

Blachart By Christina Engela

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eBook Edition PREVIEW

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Dedication

To my mother Yvonne, who taught me everything worth knowing – and the importance of being able to laugh at myself.

Imagine, if you will:

SPACE.

Just think about it.

PREVIEW

As frontiers go, this is probably the most final of them all, not because it may be the last frontier, but because as long as we try to cross it and explore it, we take it with us. No matter how far we go, the frontier will always be just that much ahead of us, tantalizing our curiosities. Thus, we can never really cross it in so far as just push it back a little.

The universe is so vast, so immense, we can never expect to explore it all. It is in effect, not so much a final frontier as an ultimate frontier; the ultimate frontier – as wide as it is deep. Stars shine coldly in the unimaginable blackness. Out of the darkness, a tiny speck caught the distant light of stars – a tiny gray speck that, as it moved, seemed to grow larger, catching the light just so until it revealed itself to be a ship.

Mykl d'Angelo groaned where he sat slumped in his chair. The irritating noise was unsettling his pet dog lying on his lap. The wickerwork garden chair creaked pleasantly under him and some native Earth birds made pleasant sounds above while the cool wind wafted over him as he lazily

...

Wait-a-minute!

Reality kicked in after marking its spot ‘position vacant’ for the short and pleasant while. He groaned mournfully as he found himself staring at the inside of his own eyelids. The first thing that occurred to him was the terrible bone-wracking pain running up and down his spine. Pain? No, curiously enough. It was the memory of it that seemed to hurt so much. Maybe that’s what scared him. Or perhaps it was the creaking of the ship – which consisted of tons of normally strong and silent hi-tech duranium, durastress and titanium materials, which surrounded him...

He opened his eyes and looked around. The smoke had cleared up, except for the wisps rising from what until very recently had been his ‘mac. Ugh. The last thing he remembered was...was...what did he remember? Bright flash. There was a noise like...like – someone frying crisps, actually. Weaver had suddenly gone rigid, screaming, then glowed a bright yellow, which alternated with a luminous blue and neon pink. It was a rather nice blue, he remembered. What the hell was *that*? Oh yes. The surge of pure energy that had pulsed through the ship. Of course, it did pass through Weaver on the way... He was surprised there was a body at all, considering the kind of power that it conducted before almost burning out like a spent fuse.

What else? Oh yes – the ship-wide alarm was blaring. *Still* blaring, to be more accurate. It was an annoying, soulless mechanical sound that reverberated down the corridors of the ship – *his* ship, and signified an emergency, or as in this case, total disaster! Steeling himself, Mykl lifted his head off the hard deck he’d been lying on, turning it carefully from side to side just to make sure his neck wasn’t broken. It wasn’t he concluded, and carefully sat up. Then, coughing from the electromagnetic dust in the air, he shook his head, praying that the dull thumping wasn’t an indication that it might fall off. He rose slowly to his feet, eyeing the smoking remains rather sadly. Mykl d’Angelo struggled for a decision. He had to contact the bridge – if, he mused, there *was* still a bridge.

The lights were still on. The gravity net was still operating. The communications panel in the wall in front of him seemed to be working, but there was just no answer from the other end. He tried again anyhow.

“d’Angelo to the bridge.”

Silence was the only reply he got.

“d’Angelo to the bridge! Answer me, Jang!”

He got the same result. There seemed to be no other solution but to go there himself. There was nothing more he could do here anyhow. He couldn’t hope to assess the damage, but he realized it must be pretty bad. At least things like lights and the doors still worked – and that damned alarm!

A walk down the corridor led him to the elevator – and another body. It lay sprawled in an unnatural position on the deck. Turning it over, he recognized it as Fuller, his cargo master. The man’s neck was broken. Had to be, looking the way he did.

Swearing under his breath, d’Angelo tensely entered the elevator. Fortunately, that was also still in order. When he got to the bridge, everything looked pretty ordinary – except for the third body of the day, which was lying spread-eagled on the deck with an almost comical look of surprise

on his face. Jang was dead, although d'Angelo couldn't see the cause, but then, he was no doctor. He sighed dismally. Now he hadn't a navigator either – or a crew for that matter.

He slumped down in the skipper's command seat and shut off the irritating alarm from the control console in front of him. He sighed another deep sigh. It seemed to be a wonderful day for Mykl d'Angelo, captain and owner of the 'tramp' loderunner *Pegasus*. As wonderful days went on his personal scale, he rated this one '*one of the best*'.

The last week hadn't been any better, come to think of it. On Monday they arrived at Gorda, just to find that the cargo of electronics he was to ship to Beowulf had been taken by another freighter for a lower fee. It took him until Wednesday before he found another cargo – which had to reach Brien by Saturday. After a brief career in the Terran Space Fleet, Mykl d'Angelo, 26, had left all the uniformity, rules and regulations behind him. Despite that, as a former Exo aboard a 'Fleet starship, he'd grown accustomed to things being done a certain way – and that carried over into his leadership style as the civilian skipper of a loderunner. This didn't sit too well with his raggedy civvy crew, and there was often friction between them during the few short months of his career as skipper of the *Pegasus*. The last straw fell when his former crew mutinied a day out of the Hermes system and demanded a pay increase. They also demanded more time off and a better cook – at least one who knew which end of a frying pan to hold. The union tended to call that sort of thing '*collective bargaining*', not actually *mutiny* – but hey, the results were the same. Personally, Mykl favored the term '*piracy*', but this wasn't the high seas and out here, there were *real* pirates to worry about. Mykl's finances being what they were, he was unable to comply – and so, *Pegasus* made an unscheduled stop at Beowulf anyway, without his say-so. There – at the space port, his former crew disembarked and cheerfully waved their middle fingers at him, before heading to the nearest employment office to put their names down for the next available openings on any loderunner other than *Pegasus*. That was the last time he saw them. Fortunately for him, three of his crew – Weaver, Fuller and Jang, had opted to stay with him – and that was just barely enough to run the ship so he could leave Beowulf again. Whether it was out of loyalty, or perhaps just convenience, he didn't know – and now, never would.

“Look where it got them, poor bastards!” He muttered to the ship in general. Today was Friday, and if current events were any indication of what the future held in store for him – then he could expect a pretty rotten weekend. Under the current set of circumstances, he was unlikely to meet the deadline to get his payload to Brien.

The *Pegasus* was a good old ship – particularly the latter. She was moving on forty years old and was prone to breakdowns. They were minor breakdowns that had little effect other than to slow her down some, but they made her a little less than reliable – and in this line of work, speed and endurance – and keeping to time tables, was everything. *Pegasus* wasn't really efficient at anything anymore, except perhaps at breaking down at awkward times. Newer ships were more efficient, but he couldn't afford one. He could barely afford this one as it was – and if hadn't been for a stroke of luck in the *oordo* races on Brien eight months previously, Mykl d'Angelo would probably still have been sitting at the spaceport bar wondering what the hell he was going to do next with his life.

To try to make up lost time, Mykl had to push Pegasus to her limits. He sighed again, easing his weary frame out of the skipper's chair and into the one behind the helm console. Cruising at full throttle was fine for a while, he mused while running a diagnostic scan of the ship's systems – that is, until Weaver reported a minor problem down in engineering and asked Mykl to give him a hand. Mykl didn't have much entech training at the Academy, nor had he picked up much more expertise on warp engines while serving on the Fleet ships – but he could help Weaver by holding *this* and passing *that*. Then Weaver had to go and put his damn attenuator in just the right place at just the wrong time, which caused a short in a main feed line – a really bright thing for an engineer to do.

Bright pink, Mykl thought, running his blackened fingers through his short sandy brown hair with considerable effort, accompanied by assorted snaps, crackles and pops of residual static electricity. Then Mykl changed positions and went to sit at the helm. The sensors showed no space traffic at all. The viewscreen was off. Turning it on only revealed the whirling stars outside, which told him that Pegasus, a cylindrical ship about a kilometer long, was doing somersaults nose over tail. He deftly brought the maneuvering thrusters into play, slowing the tumble caused by the explosion to a stop. The stars stopped whirling. A stable ship helped him to feel better. It was at least a start. A chime from the console told him the diagnostic scan was ready – it elicited another pained moan. To say that the engines were all off-line would be an understatement – they didn't even register on the diagnostics inventory. The explosion had essentially destroyed the engines entirely, and caused an auto-seal of several stern compartments. More than half the emergency batteries were also damaged, and had reduced his chances of staying alive for more than a few hours to less than a couple of days at best.

Truthfully, d'Angelo wasn't surprised that had happened. Weaver, like his predecessors, had been a kind of starship 'backyard mechanic' and at the time of the explosion, the stardrive was all but held together by bits of wire and duct tape. Okay, that was an exaggeration, but it wasn't far from the truth. Weavers' mistake had cost him the stardrive – and Fuller and Jang their lives. "Blown up" seemed a little inadequate to describe what had really happened, but what remained of the engines was now spread over the last light-year or so behind him. Now *that* really made his calendar cycle!

Pegasus had been going hell for leather when the engines blew, and right after that, the old ship had dropped to sub-warp speed. It was still moving pretty fast, though gradually decelerating – roughly in the direction of Brien – but with the amount of drift caused by the explosion, it was likely Pegasus would pass through space also away from the main trade routes. Now he sat alone in space, on a disabled starship about fifty years from anywhere on conversion drive – assuming he still had *that*. He did not. What he *did* have was the *Short Shit* – the ship's only shuttle, which was basically a space-going jalopy that he might use as a life-boat to take him to Brien as Pegasus passed by. That is, if it had enough fuel and didn't break down in the attempt. At the current speed and rate of deceleration, Pegasus would pass by its closest point to Brien in about three years' time – and Mykl doubted he could hold his breath that long.

He resisted a powerful urge to smash his fist down on the console – that wouldn't solve anything. Besides, the last time he did that, he still had a medic handy to treat the resulting injury.

Yes, he had taken out insurance on the Pegasus – that was pretty much standard fare, and the law didn't really leave him any choice there – but a fat lot of good insurance was going to do him stuck out here! He sighed again, trying to bury the frustration he felt – and also the rising tide of panic.

How the hell was he going to get out of this?

The highlight of his evening was going to be staring at the blinking bridge instrumentation – which just happened to be running on the emergency batteries and actually blinking, like for real. Mykl turned on the emergency beacon – there was little else he could do. That at least still worked – and, seeing as he had to conserve as much energy as possible, he cut all unnecessary power, and shut off the lights and heating equipment in most of the ship. Then he cut power to the gravity net on the other two levels and sat back, to wait.

The star-scape on the viewscreen did little to inspire him. He couldn't repair the engines – even if he had the know-how, there was nothing left to repair. As the hours passed, his mind slowly began to wander, and he started to fantasize about being down in engineering, trying to build a workable stardrive out of the parts of a landing thruster, a garbage compactor and the cheap Swiss watch on his wrist. Nope – he didn't see it working. He sank back into the padded seat by the console resignedly. There was nothing more he could do now, except wait – and offer prayers to whatever gods happened to be listening.

* * *

Somewhere else in the dark vastness of deep space, another starship was also experiencing problems, though perhaps not quite as severe as those of the beleaguered loderunner Pegasus. The *I.S.S. Antares* was a military ship in the Terran Space Fleet – a warship. Although not a new ship, she was one of the frontline service ships, pride of the Fleet. She'd been in service a good many years already, and since keeping up with the pace at which technology advanced was quite expensive and also labor-intensive in updating a ship of her size, there was the inevitable factor of creeping obsolescence.

Many older ships in the imperial Space Fleet nearing retirement age were occasionally sidelined to be refitted and upgraded with modern equipment to extend their useful lives, and also to keep them as close to the most efficient and effective standard possible. Thus, technologically at least, Antares was currently one of the most advanced ships of the Imperial Space Fleet. Unfortunately, Antares had been rushed out of dry dock so hastily – due to circumstances that will still be made clear – that she was now also one of the most troubled.

For Commander Ripley Jones, second in command onboard the Antares, it was a situation that was becoming rapidly more and more troublesome. It had been said, and fairly often, that nothing is infallible – the Antares apparently being the proof! Most refits took around six months in dry dock to complete, and Antares' refit had been almost complete when the call from Fleet Command came through. As Exo, Ripley had been part of the refit management and planning team, and was intimately familiar with the progress on a daily basis. They were just two weeks away from final checks, with trials scheduled for the week after that. The state the ship's critical

systems were in now was nothing short of chaotic! Some of the crew had been attending training courses to familiarize them with the upgrades – some had been away on shore leave, and were probably still blissfully unaware of what was going on... Antares had left without them.

After hastily recalling all available crew, Antares had left Spacedock 7 thirty hours ago. Since then, there had been nothing but problems! The entechs – engineering staff and technicians were kept busy tracing and solving breakdowns in the ship's sensors and telemetry, system failures of a wide variety, and finally – the Last Straw: a brand new coupling seal in the stardrive engine failed! Fortunately, the cut-out worked – or the whole of engineering would've disappeared in a flaming ball of anti-matter, and would probably have taken half the ship with it! Five crewmen were seriously injured as it was, and were under hi-care in the sickbay. In the meantime, the rest of the crew was being occupied with running tests of their equipment – specifically weapons systems, shields, survival gear and so on.

Right now, as Ripley was pondering the status quo, Commander Nore, the newly promoted long-time Chief Entech, had the offending unit stripped down and under repair. Even so, Antares was still underway – albeit at maximum sub-light speed – and Ripley was currently in an elevator with a very pissed Captain Joel “Joey” Falcone.

Normally he was quite patient and benevolent, but the sixty-year-old officer had good reason for his frustration. Falcone himself was due to retire in just one month; his active duty was to have ended at Spacedock 7. He'd decided enough was enough, and he wanted to spend the remainder of his years with his wife instead of gallivanting around the galaxy. Retirement was no longer mandatory – except for reasons of ill health, or when people reached the point where they could no longer meet the demands of their roles on the job. A lot of people lived beyond the ‘magical number’ of 100 these days, and still enjoyed very good quality of life. Some wanted to continue working, for whatever reason – and retirement became voluntary after reaching the age of 60 years, which is where “Joey” Falcone was at. He had two sons and a daughter – all of them in different parts of the Service – and his wife, who was two years older than him, had already retired from her job and was waiting for him at home.

Falcone's replacement – whoever that was – was due to arrive within the week, to participate in the final phases of the refit and take command thereafter at a nice little ceremony in front of the gathered ship's company... until Fleet Command saw fit to interrupt completion of the refit, and to abruptly extend Falcone's active service by handing him this last assignment. There was some urgency involved, with all the frantic rushing it took to get Antares out of dry dock at such short notice! There had to be, for an incomplete ship to be kicked out of dry dock before Final Checks could be performed! The lead refit Foreman had refused to sign off on the ship's space worthiness certificate, and Falcone had just ordered him off the Antares. In the tense atmosphere in the elevator car, she stifled an inappropriate little giggle as she recalled his parting words to the man: “The transmatter or the airlock – pick one!”

What their mission was, Ripley Jones was oblivious of – but she knew they were on one! In the state Antares was in, Ripley could only imagine the nature of the emergency at hand! It must have been vitally important – whatever it was. She cleared her throat as quietly as she could.

“Commander Nore said he should have the stardrive back on line within four hours, Captain.” She might’ve said the wrong thing – Falcone glared at his executive officer.

“*Four more hours?*” He railed. “What about the shields? Have they been repaired properly this time?”

“The – uh – generator crystals have been re-cut and recalibrated. They should be running final tests right now.”

“Good. We may need ‘em.” He nodded, “I don’t want them fading out on us again.”

The next few minutes were filled with silence as the elevator carried them towards the bridge. Ripley idly rubbed her cheek for lack of anything else to say. Falcone’s hair shone even whiter under the lights in the ceiling of the elevator car, and his usually warm brown eyes seemed a cold faded gray today, skulking in the map of his tough, wrinkled old face. His features seemed drawn, the wrinkles deeper somehow. Ripley sensed his tension in the air. He grunted suddenly.

“Sir?”

“Looks like my retirement holiday on Tarsus is going to have to wait, Ripley.”

Curiosity got the better of her. It’d been thirty hours and still he hadn’t said a word to her about their mission.

“What’s this all about, sir?”

Falcone became visibly uncomfortable. He hesitated, then said:

“We’ve lost contact with a Starbase 91.”

“Starbase 91?” Ripley repeated. “That’s in the Omegan Quadrant, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” The Captain replied slowly. “Command wants to know why – and we’re the lucky sods to draw the short straw!”

“Doesn’t Core Command know what shape we’re in, sir? In the middle of a refit? Why us?”

The old man grinned, unwittingly making himself look evil in the lighting inside the car.

“They do, but we’re the only available cruiser close enough to respond – *why’s this damn thing taking so long?*”

The elevator did seem to be taking longer than usual. Another malfunction, probably. Ripley wasn’t a newcomer to deep space travel, or even to space combat. Even at her 25 years, she’d seen her share of trials in space. Antares – the ship she’d been with since she left the Academy as a Lieutenant six short years before, had seen her meteoric rise to the rank of Commander and to the position of Exo. Along with the ship, Commander Ripley Jones had participated in the fight against the dreaded Corsair menace. But she also knew that there were more than just Corsairs in deep space – and more *other* deadly threats to mention as well.

“Perhaps their transmitters are down, Captain.” She suggested.

“Hmm? Oh – I don’t know, Ripley. Could be anything. Better leave it for the briefing this afternoon – I’m a little tired to go into it too in-depth right now. Doesn’t matter anyway...” His features softened into a grin, and for a moment she recognized the wise, genial old man who had mentored her growth into an outstanding officer. “They’ve just found a way to liven up my last few days in the service.” He grunted. “This is my last show. Ha! My retirement party!” Then he resumed staring at the gray elevator doors. Grunting, he made eye contact with her again.

“Did you tell Nore to check up on those power fluctuations in the weapons circuits?”

“Yes sir. He said he couldn’t find the problem – said it was fine when he looked at it. He said the ship’s probably just being temperamental.”

“Not good enough. Tell him to check again. We may need our weapons where we’re going!”

“Yes sir.” Ripley nodded, knowing full well how hard it was to tell *Commander* Nore anything. The man was about a hundred years her senior for a start. Okay, well, not really a hundred – it just seemed like it sometimes. Commander Adam Nore had been until recently, a Lieutenant-Commander, finally promoted after thirteen years in the post of Chief Entech aboard the *Antares*. Nore was due to be transferred off the crew at Spacedock 7 – at his own request, to be posted somewhere quiet where he could tinker with a desk for his last year of service before retirement. *Antares* had also been waiting for a replacement Chief Entech there, one that conformed to the normal requirements – like saying ‘*yes sir*’ to her orders, not ‘*piss-off*’ or ‘*get out of my engine room*’. If his replacement had arrived before they’d been given this assignment, things might have been easier. Then again, Ripley realized, it might not – Nore at least was experienced and efficient – and who knew what sort of mook they might have been stuck with?

Ripley tried to sigh as softly as possible. Everything, it seemed, was meant to have been fixed or straightened out at Spacedock 7. The car-computer spoke, finally.

“*Mess Hall.*” It announced in a monotone voice.

“Thank the gods, finally.” Said Falcone. Ripley, although irreligious, gratefully echoed the sentiment in her thoughts.

The doors parted slowly, and Ripley and Falcone stepped out onto the bridge – which was alive with activity. Crewmen were busy at their respective stations – the helm, sensors, weapons, comms. The comms desk was currently vacant – the communications officer had been relieving Falcone at his station. A youthful lieutenant who looked around 21 to Ripley (and probably like a teenager to Falcone) swiveled round in the command chair like a bowl of handsome, well-built fruit on a display stand to face them. Ric Nordyke smiled at her briefly, with the knowledge that fraternizing with a senior officer was likely to cause trouble no matter which way it went.

“Get outta that chair, Lt!” Falcone growled at the young man, giving him a big wink as he did so.

“You look like you’re enjoying my chair *far* too much!”

“Yes sir!” Nordyke breathed as he quickly stood up to vacate the Captain’s chair.

Ripley knew that nobody graduated from the Academy as an officer younger than 22, so he must’ve been older than that, even if only just. Nordyke was one of the very new crew drafted from Spacedock 7 when the crisis struck and they had to fill all their personnel shortages post haste. He seemed eager to please, and certainly seemed to prefer the prospect of serving his first years aboard a starship than on a dreary old space dock.

“Captain!” Nordyke called, face aglow with the excitement of a reasonably green crewman.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” Falcone replied, already halfway towards the command seat at the center of the bridge. Ripley took her seat at the *Exo*’s station, which was immediately to the left of Falcone’s, and observed from there. Nordyke turned to face Falcone.

“I just wanted to inform you that we’ve picked up a distress call, sir!”

Falcone paused to look at him a moment before sitting down.

“What? Only one?” He shrugged. “So?”

“We – uh...” Nordyke faltered, caught off-guard by Falcone’s demeanor, “We’re the closest vessel to the source, Captain?”

Falcone was no spring chicken – he knew the course of action to be taken. It was law. Distress calls had to be answered and investigated with all possible haste... even in the light of their current assignment. The only problem was, Ripley reflected, with the stardrive strewn all over engineering, the sub-light drive could propel them at a maximum speed of only around 100 000 kps – which meant, in interstellar terms, that they might as well stop.

“Who’s in distress?” Falcone asked, making it plain that it was an unwelcome intrusion to their already daunting workload. Like the Last Straw. Ripley thought for a moment the lieutenant’s hesitation meant he was thinking the same as her – what all of them were thinking: *‘You mean aside from us?’*

“Er... It’s a freighter, sir. S.S. Pegasus. Registry says private owner, name of d’Angelo.”

Ripley seemed suddenly shaken up, tense. Interested might have been a more descriptive term. It was that name, *d’Angelo*. She quickly turned towards Nordyke and gave him a quizzical look.

“What exactly is that man’s name, Lt?” She asked him.

Nordyke glanced at her matter-of-factly.

“Skipper of the Pegasus, sir?”

She nodded in answer.

“Uh. d’Angelo, small ‘d’, apostrophe, big ‘A’ – Michael, I think – though it’s spelt differently... M-y-k-l.”

“*Mykl!*” She breathed, almost to herself.

Falcone eyed her suspiciously, noticing that his usually crisp and aloof Exec seemed to be stroking her long fawn brown hair absentmindedly.

“You okay, Commander?” He asked.

“Mm? Oh – yes, sir.” She replied, recovering her composure. “I think I know the owner of that ship, that’s all.”

“You think?” Said Falcone, “Or you know?”

Ripley blushed.

“Well, unless there’s more than one Mykl d’Angelo, then I know him, sir.”

“Friend of yours?”

“Uh – well, no, sir.” She replied in a more level tone. “I knew him while I was at the Academy, sir.”

“An ex-Fleet man?”

“He was a Commander, last I heard, sir – which was about a year ago.”

“Interesting.” Falcone commented. “Get me his file. If I have to take him aboard my ship, I want to know all I can about him.”

She swallowed. “Yes sir.”

Falcone returned his attention back to Nordyke.

“What’s their location?”

“They’re about a week outside the Hermes system, Captain.”

“Helm, set a course – best possible speed!”

“Um – sir, we’re on conversion drive at the moment.” The helmsman reported.

“I know, Linson – d’you think I’m senile already?”

“No, sir – I...” The young helmsman stammered.

“I did say ‘*best possible speed*’, didn’t I?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you might as well point us in the right direction at least, while we wait for something to happen in engineering! Lt. Nordyke – answer the call; tell this d’Angelo feller we’re on our way – or will be soon. And get me some more details about the nature of the emergency.”

“Yes sir!”

“And get me Commander Nore on the line!”

“Yes sir!”

“And then,” Falcone continued, smiling wryly, “When you’re done with all that, you can get the galley to send me up a cup of coffee.”

Joel Falcone – who was currently in his element – was going to miss these times.

END OF PREVIEW