

## Chapter One

Another blast rattled the ship. Jasper grabbed a bulkhead with both hands as the deck shook and creaked under his feet. "Attendant: Report!" he yelled into his headset.

"Fire Control reports that the fire at A-17 is out," the Attendant said with exaggerated calm. "However there is damage to the combustion chamber and crews have been dispatched."

"Captain Chandler! Where is Chandler?"

"Unknown at this time," she said.

The Goran pirate ship had been taking potshots at the Journeyman for the last three hours. She was practically dead in the water, but Captain Chandler refused to yield. Jasper knew that the pirates would never completely destroy the Journeyman; it had a belly full of repair parts that they wanted. No, they would not destroy her, he thought, but they certainly would beat her soundly until she had no life in her. Jasper started moving toward the bow again when a crew of five sailors dressed in fire suppression suits pushed past him. He was about follow them to lend a hand, but had to remind himself that his job was on the bridge.

The Journeyman creaked and groaned under Jasper's feet from another Goran blow. In his mind he had been wishing that the Goran attack was just a dream, but as he steadied himself, he drew a deep breath of acceptance. This fight was upon them now and he had no choice but to make a show of it. In his time as an Agency Seaman -- two years on the Journeyman, three years on the Aspen Glenn, and two years at school -- he'd never had a confrontation with the Gorans. He'd been lucky. The last time he had crossed paths with the pirates was a lifetime ago, when he was ten years old.

He waited for another group of sailors to rush past him toward the damage in the stern and he realized that he was getting tired. He had just finished carrying a wounded man down to the infirmary, which is why he felt a little shaky and weak, he thought. He needed to get back to the bridge, but it was still one deck above him and ten sections forward. He was also in desperate need of a drink of water. He clenched his teeth, drew in a deep breath and started forward again, just as the attendant's klaxon rang in his headset.

"Mister Crane," the attendant said calmly.

"What is it?" he said, knowing that it was not going to be good news.

"Captain's orders, sir," she said. "Please report to the Captain's Quarters immediately."

"Captain's Quarters?" he said with disbelief. He was relieved that Chandler had been found, but this was a ridiculous time for a meeting. "Tell the Captain, with all due respect," he said, "I am needed on the bridge."

"Captain's orders, Mister Crane," the attendant said politely.

"Aye," he said with a heavy sigh.

Chandler was a good man and an experienced captain. He was short, maybe five foot, three inches, and nearly as round as he was tall. He had a jolly look: ruby cheeks, a hearty laugh and a deep, resonant voice. He would often crack jokes with the mates, but he was still stern -- very much the typical Agency captain. Chandler was also a fair and honest soul, which was unusual for Agency officers, and Jasper had been lucky to be chosen as Chandler's Negotiator's Mate.

Chandler was no novice in space either. He had been given his first command when he was seventeen, two years younger than Jasper. Chandler was certainly space-

hardened: he never went anywhere without his headset, even when he had to go to the scrubber, and he sported the most outrageous set of jeweled, silver and gold teeth. You couldn't take your eyes off his jeweled-filled mouth when he talked, and sometimes he would sort of hiss his words because of them. To have dinner with the captain was more of a punishment than an honor. His teeth would become encrusted with food and Chandler would spit and spray if he talked while he ate. Jasper had learned early on that it was best just to keep his face pointed toward his plate and not to ask questions of Chandler over dinner.

Jasper jumped onto the elevator as the Journeyman was hit again. This time it was just a small charge amidships where a fire was already raging. Like sticking salt in the wound, he thought, and ordered the elevator one deck up. Despite the extra shielding in this area of the ship a recent cannon blast had left the executive deck in shambles. It seemed like anything that had not been locked up or tied down was scattered in the corridor. The captain had obviously not been there for quite a while; he would have never let this mess go unanswered, even while under attack. No one had silenced the alarms either, and the alert lights were flashing, plunging the entire deck into noisy chaos.

"Attendant," Jasper said as soon as he stepped off the elevator, "please silence the alarm." The corridor went silent and suddenly calm. On the decks below, in the narrow corridors of the Journeyman, Jasper knew that the crew was teetering on the verge of complete panic. But up here on the executive deck it was calm. There was no one in the corridor or rushing from cabin to cabin. He did not like the quiet. Something was wrong. He took quick look up and down the long Executive Deck, and then walked briskly to Chandler's quarters, the last door on the right before entering the bridge.

The hatch was already open and several of the mates were standing around inside. The Captain's Quarters were the only cabin on the Journeyman that had more than one room. It had a small entryway with a desk, called the Matesroom that Chandler used for an office. Through the door to the left of his desk was the Captain's Mess, and beyond was the bunkroom where the captain slept. Five of the seven mates were all standing in the Matesroom, whispering to each other in a circle. When Jasper entered they all turned to look at him, almost as if they were coming to attention.

"What is going on," Jasper said with a stern look around. "Doesn't anyone know that we are under attack?" Nobody spoke. They all just looked at the floor. "Where's Sullivan," he barked noticing that the First Mate was missing from the room. Freeman was the first to speak. He was the oldest of the mates and had served with the captain the longest. He had a growing belly but refused to admit it, and so his clothes never fit quite right. But he was a great communications officer and radioman.

"Sully's gone, we think," the aging Radios Mate said. "There was a pod eject about an hour ago and he's been missing for about the same time."

Webb, the 35 year-old Stewards Mate burst in, "He's a contractor, Crane. The Agency in their infinite wisdom again! How can you outsource the mates? I ask you. How?" Webb was always unhappy about something the Agency was doing, but this time, Jasper thought, he was probably right. There were plenty of Agency regulars who could qualify for Mate, and why the Agency hired contractors, instead of Academy cadets was baffling. Luckily the rest of the mates were pure Agency, but this wasn't the time to complain about outsourcing or Agency politics. Jasper gave Webb a scowl to shut him up.

"So where's the captain?" Jasper asked with growing impatience. "There are men and women below watching the end of their lives come too soon. But up here, the Exec's are talking politics!"

"Captain's hurt," Freeman said bluntly. "I think --" he paused. "I think we are all done with this fight."

"Well I don't want this fight, either," said Jasper. "That doesn't change the fact that we have a pile of trouble down below. We certainly do not need a *meeting* on the subject."

"Captain wanted to see you, Crane," said Lopez, the Navigators Mate. "We all got orders to report to you. So you get in there and do what you have to do. If he tells you to negotiate our surrender to those dogs, we got a lot of hell to wade through. "

Jasper was certain Lopez was right. Why else would Chandler have called all the mates together? Jasper was about to be asked to negotiate the surrender of the Journeyman. He looked around the room at each of the mates, and he was struck with the overwhelming ache that he was not up to the task. He was the youngest mate -- only 19 - - and the fate of the Journeyman and her crew was soon going to be on his shoulders. Jasper's hands went cold.

He was suddenly aware of his headset and constant drone of status reports and radio traffic, so he ripped it off and threw it onto the table as he walked through the captain's dining room. He knocked once on the bunkroom door and entered without waiting for an invitation. The captain was lying on his bed, and a weary, blood-spattered medic was sitting beside him, finishing up the bandages around the captain's chest. Chandler looked bad. Something had fallen on him and his whole chest was caved in.

He was a barrel-chested man, but now he looked odd and compressed: blue and red, weak and tired.

"Crane here, capt'n," Jasper said softly.

"Right, Crane." His booming voice was just a whisper and his jeweled teeth made him sound very snake-like. "Gorans got me boy," he said. "I said that I would rather die than be taken prisoner, and I guess they took me serious." He tried to laugh, but only managed a wet sounding cough. "The heart's had it, says the doc here. I'm a goner."

"That right, doc?" Jasper asked. The medic just nodded his head. "Sully's gone, sir," Jasper said, leaning closer to the captain.

"Right. I know, blasted contractor. It's your show now, boy," Chandler whispered sternly.

"Sir, the Journeyman has more run in her, I don't think if it is time to negotiate with the dogs yet, sir."

"Boy, I am telling you to take the ship, not to barter with the pirates, you lump," the captain said, and then started coughing. The medic helped him spit some blood into a very white cloth bandage. "I want you to captain the Journeyman. Give the pirates a good run."

"Sir, I beg to differ on that point," Jasper complained, completely blindsided by the order. He was not the least bit qualified to captain the Journeyman and especially not when she was right in the middle of a firefight. "Sir, Freeman, Cox and Lopez all have more experience than me. They can do this job."

"Well," the captain said, "when you get the ship out of this mess, maybe you can give your command over to one of them. Until then, you are my man."

He couldn't command this crew, Jasper thought. He was a full decade younger than most of them. Besides, he was certain he wasn't qualified to have the burden of so many lives on his back. "Captain, I know you want this for me, but I am not ready," he pleaded as if Chandler was his father not his captain.

"You listen to me, Crane." Captain Chandler's voice suddenly changed. Jasper was put a little off guard by the force of it. "Sully's gone, and he was a fool anyway. Didn't want him on the ship to begin with and I am glad he's run off. Cox is a good man, but he looks at the world through his cannon sights. There are always other options than fighting and Cox needs to learn that lesson. Lopez is the best Navigator in the fleet and his team is top notch. You need them on the bridge. Simmons is a good mechanic, but he gets cold under pressure. He needs a decision-maker to direct him, not the other way around. That leaves Freeman, Webb and you." The captain started struggling to breathe. Jasper heard the deep gurgle inside Chandler and knew that blood was filling up his lungs. Jasper had to avert his eyes. It was hard to watch a man, who was once so strong, fade so quickly.

"You don't think that ol' Webb is right for the captain's seat, do you?" the captain continued. "That old cook is a fine Stewards Mate, but god help us if he gets the helm." Jasper chuckled and the captain smiled. They both knew that Webb was just not up to the task. He was a packrat and loved to collect and trade. But Webb was also hotheaded, never even dressed in a complete uniform and only shaved once a week. "So that leaves you and Freeman." The captain coughed and was suddenly much weaker. "Dammit, son. Freeman has been a mate for 30 years without a promotion for a reason. I just don't think he's a boss." Jasper knew that it was true.

Freeman was a fine man, and he had become a surrogate brother to Jasper. They would often talk into the night or spend hours pouring over radio logs to find secret codes or private conversations. It was an odd friendship too: the oldest and the youngest mate being best of friends. Jasper knew that Freeman was not going to take the news very well. Freeman and the captain were at odds a lot of the time, mostly because the captain, for all his experience, never really understood radios or communication systems. Chandler hated it when there was a communications glitch and would pound poor Freeman mercilessly without trying to understand the reason for it. Freeman had respect for Chandler, but there was no love between the men. Jasper was afraid that Freeman would resent being passed over for the promotion, and that it might be the end of their friendship.

"Freeman just can't do the job, son," the captain said. It was the first time Chandler had called him son, and there was tenderness in his voice, something that Jasper had never heard before. "I was much younger than you when I had my first command, and I think if there is anyone who can get the Journeyman out of this mess you are it." Jasper nodded. Of course the captain was right. Not that he thought he could be a good captain, but he was right about the other mates.

"Aye Captain," Jasper said, still looking at the floor.

The captain spoke clearly into the headset. "Identify my voice, Martin Chandler." There was a pause, then with a certainty that showed the old captain was still in that broken body he said, "please execute my orders called Crane14." There was a small silence and Jasper realized that he was now, officially, the captain of the Agency cruiser Journeyman.