

## Prologue

Deep in the bowels of the nothingness of space it sat, squatting like a sentinel over its domain. Its dark presence served as an admonition, a warning for any unfortunate enough to find themselves in the void.

*Danger.*

*Death.*

*Go no further.*

But this day, chaos had erupted within the controlled order – retaliation, a riot. It was inconceivable, unimaginable, but it had happened.

The wardens found themselves the immediate targets; they were eradicated quickly and without fuss. Barriers between species were forgotten as the escapees worked methodically through all the decks, freeing all allies and disposing of foes. Finally, they reached the airlock and the ships were launched, leaving Marson Alpha IV floating dejectedly in space, its broken hull no longer capable of inspiring fear. It had been overrun by the very people it had held for all eternity, and it had been destroyed.

The escapees never once looked back. They were free.

## Chapter 1

“Attention, passengers, we are now within viewing range of the Marson prison. You may proceed to Viewing Decks One through Four. We will remain in the vicinity for two hours. Please direct any questions to the personnel on your deck. Thank you.”

Ensign Connie Barker sighed as the ship-wide announcement ended. She loved her job on the *USC Avenger*, but after almost six years of service, certain things were starting to get on her nerves. This particular run and that particular message were featured at the top of her list.

Barker was an archeologist. To the rest of the world she would only ever be known as a Doctor of Ancient and Extinct Civilizations of Earth, but she called herself an archeologist; it was much simpler. She had made a study of the humans of Earth through the 20th century and all the way up to the 24th, and was considered the leading expert on the cultures of that time period. When she first got her job on the ship, she had been just as enthusiastic as any passenger to be visiting the notorious Marson. She had known that it would take several trips to the abandoned prison to learn everything about it, and she had been right. Her historic interest had lasted for about six trips, and then the novelty had worn off. Now it was nothing more than a boring routine.

She sighed as she turned the corner and jumped onto the lift. She was assigned to Deck Four this trip. For the sake of appearance, she was there to answer questions and she often did. But in actuality, she was there to keep the peace. When Marson prison was included on one of the tour runs, people always reacted in

strange, unpredictable ways. Barker supposed that it was justified, in a way. Marson had been one of the cruelest prisons in history, locking up thousands of people of different species for the totality of their lives, most of whom hadn't deserved it.

Barker cringed as she stepped onto her assigned deck and took up a position in the front against the viewing window. As the automated spiel about the prison droned on, a fuming Barker just barely kept herself from running out of the room. She knew everything there was to know about the prison, and it infuriated her that the things that would have shown the Coalition in a less than favourable light were omitted from the recording, or glossed over, or denied completely. Nine out of ten people who took the tours did so to learn the truth about the infamous prison. Barker felt that it was their duty to supply that truth in its entirety. If they didn't, what was the point of supplying it at all?

She ran a hand through her short-cropped blonde hair and shook her head. The inaccuracy of the information was something that had been bothering her for a long time, but Barker had quickly realized that fretting about it didn't do anything except give her a headache.

Finally, the recording ended, and she was relieved that she at least didn't have to deal with that annoyance any longer. She scanned the crowd for potential troublemakers. Finding no one that looked overtly hostile, Barker sighed and leaned back against the viewing window, hoping it would be a nice, calm shift.

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"Captain Harrison?"

The captain turned and looked at her man on Ops. "Yes?"

"There appears to be a ship about four minutes out."

"Appears?"

"Yes, ma'am. The reading is erratic, but it appears to be dead in the water. I'm not picking up any energy output and it..." Lieutenant Thorp trailed off in uncertainty.

The captain walked over to the Ops console. "Lieutenant? And it what?"

He looked up into the intelligent brown eyes peering down at him. "It doesn't match any ship in our database."

"What?" Captain Harrison directed her attention to the console displays, taking in the minimal readings. She verified that their computers could not identify the vessel. "Someone get Barker up here...I want her opinion."

She walked back to her chair and sat, her mind churning with visions of lost ships or, even better, a new race of beings. No matter what it turned out to be, it was her duty as a Captain of the Coalition to either provide assistance to the passengers on the vessel or make first contact. "Send a message to the ship."

"Yes, ma'am." The Ops Lieutenant keyed in a greeting on standard hailing frequencies.

Barker arrived on the bridge just as the message was sent. She sent a questioning look toward the captain, who motioned her to look at the Ops console. Barker took a look at the configuration and could not see any resemblance to any Earth vessel, nor to any ship that belonged to the allied planets. Ever.

The view screen crackled to life seconds later, showing a picture of a dirty metal floor covered with debris. The crackling sounds of electrical fires could be heard amidst the tearing of bulkheads. Suddenly, the view screen tilted upwards, providing a picture of a battle-scarred man, humanoid in appearance.

He blinked owlishly into the screen for several long moments, not sure if what he was seeing was real. Finally, he spoke, "Hello?"

Captain Harrison stood and moved closer. The man on the screen was filthy, with all manner of cuts covering his strained face. "Hello, my name is Captain Harrison. Are you in trouble?"

The man blinked bloodshot hazel eyes at the image of the captain and then started to laugh. “Trouble? Hahahaha!”

His cackle was insane, the pitch of it rising and hurting Barker’s ears.

“Trouble? Oh no, dear Captain. I’m not in trouble.” He shook his head violently and grinned madly. “I was in trouble four weeks ago. I’m waaay past trouble; I’m already dead. And you will be too, if you aren’t careful.” At the conclusion of his cryptic statement, the mad cackling started again.

Harrison pulled back a little, not sure if the man was truly mad or just appeared so after a long stint in hell. “Please, sir, I want to help you; we all do. Can you tell me what happened? Is anyone else alive?”

The laughing stopped abruptly as the man gathered his wits about him. “What happened? We were attacked by the spawn of Satan, that’s what happened.” His eyes cleared as a resounding screech ripped through his ship. He shook his head and refocused on the monitor. “Listen to me, Captain. The only way you can help is to leave, as quickly as possible. We’ll take these monsters down with us. No use giving them a new target. Just fly, fly as far away as you can before they get you too!”

“We? Is there anyone alive besides you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Last person I saw alive was Janus, but that was...” his voice trailed off as he thought for a moment, “...five days ago, I think. Janus went down to the decks flooded with radiation. I don’t know what she hoped to do. Just run, Captain, for your own good. Like I said, I’m already dead.”

“Running is not in my nature. It is my duty to help you.”

The ragged warrior turned violently back to the screen, his face an angry sneer. “Listen to me, *Captain.*” He spat the word like a curse. “Don’t be stupid. You have no idea what you’re dealing with here. The second you even attempt to save whoever is left here, they’ll get onto you, and then what will you do? Huh? You’ll die, that’s what. Nice and slow. We couldn’t do anything for four weeks; what makes you think you can just come in and save the day? You don’t want to go fall into the hell we did.”

Barker stepped forward and opened her mouth before she considered her words. “Excuse me, sir? But why don’t you want our help?”

He focused on the new person, his upper lip twitching in annoyance. “Don’t you get it? You can’t help me; I’m gone! Don’t risk yourself in a fight you can’t win.” He reached forward for the control panel as if to end the transmission.

“Wait! Please. You said you’ve been fighting this menace for four weeks. Surely you discovered some weakness, something we can use to get you out of there.”

He paused for a moment, considering. “Do you have any plasma guns?”

“Yes.”

“How about pesticide?”

“Pesticide?”

“Yeah, to kill bugs.”

“Um, yeah.”

“Okay. If you insist on risking your lives, I can’t stop you. Mix the pesticide in the plasma guns. Come with lots of first aid gear and people who aren’t squeamish. Oh, and avoid Decks Two through Seven, Nine, and Thirteen. Last time I checked, they were flooded with radiation. Probably more of them are by now. You can use our computer; most of the sensors are still working. Address it as Sandra.”

“Sandra?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Um, no.”

“Good,” he growled.

Harrison took over the conversation again. “What’s your name?”

“Everson Patrik.”

A high pitched screech filled the damaged ship, followed by the sound of tearing metal. Patrik ducked wildly, knocking into the view screen. The monitor tilted, giving the crew of the *Avenger* a view of the entire room. It was decimated; lifeless bodies lay scattered around the deck. Their attention was immediately drawn to a body falling into the center of the room.

Barker got closer and squinted. The floor of the deck above had been ripped away entirely. Her eyes widened as the person turned and landed clumsily on its feet. It was a woman, who stumbled and straightened, then turned and assumed a defensive stance as a grey creature pounced down from above. She stumbled back under the onslaught, then pushed it off and across the room. It came back swiftly and launched itself at the woman, baring long, hook-like claws.

Barker saw contact made as prey and predator once again tumbled to the floor. She heard an inhuman screech, followed by the crack of bone.

“Janus!”

As the *Avenger* crew watched, the woman turned and smiled and Patrik scampered out of his hiding place to slap Janus on the back.

“We ’ave ta get out of ’ere, Patrik. They are coming.”

He nodded. “They’re always coming. Someone offered to help us.”

Janus snorted. “They stupid, or just suicidal?”

“I dunno. Why don’t you ask them?” He pointed to the screen.

Janus turned and walked over to the screen, tilting it to better focus on her face. “If ya people want ta kill yourselves doin’ this, I will not object. I would like ta keep on livin’. Patrik given you the details?”

Masking her shock, Captain Harrison stepped forward and nodded. Because the man had been human, she had assumed that the entire crew was. However, Earth origins would not have explained the ship not being in their database. “Yes, he has.”

Janus grunted and turned as more screeching came from the hole in the ceiling of the deck. “Let us go!”

Janus and Patrik ran out of the control room, leaving the view screen active for the *Avenger* crew to see a horde of grey go thundering through the gap, chasing after their prey.

Harrison turned and started barking out orders. “I want the plasma guns modified, a team assembled, and a shuttle launched within the hour.”

As crew members dispersed to carry out the commands, Barker determinedly stepped forward and locked eyes with her captain. “I want to go.”

Harrison debated briefly. “Very well. But be careful, Barker.”

“I will.”

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Barker careened around the corner and slid to a stop in front of the doors to the docking bay. Despite the potential danger, she was excited – this being almost like uncharted waters. They were facing a new enemy, something that the Coalition had never seen before, which in that day and age was highly unusual. She had gotten a good look at the aliens as they had swooped down, and she agreed with Patrik: they looked like the spawn of Satan.

They were grey, with a slightly triangular head, two main eyes with an additional two stalk eyes, and a mouth that wasn’t really a mouth. It appeared as if the aliens’ teeth extended beyond almost nonexistent lips to form a hard beak with pointed edges. These strange teeth looked strong enough to split a human hand in two. Its main body was almost a formless lump, with four ant-like legs. It also had an upper body, with two forearms branching off just below the head and neck, and ending in very long, sharp looking claws that curled

inward at the end. They were perfectly suited for tearing into flesh and bone. Small bumps covered the head and body, and the entire entity was covered in a slimy ooze, so much so that if the creature stood still for even a moment, a large puddle would form. There appeared to be small spikes along the sides of the body. As a whole, it looked incredibly dangerous.

Barker took a deep breath before she stepped into the transport area and looked around. Including her, a group of eight crew members was going to board the besieged ship. They were mostly security personnel, trained to fight. There was also one medic, who looked extremely nervous. "You all right?" she asked softly.

The woman flinched, then turned and saw Barker. "Oh! You startled me, Ensign."

Barker cringed. She hated being called "ensign", it just served to remind her how low in the chain of command she was. The only reason she had even been assigned a rank was because the ship was a USC vessel, Sol Division, owned and operated by the United Space Coalition's headquarters on Earth. The USC was a military based organization and required all ships, whether they were military or not, to follow their regulations.

"Sorry. You looked a little nervous."

"Yeah." The medic nodded. "I can't believe we're doing this. We aren't supposed to have to risk our lives. This is a tour ship, for God's sake! I didn't sign on for this!"

Barker was just about to open her mouth when a deep voice answered for her. "Tour ship or not, Captain Harrison is a captain of the USC, and they are under standing orders to help anyone in trouble. The *Avenger* may be a tour ship now, but it wasn't always."

Barker smiled up at Melvin Kodiak, one of her best friends.

The medic looked suspicious and squinted her eyes. "What do you mean?"

The blonde ensign turned away from her friend and back to the medic. "Didn't you know? The *Avenger* used to be one of the most powerful warships in the Coalition. They decommissioned it because it was too much of a security risk."

Any reply the medic might have made was cut short as the leader of their rescue team bellowed out his orders. "All right, people, let's move out. It's time to go and rescue the weak."

Barker saw Kodiak wince at the officer's choice of words. Major Commander Samson was a total ass who took every advantage of his rank. His view of the world was dismal, and he looked down on anyone who had ever gotten into a scrape of any kind. He was also something of a Human Supremacist, a group that was violently opposed to the inclusion of alien species in the Coalition.

The eight would-be rescuers loaded into the shuttle, took seats, and waited for launch. Barker gripped her plasma gun tightly and looked at the grim faces around her. She knew that most of them were scared; it wasn't often that they had to face an unknown threat. The condition of the ship in trouble hadn't been very encouraging, either.

The shuttle launched and flew steadily toward the ship under siege. As they approached the docking bay, their shuttle started to rock violently, throwing everything not secured onto the floor.

"What the hell is going on?" Samson yelled at the pilot.

"I don't know, sir. There seems to be some heavy turbulence around the ship."

"Well, make sure you get us through in one piece!"

"Aye, sir."

Hating the rocking and lurching with a passion, Barker squeezed her eyes shut. She felt a sympathetic hand on hers and blinked one eye open to see Kodiak smiling at her. She managed a weak grin in return, then breathed a sigh of relief when they finally docked.

Samson stood and looked at his crew. "All right, we're all going except you." He pointed at one buff young man. "You stay here and keep the shuttle secure. The rest of you, come with me. And remember, we

are dealing with an unknown threat here. Keep your eyes peeled and don't hesitate to shoot at anything that is grey and screeches at you. Move out!" Samson took the lead and the rest followed.

Barker did as he had ordered and kept her eyes peeled, not out of fear, more out of fascination. The ship was marvelous, unlike any she had ever seen. She recognized that the bulkheads were falling apart and there were numerous holes in all the walls and numerous bodies in various stages of decomposition, but she knew that cleaned up, it would be a wonderful ship.

She felt her stomach churn at the sight of a body that was burned beyond recognition. Barker looked away swiftly, stepping carefully around some wires.

"So," Kodiak spoke up, "how do we find these people we're supposed to rescue?"

"Patrik said to use the computer," Barker offered.

Samson stopped walking and gestured at the blank walls. "Do you see any computers around here?"

"Well, no, but...Sandra?"

A sleek, feminine voice answered. "Yes?"

Samson looked around, trying to figure out where the interface was.

"Can you tell us where Everson Patrik is?"

"Wait, please." A slight humming came from the walls as the computer searched. "Patrik is on Deck Twelve, hallway 32, junction 67."

"What about Janus?"

"Janus is currently off sensors."

"Oh. What deck are we on?"

"You are currently on Deck Eleven, hallway 12, junction 45."

"Um..." Barker paused, thinking. "Could you tell us how to get to Patrik?"

"Surely. Take ladder 19. It is 30 feet forward on the right."

"Thank you, Sandra."

"You are welcome." The computer fell silent.

Barker looked up at a scowling Samson. He really didn't like it when someone showed him up. *Ab well, he'll just have to live with it.*

Samson growled and started forward. They had only walked 10 feet when a high screeching sounded down the hall. "Take cover and get ready to shoot!" The team obediently dove behind any cover they could find and raised their guns.

A squad of four creatures came bounding down the hallway, jumping off the walls and ceiling, almost flying through the air. The claws could apparently also be used as rappelling devices, the aliens burying them in the ceiling and walls to allow themselves to swing and jump. As if they could read each other's minds, all four stopped and looked around.

Samson didn't want to risk them calling for reinforcements, so he yelled, "Fire!" and stood and began firing his plasma gun at the quartet. The rest of the team followed suit, and soon the body count of the grey things rose by four. Samson stepped back into the hallway and shook his head at the creatures. "Come on. I don't want to have to deal with many more of these." He led them in a slow jog until they reached the ladder without further incident. They climbed up one level and checked to be certain that the area was clear. Samson looked around. "Now where?"

Barker spoke up again. "Sandra?"

The computer replied, "Take a right. Then your second left and third right. Patrik will be there."

"Thanks."

Samson grunted his acknowledgement and started off again, keeping his plasma rifle raised. He hated aliens, hated their smell and look, hated how sometimes they looked human but weren't. If someone walked

on two legs, had two arms and a head, ten fingers and toes – that was human. Some species possessed those same attributes but rearranged them. To Samson, that was a travesty of everything that was human.

The commander rounded the last corner, then stopped as he heard the unmistakable charge of a plasma gun. Barker peeked around Samson and blinked. There he was, the man from the view screen – Everson Patrik.

He looked even more seriously injured than he had when they had seen him on the viewer. He was slumped on the floor in the corner, his gun tiredly held at the ready.

“Hello? Patrik.”

Patrik tilted his head, recognizing the soft voice from his view screen conversation. He thought hard, trying to remember if that conversation had been real, if Janus had been real. He didn’t think she could have been. Before she had fallen down through the ceiling, he hadn’t seen her in days. He had lost all hope, his last consolation was to be blowing up the ship and taking all the buggers with him.

“Are you...really here?”

Barker moved forward and gently lowered the arm that stiffly held the plasma gun. “Yes, Patrik. We’re here to take you to our ship. Try to remember.”

He stared forward, trying very hard to do as she had asked.

Barker watched as he tried to jog his memory and she saw his eyes slowly lose their glazed look, just as they had on the screen.

“Yes...yes I remember.” He nodded and slowly stood. He cocked his head, seemingly listening to something no one else was hearing. “You should move.” Patrik said to the female medic who was standing at the corner of their alcove.

“Why?”

“Can’t you hear it?”

Samson was about to order the woman to move when one of the grey creatures barreled around the corner, Janus right on its heels. “Get back ’ere, ya slimy bastard.” Janus leapt and tackled the creature out of midair, taking both of them to the floor.

Barker watched as the woman got her hands around its neck, or what she assumed was its neck, and squeezed. She heard a pop and the thing went limp.

Janus unwrapped her arms and stood, angrily pulling something out of the thing’s grasp. She scowled and put the string around her own neck, then turned and noticed the others for the first time. “Oh. So yer them would-be saviours?”

The blonde ensign blinked, getting her first good look at this alien. Janus didn’t actually look that much like an alien. In fact, the only visible thing that labeled her as non-human were the platinum colored designs traced across her otherwise deep brown skin. They were mostly large blotches of color in odd shapes, with a few swirls making the rare appearance. They traveled up the sides of her neck and face, and above and below her eyes. The left arm of Janus’s coat had been ripped off, and the bared surface displayed a large wound and the fact that the platinum markings covered her arms as well.

Janus stepped through the small crowd toward Patrik. She bent down so her blue eyes were on a level with his. “Ya all right, Patrik?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m good. Let’s get out of here.”

Janus grunted and straightened. “Ya ’eard ’im. Let us go before we ’ave ta fight our way out.” She had already started walking toward the docking bay when someone called, “Wait!” Janus sighed and turned back, aggravated. “Aye?”

“You’re both hurt.” Barker motioned to Patrik who had slunk up next to his friend.

Janus glanced at Patrik and raised an eyebrow. He shrugged. “We feel fine. Do not ’ave time ta play doctor. Come.”

Barker sighed and followed the two crewmates; Kodiak and everyone else trailed behind. Samson ground his teeth together and followed. Control of the mission had just been snatched away from him, and by an alien woman to boot! He blew out a heavy sigh of frustration, but knew that it wouldn't do to lose his temper. He was on official business, and making a scene would simply get his ass chewed out by his captain. No, he'd tolerate the disrespect, for the moment.

Janus stopped in front of a small hatch and grabbed the handle. She pulled, growling when it didn't budge.

"Um...don't we need to go down a level?" Barker asked hesitantly.

"Aye, but this is faster." Janus grabbed the handle and placed one booted foot on the wall. Her second foot followed and she pushed off with her legs, her hands still wrapped firmly around the handle. She pulled, feeling the strain all along her body. "Agh...stubborn ship...open...right...now!"

With a final heave, the hatch popped off, causing Janus's body to fly through the air and land heavily on the floor. She winced and rubbed the back of her head before hastily getting up.

Patrik edged up next to his friend and peered down the chute. "Janus?"

"Hmm?"

"Didn't those things get into these shafts first thing?"

"Aye."

Patrik squinted into the darkness. "Soooo?"

"So, I am agoin' first." She stepped up to the chute and slid her long body in before anyone could say otherwise.

Patrik stepped back and blinked, then sighed.

Barker gulped and looked around nervously. She really didn't feel as safe now that Janus was gone. She stepped closer to Patrik, knowing it wasn't the time to make idle conversation, but it was preferable to hear people speaking rather than just listening to the eerie sound of electrical fires and the nervous breathing of those around her. Everyone was waiting in tension-filled silence, hoping to God they wouldn't hear a screech traveling toward them. Yes, any conversation was preferable to all that.

Patrik glanced to his right as someone edged up next to him. It was that blonde from the other ship – Barker was her name. "What?" he snapped in annoyance.

"Are you two the only crew left?"

"I wouldn't know. You'd have to ask Janus, she's been all over this ship. But I do know that she hasn't brought anyone back."

"I see." Barker nodded and paused a moment before speaking again. "What um...species is she?"

Patrik sighed and looked directly at the woman. He didn't blame her for asking; it was a logical question. There was Janus, looking all human and everything, the only noticeable difference being her interesting platinum whorls. But he knew from personal experience that, in Janus's case, looks were indeed deceiving. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

Barker pulled back, surprised by his outburst. "Okay, that's fine."

"It had better be." Patrik harumphed and turned back toward the chute.

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Janus braced her legs in front of her and hoped that if she hit anything, her momentum would move it out of the way. She winced as she felt herself sliding over glass and all manner of debris.

The aliens had quickly overrun the waste disposal chutes after the crew had used them to carry out an ambush attack that resulted in the deaths of eight grey beings. After that, all such shortcuts between decks were blocked off, and the crew became as cattle being herded to slaughter. They were outnumbered and also didn't have a clue as to how to defeat their assailants. It had been horrible, some of the worst weeks of her life, and Janus had experienced some pretty terrible weeks.

Blue eyes popped open as she sensed the end of the tube coming up. Problematically, the hatch at the end was closed. Janus squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of the jarring impact that was to come. She counted down in her head: three, two, one, impact! She let out a strangled yell as she felt the shock all through her sorely abused body. Thankfully, the hatch popped off and she was soon landing on a hard metallic floor. *Rokner!* she swore silently.

She instantly bounded to her feet, in case there were any lurking beasts. Janus didn't expect there to be anyone in the room, it was after all only a storage room, but she scanned the area and sighed when it proved to be clear. She walked back to the chute and rapped loudly on it three times, signaling to Patrik that it was safe for them to come down. Then she turned to wait.

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Patrik heard the signal and glanced over at the man who seemed to be the leader of the little rescue operation. He was fuming. In the spirit of diplomacy, a spirit he wasn't too interested in keeping alive, Patrik made a choice. "You can send your people down now."

Samson hardly looked at the man, just grunted and started booming out orders. "Single file. Line it up then, and let's get moving."

"Shh! Keep it down or they'll hear you!" Patrik hissed, not very pleased with the prospect of dealing with more aliens.

Samson glared but lowered his voice. A little. He wasn't frightened of the aliens; he didn't perceive them as being a significant threat.

Each one made their way down the chute, landing clumsily but safely, with some support from Janus at the bottom. Samson slid down last, still scowling when he landed.

Janus took a head count and noted that everyone was there. "All right we have ta..." She trailed off and took three steps forward, listening.

Samson started forward, almost yelling at Janus, "Hey! We don't have time to stand around..."

She rounded on him swiftly, throwing an arm against his throat and pushing him back against the wall. "Listen. I do not care who ya are on yer ship. Ya are nothin' 'ere. Ya 'ave no idea what is goin' on. If I 'ear someone, I will do all I can ta get 'em out a 'ere. 'Cause what ya see in front of ya is it! So, shut up before I throw ya out an airlock!"

Janus released him and went back to listening intently. She stepped up to a large pile of twisted metal that was blocking off a small closet. Very faintly, she could hear the sounds of weeping. It was human, and most definitely a child.

"Emmeline?"

Patrik gasped and surged forward until he was beside Janus. He strained to hear, just as Janus had taught him, but couldn't detect anything.

A tiny voice sounded into the silence. "J...Janus?"

"Honey, are you all right?" Patrik asked anxiously as he futilely pressed his hands against the barrier.

"D-daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Daddy, but I'm scared. I want out!" the young child wailed.

Janus quickly took over. “Emmeline, ya need ta stay quiet. We do not want them ta come back. I am goin’ ta get ya out of there.” She stepped back and looked speculatively at the large pile of debris and twisted metal. It looked as if it would be impossible to move, but she was determined not to let that child die.

Patrik was well aware of the gravity of the situation. When he looked at his friend, it was the father in him that spoke. “I need my baby, Janus.”

“Aye. And I am goin’ ta give ’er ta ya.”

“But...but...” He gestured helplessly at the immovable object blocking his daughter’s path to safety.

A loud screech interrupted the tense silence. Janus turned toward the hall from where the creature would launch its attack. She saw everyone else raise their weapons and cried out, “No! Do not shoot it!”

“Are you crazy?” Samson yelled.

“Just listen ta me!”

Samson reluctantly lowered his weapon and gestured for the others to do the same. Janus stepped toward the door, but stopped when a hand grasped her arm.

“Janus, you can’t! It almost killed you the last time!”

She looked into her friend’s hazel eyes and smiled quietly. “Aye, it did. But it is the only way ta get yer daughter out, so, let go.” Janus shook her arm free and moved forward.

It was only moments before the creature came sliding around the corner, its four strange, beady eyes focusing solely on Janus.

Janus taunted the creature as it prowled around her. “That is right. Ya remember me, ’ow could ya not? Only spent the last week ’untin’ us. Come on.” She started backing slowly toward the barrier between Emmeline and Patrik. Janus didn’t take her eyes off the alien as she waited for it to lunge. When it did, she was ready.

The grey being jumped and Janus threw her hands up, capturing it around what served as a neck. She dug her fingers in, and there was a reaction almost immediately.

Patrik and the rest watched as a bluish cloud slowly appeared around Janus’s hands. The platinum markings on her skin darkened for an instant before glowing silver as Janus assimilated the energy from the alien’s body.

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Barker watched in amazement as Janus dropped the alien and turned to focus on the pile of metal debris. Janus’s body rocked slowly from side to side as the newly absorbed energy was dispelled toward the barrier. Slowly, the pile rocked, and then moved away from the door, as if under its own power. Seconds later, the blockage was resting against another wall, the door was open, and Emmeline was free.

Patrik ran to his daughter and scooped her up, then held her close as she cried against his shoulder.

Janus was suddenly hit by the shock of having processed so much foreign energy through her body. She fell over onto her side and shut her eyes, gasping for breath and trying desperately to order the chaos in her mind.

She hated absorbing their energy. For whatever reason, the life force of the grey aliens was totally incompatible with the workings of her energy transfer, and, as Patrik had intimated, the results had nearly been deadly. The first time she had directed her powers toward them had been several days earlier, near the beginning of the attack, and she had used the innate weapon that had always worked flawlessly for her. Her energy burst had taken out two decks and at least twenty-four aliens, but she was unconscious for nearly three days afterwards. That in itself was highly unusual. When she awoke on the medical deck, one of the last places to fall to the attackers, Janus had been shocked to learn of her extraordinary negative reaction. She didn’t remember any of it.

Now recovering from the smaller energy expenditure, Janus gasped and rolled over onto her back. She blinked up at the ceiling as her mind slowly started to clear. Looking at the debris around her, she fuzzily decided that it was despicable how dirty the ship was.

A gentle patting on her cheek brought Janus's mind screeching back from where it had been floating in recovery. Cloudy blue eyes looked up into hazel ones that were a replica of Patrik's.

"Janus, you okay?"

"Aye, little Emm. I am fine now. 'Ow about ya?"

"Mmkay. Thank you for getting me out, Janus."

Janus slowly sat up, wincing as her body protested. "But a course, Emm. I need ya ta 'elp keep yer pa in line, right?"

When the little girl giggled and wrapped her skinny arms around her hero's neck, Janus closed her eyes in relief, seeing that Emmeline was none the worse for her internment. Janus had been worried about Patrik since his daughter had disappeared, and she knew that he would be in a little better shape now that his entire family wasn't gone. Emmeline in her arms, she stood and looked around, seeing compassion on most of the faces in the room. The single exception was Samson. His look was one of contempt. That didn't matter to her.

"All right...let us get out of 'ere. This way."

Barker was in awe of Janus. The display of raw power and caring was something truly new. She had never before encountered such a species. There were numerous races that had mental abilities of some kind, but none that actually absorbed energy from other living things. And typically, people who had advanced mental capabilities – as Janus did – were weaker physically, but Janus was very strong. She did not carry any gun that Barker could see, but was nevertheless victorious in combat. And she spoke...Barker scrunched up her face, trying to place it. Janus spoke as if English was not her first language, which was understandable, but she seemed very familiar with the dialect. And she almost sounded like someone from Earth. It was a puzzle, and one thing Ensign Connie Barker liked was puzzles. She was very much looking forward to talking with the woman.

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Janus stopped and peered around the corner. The docking bay was only twelve steps in front of them, but it didn't feel right. Reaching it had been too easy. She knew the aliens were undoubtedly aware that more people had arrived on the hapless ship. There was no way they were oblivious to that fact. And it wouldn't turn out to be much of a rescue if she led their rescuers directly into an ambush by the enemy.

She sighed and rubbed her head, trying to get rid of the headache that would have dropped a Zwkonian Ruper. And those things were huge. *Ah well.* Janus looked down at her left shoulder, which had previously exhibited a large wound. *One good thing about absorbing that energy, I'm healed.* She was glad. The injury had been worrying her for a while and she was happy to be rid of that annoyance, even if the price was a horrendous headache.

Tentatively, she extended her senses, well aware of the effect the aliens had on her in that respect as well. She probed the area, but did not detect anything out of the ordinary. Janus motioned to Samson that he could proceed with his rescue, which he did.

They edged quietly but quickly down the hall, covering the short distance without incident. One by one, they filed into the docking bay and stood before the shuttle. When the door suddenly popped open, guns were raised instinctively, only to lower when the young man who had been left behind to guard the ship cautiously poked out his head.

Samson stepped forward. "Everything been okay here?"

“Fine, sir.”

“Good. All right, everyone on!” The team gratefully piled into the shuttle, settling down with relief and glad beyond measure that the nightmare was over.

Patrik and Emmeline right in front of her, Janus filed in last. As they stepped inside, she gave Patrik a slight nod and he nodded back. The airlock door closed and the shuttle immediately launched, the artificial atmosphere cycling and soon taking on the regular properties of the *USC Avenger* rather than that of the damaged ship.

Patrik set his daughter down and removed a small remote from his pocket. He counted down in his head, and when he knew they were far enough away, pressed the button. An explosion rocked the shuttle, causing a few people to stumble.

Samson surged up. “What the hell was that?”

Patrik’s tone was calm. “I blew up the ship.”

“What on earth for?”

“To kill those things and keep them from following.”

As Samson was about to retort, Patrik turned away from him and stepped forward to where Janus was kneeling on the ground, gasping for breath. He knelt down beside her and grabbed her hand.

“Pa...Patrik...I can...” Janus gasped, looking at her friend with wild eyes.

“What? Janus, what’s wrong? I don’t...” He watched helplessly as Janus fell to the floor, unable to breathe.

Barker hurried toward them. “We have to do something; she can’t breath!” She turned on the medic. “Can’t you help?”

“No!” Patrik yelled, “No, no medical treatment.”

The ensign rounded on him. “Are you crazy? She’ll die!”

Patrik wasn’t listening; he was staring down into his friend’s blue eyes, thinking furiously. *Come on, Patrik, he berated himself. Think! You should know what to do. What’s wrong?*

His mind had been living in a dead zone for the last several weeks, and his brain was inconveniently having difficulty retrieving important information – like what was deadly for his friend.

Janus stared up blindly. It had been ages since she had had such a reaction, and she had been lulled into a state of complacency. She had taken for granted the friendly atmosphere of her ship, and the people there who knew what they could and could not do. Now she felt the elevated oxygen levels making her limbs heavy, and her mind started floating away. She could see the bewilderment in Patrik’s eyes, knowing he was her only chance for continued survival.

Patrik listened as Janus’s breathing became raspy and almost stopped. And then it hit him. “Oxygen!” He sprang up and looked about wildly. “You need to lower the level of oxygen in the air! Now!”

Samson looked at him in disbelief. “What? No way, it’ll kill us.”

“It will not. It was like that on my ship; we didn’t even notice. It shouldn’t be a big difference,” Patrik snarled.

Barker was already taking action, accessing environmental control. “How much?”

“It shouldn’t be above 18.5 percent.”

She quickly made the adjustment and watched as Patrik knelt down next to his friend. Emmeline edged over next to them as well and plopped herself down next to Janus. She grabbed the large hand and started tracing the dull platinum markings there.

Patrik sighed in relief as he heard his friend’s respiration rate pick up almost immediately. The large body shifted on the floor and he knew Janus would be out for a bit. He remembered the last time this had happened, almost six years earlier.

They had been embarking on a shuttle mission to another planet. It had been a newer shuttle, and no one had changed the regulation of oxygen. Within a few minutes of entering the ship, Janus had lost consciousness, but that time he had known what to do right away. Even so, she had been out for almost twenty minutes.

Emmeline smiled as the pretty silver marks on Janus's hand started getting brighter, more normal. When Janus was nice and healthy, they almost reflected light. Emmeline frowned as she recalled that Janus hadn't been so healthy in a long time and she'd missed it. Maybe now that all the bad things are gone, Janus will get better and start acting normal again. Maybe Daddy will too. That would be good.

Barker knelt beside Patrik and spent a moment looking at the now peaceful face. *She is really nice to look at,* Barker decided. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Yeah." Patrik nodded. "She'll be fine. Especially now that she's in a..." He tilted his head, looking for the right word, "healthy environment. Janus is a survivor." He nodded in affirmation and then seemed to zone out.

Barker stood and walked over to where Melvin Kodiak was sitting. She didn't know what Patrik meant by that – a healthy environment – but she was going to find out.

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