

CHAPTER 1: Discovery

The alien ship hung dead in space where it had been for several months. It was one of the last of the damaged MURKATZ ships to be searched by the Earth fleet because it was so far out compared to most of the other ships. Admiral Bowen had asked Captain Matthew Thomas to coordinate the search of all the damaged ships that had been left behind when the Nobavi Team had driven the MURKATZ fleet away from Earth. They needed to ensure that there were no injured aliens left alive on a damaged ship before the military salvage crews arrived.

Matt had assigned his own crew to check out this ship. It was one of the few nursery ships that had been damaged. He hoped that all the cubs had been removed before the ship was abandoned. RICKI, his bonded companion CAT, had come up on the bridge as they approached the ship. The ship had been accidentally rammed by a larger manufacturing ship which was damaged but still able to rejoin the fleet. The nursery ship had a huge rip that almost split it in half. During the chaos of the Nobavi attack, someone on the larger ship had engaged the engines and the out-of-control ship rammed the side of the nursery ship. RICKI scanned the ship and reported one young mind alive.

Over the objections of his first officer and his CAT, Matt had decided to join the team going aboard. Matt had donned his spacesuit and led the security team in the jump from their battleship through the gaping wound in the side of the nursery ship, using controlled bursts from their suit rockets. Once inside, their boot magnets made it possible for them to walk through the halls, checking each room as half went forward and the other half to the rear. There were dead bodies everywhere, including those of many infants and young cubs who obviously died of exposure

to space when the ship was ripped open. The adult bodies where a mix of death from injuries and from exposure to space.

Heading forward to the bridge, Matt came to a sealed off section of the ship. It had an airlock and Matt and two of his team went in and cycled through to enter the still pressurized section of the ship. There was a single spacesuit hanging next to the inner door of the airlock. They removed their helmets when the suit readouts said the air was breathable. With weapons drawn, they moved through the door and spread out, checking anywhere a MURKATZ might hide. The remainder of the party had gone to the much larger rear of the ship.

Matt and his companions worked their way forward, checking rooms as they went. In one room they found the corpse of a female MURKATZ who had been slashed open in several places and the slashes had been clumsily closed with glue. There must have been internal bleeding because the bed was covered in dried blood. The female MURKATZ had only been dead for a week or so.

These rooms appeared to have been officer's quarters and Matt was hoping to find the one belonging to the ship's commander. He was sure they must be close to the bridge by now. He opened the door to a meeting room and was surprised to find it held boxes of preserved meat and a few objects that appeared to be toys.

He left one of his companions guarding the hall and he and a second crewman entered the room. There were what appeared to be locker doors all along one wall. They opened them one-by-one. The last one held a small female MURKATZ, a very young cub, not even half grown, holding an obviously unconscious or dead infant.

The MURKATZ was terrified. She clutched the infant to her. Matt spoke into his communicator ordering whoever had the translator to bring it forward on the double. He and the crewman

with him backed away from the narrow closet and beckoned for the MURKATZ cub to come out. She refused to move.

It seemed like an eternity before the ensign with the translator arrived, but she came into the room quietly and set the small machine on the table. Matt turned on the machine, telling the MURKATZ to come out, they would not hurt her. They needed to see if they could help the infant. The small female looked down at the infant and shook her head. Matt repeated they wouldn't hurt her or the baby, but the baby appeared to be sick.

The female held the infant out away from her body and looked at it, then began to wail. She seemed to recognize that the little body had no life left in it. "Are you alone?" Matt asked. "Are there any adults here with you? Who brought all the food in here for you?"

"Dead," the little female wailed. "All dead, dead, dead." She turned her face away from the humans.

Matt was reluctant to force the cub out of the closet and risk having her rip open one or more suits. He left the ensign who had brought him the translator in the room and told the other man to come with him. "Ensign, see if you can coax her out, but if she attacks, shoot her," he said as he left the room. He left the guard in the doorway in place. "Make sure that creature doesn't get at her or her suit, he said as he left the room. The ensign had backed a good distance away from where the cub crouched in it's now exposed hiding place.

The commander's quarters were across the hall from the room where they found the young MURKATZ. Next to it was a small galley and then the door opened onto the bridge. Matt found what appeared to be star maps and a logbook. He looked through everything he could see but there were no other maps or books. He stuffed the maps and book into a satchel he had brought with him and looked around the bridge, identifying the purpose of each station. After he was satisfied, he returned to the

room with the MURKATZ cub.

The ensign kept talking to the cub after the captain left. She told her repeatedly they would not hurt her, she could come out. “My name is Merci. What is your name?” The cub turned and looked at her, then turned her head away again. “You aren’t a baby, but you aren’t very old, either,” Merci continued. “We don’t want to leave you here by yourself, but you will have to come out of the locker to go with us. There is a lot of food here for you, but it will run out and then you will have nothing to eat. And you will be here alone. There isn’t anyone else alive on the ship.” The little female was looking at her again. The translator was doing its job, and the message was getting through to the cub. She would be alone. Everyone really was dead. There was food, but it would run out, she would be alone. She slowly came out of the locker, still holding the dead infant. She carefully placed the infant on a chair and looked at Merci. “Can you tell me your name?” Merci asked again.

“ROMIROSHI,” the translator spit out. The cub looked at the machine and frowned. She said her name twice more but each time it came out the same. She opened one of the bags of food and began to eat.

The captain was surprised to find the cub out of the locker and eating when he returned. Standing in the doorway, he listened. The ensign was talking to the cub through the translator. “So, the baby’s mama died and there was no food for the baby. The cub cried but couldn’t eat the meat, the meat was too dry. You tried to take care of the cub but there was no food. The cub finally stopped crying. You tried hard ROMIROSHI. It’s not your fault the cub died. Who brought the food in here for you?”

“VINONOBOTH. She was cub’s mama. She was hurt. She put on the suit and brought food for us. She was teaching me about stars when the Nobavi made fighting. She went to get her cub and came back hurt. Then the big ship hit us.” The little

female went back to eating.

“Why was VINONOBOTH teaching you about the stars?”

Matt asked from the door. The cub looked at him but slid closer to Merci.

“He won’t hurt you,” Merci said. “You can answer him, he’s the captain of our ship,” she told ROMIROSMI.

The cub looked at Matt, stood up very straight and said, “I am smartest of my generation, of many generations. When I am grown I will be a science ship’s captain. I will be a leader for the Fleet.”

One of the crewmen laughed, “No Fleet here anymore, kid. They went off and left you behind.” Matt shot the man a look and he shut up.

ROMIROSHI looked at the man and growled then turned to Merci. “Is true?” Merci nodded her head. “I go with you, Merci?” she asked. The translator didn’t carry the sound of her fear, but it was in her voice. Merci looked at her captain who nodded his head.

“Not sure how we’ll get you off this ship without a suit,” Matt muttered. “Anyone in the back find child-sized spacesuits?” he asked through the com unit.

“We have one sir, but it has a tear from the piece of metal sticking in it. We can probably patch it enough to make the trip across to our ship. It’s pretty small.” A voice came back through the com.

“Patch it and bring it forward,” Matt said. “This kid is pretty small.” The translator had picked up some of what the captain and his crewman were saying and ROMIROSHI was listening.

“My suit,” she said possessively. “I have suit to jump from ship to ship. Part of teaching. No other cub my cycle has suit. Other cubs not smart as ROMIROSHI.”

Matt looked at the little female and asked, “ROMIROSHI did they teach you to fight, to kill?” The cub hung her head and shook it.

“Still too small,” she said. “One more turning and I will learn. VITORBOTH says good I am smart, because I am so weak.” She kept her head down, ashamed to admit her physical weakness.

Merci reached out and patted the cub on her shoulder, forgetting for a moment how dangerous even a small MURKATZ could be, seeing only a child needing comfort. The captain cleared his throat and Merci stepped back.

Matt stepped in front of the cub and said, “ROMIROSHI, look at me.” The cub looked up at him and he continued, “You must give me your word you will not attack or try to kill any humans. We are not food. We do not have to be enemies. We will get you fresh meat when we get back to Earth. We will not leave you alone on this ship if you give your word. There is one like you who lives on Earth. He gave his word and does not kill humans. Do you understand?”

The cub looked at Matt, comprehension and intelligence clear. He realized she had been at least partially acting to appear small and non-threatening. She nodded her head. “I need to hear you say it,” Matt told her. She glared at him. Saying it made it binding.

It took her a moment to reach a decision then she shrugged and said, “I will not attack or kill humans unless I am attacked.”

Matt shook his head. “Not good enough. If you are physically attacked by someone deliberately trying to kill you, you can fight back, but no killing. No killing humans. I know you understand what I am saying so you can stop pretending. Do you give your word?” he asked her again.

She knew this human had the authority to leave her here alone and she would eventually run out of food. Her only chance of survival was to go with the humans. And who was the one like her who lived on Earth? She looked at Matt, all pretense gone, and said, "I give my word, I will not kill humans. I will not attack unless a human tries to kill me. I will only attack, not kill, to defend myself." Matt nodded his acceptance. He revised his estimate of her age upward. Can't judge by size he reminded himself.

You knew VITORBOTH?" Matt asked. The cub nodded. "And his mate?" he asked. Again, she nodded. "You really must have been considered special for them to talk to such a young cub," Matt said, using her pride to gently goad her.

"VITORBOTH sired me," she said proudly, then added, "but he got old and foolish." The commanders should have killed him, but his mind control was strong. He had to hide on the nursery ships. He thought he could fight the Nobavi and got *%*&*#@*^ killed." She said this last with real anger in her voice. "He foolishly put me on this ship to be safe. I was not."

Matt nodded. "Is good the Nobavi killed him," ROMIROSHI said, a look of satisfaction on her face, just as the rest of the crew arrived.