Coray Seifert
23 Bradshaw Drive
Manahawkin, NJ 08050
(650) 743-4841
seifertc@gmail.com

120,100 words.

The Lost Construct

by Coray Seifert

Prologue

Sierra clung to her mother, eyes closed tight. It was windy but her mother's chest was warm.

"…go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep little one…"

Her cheek bounced against the soft fabric as her mother ran, singing as steadily as she could.

"…may the moons watch over you, may the starlight surround you…"

Sierra peaked an eye open. In the low light, she saw a flash through the blanket. A rumbling sound in the distance came a moment later.

"…Go to sleep—"

Her mother's voice wavered slightly. She stopped singing. Sierra took one of her hands off her ears and patted her mother's back. In the distance, she heard the familiar bark of gunfire.

"…go to sleep, go to sleep, tomorrow we'll have such fun…"

Somewhere nearby, she heard her father yelling. His voice was hoarse and loud. He screamed at someone she couldn't see. Someone else was screaming too. She didn't know what they were arguing about, but then she heard a thump and things were quieter.

"…so go to sleep, go to sleep, because today is all done…"

They ran on for a while and then it was warmer. Sierra relaxed. They must have found a safe place for the night.

"They'll take us in, right?" her mother whispered.

"I don't know. But we can't go back."

Things were still for a moment. Her parents spoke to each other, keeping their voices low. She reached a hand out from under the blanket and her father held it. She squeezed it three times. He squeezed back three times.

Their secret code.

Sierra drifted in and out of sleep. She was dimly aware of conversation swirling around her for a while.

Then, someone ripped the cloak away, enveloping her in bright light.

"She's got a kid."

"Wait—"

A hand grabbed her wrist.

"Hey!"

"What are you doing?"

"Step back ma'am."

Her father lunged forward. A dark figure struck him down.

Sierra screamed.

Someone pulled her from her mother and shoved her into a cage. The cold bars pressed into her legs. She watched in horror as unseen hands pulled her parents away. They fought and reached for her, struggling against a trio of men in scary matching outfits. A pair of wide doors

slowly closed from both sides.

Each door displayed half a large red shield. As they closed, the last thing Sierra saw was her mother reaching for her, tears streaming down her face, her raven hair blowing wildly in the wind.

Then the doors closed.

Sierra sat in the small cage and pulled her hands into her sleeves, wrapping her arms around her knees, shivering in the cold. She looked up at the guard, a dark-haired, tattooed man. He glanced at her for a moment, then looked into the distance.

The doors pulled away. She realized they were the doors of a train station.

She was on a train. Without her parents.

The doors faded into darkness as the train rumbled into the night.

The last thing she saw before the dark night enveloped her was the red shield painted on the doors.

Part 1

Chapter One

Sierra sat in the dark metal box, wondering what she had done to endure this fresh hell. “Please, no. I’m begging you.”

New Lagos Naval Lieutenant Sophia Brown stared back at her with a malicious grin. “I spy, with my little eye, something big and black and—”

“It’s space.”

Sierra leaned back in her flight seat and rubbed her temples. She could feel the migraine threatening to return, lurking just behind her eyes. “It’s space. It’s space. You’ve tried that like five times. You are killing me, Brownie.”

It was the 18th hour of their 7th trip from New Lagos Prime to the asteroid belt and back. Their ship, *Hold Fast*, was a New Lagos Navy corvette high on performance but low on comfort and the crew was getting punchy.

Escorting a dozen heavily armed freighters was boring. Escorting them through a sector of space a dozen jumps from anything interesting was torture.

Hold Fast slid past *ISV Kathryn*, the pleasant freighter’s habitation module spinning just

off their port bow. To starboard, an abandoned mining station came into view, filling the cockpit side windows with a tangle of asteroid and metal.

A chirp on the control board let Sierra know they had entered New Lagos Prime's comms range. She set the radio frequency, grabbed the handset off its carriage and held the button on the side.

"New Lagos Prime Traffic Control, Escort Squadron Four Actual," she said, falling into easy radio discipline. "We're inside radio range. Kids are well-behaved and we should be there by happy hour."

"Gopher Actual, Control. Copy that," Mike from New Lagos Traffic Control said, his voice clipped by static. "I'll send a few cold ones down your way."

"Thanks Mike. See you in a few."

Sierra liked Mike. He was a good guy.

Not the kind of guy who would torture you with the same stupid joke about space while flying through space for 30 plus hours. Sierra turned to her crew, her eyes bloodshot, her hair a mess. "So, let me get this straight. We've been flying through the infinitely vast reaches of space for…Gun, how long?"

"36 hours, 53 minutes, 20 seconds," said Gunnet Alresekian, the ship's navigator and occasional weapons control officer. Her serpentine shipmate lounged at the engineering station, his emerald tail wrapped casually around his flight seat. "Though with the lively conversations, it doesn't feel a minute past 35 hours."

"Okay, so you've been staring at nothing for what doesn't feel like a minute past 35 hours. Now we're passing something interesting and you can't pick that?"

Brown cut in, deflecting Sierra's indignant semi-rage. "Hey, I ever tell you guys about

that time I found the best ramen noodles on *Da'alin Bay*? Tried to find them forever since. Best damn ramen I've ever had. Permission to orbit the station, Commander?"

"Go ahead."

They were within spitting distance of New Lagos Prime. Better to blow off some steam before they had to spend another week in orbit babysitting tugs and colliers. Sierra grabbed the radio and tuned it to the squadron channel. "Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. We're going to check out *Da'alin Bay*. Thought we saw something."

Sierra winked to Brown and the young pilot pulled the stick over, sliding the t-shaped gunship toward the abandoned station.

"You ever feel like Gopher is a kinda boring squadron name? I mean, we're the baddest gunships in the sector," Brown said, her hands occupied so her mind could wander. "Why couldn't we be like…Tiger Squadron or Shark Squadron or something?"

"Or Cobra Squadrons," Gunnet added from navigation.

Sierra put her hand in the air, halting the conversation.

"First, that's way too on the nose," she said, pointing at Gunnet. "Second, you don't get to choose your family, you don't get to choose your friends, and you definitely don't get to choose your squad name. Your squadron name chooses you. I don't remember where we picked it up and this name might be the weakest sauce in the galaxy, but it's ours, goddammit."

Sierra banged her fist on the control board in mock indignation.

"Inspiring stuff there, Commander," Brown said, a half smile playing across her lips.

Gunnet unclipped from his station as they eased into a steady flight path. With a quickness that Sierra always found unnerving, he joined them at the front of the ship. "Sophia, how the hells did you find noodles on an abandoned mining stations?"

"Ah, you know how it goes. When a kid gets their hands on a ship, what's the first thing they do? Find the closest abandoned shit and fuck around with it. We found a palette of these things in cold storage."

Hold Fast pulled alongside the station in an easy orbit, the enormous spoke-and-wheel facility stretching out before them. Some long-forgotten conflict had slagged half of the installation's dozen terminals and looters had stripped the others so bare it looked like the station was halfway done rather than halfway undone. Chunks of unrefined ore and pieces of heavy equipment orbited around it, remnants of the station's former life as an industrial mining hub.

"So get this. It said it was from Sol 3. So, that would have to be…What? Over a hundred years old? I swear, still super good," Brown said, twisting the craft through the wreckage. Sierra noticed the corners of her mouth curve up in the smile Brownie got when she was flying.

The debris was just thick enough to make flying through it fun. Brown dove around a chunk of rock the size of their base back on New Lagos and slipped between a pair of ancient-looking boilers, still tethered by timeworn cables. She rolled the ship to bring the station back into view and they cruised along at an easy clip.

"You ever get out to the station, Cap?" Brown asked.

"Nah. Never did a lot of joy-riding growing up."

Her answer lingered in the air for a moment, the only sound the quiet chirp of instrumentation and the occasional burst of compressed gas as Brown worked the maneuvering thrusters.

"Hey uh…Sophias, you puts the spices in first or the sauces?" Gunnet asked, his standard confusion of singular and plural an artifact of Interstellar Common being his third language.

"No spices, just the noodles."

“I’m sorries, what did you say?”

“What? I eat ‘em straight up.”

“Wait, do you even cooks them?”

“Contact,” Sierra broke in, grabbing a radio from overhead. “Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. Contact, far side of the station. All hands, all ships, action stations.”

The trio shot into motion, each pulling a flight helmet down from mounting brackets on their flight seats and sealing it to their environment suits. Sierra brought the ship up to combat readiness and threw a lever marked “EMERGENCY DECOMP.” A moment later, a loud hiss announced the removal of air from the cabin into the holding tanks. Brown wrenched the controls, throwing the ship into a standard evasion pattern, increasing thrust as Sierra brought the power plant up to full burn.

“Confirm contact. Far side of the stations. Bring us around on 35 by 15,” Gunnet said, his voice tinny over the ship-wide radio. “Keep the stations at 30 degrees at 70% burn.”

“Copy that.” Brown rotated the ship to bring it 35 degrees clockwise from Stellar North and pulled it 15 degrees up from the Galactic Equator.

Like every time they flew together, Sierra was astounded by Gunnet’s ability to do complex stellar navigation on the fly. No human had the mental horsepower of your average Sarpe, and Gun was sharp even for his kind.

“Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. Drop into formation with us,” Sierra said. “Convoy, get out of here. Evasion pattern delta.”

Confirmations chirped over the radio but then Sierra felt a knot pop into existence at the base of her gut.

“What is it?” Brown asked as Sierra realized her mouth was hanging open far enough to

be seen through her visor.

"There's a ship on the far side. A big one."

Chapter Two

The ship was quiet, like all ships were in vacuum. Sierra could hear her own breathing, hear clicks and rustles from her suit, could hear the maneuvering thrusters shaking the ship through the vibrations in her seat traveling through her body to her ears. She couldn't hear much else.

"Scopes look like it's a Tredrea-class frigate," Sierra said, rotating the active sensors toward the target. "Maybe an Emmel. Not moving. Not powered. But it's definitely there."

"Shits. A Frigates? Out here?" Gunnet said. "That's a dang warship."

"Yeah. No reason it should be here. Wasn't here when we left. This station was in visual contact, just spinward of us."

Her crew sounded kilometers away, even though she could reach out and touch both of them.

Hold Fast was now orbiting at combat speed around the station. As they passed a shattered industrial terminal, they made visual contact. It was, in fact, a Tredrea-class frigate. An old design, with a massive rectangular hull flanked by a pair of engine nacelles running parallel to the deck.

Alone against the freighters, it would be cause for immediate surrender. Against the trio of heavily-armed gunships that comprised Gopher Squadron, it was a credible threat but nothing they couldn't handle.

They closed on the frigate. Gopher Two and Three were still minutes away but closing fast.

"Weapon systems are still intacts," Gunnet said. "I would have stripped thems first. This hasn't beens here long."

"Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. Keep an eye out. Lot of places to hide," Sierra said into the radio, mentally cataloging the debris clusters and ore deposits in their area of operation.

"Gopher Actual, Gopher Two. Permission to hang with the convoy? Worried we might get flanked."

"Negative. Get on us. If this thing goes live, we're going to need help. The freighters are big boys. They can handle their business."

"Copy that, boss."

Hold Fast closed in on the dark ship. Sierra squinted, trying to make out the ship's armament. "Sophia, slow down, but move us in. Keep the engines warm. Gunnet, if that thing lights up, give me evasion pattern gamma back towards the squadron, full burn."

The frigate hung in space a few hundred yards from the station, slowly rotating around its centerline. As it rolled into the light of New Lagos, the system's namesake star, they saw faded paint scrawled across the side.

"Can you make that out?" Sierra asked.

"Nah," Brown said. "Gun, bring those big eyes up here."

Gunnet turned and leaned forwards from his terminal, blinking for a moment to clear his

vision. “Starts with a J. Can we gets a little closer?”

“Sure thing,” Brown said, pulsing the engines forward. “You know, nothing bad or disastrous in the history of the universe has happened to patrol ships approaching derelict salvage.”

The ship grew in the distance as they closed in. Sierra grabbed the radio and opened the channel. “Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual, what’s your ETA?”

“Gopher Actual, Gopher Two. T-Minus three minutes to your position. No other movement.”

“Gopher Actual, Gopher Three. No contact. Two minutes thirty.”

“Copy, keep us posted.”

“*Jungle Chicken*,” Gunnet said. “That’s the name of the ship. *Independent Shipping Vessel Jungle Chicken*.”

“Weird name,” Brown said, peering out at the ship. “Who the hell approved that?”

Sierra grabbed the Republic ship registry from overhead. The document contained thousands of ships, sorted by vessel purpose and class, flipping it for references to *Jungle Chicken*.

There were only so many active ships in Republic space. The things were ungodly expensive, slow to manufacture, and almost impossible to destroy, so it was straightforward work to log every ship still sailing.

“Yeah, that’s a Tredrea-class frigate, but it has to be recommissioned,” Sierra said. “Those are 8-Inch Naval Guns. Six of ‘em. Most frigates come off the line with four-inch guns or combo clusters. It’s a ship buster for sure. That thing would tear our ass apart if it ever hit us.”

“Yeah, like they could tag us. Lotta space out here and those turrets track slower than

Gunny when its cold out," Brown said, nodding upwards at Gunnet before turning to Sierra. "Anything in the logs?"

"Nope. They did this one off the books," Sierra said, before grabbing the radio and flipping it to the general public frequency. "*New Lagos Navy Vessel Hold Fast* hailing old ass starship claiming to be *Jungle Chicken*. Are you in need of assistance?*"*

They drifted in, Brown bringing the ship to a stop face to face with the nose of the frigate, so close they could see the bridge. Gunnet flipped a switch and a pair of huge spotlights winked on.

Jungle Chicken was dark and empty, *Hold Fast's* lights casting dancing shadows off the command deck. A half dozen flight stations sat unfilled, no signs of life or activity to be found.

"Well, that thats," Gunnet said. "Log it for salvage and head back?"

Brown raised en eyebrow. "Hang on, Slick. This is our one opportunity for 15 minutes of excitement on this whole damn rotation. Let me savor this."

"*Jungle Chicken, Hold Fast.* Do you need assistance?" Sierra repeated, receiving nothing in return. For a long moment, it was quiet on the ship, the three crewmates content to wonder what had happened to this vessel.

Then, a static-filled call came from the radio. "Gopher Actual, *ISV Reddy…*fire from new…repeat we are taking fire.*"*

The scopes lit up with new contacts. A half dozen blips swirled around the freighters.

"Shits, new contacts at the back of the convoy," Gunnet said, strapping into his station. "Closest is on 121 by 302."

Just then, Sierra noticed another blip appear on the radar. It was right next to them. "That thing is live!"

Jungle Chicken's eight-inch naval guns rotated towards them.

"Brownie…"

Brown jammed the throttle down, rocketing *Hold Fast* in a chaotic spiral as a blast from the frigate intended for them ripped through space just off their port side.

"All vessels, Gopher Actual. Frigate is live and we are engaging. Make best speed to sector Tango 22," Sierra said, chinning a toggle back to the squadron's frequency. "Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. Three more contacts in sector Victor 28. Attack craft. Fighter-bombers looks like. Let's deal with the frigate first, then we'll intercept the assault ships."

Jungle Chicken slammed rounds at them at its full rate of fire, but it was an artillery boat, not an escort ship. Brown could dodge the rounds by spotting the telltale charging flash at the ship's gun port right before they fired.

It would work for a while. Until a lucky shot took them off the board. They needed numbers.

"Gopher Actual, Gopher Three. ETA 45 seconds. Can shave if we intercept the boat directly."

"Gopher Three, Gopher Actual. Negative. Get on our ass. Move it," Sierra said, annoyed with everyone second guessing her orders.

"Copy. ETA 35"

Brown continued the hard turn until they were heading away from the convoy, the frigate in full pursuit. She threw the ship through violent evasions, using the rear cameras to judge the incoming rounds, then rolling and diving around them.

"Gopher...*ISV Smolney*…craft engaging. We're under…Need support," the radio barked, panic creeping into the speaker's voice.

"*Smolney,* Gopher Actual. Your ship is bigger than my goddamn hometown. You'll be fine," Sierra said, not looking up from her tactical display. "Point that big ass of yours towards them and burn like hell."

Brown glanced to Gunnet, who returned the look. They knew people on those ships. They were big, but thin-skinned. Built to fill with ore and materials, not fight off assault craft.

"What's the plans, Commander?" Gunnet said.

"Steady on, Gun," Sierra said, agitation creeping into her voice. A round with a good trajectory closed in on their ship. Brown jogged them to the side with a blast of the maneuvering thrusters. Another round burst just off the starboard wing.

"Shots are getting closer," Brown said, working the flight stick hard. "They're dialing in on us. I need to get on a new vector."

Sierra raised a flat-palmed hand. "Negative. Just keep us moving on the same course. Two and Three are routing to us. We just need a few more seconds."

"We should send the others back to the freighters. We can takes them," Gunnet pleaded. "We just—"

"Negative. One thing at a time. Keep the frigate's attention long enough for—"

Sierra never saw the round that holed the ship.

Chapter Three

Brown flashed her eyes open after an interminable moment of darkness.

Had she blacked out?

The world was spinning. A concussion then.

No, that wasn't it.

She was in a ship. She was in *Hold Fast*. Her head was straight. It was the ship that was spinning. She could see stars through a hole in the hull next to her foot.

But it was quiet, and the ship was dark. Were they disabled?

She turned to see Sierra hitting buttons on her terminal. Brown could see her mouth moving, but couldn't hear anything in the vacuum of the decompressed cabin.

Then, a flood of light and sound assaulted her senses as the ship came alive. Sierra's steadying voice brought her back to the moment. "Fusion drive reboot complete. Life support out. Starboard torpedo tube out. Starboard air tank out. Sensors on and off. Hull integrity holding."

Brown shook her head, and everything came into focus. The ship was intact. Mostly.

The starboard side was in one piece, but *Jungle Chicken* had trashed their port side. The 8-inch round had hit them just under their nose. The hole near Brown's left leg showed stars flipping by as the craft tumbled end over end. She followed the path of the shot over her shoulder and through the cockpit above, where more stars streaked by. It was a miracle the shot hadn't hit one of them. Or the fusion reactor.

"Brown, get us under control," Sierra said.

Brown reached out for the flight stick, wrapping her right hand around the worn plastic grip. She eased the stick to the right and to the left. The ship rumbled as the maneuvering thrusters fired. That was good.

She placed her left hand on the throttle control and gritted her teeth as she eased it forward, afraid the ship would rip itself apart under the complex forces. *Hold Fast* creaked and groaned and Brown could feel the ship bend itself around the new holes in its superstructure, components that weren't meant to be load-bearing now doing just that. The ship's fusion drive bucked like a combustion engine that wanted to stall out.

But it held together.

"She's pulling hard to port. Engine isn't firing clean, but we're good. I got it," Brown said.

Sierra pointed out the front windshield. "Look."

They had spun dozens of times, but were now facing *Jungle Chicken*. It had turned away, back toward the onrushing pair of corvettes. The big ship guns splitting their fire between Gopher Two and Three, the seemingly disabled *Hold Fast* no longer a concern.

When Sierra spoke, Brown could hear the smile in her voice. "Take us in, Brownie."

Brown pushed the shaking craft forward, bringing them into the blind spot of the hostile

ship to line up a torpedo run.

The stately design of the Tredrea-class frigate was legendary for its ability to pack heavy weapons onto a compact frame, but it was also legendary for having a massive blind spot behind the side-slung engine nacelles. Not a problem when fighting capital ships, big problem when engaging smaller craft.

Brown had brought them into just that spot.

“I have target. Torpedo one greens,” Gunnet called out from behind them.

“Fire,” Sierra called out, and the ship jolted to the side as the rocket flashed away, closing the short distance to the target with a burst of propellant. “Reloading.”

Brown watched as the torpedo tracked toward the big ship. Behind her, a new torpedo thunked into position, Sierra’s hands racing across the controls. “Good line. Ordinance on target.”

Then, at the last possible moment, *Jungle Chicken* banked hard, and the torpedo struck the starboard engine at a shallow angle, ricocheting into space. It detonated just far enough from the ship to wash it with heat and shrapnel, but not much else.

“Target hit. No effective damage,” Sierra said.

“Damns,” Gunnet said, tense and focused.

Then, a torpedo launched from one of the other corvettes slammed into *Jungle Chicken*, sending debris out in a wide arc.

Hold Fast bounced and shook as if flying through atmo. Brown came away with her ears ringing and a loud hissing sound somewhere nearby.

“Gopher Actual. Gopher Actual. Gopher…” Sierra shook her head, as if trying to clear the cobwebs. “Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. Clear out. Don’t let that thing target you. Shoot

it again, Gun."

"I have target. Torpedo one green," Gunnet said, waiting a moment for confirmation from the commander.

After a moment, Sierra nodded. Brown heard gasping over the comms as the ship rocked again, Gunnet firing the second torpedo. She pulled hard to keep it under control. The rocket closed in on the frigate, its prior evasion exposing a broad flank. This time, the missile plunged deep into the port engine, detonated under the thick armor, and burst *Jungle Chicken's* port engine apart, dozens of chunks of the huge craft breaking off in all directions, disabling the vessel and sending it spinning wildly through space.

Brown strafed around a flying chunk of armor plating, slipping the craft through the space between the two lengths of metal.

"Hell yeah!" Brown shouted, unable to control her momentary relief and excitement.

"Gun…" Sierra started and took a short breath, sounding tired. "Gun, bring us around to…to the other hostiles."

"Okay, gives us…" Gunnet said, pausing as he ran the calculations in his head, glancing at his tactical display. "…121 by 174."

Brown waited for a moment for the Commander's confirmation, then pulled the ship around to the new heading when she didn't hear anything. "Boss, you good?"

The squadron fell in line behind them. She could see the pirates in the distance, hovering to the side of *ISV Kathryn*, blasting away at its midsection.

As the ship leveled out, she pushed the throttle full ahead and looked to Sierra. With a shock that ran through her whole body, Brown realized the hissing sound she had heard was coming from Sierra's helmet.

Sierra blinked three times as she stared at Brown. “You know what to do.”

Then the commander closed her eyes and laid her head back on her flight chair. It was only when she let her head roll to the side that Brown could see the shrapnel sticking out of her visor, the jagged edge of steel mere inches from her face.

“Gun, get up here,” Brown called out, glancing back and forth between Sierra and the pirate interceptors.

“What? I’m working. You know, I don’t just do courses. I also plots weapon trajectories and fix yours lousy—“

“The Commander has a leak in her helmet. Need you to seal her up.”

“What? She can deals. Humans can hold their breath for like an hour, rights?”

“No, you’re thinking of Hof’fmans. Fucking shit, Gun just do it,”

With a complaining grunt, Gunnet unclipped and climbed into the front of the cockpit, his muscular tail pushing off from the engineering station against the force of their heavy acceleration.

“Patch her up with the emergency kit. We have 30 seconds before we’re CQB.”

“Shits, you kidding me?”

“No, focus. Slap that crap on there. Regulator will even it out.”

When she looked again, Gunnet was strapping himself back into his seat in engineering.

“What are you doing?”

“Prepping for combat. We’ll both be deads if I’m climbing around the cabin.”

“She’ll die.”

“You fly, I’ll shoot. Better one casualty than threes.”

Brown looked to the commander. Her body was still and her eyes were closed. Every few

seconds, a puff of steam appeared on her visor, quickly disappearing.

With a muttered curse, she locked the flight stick. Ahead, the pirate cutters wheeled towards them.

Brown unclipped, climbed across the cockpit, and grabbed a patch kit from the wall.

“Brown, what the hells?”

“Get fucked, Gun.”

Brown ripped open the kit and grabbed a spray can, blasting as much of the sticky foam as she could on Sierra’s helmet before diving back into the pilot’s seat.

“They’re on us!” Gunnet shrieked.

Brown clipped in and threw the ship into a hard roll, the whine of the maneuvering thrusters competing with the warning sirens announcing incoming fire.

“Gopher Squadron, Gopher Actual. We’re drawing fire. Take them out on the pass,” she said, turning the underside of the ship towards the enemy, hoping the fresh armor there would be more intact.

The ship groaned and creaked and was pin-holed with projectile fire, rounds passing through the cabin with disturbing velocity.

Brown rolled the ship, jammed back the throttle, killing the fusion engine and blasting the reverse maneuvering thrusters at full force. Before she could think, she felt her eyes bulging out of her head, her chest pressed hard into the straps by the sudden deceleration. She heard pops and warning sirens and a satisfyingly painful gurgling noise from the radio that was probably Gunnet.

Before she had time to black out, she cut the maneuvering thrusters and drive, leaving them spinning through space.

Passing by in a series of flashing images, Brown saw the battle unfold all around them.

First, the two onrushing pirate cutters zipped past them, their rounds streaming into the blackness of space.

Then, Gopher Two and Three tracking in formation.

Then, their squadron peppering the pirates with projectile fire.

Then, one ship tumbling out of control, ejection mass venting from its engine.

Then the other, chewed apart by chain gun fire until the power plant died and it winked out, dark against the surrounding blackness.

By the time Brown had regained control, the final hostile had powered down.

Brown slumped back into her flight seat and let out a long breath, wincing as the adrenaline drained from her body.

Chapter Four

Sierra was cold.

It was freezing where she was. And dark.

She could barely see anything. Just a dull gray surface, speckled with some sort of off-white resin.

She sat up with a start.

"Status?"

"We're good," Brown said, sitting in the pilot's seat next to her, staring out into space. "Dead in the water unt*il* pickup gets here in a few hours, but we're in one piece."

"Are we combat ready?"

"Nope. Ship's pretty shot up. Drive's down, weapons toast, but the reactor somehow made it fine."

"The pirates?"

"All disabled or secured. A few tried to make a run for it in escape pods, but one freighter had a jolly boat and tracked 'em down. We'll get bounty credits at least."

Sierra groaned, imagining what the damages would be. The shipping company and the New Lagos Navy had insurance, but nothing was free this far out from civilization.

"Yeah…It's bads," Gunnet said, his voice distorted by the battered comms system.

"Hey, no casualties on our side," Brown said, nodding to the freighters receding into the distance. "We'll never have to pay for beers around any of those folks again."

They were quiet for a long time. Sierra checked the scopes to see what she could see. She couldn't see much. After a cursory inspection, she drifted off to sleep, exhausted and bruised from the battle. A moment later, Brown's voice brought her back.

"Hey boss. Wake up."

Sierra felt like she had only just closed her eyes, but a glance at the clock revealed it had been hours.

"*NLNV Hold Fast*, *NLNV Rifle*. You read me?"

"Yeah Mike, I got you. Sorry," she said, nodding to Brown.

"I have Administrator Falcion and Lower Rear Admiral David for you," he said.

"Fuck me," Sierra said off comms, then replied to the radio. "Okay, put 'em through."

Administrator Craig Falcion was the head of the nominal government of New Lagos Prime and the de facto Naval Administrator for the dozen ships that comprised the New Lagos security forces in the system. Including the feckless Admiral on the call, an older man that seemed to never have anything to say.

Sierra straightened and took a deep breath. She was sore from the rattle of combat and her head ached, but the biggest pain was in her gut. She knew how this was going to go.

A click informed her the administrator was on the line.

"Sierra, this is Falcion. Are you and your crew okay?" the Administrator asked, his deep

voice shaking the radio receiver.

"Yes Sir. We're in one piece. No casualties."

"Good. That's what's important."

"Yes, Sir."

"I have Admiral David here with me. We want to understand what happened."

The line was quiet for a moment, the administrator leaving room for Admiral David to say something. A beat of uninterrupted static told them he had nothing useful to add.

"Commander, I'm afraid it doesn't look good. My report lists over 400 million credits of cargo lost when you were within visual range of the planet. You took an unsanctioned joy ride when you could have stuck with the freighters. You pulled your escorts away from the ships they were supposed to be protecting to protect yourself. You let your three state-of-the-art gunships get overwhelmed by pirates flying junkyard retrofits and almost got your crew killed in the process. Commander, help me understand what you were thinking here? Walk me through your decision-making process."

Sierra took a deep breath and focused on running the post-action report by the book.

"Sir, our mission parameters require us to investigate any visual anomalies. At 17:51 we observed movement at the—"

"Did you even read the mission parameters? Do you pay attention when I speak?" Falcion snapped, his measured facade dropping. "I've been telling you for years to clear out that station, but nobody can bother. Why did you tell your escort ships to leave the formation? Do you realize how much cargo we lost? Did you even try to be a leader, Sierra? Or did you want to get into a fight? Is it just that this job is too boring for you? Commander D'Arjet, I want to see you successful in this role but you're not helping me help you."

Sierra tried to control her breathing. She had to choose her words carefully here or she could find herself out of a command and into a court martial. She wouldn't be the first one.

"Administrator, Lieutenant Commander Alresekian," Gunnet said, taking advantage of her moment of reflection. "We suggested keeping the other ships with the freighters but the Commander didn't thinks it was a good idea."

Sierra shot him a look and Brown blanched.

"Well, how about that?" Falcion said. "At least someone was trying to think about the mission. Thank you Commander Alresekian. I'll make a note of that."

Sierra felt a shock of anger shoot through her gut as she stared down Gunnet.

"Understood. Sir," she said, slipping the words through gritted teeth.

"Do you understand Commander? Because it feels like you keep making the same mistakes over and over again. I'll just have to oversee the operation to clear out the station myself. Or find someone competent to lead our security patrols."

The line went quiet for a moment. Sierra saw red.

"Get back to the station and get your ship cleaned up."

"Understood Sir. We could use—"

The line went dead.

Sierra took a few deep breaths, staring at the light that had just gone dark. "You little piece of shit."

The Sarpe held up his hands, apparently surprised, which only further enraged Sierra. She unclipped and stood over him. "What the fuck is wrong with you? I know you can't fucking figure out how to operate a starship, but can you at least shut your goddamn mouth long enough for me to make it look like we have our shit together?"

“Hey, it’s not my faults you got us shot up.”

“Look, we all could have—” Brown said, rising and trying to move in between the two.

“Hang on,” Sierra held a hand up, stopping Brown in her tracks. “It was my call, but you don’t step out of line like that, Gunnet. Now get into the hold and take inventory. We need to get ready for teardown. I don’t want to see your face until this ship is ready for maintenance.”

Gunnet stared daggers at her, his eyes unblinking.

She stared back, running through a few scenarios that invariably ended with her pummeling Gunnet’s stupid reptilian face.

Gunnet broke his gaze away, unclipped from the seat and slithered down to the cargo hold.

Sierra took another deep breath, closing her eyes.

“You okay?” Brown asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, more curt than she meant. “Just get your prep work done. I want to get the fuck out of here when we dock.”

Brown nodded and turned back to her console, staring hard at buttons that Sierra knew she didn’t need to hit. For a moment Sierra considered apologizing to the young pilot, but she didn’t trust herself not to take out her frustrations with Gunnet and Falcion on Brown again.

Instead, she just turned back to her own terminal and stared hard at buttons she didn’t need to hit either.

Chapter Five

"*NLNV Hold Fast, Flight Control.* Tug starting landing sequence," Mike said, but all the mirth was gone from his voice. "Keep her steady, over."

"You heard the man, Brownie," Sierra said, as they descended through the night sky over New Lagos Prime. "No barrel rolls."

Brown said nothing, but Sierra hoped the joke had broken the tension. She hadn't meant to be so harsh on her pilot, and she knew Sophia could be sensitive.

"*Control, Hold Fast.* We copy," Sierra said.

A moment later, *Hold Fast* landed with a thud in their berth at the Arjet Naval station, a sprawling naval base that took up a quarter of Sierra's home city. Sierra felt the fabric of her flight suit press to her skin as dry air from the desert city flowed in through their fractured hull.

"*Hold Fast, Flight Control*. Ship secured. Repair crews will be with you shortly. Good luck patching her up. *Control* out."

"Thanks Mike. *Hold Fast* out," Sierra said, turning to Brown.

A light flipped from red to green to indicate the environment on the ship was now human

hospitable and Sierra stripped off the cracked and foam-covered helmet, shaking her sweat-soaked hair out.

Floodlights brightened the hanger one row at a time and a half-dozen members of the repair crew entered the bay, staring at the busted ship in disbelief.

Before Sierra could say anything, she heard the rear crew hatch bang closed. Gunnet had left. Brown followed a moment later, a curt nod on the way out.

Sierra finished cycling the systems off and hung her head for a moment. Getting dressed down by Falcion was humiliating, but her shortness with Brown was inexcusable. She hated that her crew had caught flak just for following her orders and that she had made it worse.

“Okay, one thing at a time.”

Sierra popped the seal on her locker and grabbed her pack. As she moved through the cramped ship, she fished around the bag until she felt the cool metal surface she was looking for.

She pulled out a metal cylindrical bottle, a trio of cups and poured a heavy pour of Serviss ’84 into each. The woody aroma filled the small space. This was good stuff. For celebrations and making amends.

She moved through the cabin, careful not to spill the drinks, and stepped out into the bay.

“To a shitty mission, but a—”

She stopped mid-toast, her feet slipping a little on the sandy gravel.

The ship berth was empty, except for a sheepish-looking security guard.

“They, uh…went that way,” the young man said. A white ID clipped to the breast pocket of his jacket read Petty Officer Center.

“Got it,” Sierra said, hanging her head.

“Planning a toast?”

“Let’s just get this over with.”

“Sure thing,” Center said, flipping on a headlamp and shining it into Sierra’s eyes. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like I just got my ass kicked and then got chewed out by my boss and my crew is mad as hell and I’m annoyed that I have to convince you I’m not a robot.”

“Woof. Sorry to hear that.”

“These tests are bullshit. I could be a bot and you wouldn't have any clue.”

“Sorry, it’s protocol. Plus, talking to interesting people ain’t the worst gig.”

“Okay. Sorry, you were saying?” Sierra said, taking a breath. Poor kid was just trying to do his job.

“So, you got yelled at by your boss. That happen a lot?” he said, holding two fingers to her wrist.

“You got a boss?”

Center laughed at this.

“Good one. Flies in the ointment, right?”

“Pretty much.”

“How would you describe yourself?”

“Well, I’m a ship commander. I try to do my job well. Try to set a good example. Try to do the right thing. Lotta trying hard but…” Sierra glanced at *Hold Fast*.

“You have a job when you were a kid?”

“Yep.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I ran errands for the locals. Take this here, pick up that, don’t ask questions. That kind of

stuff."

"How did you like it?"

"It was awful. Got beat up all the time. Barely made enough to make ends meet. Arjet Social services are shit."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Center said, staring into her pupils one more time, jotting down a few notes and putting away his pen. "Glad you made it to the Navy."

"Hooyah," Sierra replied, shaking the man's hand.

"Hooyah. Thanks Commander. Welcome back to *New Lagos*."

Center smiled and saluted before making a crisp turn and walking back towards the control tower.

Further down the row, a welder was hauling a stack of patch plates with a pneumatic mech and a maintenance team was pulling tools together. They regarded her for a moment as she picked up her drinks and moved to a workbench. A quiet chorus of whispers floated across the bay. Sierra could feel her neck redden. Lowering her eyes to the deck, she slipped into one of the seats at the bench.

She watched the work crew out of the corner of her eye. They moved into position and marveled at the pathetic state of her ship. They laughed and barked insults and shoved each other as they got to work.

She picked up two of the glasses and raised them in front of herself.

"Here's to…"

She couldn't think of a damn thing to say.

"Fuck it."

She clinked them together and drank them both.

Sierra pulled on a work suit, threw back the third drink, and got to work on her ship.

Chapter Six

Sierra walked down the side of *Hold Fast*, her boots crunching on the gravel of the landing bay, marveling at the progress the team had made. The ship was already almost ready to fly. The maintenance crew had done a hell of a job patching it up.

It helped that the Republic made their ships to be modular. Busted fusion drive? Grab one from the next ship over. Totaled reactor? Grab one off the assembly line.

Busted crew?

Sierra let out a long, shuddering sigh. She had fucked everything up. It was going to take some work to unfuck it. Lifting her chin, she grabbed her tool belt and considered the ship.

Sierra prided herself on reviewing every inch of the ship before and after every operation. She wanted to know the status of every rivet. She wanted to know the state of every component and its redundancy. She wanted to know where to look when something went wrong. Sierra was the commanding officer of the ship, but she was also the engineer. She needed to do her homework.

Sierra resumed her walk around the ship, pulling off every panel to inspect the new

wiring, testing every new connection, referencing every rebuilt component against the worn ship operations manual she carried around like a bible.

The thing was in pretty damn good shape.

“Fuckin’ A,” Sierra said to no one in particular. “Crew did a nice job.”

Sierra hated the Republic at large, but she appreciated Republic ship design. It built them tough. Easy to mess up a system, but hard to disable the whole ship, and nearly impossible to destroy outright. She’d seen Republic starships turned into cheesecloth with projectile fire, only to be reborn in dry dock just a few weeks later.

Sierra fell into her work, letting the chaos and strife melt away. It was just her and the machine. She worked through the backlog, taking satisfaction at every step in doing it the right way.

She was so absorbed in her work that Sierra jumped when a voice echoed through the large space.

“Hey boss,” Brown said, waving from across the bay as she weaved in between workstations.

“Christ, Brownie. You scared the shit out of me.”

Brown held up a plastic bag. “Sorry about that. I brought you a cheesesteak because I know you like them and I know you probably forgot to eat lunch and I’m a good friend like that.”

Sierra’s heart flooded with a dozen emotions. She couldn’t quite pick one, but she broke into a half smile and took the sandwich, the rich smell of fresh bread and melting cheese filling the air.

“A couple of us are getting drinks at Barrett’s Privateer with the freighter crews tonight.

They want to buy you a drink."

Sierra reviewed the spools of cabling and detached panels that covered the bay.

"Thanks Sophia. You have no idea how much I needed to hear that. It's just I've still got a mountain of systems to check, a maintenance log to get through, and I gotta clean this place up before I bed down for the night."

"Well, I'm just buzzed enough for peak productivity. Let's get this shit sorted and then get you shitfaced, yeah?"

Brown smacked Sierra on the shoulder, grabbed a clipboard, and they got to it. The pair worked for hours, addressing every remaining maintenance ticket, dividing tasks, or tackling them together. They discussed the technical implications of the repairs and why they were important. Brown wasn't an engineer, but she was a hard worker. Plus, any pilot worth their salt had an obsessive attention to detail that served the task well.

Finally, they hit the bottom of the list. It was getting late and they were tired, but the ship was ready and the night was young. They gathered their things, closed up shop, and headed into town.

As they moved through the spaceport, Sierra felt a rush of appreciation for her pilot. "You know I push you because I care. You've got a lot of potential. If you didn't, I wouldn't be on you for the little things."

Brown nodded, looking down at the rough concrete as they entered an intersection packed with travelers, ship crews, and entrepreneurs working hard to extract money from both. "What about Gunnet?"

"Gunnet…" Sierra paused for a moment as they waited for a pair of immense insectoid creatures deep in argument to pass through a crosswalk. "Gunnet is an asshole."

Brown broke into a laugh, and they drifted into an exquisite smelling food court. Rows of noisy bars with thumping music created a canyon of chaotic sound.

Brown waved Sierra over to a beer stand with a faded sign. “Come on. Roadies.”

Brown paid for two beers, handed one to Sierra, and raised a toast. “To tough love and asshole navigators.”

“I cannot officially condone this toast,” Sierra replied with a wry smile, but tapped the long-necked bottle against Brown’s anyway. They moved past a swirling group of a six-armed drum line, following the flow of revelers until after a short trek, they arrived at a nondescript blank wall, the only remarkable feature a pair of lights, one green and one red. Brown knocked on the flat surface. A muffled voice answered after a moment.

“What ship you with?”

“*The Antelope*,” Brown said. “I’m the last of Barrett’s Privateers.”

“Goddamn them all,” the voice said. For a moment, nothing happened.

“Like the song?” Sierra whispered.

Then the wall parted, revealing a dark passageway beyond. Brown moved into the space, descending a set of stairs barely visible in the low light. “Let’s go, boss.”

Sierra peered into the darkness, trying to gather anything she could about the man who had opened the door. She was certain she saw a triangle-shaped hat.

“Let’s go, boss,” Sierra whispered to herself and stepped down the dark stairwell. The door closed, plunging her into total darkness, the only illumination a few flitting lights bouncing up the stairwell.

Stepping carefully down the smooth stones of an ancient spiral staircase, Sierra found herself in the middle of a chaotic scene. Jumpsuit-dressed ship crews and feather-bedecked

musicians sang sea shanties in the midst of a tavern decorated in the style of 18th century Sol 3 sea pirates. She spied Gunnet at the bar, hunched over a drink.

"Ladies and Gentlemen…" Brown shouted.

Before she could stop her, Brown leapt onto the bar.

"…the hero of the day, the scourge of pirates, the bane of Flaccid Falcion…Commander Sierra D'Arjet!"

Cheers erupted all around her as a mix of unshaved faces and feather-hat wearing revelers pulled her into their orbit, a half dozen coconut-shaped drinks offered with exuberance. She accepted one as the chorus of a classic song of privateering and jolly good fellows spread through the crowd.

The next few hours were a blur. Rounds of drinks and faces familiar and unfamiliar led to a late night conversation with the three crewmates. Brown was seemingly in her element, reveling in the hero worship, while Gunnet was getting quieter by the moment.

"Is it always like this?" Sierra shouted.

"Only when the pilots all make it back," Brown said. She raised a glass and a hearty shout.

Sierra heard her radio chirp.

"Shit."

She took a knee at the rail of the bar, shielding the radio from the noise of the crowd as best she could.

"Sierra, this is Falcion," a raspy voice crackled over the radio. For a moment, Sierra imagined unloading every pent up frustration onto her boss. If she had been a few more drinks in, she might have actually done it. "I know its short turnaround, but we need your team ready

for an op tomorrow morning."

"What we got?"

"We have a lead on the party responsible for ambushing the convoy. We believe they'll be in a skiff called the *H Steven,* taking off from Docking Bay 7 at 0640 tomorrow. I want your crew to be ready to intercept them. We think they will rendezvous with another element, but we don't want to commit a large force. *Hold Fast* is being retrofitted to appear as a light freighter overnight."

"Copy. We'll be ready."

"Good."

For a moment, there was silence on the line.

"That it, Sir?"

"Sierra, I had to pull in a few favors to keep your command. This has to go off without a hitch. I have spent all the political capital that I can on you. Please just follow my orders and make sure this operation goes smoothly."

"Yes sir."

The line clicked off. Sierra stood and returned to the bar. Brown welcomed her back with a swimming smile. Gun's eyes flicked to the radio.

"Close up the tab kids, we'll need to be up early tomorrow," Sierra said, raising a hand to get their server's attention.

"Bosh, they ain't gonna let you pay for shit here," Brown said, throwing an arm around her. "I donknow if you heard, but we're heroes."

At this, Gunnet's eyes narrowed, his shoulders rolling forward over his drink just a little further.

"Gun, you good?" Sierra said.

"Yessir," he said with more than a slight slur. "Just soakings up the festivities. Not often we gets praises for whats we do, huh?"

Sierra stirred the fruity monstrosity in front of her, wishing her head were clearer. "Hey, Gunnet. You've come a long way. You're good at this. I don't say it enough. When you first got outta school, you couldn't tell your ass from your elbows and now you know enough to run a cap ship."

"Firsts," he said, waving an unsteady finger. "I don't haves an ass."

Sierra considered the physiological implications, while he took another long pull from his drink.

"And seconds, you gotta trust us more, boss. We can fly. We got skills. You think you can fly ship on your own? Nopes," he said, gesturing with his glass, sloshing some of the brown liquor onto the bar. "You needs us and you can't keep mothering us just cuz you don't haves any kids."

The color drained from Brown's face and seemed to fill Sierra's. The comment stung not because it was sexist or heteronormative. It hurt because of the malice behind the words. Gunnet didn't have a reason to care about her reproductive habits. He just wanted to say something mean.

"Not our faults no man'll give you the business," he said, staring at her, unblinking. Brown made some sort of noise as Sierra sucked in a sharp breath, trying to remain calm. "You're not half bads lookin' for a furball, y'know. I'd gives you a throw."

Sierra opened her mouth to speak when Brown slugged him. "Fuck you, asshole!"

Gunnet hit the deck hard.

Before Sierra could react, a haphazard melee of security, ship crews, and feather-bedecked pirates erupted around them.

Chapter Seven

Sierra stepped into the bright morning light of the launch bay. The octagonal space was utilitarian and sparse. Just a few tool benches and supply boxes on a sandy floor. The clouds parted, the sun shone bright, and she loathed New Lagos' weather system for it.

Sierra moved toward the ship, wincing as the light hit her eyes. A dark shiner and a sore shoulder accompanied a profoundly terrible hangover as mementos from the evening prior.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw the ship.

"That can't be right."

Hold Fast sat on its struts, still a New Lagos Navy Corvette to even a casual observer. Sierra had expected to see cargo containers or gas tanks strapped to it.

She continued to the ops deck as she sipped a local drink distilled from the leaves of a mildly poisonous fruit. Leafing through a stack of mail that had been waiting for her at the administrative desk, she reviewed a small trove of interstellar spam.

A letter informing her she had won a colonization claim she couldn't afford, offers for discounted insurance on the ship she didn't own, and a brochure for natural enhancement

supplements for a reproduction proboscis she didn't posses.

Then she found something that caught her attention. She placed her drink and bag on the workbench and held the envelope with both hands.

"To Commander Sierra D'Arjet" from "New Lagos Naval Command." She knew what the thinness of the letter meant. She stared at it for a moment, unable to bring herself to open it.

With a sigh, she ripped the cover off and read.

"Commander Arjet, we regret to inform you that your recommendation for Gunnet Alresekian to be promoted to Junior Commander has been denied due to…"

Blah, blah, blah.

She tossed the paper into the recycling bin. It was the third time they turned Gunnet down for the promotion. Sierra had stopped asking about her own promotions. She knew her record made her toxic to senior leadership, and that seemed to extended to her crew. Falcion had exhaustively detailed every shortcoming, real or imagined, for every review she had received since being promoted to command.

She threw her pack into her locker hard and fired up the reactor, looking for the mission briefing folder that should have been waiting at her command console. A strange sound came from the co-pilot's seat.

Then a strange aroma came from the co-pilot's seat.

It was Brown.

"Please…stop…making…noise."

"Damn Brownie, you smell like death. I thought we had sprung a leak."

"I think I sprung a leak."

Brown groaned and stumbled out of the cockpit. Strange noises emanated from the head a

moment later.

The reactor whined to life, this time without a single warning light.

“Hey, we fixed this bird up pretty good,” Sierra called back.

More strange noises.

“Where’d Gun end up after last night? I gotta talk to him about a few things.”

“I don’t care. Stop yelling.”

The radio chirped, and Sierra answered it.

“Sierra, change of plans,” Falcion’s voice crackled over the radio without preamble. “The mark is taking the train, not their ship. They are meeting with an informant at the fish market in Center City in 5 minutes. Older guy. Nicely dressed. We don’t have anyone close enough. Get over there. Now.”

“Copy. On our way.”

Sierra powered the ship down, grabbed her pack and headed for the exit. This wasn’t in her job description, but she wasn’t about to give Falcion justification for another write-up.

Sierra pounded on the bathroom door as she passed it. “Brown, we gotta go.”

She jogged down the corvette’s ramp and across the sandy bay, Brown stumbling behind her a moment later.

“The amount of malice I have for you right now is indescribable,” Brown said, using the wall to guide her through the alleyway leading out of the bay and into the city.

“Muscle up buttercup, we have five minutes to get to Center City,” Sierra said, the pain behind her eyes lessened by the relative suffering of her pickled crewmate.

Brown muttered something obscene, and they hurried through a series of tight alleys leading from the New Lagos Navy dockyard to the city’s bustling downtown. They passed a half

dozen huge quadrupedal beasts of burden hauling cargo, ducked around a gaggle of humanoids arguing over a fender bender and waded through a couple dozen grub-like creatures out for morning calisthenics. They stopped momentarily, a huge propaganda poster blocking their way as it was being lifted to a billboard high above the street.

"SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING"

The caption framed a quartet of humanoids cowering under the shadow of a robot.

"Report unauthorized digital contraband to your local RSO."

Sierra rolled her eyes, and they ducked under the sign as it reached chest height, diving into the early morning foot traffic. Following the flow of the crowd, Sierra caught the aroma of brine and saltwater and she knew they were close.

"Brown, we're close. Stick with—"

The Lieutenant was gone.

"Brown? Sophia?" Sierra turned in a tight circle, surveying the crowd.

No sign of her pilot.

She glanced at her watch. Two minutes.

She cursed and dashed down the cobblestone street to the fish market, slipping into the shade of a bodega where she bought a magazine about guns, transports and more proboscis compensators.

She flipped to the centerfold.

"Are you satisfying your lifemate?" the headline read, with an infographic that made Sierra both blush and question the basics of the reproductive anatomy of the Saiconan.

She eyed the flow of tourists and locals moving steadily through the courtyard over the edge of the magazine.

“Hey hun. I’m downtown,” she said, trying to imagine she was talking to a hypothetical boyfriend she didn’t have enough time for.

Dozens of faces, human and otherwise, flashed by. Finally, her earpiece crackled with static.

“Sierra, Gunnet. I’m at the command centers. I’m going to relay instruction from the teams. Contact should leave an offices on the North sides of the square in the next minute. Nice suit, red ties, has a vintage briefcases.”

That was odd. Why was Gunnet at the main office? He was the ship’s navigator. He should be on the damn ship.

She lost the train of thought as a man matching Gunnet’s description stepped into the square. She folded up the magazine and stepped out into the street. “That’s nice. Hey, I think I want to get mushroom steaks in North Liberties. Maybe go to Vito’s.”

“Good. Stays on him.”

“Okay. That sounds great.”

The mark slipped through the valley of buildings created by Arjet’s stout clay structures. He was an older man, nervous and twitchy. He looked back and forth as he bumped his way through the streets.

“Hey hun, you know what’s up with Brownie? I thought we were going to meet downtown.”

“I thought she was with yous.”

“Nope.”

“You were supposed to go togethers. Did you forget to tell hers?”

“Nope.”

“Special comin’ up!” a voice called out. The mark stumbled in surprise as a massive creature flew through the air. It was smooth and gray, with a half dozen tentacles that pinwheeled out as it crossed the street.

“Oy, what’s special about this? Feels light!” the trader said with a grunt as they caught it.

Appreciative but unimpressed, Sierra ducked under another flying Chaveco, which was followed by a dozy lusty insults. The mark moved on.

Sierra had lived on these streets for her entire life and knew the ebb and flow of the concourse. The way the flow of traffic slowed around carts. The way it ran quickly over the long, open stretches by the warehouses. The way it avoided the Republic buildings entirely.

She followed the mark for a few moments through the heart of the city, passing the noisy market where shouts of barter and trade mixed with the staccato notes of street music.

As they reached the mid-point of the market, another figure joined the mark. It was a well-dressed Arshto, its chitin tastefully adorned with colorful jewelry. They nodded to each other and took a hard turn through the market, heading North.

“You know what, I changed my mind,” Sierra said into her radio. “We should go uptown. Maybe Katz’s?”

The pair began an intense, whispered conversation. They weren’t paying attention and drifted too close to the one of the stand’s fryers. Sierra skirted around the side to get ahead of them.

As expected, she heard a howl in pain as oil splashed across the way, the street merchants preparing the day’s catch for market. Today it was a Grek - a massive shark-like creature from the mountain lakes - that had the taste and texture of a rock, but many prized it for its supposed curative properties.

Now she was walking just ahead of them and could hear their conversation clearly.

“I…I don’t understand. I don’t have any business in Mountain Station.”

The Arshto responded with a series of clicks and high-pitched sounds. Sierra spoke little of the language, but could hear the agitation in their voice. The mark responded with gritted teeth. “Look, it’s your money. It’s just a pain because it’s last minute. I’m supposed to be…”

The pair moved out of earshot with the flow of foot traffic toward the city’s park district. Just beyond ornate fences, the wealthy elite of the providence lounged on blankets and ate delicacies, oblivious to the rush of dirty commoners just beyond.

They arrived at an intersection and the pair turned away, walking down one of the side streets towards the port.

Their path made little sense. They seemed to just be wandering around.

She cut back and slipped behind them again as they continued arguing.

High above, a ship’s engines screamed in protest as it left its pad under heavy load. Sierra lost their voices in the din.

None of this made sense. The mission, the marks. Sierra wasn't a cop, but something felt wrong.

Someone bumped into her, cursing. She returned the colloquialism and added a favorite local gesture for good measure.

When she looked back at her targets, she froze.

They were staring right at her.