Murder on the Mayflower

'We expected deaths on the voyage, but not like this.'

Starship Captain Kris Devlyn nodded to Dr Charles Benson. It was confirmation the chief medic should transport the bloodstained corpse to the mortuary level beneath the Mayflower's bridge. He turned to David Holmes. 'I assume you'll take responsibility in your capacity as justice co-ordinator.'

Holmes leant against the central control console, rubbing his eyes. 'I hoped I'd have a break for five years.' *As if anyone could describe a drug-induced coma as a break. And he should revise his temporal definitions—New Earth's day would be thirty hours, its year four hundred days.* 'I thought they'd weeded out any criminals.'

Devlyn grimaced. 'Not if you include the politicians and their hangers-on. Any thoughts?'

'I assume you've checked the security log. Any unauthorised entry to the bridge?'

'None. Only four of us were present. Unless…'

'What?'

'Not all the implanted chips work,' replied Devlyn. 'Some failed when we hit a stellar flare in sector four.'

'So a passenger might have tailgated in? Do we know who's got a faulty chip?'

'We know ten,' said Chief Engineer Enrico Maldini. 'But we only pick them up when they move between zones.'

Holmes muttered a silent curse. 'Ten thousand passengers. It'll be a nightmare to check them all. Even then, it proves nothing.' *Ten thousand, three hundred and four, to be precise. Hand-picked for fitness, intelligence and ability to breed—apart from those who could escape the dying Earth through power or money.*

'Only a few would be conscious,' said Devlyn. 'The doc can tell you who was due for medicals.'

'None,' said Benson. 'I had to carry out crew checks. But others would have self-programmed a leisure resuss. Especially as we passed through a star system. I don't think we record that.'

Maldini grunted confirmation.

Holmes pointed at the body. 'Dr Benson, what do you make of Vasile's injuries?'

'Unusual,' said the doctor. 'I can't think what weapon could cause that damage.'

'Could it be an animal?' asked Holmes.

Benson re-examined the dead man's wounds. 'Possible, but…'

'No way,' said Devlyn. 'They're all in induced comas and their zone's at the other end of the ship. Anything that escaped would pass through the viewing area. And we've had no reports of injuries.'

Holmes squatted beside the doctor. 'Okay, this is a mad idea, but is it possible an alien ported in? Were we close to any planets in the last couple of days?'

'We passed within a half-a-million miles of Xarahensia three hours ago,' said Devlyn.

'We can't rule anything out,' replied Maldini. 'But would a being that advanced resort to biting if it wanted to kill us?'

'And,' added Devlyn, 'you know the boffins checked every galaxy within ten light years for planets that might sustain life. Besides, Xarahensia's too hot. Barren place with no atmosphere. Reminded me of our old moon.'

'Humanlike life. That's what they looked for.' Holmes continued to examine the dead man. 'Whatever attacked him didn't stop at his neck. There's a lump of flesh missing from his left arm. Isn't that where his chip would be?'

Benson nodded. 'If he was right-handed.'

Holmes glanced at Deputy Navigator Rosa Romescu. 'Rosa, please get a scanner.'

Holmes' thoughts often drifted to the beautiful DN during his waking times. They'd warned him about relationships with passengers and crew. The different coma patterns meant some would age quicker than others. His biological age when they arrived on New Earth would be mid-forties. The crew and Benson would average around seventy while the ordinary passengers would stay in their twenties. Half the politicos would be dead.

He waited until she disappeared into the equipment store. 'The DN… Eastern European, isn't she?'

'I'm not sure,' replied Devlyn. 'She's from the European Republic. That's all I know. Why?'

'It's Vasile's wounds. We kept it quiet, but after the comet hit last year, weird things happened. Horrors emerged we assumed died centuries ago. Including werewolves.'

'You're joking?'

'I wish I was. An epidemic occurred in the Carpathian Mountains area. We thought we'd contained it, but there were isolated cases in New York and London.'

'We'd have screened for that, surely?' asked Devlyn.

Dr Benson stood up. 'We did. I supervised the programme personally. At least for ordinary colonists, but the politicos and their lackeys might have slipped through the net.'

'I'm a lackey, don't forget,' said Holmes. 'And the Anglo-Dutch Federation insisted our people went through the same pre-checks as everyone else.'

'The crew endured advanced vetting,' said Devlyn. 'None of us have got deficient genes, so you can rule us out.'

'Only of being werewolves. Did Vasile have any enemies?'

'Not that I know,' said Devlyn. 'Except… There was tension between him and Rosa. He was also European.'

'Remind me,' said Holmes. 'Who was on the bridge when he died?'

'Me, Rosa and Enrico. We were in sleep mode.'

'Suppose someone woke early? Would you know?'

'No.' Devlyn turned to Maldini. 'You woke me. Was Rosa awake?'

'Not as far as I know. I left my pod and saw the body. I woke you two up immediately.' Maldini's voice rose an octave. 'It wasn't me.'

'It could have been any of you,' said Holmes.

Romescu returned holding a small square device. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Search for Vasile's chip,' said Holmes.

The DN pressed a button, then ran a slender finger over the small screen. 'Sorry… Let me try again.' She repeated the process. 'I can't find it.'

'I need to see the security log,' said Holmes. 'Anything in the last six hours.'

Devlyn walked over to the nearest console. 'I take it you want to know when his chip was last detected?' He pressed a single button. 'K-4-9… Security Trace… Crewman… Vasile.' The captain peered at the screen. 'Strange. He left the deck three hours ago. He was in the executive zone for twenty minutes and then he vanished. Or his chip did. Could he have been killed elsewhere and brought here?'

'Unlikely,' said Holmes. 'Looking at the blood under the body and the absence of any other bloodstains, I'd say he died where we found him. My guess is the killer used Vasile's chip to leave the deck, then flushed it down a recycling tube.'

Holmes wondered if the killer was a resident in the executive zone. It was the temporary home of the crew, other officials including Benson and himself, and twenty heads of state and their families, mistresses and hangers-on. That's if sixty years counted as temporary.

'Why?' asked Devlyn.

'Because their chip isn't working. Rosa, who's here now? Scan everyone here.'

The DN clicked more buttons. 'The captain, you, Enrico, Dr Benson…'

'What about you?'

Romescu scowled and thrust the scanner at Holmes. 'If you don't trust me, you can check.'

Holmes cursed to himself. He liked Rosa, but it wasn't mutual at that moment. His damn job always screwed up his life. He peered at the small display before handing it back. 'I needed to be sure, Rosa.'

She shrugged. 'If you say so.'

He smiled, trying to put her at ease. He didn't like it, but she was his prime suspect. 'Can I have a word? In private.'

Romescu shook her head before leading him off the bridge into the equipment store area.

'You think it was me,' she said. 'They do.'

She was trembling. He tried to appear relaxed. 'I don't. You and Vasile—everything okay between you?'

'He was a shit. He thought I might be a werewolf.'

'Why?' Holmes told himself to stay calm. His thoughts were a battleground between desire and suspicion.

'He came from my region. The old Transylvania. He claimed to be a savant, you know, someone who could sense the shapeshifters. He was sure one was on board, and he thought it might be me. Just because of where I was born.'

'When did you last see him alive?'

'At the medical. There were six of us. Me, the captain, Enrico, Vasile, Deputy Engineer McBride and my boss. That's Ade Dembele.'

'When was that?'

'I never like to look. But we were passing Xarahensia. I remember how beautiful it looked. But cold.'

Holmes smiled. 'I thought it was too hot to support life.'

She smiled back. 'Perhaps. But it looked cold, like the moon.'

Holmes opened a drawer in a nearby cabinet and pulled out a small shiny metal cylinder. 'These are spare chips, aren't they?'

'Unactivated. The casing is pure silver. If I was a werewolf, I couldn't have one inside me.' She rolled up her sleeve to show him her scar.

He reached across and touched her arm. 'Thank you, Rosa. I now know who the killer is. And you can help me expose him.'

Five minutes later, Holmes led a handcuffed Rosa back onto the bridge.

'Doctor Benson, can you please get me some ELQ? Also known as the truth drug.'

Benson smirked before exiting the bridge.

Holmes watched him disappear before speaking again. 'Captain, arrest Dr Benson on his return. And search him. I think you'll find a loose chip somewhere in his clothing.'

'Why?' asked Devlyn.

'The wounds are typical of a werewolf attack. Vasile suspected there was one on board and it was only a matter of time before he accused the doctor. The moon-like nature of Xarahensia would trigger a transformation, so Benson knew he had to act. My guess is he gave Vasile some substance that would force the victim to call for medical help. Benson probably told Vasile his chip had malfunctioned and so Vasile allowed him in. After the murder, he used Vasile's chip to let himself out.'

'But what of his own chip?' asked Devlyn.

'He'll normally just carry it in his pocket. Given he's a werewolf, he couldn't tolerate one in his flesh and as he supervised the installation and vetting processes, it would be simple to exclude himself. If you'll excuse me, I need to sleep. One more job to do.'

He unlocked Romescu's cuffs from behind. As he did so, he whispered in her ear.

'Any chance we could synchronise our next wakings?'