

MAGNETISM

CRYOBORN GIFTS



MAGGIE LYNCH



Windtree
Press

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CHAPTER 1



*P*ound. Pound. Pound.

Kieran pulled Nisa into him. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No. Let the kids get it. They’re probably already up.”

“Mom,” Eijaz yelled from outside the door, his voice trailing off on the mom part. “Adira is here and she wants you to get up right now. She says it’s a matter of life or death.”

“I’ll handle it,” Kieran said as he grabbed pants and t-shirt. “You sleep in. You haven’t even been home twelve hours yet.”

He opened the bedroom door, stepped outside, and closed it again quietly.

“Sorry,” Adira started immediately. “We have a huge problem. Six other farming communities on other planets have already called in. The crop wasting is spreading beyond the wheat. Worse, it appears that some people and animals are getting sick, too.”

“Six? What about here? Has anyone spotted this here?”

“No, but they are double-checking. Evidently it starts with the one farm and one crop—mostly wheat—then over a year it devastates that crop and morphs to attack other grasses and seeds. This is the first

time we've heard of it jumping to humans. They aren't sure it's the same virus but it appears to have the same symptoms."

"Compromised immune systems from the left over gravity waves from Q-bombs," Kieran said. He knew that some people were hit harder than others at the end of the war and, however that changed their bodies, it was then passed down through generations.

"No one is saying. All the researchers are caught by surprise."

"What do they expect us to do about it?" Kieran asked.

"The Earth Conservatory field scientists have been taking samples at impacted planets and trying to work on a vaccine or some counter agent to stop it. They've been sending samples to different research planets hoping different environments might come up with similar but different solutions. So far Discordja-C is the only group of researchers who have been succesful in creating a kind of vaccine that seems to be working. They are now creating copieess from their core samples to provide it to others to try."

Kieran understood why they needed Nisa now. She had the fastest ship in the Rim. And with the two of them together they could smoothly do wormhole jumps anywhere.

"And they want the Kalypso to deliver it," he said on a sigh. "Everyone wants the Kalypso at their service."

"True." Adira confirmed. "And Captain Star. I love her name change, Nisa Star. It's like one of those vids with the heroic captain rushing to save someone from the bad guys."

Kieran chuckled. "She is kind of like that, when you think about it." She'd laughed when he suggested her last name be Star instead of Star and embraced it as a joke.

"I know this isn't the usual kind of stuff Nisa does," Adira continued. "And there is zero profit in it because everyone is working on this for free. But it may mean the difference between all of us living on nutritional supplements for years and eventually running out, or having a robust plant product to at least create those supplements.

"And maybe entire ag planet populations living or dying," Kieran finished for her. "We'll do it," he said hoping that he could convince Nisa. "What's the timeline for us to get going?"

“The sooner the better. She is to meet up with an old friend you both know, Stambuli.”

“Stambuli is working on the vaccine?” Kieran remembered her fondly. She was the medic on board the Phoenix when he had stowed away with his two children. She was the one who safely brought his children out of cryosleep. Her attention to Z-Huang probably saved her life. No one had previously encountered a six month old baby held in cryosleep for decades.

Adira smiled broadly. “How could she not? You know how Stambuli is. She’s one of the most compassionate people I’ve ever met.”

“That might be just what will give Nisa the needed motivation to take this on. She has a soft spot for Stambuli.”

Adira held up her p-tab. “Let me transfer the coordinates on Discordja-C where Stambuli and the other researchers are working on the vaccine. If there is any way you can convince her to leave by tomorrow, it would be appreciated.”

“I’ll do my best. You know Nisa prefers being in space, so I doubt she’ll put up too much of a fight on leaving again so quickly. It’s the no profit part I’ll have to work on.”

Adira chuckled. “I know you can be very persuasive when you put your mind to it. Let me know what she says.” Then she turned and left.

Nisa had been Lehana when they’d first met eight years ago. And her motto was to take on the most dangerous deliveries because they made the highest profit. And she had done it—going to the hot planets still burning from the Oblivion War q-bombs. She had no problem jumping through multiple wormholes to keep trackers of her tail. She’d even sacrificed herself and her freedom, become Hellebor’s slave once more, to save him and his children. She was a lot more than any vid hero. She was the real thing, in the flesh.

After all that had happened, when she finally was free again, they had to change their names. But she was still the same woman, strong and brave when out in the void and the Rim, fighting for justice or running a dangerous cargo across the galaxy. But when it came to believing she was loved, Nisa was like an abused animal—never able

to trust fully, never willing to let herself care too deeply. She covered those fears using the cold logic of profit for her actions.

But Kieran still believed that one day she would embrace that miracle of being truly loved for more than the few moments they were together. And he intended to be right at her side when she finally did.

He'd hoped she would be happy living on Raeaa and they would make a permanent home there. She was fine for the first couple of years as they built a home and watched the children grow. A little restless, but the occasional trip out on her own kept it in check.

She'd come to know Eijaz and Z-Huang as more than just his children. Sometimes he really believed they were her children as well. Around the third year of them all living on Raeaa as a family, things came to an impasse. She said it was too hard for her to stay in one place. She'd been a star traveler for more than fifty years, plying the Rim first with the pirate Hellebor and then with her own star-freighter. She couldn't help but miss the excitement and knowing she was one of only a few who was willing to take dangerous jobs.

Whenever she was home on Raeaa too long, she became restless and then she started to pick fights with Kieran so she had an excuse to leave. Eventually, they came to an agreement where she would continue to do her deliveries and then she could come home for a month or two and enjoy learning what new things the children had accomplished. Those couple of months were a kind of relived honeymoon period and a chance for the two of them to reinvigorate their own relationship. It had been hard, but in the last three to five years he felt they'd come to have some type of consistent family unit. It was nothing like most folks on Raeaa but it was theirs and it was working.

Occasionally Kieran would go with Nisa on a brief trip, particularly on the more dangerous multiple jumps. The two of them together were much more smooth in the wormhole transits than Nisa and the AI by herself. During those brief trips Kieran realized he too missed traveling the Rim, meeting new cultures and, of course, being with Nisa every day. He had to admit that getting the adrenalin going

when in a tight spot appealed to him too. He wasn't sure if she was rubbing off on him or not.

Maybe it was time both he and the kids started traveling with her on occasion. Delivering this vaccine might be the perfect situation. Not a lot of danger, but still an important mission. The kids could be part of doing something really important and they'd get the exposure to new worlds and cultures that he wanted them to have.



NISA LISTENED to Kieran's description of the problem. It wasn't so much losing profit on a few runs that made her hesitate. She understood the need to help. If no one could successfully deliver the vaccines everyone would be hurt. And she still had lots of bad karma to make up for from her past.

The problem was having the children on her ship. She wasn't the motherly type. She'd told Kieran from the beginning that she would never be like his deceased wife. She'd never wanted children and therefore she'd never considered having them on her ship. They'd be underfoot, making crazy noises and asking questions. Her life and her trips were not designed with children in mind.

She'd taken to enjoying her trips away from Raeaa, away from the whole family unit thing. Not that she didn't care about the children. She did. She'd grown fond of them, and she did marvel at how quickly they learned and changed. But it was more like watching a summary vid for a serial. Come back from being away for a month and catch up on what happened while she was gone. Interesting for a while.

But she still had a hard time with even thinking about belonging to a family and making a commitment to love and protect them forever. Of course she'd protect them tomorrow and maybe even the next day or the next year, but she couldn't see herself bound to something truly long term.

"Nisa?" Kieran asked. "If you'd prefer us not to come, you can say it. I just thought this would be a way to test how it works in a situation that is not dangerous, just helpful."

She blew out a big breath. “Okay. I’ll do it. It sounds like some really quick jumps to six planets. Maybe a total of twelve days at the most. I can handle the kids on my ship for twelve days.”

Kieran hugged her tight and feathered a few light kisses across her lips. “Thanks. That means the world to me, and I think you’ll find Eijaz and Z-Huang won’t get underfoot. They can actually be useful. They can do regular chores like the cleaning, and you already know Z-Huang has some mad cooking skills, even though she’s only seven in Raeaa yearunits. And now that Eijaz is entering his eighth rank in lessons, he is a wiz at research of the interstellar databases. And it’s perfect timing for him to do his studies virtually.”

“I know. It’s just that my travels around the galaxy is *my* time. Time for being me without any need to try to be different or to think about what kind of model I am for young children.”

“You don’t have to be different to be a good model to the children,” Kieran reiterated as usual. “You are fine just the way you are—a strong woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. You’re a great model of someone who can fend for herself but is also smart enough to know when to ask for help. What more would I want for them?”

She shook her head in denial but didn’t respond. They’d been through this hundreds of times. She was a loner. She’d always been that way. She liked it that way. She was selfish, rarely thought of the children when she was away from Raeaa and, truth be told, was a little relieved not to be with Kieran. She’d told him this but he wouldn’t listen. Even eight years later he still thought she’d get over it, become that loving mother-figure his wife had been.

She’d never be that woman, and if that’s what he expected. Well...

A held breath whistled between her teeth. Eight years was a long time for her to be in a relationship. Usually she didn’t get past six months.

Their magnetism together was special and, in the moment of surrender to the universe, she felt amazing. But when she’d come down from the high and the physical craving for him passed, she was left unsure. It wasn’t natural to feel that good. It would never be natural.

Kieran picked her up and carried her back to the bed. “Being on the ship together for longer than a couple weeks will also give us more of *our* time.”

“Where will you take me this time?” she asked as the buzz of electricity zinged along her skin. “Let’s go somewhere we can’t jump. Somewhere beyond the Rim.”

He stripped and began moving his kisses down her throat, across her shoulders. “Skin to skin,” he whispered.

The flash of light pushed the history of the universe into her mind and she rose to meet him as it swirled around them. In only a few nanoseconds she knew what had come before. They remained still for a moment—neither moving, just enjoying the intimacy of being of one mind and one body. Time stretched until it was so taught, if they didn’t move they might be caught in that one moment forever.

Nisa luxuriated in that moment. This was the time she always felt the most free, the most willing to let her true self be known—not only to Kieran but to herself. Then she felt him moving, pushing her forward and she knew she had to move, too. She responded and the universe flashed bright again as they moved into the future. She could see beyond The Rim into the deep dark, and beyond that to galaxies and worlds they may never see in real life.

All the possibilities displayed at once as thousands of different strands, each with connections to every part of their past and their present. Some of the strands included the children, while others did not. Some of the strands didn’t include Kieran and a few didn’t include Nisa.

Not wanting to remain in the chaos of choices she pushed him faster and faster, harder and harder. As he responded to her urgency, they retreated from the other galaxies, back through the deep dark and finally into the present for one penetrating moment. Then he released them both into a languorous stable field of stars. She recognized them as their own Salty Way galaxy. Her relief was palpable as she snuggled into him and the two fell asleep once more.



EIJAZ SAT at the comms relaying information back to Raea station as they prepared to move out into space. "All tethers off. Confirm."

"Good journey," the station master responded. "You are free to leave. And thank you Captain Star."

Kieran patted Eijaz on the shoulder. "Good job. Let's get moving, shall we?"

Eijaz competently backed away from the docks. Once clear, he executed a one hundred and eighty degree turn and set impulse power to move them into the void.

"When is the wormhole jump?" Z-Huang asked, her small hand on Kieran's chair arm. "I want to help."

Nisa shook her head from side to side vehemently.

"I think now is not the time," Kieran said. "This is your first time and it might distract Nisa's concentration."

"And yours," Nisa said her mouth tight and eyes half closed.

"It's not my first time," Z-Huang said. "I remember many jumps as a baby in cryo."

Kieran's eyes widened and he looked at Nisa. Again she shook her head, her jaw tight. He understood the complicated relationship they had when making jumps. You couldn't hold back, you couldn't really control what was happening. Nisa was never good at giving up control but she had learned to do it with him.

"Maybe, after we get to Discordja-C it can be just you and me on the next jump. That jump is a shorter distance, and we can give Mom a break."

"I understand," Z-Huang said, though her lower lip trembled a bit.

"What do you remember from the other jumps?" Kieran asked.

"Mom getting caught in a timeloop. You holding her hand and the two of you getting pushed out."

"That's impossible," Nisa mumbled, shaking her head in denial.

"Any other jumps you remember?" Kieran asked slowly.

"You and mom doing a double jump. I don't know exactly what you did, but instead of holding hands she was sitting in your lap."

Nisa stood, her eyes wide. "Drakh. Now I have two of you inside

my head with me.” She turned to Eijaz. “And you? Do you see all of this too?”

“I don’t remember anything from cryo. This will be my first one. I’ll tell you after we jump to Discordja-C.”

Kieran was caught between being worried for Nisa and being in awe of his children to display these gifts so young. He wondered if their gifts were even stronger than his own. After all, he had been put into cryo as an adult.

Nisa looked straight at him. “We need to talk.”

He nodded.

“Now!”

“I’ll..go make us some gorp to restock our sugar needs after the jump.” Z-Huang offered and hurried toward the galley.

Eijaz leaned into his p-tab.

“Eijaz?” Kieran said a little loudly.

“What? Don’t mind me, I’m not listening.”

“Why don’t you take that with you and determine what our angle of approach after the jump should be to dock at Discordja-C with the least use of fuel.”

Eijaz finally looked up. “Oh. Sorry. Didn’t know this was a private adult talk thing.” He slowly gathered his things and sauntered off the bridge.

“Lock down access to the bridge,” Nisa said. Still standing she paced back and forth several times. “This is not going to work. When we get to Discordja-C you and the kids will get off, arrange for some other transport back and I’ll head out to the other six planets on my own.”

“Nisa, it’s not like they will be in your head with every jump.”

“How do you know that for sure? Evidently, Z-Huang was there with us even as a baby. *And* she remembers! I don’t even want to know what she will see, hear, know about us as a precocious seven year old and completely conscious.”

“From what she described, she doesn’t see actions, only feelings. That’s how it works. And most of it is really seeing the workings of the universe.”

“She saw us holding hands,” Nisa countered. “She saw me sitting in your lap. The only reason she can’t describe more is probably because her baby consciousness didn’t comprehend more.”

“And because in her baby consciousness, interpreted today, holding hands or sitting in my lap means comfort, caring, helping. She can’t read your mind, Nisa.”

“Are you sure. Because it seems that you can.”

He stepped to her and took her hand and waited for the shock of the current to connect them. “I cannot read your mind. I only know your feelings. Can you read mine?”

She yanked her hand away. “No. I can’t. And how do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

Kieran smiled wryly and sighed. “I know you scared. I know you don’t like letting anyone into your feelings. Have I ever lied to you? Have I ever presented myself as someone you couldn’t trust?”

“No...but...”

“But you think it may still happen.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I can’t let go that easily. I’m not you. Too many years of believing I could trust someone and then something would happen to prove I was wrong.”

“It’s been eight years we’ve known each other now,” Kieran reminded her. “Eight years.”

“I know. And maybe I do trust you...most of the time. But not the children. I don’t know them. Not really. They are still growing and changing. I don’t know if they are trustworthy. I don’t even know what normal children should know or feel. I was never a normal child.”

Kieran wondered if it would always be like this. Ten years from now? Thirty years from now? Would she always be having to rebuild that trust again and again?

“Would you be willing to be knocked out on the wormhole transit to Discordja-C?” he asked.

“No. Absolutely not. You know I never take those drugs.”

“Just this one time. If you are, I can then see exactly how strong Z-Huang and Eijaz are and you wouldn’t have to experience that.”

Nisa paced some more. He could tell she was thinking about it. Processing every objection and asking herself if she could handle it—simultaneously berating herself for having to ask and being fearful enough she knew she had to ask.

“I can’t,” she finally said. “But...” she stopped and cocked her head to one side.

“But?”

“If you could manage *not* to touch me during the transit, I *think* I could handle it more like an observer instead of a participant.”

“Are you sure *you* could handle not touching me?” Kieran asked. “You know how it is now between us.”

“I’ll have to. And if I do, you have permission to deck me.”

Kieran chuckled. “That’s not going to happen. We will both have to be very focused. If we think about concentrating on what the kids are doing, instead of what we are feeling, and *trust* the path they choose—”

“Now you are asking too much,” she said. “You have to check the path. They can’t just go off willy nilly because they have some childish idea it’s the best one.”

”You know that isn’t the way it works,” he said gently. “Either we all go with the flow or the process will break it down . You know that any attempt to control it, to gain power over, causes the process to end in chaos.”

“What if they’re wrong? What if they’re too immature?”

“They won’t be.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I will surrender, as always, and they will too because that is what is asked of us. And if all of us are part of the navigation as one mind we can’t be wrong. If anything, we will be stronger together.”

Nisa bit her lip, saying nothing.

Kieran waited, willing her to see it for herself—to make the decision.

“I’ll take the knockout drug.”

“Are you sure? A minute ago—”

"I know what I said a minute ago," she said between locked teeth. "I just...can't...go there. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. No expectations. Trusting us to get you to Discordja-C in itself is a huge step."

"I trust *you*," she emphasized. "Not the children. You. And you damn well better not piss in the vac."

He chuckled again. He loved her. No matter how many times she tried him with her natural distrust, or how many times she needed to away run instead of stay, he loved her. And now even more than ever. "No worries."

She shook her head. "Don't make me regret this."

"You already do."

She nodded, but said nothing.

Kieran smiled. She was trying. Every year she tried a little more, and every year he knew that the day of revelation was closer—the day when she no longer would have to try to trust. The day when she would simply accept it and let go. He just hoped it happened before they both died.

"Message from Discordja-C," The AI announced. "Stambuli pinging Captain Star."

They looked at each other. "Accept," Nisa said and waited for the signal to connect. "Stambuli? Is something wrong?"

"Yes." Her voice was a whisper and she seemed out of breath. "I think the core vaccine sample has been stolen. All lab personnel were forced, with blasters aimed at us, to a backroom and secured. We can't get out and we can't stop them from whatever they are doing. I've heard some crashes and it sounds like they are destroying all of our equipment."

"What the freeze?"

"I'm pretty sure they are from KaCorp."

"The biggest drug manufacturer in the Rim?" Kieran asked.

"And they want to have the only copy so they can manufacture it and control the market, charging whatever they want," Nisa finished for him. "I'm familiar with them. I've delivered for them before. Before I became...well...reformed so to speak."

“We’re on our way,” Kieran said. “We’ll get there as fast as we can.”

“Watch for a KaCorp ship. Maybe you can stop them,” Stambuli suggested.

“They won’t be under a flagged ship,” Nisa said. “They contract smugglers specifically so they can say it wasn’t them.” She turned to Kieran. “Look for a wormhole deformation.”

He nodded.

“Hang on, Staumbuli,” Nisa said. “I’ll ping you when we’re through the wormhole.” She cut the connection. “Open a wormhole as soon as you or Kieran find something,” she said to the AI.

“I have it,” Kieran said immediately .

“Located,” the AI confirmed the instantaneous transmission from Kieran’s device. “Event horizon in twenty-one...twenty...nineteen...”

“Tell the children to take the knockout drugs. I’m not willing to try them now. We need to be as fast as possible and I need to concentrate.”

Kieran relayed the news. “No time for pushback,” he said to Eijaz. “There will be another time. After we clear Discordja-C. And strap yourself in.”

Nisa grabbed Kieran’s hands and in mere seconds they transited, exiting the hole into the starfield.

“Where is it?” Nisa asked. “Where is Discordja-C? It should be right in front of us.”

“Scanning,” the AI said.

“Did we exit where we planned?”

“Yes.” Both Kieran and the AI responded.

“Then where is it?”

“It is not here.” The AI said.

“I know that! Tell me something I don’t know,” Nisa screamed.

“An entire planet doesn’t just disappear,” Kieran said. “KaCorp has done something to cloak it.”

“Or destroyed it,” Nisa suggested.

“There is no debris field.” The AI said. “There is a slight malformation near where the planet should be. I am unsure if this is something left over from the Oblivion War or something else.”

“It’s cloaked!” Both Nisa and Kieran said together.

“Then we go in blind and hope the space station is still at the coordinates we had.”

“And if they aren’t?” Kieran asked.

“Then we crash into something, hope we don’t die, find our way to Stambuli and the other researchers any way we can.”

“And save the world,” Kieran added, consciously lifting one corner of his mouth in a half smile to try and calm Nisa. He could feel her emotions revving. His heart beat in double-time. He took in a big breath to slow it.

Nisa’s eyes were bright with the fire of a challenge. He’d seen that look many times before. Where she was deathly afraid to be too close to people, when it came to putting her life on the line and fighting a big bad guy she was at her best. No fear. Just straight ahead acceleration with the confidence she would handle whatever came at her and improvise as needed.

He had to admit, his adrenaline was already pumping. He’d really missed this.

“Going in blind,” Nisa called as she headed toward the last known coordinate for the Discordja-C space dock. “Strap in and by the forgiving stars may the dockers see us even if we can’t see them.”