

# Gravlander



# Prologue

Jo hadn't heard her father laugh since the men came and took them from their home. In fact, four-year-old Josephine couldn't remember anyone laughing in the makeshift re-education camp on the icy moon Aetna, and that was a shame, because her heart's joy came from listening to her father burble when something amused him. She could picture how his sides would shake just so, his joy rippling through his excess weight. She loved the large man with the round head and wisps of blond hair with all of her might, often standing on her tiptoes to hug his soft waist.

But right now she stood behind her mother, clinging to the leg of her jumpsuit, forced to witness the punishment of a prisoner with all the rest of those who had been rounded up in the purge of their hometown, Utopia—a town Jo's father had once managed for the Unity Corporation. Jo had been proud when people had called her father Mayor, but no one did that anymore.

Jo watched with mingled interest and horror as the blood ran from the prisoner's cheek, where the guard was punching him repeatedly. She was so fascinated by the steady disintegration of the man's face that her father's voice startled her.

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“That’s enough! We’re all still citizens here, and I outrank you.”

Jo felt her father brush past her as he stepped forward and grabbed the guard by his thick arm.

The guard didn’t hesitate. He turned with his weapon already drawn and shot her father right in the chest. For a moment he stood there, looking down at the now spreading red, gasping for a breath that would not come, and then he collapsed.

Jo felt her mother jump at the sound of the weapon. As her father collapsed, she screamed and momentarily lost her grip on Jo’s twin brothers. Momentarily set free, the two eight-year-olds rushed toward her father while Jo twisted the fabric in her hands as tightly as possible.

The guard didn’t hesitate. After he shot them, the two boys fell to the ground next to her father. Her mother was hysterical now, wailing. Jo buried her head in the blue leg of her suit, hiding her face in its familiar smell.

The safety only lasted a heartbeat before strong arms ripped her away, pulling her from her mother’s grasp. Josephine screamed and received a fist to the side of her head for her efforts. Jo’s thoughts drifted, and the roar of the world faded to red and then silence.

Fifteen Years Later...



# 1

## The Anvil

The spacer held onto life by the thinnest of strands. His burned skin lay in blackened sheets, while the sinew and muscle below wept. To fight his wounds, he had so many emergency medical nanites in his blood that his stool would be an odd shade of gray for a month. Yet it wasn't the external injuries that threatened to kill him. His lungs had been so badly burned, they had swollen to uselessness.

Lieutenant Josephine Lutnear stared at the display projected by the screen of the heads-up device dropped down in front of her right eye. Her hands shook as they manipulated the swarm of nanites in the patient's body. *Don't you fucking let him die, Jo. Don't you dare be a shit doctor today. You fucking figure this out.*

Jo was working on her fourth patient without a break. She'd panicked when they wheeled in a second before the first had even left the operating suite. She was used to doing one surgery at a time.

Sixteen hours had passed since the first patient arrived on the hospital ship *Gallant*, twenty-two since

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the catastrophic meltdown and explosion on the advanced refueler *Regal*. Jo hadn't taken the time to find out how many casualties there were. Her ship had a capacity of nearly six thousand patients, and while they were nowhere near full, it was a measure of how bad the situation must be that her spacer was only now getting his first treatment from an attending surgeon. Most of their incoming had burns and radiation poisoning, while a few others were dealing with decompression-related issues and blunt-force injuries.

The Ghost Fleet contained just over nine hundred warships, including six such hospital ships designed to serve the one point two million spacers. Jo guessed that other hospital ships must have it much worse. The *Gallant* had been on the far side of the fleet when the reports started to arrive. Even now Jo could feel that they were maneuvering to get closer to the disaster.

Glancing up from her work, she frowned. Her heart beat faster. Speaking to one of the four nurses scattered around the table, she said, "Nora, watch that saturation level! Give him a bit more of the oxytrine. He's got enough troubles as it is; we don't need him hypoxic."

Nora spoke up, forehead beaded and lined. "He's not due for another five minutes. If I go now, we risk a heart problem. I'm not sure it's such a good idea to—"

Jo's cheeks flushed. "Just do it! *I'll* worry about his heart. He can't stay alive long enough to have a heart problem if he doesn't have any oxygen."

At nineteen, Jo was about to become the youngest general surgeon in the history of the fleet, and one of the youngest living surgeons in the galaxy. Her treatment record? Nearly spotless. In meatspace, she'd only lost two patients, and in both cases

someone else had been the attending physician. She had merely assisted. In the immersive simulations of intraspace, she was 642 and 12—a fleet record for any trainee since the advent of intraspace medical training. She was good at her job, and she hadn't come this far by letting anyone question her judgment.

The nurse answered with evident disdain. "Yes, sir."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Jo's conscience twinged. She could have stated that a little less harshly, but she didn't have time. Right now she was the surgeon in the room. It was her responsibility to make the hard calls, not the nurse's. *No one dies on my watch.*

Still, she didn't like pissing people off. Without pausing to look up, Jo tried to temper the woman's anger a little. She softened her tone. "He'll be all right once Dr. Evans gets back to us with a stasis chamber. Then the nanites can take care of anything we do to his heart."

Jo squinted in concentration behind her copper-threaded mask. Keeping her attention focused on the heads-up, she spoke to the nurse standing to her right. "Speaking of, it's been twenty minutes. Have we heard back from Evans?"

Jo could feel her hesitation. "Dr. Evans is in surgery," said the nurse. "I've tried to contact him, but I haven't heard back yet."

It had been many hours since she'd had a break, and perhaps it was the lingering anger at being questioned about the oxytrine, but whatever the reason, Jo felt herself go from relatively calm to instantly ready to scream in a flash.

Instead of yelling, she became still and gave the nurse a look as sharp as a scalpel. Controlling herself

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as best she could, her voice came out as a deadly snarl. "Then go down there and ask him directly! This patient will die without a chamber."

To be fair, the nurse had been working as many hours as she had, but to Jo, that was no excuse to become complacent when it came to the life of the patient.

Twenty minutes later, Jo pressed her mouth into a thin line as she watched over the heads-up display as Evans slowly scrolled through her patient's chart on a datapad. When she sent her nurse, he had refused to give her the chamber, instead wasting precious seconds by consulting with Jo. She had her doubts that he would have done this with any other doctor in the fleet.

When he spoke, Evans didn't look up from the pad. "Give the guy a skin tank with a forty percent hydrocolloid solution and double-strength dermagen, and give him a sedative for at least the next seventy-two hours. Under the circumstances, it's all we can do."

Jo hesitated. She held the rank of a lieutenant, finishing her internist's year before being granted a captaincy and the full title of general surgeon in the Ghost Fleet's medical core. Her junior position gave her no room to question a flight surgeon like Captain Evans. All she could really say was "yes, sir" and let it be, and in a situation where seconds mattered, that would probably have been the smart play, but it didn't help that Captain Evans was the one doctor who always used a condescending tone of voice when talking to her.

Jo's palms dampened. At first, her voice caught, and then, remembering the patient's life was at stake, became firm. "Dr. Evans, I'm not sure he would handle the intubation for the tank. His lungs are

pretty fragile as it is. If we could slow his metabolism down to give the nanites time to work—”

The senior doctor looked up, his smile forced. “Don’t question my orders, Lieutenant. I don’t have time or the inclination to explain them. Get the patient ready for a skin tank. I will send an orderly in fifteen minutes to transport him.”

Jo’s hands clenched. She tried to match Evans’ calm, but failed. “But, sir, without a stasis tube, he’ll drown in his own fluids! His lungs won’t handle it.”

This time, the senior officer’s manicured exterior fractured. Jo could see his eyes harden. “I’m not going to argue with you, Lutnear. You will obey my orders without question. Now do as I said or be relieved.”

Realizing she had crossed a line, Jo’s exhausted gut tightened further. She answered sheepishly, her face beet red. “Yes, sir.”

Evans’s voice continued to move from cold to deadly. “When I finally go off duty and have slept for a year, I *will* be writing you up for insubordination.”

Without waiting for her reply, the senior doctor ended the transmission.

Jo’s shoulders slumped as she stared at her patient’s chart on the datapad in her hand. Only when one of the nurses dared to touch her arm did she realize that she couldn’t remember anything the device had told her.

Toward the end of her shift, Jo held her patient’s hand while he died. She was more conscious of his death than he was. Alone, sitting in tainted scrubs, wearing bright blue gloves, Jo pushed down hard on tears that she had no use for. All the fleet surgeons knew that sometimes patients got inside a doctor’s walls, but they never talked about it.

The nurses let her be. On *Gallant* there was an unspoken rule that you dealt with your emotions on your own. Emotions could be intrusive and contagious. They were bad for morale. You didn't share them, lest you damage someone else's performance.

Jo felt angry, though furious might have been a better word. *I could have saved this one*, she thought. *I should have saved him. He deserved to live, and I fucked it up by blowing my cool with Evans. God, Evans is such an egomaniac. Maybe I could have talked with him, but that doesn't matter. I have to keep my cool. I can't let assholes ruffle me.*

When she was finally relieved, Jo fled to one of the quieter reading lounges on the ship and pulled out her heads-up. For the moment, she wanted nothing to do with the world of medicine or anyone on her stupid ship. The tears that she had suppressed now felt as if they had congealed in her throat. She needed a distraction, and she didn't want to be alone.

If she could have, she would have contacted her only remaining family member, her oldest brother, Teddy, but he was somewhere in the territory of Rhinegau studying physics, or at least that's what he was doing two years ago when she was last able to smuggle a message to him. The fleet Jo lived on couldn't stay hidden if the troops were always calling home, so talking with her brother was out of the question.

After her parents had been killed, Jo and Teddy had escaped the Unity with the help of Jack Holloway, a smuggler who had made a promise to their dying mother. Jo, Teddy, Jack, and his girlfriend, Anna, had become refugees in the galactic capital, Apollos. To the best of his ability, Holloway had made good on his promise, but he wasn't much of a parent. Jo and

Teddy had been mostly left to raise themselves. That is, until Jack and Anna had been targeted for assassination by the Unity government. Their crime? Knowing the truth about what happened on Aetna.

When the people had tired of their lousy treatment at the hands of the new administrator, they had dared to rebel. For their efforts, the Unity had pushed an asteroid into their moon, murdering everyone on the surface.

After the attempt on their lives, Jack and Anna, and by extension, Jo and Teddy, had become a *cause célèbre* for those states that opposed the Unity Corporation in the Empire. The four of them had found shelter in the palace of the King of Athena, a place where Jo had been the happiest she had been since her parents had died.

But it was all for nothing. Having secretly prepared for war, the Unity launched its assault on the Empire when she was twelve, only a few weeks after Teddy had left to study in neutral Rhinegau. Two years later, Jo, along with Jack and Anna, fled the final defeat of Athena in the Ghost Fleet. The ships had been her home for the last six years, and as far as Jo could see, they would be her home until the Unity destroyed them, they fell apart, or she died. It was not a prospect she looked at with any joy.

Jo put her heads-up back on, flipped the small screen down over her right eye, and pinged the man who had raised her, Jack, now a rear admiral. His aide-de-camp answered in a voice so dripping with sugar, it sounded like the way you might speak to a toddler. It instantly put Jo on edge.

“Josephine, sweetie? How are you? Is everything okay?”

Most of the time, Jo could shrug it off—*most* of the time. It wasn’t as if that kind of behavior didn’t

happen all the time. When you come on board as the only fourteen-year-old in a fleet that lost the war but escaped to fight another day, you become a kind of mascot, with all the impotence that goes with the position. Jo couldn't count the number of times that she had been referred to as a "symbol of hope" and a "reminder of home." That might have felt nice at fourteen, but now, as a nineteen-year-old lieutenant, Jo wanted to be treated like an adult. The problem was, for every year she aged, everyone else aged a year as well. She'd always be at least four years younger than any of the other sailors and most were much older.

Jo held down the lump in her throat. Despite wanting to bite Marla's smarmy head off, she kept her tone amiable. "I'm fine, Marla. Is Jack around?"

The aide hesitated, and Jo could see the lie in her eyes. She tried to sound unsure. "Well, honey, he's in a meeting. Is everything all right?"

*Bullshit, he's in a meeting. You let me talk to him, cow. It's not like I call often.* The last time she talked to Jack at work was probably over a month ago. Jo felt the knot in her chest expand. Her voice sounded shakier than she would have liked. "It's all right. I'll try again later."

She was about to disconnect when the aide caught her and said in her most condescending tone, "Wait a sec, honey. Don't go. Let me check with him first."

*You could have done that to start, bitch,* thought Jo.

There was a pause, and Jack's image followed. Jo could feel him leaning toward her even through the simulated display from his device. "Jo? Everything okay? Marla said it sounded like you were crying."

Jo felt the heaviness of her own disappointment descend on her. Jack really was busy; she could tell by

his tone and the way he sat. She hadn't wanted to make a fuss. She held up her hands and forced herself to sound almost chipper. "I'm fine, Jack. I'm sorry to bother you. It wasn't really necessary."

Jack's eyebrows lowered. Jo had the distinct impression that he hadn't bought it. "Okay. You sure? I'm about ready to head into a meeting with Jonas and the fleet commanders. After that, it might get a little crazy, so this is the only time I'll have for a while."

Jo sat up a little straighter. Until she entered medical school at age sixteen, Jo had grown up on the flagship of the fleet, the *HMS Ares*. Some part of her missed being close to the hustle and hearing all that was happening with the fleet. It made her feel even more isolated than normal to realize that things were going on without her knowledge. She leaned forward as she spoke. "So what's up?" The secure nature of the entangled particles used by the heads-up gave her no hesitation to talk about sensitive matters over the fleet comms.

Her surrogate father paused a little too long before he answered. He sounded overly smooth. "Nothing, really. We just picked up a few Unity ships gathering within striking distance of the Anvil. It's probably just an exercise, but out of an abundance of caution, we're getting ready, in case they somehow picked up on the *Regal* disaster."

"Do they have enough ships to engage us?"

"No, but they don't need to. All they need to do is push us a little, make us move before we find a way to replace our lost fuel, and we'll be in a world of hurt. The *Regal* represented about eighty percent of the tritium in the fleet. We'd run out of fuel really fast if we ended up in a fight."

Jo nodded to herself, her mind already engaging the problem. "Bastards! Sometimes I wish they'd just

come and finish us off. It's not like they don't know we're here."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, me, too. Then at least we could bloody their nose. I think that CEO Randal finds it more to his advantage to have us under his thumb rather than gone."

Jack paused for a moment, his expression showing that he was thinking about the problem. Then he shrugged a little and looked back at Jo. "So why did you call?" He used an off-hand tone that Jo recognized as asking her to get to the point.

Now that the moment arrived, Jo found herself questioning the importance of the call. *Doctors lose patients all the time*, she thought. *It's not a big deal*. She shrugged. "Nothing, Jack. I just hadn't talked with you in a while, and I finally got off shift and thought I would catch up."

As soon as she said it, Jo knew that it was a totally lame story. Jack was smart, and that meant that he knew she had just been treating patients from the disaster. It wasn't any ordinary shift, and she never called, but he didn't push the point.

"Ah, well, in that case, I really do need to get going. I'll get in touch soon."

"Sure thing. I'll talk to you later." Jo smiled as she disconnected her heads-up and took the device off. She leaned back and blinked hard. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and realized she felt more alone than before she called.

A cavernous one hundred and thirty-two meters of empty space spread out below Jo, hungry, patient, and waiting for her to make a mistake. Jo climbed to forget. It was the only thing she had found to do on the godforsaken fleet that let her pass beyond her frustration and aching loneliness. The more

dangerous the climb, the more she forgot. In her two years aboard the *Gallant*, she had only watched three people die. Yesterday, watching a man slowly drown in his own bodily fluids had been excruciating.

Desperate to avoid reliving that again, Jo wedged her left foot into the gap between two giant cooling pipes that fed the ship's power plant. She pulled the opposite foot up to the access joint far to the right, giving both feet contact with the face. Leaning back over the void, Jo reached blindly behind her to find the weld that was her next hold. This was the most toe-curling moment of the whole ascent. In a few seconds, she would carefully loosen both feet, gently swinging free.

Jo looked up at her only friend, Amanda, who was busy working her way around a bend and completely unaware of Jo.

Using the heads-up device, Jo sent a thought to turn off her anti-gravity safety belt. The computer squawked its protest, letting her know that she wasn't likely to be able to reactivate the device before she hit the floor below at a deadly speed. Jo overrode the protest and glanced back at Amanda. She hadn't noticed the computer's mewling.

Jo held her breath and pulled as hard as she could with her weaker left arm, gently letting her feet swing free as she did so. Reaching forward with her right hand, Jo sought out the large nut she needed to grab in order to carry her momentum upward. For a second, Jo dangled over the void, held up by three fingers. For a fraction of that second, she wasn't sure that she would find the hold, and for a piece of that fraction, she wasn't sure that she cared.

Later, Jo sat with her arms wrapped around her knees on a small platform left over from the ship's construction and reachable only by the climb. Not

only did the platform have a view of the main engine room, it also had a small porthole that looked out on the Anvil, the thick star cluster where the hidden Ghost Fleet lay. Jo sat staring into the void.

Amanda sat next to her. She was a floor nurse and six years older than Jo.

“You show the other doctors up, Jo.”

Jo sighed. Her shoulders slumped. “I’m just doing my job.”

Amanda opened her mouth to speak and shut it again. Her forehead wrinkled. She looked away from Jo, joining her in watching over the deep, cold dark. “Yes, you are, and everyone knows that you’re really good at it, but it’s the *way* that you do your job. Did you have to report Rollins for her screwup with the patient’s meds? Was it your job to correct Abrams’s procedure when the senior flight surgeon was right in the room? You might not like it, Jo, but it’s the truth—you are a nineteen-year-old upstart who’s only been doctoring for a few months, and you keep showing up those who’ve been doing it for a decade or more.”

Jo’s chest tightened. This wasn’t the first time she and Amanda had discussed her interactions with the other staff. “What am I *supposed* to do? Quit doing my best?”

Amanda leaned back on her elbows and shrugged. “I guess that would be one solution. The other is to just understand the tension you bring to the team. Maybe you could try going to them privately instead?”

Even with Amanda’s gentle criticism, Jo’s face flushed. She wanted to defend herself, to argue, but there wasn’t really a point. Instead, she mumbled, “Well, I wasn’t trying to show Evans up. He could have told me why.”

Her friend continued. “So you got a write-up from Evans. It’s not the end of the world.”

Jo looked up at the ceiling above her and rubbed the back of her neck, her voice louder than she intended. "But that wasn't..." She wanted to say fair but caught herself. It seemed childish. "That wasn't right. He never told me that the stasis chambers had all been filled. If he had just said that my patient was too far gone, that he would have taken too much time in stasis..."

Amanda shook her head. "He shouldn't have to. It was an order. You're a soldier and an internist. You follow orders."

Jo shifted uncomfortably, still annoyed. "Yeah, but unlike the rest of you, I didn't sign up to join this slowly unfolding fiasco. I wasn't given a choice." Her tone sounded harsh, even to her ears.

Amanda grunted her understanding. "How did you end up becoming a doctor, again?"

Jo shrugged. "It's the only serious academic course offered in the fleet. There really wasn't another option for me."

"So astrophysics wasn't good enough for you?"

Jo closed her eyes and leaned back against the bulkhead. "When your brother is studying at Rhinegau, it doesn't seem like a good idea to follow in his footsteps."

"You miss him?"

"Yeah. I miss him. He's the only family I've got."

"Isn't your dad some kind of admiral?"

Jo shook her head. "Jack's not my dad. My dad and my mom and my two brothers were murdered by the Unity when I was four." For Jo this was mere statement of fact, and sometimes she forgot the reaction it engendered in others.

"Oh, Jo, I'm sorry."

Jo shrugged, keeping her eyes closed. "It was a long time ago. I don't think about it anymore."

"And with a word, the mystery unravels."

Jo leaned forward and opened one eye. "What?"

Amanda smirked at Jo, arms crossed. "You make sense to me now. You can't relax, and you run people over without understanding that you do it."

Jo knew that she didn't get along well with the other people in the fleet, but Amanda seemed determined to needle her about it. Her stomach tightened, but she really didn't want to piss off her only friend. She was lonely enough as it was, so she tried not to sound too irritated and for once pulled it off. She smirked. "Okay, that's enough, Amanda. I didn't hire you to be my counselor." She hoped a gentle course correction would be enough to get Amanda to leave it alone.

Amanda didn't answer Jo's outburst. Instead she sat there unmoving with a small grin playing at the corners of her lips. After a beat or two she stood up as if nothing had happened. "If it goes on much longer, this fleet will tear itself apart. Six years of running away from the Unity. I thought we were supposed to take the war to them. Start a rebellion and bring hope to the galaxy."

Still mildly annoyed but grateful for the change in topic, Jo nodded her agreement. "Yeah, well it turns out starting a rebellion when the Unity has control of the whole galaxy is harder than it looks." She squeezed her knees more tightly to her chest. "I heard it was faulty maintenance that did in the *Regal*."

The two women fell silent. Jo turned her head back to the porthole next her.

There was a depth to the void in the Anvil, a depth not found in the deep dark of elsewhere. In the Anvil, stars lay so close together that the distances between them became almost perceptible. At their current position near the center of the cluster, eight hundred

and sixty-seven stars lay within a parsec of the fleet. There were just over forty-five thousand stars in total in the whole of the cluster.

Eventually, Amanda spoke. "How're you doing with losing your patient yesterday?"

Jo's anger rose up. She wanted to yell at her friend for meddling again, but after the feeling passed, she decided she was grateful. "I don't know, Mandi. I'm not..." She stopped, unwilling to face the tsunami of emotion. It wasn't just the patient—it was everything. *Does everyone die alone, with a stranger holding their hand?* She ended with a half-hearted shrug. "I don't know." Jo went back to looking outside.

In the Anvil, the crowding of too many stars into such a small space created a kind of stellar insanity, a continuous dance of hot plasma and radiation. One discontented star could erupt and send shivers through the whole. All that energy made it a perfect place to hide a fleet. It also made it the perfect place to destroy a fleet. Life in the Anvil was an alien import, ephemeral and tenuous. It could not take root in the light and fury.

Amanda spoke quietly and put a hand on her shoulder. "You get used to losing patients. I don't know if it's good, but it's true. Most of us went through what you're going through back before the Ghost Fleet ran, back when we thought we could win. It's hard."

Suddenly unable to speak, Jo just nodded. After collecting herself, she cleared her throat. "I'm tired, Mandi. I'm worn down to a nub."

Amanda spoke with biting irony. "You can always leave."

Jo laughed without mirth. "Yeah, right, and have my memory wiped back to the time I was fourteen. I'd

lose all my medical training and all my education. No. I won't do it. I'll find a better way."

Amanda broke Jo's dour reverie by giving her shoulder a gentle push. "If you find it, let me know."

Everyone in the Ghost Fleet knew that thinking too long only led to a dark place. Those who survived didn't dwell long in their heads; they kept moving. It was time to go.

Amanda turned and, reaching out, pulled Jo up.

Jo joined her at the edge of the platform and looked down, savoring the rush.

Flipping her heads-up down over her eye, Amanda put her back to empty space. The lights on her active anti-gravity belt shifted from red to green, declaring its readiness for any accidental falls. "Wouldn't surprise me if it's true..."

Jo looked puzzled.

"About the *Regal*. Discipline's getting lax. Something's going to have to change, or there will be real trouble. On the other hand"—she grinned—"in any other fleet, you couldn't do this."

Falling backward, she plummeted into the void. Careening blindly to the ground, she looked up at Josephine, grinning ear to ear, trusting the belt to catch her at the last moment.

At the end of their afternoon adventure, the two women clambered back toward the civilized parts of the *Gallant* through dark, unused corridors. Jo had to go on shift that evening, and she wanted to grab a nap before she started a twelve.

Scrambling over machinery and around huge pipes, Jo found herself replaying Amanda's words. Finally, she spoke. "You're right, you know. I should have talked to Rollins. That was a mistake. Abrams, on the other hand..."

“He’s a sexist dick, but he...”

Amanda stopped talking as the hull resonated with a metallic squeal and crunch. Josephine, who had been climbing over a giant pressure release valve, looked up. For just the briefest of seconds, an ominous hiss followed the bang, and then it stopped.

Instinctively, Amanda crouched down behind one of the many nameless pieces of machinery that kept this wonder floating in the void. “What the hell was that?” she whispered.

Jo shrugged and whispered back, “Meteor?”

“Maybe, but those things don’t usually make that much noise, unless it was really big, and they don’t hiss. They also tend to come in fast enough that the plasma shield kicks in.” Amanda stood up and grinned, shaking her head. “If it was a meteor big enough to make that kind of racket, it would have ripped the hull open, and we’re still here, so it didn’t.”

Jo signaled her agreement by standing up beside her friend. “Maybe that maintenance thing we were talking about on the *Regal* has caught up to the *Gallant*?”

Amanda seemed excited. “Could be.” She took off at a slow jog around the bend in the corridor. “We ought to check it out, just to make sure nothing dangerous is going on.”

Jo shrugged. Amanda was probably right, but Jo didn’t share her enthusiasm.

When she stepped around the corner, Jo was convinced she was going to die.

A deformed, gray-skinned person, over two meters in height, pointed his weapon straight at her. It was hard to tell for sure with those large, bulbous eyes, but Jo thought she saw surprise there ... and fear. With his weapon still leveled, he ripped his ancient breathing mask off his face.

*“Skvop! Aust skorpt trigen!”*

The Timcree were human, or at least they had been at one time. Their genetic modifications had created some debate as to whether or not the two groups could still interbreed.

Jo and Amanda froze.

Behind the man, three more tall, wiry persons stepped out of a gash that had been ripped in the hull of the *Gallant* by the nose of the Timcree intruder.

*How come the sensors didn't pick that up?* Jo wondered.

Water dripped from the ceiling where a pipe had been fractured by the impact. Still in his pressure suit, one of the four now stepped forward and examined them. After a second, he gestured with his hand. A series of clicks and tweets substituted for words. Without giving them another look, he turned and stepped back into the small attack vessel attached to the hospital ship.

Two of the other Timcree raised their weapons toward the women.