

Chapter 1

I took one last look at the traffic in my departure orbit. Status quo and ready to go. Green lights across the board. And my passengers? Their compartment display showed them strapped in and set to boogie. If Ickies ever boogied, that is. Who could tell? I didn't know squat about how Ickies lived or what they did for fun. I didn't speak their language, if you could call making rude noises with your nose language, and the only expression I could ever see on an Icky face was a frown. But no matter. They were my passengers, and hence my responsibility. Freelancers can't afford to be picky about who or what they haul, and I darn sure didn't need any bad reports. So nothin' but the best for my three Ickies. I flipped the safety release on the warp drive and reached for the Big Blue Button.

The proximity alarm sounded, and a warning light blinked on the console. Damn, what kind of an idiot just bumped into my warp zone? My ship had already been cleared for departure, and nobody was nearby a minute ago. I reset the warp safety and switched the display to ship-surround.

A tiny blip materialized out of nowhere, crossed into my zone, and was closing on me fast. I squinted at the display. Who the heck was that? If the jerk had wanted to get my attention before I warped out of orbit, there was always the radio. It took either a lot of guts or a lot of stupidity to waltz into somebody's warp zone in the departure lane. Good way to end up dead if the other guy's not on the ball. Then a depressing thought struck me. I waited, resigned to whatever the men-in-green had in mind for me.

A minute later, relief washed over me. It wasn't the EarthPort Police after all. I was pretty sure I hadn't broken any laws, but with my luck, the possibility always existed. The last time I'd been zone trampled, it had been a cop who wanted to make sure I didn't warp out and get away to parts unknown. That guy had been guts and stupidity, all wrapped up in one green-suited package.

But the ship pulling up alongside was a little two-seater racing sloop, a toy for rich boys who don't have to work for a living. I was composing a stern lecture when the comm screen lit up with a message from the other ship, and a rush of unintelligible gobbledygook crackled out the speaker. Two frowning Icky faces stared at me from the screen, their mouths and nose flaps quivering in time with the chatter.

I shrugged my shoulders in what I hoped was a universal gesture of 'beats me.' The noise from the speaker went up a notch in pitch. I punched |

a few keys to patch the show down to my three passengers, and added my own line to the cacophony. "Hey! You know these guys?" They probably understood English about as well as I understood Icky, but what the heck, I could try.

For the first time in my life, I saw emotion on an Icky face. Three Icky faces. Their nose flaps lifted up off their nostrils and stuck straight out, while the hair-like tendrils that adorned their heads quivered like a nest of baby swamp snakes. No doubt about it, they knew these guys. All three of my passengers moved at once in a weightless ballet. They unsnapped their restraint harnesses, kicked the floor, did a single zero-G tumble in mid-air, and grabbed the handles next to the cargo loft. The middle Icky pressed the keys on a travel case, popped the lid, reached in, and passed small objects to his two companions. One at a time, they kicked away from the loft, propelling their gangly gray bodies across the compartment. A moment later, the cockpit door behind me opened and they tumbled in. I stared at them wide-eyed as the radio babble from the other ship went up in pitch about ten more notches.

All three Ickies looked intently at the comm screen, obviously listening to what was being said. One of them extended its long bony arm and pointed straight ahead. It didn't say a word, but the meaning of the gesture was clear: get the hell out of here.

The cacophony from the comm speaker suddenly died. I looked down at the screen. The two Ickies were gone, replaced by a snowy white, silent display. My passengers stood still, frozen in place. The nearest one's arm still pointed forward, an Icky Ghost of Christmas Future telling me in no uncertain terms to haul our butts someplace else, fast. Unfortunately, I couldn't.

No way could I explain it to them. In my years of travel across the galaxy, I had learned to say "Sit down!" and ask "Where is the bathroom?" and "What is this meat?" in just about every known language. But Icky was beyond my comprehension. Ickies kept to themselves, and I couldn't imagine trying to imitate the sounds an Icky made by blowing out its nose holes while flapping its flaps. Elucidating our situation might be tricky.

I shook my head and spoke slowly. "No...go...warp. Ship..." I pointed toward the little racing ship alongside. "Too close." I crossed my arms at my chest and then splayed them apart while shouting, "BOOM!" None of the three faces showed any sign of getting the message. They kept on frowning.

A violent lurch threw me sideways in my seat. My ears rang with the sound of an explosion, and my three passengers looked around in

confusion, holding one another for support. Red lights lit up all over the console.

"Damn!" I scanned the display before craning my neck up to meet the gaze of the nearest Icky, towering over me, its sinewy gray fingers gripping the back of my seat. "They just blew a hole in my ship! What do these guys want? Talk to me, damn it!"

The Icky frowned.

I flipped the display to the passenger compartment view. A single space-suited figure drifted into the compartment through a gaping hole in the side of the ship. The figure turned around once in mid air as if it were surveying the room. It fired a suit jet that sent it toward the cargo rack. It unfastened the three cases that my passengers had carried onboard and turned around, heading with the cases back to the hole through which it had entered.

One of my passengers let out a profane string of clicks, grunts, and nasal buzzes, with the other two joining in a moment later. My gaze jumped from one gray face to another, but no orderly conversation seemed to be taking place. Either they were all talking at once, like a bunch of political commentators having a round-table discussion, or the conversation was moving faster than I could see. It was pretty obvious that they didn't like the fact that this guy was making off with their suitcases, but apparently they couldn't agree on what to do about it. One thing was certain, though. An explosion big enough to blow a hole in a ship would not go unnoticed by the Port Authorities. Someone would be along to investigate any minute now.

As if in answer to my thoughts, the proximity alarm sounded again. I flipped the display back to ship surroundings. A white blip was speeding our way. I pressed a few keys to get more details, then whistled. The newcomer was bigger than the racer parked beside us, no surprise, but this thing was coming in fast. Really, really fast. Too fast for Port Police. Probably military. I turned my seat around to face my passengers. "Here come the cops," I announced, even though they probably didn't get it. A few more key presses gave me a speed readout. The newcomer would arrive in about one minute.

A chime sounded at the same time as a yellow light in the corner of the display blinked. I shook my head and muttered, "Now they ring the doorbell." I twisted my head around and looked up at the Icky closest to me. "I've got to let them in the cabin," I said matter-of-factly. "They'll just blow open the door if we don't unlock it for them." My eyes darted from one face to another, but they gave no sign of recognition. I shrugged my

shoulders. "I'd just as soon not get blown out into space through a hole. You either, I suppose." I pressed a button on the console.

An almost inaudible hiss drifted through the cabin as airlock pressure equalized to space vacuum. The three Ickies looked at each other only a moment before they moved. One propelled himself to a position on the left side of the airlock, and another on the right. The third took two giant steps forward and stood erect in front of the lock, blocking my view of the door. All three of them pulled small sidearms from their pockets.

The outer airlock door clanked as it opened, and made a second clank as it shut behind whoever had just entered. My console showed two occupants. No surprise. The hiss of pressure again being equalized told me we had about five seconds before the inner door opened. I closed my eyes and tried to clear my mind. Help should be here in a minute, but the guys who had just blown a hole in my ship were in the airlock now, coming in as soon as the lock finished its cycle. It would be a very long minute.

If I were a military guy, about then I would have been thinking about tactics and strategy and all that good stuff. But since I was a cab driver, I thought about death. My death. When you pilot ships across the far reaches of space, death can come in a million ways, and old age generally isn't one of them. Most pilots know that, and accept it as part of the job description. Always, when images of my demise had drifted across my consciousness during those thousands of lonely hours in space, I'd hoped that I would think romantic thoughts, or at least noble thoughts, in my last living seconds. But now that the time had likely come, all I could think about was how much I hated Ickies. I hated their ugly gray faces, I hated the revolting sounds they made when they talked, and, man, did I ever hate how they smelled. Two lousy minutes with them in my cabin, and the air was already thick with the stench of rotten meat. To top it all off, a bunch of Ickies was about to get me killed, and I didn't even know why. That was the worst part.

The airlock door clicked. I opened my eyes, but not soon enough, for the door flew in before I registered a thing. The Icky that had been standing between me and the door toppled backwards, its feet still stuck to the floor by magnetic slippers, wisps of smoke drifting lazily from its chest. A figure in a spacesuit tumbled through the air from the direction of the door, turning head over heels as it arced across the cabin, leaving spiral smoke trails in its path.

I pulled the release on my seat harness and began to get to my feet when a movement in the dark interior of the airlock caught my eye. I instinctively pushed off from the armrests, shooting up and out of the seat.

My left leg exploded in searing pain and went numb. My head hit the ceiling of the cabin and I pushed away, rebounding back toward the floor in a reverse somersault.

My right foot hit the floor first, and I let my body roll and drop at the same time, absorbing the impact. I knew my left leg must be gone, blown off by whatever hit it, but when I looked, it was there, intact except for a small smoking spot just below the hip. Not a hint of feeling though. The leg was numb from the hip down.

I slapped my hands to the floor, locking my wrist magnets to the steel deck, before rolling sideways to see what was happening at the airlock. My two Ickies who had stationed themselves on either side of the airlock were struggling to subdue the intruder. They were having a hard time of it, for the other guy was obviously a pro, but he was at a big disadvantage because his spacesuit slowed him down. Before long, one of my passengers held the intruder in a tight grip. The other popped the intruder's faceplate and reached inside the helmet to do something I was glad I couldn't see. He went limp. Quickly, they stripped the suit from him. One of them climbed into the suit, sealed it, and dove into the airlock, closing the door.

My remaining Icky passenger turned around slowly and locked eyes with me, taking a few awkward steps my way. The pitiful creature's leg was hurt. I didn't know beans about Icky anatomy, but I knew a broken leg when I saw it. Only one of the guy's feet was able to lift its magnetic slipper off the floor to take clumsy little hopping steps. The other foot just dragged along, stuck to the deck, trailing behind.

I looked around, tallying the destruction, wondering what I should do, and knowing it was out of my hands for now. This was an Icky show. I was the audience, and it'd been a serious show. The first to die, my Icky passenger who had stood in front of the airlock door, still had his feet planted right where they had been when he was shot by whoever burst in. His body lolled randomly, swaying in the ventilation breeze. The first intruder, in his still smoking spacesuit, hung off the rear wall where his magnetic boots had touched and stuck. The second intruder, probably the one who'd shot me, was a limp mass floating through the air, with nothing to keep him from freefall now that his magnet-laden spacesuit had been taken away. The only living creature in the ship besides me was the wounded Icky who was dragging himself to where I lay on the floor.

I wondered what my third passenger was doing outside the ship. That Icky had been in a big hurry to strip the suit off the invader and get out the airlock. Must be something important it wanted to do. Maybe

retrieve the three suitcases the intruders had taken from the cargo loft? I shook my head. Who knows? Wish the cops would hurry up, though. I might live through this yet.

Now that the Icky war was over, I figured it was time to get up and be useful, numb leg or not. The least I could do is get on the radio and report the situation to the ship I had seen coming in. I pushed off from the deck, and felt a chill run through my spine. I was barely able to push hard enough to break free from the pull of the wrist magnets that held my arms to the floor. I flexed my fingers. They moved, but with almost no strength. I tried to curl the toes of my right foot, and realized they wouldn't curl at all. Whatever had numbed my left leg was spreading, paralyzing my extremities. I looked in panic at my Icky companion a few feet away.

The tall gray figure had stopped to kneel beside its fallen partner. The glint of a thin knife flashed as the creature cut off a lock of what passed for Icky hair and placed it in a pocket. The Icky rose slowly and stumbled toward me, taking hops just big enough to break the slipper free from the deck, dragging its bad leg behind. It knelt beside me and ran its hand up and down my left leg.

The sensation was bizarre. I saw the long, bony fingers kneading the flesh of my leg, squeezing and probing deep into the muscle. But if I closed my eyes, nothing was happening. I didn't even have a leg.

The Icky stopped its search, a chunk of my flesh squeezed between its fingers. With its other hand, it drew the tip of the knife downward along the front of my leg. The tough, tight-fitting material of my warp suit parted, exposing bare flesh. A thin red line with tiny droplets of blood oozing out showed the track of the knife. Without warning, the Icky plunged the knife straight down into my leg, drew it away from my hip about an inch, pulled it out, and set it aside.

I almost screamed, though I hadn't felt a thing. If I'd had my eyes closed, I wouldn't even have known anything was being done to me, but the sight of my leg being carved open by this creature was too much to take. I tried to meet the Icky's eyes, desperate for any assurance about what was going on. It ignored me, hunching over the wound.

I struggled to raise my head to get a closer look, and immediately wished I hadn't. Two long gray fingers were buried to the knuckle in the wound. I let my head fall back, fighting a wave of nausea. It did register that no blood was gushing out. Either the creature was lucky, or it knew enough about human anatomy to avoid the femoral artery. A few seconds later, the thing lurched to its feet, tucking a tiny object in its pocket.

The Icky stayed where it was, balancing on its one good leg. It kept looking around, scanning the cabin nervously, as if waiting for something to happen. It was probably waiting for the return of its companion, outside somewhere in the appropriated space suit. I was quite sure the thing had no idea help was on the way, unless it knew how to read an Earth-style navigation console. Unlikely, but anything was possible.

A low-pitched thud made the deck shudder. The Icky towering over me spun its head toward the airlock, and then turned back and stared down at me. Its nose flaps quivered violently. My heart sank as I looked up at what must surely be a very frightened face. It knew that a ship had just docked and sealed with us. But the Icky sure didn't seem to be as happy as I was about being rescued. Did it know something I didn't? The fact that our rescuer hadn't announced his presence over the radio was a little peculiar. Maybe the ship that had just fastened its boarding tube to our airlock wasn't a rescue ship at all. Maybe it was the racer's big brother. My heart sank.

A soft hiss signaled the flow of air into the lock. The ship that had just docked with us was pressurizing our boarding tube. The Icky dropped to a squat, pulling a sidearm from its belt and leveling it at the closed door. With a click and a whirr, the airlock wheel turned. The door opened a crack and a choppy string of high-pitched clicks, whistles, and grunts emerged.

It was the weirdest Icky-speak I had ever heard. The voice pitch was much too high, and at the same time the rate of the speech was too slow. In place of the low, throaty rasps that were the norm, these were softer, higher, almost feminine grunts and groans. The clicks sounded the same, but everything was in slow motion. Another Icky dialect? An alien speaking bad Icky? One thing was clear, though. Whoever was behind the airlock door had known that a gun in a nervous hand would be pointed its way, maybe ready to shoot first and ask questions later. This new intruder wanted to introduce itself before blundering in.

My Icky chattered rapidly, answering the intruder, and then lowered the gun and put it away as the door swung partly open. But a moment later, I heard the all-too-familiar proximity alarm on my console go off for the third time in the last few minutes. Yet another ship was coming in. The new intruder, still hidden behind the half-closed airlock door, must have known exactly what that alarm meant and not liked it, for it shouted one last burst of weird Icky-speak before turning to flee back through the boarding tunnel to its own ship. I heard the sound of footsteps running away, followed by one distant clang. Whoever the intruder was

had shut its own inner airlock door but left all the others open, standard military rescue procedure to let wounded soldiers get most of the way unimpeded while still having one sealed door in case of emergency. Maybe it was the cops after all. Or maybe it was somebody else's cops.

Without warning, the Icky grabbed my hand and pushed off the deck with its one good leg. By now, my fingers and hand had become so numb that I could barely feel the sinewy grip around my wrist, but my shoulder wrenched with the force of the kickoff. The two of us careened through the air across the cabin, hitting the wall above the airlock. With my world upside down and pain tearing through my shoulder, I saw the creature's good leg fold against the ceiling and kick off again. A moment later, my arm felt like it had been nearly torn from its shoulder socket. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Icky stretch out its free hand and fling the airlock door fully open, and then reach up to the bulkhead to pull the two of us through the door. I instinctively reached back to shut the inner door behind us, but the creature jerked me forward, through the outer door, across the docking tube, and through the other ship's outer door in a wild series of ricochets from one side wall to the other. When we were inside the other ship's airlock, the Icky stopped, crouching against the inner door to catch its breath. Its bad leg hung from its hip at a crazy angle, far worse than before. Its grip on my wrist went limp.

I huddled inside the airlock, panting. The lock was larger than the one on my ship, but it was still a tight fit, and the Icky stench overpowered my senses. I couldn't believe how strong the creature had been, hauling me to the other ship like I was a hunk of meat. Unfortunately, somewhere in the journey the Icky must have torn the last thread that had been holding its leg in place, and succumbed to the pain. The creature slumped over the inner door's locking wheel, motionless except for the slow rise and fall of its chest. The Icky show was over.

My hands hung limp from my wrists, totally numb now, but the rest of my arm still responded. I reached behind and hooked my arm through the outer door's handle to pull it shut and spin the latch tight. Scrunching forward, I managed to disentangle the Icky from the inner wheel, letting the creature float in freefall inside the lock. I leaned into the wheel and pushed open the door. Reaching up with my increasingly numb arm, I hooked my elbow under the Icky's shoulder and gave it an awkward shove toward the interior of the rescue ship. It floated through the lock hatch, limp, with me right behind. I turned around, leaned into the door, and pushed my shoulder against the wheel to seal it shut.

The same stream of peculiar Icky-speak came from somewhere behind me, inside the ship. I rested against the wheel, trying to catch my breath, aware of every heartbeat pounding in my ears. Breathing was growing more and more difficult. Whatever toxin had numbed my extremities was working its way to my diaphragm. I stayed still, saving what little strength remained, working harder for each panting breath.

The weird language repeated, this time shriller, with a hauntingly human touch of insistence. I shifted my body to face the interior of the cabin, and wasn't surprised to see that it had a military layout: seats for a pilot, navigator, and weapons officer, all facing away from me. No man or beast was in sight other than the unconscious Icky floating beside me. But someone, or something, occupied the pilot seat across the cabin, typing like crazy on the control console.

I took a labored breath and managed to choke out, "I think it's fainted."

"What?" A hand appeared at the side of the pilot's seat and pressed a lever. The seat swung around. A tall, broad-shouldered woman in combat warp suit leaned forward. She spent about one eye-blink taking in the situation before swinging her seat to the front again. "Get her in a warp sling," she snapped. "You, too. They're along the wall to your left. You've got twenty seconds."

I took a shuddering breath and whispered, "I can't." My head lolled back against the airlock door, my breath coming in raspy chokes. The unconscious Icky drifted aimlessly beside me, its magnetic slippers not yet having found the deck.

The pilot's seat swung around again, and the woman half rose from the chair. She dropped to her haunches, ready to spring toward us, when a mechanical computer voice announced, "Tactical incoming."

"Shit!" She pulled herself back into the seat and swung it to its forward position.

A moment later, a deafening engine roar pierced my ears, and the deck shook under the load of military thrusters kicking in. The sudden acceleration threw me to the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Icky hit the deck beside me. We were at a good three G's acceleration and still climbing when my lungs gave up trying to breathe.

"Hang on," the pilot shouted. "We're warping now."

My guts turned inside out, and everything went black.