

Acho Harcourt was about to take a sip of his coffee when the “ping” echoed across the length of the ship. A second later, the ship’s comm activated. “*Onyeisi*, we’ve got a new contact.”

With a sigh, he picked up his coffee and stepped over to the commbox. “Acknowledged. I’ll be right there.”

Getting from the galley to the bridge took awhile. The *Enugu* was *technically* a trading vessel, so it wasn’t built for looks like pleasure cruisers. If it looked like anything, it was probably an elongated Terran submarine with various engines attached to it..

He emerged onto the cramped bridge a minute or so later, having traversed his way past cargo bays, the crew quarters and the ladder that lead down to engineering.

“What do we have?”

“Mayday,” his first officer, Ema Okoro said. “Looks like a lifeboat.”

“Pirate attack?”

Ema shrugged. “Who knows. Nothing we’re picking up anyway.”

“Can we get it?” Harcourt sat down in the captain’s chair.

“You’re not serious,” Ema was incredulous. “We’re on a *deadline*.”

“We’ve got nothing perishable.” The Enugu’s many cargo holds were reserved for both legitimate and illegitimate cargo and according to their official logs, they were bound for Lo Shen City with a cargo of spices. “Besides, it doesn’t hurt to be neighborly.”

Ema flung up her hands. “You’re an idiot.”

“You knew that when you married me,” Harcourt grinned.

“I knew it when I divorced you,” Ema shot back.

“Boss man, what do you want to do?” The comms officer, Justice Kamara asked from his station off to the right.

Harcourt thought for a moment, watching the blip on the screen in front of him sinking into the crushing atmosphere of Venus. He was a native Venusian from New Biafra- his family had been there for generations. Part of being Venusian, living here... there was a code. You didn’t break the code unless you had a very good reason.

“You think we should flip a coin?” Harcourt asked.

Ema scoffed.

Harcourt pressed a button on the arm of his captain’s chair. “Injinia, what are your thoughts?”

“I think Ema’s right.”

“We should keep going?”

“No, I think you’re an idiot,” Injinia chuckled. “Flip a coin. Maybe we help someone out, maybe we make our deadline. And that’s-”

“That’s Venus, baby,” Harcourt finished. “All right.” He reached into the front pocket of his uniform and pulled out his lucky coin. It had been in the family for generations now- all the way back to their days on Terra. On one side, there was a snarling leopard and the words “Republic of Biafra, 2 ½ Shillings” on the other were the Coat of Arms of the old country-- the country they had come to Venus to resurrect so it could be forever free.

“Kamara, you call it.” He flipped it up and Kamara called, “Heads.” The coin fell into his palms. “Looks like the leopard side up, Kamara,” Harcourt said. “So, Tails wins. Let’s go get them.”

Ema rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

"Sound dive," Harcourt ordered. The klaxon blared throughout the ship and the bridge crew strapped in as the Enugu tilted down sharply as it dove hard and fast for the lifeboat.

"Deploy shields," Harcourt added as they approached the atmospheric boundary.

"Aye, Captain," Injinia responded and a second later, they heard the rumble of the atmospheric shielding starting to roll out and encase the ship in extra armor to absorb any of the more corrosive gases they might hit.

"Time to intercept?"

"Two minutes," Osoko replied.

"Prepare grapple."

"Copy," Ema said. "Ready on your mark, Captain."

"Are we in range?"

"Another thirty seconds," Osoko replied.

Harcourt watched the chronometer for a long moment as the Enugu began to level out from its steep descent.

"Deploy grapple," he ordered.

"Copy," Ema said. "We've got capture."

"Good, take us back up and start reeling them in," Harcourt stood. "Docking Bay Two. Ema, you're with me."

It took a few more minutes to get back up to safe cruising altitude, but soon enough they were both in the docking bay, watching as the doors to the escape pod opened and the passengers emerged, one by one.

"Three troubadours, an old man, a ship's officer and a weeping young woman," Ema muttered. "Well done. You know-"

Harcourt held up a hand to forestall her. "Please. Don't say it."

"You're a terrible pirate."