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By Ann Aguirre

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ann Aguirre is a USA Today bestselling author who lives in Mexico with her husband, children, two cats, and one very lazy dog. She writes SFF, romance, and YA. Visit her online at annaguirre.com.

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One

Grimspace blazes through me like a star gone nova.

I'm the happiest junkie who ever burned chem because this is where I belong. Kaleidoscopic fire burns against the hull, seeming as though it should consume us, but we are the only solid thing in this realm of ghosts and echoes. Sometimes I think this place holds all the potential for everything that ever was, everything that ever shall be. It's a possibility vortex, and thus it lacks any shape of its own.

I glory in the endorphins pounding through me. Cations sparkle in my blood, marking me as unique, even among thrill-seekers. You see, my life started here.

Unfortunately, the rush is fleeting, and I need to carry us safely through. I focus on the beacons; they pulse as if in answer to my command. Here, I feel powerful, damn near invincible, however much a lie that proves to be. Jumpers almost never die old and gray.

March swells inside me, filling my head with warmth. My pilot, who is also my lover, feels natural there. Anybody else would wonder at that, but if you're a jumper, you get used to sharing mind-space. In fact, I'm lonely without him there.

He manipulates the ship so we can jump. The phase drum hums, all juiced up, and we swing out of grimspace. Homesickness floods me at once, but I battle it back. No point in dwelling on what can never be—staying in grimspace would kill me. But at least I'm jumping again. Not too long ago, I thought I'd have to choose between my addiction and my life. The decision isn't as obvious as you might think.

I unplug, still savoring the boost, and check the star charts. *Oh, nice, a clean jump.*

"Good work." March grins at me and steals a kiss.

I'm so happy that he wants to.

He's not as pretty as the men I've been with before. I used to have an eye for the lovely, androgynous ones, but I guess deep down, I don't mind a bit of the brute. March has strong, angular features and a nose that's obviously been broken. But his eyes, his eyes shine like sun through amber. I could spend hours looking at him.

Business before pleasure, however—I have an important message to send. With a jaunty wave, I leave the cockpit and head for my quarters. I share the space with March. Despite cohabitation, it's still an austere environment: plain berth, terminal, lighting fortified with solar simulators to compensate for lack of nutrient D3 if you spend too much time on board.

Constance greets me, flickering into a holo projected from my terminal. She's everywhere and nowhere, blazing her way through the ship from terminal to terminal. I don't know if we'll ever convince her to come back to a physical shell now that she's tasted the power and freedom a starship can offer. She's either fused with the vessel's limited AI or overridden it. Regardless, I suspect there's something illegal in what we've done, and I couldn't care less.

"All systems indicate a smooth arrival, Sirantha Jax."

I smile. "You got that right."

Since we jumped from Ithiss-Tor to the beacon closest to New Terra, the crew could be forgiven for thinking we intend to land there. That's what our orders demand. Instead, we're heading away from the planet. We're not operating on the Conglomerate's credits, and this is a vessel out of Lachion, so I can do something I've been longing for since the minute I acceded to that rock-and-a-hard-place decision. Jael—the merc who betrayed us all on Ithiss-Tor—was right about one thing. People seem to think it's fine to force me to choices that range from bad to worse.

No longer.

I add, "Activate comm. I need to bounce a message to Chancellor Tarn."

"Acknowledged."

The system glimmers to life before me, and I sit down to record. This won't take long. Constance zips through the protocols, leaving the proper software in place. In the shadowy light, I can see myself in the terminal, and it's an eerie feeling, alone but not.

I could make this a lot more detailed. Instead, I go with blunt, which is my favorite style of communication. If I never have to disassemble again, that will be wonderful. My time on Ithiss-Tor damn near killed me, figuratively and literally.

I imagine Tarn playing this message and smile. Then I deliver two words: "I quit." Satisfied, I stop the program and tell Constance, "Send it right away, please."

"My pleasure, Sirantha Jax. Do you require anything else?"

"Not at the moment. Feel free to go back to exploring the ship."

Like she needs my permission. She's been blazing through the circuits since Dina—our ship's mechanic and my best friend—set her free from the memory spike. Under her direction, the long-haul fuel system has increased efficiency by fourteen percent. Though I had no hope of the merchants on Ithiss-Tor doing so, Constance might even improve the phase drive from the inside out.

Standing, I consider the consequences of what I've just done.

Tarn may reply with bluster and words of obligation; he might say I have a duty during mankind's darkest hour. Maybe he'll even accuse me of turning tail when the chips are down. Once, those accusations might have even been true.

Now my skin is too thick with scars for such barbs to draw blood. I know my own mettle. I've glimpsed my breaking point. And Tarn will never, ever have my measure.

I choose not to serve the Conglomerate as an ambassador, but that doesn't mean I've given up on humanity. Surrender isn't a word in my personal lexicon; there are other ways and means. If nothing else, Ithiss-Tor taught me there's always a choice.

Now we're heading for the last place anyone would ever look for us, Emry Station. It will be a long haul in straight space, but this isn't a frequently traveled trade route, and there's nothing here to attract pirates and raiders. We should pass unnoticed.

After the Morgut attack, Surge—one of March's old merc buddies—and Kora, his Rodeisian mate, turned the place into a virtual fortress, complete with junker tech that will prevent the docking of Morgut vessels. Just thinking about them, the ravening monsters, brings to mind a memory too vivid for me to staunch.

After Vel shines the light both ways, I don't have an opinion, but I do know my skin is crawling all to hell. It feels like I'm passing through wisps of webs, not enough to entrap me, but it does stick to my face. I refuse to let myself start slapping at my skin, a complete breakdown of impulse versus intellect. I won't be the one to go nuts and flee shrieking in the dark.

The hum of machinery grows louder as we make the turn Jael suggested. Maybe we can find a terminal here, so Vel can patch in and see how many we're looking at. I'd rather know the odds, straight out. I saw the bounty hunter handle a full clutch of Morgut on board the Silverfish, so maybe our chances are good. Maybe.

I continue the silent pep talk as we continue, step by step. The coppery stink increases, the closer we come. By the time we hit maintenance, I have to cover my nose and mouth with my shirt.

Mary, no.

I don't want to look, but it's a compulsion as Vel lifts his light. I register impressions as flashes that burn themselves into my retinas. I'll see this room again, frame by frame, in my nightmares, as if rendered on some old-fashioned film.

They've been here. Chunks of flesh litter the floor. I imagine the hunger, the frenzy that drove them to this. I imagine the spilled blood as an intoxicant, reacting on their alien body chemistry.

I fight my way out of the flashback to find March studying me. He recognizes the signs in someone else, but he doesn't say anything. We're broken in complementary ways, thus rendering our damage comprehensible to each other. Instead, he merely sets a palm on my back, centered heat to let me get my head on straight. I take a deep breath.

We had been forced to take shelter at Emry Station, when Kora gave birth on our Conglomerate ship. Grimspac damages unformed minds, so you can't jump with a child less than two turns old on board. Emry offered the only sanctuary within our hauling range, but once we docked, we found the place infested with Morgut. I'd never forget the trouble that followed. Nor would Surge and Kora, so they'd taken defensive measures. Therefore, we couldn't find a safer place if we searched the whole galaxy, but we're not going there just to hide or to see old friends, although that's part of it.

I step out into the corridor and nearly run into Vel. He goes without human skin these days, more often than not. I hope that means he feels sure of his welcome.

"I wanted to tell you that I've nearly completed the simulator you requested."

My brows arch. "Already?"

"It was not difficult," he tells me with a flex of his mandible. "All Farwan's data is now a matter of public record."

"And you can build anything I might want from a schematic." I try to restrain a smile. From anyone else, that claim would seem like bragging.

"I am unfamiliar with artificial intelligence," he says then.

Right. So he can't build an android from the plans. Good to know.

"Thanks. Will you find Argus for me? I want to talk to him."

I've got an idea. Maybe it's crazy, but then again, some of the best ideas are. Can you imagine the reaction they gave the guy who first found phase-drive technology? This is certainly less radical.

Vel inclines his head, then heads off down the hall.

Later, I'm ensconced in the starboard lounge when Argus finds me. He's young, one of Keri's distant cousins, and he has the J-gene. Doc confirmed it for me today. The kid first came to my attention when I was investigating a murder attempt back on Ithiss-Tor. Argus broke the rules and slid planetside to get a glimpse of the unknown. Too bad for him, he couldn't figure out how to leave the spaceport.

He strides up to my table and offers an awkward bow. His earnest courtesy makes me want to smile, but I don't. I know how easily these kids bruise. I want his willing cooperation, so I'll need to deal with him carefully.

There are others in the break area, mostly clansmen, and a few of them raise their brows when they see the captain's lady invite a young man to join her. Tough. Mary knows, they'd talk even more if I did this in my quarters.

"Have a seat," I invite.

Argus takes me at my word and drops down into the chair opposite me. Wariness wars with excitement in his young face. I think he knows already that I have a reason for summoning him. This isn't a social visit.

"Good to see you again..." He trails off, unsure what rank to use for me and unwilling to presume the intimacy of my name.

"Jax is fine. I have this idea," I continue. "Maybe jumpers can be trained outside an academy. If a starship were outfitted with a simulator, a lead jumper could take on an apprentice and spend the downtime in straight space teaching him the ropes. It might also be possible to tweak the nav computer so that both jumpers could jack in at once."

His excitement spikes to painful levels; his smile becomes blinding. "Do I think it's possible, or do I want to sign on?"

"Let's start with the first question."

Argus nods. "I think it could work. We teach kids to drive in vehicles like that dirtside. Why not up here?"

I go on, "I think you're right. It wouldn't take too much to tweak this ship into a training vessel. That way, the lead jumper is there to make sure things go smoothly. Like any apprenticeship, it would have a training

period and a commencement."

"I want in," Argus says. "I'll do it."

"It may be a while before I have all the technology in place," I warn. "We have good people on board, but I won't risk a jump unless the gear has been perfected, and I'm sure you're ready."

"Whatever you think best," he answers.

Well, that's a good start.

"The good news is, I have a simulator standing by. It'll give you a feel for grimspace and replicate the pulse of the beacons. At the Academy, we trained on those for years before ever touching a ship."

He grimaces a little. "Well, I hope it doesn't take *years*, but I know a jumper has to be well trained. I would never put the ship at risk."

There's good steel in this one. We talk a little longer, but he's eager to be off to tell his friends that he's been accepted as an apprentice jumper, the first in this new program. Whether he knows it or not, Argus Dahlgren will make history; he'll be the first of his kind—a jumper trained outside of Farwan's academies. It'll be up to me to make sure he does the role proud.

"So you did it," March says from behind me. "You think he'll be ready in time?"

We've talked about this at length. It's his idea, his dream, and I'm going to make it happen. Not the way they originally intended, but sometimes paradigms must be adapted and improved.

"I hope so," I say quietly. "We need this if we have any hope of winning the war against the Morgut."

His big hands on my shoulders feel hard and warm. I lean back against him, resigned to a long haul. But at least I can use the time working with Argus.

Mostly, I'm tired of taking orders. It's time for me to decide my own destiny. And that's just what I'm going to do.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Annette Morrison:

Have you spare time for a day? What do you do when you have more or little spare time? That's why, you can choose the suitable activity regarding spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book entitled Killbox (Sirantha Jax)? Maybe it is to become best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with it has the opinion or you have other opinion?

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