

Part One

Chapter One

The scream of the red alert cut rudely into Jess's dreams, waking her instantly. She sprang from her bunk and ordered the computer to shut off the alarm, then pulled on her bodysuit and raced the short distance from her cabin to the flight deck. She flung herself at the control panels. The flickering lights above the main computer console and the figures on the visual output screen demanded immediate attention.

Her fingers elicited no response when she ran them rapidly over the tactile command pads. She looked up and addressed the main computer panel. "Jaii, these readings are crazy. We're way off course and nothing's working on manual, either. I thought I'd fixed the fault. What's going on?"

The image before her wavered, the familiar features distorted.

Emergency, the J.A.II series computer intoned, with what sounded like a hint of panic. Serious malfunction of auto navigation array, inertia dampers and control systems, including shrouding device failure. Life support systems severely compromised. All systems currently operating on emergency power. Auto-repair systems unable to reverse degradation. Main drive calculated to reach critical mass in fourteen minutes and nine seconds.

"What? Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

Such action would have been pointless. You could have done nothing further. I anticipated that the auto-repair systems would keep the situation under control. When the position became unsustainable, I transmitted an emergency beacon before waking you.

"What are the chances of the signal being received?"

There is insufficient data to form an accurate prediction.

"A guess would do."

The image darkened as if about to fail completely, although a moment later it sputtered grudgingly back to life.

"Well, I can't see help reaching us before the ship blows," Jess muttered, her voice grim. She had only one course of action available.

She was heading in the direction of the emergency airlock and her escape pod when the computer's voice made her stop and turn back to the flight deck again.

It appears...the signal...has been answered. My sensors indicate a large starship on our trajectory. Available data shows that since it would have been outside the range of our sensors when the beacon was transmitted, it must have attained previously unrecorded speeds to reach us so quickly. We are currently being scanned.

Despite the distortion, combined with the gravity of the situation, Jess had a fleeting sense of something akin to amusement. The computer gave the impression of looking and sounding almost envious as it recited the data relating to the other ship's size and speed. The strange ship was obviously larger and more powerful than anything previously encountered—and phenomenally fast.

"It would help if our scanners were operational," Jess said in frustration. Frantically she activated another control, and the titanium shield covering the observation panel slid back.

"Well, at least something works." She gasped at the sight of the starship speeding toward her craft.

She took in the long, sleek lines of the main hull with its lethal-looking weapons array. The nacelles on each side gave the appearance of the backward sweeping wings of a gigantic bird of prey. Its graceful double tailfins glowed, radiating a pulsing, golden light.

Jess tore her gaze from the panel. Her situation was too critical to muse over the aesthetics of the unknown vessel. She had to leave her ship, and quickly.

Attention, the computer commanded. Imperative you eject in the escape vehicle immediately. Repeat, eject immediately. Life support systems are not sustainable. Drive mass will reach critical in eleven minutes and thirty-seven seconds. All functions deteriorating. I am no longer able...to...stabilise...

The electronic voice slowed and then faded completely, the image dissipating as if it had never existed. Jess swallowed, hard. For a long time the ship's computer had been her only companion. It was almost like losing an old friend.

She had no time for such sentiments, though. The emergency lighting flickered ominously. The instrument panels were shorting out and gave off a pungent smell of burning. As she sped toward the airlock, she fancied she heard a voice in her mind.

Listen closely. This is the starship Destiny. You need have no fear of us. Your ship relayed a distress signal, but the communication systems appear to be inoperative. This is the only way we could reach you. Our sensors indicate your drive core is approaching critical mass. You must eject from your ship at once. We will help you on board. You don't have much time.

After a moment's hesitation, wondering if she was imagining it, Jess felt compelled to obey the 'voice'

Leave your ship immediately and proceed as follows—

She stopped abruptly, and half turned. "I need to get something from my cabin."

There is no time. Whatever you have there will be destroyed anyway, as you will be, if you leave it any longer.

Reluctantly Jess agreed. She reached the airlock, boarded the escape pod and ejected from the ship. Guided by the mysterious voice, she skillfully maneuvered the capsule into a position adjacent to the starship's hull. Was she heading into a trap? She had no alternative. Her ship was about to self-destruct and the escape pod was not fast enough for her to outrun the explosion.

The control panel in front of her flashed wildly, a panorama of red telltales. Moments later it died as an unseen force pulled the small vehicle inexorably toward the *Destiny*.

There is no need for concern. You are in the grip of our tractor beam. Cut the power to your engines and we will bring you in.

Jess complied, and after a few moments the module came to an abrupt halt. She realised she had passed through the outer hull and was now in what was presumably the starship's main airlock.

She ran a quick sensor scan, which confirmed conditions on the ship were compatible with human requirements. She raised the hatch with some caution, stepped from the escape pod, and glanced around for signs of danger.

The 'voice' appeared to have left her. As she approached the inner lock, it opened slowly and she found herself confronted by a man with long, very blond hair, and a calm air of authority. He smiled reassuringly, but she noted the weapon at his hip. Although his stance was not threatening, she remained on her guard.

"I'm Jon Quinlan, commander of the *Destiny*."

"You're among friends," he said, using the customary Common Universal speech.

"Thank you," she said simply. "I owe you my life."

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Yes...I'm fine. But all my ship's control and navigation systems failed at the same time." She hesitated. "There's no reason why that should have happened. There was a slight navigation fault, but I'd rectified it and checked everything else thoroughly a few hours ago. I don't understand, unless—"

She bit her lip and broke off abruptly. It might be better not to mention the thought that only now occurred to her. He and the rest of the crew—and on a ship this size, presumably there was a crew—were strangers to her. Best keep her notions to herself until she was sure she could trust them.

"Was it you who contacted me on my ship, Commander?" she queried instead.

He smiled again. "Call me Jon, we don't stand on ceremony on this vessel. No, I'm not telepathic. That was one of our crew, Delian. You'll meet him shortly."

As he escorted her along a narrow corridor, she wondered again if she'd walked into a trap. For the moment, at least, it seemed she had no alternative but to obey her instincts and accept that they had saved her from certain death.

Eventually they stepped out of the trans-unit, onto what was evidently the main flight deck. She gazed around, trying to take in her new surroundings and the small group of figures ranged around the flight controls, obviously curious to see her.

A vivid white flash lit up the main observation screen. Jess and the others on the flight deck shielded their eyes and looked away for a moment.

Destruction of the unidentified spacecraft, as predicted, is confirmed. The Destiny is at a sufficient distance from the explosion to have sustained no structural damage. All systems currently register normal.

The voice was authoritative, female, and, Jess realised, must belong to the *Destiny's* main computer. Apparently, in keeping with common practice on well-crewed ships, it was deemed unnecessary to provide holographic imaging to go with the vocal interface.

"Thank you, Metisa. It appears we only just brought the capsule on board in time." The speaker was an imposing man with dark, slightly curling hair and a sombre expression. Seated before a complex control panel, he did not look up.

At the confirmation of her craft's destruction, Jess felt a sharp pang of loss, for the second time in the space of a few minutes. She remained silent, uncomfortably aware of the curious stares of the rest of the crew.

"Sorry about your ship," Jon said gently. "I wish we could've done something to save her. When we received your distress signal, we ran a computer analysis. The conclusions were obvious. The only option was for you to abandon her before her drive reached critical."

The stern-faced man turned to look at her now. His blue eyes, cool as gunmetal, fixed on her until she felt herself blush under his relentless scrutiny.

He smiled slowly, as if unaccustomed to such an action. He was, in fact, very attractive when he smiled. "Welcome aboard."

The commander nodded in his direction. "Let me introduce Kerry Marchant, second-in-command."

Although Jess still could not help feeling a little suspicious, she managed to smile back at him with a degree of confidence she did not feel.

"I guess you'd better meet some of the others."

Jon turned to a girl whose cropped hairstyle heightened her dainty, almost impish looks. "Laitha Callahan's our astro-biologist and ecologist."

A small, neat girl stepped forward, holding out a friendly hand. She appeared to Jess to be barely out of her teens. Despite her rather unprepossessing aspect, she nevertheless radiated a vivaciousness that went beyond physical appearance.

"Hi, nice to have another woman on board. You'll meet Zeldra later on, but she's a lot older than me and I feel kind of outnumbered here." She rolled her eyes disparagingly. "No one ever pays me a moment's attention, that is, unless there's something unpleasant that needs doing, which no one else wants to attend to."

She chortled loudly, and Jon chuckled. Laitha's hearty laugh was infectious. Even the solemn second-in-command had a twitch at the corner of his mouth. Jess could not help adding a smile, and felt she might have an ally in the girl.

Jon indicated two men who stood by the communication panel, obviously brothers. Almost identical, both with short beards, their pale skin created a sharp contrast to their black hair.

"Delian and Ragin," he informed her, "are from Earth Colony Niflheim. They're telepathic and telekinetic, like all Nifls." As the two men smiled in greeting, he continued, "It was Delian who telepathed a message to you so we could get your escape-module on board."

Jess nodded at the brothers, wondering if she would ever be able to tell them apart.

"You'll meet the other two members of the crew, Berne and his wife, Zeldra, when we eat, later on. We all try to take our evening meal together."

Jon paused, clearly waiting for her to introduce herself in return. "I'm Jestine Darnell," she announced, after a slight hesitation. "I'm usually called Jess. I'm a citizen of Earth."

"You are rather a long way from home," Kerry Marchant remarked archly, "considering how small your ship was."

"She was a Category 'A' hyperspeedster." Jess tossed back her long hair, a hint of pride in her voice as she defended her lost ship. He was right though. She was a long way from Earth. She searched for a plausible explanation. "I'm a...a trader. I was returning from..." she hesitated again, "...from Aquarius Seven."

"Really?"

Was it her imagination, or was there something more than polite interest in Kerry's voice? She sensed he somehow knew she'd lied about her origins. Why did he not challenge her, then?

"We're from Earth too," Jon said. "Originally, I mean."

"Have you heard from Earth lately? How are things there?" she asked. "I...I've been away a long time."

"You've not missed much," the second-in-command commented. "Not a great deal has changed. According to the most recent information, it's still pretty much the same oppressed 'trading post' it always was."

"You don't care too much for Earth, then?"

His glance was frosty as he replied, "Are you surprised? Any scope for initiative or freedom of thought is stifled by the Union and its tyranny. Its petty laws and restrictions do not conform to my idea of what makes an ideal home planet."

"That's partly why the *Destiny* was built," Jon added. "Although she's basically an exploratory vessel, designed to investigate the far reaches of space, I guess we were all beginning to feel our lives had become dull and eaningless. The ship gave us a chance to escape the domination of the Union, to face new challenges."

Jess studied him thoughtfully. He seemed genuine enough. She wanted to trust him, but perhaps she should wait a little longer before telling him about Phidia.

She could not afford to wait too long, however. Who knew what might be happening there now?

After the somewhat cramped conditions of her own craft, Jess found the quarters assigned to her on board the *Destiny* frankly luxurious. Everything about the great starship fascinated her, and Jon and Kerry showed her many of its mysteries.

The basic principles of the sophisticated hyperdrive, which enabled the *Destiny* to accelerate from standard cruising speed to many times that of light, together with the highly complicated system of time-dilation stabilisation, the bio-neural cell structures and automated flight controls were similar to those on her own ship. They were refined to such a degree, however, as to make her little hyperspeedster seem almost primitive by comparison.

"The main source of fresh food for the crew is from here," Jon told her as he showed her around the vast hydroponics section. Laid out to represent a garden on Earth, avenues of trees bordered banks of shrubs and flowers. Jess marvelled at the diversity of vegetables and fruit, many of them of extra-terrestrial origin in exotic shapes and colours. A glorious mixture of scents drifted toward her as she took in the almost overwhelming shapes, colours and textures. "The computer controlled synthe-units, while capable of producing satisfactory foodstuffs, are mainly for the supply of items of clothing, tools and other articles. I guess most of us prefer our food to be natural." He paused. "Did you have a hydroponics unit on your own ship?"

Jess nodded. "Yes, although it wasn't nearly as large and well laid out as this."

She was also impressed by the well-equipped sick bay. Zeldra and Berne Kristiensen, the ship's medics, took pride in showing her around. It contained some of the most advanced equipment she had ever seen, much of it linked to the computer.

"As you can see, we're prepared for any exigency," Zeldra said. Her eyes shone with enthusiasm and her smile dispelled the severe impression she tended to project at first sight.

"Metisa's memory banks contain the knowledge of Earth's greatest surgeons and physicians. Earth's greatest. There's no surgical procedure so complex and dangerous we couldn't deal with it," Berne added, grinning broadly. Built like a small mountain, he, too, had seemed a little intimidating when she'd first met him. Still, Jess found it difficult not to feel at ease with someone with such kind eyes, who radiated such easy-going friendliness.

She could not help feeling a certain apprehension, however, when it came to the telepaths, Delian and Ragin. Could they read her thoughts? The feelings of peace and friendship that filled her mind when Delian "spoke" to her telepathically on board her ship had been so strong, however, she felt sure she could trust them. Nevertheless, she tried to keep her thoughts on purely routine matters when she was near them. Some things she would rather keep to herself.

"Do you ever want to go back to Earth?" Laitha asked, as they relaxed by the viewport after their evening meal. Jess forced herself to concentrate on what Laitha was asking. Her mind had been on Phidia, which was always there, impossible to ignore.

"I miss it sometimes," she confessed, "but I love space and travelling. It's something I've always wanted to do."

"Me too," Laitha agreed. "I've no family, no ties, so there's nothing to keep me there, and I was fed up with the conditions there, like we all were. Jon's a very distant cousin and my only living relative. When he asked me to join him on the Destiny I was only too glad to get away from Earth." Before Jess could reply, Laitha went on, "What about your family, were they happy about you choosing space as a career?"

"Both my parents are dead now," Jess said, trying to keep the sadness from her voice. "My father was killed when I was a baby, he was lost in a starship accident. Because of that my mother was very much against me training to be a space pilot, but she came around in the end."

Laitha leaned across the table they shared and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "I didn't mean to stir up old memories."

"It's all right, you didn't know. My mother died suddenly a year ago, on Earth, and I've always regretted not being there with her at the end. We were very close."

"D'you have any other relatives?"

"Not now. My grandfather lived to a great age, but he died just after I graduated from Orion. I was so glad he lived to see it. He persuaded my mother to let me accept a scholarship and attend the Space Pilots academy in the first place."

Laitha shot her a quick, admiring glance before adding, "So you're all alone now, like me."

Jess allowed herself the hint of a smile. "I suppose so—but surely you have friends on board this ship?"

"Yeah, I guess. But no one in particular. What about you, have you any men friends—lovers—stashed away?"

Jess laughed aloud at her directness. "No, nothing like that. I had a few boyfriends at Orion, of course, but that's all they were, friends. There was one...but we were too young, our studies were more important and we drifted apart. There's been no one since."

Laitha drank deeply from her glass. "Good!" she said with her deep, infectious laugh. "Men are more trouble 'n they're worth. We're better off without 'em."

"Does that include your cousin?"

Again, Laitha chortled. "Distant cousin," she corrected. "Nah, he's okay, I owe him a fair bit, and

he's a pretty reasonable guy, considering."

Coming from Laitha, this appeared to be high praise and confirmed the conclusion Jess had reached, herself. If there was one person on board the ship in whom she might be able to confide, it was Jon. She knew she would have to tell him the truth soon, though. She'd already been on board the Destiny for several days and time was running out. She might be able to persuade him to help her, even though she no longer had anything with which to bargain. The Phidians trusted her. She owed it to them to try to fulfil her promise...their way of life, their very world might depend on it.

She brought her mind back to the present as Laitha drained her glass and, standing, grabbed hold of her arm.

"Come on, let's go over to the recreation deck and see what computer games Metisa can rustle up for us."

Kerry, by contrast to the rest of the crew, was something of an enigma to Jess. She noticed his attitude toward her becoming increasingly cool.

Quietly spoken, often taciturn, he was clearly possessed of a brilliant mind. Although slow to volunteer information, if she asked a specific question relating to either the Destiny or Metisa, he became completely involved with the subject, explaining simply but precisely. However, she could not persuade him to talk about himself, which naturally made her all the more curious about him. She frequently felt his scrutiny as if he were waiting for her to give herself away, although she could think of nothing she had said or done to arouse his suspicions.

This was not the only thing about Kerry she found disturbing.

She was coming to know the ship almost as well as she had known her own vessel. A skilled pilot herself, she was happy to tackle many of the routine operating tasks, plus some of those that were not so routine. Despite his aloofness, she found herself learning a great deal from Kerry. She observed the way he handled the ship, the instructions he gave to the computers. It seemed like second nature to him.

On one occasion, at Jon's direction, she was perfecting a complicated navigational manoeuvre with the manual controls, under Kerry's supervision.

"She's a large, powerful ship," he said, "and needs handling with a delicate touch. Too much pressure and you would lose her." Jess glanced at him, frowning. Perhaps the ship wasn't the only thing that needed delicate handling.

He placed his hands lightly over hers to guide them, and to her embarrassment, she felt her heart thud uncomfortably against her ribs and a blush of colour burn her cheeks.

"This is exactly the position these controls need to be in relation to each other, when the readings here, and here, correspond to the coordinates already set."

To her relief, he appeared not to notice her unease. For a moment, his eyes met hers. She saw they were no longer expressionless, but alight with the pride and enthusiasm he felt for the ship. She looked away quickly to concentrate on the data in front of her, forcing herself to ignore the feelings stirring deep within her. She felt privileged that he and Jon allowed her to handle the controls, and determined to make the most of the opportunity to pilot the immense starship, without any distraction.

Besides, she had a mission to accomplish. She had enough to worry about; she didn't need added complications. She thought of the blaster hidden in her cabin. All the crew had free access to the ship's arsenal, and because there was no one else on board the ship, there was no reason for stringent security. She'd found it relatively easy to take the gun when no one was around, but she knew if its loss was discovered she would have to act very quickly.