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*Présentation de l'éditeur*The universe isn't what it used to be. With the new Alliance between the Triad and the United Coalition, Captain Tasha "Sass" Sebastian finds herself serving under her former nemesis, biocybe Admiral Branden Kel-Paten—and doing her best to hide a deadly past. But when an injured mercenary winds up in their ship's sick bay—and in the hands of her best friend, Dr. Eden Fynn—Sass's efforts may be wasted. Wanted rebel Jace Serafino has information that could expose all of Sass's secrets, tear the fragile Alliance apart—and end Sass's career if Kel-Paten discovers them. But the biocybe has something to hide as well, something once thought impossible for his kind to possess: feelings . . . for Sass. Soon it's clear that their prisoner could bring down everything they once believed was worth dying for—and everything they now have to live for. From the Paperback edition. Extrait Chapter One SHIP'S GYMNASIUM, TRIAD HUNTERSHP VAXXAR "Captain, we have a problem." It took a moment for Sass, toweling the sweat off her face, to acknowledge the comment voiced by the tall woman striding down the locker room aisle toward her, her black and tan Alliance uniform partly obscured by a blue lab coat, her shoulder-length blond hair uncharacteristically mussed. Captain. Gods' blessed rumps, after five and a half months of being called "commander," she finally had her rank back. That was the only good news Admiral Branden Kel-Paten gave out during the senior staff meeting earlier—though the definition of "captain" on board the Vaxxar was, in Sass's opinion, still up for grabs. However, Sass had a feeling that the admiral's announcement—at that same meeting—of the Vaxxar's departure from Lightridge Station within the hour was solely responsible for the grim expression on Doc Eden Fynn's face. "You've given Lightridge some decent leads—" "Leads?" Eden came to a halt in front of her, then flung her arms wide in exasperation, narrowly missing smacking her hand on a metal locker door. "People are dying of fright in the space lanes, Tasha. No one knows how or why. And now we have eighty-seven more dead bodies exhibiting abnormally high levels of dopamine and serotonin." The deaths on the freighter Degun's Luck were the sixth such incident in Triadian space in the past four months. Lightridge had promptly alerted Alliance HQ, requesting a forensic medical team. The Vaxxar, chasing down reports of an Illithian mother ship in the sector, had been diverted to Lightridge, pending the team's arrival. But only temporarily. Sass draped the towel around her neck. Three of the dead were Zingarans, Eden's people. That only made the incident worse for the CMO. "The med team from HQ arrives in ten hours. They're best equipped to handle this. We're a huntership, Eden. We need to be out there stopping the Illithians from breaching our borders, not sitting on station performing autopsies." Eden didn't seem to hear her. "I'm the only empathic doctor to come on scene in the first thirty hours after one of these incidents. There are still emanations. But I need time to work with them. Only now he pulls us off Lightridge. All because some damned pirate-turned-informant decided to go on an unscheduled vacation!" "That damned pirate was gathering intelligence on the Illithians," Sass pointed out. "HQ and the admiral feel it's imperative we locate him." Border breaches and a missing undercover operative did not make for a happy Admiral Kel-Paten. Sass figured that was why he denied Eden's request to stay behind on Lightridge. He needed Eden's expertise when they captured Jace Serafino. Sass just wasn't sure if he was referring to Eden's empathic talents in discerning falsehoods or her medical ones in putting Serafino back together after the admiral wiped the floor with him. Their mutual animosity went back years. It was years as well since Sass had seen Serafino. He was a charming rogue, always hip-deep in some kind of trouble. According to the staff briefing, he had changed little. But Tasha Sebastian—the woman Serafino knew as Lady Sass—had changed. Though she prayed he wouldn't remember her. She didn't need Admiral Edmonds's warning ringing in her mind to know that there were parts of her past that the Triad—and especially Kel-Paten—must never know. "Since he won't grant the medical investigation critical-mission status," Eden was saying, "then I'm asking for a two-week leave of absence. It would take me only six hours to get back there by shuttle." They were still in the inner-system lanes and at sublight speed. A shuttle launch would slow them down twenty, thirty minutes at most. If Kel-Paten agreed to it. And he might, if Sass

couched it in the proper terms. For all of Kel-Paten's aggravating qualities—and they were legion—he encouraged her input. Sass enjoyed testing the depths of his cybernetically perfected mind. His cybernetically perfect form wasn't half bad either, she grudgingly admitted. Except for his attitude and that damned perpetual scowl . . . But she'd brave that for Eden, even though she wasn't thrilled with the idea of losing her CMO—and closest friend—for two weeks. "Let me see what I can do." Her comm link trilled as if to punctuate her words. It took her a moment to find it under her towel, clipped to the neck of her pink workout shirt. "Sebastian." "My office. Five minutes." The admiral's familiar deep voice brooked no argument. She wondered what crisis he uncovered—again—to occupy what was left of her free time. But, hell, she'd just agreed to talk to him on Eden's behalf. "By your command, sir." Sass clicked off the link and caught Eden's wry grin. "What?" "Good shirt." Sass looked down. My name's No, No, Bad Captain! What's Yours? was clearly visible now that she'd removed her towel. She grinned back as she tossed the towel into a nearby hamper, remembering the day her officers on the Regalia gave her the pink T-shirt. Remembering more the wide-eyed expression on Kel-Paten's face the first time he saw her wearing it as she left the Vax's gym.

Gods, she so enjoyed rattling his cage. "Want to try double-teaming him?" she asked, heading for the door. Eden fell into step with her. "He can dock my pay for the cost of the shuttle fuel if—" The red-alert sirens erupted as the corridor doors slid open, stopping Eden in mid-sentence. Damn. What now? Sass flicked on her comm link. "Sebastian to bridge. Status, Mister Rembert." "Incoming interstellar thermal wave. Eight-point-two on the Graslan scale. McAbian residue readings—" "On my way! Sebastian out." Sass bolted down the wide gray corridor for the lifts, her heart pounding. She didn't have to hear the residue reading figures.

An 8.2 Graslan wave was more than enough to tear a huntership the size of the Vaxxar apart. Oh, gods. Tank. She stepped into the lift, gave the command for the bridge deck, and tapped her comm link again. "Sebastian to captain's quarters. Tank. Kennel, now!" She knew her voice would sound in her quarters. She prayed her black and white fidget wasn't sleeping so deeply he couldn't hear it. No, he'd be awake. The sirens would have accomplished that. Chances were good he'd clambered into the small safety pod even before she barked out the order. The pod was rigged to dispense one of his favorite treats when it sensed his presence inside. The fidget might not understand emergencies, but he was never one to miss a meal. "Bridge," the tinny autovoice announced. She lunged out of the lift, almost colliding with a tall, dark-haired man in a black Triad uniform. Kel-Paten. He slanted her one of his infamous scowls before guiding her through the double sliding doors that led to the upper level of the bridge. The two-tiered, U-shaped command center of the huntership was already frenzied with activity, black-uniformed senior officers moving efficiently from station to station, specialists glued to their chairs but swiveling quickly as new information downloaded to a nearby screen. Voices were terse, commands clipped. Every screen streamed with data. Kel-Paten released her arm. "You're out of uniform." She was also off duty, but the possibility they were at death's door prevented her from reminding him of that fact. She offered him a brief "noted" as she headed for the closest scanner station to check incoming data. What Sass saw on the screens wasn't pretty, but they had time. Five, maybe ten minutes to try some fancy dancing that could either save their lives or send them to their graves in infinitesimal pieces. She glanced over her shoulder. Kel-Paten slid into the left command seat. She watched as, with a practiced familiarity, he thumbed open a small panel covering the dataport in the armrest and linked into the ship's systems through the interface built into his wrist. He frowned slightly, then his eyes flared with that eerie, luminous hue that signaled his cyber systems were at full power. He was spiked in, as much a part of the huge huntership as the drives, scanners, and bulkheads. Except, unlike the drives, scanners, and bulkheads, he could talk. She turned back to her console, knowing he could hear her just as well from there as if she were seated next to him. "Admiral, my data shows a major energy disturbance at oh-five-seven-point-four." "Oh-five-seven-point-four-three-two," the voice through her comm link stated. "No damage from preliminary residual shock waves. Ship integrity is sound. Secondary waves—" "Damn!" Sass swore as she was thrust abruptly sideways. She clung to the wide console with both hands and considered sitting down and strapping in. "Forward shields down to eighty-five percent," a crewmember's voice announced below her. She opted to remain standing, working at the console. Kel-Paten was no doubt eons ahead of her calculations in his inner journey through the data, but he looked for the known, correlating and synthesizing, while she looked for the unexplainable. Granted, his cybernetically enhanced thought processes were a million times faster than hers, but he was linear, where her analysis tended to do pirouettes and somersaults. "Tell me what we don't have, Kel-Paten," she said tersely under her breath, forgetting for a moment that—spiked in—he could hear her. The huntership shuddered as another line of shock waves impacted its shields. "Energy signature is not indicative of ionic-storm formation," he replied. "No indication of interstellar gas cavity. No known binary-collision region in this sector." And no comment as to the inappropriateness of her sarcastic tone. "Space-time rift?" she

ventured, her fingers rapidly tapping instructions into the sensor pads. "Highly improbable, with no previous black-hole activity recorded in this quadrant." "We might just be making history, then," she quipped, scanning the results of her latest data request. She frowned. "We have abnormally high levels of McAbian particle residue." The Vax heeled hard to port, and Sass's stomach made a corresponding lurch to starboard. "Admiral, look at those levels!" The few seconds of studious silence from the admiral were filled by the sounds of voices around her: reports of minor hull damage on Deck 7, another fluctuation in shield integrity portside, two crewmembers with broken arms on Deck 10. Down in sick bay, Eden would be up to her eyes in contusions and broken bones. After this, they'd both need a pitcher of iced gin. "McAbian levels are increasing at the rate of seventeen parts per nanosecond," Kel-Paten reported. "Probability of vortex formation is eighty-seven point six-five percent in the next ten minutes." At his words, a chill surged up Sass's spine. A vortex—a hole violently torn in the space-time continuum. It could be anything from the universe farting to the birth of a major black hole as the result of a dark-star implosion perhaps hundreds of thousands of light-years away. But there were always warnings. For a vortex to just suddenly appear was . . . impossible. Yet there it was. And here they were, stuck at the wrong place at the wrong time with nowhere to go but down the galactic shitter. And no time to figure out the whys and hows. "Can you spike out? We have to do some fancy dancing. I need you at the con." "Agreed. Acknowledged." "Remy!" She called to the lanky, amber-skinned man—the Regalia's former science officer—two consoles down. "Monitor this station—we've got a rift coming." She took the seat next to Kel-Paten, raked a safety strap across her chest, then stabbed at the intraship comm link on her seat's armrest. "This is the captain. Secure all decks. We're on a rift horizon. Sebastian out." She turned to him. "Shields were down to eighty—" "Corrected." His pale eyes were losing their eerie luminescence. "They're back at optimum." "Well, praise the gods and pass the peanut butter," she said, noting the undisguised superiority in his tone. "Remind me to tell you how much I love you, Kel-Paten. If we live through this." The ship lurched sickeningly again. Alarms wailed. Data on her screen relayed everything she didn't want to know. This was a different kind of reminder, a deadly one. One that stated that when huntership met vortex, vortex usually won. CAPTAIN'S CABIN Friend? Friend? Tank hunkered in the rear of the kennel-pod and called out plaintively to the older fuzzel a few cabins away. The alarm—what he termed "Loud High Noise"—blared constantly, making his furry ears twitch. Big Ship shuddered and pitched. He was in Small Safe Place and shouldn't be worried, but worried he was. And it wasn't because of the way Big Ship moved. Friend? Bad Thing here! Friend. Reilly's mental contact was reassuring to the fidget. See. Smell. Know. Have time. Be safe. Go Blink now? No Blink now. We stop Bad Thing? A sense of pride filtered through his mind. Our job. We protect. Big Ship shimmied and Tank bumped against the pod's side. Protect MommySass. He paused. Thirsty. A mental sigh sounded in his mind, then an image of two small glowing circles. Remember! Blue light, blue light water, Reilly instructed. Blue light, yellow light food. Tank ducked his head slightly, even though he knew Reilly couldn't see. Remember! So much to remember, and he was only a fidget. Standing a bit unsteadily, he found two blue lights on the side of Small Safe Place, then recognized the pattern of sticklike markings above it: WATER. There was a small round spot. He nosed it and a slender tube slid down. The tube dripped a cool wetness onto his tongue. Thirst quenched, he closed his eyes, ignored Loud High Noise, and reached carefully through the neverwhen. Yes, there it was with its ugly smelly light. Bad Thing. Bad Thing was here. When Reilly gave the word, Tank would be ready. Présentation de l'éditeur The universe isn't what it used to be. With the new Alliance between the Triad and the United Coalition, Captain Tasha "Sass" Sebastian finds herself serving under her former nemesis, biocybe Admiral Branden Kel-Paten—and doing her best to hide a deadly past. But when an injured mercenary winds up in their ship's sick bay—and in the hands of her best friend, Dr. Eden Fynn—Sass's efforts may be wasted. Wanted rebel Jace Serafino has information that could expose all of Sass's secrets, tear the fragile Alliance apart—and end Sass's career if Kel-Paten discovers them. But the biocybe has something to hide as well, something once thought impossible for his kind to possess: feelings . . . for Sass. Soon it's clear that their prisoner could bring down everything they once believed was worth dying for—and

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