

Cold Brew

The sound was like thunder that didn't fade. It roared into his ears until they bled. He gripped his controls, teeth clenched with tears of frustration in his eyes. Suddenly, like a door slamming, the noise stopped, and he was thrown into the vacuum, propelled by the explosion. He could feel his body expanding, fluids leaking from his eyes. as he opened his mouth to scream. There was no air. There was no anything anymore except debris whipping past him and the distant lights from the engines of a starship speeding away. His vision was getting blurrier as the vacuum did its terrible work on his body and he soon lost consciousness, staring at those fading lights. Within seconds of exposure, his fur was freezing, and the unfortunate pilot was left in the darkness, reduced to just another object to endlessly drift through space.

Kris sat up suddenly. His breath was fast, and his heart was pounding. The geroo rubbed an arm across his eyes, clearing any trace of tears as he focused on calming himself down. It was just a dream. Not just a dream; the same dream that had been tormenting him for years. Not every night, but regularly. He took a few deep breaths, throwing his covers from him and swinging a leg off of his rack.

Captain Kris was a neat and organized sort of person. Everything was where it should be, including his sidearm, which lay beneath his pillow. His deck was clean of dirty clothes, and every personal hygiene tool was placed neatly, at 90-degree angles. After a few moments of resting on the side of his bed, he stood up and gave a stretch. The geroo was reminded of his age when he heard all the cracks and pops along his back. He gave his head a little shake and began his morning routine. He slipped on a pair of trousers and began to brush his teeth. He was very

particular about his teeth. When satisfied, the captain spit into the sink, which immediately sucked the fluid away for recycling.

After a few seconds, a synthesized voice came from a speaker above his head, nestled neatly into the beige overhead, “Good Morning, Captain Kris. May I assist you?”

“Cold brew,” the captain mumbled.

“Right away,” the voice said.

And right away the coffee appeared on a tray table seated into the bulkhead. There was a slot cut from the wall that could slide open to deliver food and drink right into the captain’s chambers. Captain Kris threw a heavy black coat over his shoulders and scooped up his coffee before leaving his chambers.

Stepping into the main hall, he could tell that he was the first one up. He was usually the first one up, so this was no surprise to him. The ship sported a crew of twenty-six other creatures, and though they were loyal, it was foolish for a captain to let his guard down. Casting his eyes about sleepily, he turned and took the couple of steps that separated his chambers from the bridge. Captain Kris plopped himself down in his chair and called up the navigation display with a simple paw gesture.

They were a little off course, but the ship did tend to pull to starboard over great distances. It was nothing to be concerned about. The captain found his head swimming with thoughts of his dream. The familiar feelings of guilt and sadness ate away at his insides, gnawing like a hungry animal that seemed to have no limit to its appetite. Kris sipped his cold brew and leaned his head over to rest it on his paw. The captain’s mind drifted back, replaying the memories and moments that defined his questionable career.

He huddled in his cell with the other slaves. Panic was building in the chamber from the commotion outside. He could smell the acrid smoke drifting in through the life-support systems. Sometimes it smelled like an electrical fire, but other times it smelled of flesh and fur. Occasionally, Kris heard a scream from the hallway, alongside the thud of something heavy. There seemed to be stomping paws everywhere.

It must be an attack, he thought to himself. Around his cell, other creatures seemed to be arriving at the same conclusion. The whole bunch of them edged closer together, squeezing into a corner of the cell and keeping their eyes on the door.

Eventually, the commotion began to subside. As the sounds of combat died down a ringel named Seax crept away from the huddle, towards the door.

“Get back, you little fool! You’ll look like a threat and get us *all* killed!” an older geroo snapped at him.

Seax waved a paw back at the older creature, dismissing the warning, “Shh! I want a better listen!”

Kris placed a paw on his fellow geroo, seeking to assure him as he watched the ringel. He watched as Seax crept paw over paw, his long tail held high in alert. The ringel was flat along the door, his ear pressed against the surface. The cell reeked of geroo anxiety. The passageway beyond was calm now. There were no sounds of fighting or dying creatures. Seax pressed his ear against the metal door, closing his eyes so he could listen more carefully. There was only silence.

A sudden metallic buzz filled the air. Seax was so startled all ten of his claws could be heard scraping the ground as he scrambled for his composure. He took a contradictorily acrobatic jump backward, and the magnetic locks on the door slid from their slots. Seax's ears were perked and eyes alert as he made his way back to the huddle, now placed between the unknown danger and his fellow slaves. Everyone held their breath, unsure how many more they might take.

The door was pushed open with force. There came a soldier immediately, his weapon tipped with a laser sight. He was wearing a helmet and visor that shielded his face. His attire seemed improvised, having no specific cultural derivative. Directly after there came another soldier, their rifles scanning the room for any hostile targets. The slaves all stood perfectly still. A soldier trained his rifle on them and barked in a language no one could understand. He jerked the tip of his weapon toward the sky. Seax immediately raised his paws in surrender. The other slaves followed suit. The soldier seemed satisfied. He kept the rifle trained on them while his fellow confirmed the room was clear with more words nobody understood.

The first soldier took a step forward, grabbing Seax by the shoulder. The ringel gave a small yelp of protest, but the other creature was almost twice his size. He was pushed to his knees but kept his paws up and his eyes downward. The soldier pointed at him and then the rest of the slaves. The message was clear, and they fell into position beside him. He kept a rifle on them as the second soldier retreated, moving to assist in clearing other rooms.

They were under guard for about ten minutes before a strange order was shouted up the hall. The soldier guarding them barked an order and reached down for Seax, pulling him to his feet. The slaves understood, and they all stood up and fell in line. In the passageway, Kris could see the other cells had been opened as well. Slaves were falling in line along the walls, trying to

avoid walking on fallen krakun and soldiers. Kris never knew how many slaves were onboard the ship, but he guessed it must have been in the two-hundred-and-fifty range based on the clamoring bodies in the hallway.

Between every five or so slaves, stood a soldier, rifle in paw. Nobody moved or made a sound. There was another order barked, and all the soldiers straightened up again, making final adjustments to their postures. With his back against the bulkhead, Kris understood why. There was a looming shadow stalking around the corner of the corridor. Given way to that shadow, a tall, muscular figure stalked down the hallway. When they reached the middle, they raised a paw toward the bulkhead for a moment. The figure placed a device on the ground. After another moment, a hologram sprung the top, showing the figure of a large, dreadful looking krakun.

His dark blue face was adorned with scars. Around his shoulders was draped a large and heavy looking black cloak with several medals dangling from it. In his teeth, he had clutched a cigar. Sitting up on his haunches and removing his cigar, the krakun addressed them through the communicator. His voice was computerized, echoing in the common tongue of the slaves.

“Today is your lucky day, you unfortunate souls. I am Commodore Qursak, and I have liberated you,” The device spoke out. The silence was such that all present could hear.

A few seconds went by as the slaves digested the information. Somewhere down the hall, a slave gave a cheer. Other slaves slowly began to join the cheer. Kris glanced at Seax. The ringel shook his head in warning. When the cheering began to rise more, Commodore Qursak began to stomp his footpaw and roared out a few commands. The soldiers quickly trained their rifles on the slaves. Everyone fell silent again.

Qursak spoke to his device some more in the silence, and it spoke out when he was finished, "Return to your cells for the remainder of the journey. I want silence in this passageway."

Without hesitation, the soldiers began to corral the slaves back into the cells. Kris felt a sharp push against his back as he stumbled back into his room, quickly followed by the remainder of his fellow cellmates. The door slammed closed behind them, and the magnetic locks were engaged once more. Kris and Seax looked at each other, not sure whether to be happy for the development or fearful. Then the lights went out.

A few hours later, the soldier returned. Each cell was escorted out and lined up in a hangar. The Commodore was nowhere to be found but standing taller than most else was another creature, his helmet removed. It was an Anup, his black face painted in red stripes. The anup had a clipboard clutched in his paw that he was using to give instructions, not that any of the slaves could understand him.

He walked down the line, inspecting each of the liberated slaves. His translator helped clarify that he was asking their names, race, and species if it was not clear. As he approached Seax, there came a sudden rustle from the damaged slave transport ship behind them. The anup looked up and signaled to a few soldiers who moved to investigate the commotion. After a brief struggle, they hauled a tiny creature out. The soldiers brought the creature around to the anup who looked down at it.

It looked a pathetic thing, large ears, and nose shaped like a canid. Its fur was tan and brown, with hints of cream on his belly. There was a little bobtail on his rump. The creature

struggled piteously, footpaw scrapping along the hangar deck floor. The anup sneered at the lesser creature and snarled, his translator left on for the slaves to hear, “What the hell are you?”

The creature pulled on his arms, trying to take control of them but lacking the strength. His long fingers curled and flexed wildly.

The anup tilted his head, “It looks like a pet. Kill it.”

The creature began to struggle more violently, leaning in to try and bite at the gloved soldiers restraining him.

Seax spoke up quickly, “That’s Bindi, sir. He speaks through sign.”

The anup listened through his translator, signaling for the soldiers to wait. He jabbed Seax with the clipboard, “Is it useful?”

Seax nodded quickly, “Very useful, sir. He is intelligent and capable of learning.”

The anup glanced down at the struggling creature, bringing the translator close as he hissed a warning to Bindi, “Fall in line, or we’ll scorch your brain.”

Bindi halted his struggle, taking deep breaths but nodding, understanding well enough what was being asked of him. The anup gave the soldiers a nod. They released the creature who quickly fell in next to Seax. The anup turned his attention to the ringel.

“What’s his species?” The anup grumbled.

“He is a hekiru, sir.” Seax replied, glancing down at Bindi.

“Why wasn’t he with the rest of you?” The anup inquired.

“The krakun bought him as an oddity, not a slave.” Seax replied.

“Acclimate him. This is no place for useless bodies.” The anup moved on, continuing to gather his information. When everyone was accounted for and recorded, he pressed his clipboard

against his side and stood before the group. “You have all been assigned jobs. Unfortunately, we don’t have the resources to send you back to wherever you came from. You will all live and work here, performing your jobs while paying off your debt to Commodore Qursak. Currently, you all owe a thousand golds for the expenses involved in your liberation. Nobody is authorized to leave until their debt is paid in full. This is a rough place. Do not act a fool or you will find a cruel punishment, from either authorities or your fellow citizens. Welcome to the Hive.”

There was silence across the hangar deck. Kris leaned in to whisper to Seax, “Did we just get enslaved again?”

The ringel gave a twist of his mouth, showing his displeasure, “Yeah, mate. We did.”

Several years passed without incident. Kris, Seax and their fellows fell into the local language. Not all of the slaves that had arrived with Kris and Seax were still alive, but none had left the Hive. Only a few were killed in violence, struggling to adjust to the lifestyle. Others died of old age or hopelessness. The Hive turned out to be the cold and dangerous place the anup had warned of. It wasn’t a colony or a civilization, merely a base anchored to an asteroid.

Kris found himself assigned to a pirate crew. He served as a navigator under a captain that cared little for the Hive or Commodore Qursak. They ran several lazy missions, enjoying easy catches, but making little headway into their debts to the Commodore. It turned out that almost everybody at the Hive owed the commodore golds. Every ship that docked or ran jobs from the pirate haven were owned by the Commodore. The captains onboard each ship were only a captain by title. The Commodore owned and controlled everything.

Out in space, waiting for some easy target to happen by Kris's captain, Frisk, had been lamenting about the state of things to the crew. Frisk had been captain of the *Talon III* for a little over a year. His leisurely attitude made him popular among other captains, even if he didn't haul much loot home. Captain Frisk was a geroo like Kris, but a few years older. He was light and dark brown, a little taller than most geroo were. He was on the skinny side but wore his frame well.

He reclined in his chair, "I tell you, mates. One of these days, we're all goin' to get out of this life."

The gunner, an anup named Osp, snorted, "Oh yeah? What's the balance on your debt, Captain?"

Frisk shook his head, "Won't matter. We are out here, lookin' for opportunity. I bet one day; the perfect opportunity comes along. And I ain't talkin' about bloodshed. I'm talkin' about a real way out. Maybe we find a nice ship worth runnin' with. Maybe we hit a big score. Pay off all our debts. Maybe we find some nice creatures ta hide us until we get to civilized space."

Kris looked up from his consoles, nothing requiring his attention while they sat and waited, save for some debris objects he was tracking, "Is that a healthy point of view, captain. You know the Commodore will kill you just for thinking about it."

Frisk replied, "Whatever. Is this really livin'?"

Nobody said anything, all three of the crew were staunchly aware of what the captain meant. In the pirate lifestyle, it was often life or death. Sometimes that choice meant something else had to die. They sat in silence for another hour before an alarm started up on Kris's console. The junior geroo fumbled a bit with his headset and interface before calling out.

“Captain, we have an incoming vessel,” He reported.

“Fantastic. Let’s see what she’s worth,” Frisk replied.

As the ship entered range, and Osp detonated pre-positioned fold drive disruptors, bringing the ship to a halt. They didn’t raise defensive shields, so Frisk brought the ship alongside and ordered a hole punched in the bulkhead with the boarding module. The crew formed up into a boarding party and moved onto the unfortunate vessel. They moved as a group, clearing passageway after passageway. When they arrived on the bridge they saw, Frisk popped his head around the corner and quickly had to retract it as hostile fire began bouncing off the walls in response to their presence.

Frisk pressed his back against the wall, counting the lasers as they fired recklessly on their position, despite the raiding party being in cover. After a few moments, there was a yelp from the bridge. Frisk heard a clatter of metal on metal.

The captain called out around the corner, “Never fired a pistol before, then? The cheap ones get really hot if fired recklessly.”

“Get lost, pirates. Leave us in peace!” A female geroo voice replied.

Frisk leaned forward a little, recognizing the language. He peered into the bridge. There were two creatures taking cover behind a desk. He snorted and glanced to Kris and Osp. The captain shook his head at them.

“I will make you deal. Kick that pistol over here, and we won’t kill either of you. We won’t even hurt you,” he called into the room.

“Like we are going to believe you, pirate!” The female replied.

“I may be a pirate, but I speak the truth. You’re a slave. You don’t own any of this. It isn’t worth dying over, and I am perfectly capable of killin’ the two of you. Truth be told, I don’t own my ship either, and I don’t feel in the mood to kill for it if I don’t have to. Here, look.” The captain pulled his strand, in a heavy case, from his belt and tossed it into the bridge. “I’m geroo, too. Please give me that pistol, so I know my crew and I won’t get torched.”

The female geroo scooped up his strand and examined it. She scooped her pistol back up, holding it to her chest a moment. She glanced at her companion, another geroo. Her fellow shook his head, not willing to trust the pirates. The woman furrowed her brow, weighing the options. She took the strand from its case and tossed the protective cover back towards Frisk.

“I want to believe you, but you’ve attacked my ship and threaten the lives of my crew. Turn your weapons down, or we smash the strand.” She threatened.

“You wouldn’t,” Frisk growled back.

“You aren’t one of us, pirate. We’re better off without you.” She called back.

Frisk glanced at Kris and Osp. Osp shook his head. His glare had murder in it. Kris had a different look, almost fearful. Frisk looked to Osp. “Flash” was his only order.

Osp pulled the pin on a flash grenade and tossed it into the room. Both of the geroos within cursed but the bang cut off any further sound.

“Go! No blood!” He shouted.

The three moved in quickly. The female captain managed to squeeze a few wild shots off in her blindness, firing over the desk, but the beams missed any of her attackers. Frisk kicked the pistol from her grasp. It skid away as he placed his footpaw on her shoulder, pinning her down and training his rifle on her. Osp and Kris treated her companion with similar manners. Osp

aimed a kick at the poor creature's jaw, knocking him unconscious. There was blood running from the geroo's mouth, but there didn't seem to be much permanent damage.

Frisk reached down and retrieved his strand, keeping the captain contained, "No sudden movements, miss. I'll keep true to my word. Just don't give me a reason again."

The captain below his footpaw had both her paws gripping his ankle, using what strength she had left to keep some weight from her chest and make sure he didn't stomp suddenly. The defeated creature didn't resist much, though she showed him all her teeth, hissing, "Worthless pirate!"

Frisk nods down at her, "Yeah, that's me." He lowered his rifle while he manipulated his strand, "Listen, I'm takin' your cargo. That much is for sure. I know your krakun masters will flay you for it, so I'll transfer you some extra fuel. We can head to our home early. You need to take this fuel and go to the Camp. Show me your strand."

"The Camp?" the captain said.

"Yes, the Camp." He sounded irritated, "It's a place to hide. Things are rough there I hear, but it's better than death."

The other captain lifted her strand and Frisk bumped the device against her's. "Those are the coordinates. You are behind schedule on your delivery, so I suggest you leave as soon as we depart your ship. Now listen to me, lady. If you betray these coordinates, a lot of decent folks are gonna die."

Kris had scooped up the pistol and stood by, listening intently. He furrowed his brow at his captain. A range of emotions enveloped Kris. As right as this felt, the young geroo felt a deep

anxiousness well up within him. He knew survival meant killing this crew and bringing the ship back to the Hive. Osp had similar concerns.

“Sir? You can’t just let them leave.” Osp said.

“Osp, last I checked... I’m the fuckin’ captain! I can do whatever I want!” Frisk said, looking up at his much taller gunner, a hard glare in his eyes. He lifted his footpaw from the defeated captain. Osp fell silent and moved away from the first-mate as well.

Frisk raised his strand and gave a command into it, initiating the transfer of half of their liquid fuel. There were several loud clunks as the *Talon III* connected fuel lines to the conquered vessel. Frisk moved to the control panels with the female captain right behind him. With a few keystrokes, Frisk ejected the cargo, which simply detached began to drift down from the body of the freighter.

He looked back to the female captain, “I’ve done all I can. Go to those coordinates. You will find some peace there.”

The captain crossed her arms, unsatisfied uncertainty causing her to frown, “You better be trustworthy.”

“I’m trustworthy as they come in pirate space, lady,” Frisk replied. He looked to his crew, “Back to the ship.”

They left without another word, Frisk placing his strand back in its protective case as they made their way through the hallways. As soon as they entered the boarding module, Frisk disengaged the lock. The freighter’s crew would have to avoid that passageway for the remainder of their trip.

When they were all safely aboard the *Talon III*, Kris couldn't keep his eyes off the back of Frisk's head. He didn't understand the mercy he had seen from a long-time pirate. Osp was silent and fuming slightly. Frisk kept his visage to the stars as he launched the tow ties to engage the cargo pods and bring them in close and secure to the sides of the *Talon III*. As Frisk began to charge the main engines, Kris spoke up.

"Why, captain? That ship would have gone a long way to paying off our debts. Plus leaving them alive is the definition of a liability. They know where we were hiding. On top of that, they now know of a haven for rebels. What if they can't be trusted?"

Frisk looked over his shoulder, "Boy, space is an ugly place. Especially in our line of work. It's not that we want to kill each other, it's that this place has taught us that that is the only way. I take a chance sometimes to fight that system. We would have been killin' and dyin' for establishments we never wanted to be a part of. Not today, boy."

Osp seemed slightly satisfied with the response and shook his head. He pressed a button on his console and let fly half of the ship's ordinance. Osp watched the bright flashes of the weaponry headed into space with no designated target "It's a shame that freighter was so full of holes that it wasn't worth bringing back with us."

Frisk smiled leaned back, watching the engines on the freighter light up, the fold drive activating and taking the ship away. "Take us to the Hive, Kris. We're low on fuel."

"Yes, Sir." Kris smiled.

That would be the last mission Kris would fly as a navigator. When the ship returned to the hangar and disembark procedures had been completed, Kris rose from his seat and moved to exit the ship. Frisk was waiting by the exit, and he shifted to make room for Osp's much larger

frame to pass by. When Kris attempted to pass, Frisk raised an arm to stop him. The younger geroo looked at his captain, quizzically. The captain glanced over his shoulder; ears trained on Osp's receding footpaw falls.

“There aren't very many folks who know about the Camp, Kris,” Frisk said.

“I won't tell anybody, Captain,” Kris said quickly.

Frisk pulled his strand from his arm sleeve, selecting a few inputs before holding it out for Kris, “Well, hopefully someday you do. Just make sure they are the right sort. Don't let that information fall into the wrong paws.”

Kris obediently bumped his strand to Frisk's. There were a few chirps, and the coordinates to the base transferred over. Nodding in satisfaction, Frisk lowered his arm, allowing his navigator room to pass, “Get some good rest tonight, kid.”

Kris nodded and took his leave. It struck him as odd that grizzly pirate like Frisk would care. What's more, why he didn't take advantage of the knowledge and try to exploit the Camp for loot? With his pirate connections, Frisk could be extorting the leaders of the Camp. He could sell the coordinates to the krakun federation if he wanted to. Surely that would be enough to pay his debts and get him off this base. Kris let his thoughts wander free from it, leaving the hangar behind in favor of the more conditioned interior of the Hive.

While at the Hive, there was little need for heavy clothes, since the station had sufficient life support systems. Onboard smaller vessels like the *Talon III*, the crew had to wear heavier, warmer flight suits to maintain comfortable body temperature. If an extended trip was required, power could be redistributed to make the interior more comfortable, but flying sorties did not

afford that luxury. Kris was stripping away his outer layers as he walked down the passageway, glad to be dressing down. The gear was tossed into a bin in the bulkhead for recycling.

Later that evening Kris met with Seax and Bindi in the Hive's cantina. Seax's hips were adorned with a simple sash that covered his front and rear. The garment had a special slot that he could fasten around his tail to avoid restricting its motion. Seax had acquired many piercings in his face and ears since arriving at the Hive. They made him look more menacing, he thought.

Bindi was adorned with a plain white apron, stained with kitchen work. His neck flashed with a bioelectric implant beneath the fur. Attached to his esophagus, the hekiru had a piece that could filter out much of the nitrogen in the air, converting some to sulfur through electromagnetic force and a patterned electrical charge that allowed the device to rearrange electrons and protons within incoming air particles. The hekiru species didn't breathe the same air as the other creatures around. This piece of equipment was essential to his health, though it alone did not make the conditions ideal for his kind.

No pirate captain saw Bindi and thought he would make a decent addition to their crews. His lack of speech would make communication in the cockpit difficult. In the event of a boarding operation, he wouldn't be much use with a rifle. Bindi had been assigned to the scullery but didn't mind the safety of the work. He had taken to carrying a wooden spoon around with him, despite not being a cook.

The cantina was called the Left Wing, and it was as colorful and vibrant as the population of pirates that inhabited it. Creatures from any given species talked animatedly, playing cards and drinking their fill of whatever passed for beer in pirate space. Any notion of quality in the brew was lost on Kris and his friends. Like most of the other patrons, it was the only alcohol they had

ever imbibed either way. Kris spent much of his time just watching other pirates, seeing the differences in size and color and language play out in the crowd.

Seax had been recently appointed captain of a ship very similar to the *Talon III*. He was an easy study and very likable. He was unique in his ability to manipulate a conversation this way and that, however it suited him. That was his method when he dealt with the other pirates anyway, never Bindi and Kris. Seax's previous captain had been struck down in a raid, and the navigator suffered a neurological disorder that kept him from taking the captain's chair. The duty naturally fell to Seax, who was happy to assume it.

He was relating the events of his latest score to his companions, drinking his fill. Bindi listened intently. The hekiru had never been on a heist, but Kris had been teaching him to navigate while the small creature was not assisting in the kitchens.

"We breached through the ship's hull and as soon as we opened the door, six rifles. Staring right at me." Seax claimed, eyes wide and gesturing with his paws, almost sloshing his beer.

Bindi made a few rapid signs at him, the wooden spoon lying down on the table, "Six rifles? You should be full of holes."

Seax understood the sign language and shook his head, "Oh, I would be, if not for the quick paws of my crew and I. We tucked against the walls, fast as you like. The door frame provided us a little cover, and we immediately dropped two of them bastards. They were so scared; it was like they forgot how to aim!"

Bindi exchanged a glance with Kris, who smiled a little and shook his head, "Okay, so you make your way through the breach, a killing machine. And then what?"

Seax took a swig from his mug, “We get to the bridge, right? The pilots aren’t even armed. My gunner, Koba, just dispatches them on the spot. Ketí, the navigator plops herself right down in the seat, and the ship is ours.”

“Who were they?” Bindi signed to Seax.

“Who was who?” Seax replied.

“The pilots.” Bindi continued.

“They weren’t us. That’s all that matters.” Seax said, taking another drink.

Kris wagered whether to relay what had happened on his flight today but decided against it. It was a bad idea to show mercy in the Hive. Mercy translated to weakness. He took a drink of his beer as well, thinking with a furrowed brow.

“What’s up with you?” Seax asked.

Kris was about to respond when there came a commotion from across the bar. A circle of creatures began to shout, clamoring back away from a table. Kris and his friends instinctually dropped their heads low as several weapons discharged in rapid succession. There were a few screams of pain and much cursing, and then the scene was over. The Hive guards showed up and rounded up a few of the rabble-rousers, and the evening went on.

Kris shook his head as he sat back upright, “I would say I am having trouble adjusting, but I’m not sure what I would be adjusting from.”

Bindi and Seax glanced at each other, and then Seax spoke up, “Look, buddy, I know this is a rough and tumble place. This is our reality until we pay off our debts to Qursak. You have to pull it together and just make as much money as you can. How does your debt look?”

Kris crooked his mouth, “More than yesterday.”

Bindi reached up and gave the geroo's paw a few pats for reassurance. When Kris looked at him, the hekiru made a few signs, "Don't lose hope. Every day is new."

Seax agreed, "It wasn't that long ago all we had to look forward to was slow death in servitude somewhere, after all."

Kris nodded a few times and drank some more of his beer, "For good creatures, slow death in servitude might be too good for bad creatures like us."

Seax switched side of the table to sit closer to Kris, offering an arm around his shoulders. "Don't get caught up on good and bad, Kris. We're not on trial. We're surviving, just like every other creature in this twisted up universe."

Kris leaned into the touch a little, finding some comfort in his friend. "Yeah. You're right."

A clipboard suddenly clapped down onto their table, causing them all to jump, startled. Staring down at the three surprised faces was the tall anup from the hangar deck all that time ago. His name turned out to be Gregger, and he was a member of Qursak's cabinet.

"Kris. Your captain is dead. You are at this moment appointed the commander of the *Talon III*," Gregger didn't make it seem like the matter was for discussion.

Kris blinked a few times, "Frisk is dead? What happened?"

Gregger looked down at the geroo, annoyance on his face, "Do you really care?"

"Well... Yes, I do," the geroo replied.

"Well, I don't," Gregger replied. "The *Talon III* is under your command. Don't mess it up."

"What about Osp? Doesn't he have seniority?" Kris replied.

Gregger smiled a bit, holding his clipboard at his side, “You should get to know your crew better if you hope to survive, *Captain* Kris. Osp was the captain before Frisk. He was relieved of his duties and is no longer authorized to pilot Hive property. As such, you’re going to need a new navigator. I suggest you select one you trust and that protects the interest of the Hive. Ships can be expensive to operate.”

Kris was watching his debt rise before his eyes, and it filled him with frustration. Seax recognized the smell of the geroo’s emotions and quickly nodded to Gregger, “He surely will, sir. I’ll help him.”

Gregger’s lips gave a rare twisted little smile, “I am sure you will.” The clipboard tapped the table a few times, and Gregger vanished into the crowd.

Kris stared after him for a few moments, calming down until Seax gave his shoulder a few pats, “Congratulations, Kris. You have a teensy little bit more control of your destiny.”

“That’s one way to look at it. Bindi, are you ready for some practical exercise?” Kris looked down at the hekiru.

Bindi’s eyes squinted a little, and then he nodded, “I would rather die in space than die in the kitchen.”

Kris took a deep breath, “Welcome aboard, then. Let’s just try not to die at all.”

Seax laughed and gave Kris little kiss on the cheek before swigging from his mug of beer. Kris glanced sideways at his friend but didn’t say anything. He swigged some beer too. Seax always got a little feely after he had been drinking.

After some time, an attractive anup named Skera joined the table. She was an average build for an anup, muscular and tall. She had been disqualified for flight duty when an accident

cost her hearing in her right ear and her right eye. There were hidden fractures in her skull that prevented her from handling rapid changes in pressure or gravitational force without passing out. To hide her injuries, the anup had tied off a black handkerchief around the right side of her head. She carried a broom with her wherever she went. Her fur was the standard dark blue, but when the light caught it just right, it could almost look purple.

She and Bindi had formed a strange romance among their time as kitchen staff. The relationship had gotten off to a rocky start with Bindi using his paws to make rapid gestures at her in an attempt to communicate. Her yellow eye flashed, and she had rapped his knuckles with the shaft of the broom. This was the reason for the wooden spoon. Over time they seemed to have reached a middle ground using a mix of words and wooden spoon gestures to communicate. Skera encouraged Bindi to use words more often, which around the Hive was not a bad habit. Very few pirates could understand anything Bindi was trying to say with his signs, and few had the patience to try.

The real reason for her approach was that the hour grew late. She had come to collect Bindi for the evening. The hekiru didn't seem very off-put by the notion of some rest. He gave them each a quick sign for goodnight. His friends returned the gesture, giving each other a glance as the couple retreated from the cantina.

When they had had their share of beer, the pair headed back to the barracks portion of the Hive. Nobody had their own rooms, but nobody really cared either. There were curtains, nooks, and crannies for privacy. Most pirates were content ignoring their surroundings, accustomed to sleeping in busy environments. When it came time for them to part, Seax reached for Kris's paw.

“Hold up, *Captain*. Why don’t we do a little celebrating for your promotion? I can put you at ease in the new position. I do have some experience.” Seax mused.

Kris narrowed his eyes at Seax, but after a few seconds, he gave a little nod, “I will follow your example.”

Come morning time Seax was the first awake. He kept his eyes closed, enjoying the warmth of his friend beside him. The ringel focused on falling back asleep but instead had to settle on just lying in the warmth and comfort for another half-hour, breathing evenly and shifting to block as much of the dim light as possible. He had no desire to start the day.

When it was apparent he would have no choice, he wriggled himself to the edge of the bed and placed his footpaws on the cold deck. He reached an arm behind him and elbowed Kris lightly. The geroo didn’t budge so Seax elbowed him again a little more forcefully. Finally, Kris gave a stir and blinked his eyes open.

“The day is new,” Seax announced, still a little groggy.

Kris remained lying down, “So it is,” He sounded equally as groggy.

With a huff, the ringel began to dress, not that he wore many clothes to begin with. He began putting his jewelry back in, at least the pieces that weren’t suitable for sleeping in. He stood up and stretched his lean back, showing off his lithe frame. Kris sat up and followed his example. He fastened a similar sash around his waist, though his was a little longer and had a different slit to accommodate his much thicker tail.

“I need to get to my ship,” Seax said, face now illuminated by a little communicator in his paw. “We’re tracking a freighter that potentially has a fortune onboard.”

“Sounds promising,” Kris replied, unsure what he was going to accomplish for the day.

Seax glanced up, “I *was* going to ask one of the other captains, but since you happened into the position, why don’t you and your crew come along? You may be green, but it should be an easy sortie.”

“I’ll get them together.” Kris nodded, glad to be included in his friend’s plans.

“It looks like we have six hours before they are in intercept range. Be ready for wings out in five and a half.” Seax snapped his communications device closed. Seax leaned over and offered Kris a short hug, “This is gonna be fun working together now.”

Kris gave him a little smile, “I wouldn’t trust anybody more.”

Seax departed, leaving Kris alone in the cot in the dark passageway. When he was gone, Kris set out for his ship. At the entrance of the hangar, Kris scooped up a set of recycled flight gear, quickly putting it on before entering the cold hangar. He could see his breath as he reached the base of his ship. Using his right thumb, he depressed a button outlined in yellow, but flush with the hull of the ship. With a slight hiss of air pressure and the soft whir of machinery, the catwalk lowered.

The lights were already on inside the ship as Kris climbed the catwalk. The ship was relatively tiny. Immediately to his right, there was a chamber that served as the head. In truth, it was little more than an elevated hole in the floor. There was a shower head in the chamber as well, but it had rarely been used. Pirates didn’t bother to take that much water on a sortie. Most missions only lasted a few hours. To the left were three bunk beds. Each bed was about ten feet long and three feet deep. Larger anup pirates would struggle to use them.

Just beyond the “crew quarters,” the gunner’s station sat on the starboard side of the ship, nestled into the bulkhead. Most weapons were set to track targets automatically, but some needed to be assisted. There was a joystick coming from the deck and multiple screens to offer the widest view of the outside of the ships and monitor feeds from the weapon systems. Kris always thought that job was probably the hardest.

A meter further into the ship, the navigation station was nestled similarly. It was a smaller station but had a very important role. The navigator’s job was not just to set the course, but to monitor proximity sensors, inertial sensors, and keep an eye on port, starboard, and aft cameras. The captain had these views too, but it was important to have more than one set of eyes during a dogfight.

Finally, there was the captain’s chair. The captain could control everything from his station, though, with everything to control, it would be very difficult to fly the ship solo. The station was located centerline within the cockpit and faced forward. While there was a wide canopy to view the immediate forward field of the vessel, the majority of the ship’s navigation was done via proxy detectors and cameras. There were pedals to fine-tune roll, a joystick for pitch and yaw, and lastly an omnidirectional translator for slight strafing, forward and aft movements, and vertical adjustments.

Kris had some experience flying, but not much. Granted, the computer did most of the work, so manual pilot control was only ever taken on during specific conditions in which a pilot felt more confident navigating obstacles the computer might have trouble with. The thought tied a knot in Kris’s stomach, but he was committed to practice. Any collision in space had the potential for a hull breach, putting the crew at risk of being sucked into the vacuum.

The geroo lowered himself onto the captain's chair. The seat automatically adjusted to fit him. He tapped his fingertips along the consoles beneath his arms, looking around to get a feel for it. A blinking light caught his attention, and he focused his eyes, realizing it was an abandoned strand. Kris leaned forward and scooped the device up, realizing it must be Frisk's. Kris was still unsure of what happened to his former Captain, but in pirate space, what's dead is dead.

He pulled himself up from the captain's chair and placed the strand in his pocket. As he made his way back out of the hangar, he stopped, glancing up to the bulkhead. Kris smashed the communicator against the bulkhead a few times. The screen flickered with each impact before finally shutting off. The geroo dropped it into a recycler, swallowing an anxious and dismayed sort of feeling. He shook it off before heading into the Hive proper to find his crew. The rookie captain wanted them ready when Seax gave the word to commence the sortie.

Kris found Bindi in a pile of blankets alongside his anup companion. They had taken up bedding for the evening in an isolated corner of the quarters. Kris gave one of the hekiru's long ears a gentle tap. This was a sure-fire way to wake any hekiru. The little navigator's ear twitched, and his eyes came open. Bindi turned his head a little and saw Kris standing over them. The hekiru glanced at Skera's still form beside him before sliding out from the covers. Kris turned his back as Bindi scooped up his wooden spoon and a small sash to cover himself.

The hekiru gave Kris's ribs a tap with the spoon before signing to him once the geroo turned around, "What's going on?"

With respect to the sometimes ill-tempered sleeping anup, Kris signed back, "Expecting a sortie any time now."

Bindi glanced off to the side a moment, “So soon?”

Kris could sense his nerves, “Relax. We’re partnering with Seax. We’ll all be together.”

Bindi seemed a little relieved, but it was clear he wasn’t expecting to be out in the vacuum so suddenly after his new appointment.

Kris and Bindi set out to Osp’s typical territory. Osp had a family, so they had taken up a semi-permanent location, moving only when a more convenient spot opened up. They had arranged a series of curtains and creating what amounted to a little fort littered with objects. While some were decorative, many were structural support for their makeshift home. Kris and Bindi stopped just short of the entrance and listened a moment. There was a little bell on a stool nearby. Kris picked it up and gave it a ring.

After a moment, an anup pup popped its head out from one of the folds of the entrance. The pup was only slightly shorter than Kris, but almost a head taller than Bindi. Its paws were wrapped up tight in strips of cloth, and they kept them down along their sides. The pup looked them over a moment and then disappeared back into the encampment.

A moment later, Osp stepped out into the passageway. He towered over his crewmates, but he was already dressed for the flight. The anup tossed a glance at Bindi and then back to Kris.

“I heard about Frisk. Shame. Is this the navigator *captain*?” Osp said.

There was something about the way he said captain that made Kris uneasy. The geroo just gave a nod, hiding his emotions, “That he is. We’ve got a job lined up.”

Osp nodded, keeping his paws in his pockets, “He doesn’t look like he would be much good in a fight, but whatever. Let’s go.”

Bindi and Kris exchanged looks but ultimately turned to leave for the hangar, Osp in tow and his family's little camp fading in the gloom as they walked. The trio walked along in silence, save for the patter of paws on metal deck plates. There was an uneasy feeling in the air, and Osp gave a snuffle rubbing his nose and then his eyes. When they finally reached the Hangar, Bindi found the smallest flight suit available and shuffled it on. It was still big on him, but it would do to fend off the cold inside the ship.

The crew climbed inside of the ship, and each took up their positions. Osp leaned back in his seat and called over his shoulder, "So what do you have me up and risking my life for today?"

Kris was still wiggling his way into the captain's seat, "Our mate, Seax, has a lead on a freighter coming through our track of space. We're going to meet up with him and see what we can get off her."

Osp waited a few moments, "Partnering up with other captains can be risky. Plus it's half the take, assuming what we find isn't worth killing your friend for."

Bindi spoke up, having been instructed not to use signs as a navigator, "We will not be killing Seax."

Osp snorted, "Well I hope he feels the same way about you. It's not just him you have to worry about. He has a crew with their own debts, remember?"

Kris shook his head, finally adjusted properly, "We can trust Seax. He wouldn't betray us, nor would he consort with the type that might."

Osp snorted again, "Just remember kid, You've never been a captain in pirate space. I have. It's a different game than just being part of a crew."

Kris crooked his jaw, “If you know so much about being a captain, Why am I in this chair instead of you?”

Osp fell silent for a few seconds, “You may be the captain, but you should be careful how you speak.”

Kris glanced over his shoulder and caught Bindi’s eyes. They shared another uneasy silence until Osp spoke up, “I don’t like your choice for the navigator, and I don’t trust you as a captain. But I am not about to give up this chair to anybody else. Just make sure we make it home today, Kris. Some of us have people to come home to.”

The geroo felt the anup’s words shift to a less confrontational tone. Kris nodded, “Understood, Osp. I promise you that no matter the cost, this crew will make it back to the Hive after every sortie until we can all afford to leave.”

A few moments later, the screen on Kris’s strand lit up. There was a single message from Seax containing coordinates for the meetup. The geroo swallowed some nerves and started the ignition sequences. He relayed the coordinates back to Bindi, who confirmed them. After getting clearance from Hangar Control, the ship lifted from the deck and inched out into space, leaving the hangar behind.

The space-fold drive took them to the coordinates in less than an hour. As the drive powered down *The Father Claw* came into view. In the distance, Seax’s ship was no larger than a paperclip. As the ship came to a stop, the stabilizers hissed and steadied the vessel. The crew was strapped into their seats now, no artificial gravity to keep them where they ought to be.

Kris called over his shoulder to the port side of the ship, “Good job, Bindi. I can see Seax’s ship.”

The Captain reached up and flipped a view switch, selecting *The Father Claw* on the radar and hailing his friend. After a few moments, one of Kris's screens flickered, and Seax's face appeared.

"There they are. My crew was starting to think you wouldn't show." Seax's image teased at him.

"We're here and we're ready. What exactly are we after today?" Kris replied.

"Well, we don't really know yet. I have a hot tip that says it's the kind of thing that makes getting up in the morning worth it. They assured me it would change my outlook on the world," Seax said.

Kris raised an eyebrow but shrugged, "Alright, whatever. What is the E.T.A.?"

"Just a few minutes I think. Make sure Bindi is standing by. We're going to be launching some fold and shield disruptors. When the main drives cut out, we will be making a rapid advance. We want to overwhelm them without a fight." Seax explain.

On *The Father Claw* Seax watched his own screen and heard Bindi's voice come across, "Understood, Seax."

Seax smiled and cut the transmission. He glanced over his shoulder at his crew, composed of two geordians, Koba and Ket, "You two lovelies had better show them how it's done when the target arrives. Don't embarrass me in front of this rookie captain."

Koba and Ket looked similar to him, but there were some key differences. Ket's ears were rounder than Koba's. The cat-like creatures shared a similar fur color, both dark grey. Ket was more or less solid, but Koba had darker stripes on his fur. Two pairs of yellow eyes stared back at Seax in the darkened conditions of the ship.

“Don’t worry your piercings, captain. We aren’t going to let that bunch show us up.” Keti winked a single eye at him. Koba nodded as well.

Seax looked back into the open space in front of them. He wiggled down in his chair, feeling the pre-nerve anxiety of a heist. He kept his eyes on his instruments, but he was really waiting on the word from Koba for the signature of the ship they were waiting for. He kept his ears pinned back. Once the ship was detected, Keti was standing by to detonate a fold disruptor deployed in the flight path. If all went well, the ship would screech to a halt and Keti could fire the shield disruptors.

As with most sorties, the pirates didn’t expect much resistance from the crew. The majority of transport consisted of enslaved crews. Most of them were not willing to die for the cargo and didn’t need much encouraging to drop the goods. Seax wasn’t looking for a fight; just a quick come up.

After several minutes of the ringel captain gathering his thoughts, Koba gave the signal.

“Keti! Get ready. Three... Two... One... Go!” Koba called.

There was a flash in space, and what would have been a blur came into view in the form of a ship.

Koba was quick to launch to shield disruptors. The whole ship shook as two bright blue orbs of light soared off towards the target. Seax tracked his eyes on the far off *Talon III*. Almost immediately, he saw a bright blue orb come from the other pirate vessel. The projectiles from each vessel burst against the freighter’s shields. There was a little shudder and a flash as the energy surrounding the ship dissipated into space. The shields were down. He smirked and began opening communication lines to his prey.

“Greetings, friends! Disengage your cargo pods and my friend, and I won’t have to come aboard and do it ourselves,” Seax exuded confidence at his screen.

On the other side of the screen, a female geroo was scowling back at him, looking frazzled, “Go boil your head, pirate! If you want to die in the vacuum, keep talking shit at your silly little screen!”

Seax hid his surprise and kept his smile up, jewelry dangling from his face, “We have you way outgunned. You don’t stand a chance, mate. Don’t die for your masters.”

The geroo on the other end showed him a rude gesture before the communications broke away, leaving Seax nothing but a dark screen and his own reflection staring back at him.

“Keti, bring us in! Keep it wild.” Seax called into his headset.

The whole ship shook as a turret from the freighter began to fire on their position. Seax clenched his teeth as the ship lurched forward and starboard, seeking to become a harder target as Keti took the controls.

From the *Talon III*, Kris saw the fight begin. He touched the side of his headset, bringing out of push-to-talk mode. “Bindi, keep an eye on the sensors, I am going to bring us in. Osp, engage. Target the turrets. We can’t risk blowing any major holes in that ship.”

Both of his crew members acknowledged the orders as Kris grasped the joystick and punched it forward. His goal was to avoid as much damage as possible while putting himself in boarding range. It would do him little good to damage the ship more than necessary to neutralize the threat.

Kris’s adrenaline was pumping. He could see Seax’s vessel making similar moves, closing the distance. A successful shot from *The Father Claw* struck one of the freighter’s

turrets, sending orbs of fire and twisted metal into space. Even so, the freighter landed on shot on the *Talon III*. The whole vessel shook, but the shields held.

Despite the boom, Bindi called out, “Shields at Seventy-five percent, Kris!”

“Keep it wild, Captain!” Osp yelled through gritted teeth.

Kris doubled up his evasive maneuvers, aiming to zig, zag, and strafe, changing direction to keep his vessel unpredictable while still closing the gap to his prey.

Kris watched another turret on the freighter explode, courtesy of a well-placed shot from his anup gunner. They were almost in boarding range now. *The Father Claw* was close too. Kris gained confidence, the image of boarding before his friend emboldening him.

“Osp, initiate boarding!” He called out.

The anup shook his head but started the process. As he launched the harpoon that would anchor the ships together, a countermeasure turret from the freighter blasted the projectile off target, twisting and melting the metal hook. Osp cursed, but suddenly *The Father Claw* made a pass on the target. The pirate vessel fired several kinetic flak cannons, aimed at the freighter’s turrets in rapid succession. There was a series of explosions as every turret on the starboard side of the freighter was neutralized.

The ship was now properly defenseless on the keel of action. Seax smirked from the seat of his ship.

“Koba, let’s board them. Ket, get armed.” He said into his headset, moving to unbuckle his harness.

Kris gritted his teeth and huffed, amused at the display, “Osp, try again.”

Osp rolled his eyes, firing off a second anchor. With both pirate ships anchored to the prey, mechanisms went to work, drawing the pirate vessels against the now defenseless freighter. Kris Unbuckled his harness, floating out of his seat. Osp and Bindi were doing the same, using handles within the cabin to propel themselves towards the weapon locker. Osp reached the locker first and kept a paw over the hasp that secured the door.

“Are you sure you want your little friend in this fight, Captain?” The anup leveled his eyes at Kris.

“My little friend is your navigator and a part of this crew. If I didn’t think he could do it, he wouldn’t be here.” Kris replied, matching the gaze his gunner gave him.

“Aye, Captain,” Osp said as he moved his paw away, springing the mechanism and drawing a rifle and a cutting torch from the locker.

Kris and Bindi followed suit, retrieving rifles. The ship came right alongside the freighter. While the crew waited in a pressurized chamber, the *Talon III*’s boarding space attached itself to the other ship haul, both magnetically and with a vacuum. Once the boarding chamber was pressurized, Osp moved forward with the torch. He placed it against the haul and began burning through the freighter’s exterior.

Kris and Bindi held back. Their rifles were raised to cover their point man. Kris looked sideways at Bindi. The hekiru had a fierce look on his face, eager to prove himself to Osp. Kris felt a certain satisfaction in his faith in the small man. Osp had finished cutting through the hull and signaled to his team. The anup fired a round from his rifle into the fresh cut outline.

The hull moved into the ship and fell against the deck. Osp was quick to move through. When he passed into the next chamber, he felt gravity take hold. The anup stumbled a little but

kept his footing as he stepped into the lighted passageway. Kris and Bindi were right behind him. As the crew took up position, Bindi was watching the six while Kris kept covering Osp and Osp was scanning over each entrance the passageway.

They were not surprised to see Seax and his crew already in the passageway, taking up a similar position. Seax gave Kris a smirk, silently winning the bragging rights.

“Damn it,” Kris muttered narrowing his eyes, hiding any amusement from the smirking ringel.

Before anybody could say anything else, there was an unexpected blur of motion. A massive shape dropped from the overhead. There was clack, and a meaty thump as Osp’s rifle sailed from his grasp and the blur connected a haymaker to the side of his head. The large anup dropped immediately. Before anybody could react, the form was pole vaulting forward, both feet connecting with Kris and Bindi. The captain and his navigator were forced backward into the hole where they came from, tumbling as the artificial gravity lifted.

Seax and his team raised their rifles, but as soon as they made to fire the figure had swooped low, the laser weapons missing entirely. It came back up, aiming a blow with it’s pole to Koba’s head. The gunner dropped in on the spot, crumbling straight down. It aimed another strike to Ketu, but the navigator used her rifle to deflect the pole, though the force staggered her. It was about that time, Seax got a shot off, catching their attacker in the midsection.

The rifle did its work, burning a hole into the freighter’s defender. It was only now that Seax even could process what had intercepted them. It was an adult, though smallish anup, now curled up and holding her midsection. Seax used a footpaw to kick away the pole, keeping his

rifle trained on the creature. Ketí dipped down to check on Koba, who was blinking his eyes, slowly coming back to consciousness.

The anup shuddered and groaned. Seax kept his rifle on her as Osp got back to his feet. Shortly after, Kris and Bindi came back through to the passageway. Seax was about to shoot the defender anup when the creature shuddered again and went still. His eye twitched a moment and he called out, keeping his rifle on target.

“Roll call. Everyone survive?”

The other five pirates gave confirmation, though Koba and Osp were a little dazed. Seax prodded the downed anup with his footpaw, “Scoop up her rod. What a fighter. It’s as good a trophy as any.”

When the anup didn’t move, Seax was satisfied she was no longer a threat, “Form back up. Switch point. Kris take the lead on yours. I will take the lead on mine. Koba, take the six. Ketí, cover me.”

Kris shook his head in admiration. He had no idea Seax was so competent in command. He issued similar commands, putting Osp at the back. Bindi scooped his left footpaw right up behind Kris’ right, keeping close and covering him. They moved through the passageways of the ship in their squads. Always the point man first, then the cover, and finally the six. They made their way to the bridge.

The passageways were empty. It felt lucky. Though it was pretty common for these types of ships to be undercrewed, Kris suspected there might have been more security for this particular vessel given the value of what it was hauling.

The door to the bridge was slightly ajar. Seax held a cautious paw up, urging everyone to proceed with caution. He took a few slow steps, keeping his rifle level and his eyes trained on the entrance. It was a trap. He knew it was a trap. However, he and his had to take that room to take the cargo, and that meant trying to come out ahead of whatever the remaining crew was plotting.

Seax called into the bridge, “Alright! My name is Captain Seax of the *Talon III*. We’ve killed your security detail, and we’ll kill you too if you don’t surrender yourselves and your cargo!”

There were a few moments of silence before a canister bounced off the angled door, landing at Seax’s feet. The ringel glanced down at the hissing grenade and cursed under his breath. He managed to leap backward, not bothering to look at what was behind him as he raised an arm to cover his face. He collided with his squad, bowling into Ketu and Koba right as the canister erupted.

The noise was deafening, and the flash was blinding. The air was filled with a stinging, pungent gas that brought every sinus mucus pouring forth from the would-be pirate’s noses and eyes. Smoke was filling the passageway, further restricting any chance the pirates had at seeing the defending crew. Kris couldn’t hear anything but a ringing. His equilibrium in a state of confusion, he had to lower his rifle so he could grasp the bulkhead. Bindi immediately collapsed, and Osp wasn’t fairing much better than Kris.

Seax’s squad were all knocked flat having been closer to the grenade than Kris’s. Seax looked unconscious, and Ketu and Koba were struggling to keep their feet as they sneezed, blind and disoriented. Ketu had an arm out, supporting Koba as Seax slumped against her knee. Panic flashed across Kris’s mind. They were sitting ducks.

He was right. A hot beam grazed passed his face. He could smell singed fur as the concentrated light ripped past, diffusing against the bulkhead behind them. Another beam whizzed past, this time nearly catching Osp in the side of his head. Flesh, fur, and ear were instantly melted away. The hit was not direct, but close enough to take half of his ear. The gunner dropped to a knee, holding the side of his head and pressing himself against the bulkhead. There was no pain, but blood began to seep from between his fingers, and he growled low through his blindness.

Keti by this time had let Seax fall and pushed Koba away and to the deck behind her. She blindly fired her weapon through the door, seeking any covering fire from the lasers coming through. Kris followed suit. His vision was coming back, but he was huddled in front of Bindi, pressing himself against the bulkhead to be a smaller target. Nobody knew what they were shooting at; the smoke made sure of that.

There suddenly came a cry from within the bridge, and the incoming lasers stopped. Kris stumbled to his feet and hissed at Keti, "In! Now!"

He couldn't see much, but he kept his shoulder on the wall as he burst through the door. He stumbled a bit, Keti emerging from the smoke beside him. They both trained their rifles into the bridge, looking for the former source of the incoming lasers. Through blurred vision, Kris could make out the figures of two geroos, one clutching its paw and the other with its paws in the air. The pair had been taking cover behind a console, now thoroughly blackened from sheltering them from the pirates' suppressing fire.

Kris kept his rifle up as he shouted through tears and sniffles, "Whatever weapons you have, kick them over! Now!"

The geroo holding her paw sneered and kicked a damaged rifle out from behind the console, “It melted, boy. Damn krakun didn’t even give us quality defense. Your lot would be dead otherwise!”

Keti scooted forward, kicking the rifle farther away, “Bad luck, lady. Out from behind the console. To your knees, paws behind your head.”

Kris let Keti handle the crew, satisfied as they followed her instructions. He moved to the cargo console and began issuing commands to the system. There were a few confirmative beeps as the pods detached. He stepped back from the console and looked over the beaten defenders. The geroo pirate knelt beside the injured female and pulled out his strand.

“How much fuel do you have left?” Kris asked.

“How mu-?” The woman’s reply was cut short as Seax came through the door, angry and red-eyed.

“Holy hell, which way is up?” The ringel was loud and still a little dazed.

The smoke had dissipated from the hallway and Koba and Osp, who had Bindi over his shoulder, entered the bridge. The anup had lost half an ear from the laser that caught him but otherwise looked okay, other than the stream of snot coming from his nostrils and a clearly bad mood. Koba moved to stand next to Keti, keeping the crew under control.

Kris glanced up at his friends and then back to the crew, “Hold up your strand.”

The female geroo glanced at the rifles on her and then slowly reached to her armband, holding out her strand for Kris.

Kris pressed a few icons on his device before tapping it against hers, “There is a place called the Camp. I have given you the coordinates. When we leave, you head straight there. They can help you. Do you understand?”

The other geroo glanced at her screen, seeing the coordinates. She looked at Kris reading his eyes. After a moment she nodded her head.

Kris felt a relief well up inside of him. Satisfied, he stood up and motioned for Osp to follow him out of the bridge. Seax’s eyes were on Kris the entire time. Kris felt something troubling in his gaze.

“Let’s go, Seax. We have the cargo,” Kris said.

Seax looked from the surrendered crew to his friend. The ringel motioned to Kris, “We have the rear. Let’s get out of here.”

Kris turned his back on the scene, Osp following him through the door and into the passageway. The geroo took a deep breath, his adrenaline fading. He glanced up to Osp, noticing that half of his ear was missing for the first time. He suppressed any notion of asking about it, more concerned with getting back to the ship and getting home with the loot.

From behind there suddenly came the sound of discharging weapons. There were a few faint cries of surprise and pain and then silence. Kris stopped in his tracks; ears pinned backward. Osp had already turned around. Stepping from the bridge to the passageway was Seax, Ketu, and Koba. Kris showed them a grimace full of teeth, able to glance at the bodies inside. The surrendered crew had execution style wounds, burns right between the eyes that displayed bone and tissue alike.

“What did you do?!” The geroo growled.

“I did what was best for us.” Seax replied.

“They would have been safe!” Kris half yelled back at the ringel.

“They would have sold us out! If the krakun empire gets word of these coordinates, we are all going to die. You can’t just let them go! You either bring them back to the hive, or you kill them. You don’t just walk away and leave them on their own! You should be less worried about ghosts and more worried about getting your crew killed!” Seax yelled back.

Kris felt a burning behind his eyes. He was fighting a sense of betrayal. Betrayal from Seax, but also a betrayal to the crew he had just tried to save. He narrowed his eyes at Seax for a brief moment, trying to find the right words for his friend.

“We were slaves once too. We became worse than them. If anyone deserved to die, it should have been us.” Kris growled, turning on his heels and stalking back to his ship, no longer worried about squad movements.

Once back aboard the *Talon III*, Kris set about disconnecting from the ship. Using magnetic tractors, he assumed control of half the disconnected cargo, leaving the other half for Seax and *The Father Claw*. His mind as seething with anger and guilt. It was all he could do to keep from shedding zero-gravity tears of frustration as he angrily punched in a flight path back to the Hive.

When they were securely in the hangar, *The Father Claw* set down beside them. Seax walked down the gangplank of his ship, Kris walking down his own. The pair met between the ships, neither saying a word. The air was tense as they approached the commandeered cargo. They stopped in front of what they captured. Kris glanced at the cargo and then off to the side, tongue rolling over his teeth, still angry.

Seax took a step forward and depressed a button on the side of the cargo container. There came an audible hiss as the pressure equalized within the container. When the hatch opened, several boxes fell from it, tumbling onto the deck between the two captains. Seax knelt and scooped up one of the boxes, examining it.

“Coffee makers...” He said slowly.

“Coffee makers?” Kris replied, leaning over to look at the box, “Coffee makers?!”

Seax nodded his head, tossing the box to the ground. He looked up to the overhead of the hangar and whispered a few curses.

“Coffee makers?!” Kris said again. “You killed them for coffee makers?! Look, they aren’t even electric coffee makers! Not even automatic!” Kris kicked a few boxes, sending the packaged appliances scattering, “It’s fucking cold brew, you dumb... dense... This cargo is practically worthless!”

Kris grabbed Seax’s collar in a fist and immediately shoved him away, mocking at him, “It’s the kind of thing that makes getting up in the morning worth it. It will change your outlook on the world! This trash is hardly worth the recycling fee!”

Seax stumbled a bit, catching himself on a nook of the cargo container. He picked up a coffee maker and threw it at Kris. The geroo was prepared, catching it smartly. Kris tucked the stolen goods under his arm and stalked out of the hangar.

“Recycle this garbage and pass me my share later,” Kris yelled over his shoulder, no longer interested in talking.

In the end, both crews were able to pay a little debt from their balances. The morning following the sortie, Seax managed to corner Kris and work out an apology. Kris didn't have the emotional bandwidth or energy to argue, so it wasn't hard for Seax to make peace with him. The two entered into a shaky, but peaceful, settlement. Seax and Kris continued to run sorties together but took a different approach to resistance. Instead of initiating a boarding, they would disable their target enough to tow them back to the Hive. This gave Kris plenty of time to talk the captured crew down from resisting. For a modest fee, the Commodore Qursak's own boarding parties would board the ship and take prisoners who would become later indentured into piracy. If there was a fight on board, Kris didn't have to see it. It made Kris feel better that even if somebody did get killed, he had done his best to prevent it while still looking after his crew.

Kris kept the coffee maker. Now and then, when he could afford it, he would purchase coffee grounds from the commissary and make a flask of cold brew. It was a bitter drink, but it helped him start the day, and he was rarely ready to do that when he needed to. At least that much was true about Seax had said him of the cargo, he thought to himself.

This practice continued for several months. Osp had taken to wearing a strap around his head to hide his mangled ear and warmed up to Bindi, despite the results of that first boarding. Ket and Koba turned out to be very positive creatures, each with a vision of escaping the pirate life and settling down somewhere quiet. The pair of geordians were always together, upbeat, and outgoing. It wasn't long before members of both crews were solid friends, as much as pirates could be.

Almost a year after the coffee maker incident, Seax and the crew of *The Father Claw* were on a sortie with Kris and the *Talon III*. The pair of ships were stabilized, waiting in the

dark of space for their prey to venture through. Every sortie was like a lottery to a pirate. Seax could feel it in his chest. This was going to be the haul that would set them free. All any pirate needed was one good score to pay off their debts and book a transport off the Hive. There was a glint in his eye, and his infectious attitude spread to his crew.

Coms were quiet between the two crews as they wait. Osp and Bindi were silent in their stations as Kris kept his eye on the communications channel. Bindi was waiting for the signal, prepared to detonate their fold disruptors at a moment's notice. The communications channel opened up, and Seax's familiar voice could be heard.

"Blow it, Bindi!" The ringel called.

Kris gave a nod, and Bindi actuated the fold disruptor. There was a flash in open space, almost in tandem with the fold disruptor from *The Father Claw*. Almost instantly, blurred lines formed the image of a cargo vessel. Bindi fired off the shield disruptors. Kris watched projectiles from *The Father Claw* trace through space, synchronized with his own vessels attack. He gave a smile more confident in their abilities than ever before.

Before the shield disruptors could even make contact, his communications channel began to ping. Kris answered the call from the cargo ship. On the other side of the video line, there appeared an anup with a pleased grin.

"Run away, little pirates." The female taunted.

The lights flickered on and off around the woman, her eyes flashing and teeth almost glowing as the shield disruptors did their work on her systems. The video feed cut off for a few seconds before it faded back in, the anup still grinning with all her fangs.

Seax was receiving the same transmission, and he smirked back at her, “Drop the goods, lady. You are outgunned and we are prepared to use excessive force.”

The anup blinked at the camera, finally frowning, “You don’t remember me, but I know your ship’s signature, Captain Seax.”

Kris blinked a few times, “Seax, what the hell is this?”

“This is the end of your treachery, pirate!” The anup barked at the camera.

Kris glanced over his shoulder, “Osp, bring everything online. It’s time to engage.”

Seax must have had similar notions as *The Father Claw*’s engine roared to life and the pirate vessel charged in, closing ground between themselves and the freighter. Kris urged Bindi onto a similar path, weapons blazing.

On the communicator, the channel had stayed open. The anup captain had a fire in her eyes. The camera shook as her vessel took hits from the attacking pirates. She curled her lip, steadying herself as she took hull damage.

“So predictable...,” she growled.

Kris swallowed as they continued their approach. He was unnerved and called over his shoulder, “Bindi, slow it down. I don’t like this.”

Bindi spoke into his headset, “Slow it down, aye, captain.”

The *Talon III*’s retrograde thrusters flared, but *The Father Claw* burned forward. Kris watched Seax blaze toward the target. The geroo bit his lip and shouted into his comms, “It’s not right, Seax!”

Seax called back, “It’s just shit talk! She is cornered and bluffing!”

“She knows your name, you damned fool!” Kris countered.

It was at the moment that many things began to happen at once. Primarily, several fighter escorts appeared nearby, their fold engines shutting down. Secondly, the freighter's shields reactivated as its turrets, for the first time, reared up. They trained on *The Father Claw*. And lastly, the anup mumbled, no longer smiling, "Goodbye."

The communications ceased. Kris watched his scanners as several fighters converged on the conflict. The geroo instinctively tightened his harness. Without taking his eyes off the unfolding scene, the captain called over his shoulder.

Kris yelled over his shoulder, "Bindi, get us out of here!"

Bindi nodded and immediately took over manual controls. The *Talon III* reared and spun around, quickly redirected by several small reaction control system thrusters. As they pitched and rolled to the opposite direction, the main engines roared back online. Osp was covering their six, though the ship only had one rear facing turret. He fired as rapidly as he could encroaching escort fighters, careful not to overheat their only means of defense.

Onboard *The Father Claw*, Seax was taking similar measures. The ship immediately came under fire. The ringel and his crew were jostled in the cabin, lurching against their harnesses as their shield started taking hits.

"Koba, take the main weapons! Ket, this ain't the fight for us, evasive maneuvers! Fold as soon as we have the time." He barked at his crew.

Seax, for his part, took control of the defensive turret. The captain kept his eye on their shield levels as they retreated. The shield's charge was diminishing with each laser they were not fortunate enough to dodge. Sixty percent. Forty percent. He grit his teeth harder, focusing on

defending their rear. He saw the shields break on one of his pursuers. It peeled off and retreated, but there were still four hot on his tail.

Twenty percent. Seax felt a coldness gripping his insides. He didn't dare take his mind off the task at hand. He only needed a few more well-placed shots to discourage further pursuit. If the shields failed, there would be very little between his crew and the vacuum. *The Father Claw* was not a heavily armored vessel. Ten percent.

Just as hope seemed lost, the *Talon III* made a pass from starboard to port, raking over the tops of the pursuing fighters. The outboard most vessel of their formation almost immediately lost shields and crumbled into a twist of metal that was quickly engulfed in a spherical explosion. Osp's aim had been dead on, and he managed to connect a few shots on the shield of the remaining three fighters.

The surprise attack had the desired effect. The pursuing fighters peeled off, heading back to the freighter. Seax finally exhaled in relief as the incoming projectiles ceased. His whole body began to numb as his adrenaline levels steadily decreased. He allowed himself to slump back in his chair, momentarily closing his eyes. Kris' image appeared on his communicator.

"We're getting the hell out of here. No more close calls, Seax." The geroo said to him, a smile on his face.

Seax half opened one eye, "Yeah, no. You're right," he panted at his friend.

There was a sudden shockwave, strong enough to jar the ringel's neck a little, followed by a bright flash. Ketu gave a shriek as the console in front of her popped and began smoking. Seax felt the drive from the engines die. The ship's powered flickered on and off, switching to the emergency battery.

“What in the hell was that?!” Seax called back.

Keti was flipping switches, resetting breakers, and slapping the side of her console, “I don’t know, but I don’t have any power.”

Koba sat still in his chair, listening to Seax and Keti try to talk through troubleshooting for a few seconds. All of his consoles were dark too, except the radar. Even in emergency power operation, he could see the escorts had turned back around.

Dejectedly, he mumbled, “Fold disruptor.”

Kris felt the shockwave in his vessel as well, but they had been out of range of the mine. He looked over his shoulder to Osp. The anup was looking back at him with a determined glare. The geroo looked the other direction to Bindi, who didn’t seem to know what to do.

Osp had his eyes on the radar, also tracking the return of the escort formation, “Captain, we need to leave.”

Kris opened up his comms with *The Father Claw*, “Seax, what’s going on?”

The ringel on the other side of the screen looked angry, “It was a fold disruptor. All of our systems are down.”

Kris glanced at the radar as well, “How long until you get back up?”

The ringel shook his head, “Keti is working on it, but we aren’t sure. Koba, would you snap out of it and help her?!” He was shouting off-screen.

“Captain, we got to make some moves,” Osp voice came from behind Kris.

The blips were getting closer on the radar. Seax must have been able to see it too because he became increasingly distressed, “Kris, we need a jump, or a tow, or something to buy us some time. Bring the *Talon III* in close.”

Kris began flipping a few switches and barked an order to Bindi. The first of the shots from the escorts began to stream passed their bow. Osp was cussing angrily as Kris began maneuvering to the disabled vessel.

A shot made contact with the *Talon III* and the shields faltered a bit followed by another shot, and then another. Kris' mind was racing, heart pounding. Each successful strike against the ship's shields made his nerves jump, eyes dashing between the navigation controls and the shield levels. He glanced over his shoulder at Osp, who was returning fire to their attackers through the single turret. Kris looked the other way at Bindi, who was looking more intense than Kris had ever seen him. Kris let out a shuddered breath, knowing what he had to do, before looking into his communicator. He could see his friend's face staring back at him, panic-stricken.

"Seax, we're not gonna make it to you," Kris said.

Seax stared back at him through to monitor, another shot striking his shields and causing the visage to shake violently, "What are you saying? You'll make it. You have to."

"Seax, we can't-" Kris started.

"No! You can make it! You can fucking make it! You can save us!" Seax yelled back at him, emotions ranging from disbelief to anger in an instant.

Kris's eyes dashed over to his shields. Fifty percent. He shook his head. The ringel on the other end slammed a fist on the camera of his communicator, causing his words to break up intermittently, but Kris could still understand him.

"Don't leave us out here! Don't leave me! Kris, please don't fucking leave me!" The ringel was repeating.

Kris closed his eyes, "Bindi, evasive maneuvers to port!"

Bindi gave pause until Kris barked at him again, “Do it, Bindi!”

The tiny navigator veered the ship portside. There were flashes of light all around them as the fighters closed in. The world went quiet as the geroo watched his communicator.

Seax was still begging, “Turn back! Please don’t go!”

Then the screen went black. Kris turned his attention to the rear camera. The escorts had turned their attention away from him and were focused on *The Father Claw*. Osp had ceased fire as the range increased beyond effective capability. The crew watched as the dot that used to be their allies erupted into a spherical ball of fire. Kris sat back in his chair, mind swimming with guilt and grief. He felt hot tears as Bindi initiated the fold drive, and the entire scene disappeared behind them.

Kris felt a tap on his head. He blinked open his eyes. The geroo had fallen asleep in his chair. His vision was coming back into focus after the long hard dream. Standing a meter from him was Bindi, wearing a grin and tapping a wooden spoon against his paw. The Hekiru looked at him with a chastising stare, clearly humored to find his captain like this.

“The ship’s off course,” Kris waved a paw, grumbling at him.

Bindi nodded to the statement and made some motions at him, “Are you alright, Kris?”

“I’m fine, mate. Nothing to worry about,” Kris assured him.

“Ghosts?” Bindi said aloud.

Kris didn’t say anything for a second; his eyes fixed on an old dusty coffee maker that he kept near his console. The geroo nodded a few times, “Ghosts.”