

Cold Brew

The sound thundered around him, never fading. It roared into his ears until he thought they would bleed. He gripped his controls, teeth clenched with tears of frustration in his eyes.

Suddenly, like a door slamming, the noise stopped. He hurdled into the vacuum, propelled by the explosion. The pilot could feel his body expanding, fluids leaking from his eyes. As the air rushed out of his lungs, any scream of terror or distress disappeared into space. Debris whipped past him as his eyes focussed on the distant lights from the engines of a starship speeding away. His vision grew blurry as the vacuum did its terrible work on his body. Despite the situation, he fought to stay conscious, eyes staring at those fading lights. The unfortunate creature succumbed, left in the darkness and reduced to just another object to endlessly drift through space.

Kris sat up suddenly. He breathed rapidly and his heart pounded. The geroo rubbed a furred forearm across his eyes, clearing up any trace of tears as he tried to calm down.

Just a dream, he thought. Miserably corrected himself, *Not just a dream*. The same dream tormented him for years. On a recurring basis, he experienced that sequence of events, feeling the emotions of the pilot. Not every night, but more often than he liked. He took a few deep breaths before throwing his thin sheets aside and swinging a leg off of his rack.

Captain Kris was a neat, organized, sort of person. Everything had a place and was where it should be. The deck was clean, his desk organized, and every personal hygiene tool sat neatly, at 90-degree angles. After a moment's pause, resting at the side of the bed, he stood up and gave a stretch. The cracks and pops along his spine reminded him of his age. Shaking his head a little, the geroo began his morning routine. He stepped in front of his mirror and began to neatly comb at the fur on his face, trying to sooth the disheveled fibers into alignment with the contour of his

round cheeks and jawline. After he was satisfied, the captain carefully replaced the comb right where it had come from, seeking his toothbrush instead. Particular about his teeth, Kris brushed them for a solid five minutes. The aging geroo spat the water and paste into the sink, where suction immediately slurped it away for recycling.

A few seconds later, as Kris clipped his holster into place, a synthesized voice spoke from a speaker nestled into the beige overhead, “Good morning, Captain Kris. May I assist you?”

“Cold brew,” the captain mumbled.

“Right away,” the voice replied.

And right away, there came a whirring of machinery within the walls. A cup dropped onto a tray table seated into the bulkhead. An unseen dispenser delivered the coffee into the cup in the form of a thick stream. Kris threw a heavy black coat — a symbol of his rank — over his shoulders and placed his sidearm neatly into its holster. The geroo scooped up his breakfast coffee before leaving his chambers.

Stepping into the main hall, he could tell he was the only one up, save for the night watches. He usually rose before the rest of the day crew, so the captain was not surprised. Kris had twenty six other creatures onboard, and though loyal, only a foolish captain let his guard down. Rising early, sleepy as he was, helped instill a sense of omnipotence into the ranks. Casting his eyes about, the captain took the couple of steps that separated his cabin from the bridge. Plopping himself down in his chair, he called up the navigation display with a small paw gesture.

The ship drifted off course, as it tended to pull to starboard over great distances. Kris didn’t concern himself about it. The captain found his head swimming with thoughts of his

dream. The familiar feelings of guilt and sadness ate away at his insides, gnawing like a hungry animal that seemed to have no limit to its appetite. Kris sipped his drink and leaned his head over to rest on the pads of an open paw. The captain's mind drifted back, replaying the memories and moments that defined his questionable career.

He huddled in his cell with the other slaves. The stench of panic invaded his nostrils. Seax, a ringel, tried to reassure the geroo slaves around him. Acrid smoke drifted through the life-support systems. Sometimes it smelled like an electrical fire, but other times it smelled of burning flesh and fur. Someone screamed in the hallway alongside the thud of something heavy. The low thud of stomping paws dominated the sound profile.

We must be under attack, he thought to himself. Around his cell, other creatures seemed to be arriving at the same conclusion. Seax was the only ringel in the cell. His long tailed curled up behind him, as he and the geroo drew closer together.

Eventually the commotion subsided. With the sounds of combat dying down, Seax crept away from the huddle, inching towards the door.

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

Seax waved a dismissive paw, "I am just gonna get a better listen..."

Kris placed a reassuring paw on his fellow geroo. When his geroo friend nodded to him, Seax crept paw over paw, his tail held high in alert. Reaching the door, he pressed close to the metal fixture, ear flush against the surface. . But the sounds of fighting and dying, at least from

across the cell, had themselves ceased. Seax closed his eyes to listen more carefully. There was only silence.

A sudden metallic buzz filled the air. All twenty of the ringel's claws audibly scrapped the deck and door as he stumbled back, scrambling for composure. He leaped backwards as the magnetic locks on the door retracted. Seax's ears perked and eyes widened as he pressed back into the huddle. Kris's heavy arm wrapped around the ringel's chest. Everyone held their breath, unsure how many more they might take.

A soldier burst into the cell, a laser tipped sight scanning over the scared slaves. It emerged wearing a helmet and visor and an entire heavy environment suit that hid every emotion from the frightened creatures. A second soldier followed the first. The slaves stood perfectly still as the soldiers' weapons roved over the room briefly. As the rifle came to rest aimed directly at Seax's face, he turned his indigo face away, ears pinned down submissively.

The soldier barked a command at them, voice masked through speakers embedded on either side of the helmet. It reached out and grabbed Seax by the shoulder roughly hauling him forward. The ringel yelped in protest, but didn't resist as the creature forced him to his knees in the center of the cell. Seax held his breath, putting his paws up in surrender and not daring to look up with the rifle still pointing at him. The soldier barked again, pointing to the deck beside Seax.

The other slaves took the hint and quickly fell in beside Seax, dropping to their knees and raising their paws. Several quiet, tense moments passed. The garbled communications Seax could hear sounded familiar, but the dialect was strange. He focussed on trying to make out the messages.

The soldier reached down, grabbing Seax the loose, fluffy fur on the side of his neck and hauled him up to his paws. With a rough shove, the ringel stumbled into the passageway. Though confused, Seax understood: the soldiers had already emptied several other cells and their occupants kneeled, backs against the bulkhead. Seax assumed a similar position as his cellmates filed in. Kris knelt down directly to his right.

The ringel's long, fluffy, striped tail came to rest against the base of Kris's much thicker one, offering comfort. He could smell the distress hanging in the air, even over the scent of blood from the anup bodies, their former guards, that littered the passageway. The two chanced a glance at each other as soldiers took up positions to watch over the assembled captives, flanking the creatures. An order shouted in the distance brought all the soldiers to attention.

A soldier several heads taller than the others marched purposefully down the passageway. When he arrived in the middle of the assembled slaves, he placed a device on the deck. A moment later, a hologram sprung from the top, depicting the form of a large, dreadful krakun.

His dark, scar-riddled blue face idly looked between the slaves. In his teeth, he clenched a thick cigar as long and as fat as a geroo, smoke rolling up from his nostrils and the corners of his maw. A black cape draped his shoulders, several medals dangling from it. He sat up on his haunches and addressed them in a clear, but low guttural voice, using the common dialect of krakun.

"Today is your lucky day, you unfortunate souls. I am Commodore Qursak, and I have liberated you," the fearsome creature spoke out in the dead silence.

A few moments passed as the slaves digested the information. Somewhere down the hall, a slave cheered. Other slaves slowly joined the cheer. Seax glanced at Kris and shook his head in

warning. As cheering spread through the passageway, Commodore Qursak roared out an order, stomping one large claw up and down. The soldiers quickly trained their weapons on the slaves again. The passageway fell silent.

The commodore spoke again, devoid of empathy, “You are all en-route to The Hive, my base of operations. You will fall into place and make yourself useful in some capacity. My crew will ensure you find purpose. Return to your cells for the remainder of the journey. I want quiet in this passageway.”

The hologram flicked off. Without hesitation the soldiers began yelling again. Seax recognized the language as krakun, but it sounded different. He didn’t understand some of the words. The ringel and his cellmates quickly filed back into their cell, not wanting to upset any of the soldiers. Once inside, the heavy metal door slammed shut, the magnetic locks sliding into place. Seax took Kris’s paw and squeezed. Then the lights went out.

Several days later, the lights popped back on. Kris felt the shifts in the ship’s momentum. He knew they must have arrived at their destination. A soldier opened the door to their cell and escorted them out. Kris and his fellow slaves were lined up, shoulder to shoulder in a hangar bay. An anup walked down the line, his canine face painted in red stripes to contrast with his jet black fur. Around his long muzzle he wore a respirator. He stopped in front of each slave, a clipboard and stylus in his paws. He used the clipboard for all of his gestures as he approached Kris, scribbling notes as he walked.

“Name, Age, Skills?” the anup said, voice muffled by the breathing device while scarce looking past his clipboard.

“Kris, sir. Uh... Twenty-seven. And I... uh...” Kris started.

“Fantastic,’ the anup cut him off.

He stopped in front of Seax, “Name, Age, Skills?”

Seax replied, “They call me, Seax, sir. Twenty-six years old and I’m good with my paws.”

“Fantastic,” the anup said as he noted the response.

As the anup marched on to the next slave, a clamor arose from the ship behind them. Several soldiers carted a terrarium out of the cargo bay of the ship. The anup stopped and looked up.

“What is that?” he called out to the other soldiers.

“We don’t know, but it’s very angry. It won’t tell us.” A soldier called back.

The anup glanced to Seax, “What is that?”

“That’s Bindi, sir. He’s a hekiru,” Seax replied, his ears forward earnestly.

“Is he useful?” the anup asked.

Seax looked unsure a moment, then he quickly spat out, “Oh very. He is a sulfur breather, though.”

“Fantas-,” the anup marched a few steps forward before pausing. He called out to his fellow soldiers, “Take that little beast to the commodore.”

Kris watched the little creature. With its huge ears and bobtail, the hekiru moved from one end of his terrarium to the other in agitation. The hekiru’s black eyes darted back and forth as he snarled at the soldiers carting him along. The soldiers disregarded his efforts.

When the anup had recorded every slave present, he marched back to the front of the formation.

He lowered his clipboard to his side and began to speak to them, so that they could understand, “Unfortunately, we do not have the resources to send you back to wherever you came from. You will all live and work here, while you pay off your debt to Commodore Qursak. Currently, you all owe a thousand golds for the expenses involved in your liberation. Nobody is authorized to leave until their debt is paid in full. This is a rough place. Do not act foolish or you will find a cruel punishment, from either authorities or your fellow citizens. Welcome to The Hive. Your next stop is decontamination.”

Silence reigned across the hangar deck. Kris leaned in and whispered to Seax, “Did we just get enslaved again?”

The ringel pinned his ears back in displeasure, “Yeah, pal. We did.”

Kris and his fellow “former” slaves followed a soldier into a harsh metal chamber, as many as could fit. The soldier lined them up as several workers in hazmat suits entered the room, scooping up hoses from the bulkheads. A single barked order brought the hoses to life. The workers swept the hoses back and forth over the furred masses. Kris tried to cover his face, but the foul smelling chemical came from nozzles on the deck and the overhead as well, ensuring every new arrival was completely drenched. Kris thought the process would last forever. When the decontamination chemicals ceased, the new arrivals all stood, shivering and hugging themselves or others nearby tight for warmth.

The workers in hazmat suits left the room. Kris felt his temper rising, but recognized how little he could do about the situation. His short, thick fur bristled. Seax pressed up against the side of his body. The ringel was a lot thinner than Kris was, made more apparent by his ragged

looking soaked fur. Where ringel were thin and lithe, geroo had thick foundations. Kris found some amusement in seeing his friend with all the fluff out of his fur. Still he offered what warmth he could.

Soldiers arrived and escorted the group into an auditorium, where slowly but surely, all of the slaves from Kris's ship arrived. When everyone was present and seated, the anup with the clipboard took his place on the stage. The paint had been cleaned from his face, but he still wore his respirator.

"My name is Korek. I am the transitions officer for The Hive. Now that you are all clean, I would like to discuss the nature of your new home. Such a rigorous decontamination process is necessary for all new arrivals because the disparity between species here at The Hive is vast," as he spoke a diagram of the base appeared behind him.

"The crew come from all over the universe. There are creatures here you have never seen before. As a result, The Hive is constructed in such a way that there are many different atmospheres present. The atmospheric makeup of an area will be posted outside of that area. Depending on the danger, we try to maintain some protective equipment nearby, but no promises. The common areas of The Hive are designed for geroo and ringel, the most prominent population at this time. The atmospheric makeup of chambers within The Hive can be configured to accommodate new arrivals, or fluctuation in populations, so it is imperative you pay close attention to any airlock you walk through," the projection illustrated chemical levels rising and falling in a few different passageways.

"You will always have a way to get wherever you need to go. In the very center of The Hive, there are gravity wells that can bring you up or down levels. All spaces are connected to

the center in some way,” the diagram of the base stayed illuminated behind him as the anup finished, “Are there any questions?”

The crowd of newcomers remained quiet.

“Good. I am done talking to you,” Korek said, stepping away from center stage.

As he stepped away a crowd of other creatures took his place. Kris watched as the mass lined up. Some were in hazmat suits, some wore respirators, and some wore nothing at all. They argued and scuffled before some semblance of peace reigned over the congregation. When their quarrel seemed satisfied, a single creature, the leftmost positioned on the stage stepped forward. It lifted a clipboard and read off five names, announcing that they would be joining the paraloft division.

The pattern continued, each member of the group stepping forward and calling out names, claiming members for their own ddepartments or needs.

A ringel stepped up, “Seax. Gunner of *The Father Claw*.”

Kris glanced at Seax, who glanced back a forced smile on his ears. Seax got up from his seat and made his way down to meet the ringel who had chosen him. They touched paws. Kris watched ringel lean forward and touch cheeks with Seax. Kris settled into his seat dejectedly. A few more captains and division chiefs crossed the stage as Kris stared off in silence.

“Kris. Navigator of *The Talon III*,” a voice called out.

Kris snapped back to reality at the mention of his name. He stood dutifully, adjusting his necklace a little and making his way down to the stage. A geroo met him halfway, offering a paw in greeting. Kris touched a paw to his.

“Captain Frisk. It cost me five extra gold of debt to be here. Please don’t disappoint me,” the geroo said, a smile on his ears.

Kris looked over his new captain’s dark brown fur, seeing flecks of grey from age. The younger geroo nodded a few times, perking his ears seriously, “You can count on me, Captain.”

Bindi’s temper ran out of fuel. By the time the soldiers finished carting his terrarium to the destination, he felt exhausted. He sat on the floor of the sealed tank breathing his sulfur environment angrily. The soldiers opened an airlock and pushed him through. Bindi got up and growled at them as they retreated, cycling the environment behind them. The hekiru’s large ears pinned back as he pouted at being separated from the ship.

“They say you breath sulfur.” A low, grumbling voice said.

Bindi his glare away from the airlock for the first time. His saw meter long teeth as a billow of smoke washed around his enclosure.

The hekiru sprung to his paws and staggered backwards. Commodore Qursak held his chin close to the deck, eyes focusing on Bindi.

“Do you?” the commodore inquired.

Bindi signed at the monstrous alien, now half panicked, “*Yes yes yes.*”

The commodore frowned, not understanding the gestures. He reached a claw forward and used his talons to pry the aperture to the terrarium away. Bindi dropped to his rear, covering his head with his arms and closing his eyes as the krakun unsealed his environment. The commodore used a talon to push the terrarium on it’s side, sending the hekiru sliding into the wall of his tank. Bindi stayed frozen in place a few moments.

“Out,” he said, simply, jerking his large head to one side.

Bindi scrambled out of the terrarium and up to his hind legs. He clutched his paws together across his midsection uneasily, avoiding eye contact,

“You understand me. Can you speak?” Qursak asked, growing less patient by the minute.

Bindi sensed the danger and quickly nodded.

“Then speak,” the krakun demanded.

Bindi opened his mouth and his voice struggled forward, not making any discernible sounds.

The commodore stared at his attempts, “It doesn’t matter. You can understand me and you don’t need a suit. What was that? Some kind of signed language?”

Bindi nodded, displaying a few gestures.

Qursak breathed a krakun’s lungs worth of cigar smoke down around the hekiru, “You’re probably the luckiest pirate in The Hive. Since you can’t tell me your name, I am just going to call you Squall.”

Bindi coughed and sputtered, waving his paws around in hopes of spreading the smoke away from him.

The commodore gave a low cackle, “I have not learned a new language in so long. Show me some signs, Squall.”

Bindi took a breath, still adjusting to the fact he didn’t have to live inside a terrarium anymore. He nodded and began going over basic signs, trying to find a way to explain each to the krakun.

Several years passed without incident. Kris and his fellows fell into the local pirate dialect. The language derived mostly from krakun but with a mish mash of other words and rules thrown in. Not all of the slaves that arrived with Kris and Seax still lived, but none had left The Hive. Mostly they died from violence, unable to adjust to the lifestyle. The Hive turned out to be the cold and dangerous place Korek had warned them of.

Captain Frisk cared little for The Hive or Commodore Qursak. Kris, serving as the navigator for *The Talon III*, ran several lazy missions, enjoying easy catches. The downside remained that the debts to their krakun commodore largely went unchanged. The crew made enough that nobody bothered them, but not enough to make significant progress towards their freedom. The truth was that no crew really did. After berthing, messing, fuel, and munitions, it took a miracle to not break even. The captains of the ships were only captains by name. The commodore owned and controlled every ship that docked at The Hive.

Out in space, Captain Frisk lamented about the state of things. Frisk had been captain of *The Talon III* for years. His leisurely attitude made him popular among other captains, even if he didn't haul much loot home. He was a little taller than most geroo, though thin in his build with dark brown eyes to match his fur. He wore thick rings around his muscular tail to compliment his necklace.

Frisk reclined in his chair, an oxygen mask fixed across his face, "I tell ya, beasts. One of these days we're all goin' to get out of this life."

A voice, dampened by a different sort of respirator snorted, "Oh yeah? What is the balance on your debt, Captain?" Osp replied. He was an anup and relied on his respirator to

supply him with the bromine compounds familiar with his home planet. Heavy dark lenses covered his eyes.

Frisk ignored the stab, “Won’t matter. We’re out here, lookin’ for opportunity. I bet one day; the perfect opportunity is gonna drift right by. And I ain’t talkin’ about bloodshed. I’m talkin’ ‘bout a real way out. Maybe we find a nice ship worth runnin’ with. Maybe we hit a big score. Pay off all our debts. Maybe we find nice folks ta hide us until we get ta civilized space.”

Kris looked up from his consoles, also wearing an oxygen mask. “*Civilized space*”. *Did such a place even exist*, he thought to himself. The young navigator pulled at the uncomfortable compression suit that engulfed him. He hated the thing, but Frisk had explained it was essential to keep him from passing out when the tiny ship pulled excessive g-forces, “Is that a healthy point of view, captain? You know the commodore will kill you just for thinking about it.”

Frisk replied, “Whatever. Is this really livin’?”

Nobody said anything. All three of them were well aware what the captain meant. In the pirate lifestyle, it was life or death. Sometimes that choice meant someone else had to die. An hour passed as a solemn silence engulfed the crew.

Kris’s console suddenly lit up in alarm. The junior navigator fumbled with his headset before calling out, “Captain, we have an incoming vessel!”

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

As the ship entered range, Osp waited patiently. At just the right moment, the anup detonated pre-positioned fold disruptors. The target appeared, transforming from a blur to a huge ship, a freighter, ripe for the taking. The ship defensive shields remained dormant, so Frisk ordered *The Talon III* brought around. Kris did as he was bid, bringing the ship alongside the

target. Osp initiated the boarding gear. *The Talon III* latched to the neighboring vessel, both mechanically and magnetically.

As *The Talon III* pressed into the hull of the freighter, Kris released the harnesses that kept him in his seat. The other two members of his crew followed suit. They used paw holds and cables to pull themselves to the armory where they donned boarding gear.

The armory on the ship was only accessible so long as boarding was initiated. Kris felt the familiar nerves in his gut as he put his paws through the armored environmental suit. He lowered the helmet over his head, twisting until a hiss of air confirmed he would be protected on the target vessel. The geroo still found rifles unsettling to hold, but he swallowed the nerves, moving into the now pressurized boarding lock.

Two door integrity protected the interior of *The Talon III* from the vacuum as Osp brought a cutting torch to the airlock on the freighter. Kris covered the six as the anup cut through the locks on the door. The geroo was thankful for the helmet as smoke rose from the melting metal. When he was done, Osp, still in zero gravity, used a sturdy pawhold and a heavy boot, backed by the mass of an anup, to kick the door open.

The boarding party crossed into the artificial gravity carefully. Security on board was nonexistent. Kris wasn't sure that was a good sign. The ship almost certainly had no real valuables. The geroo managed a heavy breath, relieved that at least there wouldn't be much fighting. The crew moved as a team, working their way to the bridge.

When they arrived, Frisk popped his head through the door, but quickly withdrew it. Hostile fire bounced off the door and bulkhead in response to their presence. Kris felt a heavy arm across his chest. Osp pressed him against the bulkhead. The geroo's ears blushed, a little

embarrassed, but he didn't say anything, glad for the protection. Frisk was still the closest to the door, a look of concentration on his ears.

After a few moments of the reckless fire, a yelp was heard from the bridge. Frisk heard the metal clatter to the deck.

"Never fired a pistol before, then? The cheap'ns get hot real quick," the aging geroo yelled into the bridge.

"Get lost, pirates! Leave us in peace!" a female geroo replied.

Frisk leaned forward a little, peering into the bridge, "I'll make ya a deal. Kick that pistol over here an' we won't kill either of ya. We won't even hurt ya."

"Like we are going to believe you, pirate!" the female voice responded.

"Aye, I may be a pirate, but I speak the truth. You're a slave. Ya don't own any of this. It ain't worth dying over. Truth be told, I don't own my ship either. Trust me, I am perfectly capable of killin' the two of you. I don't feel in the mood to kill I don't have to," Frisk called back.

"I want to believe you, but you've attacked my ship and threatened the lives of my crew," she said.

"Honored parents, and parents of my parents, in a chain unbroken, like the necklaces we wear, leading us all the way back home," Frisk called into the bridge.

"You aren't one of us, pirate. We're better off without you," she called back.

"Flash 'em," Frisk ordered.

Osp obliged, pulling the pin on a flash canister and tossing it into the room. They heard the creatures inside shout in surprise, but the bang cut off any further sound.

“Go! No blood!” Frisk shouted.

Osp moved without hesitation, Kris following suit. The female captain managed to squeeze a few wild shots off, blindly firing over the desk. The beams missed any of her attackers. Frisk rounded her barricade and kicked the pistol from her grasp. The firearm skidded away as he stepped on her shoulder, pinning her down and aiming his rifle square on her chest. Osp was ahead of Kris, or the geroo might have tried to stop him. The anup kicked the first mate under the chin, instantly taking the lights out of the poor creature. Blood trickled from the geroo’s mouth, but there didn’t seem to be much permanent damage.

Frisk kept his rifle on the captain below his paw, “Your crew? There’s only two of you.”

The geroo under his boot jerked, so Frisk pushed down a little harder. “No sudden movements, please. I’ll keep true to my word. Just don’t give me a reason again.” His free paw removed his helmet so he could use his ears.

The captain below his paw gripped his ankle, using what strength she had left to keep some weight from her chest. The defeated geroo didn’t resist again, though she opened her mouth to show him her teeth. She glared hard, ears forward angrily and defiantly hissed, “Worthless pirate!”

Frisk nodded down at her, “Yeah, that’s me.” His paw pressed down as he lowered his rifle and reached for his strand, “Listen, I’m takin’ your cargo. Your krakun masters will probably flay ya for it, so I’ll transfer ya some extra fuel. We can head home early. Y’all should take this gift and go to The Camp. Show me your strand.”

“The Camp?” the fallen geroo replied, but did as he asked. She drew her strand from a holster on her arm and held it up to him.

“Yes, The Camp. It’s a place to hide. I hear things are rough there, but it’s better than dyin’,” Frisk told her as bumped his device against hers. “Those are the coordinates. Y’all are behind schedule on your delivery, so I suggest you leave as soon as we depart your ship. Now listen to me. If ya betray these coordinates, a lot of decent folks are gonna die.”

Kris scooped up the pistol and stood by, listening intently. He furrowed his brow at his captain. A range of emotions enveloped the young geroo. As right as this felt, he felt a deep anxiety well up within him. Kris knew survival meant killing this crew and bringing the ship back to The Hive. One glance at his anup crewmate confirmed he was not the only one feeling this way.

“Frisk, You can not just let them leave,” Osp said.

“Osp, last I checked... *I’m* the fuckin’ captain! I can do whatever *I* want!” Frisk growled back at him, his chin angled up at the much taller pirate. He lifted his paw from the defeated captain. Osp fell silent and moved away from the injured first-mate as well.

Frisk raised his strand and gave it a command, initiating the transfer of half of the liquid fuel from *The Talon III*. Several loud clunks confirmed the ship connected to the captured freighter. The male geroo moved to the control panels with the female captain right behind him. After a few keystrokes, Frisk ejected the cargo, which simply detached and began to drift down from the body of the freighter.

He looked back at the female captain, “I’ve done all I can do. Go to the coordinates. Y’all should find some peace there.”

The other geroo crossed her arms, ears pressed into a frown, “You better be trustworthy.”

“I’m as trustworthy as they come in pirate space,” Frisk replied as he shifted his attention to his crew, “Back to the ship.”

When they were all safely aboard *The Talon III*, Kris couldn’t keep his eyes off the back of his captain’s head. The young geroo didn’t understand the mercy he saw from the long-time pirate. Osp was silent and fuming. Frisk kept his eyes to the stars as he launched the tow ties to engage the cargo pods. The ties brought the cargo in close and secured them to the sides of *The Talon III*. The captain engaged the main engines.

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

Frisk looked over his shoulder, pulling his oxygen mask aside a little, “Space is an ugly place. Especially in our line of work. It’s not that we want to kill each other, it’s that this place has taught us that that is the only way. I take a chance sometimes. Helps remind me I’m geroo. We would’a been killin’ and dyin’ for systems we never wanted to be a part of. Not today, Kris.”

Osp seemed satisfied with the response and shook his head. He pressed a button on his console and let fly half of ship’s ordinance. Kris watched the bright flashes of the weaponry, headed into space with no designated target. Kris heard the anup’s voice over the headset, “It’s a shame that freighter was so full of holes that it was not worth bringing back with us.”

A smile formed on Frisk’s ears as the engines on the freighter lit up. Its heavy thrusters ignited and took the ship away.

“Take us to The Hive, Kris. We’re low on fuel,” the aging geroo said.

“Yes, sir,” Kris smiled, his ears perked more than they had in ages.

When the ship returned to the hangar and disembark procedures had been completed, Kris rose from his seat and moved to exit the ship, glad for the gravity. Before he could depart, Frisk blocked the exit from the ship. The captain shifted to make room for Osp’s much larger frame, allowing the anup to exit. When Kris tried to follow, the older geroo blocked his path. The navigator looked at his captain quizzically. Frisk glanced over his shoulder, ears pinned back. When Osp’s receding steps could no longer be heard, the older geroo turned back to him.

“There aren’t many folk who know where The Camp is, Kris,” Frisk said.

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

The captain pulled his strand from its sleeve on his arm. He selected a few inputs before holding it out for Kris, “Well, hopefully someday ya do. Just make sure they are the right sort. Don’t let that information fall into the wrong paws.”

Kris obediently bumped his strand to Frisk’s. A series of chirps confirmed the transfer of the data. Frisk nodded, seemingly satisfied.

The captain lowered his arm, “Get some rest.”

Kris quickly took his leave. It struck him as odd that a grizzled pirate like Frisk would care. What’s more, why he didn’t take advantage of the knowledge and extort the leaders of The Camp. The navigator reasoned the Krakun Empire would pay enough to cover Frisk’s debt to the Commodore many times over. The young geroo secured his strand in its arm holster, leaving the spacious hangar behind in favor of The Hive’s interior.

Commodore Qursak sat high on his haunches, eyes narrowed down at his prey. The hekiru stared back up at him in defiance. The large krakun considered his options, calculating everything that could go wrong or right with his next decision. The little creature's paw twitched, a minor detail but it betrayed Bindi's anxiety. The Commodore's maw split into a wide wicked grin as he raised his claw threateningly.

"You've made your last mistake, rodent," he growled low.

Bindi executed a series of rapid signs, "I'm not afraid of you, Qursak!"

The commodore understood each sign as Bindi continued to glare at him. The krakun brought the claw down, forcefully entering his next move on his strand. A large three-dimensional holographic game piece glided across a board projected on the deck. It collided with one of Bindi's pieces. The piece exploded into chunks, flickering out of existence as they landed around the hekiru.

"My turn," the hekiru signed up at the krakun.

The krakun signed back, "Your last turn."

Bindi entered a few commands on his strand. The commodore watched his counter-attack. One of Bindi's pieces glided along, crashing into the piece Qursak had just moved last turn. The krakun smiled wider as the piece exploded and faded away. The hekiru's confidence faltered a bit.

"Game over, rodent," the commodore declared.

"How do you figure?" Bindi signed at him.

The krakun raised a claw, "Uh-uh. You know the rules. Speak it."

The hekiru turned his ears back and concentrated, summoning up the strength. He repeated the line in the simplified local krakun dialect, his voice just above a whisper. The two agreed that their exchanges must follow a pattern; bilingual, hekiru sign, krakun.

Qursak nodded in approval, “It was a sacrifice, as those are often necessary. Were you to ever have the opportunity to live as long as me, you would make hundreds, maybe thousands, of them.”

Qursak inputted his next move, and the corresponding piece slid to its destination, colliding with Bindi’s most critical piece and ending the game. The krakun watched the hekiru’s ears sink as chunks of Bindi’s piece landed around his paws and flickered away. Each player’s strand prompted them to opt for another game, but the krakun declined.

“That will be fifty golds for me. Maybe in a few thousand years, you will beat me,” The Commodore signed at him, his grin almost a sneer, “Now go away. Find some other lowly mammals to spend your night with.”

Bindi’s ears perked into a smile at the dismissal. He broke the pattern as spoke out, “Have a good evening, Commodore.”

The Commodore watched the hekiru scurry off. When the airlock closed and he was again alone, the large krakun lifted his strand. His yellow eyes scanned over the screen. He opened the application that tracked the debts each member of the crew owed him. Every name had two figures next to it, one that the crew could see, and one that the crew could not. Bindi’s balance already updated to show the fifty golds Qursak had just won, bringing the total to eight-hundred and five.

The commodore manually adjusted the second figure. The indigo krakun swiped his claw down, dropping the figure fifteen golds, now just two-hundred and fifty. He closed the app and dumped his strand into an interior pocket of his frock, heaving a sigh into the lonely air.

Bindi found Kris and Seax together in The Hive's cantina. He trotted over and plopped himself down across from them. Seax recounted the details of his latest exploits, sloshing around a beer as he used his paws to illustrate parts of the story. Bindi silently sat, acknowledged by a glance from his friends.

"So, we breach the airlock and as soon as we open the door, six rifles. Staring right at me," Seax claimed, ears forward attentively.

Kris crossed his arms in disbelief, "Six? You should be full of holes."

Seax nodded a few times, flush with intoxication, "Oh, I would be, if not for the quick paws of my crew and I. We tucked against the walls. The door frame provided us a little cover. My geordians immediately dropped two of the anup bastards. They were so scared it's like they forgot how to aim."

Bindi glanced at Kris, who smiled in his ears and shook his head, "Okay, so you make your way through airlock, a killing machine. And then what?"

Seax took a swig from his mug, a black coat draped over his shoulders, "We get to the bridge, right? The pilots aren't even armed. My gunner, Koba, just dispatches them on the spot. Ket, the navigator, plops herself down in the pilot's chair and the ship is out."

"Who were they?" Bindi signed to Seax.

"Who was who?" Seax replied.

“The pilots,” Bindi continued.

“They weren’t us. That’s all that matters,” Seax replied as he masked the loss of enthusiasm in his voice with another swig of beer.

A brief, uncomfortable silence passed between them before. Before anybody could speak again, a commotion erupted from a distant corner of the cantina. A circle of pirates began to shout. Several weapons discharged in rapid succession. Bindi and his friends dropped their heads instinctually. After a few screams of pain and much cursing, the scene was over. The Hive security showed up, rounded up a few rabble-rousers, and the evening went on.

Kris shook his head as he sat back upright. Bindi could see the troubled expression in his ears as the geroo spoke, “I would say I’m having trouble adjusting, but I’m not sure what I would be adjusting from.”

Bindi and Seax exchanged glances, and then Seax spoke up, “Look, buddy, I know this is a rough place, but this is our reality until we pay our debts to Qursak. You have to keep your chin up and just make as many golds as you can. How does your debt look?”

Kris huffed down into his beer, dejectedly, “Higher than yesterday.”

Bindi reached forward and gave the geroo’s paw a few pats of reassurance. When Kris looked up at him, the hekiru signed, “Don’t lose hope. Every day is new.”

Seax agreed, “It wasn’t that long ago all we had to look forward to was a slow death in servitude somewhere, after all.”

Kris nodded a few times and drank a little more from his beer, “To honest people, a slow death in servitude is probably too good for people like us.”

Seax put an arm around Kris offering some comfort, “Don’t get caught up on morality. We’re not on trial. We’re surviving, just like everyone else in this twisted up galaxy.”

Kris leaned into the touch a little, inhaling the oddly pleasant smell of beer and his friend, “Yeah, you’re right.

A clipboard suddenly clapped down onto their table, causing them all to jump. Korek stared down at the surprised faces, a bromine respirator wrapped around his muzzle. He raised his clipboard, reading over the names.

After he found what he was looking for, he gestured the clipboard in Kris’s direction, “Kris, your captain is dead. You are at this moment appointed to captain of *The Talon III*.”

Korek didn’t make it seem like the matter was up for discussion, but Kris blinked a few times, “Frisk is dead? What happened?”

Korek stared at the geroo, annoyance in his eyes, “Do you really care?”

“Well... Yes, I do,” the geroo replied.

“Apparently, dear Frisk owed golds to more people than just the commodore,” the anup said.

“Did you find the killer?” Kris quickly interjected.

Korek’s ears flipped around, betraying a hint of a smile, “Of course. They will take on Frisk’s debts and continue in service.”

“That hardly seems fair,” Seax spoke up.

Korek continued his smile, “The commodore does not care if you kill each other. As long as he gets his golds.”

“What about Osp? Doesn’t he have seniority?” Kris asked.

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

Kris watched his debt rise before his eyes. Frustration turned into anxiety and then anxiety to fear. Bindi recognized the geroo’s distress.

Seax quickly interjected, placing his frame between the geero and Korek, “Don’t worry about Kris, sir. I am sure he will run a fine ship.”

Korek’s nose twitched, reading the young geroo, “I am sure he will.” The clipboard tapped the table a few times before the anup vanished into the crowd.

Kris stared into the crowd a few moments. Bindi watched as Seax gave his shoulder a few pats, “Don’t let him get to you. He’s just as trapped as we are. Kris, you have a teensy bit more control over your destiny.”

Kris blinked a few times and seemed to regain his composure, “That’s one way to look at it. Bindi, are you ready for some practical exercise?”

Bindi blinked a few times. Kris had been teaching him about navigation in space over the last few months. He signed to his friend, “I don’t think the commodore would let me.”

Seax interjected, “That aside, doesn’t he pay you five gold a day? Guaranteed income? Last you told us you were down to just eight-hundred and some change. Income on a ship ain’t steady like that,” the ringel seemed to be talking more to Kris than Bindi.

Kris nodded, “Yeah, no, I know. But I don’t know who else I can trust.”

Bindi gave a firm nod, signing, “I will ask him. Maybe I can do part-time.”

Kris smiled in his ears, “Thank you, Bindi. Who knows? We might hit it big and pay all of our debts at once.”

Seax rolled his eyes and swigged some more beer. His ears blushed brightly as he chuckled a little, “Every pirate’s dream.” He kissed Kris on the cheek. The geroo glanced sideways at his friend but didn’t say anything. He swigged some beer too. The ringel always got more affectionate after he had been drinking.

After some time, an attractive anup named Skera joined the table. Kris watched her sit close to Bindi, who also didn’t seem to mind. It amused the geroo to see such a large, though attractive, female take so much interest in the tiny hekiru. Both wore rebreathers and leaned against each other. She had midnight blue fur and a black handkerchief over her right eye concealed an empty socket, not that Kris had ever seen. The geroo had only learned from Bindi.

Skera admitted that came to collect Bindi for the evening. The hekiru didn’t seem very off-put by the notion of some rest. He gave them each a quick sign for goodnight. Kris and Seax returned the gesture, glancing at each other as the couple retreated from the cantina.

When the pair had had their share of beer, they headed towards the barracks spaces of The Hive. Nobody had their own rooms, but nobody really cared either. Curtains, nooks, and crannies provided privacy. Most pirates ignored the typical sounds of a busy environment in favor of sleep.

When it came time for them to part, Seax reached for Kris’s paw, “Hold up, Captain. Why don’t we do a little more celebrating for your promotion? I can put you at ease in the new position. I do have some experience,” Seax mused.

Kris narrowed his eyes at Seax. After a few seconds, he gave a little nod, “I’ll follow your example.”

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

When it became apparent he had no choice, he wriggled himself to the edge of the bed and placed his paws on the cold deck. Seax elbowed Kris lightly. The geroo didn’t budge so Seax elbowed him a little more forcefully. Kris stirred and blinked his eyes open.

“The day is new,” the ringel announced, still groggy.

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

Seax huffed and began resetting his piercings, at least the pieces that weren’t suitable for sleeping in. He stood up and stretched his lean back, showing off his lithe frame. The ringel shifted and then reclined against the bulkhead, watching Kris follow his example.

“I need to get to my ship,” Seax said, bringing his strand towards his face, “We’re tracking a freighter. Supposed to have a fortune on board.”

“Sounds promising,” the geroo replied.

The ringel glanced away from his strand, “I *was* going to ask one of the other captains, but since you now hold the position, why don’t you and your crew come along? You may be green, but it should be an easy sortie.”

“I’ll need to meet with Bindi come lunch, but I’ll make sure Osp is ready,” Kris nodded, glad to be included in his friend’s plans.

“It looks like the arrival time is still up in the air. Be ready for wings up anytime after 1630,” Seax said, snapping his strand closed. He leaned over and pulled Kris into a short, but tight, hug, “It’s gonna be fun working together.”

Kris smiled in the embrace, “I wouldn’t trust anybody more.”

That afternoon, Kris climbed the catwalk to his ship. The lights were already on, revealing the tiny interior of *The Talon III*. A tiny common area served as a head, though it was rarely used. Four racks were embedded into the bulkhead. They had little head space but were just long enough for an anup. On the port side of the ship, the navigators stations nestled against a window, allowing a little sight. Generally, ships were flown more by sensors and instruments than sight. On the Starboard side, the gunner’s station appeared much the same, though it had monitors, rather than a window, ensuring the user could see every angle of space around them.

In the foremost part of the ship, the captain’s seat sat behind a wide array of transparent polymer windows. Frisk’s black frock hung from the back of the chair. The station featured the same monitors as the gunner and the same controls as the navigator. The captain had to be able to do and see the same things as its crew. It was possible to fly the ship solo, but the inefficiency rendered the ship almost useless in most scenarios.

The geroo lowered himself into the captain’s chair. The seat automatically adjusted to fit him. He tapped his pads along the consoles beneath his paws. A blinking light caught his attention. He focused his eyes and realized it was an abandoned strand. Kris scooped up the

device. The geroo realized it must be Frisk's. While he didn't know exactly what had happened to his former captain, in pirate space what's dead is dead.

As Kris left the hangar, he paused just within the airlock. He held Frisk's strand in one paw and glanced at the bulkhead. The dark furred geroo bashed the device against the bulkhead. He repeated the motion over and over. The screen flickered with each impact. When it died and he was sure it would never work again, Kris dumped the device in a chute that led to the recycler. He felt anxious and dismayed.

Shaking off the feeling, Kris sent messages out to his crew. He needed them ready. When he received no reply, he made his way to the cantina. It wasn't even 0800 but he ordered a beer, adding another gold to his debt. The geroo placed his head against the pads of his paw as he nursed the drink, lost in thought.

He was sure Bindi had awoken by now. He pictured the little creature untangling himself from his anup mate. Kris's paw drifted his necklace and rolled the beads around. He wondered about Seax only briefly. Seax wasn't the type to take a permanent mate, and in truth, Kris wasn't sure he wanted to settle into a relationship that wouldn't result in a son or daughter. He didn't need a token anymore.

His mind shifted off to Osp. Osp had a whole family in the bromine hexadrant. The anup had two pups and a wife. Kris wondered what it would take to free them all. What did that debt look like? If a beer cost a gold, what did childbirth cost?

The weight of his responsibility weighed heavier on Kris than it ever had before. He realized he wasn't just looking out for himself anymore. He needed to look out for Osp and

Bindi, for the sake of their loved ones and his own conscience. He took a swig of his beer before resting his face on the dirty table.

“I am a terrible pirate,” he muttered into the metal.

“You want to join a crew?” The commodore’s voice angrily boomed down at the little hekiru.

Bindi took a few steps back, eyes clenched with head and ears angled away from the noise. He clutched his paws together in front of him and used his voice to respond, “Yes, sir.”

His tiny vocalizations barely cut through the sulfuric atmosphere enough to reach Qursak’s ears. The krakun lowered himself down, resting on his elbows and placing his chin against the deck.

“Why?” the commordore asked, low and dangerous.

Bindi quivered beneath his gaze but managed to speak up to him, not daring to sign, “My friend needs me.

Somewhere deep down Qursak felt a tinge of jealousy. He hid the emotion from Bindi as he crooked his mouth to the side, “No.”

The hekiru swallowed and blinked up at him, looking pitiful.

“It’s too dangerous, you flea. Your *friend* doesn’t understand that you can’t help him. You’re small. You can’t speak well enough. You’re soft,” the krakun talked down to him.

“I can help,” Bindi said, softer than before.

Commodore Qursak rose back to his full height, “I said no. You are MY liason. You breath MY air. You’re MINE!”

The outburst sent the hekiru to its rear, paws barely catching it. its ears drooped lower and covered its shoulders.

Commodore Qursak stared down at the pitiful thing. He huffed deeply and turned his head away. The air felt strange. It was heavy and uncomfortable. The commodore didn't really understand it, but he began to second guess himself. Even his own tongue felt uncomfortable in his mouth.

Several uncomfortable moments passed until finally the krakun sighed and said, "Fine."

"Fine?" the tiny voice echoed up to him.

"Yes, fine!" Qursak said loudly, "If you want to go risk your life, so be it. You will stay on with me from 0500 to 1200, every other day. Afterwards you are permitted to do whatever makes you happy, but I am cutting your pay by half."

Though it hurt him to say those words, he was rewarded as Bindi perked up, ears raised in a true smile.

"Thank you, sir!" The hekiru said, more audible than he ever had been.

The commodore quickly turned his gaze to the overhead, "What is your friend's name?"

Bindi's smile faltered a little, "It's Kris, sir."

"Kris," the blue krakun repeated, keeping his eyes turned away. "Run along. I want to be alone," Qursak declared.

Bindi quickly retreated. Commodore Qursak waited until he was gone before laying down again, heaving a long sigh. The large blue krakun curled into a ball, wrapping himself in his black cloak. Qursak drew his strand from a pocket within. He stared at the screen as he opened his debt tracking app. Navigating to Bindi's name, his eyes fixated on the entry. With a

swipe of his claw, he increased the second figure to well over two-thousand gold. The commodore huffed and laid his head down, absorbed in his thoughts. After a moment, he snarled, picking himself up. With a sudden jerk of his claw, he reduced both figures to zero. If the little rodent didn't need him, he didn't need the little rodent.

He stowed his strand away and curled back up. The krakun muttered a command and dimmed the lights in his chamber, feeling gloomy and tired.

Kris recovered some from his slump by the time Osp and Bindi arrived at the cantina, responding to his message. The large anup sat across the table from the geroo and the hekiru. Osp stared hard at Bindi, disapproval in his eyes.

"Is this the navigator, *Captain*?" the anup spoke through his mask.

"That he is," Kris replied. He felt uneasy about the anup's tone, but hid his emotions.

Osp shook his head, "He will not be much good in a fight, but whatever."

Kris glanced at Bindi before standing up and turning to leave. He only hoped Osp would follow him. There was an uneasy feeling as he led them to the hangar. Kris found the smallest compression suit available and tossed it to Bindi. It was still big on the hekiru and probably wouldn't do much to thwart the G-forces of space combat on a light fighter.

The crew climbed inside the ship. Each took their positions in the cabin as the clock ticked over to 1615.

Osp leaned back in his seat, "What do you have me risking my life for today?"

Kris clipped his harness on, "Captain Seax of *The Father Claw* has a lead on a freighter coming through our track of space. We're going to meet up and see what we can get from it."

The anup waited a few moments, “Partnering with other captains can be risky. Plus it’s half the take, assuming what we find is not worth killing your friend for.”

Bindi spoke up in his small voice, “We will not be killing Seax”

Osp snorted, “I hope he feels the same way about you. It is not just him you have to worry about. He has a crew and they all have their own debts, remember? Do you think he is going to risk them turning on him?”

Kris shook his head, “We can trust Seax. He wouldn’t betray us, nor would he consort with the type that might.”

Osp snorted again, “Just remember, cub, you have never been a captain in pirate space. I have. It is not the same as being part of the crew.”

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

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

Kris’s strand lit up. A single message from Seax contained coordinates for the meetup. The young captain swallowed some nerves and started the ignition sequences. The geroo relayed the coordinates to Bindi, who confirmed them. Hangar control passed launch clearance for departure. The ship lifted from the deck and crept into space, leaving the hangar behind.

The heavy thrusters took them to the coordinates in less than an hour. As the thrusters powered down Kris could see *The Father Claw* in the distance. Seax's ship looked no larger than Kris's thumbclaw. As the ship came to a stop, the stabilizers hissed and steadied the vessel. The crew was strapped into their seats now, no artificial gravity to keep them in place.

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

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

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

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

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

Kris canted his head to the side but shrugged. "Alright, whatever. What is the E.T.A.?"

"Just a few minutes, I think. Make sure Bindi is standing by. We're going to be popping off a fold disruptor and following through with some ion missiles to take the shields down. Once the main drives cut out, start a rapid advance. We want to overwhelm them without a fight," Seax explained.

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

Seax smiled and cut the transmission. He glanced over his shoulder at his crew, composed of two geordians, Koba and Ketí, "When our target arrives, you two lovelies had better show them how it's done. Don't embarrass me."

Ketí reclined in a relaxed position, her dark gray fur neatly groomed. She smiled in her round ears towards the captain, yellow eyes bright in the dim light, "Don't worry your piercings, Captain. We aren't going to let that bunch show us up," she spoke through an ammonium respirator.

Koba nodded, his attention fixed on his gunner's displays as he waited patiently for the target to arrive. They looked similar to Seax. Koba's eyes matched Ketí's. His fur almost matched her too, though the male had darker stripes.

Seax looked back into open space. He wiggled down in his chair, feeling a familiar pre-heist anxiety. His eyes stayed on his instruments, but really waited on the word from Ketí for the signature of the ship they were after. Once the ship came into range, Koba stood by to detonate a fold disruptor deployed along the flight path. If all went well, the ship would screech to a halt and Koba could fire the ion missiles.

As with most sorties, the pirates didn't expect much resistance. Slaves crewed the majority of trade vessels in this system. Seldom did these crews risk their lives to defend the cargo and didn't need much encouraging to drop the goods. Seax wasn't looking for a fight; just a quick come up.

After several minutes of the ringel captain gathering his thoughts, Keti suddenly corrected her posture, ears up with attention, “Captain, I have them on radar.”

Seax glanced down to his instruments as Keti focussed the ship’s sensors on the incoming signature. The ringel’s ears split apart in a satisfied smile as the blip transformed from a blurry dot to a clear, triangle. The ship moved right along it’s predicted path, towards the disruptor. The timing would have to be perfect.

“Koba, get ready! Three... Two... One... Go!” Keti called over her shoulder.

The fold disruptor actuated, causing a bright flash in space before them. What would have been a blur materialized into a ship.

As soon as he had a lock, Koba quickly launched two ion missiles at the target. The whole ship shook as two bright blue orbs of light soared off towards the freighter. Seax cast his attention towards *The Talon III* in the distance. Almost immediately, he saw a pair of bright blue orbs fire from the other pirate vessel. The ion missiles converged on the target and burst against the ship’s shields. The space around the freighter shuddered and wavered a moment before the energy destabilized and dissipated into space.

Seax kept his smile as he reached up and opened a communication line with his prey. The face of a female geroo scowled at him as the image focussed. She had a thick red scruff and kept her ears pinned all the back.

The ringel showed no sign of intimidation. “Greetings, friends! Disengage your cargo pods so my associates and I won’t have to come aboard and do it ourselves.”

The frazzled and angry geroo on the other side spat back at him, “Go boil your head, pirate! If you want to die in the vacuum, keep talking shit at your silly little screen!”

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

The geroo made a rude gesture before breaking off communications, leaving Seax with nothing but a dark screen and his own reflection staring back at him.

The ship shuddered as the freighter opened fire. *The Father Claw*’s shields absorbed the energy from the defensive turret, but they wouldn’t indefinitely.

Seax called over his shoulder, “Bring us in, Ket! Keep it wild.”

The whole ship lurched and shook as the incoming fire increased. Seax clenched his teeth as the ship roared forward and starboard, seeking to become a harder target as Ket took the controls.

From *The Talon III*, Kris saw the fight began. “Bindi, keep an eye on the shields. I’m going to bring us in. Osp, engage the turrets. I don’t want any unnecessary holes in that ship.”

His crew acknowledged the orders as Kris grasped the joystick and punched it forward. His aimed to avoid as much damage as possible while putting his vessel in boarding range. A ship was worth far more in one piece than it was recycled.

Kris’s adrenaline pumped. He could see Seax’s vessel making similar moves, closing the distance. A successful shot from *The Father Claw* struck one of the freighter's turrets, sending orbs of fire and twisted metal into space. Even so, *The Talon III* suffered a direct hit to the shields. The whole vessel shuddered violently, but the shields held.

Despite the boom, Bindi called out as loud as he could, “Shields are down to seventy-five percent, Kris!”

“Keep it wild, Captain!” Osp yelled into his respirator.

Kris doubled up his evasive maneuvers. He zigged, zagged, and strafed changing direction to keep his vessel unpredictable while still closing the gap to his prey.

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

“Osp, initiate boarding!” he called out.

Osp shook his head but initialized the process. He launched the harpoon that would anchor the ships together, but a countermeasure turret from the freighter blasted the projectile off target, twisting and melting the metal hook.

As Osp began the reloading process, the shields took another hit. And then another. If not for the harnessing keeping them in their seats, the whole crew would be thrown against a bulkhead.

“Thrity percent, Kris!” Brindi yelled over the noise.

“Get us out of here, Kris!” Osp shouted over his left shoulder, fumbling at his controls.

Kris’s heart beat harder than it ever had in his life. The inexperienced pilot fumbled with his controls, unable to gain his bearings to try and put some distance between them and freighter. He was disoriented and everything moved too much from the impacts.

Suddenly *The Father Claw* made a pass on the target. The pirate vessel fired several kinetic flak cannons, aimed at the freighter’s turrets in rapid succession. A series of explosions flashed as every turret on the starboard side of the freighter was neutralized.

The strafe rendered the ship properly defenseless on the keel of action. Kris took a deep breath as the world steadied. Nerves coupled with the compression suit left the geroo's fur thick with sweat.

Osp fired off a second anchor. Due to some instinctual sense, Kris could feel the anger radiating from the gunner's position. Bindi appeared to be fine, though he watched the hekiru drag an arm across his cheek. They all sat in silence as the boarding mechanism successfully drew them against the hull of the ship.

Kris unbuckled his harness, floating out of his seat. Osp and Bindi did the same, and used handles within the cabin to propel themselves towards the weapon locker. Osp reached the locker first and held a paw firmly over the clasp that secured the door.

"If you ever do that again, I will crush your throat," the anup growled at Kris.

Kris knew he had made a mistake, and he didn't doubt the anup could do it. The young geroo didn't let his ears falter as he scowled at the anup. "We'll debrief later. We have work to do."

Osp moved his paw away. He sprung the mechanism and withdrew a rifle and a cutting torch. Kris and Bindi followed suit, retrieving rifle. They all donned their environment suits, unsure of the status of life support on the other vessel. The ship came right alongside an airlock on the freighter. When *The Talon III's* boarding made contact with the hull on the freighter, the chamber inside sealed and pressurized. Osp moved into the space with Kris right behind him and Bindi in the rear. The anup took the cutting torch to the edges of the airlock, melting away the bars that held it closed.

Kris and Bindi held back, their rifles raised to cover teit point man. Osp finished cutting through the airlock and signalled to his team. The anup fired a round from his rifle into the damaged hatch. The airlock tipped into the ship and fell against the deck.

Osp quickly moved through. When he passed into the freighter, gravity took hold. The anup stumbled a little but kept his footing as he stepped into the lighted passageway. Kri and Bindi were right behind him. As the crew took up position, Osp scanned over each entrance to the passageway.

They were not surprised to find Seax and his crew already in the passageway, taking up a similar formation. Seax smirked in his ears at Kris, silently claiming the bragging rights.

“Damn it,” Kris muttered narrowing his eyes to mask his amusement at the smirking ringel.

Before anybody could say anything else, a massive dark blur of motion dropped from the overhead. With a clack and a meaty thump, Osp’s rifle sailed from grasp as metal rod connected with the side of his head helmet punching through and connecting with his jaw. The large anup dropped, immediately unconscious. Before anybody could react, the figure pole vaulted on the rod and fiercely drop kicked Kris in to Bindi. Both pirates tumbled back into the boarding module, where the artificial gravity lifted.

Kris managed to grasp the bulkhead to keep himself from going very far. He heard Bindi hit the airlock leading back into *The Talon III* with a thud and a pained squeak. Kris pulled himself back into the passageway in time to watch a female anup drop Koba in a similar fashion as Osp. Kris raised his rifle, but couldn’t risk hitting the other crew.

The anup swung again, aiming for Ketí. The geordian managed to deflect the rod with her rifle. As the anup recovered, Seax took the opening and fired directly into her midsection. Kris heard the anup gasp, her rod falling away from her grasp. She stumbled away from the fight, holding an arm across her stomach. The anup's knees failed her and she sank to the deck, motionless and curled up in a ball.

As Kris kept his rifle on her, Seax kicked the rod further away from the fallen defender. Ketí dipped down to check on Koba, who was blinking his eyes, slowly coming back to consciousness. She quickly put his respirator back into his mouth.

The anup shuddered and groaned. Seax kept his rifle on her as Osp got back to his paws. Kris moved to help Bindi back into the passageway. The geroo glanced at Seax and then down at the anup. He gently and slowly placed his paw on the barrel of Seax's rifle and guided it aside. The anup shuddered a last time and then went still.

Seax met Kris's eyes a moment before turning to the group, "Roll call. Everyone survive?"

The other pirates gave confirmation, though Koba and Osp sounded a little dazed. Seax prodded the downed anup with his boot, "Scoop up her rod. What a fighter. It's a good trophy as any."

When the anup didn't move, Seax seemed satisfied she was no longer a threat. "Form back up. Switch point. Kris take the lead on your crew. I will take the lead on mine. Koba, to the six. Ketí, cover me."

Kris issued similar commands, sending Osp to the back. Bindi scooped his paw right up behind Kris's, keeping close and covering him. The two squads moved through the passageways, point man first, then the cover, and finally the six. They made their way to the bridge.

Kris felt lucky at the emptiness of the passageways. Common practice left many of these freight vessels under-crewed. Kris suspected there would be more security for this particular vessel, given the supposed value of the what it was hauling.

The door to the bridge hung ajar. Seax held a paw, urging everyone to proceed with caution. He took a few slow steps, keeping his rifle level and his eyes trained on the entrance. Kris felt his nerves creep back on him. The geroo knew it was a trap and he was sure Seax did to. However, the pirate crews had to take that room to get the cargo. That meant trying to come out ahead of whatever the remaining crew was plotting.

Seax called into the bridge, "Alright! My name is Captain Seax of *The Father Claw*. We've killed your security detail, and we'll kill you too if you don't surrender yourselves and your cargo!"

A few moments of silence passed before a canister, smoke hissing from one end bounced off the angled door, landing at Seax's paws. The ringel glanced down at the hissing grenade and cursed under his breath. He managed to leap backward, not bothering to look at what was behind him. He collided with his squad, raising an arm to cover his face right as the canister erupted.

A deafening noise and a blinding light accompanied a shockwave that sent Kris reeling. A stinging, pungent gas filled the air and brought a stream of fluid pouring forth from the pirates' noses and eyes. Smoke filled the passageway, further eliminating any chance the pirate crew had at seeing the defending crew.

Kris caught a glimpse of his crew through his blurred, burning eyes. Bindi lay, collapsed, beside him and Osp wasn't fairs much better. The geroo grasped the bulkhead, his nose and equilibrium in disarray. The explosion almost knocked Seax's crew flat. The ringel looked unconscious as Ketl and Koba struggled keep upright as they sneezed, blind and disoriented. Ketl had an arm out, supporting Koba as Seax slumped against her knee. Panic flashed across Kris's mind. He realized they were sitting ducks.

A hot beam confirmed his fear as it grazed passed his face. Another beam whizzed passed, this time grazing the side of Osp's head. Flesh and fur and ear instantly melted away. The gunner dropped to one knee, holding the side of his head and pressing himself against the bulkhead. Blood seeped from between his fingers as he growled low through his blindness.

Ketl let Seax fall and pushed Koba to the deck behind her. She blindly fired her weapon through the door, seeking any covering fire from the lasers coming through. Kris followed her example. With his vision recovering, he pressed himself against harder against the cool metal bulkhead to become a smaller target. Nobody knew what they were shooting at; the smoke made sure of that.

A cry came suddenly from the bridge. Kris stumbled to his paws hissing at Ketl, "In! Now!"

He couldn't see much, but he kept his shoulder on the bulkhead as he burst through the door. Kris stumbled a bit, Ketl hot on his heels. They both trained their rifles into the bridge, looking for the source of the fire. Through blurred vision, Kris could make out the figures of two geroo, one clutched a bleeding paw and other with its paws in the air. The pair stood behind a

console, that served as their cover, now blackened from sheltering them from the pirate's suppressing fire.

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

The geroo holding her paw kicked a damaged rifle out from behind the console. Blood dripped from her elbow as she clutched her paw. "Lucky shot, scum. Your lot would be dead otherwise!"

Keti advanced and kicked the rifle away. "Not so lucky for you. Out from behind the console. To your knees, paws behind your head."

Kris let Keti handle the crew, satisfied as they followed her instructions. He moved to the cargo console and began issuing commands to the system. There were a few confirmation beeps as the pods detached. He stepped back from the console and looked over the beaten defenders. His eyes fell on the female who had had the rifle. He smelled the blood coming from her paw, that now lacked three digits, leaving only her thumb and little finger. When his gaze fell on her beaded necklace, his paw went up to feel his own.

The geroo pirate knelt beside the injured female and pulled out his strand. "How much fuel do you have left?" Kris asked.

"How mu-?" she started before Seax emerged through the door, angry and red-eyed.

"Holy hell, which way is up?" the loud, dazed ringel asked.

The smoke dissipated from the hallway and Koba and Osp, who had Bindi over his shoulder, entered the bridge. The anup, excluding the stub where his ear had been, looked okay,

though clearly in a bad mood. Koba moved to stand next to Ketu, dutifully helping her keep the crew under control.

Seax marched his way up to the geroo crew they captured. “We killed your anup, so the way I see it, you two have been liberated by Commodore Qursak.”

The male geroo finally spoke. “Who is Commodore Qursak?”

Seax glanced away a moment before responding. “The commodore is a pirate warlord of sorts. He collects krakun slaves and provides them employment and shelter from the empire.”

The female spoke again. “Is he a krakun?”

Seax nodded. “Regrettably.”

“Pass.”

Seax pinned his ears back, disappointed. “Pass?”

“Pass. I’m not interested in becoming a pirate.”

“Doesn’t it beat slavery? Doesn’t it beat death?” Seax insisted.

“I refuse to exist for the sole purpose of causing others misery, especially for a krakun,” she stated plainly, shaking her head and causing the long red scruff to whip about behind her.

Seax glared at her a moment then looked to the male. “What about you?”

“P-pass,” he stated, voice lacking conviction.

Kris glanced up at his friends and then back to the crew. He placed a paw on Seax’s shoulder and guided him aside. “Hold up your strand.”

The female geroo glanced at the rifles on her and then slowly, pitifully, attempted to extract her strand from her left bicep with her left paw.

Kris ended up having to help her. “You’re going to have to learn to use that left paw.”

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

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

Kris felt relief well up inside him. Satisfied, he stood up and motioned for Osp to follow him out of the bridge. Seax met his gaze as he passed. The geroo could see could see trouble in his friend’s eyes.

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

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

Kris turned his back on the scene, Osp following him through the door and into the passageway. The geroo took a deep breath as his adrenaline faded. He glanced up at Osp, attention going to the anups’ missing ear. He didn’t have the nerve to ask about it, sure the gunner was pissed.

“Wait! Please! He sai-!”

The discharge of a rifle silenced the voice. He heard the female scream in rage, but a second discharge silenced her. Kris stopped in his tracks; ears pinned backward. Osp had already turned around. Seax, Kobe, and Ketis stepped from the bridge. Kris’s eyes burned into them with anger, able to glance the bodies inside. The two geroo had execution style wounds, burn right between the eyes through bone and tissue alike.

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

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

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

Kris felt a burning behind his eyes. He could feel hot angry tears gathering. He fought a sense of betrayal. Betrayal from Seax, but also betrayal to the crew he had just tried to save. He narrowed his eyes at the ringel for a brief moment.

“We were slaves once, too. We became worse than them. If anyone deserved to die, it was us,” Kris growled, whirling around and stalking back to his ship, no longer concerned with squad movements. The geroo knew better than to cry in front of Osp or Seax and his crew.

With his crew back aboard *The Talon III*, Kris set about disconnecting from the ship. Using magnetic tractors, he assumed control of half the disconnected cargo. He seethed with anger and guilt. The geroo carefully caught any tears that threatened to float away as he angrily punched in a flight path back to The Hive.

Keti felt bad for the geroo crew. By all standards the two did everything that anybody expected of them. She understood why Seax did what he did, but it never felt right. The geordian breathed slowly in her ammonia respirator, keeping her eyes averted from the bodies. She sat alone at a console, getting used to the navigation controls for the ship. She had stayed on board the freighter while Seax and Koba returned to the *The Father Claw*.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She didn't enjoy being alone on the ship, the only living thing. The flight would only take an hour or so. The geordian used her paws to configure the flight path, setting the heavy thrusters to engage as soon as the shields were back up.

A large, bloody paw grabbed her around the throat from behind. The force was so much that her windpipe was immediately clamped off. She arched her flexible back, trying to create some space between her body and the body she was pressed against, paws clawing at the muscular arm that lifted her from her seat. The geordian's legs kicked in the air trying to get any momentum or leverage she could.

A second bloody arm wrapped its way around the back of her head, allowing her attacker extra leverage. Ketí's world started to go in and out of focus. She fought the darkness, jerking and twisting any way she could. Just before she blacked out, the attacker dropped her.

She coughed and hacked, her airway reopening. She raised her eyes from the deck, catching sight of the female anup from before. Before she could say another word, the anup aimed a kick at her jaw. Her teeth clacked together and the world blinked off.

With *The Talon III* securely in the hangar, Kris stalked down his gangplank. *The Father Claw* set down beside them and Seax walked down his own. The pair met between ships, neither saying a word. The tense air overshadowed the two as they approached the commandeered cargo. Stopping in front of what they captured Kris looked over the haul, tongue rolling over his teeth, angrily.

Seax took a step forward and pressed a button on the side of the cargo container. An audible hiss came as the pressure equalized within the container. When the hatch opened, several boxes fell from it, tumbling to the deck between the two captains.

Seax scooped up one of the boxes. “Coffea makers...” he said slowly.

“Coffea makers?” Kris replied, leaning over to look at the box, anger escalating.

Seax nodded his head, tossing the box to the ground. He looked up at the rafters and whispered a few curses.

“Coffea makers?” Kris yelled. “You killed them for coffea makers! Look, they aren’t even electric! Not even automatic!” Kris kicked a few boxes, scattering the appliances. “It’s fucking cold brew, you dumb... dense... This cargo is *worthless*!”

Never in his life did Kris feel this kind of anger. It was compounded with fresh feelings of betrayal. The fact that Seax caused all this pain affected him the most. The geroo hardly knew what to do with himself. He could only think of lashing out at the captain.

Kris grabbed Seax’s collar in a fist and shoved him away, mocking him. “‘It’s the kind of thing that makes getting up in the morning worth it. It will change your outlook on the world!’ This trash is hardly worth the recycling fee! By the time we all shower, we’ll be in the negative!”

Seax stumbled, catching himself on the cargo container. He picked up a coffea maker and threw it at Kris. The geroo caught it and tucked it under his arm, stalking out of the hangar.

“Recycle this garbage and pass me my share later,” he yelled over his shoulder.

Seax didn't sleep that night. Not only did his argument with Kris jar him, Ketu never showed up with the freighter. The ringel stared at the overhead in the morning. He didn't know how much debt Ketu owed, but in the best case scenario, Seax would have to pay it. With bloodshot eyes, the ringel managed to roll himself out of the rack.

He had to find Kris. Before leaving his rack, he grabbed the anup from the ship's rod. He swallowed a little at its weight. There was no wonder she had been able to down Koba and Osp with single blows. He felt a little amazed the anup had even been able to swing it as fast as she did. He tucked it in his armpit as he scampered out into the quarters, sniffing the air.

He knew Kris well enough to know the geroo had probably found some secluded corner, well out of sight or hearing of anybody else. He wandered through the most deserted areas, keeping his nose high and sniffing the air. His sense of smell might not have been as good as Kris's, but he knew his friend's scent.

His nose detected a familiar whiff. Seax followed it, moving abandoned curtains aside in the dim light. Just as he figured, Kris lay curled up facing the bulkhead in the corner of the space.

Seax took a few cautious steps towards him. He wanted to get closer, but feared ruining the approach. Kris saved him the effort, grunting and pulling his thin sheet tighter around his body.

"Go away," Kris grumbled.

"I can't. I need to talk to you," Seax replied.

"I don't feel like talking."

Seax took another step forward. He cast his eyes about nervously, "Please, Kris. I have to clear my mind and I need you to understand."

Kris tightened the covers around his body again, "It's not always about you."

Seax knelt down and very gingerly placed a paw on his friend's arm, "No, I know. I did what I did for us. There is nothing I wouldn't do to keep you and Bindi safe."

Kris didn't reply so Seax continued, "I don't have to tell you how cruel krakun can be. If the commodore found out about us letting them go, he would kill us both. If they didn't believe you, they would run home to their masters. When they didn't have their cargo, their masters would demand to know where it was lost. If people find out where The Hive is, it will be attacked."

"They wouldn't have told," Kris mumbled.

Seax looked down, trying to keep the conversation on track. "Yeah maybe, Kris. But it's less about the defeated slaves and more about the pirates. Any of them, aside from Bindi, might have sold you out. Osp and Koba now know of 'The Camp' and that could be an issue. Everyone is just trying to lower their debt around here. That makes you a target."

Kris didn't respond for a few moments, but then he rolled over, "What about Ket?"

Seax pinned his ears down and fixed his eyes on dirty bulkhead beyond his friend. "Ket didn't come back"

Kris sat up, letting the thin sheet fall away from him. "What happened?"

"No idea. She was supposed to navigate the freighter here. Koba and I waited for hours in the hangar. Look, I haven't slept at all. Please, Kris, forgive me. They didn't deserve it, they truly didn't. It's just a shit game and they were the wrong pieces," Seax replied, a hopeful expression in his ears.

“You killed them in cold blood, Seax. I don’t want to leave a trail of cold bodies in space behind me. I need some time.”

It wasn’t forgiveness, but it was peace. Seax nodded his head and took a breath. “Okay. Thanks for listening to me, Kris. Take your time. And here.”

Kris rolled over, seeing the anup’s rod, “That’s your trophy. You keep it.”

Seax shook his head, “I’ve decided it’s not a trophy. It’s a reminder that we’re all just trying to survive.”

Kris accepted the rod and held in his paws, feeling over the grooves with his pads. “If you say so.”

A notification beeped on Seax’s strand. The ringel cursed as he read the message. “It’s Korek. The Commodore wants to see me,” he said, hiding his distress.

As seax turned to leave, Kris grabbed his wrist. “Just tell him the truth, Seax.”

Seax nodded and kissed his paw before tapping it on the geroo’s paw. “I’ll be fine.”

Seax made his exit, heading straight for the center gravity well. He rode it up to the very top level. Outside of the sole airlock, Korek stood, clutching his clipboard. The anup motioned to a hazmat suit.

“Good luck, ringel,” the anup coyly said through his respirator.

“Yeah, thanks,” Seax replied, slipping into the hefty suit.

The airlock hissed as he crossed through both doors into the krakun chamber. Bindi greeted him, smiling in his ears. The hekiru made some very quick, small signs at him, “He’s in a good mood. You should be fine.”

Seax signed back, “Thanks.”

As Seax stepped further inside, the blue krakun turned his scarred face and cigar on the tiny pirate. “Coffea makers...” the lizard sneered.

Seax, tucked his paws behind his back, standing as straight as he could. “Yes, sir.”

“Not a very fruitful harvest, was it?” Commodore Qursak quipped down at him. The krakun’s lips split into a grin, then a chuckle. He began to laugh outright at his subordinate.

“It was supposed to be-” Seax said, before the commodore interrupted him.

The commodore’s mood flipped suddenly as he roared down at the ringel, “Supposed to be what? Worth risking my base over?”

Seax jumped his suit. “Sir, I did everything I could to make sure that ship came back to base. The whole crew was dead.”

“There are but one of two possible circumstances, ringel. Either you didn’t kill everyone on board, because no one came back with you, or let you let a disloyal crew member escape with *my property*. Can you guess which one is worse for you?” Qursak reached a talon down and gripped around the ringel, lifting him into the air.

Seax squirmed in the grasp, finding it difficult to breath, “Please! Please, sir! Killing me won’t fix anything!”

“No... But it might make me feel better,” the krakun snarled at the helpless pirate. “How else are you going to make it up to me?”

“I-If you kill me, Ket’s debts go unpaid just like mine! P-please, just add hers to mine! I will figure out where the ship went!” Seax pleaded, as the krakun gripped him a little tighter.

The commodore held Seax high, dangling the ringel over his gaping maw. His sloppy tongue roiled beneath the unfortunate captain. He closed his mouth just enough to say, “Not good enough.”

Seax panicked a little more, looking down at the certain death below, “Please! Please, sir! I promise. We killed everyone! Ketu must have fled! It’s not worth the chase, sir! Let me pay her debts! I beg you, please!”

“Such fine begging, Captain Seax.” The krakun lowered him to the deck, snapping his maw closed. “I am imposing an additional fee for this counseling session. Get lost, ya blight.”

Seax stumbled backward, landing on his tail. He quickly stood up, “Thank you, sir!”

Bindi gave the ringel two thumbs up from the corner, his ears smiling expressively. The ringel muttered as he passed, heart still pounding in his chest, “I thought you said he was in a good mood?”

Bindi nodded, signing, “He didn’t stomp you on the spot. Or bite you at the midsection. Or throw you against the bulkhead. You did great, Seax!”

The ringel looked at the hekuru with uncertainty, having no idea what his new debt balance would look like. Seax just thanked the fates to be alive.

“Right. See you later.” Seax stalked through the airlock, shed the hazmat suit and headed back to the barracks. He really needed some sleep.

Bindi watched the ringel depart, happy for him. Not the increased debt part, but the not being killed part.

The big blue krakun seemed much calmer after the incident. He lowered himself down and crossed his forearms over each other. “Come here, Squall.”

The hekiru’s ears perk. He quickly scampered over in front of the lizard. “Yes, sir?”

Commodore Qursak didn’t meet the hekiru’s dark eyes as he spoke, “That debt of yours. What is your balance?”

Bindi took his strand from the holster on his arm. He woke the device up, navigating through the endless list of icons. Bindi’s ears went sideways as he saw the balance.

“There... must be some mistake. I have two golds.” Bindi said slowly.

“Not quite. I *owe* you two golds,” the krakun said. “Do you know how long it has been since I have owed anything to anybody? Several thousand years. I do not think I even remember it. I do not enjoy the feeling.”

Bindi shook his head, his mind suddenly empty as he listened to the deep krakun voice.

“My debt was well over eight-hundred, sir,” Bindi said.

“Well now it is not. You are free to do whatever you wish. Go wherever you want to go. I release you from my service. I would have told you sooner, but I had to deal with that ringel first,” the commodore grumbled.

“Can I transfer this?” Bindi said, indicating his positive balance.

The commodore glared down at him, “Transfer it?”

“Yeah. To someone else.” Bindi, signed at him.

“Why in the hells would you want to do that?”

“All my friends are here. Kris, Seax,” the blue skin of Bindi’s inner ears turned a little purple, “Skera... I’m not ready to leave yet.” He spoke out loud this time. “I could be helping them. I’ll take an extra shift as your liaison if you’ll have me.”

The krakun made an annoyed grumble in his throat, “It’s amazing what you mammals can do to frustrate me. Thousands of years I have been doing this and your kind still find ways to frustrate me. Tell me, Squall. Do you think we are friends?”

Bindi didn’t know how to respond. He clutched his paws together nervously. He swallowed and signed, “Of sorts.”

The krakun stared hard at him, making Bindi feel even smaller than he usually did. Finally the Commodore signed, “Of sorts.” A smile formed on his lips then he spoke, “Do whatever you want, Squall. I am not going to make you leave this death trap if you do not want to. Just keep that balance empty until you buy your way off this base.”

“Let’s... Play a game then. I will bet you one gold. It’s half of what I have,” Bindi signed.

The commodore smiled, using his strand to bring up the holographic game board. “Deal.”

Despite the events of their first sortie, Kris and Seax continued to run sorties together but took a different approach to resistance. Instead of initiating a boarding, they would disable their target enough to tow them back to The Hive. This gave Kris plenty of time to talk the captive crew down from resisting. For a modest fee, Commodore Qursak’s own boarding parties would secure the ship, taking prisoners who would later become indentured into piracy. If there was a fight on board, Kris didn’t have to see it. If somebody got killed, he knew he had done his best to prevent it while still looking out for his crew.

Kris kept the coffea maker. Now and then, when he could afford it, he would purchase coffea grounds from the commissary and make a flask of cold brew. Bitter as the drink tasted, it helped him start the day, even when he didn't want to. At least that much was true about how Seax described the cargo.

Almost a year after the coffea maker incident, Kris and his crew in *The Talon III* waited in the dark space with Seax and *The Father Claw* nearby.

"This is gonna be the one, Kris. This one is gonna set us free." Seax's voice said over the comms.

Kris glanced up from his stabilizer controls, "What makes you say that?"

"I can feel it in my tail, Kris. All we need is one good score. One good score and we can all book transport off The Hive," the voice continued. "We'll all be free at last."

"We can only hope."

Bindi spoke up, tapping his screen, "I have the signature!"

"Understood, stand by with ion missiles, Osp," Kris replied, proud of the little hekiru, who could speak almost as loud as any of them after being navigator for a year.

The geroo kept his eyes on the radar, tracking the blip as it gained resolution in relation to the accuracy of the tracking information. "Alright then... Three... Two... One... Blow it, Osp!"

The now familiar flash erupted in space. Almost immediately, blurred lines formed the image of a cargo vessel. Osp launched the ion missiles. Both crews watched as the missiles roared through open space. Kris smiled, feeling more confident in their abilities than ever before.

Before the ion missiles could make contact, his communications channel pinged. Kris answered the call from the cargo ship. On the other side of the video line the image of a grinning female anup came into focus.

“Run away, little pirates,” the female taunted.

Kris felt a chill in his spine. He knew that face, but he couldn’t place it. The lights flickered on and off around the anup as the ion missiles made contact. Her eyes flashed, teeth almost glowing, making her a fearsome sight. The video feed cut off for a few seconds before it faded back in, the anup still grinning in her ears, teeth on display.

Kris heard Seax’s voice over the line, “drop the goods. You are outgunned and we are prepared to use excessive force.”

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

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

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

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

On board *The Father Claw*, Seax had similar notions. He throttled the engines, taking control from the navigator, another ringel named Ferg that replaced Ketí. Koba already had the weapons blazing as they aggressively charged the target.

On the communicator, the channel stayed open. The anup captain's fiery eyes burned into the camera. The image shook and flickered as her vessel took hits from the attacking pirates. She kept her smirk, steadying herself as she took hull damage.

"So predictable..." she growled.

Seax saw the retrograde thrusters on *The Talon III* activate. The ringel urged his ship forward, surging passed the other pirates. He heard Kris in his ear, "It's not right, Seax!"

The ringel grit his teeth, responding, "It's just shit talk! She's bluffing."

"She knows your name, you damned fool!" Kris's voice shouted in his head set.

Many things happened at once. Several fighter escorts appeared nearby, their fold engines shutting down. The freighter's shields reactivated as its turrets, for the first time, reared up, training on *The Father Claw*. The anup on the screen mumbled, her ears stern, "Goodbye."

The communications ceased. Seax growled, watching as *The Talon III* pitched forward one hundred eighty degrees and burn full thrusters in the opposite direction. His ship immediately came under fire. He took the hint, pitching back, the stars in the distance translating across his vision.

"Koba, use the defensive turret! This fight ain't for us! Ferg, hit that fold drive as soon as we have time," he barked at the crew.

The captain kept his eyes on their shield levels as they retreated. The shield's charge diminished with each hit. The whole vessel rocked and jolted. The ringel watched his shields failing. Sixty percent. Forty percent. Koba kept firing. Seax saw the shields break on one of his pursuers. It peeled off, leaving four still on his tail.

Twenty percent. Seax felt a coldness grip his insides. If the shields failed, little would separate his crew and the vacuum. *The Father Claw* was not heavily armored. Ten percent.

Just as hope seemed lost *The Talon III* made a pass from starboard to port, raking over the tops of the pursuing fighters. The outboard most vessel of their formation almost immediately lost shields and crumbled into a mass of molten metal. Osp managed to connect a few shots on the shields of the three remaining fighters.

The surprise attack worked. The pursuing fighters peeled off, heading back to the freighter. Seax finally exhaled in relief as the incoming lasers ceased. His whole body felt numb as his adrenaline levels steadily decreased. The ringel allowed himself to slump back in his chair, momentarily closing his eyes.

Kris appeared on his communicator, smiling, “We’re getting the hell out of here. No more close calls, Seax.”

Seax half opened one eye, paw tugging at his compression suit. “Yeah, no. You’re right,” the ringel panted as he spoke.

A sudden shockwave jarred Seax’s neck. A bright flash blinded him as Ferg shrieked. His console popped and smoked. The ringel felt the drive from the engines die. All power on his ship flicked off as the emergency power kicked in.

“What in the hells was that?” Seax yelled over his shoulder.

Ferg flipped switches and reset breakers. He slapped the side of the console, “I don’t know! I don’t have any power!”

Koba sat still in his chair, listening to Seax and Ferg try to talk through troubleshooting for a few seconds. All of his consoles were dark too, except the low-res radar. Even in emergency power, he could see the escorts turn around.

“Electromagnetic pulse. An EMP,” the geordian said dejectedly.

Kris felt the shockwave in his vessel as well. The systems on *The Talon III* failed momentarily but roared back to life. He looked over his shoulder to Osp. Osp looked back at him with a serious glare. Kris looked to Bindi, who didn’t seem to know what to do.

Osp tracked the return of the escort formation. “Captain, we need to leave.”

The geroo looked at Seax through the communicator, having heard the conversation, “How long until you get back up?”

The ringel shook his head, “Ferg is working on it, but we aren’t sure. Koba, would you snap out of it and help him?” he shouted off screen.

“Captain, we have to make some moves,” Osp called out to Kris.

The blips closed in on them on the radar. Seax must have seen it too. The ringel’s expression grew more distressed. “Kris we need a jump. Or a tow. Something to buy us time. Bring *The Talon III* in close.”

Kris flipped a few switches and barked to Bindi. “Turn to! We don’t have much time!”

The first shots from the escorts streamed passed their bow. Osp cursed angrily, firing back through his turrets.

The Talon III shuddered, shields faltering as shot after shot made contact with the vessel. Kris’s mind raced. His heart pounded. His nerves jumped with each successful strike against his

shields. His eyes dashed between the navigation controls and the shield levels. His eyes dipped back to Osp, who returned fire, growling, but never wavering. The geroo looked the other way, towards Bindi. The hekiru looked more intense than Kris had ever seen him. Kris's paw went to his necklace. He released a shuddered breath, knowing what he had to do. He looked into his communicator. Seax's panic stricken face stared back at him.

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

Seax stared back at him through the monitor. A shot shook his camera violently. "What are you saying? You'll make it. You have to."

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

"No! You can make it! You can fucking make it! You can save us!" Seax yelled back at him, suddenly angry and desperate.

Kris could see the betrayal on his friend's face. He glanced at his shields. Fifty percent. He shook his head. The ringel on the other slammed a fist on the camera of his communicator, causing his words to break up intermittently, but Kris could still understand him.

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

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

Bindi didn't respond. The ship rattled as a laser connected with their shields. The hekiru didn't know what to do.

Kris turned and barked at him, "Do it, Bindi!"

The tiny navigator veered the ship portside. Flashes of light burst around them as the fighters closed in. Kris's world went quiet as he watched the communicator.

Seax begged, “Turn back! Please don’t go! Please! Pleas don-”

Then the screens went black. Kris turned his attention to the rear camera. The escorts were focussed on *The Father Claw*. Osp ceased fire as they left practical gunnery range. The crew watched as the dot that used to be their allies erupted into a spherical ball of fire. Kris sat back in his chair, mind swimming with guilt and grief. Hot tears stained his cheeks as Bindi initiated the fold drive. The scene disappeared behind them.

Kris felt a tap on his head. He blinked open his eyes. The geroo had fallen asleep in his chair. His vision came into focus after the long hard dream,. A meter from him, Bindi stood, wearing a grin. The hekiru gave him a chastising stare.

“The ship’s off course,” Kris grumbled at him, waving a paw.

Bindi nodded, understanding and signed at him, “Are you alright, Kris?”

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

“Ghosts?” Bindia said aloud.

The geroo didn’t say anything for a second. His eyes fell on a dusty old coffea maker that lived near his console. Kris nodded a few times. “Ghosts.”