

# Nightchaser

## CHAPTER 1

I sat back in my captain's chair and breathed, slowly and deeply, letting my body adjust to traveling at a normal velocity again. It was risky to come here, but maybe we'd finally get a break. We needed one. So did the ship.

Outside the bridge's large window panels, stars winked back at me from the endless Dark. The view didn't look much different from anywhere else we'd been in the galaxy lately, but no one in their right mind would be here. I was counting on it.

It never ceased to amaze me how vast space was—and yet not a single corner of it was free. No technology existed that could get us beyond the Overseer's reach.

A red light sputtered to life on my console, and I shot forward in my chair and stared. Communication open/outside channel blinked back at me.

My heart rate went from normal to warp speed so fast it hurt. "Who the hell is in Sector 14 with us?" I demanded, turning to my first mate.

Jaxon's space-pale complexion whitened even more as his eyes jumped between me and the flashing button. I figured I looked just as ghostly, and not only because we hadn't seen direct sunlight in weeks.

"No one's ever in Sector 14," he said, sounding worried and pissed off. "Half of it's the Black Widow."

"Well, someone's here now," I answered sharply, days of high stress and almost no sleep adding extra bite to my voice.

We both eyed the blinking red com button again. This part of the galaxy was off-limits. Usually, I was the only one not following the rules.

I scanned the views outside the multiple windows again, not seeing the ship that was reaching out to us. I did see a portion of the gigantic ring of darkness everyone tried very hard to avoid and felt a little queasy, only part of which I could blame on the long jump we'd just made through hyperspace.

The Black Widow was the reason we'd come to Sector 14. Choosing the dicey location was a last-ditch effort to lie low and recharge after three days and seven Sectors of hot-on-our-tail leapfrog with hostile Dark Watch vessels.

I wasn't an instant pessimist, but this couldn't be good. The *Endeavor* was almost out of juice, and the Sectors were crawling with government spacecraft out looking for the vaccines we'd

stolen. Only the elite and the military were given access to cure-alls. Someone needed to redistribute more fairly. But when patrol ships had started popping up all around us, instead of emptying the contents of the floating lab we'd found into our own cargo hold as usual, I'd nabbed the entire thing with a vacuum attachment. Now, the extra hunk of ship was sticking out like a sore thumb, weighing us down, *and* about to get us all sent back to jail. Or worse.

I even had an enormous, leather-clad, bearded man who'd accidentally come with the floating lab. *Shit!*

My fingers tensed around my armrests. There was no way I was reaching for that com button. Whoever was hanging around Sector 14 and a freaking *black hole* was going to have to talk first.

Or maybe they would fly right on by...

"Cargo Cruiser model 419, please identify yourself."

*Damn it! They talked.*

I stared at the panel in front of me as if it were a poisonous snake from one of the green planets. They had water and pretty plants, but they also had all the nasties I didn't like to think about. That was what happened when you grew up in a metal box—nature scared the crap out of you.

"I repeat, Cargo Cruiser model 419, please identify yourself."

I almost recoiled at the tinny, no-nonsense male voice that burst out of my console again. Interference from the Black Widow made the communication shriek like the five o'clock wake-up whistle in prison. I'd hated that whistle. It'd made my stomach hurt.

"Answer him, Tess," Jax hissed, nodding to the flashing button. "The longer you wait, the more suspicious they'll get."

"They're already suspicious." Only a ship up to no good would be anywhere near here.

I looked from Jax to Miko. Miko's good hand still hovered over the navigation panel, her dark-brown eyes bigger than I'd ever seen them. She looked like she hadn't moved a muscle since typing out the coordinates for Sector 14—where *no one* was supposed to be.

Swallowing a curse, I turned back to my controls and pressed down on the blinking red com button only long enough to transmit a response. "This is Cargo Cruiser model 419. It's only polite to identify yourself first." Even space had etiquette. Granted, I usually ignored protocol, but I could still cite it when necessary.

Jax groaned softly. Miko looked like she was about to pee her pants, which was odd, because I knew just how hard-core she could get when push came to shove.

The same sharp voice came through in immediate response. "This is *Dark Watch 12*. Captain Bridgebane speaking."

Shock jolted me. So did fear. Battleship 12? And Bridgebane? He was a high-ranking galactic general and part of the Overseer's band of science freaks who had come close to carving me up when I was a kid. All the higher-ups had wanted to know what made me tick differently from everyone else.

*Maybe it was having a freaking heart.*

I shot a look at Jax, who shot me one back. This whole mess had just gotten exponentially worse.

There was no doubt in my mind that Bridgebane would recognize me. I'd grown up, but I hadn't changed that much. I still had the same straight reddish-brown hair, wispy bangs, unusual height—which now put me eye to eye with most men—and blue eyes that stood out from a mile away. Before she died, Mom used to tell me that my eyes made her dream of the great oceans and blue skies she'd never see. And she never did. Dad kept us both under lock and key.

And now ancient history was coming to bite me in the neck and shake me hard. *Dark Watch 12* was one of the Galactic Overseer's premier warships and could blow my faithful little *Endeavor* to pieces with only two or three direct hits. It was a fully armored beast. And I knew my way around it. If not for my oddities—and my conscience—*DW 12* might one day have been mine.

"Please identify yourself," Captain Bridgebane ordered, "or we will be compelled to board your ship and ascertain your identity ourselves."

And there was the galactic military in all its glory—polite, even while putting a gun to your head.

Boarding us was out of the question. There was nothing on my ship that wasn't stolen. Hell, even the ship was stolen. Even the *crew* was stolen because, well, *jailbreak*.

I reached out and pushed the communications button without letting my hand shake. "This is Captain T. Bailey. You're looking at the *Endeavor*," I answered in the flattest voice I could muster.

"Captain Bailey, Sector 14 is a no-fly zone. What are you doing in this area of the galaxy?" Bridgebane asked.

I wanted to ask him the same question but managed to refrain. I pressed the com button again and calmly said, "Taking in the view. The crew wanted a peek at the Widow."

I lifted my hand, cutting off all sound from our end, and the longest few heartbeats of my life passed in total silence as the bridge crew stared at me, waiting for their orders.

My mind bounced from one possibility to the next. I'd given my usual false name—any Bailey, especially with only a first initial, was extremely hard to pin down since it was one of the most common surnames in the galaxy—and the *Endeavor* had fake ID numbers stickered on both sides. I could peel them off and get new numbers up in less than forty-five minutes, even with the necessary spacewalk. But I couldn't do it with Bridgebane watching.

"Power up, Jax. Time to jump us out of here." The only problem was, we hadn't found a safe Sector in *days*. "Miko, move us closer to the Outer Zones."

"We can't, Tess." Jax shook his head as he examined the data readings on our current energy levels. "We don't have enough power left to get us out of 14. And they've locked on to our com channel now and can follow short-range leaps, even if we use warp speed to stay out of sight and jump around the Sector."

I stared at my first mate. I'd known we were low on juice, but that was very bad news.

He pivoted the screen portion of his console in my direction, showing me just how fucked we were. Repeatedly hauling the lab at warp speed had put a huge strain on the ship's energy reserves, and that last, big jump had drained even more power than I'd anticipated. We'd come here to try to *fix* our power problem, not make it worse.

"Can we get close enough to the nearest star to recharge the *Endeavor's* energy core as planned, not fry, and still keep away from the Dark Watch?" I asked, knowing what Jax would probably answer.

He winced. "Even short jumps to stay away from the warship would drain our reserves faster than the solar panels could build them up again."

I winced, too. "We'll end up a floating duck."

He nodded.

"We already have a target on our back, and this is the end of the line." Usually softly lilting with Sector 10's melodious accent, Miko's urgent words flooded the bridge with the near panic I was trying hard to keep at bay. "What choices do we have?"

Bad ones. Without recharging, our already crippled capacity for warp speed would fizzle to nothing in no time, and simply flying away wasn't going to work, either. A Dark Watch vessel could chase a lot faster than a cargo cruiser could run.

The red com button flashed again before I could even begin to analyze our terrible options, and Bridgebane's clipped voice came through to the *Endeavor's* bridge as clearly as if he were sitting right there. "We see you have three cargo holds and a vacuum attachment that looks like the lab that was recently stolen from the Lyronium System. Prepare your starboard port for a boarding party. Any lack of cooperation on your part will be taken as hostility, and we will not hesitate to fire to recover the lab by force."

The communication went dead, and my heart slammed so hard against my ribs that it left me short of breath. I leaped out of my chair as I switched to a mapping screen on my console to get an idea of just how close they were.

My eyes widened. *Dark Watch 12* was right behind us—and looking straight at the stolen lab.

"Jax! Power up with what we've got. And tell Miko her jump range the second you know it," I said.

"It won't do any good." Jax started flipping the necessary switches anyway. "They'll just follow us and start shooting."

I glanced at my controls again, at the terrifying digital image of the mammoth battleship hovering on our tail, and then pressed my lips together, trying to hold back what was probably the worst decision of my life. "Then jump us closer to the Widow."

"What?" squeaked Miko. "We'll get sucked in."

"Well, don't jump us *that* close!" I kicked the lock on my chair and shoved the whole thing back and out of my way. I didn't plan on sitting down again while taking four other lives into my hands and also protecting the vaccines that could save thousands of people from the diseases that still ran rampant in the galaxy's civilian populations.

I watched to confirm that Miko's hand was flying over the navigation controls before I punched my own hand down on the yellow internal communications button. "Shiori! Get to the bridge. Fiona! You, too! Do *not* stop to collect your plants. This is an emergency."

I swung my eyes back to Jax, nerves riding my spine like an icy comet. "Tell us when we've got the juice."

"We're good to go," he answered. "At least to Miko's new coordinates."

I nodded. Now we waited for the other two. Usually, I'd just have told them to brace themselves for a jump, but right now, with the *Dark Watch* threatening to fire on our back end, I wanted everyone up front on the bridge.

The bridge was also where we could access the ship's escape pods, if it came to that—not that I believed they'd do us much good.

Every second lasted an eternity with the warship *DW 12* and Captain Bridgebane breathing down the *Endeavor's* comparatively minuscule neck. I stood there. I didn't shake. I didn't move. My head felt numb. But I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. Not in fear, although there was plenty of that, too. No, it was *rage* boiling in my chest.

Shiori rushed through the bridge doors, her fingers gliding along the wall. Miko ran to her grandmother and quickly guided the older woman toward my abandoned chair. With her good

arm, Miko practically threw the tiny Shiori into my captain's seat, strapped her in, and then locked the chair back down, not leaving me much room at my console.

Miko raced back to her navigation controls. Shiori reached out to me blindly.

"I think I got us into big trouble," I said, taking her fragile hand.

Her skin felt paper-thin and dry and looked almost unhealthy, the creamy tan shade of it having faded into something pasty from lack of sunlight. The veins stood out, and her tremor seemed worse, but Shiori squeezed my fingers with surprising strength. "We've been ghosts for five years already, child. You gave us many more days."

The heat of unwanted emotion crawled up my throat just as my console delivered new information with a warning signal. Incoming cruiser—starboard side. 200 meters.

I glanced at Jax. "We can't wait." Fiona was going to have to deal with taking a fall.

He nodded, and I grabbed the edge of my console for balance.

"Go!" I cried.

Jax hit the small, round button that had saved our lives countless times, and everything went dark and weightless as the *Endeavor* shot through space. My bones seemed to crunch and shudder and then pop back to normal again as the ship slowed almost immediately. That was the shortest jump of my life.

I shook my head to clear it and then studied the view outside the bridge's windows again.

*Mighty Powers That Be...* The Black Widow was all I could see.

"You're certifiable, Tess," Jax murmured.

*Yeah.* I kind of had to agree.

I swallowed hard. "They won't follow."

The outside com blared like that awful prison whistle again, sending through Bridgebane's now-furious voice. "Captain Bailey, you are under military arrest. Jump again, and all crew members on board the *Endeavor* will be deprived of a trial. Our boarding cruiser jumped after you, and *DW 12* followed. Prepare for entry on your starboard side."

I cursed. How could I have forgotten that Bridgebane would do anything for the Overseer?

Fiona burst onto the bridge, spitting mad. She was barefoot and wearing leggings and a tank top, which probably meant she'd been in a hazmat jumpsuit only a few moments earlier. If she'd had to get out of it before leaving her secure experimentation lab, it was no wonder she hadn't shown

up in time for the jump. At least she'd listened to me and hadn't stopped to collect her specimens. Botanists got really attached to their plants.

"What the hell is going on?" Fiona stalked toward me, her high, dark ponytail swinging angrily as she walked. "I just cracked my head on the wall when you dragged me out of my lab and then *jumped* without even telling me to brace myself. And just when I was getting close to making a breakthrough with those new cure-alls, too. I'm even wondering if they can cure Shiori's blindness. They're full of good stuff—like, superpower stuff."

"Those vaccines just got us followed practically into the mouth of a black hole," I said, motioning toward the bridge windows.

Fiona looked around, and her eyes widened at the sight of so much absolute darkness.

"Holy shit!" She gaped at me. "Are you crazy?"

I gave a small shrug. "The Dark Watch was breathing down our neck."

"The Dark Watch is always breathing down our neck!"

"Yeah. Well, this time, they're trying to board the *Endeavor* as we speak, and a warship got close enough to get visual confirmation on the stolen lab."

"So jump the hell out of 14!" Fiona cried.

"We *can't*. We've been leaping almost nonstop for three days, and the *Endeavor's* power is too low to do anything other than play cat and mouse around the Sector until we completely run out of juice."

Fiona snapped her mouth shut, her usual space-rat pallor taking an abrupt dive toward ashen.

"And then they'll either board the ship or blow us up," Jax added solemnly. "Either way, we're toast."

I caught Shiori's serene expression out of the corner of my eye as I nervously tucked my bangs behind my ear. Shiori was always asking me to meditate with her and Miko, but I never wanted to sit still. Maybe I should have. She looked a lot calmer than I felt.

The *Endeavor* jolted from the hard bang of *Dark Watch 12's* boarding cruiser latching on with a vacuum seal. Obviously, we hadn't opened the port.

"Starboard side has our most solid door," Miko said. "It'll take them a while to break through."

I nodded. But break through they would. They had all the tools.

"I don't get it," I muttered out loud. The intensity of this chase was baffling. Vaccines were important, yes, but the military was acting as though this particular batch were liquid gold.

I turned back to Fiona. "Has the big guy said anything about the vaccines?" He hadn't threatened the crew in any way after we'd carted him off by accident along with the floating lab. He hadn't tried to reach the bridge. He hadn't complained about the near-constant jumps. He hadn't so much as asked for food or water or a freaking loo in the three days we'd had him. I'd offered him the basics more than once, but he never took me up on anything. He was big, quiet, and stoic in the extreme.

I liked him. And I'd better go get him.

*Will he even fit into an escape pod?*

Fiona shook her head. "He left the lab only once, and I couldn't stop him from poking around the cargo holds. He wanted to know where we were taking everything."

*Nowhere anymore.* At this rate, those things had no chance of getting to where they needed to go. The food and seeds were for the dirt-poor colonies out in Sectors 17 and 18 that would never recover from the war. The books were for the Intergalactic Library's rare and archaic section, and the drop-off I'd planned would have been stealth itself. The vaccines were for Starway 8. Orphanages never got cure-alls. I would know.

"What did you mean by 'superpower stuff'?" I asked, suddenly zeroing in on what Fiona had just said about the vaccines.

"I meant give a few rounds to Jax, and he'd be unstoppable. Strength. Speed. Boosted healing." Fiona huffed. "Hell, give some to Shiori, and she'd kick ass like she was twenty years old again."

I felt my jaw loosen. "An enhancer?" *The enhancer?* I'd thought that was a myth. Or a bad dream. Or something that would never work.

And then it hit me. No wonder the lab had been so discreet, so empty of personnel that it shouldn't have drawn a single eye while it floated around out in bumblefuck Lyronium. That was how the Overseer worked. Hide your best science. Destroy what you don't understand.

*Shit!* I'd almost genetically modified thousands of kids.

"We can't give that to orphans!" All those shots clearly labeled as cure-alls were in reality the abomination the galactic government had been working toward for years.

Fiona shrugged. "You can if you want to call the concoction a vaccine and turn people into super soldiers without telling them."

I gasped. Wasn't the military already unstoppable enough?



An earsplitting hammering started on the starboard side just as the edge of the Dark Watch ship came into view. It was immense and intimidating. Too bad I couldn't incinerate it with just the heat of my glare.

Apparently, the galactic generals weren't only lying to civilians anymore; they were lying to their own.

Furious on behalf of just about everything that lived, I slammed out a combination on my console. "I won't give it back. I'll die before the Overseer gets his serum back and uses super soldiers to terrorize the Outer Zones even worse than he already does."

The bridge lights flickered from the sudden power drain, and the hammering abruptly stopped.

"I just electrified the whole starboard side," I announced. Best-case scenario? I fried their jackhammer, and they'd have to return to the warship for another. Worst case? We were pretty much already living it.

Bridgebane's voice barked across the com again. "You are now accountable for an attack on the military, three burn victims, and a damaged Type-4 Heavy Armor Hammer. Galactic records show no Captain T. Bailey and no cargo cruiser matching your ID numbers or called *Endeavor*. We've definitively identified the floating lab. We will fire on the bridge if you continue to resist."

Jax looked at me. "They can blow up the bridge and still recover the lab."

I watched the behemoth warship hovering over our starboard side. *DW 12* definitely wasn't behind us anymore. "If they board, we're dead."

They'd consider us all repeat offenders simply for breaking out of prison. Now I had the vaccine heist and an attack on the military against me as well. There'd be no jury, no trial, and no more wasting food and space on a criminal like me. Jaxon was in the same position, but not for theft. I called what he'd done in the Outer Zones heroic. The galactic government called it murder—because they'd won.

Shiori had never technically been arrested, but Fiona was a bio-criminal who'd created at least three major airborne plagues when she'd been fighting alongside the rebels out in 17, just like Jax. And Miko had cut off her own left hand to get out of shackles, so I was pretty damn sure she didn't like being chained up.

I glanced at my navigator. Miko's glossy black hair, fine-boned features, and delicate-seeming beauty had landed her in a position she didn't want to be in when she was nineteen years old. I could only guess at the details, but Miko's sporadic comments about the violent appetites of powerful men spoke volumes. And Miko's death sentence spoke volumes about her violent response. She'd escaped with her grandmother's help the day before she was slated to die. Shiori went where Miko went, even if that was a galactic prison—or a cargo cruiser that looked like a good place to hide.

Five years together now—Jax, Fiona, Miko, Shiori, and me—and my obsession with kids and their health was about to get my loyal band of misfits killed. If I hadn't taken the lab, no galactic warships would have been out looking for us. There wouldn't have been a Dark Watch frigate in Sector 14. Nathaniel Bridgebane would have been stalking someone else.

I looked out the front and portside windows at the looming Black Widow and curled my hands into fists. Almost the entire view outside the ship was darkness, the stars that edged the rim of the black sphere so startlingly bright in comparison. I wondered how long it would take before they were swallowed up, and then the whole Sector, and then the neighboring ones, too. How far could oblivion expand? Such nothingness was terrifying. I could almost feel its unholy pull.

I should have stayed away from the vaccines—the *super soldier serum*. I should have known the almighty Galactic Overseer could never produce anything good or pure. But I'd been so set on giving the orphans on Starway 8 a defense against some of the things that killed in silence, since I could do very little about those that did it loudly.

The ship lurched—the Dark Watch's boarding cruiser latching on again with new equipment. Probably insulated this time. My tricks never worked twice.

"I'm getting some of those vials before it's too late," Fiona said, racing for the door. "I can work backward and figure out the organics, I'm sure!"

"Stay put." My voice rang out loudly over the bridge. "I'll get the samples. And the big guy."

Fiona pulled up short. At least everyone here listened to me. When I said stop, they stopped. When I said move, they moved. My father might have stripped me of my identity and tried to get rid of me when he couldn't figure out what was wrong with me, but I'd obviously inherited his imperial vibe and knew how to use it, despite eighteen years of abandonment and four Sectors of separation.

I looked at my crew one by one. At my friends. My real family. "Anyone preparing an escape pod when I get back can take their chances with the authorities. If you choose to stay on the ship, you're dying today with the *Endeavor*, me, and a hell of a lot of super soldier serum. You have five minutes to decide."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

I quickly worked my way through the air lock and vacuum seal at the back of the ship and then strode into the stolen lab, spying the massive man immediately. He was a head taller than anything else in the room, including the dozens of refrigerated shelving units jam-packed with *vaccines*.

I took him in, surprised all over again. Not many people were naturally that big. Considering I'd found him with the lab, there was a good chance he'd been shot up with the super soldier mixture, and this was the result.

He looked over at my entrance, his dark eyes seeming to swiftly scan for threats. Probably in his midforties, he was a ruggedly handsome black man. Short, curling hair was barely graying at his temples, but the grizzled streaks became more pronounced as they trailed down his thick, somewhat shaggy beard. The beard seemed neglected. It wasn't neat and trim, as though he wanted it. It was bushy, as if it didn't belong.

Just like the previous times I'd come into the lab, he watched me with neither hostility nor apprehension, but I couldn't say he looked exactly friendly, either. More like he was reserving judgment.

Slowly, he lowered the vial he'd been inspecting, the movement drawing my eyes to the capped test tube in his hand. The liquid inside looked like blood.

"Where did you find that?" I asked. Between jumps, I'd searched the lab and seen nothing of interest besides the false vaccines in their prepared syringes.

He tilted his head toward one of the refrigerated units. "I just uncovered a whole tray of identical blood samples in there—under a false bottom."

I wanted to blame the sudden dread surging inside me on the frantically wailing alarms, but it felt more like the panic of being forcibly strapped down, pricked with needles, and *examined*, inside and out.

My gaze darted back to the test tube. That label couldn't possibly look familiar. *Could it?*

Swallowing, I held out my hand. "May I?"

He handed over the vial, and I turned it so that I could read the label. The bold-print *Q.N.* lunged out at me like a punch to the solar plexus.

"This was part of the lab?" My breathing shortened as I tore my eyes away from my own initials and Sector 12 citizen matriculation number.

The man crossed his arms over his massive chest. "An important part, considering how well it was hidden. Not many samples left."

"You just said there was a whole tray." I felt light-headed. My heart hammered.

"Ten vials, all labeled the same way. I didn't find more of that same thing *anywhere* else."

From his tone, I knew he'd looked hard—and maybe not just here in this lab.

Horror scraped through me as the word *component* stumbled out from somewhere deep in my memories of blurry-headed days in the Overseer's lab—along with whispers of an enhancer. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I let my thoughts dive right into my childhood nightmare.

My blood. Component. Enhancer.

Terrible understanding clicked into place. They'd used one abomination to create another.

I couldn't stop the slight tremor in my fingers as I set the stolen piece of myself down on the table next to me, my pulse booming like the noises echoing around the cargo areas as Bridgebane's lackeys worked on breaking into the *Endeavor*.

"Is that something to worry about?" the big guy asked casually. If he hadn't glanced in the direction of the central cargo bay right then, I would have thought he meant the blood, not the relentless hammering.

A high-pitched sawing started up, and a second set of alarms squawked out of the central computer. My insides pitched sideways. We needed to hurry.

"And that?" he added, his eyebrows lifting.

"Yeah. Those...and a hell of a lot of other things." In fact, I couldn't think of one thing that *wasn't* a problem right now. "Head to the bridge if you want to live."

I'd told Fiona I'd get some samples. It made me queasy to carry through on my promise now that I knew the serum was probably based on my blood, but I grabbed an insulated medical satchel stamped with the galactic government's seal anyway and started filling it with false cure-alls from the nearest temperature-controlled unit. I didn't take the sample of my blood or try to find the other vials. Drawing attention to them somehow seemed worse than leaving without them.

While I gathered syringes, the man watched me, his gaze so heavy and intense that I was pretty sure he'd memorized the placement of every freckle on the bridge of my nose by the time I finished filling the bag and zipping it closed.

I mentally gave him ten seconds before I turned on my heel and left. He could stay or go, but I hoped he'd come. Like Jax and Fiona, the somewhat prominent vowels and lightly rounded tones of his speech practically screamed Outer Zones, and he had the same slightly weathered look they did, as if once upon a time, he'd spent a lot of his life outdoors.

Those weren't the only things about him that appealed to me. His nonthreatening calm had just prevented me from completely losing it. It wasn't every day you realized your mortal enemy had most likely made a weapon from your own blood. And with Bridgebane doing everything he could to get it back, my freak-out time was limited.

I beckoned with my free hand. "Move it, Big Guy. We don't have long." His ten seconds were up, and it was time for him to squeeze his big, bearded, and possibly genetically modified self into an escape pod.

Hesitating, he studied me with uncertain eyes. They shifted to the bag I was holding.

I tightened my grip on the strap. "Look, I don't care if you're military or civilian or a scientist or a victim or whatever," I said. "You came with the lab by accident. The Dark Watch is about to board my ship, so unless you're one of them, you'd better get off it if you want to live."

"Are you offering me a pod?" he asked.

I nodded, wincing as what sounded like a different saw scraped its serrated teeth right over my frayed nerves. "Let's go."

"You take a pod," he said, not moving. "I can't let those Dark Watch goons get the lab back."

Not only did he sound like a rebel from one of the trampled Sectors, but he acted like one, too. I knew I liked him.

"They won't," I told him. "I know exactly how to take it out of their reach. And a captain doesn't abandon ship."

Something in his eyes glinted, as though he might have approved.

With that, I thought we'd reached an understanding, but as I turned to leave, he leaped forward and snatched the medical bag from my hand. He'd moved fast. Super soldier fast.

I swung around with a glare. "I need that." If Fiona opted for a pod and actually managed to escape, I had no doubt she could eventually figure out how to use the samples for something good, like helping invalids left crippled by the war.

Shaking his head, he tossed the bag onto the metal lab table behind him, blocking my access to it with his huge body. I tried twice to grab it again, but he was incredibly quick and like a freaking building—impossible to get around.

"You're wasting time," I ground out, unable to ignore the screeching that was coming from the starboard door. It was getting louder. They were probably most of the way through.

"Get it later...if there is one." He jerked his hairy chin toward the exit in a get-the-hell-out-of-here type of way.

Metal cried out as though in pain, and the *Endeavor* gave a sickening groan. *Later* seemed entirely unlikely right now, especially given my plans.

*To hell with it.* I didn't reach for the bag again.

"Let's go," Big Guy said, herding me toward the door.

I was pretty sure that was my line, but we were headed in the same direction anyway.

We worked our way through the vacuum seal and air lock, closing them behind us again before hurrying toward the bridge, our footsteps accompanied by a deafening chorus of ship-wide alerts, hammers, and saws. The bridge doors slid open at my voice command, and all four of my crew members looked over at Big Guy and me—even Shiori, who couldn't see.

Emotion lodged in my chest. This was it—and not one of them was positioned over a pod hatch, let alone setting up for a scrambled, last-hope escape in one. They'd chosen, and I couldn't tell if my heart soared or sank. It definitely swelled.

"Where are the samples?" Fiona asked.

"Still in the lab." I strode to my console and silenced the blaring alarms, leaving only the visual readouts.

I looked pointedly at Fiona again. "And they don't matter if you're not gearing up an escape pod right now."

She opened her mouth to argue but then shut it. I'd announced that it was a pod or death, and my crew knew I always meant what I said. The two were likely synonymous anyway.

"I won't let the military take back the serum. They've been working on that enhancer since I was a kid, and if we stole their secret lab and their only batch, there's a good chance it'll take them years to create it again." And if my freakish blood really was the base ingredient, and they'd used their entire supply to produce those thousands of fake cure-alls, which my gut feeling told me they had, then they were about to be shit out of luck.

Fiona's brow furrowed. "How do you know they've been working on that serum since you were a kid?"

Ignoring her question, I informed them of my decision. "I'm taking the *Endeavor* and the false vaccines into the Black Widow. If you don't want to come with me, you need to get out *right now*."

The crew all looked at me with little surprise. In addition to categorically needing to keep the enhancer out of the Overseer's hands, we were out of time, and we'd run out of chances to get away. Capital punishment or, if someone was feeling *very* generous, life in jail were our only future options. It was really a no-brainer, at least for me.

The ship groaned again, and my console flashed to indicate a breach at the starboard door. Dark Watch goons were inside the air lock. They still had to break through the safety entrance, but that door was nothing compared to the outer wall.

Bridgebane's voice barked over the com. "I'm taking the Overseer's lab back, and you're all going to be court-martialed in Sector 12."

"Tell him who you are, Tess," Jax whispered, the scar on his cheek whitening from the tension in his jaw. "It'll stop him. Your father..."

I laughed. It burst out of me, awful. Then I squared my shoulders and told my best friend and first mate the one thing he still didn't know about me.

"My father handed me over to Bridgebane when I was eight years old, and only three days after my mother died, with strict orders to keep me in an air lock on *Dark Watch 12* until the ship was out of my home Sector and then float me into space."

Jax's jaw dropped. Miko gasped. Shiori stayed silent.

"Who the hell is your asshole father?" Fiona asked.

I glanced at Big Guy, who was staring at me. I didn't mind that he was here for the truth, but maybe that was because I wouldn't have to worry about it for long.

"Bridgebane is the one who took me to Starway 8, but he said if he ever saw me again, he'd do what my father first asked."

Jax cursed. "So Bridgebane is the good guy in all this?"

"Bridgebane is a bastard. And my name will only get us all killed faster than we're already going to get killed anyway."

"Who the hell is your asshole father?" Fiona practically snarled.

I wanted to snarl back what had always been in my heart. *That man has never been my father!*

"Who the hell are *you*?" Fiona demanded.

My pulse pounded so hard I heard it in my ears. Tess Bailey was about to die along with the rest of us. "I'm Quintessa Novalight."

My friend stumbled back against Jax's broad chest. That was the power of a name.

The blood visibly drained from Fiona's face. "As in Galactic Overseer Novalight's dead daughter?" she choked out.

Clearly, not so dead after all. Yet.

Nodding, I owned up to the name I hadn't used in years and to the family I wished I didn't have. "Daddy is the evil overlord of the galaxy, and Bridgebane is my uncle."

Everyone stared in shock, even Jax, who already knew who I was.

"So... No one's leaving?" I eventually asked, not surprised, but not happy, either.

No one spoke. The *Endeavor* rattled like a sick metallic animal and then groaned again hard.

"We're as dead out there as we are in here," Miko finally answered. No one contradicted her, so I figured she spoke for them all.

"Big Guy?" I asked, turning to the bearded man.

He just shook his head.

*Fine.* His choice, although I had no idea why. Maybe he was as wanted by the Dark Watch as we were.

"Power up, Jax, and get ready to punch it. Miko, set us ninety degrees to the left." Portside was nothing but the Black Widow. Devoid of all light, the huge, empty circle interrupting the stars looked like a bottomless pit and gave new meaning to the oft-used expression "endless Dark."

I turned away from the window, my stomach knotting. I feared the unknown as much as anyone else.

Focusing on my friends again didn't help. I had zero expectations for an afterlife. I'd never see them again. This was it.

I cleared the lump from my throat. "Strap in. Don't strap in. It doesn't really matter at this point," I said.

We'd never been much for emotional speeches, so I didn't give one. Shiori unbuckled herself from the captain's chair, got up, and felt her way to Miko. The two women stood side by side near the navigation controls, holding hands. Fiona and Jax stayed close together. I was alone. Except for Big Guy. He stayed pretty close.

My gaze returned to the black hole, as if drawn by its massive gravitational force. Twenty-six years, and it hadn't been a bad life, even if a lot of it hadn't been fun. I'd wreaked more havoc on the galactic government than most rebels could manage in five lifetimes. With the help of my crew, I'd kept the Outer Zone colonies from true starvation for years. And everything else I ever had, I gave to the kids on Starway 8. I didn't regret a thing.

And I was a Novalight. I wouldn't go out like a sigh in the Dark. I'd go out like a fucking bomb.

I reached for the external com and opened the line to Bridgebane. "Your boarding crew has thirty seconds to detach. After that, I'm taking the *Endeavor* and your *vaccines* into the Black Widow. Everyone on this ship would rather die than see that serum back in the hands of the Galactic



Overseer." I lifted my finger but then pressed firmly down on the button again. "By the way, this is Quintessa, and you can tell my tyrant father that I hate his fucking guts."

I pulled my hand off the com. The line went dead, then blinked red again.

"Quin?" Bridgebane said.

I counted down in my head. *Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight...*

"Let's talk, Quin," my uncle said. "Give me the lab, and I'll see what I can do."

*Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen...*

"I saved you, Quin. You owe me."

*Five, four, three, two...*

I turned to Jax, seeing the Black Widow looming through the wall of windows behind him. I felt a lurch and hoped it was the boarding cruiser beating a retreat.

"Quin!" Bridgebane yelled over the com.

A second later, the Dark Watch frigate fired on us. The resulting jolt nearly knocked me off my feet. Silent alarms flared all over my controls—pressurization compromised in three zones. Another blast like that, and they could disable us enough to hold us in place.

I gripped my console to steady myself. The *Endeavor* was a good ship. It was too bad I had to take her out.

Each beat of my heart felt like an explosion inside my chest.

*Some ends are just a new beginning...*

My mother's words to me, when she'd gotten so sick. Too sick for anyone to save her.

The Black Widow stretched before us, ready to snare us in her web. Nothing escaped a black hole. Not light. Not matter. Maybe not even a soul.

Slowly, I exhaled. Some ends were just the end.

"Hit it, Jaxon." I nodded crisply to my first mate.

Jax looked at me one last time. Our eyes met, and seven years of shared history struck me in a bittersweet rush. Then he grabbed Fiona around the waist and threw the hyperdrive switch with a cosmic roar.

I inhaled sharply. Everything blurred. My bones crunched, and my chest folded in on the thousands of things I'd still wanted to do as the *Endeavor* shot toward the event horizon—and the end of us all.