

Jewel of The Stars

Season 1 – Episode 1

“Earth’s Remnant”

Chapter One Sample

Les Miller refused to teleport without his hat. As the captain, he had to set an example for the rest of the crew. He rummaged through his suitcase. He’d worn it home from the ship yesterday, so would’ve put it straight on top.

He glanced at the time projected by his eye lenses. Quarter past seven. It would take fifteen minutes to reach the spaceport on Toronto Island. If he didn’t find his hat in the next few minutes, he’d be late.

He moved into the living area. There it was, sitting on the chesterfield. He picked it up and slipped it on his head. Now he looked the part of ship’s captain-and it covered his grey hair.

He headed back into the bedroom to close his suitcase. How had his hat ended up on the chesterfield? That’s right. He’d tossed it down last night when his brother called just as he’d arrived home.

The door chime sounded. Seriously? He had no time for visitors. Les put the suitcase down and opened the door. The man on the threshold had a forehead dripping with perspiration and sporting a short scar leading up to wild orange hair. The guy’s rags had a whiff of smoke about them, and wild bloodshot eyes stared at him.

Great. A homeless crazy had got past the security downstairs.

“Can I help you?”

“Captain Les Miller?”

What was that accent? South African?

“Yeah?”

“You’re on your way to the ship, aren’t you? The *Jewel of the Stars*?”

How did a tramp from the street know his name, let alone the name of his ship? A family of butterflies landed in his gut. Was this guy stalking him? He reached his left hand around the doorway and hovered his index finger over the security button. “Who are you?”

“I’m ... I’m not important. You can’t go.”

“I can’t go where?”

“Into space. On the ship.”

“How do you know so much about me?” Les pushed the button.

“Doesn’t matter. Something terrible is going to happen.”

“Something terrible is already happening. I’m late for work and I’m being stalked by a crazy man. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He picked up his suitcase.

“I’m serious, Captain. There’s danger out there. Actually, the danger is coming here, but that’s irrelevant.” The man clenched his eyes shut, then opened them a second later.

“The point is, you’ll be better off if you stay here. You might be able to prevent it.”

This guy was either insane, or privy to some disturbing information. Les bet on the former. He wasn’t abandoning his job based on nothing more than vague predictions of doom. There was still the question of how this caller knew so much about Les. Why choose him as a target?

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You will. Don’t let that ship leave.”

Les put down the suitcase and clenched his fists. “Step away from my door.”

Ding. The lift doors behind the crazy man slid open. Two uniformed guards stepped out.

“Sir, you need to come with us.” One of the guards strode towards the door. “Nobody wants to be bothered by you.”

The crazy man glanced over his shoulder at the guards. And bolted. The guard by the lift leapt after him down the hallway. Moments later, the guard dragged the intruder back into the lift.

“Don’t go into space,” the man shouted. “Cancel the flight. Don’t let those passengers leave Earth.”

The lift doors stole anything else the intruder would have said.

Les turned to the remaining security officer.

“Your men need to be more vigilant. If he’d been dangerous, you might’ve been too late.”

“I apologise, Captain Miller. He slipped by us. Tricky guy. Not sure how he managed it.”

Miller nodded. “Well no harm done, but I do need to get to the spaceport, so if you don’t mind ...”

“Of course. Have a good day, Captain.”

Les couldn't help a smile. His uniform and rank often impressed people, even though he wasn't military. It was nice to be respected. He glanced at his watch.

Stars!

He needed to leave. Now.

The air around Les fizzed for a moment as he materialised in the teleport chamber aboard the *Jewel of the Stars*. He stepped out of the chamber, meeting the gaze of the pretty Asian teleport operator, and strolled out into the corridor.

He stole a glance at the time display. He'd made it, but he no longer had the luxury of taking his time to ensure the ship was running smoothly. Everything had better be ready for their passengers.

The hallways of the crew decks were plain. The raw metal walls and nondescript beige carpet were a stunning contrast to the opulence of the passenger decks. Up here, he could believe he was back on the cargo ship he and Joannah worked on for so many years. She'd have loved it here. Why hadn't he taken her on a cruise back when he still had the chance? He now spent most of his days on a cruise ship and Joannah wasn't around to share it with him. Fate was cruel.

This particular hallway was redeemed by the floor-to-ceiling photo of the ship in all her glory. Passengers of space cruise ships rarely got to see their vessel from the outside, which was a shame. She was a sight to behold, like her ancient cousin in the next photo over, *Jewel of the Seas*. The older model looked similar, apart from the triangular bow and lack of a warp ring. Les smiled at the images. He was part of a grand tradition.

He reached the end of the hallway, opened the door, and swept onto the bridge. Blue earth-light bathed the bridge through the front windows. Crew moved about from station to station, none of their faces betraying the usual pre-launch pressures. They were professional, every last one.

Staff Captain Maya Rice, his first officer, strode forward.

"Captain, the chief engineer reports minor problems with the electrical systems on deck 12."

"Tell her to get it fixed yesterday. You know my motto."

"Yes, Captain," she said. "Everything must be perfect before the passengers get on board."

"And the early birds will start arriving in minutes."

Maya nodded. "And Captain, Director Mallick is on the line. He wants to speak with you."

Les dismissed Maya with a wave of his hand. "Better see what His Majesty wants."

He stepped into his ready room and closed the door. The ready room sat directly behind the bridge, and was little more than a closet. It offered him a quiet place to sit without leaving the bridge, but was nothing compared to his main office down on the administration deck.

He sat at the tiny desk and pressed a control on his wristband, syncing his eye-lenses with the terminal. The communication screen was projected in the air in front of him. There it was, a pending call from Director Mallick. He reached out and pressed the *receive* icon. The screen vanished and Mallick's age-creased face appeared, floating above the desk.

"Captain Miller, I'm afraid you're going to have to alter your route for this cruise."

"Now?" Les raised both eyebrows. "We're about to leave."

"It's unavoidable, I'm afraid. You're not to go anywhere near Alpha Centauri."

"But that's our first big attraction. People love to see the landing site on Proxima B." Les tapped an icon, then glanced down at his desk. As he did, his eye lenses projected an image of the pre-flight checklist. He scrolled it with his finger.

"They'll have to settle for a view of the Helix Nebula instead."

Les locked eyes with Mallick. "People have paid good credits for this cruise. If we don't take them to the advertised destinations, you'll be drowning in complaints."

"Captain, we've received safety alerts for the entire Alpha Centauri system. Dangerous solar activity, I'm told."

"*Glory of the Stars* was there just two weeks ago." Solar activity? His ship had shielding for a reason. Was Mallick trying to sabotage Les's passenger satisfaction rate?

"Yes, and Captain Moore reported unusual readings."

Funny. Moore hadn't mentioned anything when they'd bumped into each other at headquarters yesterday. Still, passenger well-being came first. No matter what.

"Well, if there are safety concerns ..."

"I realise this is unconventional, Captain, but it's not negotiable. You let me handle the fallout from the passengers."

"As you wish."

Mallick nodded. His face vanished, replaced immediately by the Earth United Cruise Lines logo.

Les huffed. Nothing was going right today.

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