

Sub Martis:  
STARSHIP

Chapter One

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## 1 BOOTCAMP

The sleek, red twin-finned craft rose to the apex of its flight and tilted like a predatory bird, to descend in a lazy double spiral that left a trail of azure haze through the thin Martian atmosphere. The trail had traced a figure eight across the rose-hued sky.

“Two points off for being a smartarse,” Lieutenant Copper Milkstone commented to her friend Lieutenant Linen Lyrican as they watched the display from the vantage of the observation deck of the Flight Dome of Beagle One Basecamp, one of Mars Fleet Academy’s training stations. “I hope we’re not expected to do that after another month’s training.”

Linen turned to look at her friend. “You mean you haven’t done the figure eight manoeuvre in flight training simulations?” she asked, her gold-flecked eyes glowing in mock surprise.

“No. And neither have you, so cut it. I’ve seen your results and you’ve only had one perfect landing out of three in sims and *that* was in a standard military shuttle.”

Copper leaned back in her chair to look up again through the overhead dome. “See that, he’s sending out a green trail now,” she noted. “Flight instructors! We should be up there practising, not sat here watching him show off his paces in a fancy fighter.”

“He’s the one in the classy uniform with the gold wings and insignia that says he’s the boss,” Linen shrugged. “Besides, as an instructor he needs to keep his flight hours up, doesn’t he?”

“He gets plenty chance taking rookies like us up. And talking of classy uniforms, who the hell did they get to design these fizzing jackets?” Copper complained, running a finger around the inside of her collar. “Gray Woodelms it certainly wasn’t.”

“Itch Factor Incorporated,” redheaded Linen grinned. “They should have got my Ma: she’d have built in a comfort factor and more pockets. Never mind, we’ll be in flight suits later for yet more flight training. They wouldn’t let any of us loose solo in a fighter unless we can show we can handle one upside down, backwards and falling out of the sky with no engines.”

“That’ll be the sol: on two months basic training that seems to be stretching to four, none of us will get near that standard. Here we are, Class Alpha Zero One out of the new and exciting Beagle One Basecamp and the pride of Mars Fleet Explorer and Space Corps and what have we got: at least another month of endless flight sims, classwork, physical jerks, memorising rules and regs even God’s never heard of, washing our socks, spit-polishing our billets, saluting our seniors and whatever else they throw at us! Weren’t we promised only six sevensols basic in boot and then on-the-job training with whatever base or ship we’re assigned to? In our case the almighty *MSS Drake II*, with the scary Colonel Elle Chryse Moritz in the command chair.”

“We signed up, though I admit we *were* actually pushed into it by the aforementioned scary Colonel Moritz and promised six sevensols of officer training in bootcamp and we’ve done that already and then some. But they reckon we’ve *all* at least another six as the new squadron’s not near ready to launch yet – though you can bet that most of our teammates will not be assigned to any of them. But let’s face it, although these uniforms aren’t a cut above the rest, once we get the *Drake’s* insignia attached to our jackets, we’ll stand out in any crowd.”

Although most were not destined to become pilots, all new recruits to Mars Fleet’s fast-track officer training scheme were given basic flight instruction and those with aptitude or previous training were expected to continue. As both Copper and Linen had completed their basic flight tickets and were qualified to fly short-range mid-atmospheric civilian craft,

they had little option but to spend part of almost every sol in flight simulations or in actual flight with an instructor either aboard with them or watching every manoeuvre they made from a station on base, with the facility to take over control should he or she so wish.

Aboard their assigned starship the duo knew that they would be classified as science specialists, both being part of the way through their PhDs under the auspices of Lowell College of the University of Mars, but in common with their newly-recruited peers they were doing the groundwork that would bring them up to the standard required for junior officer ranks aboard any ship of Mars Fleet. Unlike their fellows, they knew the identity of the ship in which they were to serve, but this they had agreed between them to keep under wraps. Bound for the flagship of a new squadron of top range vessels that would be heading out on a shakedown cruise, they suspected that a degree of envy might result that could make life a tad uncomfortable if it were widely known. Holding the ranks of lieutenant whilst in training as a result of their first degrees plus their tertiary education, they had already fielded sufficient flak from those of their cohort that had been assigned the training rank of ensign.

“Here’s Instructor Captain Meltdown on the way in, so we’d best look sharp,” Linen announced as she stretched lazily.

“One sol you’ll accidentally call him that to his face and it’s you that’ll be for meltdown,” Copper warned. “Where the hell are Blazells and Dingle? Aren’t they supposed to be watching every move with us and profiting from the experience?”

“Grabbing a last caff in the mess, I’ll bet. They’ve seen all this before, just like us. Talk of the devil... you guys have just missed the magnificent Meltdown showing his wings.”

“One sol he’ll land on his nose and it’s his underwear he’ll be showing,” Copper prophesied.

“Hope I’m there to see it,” Linen shot back. “You two ready for a trip in the four-man trainer?” she asked the newcomers.

“Depends who’s at the helm for lift-off,” Gadget Blazells responded. “If it’s you, Lyrican, I want a back seat.”

“You don’t need to pack your sick-bag just yet, Blazells, Lieutenant

Milkstone's in the hot seat for this jaunt," Linen told him, her face creasing in a smile. "But let's go meet Captain M, he's obliged to brief us before we take off and then watch every manoeuvre from his control seat. We could always reprogram his flight-schedule pad with the Leisure Dome as our endpoint this trip and stop off for an hour?"

"Then we'd be grounded and it would be your fault," Copper told her. "This is Mars Fleet's Basecamp Beagle, not Pillinger Junior School's Detention Centre for unruly students. Besides, as the Leisure Dome doesn't have its own spaceport, we'd have to land at the main spaceport and take a land shuttle. You try sweet-talking Beagle Port Control into letting us land without a permit."

"Sometimes I wonder how you two made it in here," the earnest Dingle put in. "You don't strike me as Service material."

"We got drafted, more or less," Copper informed him sourly as the foursome strolled off the observation deck and across the hall in the direction of one of several briefing rooms.

"How come?"

"Relatives in the Service that thought they knew better than we did," Linen lied smoothly. "And promised us no more than a month and a half in boot. They fibbed. How come you ended up here, Dingle? You're not exactly Service material either."

"Couldn't find a job after my degree that paid any better and I'd gone through cadet training in school and quite liked it. The recruitment office said it was similar here, only more advanced *and* I was virtually guaranteed the training rank of lieutenant."

"And you believed them? You mad fool."

"Tell me about it: cadet school was a holiday camp compared to this, and I'm only an ensign and will be when I'm assigned," Dingle said mournfully as he led the way into the briefing room. "After the breeze they call the Service Entrance Test, this comes as a shocker."

The four spun out the time in casual chitchat until Instructor Captain Max Meldyn stalked in. His uniform was standard issue for his rank, but he wore it as if it *had* been designed by the celebrated Gray Woodelms for the hero in a high-budget tri-dee holo-flic. His teeth shone at his four

trainees.

“Right, let’s get to it, people. Sit,” he commanded. “We’ll go over your route and then we’ll see if you know the inside of the Ares-Class Mark IV four-man shuttle as well as you know your own backsides...”

Forty five minutes later the four trainees had escaped to the hangar, suited up and were slotting themselves into their allotted positions. As Flight Captain, Copper soon had them organised.

“Lyrican, you’re navigator and comms on the outward leg. You’ll take over on the way back Blazells, but for now you’re weapons: we’ve a logged short stopover at the mil base out to the north of Mendel Dome but meanwhile keep your hands on the trigger in case our instructor lets loose unscheduled target drones. Dingle, you’re survey and mapping and make sure you keep your eyes peeled: you can bet Ground Ops have moved a few mobile work domes around since the navi-comm self-updated. Web in people, we haven’t got all sol.”

“You don’t need to sound so efficient, our talk’s not being monitored,” Linen told her friend.

“Want to put credit on that? I bet this thing’s got more bugs than a flea-infested sewer,” Copper responded as she called in to their local flight control to confirm their status.

Having carried out the obligatory pre-flight safety checks and obtained the relevant permissions, she set for taxi to the take-off pad. As she had several hours of sims and actual flight under her belt and was well able to handle a civilian version of the craft, she lost no time in further chat. Once airborne, she set the small shuttle on course for their first scheduled destination of a newly established military station beyond Beagle’s most northerly sub-dome, Mendel.

Beagle One Basecamp was a recently-established facility for training fast-track recruits to the Fleet branch of the Service, the body on Mars charged with planetary defence and similar vital concerns. After a widely-publicised increase in fleet recruitment, owing to a surge in outer system exploration for new resources and the building of new starships to carry out the work, several such new training centres had been established planet-wide. Beagle One was located to the west of and beyond the

ancillary systems dome that served Beagle’s central dome, Pillinger; it had once been a drilling site for water ice extraction. The Basecamp comprised a main base dome, a flight training dome with attached launch site and a dormitory dome where both trainees and instructors lodged. Despite its designation as Beagle One Basecamp, there was no Beagle Two.

The small training shuttle cleared the basecamp and followed a north-easterly course in order to avoid overflying populated centres. The planned course took the craft between Mendel, the most northerly habitation dome of Beagle Complex, and the Astrobiology Field Dome, a prestigious science centre under the auspices of Mars Deep Mining Consortium that Copper and Linen knew very well, it being the field base for their PhDs. Linen pointed this out to their fellows as the glittering plas-crystal of the AF Dome’s upper sections slid by on their left.

“Aren’t you cutting by a tad close, Milkstone?” Dingle asked anxiously from his rear seat.

“Check your chart, Dingle: we’re flying over the north end of the new sub-tunnel route that will eventually link the spaceport and the AF Dome. And as I’ve set a straight line for Beagle One Military Station, that takes us this close – as long as nothing’s thrown at us to cause us to divert.”

“Confirmed,” Linen put in from the navigator’s position at Copper’s side. “Doesn’t seem to be much action going on as far as the tunnel goes,” she went on. “You charting it, Mr Dingle?”

“I’m charting,” he replied automatically. “But I guess most of it is underground, so we won’t see much surface works.”

“We have another craft in our sights,” Copper noted a short time later. “Let’s check it out. This is Flight Six-Five-One-Three out of Beagle One Basecamp on a training mission east of you. Do you read us, over?”

“Loud and clear Six-Five-One-Three! This is Flight Alpha Two-One-Niner out of the Astro-Field Dome en route to the north, over,” a well-known voice replied.

“It’s Kezza and the Amber-Scamper!” Linen exclaimed.

Intensely conscious that they were possibly being monitored, Copper tabbed her link and replied formally. “Well met, Captain Brownpelt! Copper Milkstone, Flight Captain. I take it you’re heading to the Warren

site station, over?”

“We are, in atmospheric flight; is Linen with you, over?”

“I certainly am, Kezza. Great to hear from you,” the redhead cut in without as much as a by-your-leave. “Flying high, I see. How many have you aboard and who are they?”

Before she could add anything further Copper’s voice cut in with a warning of incoming and a curt directive to Blazells to man his station and target the blips she could see on her screen.

“Six-Five-One-Three diverting eastwards. Have a good trip, Alpha Two-One-Niner, out. Get those damn drones, Blazells!”

As Copper activated the crew protection gear and felt the webbing tighten round her, she hauled back to pull the shuttle’s nose up in an effort to avoid one light-drone that had ducked the virtual fire of her craft’s weapons. Acutely aware that this was not a simulated flight and that she had three other bodies to safeguard, she increased acceleration to reach a clear area of sky. It was Linen, manning the secondary weapons station, who took out the remaining drone.

“Well done, Flight Six-Five-One-Three: confirm destruction of all your targets,” the voice of Instructor Captain Max Meldyn came in over the comm. “Continue your mission and return to base as directed.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him to try that again,” Blazells snarled angrily from the back. “He was listening in! You shouldn’t have started that chat with your buddy on the other flight,” he added irritably to Linen. “Bet that’s what triggered it.”

“If your fingers and eyes had been where they *should* have been, I wouldn’t have had to take out that last drone for you,” Linen returned equably.

“Cut the chat people and attend to your business,” Copper ordered. “We dissect this flight back at base. Lyrican, plot us the most effective direct line to Beagle One Military Station.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Linen responded with a twinkle in her eye as she complied speedily.

The shuttle reached its endpoint without further trouble and after a rapid about-turn and a reordering of positions they were on the return leg.



The sage Captain Meldyn thought it prudent to retest their reactions by sending up another clutch of light-drones but no other trials were aimed at them and they touched down at Beagle One Basecamp on time.

Blazells' recriminations against Linen continued as the four made their way from the re-pressurised hangar to their assigned briefing room, despite Copper's sharp instruction to button it. Their instructor, a sardonic grin on his face, was waiting to greet them but the anticipated ear-bashing did not materialise. The flight was gone over meticulously and no blame apportioned, although Meldyn requested to be apprised of their connection with the captain of the passing flight.

Captain Kezza Brownpelt was in fact the pilot of the second dual-operational land-hover shuttle belonging to the Amberline research group, to which Copper and Linen officially belonged. It had been heading out to the Amberline research site at which they had both worked before being assigned to the Fleet as trainees. The captain was also the niece of Linen's ex-landlord back at Lowell Dome Complex and hence the redhead knew her well. The details were retailed to Meldyn as briefly as possible: that Copper and Linen were PhD students was known but the extent of their work and the prestigious group of which they were still effectively a part was not common knowledge and for various reasons they preferred it that way.

Linen wiped imaginary sweat from her brow as the four, now released from duty, were allowed to depart and make their way across to Main Base Dome for well-earned mugs of caff.

"That went well," the redhead said, selecting her drink.

"No thanks to you," Blazells retorted.

"We weren't penalised," Copper pointed out. "You're lucky he didn't drop a point off you for missing that light-drone."

"I think we did okay," Dingle put in. "As a team, we're quite good. Maybe they'll match us up next time as well?"

Copper's glance at her friend clearly spelt out that she hoped not: she had seen enough of the other two to last her until the end of their training. All she said, however, was that she hoped their furlough would be announced soon as it was high time. As they were heading into what

normally would be rest-sols for a large proportion of Mars' citizens and were more or less half way through their extended stint, it would be a logical time.

"You could sweet-talk Captain Meltdown and find out about our leave," Copper said to Linen once their two colleagues were safely out of earshot. "He likes the cut of your jib."

"He likes the cut of anything female and stylish that's half a decade younger than he is," Linen countered. "*And* that he thinks worships his every word," she added impishly. "But I'll give it a go after our next class if I see him: navigation isn't it?"

"It is," Copper said briefly. "We'd best down the rest of this and go fish our learn-pads from out our lockers."

"At least we must be *close* to our first and only furlough," the redhead went on. "We were told it was about half way through our training, weren't we? And we don't have far to go, as we have our own place in Beagle."

"Your Grammy's place, you mean," Copper corrected her.

"Thanks to Grammy, but she told us in no uncertain terms that it was ours for the duration. Unit Five, Court Nine, Road Five off Memory Avenue. Make the rest of them jealous..."

"I wouldn't go broadcasting it, half of them are jealous of us as it is," warned her friend. "And everybody will want to come along for a party and free billets, and given some of the rum recruits we have in our class, you don't want them abusing your Grammy Magenta's stuff. *And* they will."

"You have a point. But from what I hear, most of them are hatching plans of their own, after a party somewhere in Pillinger Dome, once we know about the timing."

"Why don't we suggest Dirty Deneb's for any party? If they did damage there, you'd never notice."

"Another good point," Linen agreed, nodding. "And we could hobble as far as my Ma's place if we didn't want to face the longer walk home," she added.

"Talking of fam-units, I had a link from Majorelle," Copper mentioned

as they marched along to the line of lockers.

Majorelle Moritz was a friend of the two who had once lived next door to Copper in the Kellyn family unit on Road Eleven in Lowell Dome Complex and had paired with their old friend Lofty, the owner of a somewhat downmarket diner that they, as impecunious students, had patronised regularly. She was also the niece of Colonel Elle Chryse Moritz, whose introduction into their lives had since seemed to lead to nothing but trouble.

*“I didn’t,”* Linen declared. *“Why didn’t she copy to me?”*

*“Because it was a tip-off about Ma Kellyn; Ma’s still peeved that I flitted from her place when we started training here, but – wait for it – according to Malachite’s landlord Pa Larimar, Ma has apparently expanded her little property empire again and has landed a block of ex-rental apartments in Beagle Central, of all places. How Pa Larimar found out Malachite doesn’t know, but with Malachite working at Lofty’s and knowing Majorelle once had an apartment at Ma Kellyn’s, he passed it on. If it’s true and knowing Ma, she must have snapped them up for a song. But as she’s no doubt looking to rent them all out speedily, Majorelle warned me in case Ma calls to try to rent me one. They’re on some backstreet called Skady Lane, wherever the blazes that is.”*

Linen began to laugh. *“Better known to the locals as Shady Lane. It’s at the end of a private road that starts at Blur Street, passes the back gate of Beagle Law Enforcement HQ and links with the far end of Skyring Street. It’s the teeny bit of road that begins at the end of Skyring and cuts through to Zaranj Street, not that far from Styllaflax in fact, but over the back,”* she went on, naming a small fashion store that was run by art students from Beagle College and to which she had dragged a reluctant Copper some time before.

*“But so close to Central, apartments can’t come cheap,”* her friend objected. *“How could Ma afford a whole block?”*

*“If apartments you call them,”* the redhead grinned. *“It used to be Law Enforcement’s accommodation block for rookie cops and junior officers that were assigned to Beagle Central. Most of them didn’t stay long, by all accounts. But it’s surrounded by what looks like cut-price warehousing, or*

was once. It's maybe so underused it's being sold off. I expect the newbies have to find their own lodgings these sols. Your ex-landlady *will* have picked it up for a song, though: you know Ma Kellyn and all this way away from Lowell it would have had to be a bargain price, even given Ma's legacy from her late Uncle Whatsit at Phoenix."

"Uncle Singeol Kellyn," Copper reminded her. "She always hinted that she and her brother Pinker inherited little but given what she's done so far, with her fancy apartment at Lowell Leisure Dome as well, *that* was probably a blind. Maybe Pinker was coerced into chipping in for the purchase – Ma can be very persuasive when she wants to be, just like someone else I could mention in fact, and Pinker's a walkover."

"Could be," Linen agreed. "And I expect your sly reference was to my distant relationship to Ma. But didn't Ma sue that swindler calling himself Dusty Kellyn that tried to cheat her out of part of Uncle Singeol's estate? She maybe got a packet out of that. So we must check out this Skady Lane place and see what it's all about when we're on this leave we've been promised."

"I rather hoped we'd check out the Leisure Dome for a sol or two and then have a couple of nights on the town eating real food and not stuff that tastes like it's Earflaps' reject stock. But what's this private road off Blur Street out back of the Lock-Block called?" her friend asked curiously.

"Private Road," Linen informed her.

"That figures."

"But better known to the locals as Rookie Road, as that's the way the rookie cops had to walk to report in."

"Only in Beagle..."

"We Beagle-ites are known for our ready wit as well as our charm," Linen said roguishly.

"And a few other things best not mentioned," Copper returned. "But enough already, let's collect our stuff and head in for the next lecture. It's just like our undergrad sols, except you don't get any time off for bad behaviour."

\* \* \*

Some time later and back in the twin quarters they shared, Linen set

the privacy lock and turned to her friend.

“I sweet-talked Captain Meltdown at break and he says we’re all due furlough, but it’s not within his remit to say when: we get leave when our contract says we do. And that’s two sols from now, I found out from the office. But I won’t be sweet-talking him again. He’s rather put out.”

“Why, what did you do to him?”

“He tried to sweet-talk *me* into spending part of my leave in his company...”

“Surely consorting with your own trainees is strictly against regs,” Copper interrupted.

“Sure is, kiddo. So I told him I’d planned to spend part of it with an aunt who’s in Mars Fleet as I know she’s due planet-side sometime soon.”

Copper’s eyes widened. “Lor’ I bet he backtracked once you let slip who it was. I assume you *did* tell him that Colonel Moritz was your Auntie Elle?”

“Of course I did: that fib’s been going the rounds so long it’s almost true. And Colonel Moritz was all right about it when she found out I’d used it to get the persistent Wolff Waterbone off my tail when he was trying to make his way into my confidence – and elsewhere – after I’d persuaded him to persuade the almighty Mars Deep Mining Consortium to fund my PhD. So there’s no problem. Meltdown will never check it out as he knows questions would be asked.”

“As I’ve told you before, you’re the dizzy limit. You *will* have to behave once we’re well and truly graduated as fleet officers, you realise.”

“Like hell! I signed up for a stint in the Service with Auntie Elle breathing down my neck but I don’t recall agreeing to bend my knee to any old authority.”

“Check your contract,” Copper advised. “It’ll be there in the small print at the bottom of the holo.”

“Whatever; how’s Spook by the way? You haven’t mentioned him much recently?”

“Because we’re mostly in company is why. He comes and he goes. He’s here now. I think he’s getting all excited because he knows what’s going on and hopes to get back into space soon.”

Spook, an alien entity that had awoken when the deep tunnel system in which its ship had been buried for millennia had been disturbed, had latched onto the unconscious Copper when she had been injured in a rockfall. She and Linen had been working within the ancient tunnel system known to their research group as the Warren, deep under the surface of Mars, as part of their PhD projects. It had been the various remarkable finds at their site and elsewhere on Mars and their conjectures in relation to them that had brought them to the attention of Colonel Moritz and in part had led to their present situation. As far as Copper was concerned, Spook was intangible but definitely *there*. They were connected on some subliminal level that she could not fathom but she had grown so used to him that she was almost comfortable: almost, but not quite. Linen believed that she had likewise developed some sensitivity to the entity, but was far less receptive to it than her friend.

“You’ll have to tell Auntie Elle about Spook once we’re on board the *Drake*, you know. You did let out to her that you had the impression that several times an alien mind had reached out and touched yours for a fleeting second, when first we figured there *was* an alien ship buried out beneath the Glory Hole.”

“I guess, though I don’t think she quite believed me. She thought it was the after-effects of that bang on the head I got in the rockfall. We *did* get the impression that her team had found evidence that there was an active life-support system in Spook’s ship, though they were never able to breach it,” Copper replied. “But we’ll have to get used to calling her Colonel Moritz even when we’re not in her company, you realise? I suspect we’ll see little of her anyhow; we’ll be stuck in our lab getting on with our PhD stuff until something really exciting happens. I hope I don’t get space-sick. I’ve never been in a *moving* starship before.”

“You’ll never notice. It’s equipped with gravity generators, so it’ll be just like our lab back at Lowell except the scenery outside will shift. Even Trisk will be there to keep us company, and we’ll be well away from people like Lomax Gratikule and Wolff Waterbone and other Mars Deep Mining Consortium lackeys at the Extra-Martis Missions Survey Office up at Viking One that are endlessly demanding reports and project updates,”

Linen pacified her. “Not to mention out of the immediate orbit of our ex-College colleague the Divine Thulia, as she’s based at Vee One as well and likes to wag her tongue in our direction too often for comfort. Although as MDMC’s still paying our PhD disbursements, I suppose they’ll *have* to get reports via the EMMS Office from us now and again.”

“But you can’t get *off* a starship,” Copper lamented. “There will be rec areas and so on, but we’ll be trapped.”

“Lor’ we’re all trapped under the domes here, so where’s the difference? You’re just getting nervous the closer we get to take-off, saying goodbye to all that’s familiar and saying hello to a strange environment.”

“Stop psychoanalysing me, it’s annoying.”

“There, there, little Cop.”

“That as well. And you can stop too, you’re as bad as she is.”

“Are you grumping at Spook?” Linen demanded.

“Yup. And I get the feeling that he agrees with you.”

“So you’re outnumbered. But we’re on leave in a couple of sols!” Linen crowed, picking up a pillow and throwing it at her. “You’ll feel better after a soak in a decent tub and a good meal.”

\* \* \*

By the time the signal sounded to announce dinnertime, the whole training wing had heard of their forthcoming six sols of furlough and plans for a get-together were in the air. Someone had found out that the Service would provide a shuttle-bus to take them as far as the Orbital Route that circled Pillinger Dome and a list of inexpensive local lodgings was doing the rounds. As inset trays clattered and rations were selected from the options available at the servery in the mess hall, the lines of uniform-clad trainees were swapping ideas of where to head to and what to do once they got there. It was as the pushy Lieutenant Gadget Blazells had decided that in his opinion something classier than the dingy Deneb’s Diner was called for and was listing a number of much more upmarket watering holes of his acquaintance that an electrifying idea occurred to Copper.

“Giordano’s!” she exclaimed to the line at large.

None of their fellow diners had heard of the place and were agog to know where and what it was. As the two from Lowell explained its position in the Mars Deep Mining Consortium-run Astrobiology Field Dome, curiosity was sparked. None of their mates had visited the AF Dome but all had heard of it and of MDMC. That Giordano's was the largest leisure bar and diner in the place and possibly on the planet and was space-themed to boot went down very well. When Linen announced that it was known to customers as The Black Hole, as once inside, it was challenging to find the way out, almost everyone decided that it was the ideal place to mark the beginning of their leave.

"Well done, Cop," Linen whispered to her friend as the two made their way to a small booth. "He only wanted his ideas to be given top billing and Dirty Deneb's doesn't suit the taste he thinks he's got. And I've had another great idea – tell you later."

Later turned into much later as the ideas for furlough and a good time at the AF Dome were debated. Several of the trainees had called up specifics on the diner and were impressed by what they saw. The reservation was made and confirmed and credit extracted from those who had decided to attend. Both Copper and Linen were plied with questions and were hard put to keep under wraps much of their background with respect to the AF Dome and the reasons for their extensive knowledge of it.

Once back in the familiar setting of their quarters, Copper turned to her friend. "Okay, out with it – your idea."

Linen's eyes lit up and she grinned. "I'll check in with Thars – he *did* say keep in touch after all, as he's our senior mentor – and see if we can get overnight billets at the Psi Complex! That would save us having to come back to Pillinger and then having to find transport back to ours. We're still Lowell PhD students with the Amberlines, so we should have access."

"For work," Copper said shortly. "Thars won't sanction it for a pleasure trip to the Astro Field Dome with a bunch of Service rookies out for a night of drinking and dissipation."

"Hardly pleasure, given many of the company, but let's have a think:



we have a couple of sols before we set off.”

Linen’s idea of a think was a rapid finger-tapping session and then a short link to Thars Amberline, the head of the Amberline Geology-Astrobiology Research Group at Lowell College, and technically in authority over the two students and their work. The redhead prudently waited until Copper was in the shower before contacting the professor, as she suspected that her idea would not appeal much to her friend.

“We have a billet for our fun at Giordano’s,” she announced when a damp Copper surfaced from the hygiene cubicle.

“You what?”

“I called Thars...”

“At this time! It’s nearly midnight!”

“*Here* it is; it’s not at Lowell, it’s different time-wise than we are, but Thars is about anyhow, and so’s Avrom, as he’s making up time to go buggy racing later in the sevensol. And we have a billet,” she repeated.

“So what have you mortgaged our souls for that you swung that?” Copper demanded dangerously as she towelled her hair.

“Well, we *will* have quite an early start on the Satsol after the party,” the redhead warned. “We’ll be off in the Scamper to visit the guys out at the Amber Warren...”

“What! You’ve promised we’ll do some work, haven’t you?”

“Just collecting a few extra samples is all, so that we have more than plenty for our trip away with the *Drake*...”

“We have plenty already! They’re all in storage at Lowell and we have to get them shipped up to the *Drake* before we leave so we’ll have something to keep us occupied while we’re headed to wherever it is we’re going! *That* was made quite plain when all this shenanigans began. And what about our enviro-suits, our sample tubes, our instruments...”

“Thars was heading out to the AF Dome in a couple of sols anyhow, so he’s agreed to come out early; he’ll get our enviro-suits shipped out pronto and get Avrom working on the details. We have our MEDICs here in any case – all our data is stored in them – and the bits of kit Auntie Elle gave us: we didn’t dare leave *them* behind. Thars knows our schedule, so it’ll be a quick turnaround as he’ll organise the Scamper’s schedule. And

we'll get to see our friends out at the Amber-Warren..."

"Damn, hell and blast!" Copper exploded, her face creasing as if she was thinking rapidly. "Oh Lor', not Spook as well! He wants to be closer to his ship!"

"Handy having a disembodied alien as a familiar, isn't it?" grinned Linen.

"Who for, you or him? It certainly isn't me! I wanted a trip to the Leisure Dome."

"Look, we'll still have time," Linen pointed out. "We head out Frisol for the party, our first leave sol is technically Satsol, and we're not due back here until the next Frisol..."

"You mean back here Thursol eve if we're due on duty early, and I bet we will be. And what about our plans to stay out at our own place? What about the visit to that apartment block in Skady Lane that's now Ma Kellyn's, supposedly?"

"We'll have time for that! We only need to hop over to the Warren, one sol out in the field, back the next to the AF Dome and then Beagle Central – plenty of time. And don't forget that we'll have at least a couple or three sols after we finish training before we have to join our ship," Linen reminded her.

"Which we'll be spending at Lowell sorting our stuff: Auntie Elle's not going to sanction a sol off to have a good time when there's a ship to launch that's already well behind time," Copper snapped rebelliously.

"How d'you know she's *well* behind time?" Linen retaliated.

"Trisk told us when he linked in the other sol with the list of quarters still free aboard that he'd charmed out of the officer in charge and his suggestions of the best ones, based on what he's seen, remember? I figure she's late because they're still trying to retrofit her hull with the self-repair organo-metallic material that was developed based on the alien material that makes up most of the alien hulls and other artefacts that have been found on Mars to date. They hadn't quite got there the last we heard and if I recall, the colonel was a bit cagey about how much of the stuff was in production, given it was clandestine and under military jurisdiction."

"Trisk said six sevensols or so to the launch," Linen smiled. "That's

hardly well behind time. Good to have a friend aboard the *Drake* that's looking out for us isn't it?" she went on blithely.

"Stop changing the subject in the hopes I won't notice," said Copper. "At this rate we won't have much furlough for the next frocking half-year!"

"Look, it'll be good to see the guys out at the Warren again if nothing else and make sure they keep their eyes on our site for us. And Spook sure as shells wants to check his ship, as he won't be seeing that again if he decides he's in the Service for the duration as well."

"He can check it anytime he wants: I figure he must be able to move close to light speed. It's just that he doesn't like leaving me alone for any length of time. But have it your own way, both of you. I wish I'd never mentioned Giordano's."

"It *will* be much better than Dirty Deneb's and we can easily sneak away if the company gets too annoying. I guess we'll have to check on the shuttle we need to get us over there and book places. The other guys can sort themselves out," Linen decided. "They're the cream of the crop of recruits after all."

"You can damn well book it."

"Done. Wonder if Lieutenant Korin Karst will be on table duty for the eve?"

"Once he sees your face he'll change his shift," Copper warned her.

\* \* \*

The following two sols were spent in eager anticipation of the leave that all the trainees now knew was in the offing. The major highlight of the penultimate sol in harness from their point of view was that Copper and Linen were given the chance to take out a two-man low-atmosphere craft that seemed to be a cross between a shuttle and a fighter. It gave them some sort of idea of what it might be like to fly a combat vessel and both had been exhilarated by the ride, despite the vexing interference of Captain Max Meldyn. *He* had enlivened their sortie by sending a small fleet of virtual combat drones in after them. As their route had taken them through Hebes Chasma, a deep and sheltered channel north of Valles Marineris that was tough to navigate, they had been severely tested

and had little time to enjoy either the experience or the view. Copper had piloted the small ship around the central plateau to avoid the many rocky trenches and highly scored cliff faces whilst Linen had taken out the drones, swearing softly and continuously.

“He did it deliberately,” the redhead complained testily to her friend after a rigorous debriefing that had itemised their every error. “Now I’ve given him a serious brush-off and he’s realised that I don’t hang onto his every word in breathless adoration, he’s trying to make things difficult.”

“The advantage is that it *does* test us almost to our limits,” Copper soothed. “Though I suspect he’ll regret it if he breaches the upper threshold of *your* temper.”

“Don’t have one. You’re the grouch in our team,” Linen told her, chuckling. “I must drop Auntie Elle into the conversation when next I see him, just to keep him in line. We’ll have enough to put up with when Blazells finds out we’ve been allowed up in the MV2 flyer: he’s trying to be the hotshot of our cohort and takes everything personally.”

“You realise now that you’ve told Captain Meltdown about Colonel Moritz, he’ll think she’s pulled strings to get us aboard the *Drake*?”

“Hardly; we’re the best of the best after all and try as he might, Max the Melt can’t ignore that fact. We’re just lucky we had the opportunity to get our provisional pilots’ tickets before we were dragooned into the damn Service, although we owe a lot of that to the use of Rustin’s flight simulator. We must give it him back one sol, if ever we get out to Wells. Whoops! Here are Blazells and Dingle and the Gadget’s not a happy trooper.”

One half of the approaching duo was undoubtedly in a foul temper and expressed it by a snappily-worded salute and a curt nod in passing. Ensign Dingle was more affable and voiced his congratulations as he mentioned that he and his team-mate were set for test flights in the simulation suite.

“Good luck, Foxy; you too, Blazells,” Linen said impishly as they passed.

“You’re taking a risk, lady. Did you see Dingle’s eyes light up when you called him Foxy?” Copper demanded. “He’ll think you’re taken with him

and he'll be asking you for a date."

"Only being polite. But Foxin Dingle's too shy to be asking anyone for a date without a lot more encouragement than that."

"You were deliberately winding up Gadget Blazells' prop," her friend accused.

"Naturally: he asks for it by his attitude. And besides, he's sweet on me and trying to hide it," Linen announced blithely.

"No he isn't, you annoy the hell out of him. In fact you annoy the hell out of most everyone, including me at times."

"Why thank you, I do my best. But let's cut the chat and find a caff well away from prying ears and eyes. I'll fetch Gerald out of my locker and we can use him to organise our schedule. We have a whole hour to work out the best way of spending our furlough to advantage and it's only half a sol away."

"Good idea; I'll bring Gemima, as we have a link from Trisk to check out. I hope he's managed to put the word in for our new billets aboard the *Drake*, though I would have thought it would be first come, first pick."

Their erstwhile Amberline Group colleague and now one of the senior science officers aboard the *MSS Drake II*, Lieutenant Trisk Addystone had had the advantage of a very short spell in basic training and an established position aboard ship. As an outgoing and friendly individual, he was also adept at persuading others to see his viewpoint and the two trainees were in high hopes that he would have engineered some comforts for them aboard their soon-to-be assigned ride. Stopping only long enough to abstract their Mobile Encyclopaedic Detection and Information Consoles, or MEDICs, from their lockers, the two made their way to the trainees' mess.

Once they had commandeered a small table in the mess well away from everyone else, they eagerly called up their link. Trisk was as cheerful as ever and his smiling face lit up as the image projecting from Copper's MEDIC, Gemima's, holo-generator port expanded outwards. Their friend's message was short and to the effect that he had suggested to the harassed individual tasked with organising the *Drake's* accommodations

that it might be as well if the scientific research personnel aboard the starship had billets near one another, for the sake of efficiency if nothing else. The officer had not been taken in but had marked two comfortable berths close to Trisk's as assigned to incoming crew and ticked another job off her busy schedule. The diligent Dr Addystone had also tacked their names alongside his on the door panel of what would be a sizeable office near his main lab: it had not yet been allocated and he hoped they would be able to commandeer it when it was operable. The whole science section had been removed from deck ten to deck five owing to some structural constraints, the deck ten area labs being given over to the engineering department. Trisk was happy enough with the upset and the move: although further from the crew quarters on deck nine, they would be closer to their local mess.

"The joys of housekeeping on board Mars Fleet's finest," Copper laughed quietly. "We'll have to pay him back once we're actually up there. Best send him a thank you. But it sounds like the *Drake's* nowhere near ready for launch yet. She was pretty near finished when we saw her last, I thought."

"We only saw the bits that we were shown by that Lieutenant Commander Khilph and then by Colonel Moritz," reminded Linen. "And that wasn't much. We didn't see any of the crew berths or even the engineering decks. We should call up the specs of every big ship we can and try to get a feel for what we might have to navigate around once we're aboard."

"Let us see what we might be in for, you mean," Copper said. "But I agree. Now we're officially Fleet, we should be able to get access to that sort of information. Or at least, Gerald and Gemima should, as they were given access to military and other databases way back, when Colonel Moritz jumped into our lives and started to take over."

"We were told we'd be given a sol away to be shown around a ship and it hasn't happened," Linen remembered. "Normally it would be part of training to be assigned short trips on training ships, but because of the recruitment upsurge, we've missed out. Lor' knows how many more recruits are out there in all the other basecamps that seem to have

sprouted up over half the planet. I'm amazed nobody's twigged that it's not just because of the expansion of the Fleet's exploration budget that there are all these new ships building that need crews to man them."

"Well I'm not going to enlighten our lot if the question comes up," Copper said decidedly. "Least said and all that; and they'd freak and want to know how I knew. But we'd better get on and organise our schedule. There had better be time for a couple of sols of nothing but R and R or you're in trouble."

"Then let's move it. I've had a number of our buddies asking for details of cheap lodgings so I'll check out one or two in Beagle Central that I suspect are passable and see if they have spaces available. There's only morrow-sol left for booking up. Gerald," Linen instructed her MEDIC, "Check if there are rooms available in the following locations in Pillinger Dome: Asaph Hotel, Helix Hotel, Pallas Hotel and Mary House."

"You know all those places?" Copper demanded.

"Yes, they're all this side of Beagle Central and close enough to the Land-Hover Station to get over to the Astro Field Dome reasonably easily; and they're the least expensive. Saying that, they're not cheap, but I'm not going to suggest any of our lot try out the two rooms that are let out in the basement of Beer Belly Pete's Bar in Bee Street, or the Blue Gene that's on Shergotty Street, further away. I wouldn't let either of those out as a dog kennel, not even for Osterley. The Shuttle Shed at the far end of Barnes Street has a few letting rooms, I think, but I wouldn't swear to it. You can often pick up an economy billet near Beagle College out of semester time and there you're close to decent drinkeries like Susie's Cider Factory and Fiddlers *and* the student med centre if you go overboard on the drinks or get caught up in a brawl. Some of our lot wanted to know the best upmarket bars to take a date, but they can find that out for themselves, I'm not a frocking directory of Beagle Central. But maybe I should tell them what places to avoid?"

"Lor' they're all big boys and girls, they'll work it out one way or another," Copper told her. "But they'd best pocket a supply of Oxypep if they're visiting any dens you recommend or they'll never make it back to their billets. Do you *know* all the dubious drinking dens in Beagle, by the

way?” she added suspiciously.

“Most of them – though only by reputation, of course,” Linen responded.

“I’ll bet. Anything else I should know if we’re augmenting the education of our fellow rookies?”

“Don’t book a room at Mary House if it’s the last one to be had in Central Dome,” the redhead advised. “It’s known as Scary House and the owner’s called Scary Mary. So I’ve heard. But if he asks, tell Blazells it’s the best one on offer.”

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