

MAGNETISM

CRYOBORN GIFTS



MAGGIE LYNCH



Windtree
Press

CHAPTER 1



*P*ound. Pound. Pound.

Kash pulled Lehana 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,” Kash 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," Kash 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?" Kash 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. Discordja-C has a kind of vaccine that seems to be working on their planet and they are creating copy samples from their core to provide it to others to try."

Kash understood why they needed Lehana 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. "I know this isn't the usual kind of stuff Lehana does, and there is zero profit in it because everyone is working on this for free. But it means 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," Kash finished for her. "We'll do it," Kash said hoping that he could convince Lehana. "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?" Kash remembered her fondly. She was the medic on board the Phoenix when Kash had stowed away. She was the one who safely brought his children out of cryosleep and 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 Lehana the needed motivation."

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 Lehana 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.

Lehana had come a long way since they'd first met eight years ago when she *only* took deliveries for profit. 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 years. 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 Kash 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 kids had learned. Those couple of months were a kind of relived honeymoon period and a chance for the two of them to reinvigorate their own relation-

ship. 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 Kash would go with Lehana 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 Lehana and the AI by herself. During those brief trips Kash realized he too missed traveling the Rim, meeting new cultures and, of course, being with Lehana 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. This 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.



LEHANA LISTENED to Kash's description of the problem. It wasn't so much losing profit on a few runs. It was having the kids there. 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 kids. She did. 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.

"Lehana?" Kash 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."

Kash 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 eight 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 being to young children.”

“You don’t have to be different to be a good model to the children,” Kash 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 themselves 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 and 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 Kash. She’d told him this but he wouldn’t listen. Even eight years later he still thought she’d get over it.

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. It would never be natural.

Kash 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 she already felt the buzz of electricity building. “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.”

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 and then 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 taugth, if they didn't move they might be caught in that one moment forever.

Lehana 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 Kash 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. 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 Kash and a few didn't include Lehana.

Not wanting to remain in the chaos of choices she pushed him faster and faster, harder and harder toward release from the future universe and he responded, as always releasing her and himself into a languorous stable field of stars. 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 Raaea 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 Saar.”

Kash patted Eijaz on the shoulder. “Good job. Let's get moving, shall we?”

Eijaz competently backed away from the docks, executed a one hundred and eighty degree turn once they were clear of the docks; and set impulse power to move them into the void.

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

Lehana shook her head from side to side vehemently.

"I think now is not the time," Kash said. "This is your first time and it might be too much for us to concentrate."

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

Kash's eyes widened and he looked at Lehana. 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. Lehana was never good at giving up control but had learned to do it with him.

"Maybe, after we get to Discordja-C it can be you and me on the next jump. Okay. That one is closer 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?" Kash asked.

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

"That's impossible," Lehana mumbled.

"Any other's?" Kash 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."

Lehana 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."

Kash was caught between being worried for Lehana 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.

Lehana 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?" Kash 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,” Lehana 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.”

“Lehana, 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,” Lehana 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, Lehana.”

“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 are telling me the truth?”

Kash smiled wryly and sighed. “I know your 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,” Kash reminded her. “Eight years.”

“I know. And maybe I do trust you...most of the time. But not the children. Really I don’t know them. 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.”

Kash 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.”

Lehana 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?” Kash asked. “You know how it is now between us.”

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

Kash 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 attempt to control it, to gain power over the process will break it down.”

“What if they’re wrong? What if they are 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.”

Lehana bit her lip, saying nothing.

Kash 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, her need to 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.

Kash smiled. She was trying. Every year she tried a little more, and every year he knew that the day 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 Saar.”

They looked at each other. “Accept,” Lehana 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 I’m pretty sure they are destroying all of our equipment.”

“What the freeze?”

“I’m pretty sure they are from Ka-Corp.”

“The biggest drug manufacturer in the Rim?” Kash asked.

“And they want to have the only copy so they can manufacture it and control the market, charging whatever they want,” Lehana 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,” Kash said. “We’ll get there as fast as we can.”

“Watch for a Ka-Corp ship. Maybe you can stop them,” Stambuli suggested.

“They won’t be under a flagged ship” Lehana said. “They contract smugglers specifically so they can say it wasn’t them.”

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

“I’m looking for a deformation to open a wormhole now.”

“Located,” the AI said. “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.”

Kash 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.”

“Right. Wormhole transit as quickly as possible – grab hands,” Eijaz repeated.

Before they could count to fifty they were through the hole and exiting into the starfield.

"Where is it?" Lehana 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 Kash 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," Lehana screamed.

"An entire planet doesn't just disappear," Kash said. "Ka-Corp has done something to cloak it."

"Or destroyed it," Lehana suggested.

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

"It's cloaked!" Both Lehana and Kash said together.

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

"And if they aren't?" Kash 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," Kash added. His heart beat in double-time, he took in a big breath.

Lehana'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," Lehana called as she headed toward the last known coordinate for the Discordja-C space dock. "Strap in and by the stars may the dockers see us even if we can't see them."