GRAVITY

CRYOBORN GIFTS

MAGGIE LYNCH

Windtree
Press

Copyright © 2019 by Maggie Lynch

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design by Victoria Cooper

Published by Windtree Press, Portland, Oregon USA

For information about all books in the Obsidian Rim series go to: https://obsidianrim.com

Gravity: Cryborn Gifts / Maggie Lynch. -- 1st ed., Book 1 in the Obsidian Rim series

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-950387-11-3

Print ISBN: 978-1-950387-12-0

THE OBSIDIAN RIM

Before the devastating Oblivion War, humankind had expanded from SolPrime throughout the Salty Way, exploring and settling (and sometimes exploiting and destroying; such is humankind's appetite) the many solar systems within its barred spiral arms.

They traveled in stellarships of great variety—from speedy cruisers to slow generation ships. Although humankind found no evidence of sentient alien life elsewhere in the galaxy, they adapted themselves, sometimes at great cost and danger, via genetic, cybernetic, and AI tech—to sometimes greater and sometimes lesser suitability. The stellarships conquered the vast distances with the help of Quantum Entanglement Drives, and humanity seemed poised to expand beyond our small galaxy.

That was before the Oblivion War.

The Oblivion War was the first—and last—cataclysmic intragalactic conflict. A century of battles between competing interests among the core systems was unceremoniously discontinued when the first quantum bombs were deployed. The

effects of the qubition-powered bombs (q-bombs) cascaded through spacetime, resulting in the obliteration of half the galaxy and the quantum destabilization of the half that remained, pushing all survivors to the untouched farthest reaches beyond the spiral arms—the Obsidian Rim.

What is the Obsidian Rim? When the devastating waves of the oblivion bombs reached the gaseous galactic halo that marks the outer edge of the galaxy, the waves formed a scrambled magnetic field barrier that prevents QED travel beyond the Salty Way. With most of the galactic interior devastated by the Oblivion War, humanity now resides in a relatively narrow "wheel" between the destabilized dead zones consuming the spiral arms and the uncrossable starless void of intergalactic space.

Now, after the war, the survivors struggle on the Obsidian Rim, living and dying, rebuilding and losing again. In the harsher environs of the Rim, there are farmers and qubition miners, pirates and the cryoborn, but also corporate executives and self-styled royalty plus the honorable (and not so honorable) remnants of the core systems governmental structures that once ruled—and then destroyed—the galaxy.

Existence here is dark and dangerous. Looking inward, we sorrow for the past. Looking outward, we fear for the future. But on the Obsidian Rim, we fight and love for today.

CHAPTER 1

"No! No, no, no," Lehana screamed as she was thrown back in the pilot seat when the qubition ejected for a third time. "What the freeze? I did not authorize that. I did not!"

A single injection of just the right amount of qubition stabilized the wormhole. But the *Phoenix* had just released her entire Q supply, enough for at least seven transits. She had no idea what that would do. At best the hole would start closing behind her and she'd exit before it closed. At worst it would collapse and she'd die. Or she'd be thrown somewhere else in the multiverse and she'd never make it back to the Salty Way.

None of those scenarios were great for a pirate who'd just changed identities, ship registration, and purloined enough credits from a systems hacker to set her up for a year without having to trade anything for income.

Painful starbursts of light exploded on the forward viewscreen. Lehana screamed again as the ship accelerated

through the wormhole, seeming to fall without control toward the other side.

"Kali!" she screamed at the ships AI. "You just pissed in the vac and I'm the one who's going to pay for it. Where are we? Where can we land?"

"Calculating," the AI responded.

Lehana held back a string of additional curses as the ship shifted abruptly several more times, throwing her against the cushions of the pilot's chair until her entire body felt like she'd played with by a 500kg jellicant that rolled over her several times. It wouldn't do any good to curse at the AI. It had no feelings and had no comprehension of guilt.

"Anytime," she said to Kali through gritted teeth. "It would be nice to know where we're crashing before I pass out."

"Reverse thrust. Aligning for re-entry," Kali reported. "Fuel expended."

"What do you mean expended? We need to slow to subsonic speed! Dump the cargo bay."

"Cargo bay not releasing. Aerobraking in three…two…one…now."

Lehana was thrown back in her seat, and the increasing pressure on her chest pinned her there as the Gs climbed.

"Prepare for atmospheric re-entry in five…four….three…"

"Drakh! Drakh! Drakh!" Lehana hit the enclosure button on her chair. The padded headrest and seat back extended into a circle enclosing her in a shell that would cushion her body in the crash.

"Brace for impact," Kali instructed.

She felt the ship bounce three, no, four times along the surface of something and then impact. Everything went dark.

Lehana woke to a headache worse than the last time she'd had a hangover from a bad batch of vac-alky. Though she could

see nothing in her egg cocoon, she heard all kinds of alerts and warnings heightening the pain.

Kali said, all too loudly, "Starting repairs. Estimated time for first level systems is two planetary days."

"Shut off all audible alerts," Lehana instructed, her voice a scratchy whisper as if she'd been screaming for days.

The welcoming silence helped her take a deep breath and center her thoughts. "What about second and third level repairs?" She didn't need so many noises echoing in her head. "And open my egg so I can see what the hell is going on."

"Egg opening is a second level task," Kali said without inflection. "Task scheduled on day four."

"Like hell I'm staying in here for four days. Make it a first level, high priority, right-this-minute task!"

"It will take a minimum of— "

"I. Said. Now!"

The padded egg creaked open about one third of the way.

"That is all I can manage until other first level systems are operational," Kali said.

Lehana manually released the harness holding her, and then snaked an arm out the opening. She braced her hand against the outside shell casing and groaned as she leveraged herself up to stand with one leg out and one leg inside. She balanced for a moment checking her steadiness. Though she was petite, her frame barely fit through the opening. Satisfied with her balance, she slowly extracted the other leg and arm, this time biting off a whimper.

The viewport to the front of the ship showed nothing but sand and rock. "How bad is the hull?"

"The structure is stable," Kali responded.

Was that a note of pride Lehana heard? No it couldn't be. AIs didn't show pride.

"And the cargo bay?"

"Structurally stable though repairs are needed on individual units. It is not pretty," Kali added. "Exterior repairs, outside of hole patching, are not in my purview."

Lehana sighed. Not that she cared if the ship was beautiful, but she'd just paid a good two-hundred million credits for a brand new hull. When she'd left dock on the other side of the galaxy, it had been reinforced with the latest technology and the skin honed to a nice matte finish that absorbed light instead of letting it bounce off the hull. That helped mask her travels across the Salty Way. Perhaps that investment in the hull, along with heat shield upgrades she didn't think she'd ever need, were what saved the ship.

She carefully turned from side to side and stretched. Nothing seemed broken, even though she ached from the beating of the landing. The egg had done its job.

"What the freeze happened with the Q injection? Why did you dump the entire load?" They'd had some scary wormhole traverses before but this one could have left her spaghetified and never to be found again.

"Instruction for Q injection was exact," Kali stated.

"Like hell it was. Dumping eight loads is *not* exact."

"Checking log…log states one load was injected."

"But clearly that isn't true," Lehana bit out the words as she held back the desire to pound something.

"It is false data," Kali agreed. "I will perform a full diagnostic on my injection code. Shall I give that priority over first level tasks?"

"Drakh," Lehana swore. What was an AI good for if it couldn't accurately prioritize? "We aren't injecting Q soon. We don't have any Q onboard anymore because *you* dumped your wad in the hole. So what do you think? Of course, it is not a

first-level task. But you damn well better have it figured out before we get off this planet and make another jump."

"The rise in your voice indicates a level of frustration that is misplaced," Kali commented. "I am not capable of making mistakes. If there is an error, it is a human in error in my programming error and I will identify and correct it. If it makes you able to better make decisions, I will await your sting of curses before your next instruction."

Lehana paced back and forth, cursing in her mind. She was not going to let the AI tell her how to respond.

"Where, exactly, are we?" she finally asked. May it please the stars they were in friendly territory.

"Ydro-Down."

Lehana knew QueCorp, the mining company that ran Ydro-Down. Was it two or three transits ago that she'd picked up a full load of Q to deliver to a space station on the other side? "I know the station here. Have you already sent the request for assistance?"

"We are not at the primary trading station," Kali said. "Request for assistance was rejected without proof of advanced payment for a gravity lift to the catapult and payment for the catapult to space dock. The cost is one million DICs per one-hundred kilometers per ten thousand tons for the gravity assist to the catapult, and two million per ten thousand tons for catapult payload."

Lehana shook her head, unable to comprehend what she just heard. "I know we are not in the station. We are obviously buried in rock on the planet. But we are near the catapult station. Right?"

"Negative. We are closest to mine 154893, approximately two-hundred and seventy-four kilometers from catapult to space dock."

Lehana did a quick calculation in her head. She had approximately 5.2 million DICs left in her accounts after expenditures to get the Phoenix in shape. No way could she afford a gravity lift to the station and still be able to purchase Q to get her through the next wormhole. If she was lucky, she might negotiate a single load of Q for five million DICs. That's assuming she could get a fifty percent reduction from the current market rate, leaving her almost nothing for repairs beyond what Kali could make using what materials already on the ship.

"Will level one repairs get us airborne?" she asked. "Enough to get us to the station?"

"Negative. Level one repairs are to backups for life support, the medical bay, and sanitary systems. Level two will include significant repairs to achieve cruising control and enough escape velocity to leave the planet and get to space dock with the help of the catapult."

"Concentrate on getting us off planet. I'll work on negotiating a Q load and advanced credit for repairs."

"Estimated time five days," Kali said.

"Make it three."

"That is not possi—"

"That is not a suggestion. I can't afford to stay here any longer than three days. This is not a friendly place. It will take all my persuasive powers, and likely a good amount of bribery, just to make sure my ship isn't impounded by QueCorp. I had no permission to land and they will certainly take offense at the fact I crashed into a current or future mining line."

"I will attempt to complete needed repairs in three days," Kali affirmed.

"Not attempt. You will do it."

Kali did not respond.

CHAPTER 2

The alert of a possible cave-in had the miners scrambling toward the entrance, running into each other like ions shot into a collider. Kash had felt the earthquake while he was deep in the mine, but it was not like the usual rolling shake they endured almost daily. This felt like the time one of the whompers had hit a new vein and burst through an empty space to fall into a new cavern. He'd seen machines fall into the maw of rock when they hit a hollow spot. Often the entire floor collapsed and all those nearby died in the fall. Every time it happened, the ground shook like the planet was imploding.

His environmental suit visor darkened as they emerged from the darkness into the dusty, sun-drenched landscape. The comm whispers from other miners reached him, but he couldn't believe his ears. A starfreighter? Here? That was impossible. Starfreighters were too big to land on Ydro-Down. They docked in space and shuttled cargo and personnel down to the planet.

"Line up. No talking. Count off. If anyone is missing you all will pay by working all night." The crew chief overrode the individual comms.

The whispers silenced and each worker lined up in number order, looking like a small army of clones. All of them were sweating inside identical suits with darkened visors.

"One ninety two," Kash stated his miner identification in a clear voice when it was his turn.

He was an older miner, having been here for forty-five turns. The count off continued through the final and newest miner, number one thousand forty-four, having come of age to work only half a turn ago. He shuddered at the thought of his oldest being conscripted at age ten. Perhaps it was better his first child was kept in stasis at nearly four years old. His son would not reach age ten until released and allowed time to grow.

No one had tried to escape for at least seventeen turns of the planet. Though every one of them dreamed of escaping, it seemed futile. The few who tried had been brought back dead and displayed for all to see. There was nothing between this mine and the catapult station, the only place with any hope to stow away on a small luxury cruiser or shuttle. Only unforgiving desert, other mines, and overlords lay over the more than two-hundred seventy kilometer distance. No water. No cover from the sun or the road. Their environmental suits were issued for each shift and recovered once they entered the warren of underground caves that constituted their sleeping quarters.

The few who had tried to escape left during a shift, keeping their suit on with a plan to conserve air and energy while walking toward safety. However, word spread quickly that no one at any other mine would dare shelter a runaway or provide

a new suit and filtration pack for them to continue to toward the catapult launch.

Kash had not even contemplated that type of escape. Even if there were people willing to shelter him, he could never manage the distance hauling his two children in cryounits.

Silently, Kash stared at the starfreighter embedded in the side of the mine. He could feel the unease of the men and women around him. Each one wondering if the ship could escape Ydro-Down. Each one thinking what it would take to stow away undetected. Each one wondering the size of the crew, who or what was aboard already, and if the captain was one of the few who disagreed with slavery and would at least look the other way when finding a stowaway.

It was a big freighter, certainly the largest Kash had ever seen. Not knowing how much of the length was buried in the mine, he estimated it to be at least three-hundred meters long. Certainly it was big enough to take him and his two children aboard. It must have crew quarters. Probably a med bay, too, to ease them from cryosleep. He'd be happy for the three of them to share a single space if he could manage it.

He shook his head. Don't even consider it. This ship would likely be impounded and the captain and crew either killed or made a slave like himself. At the least QueCorp would make the captain pay a hefty fine for destroying part of a mine.

"There will be no mining at this site until the ship is removed," the crew chief said through comms. "Double rations for the first thirty who volunteer to dig her out."

Kash surged forward, pushing aside other miners in order to be at the front of the line and chosen. Double rations meant many could better feed their families. For Kash, it was a beacon of hope that he could find a way to get his children onto this

ship and have food for a journey of several days until they were discovered.

The crew chief pointed, one by one, to the thirty he would take. Kash was the second one chosen. The man laughed as Kash stepped up and he read the tag on his environmental suit.

"Number one ninety-two, how many rations do you have already stored for those babies?" he asked.

"Fifteen or sixteen, sir," Kash answered.

The chief laughed again. "Sixteen days rations for two half-dead children. No wonder you are a slave. You have no idea how to take care of yourself. If you were smart you'd let those children die and keep the extra rations for yourself, or trade them for other goods."

"Yes, sir," Kash responded automatically.

The chief laughed again and looked over the other fifty. "Anyone else storing rations for dead children?" All the other volunteers shook their head.

Kash knew he was different. None of the others were cryoborn. None of the others had escaped the Oblivion War in a generational ship and entered the Obsidian Rim in cryosleep when the quantum wave hit. None of the others knew what life was like a two thousand turns ago, how people lived in community and helped each other. None of them knew; and only a few even pretended to care.

In his forty-five years of mining Q no ships had ever landed at the mines. Most shuttles coming from space dock landed at the orbiting station above this mine that was tidally locked with the planetoid. The executives lived at the station and took the secure space elevator to the planets surface. When new miners were delivered, they were escorted by the guardians and never allowed on the space elevator again.

A starfreighter crashing at this particular mine was a once in a lifetime event. This might be his only chance to escape.

"One ninety-two," the crew chief said. "You will lead the effort inside the mine. Take nine miners and dig your way to the ship's bridge. Once you reach it you alert me. If you see anyone inside, you alert me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Kash responded.

The crew chief put his helmet against Kash's helmet for a private communication. "Your children's lives are the payment for any mistakes, any failure to keep me informed." Then he stepped back.

"Proceed," the crew chief said and pointed at the pile of shoulder bags just inside the mine. "The rest of you will work from the outside. Once we uncover the docking port and are able to board, we will know exactly what we have here."

Kash stepped forward first and slung the bag over his shoulder. It contained a 3D printer for processing iron ore to create structural supports as they dug toward the ship. When Kash and the other nine miners reached the shaft closest to the bridge of the ship, six of them took the printers and set up a spot to process the left over iron ore that had encapsulated the Q. The printer spit it out into successive strands to build the appropriate structural support. Two others set their printers to create fasteners to put the supports together.

Kash was in charge of running the whomper, a large automated digger. The next several hours were filled with the sounds of digging, followed by construction as the miners slowly moved closer and closer to the ship.

Five hours. Six. Eight. Ten. Each hour they paused for ten minutes so their suits could process their sweat and urine into a liquid they could sip to keep hydrated. Not one of the miners complained or showed outward signs of tiredness.

The possibilities of double rations and unspoken dreams of escape kept the adrenalin pumping. They all wanted to see the ship. They all wanted the same chance for freedom. Kash could see it in their eyes when they paused for their ten-minute breaks—eyes that reflected his own thoughts of escape.

"Stop digging!" one of the miners shouted. "I see the hull of the bridge."

Kash silenced the whomper and quickly moved forward to brush away small bits of dirt, revealing a large rounded piece of the hull covered in at least two inches of debris. "Careful," he said to the others. "We don't want to damage the skin."

The other nine workers surged forward with a combination of soft brushes and hand-held scrapers. Within another hour they had the majority of the window exposed to the bridge and the ship's name was emblazoned just below it: Phoenix.

Kash dropped to one knee in surprise. It was an omen. It had to be.

"Woman. Alive." Several people said it at the same time and Kash stood again to peer into the window. The interior lights were on and a petite woman stood in battle gear and stared out at them, a knife clutched in one hand as if she anticipated being taken.

Suddenly, the woman threw back her head and laughed. She secreted the knife in her vest, and then smiled and waved like a schoolgirl.

Kash's mouth dropped open.

"Call the chief. Call the chief." Several miners whispered.

For a moment, Kash wanted to say no. He wanted to talk to her. Who was this pilot with enough boldness to smile and wave without worry? Either she was wormy or she possessed the fearlessness he needed to get him and his children off this

planet. He looked at the other men, all of them mesmerized by the woman's actions.

He shook his head to quarry his thoughts. Not calling it in was suicide for him and his children. He pressed the communicator on his uniform. "At the bridge. Forward view window shows pilot inside. Alive. Female."

"Other crew?" the crew chief asked.

"Not visible," Kash responded.

"Stand down," the chief ordered. "Scraff is on his way."

A shudder went through all the workers. Harris Scraff was the executive overlord of this mine. He was cruel and didn't think twice about killing anyone he thought was in his way. He gloried in making an example of someone just to put fear into the miners. If he thought they did anything wrong in uncovering the ship, he wouldn't hesitate to make someone the example.

Kash didn't envy the woman. If she survived meeting Scraff, he'd find a way to contact her and to try to negotiate his passage for his help getting her get off planet. Before Kash and his wife had been captured and enslaved on Ydro-Down, he'd had a reputation among the cryoborn as being a gifted navigator. Certainly, it was not a skill he could use here; and he'd told no one. But this time it could mean the difference between eternal slavery and freedom for him and his children, if... if he could find a way to get to this woman and convince her he would be an asset instead of a deficit.

Lehana couldn't help but laugh at the miner's response when she'd waved. Though it was hard to see their expression through the environmental suits they wore. The way they

stopped all movement was as if she had momentarily stopped time from moving forward. She figured what the hell. Whoever came to meet her was not likely to be friendly, so she might as well go down laughing. Perhaps, if they thought she was wormy —some pilots went insane after a bad transit of the wormhole— they wouldn't kill her right away.

"Darken viewport," she instructed and then quickly stripped out of her clothing and into a skinsuit that would make it easier to get into the body-hugging environmental suit she'd have to wear on planet. She was still taking weapons, in case she needed to defend herself, but they would be hidden beneath a couple of layers and hard to find in a pat down.

"Status," she said to Kali.

"Two days, three hours."

"So, you will meet my three day deadline."

"Probability is seventy two percent," Kali responded.

"I know you can do better. Optimize. I'll be comfortable at 85% or above."

"Working."

"Give me information on the executive associated with this particular mine and their customs and habits."

"QueCorp owns all mining rights on Ydro-Down. Owner is Ming Waller."

"I know that part," Lehana said. "I've traded with QueCorp plenty of times over the years. Ming and I go way back. I want to know who is likely to come greet me at this particular mine. Friend or foe? Should I shoot first or shake the individual's hand or, stars forbid, give a kiss of some type?"

"Overly friendly foe, named Harris Scraff."

"Ohhhh, I remember him. Handsy. Privileged. Can be cruel when provoked. But he can be manipulated."

"Records indicate on your last encounter he tried to kill you by strangulation."

"Yes, I remember that well." Lehana rubbed the side of her neck. She'd sported a bruise for a good week after that. Scraff was one of those men who would not take no as an answer and didn't care if he killed the woman in the process. When she didn't accept his advances he thought he would subdue her by cutting off her air and doing whatever he wanted.

Lehana had been raped when she was barely thirteen. It took her three months to get up the courage to tell Hellebor about it. He found the man who did it and killed him, slowly. Not because he loved Lehana or was loyal to her, but because she was his property and no one touched his property without permission. After that she learned self-defense. She learned to become the aggressor. She studied how to stop things before they started by showing she was willing to kill too.

She'd knifed Scraff in the side and escaped while he fell to the ground and bled profusely. She'd hoped she'd killed him, but evidently not.

She doubted he would recognize her though. She'd had blonde hair then, with hints of grey, an aquiline nose and blue eyes. She'd designed herself to look to be in her forties, mistakenly believing that would dissuade casual seduction attempts. She'd also been considerably taller and heavier. What was her identity then? Avia? Zallili? She couldn't remember. That was at least three nanobot changes ago and twenty-eight yearunits.

With her latest image regeneration she'd made her hair dark, shrunk four inches, lost forty pounds, and redid her face to be that of someone in her twenties. Though younger women caused more unwanted advances, she could also use it to distract and manipulate if needed. If Scraff had heard of Lehana Saar it was only in glowing terms as the best Q trader in the

galaxy, or maybe as a keen negotiator and a bit of a party girl. Ming Waller trusted her to always get his deliveries to customers on time and under budget. Because she took chances no one else dared, Ming always gave her first choice on the longest and most dangerous deliveries. He also paid her handsomely, with the bonus of triple pay compared to what other Q traders received for their easy deliveries.

If things went well, she'd negotiate a Q delivery and the ability to get off this dust ball with her ship intact. And maybe even more money in her accounts.

She pushed a button in the console and retrieved a tranquilizer dart, secreting it in the sleeve just above her left wrist. She'd be prepared this time. Scraff would likely try to be more persuasive with a younger woman, and choking was not going to happen again.

Lehana checked her skinsuit to make sure her knife, ray gun, and choke-ties were well hidden before donning the environmental suit. Then she swiftly headed toward the docking door that was the only passenger access to the ship.

"Send a message to QueCorp at space dock," she instructed as she walked. "Tell them Lehana Saar is here to do business, and I will make a good bargain in return for getting me and the *Phoenix* out of this mine in one piece."

"Visitors at docking door," Kali announced at the same time Lehana arrived.

She stood with her feet wide apart, ready for multiple possibilities. ""It's show time. Open the door."

The docking door unlocked and hinged inward.

A miner stood in front of her staring.

"I'm the…uh…bait in case you come out shooting." His voice held no fear. In fact, it seemed he was nonchalant about the possibility of being dead right now.

"No weapons," Lehana stated, her arms slightly away from her side, palms outward.

The miner approached and stood within twenty centimeters of her. She swallowed, preparing for any eventuality. Now that she saw him up close, his suit was not only covered in the sticky dirt of this star-forsaken planetoid, but the frayed edges clearly indicated it was on the edge of failure. He wiped the back of his hand across his visor and she could see his face. His lips were firmly together; his jaw held tight. But his wide-open, dark blue eyes stared straight at her. The hints of gold specs in the iris appeared like tiny stars against the deep blue field.

She took a step through the door and her ankle wobbled to one side as her foot caught on a rock.

The miner placed a steadying hand below her elbow and she grabbed tight to him as a strange current quickly ran through her suit followed by a flash of bright light, momentarily blinding her.

The miner gasped and stumbled backward into one of the guardians, who roughly pushed him away toward the other miners standing behind him.

Lehana quickly regained her balance and took a deep breath to calm her racing pulse. What the vac was that? And why did it effect the miner as well. Some kind of scanner? Had he been instructed to disorient her in some way?

"Get on with your business," an abrasive voice said to the miners. They scrambled in different directions, leaving her alone with two guardians pointing guns directly at her.

Then Scraff strode forward. It was true to form that he let others clear the way and protect him before exerting himself. He appeared much the same as she remembered him. His eyes scanned her slowly, and a small grin started on one side of his

mouth. Obviously, his lascivious nature hadn't changed over the years. Good, she could use that against him.

"So, this is how you greet a stranded Q trader?" she asked Scraff with a hint of seduction in her voice.

"Protocol," Scraff said in a surly voice. "Take her to my quarters, strip her and frisk her for weapons. Then hold her there until I arrive."

Lehana held up a hand. "Not so fast, now. I suggest you wait ten shakes." She heard the comm signal come to Scraff's device. "That will be a call from QueCorp."

Scraff looked at his comm and blanched as he noted the sender.

She cocked her head and smiled behind her visor.

"Delay my order but keep your guns trained on her," he said, and then stood straight, as if someone had pushed a rod down his spine. He tapped twice beside his ear so that no one else would hear what was said from corporate.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Waller."

Lehana waited through each silent pause with a cocky smile as Waller spoke to Scraff.

"I understand…Yes, sir. No damage to her…We are greeting her now…Dignitary protocol. Yes, sir. I will, sir."

He tapped his ear again and then shouted at the guardians. "Stand down. Dignitary protocol." Then he approached with his right hand offered. "My apologies, Captain Saar. We've never had any kind of ship crash on Ydro-Down before. I just assumed…" He cleared his throat. "I…uh… understand you are a good friend of Mr. Waller and a trusted Q trading partner. Again, my apologies for treating you like a common…"

"Thief?" Lehana asked, her eyebrow raised. "I'm far more dangerous than any common thief."

Scraff swallowed and cleared his throat again. "May I escort

you to my quarters? There you can refresh yourself and, with your permission, we can share a meal while QueCorp is working on how to help your ship get back underway as quickly as possible."

She accepted his hand in a single quick shake and formed a thin-lipped smiled. She well-remembered his quarters and, before she left this time, she would take something precious from him. Something that might help repay what he did to her previously.