

Chapter 1

Rita Nuu Longknife had been many things. A former debutante. The former captain of an Attack Transport in the recent war. A former member of an assassination team that ended that war.

At the moment, she was hugely uncomfortable. But then, being nine months pregnant, comfort was a distant memory.

It was bad enough, putting up with this beloved child under her heart. Now she had to contend with a stomach that did not appreciate tonight's enchilada dinner. She'd asked the cook to be sure the onions were well done, and Lotty normally did what she asked. The cook had done her best to make Rita's food as comforting as possible the last six months.

Why'd you have to blow it tonight?

Once again Rita struggled to the bathroom, sat, and did nothing. This was a real pain. *No, that was a real pain*, she thought as the general background discomfort resolved itself into a serious pain.

It was there, and then gone.

She waddled her way back to bed. There, her husband, General Ray Longknife slept the sleep of the dead. Damn it, the man could sleep through an artillery barrage, and bragged about it.

She loved him dearly. She'd held her attack transport on the ground long after the recall had been sounded. She'd brought him back, broken back and all, to a hospital that could mend him. When he refused to see that he wasn't a wreck of a man, she'd tossed her dress aside and mounted him naked, pulling out of him the seed that, just this moment, was causing her so much discomfort.

She'd gone along with him on a suicide mission, and used her pregnancy to get the bomb through security, then waited for his death, only to get him back because a man, courageous beyond all measure, had taken her husband's place.

When he'd gone off to a meeting and his space ship vanished into a sour jump, she'd used her appointment as Deputy Minister of the Wardhaven Ministry of Exploration to send ships deep into space to search for him. The man had come home to her, then, much against her protest, he'd taken off again for a meeting. He stayed on Savannah long past his promised return date. But before he finally left, a vicious government had fallen and a planet was on its way to finding democratic answers to its problems.

Yes, life around Ray Longknife was never boring.

Rita felt another one of those pains. She lay down next to her husband and rocked him softly back and forth until an eye opened.

"We got a drop mission to run?" he asked alertly.

"Maybe. Maybe not. What I do know is that if I can't sleep, husband, you are not going to sleep, either. This is your child as much as mine. Entertain your wife and his mother."

Ray grinned. "To hear is to obey," he said.

He fetched a book from the bedside table. It was a real book, from Earnie Nuu's library downstairs. It was one Rita had loved as a child. Now she wanted to lose herself in it again. She wanted her child to hear the soft voice of his father.

Ray began to read, sitting cross legged on the bed. One hand held the book. His other hand massaged her swollen belly. The youngster tried to kick his old man. Both of them marveled at the miracle of life within her.

Hypnotized by the sound of her husband's voice, Rita began to calm, to slip into a soft trance. She began to think that sleep might even be possible.

Then another pain swept through her abdomen. She began to rethink herself. A drop mission might just be very imminent. Very imminent indeed.

Chapter 2

Joseph Edris didn't have to stand watches. He could have been asleep in his bunk, but here it was at going on two in the morning and he was wide awake.

The *Jackpot 27* was about to make a jump.

Joey, as his mom had always called him . . . except when he was in trouble . . . was the science officer on the good ship *Jackpot 27*. Which was to say that his bachelor's degree in geology and master's in Science History was the best that the captain of the *Jackpot 27* could lay his hands on. The captain had personally signed Joey up just hours before he sealed locks and took his ship off hunting for the pot of gold at the end of some rainbow.

The signing bonus had paid off Joey's college loans with enough left over to send his folks money to pay off half of the farm's mortgage.

When people put that kind of money under an unemployed college kid's nose, he signs and figures out why later.

Joey still wasn't sure if signing that employment contract was such a good idea.

Take the good ship *Jackpot 27*. Please take it. Somewhere else. Without momma Edris's little boy.

Launched twenty years ago, as a merchant ship, it likely would have been scrapped, but the war came and The Society of Humanity was desperate for any ship that held space at bay. Thus, the *Constant Traveler* become the *General Casimir* but spent most of the war tied up to the pier, or so the story went. Now, someone had managed to buy the boat, complete with twelve supposedly still working 6-inch lasers. What would happen if the crew tried to fire them was a nightmare that Joey didn't even want to think about.

The crew was kind of like him, what the skipper could scrape off the docks and out of the dives to get aboard before they sobered up from their binge with their signing bonus.

If that had been the worst of the problem, things might be getting better. But it seems every ship has a still, or so said Joey's best friend aboard, Drugi Mälner, the 3rd Officer. Usually, a captain saw to it that the still limited its business.

Aboard the *Jackpot*, however, the skipper was the still's best customer.

Joey shook off his misgivings. The *Jackpot* was hunting for inhabitable planets. He was the science officer. And if they found a decent planet, that signing bonus would be just a drop in the bucket compared to the reward.

"Hold her steady," Drugi ordered the helmsman. "Paddy, have you been drinking today?"

"Not a drop, not even a wee one, I swear. I knowed we had a jump coming this watch, Drugi, and me hands are as steady as a rock."

The helmsman held out a hand. Even in zero gee, it didn't tremble.

"Okay. Joey, me boy, have you got the jump in your sights?"

Joey studied his board. Dead ahead of them was a spot in space that had much more mass to it than it deserved. When he tickled it with a radar wave, it bounced back a solid echo. Even the laser range finder got a reaction from it.

Here was a jump point. One of the strangest anomalies humanity had found among the stars.

For the longest time, everyone thought they were just something left over from the early moments of the universe. Of late, the suspicion was growing that some aliens had actually made them millions of years ago. How they might have done that was way above Joey's paygrade and education.

The jumps were just there. If you treated them right, they took you places, maybe to wonderful planets full of real estate people could live on. And those people might pay Momma Edris's little boy more money than he'd ever dreamed of.

"I've got the jump locked in," Joey told Drugi. "Give her a nudge and we should slip right through."

"Okay, helmsman, let's poke her and make her smile."

The helmsman tapped his board one quick hit. The queasy feeling in the pit of Joey's stomach twinged. Even with his seat belt cinched in tight, he felt a hint of down as the ship drifted to and through the jump point. A moment later, Joey swallowed hard as the dizziness came and went like a cheap whore.

The stars on the main screen flicker for a moment. Then they were replaced by a new set, not all that much different.

He compared the view with what he'd been told to expect. Some brain back on Savannah had put together the entire search; the *Jackpot 27*'s job was just to go there and see what there was to see.

Of course, it was their necks out on the chopping block if anything went wrong.

"Nothing's going to go wrong," Joey mumbled to himself, trying to believe the captain's often repeated answer to any given question.

"Right," Drugi said from the command chair. "Nothing's going to go wrong. So, Joey, you pessimistic old farm boy, what have we here?"

"Give me a few minutes to get this all catalogued," Joey said, half to himself as his fingers went over his board, bringing up new readouts to his half dozen screens. "I spent half the afternoon watch getting the technicians to take the sensor suite down and bring it back up right."

"Did they solve whatever it was making it so flaky?" Drugi asked.

"They say they did, and the sensors were working fine when I finally let those five thumbbed monkeys go off watch," Joey said. Neither Joey nor Drugi were all that sure of their technical support.

Drugi sipped his coffee bulb as Joey did what he could do. No doubt, his coffee was well laced with the still's finest white lightning, aged a good fifteen minutes.

The thought, *That still will be the death of us*, bubbled to the surface of Joey's mind, but he sank it swiftly as *he* concentrated on his job.

Someone on the *Jackpot* had to.

“There are gas giants on the outer edges of this star system. That’s good. They would have swept the system clean of stray rocks.”

“Are there any nice rocks down in the Goldilocks Zone?” Drugi demanded.

“I’m looking. Give me time. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“But I want the watch report to show that we discovered Rome and all its naked dancing girls on our watch, Joey, old boy,” Drugi unnecessarily pointed out.

“It will,” Joey said, not taking his eyes from his instruments.

He knew they were soaking up light that had left the planets hours ago; it wasn’t the speed of light that was slowing him down. No, it was the sensors. Finding a huge gas or ice bag was easy; you’d have to be blind to miss one of those.

Now the tiny rocks deep in the system that might hold air and water. That was something that took some careful looking for.

Minutes ticked by. Out of the corner of his eye, Joey noticed when Drugi ordered the ship to one gee in the general direction of the systems star. Joey took note of this with the tiny fraction of his brain not absorbed by his concentration on the primary question, the question for which the *Jackpot 27*, and all the other ships that optimists had named Jackpot had been fitted out for.

Is there an inhabitable world somewhere around this star? Or that star. Or any of a number of stars they were all running around looking at?

Teeming humanity wanted to know.

Well, maybe not the teeming billions of poor inhabiting the established worlds like old Earth and the first twenty or so colonies. No, not them, but definitely the bankers and industrialists of the rim worlds, looking for places to make money, build fortunes and settle the folks with itchy feet who had had enough of someone else’s idea of civilization.

Word on the street was that at least six groups from New Jerusalem were wanting to take their kind out of the evil clutches of the various states’ religions to a new and perfect promised land.

Joey shook his head.

“Nothing?” a worried Drugi asked.

“No, I’m still looking. Damn it, Taddie, it’s not like falling on some hooker in a bawdy house in Petrograd. These things are hard to spot and take some courting.”

“So, court the damn coquette, Joey, me boy, romance her and dance her, but get her to spread her legs.”

And on that bit of urging, Joey got the first hint. “I’ve got gravity wells in the Goldilocks Zone,” he said. “Three of them. One on the outer edge, one a bit too far in, and one that’s just right,” he said through a grin.

“And papa bear says great!” Drugi said with his own grin. “Computer, log the sensor findings.”

“The results on the sensor board are logged,” the computer answered.

“Now, Joey, me fine lad, give me a heading for that sweet one in the middle.”

“I need to refine the location a bit,” Joey said, and then, when he spotted the frown that replaced the 3rd officer’s grin, he changed his mind. “I’m shooting a course to the helm, sir. I will refine it later. This should be good enough for now.”

“Yes,” Drugi said, eyeing his own board that repeated the course and heading that now showed on at the helmsman’s station. “Yes, Paddy, make it so.”

“Coming to recommended course.”

Joey swallowed a scowl as the ship changed course, a course change that caused not so much as a flutter in his stomach. At the huge distance they were at, it hardly amounted to tiny fraction of a degree to the left and up. Still, Drugi had his course and they had their find.

Joey went back to studying his board. He focused his visuals on his targets. The outer planet was the closest. It was also the brightest of the inner planets. It seemed to have some sort of atmosphere, but it was solid clouds and reflective as hell.

Hell might be the operative word. What was taking place under that thick and pervasive cloud cover could not be good for flowers and other living things.

The closest in planet, as far as orbits went, was a bit less forbidding. Still, it showed an ocher face to Joey that showed no sign of water’s blue reflection. That one was dry. Humans might live there if they could find some water in its hard shell, but it would not be a slam dunk to sell that real estate.

The middle planet just now happened to be on the far side of the star from the jump they’d come in on. It was also just coming out from being occluded by that sun. A week earlier and Joey would not have even spotted it.

Now, he focused his instruments on that one bit of space, trying to pry data from it as soon as it might be had.

That planet was reluctant to give up anything.

When he turned the mass spectrometer on the planet, his first readings were from the star. It was so close and so large, the instruments tended to switch to it by default.

Joey manually focused his gear on the planet, forcing the focus away from the overpowering sun to this tiny dot just edging away from it. Two, three, four times he had the damn gear lock on, only to find it had again slipped away to the wrong bit of space.

On the fifth try, he got the optics to hold their fix. On the sixth try, his ranging laser held its lock and sent a beam out to establish the exact distance to that particular rock and to be changed however way it might be changed by reflecting off it.

It would probably be next watch before anything came back. Maybe later. Joey explained that to Drugi. His friend did not want to hear that.

“You got to tell me more,” the 3rd officer insisted. “If they find out all the good stuff on another watch, we’ll be written out of the findings, me boy. Talk to your good friend Drugi. Momma Mälner needs a new dress. A nice skimpy new dress. The less cloth in the dress, the more it costs. Drugi wants to give Momma Mälner a very expensive dress.”

“You ain’t married,” Paddy pointed out.

“But I want to be,” Drugi shot back.

“I’ve got the mass spec working on the light from the planet. Give it a bit of time. It’s having the devil’s own time not doing a rundown of the star there.”

So, the 3rd officer gave him some time, fuming the whole time and glancing every five seconds at the chronometer ticking away at the upper right hand corner of the main screen. Their watch would end at 0600.

The duty cook for the midwatch brought fresh coffee and bread. It was left over from yesterday morning’s breakfast. Drugi ragged on the poor kid for not having some fresh bread, but he told him what he told Drugi ever midwatch.

“The cook, she don’t come on watch until 0400 and the skipper, he wants fresh bread for breakfast so you get the stale shit.”

Joey took what was offered to him. It came with real butter. The bread had been warmed. With the butter, it tasted a whale of a lot better than anything he’d eaten at the college cafeteria.

His scholarship said he’d get an education. It didn’t say anything about him enjoying it.

Or it being all that good an education, but mom was so proud of him. No Edris had ever graduated from college in anyone’s memory. They’d always been farmers.

Joey meant to change that.

He munched his bread and drank his coffee. His was served from one thermos. The others drew their coffee from a different one. It, no doubt, had been by the still on the way to the bridge.

Joey shrugged and kept his eye on the blank readout from mass spec. He was chasing the last crumbs around his plate when the mass spec beeped and began to run a line across one window of Joey’s board. The line dipped and rose, squiggling its way across the screen.

Joey emitted a low whistle and enlarged the screen. Just to make sure, he had the screen go to basic mode. At the bottom of the screen, the names for the elements appeared.

Drugi was suddenly standing at Joey’s shoulder. “What’s that whistle mean?”

Joey used his finger to make sure he wasn’t tracing the wrong elements. “That whistle means we’ve hit the jackpot, me old man, the jackpot,” he said, knowing he was mixing and matching Paddy and Drugi’s accents and way of talking.

“That whistle means we’ve found oxygen and carbon on our planet,” he said, stabbing his fingers at the two bumps in the readout. “And where you find oxygen and hydrogen, you get water. And where you get water and carbon, you get all sorts of nice things.”

Suddenly, Joey was pulled from his seat. Suddenly, he and Drugi were doing a jig around the bridge, singing some sort of song, or maybe half a dozen all run into one.

“We’re wealthy men! I’m so wealthy, I’m so wealthy, I’m wealthy and happy and wealthy!”

They might have danced for the whole rest of the watch if the sensor suite hadn’t beeped. It started off beeping softly, then got louder and louder when Joey didn’t answer it immediately.

“What’s the damn racket,” Drugi finally demanded. “It’s knocking me off key,” not that he’d ever been close to a key the entire mad song.

Joey slid back into his seat. The flashing alarm was in a small window, one he hadn't paid any attention to.

Now he reduced the mass spec report and expanded the other one. It took him a long moment to recognize what he was looking at. Then an even longer moment to take in what it meant.

"Drugi, I think there is another ship in the system."

"There can't be. We own that planet lock, stock, and barrel."

"Well, there is another set of reactors all the way on the other side of the system. Maybe they just jumped in. I don't think they were there before?"

"You don't think? What do you mean, you don't think?"

"You know as well as I do that this gear is junk, war surplus from the lowest bidder, and worse than that, it's the stuff left over after the Navy picked it over and ran off with the best of the junk."

"Quit crying in my beer, Joey. Tell me what you've got."

The Science Officer of the *Jackpot 27* suddenly felt the bite of the caution worm. He went over his screen with a fine-tooth comb. He called up the help screen and read it through carefully, even with Drugi breathing down his neck.

Well, Drugi was breathing down his neck to start with. But even Drugi could read. Joey knew Drugi was reading the help when he told Joey to hold off a minute before flipping to the next screen.

Both of them read, and both of them studied the screen readout.

"Joey, run the scan again," Drugi ordered.

Joey tapped the screen readout. It did what it was programmed to do. At least Joey hoped it did.

Then he hoped it hadn't.

"We've got a ship in system," both of them said at the same time.

"And those reactors are like nothing in our database," Joey added.

