

AIRBORNE

By Jason Kristopher

Tessa sighed as she leaned back into the leather spaceplane seat and cherished the feel of comfort after three days on a dead world.

The Apex Spaceways StratoFlier was full on the return trip, packed with men and women going back to the orbiting Ticonderoga Station to continue their vacation. Along for the ride were twenty or so Imperial Marines, from what Tessa could see, and she guessed that they were rotating home after a long tour guarding the desolate world below.

Francine the Tour Guide—which was how Tessa thought of her—appeared in the walkway and cut off the view to the rear compartment where the Marines were seated. The tall, vivacious, and above all perky woman ran the privacy curtain across the walkway and then turned back to the cabin and proceeded to do her final checks before takeoff.

Oh, how she hated Francine—and not just one thing, or two, but everything about the woman annoyed Tessa. From her shock-pink outfit to her insipid airhead bubble voice it all grated on the older woman, and it was only that they were finally on their way back to the station that she was able to deal with her at all.

What irritated Tessa most was that she couldn't figure out why she didn't like Francine. There was no concrete, rational, adult reason for it.

“Welcome aboard, fliers!” said Francine in her over-oxygenated, whistling nasal manner. “Apex Spaceways thanks you for flying with us today, and we hope you'll come back to see us soon. Our flight time to Ticonderoga Station today is approximately fifteen minutes, so we won't be serving snacks, but drinks are available in your seat's armrest as usual. We ask that you take any used materials with you when you deplane, please.” Francine paused to smile, then continued her speech. “The safety features of this—”

Tessa tuned out as she always did during this part of the flight. With over two hundred flights on her StellarPass, she knew it by heart.

“There should be some sort of club you can join to bypass that bit,” William said from the seat next to her. “Or to just wave away Francine altogether.”

It was times like this that she loved her husband the most. This second honeymoon had been one of the best decisions they'd ever made, and they had reconnected on a level she hadn't thought possible in years. Tessa squeezed his hand, and they smiled at each other.

Francine's speech had changed, and Tessa's brain finally caught up to what she'd been hearing.

“—quarantine, as a precaution, for seventy-two hours. Our Q-Suites, as we like to call them, are the premier facilities in the Quadrant, and your every luxury has been provided for during your stay with us.”

“Except freedom!” It wasn't precisely a yell, but the woman from several rows toward the nose wasn't exactly trying to be quiet, either. “It's been over four hundred years! It's ridiculous that we still have to go through this.”

Tessa noticed the tour guide wasn't flustered. She'd been through this before or had been trained to handle it at the very least. “During your stay in the Q-Suites—”

“I'm not staying in one—don't shush me, Harold—I said I'm not staying in one of those suites. We've got a dinner engagement that we can't miss, and I won't be locked up like some farm animal!”

“Is there a problem here?” A deeper, more commanding voice came from over Tessa’s shoulder, and she looked back to see one of the Marines standing there at attention. The space-black uniform she wore accented her hazel eyes and dark red hair, not to mention the bright white beret. The colonel’s features were sharp, as though they’d been hacked out of an olive-colored marble with a chisel and left that way. A colonel, if she had her rank insignia right. Her nametape read KRITIKOS.

Tessa’s eyebrows rose, and she glanced over at William, who was just as surprised.

“Shouldn’t she be taking a military transport?” William whispered.

To Tessa, those were excellent questions. Colonel Vanessa Kritikos was the commander of all ground forces on the wasted planet they’d just left. What the hell was she doing here? And more importantly, why had she left? Tessa just about fainted when the colonel glanced her way and winked so quickly she thought she’d missed it.

Tessa squeezed William’s hand so hard he grunted in pain, and when the colonel looked back at the cabin, she let out the breath she’d been holding.

“No problem, Colonel,” said Francine, who glared at whatever fool woman had complained. “We’re fine.”

The colonel didn’t budge from her stance, even when the plane banked to one side. She balanced and compensated like the seasoned warrior she was. “Glad to hear it. This planet is no joke, despite what the press will tell you. I’ve lost four men in the last ten years to the sickness. It is very real, even now.” Kritikos cracked a smile. “Not to worry, though. That’s why we have the quarantine. No visiting men have died in over a hundred and fifty years, and with the safety measures we take, no outbreak is possible. Provided you stick to the Q-Suites, of course.”

The colonel turned to walk back to the rear compartment, then stopped and turned back. “Just follow instructions, and you’ll be—”

A sudden hacking cough broke the silence on the plane, followed by another, and another, coming rapidly like sneezes. Tessa felt three sudden sharp squeezes on her hand, and she looked over at her husband as he covered his mouth with a sleeve. Time slowed for her as he looked up at her, and she knew he could read the horror on her face. On all their faces.

William smiled, and Tessa flinched back at the blood on his teeth.

“Dearest, what’s wrong? It’s just a cough!”