

REQUIEM FOR INNOCENCE

Close Enough

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As she stepped out onto the docking bay, the acrid stench of ozone mixed with machine oil to fill her nostrils with a scent both overpowering, yet oddly comforting. It smelled enough like a flight deck that she felt at home. In her element. She was one of the rare breed of idiots that wrapped themselves in tin cans to fight other idiots in tin cans. With barely more life support than an EVA suit, a wildly oversized reactor and enough ordinance to blow up a small city, flying a fighter was one of the most dangerous thing a sentient being could still do. And she did it not just for a living, but because she enjoyed it. Rarer still, she was one of the few pilots to ever achieve 'Top Ace'; with her total verified kills making her one of the best pilots in human history.

Few things in this universe could shake her cool.

Walking across this crowded docking bay, wearing this ridiculously cliché hoodie and hoping not to get noticed was one of them.

Damn my hair. It wasn't the first time she'd cursed the red-orange hair she inherited from her mother and it wouldn't be the last. She wanted the universe to measure her worth based on *what* she did, not *who* she was. Unfortunately, everyone knew about Admiral McKenzie's daughter, where the only thing more lethal than her looks was her skill behind the stick. *Or my skills in hand to hand combat. But everyone leaves that part out.*

She mentally shook herself, focusing on the task at hand. Not only did she have to get across the docking bay looking like some ne'erdoowell out of a damn classical spy drama, but she had to locate her target, tail him to a secluded part of the station, avoid showing up on any of the station's security cameras, and all in the next thirty minutes. She rubbed the handle of the standard issue Terran combat knife she'd lifted two stations back, draining her anxiety into the cool plastic. She hated cloak and dagger missions; she preferred to deal with her problems from a few hundred thousand kilometers away with an egregious use of long range ordinance. That or run at them head on with a sturdy metal pipe. But this man, in particular, was a problem that required a light, *personal* touch.

This docking bay of Tycho station was particularly busy today. The *Spring's Endeavour* had arrived in system a few hours ago and she'd been shuttling crew over since. Normally the infamous Privateer Captain would have gotten a prime berth, but her presence at the station was more to make a point than it was about resupplying or shore leave. Circling outside the station were two Terran Viceroy light cruisers and an older Valorous cruiser; enough firepower that the local pirates felt the need to swarm around the station, posturing.

It didn't really concern her; Tycho was one of the few independent stations where the Terran Military was tolerated; the station's owner would've used the word 'welcome' but Glyse was much more realistic about these things. Aunty's status as the Lost Scion of House Simon let her

walk a very tight line when it came to the station's legal status; it was a House Simon holding, after all. And anyone who thought they could wrest control of it from the famous Mercenary Lizbeth Locke had no idea the kind of loyalty that woman had fostered among the residents. They'd rather see the place tossed into the heart of a sun than return to true Terran control.

At the end of the day, Glyse didn't know why they were here, just that their presence would make for an excellent cover. It brought her target in on one of the innumerable shuttles from the pirate ships in orbit, and put him in a crowded docking bay. This was an opportunity that wouldn't come again for a very long time; and she was nothing if not decisive. She saw her opening and was going to take it.

With so many pirates around, no one was paying attention to the tall, slender woman in the dirty hoodie picking her way around cargo containers, dock workers, and disembarking crews. She weaved a path expertly to where her target's shuttle had landed. Its passengers were just starting to disembark, meaning her timing had been perfect. She hung back, making like she was inspecting a nearby ship's engines, until she saw *him*. Her heart leaped; it'd been almost six months since their last run in, and she was finally going to —no, she had to focus. *One step at a time.*

She waited till he was almost to the exit before making her way in the same direction with a group of already drunk pirates. One of them grabbed her ass and she shot daggers at the short woman, who only grinned. Gritting her teeth and doing her best to ignore the woman's advances, she split off from the group once they made it to the promenade.

Tycho Station's Grand Promenade was a sight to behold. One hundred stories tall, every manner of shop, bar, restaurant, brothel or office lined the inner pyramid of empty space that made up the station's interior. In the center of the pyramid was Station Central, the heart of the Station. Not only was it the station's primary reactor, grav generators and central computer, but it was where the Simon family's personal suits were, as well as Station Ops. Any business lucky enough to get even a five meter by five meter booth in Central was considered high class. But that wasn't the reason why everyone couldn't help but stare at Central. No, that would be the four waterfalls that each fell over half a kilometer down an invisible gravity well into the Central Lake that was the focal point of the lowest floor of the promenade, right in the middle of its —impressive on its own— arboretum. Rumor was that Tyco Central Park was the only known place to find dozens of extinct flowers. They'd survived here because the station was a relic, dating back at least three hundred years. Somehow, given the station's current owner, it seemed appropriate.

Shit. She always let herself get distracted by the impressive view. Her target was just turning a corner down one of the side alleys, heading deeper into the station. *Fuck.* She wanted to get him alone, but she was counting on the promenade to let her get close to him; now it'd be too noticeable. She wasn't about to give up, but her job was now significantly harder.

She booked it as quickly as she dared down the promenade to the alley he took. She glanced down it, and just barely saw him turning another corner. To most people, the alleys off the promenade were a maze of identical corridors, with confusing (or intentionally misleading) signs. Luckily for her she'd grown up spending a lot of time here, and she knew it almost as well as a resident. She pushed past two drunk engineers arguing about which ship class would win in a fight or something and darted down an adjacent corner. She broke out into a run; if she was fast enough, she could get ahead of him and pop out casually, making like a local out for a stroll. After all, she couldn't be following him if she was in front of him, right? She'd eventually slow down, let him pass her, and drag him down a side corridor and be done with it. Yes, this would work.

She about ran over a homeless man in her mad dash, but she made it to the corridor. Taking a second to slow her breath and focus, she exuded an air of casualness that she was sure was just subtle enough to feel natural.

Except her target was nowhere to be seen.

Panic raised in her throat as she tried to maintain the casual exterior. She walked back down the way she expected him to come, trying to figure out where he could have turned off. There was only one other corridor, and it dead-ended in a sealed section. The only thing down that way was ruined wiring and condemned rooms. She passed it, not seeing him, made sure he hadn't doubled back and then returned. He was nowhere to be found; He had to've gone down the dead end. She steadied her nerves, focusing much harder now, trying to sense an impending attack... or anything at all, really. As was typical, the universe refused to cooperate. If he was down there, she couldn't tell.

She took a deep breath, and plunged forward. One of the doors at the end was ajar; she could see from here it'd been pried open. He had to be in there, all the other doors were still sealed. She tightened her grip on the combat knife and stepped into the room.

She was greeted by nothing but dust and dimly lit, ruined furniture. She stood there for seconds, waiting, and nothing. Sighing, she was about to turn around when she felt the cold metal of a pistol pressed in between her shoulder blades. A hand roughly pulled her hood down.

"I would've expected better from the daughter of Alastair McKenzie. You were a bit obvious; my friends had plenty of time to tell me you were coming. Now, drop the knife."

Friends... dammit. She did as she was told, letting the clatter of the knife finish before addressing her target. "Let me guess, the homeless guy?"

"Him, the engineers, the chick that grabbed your ass... It was easy to place members of my crew all along your path, since, let's be honest, I was leading you not the other way around. Hell, I had a few other plans in case you came at me from an unexpected direction; kids'll do

anything on this station for a few yuan.” The gun pressed harder into her temple. “Anyway, should we get this over with? I have dinner reservations.”

She couldn’t keep the smirk out of her voice. “Do you know what the most common mistake people make with a gun is?” She didn’t wait for an answer before turning with inhuman speed. “They get too close.”

She grabbed his gun, expertly twisting it from his hands with superhuman speed and force. She reversed it and brought it up, pointed right at his face. Instead of shock, all she saw was another gun pointed at her. *Since when did he start carrying two guns?*

“You realize that only works on normies, right? You can’t pull that superhuman crap on me. Now drop the gun; it’s over.”

“Oh, we’re not done. Not by a long shot.”

“Pretty sure we are.” She heard the sound of something metal hitting the floor.

She resisted the urge to look down. “You’re not going to get me that easily.”

“You sure? Your gun has no clip.”

She glanced at the bottom of the gun, and it was true, he must’ve released it when she took it from him. “Doesn’t matter, there’s still a round loaded.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough. But also, the safety’s on.”

There’s no fucking way... She turned her gun to look, while still watching him. The safety was, indeed, on.

Her shoulders slumped and she lowered the weapon. “God-fucking-dammit! You realize you’re insufferable, right?”

He laughed and holstered his gun. She tossed the one she’d taken from him at his head, but he caught it, as she knew he would. She wished, just once, he’d let it hit him in the face. He could at least give her that.

Retrieving the clip, he was grinning up at her like the stupid little brother he was. “That makes thirty, sis.”

She crossed her arms. “*Twenty nine*. The one with the hooker doesn’t count.”

“Her name was ‘Nebula Starlight Quasar’, and I think it does.”

"I had you dead to rights! There was no way you were getting out of that NorAellian's grip."

He shrugged. "But I did."

Her eyes narrowed as they headed out of the condemned room. "No, no. He let you go; you couldn't've known he'd accept her proposition. A NorAellian with a human fetish? There's no way!"

"I keep telling you, it isn't always about force. Slip a sex worker the right amount of credits and you have an instant ally whose whole schtick is finishing the job once she takes your money, no matter how much she might not like it. No, I didn't know *who* you'd use, but the NorAellian was a safe bet, and given how he was dressed, I took the gamble that paid off. That counts."

She shook her head. "How he was *dressed*? The fuck does that mean? No, you listen here. Getting lucky doesn't count! This is a contest of *skill*, David. You were going to use her to try to make me uncomfortable, because you know how I feel about people hitting on me. *Especially* women. Except I saw it coming, so it wouldn't've worked. I was cold as ice, and had you dead to rights."

He stepped closer, pulling her into a side hug. "So *you* keep saying, but how do you know I didn't have something else even more awkward planned? She *was* a sex worker; enough credits and I coulda made things *very* awkward." He laughed at her expression. "Ok, ok, *fine*. I wouldn't have done that to you; you're right about the original plan. Still, I pivoted because I hadn't expected you to commit so single-mindedly to the NorAellian, and he really would have been a problem. I still count it, but we can agree to disagree."

She squeezed him back tightly. She'd missed him. There were three people in this universe she ever sought physical contact with and her brother was her favorite. He radiated safety, he knew all her secrets, and best of all, he had no expectations of her other than she be the best *her* she could be. When he was around, it was like he was shouldering some of the burden of simply *existing*. Somehow, he just always knew how to meet her where she was, and for that, he could burn down the universe and she'd still love him. They made one helluva team after all.

After a second she released him. "You're buying dinner. And it better be nice."

He laughed. "Liz recommended this new place that does Asian-NorAellian fusion. Lots of meat, most of it rare, and some kickass sauces. And it's right on the Promenade, so the view's spectacular."

She grinned. "Sounds pricey. I hope being a pirate's been good to you, because I'm going to bleed your wallet dry."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a wad of yuan. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen that much physical currency before. "Our dinner's sponsored by a rather disgusting idiot the Captain

took down last month. This 'legitimate businessman' was trying to offload a few hundred fake Lyndri artifacts in bulk, but we got there first. You would have loved seeing his face when the *Endeavour* dropped out of subspace instead of some light freighter, like he was expecting." He was beaming, and she loved how genuinely excited he sounded. He was right, she wished she could have been there. "Anyway, the Captain gave me her share and told me to treat you. Consider it a thank you for letting our crew challenge your squadron in the sims. They almost make decent pilots these days."

Remote sim battles weren't nearly as good as real training, but over the last six months she'd had her pilots training with *Spring Endeavor's* to help them learn how to fight against non-traditional combatants. The Freelancers had taught her people a thing or two, but it was clearly the pirates who'd improved by leaps and bounds fighting against military trained pilots. They still managed to pull something insane out of their asses half the time, but now they were getting good enough to follow through and stick the kill. She's gained a new respect for the skills of these people, that was sure. *For a bunch of civilians, I'd hate to face them when something important was on the line.*

She took the whole wad of cash out of her brother's hands. "Well, in that case, I'm ordering the whole damn menu. Oh, and tell your Captain she's welcome."

She gave her brother a little shove and headed off down the corridor, leaving him to catch up. He was only on the station for a few days, but they were going to make the most of it. The McKenzie siblings hadn't had down time together in ages and it was going to be a time to remember.

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David flipped the knife over in his hands, getting a good feel for the weight. He was more familiar with the League version, but this was a solid, simple blade, good for survival or—in a pinch—hand to hand combat. It might not be as fancy as the ultra light, unobtainium-composite monoblade pinnacle-of-engineering the League issued, but like all things Terran it was a centuries old design that just worked, was everything it needed to be and nothing it didn't. Hell, it could probably even be sharpened with a rock. The League blade needed a special laser in a vacuum chamber. Oh, sure, it weighed nothing and held an edge against most materials for a while, but physics said no matter how much science you shoved in it, eventually it would dull, and when it did, it became useless pretty quickly. There was some deeper philosophical observation waiting to be made here, he was sure of it, but at the end of the day he just didn't care enough to find it. The Terrans made a respectable knife, it was as simple as that.

"So, let me get this straight. Your plan was to stab me with this?"

"Only a little." Glyse grinned over her second plate of very expensive meat in a sweet and sour sauce. So far she had expertly kept any of the sauce off the dress he was sure cost more than some of the ships in the docking bay a few floors below them.

David raised an eyebrow. “And how was fratricide going to help you win?”

“Seemed a good idea at the time. Still does, if you don’t get us more wine.”

He watched the little mischievous smile form at the corner of her mouth. Most people couldn’t read the normally stoic ace pilot, but he’d literally spent his life learning to read her moods and understand them. He supposed that was the closest he’d ever get to caring about another human being the way everyone just *assumed* you had to. Like his sister, he had little use for romance. The whole concept seemed alien to him; sure he got physical attraction, but that was a base need like hunger. “Love” was something he’d had to learn about well enough to fake when required, nothing more. *Unlike* his sister, however, he didn’t eschew physical encounters; faking love had been a well proven way to find a temporary way to meet his base needs.

That, he realized, was part of the problem, though. She was honest about her desires; when she met someone she felt *feelings* for, she made it clear what would and wouldn’t ever happen. If they could accept that, then she would move forward. Most couldn’t. Him? He was nothing but lies all the way down. He didn’t understand people intuitively like she did. Every day, from morning to night, he spent pretending to be like everyone else. So when he felt a physical attraction to someone, he did the same thing he always did: he lied and pretended to care about them till eventually they learned it was a lie and things ended. Generally speaking, he’d get what he wanted, but the end was always difficult to handle without making things much, much worse for his now former partner. Sometimes, he wondered if it was even worth the hassle. At the end of the day, these struggles meant they both spent much of their time without anyone “special” in their lives. Except each other, though try explaining *that* to a normie without them thinking it was creepy.

Glyse, despite her considerable flaws, understood that he wasn’t like other people. She helped him learn, and never once judged him or reacted negatively when he spoke his thoughts out loud, no matter how “disturbing” they would be to anyone else. With her help, he’d learn to internalize some concepts, like empathy. But he didn’t imagine how *he’d* feel if something happened to him, he imagined how *she’d* feel. After all these years it’d become natural to him. He didn’t “love” his sister, not as she understood the word. But she loved him, and he’d learned how to reflect that back in his own way. It wasn’t what part of him wished it was, but it was close enough.

She was watching him, clearly aware that his mind had wandered down some alley and he’d missed whatever she’d been saying. She was just patiently waiting for him to finish.

He loved these moments with just the two of them where he could just turn off those parts of his brain trying to make sure he wasn’t about to say or do something socially unacceptable, and just enjoy spending time with his sister. Watching her goofy grin as she ate a ridiculous amount of meat in an even more ridiculous dress was worth far more to him than whatever meaningless

trysts he could otherwise be having. He was never one to really get the whole 'wholesome' thing, but he imagined moments like this were what people were talking about. Probably.

"You good?"

He nodded. "Sorry, just realized I missed you."

She laughed. "The man asks me about my plan to stab him and then gets distracted by thinking about how much he missed me. If you weren't my brother, I'd think something really broken and disturbing was behind that. But since it's you, I already know exactly which broken and disturbing thing it was."

He shrugged. She wasn't wrong. Neither of them were exactly the pinnacle of mental health. "Yeah, well. Back to the stabbing; I still don't follow your plan. Threats or no... why the prop?"

She sighed and set down her fork. She was about to respond when the waitress showed up with another bottle of wine and filled both their glasses. David nodded to the Lyndri woman, giving her a warm smile. She blushed; not a common sight among Lyndri. Given her age, he suspected she was one of the rare Free Lyndri who'd been smuggled off planet when she was still a child, and raised away from the typical horrors her people were subjected to. It was cute, or at least, he thought Glyse would find it so.

"Hey, CIC to David. Wave off. You thinking about making a play at the waitress? Don't. Too young."

His eyes snapped to his sister. "First off, she could be eighty or ninety for all we know. It's impossible to tell with Lyndri. Second, I wasn't, *exactly*... just the way she blushed got me thinking... maybe..."

She threw her napkin at him. "Gross. And she's nineteen, for your information. I chatted her up when you were in the bathroom earlier, just in case you decided to be a gross creep. Turns out, I was right. Go after her, and I *will* stab you. A lot."

He held up his hands. "No stabbing the brother, please."

She sighed, already dropping the current line of thought. "It was a good plan, too. I even faked up some Terran Intelligence and planted it at Dad's office."

He blinked. "Wait, *what*?"

She took a dramatic sip of her wine. "See, that knife is tipped in a paralytic. Just a little slice and you're down in seconds. So, the plan was I catch you from behind, cut you, and you're passed out. I then hold you in a place you can't escape from for a few hours. Auntie was going to fake the coroner's report and send it just about the time Dad's finding the intelligence that there's a

hit out on you. He sees the report, loses it. By the time he finds out from his sources it's faked, I've had you and him dancing to my little tune for ten hours or more. I let you go, come clean, and claim my victory over both of you as the superior intelligence operative."

He shook his head. "And they tell me *I'm* the one with psychopathic tendencies. You'd risk starting an interstellar war just to win our stupid competition?"

Her eyes narrowed in a dangerous, yet playful way. "You keep telling me my problem is I won't commit. That I keep treating this like a game, a sibling rivalry. You have no room to bitch now that I've finally taken your advice."

He sighed. Clearly he'd created a monster. "Yeah, but aren't you the one who's supposed to be worried about civilian casualties? You'd lose your shit at me if I pulled this."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't bring Aunty into it. See, I ran this all past her, and she helped me iron out the safeguards. First off, Dad wouldn't act without confirmation. And what's he always saying? 'No body, no proof.' I had some plans to keep him running around in just enough circles to keep his suspicions this was all fake just high enough. And even if he did go off the deep end, Liz'd spill the beans before he could get too far. You think he'd not contact our Godmother if he thought you'd been murdered?"

He had to admit, if she'd pulled it off, she'd definitely have earned bragging rights with both father and son. One of the few things they both agreed on was that Glyse was far more impressive than she realized and she had this bad habit of underselling herself. He felt a pang of guilt. It would have been nice to let her have this one. But he'd done what he always did; think about himself and focus on his own goals, losing sight of those around him. Unfortunate, but it generally worked out for him in the end. And at least he had the chance to give her this nice dinner.

He was about to change the subject when he could feel another person behind him. He turned his head slightly to see a Terran officer standing to his left. Captain, by the insignia. The man gave a slight bow before gesturing to the knife.

"I couldn't help but notice that knife you're holding. Military surplus, I imagine? It seems well maintained. Truly a gorgeous piece."

The mood at the table shifted as his sister gave him a wary look. It was already obvious to David that the only way out of this situation was through it. He gave Glyse a look that told her to let him handle it, and then turned his attention back to the Terran. The man was flanked by two other officers, also both Captains. Whatever this was, it wasn't about a knife.

"I don't know its history, truthfully. It was a gift."

The Captain pulled a chair from another table over and sat down. "I'm sorry for interrupting, but my subordinate here is quite smitten. He'd love to know how much to part with such a lovely piece."

David set the knife on the table and looked at the man in the face for the first time. He could feel the arrogance rolling off him. The threads of will in the universe swirled around the man in a way David knew meant trouble. And, if he focused for even a second, it was obvious this man was going to cause pain for both him and his sister, if the threads of will kept flowing as they were. He sighed. He didn't like what he was seeing.

"Captain...?"

The man bowed his head slightly. "My apologies. I'm Captain Akio Yu of the *TRS Warchild*, the Cruiser you may have noticed on your way in here. My associates are Captain Klien of the *TRS Savage*, and Captain Zhao of the *TRS Uncompromising Victory*."

David turned and nodded to the other two who were standing behind the senior Captain. "Well, I'm sorry, Captain Yu. But the knife isn't for sale."

Yu sighed and reached into his jacket. He pulled out a tablet and slid it over to David. "I really must insist."

On the tablet was the logo for the Galactic Credit Bureau, along with the form for a credit transfer of two million. David looked at it for several seconds before meeting Yu's eyes again. "This isn't about the knife, is it?"

Yu smiled. "It's always a pleasure dealing with people who are quick to pick up on things." He glanced at Glyse, who looked *particularly* murderous. David gave her a subtle shake of his head. She glared, and David squinted his eyes in response. After half a second, she looked away, defeated.

Yu, for his part, missed the silent conversation between the siblings. "Given your confusion, allow me to adjust that number up some."

Yu took the tablet back and tapped on the screen a few times. He then slid it back towards David. "That seems more than fair. You see, I overheard your conversation a moment ago and I surmised that the two of you aren't lovers... so this should be more than a fair compensation no matter who she is to you."

David glanced at the number, and it was now 3.5 million. A universe changing amount of money for most people. Enough that he couldn't even blame someone for selling their sibling for it. But he was one of the rare people who saw money as a tool, one that was easy enough to acquire when needed, otherwise worthless. And there wasn't a force in the universe he could think of that would convince him to sell another sentient being, period. Glyse would hate him if he ever

even considered it for a second. Then again, the idea of selling *her* to this asshole as a joke did amuse him. After all, whoever this man was, he couldn't keep Glyse contained for more than five minutes. And it'd be a funny story they could laugh about later.

No, there was too much chance of collateral damage. He couldn't do that, as funny as it would be in the moment. He slid the tablet back to Captain Yu. "My *sister* is not for sale."

Yu took the tablet and put it back in his jacket pocket. "Unfortunate. But as I said, my friend Captain Klien has his heart set on this acquisition. Like everything on this station, it rightfully belongs to the Terran people. So if you're not willing to see reason, I'll have to reclaim it by force." He leaned towards David and whispered, "I know your first inclination is to fight. Don't. You're just one man, while I have a fleet. You don't have any say in what happens next."

"*Hey*. I'm going to need you three to leave. *Now*."

David and Yu both looked up in surprise as the Lyndri waitress was standing here, hand on her hip, pointing to the exit, the claw on her pointer finger extended in obvious threat. Off to the side of her was the NorAellian chef, giant arms folded. David grinned at Yu.

"You were saying?"

Yu glared at the Lyndri woman. "You have no idea who you're messing with. I will have that *knife*, one way or another."

David slammed the knife on the table in front of Yu. "Take it. And Captain? Friendly advice. You won't like what happens if you come back. My sister and I have faced men with 'fleets' before. Next time, do a little research before you sit down at a table with a couple of strangers."

Yu picked up the knife and roughly held it out to Klien, the butt of the handle catching him in the gut. "This approach was *your* idea. Take the fucking thing." He straightened his uniform. "Let's go, Captains."

David watched as the three left. The waitress let out a deep sigh, and leaned against the back of the extra chair Yu had left at the table. "Maaan, I can't wait till those Terrans are gone. Sorry you had to deal with that. Chef said you're welcome to as much wine as you want, on us."

Glyse leaned forward, her eyes still bright and dangerous looking. "Any idea why they're here? I know the occasional ship stops by, but normally it's merchants, not military. Three ships just seems like they're asking for trouble."

The waitress shrugged. "They're the local contingent. They patrol the non-confederated systems out this way, under the guise of 'providing aid'. They're not *supposed* to leave Terran space, but enforcing that's hard, apparently. Rumor has it they're really just thugs who've been harassing independent colonies, arresting people, detaining ships. The only reason they're allowed at

Tycho is because they're selling us some parts for the station that you can't get anywhere else. Several of the outer sections have been having brownouts, and CNK wants the cost of a small moon to 'modernize'. I live out that way, and it's been getting real bad. Locke's been jumping through hoops to try to get these old parts as a temporary solution till CNK can get off their asses to do the work. Supposedly, a Terran convoy's showing up in a few days with the parts, and this lot's going to escort them back to Terran space after the sale. They just got in early."

David gave her an appraising look. "You're awfully well informed for a waitress."

She laughed. "I lived in the Highland Cluster before coming here. I was a scrap rat; salvaging everything I could, fixing things, selling them. Chef and I met up after I got into some trouble; he told me he was going to start this place and I was free to tag along. I always wanted to leave the Cluster and see the galaxy, so I told him I was game. Plus, I'd just found my younger sister—long story—and I had her to think about. Figured it was time for me to step up and get something stable. Cheapest apartments are in those outer sections, and when the power started going out I contacted Central. Not my fault I knew what was wrong just by looking; we've got a lot of old Terran crap in the Cluster; I know these systems better than the engineers that built this place. Didn't expect Lizbeth Locke to show up on my doorstep with a bottle of whiskey as 'thanks'." The girl blushed and David and Glyse exchanged a look. Knowing Liz, it was obvious what the girl was leaving out. "We, uh, talked, and she's kept me in the loop since. Even tapped me to help with the install." The girl shrugged. "Anyway, I'll make sure she hears about those three." She winked at David. "Good to have connections, right?"

David was feeling quite amused at how proud this girl was at "knowing" the station owner. "I suppose it is."

She looked pleased with herself. "Well, anyway, just let me know when you want more wine. Chef'll take it as a personal insult if you don't have at least one bottle on us."

"Well, we can't have that, now can we? Why don't you bring that 2603 cab I saw on the menu? If it's on the house, we might as well."

The waitress nodded emphatically. "Good call! I'll go get you a bottle."

As she left, David leaned forward to his sister. "I didn't have the heart to tell her you call Liz 'Auntie'. She was just so excited she knew somebody famous."

Glyse chuckled, despite the foul mood she seemed to be in. "You realize we're broken, right? Sleeping with the infamous Mercenary and woman who owns this station *is* a big deal to most people. It just turns out the same woman changed your diapers and helped me navigate my first crush." His sister's mood seemed to be improving. "Hell, if you think about it, we could just call up Rhea and ask what the deal was with CNK being lazy asses. I could probably even guilt trip her into cutting the station a break and doing the work at cost. ...Damn, we, uh, know a shockingly large number of important people."

David chuckled. “Ah, but we don’t have a *fleet*. I hear that’s what really makes you a big deal.”

His sister glared. “You know... you should have sold me to him. That way I could break his arms without anyone seeing.”

“Thought about it. But like the girl was saying, turns out things are complicated. If we get in the middle of this, people’ll suffer. That’s the downside to being a big deal; you don’t get to be selfish. Everyone expects you to look at the big picture.”

Glyse held her wine in front of her face and muttered, “Says you. I just wanna break some arms.”

—

One free bottle of wine turned into another four, meaning all together, they’d put back half a case. David rarely got drunk and admittedly his half-Sooni biology made it harder than normal, but he was quite wasted by the time he and his sister left the restaurant. They were the last patrons and towards the end they’d been sharing glasses with the waitress and Chef both. It had been a long time since he’d seen his sister cut loose like that, and he’d all but forgotten about the Terrans from earlier.

“Shit, David. Wher’re you stayin’?” His sister was just as far gone as he was. Somewhere past all the alcohol fuzziness, he recognized they might’ve overdone it tonight.

“Grey 17. Can’t take the elevator... skips it for some reason.”

She looked up at him from under his arm. He didn’t remember who’d started leaning on who, but now they were one very drunk, stumbling pair. “Why th’hell? You always pick such weird fucking places.”

“Don’t need much. Sketchy works for me. It’s quiet, an’ people avoid remembering stuff.”

“Fuck *that*. We’re fucking *royalty* here. Aunty set me up with a goddamn *suite*. You can have the couch.”

He knew better than to argue with a drunk Sooni with more raw combat talent than the entire People’s Republic combined. He reached over and patted his sister on her head. “Ok. Whatever Big Sis says.”

“Damn right! ‘Bout time you recognized who’s older. You’re always actin’ like I’m the young one...” She stopped and looked around. “Fuck, which way?”

David stopped, looking over the darkened Promenade. There was almost no one in this section. Knowing Liz, she'd set Glyse up at some place fancy, but not Central. He saw a white limestone facade with gold trim, not too far off. That looked like exactly the kind of place she'd pick.

"Was it that?" He pointed.

"Oh, *yeah!* Dammit, David, we're drunk."

David nodded sagely. "Yup."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he registered someone was watching them. Well, a few someones, but one was from back in the direction of the restaurant, while the other was from up ahead. They *were* being loud, after all. He imagined they were quite a sight. He tried to focus, but with his head filled with cotton like this he could barely make out the threads of will. They seemed to be pulling him towards the hotel, which made sense. Without much consideration, he started stumbling in that direction.

They were most of the way to the hotel when David got an overwhelming sense of someone meaning them harm. He instantly stopped, as did Glyse. From the defensive pose she'd taken, she sensed it too. If he could just clear his damn head and focus, he could—

They were rushed by three people and forced into a nearby corridor. David staggered, taking precious seconds to realize what was going on. A sickly sweet gas filled his lungs and he started coughing. He looked over and could see one of the assailants holding a canister of gas up to Glyse's face. With impressive form under the circumstances she broke his grasp and kicked the man in the ribs with a satisfying crunch.

"Fuck! I think she broke my ribs! The gas ain't working!"

"Give her *more*, idiot!"

David managed to break an arm free and swung wildly, connecting with someone's face. The man grappling with him stumbled back, and David was able to actually take a fighting stance. It'd been a long time since he'd fought someone drunk, and the gas was already giving him tunnel vision. It would be a matter of minutes before he was out cold. Maybe less.

Glyse got another good hit in, breaking someone's jaw from the sound of it. One of the others managed to dose her with even more gas, and she crumpled to the ground. David knew they were in trouble; all he had was his raw skill; he couldn't focus at all.

"Hey, fuckers!"

Standing at the entrance to the corridor was the waitress from earlier. From her stance, though, David could tell she'd never been trained to fight. She was operating on pure instinct and some

past experience, no doubt. Admirable, but stupid. These three were military trained, and as impressive as a pissed off Lyndri could be, training beat raw talent every time.

David recognised the motion of one of the men too late. He drew a sidearm and aimed it with lethal precision. David called out, telling the girl to run, but she didn't listen. She leapt at the man with the gun, claws out like a wild animal. The logical part of his brain couldn't help but point out that by leaping, she gave the gunman plenty of time to take aim and ensure his shot would down her before she reached him. Had she been trained, she would have stayed on the ground, using her superior speed to rush him, while presenting as narrow a target as possible.

It all played out in slow motion. The aiming, the firing, her body being knocked back from the force of the shot. The two more follow ups, and her body crashing to the ground, tumbling to David's feet. He looked down, and could see blood trickling out of her mouth. There was still intelligence in her eyes, but she couldn't manage to speak. As he watched, she looked at him with pleading eyes. She knew she was going to die and it terrified her.

Some of the cobwebs lifted as the adrenaline finally started burning away the effects of the alcohol. He crossed the distance to the man with the gun, striking him with a bone-shattering body blow. Unfortunately, this one was prepared and was wearing body armor under his civilian clothing. David caught his face and realized it was Captain Yu.

The man who'd been grappling David pulled him back and shoved him against the corridor wall. In a flash he saw the knife from earlier just moments before the man plunged it into his stomach. David doubled over and the man whispered in his ear.

"Next time, take the damn money."

With that David was released and allowed to fall to the floor. The paralytic from the blade was already taking effect, preventing him from so much as speaking. He saw Yu putting a bullet in the waitress's head, while the man who stabbed him picked up Glyse's body. For the first time in his life, he was completely helpless.

The poor Lyndri girl's lifeless face was the last thing he saw before the darkness claimed him.

—

Liz had seen her fair share of dead bodies, but it was something different when it was someone you knew. She dropped the sheet and cursed in three different languages.

"Didn't catch that last one. What was that, NorAellian?"

"German, but close enough. Christ, Em, I *knew* her."

The privateer put her hand on the mercenary's arm. "So I gathered, love. May I ask how?"

Liz gave Emelyn an annoyed look. "How do you think?"

Em removed her hand. "Ah. That's a bit awkward."

Liz let out a long sigh. "She came over with her sister and the chef from that new restaurant I took you to last month. Turns out, she's got an apartment out near the hull, where we've been having those system failures. She filed a report with exactly what was wrong, while all my damn engineers were stumped. I was impressed... pretty smart girl, honestly. I was *planning* on offering her a job in Engineering, since she seemed to know these old Terran systems better than the other jackasses I've hired... Anyway, a couple of bottles of whisky and a very memorable evening was all there was between us. Still, I can't believe someone fucking *shot* her. On *my* station!"

Liz noticed the pirate shift her weight, a clear sign of frustration and annoyance. "I understand this may not be the time, but that was our *anniversary* dinner. And you're saying you went back afterwards and bedded the waitress? I understand that we aren't exactly traditional, Lizbeth, but that's a bit much, even for *you*."

The mercenary furrowed her brow. "Gods no. I fucked her *before* we ate there."

Emelyn looked to the ceiling, shaking her head. "Lord give me strength. I love this woman. I swear I do." Looking back at Liz she set her jaw. "We'll talk about how that's not any better *later*."

"Christ, a girl's dead, Em. Can't we just forget all of this and focus on something else?" She ignored the pirate's reaction and turned her attention to the other bed in the room. Its occupant was starting to stir and she didn't know which she looked forward to least; the conversation with him, or the conversation she knew she was going to lose with Emelyn later. She had a sudden desire to throw herself into the station's reactor. It might even be relaxing by comparison.

The man in the bed opened his eyes, blinking. Emelyn moved to his side, putting her hand on his arm. "You're in Medical. You're alright, though it will take a few days for that stomach wound to fully heal. I know you have questions, but just relax. That's an order, mister McKenzie." She was smiling as she said the last part, clearly expecting the half-joke to help. Liz knew it wouldn't.

She watched as recognition dawned on his face. She appreciated what Em was trying to do, but Liz knew him far better than his captain did. She'd watched the boy grow up and, if she was honest with herself, she knew what was coming. It wasn't going to be pretty.

"Captain? Where's my sister?"

The pirate sighed. "We don't know, currently. We believe she's on one of the Terran ships. Liz hasn't put the station on alert, just yet, so we don't tip our hand. We haven't ruled out this being

connected to your father, after all. But don't worry, there's been no ships in or out of Tycho space, and I have Spring's Endeavor ready to dissuade anyone from leaving. So just take a minute and get your wits about you. Besides, the crew was worried about you, Exec."

Liz saw the look and David's eyes and knew it was futile. She'd seen that look before.

"Tell the crew I'm fine. Now, what's the plan?"

Em looked to Liz for support, and finding none, frowned. "Lizbeth and I were going to explain to the Terran Captains the depth of their mistake, and ask for your sister's return. Depending on how they responded, we were going to remind them just who they were dealing with. You're more than welcome to come along, if you wish."

David held up his hand. "No. I'm getting her. Just me." He swung his legs out from the bed, pushing himself up to a sitting position. "Where're my guns?"

Liz let out a sigh, picked them up from the nearby table and held them out to him. He reached to take them, and she pulled them back. "Your sister's a big girl. A couple of Terrans can hold her for, what, an hour? Two? *Please*. Hell, it's already been about that long; she'll be out of there and raising hell on that ship before you even make it to the airlock. Just sit this one out, kid."

He looked at her but instead of the cold, calculating look she expected when he was like this, he saw something far more disturbing. Anger. "Give me my guns, Liz."

Reluctantly she handed them to him. "Those are Terran officers. If you kill them, you know it's coming back on the Admiral... unless you, what? Kill them all? That's your damn plan, isn't it? Really, David? What the hell do you get out of this?"

He brushed past her, and paused at the foot of the Lyndri girl's bed. Her face was still covered with a sheet, but it was obvious who was under it. He checked both guns by feel, just staring at that sheet. He holstered them, then turned to face her. "Satisfaction. Those bastards took my *sister*. I'm taking something from them."

Liz raised an eyebrow. "I know you better than that. This isn't some holy crusade for you. Your sister? Sure, she'd bring the heavens down on these assholes, and not even God himself could stop her. But you? C'mon, David, you're smarter than that. Let us help you. With us we can make sure they never do this again, get your sister back—a grown-ass woman who on her best days can step to *me*—and we don't have to murder three ships full of people to do it."

"Mr. McKenzie... *David*." She felt Emelyn's hand on her arm again as the pirate captain stood behind her lover. "If you won't listen to me, listen to your godmother. We're here for you. Let us help you. Let your crew help you. Everyone in this room knows you don't *need* our help. You're quite terrifyingly good on your own. But with us, we can get those responsible, without

unnneeded bloodshed. And, if I'm being honest, I am a bit worried. They bested you once, who's to say they can't manage it again?"

David went back to looking at the dead Lyndri girl. "You're right. They bested *me*. It was *my* fault. I let my guard down, I put us in the position that got Glyse taken, and that girl killed. Her blood is on my hands, and for once that *bothers* me." He looked up, confusion on his face. "She was no one to me, why does her death *bother* me?"

Em sighed. "Because you feel guilty. Most people would, I think. It's natural, but that doesn't make it true. In fact—"

"Captain, please. Don't. I'm not most people and you know that. No, this is different, and I have to do this. *Alone*." He looked over to both of them. "I have to balance the scale. *Me*. That's the only way to fix this."

Liz shook her head. "Jesus, David. Listen, one of these days you're going to have to learn to accept help. If you keep kicking the universe in the nuts, eventually it'll kick back. And the only way to survive that is to have people around you who trust and love you. And let me tell you, kid, right now you make that damn hard. You know I love you, but you're a damn pain in the ass. 'Bout the only person who can put up with your shit and smile about it is that sister of yours."

She felt a rush of willpower as David used Focus to materialize two long bladed swords in either hand. She'd never seen him use Velaki weapons before, but it didn't surprise her that his damn sister had taught him the technique. *Of course he'd decide to use them now.*

He turned away from them, but in that brief moment she saw a flash of something else, much more disturbing than anger. *He was afraid.* "Guess I'd better go get her back, then."

She watched as he left the room. Emelyn's hand squeezed even tighter on her arm, as she closed her eyes. The mercenary leaned into her lover. "Damnit. Fucking idiot."

"What now, love?"

She looked back to the pirate and sighed. "We get ready for a fight, and pray for those poor dumb bastards between him and her." She held up her wrist. "Nil, monitor the Terran communications and switch on the station jammers if they try to get cute. And fire up the grav generators; we might need to delay some people if they try to leave."

A female voice responded. "'Keep-the-admiral's-son-from-starting-an-interstellar-war' protocol active. Are you sure you don't want me to take control of environmentals and knock him out before he leaves?"

Liz and Emelyn shared a look. Liz shook her head as Em was about to make a comment. At times she forgot just how scary her AI could be, but she'd rather have Nil than not. "No. He's

gotta work through this on his own terms, otherwise we'll just have to deal with it again when he wakes up. Damn bastard is too single-minded when he gets like this. It's way easier to run damage control than try to stop him. Trust me." *Plus, I've never seen him scared. Fuck if I know what that means. And the only person who can tell me is who he's going fucking ape shit over. Fuck my life.*

"Just so we're clear, the jamming will be total. No one will be able to talk to each other, not even us."

Liz gestured to the ceiling. "Yeah, whatever. Make a note to figure out something better when my godchildren aren't making me want to dry hump an open plasma conduit."

"Understood. And, uh, noted." The AI was definitely going to find the most awkward way to remind her. *I can't fucking win today.*

Liz separated from Emelyn and walked over to the dead girl's bed and just stared. All she saw was a sheet covering a corpse. Sure, it was sad, but even she had trouble getting too broken up about it, and she wasn't nearly as broken as he was. Sometimes people die. There was no rhyme or reason, the universe just sucked like that. *What the hell was David thinking?* He was a complete mystery to her, some days. She sighed again and turned back to Emelyn. "Helluva exec you got there, Em."

The pirate shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself. "You recommended him. I'd expect nothing less."

—

If she had a credit for the number of times in her life she'd woken up tied to a chair, she'd have five or six credits. That's not much, but it was annoying it happened that much. Her head was pounding, and she couldn't feel anything below the neck. A quick check and she was able to focus; she could force movement into her frozen limbs if she had to. She didn't know what kind of damage she'd do if she did, but it was nice to have the option if she needed it. For now, she needed more information.

Most people who restrained her knew at least *somewhat* what she could do. She was getting the increasing impression these idiots had no idea who —or what— she was. Instead it was just dumb luck they happened to get the drop on her and her brother, and after the damage she'd done to one of them, they weren't taking chances. Normally tying someone to a chair would be enough, but the numbness in her body was *definitely* artificially induced. She didn't want to think about why they had this technique on tap.

The room was a typical Terran medical station. Not the main Medical bay, but one of the smaller, one-room auxiliary stations that the Terrans liked sprinkling across their ships. Part of her mind grudgingly admitted they'd made their whole "manpower over tech" thing work much better than

it seemed like it would on paper. Things like this were why; and it was yet another practical, low-tech approach to solving the problem. Terrans were nothing, if not consistent.

“Ah, she's waking up. Exactly on time, excellent work, Doctor.”

There were three other people in the room, and Glyse managed to raise her head just long enough to see a rather hagrid looking female doctor shoot Yu a look of disgust before heading out of the room. Oddly, she wasn't wearing a Terran uniform... just a dirty, torn lab coat and civilian clothing underneath. This room was definitely on a Terran ship; she knew Tycho well enough to know she wasn't there, and this design was very distinct. There was a chance she was on a Freelance ship that had once been Terran, but everything was too clean and well organized to be most pirate operations. No, it had to be one of the three Terran ships outside. *Curiouser and curiouser.*

Yu approached her, and gestured to the other man. He was definitely one of the other Captains, the one who'd wanted the knife, she thought. He roughly grabbed her hair, and jerked her head up to look directly at Yu.

“Careful, Klein. Let's not damage her just yet; think of poor Zhao and all the pain he endured to help us get her.”

Glyse grinned at the mention of the man whose bones she'd shattered. Fun times.

Yu raised an eyebrow. “I see you're rather proud of that *altercation*. As you should be; it's rare someone even has any fight in them after the first dose, and you were incredibly drunk to start with. If it wasn't for the medical scans showing otherwise, I'd've thought you were augmented in some way. Perhaps it's genetic; we'll check that later.”

“I wouldn't.” She chuckled to herself. “You're in enough shit as it is; doing a genetic scan is a one way ticket to a fate worse than death.”

He grinned. “So it *is* genetic. Fascinating. Private or military? I'm guessing private or we would have heard about it.”

She couldn't help but laugh. “Such binary choices. I'm going with option ‘D: some shit that'd make your head explode’.”

Yu chewed on that for a second before shrugging. “Well, it doesn't really matter in the end. We'll figure out what you're best at with time. For now, however, you should rest up. The anesthesia will wear off in another thirty minutes. Unfortunately, there were some unseen complications with your retrieval so we're going to have to keep you confined till our convoy shows up. As much as we'd love to entertain you, well, it's a bit too risky while we're still near Tycho. Better to hide all traces of you for the moment.”

Complications didn't sound good. There was really only one thing they could mean, and that made her blood run cold. "Did you kill my brother?"

Yu glanced at Klein for a moment. "Not as such. We did return his knife to him, so there's no way to know for sure, but he had enough time someone might've found him."

"Ha!" Relief pours through her. She couldn't believe how stupid these people were. "You're so fucked... man. This is going to be fun to watch."

Yu's brow furled. Glyse guessed he'd never faced someone who wasn't afraid of him before. "What's one man going to do?"

Smirking, Glyse focused. She slammed her head back, catching Klein in the gut, making him double over. He let go of her head and then she forced enough power into her arms to snap the restraints. She still couldn't feel anything, but it didn't matter. She wasn't trying to escape yet, just to make a point. She grabbed Yu by the jacket front and pulled his face close to hers.

"Shocked? Good. Now listen. In a hand to hand fight, there's not a sentient being alive I can't beat. Even my brother. But here's the thing: he holds back. In everything. He's always worried about what I'd think; afraid I'll see him as a monster. You see, I'm about the only thing that tethers that man to humanity. You dumbasses just took that away. So, sure, I could kill you and your friend here and make my way off this ship... but I love my brother. I'm not going to steal his thunder." She shoved him back, and crossed her arms. "Hell, I don't even know how far he'll take this. Honestly, no one's ever been this fucking stupid before." She shrugged. They'd just brought hell down on themselves and they didn't even know it. "Word of advice you're going to ignore: Evacuate anyone you don't want being a casualty, and when he finds you, don't beg. It won't help."

Yu was quick to recover, she had to give him that. "...Right. Tell me, will your brother murder innocent civilians? Or, more to the point, men, women and children in the same situation as you?"

Glyse blinked. The doctor from earlier... it was starting to make sense. "Wait, you mother fuckers are *slavers*? Of *humans*? Christ, just when I thought we were past the event horizon of the black hole of stupid... *schlurp*."

Yu ignored her sound effect. "We're not slavers... Not in the traditional sense. While we do sell some of the more impressive specimens to a select clientele, most of this trash goes to a special facility where they rededicate their lives to service the People's Republic. Some, however, we keep on the ships as auxiliary crew. They are *our* citizens, after all, even if they forgot that fact. We just have to remind them."

Glyse was going to be sick, and it wasn't from the drugs. "So you're telling me you have Freelancers you've kidnapped *on this ship*. While you're sitting less than a click off of Tycho

station. I don't know if you're ballsy or just terminally stupid. Maybe both? Either way, I sure as fuck hope your affairs are in order, because buddy, you won't die slowly. But you *will* die."

Yu laughed. "You think I'm afraid of the 'Lost Scion' of House Simon? It's a fallen house, with its last true scion being a murdering psychopath that's more of a boogiemán myth than a real person. This Locke woman is just a pretender. She plays at being a high-priced mercenary just as much as she plays at being a Scion. In my experience, people like her are often disappointing. If I were you, I wouldn't put so much faith into your would-be saviors."

Glyse managed a lopsided shrug. "Man, when you're wrong, you really go all out, don't y—" she was cut off by the sound of an alarm. An officer came rushing in and saluted Klein. So, they were on *his* ship.

"Sorry, sir, but a shuttle is approaching, refusing to identify itself."

Klein grumbled. "Shoot it down."

The officer saluted. "Aye, sir. And if it lands?"

"Then kill everyone onboard."

The officer turned and was about to leave when Glyse called out to him. "Hey! Really? You just walk in on this, and don't even flinch? It doesn't bother you that your commanding officers are tying up women to chairs?"

The officer half turned towards her then spit on the floor before leaving. Yu chuckled. "We've picked our crews carefully. They're all like-minded, progressives such as myself."

Glyse felt the ship shake as its guns started firing. Twenty seconds later, there was a huge lurch as something crashed into it. She grinned at Yu. "Knock, knock, mother fucker. That'd be my brother coming to kill you."

Klein walked over to the wall terminal and pressed a button. "Docking bay report?" There was nothing but silence. He pressed another button. "This is the Captain. Unknown intruders in the docking bay. Dispatch with extreme prejudice."

Glyse shook her head. "Won't help. Really, you should order people out of his way. But, since you won't listen, why don't you just stash me with those civilians? Not sure if it'll help, but it might cut down on the bodycount. It's about the only play you've got left."

Yu's eyes narrowed. Klein moved to hit her, but Yu stopped his hand. "Put her in the lower decks with the others, then prepare my shuttle. And get your ship in order, Captain."

Klein saluted him roughly, and Glyse just grinned at both men. In a grim way, she was enjoying herself. *And he said it himself. These assholes all deserve this.*

David was halfway to the *Savage* by the time they reacted. The doors started closing too late; at this point he had enough speed that the laws of physics said there was no way he wasn't making it to the docking bay. He pinned the throttle and let the shuttle's computer work out the rest; he wasn't even going to slow down. He didn't need to.

The shuttle bucked as it started to take hits from the few guns fast enough to track him at this point. Mainly point defense weapons designed to detonate missiles, not stop a careening shuttle. And, he had to give the Mercury this; as a shuttle it was damn resilient. Warning lights started flashing as it took more and more damage; they managed to take out one of his engines and the ship started to fishtail, but it didn't matter. There was no stopping it now.

The shuttle screamed through the closing doors, tearing off the damaged engine as it passed. It caught the edge of the deck and cartwheeled, slamming full force into the far wall, taking out two other shuttles on its way. The lights went out as the docking bay doors slammed shut, plunging the room in darkness, lit only by glowing wreckage. As pressure was emergency dumped into the room, fires erupted, now given enough oxygen to spring to life.

Less than thirty seconds after the shuttle impacted on the far wall, Terran soldiers and officers poured into the room, weapons trained on the wreck. Still mostly intact, they knew it was likely anyone crazy enough to slam a shuttle into their docking bay had some way of surviving it. A group of marines in a powersuits could have easily survived a crash like that, and from the way they were deploying, that's exactly what they expected. David would have to disappoint them.

Focusing will in his right hand, he punched the twisted shuttle door with enough force to send it slamming into a few of the soldiers. The red smears they left was all the evidence he needed to know they would no longer be a concern. He slowly stepped out of the twisted metal, eerily illuminated in the red emergency lighting and fires. Slowly, he dusted himself off. The Terrans didn't seem to know what to do with a single man in civilian clothing and not a single scratch. Finally, someone fired. One of the two blades at his back were unsheathed and blocking the blow before it reached him. Ablative plasma bolt; standard for intraship combat. Hell on flesh, but it took sustained fire to damage metal, which was why it was preferred by military forces for hand to hand combat inside ships.

David raised an eyebrow at the person who'd fired. He heard them curse. The room opened fire and he pulled out the other sword, standing there blocking every shot that came at him. His arms moved so fast they were a blur. As the swords took more and more hits, their black blades started to glow a dull red. A normal pair of swords would have fatigued and shattered under the assault, but these were extensions of his will. There was not a force in this universe stronger than that. Reaching out, he could feel the threads of his will wrapping around each person in

this room like tentacles of some eldritch beast. He closed his eyes, using a trick taught to him by the *other* Simon sibling, and manifesting his will as ethereal blue tendrils. They wrapped around the panicking Terrans, crushing them all to bloody piles of twisted metal, cloth and meat. It was a gruesome, bloody trick, worthy of the man who'd taught it to him in secret. *Liz would lose her shit. Fuck it.*

He opened his eyes in the now silent bay, his swords smoldering. It was time to find his sister.

He was moving on instinct, letting his bond with his sister lead him to wherever she was. More and more Terrans were filling the corridors of the ship, trying to stop him. While swords were not ideal for fighting in narrow corridors, these were as much a part of him as his arms and legs. The cold logical part of his brain commented that for Terrans operating in Freelance space they had very little experience dealing with a melee combatant. He knew his sister would comment about 'almost feeling bad for them'. He didn't. He never would.

The combatants were getting more sparse the deeper he made his way into the lower decks of the ship. They were also getting worse trained; they seem to have run out of soldiers to throw at him and now they were throwing officers, junior crewmembers, anyone who could hold a gun. Then, they stopped entirely. He paused; it was unlikely they were out of men. Not on a Terran ship. If they were switching tactics, he'd have to be more cautious.

Turning the corner, he *knew* his goal was just down the end of this hallway. This section of the ship was reserved for enlisted men and cargo. There should be almost no one down here, and yet, he knew he was being watched. He heard sounds, shuffling, breathing, like there were dozens of people just watching, waiting for him to pass like some angel of death. Well, maybe that's what he was. It was hard to know for sure. He continued to make his way towards the end of the corridor.

When he made it to the middle, two Terrans stepped out in front of him, large assault rifles trained on him. Two more stepped out from behind him, the same rifles trained on him. There was something off about this. So far everyone had attacked him immediately, these four were hanging back, hoping he made the first move. Well, if he'd learned anything from Liz, there was only one thing to do in this situation. Taunt them.

"Do you really think those guns will make any difference?"

One of them grinned at him. "Depends. How'd'ya feel about collateral damage?"

"Depends."

The speaker smacked the side of the rifle. "These ain't plasma, boyo. Got enough punch to tear right through the hull if we get unlucky."

"That sounds like a problem for you, not me." There was something in his voice that made David wary. Something he was missing.

"Nah, ain't a problem for us." The man tapped a metal ring around his neck. Emergency pressure helmet, if David had to guess. "But it sure as fuck'll be an issue if for the poor bastards locked in these rooms. And, yeah, yer sister's in one of 'em."

So there *were* other people. People the Terrans thought he'd care about. They were wrong, but the little voice that sounded like his sister in the back of his head told him he needed more information. Pieces were starting to click for him; those Captains were experienced in grabbing people. Captains aren't generally inclined to do their own dirty work; they have people for that. Unless the people were busy keeping an eye on their other prisoners and keeping anyone on the station from sniffing too closely. But bringing captives here was a brazen move. Captain Yu was flaunting his ability to do whatever he wanted; David would have to correct that notion. He added it to his mental todo list.

David pointed his sword to the room the men in front of him had come from. "She's in there."

The two gunmen looked at each other. "Good guess. But what makes you think we won't start shooting up these other rooms, eh, boyo? You good with us killing more trash like yerself?"

"The only trash I see is you."

The man scoffed. "What's yer deal, boyo? You really think yer good enough t'kill all four of us before we have a chance t'make the deck run with Freelancer blood?"

"Yeah. I do." This was it, the moment David had been waiting for. He threw one of his swords with all his force. It flew straight and true, guided by his murderous will. The blade slid straight through the man's skull, picking up his body like a doll and pinning it against the far bulkhead before burying itself effortlessly into the steel wall.

The other three had let their concentration waver; their guns weren't in firing position. As much as the idiot who'd been talking was making noises about shooting up the rooms, none of them were even pointed in that direction. They were still, for the most part, trained on him. But none of them were prepared for his speed. He closed the distance to the single combatant left in front of him, burying the sword in his chest and spinning him around before the other two even had a chance to fire a shot. When they did, the bullets just punched holes through their comrade's body, grazing his left side. The talkative idiot was right; those guns could easily punch through the body he was using and him, if he wasn't careful. Well, that changed things.

He shoved the body backwards with enough force to give him room to draw his guns. He left the blade in, letting that confuse the other two gunmen for another half second. Just as they were realizing what was going on, David had both guns aimed, and with a stance that would have

made Liz proud, he pulled both triggers. The bolts of plasma found their targets, popping both men's heads like balloons.

He stood there in the silence, waiting for the next opponent. No one came.

"*Christ*. Who the fuck're you showing off for?"

David whirled around to see Glyse standing in the doorway. Behind her was a woman in a dirty lab coat and at least a dozen more people huddled behind them. These rooms were only meant to fit four to six people; there had to be nearly twenty in each room. It seemed an odd way to house prisoners. *Or merchandise*.

David crossed to his sister, and threw his arms around her. There was a comfort, and easing of the rage he'd been feeling since the alley fight. His world was right, order was returning. Glyse was safe, and he'd brought justice to some of those responsible. Well, there were still the three Captains, but suddenly they didn't seem that important anymore. Just this moment, staying right here as long as the universe would allow. That was what he wanted. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Woah, easy, David." She returned the hug, but she could tell something was off. "Careful. When you started your reign of terror I pissed Yu off and he gave me another dose of whatever it was they've been drugging me with. Fair warning, I'm a little fucked up at the moment. The doc here did her best for me, and with enough focus I can walk, but I'm only about as good as you in a fight right now, so.. worthless, really." She grinned at him.

He pulled back, struggling to find some witty retort. It didn't come. Glyse cupped his face in her hands and looked at him. His cheeks were wet. He didn't know why his cheeks were wet.

"Jesus. You're crying? Hell, you didn't even cry when mom died. Are you ok?"

He took a deep breath. What he was feeling was something new, something foreign to him. It had to be fear. He'd been *afraid*. Not for himself, but for *her*. Afraid he'd never actually see her again. Until this, he'd assumed the McKenzie siblings could do anything, tackle anyone. But he'd seen that wasn't true. They'd both been outplayed by petty thugs and if they'd been so inclined, one or both of them could have ended up dead. That thought terrified him.

Glyse was still watching him, her eyes darting back and forth taking in whatever expression must've been on his face. The expression she wore, he'd seen it once before, when his mother had been killed. He'd learned the people he relied on for protection could be killed. That shook him, though it didn't make him afraid or sad. He just realized he needed to stop relying on them, so he did. Instead, he relied on no one but himself, save his sister of course. After all, she was always his one exception to most things.

Well, that reliance had almost gotten her killed. Which meant, he had to—

“Hey, CIC to David. Look at me.” Her eyes were searching his. He looked into those alien orange eyes of hers and he knew she could read every thought he’d been having. “Listen up, little brother. This isn’t like mom, ok? You took the wrong lesson back then, and I’ve been trying to tell you that for years. Sure, this time you think you fucked up. But I fucked up too. It’s not your job to protect me. It’s mine to protect you. Mom told me to keep an eye on you when she left that day, and dammit, I’ve done a shit job of that. I’m sorry. But listen to me, David. You’re going to fuck up, I’m going to fuck up, and sometimes the universe is going to kick us in the nuts. Random chance might just fuck us, one day. I can’t tell you that won’t happen. But that’s why we have as many people around us as possible, right? The universe can’t get ‘em all, and given the company we keep, the ones who are left will make the universe wish it’d never been born. Don’t think about it like ‘having friends is good’... I dunno, think of it like spreading the risk. If you rely on a bunch of people, some of them will pull through, right?” She sighed. “So, just let this one go, ok? We’re good. I’m good. And we’ve got something more important than our own bullshit to deal with.”

David blinked, finally realizing that the other doors had opened and a rather sizable crowd had formed. Some were men and women his age, some children, some much older. They didn’t look like the typical victims of trafficking, however. He pushed his sister back, gently, and shook his head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Uh... guessing these are the other victims?” Finally, something snarky came to mind. “Damn, sis, with a group like this, I’d’ve expected you to be running the ship by now. It’s actually kinda sad you needed me to save you.”

She punched his arm weakly. “Told you, I’m a bit fucked up. Yeah, sure, I could’ve... but why bother? I knew you were coming, and that’s... a lot.” He wasn’t sure if she was gesturing to the dead bodies on the deck, or the crowd of people. Knowing her, it could’ve been both. “Figured I’d let you take out the trash and work through your shit. And look, I don’t want to hear any bitching just because I made you come to me for once.”

He’d let her have this one. “Well, I’m here now. Seems like you’ve got some ideas about what’s next?”

She nodded. “Yu told me everyone on this ship was hand picked. They volunteered for this assignment, apparently. Which means, as far as I’m concerned, they’re all fair game.”

David raised an eyebrow. “Assignment?”

Glyse turned to the woman in the lab coat. “Tell him what you told me.”

The woman crossed her arms. “I’ve been on this ship about six months. I’m the closest they’ve got to a doctor; they pulled me out of a hospital when they raided our colony. I’d been making the rounds through the non-federated worlds, picking remote colonies to go work for. I was supposed to be gone eighteen months, so no one’s even missed me yet. And that’s not by accident. Yu and his Captains have connections with Terran Intelligence. They get info on these

colonies and small time haulers in the area and pick people with useful skills that no one will miss. Or people that can be bribed not to miss someone. They've been at it about a year, from what I've worked out. Two months ago, they started getting more brazen. Drunk on their own success, if you ask me."

David considered. He'd heard some rumors, small ones, but nothing solid enough to confirm any of what she was saying. Nothing to deny it, either. "Wait, if someone were selling so many people on the black market, Captain Achenson would've heard about it and we'd've been half way to ruining these Terrans day months ago."

Glyse shook her head. "They sell some of them, but only the hot ones. After having their own fun, so I hear. No, it's a work camp, David. They're putting them to forced labor."

"Work camps are pretty hard to have in space. You need something to work *on*. And I don't think these three ships count."

The woman spoke up. "Well, they keep those of us with ship skills with them, most of the time. About half their crew, myself included. As far as actual officers go, they're running skeleton crews; they started out with one ship's worth, and I think a bunch left when they started this. Anyway, two of these ships are new; That cruiser and the other Viceroy they out there they pulled out of some abandoned shipyard and recommissioned. Terran Command gave it their blessing, as long as they didn't requisition new crew. As I heard it, that's how this little venture got started."

"Where did they find two fully kitted warships that hadn't been picked clean already?"

"They found an old forward base the military abandoned after Charlemagne. It was a secret at the time, and had been built with enough stealth to keep it off people's scopes. It has a small shipyard with some half finished ships in it. There's even a Kali class dreadnought, but it's mostly just a space frame. Anyway, they're getting as many of us together as possible to work the space yard and mine the nearby asteroids, getting the place in full swing. They plan on building their own private fleet. These other two ships are their proof of concept."

David squinted. "Proof of concept? Most people would call turning one ship into three a helluva payday and move on. Who are they going to sell old Terran ship designs to? No Freelancer would buy from them, and their own military would just swoop in and legitimize the whole thing."

Glyse shook her head. "See, that's the kicker. Turns out Terran Intelligence has been keeping the bean counters busy while this crew got up to speed. Obviously they won't commit, but apparently Yu seems to think that if they can finish that Kali, they can sell it to Intelligence. After that... well, Intelligence doesn't have to tell command shit, now do they?"

David shook his head. "A bunch of spies with a shadow fleet... now there's a terrifying thought."

Glyse just stared at him for a second before gesturing in disbelief. “Really, David? You remember who our father is, right?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. She had a point, again. “Look, it’s different.”

“Is it? Really?”

He furrowed. It *was* different, but he just knew that. Putting words to it was harder, though. “It is... Dad wouldn’t—”

“Murder a ship full of Terrans to save me? You two are cut from the same cloth, and you know it. Putting either of you in charge of a fleet is a terrifying thought, and he’s a damn Admiral.” She paused for a moment, and then put a hand on his shoulder. “Not a judgment on the killing thing. These assholes deserved it.”

“And these people didn’t.” He gestured to the onlookers. “So, I guess there’s really only one question...” he looked at his sister, hoping she was on the same page.

She grinned. “The Doc here can get me fixed up if we can get to a medical bay, and from there, I’m sure we can handle whatever strays you left alive. And then I say we pay a visit to Captain Yu. I feel like I owe him a broken jaw before we gift wrap him and drop him on Dad’s doorstep.”

Close enough. David turned to the crowd. “What do you guys say? Feel like taking over the ship?”

A wiry man with a crooked nose laughed. He looked back and forth to his fellow Freelancers and then shrugged. “Ain’t got nothin’ better to do, I ‘suppose. Fuck it, why not?” He gave David a wide grin as several people laughed.

David returned the grin. “I’ll take that as a yes. Let’s go fuck up some Terrans.”

—

Captain Feliz Klein slammed his fist on his Exec’s console. The man was being his usual insufferable self, turned way, way up. “You listen to me, you piece of shit. Get this ship away from that goddamn station and this damned jamming, or I will rip off your head and shit down your throat.” He couldn’t stand incompetence, and it seemed he was surrounded by it today.

“I’m doing my best, sir, but the station kicked on its grav drive at the same time as the jamming. Everyone out here is blind and unable to move. We can’t even contact Captain Yu.” His exec didn’t even blink at the threat. Klein fumed.

“Sie verstehen kein *Englisch*? Bring uns verdammt noch mal in Bewegung.”

His exec's eyes met his. "My english is *fine*, sir. So is my German. If you must know, my French is a little rusty. I really should work on it." The man's deadpan tone made Klein want to hit him even more than usual. "Now, sir, I can get us moving, but the station is likely to open fire. How much damage are you willing to suffer to get us out of range of the jamming?"

"*Sie sind doch ein Narr.*" He rolled his eyes. "I don't care how much damage we take. Just get us moving before that trash makes it anywhere vital. We need to contact the Commodore before this gets out of hand. A few executions ought to get this filth back in line."

"Out of hand, sir? Would that be before or after the crazy man murdered most of our crew and freed our captives, leading them on an extermination mission to take over the ship?"

Klein drew his weapon and pointed it at the exec. "I'd say it was right before I shot my executive officer for insubordination."

"Well, I'm sure you'll let me know when it gets to that point, sir. Till then, I need two people to make their way to engineering and monitor the reactors, because this is not going to be pretty. I'd rather not blow us up before we get to the you shooting me part of my day."

Klein ignored him and stormed out of the CIC. He knew his officers well enough to know they'd get the job done better if he vented his frustrations on someone else. And that jackass that'd murdered over eighty of his men seemed like he'd do just fine. Klein wasn't a fool; he'd watch how the fights had progressed. He didn't know if it was augmentation or what, but he wasn't about to go into the fight with just his bare fists.

They weren't the only augmented humans in the galaxy, after all.

Klein made his way to his quarters. They were a spartan affair, he only needed a bed and minimal accommodations. The rest of the room was dedicated to the little engineering present he'd acquired thanks to Terran Intelligence. A 'failed' prototype of a power armor suit that interfaced directly with the user's central nervous system. After killing their tenth test subject, the Research department shelved it. Klein picked it up with the warning he'd likely kill himself trying to use it, but those fools underestimated him. Yu arranged for multiple excruciating surgeries to enable him to finally wield the suit. But wield it he could.

Strapping himself in, it felt like every nerve in his body was on fire, as the enhanced neurotransmitters flooded his system. It was an indescribable pain, but he'd learned to relish it. It told him he was alive, he was powerful, and nothing would be able to stop him. Sure, that fool's sword had cut through the inner bulkheads, but those were simple composites. This suit was armored in star-forged diamond, twice as dense as normal diamond. No simple blade could cut through it, period. Combined with the built in gravitics, those swords would be dust in the first few blows.

He prowled through the decks like the apex predator he knew himself to be. The smell of blood permeated the ship, but it only drove him harder. He was hungry. The drugs pumping through

his body made him not just alert, not just sharp, but they made him crave the violence this suit was so good at releasing. The stalking and waiting were terrible, but he knew the sweet release of aggression would more than make up for it.

Finally, he turned a corner, and there was his prey. The man and his bitch, with a trail of insignificant human trash behind them. He snarled; there was no room for a proper fight in this cramped corridor, but he'd settle for whatever he could get. He'd waited long enough.

The bitch stared at him, dumbfounded. "Jesus, is that...? Damn, I thought those things were shelved. I can't believe someone's actually dumb enough to strap themselves into one." He wouldn't kill the bitch. Not yet. He had other uses for her before she died.

"Maybe we don't piss off the psychopath in the mad-science weapon suit, sis?"

Klein reached over and grabbed a hold of a maintenance hatch and threw it at the man. He sliced it cleanly in half without much effort. It didn't matter. "Fight me. *Coward.*"

"Yeah, ok." The man took a defensive stance as everyone, save the bitch, took several steps back. Before any blows could be traded, the deck shook violently and the sound of metal twisting and the whine of reactors being pushed to their limit assaulted his heightened senses. *That son of a bitch is going to rip the ship in half, not make it to subspace!* He made a mental note to kill his exec, after this.

The terrible noises of the engines being pushed way past their safeties were followed by several low thuds that sounded an awful lot like weapons fire. Then, as if someone had just flicked a switch, the noises stopped, replaced by the low hum that told any experienced spacer they were in subspace.

"Shit. David, we gotta get control of the ship before we get outside the jamming range."

"Yeah, you take a team and get control of engineering. Once that's secure, take the bridge. I'll deal with the Captain."

Klein grinned. "You'll be dead soon enough, *pig.*"

The man pointed to one of the doors behind Klein. "There's a cargo bay down there, yeah? Why don't we take this someplace with some more room."

The Captain didn't even bother acknowledging, he just turned around and made for the door. *Let the coward strike me from behind. That would just make it interesting!*

Sadly, no blow from behind happened. Instead, the idiot just followed him blindly into the cargo bay. It was mostly empty; they kept this free in case the people they detained had interesting

cargo, or they needed some more sleeping room, temporarily. It would make the perfect arena to finally crush this bug.

His opponent entered the room and took a classic defensive stance. Klein had to admit the man was well trained. Had this been a normal fight, that would have been the correct stance. But this was hardly that. The swordsman swung with his right sword, prepared to parry with his left. Klein saw the move easily, but instead of taking the offer to clash, he stepped forward, into the man's blade and swung his armored fist sideways against the man's skull. He expected to see a spray of viscera as the man's head exploded, but somehow it stayed attached and his opponent simply went flying into the far wall, punching through the composite skin and into the maintenance area just behind the wall.

It was a blow that should have killed any normal human, even an augment. But to Klein's delight, it was clear his opponent was not only alive, but conscious. He came staggering out of the hole, careful to keep some distance from Klein as he regained his orientation. Klein stopped on a floor panel, bending up one side. He reached down, ripped it off, and threw the thing at the environmental controls on the far side of the room. He heard the tell-tale hissing of the air slowly being drained, exactly as the system was designed to do in the event of critical damage. Better to lose the cargo than risk a fire. An alarm started going off, warning anyone in the room to leave as quickly as possible before the doors would be sealed. Now they had a time limit on the fight. It'd be more exciting this way.

"Really?"

Klein laughed, a deranged sound echoing through the open space. "I bet it kills you before it kills me. Either way, either I kill you, or we both die."

The swordsman rolled his eyes and took the same stance, just several feet further back. This time Klein would wait for him to strike and watch the crushed look on his face when his sword does nothing. Then he would simply take both blades and shatter them. *Yes, this will be delicious. I cannot wait.*

The man started moving much faster than Klein expected. He was too fast for the suit's sensors to pick up on perfectly, but it didn't matter. The blow came just as expected. The warnings and damage assessment floating in his vision were *not* expected. He looked down, and he saw the blade sticking through his lower ribcage. That was incredibly frustrating; either this man's swords were also sunforged diamond, or there was a material even harder. Well, the idiot still was going to lose one of his weapons, so it hardly mattered.

Twisting his body with enough force to snap bone, Klein ripped the blade out of the man's hands. He then leapt backwards, putting some distance between the two, while he figured out a new attack plan. The swordsman didn't follow, he just watched Klein dispassionately. He didn't even seem phased by missing his sword. *What kind of an idiot doesn't react when he loses half his weapons? Clearly—*

Klein stopped in mid thought. The man was still holding two swords. It couldn't be; he knew he'd taken the blade with him. He looked down, and where there once was a sword was now a hole pooling with blood. There was something different about those swords. Perhaps some sort of nanotech? Gravitic blades? No, they didn't seem powered. They were just black titanium composite blades; you could buy them from any one of a dozen specialty shops. The galaxy was full of wanna be weapon masters; and katanas were so cliché, Klein couldn't believe someone like that had even managed to land a blow on him.

"I get the impression you're not the brains around here."

Klein lept at him, bringing both fists down in a crushing blow. The man took it, knees buckling, and the deck plating giving way as he sunk half a foot into the floor. And yet he was still looking at the Terran Captain with dispassionate eyes, like nothing had just happened.

"Let me explain how this is going to go. We have about five more minutes of air, thanks to you."

Klein grabbed the man by the throat and threw him against the opposite wall. This one was near enough a main bulkhead he didn't go through, instead just slammed against it like a shuttlecraft. He landed on his knees, and stood up as if nothing had happened.

"You'll bleed out in three, if I let you. But I'll kill you in one."

This time Klein reached into the floor to grab some power conduits and held the sparking wires against the metal deck plating, until the circuit breaker tripped, plunging the room in darkness. "Just try it, fool!"

The reply came quietly from his left ear. "I don't have to try. You've killed yourself. But I'm going to take even that from you." Searing pain exploded in both feet and the warnings floating in his vision told him he'd been stabbed through both feet. He screamed; it shouldn't be possible for him to feel any other pain than the fire of his heightened nerves. His body was being pumped with a near lethal dosage of pain blockers. Somehow, this excruciating pain was flowing from the blades of those damned swords right into his every existence. This man, no, this *devil* was some inhuman thing. Worse than the filth, he was an abomination.

"Because of you, Klein, a girl is dead. A girl with a bright future. All because you wanted to fuck my sister, and weak willed pieces of shit like you can't even get laid by paying for it. You have to resort to slavery. *Pathetic.*"

Klein couldn't see his opponent any more, but he swung widely at where the sound was coming from. He found nothing but air. "Demon! Fight me! I'll kill you!"

"No, you won't."

He saw ghostly blue tendrils of energy reaching out to the piping in the ceiling. They pulled, and the pipes burst, freezing, near-liquid air pouring into the room, billowing into gas as it boiled off the floor.

"I know those suites, Klein. My sister and I... convinced your people to abandon them. But i'm glad you were stupid enough to step into one. You see, they have a... *feature*." The broken pipes ripped out of the ceiling, impaling his limbs, the tendrils forcing his arms out in the shape of a cross. "The crazy bastards who designed that thing hoped that in the future, the body could be repaired, or even replaced. Those suits preserve the mind. Keeps the brain active, pumped with all those neurotransmitters. You're clinically dead, but you still feel. Still hear, and even see, maybe. Keep it cold, give it enough power, and it can keep you trapped in a decaying body for weeks. Maybe longer. The analyst giving the briefing called it a 'living death'. A bit dramatic, but close enough."

"Coward! Remove these pipes and let me kill you!"

More pipes ripped out of the walls, criss crossing with the others. The demon was right; if it weren't for the suit, he'd be long dead. Even despite that, soon it would be just his mind left alive. No matter, that 'living death' was there for a reason. They could bring back—

"It doesn't work, you know. Once the body is dead, keeping the brain alive is just torture. Without blood circulation, brain damage happens in minutes. Even if they saved you, you'd be a vegetable. Or insane. Either way, nothing human ever comes back from being dead." He could feel the man's breath on his cheek, but he could still see nothing. "I'm going to leave now."

With his dying gasp, Klein called out, "COWARD! DEMON! FIGHT ME!"

"No."

The last thing Klein heard was the opening of the cargo bay door, followed by it shutting a moment later. The suit recorded his time of death and his body went numb. He could no longer see and there was nothing to hear. But he could still feel the burning pain from each and every pipe that had pierced his body.

He screamed. The cargo bay stayed eerily still, save for the faint sound of air leaking from the damaged pipes. He screamed again. And again. All he could do was scream. An eternity of silent screaming, pain and more pain. Klein was dead. Whatever was left was no longer Klein. It was simply mindless screams and pain.

—

Glyse looked up as David stepped into the CIC. She glanced over him, looking for any real injuries, but besides the bandages he'd had when he showed up earlier, it looked like putting

Klein down hadn't been that hard. Glyse thanked the universe; good riddance to that piece of shit. One down, two to go, as far as she was concerned.

David started looking around the room at the various stations, now manned by the Freelancers they'd freed. Turned out most of them had ship experience so she just let them divide themselves up however it made sense. Seemed easier than trying to work out everyone's skills herself.

Eventually he made his way over to her. "Sooo... no bodies?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Didn't see a reason to go all murder-hobo on them. Not till we know that they know. Plenty of time to toss them out an airlock once we don't need them anymore. How's Klein?"

Her brother's look sent a chill down her spine. "Better you don't know. But clinically dead."

She narrowed her eyes and pointed her finger at him. "See, when you add shit like 'clinically', that makes me *want* to know. Don't you pull that shit. Either tell me, or don't. None of the footsie-around-the-truth bullshit you and Dad do."

David held up his hands. "Dead. Just dead. Sorry."

"See, now I doubt that. And the last thing we need is a pissed off undead cyborg rapist running around. There's civilians onboard for fuck's sake."

Her brother laughed. "There's no worries about that. Trust me. What's left of him isn't going anywhere." He leaned over her console, trying to read it upside down. "What's our status?"

She stepped back. "If you want it, take it. This is a you and dad thing; too many damn buttons for me." He stepped into the space she'd just vacated and she leaned over his shoulder. "So, we've got control over the ship, finally, and the last of the crew's rounded up and secured. Freelancers are still manning critical systems, but give it a few minutes and we should be a pretty effective little ship. Minus the damage you caused, that is."

"Good. Looks like the other Terrans are right on our tails. No one else on sensors yet, but we'd better figure out what the plan is pretty quickly here. Damn, we made it outside the jamming range, but they seem preoccupied with hunting us down. Better not leave the system, though."

Glyse stretched. "Yeeeah, about that. I had, uh, *that guy*," she pointed to the man in the navigator's chair, "change course so we're still in system, but we can't keep flying in circles, those very angry Terrans are going to start shooting just as soon as they catch up. Meanwhile, uh, purple-haired girl down in engineering's been trying to pull logs and info and all that. It's pretty bad, David. They scrub the navigation logs, so we only have a rough idea where the system is, and it's 50/50 if it's inside Terran space. If we took a fleet out there..."

“...they’d see us coming, kill all the hostages and burn the site. Right, no calling Dad.”

She punched the back of his shoulder. “Correct. Turns out, only Captain Yu or his exec knows the actual coordinates; that’s why he got the big ship. They shuttle everyone over to the cruiser, and it makes the final leg of the trip. Stinks of some bullshit protocol dreamt up a Terran spook.”

David was smirking. “Or Dad.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and I don’t know what’s worse.” She took a deep breath. She wasn’t a big picture person. She was a ‘solve the problem in front of you’ person, and this whole situation made her feel like she was in over her head. What they *should* do is head back Tycho with all those pirate ships and pray Liz would drop the jamming. More than likely, though, they’d just be shot at, too. Somehow, someone needed to get word to Tycho to bring the calvary, and then they could beat Yu till he talked. Or she felt better.

Her brother’s hand was on her shoulder. “You’re thinking of beating someone. Guessing you just worked out that we can’t head back in a *Terran* ship, eh? Well, if it’ll make you feel better, we can’t turn back without the Terrans getting the drop on us first. And they will absolutely wreck this ship. We could keep running, maybe, but the Cruiser’ll catch us no matter how fancy we fly. It’s just a matter of time.”

Her frustration was building. They were better than this. Her and her brother could easily beat these assholes if it was hand to hand. Throw ships into the mix and she was useless. “So, what the hell do we do, David? This is your thing, not mine.”

“Oh, no. I haven’t commanded a ship since dad got me drummed out of the military. And babysitting *Spring’s Endeavour* doesn’t count; you think Captain Achenson would risk me scratching the paint? You’re the military officer... I’m just a civilian.”

She stepped forward, grabbing him by the shirt. “Oh, yeah? And just what the hell do you think *they* are, huh? You’re a damned Freelancer now, David, grow a pair. You think I can give these people orders? You think I even know what orders to give? Fuck no. So why don’t you pull that stick out of your ass, and go fucking captain. I *know* you. You’ve already got three plans cooking, and you’re just ballsy enough to think you can take a cruiser with this piece of shit. So, fuck it. Let’s ride. Stop wasting time and let’s light it up.”

She watched his face for several seconds. She was being a bit dramatic; yes, he’d seemed to be avoiding taking command for a couple years now. But not directly; that wasn’t David. No, he was just doing that annoyingly frustrating thing where he played puppet master and got everyone to step in for him and fill the gap. But she meant it when she said he needed to stop wasting time; it’d been two years. He had to get over it sometime, right? As she looked, she realized he’d already come to that conclusion before she spoke up. He was looking reassured, not upset. Like she’d just confirmed for him the next step he needed to take.

“Fair enough. But you know what I could really use?”

She let go of him. “What’s that?”

He gestured to the exit of the CIC. “The galaxy’s best squadron commander leading a bunch of civilians in stolen Terran fighters.”

She glared. “They’re flying bricks.”

“And I believe you once said, ‘If it has one good thruster and a half working engine, I could thread a needle with a brick.’ Well, suit up, McKenzie. Or are you just all exhaust and no go, pilot?”

She punched him hard in the shoulder. “Fuck you. Fine, but I’d rather fly the damn brick.”

He was grinning. “Good. Because, not joking, all my plans involve you hitting vacuum in the next three minutes. We’ve got a trap to set.”

Jesus Christ. “Well, get me a damn brick, then!” She didn’t wait for his response, instead she walked right off the CIC, dropped down the next four levels via the emergency access shafts, and sprinted just this side of natural speed to the fighter bay.

A fighter was already in its cradle, and a smirking blonde woman with short hair in a half-done up flight suit was holding out a helmet and second flight suit. She had to give it to David, once he made up his mind, he got shit moving.

“Cap’n says to get you the hell out there. Hop in, me that jackass’ll be right behind you.” The blonde woman gestured to a man already climbing into the fighter behind hers. “Unfortunately, the rest of this lot’s hopeless behind the stick. Lucky for you, you’ve got the two best fighter jocks this side of the galactic core. Hope you can keep up.”

Glyse took the suit and stepped in. “Yeah, I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She zipped up the suit and took the helmet. “What do I call you two?”

“He’s Lee, call me Buck. How ‘bout you?”

Glyse put on the helmet. “Officially? ‘Aesir One’. But my pilots call me ‘Artemis’.”

The blonde whistled. “Goddess of the Hunt and when you shoot, you never miss. I’ve heard of you.” She shook her head. “Damn, might finally get a challenge.” She gave Glyse a half salute. “We got your back.”

Glyse returned the salute. “Good. Let’s go hunting.” With that, she climbed into her fighter, cursed the controls and then signaled ready to launch. Fifteen seconds later, so did both of her wing men. Another ten, and she felt the ship drop out of subspace fight before the force of acceleration slammed her in the chest. Before she could blink, she was out in space, behind the controls of a fighter.

Fucking finally.

It felt strangely familiar, walking from station to station, calling out orders, and drinking in all the information coming at him constantly. Despite Terrans believing the Captain didn’t need a chair—instead giving him a small station off to the side—David felt at home here. Glyse was right, it was about time he took command of something again. Well, that was why he needed her around; they were always better together, after all.

He watched his sister and her escorts hit space and move into position. It had been years since they had fought side by side like this, and he’d missed it. And she’d been right, he had a few plans, each successive one easy enough to pivot to as the situation unfolded. Except, this time was different. He needed to use the Freelancers for any of this to work. He looked around the CIC, seeing everyone watching him, wondering what came next. These people manning the stations weren’t under orders; they were people who, up till an hour ago had been victims, forced to run this ship for their Terran Masters. Now they’d shoved off that yoke, but he could already tell some of them weren’t sure the new guy was much better.

You can’t do this alone. Isn’t that what Liz said? He sighed. He hated it when she was right. “Comms, get me ship-wide.”

The teenage girl manning the station gave him a sideways look, before turning it on without acknowledging. He heard the tell-tale tone, and that was enough.

He hesitated. “You know, I just realized I wasn’t sure what to call you. But that’s pretty stupid of me. Let me start over. Crew of the former Terran warship *Savage*... My name is David McKenzie. I’m the XO of the *Spring’s Endeavour*, and before that I was a Commander in the League Navy. Some of you might know my family name; yes, *that* McKenzie. Love him or hate him, there’s a chance some of you have had to deal with him or his people. If nothing else, you know the stories. Well, they’re probably all true, even the bad ones. And if you’ve heard anything about *me*, the bad ones are *especially* true.”

There were a few chuckles.

“Most of you saw me earlier and know what I’m capable of. You’ve met my sister, and a lot of you’ve seen what *she* can do. I assure you, there’s more to us than our ability to murder Terrans... Hell, if nothing else, you know not to let me borrow your shuttle.” More laughter.

“Here’s the thing I’ve learned living as a Freelancer. You’re some of the damned hardest people our species has ever produced. God himself could declare humanity dead and a handful of Russians led by one really pissed off Scott will kick him in the nuts and tell him to come back next week, they got shit to do. And you know what? We got shit to do too. Your people are being worked to death by these Terrans. No, not ‘your’. ‘Our’. *Our* people are being worked to death by these Terran sons of bitches. So listen. We’ve got this ship and three fighters. They’ve got a whole damn cruiser, another light cruiser, and a helluva lot more training. But it isn’t their lover, their child, their grandmother who’s being pushed to the brink of exhaustion. It’s yours. They took my sister. Sure, I got her back, but the only way I keep her is with your help. So what do you say we remind these assholes just what the hell Freelancers can do when you piss us the hell off. Ops? Enter this into the record. As of this moment, this ship is now the *CWS Reconciliation*, warship of the Confederacy of Freelance States. Let’s go give our regards to Captain Yu.”

The whole bridge broke out into claps and a good whoop or two. David smiled, hoping Glyse would forgive the theatrics. He didn’t need these people to save his sister. He needed them to save themselves. But there’s nothing like making yourself look powerless and the other person powerful to get people on your side. Just because it was manipulation didn’t make the core of what he was saying wrong. If this makes them fight a little harder, move a little faster, push a little more, that could just be the tipping point in what was about to be one of the more interesting battles of his career.

David waited for the din to die down, before giving orders. The Terrans were less than a minute out, so it was time to get serious. He turned to that teenage girl again. “Comms, get me the fighters.”

“Aye.” She grinned at him. Clearly he’d won *someone* over.

“This is *Thymos* squadron. Go for CIC.”

David chuckled. “Thymos, this is CIC. Getting fancy with our names, I see. Listen up, I want you to get up to a few hundred g and then rig for low emissions. Shut everything you can down. When the Terrans show up, you’re going to go full power, kick it up as hard as possible. Make them look at you. After that, weapons free, engage at will. If you see a shot, take it, don’t wait for confirmation. Kick them in the nuts as best you can. Subspace, long range comms and weapons are priority.”

He could hear his sister smiling. “Play dead, roll over, kick them in the nuts. Understood, CIC.”

“Oh, and one more thing, Thymos. Should the jamming drop, scramble a message to Tycho with our situation. Oh, and for the newbies, use the name McKenzie. That should cause enough of a buzz.”

“Roger, CIC. Scream like a little bitch and name drop if we get the chance. Aye.”

David couldn't help but smile at the girl at Comms who was silently laughing. "Good hunting, Artemis. Keep an eye on your wolf cubs. CIC out."

A few eyebrows raised at his sister's callsign. He shrugged. "Fighter pilots. I don't make the names. Anyway, Weapons Officer, you're up next." He walked over to the wiry man with the crooked nose from earlier.

"Can I just say, it's a pleasure to kick some ass with you, sir. Beats the hell out of masturbating to the same damn spot on the ceiling that kinda looks like a tit."

David wasn't sure which was more shocking, the masturbation comment, or the sir buried in the middle there. "I'm sure. Sounds boring."

"From your mouth to God's ear, sir. Let's blow some shit up."

"Yeah, speaking of that, how are we on weapons? I know Terran missiles are shit, but do we even have enough?"

The man sighed. "The sons-of-bitches consider this a *modern* system, but it ain't changed much since the last damn shooting war. I can hit 'em, but we only got about two hundred birds in the holds. They've been running these ships light."

David considered. "How's the energy compliment?"

"Rougher than burlap ass paper on a hemroid, sir. We got two oversized plasma cannons with designs older than I am, and a handful of grazers that seem the only thing worth a damn. But she's a patrol boat. More about flash than ass."

"Well, we're going to be at knife fighting range. Those plasma cannons can do some serious hurt at these distances. Plus, plasma has a great property."

"Oh?"

David's grin took on a malicious edge. "It's real easy for even shit sensors to home in on. So if you just program the missiles to fly straight at any big bursts of plasma..."

The man's eyes lit up. "...we give 'em a one-two punch right in their taint!" He was grinning. "Can do, boss. Will do. Happy to do!"

David gave him a pat on the back, and stepped back to the middle. They'd be here in seconds. It was show time.

—

Captain Yu's CIC was the model of efficiency. The *Valorous* class had been a workhorse of the Terran Fleet for nearly eighty years, and while these systems were a bit outdated compared to modern versions, he was proud of his new flagship. Walking her decks had been like stepping into the past, before the asinine ceasefire with the League, when his people were poised to take control of the galaxy and bring these ungrateful worlds back under Terran control.

After all, there was only one Humanity and both the League and this sham Confederacy were simply citizens of Mother Terra who had lost their way. One day, soon, he would be instrumental in bringing these people back under Terran rule. Until then, he was perfecting his reintegration program, and getting the wonderful benefit of glorious old warships like *Warchild*. To him, Pre-Charlemagne ship design was the height of Terran innovation; everything else was overly-automated crap created by selling their soul though those damned treaties.

"Approaching destination, sir. Scans indicate no energy signatures."

Yu raised an eyebrow. "It seems he has some skill at ship handling. Prepare for an attack from behind. Tell the *Victory* to prepare for the same."

"Aye."

His executive officer appeared at his elbow, as was her habit. She gently touched his arm, meaning she wanted a word. "Yes, exec?"

"We don't know what happened over there. The laser burst communication from the *Savage* was light on details. Captain Klein might still be in command." Her voice was quiet, just loud enough he could hear.

Yu appreciated this woman's conscientiousness. He'd had several execs over the years, and she was one of the best in the fleet. But, she was still quite far from captain material. She didn't see the big picture like he did. It wasn't her fault, she was limited by her gender, after all. He gave her a comforting smile. "We've been able to communicate ship to ship for minutes, and we've heard nothing. The *Savage* has fallen, mark my words."

She stepped closer, dropping her voice even more. "But, sir, he's just one man. We had almost a hundred officers on that ship. There's no way he could have subdued them all."

Yu turned into her, enjoying the hint of flowers she always seemed to have about her. Unlike the other women under his command, she'd been very welcoming of his advances, as all women should. It was such a chore, sometimes, disciplining these women with their wild notions planted in their brains by League propagandists, but his Exec had barely resisted at all. She was passive, allowing him free reign to do as he wished. It was refreshing when a woman knew when to be thankful.

He put his hand on her face, noticing her blush and flinch in embarrassment at the overt show of affection in front of the crew. Well, it was no secret she was his favorite. Let the crew see the rewards for dedication. "Yuri... please. Think about this for a moment. If I were taking over that ship by myself, would you doubt me?"

"No, sir." She stepped back and looked away, clearly ashamed by her failure. He let his hand fall to his side. This was a good lesson for her.

"Consider how I would have done it, then. There's a dozen ways to incapacitate a crew. The simplest would be to vent the decks to space. A viral component perhaps? Even possibly something as simple as a computer virus, allowing him to only face one or two opponents at once." He chuckled. "But there's a simpler answer. I left his sister over there, and she showed great fortitude. I have no doubt they had some way of communicating and she led a mutiny among the Freelancers. It's what I would have done. While it seems unlikely they could defeat Klein, he's not the smartest Captain I've ever worked with. I could see him being detained, at least."

His exec nodded. "Understood, sir. My apologies."

He stepped forward and touched her arm. Her shame made her recoil and he frowned. "Relax, Yuri. I'm not disappointed. Your job is to provide me counter points and question, within reason. If you'd let me step into a trap without calling me out, then we'd have had problems later."

She pointed towards the main tactical display. "We're transitioning to normal space, sir."

Always keeping me on task. She will make an excellent first wife. He stepped back to the center of the CIC. "Tactical, maintain high alert. Point defenses to maximum. I want detailed scans of the area; just because it's not emitting EM doesn't mean it's not the *Savage*."

A chorus of female voices responded with "Aye". He felt an immense sense of pride. This ship, his officers... all of it spoke of his superiority. He radiated his benign power out to all who saw him. And when the occasional jealous fool refused to acknowledge it, well, he'd show just how malicious that power could turn.

"Huge energy spike being us! Computer still working out identification, but it appears to be three SIVs consistent with a portion of the *Savage*'s fighter complement."

"Ah, a classic trap, sprung a bit too early. Tactical, shift defenses forward. Once the *Savage* attacks, feel free to use your best judgment to balance our defenses, but for the moment, assume we're about to be hit hard from the front."

"Aye."

Yu waited as the fighters did their best to seem like a bigger threat than they were. They were scoring hits, but his point defenses were handling the biggest problems well enough. He just needed to flush his opponent out. Why the hesitation? Was he out of position? Or was he trying to force an error. Yu didn't know, but that in and of itself said something about his opponent's skill.

His ship shuddered in what he knew was a large hit against an unprotected hull. His eyes darted to the tactical screen, and he saw the *Savage* appear on the sensors, right next to the fighters. He was currently blasting all weapons into the unprotected backsides of both of Yu's ships.

"Tactical, redirect defenses! Cover our rear immediately!"

He took a steadying breath. This man was unconventional, but he was still massively outgunned. "Ops, deploy fighters and relay that command to the *Victory*. No reason we need to keep taking these pot shots. Tactical, turn us around to face the *Savage*, and open a full barrage."

"Aye. Coming to bear on the *Savage*."

"Ops, damage report?"

His ops officer was a mousy woman, barely old enough for the Lieutenant J.G. insignia on her uniform. She was new to his bridge crew but already seemed to be fitting in nicely. He'd only had to discipline her once, and she seemed extra motivated after that.

"Point defenses are down in a few sections, and there's plasma fires on the hull. No other damage. *Victory* has taken some damage to secondary subspace systems—"

"Sir! Missiles just went active, unknown source. Impact in ten."

Yu had enough time to cross to the tactical simulation before his ship was rocked with impacts. Alarms sounded, and he was sent to the deck with a violent crash. He was stunned as the explosions and secondary explosions kept coming. He tried but failed to get up. Taking a deep breath, he waited for the ringing to pass. This time, when he stood, it was without incident.

"Sir, the *Victory* is venting atmosphere. Her power is failing and I'm detecting secondary explosions in her engineering section. She seems disabled."

Yu limped over to his tactical officer's chair and grabbed her hair firmly. "You will make him bleed, or I will make you bleed. Understood?"

"Y-yes, sir."

He released her and took a moment to compose herself. He hated losing his cool, but this situation had somehow gone from bad to worse. He turned his attention back to his ops officer. "Well, here we are again. Ops, damage report?"

"Uh, reports are still coming in, sir. Subspace engines seem down. Point defenses are down across fifty percent of the ship. Casualties reported in the forward missile tubes; automatic systems have failed to take over."

"Of course they did. Get some more crew to the missiles."

His exec stepped forward. "Sir, most of the available crew are Freelancers."

Sometimes he regretted his choice to surround himself with just female bridge officers. They rarely could see what needed to be done. "Round twenty of them up and put them in a cargo bay. Put a display up in the missile room, showing them. Inform them that if they so much as hesitate, you will vent that cargo bay to space. They'll be loyal, I assure you."

She hesitated until he gave her a stern look. "Yes, sir."

Turning his attention back to the tactical situation, he could see his Tactical officer had taken the encouragement to heart. *Warchild* may have been wounded, but she could still put far more firepower downrange. The *Savage* was being battered by a constant barrage; as good as that man seemed to be at ship handling, there was no way for him to win this fight. He got his best blows in, and now it was a simple punching match. Yu would win that, easily.

"Sir, over eighty percent of our fighters are gone. They are requesting to fall back."

Yu turned to his communication officer. "Eighty percent? Fine, yes, let them come in." That number was very high. "Tactical, how many fighter kills did the *Savage* get?"

"None, sir. They were all dogfighting losses."

Even more strange. "How many have they lost?"

"None, sir. These pilots are exceptionally good."

"So it would seem." He shook his head. This man had the devil's luck. "Did we ever figure out where those missiles came from?"

His tactical officer hesitated. "I think... I think they dumped them out there before we arrived. They homed in on the plasma fires."

Clever. "Estimates on their missile compliment?"

“Empty, sir. They haven’t fired a single one this entire engagement. And that missile cloud matches estimates of *Savage’s* compliment.”

“And their status?”

“They’re currently in full defensive, but our weapons are starting to get through. They can’t return fire, and their point defenses are starting to collapse. Sensors indicate they’re starting to take compounding damage. It’s just a matter of time before we hit something vital.”

Yu allowed himself a smile. This was the end game. “Bring us closer and shoot to disable, not destroy. I want to kill this man personally.”

Another series of explosions rocked the ship, before it was plunged into darkness. After a second, emergency lighting came back, but it was clear primary power was offline.

“Reactor one screamed, sir! Those fighters got a direct show on the cooling systems. Reactor two is coming online, but Engineering says it will take a few minutes.”

“Whatever we have left that’s still working, focus on those fighters. I want them dead, if you can manage it.” He was barely keeping his cool at this point. How did this man keep winning? This should be a simple fight, and yet, he insisted on fighting for every inch of ground.

“Aye, but sir, we have nothing left that can track them. Not until reactor two comes online.”

“Dammit.” He was about to give another order when the comms officer made a noise of surprise.

“Sir, we’re being hailed. They are calling themselves the *CWS Reconciliation*.”

“Cute. Send it to the main tactical display.”

Yu straightened his jacket, as the connection was made. He wasn’t expecting to see a smiling face looking back at him. The man who’d been causing him all these problems seemed down right pleased with himself.

“Captain Yu, I think I should have been more clear earlier. There was a ‘no-returns’ policy on that knife. I regret the confusion.”

Yu rolled his eyes. “We can drop the knife analogy. It’s just tedious at this point.”

The man was smirking! Smirking! “Fine by me. So, are you ready to surrender, or should my sister take another pass?”

Yu paused. The man’s sister was in one of those fighters? Leading them, no doubt. Well, that changed things, slightly. “I believe you misunderstand the situation. Those were some good

tricks, but you've run out." He glanced at his status board. His secondary reactor would be online in thirty more seconds. The timing couldn't be better.

"No, I'm pretty sure I've got a good handle on it. Your ship is disabled, mine isn't."

"Really? I think even disabled my ship is more than a match for your stolen frigate. Tactical, fire all functional weapons at the *Savage*." Yu just needed to stall for a few more seconds, and goad this idiot into having the fighters take one more run at him.

The *Warchild* fired a handful of missiles and one or two grazers at the *Savage*, which it easily deflected. The man in charge of the *Savage* laughed.

"Comms, tell my sister to take another run. Captain Yu needs convincing."

Yu did his best to control his face, trying to look impotent and frustrated. He believed it pulled it off well. The timing was nearly perfect. The fighters came in for another pass, their weapons playing ineffectively over his hull right as his ship regained full power. Point defense anti-fighter cannons came online right as the fighters were passing. The lead ship noticed and jerked, but it was too late. Multiple cannons fired at the same time and all three fighters exploded into an impressive ball of debris. Yu grinned viciously as the sensors recorded ejections from the wingmen, but nothing from the lead ship. *You see that? I killed you, you bitch!*

"Tactical, disable that frigate." Yu was laughing, watching the panic and fear suddenly on the man's face. The *Warchild's* energy weapons belched energy at their target. Quickly the *Savage's* meager defenses were overwhelmed and their grav generator overloaded. From the sensor readings their subspace engines were completely disabled.

Yu stood there, triumphant. "Well, well, sir. It appears I've disabled your ship, killed your bitch sister, and now your fate is in my hands. As it has been since I sat down next to you, those few short hours ago. If you believe in a god, I'd recommend you start praying."

Finally, Yu'd won. It was ridiculous things had gotten to this point and he was going to have to rearrange duty assignments given the loss of Klein, and possibly even Zhao. Well, after this incident, he was sure he could practically *hand* Tycho station over to his government; crew were going to be the least of his worries.

It had been a good day after all.

—

David stood stock still, letting his icy demeanor and expressionless face tell his opponent everything he wanted him to know. Glyse was gone, his ship was disabled, Yu had defeated him. Complete, total, utter defeat. You could hear a pin drop, the CIC was so silent. No one said

a word, afraid that even moving would shatter the silence of this moment. Finally, it had drug on long enough. David could feel the noose of will closing around its target.

The battle between him and Yu was over.

David tilted his head slightly to the side. "Captain Yu. Do you remember what I told you when you were kicked out of that restaurant?"

Yu's brow furrowed. "Something about I should know who I was sitting down with, or something. I'll be honest, I saw no reason to pay attention."

David nodded solemnly. "I'm going to guess you never took my advice. You don't even know my name, do you?"

Yu chuckled. "I'm about to kill you, and that's what you want to tell me? Fine. What, pray tell, is your name?"

"David McKenzie."

Yu came up short. David could see his mind was racing, trying to match everything he knew about the infamous Admiral's children against everything that had happened. And from the man's expression, he was coming to the right conclusion.

"You mean to tell me you're the son of Admiral McKenzie, Director of League Intelligence? The one who was drummed out of the military for sacrificing your own men to cover your incompetence? Well, no wonder you lost. If I wasn't going to kill you, I'd tell you to give up commanding. Your meager skill is outweighed by your gross incompetence."

The corner of David's mouth twitched a little at that comment. He couldn't afford to get angry. Not now. But the fact that a part of him *wanted* to get angry was far more infuriating. His eyes glanced at the ship's chronometer. He had to kill more time.

"I'm not the one who just murdered the Admiral's daughter."

Yu laughed. "They might just give me an admiralty for that! Or for taking *Tycho* station. Or both. Really, you're just the gift that keeps on giving, Mr. McKenzie." Yu was laughing, delighted at just how utterly perfect he thought his victory was. *As if I had any doubts, this proves he's a moron. He should be terrified, turning tail and running if he thought he actually killed my sister. He really has no idea how big the fish are in the pond he wandered into. Well, just about time to show him.*

The girl at Comms station gave him a thumbs up. He grinned back at her. "I highly doubt that's going to happen. Not when no one knows what happened here."

As David spoke, an explosion rocketed the *Warchild*, followed by another. David just stood, smiling as Yu's Ops officer informed him their long-range communication just went down, as well as their subspace engines. The explosions came from *inside* the ship.

Yu was screaming at his Ops officer. "*What? Are you telling me this was sabotage?!?*"

David held out his hand. "Captain, please. Leave the poor girl alone; I can answer that for you. Turns out, your Freelancer crews have been communicating behind your back, and my crew just convinced yours to blow some shit up. You see, you're just enough of an arrogant ass to think that everyone on your ship was loyal to you. Oh, but wait, you kidnapped most of them and made them work for you, out of fear you'd kill their families or loved ones at your work camp. But, that only works as long as they're afraid, right? What happens once someone removes that fear?" David made an explosion gesture with his hands.

Yu was glaring daggers at him. "What, you and your father are going to swoop in and save the day? Impossible. You don't know where it is! One call and I can have every traitor on that station killed!"

"A call you can no longer make."

You stumbled back a step. "I..."

David took a step closer to the camera. "You see, I didn't need to beat you. In fact, I couldn't. Not before you murdered all those people. You probably would've even gotten away with it. Now don't get me wrong, a couple of hours ago? Yeah, I didn't give a shit about collateral damage. You'd hurt me. Worse, you'd hurt my sister. I was going to make you bleed, and then you were going to die."

"Impossible! You couldn't— *Dear god, what is that?*"

David felt grim enjoyment watching as Yu reacted to the new image his Comm officer had put up. Instead of the CIC, it was a live feed from the cargo bay.

"That is what I did to Klein. Oh, say hi. I think he can still hear you. His brain's still *technically* alive, though I doubt what's left would even still be human at this point..."

Yu doubled over, grabbing his stomach. It seemed like he was desperately trying not to be sick; a battle he was losing. David signaled the Comms officer to switch back to him. "You see, Captain, my father, my sister, and myself all play at a very different level from most people. It's not a question of if I can kill you. It's just a question of how many people around us have to die before we get to you. As you so rightly pointed out, it was that kind of selfish thinking that got me kicked out of the military."

Yu was kneeling on his deck, breathing heavily. David waited for a reaction, but the man seemed to be focused on stopping the heaving. *Might as well continue.* “While you’re collecting yourself, allow me to assure you I’ve turned over a new leaf. As long as they surrender, I have every intention of letting your crew live. We’ll even turn them back over the People’s Republic, if that’s what they want. Those who’re done with the Republic, however, are more than welcome on Tycho before setting out to make their own way, or hell, if anyone wants to flip and become an intelligence asset, I know a guy.” David chuckled.

“I-impossible! None of my crew would turn traitor!”

“Sure, maybe. But maybe not. Either way, you have a ship full of pissed off Freelancers, and a crew of either co-conspirators, or —I’m guessing— victims. You see, I noticed Klein picked like minded people for his crew. I suspect you hand-picked yours as well. But you wouldn’t pick potential rivals, no, you’d pick potential victims. Assuming my read on you is accurate, at any rate. It generally is, though.”

Yu pushed himself to his feet. “And that’s where you’re wrong. Tactical, fire all missiles at that smug son of a bitch. End this.”

David smirked. He didn’t know how this was going to go down, but he had a plan for if Yu actually managed to get weapons off. The man wouldn’t get more than one final shot. Torturing him like this was just icing on the cake.

Yu’s Ops officer just looked at him in confusion. “Sir, the missile room’s empty. I told you that earlier.”

Yu whirled round on his exec. “Yuri! I told you to put the Freelancers in there!”

The exec stepped closer. Her face was full of hatred and disgust. “You told me to round up twenty of them and put them in a cargo bay as a threat to the others if they didn’t work. Had I done so, those twenty would now be dead, as that cargo bay is currently vented to space. But you knew that the designs of these old ships strategically placed cargo bays over crucial systems to absorb the damage. You wanted them to die.”

“What does it matter? They’re just Freelancer trash! They don’t deserve the kindness of dying for the Republic!”

David had to keep from laughing as the woman pulled her sidearm on him. “Do you remember when you first found the base? You asked for volunteers. But you never bothered to ask *why* we volunteered. I had to be your exec to get close to you. And now, thanks to this man, I have my chance.” She pulled the trigger, putting a plasma bolt through his leg. He crumpled to the ground.

“You *bitch!*”

“Captain Yu, under The Uniform Code of Conduct for Members of the People’s Republic Armed Forces, Article 10631, I am relieving you of command. The charges are knowingly and actively committing unsanctioned acts of aggression against citizens of a sovereign state, violations of the Ethical Treatment of Prisoners Treaty of 2431, and acts unbecoming an officer of the People’s Republic.” She was breathing heavily, but she had a grim look of satisfaction on her face. “My father was a Freelancer, you piece of shit.”

The man with the crooked nose let out a whoop, and David’s whole CIC erupted in cheers for the exec. It was probably one of the most bizarre things he’d ever seen, Freelancers cheering for a Terran officer. It took a few minutes for everyone to calm down, meanwhile two armed security officers restricted Yu, but not before several of his female officers took turns kicking him, or hitting him with whatever was handy. Finally, the exec had put a stop to it.

“Sorry you had to see that, Captain McKenzie. I am Commander Sato, temporary captain of the *TRS Warchild*. Are you authorized to speak for either the Confederacy, the League, or your father? I wish to discuss terms of our surrender and immediate cessation of hostilities.”

David shook his head no. “Unfortunately, dishonorably discharged officers don’t hold much sway in the League, and I’d hate to put my father in a bind by speaking for him. I am the Exec of the *Spring’s Endeavor*, but I don’t think that’s all that helpful to you. My Captain is rather connected, though, so maybe?” He paused, as if listening to something. He was getting better at dramatic pauses, he felt. “You know what, if you can wait another few seconds, I believe the exact people you need to talk to will be here.”

She gave him a curious look.

He held up a finger. “Wait for it... ah, there they are. Commander Sato, I’d like you to meet my Godmother and her friends.”

As he spoke, the *Ex Nihilo*, one of the most recognizable ships in the galaxy and known to be piloted by the infamous Lizbeth Locke, dropped out of subspace. Behind her was the *Spring’s Endeavour*, and just about every pirate ship that had been hanging around Tycho station. All in all, twenty ships of various sizes, all of them armed to the teeth, dropped well within weapon’s range of the *Warchild*.

David’s screen split as Liz’s face appeared, with his sister next to her. “*Warchild*, this is... well, you know who I am. And don’t worry, his comms officer has been relaying the whole conversation, so I’m caught up. Anyway, back to business. While my *godson* here can’t speak for either the Confederacy or the League, I can speak for Tycho Station, and arrange conversations with anyone else you need, including the League. Just so you know, Glyse McKenzie here wasn’t actually killed, though I’m sure her theatrics looked really good.” Liz turned to Glyse. “Yes, yes, we’re all really proud of you.” Turning back she gave Sato one of her trademark mischievous grins. “Unfortunately, we were also made aware of your whole

kidnapping, work camp scheme, and I have to say there's a whole fleet of pissed off people looking for an excuse to pull just a ridiculous number of triggers. So, I'd suggest we come up with *something* to give them. I suspect you've got a few ideas."

Sato swallowed, clearly nervous at navigating this particular negotiation. "I.. see Mr McKenzie was merely stalling Yu... right. Well played." She paused, gathering herself.

David couldn't help but interject. "Also, uh, since we're to the part where we reveal the magic trick... we're not *actually* disabled. We just put on a little show during that last barrage and turned off our subspace engines. Oh, we're beat up, but still in this one, if he had to be. So, yeah, we'd've been fine even if Yu *had* fired all those missiles. Not to steal your thunder, but... figured you might want to know. For your report, or something."

Sato's eyes were wide. "I'm.. stunned. You're a terrifying opponent, Mr. McKenzie."

David laughed. "Me? Nah. It's these crazy bastards who came up with half these ideas. I just coordinated their efforts. Seriously, though, I don't get your government's insistence to fight these people. They're scary good."

"So was my father. These people will always have my respect." She turned to address Liz. "In light of events, I offer a complete surrender. I will turn over Captain Yu immediately, and I also offer the location of the base where the other prisoners are being held." She nodded to someone off screen and from Liz's grin, the coordinates were received. "One final request, if I may?"

Liz raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? Go for it."

Sato swallowed again. "Not only do I wish to disavow the acts of Captain Yu, but I would like to provide a list of officers complicit in those acts. Some of us were less involved than others."

Liz nodded. "See, unlike your people, we actually know what common decency is. So here's the deal, we're going to pick up those two pilots who ejected, then I'm going to land, take that piece of shit you call a 'captain', and leave my goddaughter behind. The rest of this fleet will search for survivors from the *Victory*, and then *Warchild* back to Tycho. From there, I'm sure the place will be crawling with politicians and ambassadors in hours. But I don't want to wait to hit that base, so as soon as *Warchild*'s back, you and me are going to have a talk. We'll let the politicians get this whole mess sorted while we do the job that needs doing. If you're serious about disavowing Yu, you'll help make this right."

David could see a twitch in Sato's eye at that last phrase. "Listen, I know it must feel like you'll never be clean, and this will haunt you the rest of your life. Maybe it will. But I've always found that if you channel that feeling and use it to do some good, it makes it easier to sleep at night. And, anyway, you want those Freelancers free just as much as we do. This is your chance."

The woman closed her eyes. "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

David cut the communication and turned to face his impromptu bridge crew. "Alright, you sons-of-bitches, let's limp this thing back to Tycho, and the first round's on me!" The whole CIC broke out into cheers again.

His sister couldn't bitch anymore about him not having friends. He'd just made a whole damn ship full.

Epilogue

The station had been a mad house for days as diplomats, officers, pirate kings, mobsters, and even tourists arrived at Tycho station. Everyone wanted a piece of the drama. He didn't mind; it was times like these that made a spy's life easier. With so much chaos, it was easy to slip in between the cracks and go unnoticed. And when you were a career spy like him, those were the moments you found a nice place to sit, a cute girl to bring you drinks, and you just enjoyed the view. And, as far as the spy was concerned, there was no better view than a table right next to the railing on the top level of the Promenade. You could look down and see the entirety of Tycho station from up there.

As he enjoyed his drink, a very agitated man in full dress uniform and the rank of Commodore sat down across from him. He looked both angry and concerned. The spy would have wagered his favorite flask that the man was both angry about the wrong things, and not worried about the right ones. *I wouldn't be here if he was, would I?*

"Your people took their sweet time! I've been on this wretched station for almost a full day before your man made contact! Now I want to know how you plan on fixing this!" The veins in the man's neck were an unhealthy looking purple.

"Nyet." The spy held up his finger as savored his drink. The station's vodka was really quite good.

The Commodore half rose out of his chair, spittle flying from his mouth. "They have my *son!* I demand you fix this *immediately!*"

"Nyet." He said it even more pronounced. Maybe the man would get the point this time.

"Do you know who I *am?! How dare you refuse my request!*"

"Don't care. Is not how do things." The spy gave the Commodore an apologetic half shrug.

The man seemed even more flustered at the spy's response. "You'll care once I have you stripped of your rank and branded a traitor!" The man was standing up to leave when the spy reached across the table, grabbing his wrist.

"Sit. Drink." The spy slid his half empty glass of vodka across the table to the poor man. It really was the least he could offer him. *Though more than he deserves.*

As the man stared at the glass in disgust, the cute waitress who'd been serving him came bounding up with another glass. While the spy considered himself a homospecist, he could understand why so many people fell under Lyndri wiles. This girl was quite cute, despite her young age. And she had the widest, most infectious smile he'd ever seen. You could just tell

today was a great day for her. *If I was a younger man. Or drunker. Much, much drunker... ok, no, not that drunk.*

He took the glass from the girl and then looked at the Commodore. "Well? Is rude not to drink."

The man squinted his eyes and took a sip. He coughed and pushed the glass away from him. The spy did his best not to roll his eyes. *If there was any doubt the man had no taste...*

"Good. Drink more. You need it."

"I have no intention of sitting here drinking this wretched stuff while those cretins and murderers—"

He dismissed the officer with a wave of his hand. "Tell me. Who caught your son?"

The pompous man wrinkled his nose. "What does it matter? Some Freelancer trash. And they killed a lot of good officers doing it! I demand justice!"

He let out a long sigh. "This?" He gestured to the station with his drink. "Is Freelancer station. In Freelancer space, despite what government say. Is good to know lay of enemy territory, nyet? Even better, know accusers, da?"

The Commodore crossed his arms. "Rubbish. You and I both know this is Terran space. We just have to *remind* this filth of that."

Worse than stupid, he's a true believer. Poor fool. "You know name McKenzie?"

The Commodore blinked, his bluster turning to confusion. "Of course I do."

"Da. Good. Man who discovered little operation? David McKenzie."

The blood drained from the captain's face. "T-that—"

"That McKenzie, da." The career spy allowed himself an inner smile. "Was on station for leave. Visiting sister."

"S-she's here, too? Wait..."

He nodded. "Da. You're getting it. Kharasho."

The Commodore tried to rally. "Well, if an Admiral's children were involved in the attack on my son—"

The spy held up a finger, before sliding a tablet across the table to the officer. He played the video file that was pulled up. It was footage of the attack, clearly showing the man's son and two other Captains assaulting the McKenzie children, the kidnapping of McKenzie's daughter, and the murder of the waitress. The spy watched with grim satisfaction as the last bit of color drained out of the man's face.

"I... I need to—"

"*Sit. Drink.* Am not finished. Swipe to next screen." He watched as the man read through the League Intelligence report. If there was a color paler than white, this man found it.

"This... this is everything. The whole operation. How did you..."

He shrugged. "Unimportant. But they know everything. Raided place day ago. Hundreds of witnesses. Speaking to cameras about time you sat."

The man made to stand again. The spy slammed his hand on the table. "*Sit! Drink!*" The officer didn't hesitate this time, he just downed the glass. The spy shoved him the rest of his current one, and the Lyndri girl brought him a fresh glass, like clockwork.

With some silence, the officer has regained some small amount of composure. "H-how did they hit it so fast?"

"Do you know station owner?"

The man gave him a wary look. "She's supposedly the lost scion to House Simon."

"Lizbeth Locke. Never met, but reputation is well known. Less well known is fact she is Godmother to McKenzie kids."

"Jesus..."

Leaning forward, the spy nodded gravely. "*Da.*" He stood, draining his drink as the Commodore looked confused. "Stay. Drink. Anatolie will stay with you." As he spoke a rather generic looking man from the table behind him casually slipped out of his chair and into the one the spy had just left.

"W-where are you going?"

"Central. To give sincere apologies. Admiral just arrived, you see."

"W-what...how..." The man was staring at his own hands, utterly helpless.

The spy crossed over and put a hand on the officer's shoulder. "Your son have knack for pissing off powerful people. My condolences. Unfortunate for him. Unfortunate for *you*. McKenzie has pound of flesh, Command, not so much." He could see the rising terror in the man's eyes. It repulsed him. "You should consider retirement." He glanced at the railing as the tell-tail humming of the anti-suicide grav system switched off, exactly as it was supposed to.

The man looked at the railing, understanding dawning on him. "N-no..."

He squeezed the doomed man's shoulder and offered him a fake half smile. "Is more honorable than being shot as traitor. At least I give option."

The spy ignored the man's pleasing look and straightened just as the waitress arrived. He turned back to the man, holding up his finger as if he'd just remembered something. "You should talk to waitress. Much in common. Sister knew your son. *Briefly*." He turned his back as the Lyndri girl's low growl and cheshire smile sent the man scrambling from his chair.

The spy simply turned and made his way down the promenade. Behind him he heard the traitor scream, the sound of tables and chairs knocking over, and then someone calling out, "He's going to jump!" As onlookers rushed to the railing, the spy kept walking. He really did have to go to Central and apologize. He was hoping McKenzie would be as gracious as he'd been in the past.

Almost a minute later he heard a scream from far below. The traitor must have just landed in the Arboretum. *So the Lyndri didn't get him before he jumped. Wouldn't've called that.*

Gregorie chuckled. *Should've gotten her number.*