

CHAPTER 1

GETTING THE HELL OUT OF HERE

It was around 10 p.m. on a Thursday when Renji thought he might have a go at breaking out of prison.

This idea was terrible for several reasons. One, the prison in question was an Imperium International Forces Containment Facility, the kind widely reputed for being near-impossible to escape. Two, said facility was an airship in flight some fifty storeys above solid ground. The third, and perhaps most important reason was that he wasn't even a prisoner, he was a guard.

But to I.I. Forces Cadet Renjiro Starkweather, the young man leaning out of the mess hall kitchen's window to sneak a crafty cig, these reasons didn't seem quite good enough to not at least have a try. A shudder ran through him as the chilly coastal December wind snaked by, stealing the trail of smoke from his illicit cigarette and ruffling his thick black hair while he watched the lights of the city drift along below, lazy and slow. Just as it did every night, the ship wound its unhurried way between the immense skyscrapers shooting through each layer of the modern marvel that was the three-tiered

independent city-state known as Unity. The LED advertising display along the airship's side reflected off the ranks of apartment windows, blending with the building's own billboards in a shimmer of inescapable neon.

Renji huddled into the warmth of his charcoal-grey jacket, the darkness muting the copyrighted shade of Imperium Blue that ran in stripes down its sleeves, and idly wondered what he might have otherwise been doing on a Thursday night before he'd failed to wriggle out of the responsibility of joining up. Likely he'd have been in an anonymous club downing anonymous drinks with anonymous company; a meaningless waste of time, sure, but at least a more enjoyable one than this.

For what must have been the hundredth time he turned over a few of the more traditional prison escapes in his mind. Digging a tunnel was struck off the list for practicality reasons. Slipping past the guards wouldn't be difficult since he *was* one, but what to do after that...? There'd not be a vehicle to thumb down, unless there was a particularly broad-minded seagull passing by. Perhaps if he could wait until shift change, then—

“—completely out of line, as usual.” A haughty tone cut across Renji's daydreams, the sort of voice trapped in a state of perpetually complaining to the manager. “You'd have thought the upper brass would behave better!”

“At least it'll be a bit of excitement around here,” another chirped, far too close by. Renji flung the incriminating cigarette stub out of the window and wheeled around to check if anyone had spotted it, but the kitchen he'd been lurking in was tucked neatly behind the large metallic shelving of a serving area spanning the length of the cramped

little mess hall. Under the imminent threat of having to actually interact with any other cadets, he decided not to announce his presence and instead kept hidden, peering out between stacks of dirty plates to see which particular flavour of bastard was there.

The Bastards Du Jour, it turned out, came in triplicate. Three of his fellow cadets crowded around a mess hall table in a conspiratorial circle, a wiry little guy with regulation hair and mirror-shined shoes sat at the head, holding court. Renji went out of his way to forget that kind of person's name where possible, but he thought this one was probably... Simons? Simmonds? Something like that, anyway. Lounging next to Probably-Simmonds in one of the uncomfortable designer chairs I.I. insisted on stocking the place with was a round-faced, rosy-cheeked woman with chestnut hair and a smile like a knife. She was cadet... Carter? Maybe?

Probably-Simmonds huffed in annoyance. "I.I. regulations state that they're supposed to give us twelve hours' notice before they transfer any high security assets. *Twelve* hours! Not four!" He slumped on the polished table as if he'd been done a personal injustice. "It's right in the official documents and everything! I checked."

"Mm." Maybe-Carter gave him a perfunctory pat on the arm. "I'm sure you did."

"I'm just saying, the whole system falls apart if every last one of us doesn't adhere to the rules!"

Oh, shit. Narrowing his eyes, Renji remembered who Probably-Simmonds was now. He was that little stoat who kept a notebook, listing any minor infraction he happened to spy in precise detail, which he'd then present joyfully to any Upper Management who'd

give him the time of day; the sort of toerag who'd try to raise himself by pulling down everyone else around him. At least once Renji had caught the pint-sized jerk writing him up for *disrespecting the cut of the uniform* because he had his hands in his pockets. If Probably-Simmonds caught someone mid-cigarette— an *actual* infraction— the sarge would have an ecstatic novelette on his desk in ten minutes flat. Considering the only reason Renji smoked in the first place was so he could get away with something, the idea of getting caught simply wouldn't do at all.

“High security assets means... Prisoners,” rumbled the last man at the table, ruminating on the last word like a cow chewing its cud. “Real prisoners. For once.”

That one was— he wanted to say perhaps Yates? A big bald guy with bony knuckles and a forehead to match, it was too easy to assume Perhaps-Yates had a skull too thick to house a brain, but in this at least he did have a point; in the two months Renji had been stationed at this so-called secret containment facility they had, in fact, played host to a grand total of zero captives. For a secret airship prison, the place had been remarkably dull.

“Hardly matters. It's not like we'll get to see them anyway,” complained Maybe-Carter, drumming her nails on the tabletop. “They never let newbies have any fun.” What her idea of *fun* might entail didn't bear thinking about— she already had a reputation as one of the more vicious cadets to have made it through training, having memorised a perfect routine of stealing credit when things went well and pointing the finger when they didn't.

Casting a glance about the room, Probably-Simmonds leaned in close. “I know *exactly* who they are,” he announced in an overloud stage whisper. “The prisoners, that is. The call came in while I was on comms duty, so I heard everything.”

Maybe-Carter’s perfect eyebrows arched. “Well? Go on, then.”

“You’ll never believe it, but—”

Naturally, the little creep chose that exact moment to learn how to whisper properly. Leaning in closer to listen in meant Renji had to play a tricky game of Twister, winding between the perilous piles of kitchenware. After he’d managed to lodge himself between the dishes and bowls he could just make out the edge of a word or two; Something about... Past? Vast? No, *broadcast*— and that was all he deciphered before his hand slipped on the treacherous remains of someone’s beans on toast, sending two forks and a plate crashing onto the tiles at his feet.

The sounds of chairs scraping along the floor rang out instantly.

“Who’s back there?” barked Probably-Simmonds, while Maybe-Carter and Perhaps-Yates advanced on the kitchen area, batons unclipped from their belts and all-too ready.

Oh well. Time to own it. Slipping into one of his best smirks, Renji sauntered around the corner. “Huh, it’s only you lot. Thought there might’ve been something interesting happening.”

“Tsch. Starkweather.” sniffed Maybe-Carter, losing interest and throwing herself back into her chair.

Probably-Simmonds, however, had sniffed out a potential broken rule like a particularly determined dog tracking down a sausage. “*You!*” He stabbed out an accusatory point in Renji’s direction with the end of a biro. “You were up to something, weren’t you?”

“Was I? Gosh. Hope it was something fun.”

“Thieving rations, I’ll bet! Or using a prohibited phone! Or— or *something!*”

“That *does* sound fun. What else did I do? Maybe I sold company secrets to some passing pigeons. Or started an extremely localised kitchen union? Man, guess I had a real busy evening.” He widened his grin, adding several extra degrees of infuriating just for the hell of it. “Shame no-one’s going to believe it all happened, though. Not without proof. Which you don’t have.”

“I- But you—!”

“Can anyone else smell smoke?” rumbled Perhaps-Yates.

The smirk froze.

“I knew it!” hissed Probably-Simmonds, his eyes lit with petty delight, scrabbling to rip open his notebook.

Attempting to rally, Renji rolled his eyes. “Smoke? In a kitchen? Like that’s rare.”

“So, if the sarge were to search you,” began Maybe-Carter, alight with malicious glee, “he definitely wouldn’t find anything contraband, is that what you’re saying?”

With a jolt Renji recalled the crumpled cigarette carton in his pocket, which ought to have joined the stub in going out of the window several minutes ago. “That’s not- I didn’t—!”

“Partaking in banned substances unbefitting of the Imperium brand...”

“Aw, c’mon man, there’s gotta be something we can work out here...”

“...and attempting to bribe a fellow cadet.” Probably-Simmonds’ pen scratched over the page until it terminated in a triumphant full stop. “Disgraceful. I.I. gave us these guidelines for a reason, you know. Rules are rules.”

“No matter what your surname is,” added Maybe-Carter with a titter.

Renji felt his back straighten in annoyance, despite himself. “The hell is that supposed to mean?!”

“Well, it’s no secret that you wouldn’t have passed training if it wasn’t for your connections, is it?” She was the one smiling now, altogether too many pearly white teeth on display in a blatant attempt to rile him up. It was working.

“Oh yeah, it’d be just awful to be literally anywhere else but in the Mile High Club for absolute dickheads!” snapped Renji.

“Disrespecting the Forces...” muttered Probably-Simmonds, adding to his notes with barely disguised joy.

“Fine, put me in your shitty little book! See if I care!” Renji took a step closer, gesturing at Maybe-Carter and Perhaps-Yates. “So long as you two know he’ll only stick your name in there next to mine the first chance he gets!”

The frown creasing Perhaps-Yates’s heavy brow deepened further.

“I- I would have no need to, obviously!” Probably-Simmonds leapt to his feet in an indignant shower of discarded biros and nervous energy. “Because we actually keep to the rules!”

“Until you’re up for promotion ahead of him, then it’s *oops, someone’s shoelaces weren’t tied in the regulation knot!*” Renji grinned bitterly, savouring the room’s growing tension. “That’s of course if *she* hasn’t chucked you under a bus first.” Maybe-Carter’s own smile twisted into a snarl. “And I don’t know your deal buddy, but you’re probably a prick too,” he added in Perhaps-Yates’ direction, for equality’s sake.

It was at this moment that Renji realised he’d overplayed his hand, if he’d even held one in the first place. All three of them were on their feet now, all three were pissed and worse still, all three were between him and the door. Taking a smart step backwards only served as a stark reminder of how cramped the ship was, backing into the chrome kitchen partition where the stacked plates chattered and rattled like nervous bones.

“Think we’ve had enough out of you,” rumbled Perhaps-Yates, the crack of his knuckles adding a grim punctuation to his words.

Maybe-Carter hummed an almost musical note of sadistic joy, twirling her baton. “Bet he can’t talk shit with broken teeth.”

“Come and try it, then!” snapped Renji, who had precious little idea how to even throw a punch but was running out of options almost as quickly as he was running out of kitchen. Pressed up against the cold metal partition, raising his fists and cursing his lack of interest in carrying his own baton, he tensed in readiness, hoping to at least getting a few cheap shots in before going down—

“Well, well, doesn’t this look absolutely bloody fascinating?”

At the sound of the voice in the doorway, every cadet froze. Striding into the mess hall as if it wasn’t already at maximum bastard capacity came the worst of a bad lot, the last person Renji wanted to see at this particular moment in time; the ship’s resident Upper Manager and bully-in-chief, Sergeant Flood. Surveying the room with a sneer curled under his immaculately clipped moustache, he folded his arms across his broad chest. “You lot have exactly three seconds to tell me what’s going on here.”

For a long, wordless moment, the cadets exchanged glares in silent debate.

“*One.*”

The room erupted with sound.

“Starkweather had snuck in here and—”

“—I wasn’t doing anything, sarge, these three—”

“—he’s lying, that cadet was absolutely breaking the—”

“*Two.*”

“—never did, he can’t prove anything—”

“—had to defend ourselves against him, sarge, you saw it—”

Flood swept up a stray chair and flung it into the centre of the group, where it landed with a decisive crash that sent cadets scattering as though he’d scored a perfect first frame strike.

“*Three*,” he snarled.

True to form, Maybe-Carter recovered first. “Starkweather was *smoking*, sir!” she squeaked, every syllable loaded with manufactured horror.

Some primal instinct yelled at Renji to *run, run for it!*— something more practical added *where to? You’re on an airship, you dickhead*— and before he could reconcile the two impulses into something approaching useful a heavy hand had clamped onto his shoulder. Another dipped roughly into his uniform jacket pocket, where it retrieved the cigarette packet.

“Sarge, I don’t know where that came from, but—” The iron grip Renji was caught in tightened, cutting him off mid-bullshit.

Flood turned his glower to the other cadets. “You three. *Out*.”

They didn’t need to be told twice, filing out of the door with barely a backward glance, leaving Renji trapped alone between the sarge and a fifty-storey drop out of a window, neither of which felt like a workable prospect.

Having been raised in a Forces household, Renji had often heard that sergeants who remained sergeants well into their thirties had either pissed someone off or were dumb as a bag of rocks, and considering he'd been assigned to an empty floating prison, in Sergeant Flood's case it might have been both. However, Imperium *did* like the higher-ranking Upper Management of their Forces to look the part for promotional purposes, and what Flood lacked in ability he made up for in jawline. With his sandy blond hair, those cold blue eyes and that imposing figure, he was everything I.I. loved in an Upper, a perfectly photogenic ninety-degree right Anglo-Saxon without the slightest spark of imagination. Sergeant Hugo Flood, with all of the appearance of a vintage war recruitment poster, and all the brains of the cardboard it was printed on.

"Listen sarge, I can explain absolutely everything!"

"Is that so." Underneath his groomed moustache lurked a repulsive, smug twist to Flood's mouth, the kind that made an appearance when he knew he had someone exactly where he wanted them. One hand came to rest on the hilt of the gaudy ask-me-about-my-fencing-championship-sword that was eternally clipped to his belt. "If I were you..." he intoned, "I'd think extremely carefully about my next few words."

Renji's mouth snapped shut.

"Nothing smart to say, cadet?"

"I was just thinking extremely carefully, sir."

Flood's nostrils flared, and Renji had enough time to realise his misstep before the sword's hilt slammed into his gut, driving the breath out of his lungs in one aching gasp.

Usually, he quite liked a stupid man. One of the first lessons he'd learned during two dull years of training was that he could get away with an awful lot of entertaining infractions provided he could manage an apology sincere enough to fool an Upper Manager, a task which hadn't proven to be difficult; that was, until he met this particular blue-eyed bastard. Since Flood sported the nightmare combination of a mean streak a mile wide, a regrettably sharp memory and a rock in place of his sense of humour, Renji's usual tactics for dealing with Uppers had proven to be as successful as swimming through concrete. When Renji had first been assigned to the prison ship the other month, it had taken no more than ten minutes for Flood to (quite correctly) accuse him of the crime of Getting Smart With Him, and rather than handing out some cursory overtime or adding another reprimand to the personnel file Flood had simply punched the cadet in the face so hard he couldn't see out of one eye for a week. Corporal punishment wasn't allowed under the Forces guidelines, but clearly no-one had got around to telling Flood that, as any insubordination under his watch was met with swift, brutal, and enthusiastic punishment.

All in all, it had been rather a painful few months.

"On your feet, cadet."

With a spluttering cough Renji pulled himself back upright on shaking legs, though perhaps not upright enough according to the hand that grabbed his uniform collar and yanked him sharply upwards.

"We are in the *Forces*, boy. Imperium's own. Do you understand what that means? Through our hard work and dedication, we have been employed by the finest company

in the world, serving the finest city in the world. And what you need to remember is that when you wear that uniform, you are company property. And as your manager, I can always requisition a replacement for broken equipment.”

Renji nodded with care, all too aware of Flood’s manicured thumb pressing far too close to the hollow of his throat.

“Dish duty,” the Sergeant rasped. “*Solo.*”

“What?!” Renji risked a dismayed glance at the heaps of dirty crockery littering the countertops. “But—!”

“Scrub the rest of the kitchen clean too, while you’re at it.”

“Sarge, I—”

“You have a complaint to lodge, Starkweather?” The look in those cold blue eyes was nothing less than a challenge. *Go on, say some other line. Just give me an excuse.*

“...no, sir. Right away, sir.”

#

Some hours later Renji was failing to fall asleep, staring at the sterile gunmetal grey underside of the Imperium International Force standard issue bunk above his own and feeling his hands ache with a discomfort that ran far deeper than the irritation from scrubbing away at three dozen plates and a stovetop. The midnight lights of the city seeped through the bunk's single window, casting shadows across its cold grey walls, only adding to the cold grey mood that threatened to turn the dozen cadets inside equally cold and grey. The only splashes of colour and decoration were the same style of regulation informative stickers in Imperium International branded colours scattered throughout the ship, a neglected potted plant, and since it was the season for it, one pre-approved Christmas decoration. It was a limp garland of tinsel, precisely portioned to deliver one unit of I.I.-approved holiday cheer, and if the last week of waking up to stare into that dismal yuletide omen had made anything clear it was that if Renji didn't get out of this place soon he was going to throttle someone with it. Probably himself.

When someone applied to join the Forces, they tended to be asked the standard obnoxious job interview questions; *what are your greatest weaknesses, tell us a time you've worked well in a team*, and the old favourite of *what, exactly, do you want out of your career?*

Since *I want to be paid* was apparently too obvious an answer, many waxed lyrical about their desire to safeguard and serve the city they loved so dearly and the company that ran it; that was always approved of. Others talked about their need to better themselves, to raise up from Unity's lower tiers and maybe even make it to the Imperium Court one day; an answer that was also met with approval. Some would say their only wish was to help bring about order, which was essentially code for *I would like*

to knock some people about please; again, an answer that would earn entry, and possibly a note about suitability for Management training.

Having lied on his application, Renji had no idea what he wanted, at least not within the staggering structure of Imperium. It had become clear to him over the years that Unity City, or at least the top tier of Imperium Court where he lived, was a place that expected him to be a particular sort of person; and if he was not the right shape, he was to *bend*. And having failed to find a way to worm out of the family obligation of joining the Forces, he found himself stuck on the lowest rung of a ladder he had no interest in climbing.

But... it was ridiculous to even consider an alternative, since none existed. Better to keep his head down, and avoid pissing off the sarge until enough time had passed to placate Aunt L. Would it be months? *Years*? Ugh. It didn't bear thinking about.

In desperate need of distraction, Renji dug about in the regulation shoulder bag he'd stowed under his regulation bunk and fished out his non-regulation phone. He began scrolling through the internet mindlessly, wrapping himself in a cocoon of thin sheets to hide the tell-tale screen glare from any prying eyes, especially those with notebooks. The usual headlines flickered by on the news feed; Blah blah record profits from I.I. for a fifth year running... Something something top ten reasons it was better to live in Unity than anywhere in England... The usual boring old charity Christmas dinner at some swanky hotel in the Court this weekend... He tapped shut tab after tab until the picture at the top of one article caught his eye, leaving his thumb frozen mid-poke.

There she was, in that same freeze-frame everyone had seen thousands of times now, her white-blond hair and grey eyes giving her the impression of having been drained of all colour, but with that snarl of righteous anger riding over her face like a lightning strike; that furious, anonymous face of the broadcast-jacker.

Just the other month, only days before he'd been assigned to this floating clown show, an unknown group calling themselves The Loose Ends had somehow broken into the emergency broadcast system, overriding all video, audio and phone alerts up and down the entire city. And this lady, this fuming-mad round-the-bend absolute nutter, she'd started ranting and raving about the complex webs of tax avoidance, wage theft, market manipulation and bribery that had allowed Imperium International to rise from a humble email provider to practically running the entire net on their servers and software. And when they'd bought the coastal city of Steelepool from the failing English government so many decades ago, it was for no other reason than to make an extraterritorial tax haven, a company town where they made all of their own laws, and enforced them too.

Developing Unity City allowed Imperium to drive profits higher and higher and hide the human cost of it all beneath the city's own rigid steel tiers, and in this woman's opinion it was time for them to pay the price.

A sting of jealousy prodded at Renji as it always did whenever he saw that grey-eyed girl, all full of flames and anger and directing it exactly where it needed to be. Now *there* was someone who knew what they wanted, her face frozen in that moment of achieving her goal. Right there on that broadcast, she'd given the details of Imperium

executives and their dirty dealings and filthy laundry. She had proof too, mountains of it, blasted out over the internet for all to see; documents and signatures and emails, crooked contracts written for friends, rivals cut off at the metaphorical knees, each line more damning than the last.

As Renji hadn't left the Court at that point, he'd been treated to a front-row seat of Imperium International's top executives scrambling to work out whose boots to lick and whose back to stab. It was like nothing he'd seen before; Execs were being fired in droves, bewildered middle managers declared new department heads on the spot, teams altered, job titles vanishing. In one broadcast the blonde had put a blowtorch to the intricate webs of allegiances and rivalries that every department ran on, and it had been hours, *days* before the metaphorical fires were put out, throughout which Renji could only dream of how incredible it must have felt to cause that level of chaos.

There had been public outcry at first, calls for change and justice. I.I. had done their due diligence in grovelling for forgiveness, every last word committee-selected for relatable trustworthiness. Promises to take accountability and do better were repeated over and over until everyone was sick of hearing them. And with nothing left to say, the story grew fainter as it was dragged away from the public consciousness by the forever-churning rip current of topical news.

The article Renji had scrolled to wasn't a long one. It seemed that the criminals behind the broadcast had inevitably been discovered. Arrested and nameless, whoever The Loose Ends had once been, they were now no more.

Tucking his phone away, Renji rolled over in the darkness of the bunk and yawned, the kitchen work and the light snoring in the room finally catching up with him. His gaze focused hazily on the stubby shape of the potted plant, wedged onto the windowsill in the optimistic yet unlikely hope that its rubbery round leaves might catch enough light to grow.

It wasn't as though he longed to see Imperium burn, but all the same it seemed wrong that the unknown girl's fire had flickered out without leaving a mark.

A muffled crunching *clunk* of metal on metal sounded from down the corridor, jerking him awake. That noise was unmistakable; the ship's docking ramp. With all the business in the mess hall it had completely slipped his mind that midnight on Thursday was the shift change, the only time in the entire week that the airship was near anything like solid ground. A foolish plan began to take shape as Renji lay there in the dark, powerless to stop the damn thing from forming.

It would be a bad idea to desert with no destination in mind. Even worse to risk the wrath of the sarge on pulling off a desperate, spur of the moment escape attempt. Just incredibly, incoherently, weapons-grade stupid.

He was on his feet and packing his bag within seconds.

CHAPTER 2

A REALLY GOOD IDEA

Renji peered into the narrow corridor running the length of the airship's undercarriage, and found himself blissfully alone aside from the low, sleepy thrum of the ship's engines.

Skipping out of the bunk dressed in full uniform, regulation peaked cap and all, he settled into a casual swagger on the grounds that a person caught swaggering tended to be in less trouble than a person caught sneaking. Patting his bag— now loaded up with non-uniform clothes, his most-definitely-not-sanctioned phone and, for some reason, the little potted plant he'd swept up in a flurry of sympathy— he let the swagger take him towards the stairs leading down to the lower deck's docking intake.

The plan, if this loose bundle of vague ideas even counted as a plan, was simple enough; shift change meant a crowd of cadets were leaving the ship, a crowd Renji reckoned he could join unnoticed, if he was clever about it. Whatever happened after that could be a problem for later.

The swagger successfully brought him all the way to the top of the stairs, where both floors of the ship opened out and joined into the one tall, echoing space making up the docking intake. At least half a dozen cadets were busying about, filling the air with

the thump of boots on the thick metal floor, the trundling of trolleys laden with supplies, and the to-and-fro shouts of people working on a tight deadline. At the room's far end the huge steel doors of the loading bay had been flung open, letting in both cargo and an occasional gust of wintery wind that threatened to rip a tablet device out from the hands of the nervous cadet who was attempting to sign for a delivery. None of that mattered, however, since standing at the top of the ramp that led down and out to freedom with his tall, wide frame casting a propaganda-poster-perfect silhouette against the spotlights of the dock, was Sergeant Flood.

The swagger fled, leaving Renji to deal with this one alone.

Back straight and voice booming, the sarge was hard at work overseeing operations in the standard manner of managers everywhere, i.e. barking out unhelpful orders and generally getting in the way.

"You! Put that over there! No, your other *there*, idiot!" he snapped at some poor bastard struggling to manoeuvre a trolley up the ramp. "Get that moving, quickly quickly *quickly!* And you!" He glowered at another cadet, who attempted to both snap to attention and bow at the same time and got herself tangled around a clipboard. "Make certain the back room is ready to receive our guests!"

Pressing his back against the wall, Renji wondered what that last order had meant— but frankly, it didn't matter. There'd be no strolling past Flood when he was this involved. *Unbe-fucking-lievable*. As Probably-Simmonds would have been happy to tell anyone who'd listen, I.I. Forces protocol stated that the on-duty Upper Manager was

supposed to oversee the shift change, though everyone knew the sarge tended to bunk off that particular duty. Or at least he had, until tonight.

With his reckless half-baked idea blown, Renji needed a *new* reckless half-baked idea, and as luck would have it, one sprang to mind.

The now-gleaming mess hall was still helpfully empty as Renji crept in, picking through the tables and making his way back towards his old smoking buddy, the kitchen window. Turned out that fitting a ventilation system for an airship kitchen was rather a tricky and expensive affair, but a kitchen stove did need a little ventilation, otherwise the chef's special today and every day would be Greasy Clouds of Smoke with a side of Constantly Blaring Fire Alarm. The upshot was that the window by the stove opened nice and wide, offering a much more cost-effective solution than installing a ventilation system. Easy, cheap, safe, and doubled as an escape route for a suitably bold and handsome cadet with a taste for freedom.

As he reached forward to throw the window open, Renji caught a glimpse of his reflection in its surface. Against the glowing dark of the sky it was as though he were reduced to an outline of his I.I. Forces uniform, face obscured beneath the brim of the peaked cap. Damn thing was stylish in those flashy brand colours, all ironed creases and sharp tailored lines and stiff leather boots. But *uniform* was most definitely the word. The shape looking back at him from the surface of the glass was how each and every cadet was expected to be; an intimidating, elegant, faceless silhouette.

The damn thing had been handed to Renji with great reverence at the training graduation ceremony by a probably famous lieutenant with an unremarkable name and a fantastic moustache. He'd spent every second of that day hating his own stupid fake smile, shifting in discomfort on the stage amongst the rest of the beaming, proud class who had seemed to not notice the relentlessly hot sun beating down the entire goddamn time. From the crowded stands Auntie Lissa had overseen proceedings, ignoring the inevitable whispers from the other graduate's families with her usual grace. For his part, he'd played it as straight as possible, laughing and cheering his way through the presentation with a class that had disliked him about as much as he'd disliked them. After the speeches and noise and the cameras had left, Auntie L had sat with him on the stage's edge and it became immediately clear that, as usual, his acting efforts had worked on everyone but her.

"Look, I know this whole thing isn't very *you*, but—" she'd paused to flick a stray lock of straw-blond hair out of her eyes, her sigh heavy. "Just try it out for a while, Peanut. For me." She'd given a strained smile that told him less than half of what needed to be said, and he'd returned one in kind. "All you need is to find a little direction."

Opening the kitchen window, Renji took in a lungful of cool night air, pulled off his cap, and tossed it like a frisbee out into the darkness with a bright, feral grin. Whatever his direction was, it started with *out*.

From the giant screens running up the endless height of the vast skyscrapers to the countless billboards lining the streets, Unity City was yet to meet a wall it wouldn't slap an advertisement onto. Should someone need to know which movie was currently taking the box office by storm this holiday season (it was all of them) or what toothpaste was recommended by nine out of ten dentists (again, it was all of them) they could find out by simply casting their gaze towards any given flat surface. But when a brand was above all of that common advertising, and happened to have a marketing budget big enough to be seen from space, *that* was what the airships were for.

Unity's middle tier, Central Commons, was circled by the three AirCast ships creatively named AirCast One, AirCast Two, and (wait for it) AirCast Three. Unlit they were nothing special to look at, just massive sacks of air puttering around graceful as airborne beanbags, underslung with a small metallic tin can of a cabin stuffed with around a dozen increasingly irritable crew. When the ads on the airship's sides were activated however, the whole thing would become a riot of delightful, profitable colour; millions of tiny LEDs working overtime to beam out the finest in the art of advertising over a screen the size of several houses. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the ships followed a pre-programmed path that took them winding between the famous immense skyscrapers of Unity, treating anyone living in the apartments in their paths to a compulsory light show directly outside their windows. Only once a week did the ships dock for refuelling, maintenance, and to switch out the cabin-feverish crew. This was

done by each ship in turn pulling up alongside the hundred-storey tall AirCast Tower, where the open air skydock stood ready to do the supply run shuffle.

One of these ships, AirCast Two, to be precise, also just so happened to run a neat side business in squirrelling away anyone that Imperium *really* didn't want to see the light of day any time soon, such as anti-I.I protestors, general dissidents, or people who had too many thoughts about the word *union*. And as a neat bonus, it also provided them with a dull duty in which to sequester any particularly hopeless Force cadets, motivating them to find their ambition by fighting each other tooth and claw for promotion in order to escape the blasted place.

Renji, on the other hand, had a more direct route in mind.

The freezing December air slapped him in the face as if it had a point to make about his cool and sensible idea, but from this new vantage point with his back pressed against the side of the airship's carriage, he was too close to freedom to pay too much attention to small considerations like gravity.

AirCast Tower was among the tallest buildings in Unity City, one of the few that shot from the depths of the buried town of Steelepool, up through Central Commons and all the way out to support the heights of Imperium Court, some hundred and fifty storeys tall in total. The skydock itself was a hive of activity scattered with engineers and I.I Force cadets, a busy platform carved into the building's side around ninety storeys up;

high enough that it was closer to the gleaming metal and glass underside of Imperium Court than the cluttered streets of the Commons.

At this moment and with any luck, for a few moments more, AirCast Two hovered alongside AirCast Tower with its ramp extended, lined with blinking red lights and forming the only point of contact between ship and building. Said ramp was currently being stomped across by the boots of a half dozen cadets, loading and unloading whatever the hell it was they needed to load and unload and generally trudging about getting in each other's way; in other words, the perfect cover. All he would need to do would be to shimmy around the ship's outside to the ramp, hop on while no-one was paying attention, and stroll on out of there in the crowd before anyone realised he wasn't meant to be there. There were even a set of helpful ledge-like ridges running decoratively along the carriage's sides, providing just enough inches of metal to grip onto and shuffle along. Granted, he was only a single slip away from a much faster and more fatal way off the ship, but since he had no intention of slipping Renji was confident he'd be fine. Plus, he'd seen more than enough movies to know that all he had to do was avoid the classic mistake of looking down, which couldn't possibly be so difficult as all that.

Eyes locked on the lights of the skydock, he began his shuffling progress forwards; but at once, a yell froze him to the spot. Ice shot through his veins as he clung in place, craning his neck to discover that for once, the shout wasn't aimed at him.

As it turned out, Probably-Simmonds hadn't been bullshitting in the mess earlier, as a group of actual factual *prisoners* were being marched over the ramp and into the ship.

To Renji, all three seemed to be your standard Forces definition of troublemakers; a scowling woman with a trembling lip and a scattering of facial piercings, her black hair chopped into a rough bob; another with long blue hair drifting ragged and wild in the wind about her shivering shoulders; and lastly a shorter guy with wide, thoughtful eyes that would have been quite attractive if they hadn't been ringed with vivid bruises marring his dark skin. All sported matching handcuffs, beige prison jumpsuits, a grab-bag of injuries, and a defeated air of grim resignation as they were propelled up the ramp by a whack or gruff bark from one of the armed cadets surrounding them. Nothing about the group seemed to shout *High Security Prison Required*, except... There was something about them, something in the shade of blue in that one lady's hair that seemed oddly familiar... But before Renji could get a better view, the poor bastards had already been swallowed up into the belly of AirCast Two, most likely to never see the light of day again.

Despite being mere metres away from victory, Renji found himself hesitating. The thought of leaving the exhausted captives at the sarge's mercy was uncomfortable, to say the least. But even if he wanted to help, what the hell could he *do*? It wasn't as though he could hop back in and crack a door open for them. Hell, he didn't even know what they'd done to end up here! Just because they appeared pathetic now didn't mean that they couldn't have been doing some murders or whatever yesterday.

He dithered on the ledge, achieving nothing except the waste of several precious seconds, and just when he'd nearly maybe begun to perhaps approach an approximation of a possible decision it no longer mattered, because out of nowhere, a hand had clamped itself around his ankle.

Somehow, he didn't scream.

The Forces would say there was no medal for not screaming when grabbed by a hand that had no right to be there, but in Renji's recently over-informed opinion, there ought to have been such a thing and he should have twelve.

Rather, he stared down at his boot and the black-gloved appendage grasping it, then farther down to where the attached arm ran out of his sight below the ship and presumably along to an owner of some kind. Lacking a better option he kicked the hand with his other heel and it let go, retreating under the curved base of the airship's carriage; and before he could stop himself it was too late, his eyes had kept travelling past the edge of the ship and down, down all the way down to endless amounts of *down*.

Beneath lay the night-dark streets of Central Commons, peppered with thousands, or hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of lights. Street lights, apartment windows, car headlights, even some holly jolly Christmas lights, all twinkling and pretty and far, far away and they were moving now, swirling, like the tacky strobe lighting in a bar after having a few too many to keep things still without concentrating *really hard*. The unceasing hum of the ship's great engine seemed to be keeping time with the undulating motion of the lights and forming some kind of head-crushingly horrible pressure, until Renji realised what he was hearing was the sickening throbbing of his pulse in his own ears, loud enough that it felt as though the sound alone would propel

him straight off the edge. At the mere thought of falling he buckled, knees trembling, fingers scrabbling to hold onto the metal ridge that had felt so much wider mere seconds ago.

Perhaps, just perhaps, he could admit that he'd made a *teensy* mistake here. Just a small one.

Clinging to the side of the ship with his breath running rapid, he wasn't surprised to find he had zero clue what to do when a face appeared over the edge of the carriage just below his feet. The majority of said face was hidden behind a woollen balaclava but what was visible seemed pretty shocked, as if they too hadn't expected company out here. *Well, same here, buddy*, Renji thought furiously. Whoever the figure was, they had overcome their own shock and were advancing now, climbing with their hands flat against the surface of the wall like a spider that had left half of its legs at home.

Finally locating his voice, Renji had just enough time to blurt out "What the *actual* fuck?!" as the intruder drew level with his more and more cramped ledge, positioning themselves between him and the skydock, but no explanation seemed to be on offer as to what the actual fuck.

Now the figure was closer Renji could see it was some kind of guy hanging onto the metallic siding using a pair of magnetic clamps, one in each hand. Moving via pull up alone couldn't have been easy, but he seemed to have the muscle for it under all of the black tactical crap he was wearing. Black *only*, in fact, not a hint of the I.I. brand-permitted grey or blue, which meant he was more likely to be an intruder than an extremely committed patrolman. Between the kit and the getup this man looked like a

professional killer got into a fight with an army surplus store, and when those well-worn boots began to pace towards Renji he reached for his usual best defence; high-speed negotiations.

“Hey hey, woah, let’s not do anything hasty, buddy! We can talk about this!” he tried, backing up towards the window as fast as he dared. As a reply, Army Surplus leant back while hanging onto just one of his magnetic clamps and gave a precise flick of the wrist. A short but practical knife appeared in his free hand.

“Not much of a talker, huh? More of an action guy, I can respect that!” Renji babbled as he groped around for the still-open kitchen window with one shaking hand. “Listen, you’re breaking in, I’m breaking out, seems best if we just go our separate ways, yeah? Act like we never even saw each other! There’s no need to—”

Before Renji could finish the knife cut a neat arc through the air, only missing his neck due to a wobbly backstep that felt quite a lot like cashing in a last chip of luck. At last his grasping fingers locked onto the frame of the kitchen window behind him; but he had been slow, too slow to move before the next lunge of the grim little blade that came driving towards his ribs.

Slamming his eyes shut and wishing he could bunk off this class on what being stabbed felt like, it came as something of a surprise when instead of the expected jolt of cold pain, there was only a rush of movement skimming past his chest. The knife had somehow missed, falling short of its target by a few inches and instead claiming a slice of paint from the ship’s flank. Grunting in apparent frustration, Army Surplus slammed a fist into his left knee before moving forward with a strange stiff motion; but before he’d

regained his momentum Renji had already used his grip on the window frame to haul himself over to and in through the kitchen window to relative safety. While mid-scramble he caught a glimpse of some poor cadet standing against the lights of the skydock, staring at the scuffle with mouth agape and radio dangling from his hands as he failed to remember the Official Forces Code number for *Dudes On The Side Of The Airship, Please Send Help*. It seemed sensible to file that one away under trouble for later however, since trouble for now was wearing a balaclava and still advancing along the wall like a knife-wielding spider from hell. Less Army Surplus, more Army Excess.

Only a few seconds after Renji cleared the window that black gloved hand made an appearance on the window frame, but a few seconds was all he needed to snag a freshly scrubbed iron skillet and bring it down onto the guy's fingers with a crunch he could feel straight through his own finger-bones. The digits disappeared, and then... nothing.

With an inhale of shock Renji dropped the skillet, the adrenaline draining out of him and leaving a hollowness in its wake. *Shit*. If the guy hadn't been hanging onto anything else, then— then...

But he hadn't made a sound. Renji was by no means an expert on what someone falling to their death from the side of a secret prison airship might sound like, but he reasoned there'd be something. A blood-curdling scream, or, if the universe was feeling lighthearted today, maybe even a cartoon slide whistle. Not *nothing*. Carefully, he crept up to the window and peeked over the edge, dreading what he might or might not see.

Apparently— thankfully— it took more than kitchen utensils to kill a guy like that since the hardcore bastard was still hanging in there, his stubborn fingers wrapped around the handle of one of those magnetic clamps. The good news was that his knife was absent; the bad news was that judging from the blood dripping between the fingers of the hand that had met Renji's skillet, it wasn't going to be of much use in getting him out of this one. With a noise of exertion the intruder attempted to execute a one-armed pull up that didn't seem as though it was going to happen, leaving him dangling hopelessly over a fifty-storey drop. As Renji stared down in dumb shock, the man's eyes met his own; they were a serious, storm-cloud grey, softened at the edges by those fine, familiar wrinkles he'd seen on older people who smiled often.

What a good Forces cadet ought to do here was obvious. The sarge would have barked phrases like *deadly force* and *acceptable loss*, since the protocols for dealing with an armed intruder on I.I. property were both brutal and clear. And good cadets were, after all, expected to follow protocol to the letter.

"C'mere!" he shouted, reaching his hand out.

The intruder hesitated; then his bleeding hand closed around Renji's in silent acceptance.

After some amount of painful hauling and protesting shoulder muscles, both of them tumbled into the kitchen. Rolling into an awkward crouch, the intruder clutched at his left knee and winced, but while he didn't seem *good*, exactly, he was sure as hell not dead. Meanwhile, Renji's own legs came to the conclusion that they were no longer needed to keep him upright and decided to take some time off, sending him slumping to the

linoleum in a boneless pile. Drifting in through the open window came a furious clanking, a racket that could have only been the sound of the docking ramp being retracted and the intensifying hum of the ship's engine that followed meant they were leaving AirCast Tower, and any hope of escape, behind.

"Well, damn." Renji rolled his head sideways to meet the intruder's gaze once more. "Dunno about you, but I'm at my knife fight limit for tonight. We good?"

This was met with the briefest of nods and, almost lost by the muffling effect of the balaclava, a gruff whisper. "Thanks, kid."

"Oh, don't thank me yet, buddy." Renji gave an exhausted floor-height grin as the mess hall door clattered open with the sound of a dozen pairs of approaching boots. "We're *both* screwed now."

#

The intruder was hauled off at once. Renji, on the other hand, got to enjoy the mess hall floor for a little longer, guarded by a gaggle of unsympathetic cadets with a silently gloating Maybe-Carter at the head. He'd not even had time to assess his current level of Utterly Done For before Flood stomped in, tore Renji's bag from his shoulder and

upended it, sending his belongings tumbling onto the tiles where they couldn't have screamed *Renji was absolutely one hundred percent trying to desert* any louder unless it had been printed on one of the T-shirts.

There was a moment of silence, undercut by a soft, Maybe-Carter-esque giggle.

"Now I know what you're thinking, Sarge," began Renji, because anything's worth a try, "but I—"

"Do you know what the penalty for desertion is, Starkweather?" Flood asked, tone worryingly pleasant.

Renji paused, mouth open. "Uh... no, actually."

"It doesn't come up often, you see, so neither did I." The sergeant's perfect smile was a cold crescent beneath his clipped moustache. "And since I have only the highest regard for our city's rules, I thought it best to call the commander to make certain."

"T-the commander, sarge—?" stuttered Renji in disbelief. Nearly getting knifed off the side of an airship was nothing compared to the dread he was feeling in this moment.

"The one and only. And do you know what she said?" Flood's voice was syrupy sweet, smug as a cat with a bird between its claws. "She said she'll be over directly to *personally* oversee the matter."

For once, Renji was speechless. On her way here, now, was the leader of the entire Imperium International Forces; Commander Lissa Starkweather. Or, as he'd always

known her, Aunty Lissa. His mother's sister. The woman who'd raised him, and as soon as she found out what he'd been up to, the woman who was going to end him too.

Flood swept out of the room, radiating a level of malicious glee only achievable after having played the ultimate I'm-telling-your-mum card.

A bony elbow bumped Renji in the ribs. "You're proper fucked, aren't you?" snorted Maybe-Carter.

She wasn't wrong.