

**SOUL OF THE
PLANET**

— THE TWIN STAR —

KIRK WARDEN

The people that come to your birthday parties are not the same ones that go to your funeral. You can have many parties while living but one final event remains. Be careful how you leave this life.

To my dear Ilia, this story was about you before I even met you. To all the excited people who were waiting on this story to materialize. Thank you for all your support and ideas along the way and many thanks for your encouragement...

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CHAPTER

1

"THANKS FOR THE escort. We'll take it from here. LCS *Resolution out.*" Captain Ahlem spoke through the bridge comm to the gun ship's captain.

"Acknowledge. Engaging flip and burn. Valkyrie 5 out."

On the navigation console to his right, the huge *Valkyrie* gunship peeled off and flipped around. Ahlem angled the LCS stern back toward the fleet—back toward safety. It was a long way off, perhaps, but better than the uncharted space.

It wasn't that uncharted space bothered him, it didn't. It was what was likely hiding in that uncharted space that weighed on his mind. Wherever there was a mining mission, it was safe to assume there were Mitzrah nearby.

Ahlem had convinced commanding officers to send the *Valkyrie 5* as an escort in case any of the piratical scavengers showed their faces, but more dire concerns meant it hadn't been able to stay.

"Fly quiet and stay safe out here. Valkyrie 5."

Ahlem brought the microphone to his lips. "*Valkyrie 5*, always do. Give command my regards once you're back in comm range. Resolution."

"Will do. Valkyrie 5 Out."

The signature of the gun ship on the nav console turned from a dot to an impossibly long line in the blink of an eye, then disappeared entirely.

They were alone in the thick darkness.

Ahlem cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath. Alone was his specialty. As the captain of one of the fleet's long-range communication ships, or LCS as they were officially designated, striving in solidarity was his job. Well, the job of him and his crew of nearly three hundred.

Space was a dangerous place. There were any number of debris fields, electrical storms, even stray asteroids that could destroy a ship and its crew. It was nothing like home on Earth. About the only thing that made space more dangerous – aside from pirates – was hurtling through it blind.

But the fleet didn't hurtle through space blind.

That was the job of an LCS, or "rockrubber" as the ships were unofficially called due to their low survival rates.

Today was different. The fleet wasn't moving.

Not yet.

First, it needed fuel and that was what brought Captain Ahlem and the crew of the LCS *Resolution* this far out into uncharted space.

"We're a thousand clicks from the asteroid, captain. How should we proceed?"

Ahlem turned to face the navigation officer whose hands hovered expectantly over his control terminal. A single purple stripe located at the officer's upper arm glistened in the artificial light of the room.

"Hold course and reduce to orbit speed," Ahlem ordered, turning his eyes to the comm-pad strapped to his wrist. Information readouts

scrolled past on its screen, detailing the ship's status, updates from the scanners, and a variety of other relevant information.

"Course locked in, speed reduced," the navigation called.

Ahlem adjusted the lapels of his uniform, looked down at the intricate purple ram at his upper arm for strength, and stared ahead. "Ensign Niles, start the extraction routine countdown." He nodded to the newest member of the bridge staff.

Niles jumped to it, fingers flying across his projected keyboard. "Countdown begun, captain."

Every command was precise and well-timed. Ahlem was the conductor, and his crew was a well-practiced orchestra. Rockrubbers had a very high chance of space collisions, but Ahlem was going to change that. On his ship, at least.

Turning to his operations officer, Lieutenant Vinnik, Ahlem nodded. "Power down unnecessary systems, restrict communications to internal only, and set the scanners to low."

The lieutenant bowed his head in acknowledgment. "Aye, sir. Going dark in three...two...one..."

The overhead lights on the bridge dimmed to a faint red, and the various consoles, control terminals, and screens around the room matched them. Ahlem knew they'd done the same all across the *Resolution*. As well, the windows darkened as a thick, dark tint formed across them. It was difficult to notice from inside the ship but made a critical difference when it came to visual stealth. All told, the *Resolution* was running on low power, minimizing the chance of appearing on other ships' scanners or being spotted visually, however unlikely that was. Artificial gravity – set to one g – remained at full power, however, as well as life support.

If any Mitzrah are planning on crashing this party, they'd better be looking closely. Hidden as they were, they'd escape all but the

most meticulous observer. You don't have a parade when you strike gold. You just pack it up and quietly leave. Which was exactly how it had to be. While they were moderately protected from attack inside the hull of the *Resolution*, that wouldn't help the extraction crew. Working aboard a rockrubber was the most dangerous and unwanted posting in the fleet but working extraction on a rockrubber was even worse. But this was far from Earth, fuel was in short supply and it had to be done.

Some asteroids and planetoids contained an amalgamation of heavy metals nicknamed "rocket babies." Formed over eons, the cores were incredibly dense and unstable. Their surfaces were commonly oblong and rippled, almost like an infant swaddled in a blanket. Thus, the name.

Far from being decorative, however, rocket babies were mined for their ability to be converted into the storied mineral-7. In their natural state they were unstable things, prone to exploding with devastating consequences, but once carefully converted into mineral-7, they became incredible power sources, each able to be used for basic terrestrial needs of a small village for near a century. If the expedition fleet was going to have any hope of returning to Earth, or running their systems, or doing anything other than float dead in space, they needed to top of their reserves of mineral-7 as much as possible.

The journey home was soon to begin, and that meant someone had to mine rocket babies. And where there was something worth stealing, there were usually pirates waiting to do just that. So the miners went in quick and quiet, and their ship waited nearby, hidden, until it was time to make the extraction. It was the best way to avoid detection, which was the only option, considering the fleet could hardly spare gunships to protect every lowly rockrubber.

"Any foreign vessels on the scanners?" Captain Ahlem asked.

"None, sir. It's clear and empty out in this piece of sky."

"Very good." He looked to Lieutenant Vinnik again. "Extraction crew status?"

"All systems are a go," the operations officer answered, bringing up a video feed on his terminal. With a few keystrokes he projected it to the bridge's main screen.

The view came from a camera mounted on the dashboard of the mining skiff. In its pilot and co-pilot seats, two men in EVA suits were flipping switches, preparing the skiff for launch.

"Your systems are all showing green from here, Lieutenant Commander Willas," Ahlem said, nodding to his half-brother.

"We're showing everything good on our end, too," Willas said, flashing an *all-business* glance up towards the camera. The airtight suit and helmet obscured any good view of him, but the glance was enough for Ahlem to tell it was his brother. For just a moment he caught sight of Willas' earnest brown eyes, close-cropped military haircut, and salt and pepper beard. His job as security officer on the *Resolution* demanded a certain sternness – which Willas excelled in – and came with all the benefits of a face full of stress-born wrinkles. But he had earned his job. And deserved it. His and Ahlem's relationship had nothing to do with it.

Security aboard the ship was rarely a problem, but not all of Willas' job took place on the ship.

"*Miner-2, Miner-3, this is Miner-1, do you copy?*"

As Ahlem watched the video feed, the two additional mining skiffs and their crews checked in and confirmed they were good for launch.

"Copy that." Willas looked up and into the camera. "Ready to launch, bridge."