# Jenks

“Where is Jenks?” Taylor asked.

“Up there in that balcony,” Ferguson pointed with an elbow while sipping his drink.

They stood at the bar in the LoGee, the most popular disco on the wheel, or anywhere in the known universe, according to some die-hard fans. The dance floors extended to the walls, ceilings, the sides of the balconies and other geometric structures that filled the space. By eleven every one of them would be full of people.

The LoGee began each night out on the rim of the wheel, which is spun to maintain one earth standard gravity, colloquially referred to as 'one g.’ At six o’clock sharp the LoGee would begin slowly moving towards the center along one of the many spokes that attached the rim to the hub, g-forces diminishing as it goes. By midnight when it arrived at the hub everyone would be in zero-g. Entirely new forms of dancing evolved at the LoGee. People danced in mid-air, or with feet anchored to whatever ‘floor’ they could find, at any angle. After ten o’clock all drink services switched to squeeze bulbs, which had unofficially become the signal that the party is on.

“How’d she get a seat up there?” Taylor wondered.

“Maybe she can move.”

“Didn’t have her pegged as a that type.”

They made their way over to her, earning them curious glances from the youthful crowd that occupied this section of the club. Taylor, the youngest member of the Stellars Jay, normally considered himself among the ‘in crowd,’ but felt out of place here. Late twenties suddenly felt old. He had the curious sensation that a changing of the guard ceremony was unfolding. They found her at the railing, sitting arm in arm with a beautiful woman with long blond hair. Jenks looked up with an expression they both interpreted as ‘not now.’

“Sorry to interrupt,” Ferguson began. “We boost at o-six-hundred tomorrow. Last-minute change in the window, nothing we can do.” He shrugged apologetically.

Taylor’s gaze lingered on the blond woman. She gave him a questioning look.

“Um, do you have to tie that up at squeezie time?” He pointed to his hair somewhat awkwardly.

“Yes. It’s called a bun,” she deadpanned, dripping with sarcasm.

Jenks burst out laughing.

“Unless you want me to go all Medusa on your ass,” she said while holding up a few strands of hair vertically and rippling her body in time with the music.

“We were just leaving,” Ferguson suppressed a laugh and grabbed Taylor’s elbow. “Doors open at five,” he said over his shoulder.

Jenks sighed, and nodded. Then she turned her attention back to her friend.

Michaelson woke at 0500 in his cabin aboard the Stellars Jay. Jump window changes stressed him out, there are just so many variables changing at once. The process is almost entirely automated, but he still did not like rerunning the machinery so often. It felt like tempting fate. He dealt with these emotions by taking back control over the things he could directly influence, not matter how trivial. Sleeping aboard the ship counted as one, setting up the coffee maker the night before was two, and rerunning the supplies’ inventory check was three.

He watched the coffee brew and smiled.

“Systems check. Overwhelmed state now reduced to merely whelmed.” He smiled.

Jenks arrived at the dock at 0545, along with her friend. Taylor breathed a sigh of relief, then turned discreetly aside as they kissed good-bye. Jenks had clearly not slept that night. She shone with a happy glow as she ascended the gangplank. Taylor followed her into the galley and grabbed a mug. He shot Jenks a curious look then poured a cup of coffee.

“You grumpy that her girlfriend is prettier than your last one?” Ferguson said through laughter.

Jenks snapped her fingers and pointed to Ferguson, nodding with amusement. Taylor sat at the table and put his head in his hands, trying to feign indignance.

“Not grumpy. Jealous, maybe. But if you ask again, I will deny it.”

“Good to see you all here,” Michaelson said from behind Taylor. He turned to face Jenks. “Did the LoGee live up to the hype?”

“The ‘Gee *produced*,” Jenks replied as she walked past Taylor, patting him on the shoulder with the last word.

“Copy that, and welcome aboard. Stations everyone. We light up in five.”

The Jay pushed back at 0600 sharp, then proceeded to the queue. Two ships preceded them, just outside the jump box, a high-traffic volume of space requiring continuous monitoring and coordination. In the early days of jump travel, air traffic controllers from the surface transitioned into jump traffic controllers out here. They brought with them years of experience, procedures, and even some jargon. The approach to the box was still called taxiing, even though no one alive today has ever ridden in one.

Michaelson drummed his fingers on an instrument panel next to the wheel while he watched the next ship maneuver into the box. A big freighter had transited inbound, and was now clearing the space. Jenks maneuvered the Jay right up to the edge of the box. She could pilot a ship within millimeters of any target by feel.

They had gone to the wheel a week earlier in search of another pilot, and for the first five days had met with no luck. While Michaelson was certainly a solid driver, he wanted to focus more on the sciences involved with exploration and mining. He had led the interview process, and needed all of thirty seconds watching her in the simulator to make up his mind. Captain Sorensen had been hoping for someone with more experience, but a natural talent like this was too good to pass up.

In his ten years of flying Michaelson had never done many of the moves that twenty-two year old Amanda Jenkins now demonstrated with ease. He shook his head when he checked the monitors and noticed that her heart rate remained level during the entire simulation. Executing corkscrew evasive patterns in a debris field pegged his adrenaline, even in a simulator. To Jenks it was literally a walk in the park.

A light on the dashboard turned green as a klaxon sounded.

“Entering Jump Volume. Alert Level Five.” The onboard systems persona notified them.

Jenks flared the mid-range thrusters for a second, briefly pinning Michaelson to his chair. Moments later she deftly flipped the ship 180 degrees and flared them again, stopping the Jay dead-center in the box. Michaelson considered chiding her for showing off by using higher thrust than necessary, then bit his tongue when he recalled that procedure takes him more than a minute. He glanced at her without moving his head, and noticed a gentle smile on her face, unnoticed and utterly genuine. She was truly in her element. He found himself smiling too, as he set the jump coordinates.

He signaled a thumbs-up to Anna. She triggered the jump drive and they were gone.