

**24th June 2187**

***Vessel: The Finex. Class 2 long-haul freighter***

***Destination: Earth***

***Cargo: Platinum ore***

***Crew: Eleven***

***Droids: Two***

Something was wrong.

The phase drive had stopped.

The freighter jerked to a standstill, as if a giant hand had reached out and grabbed it. It shouldn't have been physically possible for a vessel the size of the *Finex* to stop like that. But it did. Jinn was flung backwards, falling hard, the base of her spine taking the brunt of the impact. The lights went out as she hit the floor, sinking her into darkness so complete that she wondered for a moment if she'd gone blind. Everything hurt. Everything. All she could do was lie there and think about pain.

Then the emergency lighting switched on. The alarms started screaming, an electronic shriek that threatened to break her skull and made it impossible to hear her own thoughts as she staggered to her feet and turned to look at the control panel. She grabbed the back of the pilot's chair, hanging on to it as the freighter tilted left. Empty Soylate cups went flying, as did discarded pieces of uniform and a couple of personal comm. units.

Pulling herself round, Jinn pushed her backside into the chair and gripped the edge of the control panel, forcing herself to stay seated. The data screens flashed. She stared at them, trying to make sense of the streaming feed, but none of it meant anything.

They had been cruising along Space Lane Seven. It wasn't the busiest of routes, but it wasn't the quietest, either. Now with a dead phase drive, they weren't so much cruising as floating, and the last thing she wanted was to get in the way of another freighter. They weren't exactly designed to stop in a hurry.

'Viewscreen on!' she yelled.

Everything around her seemed to freeze. She couldn't breathe.

She wasn't even sure her heart was still beating. There, floating alongside the *Finex*, was a ship. Not a freighter, or one of the smaller transporters used by the traffic police, but something else. It was long, fat and bulbous at one end, narrowing to a slender point at the other. It reminded her of the giant squid trapped in the frozen seas back on Earth, with its strange curving shape and the eerie way it was just . . . there.

It drifted closer, sinking lower. A vast glowing orb moved across her line of sight like a curious eye. Jinn jumped in her seat, her heart pounding up into her throat. She swallowed, fingers shaking on the control panel. She pressed her feet hard into the floor and tensed the muscles in her legs. 'Just a search light,' she told herself firmly, as the eye moved. 'Just a light. Not a cannon.'

That didn't stop her from feeling like a specimen under a scope.

The ship appeared to have been made from multiple vessels, taken apart and then stitched together with rivets and filth. She had never seen anything like it. It wasn't a government ship, nor did it belong to one of the corporations. That left only one possibility.

Pirates.

Why? Jinn silently screamed, terror stealing her words as the other members of the crew came staggering onto the control deck, all in various states of undress, smelling of chemical sleep and confusion.

‘What in the void is going on?’ asked Zane. He was the longest-serving and therefore the most senior employee on board, something he liked to remind everyone of. Frequently.

‘Pirates,’ Jinn replied, her tongue thick and heavy. ‘It’s pirates.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘See for yourself.’

Someone swore, a short, sharp word.

‘Don’t just sit there!’ Zane yelled at her. ‘Get us out of here!’

Shamed by her own stupidity, Jinn pressed her palms against the small, circular ports that would link her to the on-board system. Within seconds, the tiny Tellurium nanobots that inhabited the flesh of her forearms had formed into long, thin wires and pushed their way out of her hands and into the port.

Wetware connected to hardware, and she was in.

It took her precious seconds to navigate her way through the on-board system, which seemed to be in the middle of a full-scale meltdown. Jinn overrode it and switched to emergency protocol, which would enable her to fly. But the freighter was big, and it was heavy and fully loaded. It wouldn’t move in a hurry.

‘Shit,’ she muttered, when she realised that it wouldn’t move at all.

‘What?’

‘I can’t power up the phase drives.’

And so the scramble for the emergency escape pods began.

Zane moved first. Heavy boots thudded on metal as the crew sprinted to the little transports, located down in the belly of the freighter. Why hadn’t she thought of that? There was a way out of this and she was sat in the pilot’s chair like an idiot as the *Finex* drifted closer to the pirate ship, close enough for her to see the individual metal plates that formed the hull. From the way the freighter was moving, she knew the pirates had them in a tractor beam. There was a chance that the emergency pods would be able to avoid the pull if they used the freighter as a shield. That chance was a lot bigger if she was piloting one of them. She had to get to one of the pods, and fast.

Pulling in air, Jinn focussed on the tiny nanobots, willing them to disconnect and move back inside her body. The view screen was still active. As she watched, a small docking portal in the side of the pirate ship spiralled open and a spacewalk emerged, unfolding its way through space. They were going to be boarded.

Jinn had spent enough time watching the streaming newsfeeds to know what that meant. She closed her eyes, and with one massive push of concentration, dragged the Tellurium back inside her body and disconnected from the computer. Her hands burned but she ignored it as she sprinted down into the belly of the ship, chasing her way down endless sharply angled staircases.

Her boots clattered on the metal, her palms slipping as she tried to grip on to the safety rails.

She was almost at the hatch that led to the escape pods when she heard the spacewalk connect. Every second was precious now. She had to keep moving, and that seemed to switch off her fear. She felt nothing, thought about nothing, simply moved to the first hatch and pressed her thumb against the lock pad. It didn’t open, the light flashing red to indicate that the pod had already jettisoned. Jinn rushed to the second hatch, repeated the process. They couldn’t all have gone. They couldn’t. A shiver dropped down her spine as she stood staring at the hatch door, the slow flicker of the emergency lighting showing her the world in brief flashes of sickly yellow light.

‘Hull breach detected,’ came the voice over the internal loudspeaker.

‘Immediate evacuation recommended.’

‘Thanks for the advice,’ Jinn muttered. A hull breach meant that the pirates had cut their way in. They would find her in a matter of minutes. Or, worse, they wouldn’t, and she’d still be on

board the *Finex* when they set it adrift, when it was left to float out into space with a rapidly diminishing oxygen supply and malfunctioning on board computer.

'Shit.' She tried the lock one last, desperate time. She was aware of something crowding the edges of her consciousness, an instinctive sense that danger was closing in, moving closer with every second wasted. Abandoning the second hatch, Jinn moved to the third and final one. She jammed her thumb against the lock, staring intently at the control panel. The light stayed red, stayed red.

Then it changed to green. The hatch door spiralled open, and Jinn found herself staring into the belly of the little escape pod.

Three of her crewmates were inside. Their heads jerked round and they stared at her. 'There's no room,' Zane said.

'They've already boarded.' Jinn moved closer to the hatch, wrapped her hands around the opening and set a foot to the edge, ready to get in with them. 'If I pilot us out of here, we can use the ship as a shield. Avoid the tractor beam.'

'This is a three- person pod,' Rula said. 'It doesn't have enough oxygen to support four.'

'We're on Space Lane Seven,' Jinn pointed out. The pirates were close. She could almost taste their sweat in the air. 'We'll get picked up long before we run out.'

'I'm not taking that chance,' Zane replied. His hand flicked up, and in it Jinn saw a blaster. 'Get away from the hatch. Or I'll spill your guts all over the floor, Dome bitch.'

'Don't do this,' Jinn pleaded. Deep down, she had known they disliked her, but this was more than that. She looked at Zane.

'Let me pilot. It's our only chance.'

His response was to power up the blaster. 'Get the fuck away from the hatch. I won't tell you again.'

The blaster whined. Jinn closed her eyes.

Then two strong hands closed around her upper arms and jerked her away from the hatch opening. 'What have we here?' Said a voice, deep and rough and unfamiliar.

Those hands turned her around, and Jinn found herself looking up, up, and into the face of a man she didn't know. Thick eyebrows framed hard green eyes separated by a nose that was slightly out of kilter. If the dark hair hadn't already told her he was an Underworld, that nose would have. All his features were like that, slightly too big, not quite in line, like he'd been put together in a hurry. It was hard to guess his age. His skin said early twenties.

His eyes said something else entirely. She saw no obvious signs of prosthetics, but his size screamed genetic modification.

And her body screamed out in fear.

'Take her!' Zane yelled from somewhere behind her. 'She's Dome- raised. You'll get decent credits for her!'

The pirate kept his gaze fixed on Jinn. 'I've already got more credits than I can spend.' He lifted a hand, wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger, the white contrasting sharply with his skin. 'Now what is a Dome brat doing on a Galactinex freighter?'

'I'm the pilot,' Jinn managed.

'I see.' He poked the retinal implant at her temple. Then he grabbed her hand and examined the implant that banded her wrist, the lights glowing amber to indicate that it was functioning. She knew if he increased the pressure, her bones would give.

She could sense that in him, that impossible strength. It was why she didn't try to fight him off.

There were others with him, too. They were in the shadows, and Jinn could barely make them out, but they were there, menacing backdrop to the scene. She ignored them. They didn't matter. This one did. She'd imagined pirates to be half starved and dirty and desperate, but this man wasn't desperate at all. His clothes were expensive, he didn't smell, and he didn't

seem in any particular hurry to get on with the business of stealing everything on board the ship.

‘Please . . .’ she whispered.

‘Please . . . what?’ he asked.

‘Please don’t hurt me.’

‘Now why would I do that?’

‘Because . . .’ she began, but the sentence remained unfinished, as the sound of the hatch door closing behind her cut through her words.

The pirate released his grip, and Jinn almost fell. It was only through sheer force of will that she stayed anything close to upright, and when she regained her balance she realised that he was no longer in front of her.

He stood at the hatch, and the hatch was open. One big hand wrapped around the edge of the opening, and one big black boot rested casually on the base. She saw him lift that hand, saw him beckon her crewmates out of the pod. Heard the whine of the blaster and the call of *pirate scum* a second before it was fired.

Instinctively, she held her breath, her entire body shaking. It better have been a clean shot, because she didn’t even want to imagine what this man would do if it hadn’t.

A half-breath later, she found out. It all happened so fast that she barely had time to comprehend it. All she could think later was that maybe her mind had replaced reality with the memory that she would recall time and time again, of the pirate moving at a speed no human possessed. Of her crewmates flying out of the escape pod, their bodies shooting across the narrow deck before they hit the wall and dropped to the floor. She could taste shock in the back of her throat, the slimy bitterness of it, coated with a thick overlay of fear. Were they dead? Her mind told her to move closer, but her body refused to obey. All she could do was stand there, an open target, and wait her turn.

The pirate climbed out of the pod, the blaster in his hand.

There was blood on his shirt and plenty of it, a bloom of red against the white, but he didn’t move like a man in pain. He strode straight past her towards the rear of the bay where the rest of his crew waited. Jinn could see movement in the shadows, then more as they stepped forward. Lean bodies, gleaming, hungry eyes. All of them were dark-haired, with the expected prosthetics.

She saw miners, farmers, engineers, though these were undoubtedly Bugs, people who had skipped out of their colony jobs before they’d paid off the cost of their modifications.

‘Strip it down,’ the pirate said to them. ‘Take the ore and the droids, and whatever else you can find.’

‘Aye, captain,’ one of them said. Silver streaked the sides of his dark hair, and his left hand had been replaced by a prosthetic, the kind that spun and flicked out an assortment of intricate tools. A biomechanical engineer, which meant he was intelligent and highly skilled, not some low-rent thug. He wasn’t what she’d expected. None of this was what she’d expected.

The engineer gestured to the others, and they got to work.

Some of them moved further into the ship, some of them detached laser-cutters from their belts and began to strip out the walls of the bay. Like a group of starving scavengers, they picked it clean, but they did it carefully. Nothing was trashed, nothing was broken. Obviously they weren’t just going to take the ore from the hold, they were going to take everything. By the time they’d finished there might not even be a ship for them to leave her on.

The opportunity was there, again, and this time Jinn took it.

But she stumbled as she made her way towards the now-empty escape pod, her feet sliding in the blood that patterned the steel plate beneath her feet. If she hadn’t, she might not have heard the voice that came from behind her.

‘Help me.’ It was little more than a whisper, that desperate plea. ‘Please.’

Jinn glanced back. It was Zane. She risked a glance at the pirates on the other side of the bay. They were rapidly dismantling the cooling system, stripping out the pipes and wiring that allowed the vessel to stay at a temperature that the human body could tolerate. Without it, the freighter would rapidly start to overheat. Blood would warm, enzymes would denature, and the biological systems that kept the body functioning would stop.

Anyone left on board would, quite literally, start to cook.

‘Bloody supernova.’ Jinn turned, started towards Zane. She couldn’t leave him to die like that. She barely made it two paces before the pirate captain was in front of her.

He stared down at her with those odd green eyes. ‘Don’t be foolish,’ he said. Then he turned, strode over to her crewmate, and planted one big boot firmly on Zane’s chest. ‘They made their choice. I offered them work on my ship. They didn’t want it.’

Zane struggled against the weight of that boot, but it was futile.

Jinn flexed her fingers and wished desperately for a weapon. Blaster, a knife, and a personal comm. unit she could fling at the pirate’s head. Anything.

‘Now make your choice,’ the pirate said. He gestured to the pod. ‘Leave.’ He gestured to the rest of the bay. ‘Or stay and die with the rest of your crew. It’s up to you.’

‘Why?’ she asked, unable to help herself, knowing the choice she had to make, yet wanting to delay it. Not wanting to face that inevitable moment when she would leave her crew behind, leave them to die. ‘Why let me go?’

‘You’re Dome- raised. No- one cares what happens to a few Underworld workers. But you . . . I don’t need that sort of trouble.’

From the other side of the bay, a shout pushed through the hot, sticky air. ‘We’re done here, captain. Two- minute countdown.’

‘Get back to the *Mutant*,’ the pirate replied. He barely raised his voice, yet it had the power to carry across the space. Thence looked at her, straight at her. ‘You heard,’ he said. ‘Get in the pod.’

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t willingly leave the others here to die. Not while there was still a chance. ‘Let me take them with me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because . . . .’ she began, but the words were cut off when she saw Zane push himself up on one elbow. In one unsteady hand, he held a pocket grenade. If he threw it, it would kill all of them.

‘No!’ she screamed.

But the pirate had already seen. He broke Zane’s arm with swift kick, which sent the grenade flying up. The pirate caught it, balancing it on the palm of his hand for a moment, then deftly deactivated it and slid it into his pocket. Zane lay sprawled on the floor, his arm bent at a peculiar angle, his eyes dull. A thin trickle of blood ran out of the corner of his mouth as his throat worked for air.

Jinn turned, flung she towards the escape pod. Feet slipping, hands struggling for grip, she made her way inside, scrambled into a seat. As the restraints automatically wrapped themselves around her torso, she punched the bright red touchpad that would trigger the emergency launch. The hatch spiralled shut and then she was blasted out into space. The pod spun as it rushed away from the freighter, turning her world upside down, and doing the same to her stomach. By the time the boosters kicked in, slowing the pod to a speed that didn’t make her want to puke, the *Finex* was little more than a fragment in the distance.

There was no sign of the pirate ship, only the skeleton of her ship floating alongside Space Lane Seven. She watched it in agony; the only sound that of her own laboured breathing. She watched as it drifted, watched as it burned, watched until there was nothing left.

Then she lowered her hands to the ports on the control deck and plugged in. 'Sir,' she said, when her superior appeared on their screen. 'I need help.'