

R E S C U E

G r a h a m C h a m b e r s

Anya Simms sighed and, not for the last time, wished she hadn't been quite such a sucker for the stars. Her earliest dreams were of space, and the glimmering, distant suns calling to her, teasing her with dreams of adventure and exotic vistas filled with alien worlds. The sensor display before her did not, in particular, show a compelling view of space, however. At the moment, it simply displayed a series of numeric sequences, representing the slipstream radiation present during slipstream travel.

Around her, the bridge of the *Fortuitous Arrival* hummed with activity, and Anya blearily reached for the beaker of coffee hovering to her side, tethered so as not to go drifting too far. She grimaced, and shuddered slightly upon discovering that the java had gone cold, but caffeine was caffeine and she drank it anyway. She was going to need every iota of awareness that she could muster; though the advent of Faster-Than-Light travel had rendered Search and Rescue possible in deep space, it remained a difficult and treacherous undertaking.

The alert status monitor in the corner of her display blinked, in time with a klaxon. All around her, the humming intensity of the bridge quieted as the crew settled in to start working. Maneuvering a bundle of brunette hair behind her ear, Anya began calibrating the specialized optical sensors that her station controlled. Red-capped switches flipped with thoughtless familiarity in a pattern long since become rote, arming the bank of optical sensors under her command.

"All stations confirm ready status." Intoned a female voice over the intercom. Anya sighed and glanced at the positive indicators running the right side of her display. Nodding to herself in satisfaction, the young woman thumbed a well worn button knowing that somewhere in the captain's nest an indicator light would be flickering on. Shifting in her seat, Anya watched her monitor for a few infinite seconds. The muted half-light of slip space stared back, completely failing to shift back to the mildly more interesting backdrop of real space.

"Feeling jittery, Anya?"

"Don't make me laugh, El. I'm just... bored."

"How cute! You're just like a little rookie."

Anya frowned, glancing over at her fellow operator, Elaine Vogle, in irritation. Her companion smirked, dark eyes twinkling in an overly bottle-tanned face below florescent pink bangs. The frown turned slightly more harsh as Elaine's smirk broadened into a victorious smile. It was not long before that jovial grin began to break Anya's determination to remain angry, the corners of her mouth beginning to quirk upwards.

"Say it."

Anya turned her attention back to the gray emptiness on her monitor; boredom was, sometimes, better than having to deal with her over-enthusiastic shipmate. Elaine wasn't letting her off that easy, however, and leaned over to poke her shoulder lightly. Anya grumbled, giving the other woman a rather petulant scowl.

"Aw, don't be like that. C'mon, say it."

"Alright, alright, you win. Just stop poking me, already."

"Cheer up, and it's a deal!"

Anya's lips curled in a smile despite herself, and she shook her head ruefully, before turning her attention back to the display. The mission clock had popped up along the right side, counting down to the ship arrival at the exit vector. *'About damn time.'* She carefully did not say; Elaine would just start teasing her all over again. She gave the other girl a sidelong glance. *'Maybe I do get a little nervous about things though.'* Anya immediately decided to keep that thought to herself.

"El, I just want you to know that I think you're insane."

"Yeah, yeah. So, when are you and Nat gonna go out?"

Anya's only answer came in the form of a mild glare; her friend had effortlessly brushed off her clumsy verbal barrage, and countered smoothly with the uncomfortable subject of Natalie. Elaine seemed oblivious to the reason for her consternation, eyebrows climbing upward in query.

"What?"

"I'm not gay, El."

Elaine simply looked at her in blatant disbelief. The silence was starting to grow unbearable, when finally her friend spoke.

"You're in the closet, aren't you?"

"What? No!" She struggled to keep her voice low enough so that the officers couldn't over-

hear her.

“Right.” Elaine drawled, an infuriating grin growing on her face. Anya grumbled half-heartedly, but was spared further scrutiny by the console beeping. At the same time, the *Fortuitous* shuddered slightly, and a quick glance at the monitor confirmed that the ship had finally transitioned back to real space. *‘Time to start working. Thank god.’* She thought, turning her attention back to the display before her.

From the nest came Captain Mizuki’s strident voice. “Helm, report our position!”

“Exit vector is clear. We have entered normal space almost on top of the distress beacon.”

Telemetry fed onto the monitor, showing an overlay of the relevant data against a field of stars. She knew that the captain would be expecting a quick response to check the navigational data’s validity. Fortunately, there was little delay, her LIDAR array picking up the stricken vessel almost immediately.

“Confirmed! We are detecting a mid-sized vessel 22.7 clicks from our current position. Relative velocity is plus point-two-eight KPS almost exactly on our bearing. Looks to be our wounded *Crete*, but the IFF’s inop.” Rechecking the vectors, she whistled a low, appreciative note. “Nav sure pulled off an incredible intercept this time.” She added, somewhat superfluously.

“I’m picking up a lot of debris,” Elaine cut in, “But the vessel appears to be intact.”

“Helm, plot intercept course. Scan, keep a sharp eye out. I don’t want any surprises.”

Anya automatically acknowledged the order, repressing a sigh. She had, in effect, simply been ordered to do exactly what she had already been doing; the sensors only required human intervention when being told how and what to scan. She glanced at Elaine, who predictably appeared to be bored out of her skull. *‘At least she respects regulations while we’re on station.’* Her station beeped at her softly, and she turned her eyes back to it.

Along the bottom of the screen was simply a long string of numbers, followed by:

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: wish me luck babe

Anya risked peering back over her shoulder, and breathed a sigh of relief when she realized that all of the flag officers had their eyes on what Nav was doing, and beyond them the display showing the intercept course. That sigh caught in her throat when Elaine leaned nearly out of her chair, her eyes glimmering in interest. “What are you doing?!” Anya hissed sharply, keeping half an eye on the officers.

“Are you going to answer her?”

Anya looked back at the screen, none too gently shoving Elaine back into her seat. Her heart was pounding; if the officers caught on she would certainly receive disciplinary action. So, for that matter, would Nat, and for some reason that thought made her pulse pound far worse than thought of receiving punishment herself. Steeling herself, she glanced down; another line of text had joined the first.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: hey ana you there

Unbidden, the image of Natalie's face appeared in her mind, her pink lips pursed in concern, wavy, dirty blonde hair framing her alabaster face like a lion's mane. She paused for a long moment, then, almost reluctantly, her fingers went to the keyboard, and quickly she had a reply sent.

ENS Simms, Anya O: Yeah, I'm here. Are you trying to get me in trouble?

ENS Simms, Anya O: Are you in the boarding party?

There was a pause of nearly a minute, which practically confirmed the second question for Anya, and she sighed. Beside her, Elaine was grinning slyly and giving her a surreptitious thumbs up. The brunette Ensign sighed, certain that her friend was planning an attempt of some sort to hook her up with Nat. *'How can she think I'm interested in girls?'* She wondered to herself morosely. Before she could construct a more secure wall of denials, Nat's next message came in.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: yeah im on boarding duty.

And then more coherently.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: I'm at the ventral no. 2 airlock. Care to wish me luck?

ENS Simms, Anya O: Yeah, good luck, Nat.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: Thanks, Babe. Gotta go.

Anya smiled briefly as the exchange ended, but the realization soon hit that this was probably why Elaine had concluded that she was interested in other women in general and Nat in particular. *'I guess I'll just have to clear things up with her.'* But the image of Natalie's smiling face, jade eyes twinkling merrily, remained stuck in her mind. *'I'm not a lesbian. It's wrong for a woman to...'*

Her thoughts were blasted out of her head as her console loudly bleated at her. She could feel the eyes of the captain and the other senior officers boring a hole in the back of her head, but still it took a couple of moments for her dazed mind to return to the task at hand.

“Hull popping! Visual on a cloud of vapor from the aft third of the *Crete!*”

"Composition?" The captain demanded, clearly unamused with her laxity, but Anya had anticipated this order, and the thermal spectrometer was already chugging away at it.

"Argon, nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide. It's plain air, ma'am."

Mizuki scowled, but not at the messenger. The blowout indicated that things were worse than they had anticipated. "Damn. Let's pick up the pace people!"

Anya rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on. She didn't need Elaine putting these weird ideas into her head, her job was stressful enough already. *'I don't like girls. Not that way.'* Somehow, she failed to convince herself, but she pushed the distracting train of thought aside, concentrating on her task instead. On her monitor the *Crete* spun lazily, but her veteran eye told her that docking hadn't been rendered untenable.

"Be advised helm, the vessel is now rotating to starboard at 8 degrees per second."

"Roger that scan."

Anya leaned back in her acceleration cushion, trying to ease out the kinks in her back. She reached for the beaker of coffee to her side, and muttered a curse when she discovered that she'd already drained the dregs from it. With nothing else to do, she settled in to watch as the team of pilots expertly brought them in to dock with the derelict freighter. To Anya, watching the docking sequence was like watching paint dry, but it remained far preferable to mulling over her suddenly uncertain sexuality.

The ship thrummed deeply as the docking arms joined the two ships briefly as one, and despite the sounds familiarity it still managed to send a thrill racing through her. The funk that had descended over her abated slightly, and in a sudden fit whimsy she softly exclaimed "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!", earning a giggle from Elaine and a bemused, but still warning, look from the captain.

"Keep it down you two. This isn't a day camp."

"A-aye ma'am."

"Busted." Elaine mouthed, and Anya rolled her eyes. A long moment passed as Anya watched Elaine randomly cycling through sensor feeds. Over the bridge's intercom, she could hear the rescue parties reporting in sequence as they boarded the ruined *Crete*. Elaine glanced at her then leaned over slightly, whispering.

"Hey, you think there are any men on this ship?"

"Not likely. Command takes the segregation business pretty thoroughly."

Elaine grinned knowingly at her, and waggled her eyebrows suggestively, a task for which her petite, sylvan features were distinctly ill-suited. Anya swallowed a laugh, and reminded herself that her friend thought that she was interested in other women. *'Hell, she probably thinks she's tricked me into admitting it. How can a commissioned officer be so immature?'* Despite the irritation, though, she looked over at her friend and was glad for her presence. Life simply wouldn't have been as enjoyable without her around, even if she did tend to drive her crazy on a regular basis.

Suppressing the sudden mental image of Nat's lovely face and the torrent of confusion accompanying it, she turned her attention to the play by play from the rescue teams scouring the freighter for survivors. It was only a temporary respite, she knew. Elaine had managed to plant the seed of doubt in her, and she'd have to face whatever grew from it sooner or later.

The reports over the comm were routinely grim; whatever had hit the ship had done so faster than the crew could react. *'A ghost ship.'* she thought, and couldn't repress an instinctive shudder, an almost superstitious dread rising from somewhere in her subconscious. It was a feeling she was unaccustomed to, but she managed it well regardless, only a slight tremor betraying her nervousness.

"This is Zulu Team leader to *Fortuitous Arrival*, this place is a tomb. Doesn't look like anyone had time to get to their suits and the emergency shelter's trashed."

"Roger that, Zulu. Get someone to recover the black box, and get your people out of there. Delta team what's your status?"

"Engineering's a mess, but there're rooms that haven't decompressed yet. We're picking a strong, repeating vibration somewhere deeper in - looks like we have survivors somewhere in here, Captain."

"I'm glad to hear it, Delta."

Anya was glad too, it was like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The bizarre gloom that had seized her rapidly disappearing under knowing that there were still some who lived. Elaine sighed, leaning back in her acceleration couch, her face alight with an almost savage sense of triumph. Anya almost matched her expression, exulting internally in their victory, the of their crew over the hungry blackness that lurked between the stars.

"This is Zulu 9. We have recovered the black box from the computer room. Hopefully it'll help us figure out what happened here." Nat's crystalline alto crackled over the coms, vital and

alive. Anya shivered slightly upon hearing that voice, confusion again warring in her mind as she tried to sort out the emotions the woman awoke in her. It was all so clear before now, but only because she'd never given the matter any thought whatsoever. *'I'm not gay... I'm not. I-I think.'*

"Roger that Zulu 9, return to the ship."

"Acknowledged." Nat drawled, before cutting the line with a bite of static. After that, there was silence for a bit, occasionally broken as Zulu squad recollected itself back at the airlock. Finally, the team had assembled back on board the *Fortuitous*, the docking clamp withdrawing from the stricken *Crete's* bow.

"Delta, how're things looking on your end?"

"We've located the source of the signal, but the doors stuck tight. I've got Sinclair trying to override the mechanism. We should have it open in a couple of minutes."

"Understood. Inform us the moment you do."

"Roger."

Anya payed them no heed, instead watching the bottom of her display with ill-disguised impatience. She knew Nat would be along to message her soon, and she really needed to talk to her, though what she'd say she couldn't guess. Her agitation was obvious, Elaine giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Lighten up, okay?"

'Lighten up?!' She wanted to scream. *'You're the one who started all this!'* She remained silent, and let the raw emotion stew for a moment, before letting it drift off somewhere. She took a deep breath, gulping in stale tasting air. And looked down.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: Miss me?

Her fingers started typing screaming incoherence, then stopped. She deleted the message and tried again, and again the message eluded her. *'Damn it, what the hell am I going to say?'* She nearly growled in frustration, taking another deep breath. Her fingers moved slowly over the keyboard as she typed, trying desperately to form a coherent thought.

Elaine thinks I'm gay.

It would have to do. She hit the enter key, sending the message off, and waited for a reply.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: Like the teenage jerk insult kind of gay or actually gay gay?

ENS Simms, Anya O: Be serious, would you? And actually gay.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: And are you?

ENS Simms, Anya O: I don't know.

Anya paused, and quickly typed in a follow up, the words flowing easily now that she'd overcome the first.

ENS Simms, Anya O: I've never given it any thought. You're a fun person to be around. You're > easy to be with. But I don't know if I feel, if I can feel like that for another woman.

Leaning back in her seat Anya exhaled softly; beside her Elaine seemed to be quivering with the barely suppressed desire to urge her loudly on for the sake of love. Her mind was a fog of conflicting thoughts. As if from a great distance, she could hear the Delta team's squad leader reporting that they had breached the hatch, and that they were returning with survivors, but this detail seemed distant and inconsequential compared to her personal crisis. Finally, the console beeped, Nat's message scrolling into view.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: Heavy stuff. I guess we need to talk. How's tomorrow, after our shift's > off?

ENS Simms, Anya O: Sure.

"Say you love her, Anya." She gave Elaine a little glare, but nevertheless her fingers moved, pressing keys of their own accord. She stared at the message she had just wrote, wondering why it felt so true. Part of her screamed for her to delete it, and never let it slip to anyone.

ENS Simms, Anya O: I think I love you, Nat.

CPL Kelly, Natalie M: So do I.

And the world turned over.