luck they'd arrived at a time when Ares Station staff had been called away from their post by the gate. Security, both the Station's and TerSA's, would tighten up like an oxygen valve after this. "I know."

The doors slid open on level five, the command deck. A trio of brown-covered techs stepped around them and into the car without even waiting for them to exit. One of the techs gave Aria a puzzled look as the doors closed. She tried her best to look official as she followed Fusella past the two conference rooms and two executive offices, through the frosted glass, sliding double doors bearing a gilt version of the Terran Space Administration's official seal.

God, Fusella must have had temporary brain failure, to have picked me instead of Patty or even Vessa to play her sidekick. Aria knew the only way she was going to get through this lunatic day was to ignore all distractions, focus her attention solely on Fusella, and trust in her proven ability to get the job done. So when Fusella came to a sudden halt not four steps past the doors, she braced for disaster.

"What the holy hell have you done to my bridge?"

Aria gritted her teeth and dared to open one eye. Fusella was standing on the edge of the outer walkway that circled the bridge, her feet planted shoulder-width apart and her arms akimbo, facing a half-dozen of the tech crew who were staring back at her in frozen bafflement. The place looked like a battle zone: most of the consoles lay in pieces, deck plates had been pried up and tossed aside. Her own familiar console, her personal workspace on the bridge, was missing altogether, and two of the techs stood knee-deep in the hole in the floor where brightly colored cables were spilling out like gore from an open wound.

"Fusella? Is that you?"

A very tall man wearing a grey Interplanetary Patrol uniform and a twisty smile stood up from one of the few surviving console chairs and strode towards them. The general tension in the room eased a little as Fusella relaxed her stance from menacing to merely grouchy. "That's Captain Mierter to you," she said automatically, though without the outrage Aria was expecting. "Darvin, aren't you supposed to be out on contract with IP?"

“And why on earth are you wearing that?” he continued with a cheerful grin. He studied Aria with his startlingly blue eyes and added with a wink directed at her, “Are you here to fix a leaky pipe?”

She looked down at the purloined toolbox she’d carried all the way from the locker room on Ares Station, and for the first time realized what the letters ‘PLB’ stamped prominently on the lid must stand for. *Obviously*. “Well, if your techs there can’t handle it, I can install a washer for you,” she managed, which seemed to her a horribly inane thing to say, but Darwin laughed approvingly.

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Fusella snapped at him, though she appeared more confused than angry now. Darwin’s grin never wavered. “Last I heard you and Zan had been shanghaied by that starchy General to help with her Calamity Engines— ”

“The Nelson Project,” he corrected.

“Whatever. You appear to still be working for her,” she indicated his IP uniform, “so as far as I’m concerned you can take your tech crew and take a flying leap off my ship. TerSA is a non-military organization.” And at this blunt declaration some of the techs who had quietly gone back to their jobs froze again. Darwin gave them a small reassuring wave to let them know it was all right, and Fusella narrowed her eyes ominously, because it wasn’t.

The dedicated service elevator a few meters away from the main doors *shooshed* open, a welcome distraction from Aria’s point of view. Another man in IP greys entered the bridge, focused on the screen of the chunky IP-issue notepad in his hand. “Darvin, something must be wrong with my copy of the ship’s blueprints, ‘cause they’re indicating... hey, wow, Fusella!” he exclaimed with a hearty smile, as he looked up and turned around. “Great to see you!”

Fusella walked over to the new guy and pinned him in place with her eyes. A tough manoeuvre, since like Darwin, he was also much taller than she. “Zandarin, it’s wonderful to see you again, and I am depending on you to give me a straight answer. *What are you doing here and why are you destroying my bridge?*”

He blinked at her, open mouthed. “You mean you don’t know?”

Fusella sighed heavily in exasperation. “*Dammit—*”

“Might I suggest,” Darwin interjected smoothly, taking them all in with an expansive gesture of outstretched arms, “that we continue this conversation in the less chaotic setting of the briefing room?”

“My office,” Fusella countered through gritted teeth.

“Of course.”

He herded all four of them back out the main doors.

Fusella took the immediate left and marched into the commander’s office. The others followed her in. The room seemed for the most part as Aria remembered it; the large desk and console angled to allow for a good view of the vid screen (usually it displayed live-feed views from the ship’s forward cams, but it was turned off now), the wall of shelves that housed Fusella’s collection of small photos and curios, and the small comfy couches—love seats, Fusella called them—which she had brought in to replace the standard set of soberly styled chairs.

Fusella nosed around with a surly expression, checking in drawers, examining the thin layer of dust to see if any of her knickknacks had been moved. When she was satisfied she hiked herself up to sit on her desk in a way Aria had seen her do many times, but today seemed distinctly possessive. Zandarin took a tentative seat on one couch, Aria sat in the other (and took the opportunity to stuff the tool box around the side of it), and Darwin remained standing.

“I just want to hear one thing,” Fusella began, once everyone had settled. “Tell me you’re not here to turn the *Galaxion* into General Nelson’s next test ship of doom.”

Darwin opened his mouth to reply, but after a few seconds failed to produce any words.

Fusella let out a string of curses *auf Deutsch*. She leapt off the desk and started pacing. “*He’s* responsible for this, I know it! I’m going to *castrate* that spineless weasel Richardson....”

“The *Pathfinder* mission was considered a success, you know,” muttered Zandarin, sounding hurt.

“It took two TerSA ships five weeks to *tow you home*,” Fusella retorted. “I can’t believe the *gottverdammt* Board is doing this to us!”

Aria felt as though her head were whirling. The *Pathfinder*'s touch-and-go hyperspace jump made big headlines last year and Aria had followed the story avidly for a while, vicariously reliving her wild childhood dreams of being a great explorer like Jax Augustus. And here, if she was following the conversation correctly, were two people who'd actually been on that very ship! She longed to know more about them, about the kind of mettle it took to face such a risk.

She'd heard nothing new about the IP-led "Nelson Project" since then, but it only made sense that another test flight would be in the planning stages by now. "Do you mean to say," Aria ventured, "we've been *commandeered*?"

"It's a joint endeavor," Darwin explained. "Interplanetary Patrol and Terran Space Administration, working together to improve space travel."

Fusella scoffed at this. "Since when do IP and TerSA collaborate on anything?"

"Since TerSA realized its best employees were being lured away. And IP has been cash-strapped since forever. It's a deal that works for everybody. Where were you when they had their big press conference two months ago?"

"Crawling through rocks in the Vegan system," she replied dryly, "where keeping up with big press conferences from home is an amusing diversion at best."

"Serves you right, then," he said, but his tone was more of sympathy than censure. After a moment he said, "TerSA didn't tell you anything at all?"

"You think I'm here wearing this crappy outfit because I like the color?" She tugged at the brown sleeve of her pilfered coveralls. "Compared to you, Darwin, I am so far out of the information loop I'm practically centrifugal. Four weeks ago Chief Director Clive Richardson ordered us to return home in the middle of a mineral survey, and when we got here told us to take an extended leave of absence while the ship underwent repairs. I suppose some of my staff were pleased by the news of an unexpected vacation, but this was nothing short of screwy. I mean, not only was Richardson ducking all my queries, but they expect me to believe TerSA's suddenly willing to spring for beyond-the-bare-minimum upgrades on one of their least critical ships? Please. So I concluded the only way I was going to get any answers was to come and see for myself."

Darwin's brow furrowed briefly, but if he harbored any greater concern about his future with the Terran Space Administration he didn't let it show. "I want you to know it

wasn't our decision," he said softly. "General Nelson submitted the specifications upon request, and TerSA came back with the offer to pull this ship off the line for our use. I only learned recently whose ship it was. But since I'd never heard from you, I'd assumed TerSA had immediately reassigned you to another ship."

Aria sank back into the couch. It wasn't supposed to be this way! The *Galaxion* was going to be her panacea, the place where she could finally get away from the politicking and bureaucratic interference that had made her tenure at the research station so miserable. After all, who was going to bother about an insignificant, obsolete clunker of a ship carrying out leftover missions, when the rest of TerSA's fleet was busily vying for the chance to push the frontiers of known space? That was what Fusella had believed when she'd grabbed the opportunity to captain the unwanted *Galaxion*, and that was how she'd pitched the job offer to Aria, when she was assembling her crew. The *Galaxion* was a little too insignificant, it seemed.

"I know how upset you must be over this. But Fusella..." Darwin opened his arms in an almost-shrug and smiled disarmingly, a gesture that from across the room thoroughly charmed Aria. His actual target, however remained steadfastly unimpressed. "I swear to you, this flight is going to make history!"

"I don't want to make history, I just want my ship back, dammit!" She banged a fist on her desk as anger fired her anew. "When was anyone going to tell me? Or my crew? Am I going to have to start writing forty-three letters of reference?"

"We'll still need people to run the ship."

"Huh. And I thought impressment went out with the Napoleonic wars. Will they get a choice? Are they going to be told that all fifty men and women on board died when the first jump ship launched?"

"But they didn't die!" said Zandarin. His eyes and the twitchy corners of his mouth were alight with energy; this, Aria thought enviously, was a man who wasn't afraid to step right up to the precipice, construct a parachute, and jump. "We proved that with the *Pathfinder*! Well, technically we proved the *possibility* they survived—we weren't really in a position to bring back any hard evidence—but General Nelson believes they can still be rescued, and so do I. But can you imagine the implications?"

“Quite frankly, ‘missing for ten years’ isn’t much improvement over ‘presumed dead.’” Fusella said bitterly. “Listen, this kind of thing may be fine for you guys; you volunteered for it, and I applaud your efforts. But if Richardson expects he can blindsides me into commanding a mission like this just because it’s going to be a media event, he’s got a...” She trailed off, watching Darwin and Zandarin cast uneasy sidelong glances at each other.

“You have to look at it objectively,” Darwin began hastily. “General Nelson is the project leader, she has experience running a jump....”

She crossed her arms and looked away. “I can see the Board of Directors and I have much to discuss.” Fusella’s quiet anger was far more unnerving than her usual loud variety. It made Aria shiver to watch it.

The office door chime sounded, and the doors slid open before anyone had a chance to respond to it. Four burly station security guards geared for combat piled into the room, followed by a lightly armored and slightly less burly sergeant. Aria almost skittered up the back of the couch at this sudden show of force. Zandarin braced, Darwin raised an eyebrow, and Fusella rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Mr. Deloren?” barked the sergeant.

“How can I help you, Sergeant, ah...?”

“Stemmler, sir. We have reason to believe there has been an unauthorized entry onto this ship.” He took two long steps toward Fusella, and the rest of his unit flanked him. “May I see some identification, ma’am?”

“It’s all right, Sgt. Stemmler,” Darwin said, doing his best to keep an amused grin off his face. “I can vouch for Ms. Mierter, here.”

“*Captain Mierter.*”

“And her?” he demanded gruffly, swinging around to face Aria, who flinched again. “Our orders were to apprehend *two* possibly hostile suspects.”

“Ms. Schafer is my chief geologist, and this is *my* ship,” Fusella declared. “We are *not* hostile suspects, we work here!”

“They are both here with my permission,” added Darwin.

“Hmm,” growled the sergeant. “With all due respect, sir, I still think I ought to take them in for questioning.”

Fusella looked like she was getting ready to boil over, but Darwin stepped forward to put himself squarely between the security officer and Aria. “Sergeant,” he said patiently, his smile wavering only slightly, “I am, as I believe you are aware, the officer on watch at the moment. I am responsible for the goings-on aboard this ship. And as this is a ship security matter, I thank you for your concern, but we will handle it ourselves.”

“Your ship has less than a skeleton staff on board,” the sergeant said hotly. “While you guys are docked at Ares Station we *are* your security! Sir.” He tacked on the ‘sir’ a little belatedly.

“Then let me make plain to you, we are not having a security problem. As far as I am concerned there has been no unauthorized entry, except for yours, for which of course I will make an exception. Your assistance today, while appreciated, is neither required nor desired. With all due respect.”

Aria wanted to applaud. She’d never seen anyone get brushed off with such *savoir faire*. The sergeant rumbled to himself, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was clearly itching to arrest somebody. “My superior will want that in writing,” he muttered finally.

“I’ll see to it. Thank you, Sgt. Stemmler.”

Darwin prudently escorted the crowd of security guards out to the hallway. Their retreat was punctuated by a muffled cacophony of riot gear being stowed and guns being holstered.

When he returned, Darwin leaned back against the door, grinning broadly, to contemplate Fusella and Aria. “Outwitting station security to sneak aboard! Color me impressed.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Fusella grumped. “In your report to his boss, you tell them their security measures are an embarrassment.”

“It’s just like old times,” Zandarin said, sporting a big smile of his own. “Remember back in the Academy when we—”

“Oh, god, don’t bring that up.” Fusella was clearly in a foul mood at being slighted by the sergeant and in no mood for reminiscing, but Aria mentally filed that tidbit away in hopes of getting more of the interesting-sounding story later.

“ ‘I am responsible for the goings-on aboard this ship’ ,” Fusella repeated, curling her lip in mock disgust. “That should’ve been my speech to make.”

Darvin chuckled lightly. “It’s good to see you again, Fu.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” She relented her bad mood and reached out to give him a brief but warm hug. “You too, Zan,” she added, stepping over to the couch for another hug.

“And your so-called assistant?” Darvin prompted brightly.

“Oh, yes. Aria, please meet Darvin Deloren and Zandarin Wilder, both of whom are friends of mine from my undergrad days at Terran Space Academy. Two more brilliant but sadly immodest researchers you could not hope to meet. Darvin, Zandarin, may I make known to you my very good friend Aria Schafer, studious geologist and leader of the *Galaxion*’s contact team.” This was followed by handshakes and murmurs of welcome all around, although who exactly was welcoming whom was a little unclear.

“Now,” said Fusella, “my duty lies on the Moon, specifically in the offices of the TerSA Board of Directors. They won’t find it so easy to duck my calls when I’m standing right on their doorstep.” Her scowl resurfaced. “We’re going to have a little chat.”

“I know everything must seem grossly unfair right now, but don’t lose sight of what we’re trying to do,” Darvin said. “You can help us do it right. Besides, wouldn’t it be fun to work together again?”

“Only if I outrank you.”

Aria had a thousand questions she wanted to ask, but she was feeling rather like a fly on a departing LEO shuttle, about to be swept off on a grand adventure through no real virtue of her own, but simply because she happened to be caught in the right place at the right time. She’d been content to work on the contact team on the *Galaxion*, even if the missions only amounted to the fleet’s pick-up jobs. Her fellow crewmates were as close to her as family. And after too many horrible months running mineral analyses on someone else’s samples at the university, the chance to get out to space on a ship, any ship, was a taste of heaven.

She’d almost forgotten her old dreams.

The *Galaxion*, a jump ship! And the possibility they might keep the original crew! She had the sense that if she closed her eyes and stood very still, she might wake to find herself on board for that momentous mission. As a fly on the wall; that would be enough.

But first, she would accompany Fusella back to the Moon. She couldn't be as strong an advocate for the crew as Fusella, but at least she could help keep their captain from getting herself fired.

Galaxion: Chapter 2

Mars, Aria decided as she marked and mapped the complex sedimentary layers of the canyon wall, was a sadly underappreciated planet.

For many millennia (how many, she wondered? Vessa would know. She'd have to ask her when she saw her again) humans had struggled to understand their tiny planet. While stuck on one hunk of rock they studied it endlessly and subjected it to every kind of analysis they could think of, and invented new ways of looking at it when those answers weren't enough. There was so much to know, and an army of scientists with multiple lifetimes apiece would never discover it all. Back then, even the nearest of the planets in the solar system were the stuff of dreams, and sentimental geologists imagined they would die happy if they could only be among the first to examine the topology of the landscape with their own eyes.

But once the rocket propulsion barriers of space travel were broken and some of those distant stars no longer seemed quite so distant, suddenly the Earth's nearest neighbors were very much yesterday's news. In the crazy race to be further out than anyone had been before, Mars, Venus, Europa, and the rest of the neighborhood became the scientific equivalent of last year's entertainment blockbuster. Yeah, it was fun for a while, maybe even deserving of the rave reviews, but I've seen it now so give me something new.

Aria had to smile wryly, under her helmet. Throughout her youth her family had chided her for being like the billy goats who were convinced the grass was sweeter beyond the bridge, and woe to any trolls lurking underneath. All it took was the mere possibility of a jump ship for those cravings to come rolling back in. Fusella was probably wondering what had happened to her shy, retiring little geologist.

Fortunately for the scientific community, not everyone subscribed to the idea that further was better. The Mars Archeological Institute was an example of this—it was chaired by a collection of the most passionate minds in the business, and it was their mission statement to demonstrate to all that Mars held enough mysteries in her rocky crust to satisfy the most starry-eyed of explorers. Their job was to systematically survey the entire surface, and they spoke of it like they were 19th century Egyptologists about to

enter the fabled wealth of the Valley of the Kings. That was MAI's board of directors. Their staff, however, consisted mostly of cantakerous old geologists who for one reason or another couldn't make the TerSA cut, and postgrad students impatiently biding their time until they could land a more exciting job.

The Institute couldn't pay her much, but they were happy to take on someone with experience doing field work in a pressure suit. Since Aria had been on a real contact team on a real TerSA ship, she'd been elevated to almost demigod status in the eyes of the postgrads as soon as she showed up for work. The old farts, predictably, despised her for conspicuous slumming, but within a few days she could walk among them all without feeling like she was having reputation whiplash.

The dig was at the site of an equatorial riverbed. While the students hoped to find the long sought-after first fossils in the ancient sediment, Aria found satisfaction just by examining each layer. Such a thorough analysis was usually uncalled for on a contact team, where the missions resembled a quick precision attack—get in, gather the necessary data, get out, and move on. But here she felt like she was getting back to her roots, and she remembered why she took that path when the roads to her career began to diverge. It was a geologist's unique gift, even through a stiff and heavy pressure suit, to peel back the strata and walk backward through time.

Every so often, she snapped herself out of the mesmerizing lure of uncovering the story of the rock, looked around at the site crew, and remembered where she was. She sighed guiltily. The old farts had it right after all.

* * * * *

Fusella stormed out past the security checkpoint with an expression of grim determination identical to the one she wore when she stormed in. Aria frowned, wondering whether this meant good news or bad.

“Well?”

In reply, Fusella slapped her thin briefcase down on the bench, making a loud echo in the large, marble-walled atrium. She turned her head to look back over her shoulder and muttered in a low voice, “I hope they know this means war.”

Aria's heart stopped cold for a moment, until she stopped being an idiot and realized Fusella meant that in the Bugs Bunny sense, and not in any global disaster kind of way. But then her stomach began to sink in a most uncomfortable way. "They're reassigning the crew?" she asked in a weak voice.

"No, they know as well as I do that it'd take them forever to train a new crew who'd be even half as good at flying that oddball crate, even *with* the new renos." She grabbed her trench coat from the bench and began yanking it on over her dark blue dress uniform. "They wanted to dump my specialists, though. And *me*, though that's hardly a surprise."

Aria stood and fumbled for her own coat. She was a specialist.

"They tried to mollify me with the Chief of Sciences position on the *Ichiban*, can you believe it? Idiots. If I'd wanted that post I'd have taken it when they *first* offered it two years ago. Come on, let's get out of here before I'm irrevocably overwhelmed by the urge to vandalize something."

They continued down the grey marbled halls. It was an almost frighteningly ostentatious display, considering how costly it must have been to lift all those heavy slabs up here, but Aria supposed that was just one of the perks of having the single largest fleet of ships at your beck and call. The whole place ought to have felt like an old, chilly museum, but somehow they avoided that problem with the clever use of ambient lighting and lots of greenery (some of it imported from distances much, much further than the marble). The rotunda was designed to evoke images of grand old train stations, and featured a three metre high bronze freeform sculpture of a rocket ship in flight. They were herded through another checkpoint, and then they were out on the lunar surface.

"They're a mean-spirited pile of moss-covered old visionless conservative *lizards!*" Fusella burst out, as soon as they were beyond the TerSA building's property limits.

Aria was beginning to wonder if she shouldn't have tried to sit in on her meeting with the Board of Directors anyway, despite being unable to get a badge of admittance to the upper floors. "Er... so, are you... uh, did they..."

"Do you mean, am I still employed?" she said, with a thin smile. She closed her eyes and for a moment she looked too tired and weary for even a full week's sleep to do

much good, but she shook it off, drawing energy from god only knew what reserve. “Yeah, it looks that way. They never wanted to fire me, really, they just wanted to strip me of my command at the first opportunity that wouldn’t allow me to smack ‘em back with a lawsuit. It’s one little stinking ship! The way they’re behaving you’d think I was leading a revolution.”

Aria opened her mouth to comment, thought better of it, and closed it again. Fusella’s idea of a well-run ship resembled a small portable town, rather than the “flying office tower,” as she derisively labeled the Terran Space Administration’s popular big ships. The words “family friendly” had been known to pass her lips, and although she hadn’t yet been able to get around the problem of TerSA’s contractual refusal to allow children to remain on board with their parents, many of her crew (not to mention TerSA employees working on other ships) had voiced strong opinions in favour of Fusella’s initiative. The Board, which prided itself on the public image of professionalism its ships presented, had good reason to start sweating.

She shivered, and hugged her coat tighter around her against the chill of the domed air. “I guess we should go back and clear out our stuff, then.”

“Hell, no. They laid the injunctions on so thick you couldn’t cut through with a plasma beam, but anyone from my crew who wants to participate in this fool experiment can do so. Even certain crazy rock-jocks who ought to know they’re going to be bored stiff on a hyperspace jump.”

Aria came to a halt, unable to make her legs move properly. She’d mentally prepared herself so carefully for disappointment that the notion of success was slow to sink in. “We’re going? All of us?”

“Those who *want* to go,” Fusella repeated firmly. “I made damn sure that was part of the deal.”

“But... but what about you? If you won’t be in command...”

Fusella sighed. “If the Board had its way, I’d be stuck watching it all through a rusty oscilloscope in a broom closet. That’s how much they want me to move on and relinquish any and all claim to the *Galaxion*. But if they think they can get rid of me that easily, well—they obviously *haven’t* been paying attention.”

Privately, Aria couldn't help but think *I sat on a chair twiddling my thumbs in the broom closet on the Galaxion's first Jump, I did!* would be a story worthy enough to tell your future grandchildren, but she doubted she could ever get her captain to understand her point of view. Fusella, whose ambitions lay closer to home, had never felt the slightest desire to fling herself out to the boundaries of explored space—but as an Academy graduate, the opportunity to get herself posted on one of the deep-space ships had always been there. Aria had long since given up trying to explain why that subtle distinction was important. By the same token, she'd also given up trying to convince her that Academy graduates, unlike the majority of spacers who got their training at less prestigious institutions, had a decidedly skewed perspective on the universe.

“They were just starting to make noises about a pay cut to go along with my new lowly position—can you believe their nerve?— when the secretary pokes his head in, apologizing profusely, and tells Richardson he's got to take a call. Richardson was annoyed, of course, but I get escorted back out to the waiting room for a few minutes. When I get called back in, suddenly it's a whole new song and dance. Do you know who it was who interrupted my dismal attempt to make a deal? None other than General Scavina Nelson herself.”

“Oh, no.”

“That was my first reaction, too. But the next thing I know they're telling me I get to be Advisor to the new Captain, second in the chain of command.”

“You're kidding! But that's great news! You couldn't have hoped for a better deal than that!”

“Yeah, the Board sure thought so. Richardson looked like he was going to pop a blood vessel. I ask you, do I deserve to have an arch enemy?”

They entered the bustling train station (far less pretty than TerSA HQ's rotunda), full of lunacommuters heading out to the shuttleport. With its majestic view of the Big Blue Marble as a selling point, lunar property had become prime real estate after the domes had gone up, and only the wealthiest could afford to live there. It was a popular place to work, though. Aria and Fusella dug into their pockets for tokens, and eventually found a pair of seats on the train.

The lunar landscape was an illustration of contrast, between the sharp, ragged edges of the original surface and the gentle curves of soft plant life that had been manipulated into existence within the artificial habitat of the domes. The view from the train, which skirted the edge of the dome, was even more incongruous. On one side was a park-lined city, the other a desert of grey rock.

They watched the scenery go by for a few minutes. Fusella was being uncharacteristically quiet, her features tight as though in deep thought.

“Maybe this General Nelson won’t be so bad to work with,” Aria said finally. “That was a pretty decent thing of her to do, considering how much easier her job would have been without you there looking over her shoulder.”

“What, you’re saying I’m not a fabulous person to work with? That’s it, you’re fired!” She grinned briefly, and then returned to her previous thoughtful, slightly irritated expression. “But yes, it was generous, I’ll grant her that. She went to a lot of trouble to stick her neck out for someone she doesn’t even know. I bet I can guess who put her up to it, though.”

Aria puzzled over this. “What, you don’t mean Darwin?”

“To be honest, I don’t know if I want to kiss him or kick his ass. That was *my* fight, you know? TerSA’s bad enough, but I don’t particularly like being anyone’s pawn, no matter how well meaning they are.”

Well, Fusella may not have been happy about it, but Aria at least was glad of having someone in their corner who could play politics. “Can you imagine where we might be right now if you hadn’t found a friendly face when you barged onto the *Galaxion*? It’s a lucky thing you knew each other.”

“Yeah, the holding cells on Ares Station probably aren’t the best place to stage negotiations with TerSA,” Fusella agreed with a sour smile. She sighed deeply. “As a general rule, no pun intended, I don’t like people who subscribe to that obsolete military crap. But Darwin... he has, how shall I put this, a knack for picking the right horse. He can be a sneaky bastard—don’t play cards with him—but he’s got a discerning eye. If he’s involved in this Nelson Project, you can be sure it’s going to be a significant one.”

“That’s what he tried to tell you, but you kept yelling at him.”

“Well, I’d have been more keen on it,” she snapped, “except they were shredding up my ship at the time.”

Aria smiled, watching Fusella’s expression change from exasperation to enthusiasm and back again, several times.

“So what did happen when you were at the Academy together?”

Exasperation settled in. “I mean this is the nicest possible way, but—piss off, Ari.”

* * * * *

After that came the wait.

The engineering team had predicted four months to get the new jump engines installed and on-line. So once another month was added on for unscheduled problems and yet another for circuitous paperwork and administrative swashbuckling, it was going to be quite a while before anything like a launch date was likely to appear. Fusella returned to Ares Station in order to closely monitor the retrofit, and Aria moved down planetside to Menkaura, the smallest of the three domed cities on Mars, where short-term rent was cheaper.

According to the frequent reports Fusella sent her way, a good fifty percent of the crew chose to stay on for the Nelson Project. A hopeful number, considering they would have to have been making their decisions on faith. Despite the recent good press, the Project’s track record of missing and disabled ships wasn’t exactly encouraging, and Aria suspected the turnout had little to do with any actual interest in the mission. Without Fusella on board in a position of authority (albeit not as much authority as before), the numbers would have told a very different story. It gave Aria cold chills to think about the choice she would have been faced with if Fusella had pulled out.

Aria couldn’t afford to go six months without a paycheck, however, and since TerSA wasn’t extending any vacation pay to its employees who found themselves on forced sabbatical, she got a job with the Mars Archeological Institute.

* * * * *

There must be a transcurrent fault line around here somewhere, Aria thought as she traced the downward slope of the sediment layers. It didn't look as though much had moved in recent centuries, but she hoped someone was monitoring the seismic activity just in case. She made a notation on her notepad and sent a query to the site leader [?].

She got carefully to her feet and stretched as best she could in the stiff suit. Across the riverbed on the other side of the site she could see one of the students (she couldn't remember the name of the person in the blue-rabbit blazoned suit, but it had to be a student) whack himself on the helmet in a mistaken effort to wipe the sweat from his brow. She squeezed her lips together, determined not to laugh. It had taken *months* of suit work to cure herself of those kind of habits.

"We're going to wrap it up now, folks," said Joss, the site leader, through her helmet's comm system. "Pack up your things, we'll be leaving for the outpost in fifteen minutes. Don't be late or you'll be left behind."

Dari, a female student in the two-green-apples suit, came over to Aria as she was stowing her gear. "Hi, Ms. Schafer," she said with a happy grin on her face. "Can I show you what we found? Edwen thinks it might be significant!"

For some reason, none of them seemed to want to use her first name, despite the number of times she reminded them what it was. If they really found something, they ought to be reporting it to Joss, but he could be a bit intimidating to the kids. "Sure, Dari. I'd like to see what you've found."

She followed Dari around the bend in the riverbed, where the floor sloped down another 10 centimeters or so. Edwen was there with the white-cloud blazon on his back, crouching over a microscope braced halfway down the wall of the bed. He looked up as they approached. "Can you look at this and tell us what you think, Ms. Schafer? We'd really value your opinion."

Far too highly, she thought to herself, but she politely bent down to look anyway. She spotted immediately what they'd been so excited about. Centered in the viewer lay a cluster of round, regularly shaped depressions in the rock. A slim hope at best, but it would take a thorough study back in the lab to determine conclusively if these shapes were indeed the proof they all wanted to find.

She looked up again, at the two young archeologists holding their breath in anticipation. “I can’t say for sure,” she said carefully, and then added quickly as their faces fell, “but I think you should definitely pursue this with a geochemical analysis. Label it and tag it with your names. And then run it past Joss. Insist that he give you access to the big laser spectroscope. Who knows, this could be the discovery that will make you famous!”

They seemed pleased with that, and then she had to help them hurriedly pack their instruments. She was reasonably certain the site leader had been bluffing about leaving people behind, but there was no point taking chances.

Aria could hardly wait to fall into bed when they finally reached their outpost cabins, but she dutifully sat down to check her mail first. Waiting for her was a message from Fusella.

“Stupid engineers having problems with food refrigeration systems. Thought they were there to install engine! How’d they manage to break fridge?? Gen N. wants to hold staff conference. Expect formal request in a few days. If Joss is problem, tell him to go soak his head in polar ice cap (Martian humor, ha ha).”

Aria read the message three times.

If General Nelson wanted to gather the staff, it had to mean the retrofit was close to completion. And if the retrofit was almost done, that meant the launch date wouldn’t be too much further away.

Joss would yell at her for taking off, but that hardly mattered.

She was going on a *Jump*.