

CHAPTER 1

"It's been said that we are alone ... by ourselves in this vast ocean of black with its occasional twinkling pearls of light. We are a unique event of biology where none should exist. That, as it were, we began as a single cell that defied the universe in some protoplasmic struggle to evolve and there is no one to rescue man from himself, but himself. And a lot of folks say we've done a pretty good job of doing just that. I say poppycock, to all of it! We can do better, be better, and it is the height of arrogance to assume we are all there is. Surely there is something, someone, out there to show us the way." —The Harver Editorial, Dec 1st, 11450 CTD

The *Blue Star* was a five star luxury liner, completely intact, adrift, and dead millions of kilometers from its last recorded position twenty years ago. I was floating in the middle of the main passageway on deck nine, looking for suite nine two dash A. My suit light flashed across the bulkheads and cabin hatches.

Well ... I guess I should introduce myself before going any further. Hi, I'm Beatrice Serendipitous Christiansen. I know it's a long name. My mother thought she was being clever, but I prefer Bea. Just plain and simple Bea. And what you're reading now is my diary. I finally decided to take her advice and keep one, though I'm not sure it's as important as she thinks it is.

So why did I decide to start here? I don't know, really. It's just one of the things that crossed my mind during the jump out to the *Blue Star*. So here we are.

Anyway, I work for Spaulding Recovery Services, based out of Chalcis City, Chalcis. I'm the company's primary pilot and wreck diver. Tom, my boss and the owner of the company, sent me here to find a briefcase left behind twenty years ago by a Station Dynamics' executive. What's in the briefcase and why it's still important two decades after the *Blue Star* was abandoned ... haven't a clue and don't really care. I only know Tom's charging them a fortune for this run and their CFO smiled when he asked for half the money up front.

The *Blue Star* itself was written off years ago by the tourist agency that owned it; insurance had no doubt already paid out. It was just a frozen hulk drifting far off course, weeks away from any civilized planet. Technically any salvage company in the Republic could claim it ... if they knew where it was. In fact, Tom could have made arrangements to have it towed back to Chalcis and scraped or repaired, but that wasn't our business. We just recover items, or things that are lost. Low overhead cost with a larger payout. Tom plays the margins, which is fine by me.

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As far as dead hulks go the *Blue Star* was not exceptional. Over the last seven years working for Tom I've stood in a dozen similar wrecks, most in far worse condition, and they all have the feeling of a lifeless tomb. There was nothing to be afraid of here. Nothing living and no ghosts. Just me and my suit light shining a long beam through a death dark passageway. Think of it as a giant freezer with the door closed, and there, you have a mental picture of where I am.

The only other voice here is the synthetic consciousness aboard my ship, the *Isaac Brin*, floating twenty meters off the liner's port bow. Though, I suppose the consciousness in the *Blue Star's* datacore would be operational if the ship had power. The liner hadn't experienced an actual wreck or physical damage, but a massive power failure. A design flaw they believed. Life support kept all two hundred passengers and crew alive on battery power for almost two weeks before rescue arrived, and the briefcase was left behind in the rush to get off the dying ship. As I shined my light on the cabin hatches, I wondered briefly if the executive that forgot it was still employed with Station Dynamics. With modern life extending medicine some people switched professions or careers twice or even three times in their lifetime. He might have moved on to something else. But I suspected it was more likely he was dismissed over the briefcase. If it was important enough to hire a recovery service to jump out to the wreck to retrieve it so long after the fact— then it was something that would have gotten that executive fired.

"Bea," Brin said through my suit helmet. "You haven't checked in."

There was a note of worry in his voice, a programmed response, nothing more. A simulation of intelligence and emotion locked in a cylinder of bio-matter and polymers.

"I'm fine ... just thinking."

"I see, were you wondering what to get Tom for Christmas?"

No, that hadn't crossed my mind. It was a respectable jump out to the *Blue Star*. These tourist agencies offered deep space vacations that took their clients out to special places ... planets with odd rings or other strange cosmic formations. Some even offered a week or two out on frontier worlds. You could live like a settler, bushwhack and sleep in a tent, with the assurance that any time it got too rough you could just hop a shuttle back up to your luxury suite and ride it out in comfort until it was time to move on to the next site. Those tours could last for the better part of a year. It had taken over two weeks to jump to the vicinity of the *Blue Star*, and another week of

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smaller hops and intensive scans to find it. I hadn't thought about making it back to Chalcis in time for Christmas, let alone what to get my boss. But now that I did think about it I should make it back in plenty of time.

"Bea ..."

"What ... I'm busy."

"Oh, sorry. Please remember to check in."

Suite 92-A was in the VIP section of this level. The ship's layout wasn't difficult or unique, but navigating the passageway was slow. The liner had a slight spin and I was using the emergency handholds to pull and push my way further along.

The passageway itself was wide and clear, except for the occasional stewardess cart and debris floating in suspended animation around it. The reason why I had decided to pop the airlock hatch near the bow rather than use the *Brin's* cutting beam to make a hole in the hull about midway down had to do with safety. Tom preached it, put tons of insurance on me, installed a state of the art medbay on the *Brin*, and had me sign waivers, but he himself wouldn't actually fly out to a wreck and try to retrieve something using his own rules. At least not while I've been with the company. Safety made for more work. If I were allowed to use the cutting beam to make a hole in the hull I would have been in and out of the *Blue Star* an hour ago. For more dangerous wrecks he would have made Jasc or Kenshe ride with me. Jasc is the company's maintenance engineer, and Kenshe is Tom's nephew. But the liner was supposed to be safe, and Jasc had work to do on the *Hamilton*, the old patrol ship that Tom used as his personal courier. Kenshe was finishing up a semester in political history at Chalcis University. So that meant I was by myself, which I was fine by me. Solitude suits me.

The hatch to the VIP section was open, left that way when the very important persons did their best to exit the ship. I didn't have to imagine how two weeks living on battery power would have made them feel. Water and power would have been rationed ... at some point someone would have gotten a little afraid. I saw plenty of panic during my tour in the Rescue Patrol. And while the passengers of the *Blue Star* may not have been panicked they would have been in a hurry to leave. Seeing their rescuers through the windows in their cabins approaching and latching onto the airlocks would have *amped* them up. The captain would have been working hard to keep his soft vacationers as calm as possible, at that point discipline would have been tough to maintain. Thus, some people left things behind. I.E. the briefcase I was sent to retrieve.

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On my way through the VIP area I passed a gym and a spa, my wrist light rolling over the fancy signs above the hatches and blank advertisement boards that would have shown me vids of smiling people enjoying the activities offered, if I were a passenger twenty years ago. A few more hatches down and I found 92-A.

Hmm, must have been a nice ride, until you realized the air might run out with you still aboard.

The suite's hatch was closed. I floated in front of it, one hand on the bulkhead's handrail and one foot on the carpeted floor— *iron frozen carpeted floor*. I ran my light around the hatch's edges and found the panel to the manual release.

"Brin, come in," I said, ever being safety minded.

"Yes, Bea. I'm here."

"I'm standing in front of a sealed hatch, are there any pressure readings?"

Safety first, yeah the rules have reasons ... I hear it more from Tom than I ever did in the Rescue Patrol. God, I hope Tom never hears that. Don't get me wrong, some of his precautions are grounded, but most of them are overboard.

"A wise precaution, Bea ... standby."

Brin gave me the all clear a few seconds later and I popped the panel and pulled the manual release, expecting the hatch to open but nothing happened. The release turned but the hatch remained sealed. I played with the release for a moment before realizing that I would have to cut my way in.

I always carried an engineer's lance with me for just this sort of thing. A girl should never be without her tools, if it be a dress and heels or an EV suit and cutting lance.

The hatch was stubborn and I had to cut the whole thing out of the bulkhead. In gravity it would have been easy, but in no gravity it takes practice. Often you have to do it one handed, using the other hand to hold on to something, otherwise you just float away.

These luxury liners have all the heavy stuff, like furniture, bolted down or molded to the bulkheads for safety, but the suite was still cluttered. Everything from silverware,

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data hardcopies, and loose clothing hung motionless in the vacuum or clumped together in corners. I pushed aside a vase with frozen flowers and pulled myself inside.

"I'm inside," I said, checking in for Brin's benefit. "Should be back soon."

"Very good, Bea. All steady over here."

Pushing and pulling my way through the detritus of the main room I shined my wrist light around looking for the briefcase. The rep for Station Dynamics didn't know exactly what room it was supposed to be in, only that it was left in the suite. Given the circumstances of the executive's departure it could be anywhere in here ... or dropped somewhere out in the passageway lodged in some crevice or buried underneath a pile of other junk.

I made my way to the bedroom, fought with an open suitcase and bundle of clothes for a few moments that hovered just beyond the entry, then panned my light around ... and there it was. It was flat against the cabin's ceiling in a corner. Its silvery surface caused my light to reflect back, which is what caught my attention.

"Found it," I said, pushing off the bulkhead and grabbing the briefcase.

"Oh good, Bea," Brin said with a note of approval.

I clipped the case to my tool belt and pushed it around my waist out of the way.

Leaving the suite I turned to head back up the passageway, then stopped. My light flickered across a small bar that was a little further down and on the opposite side of the suite. On a whim I made my way over to it and flashed my light around. It was one of those half-moon setups, sort of a small crescent against the bulkhead that formed the bar. A smiling stewardess would stand behind it with bottles of alcohol in clear cabinets behind her. I pulled myself inside the bar and opened one of the cabinets. The temperature was far below the freezing point for alcohol, in the bottles the liquids had turned to cloudy ice.

I rummaged through the cabinets until I found a bottle that was mostly full. It was labeled Original Maltese Scotch.

"*Ha*, found something for Tom," I said to myself, but Brin thought I was talking to him.

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"What is it?"

"A bottle of Scotch ... at least forty or fifty years old, by now."

"Can we say it's from both of us?"

Sometimes the *Brin's* SC was uncanny, simulated emotions or not.

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The *Isaac Brin* was in its heyday when the *Blue Star* lost power and went adrift. Like the *Hamilton* it was an old Chalcis Rescue Patrol ship, except the *Brin* was a long range tug. It was made for work, real work. Six jointed arms folded up under its twenty-one meter, oval shaped hull, making it look like a gray and yellow beetle. Those arms could clamp onto things, hang-on or tear them apart. Tom's father purchased both ships when he was starting the business and when Tom took over as CEO the first thing he did was spend a lot of money restoring and updating them. That was before my time, but apparently there was a big fight about the money. Since my employment with the company he's never shied from spending large amounts of it, that's for sure. The ships go in every three years for a full maintenance overhaul and firmware update. Tom was a sort of minor league playboy when he was young; he likes name brands and expensive things. I used to think he was simply keeping up his image but he had a serious talk with me one day about how important the ships were to the business.

Entering the *Blue Star's* forward most airlock I gazed up at the *Brin's* underbelly through the hole where the exterior hatch used to be. Upon arriving I was forced to have the *Brin* rip it off because of the power issue.

"Give me an arm," I said.

"Of course, Bea."

Brin unfolded an arm slowly and guided it to me.

* * *

Back aboard, even before I changed out of my EV I placed Tom's Scotch in the galley cooler because I didn't want the sudden temperature difference to shatter the bottle. Then I slogged back to the airlock maintenance cabin on watery legs. Returning to gravity after being in zero-g was something I always had trouble with, way before I

ever started working for Tom. Over the years the immediate weakness I felt began to pass quicker, but not like some of the professional patrolmen I worked with in the past who could go from gravity to nothing without breaking their stride.

Finally, in a light flight suit I collapsed on the bunk in my cabin only to wake up an hour later to Brin's voice.

"Bea, we are wasting air and power."

"By *we*, I assume you mean *me*."

"Yes. I've plotted the jump coordinates, do you want to confirm?"

Of course I did, every time. Who in their right mind would let an SC plot a jump course without double-checking it? Brin's calculations were always accurate ... but I've heard stories of crews trusting their SCs too much and either jumping to the middle of nowhere or really far outside of their target because a digit to the right of the decimal was wrong. Not going to happen to this girl.

"Yes, I do," I confirmed.

I got up and headed to the flight cabin.

The *Brin's* interior was smaller than you might think for a ship its size. It does have decent cargo capacity but its main design was rooted in power. Everything else was sacrificed for that goal. Brin could pull something the size of the *Blue Star* out of a gravity well with power to spare. The crew quarters consisted of four double bunk berths about as big as the closet in my apartment back on Chalcis. The galley, medbay, gym, and common cabin could all be called cramped. Engineering was the largest section, taking up the entire aft portion of the ship. It was tough too, it could bounce around a scrape yard and at the end of the day need nothing more than a paint job. Like I said it was made for real work. With its tertiary power plants and thick hull it was overkill for the work we used it for.

The flight cabin was just as economically designed as the crew areas. It had three console seats, one for the pilot, the second pilot, and a monitoring station. Kenshe, of course, liked the second seat ... even when I wouldn't let him touch anything more than the controls for the external optics.

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I hopped in my seat and brought up the jump coordinates calculated by the *Brin* and then did the math myself, three times, before moving them in queue for the jump.

"Alright, prime the drive and let's get out of there. I've got some serious sleeping to do."

Tom says the reason I like making these long trips by myself is because I'm lazy. There was nothing to do while the ship traversed Newtonian space— I could play immersion-games with the *Brin's* SC, read, or watch a vid ... or sleep.

"Of course, Bea. Bringing the Newtonian drive online now."