

The Tale of Captain Vance

Dana Littlejohn

Published by Dana Littlejohn, 2024.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE TALE OF CAPTAIN VANCE

First edition. November 1, 2024.

Copyright © 2024 Dana Littlejohn.

Written by Dana Littlejohn.



The Tale of Captain Vance

By Dana Littlejohn



BLURB:

In the far reaches of the Alpha Quadrant, Captain Vance is a living legend—a space pirate whose cunning cleverness is unmatched. However, beneath the mask and reputation the captain is really Raelynn Kane, a woman who chooses to hide her identity to gain respect in a field dominated by men. After a narrow escape from some enemies, Raelynn sought solace in the anonymity of her true self in a bustling space station where a chance encounter with a thief would change the course of her life.

Rook, a skilled and charming thief, met the mysterious Captain Vance when they both showed up to rob the same place. When they are captured by a shared enemy, they must work together to get free.

Could working side by side be the catalyst that blurs the lines between ally and adversary?



Chapter One

STARDATE: 24.209.07

Three booming explosions erupted on the portside of the small passenger ship shaking it violently.

“Shit!”

“Captain! We’ve lost another thruster!” a crewman shouted.

“I know! I know!”

“We can’t take another full hit like that!” another screamed.

“I know, damn it! I know!”

Frantically the captain searched the dark skies then turned to the console and pressed a few buttons.

Come on, Castle. Hold on a little longer.

The captain gripped the controls and steered the small ship toward an upcoming asteroid field.

“Captain Vance! What are you doing? Are you crazy?” the first crewman asked.

“That’s an asteroid field. We can’t go –” the other warned.

“If we *can’t*, maybe they won’t.”

Plasma blasts continue to fly past them on all sides, but Captain Vance’s skillful piloting kept them from landing. The ship entered the field bobbing and weaving past large boulders, twisting and turning through other debris, each maneuver more dangerous than the last.

The crewmen gripped the seat of their chairs to stop from falling after each erratic dodge the ship made. Although they managed not to

scream every time, they couldn't keep their fearful gasps and grunts from filling the cockpit.

Watching the smaller rocks bang against the windows of the craft threatening to crack the screen made Captain Vance's heart accelerate. Not far in the distance, two huge boulders moved quickly toward each other just off the starboard side.

"I see an opening!" the captain shouted, turning the ship.

The crewmen turn in the direction of their leader's head nod.

"What! No, Captain, don't do it! It's closing too fast!"

"He's right, Cap. We'll never make that!"

"We'll make it."

With a loud roar, the captain pushed the ship's engines to maximum aiming for the shrinking gap. The asteroids collide seconds after the Castle passed through. The enemies tried to pursue but didn't make it. The debris from the asteroids bombarded their ship. The explosion it created sent pieces of the destroyed vessel directly at them. Captain Vance turned wide eyes to the other men then back to the controls.

"Time to go."

The captain pushed the ship again, swerving erratically to navigate through the rest of the field and out the other end.

"Woo!" the second crewman exclaimed.

"You are one crazy ass captain," the first crewman said, with a relieved sigh.

Captain Vance chuckled. "That was too damn close."

"Yeah, but you did it. Where to now, Cap?"

Captain Vance tapped on the console. "The nearest neutral space station. We need a place where we can lay low and split the score...and I need a drink."



NOT HERE OUTPOST CAME into view. Open to humans and humanoids alike, the outpost was a place where no one asked questions, and no one cared who you were or were not. You could relax, take care of business or both. No one cared either way. No forms of trouble were allowed. Not Here was neutral ground.

Captain Vance docked the ship and paid off the small crew to send them on their way. Once the men left the ship, the captain pulled the craft up and took it to another docking area on the other side of the station. Leaving the cockpit to go to one of the private quarters, the captain began to undress. Removing the oversized hooded jacket and mask, the captain shook her long locs free. She let out a relieved sigh and peeled the faux mustache away from her face then wiggled out of the thick black pants.

She pulled a trunk from under the bed and removed a simple dress and bolero jacket that would not draw attention. Walking over to the mirror, she inspected her face turning back and forth and frowned. Rum-maging through the trunk again, she removed a small bag. Adding tint to her lips and eyes and a little perfume to her breasts. Grabbing a handful of locs, she secured them on the top of her head with a band. Returning to the mirror, she arranged them to hang around her face, and finally smiled.

“Now it’s time for that drink.”

She tucked her male clothes in the space left behind by the dress then pushed the trunk back under the bed and then left the ship. Raelynn moved through the corridors like a woman on a mission.

Rounding a corner, she saw the bar and the guardian at the door.

“Raelynn! Welcome back. Haven’t seen you in a while. You look good.”

“Thanks, Kotu. You know how it is, busy, busy, busy.”

“Yeah, I know how it is. Here you go.”

Raelynn accepted the card he offered. “I solemnly swear that I will not cause intentional harm to this place or anyone inside while I’m in this bar,” she read aloud.

The card glowed green in her hand then wrapped itself around her wrist like a bracelet.

“Thanks, Kotu. See you around,” she said, pushing the doors open.

The heat and smell of many bodies in a closed space wafted over her as she entered. Too many conversations going on at the same time filled the room with an inaudible clamor. Raelynn silently scanned the room as she made her way to the bar. She sat down and the bartender held up a finger to acknowledge her as he took care of another patron.

“Hey Rae. Long time no see,” the bartender said moments later. “Still lovely as ever. How you been?”

“I’m good, Gillon. How are you?”

“Still waiting on you. It’s not too late, you know. My offer still stands,” he added with a grin.

“Gillon, you know Maxion and humans are not physically compatible in bed,” she reminded him playfully.

“Well, I know some human females and a couple males that may beg to differ. These tentacles can do wonders in whichever hole you wish them to explore.”

As if the wiggle of Gillon’s six tentacles weren’t enough to make her skin crawl, he flashed her a toothy grin. The four rows of tiny teeth made her recoil, but she hid it with a playful smile.

“As amazing as that sounds, Gillon, I’m still going to pass.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s okay. I plan to wear you down,” he promised with a wink. “You want the usual?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The fingers on Gillon’s six tentacles made quick work of the drink reaching for all the ingredients at the same time, shaking then pouring into a glass. He slid the large glass of brown liquid across to her with a

wink as he moved to the other end of the bar to take care of someone else.

With the first sip, Raelynn felt her shoulders begin to ease. She leaned against the back of the stool and took another drink. Although she enjoyed the warmth in her chest, she could still feel the tension in her muscles left behind after her narrow escape. As she lifted her glass to take another sip, the heat of someone's gaze made goosebumps rise on her skin. She peered over her shoulder with a raised brow as a stranger slid onto the barstool next to her.

His inviting smile and warm brown eyes sent a shiver through her body she hadn't felt for a time.

"Mind if I join you? You look like you could use some company," he added with a smooth voice and confident tone.

"Do I? What does that look like?"

"It's the look of a beautiful woman that has no business drinking alone."

"I see. Well, just so you know, I don't drink with people who can't keep up."

The stranger smiled. "Well, lucky for you, I can handle myself."

"Oh yeah? Well, I'll believe it when I see it."

"That sounds like a challenge?" he asked with a raised brow.

"Maybe it is. Think you're up for it?"

He grinned. "Challenge accepted. I like a woman who knows what she wants."

Raelynn turned her stool to face him and openly scrutinized him. He was ruggedly handsome. The scruffy five o'clock shadow and tattered hat and jacket added to his look.

"And you think you can give me what I want?"

"I don't know, but I'm very interested in finding out what you want so I can give it a try."

"Then let the drinking begin," she said, waving Gillon down.

“Ready for another already?” Gillon asked when he appeared before them.

“My new friend— What’s your name sweetie?”

“My name is Rook. What’s yours?”

“You can call me Rae. My new friend Rook is going to open a tab so we can test his limits,” Raelynn said to Gillon as she winked at Rook.

Rook chuckled. “I can do that. Let’s start with whatever you’re drinking.”

“That’s a great starting place. Could you bring us two, Gillon? Thanks.”

Gillon eyed Rook for a moment then turned to Rae.

“Fine.”

Gillon moved off to make the drinks. He put two glasses in front of them with a harder than necessary thud then walked away without a word.

“What was—”

Raelynn shook her head, waving away his question.

“Uh uh, don’t ask.”



RAELYNN LAUGHED HAPPILY.

“You’re very witty and funny,” she said, giving him a playful tap on the knee. “I’m beginning to like you.”

Rook emptied another bottle filling their glasses.

“That’s good to hear because I already like you. So, tell me, Rae, what brings a beautiful woman to a bar alone?”

“Let’s just say I had a bad day at work, and I needed a drink to help me relax.” She eyed him over her glass for a moment. “*And* I was hoping to find something else to help with that relaxation,” she added.

“Oh, yeah? Well, you’ve found your drink. Is it helping you relax?”

Raelynn nodded with her mouth full. “Mmm hmm.”

“Well then, you’re halfway there. Have you found that *something else* to help you relax more, yet?”

Raelynn put her empty cup on the bar. “I don’t know. How good are your *relaxation techniques*?” she added, brushing her lips against his ear.

“Not to pat myself on the back, but I think I can get you where you need to be.”

“Good. Are you willing to put that statement to the test?” she teased.

Rook chuckled. “You seem like the type who doesn’t play by the rules.”

Raelynn shrugged. “I’ve always made my own rules.”

“I see.”

“Is that too much for you?”

“Oh no. I admire that in a woman. How about we make a new rule for you, just for the night?”

Raelynn pretended to think. “Okay, what would it be?”

“No holding back.”

She smiled. “No holding back? I can work with that.”

Raelynn hopped off the stool to stand between his legs. He looked down at her as she leaned up to give him a soft teasing kiss. She could almost feel the air crackling between them when she pulled away.

“Mmm, you’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” she told him with a playful grin. “Come and let me show you.”

Raelynn took Rook’s hand to guide him outside.

“Wow. This is your ship? This thing looks like it’s been through a war. Were you in a battle?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“I...umm, I got it like this, but I’m actually looking for another ship when I leave here,” she mentioned pulling him into her room.

“So, what’s next on the agenda, fearless leader?”

She pushed him gently against the wall, her lips brushing his.

“I think you know.”

She reached out to the wall to flip the switch leaving only the distant glow of the spaceport's lights above for them to see. The low hum of the engines and their breathing filled the room.

All of their playful banter culminated in raw desire expressed in a long passionate kiss. Raelynn's hands slid openly over Rook's body, enjoying the feel of his muscles beneath the rough material.

She pressed her body against him, her hand sliding over his low cut hair as she deepened the kiss. When they pulled apart, Raelynn gave him a sly grin.

"I'm not scaring you, am I?"

Rook chuckled, his expression a mix of awe and amusement.

"Not at all. You're not like any woman I've ever met. I like it."

"Good. It's been a long time for me. I want to enjoy every moment of being with you."

She leaned in again, kissing him with fervor, her hands roaming over his back, feeling the firmness of his body beneath her fingertips.

"Remember our deal," she said, her voice low and sultry near his ear. "No holding back," she reminded him as she slid his jacket off his shoulders.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten. In fact, I'm about to show you how good my relaxation techniques really are," he responded.

Abruptly, Rook switched their positions and then pulled her arms above her head. Raelynn gasped, but did not resist. An erotic shutter passed over her when he gripped her wrists to hold her arms in place as he pressed his mouth to her throat.

"Oh," she yelped.

"Allow me to erase the bad you had so that all you remember is the time you shared with me," he whispered near her ear before returning to her neck.

Raelynn was unable to suppress the moan that followed his words. The sudden onslaught of delicious sensation had removed her ability to

speak at the moment. She could only hope he saw the slight nod of her head.

Rook continued the combination of licking, sucking and biting on her neck as he ground his hard-on into her backside. The pressure of his body was the only thing that held her upright. Her breasts smashed against the wall added to stimulation. Rook's free hand gripped one butt cheek, and he continued to grind against the other. Her short breaths and shocked gasps merged with the low hum of the engines to fill the room. When her knees finally collapsed, Rook's strong arm was there to keep her from falling.

"I think it's time we moved to the bed."

Without waiting for a comment from her, Rook scooped her into his arms and carried her across the room. He lowered her to the floor in front of the bed sliding his hands down her sides. Flipping her skirt up, he reversed his hands bringing the entire dress up and over her head.

He smiled as his palms glided over skin, his touch leaving a fiery trail of goosebumps.

"Mmm," he said in appreciation as he openly ogled her body. "You are incredibly beautiful."

He eased her down to the bed then gently turned her to lay on her belly. Confusion furrowed her brow, but before she could question him, his strong hands pressed into her shoulders kneading away the tension built up from her day.

She melted into the bed with a sigh as he moved down her back using his fingers to massage her bottom.

"Mm," she said, bringing her arms to her sides.

Rook continued down each leg with the same administration then laid on top of her.

"Now it's time to turn over," he whispered.

He lifted his body to give her enough room to roll then laid down beside her. Slowly, Rook removed the rest of her garments. Looking down at her, he paused to give her a smile on his way to kiss her breast. He

cupped them next, pulling the nipples into his mouth. Back and forth, tongue and teeth, going over the delicate flesh with purpose and expertise. Raelynn's breath caught, and a shiver raced up her spine.

Rook positioned his body between her legs. Even as the intense feeling on her nipples continued, fiery kisses moved lower. Her moans began to fill the air once more. She gripped the pillow beneath her head when the kisses reached her vulva. Rook moved his hands to grip her hips and pressed his face between her legs with his tongue extended.

Raelynn released a breath she didn't realize she was holding. She could almost feel steam come from her body when his tongue connected with her heated skin. Rook moaned as his tongue continued to move back and forth and up and down. Her head swam in a dizzy haze of pleasure. She released her hold on the pillow and grabbed both sides of his head instead.

"Rook—"

His name on her breath was all she could say before tiny lightning sparks stiffened her limbs and lifted her torso from the bed. Holding his head close she let out a long, harsh moan before falling back to the bed breathless.

Rook stood and quickly discarded his clothes and returned to the bed. He lay on top of her and took her mouth in a fierce kiss. She hungrily returned kisses as he adjusted his body to enter in one, firm stroke.

"Ahh," they said in unison at the connection.

Slowly he started to move. Each in and out motion was better than the last. Raelynn wrapped her arms around his waist then slid down to his bottom.

Mm, nice.

Smiling, she gripped each cheek to guide him.

"Rae," he said in a shaky breath.

She nodded. "It's okay. I'm enjoying it all...no matter how long it lasts."

Rook nodded and picked up pace. The smooth, direct control he had over his hips was similar to what he showed with his tongue. Each roll, twist and turn felt better than the last. Suddenly he sat up and reached for her legs. He gripped them under the knees and pumped into her with fierce desire. Moments later, he filled the room with a groan that left him shaking on top of her. She held him close. When he caught his breath, she released him, allowing him to ease himself off her body. He propped the pillows and positioned himself against them and pulled up beside him.

Raelynn lay against his chest content to take in his scent, and listen to the soft, rhythmic sound of his breathing. Both were comforting, making her feel good, mentally and physically. It had been a long time since she felt like that. To be comfortable in mind and body at the same time is rare when you can't trust those around you. She wanted it to linger as long as possible. Rook suddenly hugged her around the shoulders, startling her.

"I thought you were asleep."

"No," he answered, dropping a kiss on top of her head. "Just laying here going over how good you felt and enjoying how good it feels with you in my arms."

"I'm sure an attractive man like yourself has had many opportunities to say that to many other women," she teased.

Rook let out a hearty, genuine laugh that shook both their bodies. When he calmed himself, he positioned his body on the pillows to sit up and then pulled her up to lay beside him.

"You're right. I've told other women how good they felt in my arms and how much I've enjoyed them being there." He paused for a moment to lift her chin, so their eyes met. "But this is the first time I've actually meant it," he added.

Rook's words wrapped around her like a warm cloak. His soft brown eyes and charming demeanor could easily have her spilling all her secrets during pillow talk before she knew it. Rook placed a gentle kiss on her

forehead then pulled her close in a protective hug. With a sigh, she allowed the safety of his embrace to lull her to sleep.



WHEN RAELYNN OPENED her eyes again, Rook was sitting up looking down at her. She smiled, surprised at how relaxed and at peace she felt.

“You are even more beautiful when you're asleep.” He traced her face gently with his finger. “So, what happens now? Do we ride off into the sunset together?”

Raelynn giggled. “I'm afraid not.”

“Well, can I at least get your number, and we meet here every Thursday?” he asked in a teasing tone.

She laughed again.

“I really think we can make that idea work.”

“Now, we go back to our lives.”

Rook sighed. “Are you sure? I feel like the spark that brought us here could really catch fire. All we have to do is fan the flames a little and see where it takes us. I know you feel it too.”

Raelynn's body instantly responded to his words. For a moment she actually considered taking him up on his offer. It would've been nice not to live the double life she found herself in. But even as the possibility settled into her mind, she knew she couldn't.

“As much as I'd like to, I can't right now. Maybe, if the stars are in alignment, or I have another bad day, we'll run into each other again.”

“Well, I will be watching the sky much more often, for sure. You're not someone I'll forget easily.”

“Good. I'd hate to think I didn't make a lasting impression,” she said with a teasing grin.

With a final, lingering kiss, they got up, dressed and left the ship to go their separate ways.



Chapter Two

STARDATE: 25.051.02

Cautiously Raelynn entered the storage station, listening close for any approaching guards. She crept down the winding hallways with intent. As the room she sought loomed closer, a noise came from inside. Crouching down against the wall, she waited. A man burst from the room moments later and darted down the hall she hid in to lean against the wall across from her. Spotting her, he drew his weapon just as she pulled hers.

“Well, well, well, it looks like I’m not the only one with an interest in this little treasure.”

The man shoved something inside his coat pocket as he adjusted his blaster toward her.

Raelynn’s pulse quickened. Although she hadn’t heard that sensual and smooth voice in months, she recognized it immediately.

“Hey, could I be in the presence of the great Captain Vance?” he asked in an amused tone.

Raelynn nodded.

“Well then, it’s truly an honor. One can’t help but admire a man with your reputation. My name is Rook, a humble thief, merely in search of the next big score,” he said with a slight bow, confirming her suspicions.

Her eyes darted left and right for an escape. It was too dangerous to be here with Rook. His encompassing charm and easy banter had the ability to pull too much information from her and she could lose much more than just the artifact.

A noise on the other end of the hall made them both shuffle across the room to a darker corner.

Rook holstered his weapon and raised his hands. “My dear Captain,” he began. “What’s say we call a truce? We are obviously after the same thing, so why not work together and split the profits?”

Before she could answer, bright light suddenly flooded the area and a squad of armored soldiers stormed in from each hall, weapons drawn.

“Drop your weapons,” one of them commanded.

Raelynn and Rook exchanged a look, then, reluctantly, they complied. They were quickly bound and thrown into a cold room with no windows. As the door slammed shut, Rook shook his head and laughed.

“Well, this is a fine mess. It’s been a long time since I’ve been caught.”

Raelynn adjusted the mouthpiece on the inside of her mask before speaking.

“It would seem that your truce may be necessary to make an escape possible.”

“Great! Now we just have to figure out how.”



ROOK PACED THE SMALL space, studying every corner for weaknesses. Captain Vance remained on the floor staring at his shackles. Rook’s head tilted, watching him closely.

“So, Captain,” he began casually. “It looks like we have some time for chit chat. How did you end up in this line of work?”

Captain Vance looked up at him.

“Well, I always figured you needed to have a certain kind of background to be in this type of life. So, what was it? A mean father that ran you out the house? Rich parents made you a rebellious teenager? An overall rough childhood?”

The captain shrugged. “A rough childhood, I suppose. I learned to survive on my own at an early age.”

Rook nodded.

“I’ve had to prove myself more than once, even to my crews.”

“Ahh, that’s right. The great Captain Vance has a different crew for each job or no crew at all. Is that because you don’t find people loyal enough?”

“Loyalty is earned, not given,” he replied.

Rook continued to pace. “Indeed, it is. So, it must be a trust thing with you, then. You haven’t found people you trust enough to keep around for more than one heist at a time.”

“Trust is a luxury in our line of work, Rook. What I have is an understanding with those that run with me.”

“Uh huh, and what about your mask?”

“What about it?”

“I’ve heard rumors about it.”

“Have you? What are people saying?”

He stopped moving and leaned against the wall on the other side of the room.

“I’ve heard one that said you were horribly scarred in one of your earlier robberies and that’s why you’re always masked. There’s one floating around saying you’re not from Earth, but in fact from Excellon. You wear the mask and hood to hide that little second head,” he explained tapping his shoulder.

The captain let out a low laugh.

Rook chuckled. “I know. You wouldn’t believe the things people come up with when they don’t know the real truth.”

“People love their stories.”

“Would you like to dispute any of them?”

The captain shook his head. “Nope. Let them have their fantasies. It keeps them occupied.”

“You’ve built quite the reputation,” Rook continued. “Captain Vance, bold, cunning, mysterious,” he added dramatically.

“You’re not the kind of man that believes everything he hears on the grapevine, are you?”

“Not usually, but legends are built on half-truths, aren’t they?”

Before the captain could respond, the cell door swung open with a heavy clank. Captain Vance jumped to his feet and squared his shoulders. Rook moved to stand beside him. A tall humanoid with an oblong shaped face and intense yellow eyes walked in flanked by two human males standing on either side of him holding plasma rifles.

“Well, if it isn’t the legendary Captain Vance,” he said.

“Draxos,” the captain replied.

“Rumor has it that you’re the one that has been breaking into Nexus properties taking whatever of value you can find.”

“As I was just telling Rook, you can’t always believe what you hear on the grapevine.”

Draxos turned to him. “*Rook*, is it? Weren’t you running with Cobalt’s gang?”

“I was, but I’m doing the solo thing nowadays.”

“Not a particularly smart move. Cobalt was killed and it was a gang of you. Don’t you know that no one crosses Nexus and gets away without paying a price, especially a *solo act*.”

Rook shrugged off his comment. Draxos sighed and turned back to the captain.

“I’m not a patient being, Captain Vance,” he told her in an exasperated tone. “So, I’ll give you one chance to tell me what I want to know.”

“Sorry, I’m not in the mood for small talk, but I appreciate the offer.”

Draxos turned back to him.

“Yeah, what he said.”

Draxos’ yellow eyes narrowed as he frowned. “Very well, you leave me—”

“You know, Draxos, if you’re going to be storing stuff here you really should get the specs upgraded more often. You never know when things might... short out.”

Confusion distorted the hard lines of Draxos dark green face, but before he could say anything else, Captain Vance stomped his foot. A sudden wave of heat filled the room and then the lights began to flicker creating a strobe like effect. The restraints popped open moments later and Captain Vance sprang into action. He advanced toward one of the men with a swift kick to the gut. The man fell backwards shooting uneven blasts toward the ceiling.

Rook followed suit, grabbing the blaster from the other man and shot his partner while he was down. Vance grabbed the fallen weapon and shot the other soldier. Vance rushed to his side, and they found themselves in the room alone when they looked around.

“Draxos is running,” Rook said, going toward the door.

Vance nodded and followed him out. The lights shined bright moments later as they made their escape.

“I’m starting to think some of those rumors are true.”

“Get off the rumors, Rook. We have more pressing matters to deal with, like getting out of here alive.”

Captain Vance took the lead as they moved swiftly through the corridors. The halls were almost maze-like, made of steel and shadows.

“This place is a labyrinth. How do you seem to know where you’re going?” Rook remarked, following him around another corner.

“I’ve studied this storage facility,” the captain replied without missing a step. “I’ve had this hit planned for months.” Vance moved directly to a control panel ahead of them. “This override code cost me a lot of money and a bottle of my favorite Maxilon brandy so it better work.”

Vance keyed in a code and the door slid open with a hiss. Rook followed him through to the maintenance corridors. As they rounded the corner to the hangar, they found themselves face to face with a squad of Draxos’ soldiers with their weapons raised.

“Shit,” the captain muttered.

For a split second, time seemed to slow and then the captain sent him a quick glance before he drew his blaster. With rapid fire toward the

guards, he dove to the left, knocking over some nearby crates. Rook followed him and the corridor exploded into chaos and plasma fire.

“The ship I came on is on the end side of the hangar,” Rook mentioned over loud blasts.

“Mine is the black one they’re in front of. We should be able to reach it, if we can get past these guys.”

A massive explosion abruptly rocked the hanger throwing them both to the ground causing them to scramble out of the way of the crates and barrels they were hiding behind. Smoke filled the air, and the sound of groaning metal surrounded them.

“Son of a— I think they just blew up my ship,” Rook said, peeking around a barrel. “I guess I have to catch a ride out of here with you.”

“We have them trapped in the hanger, boss!” Someone said over the intercom.

“That EMP device you had in your shoe was very clever. You got any more tricks up your sleeves?”

The captain blew out a heavy breath “I’m thinking. I’m thinking. There’s no way we’re getting past those guys head-on. We need a diversion.”

“I’m all for diversions. Got something in mind?”

The captain looked around. “What’s in that crate?”

Rook stared at the broken crate in front of them. “It looks like some kind of canister, but I can't read what's in it.”

“Are you a good shot?”

“Very good,” he answered with a grin.

“Okay, let's hope that whatever is in the container is explosive when hit with a blast. Kick it to me. I'm going to throw it their way and you shoot it.”

Rook extended his leg reaching for the container to push it over to him.

“Are you ready?”

Rook gripped his weapon and nodded again.

Captain Vance took a deep breath, gripped the canister then tossed it toward the men. Rook laid across the floor, took aim and shot it while it sailed through the air right in front of the soldiers. The explosion set off a burst of white powder that filled the air like a large cloud. The guards screamed and shielded their eyes.

“Go!” the captain shouted.

Rook ran beside the captain as they attacked the remaining guards that didn't succumb to the blast.

“Now that's what I call a distraction!” he said with a laugh plopping into the copilot chair.

Captain Vance took his seat, and the shuttle rocketed forward bursting into space seconds later.

“That was a hell of an escape. You do not disappoint, Vance, that's for sure.”

The captain let out a relieved breath.

“I'd say we make a pretty good team, Cap. We could keep doing this, you know. A partnership of sorts. You've got the brains; I've got the charm. We'd be unstoppable.”

The captain turned to face him.

“What's the catch?” he asked.

“You wound me, Vance, with your suspicions,” Rook said with mock innocence. “No catch, at all. Just two like-minded individuals looking to make the most out of this chaotic galaxy.”

He wrapped his arms around his chest. “Uh huh.”

“We'd split everything we take down the middle—fifty-fifty, but—”

“Of course there's a *but*.” He sat back in his chair. “What's the *but*, Rook?”

“My only condition would be I'd need to know who I'm *really* working with. I want to know the truth, not the rumors.”

Rook paused to see if the captain had something to say.

“In order for a partnership to work we'd have to be able to trust each other,” he continued.

The captain turned away, staring out at the stars.

“And if you don’t like what you find?”

Rook shrugged. “Then I suppose we go our separate ways, but I think you’re hiding something worth sticking around for.”

“Let’s get away from Draxos first, somewhere safe where we can talk,” he finally offered, tapping on the console.

“Fair enough.”

Suddenly the ship’s sensors blared a warning.

“Shit. It’s Draxos. He’s not letting us go that easily,” the captain muttered.

“I guess we’re not out of the woods yet.”

A massive warship loomed into view, its dark hull bristling with weapons. The shuttle rocked violently as Draxos’ ship opened fire. Captain Vance jerked on the controls, dodging the barrage with skill, but it continued to get closer.

“He’ll be on us in minutes. Castle II can’t outrun a ship with that much power,” the captain said. “We have to fight somehow.”

“*Castle II?*”

“Don’t ask. Move over to gunnery and be ready.

Rook nodded, already moving to the weapons console.

“This ship’s got some firepower, but not enough to do any real damage in a frontal attack,” Rook mentioned.

“I have an idea. Get ready to fire on my word.”

Abruptly, Draxos’ voice crackled over the comms.

“You think you can escape me, Captain Vance? No one steals from me and gets away with it.”

The captain didn’t respond. Instead, he angled the shuttle toward Draxos’ ship, pushing the engines as they closed the distance.

“Captain, what the hell—”

“Just be ready to fire, Rook.”

The closer they got, the more intense the barrage became, but the captain weaved through the deadly beams with precision.

“Hold on!” he screamed.

Rook's heart rate accelerated. The course they were on looked like a suicide mission, but then the shuttle made a quick burst forward then abruptly dropped right up under the keel of Draxos' ship.

“Fire!”

Rook launched several torpedoes that landed across the bottom of the large ship as Castle II slid beneath it. The explosions rocked the massive vessel, sending it careening off course. The captain hit the communication button blocking out anything else Draxos could say and then maneuvered Castle II around for another pass. Before he could gun it again, they found themselves staring into a massive energy cannon on the stern.

“Holy shit,” Rook said. “We have to take out that cannon, Captain, or we're done for.”

“Get ready to shoot again.”

“I'm ready.”

The captain pushed the engines hard as they could go moving straight at the enemy again.

“Now!” he shouted, making a hard turn around the starboard side of the ship.

Rook fired the shuttle's main weapon and struck the cannon just as it fired. The cannon exploded in a blinding flash. The shockwave that followed slammed into the shuttle sending them spinning backwards. When the shuttle finally stabilized, they saw the heavy damage to Draxos' ship.

“We did it.”

Rook glanced at him. “He won't stop until one of us is dead, you know that, right?”

The captain turned to him. “Then we better make sure that he's that one.”

A high pitch humming brought their attention back to the window.

“That doesn't sound good.”

“Time to go!” the captain exclaimed.

He pushed the shuttle's engines to full power, moving away from the warship. The shuttle hurtled through space to avoid the impending explosion the loud humming indicated. With a final burst of speed, the stars stretched into streaks of light before them just as the debris of the explosion reached them.

"We made it," Rook said, relieved. "You're a damn good pilot, Captain," he added, clapping him on the shoulder.

Vance nodded and slowed the ship down.

"Now that we can breathe for a moment, what do you say, Captain? Partners?" he asked, extending his hand.

Captain Vance hesitated, but only for a moment. "Partners...for now," he added, shaking Rook's hand.

Rook chuckled, leaning back in his seat. "I'll take it. How about a drink to celebrate our *tentative* partnership?"



"I THINK I'M FINALLY starting to calm down," Rook said, putting an empty glass on the table.

"*What?* Already? I'm still winding down. Today was very intense," Raelynn said, pushing her glass toward him.

"That's for sure."

Rook emptied the rest of the bottle in their cups.

"The liquor isn't as good as the ones at Not Here, it's certainly closer."

"You've been to the Not Here outpost?"

Raelynn chuckled. "Hasn't everyone?"

Rook laughed too. Yeah, I guess they have."

They clinked glasses and swallowed the drink in one gulp and then Raelynn stood.

"Okay, bathroom break."

Just then the bar door swung open with a bang. A cold chill ran down her spine and she turned.

Draxos.

Burns marked his face and clothes. His bright yellow eyes locked on to them as he strode forward with a prominent limp.

“Did you really think you could escape me that easily?”

Before either of them could react, Draxos drew his blaster and fired. The shot echoed through the bar. The patrons scattered, shouts and screams filled the air as chaos erupted around them. Raelynn felt searing pain all over as the blaster bolt tore through her side, sending her crashing to the floor. She gasped, clutching the wound.

“No!” Rook screamed.

The room began to spin. Through the encompassing haze she saw Rook’s expression shift from shock to something more dangerous. In one fluid motion, he drew his weapon, rolled across the floor and fired a blast that landed squarely in the center of Draxos’ chest.

Rook was at her side almost instantly, his hands pressing against the top of hers adding more pressure to the wound.

“Stay with me, Captain. Don’t you dare pass out,” he ordered urgently.

Raelynn gritted her teeth, fighting to stay conscious, but the pain was overwhelming. She could feel the blood seeping rapidly through her fingers and her strength started to fade. Suddenly, a shadow loomed over them. Rook looked up, his gun ready to defend them from whatever threat this could be.

“If you want her to live, come with me. No time to explain. Come on, quickly,” the stranger said in an urgent whisper.

Rook hesitated, but only for a moment then helped Raelynn to her feet, supporting her weight as they followed the stranger out of the bar and into a narrow alleyway.

The stranger led them through a maze of back streets, moving quickly but carefully, until they reached a small, hidden speeder. The stranger motioned for them to get in, and as soon as they were seated, the speeder took off.

Raelynn's head swam, her vision faded in and out as she leaned heavily against Rook. The pain was unbearable, but she forced herself to stay awake. After what felt like an eternity, the speeder slowed to a stop. The stranger helped them inside a small shack.

"There's so much blood. Are you sure you—"

"Yes, I can. Now lie her down so I can take care of that wound," the stranger instructed, pulling out a medkit.

Rook gently eased her onto a nearby cot. The stranger's hands were skilled as they quickly attended the wound. Raelynn groaned at each touch.

"This part is going to sting a bit. Brace yourself."

The stranger applied a patch to the wound and pressed down on it. Raelynn screamed and her torso lifted off the cot.

"Hold her down. I'm almost done," the stranger instructed.

Rook complied, pressing his palms firmly against her shoulders forcing her to lay back. The area beneath the stranger's hands began to glow. Raelynn continued to yell, but after a few more moments, she slowly relaxed back into the cot.

"Okay, done. She just needs rest now."

"Who are you?" Rook asked, his tone cautious.

The stranger pulled back the hood, revealing a pale skinned woman with sharp features and glowing blue eyes.

"Just someone else who doesn't like Draxos," she said with a faint smile. "I've been tracking him for a long time, waiting for the right moment. It seems you beat me to killing him. You can call me Zera."

Raelynn blinked slowly, opening her eyes. "Zera?" she whispered, her voice tinged with both pain and familiarity.

Zera kneeled next to her to kiss her cheek.

"Hey sweetie."

"You came just in time to save my butt again, huh?"

"Well, it's such a nice butt that I can't help but keep it safe when I can," Zera replied with a smile.

Raelynn chuckled and winced.

“So, you two know each other? Old girlfriend, Captain?” Rook asked with a slight grin.

Zera nodded, her expression softening slightly as she met Raelynn’s gaze. “Oh, yes. We go way back to a time when neither of us were who we are now.”

“Zera saved my life years ago when we were just teenagers back in Delta Quadrant,” she explained. “I was in over my head, tangled up with some very dangerous people. Zera found me, helped me escape, and taught me how to survive in this galaxy. We rode together for years after that.”

Zera shrugged modestly. “I saw potential in you, Raelynn. You were tough, resourceful, and stubborn as hell. But you were also young and reckless, and I knew you wouldn’t make it on your own. It wasn’t long after that you started calling yourself *Captain Vance*,” she added dramatically, waving her hand in the air.

“If you were so close, why’d you split up?”

“Zera is...she’s, umm—”

“I’m a Celestor.”

Rook’s brows furrowed for a moment before he spoke. “Isn’t that the planet full of healers?”

“Yes, well, all the females can heal, anyway. Our healing potential reaches peak when we are halfway through our twenties. I had to go home to train and hone my skills. That’s the only reason why we had to split up. I just haven’t had the chance to reconnect.”

Zera stood and smiled down at her. “But I’ve followed the exploits of *Captain Vance* for years. Quite the reputation you’ve built for yourself. The fake mustache is a nice touch.”

“Wait a minute. Hold on. *She? Raelynn?* What the hell is going on?” Rook asked, looking between them.

Zera looked at Rook then back to her with wide eyes.

“He doesn’t know?”

Raelynn squeezed her eyes close and shook her head.

“Shit!” Zera exclaimed, throwing her hands up.

“I can’t keep doing this alone. Too many close calls that keep getting closer.”

“Damn, Rae. I’m sorry.”

“Stop talking like I’m not here. You heard me. What the hell is going on?” Rook repeated.

Zera placed a reassuring hand on Raelynn’s shoulder. “If you feel like you can trust this guy, he deserves to know the truth.”

Raelynn let out a sigh and sent a questioning look to Rook. He nodded, answering the unasked query. She felt her strength returning, so she sat up.

“Rook, my real name is Raelynn Kane. I’ve been in disguise as Captain Vance for the last six years,” she explained.

She removed the hood, the mask and fake mustache. Her neat locs tumbled down to rest on her shoulders then she held out the mask to show the voice scrambler on the inside.

“I’m also Rae, the woman you met at Not Here a while back.”

Rook’s eyes opened with recognition and his jaw dropped. Abruptly, he jumped up to pace the floor. Silently he moved around the room, then suddenly spun on his heels to face her.

“Why the disguise?”

“Because, in this galaxy, a woman can’t command respect in the same way a man can,” she answered quickly with a shrug.

He turned to Zera. “Was she disguised as a man when you two met?”

Zera shook her head. “No. We were just kids when we first met.”

Rook was silent for a few moments longer. Zera watched him carefully, her posture relaxed but her eyes alert.

“I suspected there was more to you than met the eye,” Rook finally said, wagging his finger at her. “I just couldn’t put my finger on it, but I certainly didn’t think it was something like this.” He stared at her and then chuckled. “The mysterious, bold and brave Captain Vance and the

delectable Rae are one and the same,” he mused, shaking his head. “I’ll be damned,” he added under his breath.

Raelynn met his gaze, her heart pounding. “I couldn’t risk telling you sooner, not until I knew I could trust you.”

The amusement left Rook’s features. “And now?”

Raelynn leaned back to rest on the wall. “Well with my secret out, I really have no choice...but I feel like I can trust you regardless, Rook. So even if Zera hadn’t said anything I would’ve told you.”

Rook nodded and started to pace again.

“When we met all those months ago,” she continued. “I felt like we could have a connection. We couldn’t at the time, not under those circumstances, but now—”

Rook turned to face her.

“Well, now that you know my secret and who I really am, will you stay?”

Rook stared at her for a long while and then he cleared his throat, breaking the tense silence.

“Rae, this changes nothing for me. If anything, it makes me respect you more.”

“Rook, I—” she started, but he put a hand up to stop her.

“I mean it,” he said, his voice firm as he returned to his seat. “You don’t have to hide with me, Rae. I see you, and I’m drawn to you for exactly who you are. We connected when you were Rae at the bar and as Captain Vance. You’re the best damn captain I’ve ever run with, and I’d be a fool to walk away from that now. And maybe...” he hesitated, his gaze softening. “Now that I know you are the beautiful Rae that I couldn’t get off my mind since we went our separate ways,” he interjected, fingering her locs. “Maybe we can be more than just work partners.”

The words hung in the air between them, charged with their obvious meaning. Raelynn felt a warm sensation spread through her body, a feeling she hadn’t felt since the last time she was with him.

"I'd like that," she responded, then turned to Zera. "And what about you, Zera? We were good together once. I don't know what your plans are, but if you're interested, there's always room for you by my side."

Zera's expression was unreadable for a moment, her sharp eyes studying both her and Rook. Then, slowly, a smile curved her lips.

"I accept your offer. I'd like to see where this leads."

Rook stood, extending a hand to Zera. "Partners, then?"

Zera took his hand, shaking it firmly. "Partners."

Rook extended his hand. "What do you say, Captain? Are you ready to take on a permanent crew that you can really trust?"

Raelynn looked at his outstretched hand, then up into his eyes finding sincerity and excitement there. She accepted his hand taking Zera's at the same time, as they helped her to her feet.

"I have one condition: no more secrets or lies. Agreed?" she added, shifting her gaze between them.

Zera and Rook shared a look between them then brought their gaze back to her and nodded.

"Agreed," they said in unison.

Raelynn stepped forward pulling Rook to her and kissed him. The kiss was firm, filled with a mix of relief, and the promise of something more. Rook responded in kind, his free hand moving to her waist, drawing her closer.

For a moment, everything else fell away. It was just the two of them, sealing their partnership and their new beginning. When they finally parted, both were breathless. Rook chuckled, his forehead resting against hers.

"Well, that's one way to seal the deal."

Raelynn smirked, her voice playful. "I thought it was fitting."

Zera, who had been watching the exchange with a bemused expression, stepped forward.

"You two make quite the pair," she said.

She opened her arms wide. Rook and Raelynn stepped into Zera's embrace. When they pulled back, Zera's eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Alright, lovebirds. I'll give you some space, but don't think you're getting rid of me that easily. I'll be back in a few hours."

Raelynn chuckled. The pain was fading away and she felt more at ease than she had in years.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Zera. You're welcome to join us, whenever you're ready," Raelynn offered.

Zera nodded, her smile softening. "I'll keep that in mind for when the time is right. For now, you two have some things of your own to do."



Chapter Three

STARDATE: 27.101.03

The small frontier world of Myris was a haven for smugglers, bounty hunters, and anyone else looking to make a quick score. Its bustling markets and crowded spaceports were the perfect cover for Raelynn and Rook as they prepared for their next job.

As they crouched on a rooftop, the night sky lit by the neon glow of the city below, Raelynn couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement.

"You ready, Captain?" Rook asked, his voice laced with that familiar mix of excitement and confidence. "The people of this world dare you to try to break in. We'll make history if we can get into this vault."

Raelynn nodded. "Just remember, this isn't about showing off. We do this clean and quiet and get out."

Rook grinned. "Where's the fun in that?"

Raelynn glanced at him, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Rook chuckled and raised his hands. "But don't worry, I'll stick to the plan...mostly," he added.

Raelynn suppressed a smile. She couldn't deny that Rook was good at what he did, and there was something exhilarating about working with him. They moved swiftly and silently, slipping past the compound's defenses. Rook caused a distraction to bypass security while she disabled the alarms with the practiced ease of working together over a year.

Finally, they reached the vault with only its reinforced door standing between them and their prize. Raelynn keyed in the override code they had stolen earlier, and the door slid open with a satisfying hiss.

Inside, the shelves were gleaming with artifacts, each one more valuable than the last. Raelynn and Rook wasted no time, quickly selecting the most valuable looking items and packing them securely into their backpacks. Raelynn came across a long velvet box and smiled quickly, stuffing it into the bag. They made their escape just as smoothly as they had entered, leaving no trace of their presence behind. By the time the moons began to set over Myris, they were safely aboard their shuttle.

“Not bad for a night’s work,” Rook said, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Raelynn nodded. “Let’s sort this stuff out so we can get it to the buyers.”



THE DISTANT HUM OF machinery welcomed them when Captain Vance and Rook exited their ship. The thick smell of molten rock was strong even through their masks. The dark, dust filled sky of Barronhold, known for the industrial mining of Octanate, the ore that’s used in warp drives, made even noon look like midnight.

Rook led the way into the bar nearby. Inside, they removed their cloaks and masks and took a table in the back of the room.

“The last buyer should be here any minute.”

Rook shook his head as he scanned the room. The hard lines and dirty faces of the men close to them looked tired and run down. Among them, he was surprised to recognize a familiar face.

“I see someone I need to talk to. Are you okay meeting with the buyer alone until I get back?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

Rook approached the bartender, a tall figure with a scar running down his cheek. A slow smirk spread across his face when Rook took a seat

“Well, well, if it isn’t the little thief who got away,” he drawled.

Rook's jaw tightened, but he kept his cool.

"Carrick," he said with a curt nod. "I didn't know you were in this part of the galaxy."

"I get around. You look good for a dead man. Better than you did when you ran with us, that's for sure," he added with a nod across the room. "I guess that's a perk of running with a captain."

"A *dead man*? I'm a little tired, but I didn't realize I looked that bad."

"Your captain has a friend."

Rook peered over his shoulder. The buyer took his seat at the table.

"He was expected."

Carrick poured him a drink. "I just thought that since the hit was for both you and Cobalt—"

"Hit? What hit?"

Carrick returned the bottle to the wall. "You didn't know about the hit?"

Rook stared at him with a raised brow.

"Garro sold us out, Rook. I found out that Cobalt was dead, and you were attacked, I thought you were dead, too. That's why I left. I thought I might be next."

"Uh uh. No, that can't be true. Garro was one of us. He was family. We joined Cobalt almost at the same time." He swallowed the drink in one gulp. "What makes you think he would betray us like that? Cobalt died on a job that went south. That's all there was to it."

"That's what we all thought. But it wasn't the job that killed him, Rook. It was Garro."

Rook let out a disbelieving chuckle. "Garro may have been ruthless, cunning, and cold-blooded, but he was one of us. He wouldn't betray one of his own."

Carrick shook his head, his expression grim. "Believe what you want, but I heard him myself. Garro was paid to set up Cobalt. I heard him when he was being paid for the job. I was coming around the corner when I heard voices. He told his connection that Cobalt was dead, and

the men were done with you. I didn't know if I was going to be next, but I wasn't going to wait around to find out."

Rook clenched into fists as his mind raced. The doubts he'd pushed aside for so long come rushing back, and he realized how blind he'd been.

"Have you seen Garro since you left?"

"No, I've been out here ever since, but I'd like to see Garro get what's coming to him. Now that I know you're not dead, wouldn't you like that, too?"

"Are you saying you know where he is?"

"No, but I did hear a while back that he was working for Nexus now."

Anger rose within him. Rook looked over his shoulder again. The buyer stood and shook the captain's hand.

"I have to go. Our deal is complete."

"It was nice seeing you again, Rook. I'm glad you're not dead."

"You too Carrick. Good luck,"

Rook shook his hand and walked away.

"All is well over here. You good?" Raelynn said, putting on her coat.

Rook sent a last look to Carrick. Carrick saluted him. He turned away and followed her outside.

"Yes. I think this day was very productive."



"TO A JOB WELL DONE," Raelynn said, raising her glass.

Rook clinked his glass against hers, with a look of genuine pleasure.

"To our partnership. May it continue to be as profitable as it is exciting."

She smiled and let the pleasant tasting alcohol slide down her throat.

"So, what's up with this box?" Rook said, tapping the velvet box on her lap. "We sold everything else, but you made sure to keep this."

Raelynn chuckled behind her glass. "I thought it might be jewelry, a necklace or something," she answered with a shrug.

Rook laughed. “So, there *is* a woman underneath that badass Captain Vance exterior,” he teased.

“You know there is,” she said with a wink.

Rook laughed harder.

“I don’t know why. I just wanted it,” she confessed with another shrug.

“Well, open it up. Let’s see how it looks on you. Maybe we can go back to Not Here and you can wear it with something black and clingy.”

Raelynn nodded and opened the latches on the box and frowned.

“It’s just a letter.” She narrowed her eyes giving the page another look. “It’s in another language.”

“A letter? Let me see it.”

She handed it to him.

“I think this is a cipher,” he told her with a frown.

“A cypher? Why would a cypher be locked in a vault in a velvet box?”

Rook gave her a sly smile. “Isn’t it obvious? Whatever this says, it most likely leads to something very valuable. Why else would it be locked up in a vault? You can’t read a cipher, can you?” he added with a raised brow.

She chuckled. “I’m afraid that’s outside of my skill set.”

He smiled. “Yeah, mine too. What about Zera? She’s got plenty of skills we don’t have.”

Raelynn nodded. “I’ll send her a message and tell her to meet us at Not Here.”



THE NARROW STREETS of the bustling market were alive with the sounds of vendors haggling, children playing, and the hum of countless conversations. Zera, cloaked in a simple garment that concealed her features, moved through the crowd with practiced ease.

As Zera weaved through the market, her sharp eyes scanned the surroundings. She had been trailing her target for days, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Just as she was about to make her move, she noticed something unusual. A figure, clad in dark clothing was shadowing the same person.

Zera frowned, and continued to watch him from a distance, intrigued by his fluid movements and the way he seemed to blend into the shadows. The man she was following entered a secluded alleyway, away from the prying eyes of the market crowd. Zera lost sight of the stranger as she moved to pursue her target.

Turning a corner, she gasped finding the cloaked stranger was already there, crouching low observing the target and another man as they spoke. She moved closer, careful not to make a sound, but the individual suddenly turned. The face was masked, but the eyes over it clearly locked onto hers. Instead of drawing a weapon the person stood with his hands up.

"Who are you?" Zera whispered, her hand hovering near the hidden dagger at her waist.

"I could ask you the same thing," the stranger replied, the voice calm, measured and male.

Zera's eyes narrowed. "You're after him, too," she stated, nodding toward the alley.

"It seems we have a common interest," he said, not really answering the question.

She studied him for a moment, her mind racing. "Are you with Nexus? Are you, his bodyguard?" she added, her tone cautious.

"No to both," he replied. "I'm guessing you're not either."

Zera looked him over. His posture was too composed, his words clipped and to the point and his tone too confident.

Huh, he's no amateur, that's for sure.

She looked past him to the man they followed. Her brow rose as he spoke to another guy in the alley not far from them.

"Then why are you here? Are you here to kill him?" she asked the stranger, bringing her attention back to him.

The man glanced over his shoulder at their target, then back at her.

"Let's just say I'm here to ensure that certain information doesn't fall into the wrong hands."

"And you think I'm going to let you walk away with that information?"

He chuckled softly, a surprisingly warm sound despite the circumstances.

"I don't think you'll have much choice. Since we're not here for the same reasons, perhaps we can help each other."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're proposing a partnership?"

"For now," he replied. "Until we both complete our missions."

Zera considered his offer. Trust was a luxury she couldn't afford, but she did trust her gut and it said this guy wasn't her enemy. At least, not yet.

"Fine," she agreed, her voice firm. "But if you cross me, you won't live to regret it."

The man's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Noted. Now, let's get this done."

Together, they moved silently toward the two men in the alley. Six men abruptly appeared between them and their target. The stranger was quick, precise, and surprisingly adept in combat. Together they incapacitated the guards that came from nowhere. The two men ran when Zera and the stranger approached them. The stranger ran after the other man as Zera reached the Nexus member.

"Please, please, I don't know nothing. I swear!"

"I haven't even asked you anything yet. How can you say you know nothing?"

The man frowned. "It doesn't matter. Even if I knew something I wouldn't tell you "

"That's okay." She hoisted the man from the ground by his collar. "I'm not here to ask you anything, nor am I here to chit chat. I'm here to collect my bounty on you, dead or alive."

The man's eyes widened, but before he could utter another sound Zera delivered the final blow pushing her knife into his chest to the hilt.

The stranger returned to her side as the target slumped to the ground. Reaching into his pockets, the man retrieved a small data chip that glowed faintly in the dim light. He held it up, inspecting it for a moment before tucking it away. Zera took her scanner out and held it over the body. Two bright yellow lines ran across the body from foot to head, cross-crossing itself and then the device beeped twice. Zera looked at the screen and nodded.

"You can hold your own in a fight. I was impressed."

"I can say the same about you. You're done here, then?"

"I've been paid, so yes. I'm done here. What about you?"

"Looks like we both got what we wanted," he said, patting his chest.

Zera eyed him. "I still don't know who you are. What's your name."

"You can call me the Dabbler," he answered.

"Dabbler, huh? Alright, my name is Zera," she replied, feeling a strange sense of camaraderie with him despite their brief interaction.

"Well, Zera, it's been a pleasure. Perhaps we'll meet again someday."



ZERA WALKED INTO THE bar and straight into her embrace.

"Captain Vance and Rook, two of my favorite thieves in the entire galaxy. How can I help you," she asked, giving Rook a hug.

Raelynn winked at her then sat down.

Rook extended a hand. "Have a seat Zera. How you been?"

"I'm good. I've been picking up a few assignments here and there, relaxing in between. What have you guys been up to?"

Rook sent a laughing grin her way then turned his attention back to Zera.

"You know us, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Which brings me to why we called for you. We need your help with something."

"Sure, what is it?"

Rook handed her the letter. As she looked it over her head tilted a bit and then she frowned.

“This is a cipher,” she said almost to herself. “But unlike anyone I’ve ever seen.” She flipped the paper over then looked it over again. “This isn’t the whole letter,” she told them with wide eyes. Smoothing the page out on the table, she pointed to its center. “See this part right here? This is a word I recognize. It can only be one word, but it looks cut off, like someone cut it in half.”

Raelynn gasped.

“I can read two other languages, not counting English. I see words from both those languages on here, but they’re scattered about the page...randomly. It doesn’t make sense. This is way out of my league.”

“Do you know anyone that could read it? Can you check with some of your contacts?”

Zera thought for a moment then nodded “Hmm, let me ask around. A cipher written in two or more languages and cut into two parts has to have some buzz in the underground,” she said with a smile.



THE TRIO STOOD OUTSIDE the warehouse as Rook picked the lock. The dimly lit room was filled with the hum of Nexus machinery, casting an ominous glow over the trio as they carefully advanced. Raelynn led the way, her eyes scanning every shadow for signs of danger, while Rook stayed close behind, ready to draw his blaster at a moment’s notice. Zera trailed slightly behind them, her normally sharp focus wavering as they moved deeper into enemy territory. When they finally entered a large open room full of file cabinets they stopped.

“Whoa, tell me your informant gave you a number or some kind of way to know how to find the document in all that?” Raelynn asked.

Zera shook her head. “Nope, he just said this is where it was.”

“How the hell are we supposed to check all of those for the document?” Rook asked, pointing to the cabinets. “There has to be a hundred draws over there.”

Raelynn let out a frustrated breath.

“Fine. I’ll take a quick look to see if there’s some kind of rhyme or reason to them,” Zera told them.

Asthey moved closer to the inner sanctum, a sudden noise made them freeze. The door ahead of them slid open, revealing a figure standing in the doorway.

“Zera?” the person said softly, stepping into the light.

Zera’s heart skipped a beat as she recognized the person who had once been her closest ally and lover.

“Justina?”

There was no mistaking the shock on Justina’s at seeing her. The conflict of what to do next danced in her eyes.

Zera looked back at her companions. Raelynn and Rook exchanged a tense glance, and their hands instinctively reached for their weapons. Zera raised a hand to stop them.

“Let me handle this,” she whispered.

They nodded and stepped back into the shadows. The tension in the room was palpable as Zera moved closer to face Justina. They stared at one another, a mixture of regret and love stared back at her.

“You look well,” Zera said softly, her voice trembling. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

Justina nodded. “They told me you were dead.”

“I thought I was. It took me a long time to heal from what they did to me.”

Sadness filled Justina’s eyes. “You didn’t leave them much choice. You chose to leave Nexus. You know how they feel about that. You left because you couldn’t handle doing the things they wanted you to do. I understood that.”

“They used me. I was a walking talking bandaid to them when someone got a cut or scrap and when I had a problem with it, they tried to dispose of me,” Zera told her with hushed anger. “I came to Nexus to be with you, but when I asked you to leave with me you said no.”

“I couldn’t go. I thought if I was still there, they wouldn’t bother looking for you.”

Zera scoffed. “Well, that didn’t work.”

Justina’s hands went to her chest. “Zera, I swear I didn’t know anything about the plan to attack you. I thought if I stayed, they wouldn’t have a reason to follow you.”

“You told them when I left! They were right on my tail,” she accused in harsh tones.

Justina sighed. “Nexus has a grip on me that’s too tight for me to escape. I— I thought they would just bring you back into the fold...back to me,” she explained, her eyes filling with tears.

Zera shook her head.

“When you left it broke my heart, but nothing...nothing felt worse than when they told me you were dead,” her voice broke with emotion.

“You could have come with me.”

“You knew I couldn’t do that.”

Justina took a step closer, reaching out a hand as if to touch her, but Zera pulled back.

“And now, look where we are. Both alive and on opposite sides it would seem.”

Justina composed herself and nodded. “So, it would seem. I’m still stuck in Nexus’ grasp and you...well, you’re still doing what you do best.”

The sound of footfalls getting closer made her turn. She caught sight of Raelynn and Rook readying themselves for a fight. Zera’s heart sank, knowing what was about to happen.

“The soldiers will be here shortly. I didn’t know it was you when I sounded the alarm that someone was breaking in.”

“How could you, if you already thought I was dead,” she said with a shrug.

Justina reached out to touch her cheek with a trembling hand.

“I am sorry and I’m... so glad you’re alive. I just wish—”

The doors abruptly burst open. Rapid gunfire from the invading troops flew all around her. Zera turned and ducked, but Justina collapsed to the ground.

“No!” Zera cried, rushing to her side.

Raelynn and Rook fired back at the attackers. Zera knelt beside Justina, cradling her head as tears streamed down her face.

“I’m so sorry,” Zera whispered. “This isn’t the way it was supposed to end with us.”

Justina reached up, but hesitated. Zera grabbed her hand guiding it to her face.

“Forgive me, Zee. You were right. I should’ve left with you, but I was too afraid. My life would’ve been so different. We could’ve been happy together. I never stopped loving you.”

“Shh...”

“It’s too late for me... but you still have a chance. Finish what you started. Look in number five fourteen and find the Dabbler to read it.”

Justina took her last breath, and her hand dropped to the floor. Zera gasped then pulled her lifeless body close. Her grief overwhelmed her tears streamed down her face while blaster fire echoed around her.

Raelynn and Rook moved to stand in front of her. When the last of the Nexus troops fell, Raelynn knelt beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Zera,” Raelynn said gently. “We have to go. I’m really sorry for your loss, but we can’t stay here.”

Zera nodded. “Look in cabinet five fourteen.”

“Go Rook, we’ll meet you back on the ship.”

Rook pulled Zera to her feet, leaving Justina where she lay. Giving her a hug, he left to retrieve the document. Zera rested her head on Raelynn's shoulder and let her lead them back to the ship.



Chapter Four

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Raelynn asked when Zera arrived in the galley.

She shrugged. “Okay I guess.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. I'd like to eat breakfast and focus on the mission, if you don't mind.”

Raelynn sent a look to Rook then nodded. “Okay, well, we taped the two pieces together in hopes that you could read it now that it's whole.”

Zera held a hand up. “Hold on. You're asking for a lot of thinking before having coffee first.”

Zera prepared her drink and returned to her seat. Looking over the paper, she ran her finger across the page and drank slowly. When Zera finally put her cup down, she pushed the paper back to her and shook her head.

“This is just weird. I can read a few more words, but they're all spaced out. This cipher makes no sense to me. It has no pattern that I can make out at all.”

Rook sighed. “So now what?”

Raelynn leaned on the table. “Did Justina say anything to you about how we can read this thing? I know it's been a week already and you had a lot going on that day, but do you remember if she did?”

Zera thought for a moment then snapped her fingers.

“Yes, she said to contact the Dabblers.”

Raelynn looked at Rook, but he just shrugged. She turned back to Zera.

“Who?”

“The Dabbler. I met him once during a mission. He was good, but since then I’ve heard a lot more about him.”

“He’s an assassin?” she asked with wide eyes.

Zera thought for a moment. “No, I don’t think so, but he dabbles in a lot of things, hence his name. He’s a Polygot and has a reputation of being the best linguist around. Rumor has it that he speaks more languages than anyone else on Polygotana.”

“That’s impressive for a planet of linguists,” Rook mentioned.

“Can you contact him?” Raelynn asked.

“Not directly, but I know how to get in touch with Polygots when needed. I’ll try to message him specifically and ask him to meet with us.”



ZERA OPENED THE DOOR and smiled.

“You guys ready to meet the Dabbler?”

Rook shrugged. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

“I never thought I’d be back here again,” Raelynn said, stepping into the shack.

“Well, at least this time you’re not shot,” Zera reminded her, closing the door. “He’s only been here for a few minutes. Also, the Dabbler doesn’t know I know you as well as I do. I’m just the middleman in these negotiations.”

Raelynn nodded.

Zera led the way into the larger room. The Dabbler lounged casually in a chair at the far end of a long, worn-out wooden table. Raelynn took the opposite end while Rook, and Zera sat on the other two sides.

“Dabbler, this is Captain Vance and his associate Rook,” Zera introduced.

“Captain Vance, Zera tells me that you may have an assignment for me.”

“Yes. Word has it there is no other Polygot that can match your skill. I’ve come across an unusual cipher. I’d like you to take a look at it to see if you can crack it.”

“And if I do? What are you offering for my services?”

“What are you asking?”

“If it’s treasure that you find, fifteen percent of the total. If it’s knowledge, I get to know as much of it as the person you’re taking it to.”

“Huh, how do I know you can be trusted to tell me what is exactly on the paper? You could tell me whatever you want and then take off with the knowledge of whatever is on there to retrieve it for yourself.”

The Dabblers sat up and leaned on the table.

“Are you questioning my integrity?”

“I don’t think that is what Captain Vance was alluding to, Dabblers,” Zera interjected. “He’s just being cautious.”

The Dabblers looked at her then shifted his gaze back down the table.

“Captain Vance, my skills are for hire. In that kind of business your word and skill is all you have to build a reputation on. For me, both are in good standing, and I’d like to keep it that way. So, if I say I will translate and tell you what your document says, you have my word that that is what I will do.”

“Forgive my bluntness, but I don’t know you or your reputation. We’re here on *Zera’s* recommendation. It is my trust in her that has you here and not your reputation.”

The Dabblers nodded and sat back in his chair.

“Fair enough. Why don’t I just go with you then.”

“Go with me?”

“Yes. I will translate and accompany you on the journey so I can show you why I am sought out for my skills.”

Raelynn glanced at Rook. He nodded and she turned her attention back to the Dabblers.

“Alright, Dabblers, I accept your terms. Shall we shake on it?”

Raelynn walked to the end of the table and extended her hand. The Dabblers took her hand and shook firmly. Sparks crackled in the air from the connection. Zera lifted a brow.

“Did you guys see that?”

Raelynn, the Dabblers and Rook looked around the table at each other.

“See what?” Rook asked.

“Captain Vance, may I have a word in private?”

“Of course.”

Zera led her into a room and shut the door.

“You didn’t see the sparks when you and the Dabblers shook hands?”

“What sparks? What are you talking about?”

“When we were kids, I marked you and your brother’s hands with a magical bond so you guys could find each other one day. Do you remember that?”

“Of course I remember. He was just a little boy when he was adopted out. I wanted the chance to be able to find him once we grew up.”

“Right. When you and the Dabblers shook hands, I saw the magic sparkle.”

Raelynn shook her head. “That’s impossible. This Dabblers guy can’t be my brother. You see him. Polygots are parrot-face humanoids.”

“Yes, but I made this mark, Rae. I know my own magic when I see it.”

Raelynn hesitated.

“Look, let me at least confirm. I was young and my magic wasn’t that strong, but you guys were the only ones I ever did that on.”

“Alright,” she conceded after a few moments.

“Dabblers, could you and Captain Vance shake hands again?” Zera asked, returning to the table.

“Is there a problem? One handshake is usually enough to seal a bargain.”

“Indulge me, please.”

Hesitantly, the Dabblers extended his hand and Raelynn gripped it. The sparks rose again. Zera smiled when they parted.

“Captain Vance, put your left hand out. Dabblers, put your right hand alongside it so your fingers touch.”

“Zera, what is—”

“Please Dabblers, I know it sounds strange, but it will all make sense in a bit.”

The Dabblers faced Raelynn as if waiting to see if she would comply. Raelynn put her hand out. He shifted his position to stand beside her and then put his hand beside hers. Soon as they touched, both hands began to glow.

“Whoa. Zera what's happening?” Rook asked.

The Dabblers and Raelynn snatched their hands away from each other.

“Captain Vance, there's the proof you needed.”

Raelynn stared at her hand. “That is impossible.”

“Zera, what's going on? What just happened?” the Dabblers asked.

Zera turned to Raelynn. “The magic doesn't lie. It's a blood bond.”

“It's a blood bond,” Raelynn muttered under her breath.

“Someone needs to explain what's going on,” the Dabblers insisted.

“I agree. Captain?” Rook added.

Raelynn took a deep breath. “My parents were merchants when I was growing up. I was only ten years old, and my baby brother was two when they were killed. We spent two years in our home before anyone realized we were there alone.”

“How does a little kid take care of a two-year-old alone?” Rook asked.

She shrugged. “My parents were gone most of the time buying and selling their merchandise. The house was fully automated for basic needs. All I had to do was reorder what we needed.”

Rook nodded.

“When we finally ran out of resources, I had to steal what we needed. That’s when I got caught and the authorities took us to Sheltertown.”

The Dabblers gasped. “Sheltertown?”

Raelynn turned to him. “Yes. My little brother was adopted less than a year after we got there.”

“Do you know that place, Dabblers?”

He shook his head.

Rook turned to Raelynn. “How old was your brother by then?”

“He was about five.”

“This is unreal.”

“Zera had me hold my brother’s hand and she put a mark on us, a blood bond, so that when we grew up, we would be able to find each other again,” Raelynn continued. “Blood would recognize blood when we touched hands again.”

“Zera, you think—”

“Yes, Rook, I believe that the Dabblers and the captain are siblings.”

The Dabblers took a step back. “That’s impossible.”

“That’s what I said,” Raelynn agreed.

Zera wrapped her arms around her chest. “The blood does not lie,” she repeated firmly. “Captain Vance, things are not always what they appear to be, wouldn’t you agree?”

The Dabblers dropped into his seat.

Zera lifted her brow. “Is that statement true for you too, Dabblers?”

“It can’t be true though,” he said.

Zera poked the table to emphasize her words. “Blood...doesn’t...lie.”

“Okay, okay. It’s true that I know about Sheltertown. I was adopted from there, but—”

“What?” Rook and Raelynn said at the same time.

“So it’s true?” Rook asked

“No, I mean, it can’t be. I didn’t have a brother. Before my parents came for me my sister Rabin took care of me.”

Zera and Raelynn gasped.

“Zera,” Raelynn’s voice cracked as she sat in the chair in front of the Dabblers. “You were right,” she almost whispered.

Zera pulled Rook closer to stand behind Raelynn. Raelynn took a deep breath and removed her hood.

“My baby brother couldn’t say *Raelynn*, so he called me *Rabin*,” she explained, removing the mustache and mask revealing her face in full. “His name was Bryan.”

The Dabblers sat back with a gasp. He stared at her for long moments and then he reached under his neck and removed a full mask that covered his whole head. He laid it on the table and the front continued to shift into different faces.

“A holographic mask,” Raelynn said on a breath. She brought her attention back to the Dabblers and gasped.

“Whoa!” Rook exclaimed.

“Bryan?”

He tilted his head. “My parents call me Breen.”

“That makes sense. Polygots would have difficulty saying Bryan because of their beaks,” Zera explained. “Breen is as close as they could get to saying his name.”

“Rabin? Is it really you?”

Raelynn nodded. They stood and gripped each other in a fierce hug.

Raelynn’s voice caught. “I thought I’d never find you again... I never imagined...”

They separated and stared at one another.

“How did this all happen? How did you become *the Dabblers*? You’re not a Polygot. I have so many--”

“Hold on. Before that, let me grab that Malgorean wine from the other room,” Zera suggested.

Raelynn nodded then turned to Bryan. “So, you should be about twenty-three by now, right?”

He smiled. “Yes, just last month.”

She cupped his face. “Mom's soft brown eyes. Dad's big ears,” she pointed out with a chuckle. “And the scar on your chin, it never went away. You look older but still the same. The little boy I remember is still in the face before me,” she said happily, removing her hands.

“You kinda look the same too, but...smaller,” he said with a laughing grin.

Rook laughed.

“I bet I looked huge to a four-year-old. I haven't grown that much since we last saw each, but you did a whole lot of growing,” she told him, her tone amused.

“I can vouch for that. She's barely grown an inch since then,” Zera said, returning with a tray of glasses and bottles.

She passed out the glasses and filled them, before hers up in a toast.

“To new found family in hopes we become friends!” Zera exclaimed.

“Family and friends!” they all said in unison then clinked glasses and drank.

Bryan rubbed his chin. “I always wondered how I got this scar.”

“Oh, I remember. We met a family from Fetonia at the park and their son was just learning to glide.”

“People fly on Fetonia?” Rook asked.

“Well, it's more like gliding. They have feathers under their arms. Not enough to actually fly, but with a good wind they can definitely move faster, and it looks like they're flying.”

“Huh, I've never met anyone from there. Good to know.”

“Bryan saw him trying and wanted to glide, too. So, when we got home you jumped off the dresser thinking it would give him more wind under his arms.”

Zera and Rook laughed.

“It would seem that we have a lot to catch up on,” Bryan chuckled.

“So, what happened after you were adopted? Did you have a good life?” Zera asked.

Bryan nodded. "It was a good life overall. As you've probably guessed that my parents are from Polygotana, the planet of linguists. They couldn't have children, so they decided to adopt. They wanted a child that didn't speak yet so learning several languages would be easier for them. Since I was just really learning to speak, they chose me."

Raelynn nodded. "Did they love you?"

Bryan took another sip. "Oh yes. They treated me very well, but of course growing up on a planet where everyone looked like walking talking parrots, being bullied for looking different was a way of life."

Zera chuckled. "Is that why you learned how to fight so well?"

Bryan laughed. "Pretty much. Once I was old enough to go off world alone, I learned all I could from anyone I could." he finished his drink. "You know, my parents were going to take me back to Sheltertown to look for you. They remembered that I had a sister and wanted me to know you when I got older."

Raelynn gasped. "Really?"

"Yes, but they found out the place was abandoned and had no way of reaching out to anyone."

"I heard about that some years ago when I was on my home planet training," Zera added. "It was shut down a few years after we left."

"It would've been nice to grow up with someone that understood me, but I made it work. I made a few friends along the way and built a good reputation for myself as you well know."

Rook held out his glass for a refill. "That's what I want to know. How does a human become the most highly sought out Polygot?"

"Well, on Polygotana all you learn in school are different languages and math. I learned along with everyone else. I found I had a knack for ciphers when I was about twelve," he explained with a shrug. "No one would take me seriously because I was human, so got the holographic mask to look like polygot and hide my true identity. Once I did that my skill spoke for itself."

“Speaking of,” Raelynn said, pulling an envelope from her jacket. “Here is the letter. Tell me what you can make of it.”

Bryan looked over the paper and smirked. “I can see, one, two, three, four,” he paused to scan the paper again. “Five. It seems like this cipher is written in five different languages.”

“Really? Why would someone do that?”

Bryan chuckled. “I don’t know, but my curiosity has definitely peaked. I need paper so I can break it down.”

Zera jumped up but returned quickly with pen and paper. Bryan got to work on breaking the cipher. His skill was impressive. He went through a document that looked like squiggly lines, different shapes and simple line pictures and quickly turned it into recognizable words.

“This is amazing. Whoever did this was ingenious. It’s a map, of sorts, with every other word in a different language.”

“What? What does it say?”

He turned the readable copy toward her. “Here. Read for yourself.”

Raelynn picked up the paper and Zera and Rook leaned over to read over her shoulder. Zera gasped.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Rook said, returning to his seat.

“Are you absolutely certain you translated this correctly,” Raelynn questioned.

Bryan twisted his lips. “Yes, Rabin, I mean, Raelynn. I’m sure. This is what I *do*.”

Raelynn chuckled and touched his hand. “It’s okay. You can still call me Rabin.”

Bryan smiled. “I speak all five of these languages fluently. I’m positive that this is a map to something extraordinary.”

“So extraordinary that whoever wrote it wanted to make it hard for anyone to figure out,” Zera pointed out.

“Well, putting it in five different languages surely did that,” Rook said.

“Maybe they wanted to bring five people who spoke these languages together to figure it out,” Raelynn suggested with a shrug.

“That could've been possible, but our boy, the *Dabbler*, is the man! He figured it out all by himself,” Rook added, giving him a playful shove.

“If you decide to follow these coordinates and retrieve this device, be careful who has control over it. Be sure it is used wisely. Its power can change the course of the world,” Raelynn read out loud. “That sounds like a warning. What do you think has the power to change the course of the world?”

“An enormous amount of money could do that,” Rook offered with a shrug.

“The power to heal can win you countless battles. That could change things,” Zera suggested.

“Yeah, but there are beings around now that have those things, and it hasn't changed the world. Well, not really. Do you know when this was written?”

“The map is dated for 094.184.06, about three hundred years ago.”

“Three hundred years ago people weren't that tolerant with other races let alone other species,” Rook said, with an eye roll.

“Do you think this was one person or five people adding to this map, Bryan?”

He stroked his chin. “With the disconnect of races and the lack of knowledge of other species, I don't see one person learning all those languages just to write a letter. However, science has always brought men together. So if this is an extraordinary weapon of some kind, I can see five people coming together. From the quality of the paper, I'm going to say it's the original parchment, too,” Bryan said.

“How would the paper not fall apart after all this time?” Zera asked.

Bryan flipped it over, rocking it gently. A shimmer of light flashed across the page.

“See, it's been treated to last. It shows age, of course, but it's still intact.”

“So, you believe five people actually got together and wrote the letter like this to *purposely* make it hard to decipher because whatever they've hidden can *really* impact the world like that?”

Bryan thought for a moment then shrugged. “Yes. Well, the document says specifically that it would *change* the world as we know it. Why else would anyone go through all this trouble if it wasn't that important?”

Raelynn nodded thoughtfully then read over the translation again.

“So, the direction to where to find it is here, but this doesn't tell us what *it* even is. Do these coordinates look familiar to any of you?” she asked, turning the page toward each of them.

Zera and Rook both shook their heads. She turned back to Bryan.

“They look like they go out toward the Beta Z region. There's nothing really out that way except the baron moons of Zendar.”

“Hmm, what better place to hide something you don't want anyone to find for a long time?”

“I agree, but the map also says that you need silvadene acid,” he pointed out. “That's some black-market stuff that's not easy to come by. But I happen to know a guy that knows a guy that might can get you some,” Bryan told her. “If you don't have your own connection, of course,” he added with a grin.

“Zera?”

“Nope no one on my team could get that.”

“Rook?”

Rook shook his head. “Sorry, Rae, me either.”

“Okay, well I guess that settles that. We'll need your guy. Do you still want to come?”

“Absolutely. I've got to know what this thing is, now that I know it can *change the world*.” He added quotations in the air and chuckled. “I have another assignment that I have to do first. Zera, as soon as I set up the time and place, I'll get the details to you for the buyer.”

“That'll work.”

Bryan stood and put his mask back in place. Raelynn did the same. The Dabbler and Captain Vance faced each other once again.

“I trust that our true identities will stay between us and those in this room.” he stated.

“Of course. We are not only partners in this venture, but we’re also family.”

A few minutes passed and then he grabbed Raelynn in a fierce hug. Zera smiled at Rook and they both joined in.



Chapter Five

RAELYNN, ROOK, AND Zera arrived on the remote planet Debris. Even with its unpredictable environment, the only establishments on the planet were hotels, restaurants and bars. It was common to use Debris as a rest stop while traveling between solar systems or meeting place.

“We've got a little time. Let's get a drink,” Rook said, leading the way into the bar. “It's times like this that I wish Cobalt was still here. He knew half the informants on a bunch of different worlds. We could've met with someone we already knew.”

“It's been a while since you've mentioned Cobalt.” Raelynn said.

“I haven't heard you mention him at all. Who is he?”

“He *was* my mentor, but more like a father figure.”

“Oh.”

“My actual father wasn't around much and when he was, he treated us like crap. It was just me and mother mostly, then, about a month after my sixteenth birthday my father decided that since I was a man I needed to learn how to fight.”

“Oh no,” Raelynn said.

“It started off like sparing, but when he felt like I was getting the best of him, he started to attack me for real. I protected myself but I was just a kid.”

He paused to flag down a waitress and order their drinks.

“My mother saw what was happening and jumped in front of me to protect me. My father grabbed her and tossed her into the wall.”

Zera gasped.

"I rushed over to her, but she didn't recover. My father ran out of the house, and I never saw him again."

"That's terrible. Is that when you met Cobalt?" Raelynn asked.

Rook chuckled at the memory. "Yeah, not too long after that. I tried to pick his pocket, and he caught me."

Zera laughed. "Really?"

"Yup. He was insulted that I would pass myself off as a thief with skills as bad as mine."

Raelynn laughed. "Wow."

"Yeah, he taught me how to be a better thief, how to take care of myself and gave me long term goals so I wouldn't have to be a thief forever."

"So, what happened to him?" Zera asked.

Rook sighed. "He was betrayed by someone we trusted."

Zera placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Sorry."

Rook offered her a brief smile. With a quick look at his watch, he finished his drink.

"Come on. It's time to go meet this informant."

Together they left the bar, but Rook lagged behind them.

"You guys go. I'll make sure the perimeter is clear."

Raelynn nodded. "Be careful."

He winked at her. "Always."

Rook watched them go around the corner and went the other way. He circled around checking all the side streets leading to the building. Finding a corner to watch Raelynn and Zera at a safe distance, he waited for the informant to arrive.

"I'm glad you came. Did you bring the money?" a man said, coming into view.

"Did you bring the silverdene?"

"Shhh. Not so loud," he said looking around. The informant listed a bottle and stuck his hand out. "Same time, Captain Vance. Although the Dabbler has vouched for you, you are still a stranger to me. I do not wish to make an enemy of you, but I am cautious."

“Duly noted and understood.”

“Are you all good here?”

The sound of the other male voice froze Rook's blood and raised his anger instantly. He spotted a familiar face in the distance as he approached the informant.

“Garro,” the informant said, through gritted teeth.

The sound of the other man's name brought back painful memories.

“I'll be leaving if you have this all in hand,” Garro said.

“I'm fine,” the informant assured him before turning back to Raelynn. “Captain, are you ready to make the exchange?”

Rook followed Garro so was unable to hear Raelynn's response. Garro turned the corner and looked as if he was headed toward another bar in the area. He rushed to intercept him before he could reach it.

“Garro,” Rook called out, drawing his blaster.

Garro turned. For a moment he looked perplexed, but the light of recognition widened his eyes. His face paled as he stammered out his words.

“Rook, I— I thought you were dead!”

“Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” his tone exasperated.

Garro started to back up. “Look, it wasn't personal, okay, Rook? It was just—”

He raised a brow. “Were you going to say *business*?”

“Uh—”

“Are you telling me killing Cobalt was just *business*?”

“Rook, I —”

“Well, it may have been a simple transaction thing for you, but...it was personal to me!”

“Yeah, I get that, but—”

Rook grabbed him up by the collar. “You betrayed us, Garro. You sold us out for a handful of lyonite and that got Cobalt killed!”

“Yes, but it was more to it than that, Rook.”

"I always found it suspect that you ran with him instead of running in different directions like the rest of us."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute."

"I *have* waited. I've waited a long time to settle the score with you."

"Rook, please, just give me a chance to explain."

"There's nothing you can say to me that would—"

Without warning, Garro pulled his blaster, but Rook disarmed him and forced him to the ground. With his blaster pressed against Garro's forehead.

"Are you kidding me? You pretended to beg and tried to shoot me?"

"Look, Rook, I'm sorry about Cobalt. For real. I was following orders from Nexus, man. You know it's hard to say no to them."

"If you're looking for forgiveness or absolution you won't get it from me. You betrayed us, the people closest to you. We were *family*."

"I didn't have a choice, Rook."

"There's always a choice, Garro." He paused in thought for a moment. Like I'm choosing *not* to shoot you."

Rook pushed his blaster back into its holster and snatched Garro off the ground.

"Thank you, Rook. I swear, man, I'll never forget this. You've proven you're a better man than I am."

He pushed Garro against the wall again and pulled his knife.

"I said I wasn't going to shoot you."

Rook shoved his knife deep into Garro's abdomen and then twisted the blade while still staring into his shocked expression.

"That is my choice instead."

Rook dropped Garro's lifeless body to the ground and rushed back to where left his companions. He caught up with them just before they reached the bar. Raelynn smiled when he walked up beside her.

"There you are. Where were you?"

"I ran into a situation. No big deal. I handled it," he answered with a shrug.

“Are you okay?” Zera asked.

Rook took a deep breath. “Better than I’ve been. in a long time.”



THE COORDINATES LED them to the fourth moon in the Beta Z sector. Zeefor was a desolate place, its rocky surface pockmarked by craters and scarred by ancient meteor impacts. They kicked up clouds of dust that swirled like phantoms around their feet.

The Dabbler led the way with the letter in his hand. Soon they stood at the entrance of a cave, the mouth yawning before them, dark and foreboding. He tapped the mic on the side of his helmet.

“This is it,” he told them, his voice sounding crackly and robotic. “The coordinates lead right here. Whatever it is, treasure or weapon, it’s inside.”

“About time. Let’s get this over with so we can celebrate,” Rook said, his hand moving to his blaster.

Zera adjusted the straps of her backpack and peered into the darkness of the cave.

“Don’t be so eager to run up in there, Rook. The people who hid this thing went through a lot to hide it. We should exercise caution.”

“You’re thinking booby traps?” Raelynn asked.

“Booby traps? As if the asteroid belt and putting it on this distant rock in the middle of nowhere weren’t enough protection? Not to mention the letter itself just to figure it all out,” Rook questioned.

Zera shrugged. “I’m just saying, let’s not just rush in there all willy-nilly.”

“I agree, but even after everything they put us through to get here, we should still be cautious,” the Dabbler mentioned, laying a hand on Rook’s shoulder. “I’ve heard old stories about this place. People don’t come out this far for a reason.”

“Okay, so let’s move carefully, no unnecessary risks. We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet,” she told them.

Everyone gave her an agreeable nod then stepped into the cave. The shift in the air was immediate, the temperature continued dropping as they descended. The light started to fade behind them. Zera dug into her pack and passed out glow sticks. One at a time they activated them to light their way. The narrow passage eventually widened into a vast chamber with the ceiling lost in the shadows. At the far end of the chamber, a large box covered in heavy dust sat on a low ledge in the rock wall.

Zera gasped. “There it is.”

They walked across the room. Raelynn hesitantly dusted the chest off. Symbols appeared as the dirt cleared. Rook reached out to touch the chest.

“This...this is incredible,” he breathed. “Whatever’s inside must be worth a fortune.”

“Careful,” Raelynn warned, putting a hand on Rook’s arm to stop him from touching the box. “We don’t know what kind of power we’re dealing with yet.”

The Dabbler stepped forward, then crouched to read the symbols.

“This is a warning. According to these symbols this chest contains something beyond our understanding. We left it for future generations in hopes the world would be ready for its power.”

“If that’s true, maybe we shouldn’t open it,” Zera suggested.

Rook gasped. “What? After everything that we’ve been through over the last few weeks to get here, you don’t want to open it?”

“The people who hid this thing thought that whatever’s inside this chest was too powerful for any one person—or even a group of people—to control during their time. Three hundred years have gone by. Things have changed. I think we should at least see what it is,” Raelynn explained.

“Agreed,” the Dabbler said.

Zera gave a reluctant nod.

“Okay, hand me the silvadene.”

Zera handed her a bottle for her pack, and she poured the contents over the dangling lock. The liquid bubbled slightly and in seconds it melted the metal and the lock fell apart. With a deep breath, Raelynn flipped the lid open. Frowning, she lifted another letter from the box.

“You've got to be kidding me?” Rook said, throwing his hands up.

Zera groaned.

Raelynn handed the letter to her brother.

“Okay, all is not lost. This one is written in one language, and I can read it.”

Raelynn let out a breath. “Well, that's good.”

“Okay, it says, good or bad, using this will change the course of the world depending on who is using it. Only one person can wield it at a time. Use caution when choosing who that is.”

Raelynn shared a glance with her companions and then all looked into the box. Her brows furrowed as she lifted the object.

Rook sputtered. “A ball? We went through all this for,” he paused to look it over. “A black tennis ball?”

“Hush, Rook. Let me think. It can't just be a regular old ball.” She turned it back and forth inspecting it closely. “See it has this flat glass like piece right here,” she added, sliding her finger across it. “So, it's not all the way round. What do you make of it, Zera?”

“I'm with Rook. It looks like a ball to me too.”

She turned to her brother. “What about you?”

He shrugged. “I've got nothing.”

“Well, I don't want to bounce it to test the ball theory because of this part,” she turned the flat part toward them. “Whatever it is, it's still three hundred years old. I don't want to damage it. Do you have any more ideas, Rook?”

Rook's eyes widened. He tapped the front of his helmet pointing at his mouth.

“What are you doing?”

Rook pushed himself against the cave wall thrashing back and forth, mumbling incoherently, pulling at his helmet.

Realizing something was wrong she rushed to his side.

“What's happening? Stop it! You can't take your helmet off. There's no air in here!”

Zera came to his other side. “Rook! What's wrong?”

Bryan gasped. “Rabin, tell Rook it's okay to talk again.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“You told him to hush. Now, tell him it's okay to speak,” he explained calmly.

“Okay, okay. Rook, it's okay for you to speak.”

Immediately Rook's mouth opened with a gasp. He leaned against the wall breathing hard.

“What the hell was that?” he said finally, still panting.

Raelynn stared at the ball in her hand. The surface had changed from dark like the rest of the ball to cloudy gray before returning to its original color.

“Oh my—”

“Did that ball do that to me?”

“I believe it did,” Bryan confirmed.

“That's not possible.”

“Zera, you saw what just happened. Rabin was holding the ball when she told him to hush and when she told him to talk. Rook couldn't open his mouth until she said so. I don't think that was a coincidence.”

“I don't know,” Zera said unconvinced. “Maybe we should test that to make sure.”

“What? Uh, uh, I don't want to go through that again,” Rook said, backing away.

Raelynn reached out to him. “I'm sorry, Rook. I had no idea that would happen.”

“You can say something to me,” Zera offered.

“Are you sure?”

“Hmm hmm.”

“Just say something simple like you did with Rook, Rabin,” Bryan cautioned.

Raelynn nodded. “Umm, go over there and sit down, Zera.”

Zera yelped as she moved quickly to the wall.

“Oh my gosh! I did not do that!”

“What do you mean,” Bryan asked.

“I mean, I wasn't in control of my body. I didn't do that! I had no control of my body. It did what she said, and I couldn't stop it.”

Raelynn looked at the ball again. “The same coloring on the flat part came and went like before,” she said, in awe.

“That thing has the ability to *control* people?” Rook asked with wide eyes.

“Control and possibly much more would seem.”

“Rabin, I'm beginning to understand why those people hid this object.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“You could let me go.”

“I'm sorry, Zera. You are free to move.”

Zera fell away from the wall with a heavy breath.

“That thing is too powerful to bring back with us,” Rook said, finally moving close to her again.

“Yes, but in the right hands the possibilities could be endless with it. If it can control, perhaps it can strengthen or enhance. Experimentation could tell us what it's capable of.”

“Yes, but in the wrong hands it could be devastating for all those same reasons,” Bryan counted.

“Hmm, then there's that.”

“Okay, so are we deciding to not bring it with us.”

Raelynn nodded. “I think we are. Those people hid this thing away because they felt like the world wasn't ready for this device. With all the

different possibilities that this thing can be used for, do you think the world is ready now?" she asked with a raised brow.

She waited but none of her companions spoke.

"If we're not bringing it with us, what do we do with it? Just leave it here?" Rook asked.

"Yes," she said, gently returning the orb to the box. "I think that's best. We will leave it here for future generations. Perhaps, the world will be a better place and someone wiser will know what to do with it."

"Sometimes knowing when to walk away is best all the way around," Zera said with a shrug.

"That works for me. I don't want that thing anywhere near me again."

"I can seal the cave to give it more protection since we can't seal the box back," Bryan offered.

"Do it," Raelynn agreed.

Raelynn led her party back outside. Bryan removed a charge from Zera's backpack and set them around the entrance. Zera and Rook moved closer to her silently watching. Bryan joined them and set the charge. The two explosions collapsed the opening quickly and sufficiently.

"It's done. The treasure is secure."

Raelynn let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Then let's get out of here."

As they retraced their steps. The wind whipped up around them harder than their earlier trek. Pressing into the dusty surface made their way back longer. When they finally boarded their ship Rook chuckled, removing his helmet.

"Treasure hunting is always different with you, Captain. I'll give you that."

Raelynn laughed as everyone discarded their outerwear.

"I'm starving. Let's go to the galley. I'll make us something to eat," Zera said, hanging her space suit up.

"You guys go ahead. I'll get us going and meet you there."

Raelynn made her way to the cockpit. As the ship's engines roared to life, she put in the coordinates and hit autopilot. Before going to meet her crew, she made her way to her quarters to change clothes. She sat in front of the mirror quietly thinking. After a while, she smiled, made her way to the galley.

"So, what's for dinner, Zera?" she asked.

Raelynn joined them at the table. Rook poured her a glass of wine.

"Thank you, Rook. Sounds great, Zera. I haven't had sea bass from Earth in a long time."

"I'll have it on the table in a few."

"Pause that for a second and come join us. We need to figure out what to do with the letter first."

"What do you mean?" Rook asked.

"No one in the future can find the box if they don't know it exists."

"Rabin is right. We have to do what the original authors did."

"You're suggesting we cut it up and hide?" Zera asked, sitting down.

Bryan shrugged. "Yes, I think that makes sense and it would give closure to our journey."

"Okay, let's do it. Rook, do you have your laser blade on you?"

Rook grinned and pulled the knife from his boot.

"Always."

Bryan quickly retrieved the original letter from his quarters and laid it out on the table.

"Cut it into four pieces," he instructed. "This way each of us can hide a section and we won't share the location with each other."

Rook nodded, slicing the paper into four perfect rectangle sections.

"Well, here you go." He pushed a piece to everyone before returning the knife to his

"So, Captain, once we've hidden our papers, what's next? Another heist? Or maybe a well-deserved break on some paradise planet?" Zera asked, sliding her piece of the document into her pocket.

"A break sounds nice, but you know us, we'll be itching for action before long," Rook added with a chuckle. "Right, Rae?"

"I've been thinking about that. We've been running together for over two years, now, right?"

Rook nodded. "Coming up on three years in about a month or so if you want to break it down that much," he chuckled.

Raelynn smiled. "Thanks. Bryan, since we have reconnected, you've joined us whenever we've needed you. It's been great."

"I've enjoyed every moment," Bryan told her.

Zera reached for her hand. "Hey, are you okay? What's this about?"

"I'm just pointing out that my life these last few years have been a great adventure, but I believe it's time for something different."

"Different how?"

She turned. "Rook, we've had the chance to save up money over all this time together, right?"

Rook shrugged. "Sure, I think we'd be fine if we didn't treasure hunt for the next ten years. I mean, we do it mainly for the thrill, the adventure of it all."

"Yes, the adventure of it all," she muttered almost to herself.

"What are you trying to tell us, Rabin?"

"Are you thinking of retiring? Is this our last adventure together, Rae?"

Raelynn took a deep breath. "I'm about to start a whole new adventure, something none of us have ever tackled before. I believe it will be difficult at times with unique ups and downs. Two steps forward and one step backwards before I get it right, may be the order of the day on many days, but I believe it will be worth it every step of the way."

The room fell silent, as the weight of her words sank in. She looked around the table waiting for a response.

"If you're inviting us to be a part of this new adventure you're planning, count me in. We're a team and a family," Zera said, breaking the silence.

Bryan offered her a warm smile. "I agree with Zera. I will always be available whenever you need me, Rabin."

Rook took her hand and kissed it. "I will always be on your side. You're stuck with me."

Raelynn nodded. "I have something to tell you." She stood and pulled Zera's hand to her belly.

Zera gasped. "A baby?" she exclaimed.

"A what?"

"Excuse me."

Zera jumped to her feet clapping. "You heard me. I can sense it. Rook, you're going to be a father."

"I'm going to be an uncle."

"Rook?"

Rook stared at her for long moments before a small smile came to his lips.

"Our next adventure," he started softly. "And probably our most dangerous of them all, will be our greatest and we'll continue to do it together."

Rook wrapped his arms around her. Raelynn sighed as he embraced her, surrounding her mentally and physically with his warmth and love.

"Retirement on a beautiful planet with oceans and forests is starting to sound good," he offered.

"It sounds wonderful."

"Well, I guess that settles it."

Raelynn turned. "Settles what, Zera?"

"We do have a new mission after all."

Raelynn exchanged a look with Rook.

"What new mission is that?" he asked.

"Making sure this baby has the best damn crew in the galaxy to help raise them and watch their back."

Rook laughed.

"I second that," Bryan said, putting his hand out.

Zera put hers on top of his and then Raelynn and Rook joined them doing the same.

“You can't get rid of us that easily, Captain Vance,” Zera said with a smile.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” she said with a grin.



THE END

Don't miss out!

Visit the website below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Dana Littlejohn publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-DYWPC-NKNDF>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *The Tale of Captain Vance*? Then you should read *Ivy's Hot Shots*¹ by Dana Littlejohn!



Ivy York had always been a hot commodity among the young pilots. She tried not to date them, but having an air force general for a father gave her a challenging social life. Her mother's only goal in life seemed to be to get her to settle her down with the next available pilot and birth as many babies as possible. Just as Ivy let her mother set her up with an extremely handsome tech sergeant name Steven Jones, she met Jonathan Hayes. Having spent time with both men, Ivy can't help but wonder if her mother finally got lucky in choosing Tech Sergeant Jones...or is Jonathan Hayes a better match for her after all? Ivy York had always been a hot commodity among the young pilots. She tried not to date them, but having an air force general for a father gave her a challenging social life. Her

1. <https://books2read.com/u/3LDWYn>

2. <https://books2read.com/u/3LDWYn>

mother's only goal in life seemed to be to get her to settle her down with the next available pilot and birth as many babies as possible. Just as Ivy let her mother set her up with an extremely handsome tech sergeant name Steven Jones, she met Jonathan Hayes. Having spent time with both men, Ivy can't help but wonder if her mother finally got lucky in choosing Tech Sergeant Jones...or is Jonathan Hayes a better match for her after all?

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.

Also by Dana Littlejohn

4 Queens

The Queen of Spades

Mount Olympus

Aphrodite's Day Off

Charles's Goddess

Standalone

Power of the Bayou

Wolf Blood Moon

Ivy's Hot Shots

Christmas Goddess

A Package Deal

Daughter Of The Cosmos

The Tale of Captain Vance

Watch for more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.



About the Author

As a young child, I wrote Hickory Dickory Dock type poetry as I doodled all over my papers in school. I still don't know which I did more, but by Jr. high school I wrote more than doodled and even got up the nerve to enter them in a contest or two. But it was my short stories that took all my time and energy.

I showed a few to my friends and they had me doing weekly installments of a story and had passed it around the lunch room. During the 80's; when I was in High School, I tried my hand at rapping. Rap Music was just a toddler with the arrival of the Sugar Hill Gang a few years back and everyone wanted to Rap. So with my 'crew' The Puma Fly Girls, (come on, you had a weird crew name too), we rapped and I wrote the rhymes for myself as Shorty Dee Ski and for another of my girls in my crew. (Don't Laugh. If you are a child of the 80's you were some kind of 'ski' too.)

In 2003, I picked up my pen again and I haven't put it down. Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.



About the Publisher

I invite you into my world with open arms to see my imagination run wild...

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.

