

CONFLAGRATION

Sarah McKee

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by

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DarklandsChronicles.com

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For Papaw Strange
who taught me
to love airplanes.

-and-

For my Dad
who taught me
to work with my hands.

Welcome to the Darklands

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Backwater

Planet: SHP 242 [Unnamed]

Radcliff Eloh had been a pilot with Noémie Charter Services for the better part of six years the day he died.

It had been a week since the fateful call had come in through the Flight Dispatch Office. Someone was looking for a pilot who could fly an off-books flight out to some unnamed world, pick up some cargo, and take it wherever it needed to go. Everything about the job sounded shady as the back side of an ice moon. So of course, Rad (as he was more commonly known) had used the full sway of his seniority to ensure he was assigned the flight. There was a lot of money a pilot could make for himself taking these off-book charters. More importantly, they could be exciting. You want to fly safe? Go to the Milky Way. You want exciting flying? Welcome to the Darklands.

Officially, in the company's computer, this plane was flying on a routine maintenance flight out in the Cable's End Cluster. In actuality, Rad was in the Backwater Cluster, a totally different region of the galaxy. He was flying without a flight plan, without a company brevity code, and without a safety net. Now, he was about to drop out of transtachyonic flight at some unnamed system. While in transtach, he was completely safe, but once he dropped out of transtach he would be vulnerable. That was what drew men like Rad to this kind of flying: the danger, the unknown, the rush. Not to mention the status it all afforded him. Chicks dug a hardpointer pilot and dudes envied guys like Rad.

Rad was nearing the dropout point. He ran through the checklists as he watched the unnamed solar system rapidly approach. The only thing he could really make out at this speed and distance was the star, significantly brighter than all the other stars. Technically, he and the big freighter he flew were already inside the solar system. They had passed through the heliosphere a minute ago. But solar systems are large, mostly empty things and planets are far smaller than most non-pilots realized. The planet designated SHP 242 was still way too small and too far away for Rad to see with the naked eye. All he could see of it was the HUD waypoint projected onto the windshield.

The checklists were complete. The proper frequencies were dialed in on the radios. The nav computer was standing by in deorbit mode. Rad made one last glance at his Transtachyonic Field Generator status display. The TFG capacitor was charged to 86%. He needed a minimum of 85% charge to fire off the TFG. Everything was ready. Activating the TFG would dissipate the transtachyonic field and return him to normal space and to sublight speed. He disabled the safeties on the TFG control panel and held his finger over the TFG ACTV. button.

He watched the seconds count down on his nav computer. 12...11...10... He glanced out the cockpit window. Still no sign of the planet, only its waypoint icon on the HUD. He knew from past experience he wouldn't be able to see it with the naked eye until the last few seconds. He looked back at the computer. 5...4...3... Now, back out the window and the planet was plain to see. It was a blue, green, and white orb suspended in the void. Like most terraformed planets, it was designed to be like the near-mythical Earth, his species' ancestral home.

Those last few seconds of transtach he never even looked at his nav computer. He would press the button when his aviator's instincts told him it was time. A greenhorn pilot would have fired the TFG farther out and just flown sublight the remaining distance to the planet. But even though he was only 24, Rad had been doing this long enough that he considered himself an old salt of an aviator. He knew how far he could push the envelope.

In those last few seconds, the planet approached so rapidly that if Rad blinked he ran the risk of overshooting it and having to make an embarrassing sublight chug back to the planet. Rad didn't blink. At the very moment the planet loomed overlarge in his window, a half a moment before it would be gone behind him, Rad pressed the button and the TFG activated.

There was a sudden lurch as the hardpoint freighter's little pocket universe dissipated and then a rumble as the spaceplane reentered normal space. And there sat the planet, big and beautiful, filling his cockpit window. It had been a near-perfect exit from transtach and it only took a few basic maneuvers to get the plane into deorbit position. He scanned the planet and found only two human settlements. One looked like a small village on an inland lake and the other, his

destination, a converted terraforming platform in the middle of the planet's only ocean.

He planned his deorbit burn so that he would come into atmosphere close to the platform. He fired up the plane's three big, sublight engines and let them idle as he reoriented the plane so that it was basically flying tail-first relative to the direction of its orbit. When the time came, he advanced the throttles on the engines and began his deorbit burn. The thrust slowed the plane and caused it to begin dropping out of orbit along his planned arc of descent. *Beautiful flying*, Rad congratulated himself silently.

Just as Rad was about to stop his deorbit burn and reorient the plane to drop into atmo nose first, all hell broke loose. Rad was just about to reduce the throttles when the proximity alarms went off.

"*WHOO-WHOO! TRAFFIC! WHOO-WHOO! TRAFFIC!*" came the computerized alert. A greenhorn pilot might be tempted to look at his Traffic Collision Avoidance System for guidance on how to avoid the nearby traffic, but Rad knew right away what was happening. It was an EMP bounce.

Someone was shooting ElectroMagnetic Pulse weapons at him. They were trying to shut down his engines in an attempt to bounce him off the atmosphere and back into space. Pirates.

"Fuck you, motherfucker!" Rad shouted to his unseen assailant as he plowed the throttles full forward. "Not today, not never!" The engines roared and the plane's structure groaned under the sudden load. The plane, still flying tail-first in low orbit, now slowed drastically. The planet's gravity began pulling it down at an alarmingly steep angle.

Rad knew she could take it, though. He knew just how far he could push the envelope. Adrenaline surged through his body and his pulse flowed faster than the plane's hydraulic fluid. But Rad pushed his fear down deep inside him. He kept calm and focused on flying the plane. *This is where we separate the men from the boys*, he thought.

The first blue dot on the TCAS display flew past him. The EMP weapon was flying too fast and wasn't able to descend as rapidly as he was. He kept the throttles pegged as the second weapon closed the distance. This one was slowing down. Whatever A.I. was flying that missile must be anticipating his attempts to avoid it and was compensating.

He was entering atmosphere now, still falling tail-first and having a hard time keeping the plane under control. The plane was falling into atmo at a far steeper angle of descent than it was designed for. But hardpoint freighters were built tough. The plane's heat shields were protecting it from burning up and its rigid structure was holding it together under the aerodynamic strain. Rad knew how far he could push the envelope. He looked at his altimeter and his mach indicator. He was now WAY too low and too slow to have to worry about being bounced off the atmosphere. All he had to do was avoid that second missile and he'd be out of immediate danger. The remaining missile pursued him relentlessly. It was on top of him now. Rad was out of options. All he could do was hope for the best.

He never saw the missile itself, but he was nearly blinded by the light of its detonation. After a few seconds, when his vision came back, the cockpit around him was dark. The EMP had shut down every system on the plane. All the instrument displays were dark. The only dim light was sunlight which slanted in through the cockpit windows. The plane around him was silent. There was no rumble from the engines, no hissing from the environmental systems, no alarm klaxons. The throttle levers were dead things in his hand. The flight control stick flopped limply between his knees but did nothing.

He reached out in the darkness for switches he knew by heart and began attempting to restart the engines. Just one engine would be enough, yet not even the auxiliary power unit nor even the battery bus would answer his commands. He was getting really scared now. Panicked. The kind of fear that's hard to just push down and ignore. The kind of fear that wraps itself around you and feels almost welcoming, like a warm blanket. Rad had a very human instinct to give in to that panic, to let that blanket of fear wrap itself around him, to let that be his death shroud.

But that's not how pilots die.

Pilots die with their hands on the controls. Until the moment the plane hits the ground, a pilot's only instinct is to try to regain control. That's how Rad Elof died: strapped into the captain's seat of the tumbling corpse of a dead airplane, flipping unpowered switches and working useless controls. Right up until the very moment of impact, Rad flew his plane.

The Missing Plane

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Nexus

Station: Gonaways

It was during the slow, quiet hours of the morning. Gonaways might be the biggest trade hub in all the Darklands, but even the mighty space station and its ten million inhabitants slept at this hour. A few hours from now and it would be sunrise, station time. The lights in the corridors would automatically brighten. Out on the station's gargantuan habitation rings, the solar shields would slowly open, creating an approximation of a sunrise. Soon after that, the station would come to life. The quiet corridors, the vacant streets, and the empty transport trains would begin to fill with people from all walks of life going about their days.

Just like the rest of the station, the spacecraft ramp at Noémie Station Services was quiet and dark. There were no planes landing or taking off on Noémie's runway. There were no engines roaring on the ramp or the taxiway. There were no tugs honking their horns, no baggage being moved about, and no passengers boarding or disembarking. The ramp's artificial gravity was turned down to a mere 0.2G's to save money at night. The only activity was at the far end of the hanger bay from the runway. Three night shift mechanics driving maintenance mechs worked to change out the engine in a loader.

Flight dispatcher Ivka Stoya sat at her desk in the ramp's ops tower reading a boring book on her personal data pad. Her supervisor, Rinjin, was asleep in the chair beside her. Ivka glanced at her displays; there was nothing going on. Her boards were almost entirely clear, except for two items. A charter flight was scheduled to leave in two hours, but neither the pilots nor the passengers had shown up yet. A bulk freighter was due to land in about 45 minutes, but it hadn't even dropped out of transtach yet. She went back to reading her boring novel.

A chime woke her up. She hadn't even intended to nod off. First, she glanced at the clock. She guessed she'd only slept about 10 minutes. Rinjin was still asleep in his chair, snoring softly with his foot up on the desk. He was completely unbothered by the chime from the flight dispatch boards. Ivka checked the boards and saw that nothing had changed with the other two items on them. But now there was a third item on her boards. It was a SCARS report from a company aircraft which read:

/495NC/GND/SHP_242/TFGCAP_OTS/END/

Spacecraft Communication Addressing and Reporting System (SCARS for short) was a maintenance subsystem that Noémie used on all its spacecraft. The SCARS sent encoded data about a company spacecraft's health and status back to the company. An experienced dispatcher like Ivka could read these codes without having to consult the manual. What this code said was that spacecraft tail number 495NC was grounded because the transtachyonic field generator capacitor was out of service. End of message. The only part she didn't understand was the phrase "SHP_242." She didn't know what that meant. She loaded the manual on her terminal and quickly determined that SHP_242 wasn't in the manual. She was going to have to wake her supervisor.

"Hey, Rinjin," she said. He didn't stir, so she pushed his foot off the desk.

"What the fuck?" Rinjin protested as he jolted awake. "Ivka, what the —"

"We got us a grounded plane. TFG Cap is manked." She indicated the SCARS message on her board.

Rinjin pulled his glasses out of his pocket and read the message. "What the fuck is SHP_242?"

"I was hoping you'd know."

"Did you check the manual?"

No, you twat. I sure am glad I woke you up to give me that very useful suggestion, she thought. "Of course I checked the manual."

"Nothing in the manual?"

Oh, for the love of fuck! "Nope."

"Where's the plane at?"

Ivka consulted the dispatch database which gave the locations of every plane in the Noémie's fleet. She searched for 495NC. "Hmm... That's odd. Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie is listed as being out on a maintenance flight."

"Ha! Wouldn't want to be the mechanic who signed off that TFG capacitor."

"Odd thing is," Ivka continued, "the plane's been on its maintenance flight for almost two weeks and has no designated return time."

"Ah, shit! Are you serious? Let me see the manifest."

Ivka pulled up the plane's manifest on the screen:

FUEL: 14,000 KG

CREW: 1

PIC: RADCLIFF ELOF, AG SR AMN

PAX: 0

CARGO:

CONTAINER 220071 (EMPTY)

CARGO MECH 8195

"This doesn't make any sense," Ivka said. Why would they send a cargo mech and an empty container on a maintenance flight? And why just a pilot? Why aren't there any mechanics on the flight if it's a maintenance flight?"

"Because it's not a maintenance flight," Rinjin answered ominously. "Whatever this Radcliff Elof guy was doing, the company wants some plausible deniability. Probably smuggling. Problem is that now his capacitor is out and he's stuck somewhere with about fifty-million dollars worth of company equipment and probably a container full of something illegal."

"So what do we do? We have to get the company assets back."

"Yeah, but we need to keep it quiet. If word gets out that one of our pilots was using one of our planes for smuggling, then we can expect to be fired. Company doesn't want that kind of press." Rinjin brooded for a moment before declaring, "According to the manifest, this Radcliff Elof is an Aviators' Guild Senior Airman. I'm gonna have to call Yamashita."

* * *

Ivka listened in silently on the call as Rinjin informed Haru Yamashita of what they knew about the situation. Master Airman Haru Yamashita was the president of the Gonaways chapter of the Aviators' Guild. Though Noémie's pilots were employed by the company, their licenses were issued by the Aviators' Guild. Yamashita was a man who controlled all of the pilots in Gonaways system and probably most of the galaxy. So of course he had ties to organized crime.

Rinjin didn't expressly say that they suspected the pilot, Elof, was doing something illegal; he just explained the facts and let Yamashita come to that conclusion on his own. Their call had woken him up and he wasn't in a very friendly mood.

"If one of *your* pilots has gotten himself into trouble in one of *your* planes," Yamashita said over the phone, "then that's *your* problem. Let me be clear on this: the Aviators' Guild is not responsible for the actions of individual pilots."

"I realize that, Captain Yamashita," Rinjin said, "but we don't *know* that he was doing anything illegal. We just want to help the grounded airman. Surely, as head of his guild, you want his safe return?"

"Of course I do," Yamashita answered indignantly.

"Then any help you could give us would be appreciated."

"Fine. But let me be clear: if I become aware of any illegal activity, I'm bound to report it to the authorities."

Rinjin rolled his eyes at Ivka and she could practically read his mind: *This asshole knows half his pilots make their livings smuggling.*

Aloud, Rinjin said, "Of course, Captain Yamashita. I agree one hundred percent. Noémie feels the same way." Rinjin pumped his hand up and down in a jerking-off motion.

Yamashita snorted dismissively. "Well, first of all, I know what SHP 242 means. I think it's a planet somewhere, though I don't know where."

"What kind of name is that for a planet?"

"It's not a name; it's a terraforming company's designation. The Safe Harbor Terraforming Company designates all the planets they terraform like that while they're in the process of terraforming. The SHP stands for Safe Harbor Project and the 242 is the planet's serial number. It's the 242nd terraforming project Safe Harbor has ever done."

"So...our pilot is trying to survive on some partially terraformed hellscape?" Rinjin asked. Ivka shuttered. Un-terraformed planets are notoriously dangerous places.

"Sounds like it," Yamashita answered. "The guild will send a rescue mission out to bring back our downed brother. Of course, salvage rights will apply..."

This made Rinjin's brow furrow. Ivka knew that Rinjin would be fired if he allowed the Aviators' Guild salvage rights on \$50 million of company property. And Yamashita knew it as well.

Rinjin sighed heavily. "That won't be necessary. It's a Noémie pilot and a Noémie plane. We'll see to the safe return of them both."

"Great. I'll coordinate with your chief pilot. The Aviators' Guild is committed to the safe return of Senior Airman Elof."

And sweeping his little smuggling racquet under the rug, Ivka thought as Captain Yamashita disconnected from the call.

Rinjin sighed again. "That guy is dirty as last week's underwear."

"No shit," Ivka agreed.

"Coordinate with aircraft maintenance and start planning a flight to repair the plane. I'll call Safe Harbor and find out where that planet is."

"Okay," Ivka said as she began to make the call to the maintenance chief on duty.

For the next several minutes Ivka discussed with the maintenance chief what kind of items and crew the rescue plane would need to repair and/or change out the capacitor on the ground of a partially terraformed planet. When she got off the phone, she noticed that Rinjin looked even more agitated.

"What's wrong now?" she asked him.

"Goddamn Safe Harbor won't give us the grav coordinates of SHP 242. They say it's a company secret. Bullshit!"

"I never heard o' no terraforming company keeping one of their projects a secret."

"Yeah, me neither. Something really shady is going on here."

"Do we really want to risk more assets rescuing one crooked pilot and one broke-down plane? Maybe we could let Yamashita deal with it after all?"

Rinjin thought for a moment. Then, he consulted the list of company hardpoint freighters sitting out on the ramp. Finally, he pointed to the line on the screen for tail number 788NC. "There. That one. Send Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. It's an old bird with not too many years left before we sell it off for scrap. Looks like it's due for D-check and engine overhauls in the next couple months. Also, we can insure the old crate so we might just come out ahead if it's lost."

D-check is a required (and very expensive) maintenance and inspection that all commercial spacecraft have to undergo at regular intervals. Engine overhauls were even more expensive than a D-check, especially when a plane had three engines needing overhauls. If the plane was lost before that time, not only would the company be spared the expense of maintaining it, but they would cash out on its insurance.

"Good thinking," Ivka said. "We could also take out insurance policies on the crew. That way if they die, the company makes money, so we don't get in trouble for sending them. Could Yamashita maybe help us out with getting the coordinates for SHP 242? If anybody's got the connections to get them, it's him."

"I guess he could. Just don't mention to him that we're taking out policies against the crew's lives."

"So that only leaves one problem..."

"...The crew," Rinjin finished her thought for her. "We need to crew it with a pilot and a mechanic who are just as expendable as the plane."

An Expendable Mechanic

A woman's voice woke Lyssa up from a dead sleep and drove into her hungover brain like an air chisel. "Wake your ass up! I need to get to work and I'm guessing so do you."

"Fucking dicks, Cheryl! Let me sleep!"

"Get up and get out of my unit. I recommend some hair of the dog if you're feeling hungover."

"Got any anaktisine? Works better than dog hair."

Cheryl rolled her eyes at Lyssa and stormed out of the room. "Maybe you should ask *Cheryl* if she has any anaktisine. *I've* only got hair of the dog."

Little by little, Lyssa's mind began to clear. So this one wasn't Cheryl. Lyssa always had a hard time keeping names straight – especially first thing in the morning when she was hungover – and especially when she hadn't even had any coffee yet. What was this one's name? Lyssa couldn't remember. She needed some hair of the dog. And maybe some coffee.

Lyssa swung her legs out of bed. Her head pounded. She might throw up. Something hard and cold brushed against her left foot. She looked down and saw a beer bottle laying on its side. She picked it up and examined its contents. Most had spilled on the floor, but there remained about 30-40 milliliters of flat, warm beer in the bottle. "Dog hair," Lyssa said aloud to the empty room. She choked down the bottle's vile remnants, "Part of this nutritious breakfast."

Next, Lyssa stumbled to the bathroom where she peed, splashed some water on her face, used Not-Cheryl's toothbrush to clean her teeth, and began to dress herself. She didn't have any clean clothes with her, so she started to put yesterday's clothes back on. She caught a whiff of herself and decided that a quick sink bath might be warranted. Her hair, dyed blue and shaved into a mohawk, was hopeless. She wetted her hands and tried to get the hair to lay down, but her hair wasn't having any of that noise. The dry air of the space station caused her hair to frizz up disobediently. Ultimately, Lyssa just decided the messiness was in the spirit of the mohawk and just let it go.

Once she was cleanish and back into her dirty clothes, Lyssa decided to look in Not-Cheryl's medicine cabinet. Because...you know. She found a bottle of the over-the-counter hangover medicine, anaktisine (which Not-Cheryl had said she didn't have). Lyssa took the hangover drug and washed it down with water from the tap.

Sharon, she remembered as the anaktisine began to clear some of the fog from her mind. *Not-Cheryl's name is Sharon.*

Lyssa stepped out of the bathroom and found Sharon sitting on the foot of the bed, looking impatient. "Sorry, Sharon. I don't think very clearly when I first wake up."

This didn't seem to reduce Sharon's agitation very much. "That's fine. Now, I really do need to get to work. What about you?"

"I got til 05:00. What time is it now?" Lyssa guessed it was still around 04:00.

"It's 05:10," Sharon answered.

"Well, fuck," Lyssa said. "Guess I'm in trouble."

* * *

Terry Roscoe was the Maintenance Chief of Operations for the Noémie ramp on Gonaways station. His job was to coordinate all of the aircraft mechanics on the ramp and to ensure that the fleet was always spaceworthy.

Terry wasn't a racist; he just didn't like Estrellans. They were lazy. And he especially didn't like Estrellans that don't come to work on time. He would have fired Lyssa Ruiz months ago if he could have, but unfortunately she had connections with the Boaters. He didn't know what those connections were exactly, but he knew that some bigwig Boater had gotten her this job. No matter how many times a week Lyssa showed up late, he couldn't just fire her.

He could, however, hope for her to die.

So when that smarmy supervisor, Rinjin, up in the Flight Dispatch Office had asked him to "volunteer" the mechanic he could most easily do without, only one name came to Terry's mind: Lyssa Ruiz.

Now, Ruiz stood across the desk from him in his office. He had been waiting for her at the time clock when she'd finally rolled in almost an hour late. She arrived smelling vaguely of booze and sex and wearing dirty, wrinkled coveralls. She had apologized profusely saying there was some kind of a problem with the commuter trams, but he knew that was

bullshit.

"Well, Ruiz, that's not what I called you in here for. I got a *special* job for you."

"Okay," Ruiz sighed resignedly. She clearly knew he was about to take a giant dump on her day and he was loving every second of it. "What kind of a job?" she asked.

"Ever been planetside?"

"No." She clearly didn't like him any more than he liked her.

"Good. This should be a new experience for you. Hope you have a toothbrush and a couple days worth of clean panties in your locker. You're going on a little trip." He smiled and leaned back in his chair as he watched the life drain from her face. No one would want this assignment. Maybe she would get mad and quit her job. Maybe she would get herself killed doing the repair alone on a partially-terraformed planet out in the ass end of nowhere. One could always hope. At minimum, she would be out of his hair for a week or two.

"What's the job?" Her tone was one of resignation.

He laid out the job and enjoyed watching the life further drain from her hung-over face. When he was done, he pinged a list of parts and equipment from his data terminal to her phone. "Get down to Stores and sign all that shit out. Get it loaded onto tail Seven-Eight-Eight. And make sure the plane has wings and an empennage installed on it. You're going into atmo and you're probably landing on water. So make sure the wing floats extend properly."

"I know how to prep a hardpointer," she said through gritted teeth. She clearly wasn't happy about this job.

"Oh, and there's one more thing..." He paused for dramatic effect before he dropped the last turd on this pile-of-shit assignment. He savored the look of resignation on Ruiz's face as she braced for whatever he was about to lay on her. "The pilot you'll be flying with: I hear tell they're slating the plane burner for this job." He watched the last light go out of Ruiz's eyes.

"What? No, Terry, you can't put me in a tin can for a week with some crazy bitch that's known for burnin' planes."

"Correction, Ruiz: I most certainly *can* do that. And if you want to keep your job, you'll fly with whatever crazy bitch I tell you to fly with. Enough chitchat. Get your ass to work. I want that plane ready to fly *before* the pilot gets here at 07:00, understand?"

Ruiz looked like she was about to say something regrettable, but ultimately held her tongue. "Alright," was all she said and then she left his office.

He watched her on the security cameras. As soon as the door was closed behind her, she turned and made an unladylike gesture at his office door. Terry chuckled quietly to himself. He couldn't fire her, but he would get rid of her one way or another.

The Plane Burner

It was 06:30 and the ramp at Noémie Station Services was still quiet. In a half an hour, it would be a cacophony of tug and spaceplane engines, the clattering and banging and screeching of equipment. But now was the calm before the storm and Erin O'Connell was enjoying her coffee at the end of the runway as she stared out into the abyss of space.

Most days, Erin showed up to work early enough that she had plenty of time to get a bulb of coffee from the pilots' lounge and walk out to the FOD pit at the end of Noémie's runway. The narrow pit just below the end of the runway provided a place for Foreign Object Debris to fall where it couldn't be sucked into a spaceplane engine or damage landing gear.

Now standing on the FOD pit's catwalk, Erin was in the narrow gap between the end of the runway and the rippling forcefield that held the hanger's air in against the vacuum of space. Sometimes planes took off or landed just a few meters above her head, but that was rare. Before 07:00 there was very little activity on Noémie's runway.

Erin sipped her coffee from the sealed bulb container necessary in the ramp's 0.2G microgravity. At 06:45, the artificial gravity would be turned up to 0.6G to create a safer and more efficient work environment. During the night shift, however, the company turned the gravity down to 0.2G to save money.

Erin looked at the rippling forcefield only a meter or so from where she stood. She unhooked her safety harness and reached her hand out. Her fingertips reached to within mere centimeters of the forcefield and the cold, merciless void beyond. She hated her ugly hand with its ridiculous, splaying fingers. What fascinating technology that forcefield was. She hated the ugly,ropy muscles in her forearm. Here she stood, within reach of the boundary to nothingness, untethered in the microgravity. She hated her pasty skin. If that barrier blinked out for even a fraction of a second, she would be blown out over the railing and into the cold, quiet eternity. She hated almost everything about herself.

It must be peaceful, she thought. A simple push off the railing would launch her out through the barrier. One final flight and she would be free of all she had done wrong in her life, all the people she'd disappointed, all she'd failed at. She should just do it. She was alone. No one would miss her. The world would be better without her.

Erin wasn't afraid of dying. She stood at this railing almost every morning and thought about it. Some days she thought very hard about it. Those days, the ocean of hopelessness rose up and threatened to carry her away. Those days, the sadness and the self-loathing provoked her to give herself that fatal push against the railing. She was sure that one day she would do it.

But not today. She re-secured her safety harness. Today, she would go to work. She sipped her coffee.

Erin wore the same, ugly uniform she wore to work every day. Tan slacks with a light blue stripe along their outseam (Noémie's company colors), white short-sleeved pilot's shirt with her wings and nametag pinned to it, tan Aviators' Guild tie, and tan shoulder epaulettes displaying two light blue bars. The epaulettes denoted Erin's rank of Journeyman Aviator, not within the company she worked for, but within the Aviators' Guild. Her hair, like everything else about her body, vexed her. She wore her blonde curls in a tight, professional bun which kept them *mostly* under control (though already a couple of flyaways stuck up from her head). Some days, she was tempted to shave that stupid hair off. Only the fear of how ugly her scalp might be prevented her from going through with it.

And of course, like any self-respecting Darklands pilot, she carried a semiautomatic pistol in a shoulder holster. Some regions of the Darklands dwarf galaxy were unsettled and dangerous. There were pirates and petty warlords who would kill or enslave pilots and take their cargo and their planes. Pilots who flew in those regions (usually smugglers) were wise to arm themselves. Erin herself never flew to the wild planets of the Darklands. Like most pilots who carried such weapons, Erin's was just for show. It was a part of the mystique of being a Darklands pilot. She didn't even own bullets for her gun. She didn't trust herself with them.

Erin's uniform was, as usual, neatly pressed and immaculate. Above all else, she needed to project the image of stability. She needed to present to the world that she was stable. She wasn't the kind of person who would burn a fellow guild member's plane as it sat on the ramp out of anger, no matter what you may have heard. Erin was stable.

After several minutes, klaxons sounded throughout the hanger deck warning all personnel of an impending gravity change. Erin felt the additional gravity come on as she settled more heavily onto her feet. The flesh of her cheeks and

around her eyes sank slightly, and she felt the coffee bulb get heavier in her hand.

The change of gravity meant it was now 06:45. She had fifteen minutes before she was due on duty. It would take her every bit of ten minutes just to walk back to Flight Ops. If she hurried, she could refill her coffee.

* * *

While making her way across the ramp, Erin noticed activity down at the back end of the massive hanger. That end of the ramp was where Noémie kept their small fleet of hardpoint freighters. Three mechanics in heavy-duty mech suits were putting wings on one of the hardpointers down there. Wherever that plane was going, wings meant it would be flying in atmosphere. That would be good fun for whatever pilot was lucky enough to get that assignment.

Too bad it won't be me, Erin thought wistfully. She hadn't flown in atmo in a few years now (unless you counted the simulator, and no one counted the simulator). Those kinds of assignments, in addition to being fun, were also quite lucrative. Thus, they were usually given out to pilots by seniority, and there were two pilots senior to herself who were qualified to fly that plane. The job would likely go to one of them. Meanwhile, she would be stuck flying a loader, shuttling containers of freight back and forth between Gonaways station and passing starhoppers, big ships too massive to be allowed within a thousand kilometers of the station. Flying loaders was good work (especially for someone with a reputation as a plane burner), but she had been flying the same loader from the same station for three years. It had been months since she'd passed her checkride to fly the hardpointers and since that day, she'd only flown them on the company simulator. She really wished that wherever that plane was going, she could be the one to take it there.

* * *

Erin first went to the pilots' lounge and refilled her coffee bulb from the coffee maker. Earlier, when she had first arrived, Noémie's pilots' lounge had been deserted. Now, the room was full of pilots chatting, drinking coffee from microgravity bulbs, bragging, and generally trying to one-up each other in prowess both aeronautical and otherwise. The pilots' lounge was open to all pilots, as long as they either worked for Noémie or were spending money with Noémie. There were pilots in Noémie uniforms like the one Erin wore as well as uniforms of competitor companies who were buying fuel or overnighing their planes on Noémie's ramp. There were a few pilots wearing cheap coveralls – these were independent contractors.

All pilots wore something (usually a tie) with the Aviators' Guild logo on it to prove they were part of the guild and they all carried a semiautomatic pistol in a shoulder holster to prove they were Darklands pilots. Wouldn't want to be taken for some soft, push-button pilot from Milky Way. Darklands pilots were all proud of the fact that they were hard, stick-and-rudder pilots forged on the frontier at the very edge of human settlement. Never mind the fact that most had grown up in space and had never even flown a planet-bound, piston-pounder airplane in their lives.

Another thing all these pilots had in common was that they were all male. A woman pilot in the Darklands (though not unheard of) was a rare sight. Erin tried to ignore the drop in conversation and the stares as she entered. They all stared at her, but not just in the way they would have stared at any woman pilot.

They all knew who she was. Erin had a reputation within the guild. No one had ever been able to prove anything, but they all just "knew" she had started that fire. They all "knew" she had burned a senior airman's plane. They had all heard it from "someone who was there." Likely everyone in this room wanted to push her out an airlock and likely some wanted to do a few other things to her first. She ignored them, got her coffee, and left the pilots' lounge. She had endured those stares for the past three years. She didn't react; she didn't lash out.

Erin was stable.

It was 06:57 when Erin accessed one of the data terminals in the Flight Ops office to sign herself on for duty. Flight ops, unlike the pilots' lounge, was a restricted area. Only Noémie pilots were allowed here. Although most of the pilots in this room hated her just as much, at least they were used to seeing the alleged plane burner and mostly just ignored her.

After she was signed on, she went to the assignments section. She expected to find a list of containers she was to move to and from the various starhoppers that were gravlocked in nearby space. Instead, all she saw was a notification for her to report to the Chief Pilot's office.

This could be good or it could be *very* bad.

* * *

As soon as she walked into the Chief Pilot's office, Erin guessed it was very bad.

Erin wasn't surprised to find her boss, Chief Pilot Evan Conrad, there. She was surprised, however, to find the

president of the Gonaways chapter of the Aviators' Guild, Captain Yamashita himself, waiting for her. Capt. Yamashita wore the dark blue suit jacket, slacks, tie, and captain's hat of a high-ranking official in the guild. There was no higher rank than Capt. Yamashita, in fact. He wore epaulettes on his shoulders, each displaying five bars, his rank of president of the guild. His shoes were polished to a high shine. In the center of his face, his eyebrows seemed perpetually bunched together above his deep-set eyes, giving him an air of calmly assessing everything around him. His suit jacket did little to hide the pistol bulge under his left shoulder. Erin had no doubt that *his* pistol was loaded. Everything about the man spoke of power. Though he stood several centimeters shorter than she, Erin still felt small in the presence of this man. With a pen strike, he could revoke her pilot's license.

She struggled to control her fear even as she felt her bladder wanting to let go. Was this about the airplane burning three years ago? There had been an investigation into that and she had been cleared as a suspect for lack of evidence. *Keep it together, she told herself. I am stable.*

"Captain Yamashita," Erin said shakily. "What an honor it is to meet you."

"The honor is all mine, Miss...?" Yamashita pretended he didn't know her name. Every pilot on Gonaways knew who she was. Plane burner.

"Journeyman Airman Erin O'Connell, sir. Um...what's this —"

"— Take a seat, O'Connell," Chief Pilot Conrad interrupted her from behind his desk. Conrad wore the same ugly, tan-and-light-blue Noémie uniform pants that Erin wore, but he also wore the uniform jacket. His pilot's hat sat on the corner of his desk, leaving his receding hairline exposed. Most line pilots like Erin usually eschewed the jacket and hat except for special occasions. A sit-down meeting with the president of the Aviators' Guild would be such an occasion. She felt woefully underdressed.

Erin obeyed her boss and sat in one of the two chairs in front of Conrad's desk. Yamashita took the other chair.

"The reason we've called you in here, Miss O'Connell," Yamashita said, "is because we need your help with a matter that concerns both the guild and Noémie."

"Um, okay," Erin said. Even if she wasn't in trouble, she still sensed danger. "What do you need me to do?"

Conrad slid a sheet of printed paper across his desk to her. Erin took the paper and looked it over. It had a SCARS message, a series of gravimetric coordinates, a spaceplane's manifest, and a summary of that spaceplane's history. It also detailed what little was known of the plane's current mission and had a brief summary of its pilot's work history. The pilot was someone she didn't know named Radcliff Elof.

"One of our planes is broken down planetside," Conrad explained. "Problem is, we don't know where he is exactly."

"Well," Yamashita corrected him, "we have some idea where he is. It took some doing, but I was able to get the coordinates out of some cargo pilots, guild members, who work for Safe Harbor Terraforming." Yamashita indicated the phrase SHP_242 in the SCARS message and the gravimetric coordinates on the paper in Erin's hand. He and Conrad then went on to explain what they knew about the plane, that it was grounded on a partially terraformed planet, and their commitment to see the pilot's safe return.

But Erin wasn't stupid. They both obviously knew that this Radcliff Elof was doing something shady. Why else would he take a plane out for a simple maintenance test and end up on the opposite side of the galaxy two weeks later? Whatever this Elof fool was up to, they didn't want it to cause a scandal for the company or the guild. Additionally, Conrad was eager to see the company property returned. Ulterior motives aside, it wasn't a bad opportunity for her. *She* wasn't being asked to do anything illegal; they just wanted her to fly a mechanic and a container of parts out to the downed plane. And this planet, SHP 242, was way out in the Backwater Cluster. She could probably add a week's worth of transtach flying time to her logbook — to say nothing of the fat paycheck that would be waiting for her when she got back.

"So...can we count on you to take this assignment?" Conrad asked.

Erin almost answered "yes" right away, but then something occurred to her. "Um, sir. Firstly, let me say how grateful I am that you are offering me this opportunity." The two men exchanged a significant glance. Erin noticed it. She continued, "But I have a question. I'm only newly checked out on the hardpointers and I don't have any flights under my belt as Pilot In Command. Both Oswald and Branch have more seniority than I as well more P.I.C. time. Why aren't you sending one of them instead?"

A heavy silence fell over the room. Erin knew right away that she had misstepped, though she didn't understand how. It was Yamashita who broke the silence. "Captain Conrad, could I speak with Miss O'Connell in private for a

moment?"

Erin saw her boss's brow twitch slightly. He didn't like being asked to leave his own office, but even he was a member of the guild. Even he could be destroyed by Yamashita. And even he obeyed. "Of course, Captain." With that, he grabbed his hat from the corner of his desk, placed it on his head, and left the room. He closed the door behind himself.

Once the two of them were alone, Yamashita turned his chair to face her more directly. He also pulled it closer so that now their knees were nearly touching. She unconsciously crossed her legs. Being alone with powerful men always made Erin nervous. Not that she suspected Yamashita had anything inappropriate on his mind, but just the knowledge that if he did, there would be nothing she could do to stop him. Everything that mattered in her life flowed from her pilot's license and this man could take all that away at will. Her pilot's license was like the forcefield that held the hanger's air from escaping into space: something thin and vulnerable that held everything in place.

"Erin," Yamashita said, addressing her by her first name, "I know you've got kind of a...*checkered* past with the guild. I know a lot of people don't like you. I know they blame you for that fire."

Erin opened her mouth to profess her innocence, but Yamashita raised his hand to silence her.

He continued, "You know as well as I do that because of your reputation, your opportunities for career advancement are always going to be limited. You don't want to spend the rest of your life flying loaders and moving containers on and off of starhoppers. Starhoppers that you'll never get to fly."

Erin felt herself twitch slightly. She willed her body to be still. He had laid bare a major source of pain: her hamstrung career.

Yamashita nodded slightly. His eyes stared directly into hers. She had to will herself to meet his gaze. She had to will herself to maintain her composure. She had to will the tears welling up in her eyes not to spill over. "Part of my job," Capt. Yamashita went on, "is to help guild members advance to their full potential. I specifically asked for you for this mission because I feel it's time to give you a chance to redeem your reputation. It's an opportunity for you to save a downed brother airman." He paused for effect, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly before asking, "Now, Journeyman Airman O'Connell, will you take this mission for the guild and for your company?"

"Y—Yes, of course, sir," she answered simply. She hated how weak and mousy her answer sounded, but it was all she could muster.

"Good!" Yamashita clapped his hand on her knee in a way that was simultaneously both companionable and patronizing. "I'm glad to hear it."

Erin took the opportunity to finally break the intense eye contact and pretend she was re-reading the paper in her hand.

"There is one more thing," Yamashita said.

Erin looked up from the paper. *Here it comes*, she thought, *the catch*.

"If you see anything illegal in Captain Elof's cargo or activities, you're obligated by law to report it."

"Um, yes sir. I know that."

He leaned in and spoke next with great and deliberate emphasis: "If. You. See. It."

She took his meaning: *Make sure not to see anything illegal that could make the guild look bad*. "I understand, sir. If I see it."

Yamashita gave her knee another of those uncomfortable claps. "We understand one another. I expect you'll make Senior Airman before long."

It was a bribe. A promotion within the guild just to keep her eyes and mouth shut.

The Baited Hook

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Backwater

Planet: SHP 242 [Unnamed]

Col. Landon Raith stood over his technical specialist's shoulder looking at the mass of wires and mangled spaceplane parts strewn out across the workbench. Col. Raith had sent a squad overland a few days ago to check out the hardpoint freighter's crash site. They had returned just yesterday with what only looked like junk to him. But Sgt. Trig had a plan for all this junk.

Sgt. Trig had sworn to Col. Raith that he could get these random pieces of spaceplane parts working and use them to send a signal that *might* lure another hardpointer here to this cursed backwater hellhole.

"Whaddya got, Trigger?" the colonel asked, addressing his subordinate by his nickname.

"Well, I got it up and runnin' and I'm pretty sure it's sending this back to Noémie." Trigger indicated a readout on a small display:

/495NC/GND/SHP_242/TFGCAP_OTS/END/

"What the hell is all that saying, Trigger?"

"I'm pretty sure it's saying that the plane is grounded because something called 'the transtachyonic field generator capacitor' is out of service."

"What the fuck is that?"

"I talked to Major Tolbert and couple of the other pilots and they said that's the thing that makes the plane go faster than light. She also said that it's big enough and heavy enough that they'll need to send a hardpointer to carry the new one out here."

"Good work, Trigger. We need that hardpointer."

"Yes, sir."

Landon examined the components Trigger had brought back with him from the crash site. They mostly looked like cockpit control panels and the like. Several of the components were covered with dried blood but they didn't look like they'd been through a fire. "The plane didn't burn when it crashed?" Landon asked.

"The back half did. All three engines were pretty much slagged. But the nose section was mostly intact. Just sittin' there on the ground like it belonged there. The cockpit itself was barely damaged. They build those hardpointers tough as fuck."

"Yeah, pirates and even some mercenary outfits have been know to retrofit them as heavy assault planes. Their main engines are powerful enough to make them nearly as fast as a fighter. Mount some big guns and some armor plating on them and you've got a poor man's flying tank."

"That's sexy, sir. Tell me that if the next one doesn't crash, we're keeping it and turning it into a flying tank."

"If we can find somebody to fly it, I don't see why not."

"Huh, I reckon the plane'll come with a pilot. Hopefully the next one will fare better than he did." Trigger indicated the body bag that contained what was left of Radcliff Elof. "And maybe even this next one will come with a mechanic to boot. I reckon we can '*convince*' them to join our cause. Or else."

"You're a devious bastard, Trigger."

"Thank you, sir."

"Why did you guys bring back the pilot's corpse, anyways?"

"Major Tolbert insisted we make some effort to get the 'body' (such as it is) back to the man's people. Some kind of 'fraternity of pilots' thing. Not that there was much of a body left by the time we got there, just a few maggotty chunks."

"Fraternity of pilots?" Landon asked incredulously.

"Don't make no kinda sense to me, Colonel. The Major's a fighter pilot, spends her whole life trying to kill other pilots, but as soon as one dies, them throttle jockeys all treat his remains like holy relics."

"Hmm...Well, let me know if anybody answers your distress call." Raith took one last look at the mess of wires and airplane parts before he left the room. "I hope this works."

"Me too, sir."

On the workbench in front of them, the slightly mangled, dissected, and bloody spaceplane components continued to broadcast their message.

/495NC/GND/SHP_242/TFGCAP_OTS/END/

The hook was baited.

A Sketchy Job

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Nexus

Station: Gonaways

After leaving the Chief Pilot's office, Erin went to her locker and retrieved the small overnight bag she kept there. She had kept this packed overnight bag in her locker ever since she'd first been checked out to fly the hardpointer three months ago. Now, the day had finally come. She was the pilot in command of her own interstellar flight.

After retrieving her overnight bag, she went back to Flight Ops. There, she got a preflight briefing and manifest directly from one of the Flight Dispatch Office supervisors, a man named Rinjin Simon. The hardpointer Erin would be flying, tail number 788NC, would carry full tanks of fuel, 14,000kg of fuel between the three tanks. No one knew exactly how long the mission would take. One thing Noémie didn't want was for her to run low on fuel and have to purchase fuel from a competitor.

Additionally, the plane would carry a heavy-duty maintenance mech and a single cargo container full of airplane parts to repair the downed plane. The shipping container and the mech suit would ride as external payload, mounted to the hardpoints on the plane's back, which is why 788NC was called a "hardpoint freighter."

"Oh, you're gonna *love* this mechanic," Rinjin said with devious glee. "She's a real peach."

The mechanic's name was Alyssa Ruiz, according to the manifest. When Erin asked Rinjin to elaborate, he just evaded her questions. *Great. I'm going to be stuck in a tin can for a week with this person, and he won't tell me what's wrong with her. Whatever. I'm a professional. I'll deal with it.*

After she signed for 788NC in the computer system, Rinjin handed over the plane's control card and paired it to Erin's QSP. Now, the control card (and by extension the plane itself) would only work for Erin. Erin hated having a QuantumScale Processor in her body. The QSP was a network of subatomic particles working together as a computer inside her brain. It went against everything she'd been raised to believe. Besides, it was just creepy. But Noémie (like many companies) insisted that she have one if she wanted to fly the heavy metal. And Erin definitely wanted to fly the heavy metal.

Now, with control card, flight bag, and overnight bag in hand, Erin walked across the ramp past the rows of parked loaders. Loaders were a class of smaller, sublight-only spaceplane purpose-built for moving shipping containers around a spaceport. Loaders could be fun to fly in their own right, but today Erin was excited to get to fly a real airplane.

The hardpointer she was preparing to fly today resembled a traditional airplane, especially with its wings and empennage installed for atmospheric flight. Its cockpit was in the nose of the fuselage and its three massive main engines protruded from its tail in an inverted triangular arrangement. The length of the fuselage was studded with hardpoints for mounting shipping containers to the plane's exterior. Unlike traditional bulk freighters, the hardpointer had only a small internal baggage hold and instead carried its cargo as external payload. The interior of the fuselage was little more than a housing for the three massive engines, the cockpit, and spartan living quarters for crew on long-haul flights. The hardpoint freighter was equipped with graviton thrusters in its belly and could normally take off vertically like an ancient helicopter. But not today. Today's flight was unusual.

Normally, hardpointers were flown without their wings or empennages installed. They typically take off without freight and then are loaded in space. Once a hardpointer is covered with an array of dozens of interlocking shipping containers, the plane enters transtachyonic flight towards its destination. Because 788NC would have the added weight of its aerodynamic structures and the freight it carried, it would be too heavy to take off vertically. Today's flight, therefore, was *very* unusual and Erin felt appropriately lucky to have gotten it.

At nearly every loader gate Erin passed, some pilot was preflighting one of the short-range container movers. More than a few cast envious, spiteful glances in her direction. She ignored them. Let them whisper about her. Let them call her a plane burner. Today, *she* was taking a transtach-capable hardpointer out on an interstellar rescue mission. Let all those scrubs wallow in their jealousy. Erin wouldn't even give them the satisfaction of a gloating glance. *Have fun moving*

containers around the local space today, guys.

As she was passing one of the loaders, the pilot who was preflighting it, Fionn Oswald, stopped what he was doing and approached her. Fionn was one of the few pilots on the flight line Erin actually liked. He was tall, thin, and handsome with a nice, well-groomed beard and gray eyes. Unlike most of the other pilots, he had always been kind to her. He also outranked her in seniority. *I hope he's not salty about me getting this charter over him*, she thought. She would hate to lose the closest thing she had to a friend.

"Erin," Fionn said, "I hear you're taking that hardpointer out to rescue Rad."

"Yeah..." Erin answered cautiously. "You know the pilot?"

"A little. Met him a few times. He works outta the maintenance hub over at Regulation Crossing. Test pilot. Kind of a bro, but a decent enough dude. Real good pilot."

"Hey, look, Fionn...about them giving this assignment to me, I never asked them to bypass seniority. It came from the guild."

"Yeah, that's what I want to talk to you about. Before they offered the job to you, they called me and Cal Branch both in and offered it to us. At first I said 'yes,' but then Yamashita – he was there in person, I shit you not – scooted his chair real close to me and asked me if I was *absolutely sure* that I wanted to take the job. The guy was creepy-intense. I knew he wanted me to say 'no' so I turned down the job. Cal said pretty much the same happened to him."

"Yamashita was there when I was in the office too. I know what you mean about him being creepy-intense. He strongly encouraged me to take the job. I was wondering why they didn't offer it to you guys first, since you're both senior to me."

"They did offer it to us. Then, they encouraged us to turn it down. Something about this job is making my bullshit detector go crazy, Erin. Why is it so important to Yamashita that *you* specifically take it?"

"I don't know," Erin admitted. It wasn't just because she could be compelled to keep her mouth shut about whatever illegal stuff Capt. Elof was doing. Almost any guild member would turn a blind eye to another's legal transgressions. And it *certainly* wasn't because Yamashita wanted to give her a chance to "redeem her reputation," as he'd claimed.

"Well, you watch yourself out there, Erin. Be safe."

"I will. Thanks for the heads up, Fionn."

"And call me when you get back. I'll sleep better knowing you're back safe."

Is he flirting with me? Erin couldn't understand what a man like Fionn could see in someone as ugly as herself. "That's really sweet of you. I will. Clear skies."

Fionn nodded. "Clear skies to you too." And then he turned back toward his loader to resume his preflight.

Erin continued on down the ramp towards her plane where mechanics were attaching the empennage to the tail section just above the three engines.

Ready to Fly

Lyssa and Feld had just finished attaching 788NC's wings and empennage, and they now stood in the cockpits of their mechs atop the plane's fuselage. From their respective mech cockpits, the mechanics watched the loading of the single shipping container the plane would carry. This container held all the parts Lyssa would need to repair the broken-down plane when they got wherever they were going. The container hung from a ceiling crane via cables. Lyssa and Feld stayed out of the way and watched as Loadmaster Serpico guided the container's gentle lowering to waiting plane's hardpoints.

Lyssa loved airplanes as beautiful and interesting machines, but she didn't really like flying in them. The pilot was somebody she knew only by reputation, and not a good reputation at that.

"Fucking Roscoe has it in for me," Lyssa complained to Feld over her mech's communicator. "Sending me on this scum-sucking shit show of a job with a crazy-ass plane burner."

"That he does. He don't like you because you're Estrellan. He don't like you because you're a woman. Mostly he don't like you because you're late to work all the time. No doubt he's hoping you'll fuck something up on this job and he can finally fire you."

"Roscoe can go blow a pig! And for the record, I'm a Gonian citizen now. Estrella doesn't exist anymore."

Feld's tone turned conspiratory. "Well, if it's any consolation, there is one good thing about this plane burner..."

"What's that?" Lyssa asked trepidatiously.

"She's hot at least."

Lyssa rolled her eyes. "You're a pig."

"Well, maybe we can get Roscoe to blow me, then." Laughter erupted from Lyssa's communicator as Feld cracked himself up at his own joke.

Down below, Serpico finished checking the cargo locking pins and the emergency release mechanism on the shipping container. He gave Lyssa a thumbs up, indicating that he was ready to start the process of securing her mech to the plane. They were taking the maintenance mech with them. She would need it to do the repair on the grounded plane when they got wherever they were going. Following Serpico's hand signals, Lyssa walked her mech over to the particular set of hardpoints to which he wanted the heavy piece of machinery secured. Within fifteen minutes, the mech, which approximated a hulking human shape while standing erect, was folded down into its streamlined transport configuration and secured to the top of the freighter.

* * *

Lyssa waved goodbye to Feld and Serpico from the top of the crew stairs as each man left to begin whatever task he had been assigned to next. They were good guys. In fact, Lyssa liked most of the people she worked with on the ramp. When she'd first started this job two years ago, she'd faced a lot of racism. Since then, people had gotten used to working beside an Estrellan refugee. The fact that she was a top-notch airplane mechanic and that she was just alcoholic enough to knock 'em back with the boys didn't hurt. These days, only a few people on the ramp still had a problem with her. Unfortunately, one of those was her supervisor, Terry Roscoe. Why Roscoe hadn't fired her already was a mystery to Lyssa.

Lyssa turned from the cacophony of the hanger and stepped through the crew door into the plane. To her left, the door to the cockpit hung open. Through this door, she caught frequent, fleeting glimpses of the pilot's right arm as it moved deftly about the switches and control panels readying the plane for flight. It would be courteous for her to go introduce herself to the pilot, this Erin Something-or-other, but Lyssa had heard too many things about how crazy this particular pilot was. As a general thing, Lyssa found pilots annoying at best. They always broke her airplanes and then got impatient with her about the repairs. No, she would settle in first.

She turned right down the central corridor of the plane. All the doors were open and she could see all the way past the crew quarters, past the small living area, and into the engine room in the back. The plane had the familiar odor of metal, old paint, dust, grease, and plastic native to older spaceplanes the universe over. Everything about the machine showed wear and age. The door latch handles were all partially denuded of paint and the light switches all smudged

with dirt from the countless hands over the years. She touched her hand against the wall, painted in drab, utilitarian aviation green paint, and felt the airplane's metal. She could feel its age and she could feel the subtle vibration of its machinery through its structure. She liked what she felt. Some sixth sense that all good mechanics and pilots possess told her that this plane was good and solid, ready to fly. Lyssa loved airplanes; she just didn't love riding in them so much.

The pilot had already settled her things into Bunk 1. It's just a function of the human psyche to wish to be nearer the front. But most people didn't know these planes as well as Lyssa did. Lyssa chose Bunk 6, the aft-most bunk on the right side of the plane. This was the bunk that no one usually wanted because it was the smallest. What Lyssa knew that most people didn't know was the *reason* Bunk 6 was the smallest. The engineers at Jaskowski Aerospace, when designing the JA88 hardpoint freighter, had made Bunk 6 just slightly smaller to allow room for the life support system's heater. Thus, Bunk 6 was always the warmest.

Her gear now stowed in bunk 6, Lyssa went about her duties and preflight checks. The environmental scrubbers were clean, the potable water tanks were full, and the lav tanks were empty. In the small galley, she found that the plane was loaded with fourteen days of normal food rations. After that, they would have to resort to eating Perma-Rations, which only technically qualify as food. No one ever liked eating perma-rats (as they were more commonly called), but the vile-tasting rations never expire and will keep a body from starving.

Lyssa had only ever eaten perma-rats once during the long transport flight which had brought she and her brother, Marcio, here to Gonaways station. It had been three years now since they had come as refugees from their home station, Ciudad Estrella. Tens of thousands had been killed during The Ruin of Estrella and the rest of Estrella's two million people had been evacuated to various worlds and station-worlds all over the Darklands. Ciudad Estrella, the oldest station-world in the Darklands, the home and pride of the Estrellan people, was no more.

Lyssa pushed thoughts of home out of her mind. Gonaways was her home now, and she had a job to do.

She checked the EVA suits. 788NC had the standard loadout of three normal Extra-Vehicular Activity suits designed for routine spacewalks, and one Heavy EVA (HEVA) suit which had a heavy-duty exoskeleton and was designed to withstand extremes of heat, cold, acidity, radiation, and pressure. Lyssa doubted they would need these suits as she would be repairing the downed spaceplane on planetside, but she didn't know what kind of atmosphere this partially terraformed planet would have. If there was a problem with one of the suits, it was better to discover it now while they were still in the hanger.

Finding all the suits in good working order, Lyssa proceeded on to her primary domain: the engine room. The dominant feature of the engine room was (of course) the three massive space/time compression engines mounted in a cluster like an inverted triangle. The engines were crawling with ductwork, wires, and support components of every sort imaginable. Everywhere there twinkled a veritable starfield of twinkling status lights, readout panels, and even the odd mechanical gauge. The three engines themselves were each wider in diameter than Lyssa was tall. The No. 2 engine was mounted directly to the engine room floor and had a narrow access space on either side of it. The No. 1 and No. 3 engines were mounted above and to either side of the No. 2. The only access to engines 1 and 3 in flight was via a claustrophobia-inducing catwalk which was mounted atop the No. 2 and ran between the two upper engines. To most people, all this machinery was just a confusing mess of grimy parts, but to Lyssa it was a miracle of technology, engineering, and precision manufacturing.

At the front of the engine room along the plane's left side was a small workbench with a vice bolted to it and several drawers stocked with basic tools and an assortment of common replacement engine parts. Opposite of the workbench and along the plane's right side was the master circuit breaker panel as well as a set of engine controls and readouts similar to those found in the cockpit. Through the plast-alloy grating upon which she stood, Lyssa could see the heavy-duty magnetic ducting that fed energy from the engines to the Transtachyonic Field Generator, the device which made faster-than-light travel possible. The magnetic ducting nearly obscured the TFG itself and its all-important capacitor from her view.

The plane she was going to repair was of a nearly identical design to this one. Much of the work she would have to do when they got to their destination would be removing that ducting on the broken-down plane. She estimated that it would take her longer to get *to* the capacitor than it would to change it out.

Satisfied that everything was in order in the engine room, Lyssa made to head toward the cockpit. She couldn't put off meeting this pilot much longer. On her way out of the engine room, she stopped briefly and examined the airframe plate mounted above the door. The airframe plate gave the plane's date of manufacture (some fifty years ago) along with

the words:

JASKOWSKI AERSOSPACE, Inc.
MODEL JA88
SERIAL No.4278
Ciudad Estrella
Vacuum Welders' Local 173
"We build with pride."

The last three lines were written in Estrellan and next to it someone had scratched "Go back were you came from!" into the paint in Gonian.

"*W-h-e-r-e*," Lyssa emphasized the letter "h" as she spelled the proper word aloud to the long-gone vandal. "Illiterate brotherfuckers can't even speak your own language." She made a mental note to find some paint and paint over the graffiti as soon as she had some downtime.

Now, she heard a faint whirring from far aft, near the very back of the plane. The lights brightened ever-so-slightly. She knew that whirring sound well. It was the plane's Auxiliary Power Unit starting up. If the pilot was starting the APU, that meant that soon they would be pushing back from the gate and starting the engines.

Well, I might as well go meet the plane burner. Lyssa loved spaceplanes, but she hated flying on them. She especially wasn't too keen to spend the next week or so trapped in a plane with a pilot who had a reputation for burning planes.

First Impressions

Erin was neither deaf nor stupid. She'd heard the mechanic, this Alyssa Ruiz, come up the crew stairs, hesitate just inside the crew door, and then proceed back into the plane without introducing herself first. It was common courtesy for crew to introduce themselves to the captain as soon as they came aboard the plane. Erin noticed the slight, but she'd hardly expected anything more. Even among the mechanics Erin's reputation for setting airplanes on fire made her a pariah.

Erin remembered what the flight dispatcher, Rinjin, had said about this Alyssa: "Oh, you're gonna *love* this mechanic. She's a real peach." Something told her that she and Alyssa weren't going to like one another. Erin sighed. *Fine. You stay out of my cockpit, and I'll stay out of your engine room. I'm a professional. Let's see if you can say the same thing.*

She shifted in her seat to try and get comfortable, knowing it was hopeless, and went back to her checklists. The long list of items required to make the spaceplane ready for flight ticked up the MultiFunction Display panel next to the Primary Flight Display. As she flipped each switch into its required position, that item disappeared from the top of the checklist and all the other items moved up the display screen.

AUTO YAW...**ON** read the top item on the checklist. Erin flipped the automatic yaw dampener switch to the ON position. On the display, the "**ON**" changed briefly from red to green before the entire item disappeared and the next one moved up to replace it. This process repeated with each successive item as she moved down the checklist.

ART. GRAVITY...**0.6G**

INERTIAL STABILIZERS...**ON** (Because only an idiot would take off without inertial stabilizers.)

PRIM. FUEL PUMP...**ON**

SEC. FUEL PUMP...**OFF** Some items were already showing green, indicating that the switch was already in the proper position. Nevertheless, the plane's computer required that she physically touch the switch to verify it was in the proper position before she could proceed. Once the sensors in the control panel were satisfied that a human hand had touched the switch in question, the checklist proceeded to the next item.

Eventually, she got to the line that read:

APU...**START**

She pressed the button labeled APU START on the overhead switch panel. In the back of the plane, the Auxiliary Power Unit came to life. The APU was basically just a small engine that didn't provide thrust, but instead ran a generator to provide internal power. Additionally, the APU's power output was necessary to start the three main engines.

Erin could feel the slight vibration from the APU all the way up in the cockpit through the plane's structure. She took a moment to check the gauges to make sure the APU was functioning normally and charging the onboard batteries. These checks weren't on the checklist. Even though Erin might only be 21 years old, she was already an experienced pilot. She knew not everything was on the checklist.

By the time she was satisfied that all was well with the APU, she heard Alyssa gracefully clomping forward in her heavy work boots. *Now, she's finally going to introduce herself*, Erin thought. *Fine, just stay out of my cockpit.*

Ignoring the clomping, Erin ran through several more items on the checklist. Once she was satisfied they didn't need station power anymore, she lifted her hands up to the cockpit window and gave the appropriate hand signals to the maintenance bot on the ramp below. The bot went about disconnecting the plane from the gate's power umbilicus, closing the crew door, retracting the crew stairs, and removing the wheel chocks. On her checklist, the item STATION POWER...**DISCONNECT** changed to green and disappeared. They were now isolated from the outside world, breathing their own air and making their own energy.

She held her finger over the radio XMT key, about to call Ramp Control for permission to push back from the gate —

"So, we 'bout to get this shitbucket movin'?" came a sardonic voice from the cockpit doorway. "Don't want to keep our corporate overlords waitin'."

Erin felt her blood pressure tick up a notch. What kind of introduction was that? She looked over her right shoulder at the figure standing in the cockpit door. The woman was short, standing at only slightly over 1.5 meters. She wore the Noémie uniform for mechanics: tan coveralls with light blue piping. Above her left breast pocket was printed the

Noémie company logo and above her right breast pocket a patch reading RUIZ had been stitched. Both the logo and the name on the patch were in the company's signature light blue. The many pockets of her coveralls were stuffed and bulging with various hand tools and other necessities of the mechanic's trade. The mechanic wore heavy safety boots with toe protection and non-slip soles. All of this was common enough for any mechanic, but the odd thing was her hair. The woman had shaved her hair into a wide mohawk and dyed it the same light blue as the Noémie logo. *Did she do that on purpose to match her uniform?* Erin wondered.

The hair made no sense to Erin. Alyssa Ruiz was obviously Estrellan. This was an unusual thing, as Gonaways law required all ramp personnel to be Gonian citizens. The law did allow for an exception to the citizenship requirement for pilots, owing to the transient nature of their trade. Erin, like many pilots, was a foreigner herself. She had no problem with Estrellans, but a lot of people did. Erin would think that if she herself were of such a widely despised ethnic group, she would do as little as possible to draw attention to herself. But that hair was clearly meant to draw attention.

She must be an idiot, was the only answer Erin could think of. *Great.* "I'm about to call for pushback now," Erin answered Alyssa's question dismissively.

"Good. Sooner we get this butt fucking started, the sooner it'll be over with. Am I right?"

"Excuse me? This what?" Erin didn't like that kind of language generally, but she especially loathed it in the cockpit. She felt her blood pressure tick up another notch.

Alyssa (who still hadn't done Erin the courtesy of introducing herself) stepped deftly over the center console and angled herself, uninvited, into the cockpit's right seat. Erin had to force her brow to unfurrow itself, lest she get frown lines. Alyssa continued: "This dry-cob butt fucking. You know this is a shit job, right? That's why you got me. You know Terry Roscoe, the aircraft maintenance chief? He wants to get me out of his hair for a while. So who'd you piss off to get stuck on this job?"

"Umm..." Erin was stunned with just how rude and crass this woman was. "I didn't make anyone mad. This is a huge opportunity for us to prove ourselves." Erin almost mentioned that Capt. Yamashita himself had wanted her to fly this mission, but then she thought better of it. Something about all that seemed a little *off* to her. She thought of Fionn's misgivings about the mission. And then she thought about Fionn's gray eyes, like storm clouds. She pushed all those distracting thoughts aside. She shifted in her seat again to try and get comfortable.

"To prove ourselves as what?" Lyssa asked, incredulous. "The expendable, unloved, red-headed, bastard, inbred stepchildren of Noémie Gonaways? Shit!" The pilot, Erin, was one of the most beautiful women Lyssa had ever seen, but she seemed kind of dumb (even for a pilot). Built tall and slim, Erin's long, gangly limbs seemed almost out of place in so cramped a space as a cockpit. The woman seemed uncomfortable, perpetually repositioning herself in her seat. Lyssa wondered if Erin's discomfort was a function of her long, wiry build or her inexperience as a captain. *Hopefully the prior,* Lyssa thought. Erin had curly, blonde hair. She obviously struggled to keep her hair tamed down, but those curls clearly had an agenda of their own and would not be tamed. Lyssa wondered what it would feel like to pull on those curls.

The pilot gave Lyssa an exasperated sigh. "If you don't mind, I have a spaceplane to fly."

"Sure, no problem," Lyssa said, fastening her seatbelt. "Oh, you don't mind if I sit up here, do ya, Captain Uhhh..."

"O'Connell. Erin O'Connell. And you're Alyssa. I know. Nice to finally meet you." The tone of Erin's voice was annoyed.

Fuck, Lyssa thought, *I forgot to introduce myself! She probably thinks I did it out of disrespect.* "Um, yeah. Nice to meet you too," Lyssa answered, somewhat chastened. Somewhat. "But I go by Lyssa, not Alyssa."

"Fine. Lyssa it is, then," Erin answered dismissively. *Just stop talking,* she thought at Lyssa. She knew that if she kicked this woman out of the cockpit right now, then this would be a very long, contentious flight indeed. Nevertheless, she needed to be able to focus on her work. She would kick her out if she had to.

"So anyways, why did they send you on this shitty flight?" Lyssa continued. She obviously wasn't taking the hint to shut up. "I know why they sent me: 'cause I'm a fuck up, ya' know? But why they got you thinking this some kind of 'opportunity'? Padding your résumé to make Senior Airman with the guild? Goin' for that third bar?" At this last, Lyssa reached over and patted the two-barred journeyman's epaulettes on Erin's shoulder.

This was too much for Erin. She had not given this rude woman permission to enter her cockpit, to sit in the right seat, and she had *definitely* not given her permission to touch her. Anger rose up in Erin, and before she could stop herself, she slapped the mechanic's hand roughly away from her shoulder.

Lyssa flinched back, more from surprise at the sudden anger than at the slap itself. Some instinct in her sensed

danger and she reflexively drew away. *Where did that come from?* Lyssa wondered. A few seconds passed in tense silence as Erin visibly struggled to contain her temper.

"I'm sorry. That was uncalled for," Erin said, but Lyssa could see that it was still taking an effort for the woman to contain herself.

"No sweat. It's cool, dude."

After several more seconds, Erin keyed the XMT button on her control stick and spoke into her headset mic. "Noémie Ramp, Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, ready to push."

As Erin taxied to the runway at the far end of Noémie's hanger, Lyssa pondered that wide-eyed flash of anger she's seen in Erin's face. Lyssa no longer had any doubt why Erin was on this crappy job. *This is definitely a woman who would burn a plane if she got mad enough.*

Takeoff

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, taxi into position and hold," Tower instructed Erin.

"Position and hold, Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie," Erin read back the tower's instruction. They wanted her to taxi onto the runway and get ready to take off, but not to actually take off yet. This was usually done to provide separation from other aircraft. Sitting on the taxiway near the end of the runway, she nudged all three throttle levers slightly forward. The engines grew louder in the back of the plane and presently the plane started to roll out onto the runway. She pulled the throttles back to idle again, confident that the plane now had enough momentum. She lined up with the runway centerline just as the plane's momentum was nearly depleted. She stood on the toe brakes to hold the plane in position until they had an actual takeoff clearance.

Lyssa sat quietly in the right seat. She seemed to be texting with someone. They had sat in awkward silence since she'd slapped Lyssa back at the gate, but at least it was silence.

Erin verified one last time that the departure frequency was set into the standby position on the radio. She checked the flaps and trim were set properly and that the expected departure heading was entered into the flight director. Erin was now fully in her element.

Erin was happy.

Erin was never happier than when she was at the controls of an airplane. Ahead of her was 600 meters of runway and beyond that, the open freedom of space. The vibrations coming through the controls made the plane feel like a living thing, a breathing, powerful creature that just wanted to fly. A flying creature that would not be denied. The three massive engines were held at idle by Erin's hand on their throttles. The beast pulled at its leash. Erin licked her lips and repositioned herself in her seat.

From one of the landing pads beside the runway, a non-Noémie plane performed a vertical takeoff. This private luxury plane was given priority departure since they were customers who had likely bought fuel from Noémie. Erin watched as the other plane hovered over its platform briefly and then was cleared to hover-taxi in front of Erin's plane. The luxury plane passed through the forcefield at the end of the runway, leaving the safety of the hanger for open space. Once that plane was through the force field, Erin expected her takeoff clearance shortly. She was not disappointed.

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, Clear for takeoff. Maintain runway heading. Contact Gonaways Departure on frequency forty-four-eighty-one. Good day," The Noémie Tower said to Erin.

Erin glanced at the tower as she read back her clearance. The "tower" wasn't really a tower, just a control room hanging from the cavernous hanger deck's ceiling. "Cleared for takeoff. Runway heading. Departure forty-four-eighty-one. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Good day," she read back. Without any further hesitation, she pushed the throttles to 30% thrust while standing on the brakes. She waited a couple seconds for the engines to spool up to speed and smooth out. Once they did, she released the brakes and pushed the throttles forward to the 50% position. The plane was loaded heavily and the runway was short, but the gravity in the hanger was only 0.6Gs. Erin had done the calculation back at the gate and 50% power was more than the mighty engines needed to get the plane off the deck. The hardpointer launched forward from its starting position like a dog that's slipped its leash. Now harmonizing with one another, the engines sounded like some kind of buzzsaw as they pushed the plane eagerly down the runway.

The computer's automated voice sounded out in the cockpit, calling out critical airspeeds. "V-One!"

V_1 was the so-called "point of no return" airspeed. They were moving too fast now for her to abort the takeoff. If she tried, they would fall into the FOD pit at the end of the runway where she liked to take her coffee and ponder the fragility of life. If she tried to abort now, she'd die in that pit, which would bring her day full circle in a dark sort of way.

"Rotate!" the computer sang out. Erin applied only the slightest amount of back pressure on the stick between her knees and the nose rotated obediently off the runway. It rode a wheelie for a few seconds and Erin was reasonably sure she heard Lyssa gasp through the intercom system. Then, the shimmying rattle of the landing gear subsided as the main wheels left the runway. A second later, it got much brighter and much quieter as they passed through the forcefield, out the station's atmosphere, and into the dazzling sunlight of open space.

Over the intercom, Lyssa exhaled noisily. Erin switched primary controls over from aerodynamic mode to thruster

mode now that they were in the vacuum of space. She tapped the brakes and retracted the landing gear. The Traffic Collision Avoidance System display lit up with nearby spaceplanes; it was the start of the workday in the Darklands' busiest trade hub.

Erin switched the radio over from tower to the departure frequency of 4481MHz. The frequency was busy as usual and Erin had to wait several seconds for a break in the radio chatter before she could speak. When a momentary break finally came, she pushed her XMT key and spoke into her headset's boom mic. She made sure to speak in the cool, in-control, fast-paced affectation that pilots had used since before they had ever flown out of old Earth's atmosphere. "Gonaways departure. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Outta Noémie. Request HOLZR-3 departure."

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, I don't have a flight plan for you. State destination," answered the space traffic controller.

"No destination. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie is maintenance flight." The first part was definitely a lie, but Erin didn't want to broadcast to everybody listening on the frequency where she was going. The last part about this being a "maintenance flight" wasn't *technically* a lie.

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, understood. Cleared HOLZR-3 departure procedure. Request clearance prior to transtach and be advised G.B.E.Z. is hot." The space traffic controller's "understood" signaled that he was reading between her lines. He understood that she didn't want to name her destination because she was going somewhere to do something which may or may not be legal. STC weren't the police. As long as she didn't fly dangerously in his sector, he didn't care what she was up to. His advice that the "G.B.E.Z. is hot" conveyed two messages. It served not only as a reminder that the Giant's Backbone Exclusion Zone was a dangerous restricted area but also a veiled hint that the controller assumed he knew what she was up to and that the GBEZ was her actual destination.

Erin intended to avoid the GBEZ, but she made no effort to correct the controller. "Roger that. Cleared HOLZR-3. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie." Now cleared for the departure from Gonaways space, Erin entered the new instructions into the Flight Management Computer. The FMC advised that she activate the autopilot, but Erin ignored that. Chances to fly a plane like this one seldom came along for her and she wanted to hand fly it for a while. She turned the big hardpointer onto the heading the FMC advised she fly to intercept the first leg of the HOLZR-3 departure course.

"What the fuck does 'G.B.E.Z. is hot' mean?" Lyssa asked over the intercom.

Erin forced her brow to unfurrow and shifted once again in her seat. She'd almost forgotten that the annoying, little mechanic was in the seat beside her. Erin decided to ignore her. That was what she was trained to do: ignore distractions while flying.

"Hey, is this thing on?" Lyssa punctuated her question by tapping her headset mic three times with her finger. It came through both women's headset speakers as an obnoxiously loud *THUMP-THUMP-THUMP*.

"I hear you," Erin snapped.

"That's good," Lyssa said. "I was worried for a second there the intercom might be malfunctioning. I'd have to take this whole cockpit electrical panel apart to get to the intercom system."

"It's working fine. Now, let me fly."

"Cool. Anyways, what did the controller mean by that 'G.B.E.Z. is hot' thing?"

Erin sighed audibly and irritably into the intercom. "It's the Giant's Backbone Exclusion Zone, the war zone between the Kell Republic and the Olost Federation. It lines up directly with our departure course and the controller assumes that we're secretly going there to smuggle for one side or the other."

"Umm...Nobody said anything to me about a goddamned war zone. We're not going there, are we?"

"No."

"But..."

Erin sighed again. "We're going to a planet way out in the Backwater Cluster, on the other side of the Giant's Backbone. We're going to fly *around* the G.B.E.Z., but I'm fine with S.T.C. thinking we're going there. It's probably better if they and every nosey pilot listening on the frequency not know where we're actually going."

By this point, the plane had nearly completed its long, slow turn towards its departure heading. As it happened, the turn put Gonaways station right outside the right cockpit window. Lyssa caught sight of the largest space station in all the Darklands. The station-world had the population, industry, and the economic and military might to stand alone as an undisputed nation in its own right. It orbited not a planet, but a sun all its own. Gonaways and its nearly ten million citizens lived entirely in space where the tenebrite shadow, which makes life so hard on Darklands planets, can't slow

the march of human progress.

The station was basically four wheels on a single, long axle. The central axle (known colloquially as "the Stem") was two kilometers wide and over twenty kilometers long. The four habitation rings (called Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta Rings) were clustered at the far end of the Stem from where Noémie's hanger was. The rings spun slowly about their shared axle, generating 0.8Gs of cheap, comfortable spin gravity for those who could afford to live on the rings. The station had been anodized all over in white, navy blue, and dark orange, the colors of the Gonaways flag.

"Ho-ly shit!" Lyssa exclaimed. "It's even bigger and more beautiful than I imagined it. Pictures don't do it justice."

"You've never seen Gonaways from the outside?"

"Nuh-uh. I know you fly a loader, so you're out here every day. This ain't no big deal for you, but for me, this is the real-cow!" Lyssa answered. The phrase "real-cow" was Gonian slang for something that's the genuine article, as in steak that's made from actual cows rather than vat slurry. "Feels kinda small on the inside, especially on the Stem where the population density is highest. Ya kinda just forget how big it is!"

"Didn't you see it out the window when you first came here?" Erin asked.

Lyssa couldn't believe how clueless Erin was. She turned away from the station passing outside her window. "What do you think the refugee ships were like? Luxury spaceliners? Yeah, there were a few of those and even a couple of the big starhoppers, but most of us came to Gonaways stacked like cockroaches inside converted shipping containers on the backs of hardpointers like this one. They didn't bother to cut windows in those containers for us. Hell, they didn't even bother to tell us where they were taking us."

"Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's no big deal, really." But it was a big deal. This girl could never understand what it had been like to have your home station eaten alive by its own reactor. Thousands of people swallowed alive by the black hole-like object that the reactor turned itself into or ejected into space as the station broke up. This girl would never understand the fear. She could never understand being herded into a glorified shipping container and just being glad for the ride off Ciudad Estrella. She could never know the crying, the smell inside that container. They had been packed in too many to a container and no one knew where they were being taken to. There had been fights over what little supplies of perma-rats were available and the buckets which served as toilets quickly filled and overflowed. Lyssa still had nightmares about being trapped in a shipping container with little to eat. This girl could never understand all that.

"But...you...seem to be doing okay for yourself now, right?" Erin asked delicately.

"Well, I'm definitely doing better than most Estrellans on Gonaways." Lyssa was unable to hide the anger in her voice.

Several seconds of silence followed. Erin was understandably curious. She was wondering if she should press the question, but Lyssa, ever eager to run her mouth, continued: "Have you been down to the camps in the Lower Stem? Have you seen how those folks live? Not enough food, no work. Women selling their bodies for perma-rats to feed their kids. Men taking the most dangerous, most crappy day labor that no one else wants in exchange for not enough money to take care of their families. Children with hollow cheeks and hollow eyes and hollow bellies. Those are my people."

"That's incredibly sad," Erin said. She meant it, too, for Erin had grown up in the church. "How did you...you know...get out?"

"From the refugee camps? Well, as I understand it, we were slated to be shipped on to somewhere else, but Marcio somehow got us fast tracked for Gonian citizenship and he got us lined up for jobs, since we're both skilled workers."

Something seemed odd about that statement. Erin glanced over at Lyssa and Lyssa glanced sheepishly away. She obviously knew the story seemed odd too. The phrase "skilled workers" meant nothing. On Gonaways, Estrellan doctors were happy if they could find work as orderlies. The rise of Gonian nationalist movements and populist politicians in the past few years had made it nearly impossible for Estrellans to apply for Gonian citizenship. Erin guessed that this "Marcio" guy (whomever that was) had done something shady to get them their citizenship papers. Whatever this Marcio had done almost certainly would have involved the Boaters. Part political movement, part crime syndicate, the Boaters had their hands in virtually everything that went down on Gonaways. Erin decided to change the subject. "Is Marcio your husband?" she asked.

The look of horror and revulsion that shot across Lyssa's face made Erin worry that she'd just offended her in some way, but then Lyssa laughed. "Fuck no! Marcio's my brother. That shit might fly out where you're from, but not on Estrella!"

Erin laughed in spite of herself. "Sorry, I didn't know. Do you have a guy?"

"It's okay. No, I don't have a *guy*. Don't want one neither. But I do have a few *girls* I like spending time with." Lyssa shot her a wink.

Erin got red in the face. "Oh, umm...sorry, I didn't mean to presume..."

"You know you say 'sorry' an awful lot."

"Yeah, sorry, it's just the way I was brought up." The sentence was out of her mouth before Erin even realized what she'd done. In the right seat, Lyssa was struggling to hold her laughter in. "Oh...sor—" Erin stopped herself as she almost said it again.

At this, Lyssa could hold her laughter no more. She tilted her head back in riotous guffaws and drew her knees up to her chest. "Say it again!" Lyssa exclaimed through her laughter.

"So—sor—" Erin, now laughing herself, couldn't even get the word out.

Presently, a *ding-ding-ding* sounded from the FMC. It was the course deviation alarm, letting Erin know that she was drifting off course. She was only a little off course, not even enough for departure control to say anything and she began to correct the course.

"Holy shit! We're all gonna die!" Lyssa exclaimed, renewing her own laughing fit.

"Ah, shut up." Erin was laughing herself, though not as hardily as Lyssa was.

Gradually, the plane got back on course, the alarm silenced, and the laughter died down. After a few minutes of both women trying to catch their breath, Lyssa asked: "So what about you? You got a guy? A girl?"

"Uh, no. No *guy* at present." Erin answered, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. From the way she leaned on the word "guy" it was clear to Lyssa that this long-legged hottie wasn't looking for what she had to offer.

Damn, Lyssa thought, *That's a waste right there.*

The Art of Estrellan Cooking

The next couple hours passed in companionable conversation as Erin continued to fly the departure procedure away from Gonaways station. Once they were aligned on their transtach vector, Erin switched the engines' output ducts over so that now the engines were charging the TFG capacitor, rather than providing forward thrust. It took a lot of energy to generate a transtachyonic field and it would have to be released all at once. The capacitor would store the energy output of all three engines for the next half hour or so as the plane continued to coast through space at about 1% the speed of light.

Until they got to their destination where she would have to work her ass off to repair the downed spaceplane, Lyssa was basically just a passenger. She watched as Gonaways passed behind them, craning her neck to watch it go. Though there were more comfortable seats back in the galley or her bunk, Lyssa preferred to ride in the cockpit. Trapped in that container three years ago, she'd had no idea where they were going, how long the flight would last, or what was happening outside the container. Lyssa still hated flying, but at least up here in the cockpit she could constantly reassure herself that all was well.

She was starting to like Erin. She wasn't as bad as everybody said, but Lyssa had to remind herself of what she'd seen back at the gate. In that brief flash of intense anger, Lyssa had seen a woman who *could* burn a plane. But *had* she? Lyssa wanted to ask her about it, but that felt too dangerous a subject to broach as of yet. Now that they were getting along, she didn't want to screw up the harmony.

She liked watching Erin work. Even now, more than two hours into the flight, Erin was still hand-flying the plane. Her left forearm rested on her thigh as she held the stick lightly with just her thumb and first two fingers. She flew with her fingers. Her inputs on the flight controls were so small that the stick barely seemed to move at all. Meanwhile, her right arm seemed a busy thing. It frequently flew up to the overhead panel, entered new data into the flight computer, adjusted engine controls, switched frequencies on the radios, and engaged in a thousand other tasks. Erin's short-sleeved pilot's shirt left her toned arms exposed.

It was clear to Lyssa that Erin worked out. Lyssa could see the muscles moving in the pilot's forearms. Erin's arms were possibly her best feature and Lyssa would lay her paycheck down that most men never even noticed them. They looked firm and strong, but not like a man's arms. They long, delicate and feminine. Occasionally, when Erin would reach up to the overhead panel, Lyssa would be treated to a glimpse of her bra right up her sleeve. At least once, Lyssa was sure that Erin caught her looking but pretended not to have noticed. Lyssa really liked watching Erin work.

"Gonaways departure, Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Request transtach, current heading," Erin said into the radio. She shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. Lyssa had noticed that Erin shifted in her seat like that every few minutes, but she still hadn't decided if it was because of nerves or her gangly frame. Possibly both.

Lyssa glanced at the TFG status display. It showed that the TFG capacitor was at 87% of its maximum charge. Lyssa knew that anything over 85% was safe. The company forbade pilots from charging past 90%, as doing so shortened the life span of the capacitor. *I'll bet that's what happened to the plane we're going to fix*, Lyssa thought. *Overcharged his capacitor.*

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, cleared for transtach. Caution the exclusion zone. Frequency change approved. Good day," came the response from STC.

"Cleared for transtach. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Good day," Erin read back the clearance.

Lyssa watched as Erin went through one final check that everything was ready and then reached up to the protected button on the overhead panel. Erin pushed back the spring-loaded safety cover over the TFG ACTIV. button, hesitated for only a second, and then pushed the button. As the TFG activated, a shuddering rumble passed momentarily through the plane's structure as it slipped out of normal space. Then, there was an oddly reassuring lurch as the transtachyonic field stabilized around them.

The readout on the TFG capacitor now read 0%. They were no longer in the universe itself, but in a pocket universe which only extended for a few hundred meters in all directions. And their little pocket universe, for its part, was impersonating a tachyon. Supposedly nothing except a particular subatomic particle called a tachyon could fly faster than the speed of light. Erin had just generated a transtachyonic field which tricked the laws of physics of the prime

universe into thinking that their little pocket universe was nothing but a common tachyon. Speed limit does not apply.

Within seconds of entering transtach, the plane had already flown farther than it had flown in over two hours of sublight flight. Within five minutes, the plane passed through the heliopause, the boundary of the Gonaways solar system, and entered interstellar space.

Erin began shutting the engines down. Until the transtachyonic field was dissipated, their little pocket universe would carry the plane along on it's initial trajectory without any need for further energy input. "It's about six hours before we need to drop out of transtach to turn to our next heading. I'm gonna get something to eat."

"I think we got the stuff back there in the galley for rocks-in-a-sock. Want me to make you some?" Lyssa asked.

"What are rocks-in-a-sock?"

"What?! You ain't never had rocks-in-a-sock? Now, you *have* to try it! I insist. Estrellan food. You'll love it, guaranteed."

* * *

Rocks-in-a-sock, like most vacuum dweller food items, turned out to just be a new variant on the old formula of combining processed nutrient pellets (and/or paste) with equally processed flavor additives in ways that made them palatable. This particular iteration of the old formula consisted of protein pellets mixed with carbohydrate paste and "flavor powder number eight." It was all then spread across an algae flatbread and rolled up. The meal that Lyssa prepared was healthy and nutritious, but it was a far cry from the fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats that Erin had grown up with down planetside.

"What about you?" Lyssa asked. "What kinds of stuff did you eat where you grew up?"

Is this her ham-fisted attempt at subtly asking about where I'm from? Erin really didn't want to talk about her past with this woman. Just because Lyssa was comfortable talking about her pain didn't mean that everybody was.

"Catfish," Erin answered. "We ate a lot of catfish."

"How do you make that?"

"Usually just fry it or bake it."

"But what goes in it?"

"What?"

"How do you make a catfish? Like, what ingredients do you put in it? If we got the shit we should make some tomorrow."

"Um...wait, have you never heard of a catfish?"

"Goddamnit, no. That's why I'm asking you how you make them."

"You don't *make* catfish; you *catch* them. They're literally a fish. They swim in the water."

"What? Wait? Like a real fish? You grew up on planetside?"

And here it is. She's trying to 'fish out' where I'm from. Even Erin had to suppress a groan at her own internal pun. "Yeah," was her simple answer.

"I ain't never been planetside. What's it like livin' in atmo and constant gravity?"

"It's nice, but I don't miss it. I live in space now." *Take the hint. I don't want to talk about this.*

"How's about that? You live on Gonaways, but you're not a Gonian citizen. I bet nobody ever bothers you. Meanwhile, I *am* a Gonian citizen and I get treated like shit 'cause people can see I'm Estrellan and they just assume I'm taking some Gonian citizen's job."

Erin stared at Lyssa. The tenuous harmony they'd managed to build that morning now felt like it could come tumbling down if she said the wrong thing here. So Erin opted to remain silent.

Lyssa seemed to realize she'd made the conversation awkward. "Sorry, I didn't mean that to sound like I was accusing you of being a part of all that bullshit. Just voicing my frustration at how other Gonians see me. They'll never see me as one of them, ya know?"

Erin held her tongue for several seconds until she was sure the tension had dissipated. "Now, who's saying 'sorry'?" she asked with a mischievous smirk.

Lyssa chuckled at the callback to their earlier joke. "Fucking fuck nutter."

Erin had no idea what that even meant, but Lyssa's tone was jocular. *Why not,* she thought, and then she said aloud: "I'm from a fishing village on a planet you've never heard of called Promisedland."

Calling Captain Elof

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Backwater

Planet: SHP 242 [Unnamed]

It had taken four days of flying to get to the unnamed system in the Backwater cluster, but now they were finally here. The Darklands dwarf galaxy was one of the most remote and sparsely populated galaxies that humans had ever settled. Even at that, the Backwater Cluster was the most remote (and aptly named) of the four clusters in the Darklands. Practically no one lived out here.

"This your first time in Backwater?" Erin asked Lyssa. Both women were back in the cockpit, Lyssa sitting in the right seat where the first officer would sit if this flight had a first officer. Ahead of them, beyond the bubble of their little pocket universe, one star shone much brighter than all the others. It was around this star which the mysterious, unnamed planet SHP 242 orbited. They were still too far out for the planet itself to be visible.

"Yeah. Never even been planetside before." Lyssa answered. There was a note of tension in her voice.

"Don't worry. Deorbiting is perfectly safe."

Lyssa just nodded at first. Then, after a moment, "You've done this before, right?"

"Of course. Bunches of times." Erin gave her passenger a reassuring smile. In truth, she'd only deorbited about a dozen-or-so times, and most of those were training flights with Aviators' Guild instructors sitting in the right seat beside her. This would only be her third or fourth solo deorbit and her first with such a heavily loaded spaceplane. She was perhaps more nervous about it than Lyssa was, but she wasn't going to let her passenger see that.

Outside the cockpit windows, SHP 242's star was growing noticeably brighter. It wouldn't be long now. Erin glanced at the TFG capacitor readout. 84%. The three main engines' energy output was being ducted via magnetic ducting into the capacitor.

"You said you're from Backwater, right? Are we far from your home world?" Lyssa asked.

Erin didn't want to talk about her past or where she was from, especially now when she needed to focus on the job at hand. "Not far."

Lyssa laughed nervously. "Maybe we could stop in and see your ol' homestead?" It wasn't a serious suggestion, of course.

"No." Erin's answer carried a tone of grave finality.

"Just kidding. Besides, could you imagine how the Noémie bean counters would shit asteroids if they found out we wasted fuel for a personal side trip?"

Erin just shot her a warning look and said, "Eighty-five percent." in reference to the readout on the TFG capacitor display.

Lyssa watched the muscles in Erin's forearms tense as she pulled the three throttle levers back to their idle detents. Glancing at the navigation readout on the Primary Flight Display, Lyssa saw that they were within a half minute of arrival at the planet. "How come I don't see no planet out there? Shouldn't we see it by now?"

"We are very close, but only in astronomic terms," Erin said. She was glad for the change of subject. She could talk about flying all day, but she had been really uncomfortable with the talk of her home world. "Most people think planets are big things, but on the scale of the universe, even galaxies are quite small. At the speed we're flying, a planet is only a speck of dust. If we didn't have very precise navigation, we could fly right past it and never even know it. We won't even see it until the last couple seconds before I push the button." She indicated the TFG ACTV. button on the overhead panel.

"I know what you mean. It's easy to forget how big space is when you live in a space station where everybody's so crammed together and tight like."

"Wait 'til you stand beneath an open sky for the first time. You won't believe it."

"Is it like the sky on the Delta Ring?"

"Nothing like that. The fake skies that station-worlds like Gonaways have on their habitation rings are weak

imitations of the real thing. You'll see. I can't wait for you to see. You'll be amazed."

At that moment, the ten-second warning chimed on the navigation display. *BING!* All conversation ceased. Erin made one last, quick check of the TFG display panel and deactivated the safeties protecting the TFG ACTV. button. She held her finger over that button as she watched the countdown. 5...4...3... Erin kept her eyes glued to the countdown. She didn't look up, but she knew the planet must now be in view. It must seem to be approaching at a frightening rate, but Erin's eyes were fixed on the countdown. She heard Lyssa gasp through the intercom. It was likely the first time Lyssa had ever seen a planet up close in her life. 2...1...0. The moment the countdown hit 0, Erin pressed the button. The plane lurched and then rumbled as the transtachyonic field dissipated and they dropped into normal space.

Now, for the first time, Erin looked upon the planet designated SHP 242. She was relieved to see that it looked to be pretty far along in its terraforming process. That was good. It meant they wouldn't be working in some primordial hellscape. She could see that much of it was forested. As she maneuvered the plane into orbit, she ran a planetary scan and saw that it was a mostly terrestrial planet with only one small ocean.

The computer automatically mapped all of the places on the surface where the water was deep enough and far enough from land to allow for a safe landing. They would only be able to land outside of the tenebricite shadow, the electromagnetic field emitted by most Darklands planets which made landing on solid ground unsafe. Within the tenebricite shadow, the effect was similar to an EMP weapon. Technology wouldn't work and airplanes would crash.

Only where the water was deep enough for the ocean floor to be more than a kilometer beneath the surface could a landing be safely attempted. Erin had expected the small ocean to be deemed a safe landing site by the computer, but she was surprised to find that the planet had several inland lakes that were deep enough and large enough to land on.

The computer also scanned for human settlements and only revealed two. One looked like a small, rustic village on the shore of one of those inland lakes. The other settlement was in the middle of the small ocean. This one looked like a terraforming rig. "There," she said, pointing to the terraforming rig on the scanner's display. "That must be a Safe Harbor rig—that's the company that's terraforming this planet. If Captain Elof set his plane down anywhere, that's where I'd wager he is. Leastwise, that's the most likely place to start."

"You're the boss. You find me a manked plane and I'll get 'er flyin' again."

Erin dialed the standard Noémie company frequency into her radio and pressed the XMT button on her control stick. "Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie, this is company Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie," Erin said, calling out Capt. Elof's tail number and introducing herself. She waited a long moment before repeating the radio call. Then, she waited another long moment before repeating the call a third time. Maybe Capt. Elof had his radio off? She would try a few more times before switching to the Safe Harbor company frequency that flight dispatch had given her back on Gonaways. "This is Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie calling company aircraft Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie. Captain Radcliff Elof, how do you read?"

To Arms

Onboard the independent corvette, *Ready Sophia*, boots clattered across grating in all directions as the drummer played "To Arms," over the ship's PA. This was the *Sophie's* way of beating to quarters. Captain Ben Villalobos made his way through the chaos of the central corridor from the officers' mess to the bridge.

As he burst through the hatch into the ship's battle bridge, Cdr. Tengrove, the ship's second-in-command, shouted "Captain on the bridge!"

"Thank you, Commander," Capt. Villalobos said to Cdr. Tengrove. "What's the situation?"

"Some dickhead just dropped out of transtach and put himself into orbit around the planet."

"Let me guess: he's not answering hails, right?"

"Correct, sir. We've tried him on CTAF and Guard." CTAF stood for Common Traffic Advisory Frequency, the frequency which civilian pilots use to communicate in uncontrolled systems like this one. Guard was the emergency frequency.

"Either he's not on frequency or he's ignoring us. What do we know about the ship?"

"It's not even a ship. Looks more like a plane. Looks like just another little shitbucket hardpointer," Cdr. Tengrove said with disgust.

"You're shitting me? They sent another one? After we shot down the last one?"

"It appears so, sir."

"Is it the same company? That No-em-ee, or whatever the fuck it's called?"

"We think so, sir. It's hard to read their tail number from this far away – even with the long range optical scopes, but it looks like it ends in the letters NC."

"No-em-ee Charters. That's them all right. Stupid fuckers." At this point, Capt. Villalobos turned to his tac officer. "Tactical, what's the status on our fighters?"

"All eight ready to launch, sir."

"Good. Launch 'em. Send two to intercept and keep the other six here on station. I don't trust Third Law not to be up to some kinda fuckery, trying to draw our fighters away from the ship. And if this hardpointer even thinks about deorbiting, hit him with an EMP and bounce him off the atmosphere."

"Aye, sir," said the tactical officer.

"And I mean *bounce*, goddamn it! Make sure those flyboys know not to fuck this one up like they did the last one. I want to board and claim this freighter."

"Aye, sir," said the tactical officer again. He went about relaying the captain's orders into his headset.

Capt. Villalobos turned to his communications officer next. "Comms, have you tried the No-em-ee corporate frequencies?"

"Uhh...not yet, sir."

"Make it happen, lieutenant."

"Aye, sir," said the lieutenant. He began leafing frantically through the manual looking for the list of known Noémie corporate frequencies.

Something's Not Right

"Noémie Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie, this is company Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. We're here to implement repairs on your aircraft. Captain Elof, if you can hear us, we're getting no joy from you." Erin had lost track of how many times she'd made this call. *Why isn't Capt. Elof responding?*

"I'm beginnin' to get the feeling that this whole trip might just turn out to be a huge-ass waste of time," Lyssa said from the right seat. Her sardonic tone did little to hide the way she was feeling.

Erin was feeling it too. Something about being way out here in the middle of nowhere, all alone, and with no one talking to them didn't feel right. Erin didn't *feel* alone. She felt like she was being watched. Watched, but not spoken to.

"Maybe his radio is down?" Lyssa suggested. "Maybe we should try calling them?" She pointed to the icon indicating the inhabited terraforming platform on the planetary scan display. "Maybe they know something about our guy?"

"That's not a bad idea," Erin acknowledged. She was ready to try something different. Her most primitive instincts were telling her that there was danger here and talking to the void was really starting to freak her out.

She opened the Common Frequencies Manual and on the page for Safe Harbor Terraforming Company she found the contact frequency that all terraforming operations monitor around the clock. The people down on that terraforming rig should respond to her calls on this frequency, so she dialed it in to her primary radio and pressed the XMT button on the control stick. "Safe Harbor Planetary Control. Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie." Erin waited a long moment before repeating the call.

Much of what would ultimately come to pass might have ended up differently had Erin just remained on the Noémie company frequency for only a few seconds more.

* * *

Capt. Villalobos watched impatiently as his comms officer found the Noémie company frequency and dialed it into his radio. "Unknown freighter, this is the independent corvette *Ready Sophia*. You are in violation of an active security zone. Power down your engines, remain in orbit, and prepare to be boarded. Failure to comply will result in being fired upon. Do you read?"

After several seconds with no response, the comms officer repeated his warning to the interloping hardpointer.

Capt. Villalobos turned back to his tactical officer. "What's the status on those fighters?"

"Two minutes to missile range."

"Tell those flyboys to get it done. I want to know when they have missile lock."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Villalobos looked at the blip on the tactical display which represented the interloper. *What are you playing at, you cocksucker?* he thought as the comms officer repeated his warning over the Noémie frequency.

* * *

"Safe Harbor Planetary Control, how do you read?" Erin said over the Safe Harbor frequency. She'd tried several times to raise the terraforming platform below, but to no avail.

Finally, Lyssa said what they were both thinking. "Something's not right here."

"I know."

"Let's just get the fuck outta here."

"Hmm..." Erin said. She wanted nothing more than to do that very thing. Her every instinct told her that she was a deer in the woods and the wolves were just beyond her sight. Watching. She had once been shadowed once by a pack of wolves when she was lost in the woods. It had been seven years ago, when she was only 14 years old, but Erin remembered that feeling like it was yesterday. She felt that way now. But if she left a fellow airman stranded on this planet because she got scared, her professional reputation would never recover. She'd probably be fired and branded a coward as well as a plane burner. Good luck getting any other flying job after that. Everything that mattered to her would be gone. Her life would be over. Running away wasn't an option.

She made her decision. "Forget this. We're deorbiting. We'll fly past that platform and see if there's a Noémie hardpointer tied to its dock."

"And if we find it?"

"I guess we'll land."

"You ever landed on water?"

Erin didn't answer. She just took up the controls and began reorienting the plane so that it flew tail-first in its orbit. Once she had the plane flipped around, she entered the planetary coordinates of the inhabited terraforming platform into the flight management computer. She moved the throttles for the three big engines out of their idle detents and began pushing them forward. As the engines' thrust increased, the plane's speed and altitude began to decrease. She watched the glide slope indicator on her Primary Flight Display and kept it centered, just as she'd been trained. If she dropped into atmo at too steep of an angle, they could burn up. Too shallow, and they would bounce off of the upper atmosphere.

She felt better, now. At least she was doing something and that was better than sitting in orbit waiting for something to be done to her.

* * *

"Gimme an update on those fighters," Capt. Villalobos said to his comms officer.

"Four-five seconds to missile range, sir"

"Get me that missile lock, first thing."

"Aye, sir," said the comms officer. Then, into his radio: "Advise when locked on target."

"Captain! He's deorbiting!" This was Cdr. Tengrove who was standing over by the tactical display.

Capt. Villalobos' head snapped around at the tactical display. Sure enough, the bastard was deorbiting. "Shit! I knew it. That son of a bitch knows we're intercepting him." He turned back to the comms officer. "Tell them both to fire their EMPs as soon as they get a target lock. Bounce this cock gobbler. I want that freighter for a prize."

* * *

Lt. Emilio Love, callsign "Mister Lover," was flying wingman to Cdr. Victor Cruz, callsign "Victimizer" when the order came in from the ship. "Squad One, target is attempting to deorbit. You are ordered to engage with EMPs as soon as you have a target lock. Captain says to bounce the target but do not—repeat—*do not* destroy. Captain wants this bird boarded and taken a prize."

"Roger that, command," Victimizer read back the order. "Tell the captain we'll deliver. Mister Lover, you copy that?"

"Rog," said Emilio into his radio. He couldn't make out the hardpointer visually yet. All he could see was the blip for it on his Heads Up Display, but the HUD wasn't showing a target lock. Less than fifteen seconds and they should have a lock. As soon as they did, they'd fire their EMPs, follow the freighter as it bounced off the atmosphere, land on her, board her, and either kill or capture the crew. Probably just kill them by blowing the crew door and letting the vacuum of space do the job for them. Once the crew was dealt with, they would tow the hardpointer back to the *Ready Sophia* and be the big heroes. A plane like that would sell for ten or fifteen million on the black market. It was a good catch.

Mister Lover stared at the target indicator on his HUD, waiting for the target lock indicator to activate. Five seconds now. He made one last check of his fighter's ordinance board and made sure he had his EMP selected. He only had one and he really wanted his to be the one that bounced the target.

"Almost there, Lover" Victimizer said over the radio. "EMP weapons free."

"Weapons free, aye, sir." And just as soon as the words were out of his mouth, the weapons lock ring appeared around the target. Lover didn't hesitate. He fired first, even before Victimizer. There was a *clunk* sound from the underbelly of his fighter and then he saw his EMP fly from underneath him and quickly disappear from his view. A second later, Victimizer's EMP was launched.

"Quick on the trigger, Lover. I like it," Victimizer said over the radio.

"Gettin' it done, sir." Mister Lover said back.

* * *

The deorbit burn was going textbook perfectly. Erin held her hand on the throttles, controlling their rate of descent with engine thrust and keeping the glide slope indicator pegged right in the center. The plane was still dropping out of orbit tail first, but soon they would start to encounter the planet's atmosphere. Flying tail-first was perfectly safe in space, and it allowed her to use engine thrust to slow the plane down. Once she started to encounter atmosphere, however, the plane would become uncontrollable. She would have to pitch it over 180° so that it met atmo nose-first. At that point, she would no longer be able to use the engines to slow the plane down and would have to rely on aerodynamic drag instead. Erin shifted in her seat. She could hear Lyssa over the intercom breathing in fast, shallow breaths.

"You okay over there? Not gonna barf in my cockpit, are you? You barf, you clean. That's the rule."

"I—I'm okay," Lyssa said. Then, she said it again, this time more to herself. "I'm okay."

Erin couldn't deny a perverse, mischievous amusement at her passenger's nervousness. She remembered feeling much the same way the first time she dropped into atmo, but of course she would never say that to Lyssa.

"Stop—" Lyssa started to say, but then had to fight back her rising breakfast. After a second, she continued. "Stop enjoying this." She heard Erin chuckle over the intercom. Lyssa tightened her grip on the armrests and closed her eyes. *Please, she thought, let me pass out and wake up either dead or on the ground.*

Suddenly a computerized alert rang out in the cockpit: "WHOOOP-WHOOOP! TRAFFIC! WHOOOP-WHOOOP! TRAFFIC!" Both women looked immediately at the Traffic Collision Avoidance System. On the TCAS display, two blue dots were flying toward them at a high rate of speed. Two other blue objects, moving at a rate much slower than the first two (though still very fast) were a little farther off.

"What the fuck?! Is some numbnuts shooting at us?" Lyssa's fear of burning up in the atmosphere was now replaced by a fear of being killed by what even she could tell were inbound missiles.

Erin didn't say anything. It took her a couple precious seconds to remember something she'd once read on some exnet message board for pilots. Something about a trick pirates use to incapacitate planes. It was called an EMP bounce. She remembered what the people on the boards said to do if some pirates ever tried it on you. At the time Erin had just found it an interesting read, but now it might just save the day. She jammed all three throttles full forward to the 100% maximum rated power position. At this throttle setting the engines would only run for a few minutes before they ripped themselves apart, but those few minutes could make all the difference.

Within seconds, she got an alert from the nav computer saying that she was dangerously below the glide slope. Alarms started going off. Engine overspeed! Glide slope! *WHOOOP-WHOOOP! TRAFFIC!* Erin ignored them all. This was an emergency. If she could get the plane slow enough, she would drop from the sky like a rock. The missiles, being much faster than the plane, would have a hard time descending at so steep an angle without burning themselves up in the atmosphere. If she could just get below those two missiles, there was little chance that the fighters would be carrying a second flight of EMPs. They had rolled their dice. Now, she was rolling hers.

* * *

"What's going on, Major?" Col. Landon Raith asked as he climbed the stairs to the terraforming platform's control deck. The main deck below was busy as a kicked anthill. Alarms were sounding battle stations, ground troops were running to their troopships, and planes' engines were starting up.

"Not sure yet, sir," Major Piper Tolbert said, "but it looks like Noémie took Trig's bait and sent another hardpointer. Anyway, somebody's dropping out of orbit and our friends up top are trying to intercept it."

"Fucking Villalobos! No way is he shooting this one down, too!" Col. Raith exclaimed. "Launch our fighters. Protect that hardpointer. If anybody gets this bird, it's us."

"Yes, sir. What about the enemy fighters? Weapons free?" asked the major. It was clear she wanted to shoot something down today.

The colonel hesitated for a moment as he considered the consequences. *Fuck it.* "Yeah, weapons free. Let's see some fireworks."

Bandits

Erin was trying to evade the incoming missiles, but they were proving tenacious. Those EMPs had been fired from a long way away which gave the missiles' A.I. guidance systems plenty of time to compensate for Erin's attempts at evasion. Erin's mind raced as she tried to think of what else she could do. The hardpointer's big engines might give it a huge thrust-to-weight ratio which was helping her slow down, but the plane still had a lot of mass. It maneuvered like a pile of bricks. They had fired on her just when she was in the middle of her deorbit burn, when she was most vulnerable. There wasn't much else she could do.

Then, an idea occurred to her. "Lyssa, get back to the engine room. I think those are EMPs and I think they're going to hit us. They're trying to disable us so that we bounce off the atmosphere. Once we lose power, I need you to get us back flying as soon as possible. Got it?"

Lyssa just nodded, all of that still sinking in. What she understood most was the part about getting back to the engine room. She sprang out of her seat and over the center console. She began running as fast as she could down the length of the plane. She made it as far as the galley before a bright light flashed outside the galley window and the floor disappeared from beneath her feet. She was temporarily blinded and floating weightlessly in the galley. She could hear her engines spooling down, no longer running, but their mechanical components still spinning through physical momentum. *If I can restore fuel flow and ignition before they spool all the way down, I can start them right up, she thought. Of course, I can't see shit, so good luck with that.*

"There's another one! Close your eyes!" she heard Erin shout from up in the cockpit. Lyssa obeyed and just in time. She saw another flash through her closed eyelids and then all was darkness again.

"That should be all!" Erin shouted back from the cockpit. The intercom system (just like everything else) was out, so they were just going to have to shout. "They're gonna board us after we bounce so we can't let this plane bounce! Get me flight controls! Get me engines! Get me anything you can!"

Were this not a life-and-death emergency, Lyssa would have chafed at being given direct orders, but right now she was just scared. She was floating weightlessly in the darkness of a dead spaceplane and it was up to her to bring this bird back to life.

It took about a quarter of a minute for her vision to come back well enough to see by what little sunlight came slanting in from the galley windows. Close at hand, she spotted an emergency supply kit. She opened it up and its supplies floated out of it. Medications, bandages, scissors, syringes, gauze, all floated off into the galley area. She found a flashlight, tried its switch...nothing. She found a small chemical light. She snapped and then shook the chemlight to activate it. She was rewarded with a dim, yellow light. It was all she had, so it would have to do for light in the windowless engine room. Above her head, Lyssa could now see in the dim, piss-yellow light a hand rail mounted to the ceiling. The rail was there for just the kind of artificial gravity failure they were currently experiencing. She reached out, grabbed the rail, and began pulling herself, hand-over-hand along the ceiling toward the engine room. She held the dim chemlight clutched in her teeth to light her way.

* * *

"Nice shot, Mister Lover!" came Victimizer's voice over the radio after Emilio's EMP went off with a bright flash. Even at this safe range, the flash was nearly blinding. A moment later, a second flash as Victimizer's EMP detonated on the target. Not that the second EMP actually did anything to the already-disabled hardpointer. It was Mister Lover's shot that had done the job and everyone back on the *Ready Sophia* would know it.

Still, Emilio knew to congratulate his lead pilot for his own successful shot. "You too, sir. Nice shot."

They kept their throttles pegged as they raced to close the distance to the freighter. As soon as it bounced off the upper atmo and back out into space, they needed to be in position to land on her and take her. Never knew when those Third Law jackasses might show up.

"We taking prisoners today, sir?" Emilio asked.

"Lemme check with command."

Emilio listened as Victimizer repeated the question back to the ship.

"Squad one, that is your discretion. The captain wants the plane," came the ship's response.

"Roger that," Victimizer said.

"So, no?" Emilio asked.

"If it's my call," Victimizer said to Emilio, "then no prisoners. We land on the plane, breach the door, and let the vacuum of space do the hard part."

"If they're in EVA suits?"

"Shoot anything that moves. I ain't dyin' just 'cause some shit stain freight dog wants to play hero. Fuck 'em."

"Roger that, sir." Emilio was glad to hear that. Killing the civvies was the safest option. "Looks like he's starting to bounce." This was going to be a good day.

Then, suddenly, the day took a turn. Mister Lover's HUD indicated inbound fighters coming up from the planet below. Over the radio, Victimizer's voice sounded. "Command, we got bandits," Victimizer said to the ship. "Want us to blow the freighter and fall back?"

Without waiting for the response, Emilio verified he still had a lock on the hardpointer and switched his ordinance panel to short-range, anti-spacecraft missiles. He held his finger on the trigger, ready for the order he knew was coming. He would hate to blow this prize out of the sky, but no way was Capt. Villalobos going to risk it falling into enemy hands.

* * *

"Sir?" the comms officer asked, unbelieving.

"You heard me," Capt. Villalobos said. "Tell 'em to take the freighter and defend it. Send squads two, three, and four to reinforce. Raith ain't gettin' it without a fight."

"Aye, sir," said the comms officer.

Now, Capt. Villalobos turned to his helmsman and navigator. "Get this ship moving away from this cursed moon. I want us in missile range within ten minutes."

"Aye, sir," said the navigator.

"Captain," Cdr. Tengrove said, "looks like the enemy has launched all their fighters."

"All of them?" Capt. Villalobos could scarcely believe what he was hearing. *Could Raith really be that reckless?* He looked at the tactical display. Sure enough, all of Raith's sixteen fighters were coming up from the planet to join the fray.

Capt. Villalobos could see the chess pieces moving to his advantage. Squad one would almost certainly die trying to defend the freighter, but that's what pawns are for. The captain saw an even greater opportunity. Just like that, Capt. Villalobos' mind reclassified the freighter from a prize to be taken to a decoy, a pawn to sacrificed. "Get that troopship loaded. We end this today." With Raith's fighters in the air, the planet's surface was relatively undefended.

"Sir, all their ground troops are still on the platform. And their gunships."

"We're not attacking the the platform. We're going straight to the squatter settlement. Our mission here is to remove that village of squatters *by any means necessary*. I want them all either dead or off our planet before Raith even realizes what we're doing."

Tengrove stared at his captain.

"Problem, Commander?"

"No. No problem, sir."

"Good. You have your orders."

The reserve fighters rocketed away towards the battle. *Ready Sophia's* four powerful engines, each big enough to park a hardpointer inside, came to life and gradually pushed the ship away from SHP 242's third moon where she had been orbiting for weeks.

The battle for SHP 242 was being joined.

"We're Gonna Die."

On board the disabled hardpointer, Erin and Lyssa had no idea what was going on out in space.

The first thing Lyssa noticed as she floated into the dark engine room was how silent it was getting. By this point, even momentum was beginning to fail and the three engines' main cores were winding themselves down. They would continue to spin for the next several minutes, but by the time Lyssa could get fuel and ignition restored, the engine cores would have lost too much speed. Restarting the engines was going to require a burst of energy from the APU, but getting the Auxiliary Power Unit back online meant getting its control computer and the plane's battery bus back online first. Lyssa had her work cut out for her and she had limited time. *Here's where we separate the women from the boys.*

The second thing that Lyssa noticed was that every one of the hundred-or-so circuit breakers on the main panel was popped out. She had never seen them all popped at once. Nothing she tried was going to work as long as those breakers were popped, so she made that her first priority.

"Check your breaker panel up there!" she shouted to make herself heard way up in the cockpit. "Push in any breakers that's popped!"

"Okay!" Erin shouted back. A few seconds later: "They're all popped!"

"So push 'em in!"

The next minute was taken up by frantically pushing in all those breakers. *Click-click-click-click-click.* She clicked circuit breakers into place as fast as she could. By the time she *clicked* the last one home, her thumbs felt like they were on fire. She barely noticed. Her mind was already racing ahead to the next task. The only breaker left to click back into place was the big master breaker, but she held off on that one.

"All your breakers in?!" she shouted to Erin.

"Almost! My fingers are killing me!" Erin shouted back.

"Pussy!" Lyssa shouted. "Once those are all in, pull the control card out of the flight computer and let me know when that's done!"

"Roger that!"

The next thing Lyssa needed to do was get power to the Battery Control Unit, the small computer that controlled the plane's main batteries. There was probably still power in the plane's batteries, but without the BCU, she couldn't use that stored power. In other words, she needed power to get power. And she had a good idea where she could get some. She stepped over to the other side of the engine room and began rifling through the tool box and supply drawers, only peripherally aware that she was no longer floating. As the plane began to encounter the atmosphere and bounce back into space, its changing direction was pulling her to the floor, simulating a sort of microgravity. Time was short. She had to hurry.

"Control card's out! We're starting to bounce! Hurry up!" Erin shouted back from the cockpit.

"Don't put that card back in until I tell you to!"

"Roger that!"

Roger that? Pilots love their jargon. Lyssa rolled her eyes as she rummaged through the drawers. Finally, she found what she was looking for: a coil of small-gauge wire about three meters long. It wasn't rated for the 40 amps she needed it to carry. Normally, she wouldn't use wire this small, but it was all she had. She'd either get the BCU running or she'd set the engine room on fire.

Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible to boot up the BCU without a command input from the plane's main computer, but the main computer wouldn't run without power. That's normally fine when the main computer can draw its power from the engines, the APU, or when it's plugged in to station power. It's not so good when the batteries are the only source of power available. Lyssa decided that if she ever met the engineer that designed this system, she'd punch him in the buttocks.

The only source of power she had at her disposal was what little kinetic energy remained in the dying engine cores. Each engine had a small, electric generator attached to it for the purpose of powering its own fuel pump, ignition, and control systems. Lyssa estimated that the engines were still turning those small generators just fast enough to get the

charge she needed. If she could get a little juice from them and run it directly to the BCU, then it may boot up and bring the main battery bus online.

She connected one end of the wire to the generator mounted to the Number 2 engine quickly and sloppily. It didn't need to be pretty; it just needed to work. Then, she ran the other end of the wire to the positive terminal on the BCU's power supply. It sparked as she first touched it to the terminal. The air in the engine room was filled with the smell of ozone and then the smell of hot copper. The wire wouldn't last long.

On the BCU a status light came on and started blinking. In Lyssa's hand, the wire was getting almost too hot to hold. On the BCU the status light stopped blinking and showed solid green. The BCU had booted up and was now online. She'd done it! They had battery power!

She reached up, feeling the weight of her arm as she did so. They were definitely bouncing now. She pressed the palm of her hand on the big master breaker and pushed it in. The master breaker slid home with a satisfying *CHUNK* sound. Instantly, the lights in the engine room came on. Victory! She grabbed the now-smoking wire and pulled it off the engine generator, burning her hand slightly as she did so. She barely noticed the burn. She shouted to the cockpit, "Now! Control card! Now!"

Up in the cockpit, Erin saw the cabin lights come on just a second before Lyssa shouted for her to put the control card into its slot. She didn't hesitate. She slid the card home into its slot on the center console. She felt the weird sensation of the control card communicating with the QuantumScale Processor in her body. Normally, that feeling felt invasive and she hated it. Today, however, as the control card and the central computer it enabled pinged her QSP to make sure the company-authorized pilot was at the controls, Erin gave a small, involuntary cheer of relief. "Main computer's coming online!" she shouted back at Lyssa. "I need engines and flight controls ASAP!"

"Roger that!" came the shout from the back of the plane. The note of mockery in Lyssa's voice wasn't lost on Erin, but as her flight instruments lit up and began to initialize, she felt nothing but gratitude for the mechanic.

After several seconds, most of the flight instruments were online. The engine instruments showed that the cores were still turning, but very slowly. Only a few hundred RPM. It was just momentum; the engines weren't actually running. Before the navigation panel had gone out, the glide slope indicator had shown them as well below their intended deorbit glide path due to their attempts to avoid the incoming EMPs. Now, however, the glide slope was showing them just slightly above the glide path and rising.

They were bouncing off the upper atmosphere and back into space. She had known it as soon as she'd begun to feel the effects of gravity returning. Erin didn't want to think of what would happen to them if they were taken by pirates out here in the most remote place in the Darklands. If she didn't have a passenger she was responsible for, she would have just scuttled the plane, rather than risk being taken.

She noticed the flight control stick move slightly between her knees and glanced at the systems status readout on the MultiFunction Display. Most systems were still offline, but she saw that auxiliary hydraulic, which provided power to the aerodynamic flight controls was back online. Next, as she was watching the MFD, Erin saw the maneuvering thrusters come online. Lyssa might be a lot to deal with, but she was bringing this plane back to life, one system at a time.

With flight controls back online, Erin couldn't stop the bounce – that would take engine thrust – but she could reorient the plane relative to the thin upper atmosphere that was hitting it. Putting the plane into a higher-drag orientation would help delay the bounce. "Hang on for maneuvers!" she shouted back to the engine room.

"No need to shout. The intercom's back online," came Lyssa's voice over the intercom.

Erin pushed the stick forward, firing the maneuvering thrusters and pitching the plane's nose straight down at the planet below. Her windshield was suddenly full of planet. It created the illusion that they were diving nose-first toward the ground, but the altimeter and glide slope told a different story. They were still bouncing, but not as quickly as they had been. Now, the plane's belly and the underside of its wings were facing the oncoming wind directly. They were still a stone skipping on the surface of a lake, but at least now they were a much worse skipping stone.

On the TCAS display, the two fighters which had fired the EMPs at them a few minutes ago had closed the distance and were now holding position above them. The fighter pilots couldn't board them while they were down in the upper atmosphere, but they were maintaining a low orbit above, waiting for the plane to finish its bounce back into space. *Vultures*, Erin thought spitefully at them, *circling and waiting for us to die!*

At that moment, a string of profanity came over the intercom so foul that Erin had to take her headset off. It didn't help. Lyssa was yelling at the top of her lungs. Even without the intercom, Erin could hear it echoing down the length of

the plane. "—FUCKING PIECE OF COCKSUCKING, DONUT PUNCHING, MILKIAN SHIT!" Lyssa finished her rant.

Sensing it was safe to put her headset back on, Erin said into the intercom, "What's wrong?"

"This piece of Milkian shit is totally manked! That's what's wrong!"

"What piece of Milkian poop?"

"This APU control unit! Most of this plane is good, Estrellan-built, but Jaskowski is a Milkian company. And for some reason, this fried APU control unit says 'Made in Milky Way' on it. I don't think I need to tell you how badly fucked we are without our APU control unit, do I?"

Erin's heart hit the floor. They needed the Auxiliary Power Unit to start the engines and they needed the APU control unit to bring the APU itself online. "Lyssa, let me be very clear to you. Those are pirates up there. Once we finish bouncing off atmo, they're going to board us and if we're lucky, they'll just kill us. If we're not lucky..." she let Lyssa's imagination fill in the rest of that sentence. "I'm trying to slow our bounce to give you more time, but we *are* bouncing. Without those engines, they *will* take us."

"I know what the fucking stakes are, goddamn it! But I'm telling you that the only way to start these engines is by ducting in an energy bleed from another plane. And I don't think those fighters are gonna be too quick to give us a jump."

An idea, like a bolt of inspiration, struck Erin suddenly. "What about vertical thrusters?"

"Vertical thrusters are useless as a lesbian condom. Heavy as we're loaded, they didn't even have enough power to get us off the hanger deck back in Gonaways. Remember that really scary runway takeoff? Didn't we do that because the vertical thrusters weren't strong enough to lift us?"

"But graviton thrusters can move far more gravitons than they're actually rated for. Don't the vertical thrusters have safeties on them to prevent overspeeding? Don't you know how to bypass those safeties?"

Lyssa was silent for a moment as she considered the risks. When she finally answered Erin's question, all she said was: "We're gonna fuckin' die."

* * *

Mister Lover was getting nervous. It was taking this piece junk a long time to bounce and the Third Law planes would be in range in just a couple minutes. They had been forced to maintain their target locks and watch from above as this asshole pilot managed somehow to get the plane's maneuvering thrusters back online. The freighter pilot had maneuvered the plane into as high-drag a position as he could. "Jesus fuck, who is this guy?" Lover had said when they'd seen that.

"I don't know," Victimizer had answered, "but I'm actually starting to root for the bastard. I'm gonna shake his hand before I blow his brains out."

Most of the approaching enemy forces had peeled off to engage the six fighters that the *Ready Sophia* had sent to help. But four bandits were still bearing down on them. The enemy had better planes, better training, and there were twice as many of them. And they would be in range soon. "What do ya think, Victimizer?" he asked finally. "I say we just pop this hardpointer and get the fuck outta here. Why's the captain got such a hard on for this junker freighter for? I mean, it's valuable, but it ain't worth dyin' for."

"You wanna know what I think?" Victimizer said. "I think the cap don't care about this freighter. I think he's up to something and I think we're the bait."

"Let's just pop this thing and get out of here."

"..."

"Victimizer? Sir?"

"If we do that, the captain will put us out an airlock. Don't pop the freighter. We're engaging the hostiles. Only four of them are coming our way. If we can get one of them, it might drive the other three off. Follow my lead, follow my target."

"Roger that, sir!" Mister Lover was happy to be doing something other than waiting to die. He pushed his throttle forward and matched speed with Victimizer. They were flying right at the enemy planes and within half a minute, they were within range.

"Last guy in the formation," Victimizer called out his target. The last guy in the formation was likely the lowest ranked pilot and therefore the least experienced, Lover knew. Lover focused on the target reticule on his HUD, his entire being waiting for the target lock confirmation. Within seconds, Lover's computer confirmed a target lock and he fired. A *clunk* from beneath his plane and the missile shot silently away from beneath his wing through space. Another missile

launched from Victimizer's plane at nearly the same time, but then Victimizer peeled off aggressively. Lover didn't need to ask why. He knew. He peeled off in a different direction. He didn't know if their missiles hit their target or not, but he knew from the flash of light nearby that Victimizer had been hit.

"Victimizer, call out!" he said into his radio as he glanced at his tactical display. Where the fourth enemy fighter had been was now just a confusing mess of scanner returns. *Countermeasures. The guy fired countermeasures.* But countermeasures weren't infallible. Maybe he was dead? No, Lover spotted the fourth blip now emerging from the cloud of countermeasure confusion.

They had missed.

And Victimizer hadn't called out.

Mister Lover was all alone.

And now his computer was alarming that multiple bandits had locks on him.

There was nowhere to hide.

But there *was* somewhere to hide.

The hardpointer. Third Law wanted that freighter probably more than the captain did. If he could get close enough to the hardpointer, they wouldn't be able to blow him up without endangering their prize. He couldn't land on it while it was in atmosphere, but he could fly very close to it. He pulled his throttle back to idle, jerked the stick to bring the nose around towards the struggling freighter, and then pegged the throttle. The fleet, little fighter took off like a shot towards the hardpointer. Two enemy missiles were already coming towards him. At just the right moment, he deployed his countermeasures and was relieved to see both missiles took the bait and followed his countermeasures down into the atmosphere below. But now he was out of countermeasures and the other two hostiles had just fired at him. Two more missiles were inbound.

"Come on, you bastards. Figure it out." If they were worried that their missiles would destroy their prize in addition to him, they might activate the missiles' self-destructs before they hit him. Then, all he'd have to do was stay close to the hardpointer until reinforcements arrived.

The missiles were getting closer.

But so was the hardpointer.

He was very close now.

They were going to have to abort their missiles.

"Come on, you motherfuckers, abor—" were the last words of Lt. Emilio "Mister Lover" Love.

Falling out of the Sky

"Alright, the safeties are off. If you get us killed, I'm kickin' your ass." Lyssa said over the intercom from back in the engine room.

"Good thing is, if we blow up, we'll never know it," Erin said. "Get strapped in."

"Ooo! Thought you'd never ask."

With the plane so heavily loaded, Erin had never thought she'd be using the vertical thrusters this trip. Now, those vertical thrusters might just save their lives. If she could just slow the plane down a little bit more, it might be enough to stop the bounce and drop down into atmosphere. What they would do after that, she had no idea. One thing at a time.

The plane was already oriented in the proper position for this maneuver: nose towards the planet and the belly meeting the oncoming, ultra-thin, upper atmosphere. She reached down to the lever beside her seat and lifted it up slightly. The collective, according to legend, was originally developed for an ancient Earth flying machine called a "helicopter," but it's debatable if such a machine ever really existed on ancient Earth. Erin doubted if the ancients ever really developed such advanced machines. Nevertheless, on modern spaceplanes, the collective was the lever that controlled the vertical thrusters and normally allowed for hovering flight. Today, Erin was going to see if they could provide deorbit thrust if all the safeties were removed.

She felt the thrusters come on, but the altimeter showed that they were still climbing very slowly. 113.0km. 113.3km. She lifted the collective to the halfway point and felt the push of the thrusters from beneath the plane. Even with the collective lever only halfway up, the thrusters were already producing more thrust than they were rated for. If she overdid it, if even one of the thrusters exploded, it would probably take the the belly fuel tank and entire plane with it. 113.7km. 113.9km. 114.0km. She needed to get that altitude to start dropping. She lifted the collective a little more and a warning alarm sounded in the cockpit. *Beep-Beep-Beep-Beep*. The MultiFunction Display automatically switched over to the vertical thrusters panel. All eight of the big hardpointer's vertical thrusters were showing overspeed and overheat warnings.

And the altitude was still climbing. 114.2km. 114.3km. 114.4km. It was climbing more slowly, but it was still climbing. She had to stop it.

She lifted the collective a little more and she could swear that the *Beep-Beep-Beep* of the alarm was getting more insistent. 114.5km. 114.5km. 114.6km. 114.6km.

A bright flash of light came in through the cockpit windows and then a second later the plane lurched violently. Erin blinked away the stars in her vision, surprised that she was still alive.

"Was that one of my thrusters?" Lyssa asked over the intercom.

Erin checked the MFD and saw that all eight of the thrusters were still online, though any one of them could blow at any second.

114.9km. read the altimeter.

It was the TCAS that told the story. The hardpointer, 788NC, was a civilian freighter, not a military spacecraft. The TCAS was nothing like a tactical display that a military spaceplane would have; it just showed the locations of nearby spacecraft for the purpose of collision avoidance. TCAS couldn't tell the whole story, just some of it. Erin had to intuit the rest for herself. Where before there had been only two blue dots above them, now there were four. The pirate fighters had apparently been reinforced by two of their comrades and had just shot a live missile at Erin's stricken hardpointer. But why had the missile exploded near to them and not hit them? Erin knew she must make an easy target. Had it been warning shot, perhaps?

She had a nagging feeling that there was something else going on here, but she didn't have time to figure it out now. She had a crippled plane to fly.

"Hey! I asked if that was one of my thrusters," Lyssa repeated her question.

"Yeah, it was the number six thruster. We're fine, though. You're strapped in back there, right?" No need to tell Lyssa the truth and scare her more.

115.0km. 115.0km. 115.1km.

She lifted the collective a little more. 115.2km. 115.2km. 115.2km.

115.1km.

Erin couldn't believe her eyes! 115.1km. 115.0km. "Oh my goodness," she said aloud without intending to.

"What's wrong?" Lyssa asked, suddenly now in the cockpit beside her. Lyssa climbed over the center console and took her seat in the right seat. This particular mechanic, who had gotten enough systems back online to give Erin a somewhat flyable spaceplane, could sit anywhere she wanted to sit as far as Erin was concerned. *Protocol be darned!*

"Nothing's wrong. It's starting to work. Watch." Erin pointed to the altimeter, which now read 114.8km

114.7km. At the moment Lyssa saw the number tick down, she shouted at the top of her lungs. "WOO! THAT'S MY GIRL!" Erin flinched at the sudden outburst and the ringing in her ear. Lyssa patted the glareshield above the instrument panel affectionately. "That's my beautiful, Estrellan-made girl."

"Weren't you just calling this plane all kinds of terrible names a minute ago?"

Lyssa looked at her from the right seat with wide-eyed dismay. "I would never! I was talking about that crappy, Milkian APU control unit. They put foreign parts on my girl, those bastards. Don't worry, though. Those thrusters are probably all Estrellan-built. They'll hold up like a convenience store."

Just then, a fire alarm sounded as thruster number three caught fire. Erin went through the emergency shutdown on that thruster and activated its fire extinguishers. Seven thrusters left.

112.2km. It was working.

"Wait a minute," Lyssa said. "You said number six blew, but here she is, purrin' like a cliché." Lyssa indicated the readout on the MFD for thruster number six. The thruster in question was actually on the brink of exploding at any second, but so were all seven remaining thrusters. "What aren't you telling me?"

Erin glanced guiltily at the four blue dots on the TCAS display.

Lyssa followed her gaze. "Wait...There's *four* of them now?! Was that a missile? Are they shooting explosive ordinance at us now?"

"Possibly. I don't know."

"Those granny fuckers. We're gonna fuckin' die," Lyssa said.

* * *

If that mysterious explosion had been a missile, the four fighters overhead never fired a second one. Though both women expected it to happen at any second.

Gradually, the thrusters did manage to get the plane slowed down enough that it was no longer in danger of bouncing back out into space. They were at 60km of altitude and still moving at a high rate of speed through the very thin atmosphere by the time that Erin was confident they were below this planet's escape velocity. By this point only three thrusters were still running and they were starting to shriek and shudder noisily throughout the airframe. Neither Erin nor Lyssa had any doubts that all eight thrusters were cooked beyond repair, but they had done the job.

Erin shifted in her seat. "Well, that's it. We're too slow to get back to space even if we wanted to and our engines are completely dead. There's nothing for it; we're gonna have to deadstick this bird."

"Not a big fan of the word 'deadstick'."

"It just means landing without engines."

"I know what it means," Lyssa snapped. "I'm not a fucking moron."

"..."

"Sorry," Lyssa said. "Just nervous."

"This is the easy part. After the deorbit burn from heck, this landing will be easy stuff." With the thrusters now shut down, Erin felt more relaxed as she maneuvered the plane into a more natural flight attitude. This was old-fashioned, stick-and-rudder flying, the type of flying she'd learned as an apprentice airman in flimsy biplanes back on Promisedland. "We're not gonna make the terraforming platform, though. We drifted too far to the east just trying to get the plane slowed down and now the platform's out of our glide range. We're gonna have to go for the village."

"But ain't that village on a little bitty lake? Can you land on that lake?"

Erin put the coordinates into the nav computer and turned to the computer's suggested heading. Simultaneously, she cranked the trim wheels, getting the plane trimmed for efficient gliding. Without any engines, the plane would continue to lose altitude until it inevitably came down to the planet's surface. By efficient flying, Erin could maximize the number of meters the plane would glide forward per each meter of altitude it lost. Lyssa watched Erin fly the wounded plane

with comfortable, practiced grace. How could somebody so lanky move with such fluid precision? Lyssa wondered what it would be like to watch this woman dance.

"Yeah, we can land on that lake," Erin answered her question. "According to the scanners, anyway. The lake's not so 'little bitty' as it looks on the scan screen. It's long and skinny, but there's one wide spot, right near the village, where the lake is several kilometers wide. It's deep, too. Scan shows 1.2 kilometers deep. Anything over a kilometer will be outside of the tenebricite shadow."

"I hope you're right," Lyssa said. "We fuck up and get too close to the surface and it's gonna be like that EMP all over again." To get to that lake, Erin was going to have to glide the plane down a long valley between tall, jutting mountain peaks. Lyssa wasn't worried about Erin hitting the peaks themselves. She was worried about getting close enough to the peaks for the planet's EM field to shut down the plane again. Losing flight controls in orbit is one thing; losing them at 1,000 meters was a whole other thing.

"I know how the tenebricite shadow works," Erin tried to reassure her. "I grew up planetside, remember."

Gliding was a new and strange experience for Lyssa. As they got lower and lower, as the atmosphere grew denser, the wind noise picked up. Although there was noise, it seemed somewhat disembodied, somewhat ghostly without the reassuring vibration from the engines. After several moments of silence, Lyssa decided to break the tension by asking, "So you ever been inside the tenebricite shadow?"

Erin didn't answer right away, as though she wasn't sure she wanted to answer the question. The pilot shifted in her seat, as was her wont. Lyssa was about to tell her she didn't have to answer if she didn't want to when Erin finally spoke. "I grew up inside the veil."

Veil? That was an interesting word choice. That's what those crazy zealots, the Fourthers, called the tenebricite shadow. Lyssa decided to let that one slide. Instead, she just asked: "What was it like?"

Again, Erin hesitated before answering. She tweaked the elevator trim a little bit and shifted in her seat again. "It was primitive. We used fire for cooking and for light. We used animals instead of machines for work. We walked most everywhere we went. The rich kids had bicycles to ride. It wasn't all bad. If we live to see nightfall, I reckon we'll be seeking shelter in that village and you might get to find out for yourself."

Lyssa hadn't thought much about the village until that moment when Erin had pointed out that they might actually have to go there. Lyssa had a feeling she knew what kind of village that was. There was only one kind of people who would build a village inside the tenebricite shadow of a partially terraformed planet. "Isn't that a Fourthier village?" she asked.

"Probably, yeah."

"Umm... Is it safe to go to a fucking Fourthier village? Those Fourthiers ain't gonna like us. I mean...you're a pilot and I'm a mechanic. And also I'm...you know...*gay*."

Erin didn't answer right away. Lyssa watched as she turned slightly to correct her course. They were just over 20,000 meters above the planet's surface now. At some point, the altimeter had switched over to display their altitude in meters instead of kilometers. Lyssa noticed that according to the TCAS the four fighters had also broken their orbit and were only about 10,000 meters above them. The fighters seemed to be following them down to the ground.

"I know how to handle the Fourthiers," Erin finally said. "Let me do the talking. Most likely we can appeal to them as travelers in need of aid. If we invoke the story of the Apostle Ignacio they'll likely look past our sins of using the devil's technology."

That made no sense to Lyssa. "What the dingleberry? The 'devil's technology'? Ain't nothin' evil or demonic about this plane. Are you serious right now? Fuckin' egg-sucking luddites! And who the fuck is the Apostle Ignacio?"

Erin glanced at Lyssa warily. "Yes, I think I should definitely do the talking. Ignacio was a sinner, a drinker, and a pilot whose spaceplane crashed on the first holy planet. He was converted after he was given aid and shelter by the Reengineered Christ. And I wouldn't mention being a lesbian if I were you. The Fourthiers have been known to burn those at the stake."

First the word "veil" and then this business with the Apostle Ignacio. Lyssa was starting to suspect she had some idea why Erin was so reluctant to talk about her past. "Hmm," was all Lyssa said in response.

* * *

After all they had been through, the landing itself was comparatively uneventful, especially considering that Erin accomplished this landing at the controls of a crippled plane with its engines silent and several tons of freight on its back.

Lyssa watched as Erin's steady hand expertly glided the plane down the long valley and remained well enough clear of the jutting peaks on either side to avoid the tenebricite shadow. An encounter with the tenebricite shadow at this low altitude would only give them a couple dozen seconds to get right with the divine. Lyssa knew that Erin must be extremely nervous, yet she seemed outwardly calm, utterly in her element.

The last few hundred meters of altitude melted away as the valley beneath them widened out onto a sprawling lake. The plane came to the wide, deep area of the lake where the water's surface was far enough from either shore and from the bottom beneath to make a safe place to land an airplane. The wing floats deployed without any problems and Erin set the plane down on the glassy-smooth lake surface. Lyssa, having been born and lived her entire life up to that point on space stations, had never been on a planet before. This was her first landing. She clutched, white knuckled, at her seat's armrests. Just before the plane touched the water, she was sure that it was going to crash or sink right to the bottom, but the landing was smooth and gentle.

Erin noticed a small, anchored service platform in the middle of the lake which looked like it was used for servicing spaceplanes, so she used the plane's dissipating momentum to steer for that. So precise was Erin's command of kinetic energy that the plane-come-glider-come-boat was barely moving by the time it nudged its nose against the service platform's dock. Lyssa let out a loud, relieved sigh, despite herself.

Erin smiled. "Easy as falling out of the sky."

Sergeant Scalps

For a half a minute, the plane was silent. The only sounds were the gentle hiss of the life support system, the creaking of the wooden dock against the plane's nose, and the lapping of the water against the outer skin. Neither woman said much. Mainly, they just took in the moment as two people who had just faced great danger and were still alive to appreciate the fact.

The silence didn't last.

Quite all at once, the noise of several smaller planes filled their ears. Through the cockpit windows, Erin saw several fighter planes circling above. She even saw what looked like a small gunship, about twice the size of the little fighters. It had no wings and instead relied solely upon vertical thrusters for its lift. From either side of the gunship protruded a gunner's turret and what looked like some kind of heavy particle weapon. And then, she saw the troopship. The troopship was too large to land on the little service platform which floated next to the hardpointer, but the pilots of that troopship didn't let that discourage them. The troopship hovered barely a meter above the platform and lowered its ramp. Before the ramp even met the surface of the platform dozens of men poured out with the practiced efficiency of military veterans.

But these were clearly no military. The men (and a few women) wore no common uniform and displayed no flag. They wore bits and pieces of uniforms from various nations all over the Darklands. They made a motley assortment and no two looked alike. *Pirates*, Erin thought. *They want to take this plane.* The thought of this made Erin burn with rage. This was *her* plane. She was the pilot in command and she was the one who had signed the plane out. No way in heck was she going to let these dirtbags have it. But what could she do? She couldn't fight them with her one, empty gun.

She knew that she had a crazy look on her face by the way that Lyssa looked at her. "Erin, what are you gonna do?" Lyssa asked, sounding more afraid of her than the army of pirates just outside the plane.

Erin heard some more big engines roaring above and behind her. They were outside of her view through the cockpit windows. Now, she heard boot steps trundling across the roof of the fuselage. She understood what was happening. A second troopship was dropping even more troops on top of the plane. If she didn't think of something quick, they were going to take the plane.

Then, something did occur to her. She reached up to the life support system controls on the overhead panel and equalized the pressure with the outside air pressure. She didn't have time to do it gently, so she did it as quickly as she could without blowing out hers or Lyssa's ears. The sudden reduction in pressure hurt and they both cried out in pain.

"What the bends are you tryna do? Blow out my ears?" Lyssa complained.

But Erin didn't have time. Once the pressure equalized, she pulled the lever on her pilot's side window and slid the window back into its frame. From the galley, she heard the emergency hatch in the roof open. A second later she heard the first set of boots drop down into the plane through the now-open emergency hatch. She had only seconds to act. They weren't going to get the plane if she had anything to say about it.

Outside, on the service platform, someone noticed that she'd opened the side window. "You in the cockpit! Surrender now!" a man shouted at her.

She ignored him. She grabbed the control card from its slot next to the main computer. The moment she pulled the control card, the central computer went dark. The flight instrument panel went dark. The hydraulics system that ran the flight controls went silent. Without the control card, the main computer wouldn't function, and without the main computer almost no other system would function. Only the lights and life support remained.

"What the—?" Lyssa started to ask, but before Lyssa could react or even figure out what she was doing, Erin managed to throw the control card out the open window. She barely heard it splash into the water below. The control card, without which the plane was useless, began its long journey to the lake bottom more than a kilometer below.

"They threw something! Take cover!" shouted a different man's voice from the platform. Pirates scurried for what little cover the platform offered, apparently thinking she'd just thrown a bomb at them. She would have if she'd had one.

Just then, the cockpit was choked with a glut of huge men in full, motley combat gear. Four or five of them, more than Erin would have ever guessed would fit in the small, cramped space. Multiple sets of rough hands grabbed her,

pinned her arms down, struggled to disconnect her seatbelt, and then dragged her roughly up over the back of her seat and threw her facedown to the corridor floor just outside the cockpit. She could barely breathe and certainly couldn't struggle if she'd wanted to as a huge knee pressed against the back of her neck. She felt someone pull her pistol from her shoulder holster as her hands were electrocuffed behind her back. They were being taken prisoner rather than killed outright. Whether or not that was a good thing, only time would tell.

From somewhere (she couldn't tell where exactly) Erin could hear that Lyssa was getting the same rough treatment. Unlike herself, however, Lyssa wasn't going quietly.

"FUCK YOU MOTHERFUCKERS! I'LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!" Lyssa shouted with helpless rage.

A couple of the men laughed and then one cried out in pain. "OWWW! Fuckin' bitch bit me!"

Erin heard an electric, crackling *POP!* and then the air was filled with the smell of ozone. The men laughed again. "Holy shit! Did you see that? She flopped like an eel!" one of them said.

"That'll teach the bitch to bite me," the man who'd been bitten said.

"Dude, is she still breathing? How many watts did you hit her with?" asked a third man.

"Barely any. It's on the lowest setting. Not my fault. It's her fault for being so small and trying to fight us."

"You sure that's a *she?*" asked the man with his knee on Erin's neck. "Looks like a fourteen-year-old-boy to me. And what's up with that hair?"

"Yeah, I don't get it either. She shaves it into a mohawk to show what a rebel she is, and then she dyes it blue to match the fuckin' corporate logo on her uniform."

Erin was beginning to be concerned that they may have killed Lyssa. Just then, however, the man who'd been bitten said, "This bitch is fine. Look, see? She's breathing."

"Good thing for your dumb ass. The old man wants these bitches taken alive." This was the man with his knee at the back of Erin's neck again. She got the impression that he was (at least nominally) in charge. "What about you, cupcake?" the nominal leader said right in Erin's ear. "We got orders to bring you back alive but the old man never specified anything about you being in one piece." He grabbed her hair with one hand and held a knife against her hairline with his other hand. "They don't call me 'Sergeant Scalps' for nothin'. Them pretty, blonde curls o' yours would make a nice addition to my collection. So hows about it, princess? You wanna put up a fight too? *Please* put up a fight."

"Nrmf" was the closest to the word "no" that Erin could manage with her face pressed against the deck.

Scalps seemed to understand, though. The knife went away from her scalp and he let go of her hair. "Damn. Not the answer I was hoping for. I'm disappointed."

Not as disappointed as you'll be when you go to look for that control card, Erin thought wickedly. Part of her wanted to tell them just to see the look on their faces, but she knew it would take a couple hours for that card to sink all the way to the bottom of the lake. If they figured it out too soon, somebody might throw on an EVA suit and go down after it before it got deep enough to be out of reach.

He lifted his knee off her and Erin took several deep breaths, glad to be able to breathe freely again. "Sit up," Scalps commanded her. She obeyed.

The first thing she did was look for Lyssa. She saw her less than a meter away. The mechanic was hogtied and unconscious, but she looked to still be alive.

"Don't worry about your girlfriend, princess. She'll live," Scalps said. Erin got her first good look at him now. He was a big man with light skin and big, brown eyes which almost appeared kind (though Erin had no doubt that any appearance of kindness was merely an accident of genetics rather than an effect of his character). "Scalps," ironically had no hair of his own, just the stubble of a man who normally shaved his head and hadn't done so in several days. Erin recognized her own pistol tucked into Scalps' belt. He stood with a military bearing. They all carried themselves like soldiers and Erin had no doubt that most of them had been soldiers before turning to a life of piracy.

"What are you going to do with us?" she asked.

"That's up to the colonel."

"The colonel?" Erin asked.

"Affirmative. He'll be here shortly."

"Pirates have colonels?"

"We're not pirates. We're private security contractors."

"So...you're mercenaries, then." Erin wasn't stupid. She knew that the line between pirate and mercenary was thin

and often crossed.

"Private. Security. Contractors."

There was a tone of warning in his voice, so she didn't push. She decided to try a different tack. "Why did you shoot us down?"

"You'll have to discuss that with the colonel. He'll be here shortly."

"We were coming here to help out a downed company plane. Do you guys have that plane?"

"You'll have to discuss that with the colonel. He'll be here shortly."

"Is the pilot, Captain Elof, all right?"

"You'll have to discuss that with—"

"—the colonel," Erin completed the sentence for him. "Let me guess: he'll be here shortly?"

"Affirmative."

Medicine or Pain

The colonel did not arrive shortly.

Erin quickly gave up trying to get any information out of Scalps or any of the other pirates – correction: "private security contractors" – directly. She changed tack again and remained silent. She watched and listened. They didn't blindfold her or anything, but they whispered a lot and were careful what they said within her earshot. Still, she was able to glean much from snippets of overheard conversation.

Apparently Scalps was in charge of a dozen-or-so man squad. Their patchwork uniforms notwithstanding, they were far more organized than Erin had ever expected any group of pirates to be. They had a clear chain of command and paradoxically seemed to take pride in their "work." And they hated somebody named Villalobos. Nobody mentioned Capt. Elof or his plane, at least not within her earshot. She wondered if that meant they didn't know anything about the missing Noémie pilot or if they knew something they didn't want to tell her.

Erin watched as a medic treated one of Scalps' men who had a nasty-looking bite mark in his forearm. Erin couldn't help but feel a little proud of Lyssa for that.

By and by, the plane was tethered properly to the platform's dock and she and the unconscious Lyssa were moved to the platform. Away in the distance on the lake's eastern shore, Erin could see a collection of shabby, wooden buildings she recognized right away as a Fourther village. The church, the spiritual center of any Fourther settlement, was easy to identify even across kilometers of open water. Its sides were partially whitewashed and its steeple was still under construction.

Most of the pirates re-boarded their troopships and flew off to wherever pirates go. *The terraforming platform out in the middle of the ocean*, Erin presumed as she watched the troopships disappear to the west. The old terraforming platform was likely their home base. It was the only other settlement 788NC's scanners had shown on the planet, though she supposed it was possible the pirates could have a cloaked base somewhere else on the planet. Only Scalps and his squad remained on the platform to stand guard over the prisoners and the hardpointer.

The platform had a small shed, a landing pad for smaller planes like fighters or gunships, a refueling tank, and a lean-to with some tools inside it for performing basic maintenance. The shed had a ladder bolted to its side to allow access to its roof. To the bottom rung of this ladder, Erin's hands were re-cuffed. She couldn't stand up, and she was obliged to sit there on the ground, her long chicken legs and big, clumsy feet stretched out before her. She shifted constantly, trying in vain to find a comfortable way to sit. Lyssa, still unconscious and hogtied, was simply placed on the deck beside her. Two men armed with full-auto slug chuckers stood guard over them.

"Sarge, we got a sail," announced the lookout, nonchalantly. Scalps had posted the lookout on the roof of the shed and now he stood almost directly over Erin staring eastward towards the distant village. Erin could just make out the patch of white, triangular canvas near the village.

"Yeah, I expected that," Sgt. Scalps said. "Wind's light. Take 'em an hour to get here." Whoever was approaching from the Fourther village clearly wasn't any great concern to the pirates. *What kind of world is this where followers of the Fourth Testament are allied with pirates?* Erin wondered.

And they waited. Still, this mythical colonel didn't show up. Erin considered asking what they were waiting for, but when she caught Scalps' eye, the look he shot her made her rethink asking the question. Eventually, Lyssa woke up and moaned.

"Mmmm...Anybody got anything for a headache?" Lyssa asked. The hogtied mechanic was laying on her side with her back to Erin.

"Yeah, we sure do." This was the man whom Lyssa had bitten. His forearm was now wrapped in a bandage. "Too bad we ain't gonna share it with you."

"Man, don't be a dick," said the medic who'd bandaged the other man's arm. "Would you've done any less if you was her?" The medic strode over to where Lyssa lay. He held an autoinjector in one hand and a stun stick in his other hand. He held them both where Lyssa could plainly see them. "You understand the choice I'm offering you here?"

Lyssa nodded. "Headache medicine or more pain."

"Good. I gonna get any trouble out o' you if I come close, then?"

"Where's Erin?" Lyssa answered the medic's question with one of her own. Erin felt like she knew Lyssa well enough by this point to know that the answer to the medic's question was dependent upon the answer to Lyssa's.

"I'm right here behind you," Erin answered her mechanic's question even though it hadn't been directed at her. "I'm okay. Don't fight them."

"What's it gonna be, Fangs?" the medic asked again with a note of grudging respect in his voice.

"Medicine...please," Lyssa answered.

The medic warily held the autoinjector to Lyssa's shoulder and pulled the trigger. It hissed the dose of headache medicine into Lyssa's arm and then the medic stepped quickly away.

"Erin," Lyssa asked, "what's happening? What are they going to do with us?"

"Shut the fuck up, you two!" commanded Scalps.

Erin couldn't help herself. Even though she knew she should keep her mouth shut, she answered Lyssa's question. "We'll have to discuss that with the colonel. He'll be here shortly."

* * *

Several minutes after Lyssa woke up, while they were still waiting for the colonel, there was a loud *BOOM* from the sky above. Everyone looked to the sky including Erin. A ball of fire and smoke high up in the atmosphere was all that remained of some unfortunate plane. For a couple of minutes, there was much low, tense, speculative talk among the pirates as Scalps got on his radio and requested a situation update.

Erin could only hear Scalps' side of the conversation as he spoke into the radio pack's handset. "Affirmative...Roger that...Understood..." He hung up the handset and announced triumphantly to his men, "I just talked to Major Tolbert. That was one of theirs. Score is three-to-nothing and now they're retreating!" At this, a cheer went up among the pirates.

The man whom Lyssa had bitten grabbed his crotch and shouted at the sky, "Suck it, Villalobos!"

* * *

"Sir, we just lost Big Dog. That's three fighters down and none of theirs."

"Fuck!" Capt. Villalobos exclaimed. "What's the status on our troopship?" They had lost three of their eight fighters while Third Law still had lost none, but Villalobos didn't care about the fighters. He'd expected to lose them. Third Law had better fighters, better pilots, and more of them. He didn't even care about the stupid hardpoint freighter anymore.

The real objectives were in that stupid, little village of squatters. If they could get the troopship on the ground and kill everybody in that village, then the Fourthers wouldn't have any legal claim on this planet any longer. His employers at Safe Harbor had made clear to him that they mainly just wanted the squatters gone. He'd hoped to skylift them out (willingly or not) to another planet, but this whole thing had gone on for too many months now and he just wanted it over with. He'd sent the troopship down to the planet with orders to kill everyone—man, woman, and child—in that annoying little shit stain of a village that Third Law was protecting.

When the tactical officer failed to answer his question right away, Capt. Villalobos shot the man a warning look. "Their gunships are beating our troopship up pretty bad and our remaining fighters are barely able to keep the enemy fighters away from it."

"Can the troopship make it to its target? That's all I wanna know."

The tactical officer hesitated. "I don't believe so, sir. Troopship pilots are requesting abort. Colonel Raith figured out what we were doing and sent his gunships to intercept before we even got the troopship out of orbit. It was an ambush."

"Fucking Raith." Capt. Villalobos sighed. "Okay, call them back. Move the *Sophie* back to a safe distance. Third Law wins this one."

Major Tolbert

Lyssa's wrists and ankles ached from the restraints, but the medicine the medic had given her was helping her headache. She was no stranger to a stun stick. She'd been popped by enough of them over the years, usually by police. Usually when she'd deserved it. Usually.

She began to hear something, a low, shrieking rumble from the south end of the lake. The pirates could hear it too. They all turned and looked to the south.

"Here they come!" one of the lookouts shouted.

As the sound got louder, Lyssa's trained ear could identify the engines making it. *Noster 482s*, she thought, *three or four of them. Fighters* She wanted to see, but she was laying on the wrong side for that. Trussed up like a hog for slaughter as she was, it took a lot of effort, but she managed to get herself turned over. The men standing guard over her either didn't notice or didn't care that she turned herself over. They were momentarily distracted by the incoming fighters too. Across the water to the south, Lyssa could see the fighters – there were four of them – coming in fast. They were skimming the surface in a tight V-formation.

"I hope those are friendlies," she whispered to Erin whom she could see now that she was laying on her other side.

"I don't think anybody on this planet's friendly to us," Erin said.

"Shut up, you two," said one of the guards.

The four fighters buzzed right over the platform, their engines shrieking. The pirates all covered their ears. Erin and Lyssa, with their hands still tied, were obliged to just wince at the pain. Immediately after buzzing the platform, the lead fighter broke off from the other three. Lyssa heard the pilot pull his engine back to idle as he broke up and to the left, spilling off airspeed in a tight turn. *Go ahead, dipshit, crack your wing spars*, Lyssa thought derisively. *Ever hear of metal fatigue?*

The pilot shut down his main engine and didn't bring his vertical thrusters online right away. A fighter is built for speed and agility, not gliding. Without his main engine or vertical thrusters, the pilot was forced to pull the nose higher and higher, exchanging more and more speed for lift. All the while, he held the plane in a tight, left turn all the way back around towards the platform. Anybody who knows anything about airplanes knows you can only do this for so long before the wings get too slow to produce lift. That critical airspeed below which a plane can no longer fly without vertical thrusters is called the plane's stall speed. A fighter, with its minuscule aspect ratio has a very high stall speed. The tight turn the plane was executing only increased the odds of a stall. "Come on, dumbass," Lyssa said aloud, "stall it right into the water." She knew it was too much to hope for, but she loathed nothing so much as pilots who were hard on their planes just for the sake of showing off. It would have made her day to see this guy stall and crash. "Come on, numbnuts. Crash."

"Goddamnit, Fangs, I said shut up," repeated the guard. He brandished the butt of his rifle at her, so she shut up. She resolved right there to make these guys sorry they'd ever met Lyssa Ruiz.

Just as the fighter was about to stall less than fifty meters from the platform, the pilot brought his vertical thrusters online and smoothly transitioned to hovering flight. His remaining forward momentum carried him the rest of the way to the platform while the vertical thrusters provided a smooth, controlled rate of descent. The landing gear dropped out of the fighter's underside just at the last second and the pilot set the plane down on the platform's small landing pad. It was the kind of cocky flying that a pilot or some other species of idiot might think was cool, but Lyssa thought was just stupid.

"That's pretty cool," said the guard that had just told her to shut up.

The fighter's canopy opened and Lyssa saw right away that the pilot was no *he* after all. *She* was an older woman (which to Lyssa meant perhaps forty). The pilot climbed out of the cockpit and onto the wing. Her flight suit was a couple sizes too big and rolled up at the cuffs. To Lyssa, an avowed believer in the "less is more" school of thought, the oversized flight suit only made the woman even more sexy. Where her left hand should have been, only a claw-like, three-fingered mechanical prosthesis protruded from her sleeve. She took her helmet off and tossed it nonchalantly into the cockpit seat. She only had hair on the right side of her head, long, raven-black hair shot through with streaks of gray. The left side of her head was covered in one continuous burn scar that disappeared beneath the collar of her flight suit.

Where her left eye once had been, a black, orb-like ocular implant now resided. The ocular implant was a little unsettling as it seemed to be looking in all directions at once, yet no direction in particular. Like a bug's eye.

"Officer on deck!" the sergeant called Scalps shouted and all the other pirates stood at attention.

These are weird pirates, Lyssa thought.

"Thank you, sergeant. At ease," the fighter pilot said as she dropped down from the wing of her plane.

"Major," the sergeant saluted her and then shouted to his squad. "At ease, losers."

Taking long, confident strides, the major walked to the edge of the platform and looked the hardpointer over. "It's a little beat up, but I think it'll do what we need it to do. What's in that container?" She pointed to the freighter's only cargo, the maintenance mech and the shipping container which were both still mounted to hardpoints atop the fuselage.

"Just airplane parts," Sgt. Scalps said. "Looks like they really thought they were coming here to repair that other plane."

"Hmm." The Major crossed her arms pensively. "We can use that mech to help us load our crap into that container. It's not a cargo mech, but it can do the job."

"Yes, ma'am." The sergeant said.

Next, the major swaggered over to where Lyssa and Erin were tied up. There was something confident and powerful about the way this woman moved. She knew her face was terribly disfigured and she didn't care what anyone thought. Lyssa had to admit there was something very sexy about her. There was also something terribly dangerous, predatory about her.

"Hey, pirate lady," Lyssa said, "you the one that shot us down? I ain't mad."

"No, I'm the one that saved you," the pirate major said dismissively. "And we're not pirates."

"We know," Erin said. "'Private security contractors.' The guy that threatened to scalp me was very clear about that."

The major cast an annoyed look at Sgt. Scalps.

"I wasn't gonna do it. Just tryna make sure she behaved herself," Scalps said.

The major turned back toward Erin. "You're the pilot of that thing?" The major chucked her mechanical claw-thumb over her shoulder towards the hardpointer.

She's left-handed, Lyssa thought, *or at least she was back when she still had a left hand.*

Erin started to answer the major's question: "Y —"

but Lyssa interrupted: "—No, today's 'Wacky Friday' at Noémie. We switch uniforms. That's how mechanics dress, right down to the Aviators' Guild tie."

The major gave Lyssa an annoyed look. "Today's Saturday."

"Lyssa, please," Erin implored the smart-mouthed mechanic. Erin felt that tact was a better strategy than antagonism. To the major, Erin said: "Yeah, I'm the pilot."

"That was a nice bit of flyin'," the major said. "When that EMP hit you, I thought you were gonna bounce for sure. Sorry we couldn't get to you quicker."

"Hey, mamma!" Lyssa said. "Don't be shy. You ever been with an Estrellan girl?"

"Lyssa," Erin hissed and then kicked her lightly. "Stop it!"

The major ignored Lyssa's attempts to draw her attention away from Erin. "I'm Major Tolbert. I'm the chief pilot for Third Law Security."

"'Cause once you go Estrellan," Lyssa continued, "you ain't *a-strayin'*. You know what I mean?"

Lyssa's trying to draw their attention away from me, Erin realized. *Does she think she's protecting me? Is this some misguided effort at being heroic? I'm a big girl; I can protect myself.* But Erin couldn't deny there was something unsettling about the major. It wasn't just her scars, her mechanical hand, or her weird ocular implant. Some primitive part of Erin's brain sensed danger in this woman. It was the same feeling she'd gotten while they were still in orbit before the attack had come, a sense of being prey. Erin followed Major Tolbert's example and just ignored Lyssa. "I'm Captain Erin O'Connell. I'd shake your hand, but...you know..." Behind her back, Erin clinked her electrocuffs to the metal ladder.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain O'Connell," the major said but made no move to release Erin from her bonds. "So I was wondering: if you were able to restore power after that EMP hit you, why didn't you just restart your engines?"

"We tried, but we couldn't restart the engines. The APU is toast. Lyssa got most of the other systems online, though. She gave me a flyable airplane, even if it didn't have engines. She's a good mechanic."

Erin saw Lyssa suppress a smile of gratitude before sayin' to the major, "That's right, mamma. I'm real good with my

hands." She made a kissing gesture towards the major.

Erin continued: "You said you saved us. What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know if you guys realize it or not, but you flew right into a war zone. Those were Villalobos' crew that shot that EMP at you. They call themselves 'Backwater Essential Security Consultants'. We turned those two dickheads that attacked you into space junk. One blew up right next to you, in fact. After that, myself and three others remained on station to protect you."

"But... A war zone? That doesn't make sense. I checked NOTAMs before I came here and I didn't see anything about there being a war over here in Backwater. Only war I know about is the Kells and the Olost over in Giant's Backbone."

"Huh!" Major Tolbert scoffed. "Little girl, most wars don't get an official Notice To Airmen. This little conflagration we got here on Sanctuary ain't no big nation-state war like that one out in Giant's Backbone. This here is just two groups fighting over one shitball planet. That's the way most wars happen, especially way out here in the Backwater Cluster. The ass end of the Darklands ain't called Backwater for nothin'."

Erin noticed that Tolbert hadn't asked what she and Lyssa were doing here. Wouldn't she want to know why a civilian freighter had flown into her war zone? If Erin were in Tolbert's place, that would have been her first question... unless Tolbert already knew, of course. Erin dreaded the answer, but she had to ask the question: "We were dispatched here to make repairs on another Noémie hardpointer that's supposed to be broke down on this planet. Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie. You know anything about the plane or her captain? Pilot by the name of Radcliff Elof?"

Major Tolbert let out a long sigh. Erin knew what was coming next even before the major said the words: "I'm afraid I have to inform you that Captain Elof's plane crashed. He was killed on impact. Villalobos' guys hit him with an EMP just like they did you, but unfortunately for Captain Elof, when they hit him he was already below escape velocity. Rather than bounce off the atmosphere back into space, he just fell."

The phrase "he just fell" made Erin shudder. She wasn't afraid of dying, but the thought of being trapped inside a tumbling plane with no control scared her to the very pit of her aviator's soul.

"Fuckin' hell," Lyssa said. Though Erin wouldn't have used that kind of language, the sentiment seemed appropriate.

"So..." Erin asked after a moment. "That SCARS report we got back at Noémie saying that Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie was just needing repairs...?"

"We sent it," Major Tolbert said, unapologetically. "Captain Elof was contracting for us. That's why he came here in the first place. His demise didn't change the fact that we needed a freighter. Villalobos and his crew have all standard FTL communications jammed from their ship. Luckily for us, they didn't think to jam the SCARS frequency of a civvie charter company. So we pulled the SCARS transmitter out of Four-Nine-Five-November-Charlie's wreckage and hacked it to send the signal."

Erin made eye contact with Lyssa. She knew the mechanic was thinking the same thing she was.

"You baited us into coming here," Lyssa said.

"And now what are you going to do with us?" Erin asked.

"That's...up to the colonel. He'll be along shortly," The major evaded their question.

Colonel Raith

This time, the colonel did come along shortly. It was scarcely another five minutes before the engines of a gunship were heard descending from above. As the gunship descended into view, Erin and Lyssa saw that it was identical to the one they had seen just after landing. With Major Tolbert's fighter already parked on the small platform, there was nowhere for the gunship to land. Instead, the gunship pilot did much as the troopship pilots had done earlier. The pilot of the gunship hovered very near the edge of the platform as the gunship's side door slid open and a man stepped out and onto the platform.

The man was of average height and slight build, but everyone on the platform (save for Lyssa and Erin who were still restrained) stood at attention. Even Major Tolbert stood up straight and saluted him. The man told his subordinates to be "at ease" and then pulled Major Tolbert aside. They had a brief discussion (which Erin couldn't hear) as they looked over the hardpointer. Then, the two pirates (Erin wasn't convinced they were anything more than pirates, no matter what they called themselves) walked over to the captives.

"I'm Colonel Landon Raith," the man introduced himself. He had light skin with brown eyes and brown/gray hair which he wore very short. His most distinguishing feature was the intricate tattoo of stylized, swirling flame which curled out from his eyes to cover the upper half of his face. The tattoos had a ceremonial quality to them and Erin doubted if the man wore them for vanity. She wondered where this man came from, what cultural significance those tattoos had for him. The man continued, "You can call me 'sir' or 'Colonel Raith'. That freighter belongs to us now and for the immediate future, you work for Third Law Security. Congratulations. You've been drafted as civilian subcontractors."

Erin was stunned. She was letting the implications of what he'd just said sink in.

Lyssa, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to make her feelings on the matter heard. "How 'bout I call you—" at this point, Lyssa lapsed into a long string of words in her native Estrellan. Erin didn't understand what the mechanic was saying, but she could tell it was an especially nasty insult, even for Lyssa's dirty mouth.

Col. Raith and Maj. Tolbert made no effort to interrupt Lyssa. They just let her finish her tongue lashing in Estrellan. When she was done, the colonel turned to one of the two grunts standing guard over the prisoners and said, "Can I borrow your knife?"

"Yes, sir," the guard said, pulling a large combat knife from a sheath on his belt and passing it over to his commanding officer.

Erin suddenly felt very afraid for Lyssa's safety. "Please, sir," Erin started to beg for her mechanic. The colonel held the knife's well-used blade to his lips in a *shh* gesture. So Erin shut up. She shifted where she sat on the ground, suddenly very uncomfortable.

Col. Raith squatted down to the ground next to Lyssa's face. "This is the one the guys are calling 'Fangs'?"

"Yes sir," Major Tolbert said. "She bit Haynes. Be careful."

Raith held the knife in his hand, blade up. "So we've got a biter and a sasser all in one. Seems like all your problems come from your mouth."

For once, Lyssa was quiet, but the look of defiance in her eyes was clear to see.

Raith continued: "I wonder if knocking all your teeth out would solve that...?" He brandished the butt of the knife mere centimeters from Lyssa's face. "I'm not a monster. I don't want to hurt my newest employees. But this is war and I need to know that you will fall in line, *private*." He emphasized the last word. Like it or not, Lyssa and Erin were in this little warlord's private army now. To drive his point home, he said: "There is only one right answer, and that answer is 'Yes, sir'."

Lyssa was silent for a long moment. She looked over to Erin. Erin nodded, not wanting to see her mechanic brutalized by this man. The colonel waited patiently. Finally, Erin saw Lyssa swallow hard, as though literally swallowing her pride, before saying: "Yes, sir."

"See? That wasn't so hard." Col. Raith turned to Erin, pointed the knife casually in her direction, and said: "What about you, *private*? You gonna play nice?"

Erin didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir."

"Good."

"What kind of work do you need us to do, sir?" Erin asked, knowing the answer. Major Tolbert had already said that the pirates needed a freighter. They obviously needed someone to fly it. Flying a transtach-capable, hardpoint freighter took a whole different kind of skill and training than flying a fighter. She suspected that they didn't have any pilots capable of flying the big plane. The time had finally come for Erin's big punchline.

Col. Raith's eyes narrowed. He could tell that Erin was playing dumb. She was up to something, and he knew it. "We need Private Fangs here to oversee repairs on the plane and we need you to fly it. Of course."

Erin knew that what she had to say next might get her killed, but would that really be such a bad thing? The die had already been cast the moment she'd tossed that control card out the cockpit window. Lyssa wasn't the only one who could be defiant. While Lyssa's defiance might be an overheated pressure cooker with a stuck safety valve, Erin's was a pot left to simmer on low, forgotten on the back burner. The pressure cooker might blow up in your face, but the forgotten pot will burn your whole house down.

"It's gonna be hard for me to fly the plane, sir," Erin said, her tone carefully respectful, "without a control card."

And there it was. In spite of himself, Col. Raith looked confused for a moment.

Lyssa snickered. She already understood.

Maj. Tolbert shifted her weight nervously. For once, Erin forgot how uncomfortable just sitting here on the platform deck was for her. Lyssa struggled to contain her snorting laughter.

The colonel, apparently not a pilot himself, turned to Maj. Tolbert. "What's she talking about?"

"The control card, sir," the major said. "It's a security feature. Without it, the plane's computer won't operate, and without the main computer, the plane is basically just scrap metal."

Raith sighed deeply and turned back to face Erin. "And where is this control card?"

"Well, sir," Erin said, "I thought you guys were the pirates who'd just shot us down. I didn't know you were respectable 'private security contractors,' so I tossed it out the cockpit window after we landed. It's probably either near or on the bottom of the lake by now."

Real, dangerous anger flashed across Raith's face. The saccharine, patronizing quality in Erin's overly respectful tone wasn't lost on him. "So, what you're saying is that the only reason I have for keeping you alive just became void?"

"Well, I'm a pretty good cook," Erin said.

Lyssa began making up a song on the spot:

"She's as good with a plane
as with a cookin' pot.
Sent the card a-swimmin'
and put him in a spot.
Twelve hundred down,
She made the colonel frown."

Unexpectedly, the colonel laughed. "I'm kinda startin' to like you, Private Fangs." He stood back up and passed the combat knife back to the grunt who had loaned it to him. "Any chance we can bypass the computer and get the plane working without the card?" He directed the question to Maj. Tolbert, but it was Lyssa who answered him.

"Oh, sure," Lyssa said in mock helpfulness. "We have a way to reset the computer in case some pilot gets too drunk and loses his control card. It happens sometimes. Just tow the plane into the nearest Noémie maintenance hanger, hook it up to a station umbilicus, and get both the Chief of Maintenance and the Chief Pilot to authorize the reset. Of course, the nearest Noémie maintenance hanger is on Gonaways Station, something like twelve thousand lightyears away. But even before we can get the plane there, we gotta figure out how to get 'er off planet. That might be kinda hard with her engines and computer not working."

"Hmm..." Raith said. Lyssa knew something bad was coming before he said it. She expected she was about to lose a few teeth, so she mentally readied herself for the coming pain. "We can still use the mechanic, but this blonde beanpole of a pilot is useless to us." He turned in the direction of Sgt. Scalps who stood on the other side of the platform talking to a couple of other grunts. "Sergeant Scalps!" the colonel shouted.

Scalps ran over and stood at attention. "Yes, sir?"

"The blonde is useless to us. Take your trophy and send her to the bottom with her control card."

The sergeant (who hadn't heard the exchange about the control card), looked confused. "Sir?"

"Scalp the bitch and then drown her."

Scalps looked to Erin with malicious glee. "Yes, sir." He didn't hesitate. He pulled his knife, stepped over Lyssa, and crouched down near Erin. Erin looked oddly calm.

Lyssa knew she needed to stop this. Her desperate mind raced. The colonel's words came to her. "...send her to the bottom with her control card," the colonel had said. Her control card. Although he hadn't intended to, he reminded Lyssa of another of Noémie's security practices, one which could save Erin's life.

"Wait!" Lyssa shouted. Her heart was racing. Erin's eyes were starting to water, but she still looked calm. Erin was facing her imminent and painful death with tremendous bravery. She was so beautiful. "Wait," Lyssa repeated. "We can get the card back."

Anger shot across Erin's face, and Lyssa had no doubt it was directed at her. This surprised Lyssa. Did Erin actually *want* to die?

"You don't give orders, Fangs," Sgt. Scalps made no effort to stop what he was doing. He grabbed Erin's hair.

Lyssa ignored him, appealing to the two officers standing over her. "But if you kill her, then the card will never work."

"Sergeant, belay." This was Major Tolbert. Lyssa wasn't sure what the implications were for the major countermanding her superior officer's orders. If the colonel minded, he didn't show it.

Sgt. Scalps seemed undecided, glancing back-and-forth between the major and the colonel. Col. Raith held his hand up in an open-palm gesture that said *stop*. At this, the sergeant sighed heavily. He let go of Erin's hair, but he didn't put his knife back in its sheath right away.

Erin stared acid at Lyssa. Lyssa didn't understand Erin's dedication to duty. Screw the plane; that's just company property. If it gets stolen, that sucks, but was Erin really willing to give her life to protect it? *Does Erin want to die?* Lyssa wondered again. Lyssa wasn't going to let it happen if she could avoid it.

"I'm assuming you're saying that the control card is QSP-linked?" Major Tolbert asked Lyssa.

"Yeah. Noémie requires all pilots to have QuantumScale Processors if they want to get their ratings to fly hardpointers. That control card's QSP-linked to her. No one else in the entire universe can use that card. If you kill her, then her QSP dies with her and the control card is useless."

"Lyssa!" Erin hissed.

"I'm not gonna do nothin' and just let 'em kill you."

The colonel, his patience clearly at its end, broke in. "This is all very heartwarming but get to the part I give a fuck about. Private Fangs, you know any way to get this card thingy back?"

"Yeah...uh, sir. We got a HEVA suit on the plane that can handle the pressure at twelve hundred meters. Send somebody down to retrieve it."

Maj. Tolbert scoffed. "That wouldn't work. Those HEVA suits are *heavy*. That's what the H in HEVA stands for: Heavy. The suit has a power assist to help the wearer move in it, but the bottom of the lake is inside the tenebricite shadow. That means the power assist won't work. And what about the rebreather? You do know a rebreather needs a computer to operate, don't you?"

"I don't know no such thing. The computer just automates the rebreather. I can rig a rebreather with mechanical valves and gauges for manual operation. I'm good with my hands, remember." Lyssa winked at Maj. Tolbert.

The major rolled her one eye at Lyssa.

Col. Raith ignored Lyssa's innuendos. "What about the weight of the suit? How's the person inside supposed to move in that heavy suit without powered assist?"

"It'll be hard, but a strong enough person can do it," Lyssa said. "Looks like you guys got plenty of big, strong men. Just have to find one that's not a total idiot so he can work the valves and shit on the rebreather after I convert it to manual." She looked toward Sgt. Scalps. "Looks like you might have a shortage of non-idiot."

Scalps opened his mouth to say something, but Col. Raith spoke first. "You're sure you can do this?"

"Didn't I say I'm good with my hands?"

A flash of annoyance crossed the colonel's face. He clearly wasn't used to people speaking to him like that. "Private Fangs, like it or not, you work for us now. You're going to have to learn some discipline if you want to survive. Now, I highly recommend that you adjust your attitude." He paused to let his words sink in. He was serious about pressing the two women into his service. "Are you done biting people, Private Fangs?"

Not a chance in hell. "Yes, sir."

The colonel stared into her face, looking for any sign of aggression. He wasn't foolish enough to just believe her, but Lyssa was a good enough liar to hide her anger. Finally, the colonel seemed to accept that she intended to behave herself in the short term. "If we take you out of this hogtie, will you try to bite anyone?"

Not today, but you better sleep with one eye open, you fucking pirate. "No, sir."

Col. Raith nodded to the two grunts standing guard over them. The men were careful to keep away from Lyssa's mouth as they untethered her legs and secured her electrocuffed hands to the same ladder to which Erin was bound. Though still uncomfortable, it was far better than being hogtied. She and Erin now sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the ground with their legs stretched out before them. Erin's long, gangly legs extended out much farther than Lyssa's short, stubby ones.

"Thank you, sir," Lyssa said. *Suck my ball-peen, Col. Cock-hammer.*

Col. Raith nodded to her and turned to Maj. Tolbert. "Major, A word with you, please?"

"Yes, sir," Maj. Tolbert said. With that, the major and the colonel walked across the platform and conversed out of Lyssa's and Erin's earshot.

Erin had been quiet through all of that exchange, fuming at Lyssa's willingness to help these pirates. "Why are you helping them?" Erin finally asked her.

"Are you serious? They were gonna kill you. And that's only after that crazy fucker scalped you." Nearby, their two guards and Sgt. Scalps stood listening to them, but none told the women to shut up. Scalps didn't say anything to this, but he still held his knife in his hand.

"I don't care about that. I just don't want them to have the plane. You ever think about what these guys might want it for? Maybe they're gonna use it for some terrorist attack or something."

"Dude I couldn't just let them kill you."

"Why not?!" Erin shouted. She convulsed in frustration. All over the platform, heads glanced briefly in her direction.

"Really?" Lyssa sounded incredulous. "Because you're my friend, that's why."

This caught Erin off guard. She'd expected Lyssa's reasoning to be something more pragmatic. This sentimental reasoning seemed out of place from someone as prickly as Lyssa. Erin had obviously known since they'd first met that Lyssa was sexually attracted to her, but it had never dawned on her that Lyssa might consider her an actual friend. They'd only met four days ago, but they'd spent that whole time cooped up inside a plane together. They'd faced great peril together and survived by working as a team. Erin reflected on the past four days and realized that in spite of all the walls she'd built around herself to keep people away, this brash, obnoxious, foul-mouthed woman had subtly found the cracks in those very walls. Like it or not, Lyssa had become a friend.

Erin wondered when the last time was she'd had a real friend? Did Fionn count as a friend? Not really. Fionn was a colleague, and she liked him. However, she only ever talked to him in passing. No, she decided. She didn't have any friends and hadn't had any since she'd left Promisedland.

She looked to the east and spotted the sail she'd seen earlier coming from the village. It was now within maybe a half kilometer from the platform. The small sailboat looked so fragile and lonesome out there on the water.

The Fourthers

Col. Raith and Maj. Tolbert didn't come back to the ladder where the two captives were bound for some time. Instead, the mercenary commanders stood talking amongst themselves by the edge of the platform as the sailboat tied off to the same wooden dock as was lashed the hardpointer. Erin found it surreal seeing the tiny sailboat's ancient technology of rope and canvas tied up next to a modern hardpoint freighter. Having grown up inside the tenebricite shadow on a Darklands planet, Erin was used to primitive technologies like sailboats and horses. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of two such very different technological paradigms never quit being startling to her. Lyssa, who had lived her entire life on space stations, merely eyed the flimsy-looking watercraft with suspicion.

The three men who climbed out of the boat eyed the hardpointer with suspicion, if not outright contempt. These three men were all dressed in simple, homespun clothing of mostly black with only the occasional white, gray, or beige article to provide any color to their dress. Two of the men were older, sixty or seventy, and one man was very young. Erin guessed this younger man to be about her age or even a couple years younger. His clean-shaven face marked him among his culture as unmarried.

"Fourthers," Erin whispered to Lyssa. "The two older ones are village elders and I think the younger one is just along to work the boat." This last was confirmed when the young man remained with the boat while the two older men walked up the dock and onto the platform proper. They began conversing with Raith and Tolbert. A couple of times, the group glanced over to where Erin and Lyssa sat electrocuffed to the ladder. "If they come over here, let me talk to them. I grew up around Fourthers. I know how to talk to them."

"Okay." Lyssa was uncharacteristically compliant. She seemed more afraid of the Fourthers than the pirates.

Perhaps with good reason, Erin thought. She had seen first-hand how cruel the Fourthers could be when their zeal was up. After a few minutes of what looked to be strained conversation, Maj. Tolbert, Col. Raith, and the two Fourther elders crossed the platform and approached the captives.

Col. Raith spoke first, indicating the older of the two Fourthers, a man of perhaps seventy: "This is Father Elijah. He's the leader of the settlers here on Sanctuary." The older man bowed his head politely at the two captives. "And this is Brother Jotham." Brother Jotham, while still old, was at least a decade younger than his compatriot.

Next, Raith introduced Erin and Lyssa to the Fourther elders. Lyssa said nothing and avoided eye contact while Erin made the customary greetings of "Well met, Father." and "Well met, Brother."

Erin's courtesy seemed to impress Father Elijah. "You're polite for a non-believer, young miss."

"Thank you, Father."

The two elders exchanged a significant look. "Did you grow up among the faith, Miss O'Connell?" Brother Jotham asked.

Erin knew the danger the truth carried with it, so she lied. "No, Brother. I grew up inside the veil on a planet not far from here. We had a village of Fourthers a few kilometers away. I knew some of them."

"Hmm. I see."

Col. Raith broke in, addressing Lyssa first. "So here's what's gonna happen. Private Fangs, you're gonna oversee repairs on the hardpointer and you're gonna modify that Heavy EVA suit to work inside the tenebricite shadow. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Lyssa answered. Lyssa was putting on a marginally believable show of submission. Erin could tell that she was holding back a lot of anger, and she doubted that Raith or Tolbert were buying it.

"Hmm, good." Col. Raith sounded skeptical. No, he definitely didn't buy Lyssa's obedient routine any more than Erin did. Apparently deciding to just play along with Lyssa's good girl act, the colonel looked to Erin. "Private Beanpole, you're worthless to us until we recover that control card. You're not to be anywhere near the plane. Because I don't trust your lanky ass. Not even a little. So you're going to go with the settlers to Pilgrim's Rest, got it?"

"Yes, sir." Erin assumed that Pilgrim's Rest must be the village from which the Fourthers had sailed.

"It'll be okay, miss," Brother Jotham assured her. "I've no doubt that Sister Judith would welcome you to stay in her cabin. She's our village midwife and a good, pious woman. You'll be put to work, but as long as you earn your keep and

obey Sister Judith, you'll be treated fairly."

"Thank you, Brother," Erin said.

"We'll come get you when we recover the control card," Col. Raith said. "You'd better hope it still works."

"It'll work," Lyssa reassured the colonel. "...sir."

Maj. Tolbert added, "One more thing: if either of you misbehaves, I'm gonna have Sergeant Scalps punish the other one. Understood?"

Both women glanced nervously at Scalps who, still holding his knife, smirked menacingly at them. "Yes, ma'am," they both answered the major.

War and Fire

Erin was worried about Lyssa.

Erin was in the sailboat with the two elders and the young, clean-shaven man who had been introduced as Brother Azariah. A gentle breeze lazily pushed the little boat back toward village of Pilgrim's Rest as Brother Azariah manned the tiller and the sheets. At first, the elders had tried to engage Erin in casual conversation, asking her where she had grown up and whom her people were. Erin found it awkward making casual conversation with her captors. Besides, she didn't wish to discuss her past with them. The only answers to their questions she offered were short, vague, and polite. By-and-by, the two older men seemed to give up on trying to engage her in conversation and instead talked sporadically amongst themselves about various subjects of village administration. Brother Azariah kept making furtive glances in Erin's direction.

Erin massaged her wrists, glad to be free of the electrocuffs. She stared over the stern towards the platform. Her plane remained tied up against the wooden dock and her mechanic – no, her *friend* – remained in the hands of the pirates. She hoped that Lyssa would be okay. Erin was under no illusion that Lyssa intended to behave herself in the long term, but she felt confident that (at least in the near term) Lyssa would do as she was told. She remembered how she had earlier thought of Lyssa's anger as a pressure cooker that might blow up any second. *Keep calm, Lyssa*, she willed her friend. *Keep Calm*, she thought again, not sure if this last was directed at Lyssa or herself. Maybe both.

"You're worried about your friend?" Brother Azariah asked from his position at the tiller.

Erin didn't want to encourage the young Fourth's obvious interest in her. She never understood what it was men saw in her. "Hmm," was all the answer she gave.

Brother Jotham reassured her, "Your friend will be fine as long as she does what she's told. Colonel Raith might be a brutal warlord, but his word is as good as any of the faithless."

"And since you've both been pressed into his service," Father Elijah continued, "he's inclined to protect his investment."

His investment? Were Erin inclined to profanity, she might have sworn at that. Col. Raith and his band of pirates had stolen Noémie's plane and pressed its crew into service. *What kind of "investment" was outright theft and slavery?* Erin felt her anger, that proverbial forgotten pot on the back burner, start to simmer once again. She wanted to burn down Raith's and the rest of the pirates' house. *Keep calm.* This time, she knew it was herself she was begging to be calm. She didn't care about her own life, but she was a professional pilot and she cared about the life of her passenger, her friend. She needed to keep calm.

"He's no warlord; he's a pirate, pure and simple. And he's holding you hostage just as much as me and Lyssa!"

The two elders exchanged an uncomfortable look. The young Brother Azariah suddenly found himself very interested in checking that the mainsheet was properly cleated. Erin knew very well how inappropriate Fourthers considered it for a woman to speak to elders so. She didn't particularly care about their fragile, old men's egos. She hated being in this situation. She hated the Fourthers' hypocrisy. *Keep calm.*

"I think..." Father Elijah started hesitantly and then started again, "I think you've got the wrong idea, young miss."

Erin didn't like being called "young miss" any more than "Private Beanpole."

"Colonel Raith isn't holding us hostage."

Erin held her tongue, but clearly Father Elijah could see the disbelief in her face.

"I mean it. Colonel Raith works *for us*."

That took Erin by surprise. "What?! What do you mean he works for you? Since when do pirates work for F –" Erin almost said "Fourthers," but then remembered that some Fourthers don't like that term. " – um, the faithful."

"Third Law Security, Colonel Raith's organization, aren't pirates. They're private security contractors. They're here on Sanctuary to protect us from the actual pirates, the same ones that shot you down earlier. The pirates call themselves Backwater Security Consultants. Backwater's leader is a real pirate named Villalobos and they work for the evil corporation that's trying to steal our planet from us."

Erin was shocked by this development. "Wait, *your* planet? I thought SHP 242 belonged to the Safe Harbor

Terraforming Company."

Erin could feel the tension increase drastically in the tiny boat's cramped cockpit. Uncomfortable glances were exchanged between all three men. Brother Jotham spoke next. "The planet's name is Sanctuary – not SHP 242. And Safe Harbor is trying to take it away from us. They've hired Villalobos and his band of thugs to remove us by force. They call themselves Backwater Security Consultants, and they've got a powerful ship in called the *Ready Sophia*. But Colonel Raith has more fighters and small gunships. Thus far, the colonel's managed to keep the wolves from the flock."

"Wait... Why does a well-known terraforming company want to take your planet away?"

"They claim they still own part of this planet. Has to do with the way terraforming contracts work," Brother Jotham said.

"It's pretty complicated," old Father Elijah, who sat next to Erin in the boat's cramped cockpit, patted Erin's hand patronly.

He means it's the kind of thing a woman wouldn't understand. Give me a break. I'm a hardpointer pilot. I'm not an idiot. Erin glanced pointedly at the distant village. It would be a while before the slow, primitive watercraft made landfall. "We're not going anywhere for a while. Try me. I think I deserve at least a chance to understand the nature of the conflict, since I've apparently been drafted to fight in it."

The two older men glanced at one another again. Young Brother Azariah looked at her with a look of disapproval which she pretended not to notice. No doubt he disapproved of her speaking her mind to the village elders, and probably he thought she needed a husband to keep her in line. *Not if you were the last man alive, buddy.*

Father Elijah shrugged at Brother Jotham, but said nothing. Brother Jotham took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh before beginning: "We contracted – in good faith – with Safe Harbor to terraform this planet near twenty years ago for a set fee. They would own the planet until terraforming was complete. At regular intervals, we would pay a percentage of that fee and we would thence forth own that percentage of the planet. At this point, eighty percent of the fee has been paid and the planet is only eighty percent terraformed."

Erin looked around her. The massive freshwater lake they were floating across looked pristine. The tall, steep hills all around the lake were covered with green woodlands. Over their bow, she could see the drab Fourth village like a pimple on the landscape's otherwise perfect complexion. Clearly the planet was livable, nice even. SHP 242 – Sanctuary, whatever – certainly wasn't the harsh, foreboding wasteland she had been anticipating since she'd first learned that she was going to a partially terraformed planet. "But, the planet looks nice. What else about it needs terraforming?"

"Ha!" Father Elijah scoffed. "You'll find out tomorrow, I wager. Soon's Sister Judith puts you to work."

Erin didn't like the sound of that. She shifted, trying to get comfortable in her seat. What dangerous or terrible job did they have in store for her?

Her apprehension must have shown on her face, for Brother Jotham gently admonished his superior. "Now, Father Elijah, you're scaring the child. Look at her face." He directed his next words to Erin. "Don't worry, young miss. We wouldn't ask you to do anything we wouldn't ask of any young lady of the faith. What Father Elijah was referring to was the atmosphere."

Erin looked up at the midafternoon sky. It was blue with some high-altitude cirrus clouds streaking across it. The air smelled normal and Erin wasn't having any difficulty breathing.

"You can't see it by looking at the sky, but tomorrow, first time you exert yourself, you'll sure 'nuf *feel* it. The air here is thin. Even though we're only a couple hundred feet above sea level here, the altitude is something like eleven thousand feet because of the thin air."

Erin hadn't heard anybody use those primitive units of measure since her childhood. She had to do some quick math in her head. She estimated that 11,000ft. was around 3500 meters. She thought back to her student pilot days. What were the signs of altitude sickness? She couldn't remember. Was memory loss one of the signs? "So, if the air is so thin, why not just get another terraforming company to finish generating the atmosphere?"

"Because Safe Harbor won't let another company come in here. They say they still own part of the planet as well as the terraforming rights. We say they forfeited their claim when they abandoned the planet without completing the job."

"Why not just take them to court?" Erin asked. The Church had good lawyers, she knew.

"No court has jurisdiction out here. This is the Backwater region of the Darklands. Here in the wilderness, contractual disputes are settled at gunpoint."

Erin knew what he was saying to be true. She was from a Backwater planet herself. Even though her home planet

did have a military and court system, Promisedland only arbitrated disputes within their own solar system. An undeveloped system like Sanctuary had no such law. With a sense of dread, she realized that these Fourthers were effectively heads of state and high court judges. Col. Raith and his band of pirates were effectively military and police all in one. Hers and Lyssa's existence was very tenuous, indeed.

"Why'd Safe Harbor abandon the planet?" Erin asked.

"We, uh..." Brother Jotham glanced nervously at Father Elijah before continuing. "We had a problem with our financing."

There it was. Erin knew this whole thing had to have started with the Fourthers. "The church didn't pay them? They have followers in a dozen different galaxies. How did the Triple-F-Double-C run out of money for one of their terraforming projects?" The FFFCC, or First Father Fundamentalist Church of Christ, was the formal name of the Fourthers' religion.

"Um, we're not associated with them anymore. We're pure followers of the Reengineered Christ, not like those bloated, glorified, wannabe papists in the Triple-F-Double-C. We follow the True Word strictly and unquestioningly."

Oh, no. This revelation scared Erin. *They're not just everyday zealots; they're some kind of fringe cult of extremists.* She reflected on all she'd said to them in the light of this new information. Were she a member of their cult, she would possibly be punished severely for her impertinence. She guessed that only her status as one of Raith's people protected her. She wasn't a member of the FFFCC who'd lost her way who needed punishing; she was just an uncouth outsider who needed tolerating. *I'm stuck on a planet full of pirates and cultists.*

"I...understand, Brother." Erin wanted to end the conversation before she could say anything to set the cultists off.

"No, you don't young miss," Father Elijah corrected her. "This planet was to be our sanctuary. A planet only for the faithful to live in peace until such time as the Reengineered Christ returns and calls us back to Earth."

"I see." This was all the standard garbage that Fourthers from here to the Milky Way believed.

"No. As I said before, you don't. When we couldn't pay the seventh 10% installment, those snakes at Safe Harbor offered us a deal. We took on an investor. A single colonist, not of the faith, was willing to pay for the seventh 10% installment. A single colonist who only wanted to live at sea alone and not interact with us in the least. A single colonist who was willing to sign a contract that they would never allow any other colonists to settle with them and whose ownership would revert to us upon their death. We assumed it was some crazy, reclusive billionaire who wanted a private, offshore flotilla where no one would bother him. The deal sounded too good to pass up." Father Elijah paused and sighed loudly. Something was obviously angering him, and Erin knew better than to push him. Finally, he spoke again: "It wasn't 'til the ink on the contract was dry and the investor's money was in Safe Harbor's pocket that we found out who this secretive investor really was."

"An abomination." Brother Azariah said from his position at the tiller. Erin was surprised to hear him speak. His voice seethed with anger – no, it was *hatred* she heard. "It lives in our ocean, polluting the water of our holy planet with its presence. Worse than a faithless, that thing is."

Erin had a pretty good idea she knew where this was going. "Is it a Broadening?" she asked.

Brother Jotham spoke next. "Huh! That's your term for it. We call it what it is: a *primeel*. We don't care if we offend it. We call it what it is."

Erin knew that term. She was even ashamed to remember having used it in her youth before she even knew how bad it was or what racism even was. Her parents had forbidden her from using profanity, but they had made no such prohibition against her echoing their slurs. "That's terrible," Erin said. She was actually referring to the slur, but she knew they would assume she was referring to the Broadening. This equivocation was one she'd used with other bigots she'd met in her life. It never failed. They never picked up on it. Racists, by definition, are stupid.

"It gets worse. When we couldn't pay them the instant they met all the contractual requirements for the next 10% installment, they tried it again. They offered to sell more colonizing rights to outsiders in order to pay *that* bill! After the stunt they'd pulled already with the *primeel*, no way were we going to sign off on any more colonists. So they shut down their terraforming rigs and refused to sign over any more ownership to us or do any more work until we paid them for that most recent ten percent."

"So now here we are," Father Elijah said. "We, the faithful, own 60% of the planet. The abomination owns 10% and Safe Harbor *claims* 30% which rightfully belongs to us now that they've abandoned the planet. They sent their pirate thugs in to remove us by force. But when Villalobos got here, he had him a nasty surprise waiting for 'im. We had some

security forces of our own. He wasn't expecting to find Colonel Raith and his army waiting for him."

All three men smiled self-satisfied smiles as Brother Jotham said, "Aye, that was a day, watching two armies of the faithless kill one another astride their infernal flying machines. Every death on both sides was a victory for righteousness."

"No offense to you, miss," Brother Azariah said.

"None taken," Erin said. She looked across the shimmering water at the ugly, plain Fourther village. It was much closer now. She felt like the village was a black hole trying to pull her in, to pull her back. To think, a village such as this had once been her home...

As she watched the village of Pilgrim's Rest draw nearer, Erin remembered something that Maj. Tolbert had said back on the platform. The major had used the term "conflagration" to describe their little mini-war. Conflagration can mean war, but it can also mean fire. War and fire in one word.

Working for a Living

Lyssa had worked in EVA suits many times, but never like this.

Normally, whenever she was in an EVA suit, it was to do a repair on a plane or on a ship while in the vacuum of space. Lyssa was comfortable in space. She was a creature of the vacuum. Lyssa had been born on a space station. She was more than comfortable in space; she was at home there.

Until today, she'd never been on a planet in her life. She'd never felt natural gravity before...it felt *different* in some ineffable way. She'd never seen an actual sky and she'd never seen so much water in one place. There was so much water here it boggled her mind to think about. On Ciudad Estrella, the great fountain in Forum Square was reputed to hold 400 liters of water. But here, on SHP 242 (or "Sanctuary" as the pirates called it), there was more water than Lyssa's mind could conceptualize. And she, a spacer who couldn't even swim, was under this massive lake's surface.

Even protected from drowning by the EVA suit, it had been scary enough stepping off the dock and into the water. It had been scary enough floating in her EVA suit on the surface. But now, she was a few meters beneath the surface and underneath the belly of the hardpointer. The rational part of her mind knew that the suit's rebreather would keep her supplied with air and that the suit's buoyancy would keep her from sinking. The irrational, instinctive part of her mind was screaming at her, *YOU CAN'T SWIM!* The bottom of this lake was more than a kilometer below her. Her legs dangled over a dark and mysterious abyss. She felt like she was going to fall into it at any moment. She felt like something was going to rise up out of it at any moment.

Lyssa struggled to ignore that part of her mind and focus on the job at hand: assessing the damage done to the hardpointer's belly when five of the eight thrusters had failed during atmo entry. The damage was significant, but not unrepairable. All eight thrusters would need to be replaced eventually, even the three that were still more or less functional. But that would require a maintenance hanger. What Lyssa was mainly concerned with was the integrity of the plane's belly skin which served as the outer pressure hull as well as being an important aerodynamic surface. She found several places where the skin was cracked and torn, including one place which was slowly leaking fuel from the belly tank right next to one of the blown thrusters. *How the shit did that not blow us up? We should be dead.* Then, a thought occurred to her: *Maybe we are dead. This planet ain't too far from Hell, in my book.*

From the tool belt she wore over the EVA suit, Lyssa grabbed a tube of thick, brown sealing dope and gobbled it into the crack in the plane's skin. She'd never applied sealing dope underwater before, but the instructions on the tube swore it would stick to metal, even in water. Lyssa found it stuck to everything else (including her gloves) much better than it stuck to the plane's metal. It took a lot of effort, but by the time she was done, she had a temporary seal over the leak and an EVA suit covered in brown sealing dope. The fix was just temporary and would never hold up in flight, but at least the plane wasn't bleeding its precious fuel out into the lake. With the planet being blockaded by the same pirates who had shot her and Erin down that morning, it's not like a fuel shipment was expected anytime soon.

After she got the sealing dope mostly off of her gloves, Lyssa made some notes on her data pad. She would need to check the fuel in the belly tank for water contamination, find some way to pump the fuel into another tank (probably via some kind of manual pump—the electric crossfeed pumps wouldn't work without the control card plugged in to the main computer). Once the belly tank was empty, she'd be able to patch the crack itself. The task seemed daunting. And that's just one small crack.

She sighed. The sound echoed loudly inside the EVA suit's helmet. Then, suddenly, she felt very vulnerable here in the water underneath the floating hardpointer. She became very aware of the abyssal darkness beneath her. Anything could be down there. The back of her neck started to tingle. She felt watched. Her every instinct told her that she was, in fact, being watched. Her rational mind told her that she was just being paranoid.

The water around her shifted, pushing her slightly sideways.

Something had just moved next to her.

* * *

By the time she got herself out from beneath the hardpointer and to the dock, Lyssa was near to panicking. She tried to climb up the dock's rickety steel ladder, but the EVA suit was too heavy. She got two rungs up the ladder and fell back

into the water. By this point, she was well and truly panicked. Flailing around wildly, she had no idea how she managed to get herself back to the ladder. She tried again to raise herself up out of the water and this time several strong hands gripped her EVA suit and dragged her up onto the dock.

The pirates could tell that she was panicked as they helped her out of her helmet. She took several grateful, deep gasps of air as they all asked her what was wrong. "Something in the water!" she exclaimed as soon as she gathered her faculties enough to speak again. "Something big in the water!"

"What?" one of the pirates asked.

"Something touched me." As soon as she said it, Lyssa realized how ridiculous she sounded. The pirates or mercenaries or whatever they were just laughed at her.

Scalps, sounding exasperated spoke next. "Je-sus diddly fuck, Private Fangs. What the hell is your flivver ass playing at?"

Lyssa was starting to not mind being called "Fangs," but what she didn't like was being called a flivver. With all her limited might, she flung her helmet at Scalps from where she sat on the dock, still trapped in the EVA suit. "Don't fuckin' call me a flivver, you inbred, racist piece of shit!"

The sergeant's reflexes were quick. He caught the helmet one-handed like a veteran short stop cancelling a line drive. "Best behave yourself, Fangs. Remember, the colonel gave me permission to punish that cute, blonde girlfriend o' yours every time you step outta line."

Lyssa glared at him from where she sat, her back resting against the EVA suit's bulky rebreather pack. "She ain't my girlfriend."

Scalps tossed the helmet back down to her. "Yeah, maybe not...but I'll bet you wish she was, though, don't ya?"

Lyssa's prodigious mouth was momentarily left speechless by this bit of insight.

"Don't look so surprised, Fangs. Everybody can see it. Hell, I wouldn't much mind if she was *my* girlfriend."

"Never happen."

"Guess that makes two of us, then." Scalps' toadies laughed. Scalps walked back up the dock and the other pirates followed. No one offered to help Lyssa to her feet. As they walked away, the pirates all made crude jokes about what they'd like to do to Erin. Lyssa had no doubt it was all meant for her to hear. She struggled to her feet in the suit. She had to walk up the dock hunched over under the rebreather's weight. Now that she was out of the water, she could feel the full force of Sanctuary's 1.16G of gravity. As she passed under the nose of the massive hardpointer she looked up at it as much as her hunched posture would allow. They needed to get out of this place somehow.

But how? One thing was for certain: Lyssa couldn't fly that plane. She would have to get Erin on board with any plan of escape.

* * *

By the time Lyssa had an estimation of what kind of materials and manpower she would need to make 788NC airworthy again, it was late in the afternoon. She handed her data pad over to Scalps hoping it would short out and electrocute him. *I could rig it to do just that*, she thought. Of course, she wouldn't actually do it, lest Erin pay the price. But it was fun to think about.

Scalps looked over the list of materials, tools, and manpower requirements Lyssa had listed for all the repairs she deemed necessary. "Okay. I'll get on the fast-cycler with H.Q. and see what they can send us." With that, Scalps went into the little shack on the service platform and closed the door behind him.

Lyssa stared out at the gently lapping lake surface as she waited. That water gave her the creeps. It felt as if the very lake itself was watching her.

After several minutes, Scalps came back out and handed Lyssa her data pad back. "Here. They said they'll send what supplies and guys they can spare. They can only spare two actual mechanics, but neither of them has experience working on hardpointers, so the colonel says you're in charge. But don't let it go to your fuckin' head. You're still Private Snotnose Fangs, and I won't hesitate to damage your girlfriend if you get to feelin' too fancy. You got me?"

"Yes...sir." It pained Lyssa to say it.

"It's 'Yes, Sergeant.' I work for a living."

Lyssa didn't say anything to this, just glared at him through narrowed eyes.

"Anyways, H.Q. is sending us what we need. Expect it here in a couple hours. Meanwhile, I need you to get together a work schedule for the mechanics. We start tomorrow morning at first light. You'll be overseeing the work, but the other

mechanics'll be the ones doin' it all. Major Tolbert wants you to get to work on modifying that HEVA suit for its trip to the bottom. You swore you could do it, so now you better deliver. Remember, the only reason the colonel spared yours or your girlfriend's ass is because you swore you could get that control card thingy back."

"I can get the suit so's it'll work inside the tenebricite shadow, but you need to find me the person to make the dive. I'll have to train him how to read the gauges and adjust the valves throughout the dive so he doesn't suffocate."

"I was thinking about sending you down to the bottom. After all, why waste a good soldier when flivvers are so expendable?"

Lyssa didn't know how to respond to that. She knew she should be offended at the anti-Estellan slur, but she was mostly afraid of the prospect of going into the water again.

Scalps laughed. "Don't worry, Fangs. I'm just fuckin' with ya. Your scrawny ass can barely stand up in a regular EVA suit, let alone that heavy-duty suit. Besides we don't want to put you in the water again. Wouldn't want you to get spooked by a fish again."

Several nearby pirates laughed at this. Lyssa really hated these guys.

* * *

Just as Scalps had said, a couple hours later, a big troopship and two gunships appeared at the southern end of the valley. They flew low over the water until they came to the service platform. At the platform, the big troopship did a hover landing into the water near the end of the wooden dock. It lowered its ramp directly onto the dock, and then two men ran down the ramp. They made the troopship fast to the dock with simple, knotted rope and then signaled the troopship pilot to cut the engines. Inside the opened ramp of the troopship, Lyssa could see it was packed full of supplies, floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall.

The two gunships were each carrying large objects suspended from cables. They lowered their cargos not onto the platform itself, but into the water nearby. Lyssa saw that the two objects were a barge and some kind of powerboat. Men repelled from the side door of one of the gunships into powerboat. Lyssa watched as they got the boat's engine running. It had a smokestack that billowed black, toxic-looking smoke into the air. Once the noisy gunships moved away, Lyssa could hear the powerboat's engine. It made a rapid *chug-chug-chug-chug-chug* sound that betrayed its ancient technology. Lyssa had read about engines like that one, but she never thought she'd see one. It was a strange device called a "steam engine." Though this technology dated back to ancient Earth, nowadays it was used nowhere outside of the Darklands. The steam engine was often used on Darklands planets due to its ability to operate inside the tenebricite shadow.

In all the galaxies settled by humans in the millennia since they'd left ancient Earth, only one galaxy way out at the ass end of nowhere had been found to have the mineral tenebricite. Were tenebricite worth anything, the Darklands would be rich, but the mineral was beyond useless. It actually made the planets of the Darklands worth less as it emitted a constant EM field, the tenebricite shadow, which made electronic devices useless. The steam engine, having no electrical components, worked just fine, even inside that EM field. Though Lyssa found the simple mechanical device fascinating and she itched to examine it up close, she couldn't help but wonder about the environmental impact of the machine. The great billows of black smoke pouring from its chimney couldn't be good for the newly terraformed planet's fragile ecology.

Lyssa was ordered to stand aside as the troopship was unloaded. The pirates unloaded an array of airplane parts and tools as well as food and munitions. The H.Q. (which Lyssa assumed to be on the old terraforming rig they'd seen on planetary scans) had even sent a pallet of beer. Lyssa helped herself to a couple of cans when no one was looking and stuffed them into the big cargo pockets in her coveralls.

She watched as the steam-driven powerboat coupled to the barge. The barge was perhaps 10 meters long and about 3 meters wide. The two watercraft coupled together made one large landing craft whose engine could provide power all the way to shore and back.

The pirates were clearly pulling out all of the stops to get the hardpointer flying again. They had risked their lives to keep it from falling into the other pirates' hands. Lyssa couldn't help but wonder...why do they need a hardpointer so badly? And who was paying for all of this? There was something more than simple piracy going on here.

A Tenuous Armistice

The mood aboard the independent corvette *Ready Sophia* was glum that evening as she returned to orbit around SHP 242's third moon and lick her wounds. Three more of her fighter bays which that morning had held fighters now stood empty. Three more fighters had been lost that day and nothing had been gained. The enemy hadn't lost even a single fighter. *Ready Sophia's* one and only troop dropship had nearly been lost as well. The troopship and the 52 troopers aboard had barely made it back to the safety of the *Ready Sophia* from their aborted mission to obliterate the squatter village known as Pilgrim's Rest. Oddly, this whole little war hinged on that single village's legal claim to the planet. Remove them, by whatever means, and the war would be won. That would be enough to satisfy their unofficial employers at Safe Harbor and thereby release the second half of Backwater's fee.

The day had started out as an opportunity to capture a juicy prize, had progressed to an opportunity to win the whole war, and had ultimately devolved into a humiliating rout. Add to that, one of the pilots who'd been lost was one of the most popular members of the *Sophie's* crew, a young guy who went by the callsign "Mr. Lover."

Capt. Villalobos was in no mood to talk to Col. Raith or anybody else from Third Law. He was in no mood to talk to anyone at all. That's why he ignored Raith's first two requests for parley. When the comms officer buzzed into the captain's quarters for a third time in as many hours, Villalobos finally gave in. "Alright, patch him through. Secure line." *If this guy presumes to gloat, I'm hanging up the call and nuking the planet. I don't care if it renders Safe Harbor's precious planet uninhabitable.* Capt. Villalobos meant it. He really would like to just nuke this pesky, little planet. Luckily for the few hundred people (mercenaries and settlers alike) down on that annoying, little world, *Ready Sophia* wasn't carrying any nukes at the moment. *If only...*

His data terminal connected and there was the heavily tattooed face of Capt. Villalobos's adversary, Col. Landon Raith. The man was in his mid forties and Capt. Villalobos thought his tattoos were about the stupidest thing he'd ever seen—especially now that they were starting to blur with age.

"Good evening, Captain Villalobos," Col. Raith said.

"Calling to gloat, colonel?"

"Negative. I'm calling to see if we can work out a deal."

"Pah! What kind of deal? You don't have anything to trade."

"Well, that's where you're wrong, Captain."

"Bullshit. I know your benefactors have had a falling out with the mother church. You took this job thinking the triple-F-double-C would be paying you out of their coffers, but now all you've got is a little village of dirt-poor farmers paying you in turnips. You don't have any pay coming in and you're bleeding money every day this little skirmish goes on. You're burning fuel, munitions, and food."

"I hate to contradict you, captain, but we *do* have money coming in and these farmers aren't as dirt-poor as you think. We can pay you a whole lot more to just fly away than Safe Harbor is paying you to play pirate."

"I'm not under contract with Safe Harbor," Capt. Villalobos lied. His employer wanted plausible deniability. Big corporations like Safe Harbor Terraforming don't like it getting out that they use mercenaries to uproot settlers. That could be bad for business. Of course, Raith knew he was lying.

"Okay, fair enough. I can pay you more than you're getting paid *not* to work for Safe Harbor."

Capt. Villalobos considered that for a moment. "What are you proposing?" If this were the movies, he would claim that he would never back out on a contract and maybe try to be heroic about it, but this was real life. This was the Darklands. Moreover, his was the Backwater Cluster of the Darklands. Contracts were written on toilet paper out here.

"Well, you see, these dumbass Fourthers already knew they were on the outs with the mother church. They knew they would eventually have a falling out with their terraforming company, so they started farming this." Raith held up a sealed, plastic bag of a yellowish, pasty substance. "They figured a terraforming company won't take this for payment, but a mercenary company would."

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yup. Pure Lu-Reban lady. The fools don't even have the sense to cut it with anything."

"Those conniving, Fourther bastards." This proposal was arousing Capt. Villalobos' interest. "How much do you have?"

"Enough. I can give you about ten thousand kilos."

"I don't have the connections to move that much."

"I do. We got a buyer on—well, let's just say in another system."

Villalobos wasn't stupid. There were only *maybe* five or six outfits in the Darklands that could move that much lady. He knew that Raith had connections on Gonaways station. And hadn't that hardpointer from earlier in the day had a Gonaways registry? Well, that explained what Raith wanted a hardpointer for, anyway: he's got freight to move. "Your buyer's on Gonaways, isn't he? You're dealing with the Boaters."

"Nope." Raith said. Villalobos could see that he was lying.

"Hmm. Twenty-five thousand kilos. And we fly it out on the *Ready Sophia*."

"Fifteen thousand and we fly it on the hardpointer. The *Ready Sophia* can fly alongside."

Villalobos didn't like that idea at all. It'd be way too easy for the hardpointer to lose the *Sophie* in transtach. "Twenty thousand. Half the crew on the hardpointer are my guys. The *Sophie* stays here until the payment is transferred. Any hint of treachery and we nuke this whole planet." Raith didn't need to know that the *Sophie* didn't actually have any nukes.

"Those terms are agreeable for seventeen thousand."

"Eighteen."

"Seventeen-five."

"Fine. I think we have a deal, colonel. When can we fly it out?"

"I've recently come into the possession of a mechanic with experience working on hardpointers, former Noémie employee. You might say she came with the plane. Says she can get it flying again in under a week. You see, the plane's a little banged up on account o' somebody shooting an EMP at it while it was deorbiting."

Capt. Villalobos scowled warningly at the face on the screen, but said nothing. They had just reached a tentative accord, but if Raith wanted to blow it all up just to make some childish gibes, then that would be all his own doing. Villalobos wouldn't allow himself to be sucked into a tit-for-tat with this man.

"Relax, Ben. I'm just having a joke with ya."

Capt. Villalobos wasn't in the mood to joke with or be on a first name basis with this nominal ally yet. He ignored Raith's childishness. "What about the Broadening? Have you heard from it lately? Do we have to worry about it interfering with this business plan?"

Raith seemed about to answer, but just then a familiar, techno-mechanical voice added itself to the conversation. "While I personally don't like the trafficking of illicit substances, it is the position of the Broadening Science Institute that this conflict should be ended with as little bloodshed as possible."

Capt. Villalobos had never seen the Broadening, nor did he have any idea what it looked like. He'd only ever spoken to it a few times, each time just like this. Audio only, and the thing only ever spoke through this weird, techno-mechanical voice modulator.

Both Villalobos and Raith sighed. Raith spoke up first. "Dr. Yunuen, this is supposed to be a secure communication between myself and Capt. Villalobos. It's rude to hack into a private, secure communication."

"I'm terribly sorry, colonel," the Broadening scientist's weirdly modulated voice said from the data terminal's speakers. Not for the first time, Capt. Villalobos wondered if the Broadening could be speaking through some kind of translation device. Dr. Yunuen continued: "But I do own a 10% stake in this planet. I deserve the right to weigh in on any decision as to the planet's fate."

Raith and Villalobos looked at one another through the screen. Capt. Villalobos asked the question he knew they were both thinking: "And what say you to our agreement? Do you oppose it? No doubt you want a cut of the profits, I'm sure."

"That won't be necessary, captain," the Broadening said. "As I said before, the Broadening Science Institute wishes this conflict to end with as little bloodshed as possible on all sides. My priority is the preservation of life first, and my research second. The only thing I ask is that no more attempts be made against the defenseless villagers of Pilgrim's Rest."

On the screen, Raith struggled to hold back his smirk. Villalobos was indignant: "Those villagers are not only squatters who no longer have any legal right to the planet, but they are also growers and refiners of narcotics. And they

are anything but defenseless. They have Colonel Raith and the rest of Third Law protecting them." Villalobos took a deep breath before continuing. "As long as Colonel Raith honors his end of the commitment we just made here today, we will honor our end."

"Thank you both," the Dr. Yunuen said. "That's all I ask."

After that, the Broadening fell silent. Neither of the two mercenary commanders was foolish enough to believe that the Broadening had actually left the conversation. They worked out the particular arrangements for how the deal was to be carried out. Once the hardpointer was loaded and ready to fly, Raith would contact Villalobos and they would make the final arrangements. After several months and after a truly bad day, it looked like this whole, stupid, little war might finally be coming to an end. And it might just turn out to be profitable.

* * *

After Villalobos signed off from the call, Col. Raith's data terminal went dark. He sat back in his rickety office chair, rubbed his eyes, and looked out the window. Third Law's headquarters on Sanctuary was on a former terraforming rig in the middle of the planet's only ocean. On the rig's main deck below his office window, about a third of his airpower was parked for the night. The rest were in hidden locations all over the planet, wherever there was a body of water deep enough and wide enough to provide a landing site outside the tenebricite shadow. Beyond the parked aircraft, the sun was setting over the western horizon, silhouetting the planes against a backdrop of blue, orange, and purple sky and darkening sea.

"It really is a beautiful planet," he said aloud.

The techno-mechanical voice of Dr. Laxmi Yunuen came from the darkened data terminal display: "It's not worth killing or dying for, colonel."

"Somehow I had a feeling you'd still be listening. Is it just you and I now?"

"Yes. The channel is secure."

"Ha! I've heard that before."

"I'm using my ship's computer to encrypt it. My technology is better than anything you or Captain Villalobos have. I assure you, colonel, the channel is secure."

"Well, I just want to thank you for giving us that heads up about Villalobos launching that strike team against the village today. That saved the day. It allowed us to get our gunships in the air and intercept their troopship in time."

"You're welcome, colonel. But remember: I only did it to prevent a massacre. I remain neutral in your war."

"That's mighty noble of you." Raith sat up and leaned in towards the data terminal. He couldn't see the mysterious Broadening's face, but he would wager it could see his. "What is your game here, truly, Yunuen? What's the Broadening Science Institute's *real* interest in this planet? I'm not stupid. No way do I believe for a second that you're here to study ecosystems on terraformed planets. And why do you never let anyone see your face? Or hear your real voice? And where are you at, exactly?"

"For safety reasons, the BSI mandates that I keep my exact location secret. We've had...*problems* with the locals on other planets we've tried to study in the past. All you need to know is that I am somewhere on the planet. Furthermore, whether or not you choose to believe it, I really am here to study the planet's changing ecology. Do you know that phytoplankton counts in the ocean are skyrocketing? Do you know what that can do to an as-yet unstabilized ecosystem?"

"Don't really care. Long as you don't interfere with my mission, I got no beef with you. But the moment you do, I will wipe you off the map. And something tells me that my racist employers wouldn't shed a single tear for you. The Fourthers don't value your life nearly as much as you seem to value theirs."

"I understand that, colonel. I can't make the Fourthers be better people. All I can do is hope that one day they'll actually understand the creed left them by their Reengineered Christ: To Love All Mankind."

Matty Moss

That evening, all but two of the pirates piled into the steam barge along with much of the gear they'd unloaded earlier from the troopship. From snatches of eavesdropped conversations, Lyssa had gathered that they planned to keep a garrison encamped near the village in case their enemies tried to launch another assault on said village. The two guys they left on the service platform were there to stand guard over the precious hardpointer for the night.

"Hey, Fangs!" Scalps shouted from the other side of the platform, "I hope you don't think I trust you to stay with the plane all night. Get your ass on the boat."

Fuck this guy. "Yes, Sergeant." Lyssa was actually glad to be ordered onto the boat. Even though she was in no hurry to be anywhere near those creepy Fourthers again, she really wanted to know if Erin was okay. Also, part of her really wanted to see how that steam engine worked up close.

On this last point, Lyssa was doomed to be disappointed. The pirates made her sit at the front of the barge, well away from the steam engine. They were suspicious of her interest in the machine and didn't want her anywhere near it. So, Lyssa just worked on her data pad as the boat *chug-chug-chug-ed* towards the dim lights of the distant village.

She was working out the least efficient repair schedule for the plane she could think of. If Lyssa Ruiz had anything to say about it, this repair work would take as long as possible and cost the pirates as much as possible. Not that she had some great plan to thwart them, but more just out of spite.

She was actually surprised they let her keep her data pad, but it wasn't like she could really cause any trouble with it. She couldn't get it onto the exnet, since this planet didn't boast anything as modern as a quantum exchange station. All she could really do with the data pad was plan the repair schedule for 788NC. And plan it she did, very inefficiently.

At some point between the service platform and the shore, the data pad flickered a couple times and then went dead. Lyssa sighed as several of the pirates around her chuckled.

"Ya first time planetside, love?" one of the pirates asked her. He was a skinny kid who looked barely old enough to shave. He had a skinny neck with an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down as he talked. Lyssa didn't recognize his accent, but she definitely recognized his body armor. It was an Estrellan police officer's body armor. She'd gotten into enough trouble with the cops on Ciudad Estrella during her teenage years that she knew that particular uniform very well. Whatever name had once been painted on the chest plate was now painted over with the word MOSS in all caps.

Lyssa answered his question with one of her own. "That's real nice armor you got there. Did you kill some poor Estrellan cop to get it?"

"Nah. Won it a dice game."

"Really?"

"Nah. Just joshin' ya. Found it a dumpster. But dice game sound much cooler." The guy was speaking Gonian, but just barely. Clearly, it wasn't his first language any more than it was Lyssa's. "Name Matty Moss." He held out his hand for Lyssa to shake, but quickly pulled it back as his comrades began to hoot and taunt him.

Lyssa snorted at him. She didn't want to make friends with any of these guys. "They call me Fangs. 'Cause I bite dick nibblers that get too close to me. Ask that one over there." She nodded in the direction of the one called Pvt. Haynes, whose forearm was still wrapped in a bandage. Lyssa hoped it would get infected.

"Yeah..." Moss said. He tapped her dead data pad. "You know that? That call tenebricite shadow, love."

"Call me 'love' again. I dare ya."

"Call ya 'Fangs' then. That call tenebricite shadow, Fangs. Lake get shallow here. Bottom get closer. EM field stronger make electronics go dark."

She really wished this idiot would shut up. She was a spaceplane mechanic. Did he think she was stupid? She knew how the tenebricite shadow worked. "Thanks for letting me know." She hoped he would hear the note of sarcasm in her voice.

He didn't. "Sure. Don't ya worry though. Tenebricite shadow not dangerous. Some say can feel it, though. But that just lies."

But Lyssa could feel it. Not directly, though. Now that she didn't have her work to distract her, she became more

aware of the world around her. She felt the gentle rocking of the barge on the waves. She became more aware of the steam engine's *chug-chug-chug* as it labored on, utterly unbothered by the tenebricite shadow. She looked up and to the west. There, she saw the first sunset of her life.

She'd seen pictures of sunsets before, but the real thing was far more beautiful. The western sky was an assortment of blues, reds, and oranges. Across the wide lake, the sun was dropping behind the mountains that rose up from the western shore. Shafts of light and color slipped and played among the peaks, moving around them like the fingers of a lover. Closer by, the waning light glinted off the waves and the hardpointer loomed darkly silhouetted against the tapestry of color. The machine seemed to her like a sleeping colossus, the mighty roar of its engines quieted for the night as it rested on the lake's surface.

"Yeah, ya first time planetside, Fangs. The shimmer on ya face, can see."

"I can't understand half the shit you say."

Then, Matty Moss utterly surprised her. He switched to fluent Estrellan with almost no accent. "I said I can tell it's your first time planetside by the look of joy on your face."

"Um..." Lyssa was stunned. She too reverted to her native tongue: "If you could speak Estrellan all along, why didn't you?"

"Ah, the guys make fun of me when I speak it. Lots of 'em don't like Estrellans much."

"Yeah, lots of folks have a problem with us these days."

"Not me, though. I lived on Ciudad Estrella for a few years. I was in training to be an Estrellan station cop. That's the real reason for the cop body armor. I was on duty in the Lower Stem when the world ended."

"'...when the world ended.' That's a good way to describe it."

"That was what it felt like. I know most Estrellans call it The Ruin, though. You lose anybody that day?"

"Nobody I care about. Me and my brother managed to get off station okay. You?"

"My brother and his wife—she was Estrellan—and their—" Moss seemed unable to finish the sentence. Lyssa was sure she saw him starting to tear up before he turned away.

For a moment, she felt compelled to put her arm around him and comfort him. Then, she noticed all the other pirates staring at them. She stayed her arm. In spite of herself, she was starting to like this kid.

She decided to change the subject. "You're not Estrellan yourself, though. Where do you come from?"

"Place you never heard of called Copasu. It's out in the Bright Bear Galaxy."

"I heard o' Bright Bear Galaxy, but not Copasu."

"It's a small planet."

"What was it like on Copasu?"

"Hard. Life was real hard there. That's why me and my brother came to the Darklands: to make a fresh start."

Lyssa didn't want to make him sad again, so she decided to steer the conversation away from Moss' lost family. "So you grew up on planetside? At least Bright Bear planets don't have this stupid tenebricite shadow to deal with."

"Ah, the shadow's not so bad. The planet I'm from has lots of heavy industry. All that industry pollutes the water and the air. We have lots of cancer there. Here in the Darklands, since industry can only work in space or on offshore flotillas, there isn't nearly as much industry polluting the planets. Breathe that fresh air." At this, Moss stood up and took a deep breath.

Lyssa remained seated, but took a deep breath. She smelled the odor of whatever biofuel the steam engine was burning, the metal of the barge, and the body odor of about fifteen pirates. She crinkled her nose in disgust.

"No, not like that," Moss said. "You got to stand up and catch the clean air coming over the bow."

Fuck it, why not? Lyssa stood up and caught a deep breath of fresh air coming over the bow. In the distance, she saw the twinkling lights of the Fourther village on the shore. The village which had seemed so gray and drab by daylight, now looked gayly alight in the gloaming with lanterns and firelight shining from most windows. "Wow," Lyssa said, in spite of herself.

"Now, you see it, don't you?" Moss said.

"Yeah, I guess so..."

Just then, the other pirates ruined the moment with a chorus of hoots and taunts in stupid, graceless Gonian directed mainly at Moss.

"Get 'er, Mossy!" one of them hooted.

"I think you got a real chance, buddy," another taunted.

"Yeah, just don't let any chick called 'Fangs' suck your dick, dude!" Haynes advised. Several others chuckled at this. Lyssa wanted to yell back at them, but she knew it would only make things worse for Moss. She really hated these guys.

Sister Judith

At the village, the steam barge tied off to a small, wooden dock for the night. Lyssa wasted no time climbing over the side, onto the dock, and straight for dry land. She had no intention of helping the pirates unload the barge. *Fuck 'em.* Also, she really didn't like being so close to the water. She just couldn't shake the feeling that something in that water was watching her.

Besides, she had a couple cans of beer hidden in the cargo pockets of her coveralls. One for her, and one for Erin. It had been a long day and Lyssa could really use a beer. And she desperately wanted to check that Erin was okay.

At the end of the dock, Lyssa stepped onto dry land and thereby took the first steps on solid ground of her life. But she was in no mood to commemorate the occasion. She was looking around at the small village, trying to get her bearings. A lot of light was coming from the unfinished church and she could hear singing coming from the roofless building. She guessed that most of the Fourther zealots would be in there for their nightly sermon, but she doubted if Erin would be there. Lyssa was 80% sure Erin wasn't a Fourther.

But where would Erin be? Was she just going to walk through the village shouting Erin's name? It was starting to look like either that or going to the church and seeing if her friend was there. A shudder ran down Lyssa's back at the prospect of walking in on a Fourther church service. She imagined they would have a steak with kindling all set up for her.

"Miss, are you the one called 'Lyssa'?" an older woman's voice called from up the hill. She was wearing the long, drab dress and bonnet of a Fourther.

"Maybe..." Lyssa answered cautiously. "Who's asking?"

"Hmph! I'll take that as a yes." The woman began walking down the hill towards Lyssa. "You mind your tone with me, young miss. I'll tolerate no sass, you understand me?"

"Okay..." *Who is this old bag?*

"I'm Sister Judith." The woman stopped about a meter away from Lyssa. "I'm the midwife here in Pilgrim's Rest."

"I'm not pregnant."

The older woman closed the remaining distance quicker than Lyssa could have imagined possible. She barely had time to get her hands up before Sister Judith slapped at her face. "I said I'd tolerate no sass."

"Okay, alright!" Lyssa really didn't like Fourthers. *This old bag is about to get herself dealt with.* "I'm sorry, already."

Sister Judith stood herself up straight, took a moment to straighten her frock, and then said, "Your friend asked me to invite you to stay with us in my house. She said you probably wouldn't want to sleep with all these soldiers."

Lyssa's irritation at this woman instantly turned into gratitude. "Erin sent you? Is she okay?"

"Your friend is fine. And dinner is about ready. Come with me." The woman sniffed. "We'll get you a bath and some clean clothes."

Lyssa was too relieved to take offense at this. Besides, even she knew she must smell bad.

* * *

"What the *fuck* are you wearing?" Lyssa asked as soon as she saw Erin. She doubled over with laughter, but her amusement was brought up short by a firm wrap on the back of her head from Sister Judith. "Ouch!"

"You will watch your language in my house. A lady should speak like a lady," the older woman admonished Lyssa.

"Sorry." Lyssa was rubbing the back of her head where she'd been slapped. Then, her laughter started up again when she looked back at Erin. Erin was wearing a long, ugly Fourther dress so darkly gray it was nearly black, a white apron, and her beautiful, blonde curls were stuffed up under a black bonnet. The dress didn't quite fit Erin's lanky frame properly. The sleeves and hem stopped short of where they should, making the outfit look even more ridiculous.

"It's the mandate of the village elders," Erin said. "They're worried that we might corrupt the youth of the village with our outsiders' ways. If we want to stay in the village instead of sleeping with the soldiers, we have to wear what they tell us. Besides, it's actually kinda comfortable."

The implications of what Erin was saying slowly dawned on Lyssa. She looked over to one corner of the simple, one-room shack where a metal bath basin full of steaming water looked inviting. Next to it, from a hook on the wall hung

Erin's Noémie pilot's uniform. And next to that hung another of the ugly Fourthier dresses. "Oh, no," Lyssa said. "You ain't getting me in one of those fu —" A warning glare from Sister Judith stopped the word in Lyssa's mouth. "— firetrucking monkey suits."

"Then you can sleep with the soldiers," Sister Judith said with an air of finality. "I've done my Christian duty by offering you a place by my hearth. But I'm under no obligation to take your insolence and I'm under no obligation to allow you to wear pants against the Holy Mandate. Hmph!" This last hmph was uttered with a nod of the head that would brook no further argument.

Lyssa realized it was she who was in the wrong here. Sure, they had taken her prisoner, stolen her company's plane, and were forcing her to work against her will to repair it. But this woman as an individual was trying to do her a kindness. Lyssa doubted if the pirates would try to do anything to her in the night, but she couldn't be sure. It was a bet she didn't want to take. She sighed. "I'm sorry, Sister Judith." This time she meant it.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Lyssa emerged from behind the "curtain" (a blanket suspended from a string) which separated the bath basin from the rest of the shack's single room. She was wearing the itchy, ugly, black Fourthier dress even though every fiber of her being screamed in protest.

She caught a hint of amusement in Erin's eye as her friend set the table with simple, wooden platters and steel utensils. "Do I have to wear this thing too?" Lyssa held the light gray bonnet up like a dead rat.

A glance from Sister Judith told her all she needed to know. Lyssa sighed and began trying to stuff her blue mohawk up under the stupid garment.

"I'll help you as soon as I get dinner out," Erin said.

But it was Sister Judith who ultimately helped Lyssa get the bonnet in place upon her head. Their hostess stood up from where she'd been rolling gauze and showed Lyssa how to wrap her hair under the bonnet. "Whatever would make you do this to your hair, young miss?" She clearly didn't approve of Lyssa's hairstyle or color choice.

Lyssa shrugged. "It matches my uniform."

Sister Judith glanced over at Lyssa's coveralls. They now hung from a hook on the wall near Erin's pilot's uniform. The Noémie company logo and the other accents of the uniform matched Lyssa's hair perfectly. "I suppose it does. But you'll never find yourself a husband looking like that," Sister Judith chided.

Erin and Lyssa exchanged an amused look.

With Lyssa's mohawk now safely hidden away from view, the three women sat down around the table to eat. Lyssa and Erin waited while Sister Judith prayed aloud over her food, but they didn't join her. After the older woman finished her prayer, they began eating in earnest.

Lyssa wasn't sure about the food. It was of a texture and form she wasn't used to. The meal consisted of some kind of soft, greasy, white protein, something green that looked like boiled leaves, and some kind of yellow carbohydrate. The odors were far stronger than any food she'd ever eaten before. The smells were nearly overpowering to her. She was very hungry after the long day, but to her spacer's mind, this stuff didn't really make the cut as "food." She tentatively tried a small bite of the white protein substance. It was very different from anything she'd ever tried before. It was certainly no rocks-in-a-sock. She chewed it slowly, trying to decide if she liked it.

Erin noticed the puzzled look on Lyssa's face and said, "It's fried catfish. Those are greens, and that's corn bread."

"You mean this is, like, *real* meat. Like, from a real animal?" Lyssa had never tasted (nor even seen) anything so extravagant as real meat before. On station-worlds like Ciudad Estrella or Gonaways, real meat was a luxury reserved for only the super-wealthy. Common spacers like Lyssa lived their whole lives without ever knowing the taste of meat.

"Yeah," Sister Judith said proudly. "Caught 'em myself this morning from the dock."

Lyssa swallowed hard, and to Erin it looked like her friend might be sick.

"You know what," Lyssa said after a long moment and several deep breaths, "I got just the thing to wash this all down with." Lyssa got up from the table, walked over to where her uniform hung from the wall, and began digging in the coveralls' bulky cargo pockets. She returned to the table with two cans of cheap beer.

Erin foresaw the coming disaster the instant she laid her eyes on the beer. Unfortunately, Sister Judith saw the prohibited intoxicant at the exact same moment. Erin's heart broke for Lyssa. Their hostess insisted that the beer be taken outside and poured out on the ground. The normally pugnacious Lyssa was clearly crestfallen, but she handed the cans over with considerably less resistance than Erin would have expected. Sister Judith promptly carried them out the shack's

only door. Lyssa hung her head, morosely staring down at the barely-touched food on her plate.

While the two of them were momentarily alone in the house, Lyssa raised her head and looked Erin directly in the eye. Erin could see the deep hurt on Lyssa's face. Lyssa wiped at her eyes before the tears welling up there could spill over. She said, "One of those was for you."

God Has a Soft Spot for Fuckups.

They finished the meal mostly in silence. Erin could see that Lyssa was angry and more than a little hurt. Her friend had been excited to share a drink with her at the end of a long and fraught day. Erin wasn't sure if it would help or hurt the situation if she told Lyssa that she didn't even drink, so she held her tongue.

After the meal, Sister Judith remained inside sterilizing and preparing medical supplies necessary to her trade while Erin and Lyssa took the dishes outside to be cleaned in a bucket of water. It was fully dark now, so the work had to be done by the light of a lantern and two of the planet's four moons which were out tonight.

Lyssa complained, "Ugh! Why do these people want to live like this? It's so primitive! Back on Gonaways, we'd just drop the dishes into a recycler by the light of an electric bulb and then go to the bar to get fucked all the way up."

"They believe one day the Reengineered Christ is gonna come back to lead them all back to Earth. He wants them to live simple lives in His kingdom on Earth. They live these simple – what you call '*primitive*' – lives in preparation for His return."

Lyssa scoffed. "Sounds pretty bananas-ass stupid to me. They condemn us for using advanced technology, but they won't hesitate to pay mercenaries to use high-tech weapons to kill people with. They'll pay a terraforming company to terraform worlds for them to build their stupid, luddite utopias on. They'll ride across the stars on spaceplanes and simultaneously condemn the people who sit up in the cockpit. Meanwhile, I just want a beer at the end of a hard day and *I'm* some kind of sinner. The whole thing stinks of hypocrisy to me."

Erin looked around, worried that Lyssa's streak of blasphemy might have been overheard, but there didn't seem to be anybody else nearby. Her eyes were starting to adjust and she could see pretty well in the low light. Still, she cautioned Lyssa: "Shh! Keep your voice down. If somebody hears you talking like that, it could be bad for both of us."

"Hmph!" was Lyssa's simple reply. For several minutes, she said nothing as they scrubbed the dishes. When she finally spoke again, Lyssa asked a question that had been brewing in the back of her mind all day. "So how come you know so goddamn much about the Fourthers, anyway?"

Erin dodged the question by repeating the story she'd told earlier about having grown up with Fourthier neighbors. Lyssa didn't say anything in response. Erin had a feeling Lyssa wasn't buying it, so she changed the subject. "So did you get a chance to assess the plane's condition yet?"

The question of Erin's past had raised a tension between them. This new subject gave them a definite common ground; they both cared about the condition of their plane. "Well," Lyssa answered, "she's a little banged up, but she ain't totally manked yet. She'll fly again. Them cock-torquin' pirates got me leading their mechanics on the repairs 'cause I know more about hardpointers than they do. Bunch o' amateur cunts. The lot of 'em only know how to patch planes together with speed tape and plastigoo. I could get her flyin' in about two or three days if I was running the repair crew efficiently. But I reckon it'll take a week or more." Lyssa threw Erin a wink.

Erin smiled. "Just be careful not to run the crew *too* inefficiently. Don't want them to catch on and get suspicious."

"Shit, I figure they're expecting me to do some fuckery to delay the repairs. They'll let me get away with some, as long as the repairs continue. I'll delay it as much as I can. By the way: you ain't gonna believe this, but the belly tank was leaking fuel right next to one of them blown thrusters."

"Whoa. How are we still alive?"

" 'Cause God's got a real soft spot for fuckups like me. You're lucky you was with me."

"Yeah, I guess I was lucky you were there." Erin couldn't deny it was true. If she hadn't had such a good mechanic to get the systems back online, the plane would have bounced off the upper atmosphere. She would be dead right now or in the hands of the other group of pirates.

"But fixin' up the plane is only my secondary responsibility. The main thing they got me working on is retrofitting that HEVA suit so's it'll work inside the tenebricite shadow."

"You really gonna be able to get that thing to work on the bottom of the lake or were you just bluffing?"

"Shit, girl. How many times I gotta say it? I'm good with my hands." Lyssa winked, causing Erin to blush. "I'll get it working. My only worry is that none of those apes is gonna be smart enough to operate the rebreather manually."

"Think they'll be able to get the control card back from the bottom of the lake?"

"I dunno. Working the rebreather and looking for a small object in the mud at the bottom of the lake at the same time..." Lyssa shrugged. "I got a strong feeling the poor bastard that goes down there will never come back up."

"Hmm. That might not be such a bad thing."

"It'll sure as shit be a bad thing for you and me. Without that control card, that plane becomes useless to them."

"Yeah, I know."

"And if that plane becomes useless, so do our unlucky asses."

"Any idea what they want the plane for?"

"Nuh-uh. Tossers are real secretive about it. Whatever it is, I know it can't be nothin' good."

"Well, keep your eyes and ears open."

"What the hell are we gonna do if we find out what they're up to?"

Erin was pensive for a moment. "I guess it depends on what it is. If it's something too bad – like a terrorist attack or something – then I'll scuttle the plane. If it comes to that, you put on a good show of trying to stop me. Hopefully they'll let you live, even if they kill me. You're a skilled mechanic and they've got other planes. You're useful to them."

"Oh, bullshit! Bitch, it ain't goin' down like that!"

Erin was pretty sure that Lyssa was being affectionate when she called her the B-word. "Lyssa, it's okay; I'm not afraid to die."

The lantern's low light accentuated the furrowing in Lyssa's brows even more effectively than the light of day could have. "Yeah, I noticed that," Lyssa said. "You was pretty casual earlier about the prospect of getting scalped and drowned. And you was pretty mad at me for stopping it. You got some kind o' fuckin' death wish or somethin'?"

This question hit pretty close to home. Lyssa might be about as subtle as a sledge hammer, but she was perceptive. "It's just that I'm the one responsible for that plane and I won't let it be used for something evil." This statement was true, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

"Hmm," Lyssa said. A heavy silence fell between them. When she finally broke the silence, Lyssa's voice was conspiratorial. "Maybe we could take the plane back somehow? Try to escape?"

"How do you figure that's gonna work? We don't have the control card and even if we did, how're we gonna get off the ground, out of atmo, and into transtach before they shoot us down?"

"I don't know. I'm just spitballing ideas here. Like if we could somehow get our hands on the control card after the pirates retrieve it from the bottom –"

"– if they retrieve it –" Erin interrupted.

"– if they are able to retrieve it and if we could swipe it, then all we need to figure out is how to get off the ground and into space. Once we're in space, we're home free."

Erin shook her head as she scrubbed the frying pan she'd used to fry the catfish earlier. "Not quite. Even if we could manage to do all that, once we're in space, we're just sitting ducks. We need time to charge the Transtachyonic Field Generator before we can slip into transtach. That means sitting there in space without engine thrust for a half-hour or more while we use the engines' output to charge the TFG."

"We don't need all three engines to charge the damn TFG. We can use two for charging and still have one to maneuver with."

"But with only two engines charging, it'll take even longer to charge the TFG. Instead of being an easy target for thirty minutes, we'll be an easy target for around forty-five. And we still need to get off the ground and into space in the first place."

"Fuck me. I ain't got it all figured out, but I ain't gonna just sit here and do nothin'. I still ain't convinced that these guys won't just kill us whenever they're done with us. And I'm not givin' up on the idea of getting out of this alive."

Erin had nothing to say to this. The conversation died as the women finished up their chore. She understood Lyssa's desire to escape, but she also understood the impossibility of it. Sooner or later, Lyssa would come to see the futility in it as well.

Still, that night as Erin lay awake, she couldn't stop thinking about Lyssa's sloppy, harebrained escape plan. Sister Judith only had the one bed in her small shack, so all three of them were obliged to share it. Erin was, as always, uncomfortable. She lay in the middle of the small bed with Lyssa snoring softly on one side and Sister Judith snoring loudly on the other. Erin's long frame meant that her feet hung over the end of the mattress even though her head nearly

touched the headboard. It took her a long time to fall asleep, even though she was exhausted after the long, perilous day. But before she fell asleep, she thought about Lyssa's terrible idea. Was it really terrible? Could it be made to work? Erin couldn't deny the appeal in the idea of not only taking the plane back, but getting her friend to safety. When you've got someone else depending on you, it's hard to tell yourself that the world would be better without you.

Fangs' New Tooth

For Lyssa, the next few days of her captivity settled into a routine. She would wake up with the Fourthers (and against her own complaints) before dawn. A group of mercenaries (her new friend, Matty Moss, among them) would come from their camp on the outskirts of the village to escort her to the steam barge. Then, the steam barge would chug her the several kilometers to the service platform in the middle of the sprawling lake. The rest of the day, until the sun began to sink over the western peaks, Lyssa would oversee the repairs on the hardpointer and work on her modifications to the Heavy EVA suit.

All had gone well over those few days. The repairs had gone sufficiently slowly enough to satisfy Lyssa, yet not so slowly that Sgt. Scalps had bothered to intervene. Scalps, in fact, seemed to be bored with the whole process. He and the other NCOs spent much of their days inside the platform's small shack gambling or telling war stories and dirty jokes.

Unfortunately, as Lyssa had initially assessed, the plane's APU control unit was fried beyond repair. Without its control computer, the Auxiliary Power Unit couldn't run. The APU was basically just a small engine that ran a generator to provide (amongst other things) power to start the hardpointer's three main engines. Without the APU, the only way to start the engines turning was to connect the hardpointer to another plane and transfer that plane's power output. It was for that reason that one of the Third Law's AF-28 *Darklander* fighters was parked atop the hardpointer's back with its landing gear secured to three of 788NC's hardpoints. A magnetic feed cable ran from the side of the fighter's engine to 788NC's station umbilicus terminal. Now, all they needed to start the engines was the control card.

But there was more to making the plane fly again than just getting the engines running. Before 788NC could fly again, repairs would have to be made to the damaged belly skin and the leaking fuel tank would need to be repaired.

Lyssa, unwilling to get back into that scary water again, had found an alternative way to repair the belly skin and fuel tank. She had set the maintenance mech into "bot" mode and programmed it to do the repairs. Maintenance mechs, when set to "bot" mode, could be programmed to function without an operator and do basic repairs autonomously. In addition to keeping Lyssa out of that water where she just *knew* something was watching her, handing the task off to the mech's A.I. meant that she could set the mech to do the job *very* slowly and *very* accurately. Not only would the repairs to the belly skin be done to factory specs, but they would also take a long time to complete.

What occupied most of the hours of Lyssa's days were the modifications to the Heavy EVA suit. The other mechanics didn't believe the HEVA suit could be modified to operate inside the tenebricite shadow, but they weren't senior mechanics with the Mechanics' and Machinists' Guild. Lyssa was. *So fuck them.*

The HEVA suit was basically a middle ground between a standard EVA suit (basically just a space suit for normal Extra Vehicular Activities in space) and a full-on mech suit (which was as much a piece of heavy machinery as a space suit). The HEVA suit, with its heavy-duty exoskeleton could withstand extremes in pressure, acidity, radiation, heat, and cold which would be fatal to the wearer of a standard EVA suit. This was important, as according to Lyssa's calculations the pressure at the bottom of the lake would be around 115 atmospheres. This was within the operating limits of the HEVA suit's tolerances but well beyond the capacity of any standard EVA suit.

Though the HEVA suit wasn't anywhere near as massive as a mech, it was still quite heavy. The HEVA suit's builders had designed powered assistance servos into all of its joints. This made it easier for the wearer to move around. With the servos functioning, the suit could be worn by almost anyone, even someone as small as Lyssa. With the servos inoperative (as they would be at the bottom of the lake) it would take a strong man to move around in the suit.

To lighten the HEVA suit, Lyssa had removed anything that she could from it, including its computer and primary power source. That done, she'd set about replacing all of its automatic valves and sensors with manual valves and mechanical gauges. The wearer would have to read those gauges, interpret the data, and adjust the valves to keep the air inside the suit's breathing circuit from becoming toxic. He would have to do this constantly while simultaneously moving across the lake's muddy bottom in the heavy suit without any power assist and looking for a small control card with only the dim light of a chemlight. Lyssa was sure whoever wore this suit to the bottom would never come up again.

She only became more sure of this assessment when the modifications to the suit were complete and she began showing the unfortunate victim how to operate it. Scalps had assigned Pvt. Haynes (the one Lyssa had bitten on the first

day) to operate the suit. At first, the tests went okay, despite the man's obvious animosity toward Lyssa. He was able to walk around the platform easily enough in the suit and he was able to operate the valves on the rebreather while standing still. He did encounter some difficulty remembering to check the gauges, but caught himself and corrected his error in time. The problem came after he'd been inside the suit for a couple of hours and was practicing the search pattern. On the bottom, if he hoped to find the control card in the mud, he was going to have to use a meticulous search pattern.

To simulate the dim, murky conditions she anticipated on the bottom of the lake, Lyssa covered most of the suit's crystalanium helmet with a blanket. Now, Haynes only had a small field of vision. He cursed her, but at Scalps' urging, he began practicing the spiraling search pattern on the platform's deck, using a length of rope as a guide. Seeing what he was doing with his limited view, managing the search pattern, checking the gauges and adjusting the valves, all while trying to move in the big, heavy suit without power assist proved too much for the mercenary. He became overwhelmed and neglected to keep an eye on the suit's jury-rigged gauges. After several minutes of neglect, the rebreather was no longer supplying enough oxygen to keep the occupant conscious.

The first sign of trouble came when Haynes stopped in the middle of his search pattern. Then, he took a couple more steps and then fell to the deck. There was a tremendous BANG! and a clatter as the HEVA suit and its occupant came down hard. Lyssa and all the mercenaries standing around rushed to help the stricken man inside. The mercenaries panicked, trying to open the suit's canopy, finding it fixed solid.

"Equalize the pressure!" Lyssa shouted. The cluster of large men made it impossible for Lyssa to get anywhere near the emergency equalization lever. The men either didn't hear her or ignored her. They worked as a team trying to pull the canopy open, but it wouldn't budge. "Equalize the FUCKING PRESSURE!" Lyssa shouted at them. "Haven't any of you knob rockers ever trained in space suits?"

This time, somebody got the message and pulled the red emergency lever on the suit's chest plate. There was a *hiss* and then the canopy finally gave way. Once the canopy was open, a medic was on hand, trying to revive the unconscious Haynes. The medic wasted no time feeling Haynes' pulse and slapping an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose.

After a minute or so, Haynes regained consciousness. "What happened?" he asked confusedly.

"You nearly punched out, dumb fuck," one of his comrades answered him.

"Yeah you nearly died bravely testing Fangs' walking coffin," another contributed.

Haynes was silent for a moment. Then, "Okay, get me the fuck out of this thing."

"Wait a minute. You need to rest," the medic said.

"RIGHT FUCKING NOW!" Haynes roared. The other mercenaries, ignoring the medic's protests, began opening the suit the rest of the way and helping their comrade out of it. Once out, Haynes sat on the deck beside the suit sucking oxygen out of the mask for another minute. Finally, he caught sight of Lyssa. "You!" he shouted at her. He jumped to his feet and bolted towards her before anyone could stop him. "You almost got me killed!"

Lyssa never saw the punch coming. The next thing she knew, she was on the deck with the medic crouching over her. "Ugh. What happened?" Her head and her upper jaw hurt. She could taste blood.

"You took a bad hit," the medic answered.

"Can't say you didn't have it coming to you," Scalps said from nearby.

"You flew through the air, but I'm pretty sure you were unconscious before you hit the deck," the medic elaborated. "You got a minor concussion and you lost an incisor. I gave you something for the concussion and I've got the autofabricator constructing you a new tooth. You're lucky your palate didn't break."

"A new tooth?" Lyssa asked, confusedly. She felt around her mouth with her tongue and felt the gap where her left incisor should be.

"Yeah, it'll be out of the fabricator in about fifteen minutes and then we'll put it in."

"Put it in?"

"Yeah, anchor it into the bone."

"Into the what? Are you qualified to do that?"

"Lady, I'm all you've got."

"Fuuuuuuck..." Lyssa said.

From nearby, Haynes said: "This one belongs to me now, bitch." Lyssa turned her head painfully and saw Haynes holding something small and white between his thumb and forefinger. Lyssa had to squint through the pain to see that the object he was holding was her tooth.

* * *

An hour and a half later, Lyssa's newly fabricated, gold tooth was anchored into her upper jaw. Despite her trepidations, the mercenary medic had done a good job anchoring the new tooth. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a glint of gold from her new incisor. A purplish bruise was slowly expanding to cover much of the left side of her face and her lips were swollen and split on that side.

The medic recommended giving her the rest of the day off and Scalps allowed it. She went into the hardpointer and laid down on her own bunk to sleep off the pain. Later, as Matty was helping her down into the steam barge for the evening return to Pilgrim's Rest, Scalps called down to her over the slow *chug...chug...* of the idling steam engine.

"Hey Fangs! You tell that little, blonde girlfriend o' yours to come to the platform with you in the morning," Scalps said. "We got orders from headquarters this afternoon. The colonel wants to talk to her."

Lyssa just glared at him. They'd better not think about hurting her friend.

"You read me, Fangs?"

"Yeah, I got it. What the fuck's Colonel Cum Cube want with Erin? The plane ain't ready to fly yet."

"Dunno. I just follow orders. And so should you. 'Less you want another gold tooth...?" Scalps grinned down menacingly from the platform.

Product of Horse Gone Crazy

For Erin, the first few days of her captivity had settled into a routine. She would wake up with the Fourthers before dawn. Though her friend, Lyssa, awoke moodily every morning, waking early was no big deal for Erin, since that was her normal habit anyway.

Erin had been assigned chores and her days started with collecting eggs from the chicken coop for breakfast and milking Sister Judith's cow. Then, she would cook breakfast for herself, Lyssa and Sister Judith. All of this was familiar to Erin, as she'd grown up in an agrarian community very similar to Pilgrim's Rest.

After breakfast, a mercenary called Matty Moss whom Lyssa had befriended would come from their small camp on the outskirts of the village to escort Lyssa to the steam barge. Erin didn't trust Matty. But then again, she didn't really trust anybody...except, oddly, Lyssa. Somehow, Lyssa's unconquerable charisma had broken through all of Erin's defenses and earned her trust. Erin marveled at Lyssa's uncanny ability to make friends so easily, especially considering the mechanic's swaggering, prickly facade. Once you saw through that facade—and most people did pretty quickly—you couldn't help but like the caring, selfless person hidden underneath.

The first full day of this new routine, Erin had worried over Lyssa all day. When Lyssa had returned that evening, she'd reported that she'd spent the whole day supervising the repairs on 788NC and working on the modifications to the HEVA suit. Erin was relieved to hear that the pirates had more-or-less left Lyssa alone. For her part, Erin was put to work during the days with a myriad of menial tasks from the care of animals to occasionally assisting Sister Judith in her duties.

Erin quickly learned that although the matronly Sister Judith's official title in the village was "Midwife," she did much more for the village than just assist women with childbirth. The small village of Pilgrim's Rest didn't have anything as ornate as an actual doctor. Almost all injuries and medical concerns were, therefore, referred to Sister Judith.

The midwife, it turned out, was a full-fledged, college-educated nurse with battlefield experience. Originally from a Fourthier settlement in Olost space, Sister Judith had been trained at Cook's Dell University School of Nursing on the Olost home world.

Olost has been in a perpetual cycle of war and peace with the Kell Republic for centuries. Shortly after Sister Judith had graduated from nursing school, war had once again broken out between the two regional powers and she'd been drafted into the Olost military as a battlefield nurse. Sister Judith could have fought the draft as a conscientious objector (as most Fourthiers did) but she explained to Erin that, "I was young. I wanted adventure, I admit it. If they'd been expecting me to kill, I would have refused the draft. But I was a nurse and they were wanting my skills as a healer. I wanted to do what I could to help end the suffering. So, I went to war."

"What was the war like?" Erin had asked naively.

Sister Judith looked Erin directly in the eye, her countenance a mixture of severity and sadness. "It was war." was Sister Judith's simple, curt answer. Erin had known better than to press the issue.

While assisting Sister Judith was interesting, most of Erin's daylight hours were occupied with helping the village women in the low-altitude fields near the village. Erin loved being outside in the open air and sunlight. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed being outside since she'd left her home planet of Promisedland a few years ago. But living in a space station—even one as large as Gonaways—felt cramped and enclosed in a way that planetside life didn't.

Pilgrim's Rest had a strange division of labor where agriculture was concerned. The women tended the low-altitude fields near the village while the men ventured into the nearby hills every morning to tend the high-altitude fields. The phraseological distinction between "high-altitude" and "low-altitude" fields was a bit of a misnomer, as the planet's thin atmosphere made all fields effectively "high-altitude."

One morning, just after Lyssa had gone off with the pirates for the day, Erin and Sister Judith were cleaning up the breakfast mess before heading out to join the other women in the low-altitude fields. Erin had asked Sister Judith what the men were growing up in the high-altitude fields. The older woman had simply answered: "Coffee." with her trademark air of finality. Erin understood that she was effectively being told not to ask about it anymore. Especially when she considered the 20kg bag of coffee sitting on the pantry shelf which had the words "Product of Horse Gone Crazy" printed on it.

Even though Erin enjoyed the outdoors, working in the so-called "low-altitude" fields proved exhausting. Indeed, any kind of physical exertion was made more difficult by the planet's thin atmosphere. Erin had grown up tending her family's fields – back when she still had a family – and she was in pretty good physical shape. Nevertheless, she found herself having to stop and catch her breath quite often. And she wasn't the only one. Most of the women and even the children who worked the fields had to do so.

"It won't always be like this, though," Sister Judith had told her that first day. "Once Colonel Raith runs Villalobos and the rest of the pirates out of our system, we can hire another terraforming company to come in and finish generating the atmosphere. That'll make working the fields much easier."

Erin looked at the dirt packed under her fingernails. She remembered helping her father in the fields when she'd been little. There was something oddly satisfying and nostalgic for her about this kind of life. She closed her eyes and turned her face upward, letting the sunlight under the brim of her bonnet. The light was warm on her face. She breathed deep the scent of disturbed earth and growing things.

"You like it here, don't you?" Sister Judith asked.

"It's okay," was Erin's guarded answer.

"You could stay, you know."

Erin looked out across the shimmering water where her hardpointer seemed ethereal in the midday haze. A trick of the light made the huge plane seem to float not on the water, but *above* it. The jagged, mountainous peaks on the far side of the valley juxtaposed against the beautiful machine's graceful lines and only made the plane seem more majestic and alluring.

"If I stayed, I'd have to join the church and give up flying. I could never do that," she answered the older woman. "I'm an aviator. That's not just what I do; it's who I am."

"Hmm. Believe it or not, I understand that."

Nearer to her view, Erin saw the village's few fishermen out in their fishing skiffs. Other than the village elders and a few specialized tradesmen, the fishermen were among the few men who didn't go up to the high-altitude fields during the day. Even at this distance, Erin's eye could easily make out the young Brother Azariah. Ever since she'd first arrived in the village, Azariah had made every effort to make himself noticed by her. He seemed too shy to actually talk to her very much. And of course, he surely knew the village elders would never let him marry a woman outside the faith. Nevertheless, he always seemed to find a reason to catch her eye. He was working his boat shirtless and she could see, even at a distance of several hundred meters, the sunlight glistening off of his tanned back as he hauled on a line. Did he know she was watching him at that moment, or was he just hoping she might notice?

"He's a good lad, our young Brother Azariah," Sister Judith said.

Erin blushed. "Yes, he seems quite...um, diligent."

"Lad needs a wife, though."

No way, Erin thought. *I'm not giving up flying and joining your cult just for a handsome man.* Then, she remembered Brother Azariah's racist views towards the Broadening which he'd expressed when she'd first met him. *Definitely not.* "We better get back to work," was all she said aloud.

* * *

That evening, when Lyssa came back from her day's work on the platform, Erin was horrified and angered to see the battered state of Lyssa's face. Both Erin and Sister Judith set upon the mechanic, pelting her with questions about what happened and examining her to make sure that she was indeed okay. After Sister Judith grudgingly agreed that the Third Law medic had done a sufficient job patching Lyssa up, Lyssa told her story. She told of Haynes nearly suffocating inside the modified HEVA suit while practicing the search pattern he would have to use on the lake's bottom. She told of his comrades rescuing him from the suit and then of the man punching her in the face.

"But I don't remember that part," Lyssa said about the punch. "It was his own fault. If he'd just watched his fu –" (Lyssa had been about to swear, but Sister Judith gave her a warning glare) – "finely tuned gauges, it wouldn't've happened."

Erin wheeled upon Lyssa's "friend," the mercenary called Matty Moss. "And you! Why didn't you do anything to stop it?"

"Happen quick, love," Matty answered in his broken Gonian with his strange accent. "Nobody saw comin'. Just happen. Quick as that." Matty snapped his fingers for emphasis.

"It's okay, check this out." Lyssa interjected. She showed her new, gold incisor. "Looks pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah," Erin said sarcastically, "it really accentuates the giant, purple bruise covering half your face." Erin was practically seething with rage. Lyssa was her friend and her crewmate. She wanted to beat that stupid Haynes to death with the butt of his own rifle. She turned back to Matty. "From now on, you look out for her, you understand me?"

"You not give orders," Matty started to say, clearly not grasping the full fire of Erin's rage.

Matty looked surprised as Erin shoved him with more force than her lanky frame had any right to be capable of. He stumbled backward a couple steps and almost lost his footing. Erin immediately closed the distance and was back in his face as she shouted: "I AM GIVING YOU AN ORDER! YOU WATCH OUT FOR HER! YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

Matty looked stunned, angry, and not a little scared by Erin's sudden explosion of hostility. He looked like he was about to yell back at Erin, but Lyssa interceded. She snaked first her arm and then her entire body in between her two friends. "Erin, it's okay. Matty's got my back. Don't ya, Matty?"

Matty glared at Erin for a moment and then swallowed his wounded pride. "Sure, love. Lyssa my friend too, ya know."

Erin let go a shuddering sigh between her clenched teeth. She was clearly struggling to let go of her rage. Lyssa still didn't know if Erin had actually burned that plane a few years ago, but she knew Erin definitely had it within her to do so. "Yeah, sorry," Erin finally said.

Nearby, Sister Judith just tutted and shook her head.

Erin backed away and turned her back. Lyssa guessed her friend was trying to hide her emotions, perhaps even crying. Lyssa waited a minute for the situation to finish diffusing before finally saying: "There's one more thing..."

Even though Erin's back was turned, it didn't escape Lyssa's attention that her friend raised her arm and rubbed her eyes on her dress sleeve before turning back to face them. "What?" Erin asked warily.

"The pirates —" Lyssa remembered Matty's presence "— sorry, the *mercenaries* want you to come with me to the platform tomorrow."

"What for? Is the plane ready to fly already?"

"Nah, not yet. I dunno what for. All they would tell me was that Colonel Butthole wants to talk to you."

"About what?"

"I dunno."

Erin nodded in Matty's direction. "He know?"

"I grunt, love. Them not tell me nothin'," Matty said.

Erin and Lyssa exchanged a worried look.

Looking the Part

The next morning, after making breakfast, Erin went to the far corner of the little shack and pulled the makeshift privacy curtain closed behind herself. Now, for the first time in days, she put her Noémie pilot's uniform on. It felt strange wearing pants again. Only now that she was no longer wearing the dress did she realize how used she'd gotten these past few days to its several meters of fabric. Her uniform pants now felt paradoxically liberating and restricting at the same time. She pinned her wings and her nametag over her breast pockets, straightened the epaulettes on her shoulders, and tied her Aviators' Guild tie. She put her shoulder holster on, even though her gun had been taken away. It was as close as she could get to completing the look of a "real Darklands pilot." She even shined her shoes as well as she could without any actual shoe polish. Whatever that stupid pirate, Col. Raith, wanted with her, she would show him what a professional was. She was a Journeyman Airman with the Aviators' Guild and a hardpointer captain for Noémie Charter Services. She was going to look the part.

By the time she emerged from behind the curtain, Matty had already arrived to escort them down to the steam barge. He was sitting next to Lyssa at Sister Judith's small table sipping a cup of coffee. Only then did it occur to Erin that the poor, foolish Matty might actually have a crush on Lyssa. She wondered if he knew that Lyssa was a lesbian.

Lyssa, already dressed in her grease-stained Noémie mechanic's coveralls, let out a long whistle as Erin emerged from behind the curtain. "Lookin' sharp, captain," Lyssa said.

"Thanks."

* * *

Everyone on the platform was staring expectantly to the south. Erin followed their gaze and looked toward the southern end of the valley. The lake looked placid with barely a wave in the early morning light as it stretched away into the distance. The wall of peaks along the valley's eastern edge were now fully bathed in morning light and even from several kilometers away Erin could see that the town of Pilgrim's Rest was coming to life.

She looked back to the south. Everyone was anticipating the imminent arrival of the plane carrying Col. Raith. As they stood there watching, it occurred to Erin that it would be pretty stupid for Raith to announce when he would be arriving and from what direction. Erin had met Raith and she was convinced he was a psychopathic warlord, but he hadn't struck her as stupid. Either he was lying about the time he was arriving or the direction.

Erin looked around her. Every set of eyes on the platform was staring southward. And Erin put it together. She looked to the north mere seconds before it happened. A single plane, one of the Third Law fighters, was approaching at extreme speed from the north. It was skimming the lake's surface mere meters above the water. The plane seemed to make no sound as it approached. That fact, coupled with the compression wave she saw moving aft along its fuselage told Erin that the plane was approaching at nearly the speed of the sound. She quickly raised her hands to cover her ears and took a deep breath, intending to shout a warning. But before she could shout, the approaching fighter broke the sound barrier as it passed less than a hundred meters away from the platform. Most of the people on the platform never expected the massive sonic

BOOM!

until it hit them.

And "hit" was the right word for it. Erin had heard sonic booms before, but never one from so close. She felt the sound more than she heard it. It was like a bomb going off. It reverberated through her thoracic cavity and pulsed through her bones. She felt like the platform beneath her feet had dropped away briefly and she had to struggle to stay on her feet.

Several of the mercenaries fell to the deck, by accident or by finely tuned soldiers' experience, Erin couldn't tell. Every person with a rifle trained their weapon in the direction from which the sound had come, but by the time the veteran mercenaries could even turn and raise their rifles, the now-supersonic fighter was gone, several kilometers to the south and moving even farther out of range every second. As the initial impact of the boom passed, its echo bounced back and forth between the mountains on either side of the valley. The echoes crossed the lake and then crossed it again until they blended together to become one long, constant rumble like rolling thunder. Finally, after several tense seconds, the

rumble faded and a cheer rose up from the mercenaries all over the platform.

Erin understood what they were cheering. It could only be Maj. Tolbert. She made eye contact with Lyssa across the platform. Lyssa shook her head.

Erin noticed the look of worry in Lyssa's eyes. For all of Lyssa's bravado, Erin knew she was afraid of Maj. Tolbert.

The Darklands Sunrise

Within five minutes, Maj. Tolbert landed on the small service platform. The fighter she was flying today wasn't the same one she'd been flying that first day. This plane was the two-seat, trainer version of the same AF-28 *Darklander* fighter.

After Maj. Tolbert landed, she didn't even bother to get out of the plane or shut the engine down. She just raised the bubble canopy and stood up in the cockpit. She raised the sun visor on her helmet, exposing her badly scarred face and creepy, orb-like ocular prosthesis. Her long, black-and-gray hair poured from only the right side of the helmet. Whatever else Erin thought about this woman, she couldn't help but admire her commanding presence or her obvious skills as a pilot.

Tolbert easily spotted Erin in the crowd in her crisp, tidy Noémie pilot's uniform. She waved Erin over with her three-fingered, mechanical claw-hand. Erin glanced at Lyssa and saw the worry in her friend's eyes. She wanted to reassure her friend, but they were several meters apart. Nothing she could shout would've been heard by Lyssa over the fighter's idling engine. Instead, Erin just gave Lyssa a thumbs up.

As Erin stepped close to the fighter, Tolbert shouted something down to her, but Erin couldn't make it out over the engine's shrieking, especially with her hands over her ears. Erin partially uncovered her ears and shouted "WHAT?"

Tolbert pointed to the plane's front seat, the training seat. "GET! IN!"

Erin glanced back at Lyssa. Lyssa looked very worried now, so Erin gave her another thumbs up. Then, she reached above her head, grabbed the plane's handhold and hiked one leg up onto the wing. Awkwardly, Erin climbed her lanky frame up onto the wing and then down into the cramped, forward cockpit.

A helmet had been left for her in the seat. She put it on. The helmet had a headset built into it and the moment she pulled it over her head, Erin heard Tolbert's voice over the intercom. "Get your harness on, kid. We're goin' flyin'."

"Roger that," was all Erin could think to say into the helmet's boom mic as she struggled to make sense of the seat's complex harness system. As she finally got the last strap untangled and clicked into place, the plane's bubble canopy secured itself in the closed position with a *clunk* sound. With the canopy closed, the cockpit's soundproofing muted out most of the engine noise. It was now much quieter.

"You all buckled in up there."

I don't know...I guess I got this stupid harness all figured out... "Affirmative," Erin said.

Erin took in her surroundings. She'd never been in a fighter before. The cockpit was cramped, definitely not designed for someone as long-limbed as herself. Every single switch, button and panel readout was within easy reach. Either side of the cramped space closed in almost to her shoulders. It would have felt claustrophobic were it not for the glorious view out the bubble canopy. She looked out and realized they were already in the air, hovering about twenty meters above the platform on their vertical thrusters. Maj. Tolbert had taken off so gently that Erin hadn't even felt it.

The collective lever beside her left thigh was elevated slightly. Erin noticed that the throttle for the main engine was also located on the collective and was worked by twisting like an electrocycle's throttle. Between her knees, a center stick was moving slightly, mirroring the control inputs Maj. Tolbert was making from the aft cockpit.

"You ready to go burn a hole in the sky?" Tolbert asked over the intercom.

"Oh yeah." Erin couldn't deny she was excited about going for a ride in this sleek, powerful, little plane.

"Good," was all Tolbert said. Erin felt herself being pulled back violently against the seat as the plane launched forward, accelerating almost faster than its inertial stabilizers could compensate for. The main engine was now howling hungrily. The collective beside her left leg dropped into its stowed position as the plane transitioned from thruster lift to aerodynamic lift. Then, the stick moved slightly aftward as Tolbert pitched the nose up. Erin looked out the canopy and over the wing. She saw that they were already several hundred meters in the air and climbing fast.

The next hour progressed in a way quite familiar to Erin or any pilot. It was very similar to any flight lesson, but with an emphasis on advanced aerobatic maneuvers. Maj. Tolbert would demonstrate a maneuver which Erin had either only read about or maybe done once or twice. Then, Erin would attempt the maneuver herself with varying degrees of success. Erin didn't feel her flying was very good, but Tolbert seemed genuinely impressed. "Remember, I've been flying

since before you were born. I've had a lot of years to practice. You can get these maneuvers if you work on them."

"Well, these aerobatic maneuvers are fun and all, but most of my training is aimed at flying the heavy metal."

"Let me guess: you want to be a helmsman on one of the big starhoppers someday, maybe retire as a ship's captain?"

Erin couldn't help feeling embarrassed at the commonness of her aeronautical ambitions. "What's wrong with that? It's an honest, respectable living."

"Not dishonest like mercenary work, right?"

"That's not what I mean..." *That's exactly what I mean.*

"It's okay. I suspect that's exactly what you mean. But I got news for ya: you're a talented pilot and you would be wasted shuttling fat, whiny, spacesick passengers across the stars. And being a captain on a starhopper is the worst fate for a pilot. They never get to do any actual flying. Everybody thinks it's an important job, but they spend most of their days listening to complaints from passengers."

"The money is real good and everybody respects the bridge crew on those big ships."

"Pah! Nobody respects those starhopper crews in their douchey, little sailor suits. Especially not us real pilots. The computer does most of the flying on those big ships, anyways. Think back to your student pilot days. Why did you initially learn to fly? Was it so you could wear a peacocky uniform and watch a computer fly or was it so's you could do stuff like this?" Tolbert performed a quick, smooth barrel roll.

Erin couldn't deny that the major was making some good points. But why did Tolbert even care? Erin had a feeling she knew... "What's this all about? This whole flight lesson? This unsolicited career counseling?"

"You're a smart girl. I think you already know what this is all about..." An awkward silence passed between them for some moments. Finally Tolbert broke the silence by saying, "I keep a downloaded copy of the Guild Registry on my data pad. I looked you up."

"How do you have access to the Guild Registry?" Erin asked before she could stop the stupid words from getting out of her mouth. "Sorry, I mean...I thought only members could see the registry."

"I *am* a member of the Aviators' Guild. I'm a Master Airman in good standing, I'll have you know – which is more than I can say for you," Tolbert snapped. "Like I said, I looked you up. You got a huge black mark on your record. You're the infamous 'plane burner,' aren't you?"

"I never burned that plane," Erin said.

"Honestly, I don't care if you did. I've met Jared Paul." Tolbert paused to let that sink in with Erin.

Erin sat there in stunned silence. She and Jared Paul had a really nasty history going all the way back to her days as a student pilot on Promisedland. When his plane went up in flames, the court of public opinion had wasted no time indicting Erin.

Tolbert continued: "Guy's a prime asshole and he deserved to watch his livelihood go up in flames. The point I'm trying to make is that with that black mark on your record, what do you think your odds really are of making it to the bridge of a starhopper?"

Erin was silent. She was looking at the control stick between her knees. It was right there. She could take her own life and take this old pirate down with her.

"Back to your original question: what this is all really about isn't a flight lesson. It's a job interview."

And there it was. Erin had suspected that was where Tolbert was going with all this. "I'm not working for you people. I definitely didn't learn to fly so I could kill other pilots." The irony that she'd just been thinking about killing Tolbert didn't escape Erin.

"Well, keep it in mind. You've done well on this flight. There could be a permanent place for you in our organization, if you wished it. We're always looking for good pilots." Then, after a long pause, Tolbert added cryptically, "Changes are coming to Third Law."

Erin didn't like the sound of that. "What kinds of changes?"

Tolbert didn't answer her. Instead, she said: "Let's go say hello to Villalobos. Give me an escape procedure. Your airplane."

"My airplane," Erin said, taking the controls. An escape procedure was a familiar procedure to Erin. An escape procedure was little more than pointing the nose of the plane straight up and accelerating to escape velocity to get into space. Every spaceplane pilot practiced these and Erin executed this maneuver perfectly. She held the nose straight up until the sky started to turn black. Then, she executed a textbook roll procedure to establish orbit.

"Nice escape procedure. My airplane," Tolbert said.

"Your airplane."

"Now, watch this. See the third moon on your nav display?"

"Yeah."

"That's where the *Ready Sophia* likes to lurk. Pretty safe bet we can get somebody to come out and play if we get close enough."

Erin could hear Tolbert's mischievous grin over the intercom. Maybe Erin wouldn't have to kill herself or Tolbert. Maybe Tolbert would get them killed. Erin found the thought comforting, as it carried none of the heavy moral implications of suicide.

Tolbert pegged the fighter's throttle and pointed the nose back down towards the planet. "This is a high-speed slingshot maneuver," she explained to Erin. "You ever done one of these before?"

"No."

"Stay with me on the controls. If we time this right, we can deadstick drift right up to *Ready Sophia*'s front door before they even know we're there. Then, we can kick the engine and be gone before they can even get off a shot."

"And if you time it wrong...?"

"...Then we're fucking dead."

Erin stayed with Tolbert on the fighter's controls as the older pilot pushed it to a tremendous speed and pulled very heavy Gs around the back of the planet. As they came around the side of the planet facing the third moon, Tolbert made some quick course adjustments and then shut down the engine and most of the plane's systems. They were drifting at an extremely high rate of speed, but it felt as though they weren't moving at all. The plane was quiet. Even the intercom was off. When they spoke, their voices echoed off the canopy inside the otherwise silent cockpit.

"Bet ya can't accelerate like that in no big, dumpy hardpointer," Tolbert said proudly.

On this point, Erin felt she had the fighter pilot. Pilots universally feel a proud defensiveness of the equipment they fly, and Erin was no exception. Thus, Erin felt vindicated as she said, "Actually a hardpointer with no cargo is basically just three really big engines and very little mass. The thrust-to-weight ratio is actually pretty similar to a fighter." *Take that, you smug, old lady!*

"But can it handle the Gs?"

"Probably. They're built pretty strong to handle the mass of all those containers you can stick on to them."

"Hmm. How many containers can you mount to the outside of a hardpointer like that one of yours?"

Erin had a feeling Tolbert already knew the answer to this, that she was just making conversation. Erin didn't care; she was proud of her plane. "Well, if you take the wings and the empennage off, you can connect sixteen containers directly to the fuselage hardpoints. But then, of course, you can stack other containers on top of those. The real limiting factors are mass and balance. That hardpointer can carry just over a million kilograms of gross mass, which is pretty standard for a hardpoint freighter. Trick is getting the containers arranged in such a way that the total center of gravity is very nearly aligned with the engines' thrust line."

"Or the plane will just fly in circles. I see."

"You already know all this, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then why do you want me to explain it all to you?"

"To kill time."

"Until what?"

"Until...Now!" Tolbert exclaimed.

Erin heard a series of rapid snapping sounds as Tolbert began flipping switches to the plane's vital systems back on. The nav controls came back up, the HUD came online. Proximity alarms began to sound and the engine start sequence began its whirring sound.

Erin's primary attention was drawn to the proximity alarm. She glanced at the HUD and there she saw it: the *Ready Sophia*. The enemy corvette class warship appeared as a threat icon projected onto the canopy by the HUD, but Erin was surprised to see that they had gotten so close she could actually make it out with the naked eye. The *Ready Sophia* was still too distant to see in any great detail, but Erin could clearly see pirate ship's angular, matte black-and-gray shape.

About the same time that Tolbert got the fighter's engine started, a new alarm sounded. "What's that alarm?" Erin

asked.

"Just a targeting laser." Tolbert sounded unconcerned, like she did this every day. "Don't worry. We're too close and too fast for their guns to track."

"But what about their fighters?"

Tolbert laughed, but didn't answer Erin directly. Instead, the older woman keyed the XMT button and called out to the enemy corvette, "This is Lefty. I'm doing a training exercise. We're unarmed. I encourage you to respect the cease-fire." Erin guessed that "Lefty" must be Tolbert's callsign. She thought of the claw-hand that served Tolbert for a left hand and guessed that was what passed for witty among pirates.

After a long moment, a response came back from the *Ready Sophia*. "Enemy fighter, power down and prepare to be subjected to inspection and seizure. You won't be harmed as long as you comply."

"Catch me if you can," was Tolbert's simple response. By this point, they were drifting behind the third moon. To Erin, Tolbert said, "We're gonna do the same kind of high-speed slingshot maneuver around the back of the moon. When we come out the other side, *Sophia* will have launched her fighters to intercept us, but we'll be going almost fast enough to get past them before they can kill us."

"...Almost fast enough?" Erin asked. "Is *almost* gonna get the job done?"

"I got another trick up my sleeve. Little maneuver I call a 'Darklands Sunrise'."

"Sounds like a contradiction in terms...or a beverage, maybe."

"Shut up. I gotta focus here. Stay with me on the controls."

Erin stayed with Tolbert on the controls as she did another high-speed slingshot maneuver from the back of the moon. This maneuver only added to their already extremely high rate of speed. By the time they came around the moon back to the side where the *Ready Sophia* was, the corvette had indeed launched her fighters. The HUD showed five enemy fighters moving to intercept. But Tolbert had managed to accelerate their little fighter to 23milliC, or 2.3% the speed of light. Though transtachyonic flight was many times faster than light, Erin had never made more than about 11milliC sublight speed. Erin hadn't even known it was possible to do better than 13 or 14.

"Is that speed right?" Erin asked.

"Yup," Tolbert said, "just as I said: *almost* fast enough. Missiles move at about 24. We just need a little more speed to outrun their missiles and then we're home free."

Then, Tolbert did something that really made no sense to Erin. She pulled the throttle back to idle. Then, she cut off the fuel flow to the engine and turned off the ignition system. The engine did exactly what engines do when you cut their fuel and ignition: it quit running. A flameout warning began flashing on the engine control panel. Erin wondered for a second if Tolbert was planning to surrender, but then Tolbert surprised her again. The older woman reopened the fuel flow valve and pushed the throttle wide open. The engine's core was still spinning, but without ignition, it wasn't actually running. Even though huge amounts of fuel were moving through the engine, the core was slowing down. Tolbert started the electric starter to keep the engine core turning at a high rate of speed, but left the ignition off. All the copious fuel Tolbert was dumping into the engine must be pouring out the back of the engine, unburned, into space behind them.

Erin thought to suggest they activate the ignition so the engine could burn fuel instead of just wasting it. "Umm..." Erin started,

but Tolbert cut her off: "Don't touch that goddamn ignition!"

Erin eyed the fuel flow rate, the engine core speed, and the thrust output. The first two numbers were quite high, but the thrust output was reading exactly 0 Newtons of force. And quite suddenly, it occurred to Erin what Tolbert was up to. Erin turned around in her seat as best as she could in the cramped, little cockpit and looked over her left shoulder. Sure enough, a fine, shimmering mist of fuel was being wasted out the back of their engine, leaving an explosive trail behind them. She made "eye contact" with Tolbert's creepy, insect-like prosthetic eye.

"I wouldn't look at it if I was you," Tolbert warned. Erin turned back in her seat and just a few seconds later several warnings sounded as multiple enemy fighters acquired target locks on them. If this didn't work, they would die for sure. "You can do the honors, if you'd like," Tolbert said. "Hit the ignition."

Erin wasted no time. She flipped the engine's ignition switch just as two missiles were launched at them. The fighter's engine, already spinning rapidly and full of fuel, lit instantly. At first, Erin felt a small burst of speed as the engine began producing thrust. Then, a fraction of a second later, she felt a much more powerful acceleration force as the

trail of fuel behind them exploded. She felt the shock wave hit them from behind. She closed her eyes as the light of the explosion nearly blinded her. She could feel Tolbert fighting to maintain control of the fighter as they "surfed" the shock wave.

When things settled and Erin could finally open her eyes again, she saw their speed readout: 26milliC. The planet called Sanctuary (or SHP 242, depending on whom you asked) was ahead of them and approaching quickly. On the HUD's tactical display, Erin saw the two missiles that had been launched at them. The missiles' approach speed was displayed as -2milliC. The fighter was outrunning the missiles. Tolbert had managed to get the fighter moving faster than even missiles can fly.

It was one of the most amazing bits of flying Erin had ever seen.

Fangs' Coffin

It was a long day for Lyssa. She was worried about her friend.

The last Lyssa had seen of Erin was when she'd climbed into that creepy, evil, old bag, Tolbert's plane. Lyssa had wanted to shout at her not to get aboard, but she knew it was futile. Like it or not, they were captives of these shit licks and if Tolbert ordered Erin to climb aboard, then she really didn't have any choice.

Also, Lyssa was afraid of what Erin might do. Lyssa could tell there was something unstable about her friend. There was a not-too-small chance that Erin might try to crash the plane if she saw a chance to take Tolbert down with her.

So, it was a long day for Lyssa.

She was distracted with worry as she oversaw some of the final repairs on the hardpointer. The plane was almost ready to fly again. All it needed was its control card and another day or so worth of work.

The HEVA suit was (and had been for a couple days now) ready to make its deep dive to the bottom of the lake. The only problem was finding somebody not too stupid to operate the rebreather manually. During that morning, after Erin and Tolbert had flown off, testing on the HEVA suit had continued. A few other victims were subjected to the HEVA suit, which the mercenaries had named "Fangs' Coffin." None who'd tried wearing the suit had proven capable.

The latest unfortunate soul to be put into the suit was none other than Lyssa's friend, Matty. Just like the other suit testers before him, Matty proved capable of operating the rebreather while sitting still, but he ran into trouble once he started to move around and practice his search pattern. He became overworked, overwhelmed, and lost control of the gas mixture he was breathing. Just like the others, Matty had to be pulled out of the suit barely conscious.

After Haynes had knocked her tooth out and given her a concussion, Lyssa had learned to stand well back and keep a 1kg machinist's hammer handy. None of the others had attacked her, but every failure resulted in several dirty looks in her direction. As Matty gasped for breath in the planet's thin atmosphere, he looked over to Lyssa. Unlike the others, he didn't have anger or blame in his eyes.

"It too hard movin', love," he said to her. Though Matty was fluent in Lyssa's native Estrellan, he spoke broken Gonian to her whenever his comrades could hear. They taunted him any time they caught him speaking Estrellan with Lyssa. "Like joints made stone, you know?"

By now, Lyssa had gotten used to Matty's broken way of speaking Gonian. He was telling her that the problem was that it was too hard to move in the HEVA suit. The suit's joints were too rigid with the power assist off. "I know," she said to him as his buddies helped him back to his feet, "but the power assist won't work on the lake bottom."

"It not work, take it gone. Like concrete slow and heavy."

This one Lyssa didn't understand. "What?" she asked him.

Matty looked self-consciously around at the other mercenaries watching the conversation. He sighed and then he said in Estrellan: "I said that moving in this suit is slow and heavy like walking in concrete. If the power assist doesn't work, maybe you should just take the servos out of the suit. All they're doing is making the suit feel heavier than it already is."

Several of the mercenaries standing around hooted at Matty and called Lyssa his "girlfriend." Matty made a rude gesture at them and Lyssa just ignored them.

But Lyssa saw his point. Without power to run the suit's power assist servos, the wearer was forced to pull against those dead servos. So Lyssa put testing on hold for the day as she began the process of disassembling the HEVA suit's major joints, removing the useless servos, and then carefully reassembling the joints.

Sometime after lunch, coded transmissions started to come in over the fast-cycling transceiver in the service platform's small utility shed. The transmissions told the story of Erin's and Tolbert's successful flyby on the enemy ship. The stunt became the talk of the platform. At first, most of the mercenaries celebrated the stunt, but then some arguments broke out over something to do with a vote of some kind. Lyssa didn't really care what these idiots were arguing about; she was mainly just happy that Erin was okay.

By the time Lyssa got the last servo out of the HEVA suit and got the last joint reassembled, the sun was beginning to settle between the mountains to the west. The mercenaries boarded their steam barge to return to the shore, but Lyssa

wasn't eager to leave until Erin was back.

"Ruiz!" Scalps shouted to her. "You goin' ashore for the night or not?"

Lyssa stood up, holding her machinist's hammer and, with a resolve that surprised even herself, she said: "Not until my pilot is back safe, you got it?"

Scalps looked momentarily surprised, but then collected his thoughts. "Fine, freeze your ass off out here in the middle of the lake. Dumb bitch."

In the barge, Matty stood up like he was thinking about climbing back out.

"Sit your ass down, Moss!" Scalps ordered Matty. "I'm on platform watch tonight. I'll make sure your girlfriend is safe."

At that point, Lyssa realized belatedly that Scalps had called her by her surname rather than "Fangs." She was actually a little surprised he even knew her last name. She wondered what caused his sudden, apparent respect for her. She doubted if it was anything good.

As the steam barge chugged away toward the shore, the darkened platform grew quiet and unexpectedly cold. Other than herself, only Scalps, Haynes, and a third man whom Lyssa didn't know remained on the platform. It quickly became too dark for Lyssa to work on the HEVA suit, even by the light of an electric lamp. She covered the suit with a tarp for the night. Reluctantly, she joined the three men inside the little utility shed where they played cards around a small table. They were using bullets, grenades, and energy weapon power packs for currency. A small, electric heater standing on the floor near the card table was the shack's only warmth.

Lyssa expected the men to expel her from their shack, but to her surprise, they moved aside and made room for her at the table near the heater. They didn't even say anything disparaging to her as she took the offered seat. The men finished their hand and then, without even asking, Scalps gave her a starting stake (ten pistol bullets and an energy pack) and dealt her in on the next hand.

Something had definitely changed today, but Lyssa didn't know what. Why were they suddenly treating her with respect? It wasn't until a couple hours later that she found out what it was all about – and none too soon, either. Lyssa was down to her last bullet and a bluff no one was buying when they heard the sound of a gunship descending from above.

Captain O'Connell

Maj. Tolbert let Erin land the plane.

When they got back to Sanctuary, Tolbert took them not to the service platform in the middle of the lake, but to Third Law's main headquarters. The mercenary company had chosen for their headquarters a converted terraforming rig. The rig had been left floating in the middle of the planet's only major ocean when Safe Harbor had left. Anchored to the seafloor many kilometers below, the rig was well outside of the planet's tenebricite shadow. It had a small power generating station and even a small runway. This was the offshore terraforming rig Erin had seen on her initial scans of the planet before being shot down that first day. It was here, at this very rig, where she'd originally intended to land the hardpointer. Now, many days later and in a different plane, Erin finally landed here.

By the time that Erin and Tolbert landed on the rig, it was midafternoon. Erin estimated that it must be nearly sundown where Lyssa and the hardpointer were, as that was several time zones to the east. Yet, to Erin and Tolbert, only about two-and-a-half hours had passed since they'd taken off that morning. To the two pilots, it was only midmorning. They'd flown so fast, as much as 2.6% the speed of light, that time had measurably slowed down for them.

Transtachyonic flight created a bubble universe which insulated travelers from the effects of time dilation, but normal, sublight flight was prone to the time dilation effects of extreme speeds. Time was weird, but Erin didn't really care about all of that. All Erin was thinking about was how badly she needed to pee.

Erin was mostly ignored by the pirates as she climbed down from the fighter's cockpit to the rig's deck and went off looking for a restroom. Everybody's attention was on Maj. Tolbert. Word of their flyby on the *Ready Sophia* had preceded their arrival. The Third Law Mercenaries cheered Tolbert and hailed her a hero. They chanted Tolbert's callsign, "Lefty." As Erin ducked into the first lav she found, she was pretty sure she caught a glimpse of the crowd carrying Tolbert on their shoulders.

A few minutes later, Erin emerged from the filthy lav feeling much relieved. She was surprised that no one seemed to care to keep an eye on her. Out on the ramp, Tolbert was standing on a munitions crate telling the story of their flyby and her "Darklands Sunrise" maneuver. The older pilot's long, black-and-gray hair drifted majestically upon the ocean breeze and her insectile, prosthetic eye seemed to look in all directions at once. In spite of herself, Erin stood at the back of the crowd and listened to the retelling of the tale, even though she'd been there. The crowd of mercenaries cheered Tolbert as she recounted it.

Erin heard a vaguely familiar male voice from behind her. "She's really popular," the voice said quietly. Erin had no doubt the speaker was addressing her.

She turned to see the tattooed face of Col. Landon Raith, the commander of the mercenaries and man who'd taken she and Lyssa captive. "She's a good pilot," Erin said.

"That she is," Raith sighed. He seemed resigned to something unpleasant, but Erin knew not what it could be. "Step into my office, Private Beanpole. I want to talk to you." And with that, the colonel turned and stepped through a hatchway into the rig's superstructure.

She hesitated for a moment, but ultimately decided that if he wished her harm, then refusing to follow him into his office wouldn't save her. Nervously, she followed.

Inside, she found a corridor leading deeper into the sprawling rig and a narrow, steep staircase leading upwards. Raith had gone up the stairs, so Erin followed. He stopped at the next level and entered a door which looked to have once read "SUPERINTENDENT" but had been sloppily crossed out and painted over with the letters "C.O."

Erin followed the colonel into the room but stopped just inside the door, subconsciously calculating her chances of making a hasty escape. She made no effort to shut the door as she took in the room. It was a messy office. It looked like it had previously belonged to someone deeply involved in the planetary terraforming project. Charts of the planet detailing everything from topography to rainfall, to temperature zones, to biomes hung from almost every square centimeter of wall space. More charts were piled in rolled-up stacks or crushed flat beneath stacks of heavier objects. Most of those heavier objects were highly technical-looking binders with names like Freshwater Phytoplankton: Introducing, Balancing, and Monitoring Procedures or Atmospheric Oxygen: Generation, Purification, and Isotope

Mixing Manual.

All of the charts and Manuals bore the Safe Harbor Terraforming Company's logo. The wall opposite the door had expansive windows with a view overlooking the small runway and the rig's main deck where several fighters, gunships, and even a big troopship sat parked. Beyond that, the vast ocean stretched away toward the western horizon.

In front of the windows was the only tidy thing in the office: Col. Raith's desk. The desk only had a data terminal, a couple of data pads, and a few neatly stacked papers in one corner. Next to the data terminal was an ornamental hand grenade (Erin assumed it was ornamental, anyway) with a paper tag hanging from its pin. The tag had a large number "1" printed on it and below the number were the words: "Complaint Department. Take a number."

"Close the door, Private Beanpole. Take a seat." Raith indicated the two, ratty chairs opposite his desk. "I promise you're safe here. I just want to talk to you."

Erin stood where she was beside the door. "I am a hardpointer captain with Noémie Charter Services. My name is either Erin or Captain O'Connell. I don't answer to 'Beanpole'."

Raith nodded. "Fair enough. Please, *Captain O'Connell*, take a seat."

Cautiously, Erin took a seat, but she didn't shut the door. "So what do you want to talk about?" She wondered if it had something to do with Tolbert's offering her a job earlier in the day. Was Raith going to lean on her to become a fighter pilot now too? If that was the case, then she'd have the same answer for Raith as she'd had for Tolbert earlier: a big, fat "no."

Raith reached into his desk drawer, pulled out a flask, and took a snort. He offered the flask over to Erin.

"No thanks. I don't drink."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Hmm, I never met a pilot that didn't drink before," Raith said.

"Well, now you have."

Raith shrugged. Then, he took another snort and returned the flask to his desk drawer. "I want to talk to you about the situation here on Sanctuary and how it pertains to you."

"I'm just a prisoner. I don't have anything to do with your little pocket war."

"Well, that's not entirely true. You're kinda the lynchpin of this whole thing."

That surprised Erin. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you've already heard a lot about the situation here on Sanctuary, right?"

"Bits and pieces..."

"You see, we've been here, stuck in a stalemate with Backwater for over six months. Our original contract with the Fourthers was only for three months. Fuel, ordinance, and food are running low not only for us but, I'm sure, for Villalobos as well. It's only a matter of time before this situation comes to a head."

"You mean like all-out warfare."

"Yeah. With civilian casualties and the whole works."

"Are you saying that Villalobos would kill the Fourthers?"

"I'm saying that he tried. The day you landed, while we were distracted fighting to defend you from Villalobos' fighters, he took the opportunity to launch an attack force against Pilgrim's Rest. They failed. We nearly shot their troopship down before it could get back under the safety of the *Ready Sophia*'s guns. But it showed us something. It showed us how desperate Villalobos and his crew are to end this conflict. You see, the Fourthers' legal claim to this planet depends on their maintaining a settlement here. Safe Harbor doesn't really care if Villalobos kills or removes the settlers, as long as they're removed from the planet."

"Are you telling me that a big company like Safe Harbor would condone the killing of a couple hundred villagers? Women, children, even infants?"

"You must be new to the Darklands. Shit like that happens all the time out here."

"I've lived in the Darklands my whole life. In fact, I'm from a planet here in the Backwater Cluster called Promisedland. And I've never heard of a company hiring mercenaries to kill a whole village."

"But you've heard of massacres of settlers by pirates, right?"

"Yeah, but those are raids..." Erin was starting to understand, but she didn't want to believe it.

"Officially, yeah, those are pirate raids. But if you look more closely at them, most of the time you'll find that the

'pirates' had some kind of dark money corporate backing. Villalobos doesn't officially work for Safe Harbor. If you asked Safe Harbor, they'd say 'Captain Ben Villa-who?'

"That's terrible."

"That's not all. You see, as I mentioned earlier, I want to see this whole thing wrapped up without bloodshed. But Backwater isn't the only threat looming over those dumbass settlers."

At first, Erin didn't understand what he was saying. And then it hit her like a slap in the face. "You mean...?"

"I'm afraid so. There's been dissent growing here in Third Law for some time now. A lot of the guys want to just do the job for Villalobos in exchange for letting us leave the system."

"By 'do the job,' you mean...?"

"Yeah, kill the settlers."

"Why not just allow Villalobos to remove them? Put them on another planet somewhere?"

"Vengeance. You see, Safe Harbor isn't the only company the Fourthers ripped off. When we took this job for the settlers at Pilgrim's Rest, Father Elijah paid our deposit and offered us a generous fee for a three-month job. He implied that fee would come from the mother church. These particular Fourthers failed to mention at the time that they were actually a splinter group not recognized by the Triple-F-Double-C. Now, we've been here for twice as long as we originally intended and we are in danger of missing our next job for a major client. Several guys have been killed on both sides during the course of this stupid, little war and it's almost all down to those goddamn cultists.

"Only thing that's keeping my guys from laying waste to that little shit speck of a village is my orders and the prospect of actually getting paid and off this mud ball soon. You see, it turns out that those slick Fourthers actually *do* have a way to pay us, after all."

Erin was pretty sure she could see where this was going. "They're paying you in lady, aren't they?"

Raith seemed surprised by this. "Did the Fourthers tell you that?"

"No. I figured it out for myself. They said they were growing coffee in their high-altitude fields, but all of their coffee says 'Product of Horse Gone Crazy' on it. Why would people who grow coffee need to import it? I'm not stupid. I know what Fourthers grow at high altitudes."

"Impressive. You're a pretty smart girl. And you seem to know a whole lot about the Fourthers..."

An uncomfortable silence.

"What are you implying?" Erin asked.

"I'm not stupid either, Captain O'Connell. I can figure things out for myself, too. I've heard about how comfortable you've made yourself with the Fourthers these past few days. Aside from being the only pilot I've ever met who'll turn down a free drink, you fit in suspiciously well with those Fourthers."

"I ain't no Fourthier," Erin said defensively. "How many Fourthers have you ever met that fly spaceplanes?"

"Of course you aren't. Not in the present tense, anyway."

Erin narrowed her eyes at him.

"I'm not judging. But I've been to your home planet. Promisedland is know for its little pocket communities of Fourthers out in the mountains. My point is that I know you don't want to see that bunch of ignorant hillbillies massacred any more than I do...probably even *less* than I do."

"So I think I see where I come in at: you want me to fly your lady shipment off this planet."

"Exactly. That's my offer to you. You fly the plane where we tell you, and you and your friend can go free."

"And our plane?"

"You can keep it. It's useless to us without you to fly it because of your QSP link to its computer."

Erin knew that was a lie. The plane was worth probably \$10-15 million on the black market. There were illegal, black market hangers where stolen planes could be chopped for parts. Also, Erin had heard that a good enough hacker could bypass a QuantumScale Processor link. She had no doubt that this warlord would keep the plane for himself. And losing a plane would put another black mark on her record, effectively ending her career. To say nothing of what would happen to her if she were caught in transit with a cargo of illicit narcotics...

"What you mean is I've got your promise (for what *that's* worth) that you'll let me return to Noémie with the hardpointer *if* I don't get caught transporting a freighter full of illegal narcotics. If I get caught, I go to prison for the rest of my life. Why would I take that kind of a stupid risk? Why not just dump your cargo into the nearest star and go home?"

Raith sighed. "Obviously, we wouldn't let you go alone. You'd have a squad of Third Law troops on the plane with you just to make sure you behaved yourself. And, we'd keep your mechanic as collateral until you made the delivery. As to your concerns about getting caught..." he looked to be considering something. Finally, he said, "Look, we can't get caught. The people I'm selling to basically own the police and have connections all over the Nexus Cluster."

"The Boaters. You're selling lady to the Boaters."

This seemed to surprise him for a second.

"I live on Gonaways Station, remember? Ever heard of it? The biggest station-world in Nexus? Everybody on Gonaways knows who the Boaters are."

"Of course. Sorry, I forgot."

Now, something else occurred to Erin. She hadn't thought of it since she'd first met Lyssa over a week ago, but it came back to her in that moment. Lyssa had mentioned that her brother had gotten them both expedited citizenship and good jobs on Gonaways. "If you're dealing with the Boaters, Colonel, I'd advise you to reconsider how you treat my mechanic."

"What?"

Erin had him on his back foot now. "Think about it: Lyssa is an Estrellan refugee, but check her passport. Her citizenship is Gonian. And she has a good job as an aviation mechanic on the Noémie ramp. Gonaways doesn't give citizenship to Estrellan refugees. Who's the only organization on Gonaways that can get a refugee expedited citizenship and a good job?"

"Ah, fuck..."

"That's right, Colonel. Lyssa's a Boater." Erin wasn't sure that Lyssa was a Boater herself, but her brother almost certainly was. No need to trouble Raith with that little distinction, though. "And one of your guys knocked her tooth out yesterday. Lucky for you, she's a little crazy and she thinks her new, gold tooth makes her look cool."

"I promise you that man will be punished," Raith said. Even he seemed afraid of the Boaters. "Unfortunately, it'll have to wait a couple days. There's some things goin' on here in Third Law that I have to let play out first. I can't come down hard on any of the men right now."

"You don't have to punish him; just keep him away from my mechanic. Reassign him back here to this rig. Get him away from us."

"That much I can do tonight. I'll send orders."

Erin couldn't hide her surprise. She had bent Raith to her will. "Thank you, Colonel."

"You're welcome. Now, as I was saying, there are some things goin' on in Third Law I need to deal with and I could use your help with them."

This worried Erin. He was expecting a price for Lyssa's safety. She should have seen that coming. Now, *she* was on the back foot. "What do you need my help with, other than running your drugs?"

Raith sighed again. He clearly was a man with a lot on his mind. "I need your help with Major Tolbert."

Erin didn't know what to make of this. "What?"

"Do you know how mercenary companies choose their leaders? We vote. And this job has gone so badly that a lot of the guys are talking about a vote of no confidence in my leadership."

"And you think Tolbert is planning to challenge you?"

"I know so. There's been scuttlebutt amongst the grunts since before you arrived. But now that we've got a hardpointer, things are accelerating here in the organization. As soon as that hardpointer is flying again, the guys will want to get the lady off to the buyer so we can get paid. But that's the rub. I've got a cease-fire with Villalobos— correction, I *had* a cease-fire with Villalobos until today. That's what Tolbert's little flyby stunt was all about: antagonizing our enemy, weakening me, and strengthening herself."

"I saw how the men cheered Tolbert, but how does that weaken you?"

"It weakens me because the cease-fire is unpopular among the grunts."

"But you need the cease-fire if you want to get the lady off the planet. Otherwise, Villalobos will shoot me down before I can get the hardpointer into transtach. What about a cease-fire is making your grunts mad? Do they just crave violence?" Erin made this last statement sarcastically, thinking that surely the peaceful situation was better for all.

"That's part of it," Raith surprised her. "The men do crave action. We've been stuck in this stalemate for a long time. Villalobos' crew isn't strong enough to take the planet and we're not strong enough to run them off. Like two armies

staring at one another from their respective trenches. But the bigger part of the whole thing is the cost of the cease-fire."

Erin was beginning to see the whole picture now. "You bought Villalobos off, didn't you? With the only currency you have: the lady? Right?"

"Exactly. Before today, I'd been forced to promise Villalobos and his company almost half of our lady shipment. After yours and Major Tolbert's little flyby, Villalobos was pissed. He called me up and threatened to just nuke the whole planet, Safe Harbor be damned. He says he has six nukes on his ship. He might be bluffing, but I can't take that chance. I convinced him to continue to honor the cease-fire, but it cost us dearly: an extra 5,000kg of lady."

"And that means less pay for you and your guys."

"Exactly. Major Tolbert gives them a symbolic victory and forces me to give them a pay cut."

Erin felt a little guilty for her part in the whole thing, but only because it had endangered the innocent settlers of Pilgrim's Rest. "I'm sorry. I didn't know all of that was going on. I didn't even know what Tolbert had in mind when she told me to get in the cockpit."

"I'm not blaming you. I'm blaming her. She did it on purpose and now it looks like she has plenty of popularity to win the election to colonel."

Erin asked the obvious question: "And what would happen to you if she became colonel."

"Oh, nothing too bad. I'd be demoted to either captain or major in charge of a squad of drop troopers. I'm a pretty skilled ground forces commander. The real question is what it would mean for your Fourther friends."

"They're not my friends."

"Fine, whatever. The point is that Major Tolbert doesn't care about the Fourthers. She's ruthless and cruel. She, like a growing number of the people in the company, want to just let Villalobos have the Fourthers."

"You mean they want to just stand aside and let Villalobos kill the settlers?"

"No, I think more like forced relocation to another planet. Once the settlers are off the planet, Backwater's contract with Safe Harbor will be complete. Villalobos can contact his employer, get paid, and fuck all the way off."

"So...not to sound harsh or anything, but why don't you just let him do that? As long as the settlers won't be harmed...you *did* say you wanted to end this without bloodshed."

"Only problem—and Major Tolbert knows this—is that that plan would lead to a lot of bloodshed. There's something on this planet far more valuable than Backwater's contract with Safe Harbor."

Erin understood. "A hardpoint freighter full of lady."

"Exactly. Turning over the settlers while the lady is still on the planet would only give Villalobos hostages to trade for the lady."

Erin didn't think that Tolbert could be that stupid. "Then why does Tolbert (as you claim) want to do that?" She was pretty sure this guy was lying to her and her tolerance for his lies was shrinking with each falsehood he told.

"Well, the major has other ideas about how to get the lady off the planet. She thinks if we send you and the hardpointer up with the lady, our fighters and gunships can keep the *Ready Sophia* at bay long enough for you to get into transtach. Just as a hammer only sees the world as a series of nails, Major Tolbert is a fighter pilot who sees air power as the solution to any problem."

Erin crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. She didn't like Tolbert much more than she liked Raith, but this reductionist assessment of Tolbert's motives rang false. She was sure he was trying to manipulate her. But why did it matter so much what she thought?

Raith sighed and then continued: "But once the lady is gone to the buyer, Major Tolbert thinks she can trade the settlers to Villalobos for our safe passage out of the system. Safe Harbor gets their planet back, Blackwater gets their payment for removing the settlers, and we get paid. That's how it works in theory, anyway."

"You get paid for a job you didn't do. There's a lot that could go wrong with that idea." Erin stated the obvious, not that she believed anything that Raith had said.

"And that's why I need your help."

Here it comes, Erin thought. This pompous pirate thinks he can manipulate me into helping with his internal politics. Big ol' NOPE on that one.

"My plan of entering into a joint venture with Backwater might not be as profitable, but it has a higher probability of ending without bloodshed. You may not realize it, but you and the hardpointer you brought to this planet have given us the first taste of hope we've had in a long time. Your word *could* carry a lot of weight around here if you were to endorse

my plan over Major Tolbert's. Maybe try to help the guys see that Tolbert's plan will just get a lot of them killed while mine will allow us to break even on this job and walk away claiming victory."

Erin scoffed. This guy was just worried about losing his spot as top dog among a bunch of idiot pirates fighting an unknown war on an unknown planet in a region of the Darklands so remote it's literally called the Backwater Cluster.

Raith continued, "You know more about what it's gonna take to get that hardpointer off the planet and into transtach than anybody here. And, since you were a part of the flyby on the *Ready Sophia* today, that gives you even more respectability with the guys."

Erin was getting annoyed with this pompous, petty warlord. "My respectability comes from this uniform, these wings pinned to my chest, and these bars on my shoulder. Ever since I landed here, you guys have treated me and Lyssa like garbage. You don't respect me or my mechanic. You had me tied to a ladder and tried to have me scalped. Remember that?"

"Captain O'Connell, I'm truly sor – "

" – Can your apology!" Erin was truly mad at this jerk now. And she wasn't interested in hearing any more of his lies or apologies. She grabbed the first heavy object within her reach (which turned out to be the ornamental hand grenade) off his desk. "You've taken us prisoner, used us as slave labor, taken our plane, given us stupid nicknames, threatened us, and now you ask for my help with your stupid internal squabbles? Go to heck!"

Erin drew her arm back, intending to throw the heavy desk ornament, but someone grabbed it from her hand. She turned in her chair to see none other than Major Tolbert standing behind her.

"I'll hold on to that," Tolbert said, "unless you want to get us all killed."

Erin was beyond surprised. She found herself wishing she had closed the door after all. Then, the last part of what Tolbert had said hit her: *...unless you want to get us all killed.* "Wait," Erin said, checking her rage, "is that grenade real?"

"Of course it is," Tolbert said. The major held the weapon up and examined it with her prosthetic eye. Erin wondered what all she could see with that eye. "And by the way: when you want to tell someone to go to hell, don't say 'go to heck.' It just sounds weak."

"How long have you been listening in, Major?" Raith asked his subordinate.

"Pretty much the whole time, sir." Tolbert handed the grenade back to Raith and turned to Erin: "With all due respect to the colonel, I have no desire to take his job away. And *even if* the men did hold an election, and *even if* they selected me to lead them, I would never sell the Fourthers out. The only way we can call this mission a success is if we drive off the pirates and secure Sanctuary for its rightful owners, the Fourthers."

Erin knew she was being lied to again. She really didn't care anymore. She didn't want to be pulled into these pirates' internal politics.

"...But hypothetically speaking, how long would it take you from the time you got into orbit to get that hardpointer into transtach?" Tolbert asked.

"She's asking because that's how long our fighters would need to provide you air support," Raith said. "She's thinking tactically about how to get the lady out with her plan, just like I said earlier."

Erin didn't like either of these two and she didn't like either of their plans. She didn't care about their shipment of lady. She didn't care who ran this stupid pirate club. She didn't like Lyssa's hare-brained plan to escape either, but she disliked it less than any plan that helped any pirate faction. Erin made her decision right then. Lyssa's plan of stealing the plane back was stupid, but Lyssa was right; they needed to escape.

Both Raith and Tolbert were looking at her expectantly. Erin realized that she still hadn't answered Tolbert's question about how long it would take her to get the hardpointer into transtach once in space. She sighed. "Well, once we're in space, I just need time enough to get aligned to an outbound heading and charge the TFG."

"What's a TFG?" Raith asked.

"Transtachyonic Field Generator," Tolbert said.

"It's the thingy that makes the plane go faster than sunshine," Erin couldn't keep the bite out of her voice.

Tolbert smirked slightly at this. "How long do you need to charge your TFG?"

"As long as we're able to get all three engines running – and that's an *if* – then it'd only take about thirty minutes to charge the TFG. With two engines, about forty-five minutes. And with only one: an hour and a half."

"Why can't you just charge this TFG thing on the ground before you take off?" Raith asked.

"Capacitor would overheat," Tolbert answered. "With the military ones you can do that, but these civvie ones begin

discharging energy pretty quick. And they discharge most of it in the form of heat."

Erin explained further: "The capacitor's apt to melt if you leave a charge in it for too long. And once it gets too hot, it'll release all its remaining energy in one big, uncontrolled burst."

"Boom," Tolbert put a final point on it.

"Lot of pilots are gonna die on both sides if we have to engage in a thirty minute dogfight," Raith said. "And that's best case scenario. *Now*, do you see why my strategy of a joint venture with Backwater is the better plan?"

Erin had a feeling that this last was meant for neither herself nor Tolbert. It occurred to her that there must be several people eavesdropping from the hallway.

* * *

Erin had learned a lot that day, but what she had mainly learned was that Lyssa had been right ever since that first night on this forsaken dung heap of a planet: they needed to escape.

Both Raith and Tolbert saw Erin to the gunship that was to take her back to Pilgrim's Rest, neither apparently trusting the other to be alone with her. Just before she climbed aboard the idling gunship, Raith handed her something. It was a heavy object in a small, plastiform box. Erin knew right away what it was. It was really two things in one. It was simultaneously one last attempt by Raith to win Erin over to his side and it was (more literally) a gun.

Erin opened the box and looked inside. It wasn't just any gun. There was Erin's own slug chucker which had been taken from her the first day she'd arrived on this stupid planet. As she beheld her own weapon which she'd never expected to see again, Raith shouted to her over the roar of the gunship's idling engines: "NO DARKLANDS PILOT SHOULD BE WITHOUT THEIR SIDEARM!"

"SOMETHING LIKE THAT!" Erin shouted back as she checked the gun to see if there were any bullets in it. She wasn't surprised to find the weapon empty.

"THE BOYS SAID IT WAS EMPTY WHEN THEY TOOK IT OFF YOU THAT FIRST DAY! I LOOKED IN MUNITIONS, BUT WE DON'T USE THAT CIVVIE CALIBER!"

Erin doubted if Raith had looked very hard, or even at all. "YEAH, IT WAS EMPTY! THAT'S FINE!" she shouted back. She knew she was being rude, but she wasn't going to thank the pirate leader for giving back something that was rightfully hers to begin with. Also, it annoyed her having to yell over the gunship's engines. Erin slid the empty gun into the shoulder holster she'd been wearing empty all day. Now, she at least looked like a real Darklands pilot. She looked like the type of pilot who braved the unsettled space at the farthest frontier of human exploration. She looked like the type of pilot who flew in pirate-infested space. She looked (and felt) like the type of pilot who would rather die than live as a pawn in someone else's game.

She climbed aboard the gunship and took one of the six spartan, canvas seats. None of the other seats were taken, so she guessed she would be the only passenger back to Pilgrim's Rest. She guessed wrong. As Raith made to close the door, Tolbert held her hand up to stop him. The major said something to her commanding officer which Erin couldn't hear over the roar of the gunship's engine. Erin watched as both pirate leaders stood aside and a couple of grunts climbed in carrying what was clearly a body bag. The grunts secured the body bag to the deck at Erin's feet and then climbed back out the open door.

Tolbert leaned in and shouted: "THAT'S CAPTAIN ELOF! HE SHOULD RIDE OUT ON A NOÉMIE PLANE WITH YOU! YOU'LL MAKE SURE HE GETS BACK TO HIS PEOPLE?!"

Erin nodded.

"FRATERNITY OF PILOTS!" Tolbert tried to sound solemn over the engines' roar.

Erin nodded again and Tolbert seemed satisfied as she slid the gunship's door shut. *Fraternity of pilots, my butt!* Erin thought angrily. *If it weren't for you jerks, Captain Elof would still be alive! You can all go to heck!* Erin wished she could swear like Lyssa.

As she felt the gunship lift off the landing pad, Erin thought about all she'd seen and learned that day. Sitting alone with the remains of Senior Airman Radcliff Elof, she contemplated how easily she could have ended up in just such a bag—or might still. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Sometimes, an ocean of melancholy would wash over her, and she often found herself longing for the peaceful undertow of death. But not at this moment. Now, for the first time in a long time, she had someone else depending on her. She had a friend.

She felt the aircraft turn east. During the ride back towards the distant mountain valley where her only friend undoubtedly worried about her, she thought of Lyssa's idea to escape. As the gunship crossed into darkness, Erin began

putting some ideas together. By the time she felt the gunship descending into the darkened valley, she had some ideas that might work and several ideas that might not. And she had a lot of questions for her mechanic friend.

How Small We Are

The card game wasn't going well for Lyssa, but it was something to do while she waited for Erin to get back. Lyssa was down to her last bullet and a bluff that no one was buying when they heard the sound of a gunship descending from above.

Lyssa abandoned her useless hand of cards and rushed out to meet the landing gunship. She hoped Erin would be aboard, and she wasn't disappointed. When the door slid open, there was the unmistakable, lanky shape of her friend silhouetted against the gunship's interior lights. Still in her Noémie pilot's uniform, Erin climbed down from the gunship. Her golden curls seemed to glow as they were lit from behind. Lyssa was so happy to see her friend that she ran across the small service platform and wrapped Erin in a bear hug. To hell with what the idiot pirates thought!

Vaguely, over the roar of the gunship's engines, Lyssa heard Haynes say something. She couldn't make out what was said, but whatever it was made Scalps laugh. *Fuckin' jerks ain't got no more brains than a pouch full of dick holes!*

Lyssa hugged her friend so tightly that she almost didn't notice the hard object digging into her chest as she hugged her. Almost. As she pulled away, Lyssa looked down and was surprised to see that Erin was wearing her pilot's gun in her holster again. Lyssa doubted if there were any bullets in it, but at least her friend looked like a legit Darklands aviator again. Over the gunship's noisy engines (which Lyssa's refined ear identified as Jaskowski 337s, but they were the newer ones with a cheaper fuel induction system) Lyssa shouted to Erin: "WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE TODAY?! HOW DID YOU GET YOUR GUN BACK?!"

"I'LL EXPLAIN LATER!" Erin answered her. "FIRST, WE GOTTA GET HIM!" Erin pointed to what could only be a body bag lashed to the gunship's deck.

"WHO THE FUCK IS IN THE LEFTOVERS POUCH?!"

"THAT'S CAPTAIN ELOF! HE'S GOING HOME WITH US! ON A NOÉMIE PLANE!"

The realization that this bag contained all that was left of the pilot they'd originally come here to help, surprised Lyssa. She just nodded.

The men in the gunship's side turrets climbed down and prepared to help with the body. But a single, angry glance from Erin halted the men in their tracks. "HE'S ONE OF OURS!" Erin shouted to them. Lyssa wasn't sure if Erin was shouting just to be heard over the engine or if she was shouting out of anger as well. From the way the two gunners backed away, it looked like they weren't sure either.

"WE'LL CARRY HIM FROM HERE!" Lyssa said to them.

* * *

A few minutes later, after they had unloaded Capt. Elof's body and Scalps had waved the gunship off, the platform was strangely cold and silent once again. To Lyssa's surprise, Haynes had boarded and left with the gunship. Scalps and the other man had returned to their warm shack, their cold beer, and their card game. They had left Erin and Lyssa alone on the platform with Capt. Elof's body.

Though the night was cold, it was peaceful on the platform. There were no clouds in the sky and only one of the planet's four moons was out. This moon was a small, dim, ice moon which blotted out very few stars and seemed to make the night even colder every time Lyssa looked at it. Farther away, the other three constellations of the Darklands twinkled in the night sky. Lyssa, a born spacer, could easily make out the recurve shape of the Giant's Backbone Cluster where people were dying every day in a pointless war that no one understood.

She could make out the cluster of Nexus where her new home, Gonaways Station, seemed so close and so far away at the same time. And she could make out the Cable's End Cluster where her brother was doing some contract work for a hotel on some planet called Distortion. He was overseeing some kind of security upgrade on the hotel's servers. She remembered the day he'd left for Distortion aboard a starhopper. He'd been nervous about the job, but he was excited about getting to go planetside. He wanted to see animals. Lyssa had often wondered where her brother got his interest in animals. After all, he was a computer guy and a spacer. Lyssa looked up at the stars of Cable's End, wondering which one was Distortion's sun.

The constellations looked so different from here than they did from the Nexus Cluster. It was weird to her that she

couldn't see the familiar shape of the Backwater Cluster because she was actually *inside* that cluster now. She felt cold and far from home.

Erin, sitting solemnly beside her, broke into Lyssa's thoughts: "What are you thinking about?"

"How small we are."

"Hmm..." Erin said. Neither woman said anything for several more minutes. Finally, Erin said: "We need to get Captain Elof into somewhere cold. Any reason we can't turn the hardpointer's baggage hold into a freezer?"

"Should be able to. Plane won't fly without the control card, but I believe we can adjust environmental controls in the hold. And on battery power, the plane can keep him cold for years."

They got to work. As they worked inside the hardpointer and out of earshot from the pirates, Erin told Lyssa all about the very eventful day she'd had flying with Tolbert and the flyby on the *Ready Sophia*. She told Lyssa of her conversation with Raith, his plans to finance his motley band of morons by selling a very large quantity of lady to the Boaters. She told Lyssa of Raith's possible removal from command and Tolbert's likely being his replacement.

The prospect of Tolbert taking command frightened Lyssa most of all. When Lyssa said as much to Erin, Erin shrugged it off. "They're both petty warlords. One's as bad as the other." Erin clearly didn't understand; Tolbert was a dangerous sociopath.

Erin finished telling Lyssa about the rest of her day: how she'd gotten her gun back, how Tolbert had given her Capt. Elof's remains to take back, and how she *might* have told Raith that Lyssa was a Boater.

Lyssa laughed. "They believed that shit? Guess that explains why they been treating me with more respect this afternoon."

"Yeah. I sold it pretty well." Erin laughed a nervous, little laugh. She seemed to be relieved.

Wait... Lyssa wondered, *did Erin think I was a Boater?*

By this point, they were done with their labors. Radcliff Elof's remains were in a small, freezing hold on a Noémie spaceplane, ready to go home. The two friends were sitting in the galley of their plane. It was cold in the plane, but it was warmer than being out on the platform and was more companionable than sharing the utility shack with the mercenaries.

Erin put on a kettle of what Noémie unironically called tea. It was basically just brown, flavorless water, nothing like what they'd had when she was little back on Promisedland. She handed Lyssa a cup of the tea-like substance and then slunk furtively to the crew door. She peeked out and made sure that Scalps and his crony were still in their little creep shack. Then, she closed the spaceplane's crew door and returned to the galley where Lyssa sat watching her with an intrigued look on her face. Now confident that they were alone, Erin told Lyssa about the long think she'd had while riding back aboard the gunship with her dead colleague lashed to the deck at her feet.

"I think you were right that first night," Erin began, "when you said we needed to find a way to escape. I've got some ideas how we might be able to make it happen."

Lyssa sipped her tea, wishing it was beer. "I've been thinking about it for days, and I've got a few ideas myself..."

* * *

By the time they had hashed together a plan of escape, Lyssa estimated it must be nearing midnight. The plan wasn't complete, but it was a start. They needed to steal the control card, steal the plane, find a way to start the engines without the Auxiliary Power Unit, get in the air, get into space, charge the TFG, and get into transtachyonic flight. Once the plane was in transtach, they would be home free, but up until that point they would be vulnerable.

Erin had figured out the flying part, how to get away from the pirates once in the air, but charging the TFG would required Lyssa's mechanical know-how. To charge the Transtachyonic Field Generator, they would have to divert one or more of the engines' energy output from providing thrust to charging the TFG's capacitor. With reduced thrust output, the hardpointer would be even more vulnerable to attack, unless they could find someplace in the solar system where they could fly and none of their enemies could follow. It had been Lyssa to suggest a place where only they could fly and how the hardpointer could manage it.

The biggest part they didn't have yet was how they were going to get their hands on the control card. It was still at the bottom of a lake more than a kilometer deep. Thus far, none of Third Law goons had proven up to the task of retrieving it. Even once the control card was retrieved, Erin and Lyssa weren't sure how they were going to steal it.

But the plan they had was a good start. They would figure out the rest later. For now, it had been a long day and they were both very tired. They knew they had missed the steam barge back to land. They made ready to sleep in their

bunks aboard 788NC when, from outside the plane, there came a "Whoop!"

"What was that?" Lyssa asked as she went to the crew door and opened it. Out on the platform, Scalps and his crony had emerged from their creep shack and were looking at a dimly lantern-lit shape out on the water. It was a small sailboat less than a hundred meters from the platform.

Erin felt she already knew who it was. She sighed. She was about to answer Lyssa's question when a man's voice shouted, "Ahoy they platform! Be good enough to lend a hand with the lines?"

"Ah, shoot," Erin said. It was none other than Brother Azariah.

Lyssa laughed. In a low voice that only Erin could hear, she teased: "Looks like your 'boyfriend' has come to save us." Then, she laughed again.

"Oh, great. My hero."

Lyssa laughed again at Erin's stalker-related misery, but presently another shape moved in the small sailboat's bow. By the dim light of the lantern, Erin couldn't make out who it was until the man spoke. "Captain Mackinaw send us. Pick up ladies. I throw line. You catch!" the man in the bow shouted to the platform in broken Gonian. It was Matty Moss.

The expression on Lyssa's face changed immediately from amusement to exasperation. Now, it was Erin's turn to have a laugh at her friend's expense. "Oh, look, Lyssa. *Your* boyfriend has come to 'pick up ladies'." Erin clutched her hands at her breast in mock helplessness. "We're rescued."

"Our heroes."

Lyssa's Big Mouth

The next day, Lyssa was back out at the platform with too little sleep. She was showing yet another goon how to use the manual valves on the HEVA suit's rebreather. This one didn't even get far enough to start practicing his search pattern before he lost control of the mixture and nearly suffocated in the suit's hypoxic environment. Lyssa stood well away from the man as his comrades rescued him from the suit, her machinist's hammer at the ready.

"Idiots," she said, not realizing she'd said it aloud.

"It ain't easy," said a voice beside her. She recognized the voice even before she turned to see Sgt. Scalps standing there. How had such a big man managed to inch so close to her without her realizing it?

"It ain't that goddamn complicated," Lyssa felt pride-bound to defend the work she'd done modifying the suit. "Your guys are just dumber than a bag of pickles."

"If we had a better mechanic, maybe it would be easier to use..."

Lyssa knew that Scalps was intentionally goading her, but she couldn't resist. "If we had somebody to wear the suit that wasn't as stupid as you and your goons, maybe it would work." Only after she said it did Lyssa realize that everyone was staring at her.

"There's a lot o' shit to do all at once," the guy still in the suit said. He was sitting on the ground with the suit's crystalanium canopy standing open above his head. He had an oxygen mask over his mouth. "Watch these gauges, flip those valves, search for a tiny piece of circuit board in the mud."

"That's three things," Lyssa retorted. She walked to where the practice search pattern was set up on the platform's deck. "You can't handle three things? Like this: First, check your gauges." Lyssa held her left forearm up to her face, pantomiming the suit's wearer checking the gauges. "Second, adjust your mixtures." She pantomimed making a small adjustment to one of the valves. "Third, take a step and look around for the control card." She took a step on the search grid and scanned the deck before her. "No control card? Repeat the process. It really is that simple. You guys are just rushing it, trying to cut corners and search two or three squares between checking your mixtures. You lose control of the gas mixture and you pass out. Only thing is: down there on the bottom of the lake, there won't be nobody to help you."

Lyssa didn't like the way they were all looking at her.

"Okay, Ruiz," Scalps said, "you've convinced me. You're hired. You're doing the dive tomorrow morning."

"What?!" Lyssa exclaimed. Several of the pirates laughed at her. Only too late was she realizing her folly. She looked out at the gently lapping lake surface. She hated that water. She knew there was something in that water and she knew it was watching her. "I can't do that dive," she protested. "That suit's too heavy. I can barely stand up in it!"

"Won't the suit be lighter in the water?" This oh-so-helpful contribution came from the medic who'd fabricated her gold tooth the other day.

Lyssa looked at Scalps. He just raised an eyebrow at her. *Fuck, Lyssa thought, he's right. It will be lighter in the water.*

"Better get yourself a good night's sleep tonight, Ruiz. Tomorrow, you're goin' into the water and if you don't come up with that control card, then your girlfriend will be useless to us...at least as a pilot. I'm sure the boys can find some use for her."

Lyssa heard several lecherous chuckles from the men around the platform as she eyed the HEVA suit nervously. Like it or not, she was going to have to do the dive and do it right. There was more than her own life hanging in the balance.

The Ol' Switcheroo

The rest of that day, Lyssa found her nerves too tightly wound to even think about the dive or the HEVA suit. She knew she should put the suit on and at least try to practice the search pattern, but she needed to get her mind off it. Instead, she spent a couple hours directing the welding together of a steel descent trolley. The trolley would attach to one of the carbon fiber support cables which anchored the platform to the lake bottom more than a kilometer below. Tomorrow, when Lyssa put on the HEVA suit, climbed aboard the trolley, and released the brake, it would run along the cable all the way to the bottom. Lyssa really didn't like the idea of more than a kilometer of water between herself and the surface.

Once the trolley was assembled, she climbed into the maintenance mech's cockpit, slid her arms into the control sleeves, and began its engine startup sequence. In the big mech, designed for mounting wings and engines to spaceplanes, Lyssa crossed the small service platform in only two strides. She took a subtle joy in watching the pirates scurry out of her way. With a single swipe of the mech's massive arm, she could send most of the men flying into the water. Let whatever was in that water eat them! She was tempted. She'd always loved piloting mechs. Inside a mech, she never felt weak or small. Inside a mech, she was large, powerful, strong. Piloting mech suits was one of the first things that had attracted Lyssa to learning to be a mechanic.

She picked up the HEVA suit easily with one of the mech's massive liftarms. The HEVA suit was bulky in its own right, but in the hands of the mech, it looked like a child's doll. She gently set the HEVA suit onto the newly assembled descent trolley and stood back as a couple of the pirates used chains to secure it to the trolley. That done, Lyssa moved back in with her mech and picked up the whole trolley, HEVA suit and all. She activated the Mech's thrusters and lifted slowly off the platform to hover a few meters in the air. She turned the suit to face the shimmering lake surface.

She wasn't as worried about going into the water in the big, powerful mech. She'd like to see something try to mess with her now. She'd cut its goddamn head off with the mech's plasma torch. *Bring it on, motherfucker!* she thought at the deceptively placid lake water. Too bad the mech couldn't be modified to work on the bottom like the HEVA suit. She piloted the mech over the edge of the platform and lowered it into the water. Even in spite of the mech's seeming indestructibility, she couldn't help but feel a little frightened as the water came up over the mech's cockpit canopy.

Under the water, she piloted the mech to one of the several carbon fiber anchor cables near the edge of the platform. She secured the trolley's guide wheel around the cable. She made extra sure the trolley's brake was secure. Cautiously, she let go of the trolley and was relieved to see its brake hold it in place. It would be a very bad thing to drop the trolley with their only HEVA suit chained to it. Next, she secured an extra safety chain from the trolley to the underside of the service platform.

She backed away from the trolley and looked up. The HEVA suit, chained to the trolley, stood in what looked to be about waist-deep water at the edge of the platform. Tomorrow, the HEVA suit would ride that trolley all the way to the bottom of the lake. With her inside.

Lyssa tried not to think about that.

That job done, she looked through the murk and could barely make out the shape of the hardpointer's belly in the water. She needed to inspect the repairs on the plane. Ever since that first day when something had *touched* her in the water (it made her shiver just to think about it), she'd been unwilling to go back into the water. Instead of carrying out the repairs herself, she'd just programmed the mech's "Bot Mode" to carry out the repairs. Mechs like this one had sophisticated onboard computers which could allow the machine to perform basic tasks without a pilot. She was confident that the mech had done good work, but she just couldn't allow people (particularly Erin) to fly aboard 788NC until she personally inspected the repairs and put her guild stamp in the plane's logbook.

She piloted the mech to the underside of the hardpointer and began inspecting all of the new patches. It wasn't long before she began to get that same feeling that she was being watched. She was having a sense of déjà vu as she floated beneath the freighter looking up at the newly repaired metal. But this time, she was in a big, powerful mech.

She rolled the mech over to face downward, half expecting to find some monster beneath her. Instead, all she saw was light slanting away into the darkness below. She repressed a sickening sense of vertigo, looking down into the abyss.

She couldn't see anything, but she felt sure that abyss was looking back at her.

I'm not crazy, she reassured herself, mostly sure she believed it. *There's something there, I know it.* Inside the mech's cockpit, she brought her fists together. The mech mirrored her action, bringing its powerful liftarms together in a mighty *CLACK!* which was sharp and loud in the water. Then, she ignited the mech's plasma torch and extended its beam all the way to its two-meter maximum length. The beam of emitted plasma burned at around 25,000°C and glowed with an intense, white light. All around the beam, bubbles formed and rapidly floated upward as the lake water boiled around it. "Come on, bitch!" Lyssa exclaimed aloud.

And just as suddenly as the feeling of being watched had come upon her, Lyssa felt it leave. Whatever had been watching her from the abyss was gone now. Lyssa had no way of explaining how she knew it, but she was sure it was gone. She shut the plasma torch off and stared into the darkness below for perhaps a minute more before resuming her inspection.

* * *

Later on, satisfied the repairs on the plane's underside had been completed to her satisfaction, Lyssa was sitting in the hardpointer's cockpit. She was making a notation of the inspection in the plane's maintenance logbook. The mech was parked back where it belonged atop the plane's fuselage, secured to its hardpoints, and folded down into its transport configuration.

While making out the log entry, Lyssa felt her eye drawn to the empty control card slot. Tomorrow, she was going to have to risk her life to retrieve that card from the bottom of the lake. Part of her felt annoyed at Erin for having thrown that control card into the water, even if she understood why.

Lyssa could see the card vividly in her mind. It was little more than a thin circuit board about the size of her hand. Even though the card was proprietary to Noémie, Lyssa was confident that she could just build one if she had all the stuff. Not that it would do them any good. The hard part would be programming the new card. Programming a counterfeit control card to be accepted by a plane's central flight computer would take a real genius hacker.

Lyssa stared at the empty control card slot. She knew just such a hacker. Her brother, Marcio, could do anything with computers. He worked in information security. His job was catching hackers, but Lyssa knew that only a really good hacker could catch a really good hacker. *If only Marcio were here, I could make a new control card and he could program it*, Lyssa thought. But ultimately she was glad he was safe and sound in his nice, cushy office job on some planet called Distortion. She was glad he wasn't surrounded by big, stupid men with guns who might snap at any moment.

An idea came to her.

She and Erin hadn't yet figured out how they were going to get the control card away from the pirates after it was recovered. But what if she never *gave* them the card in the first place? She thought about it for a moment, then she put the maintenance logbook away and went to the back of the plane. She climbed up the catwalk atop Engine No. 2 and walked all the way to the back of the tail. She opened a small access hatch and wedged herself up into the APU bay. These were tight quarters even for someone as small as Lyssa. She could only imagine how claustrophobic it must be for some of the larger, male mechanics who had to come up here to service an APU.

In the cramped, dusty compartment, Lyssa lay on her back barely able to move. Her face was mere centimeters from the protective cover over the APU's control computer. She scowled at the words "Built in Milky Way" on the defective computer's cover. She examined the screws holding the cover in place and snaked a universal screwdriver out of the thigh pocket of her coveralls. It took some doing in the cramped space, but she got all of the screws out and exposed the control computer's shorted and useless circuit board.

That'll do.

"Come to mama," she said aloud. She instantly regretted opening her mouth as some crud fell off the machinery all around her and into her mouth.

Ten minutes later, Lyssa emerged back down onto the catwalk over engine No. 2 with her prize: a dead circuit board.

* * *

That night, as soon as Lyssa managed to get Erin alone, she glanced cautiously around and showed her what she'd done. Washing the evening dishes had become one of the few opportunities they routinely had to talk alone.

At first, Erin couldn't believe what Lyssa had just handed her. She moved closer to the lantern's light and examined it more closely. "How did you get this?"

"It's good, huh?"

"Um, yeah, but won't they notice it's gone? And when did they even go down to get it?"

"They won't and they didn't." Lyssa said, obviously proud of herself.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's a fake. I made it just today when nobody was lookin'. I ripped the circuit board out the APU control computer (since it's fried anyway) and used the parts to make a counterfeit control card. Looks just like the real thing, though, don't it?"

"Yeah," Erin examined it even more closely in the dim light. "Coulda fooled me."

"Any decent mechanic would spot it for a fake. Luckily, I'm the only decent mechanic on this shit spatter planet."

"What are you gonna do with it?"

"Before I come back up, soon's I recover the real one, I'm gonna switch them. I figure I hide the fake card in one of the HEVA suit's outer pockets on the way down. Then, after I find the real card, I switch them. Come back up with the fake one in my hand and give it over to the pirates. The ol' switcheroo."

"Wait...?" Erin was putting it together now. "*You're* making the dive?! Since when? Why?"

"Yeah, apparently so." This part gave Lyssa butterflies in her stomach. "First thing in the morning."

The Great Beer Heist

As it turned out, Lyssa didn't make the dive the next morning, after all.

In the morning, Lyssa got dressed, as usual, in the cleaner of the two sets of coveralls she'd brought with her. She sniffed them as she put them on and was pleasantly surprised to find they didn't stink. Erin had washed them for her the previous day. Lyssa was glad that if she was going to be trapped inside the stupid HEVA suit all day, at least she wouldn't be smelling several days of own body odor.

Shortly thereafter, Matty came by, just as he usually did. Lyssa expected that he would have his usual cup of coffee with them and then they would be off to the steam barge. She was none-too-eager to climb into that HEVA suit and go to the bottom of the lake where all sorts of dangers awaited her from pressure and darkness to dangers she didn't even want to imagine. There was certainly something lurking in that lake and for whatever reason, it had taken a special interest in her. It wasn't her imagination, she was sure of it.

Lyssa estimated there was a 70% chance that HEVA suit would become her coffin and the lake bottom her final resting place.

She hoped her brother would understand.

But Matty brought with him a reprieve for Lyssa. Matty wasted no time. As soon as Lyssa opened the door to Sister Judith's one-room cabin, Matty stated in his near-perfect Estrellan: "Lyssa, sorry, but you're not going to the platform today. Change of plans."

"Why? What's going on?" Lyssa made no effort to hide her relief at not having to make the dive today.

"I ain't supposed to talk about it," Matty looked nervously around the room. Both Erin and Sister Judith were sitting around the breakfast table and watching him eagerly. Though neither of them could understand Estrellan, they could see that something was happening. Matty continued: "But I figure you're gonna hear about it soon enough anyways. Lots of guys don't like the colonel. Major Tolbert is challenging him for command, and we're gonna vote on it today."

This news concerned Lyssa. The idea of that sociopath, Tolbert, being in command didn't bode well for anyone — least of all for herself and Erin.

From out in the pre-dawn darkness, a man's voice speaking Gonian shouted at Matty: "Hurry the fuck up, Moss! Kiss your girlfriend goodbye and let's get moving!"

Matty turned and switched to his broken Gonian as he shouted at his comrades out in the darkness. "I come moment." Matty turned back and addressed Lyssa and the other two women in the small cabin. "I come back evening. Tell you how goes."

"How what goes?" Erin asked.

Before Matty could answer, a whistle sounded from the direction of the docks. Lyssa recognized it as the steam barge's whistle. "We're leaving, Moss," one of Matty's cronies shouted. "Move it or lose it!"

Matty nodded at Lyssa and, without any further conversation, turned and left.

"What's going on?" Erin asked.

Lyssa translated into Gonian what Matty had told her.

Erin just shrugged it off. "One brutish warlord is just as bad as another."

Lyssa didn't bother to contradict her. She knew that Tolbert was far more dangerous than Raith, even if Erin couldn't see it. Instead, she sat back down at the table to finish her coffee.

"Well," Sister Judith said, "I suppose I should inform Father Elijah and the rest of the elders about this. They'll want to be kept informed." She gathered up her things, including her nursing bag and made for the door. On her way out, she turned to Erin: "I'll go and see to my patients after I talk to the elders. You can tidy up and see this one to the fields?" She'd nodded to Lyssa when she'd said "this one."

"Yes, ma'am," Erin answered.

"What fields?" Lyssa asked.

Sister Judith ignored Lyssa. "Thank you," the midwife said to Erin and then stepped out the door.

"That old bag couldn't be more sourpuss if she squatted on a lemon. The hell's she talking about fields and shit? I

ain't no fuckin' farmer."

"Me neither," Erin said, "but around here everybody works."

"Fuck that. I'm goin' over to the pirates' camp and see if I can find some booze. This is probably my last day in this life and I ain't wasting it in no Fourther's field. I'm gettin' drunk." Then, as an afterthought, she added: "And you're coming with me."

"I don't drink."

"You can watch me drink. Come on, I need a friend."

Erin finally got the point. Lyssa was afraid and putting up a brave front. "Okay. I'll come."

Lyssa eyed the closed door, her expression pensive. Erin was about to ask what was on her mind when Lyssa finally spoke. "I think we should take him with us."

It took Erin a second to realize what Lyssa was talking about. "What? You mean Matty? You want to take him with us when we escape? You can't be serious."

"I am."

"Matty's one of *them*."

"Matty's just a scared kid. He's just fallen in with shit company because he ain't got nowhere else to go. I got a feeling somethin' bad's gonna happen to him if he don't get away from this mercenary life."

This was a monumentally stupid idea. "No way. Matty might be young, but he's a grown man who's probably killed people. Lyssa, we can't tell one of the pirates that we're planning on escaping from them. I guarantee you that Matty's first loyalty is to his buddies. He'll rat us out."

"You don't know him like I do."

"I know he marches with the same people who lured us here, took us prisoner, and have basically enslaved us. Oh, and let's not forget that they got Captain Elof killed."

Lyssa shrugged. "We gotta do something to help the guy out."

"Do not tell him anything. Do not."

Lyssa could see that Erin was serious about it, so she decided to drop it. She would try again later, after they had recovered the control card. No sense pushing the issue until then, since there was a decent chance she would die in the attempt.

So, at Lyssa's insistence, they blew off work for the day. They raided the supply tent at the mercenary camp, which proved easier than it should have. The skeleton crew left to guard the camp all knew that Tolbert had taken a liking to Erin and they had all heard a rumor that Lyssa was a Boater. The camp guards made no effort to stop them as Lyssa stole a case of beer. Besides, they seemed to have the same idea as Lyssa: get drunk and goof off.

The Great Beer Heist now completed, they walked some way along the lake shore until they found a likely shade tree where they spent the day lazing about. They talked, they napped, they ate. Lyssa stayed merrily buzzed all day. Erin tried to teach Lyssa to fish, but Lyssa proved better at eating fish than catching them. Lyssa nearly passed out when Erin gutted what she'd caught. Lyssa had to turn away until the waves of nausea passed. At this, Erin just laughed and called Lyssa a "city girl."

All-in-all, it proved to be a nice, relaxing day off. There would be consequences later, they both knew. Undoubtedly, Sister Judith would find out they hadn't shown up at the fields as they'd been ordered, but as Lyssa said: "Fuck her and the broomstick she rode in on."

Sometime around midafternoon, a distant, popping sound rang out across the water. It was sporadic at first, but quickly became steady. It lasted for several seconds and then died out almost as quickly as it had begun. Both women recognized the sound right away. It was gunfire and it was coming from the service platform out in the middle of the lake.

"Whaddya think it means?" Erin asked.

"I figure either they're fighting one another over the election or their celebrating."

It proved to be the latter. That afternoon, as the steam barge chugged across the lake bringing the platoon of mercenaries back to their lakeside camp, riotous singing could be heard from across the water. The women remained hidden amongst the trees until they were sure they wouldn't be in immediate danger. They didn't know what to make of the pirates' celebratory behavior.

It was nearly full dark when they heard the town's church bell clanging from the partially constructed steeple. They

made their way back toward the town through the woods. Eventually, while walking along the back of the church, Erin spotted Brother Azariah.

"What's going on?" she asked him.

"Erin! Where have you been? You were missed in the fields today and I've been looking for you since midday."

"Yeah, sorry about that. My friend needed my help."

Brother Azariah looked toward where Lyssa sat upon a stump. Her head was lolling. She was obviously drunk, about to pass out. "Looks like she needs a lot of help." Brother Azariah made no effort to hide the disgust in his voice.

"But what's going on with the pirates – uh, mercenaries."

He ignored her obviously less-than-accidental slip of the tongue. "Looks like Third Law has elected a new leader," he said.

"Who?" She was pretty sure she already knew.

"That ugly pilot woman with the claw-hand and the scarred-up face."

"Ugh, we're fucked," Lyssa slurred. Erin had a feeling that Lyssa wasn't as drunk as she was letting on.

"Major Tolbert," Erin said. "Well, I guess she's 'Colonel Tolbert' now."

"She's a goddamn sociopath," Lyssa said. "Blood is gonna flow."

"Miss, please watch your language," Brother Azariah chided her. "Especially here, near the church."

Lyssa answered him by vomiting the last beer she'd drank against the side of said church. Some of her blue mohawk was visibly wet with regurgitated beer.

Brother Azariah wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"So what does all this mean for you guys...and for us?" Erin asked.

"Well, I don't know yet," Brother Azariah said. "I think that's why they're calling us to the church. I guess us settlers are still the employers of Third Law as long as this new commander is planning to honor our contract."

"And if she doesn't?"

Brother Azariah sighed. "Well, if she doesn't, then your friend might be right. Blood might flow. I feel like either way, we're holding onto a dog that's about to slip its leash."

Erin was silent at this.

Brother Azariah continued: "If it comes to that, stay with me. I'll protect you."

Erin had to suppress a laugh at this. She doubted if this boob could protect her from a horsefly. "That's very kind of you." She was worried if she said any more, she might make herself laugh.

"I feel a strong protectiveness for you, miss."

Seriously? This guy is next-level cheesy. "I appreciate that," Erin said, trying to think of a polite way to get rid of him. But presently it occurred to her to wonder why Lyssa wasn't laughing at him. She turned to the stump and found Lyssa gone. She was suddenly very worried for her friend. "Where did she go?" she asked Brother Azariah.

"I didn't see her go."

"Lyssa!" she called out. She ran around the corner of the church to see if her friend had gone around there, but found no sign of her. Erin spent the next several minutes looking for Lyssa before she decided to just go back to Sister Judith's cabin and hope her friend had wandered home for the night. But when she got there, she found the cabin empty. She guessed that Sister Judith must be at the town gathering in the church, but she had no idea where Lyssa could be.

But, of course, she did have an idea.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that Lyssa must have gone down to the mercenary camp to speak with Matty. Probably also to keep drinking, knowing Lyssa. Erin could only imagine how dangerous that place would be tonight with the pirates all drunk and celebrating and with Lyssa barely able to stand up. Her mind went through all the horrible things that could happen to Lyssa in a place like that...or to herself. She worked up her courage and readied herself to go and try to find her friend. She grabbed her useless, empty gun and put its holster on over her too-small Fourth dress. The gun was for looks only.

She was about to leave for the mercenary camp when a knock came at the door. "We come. Have Lyssa, love." It was Matty's voice. Erin opened the door to find Matty and another of the pirates carrying Lyssa unconscious on a litter. "She drink much. Not sure she celebrate or sad, though."

"Is she okay? What happened?"

"She come me. Already drunk, swear it. Ask questions. Drink more. Pass out. Carry her here."

"What questions did she come to you to ask?"

"Mostly just how vote go. Tell her Colonel Tolbert win. Lyssa say we all die. Lyssa say we all fuck up."

"I hope she's wrong," Erin said as the two men lifted Lyssa onto the bed.

The other man, a medic, told Erin to make sure Lyssa remained on her side so that "if she barfs again, she won't drown in her own vomit."

Erin didn't know if such a thing was truly possible, but she promised to leave Lyssa on her side.

Before they left, Erin asked Matty: "How did you vote?"

Matty winked without answering and walked out the door with his comrade.

Now in the cabin alone with her unconscious friend, Erin began unlacing Lyssa's heavy machinist's boots. *I hope you didn't say anything stupid*, she thought at Lyssa.

The Only Way Out Is Forward

Lyssa's hangover symptoms were just starting to abate as she readied the HEVA suit for its deep dive the next morning. One of the Third Law medics had given her an injection of what he called a "military version of anaktisine." When she asked if that meant it was better, he'd told her that just meant it was cheaper.

She crouched at the edge of the platform and leaned out where the HEVA suit stood in waist-deep water upon the descent trolley. She held one hand on the suit's heavy exoskeleton for balance. The process of opening all of the suit's valves, running final checks, and making sure she had all of the equipment she would need was easy enough, but extremely important. Approximately fifteen minutes into the dive, she would enter the tenebricite shadow and lose all communications with the surface. She would be all alone with only whatever she brought with her. It wouldn't do to forget anything.

But she wouldn't be all alone.

Whatever was in the lake would be down there with her.

The lake's surface was deceptively placid.

Like it was waiting.

Lyssa tried not to think about it.

In the breast pocket of her coveralls, Lyssa had hidden the counterfeit control card. Now, she needed to transfer it to one of the HEVA suit's external pockets, but too many of the mercenaries were watching her. Including that creepy psycho, Tolbert. The new commander of the mercenaries had personally come from their headquarters on some offshore terraforming rig to supervise the dive. And now Tolbert stood over Lyssa watching her with that creepy prosthetic eye of hers. Lyssa had no idea what that eye could see, but she would bet it didn't miss much.

What Lyssa needed was a distraction. She looked to Erin who stood next to where Lyssa's small tool box was balanced precariously upon the edge of a shipping crate. Erin was wearing her Noémie pilot's uniform. She looked so much sexier in her uniform than she did in that ugly, ill-fitting Fourthier dress she'd been wearing.

Lyssa put those thoughts from her mind. "Captain O'Connell, is there a set of blue-handled pliers in that tool box?" Calling Erin by her company title was their predetermined signal for Erin to cause a distraction. Additionally, Lyssa knew it annoyed some of the pirates when she referred to Erin as "Capt. O'Connell."

"I'll look. What do you need pliers for?"

"I never go on a job without my pliers."

Lyssa turned back to the HEVA suit and tried not to cringe at what she knew was coming. Within a few seconds, she heard it. A thud and clatter as Erin "accidentally" knocked Lyssa's tool box off the crate. She didn't look around as several of the pirates scurried to help Erin gather up the scattered tools. Quick as picking a pocket, Lyssa transferred the counterfeit control card from her coveralls breast pocket to the HEVA suit's external pocket. She hoped no one had seen her do it. If they had, the whole operation would be blown. With the deed now complete, she looked over her shoulder just in time to see her 10mm socket roll off the edge of the platform and into the water.

Great, she thought, I'll never see that socket again. But she was relieved to see that everyone's attention was focused on the distraction, including Col. Tolbert. "Goddamnit! Those tools cost money, you know."

"I'm sorry," Erin said. "It just fell. But I think we got them all. Here's your pliers."

All except my 10mm socket. "Thanks." Lyssa took the pliers. There was nothing left to do now. She was as ready as she was ever going to be. "Well, I guess I'm as ready as I'm ever gonna be..." Lyssa was unable to hide the tremor in her voice. The water felt like it was waiting for her.

With Erin's and Matty's help, Lyssa climbed down into the suit's open canopy and closed the crystalanium bubble over her head. There would be over a hundred atmospheres of pressure on the bottom of the lake, over 100,000 millibars. Lyssa would have nothing but two centimeters of transparent crystalanium between her face and all that crushing pressure. She glanced at the gauges mounted to the left forearm of the bulky HEVA suit's exoskeleton. All the needles: O₂ percentage, CO₂ percentage, scrubber status, oxygen tank pressure, diluent tank pressure, etc were all in the green arcs. The rebreather was functioning normally, but she would have to keep a close eye on those gauges and adjust the

appropriate valves every few seconds or she would suffocate inside this stupid suit.

She gave Erin a thumbs up signal. It was hard lifting the suit's heavy arm. How the hell was she supposed to walk across the bottom in this thing? She wanted to call the whole thing off. She wanted to open the canopy, climb out, and tell them the whole thing would never work. But she couldn't do that. She was cornered. She had to either complete the job or bad things would happen to Erin.

Resigned to her fate, she disconnected the safety chain that held the trolley to the underside of the platform. All she had to do was release the trolley's brake and her descent would begin. She took one last look up, knowing it was probably the last time she'd ever see daylight. She knew she must look scared. Erin gave her a nod. A couple errant curls had escaped Erin's uptight bun and were drifting on the morning breeze. Lyssa locked that image in her mind as she pulled the release on the trolley's brake.

And just as simple as that, she was on her way to the bottom of an extremely deep lake.

Water rushed over the canopy as the trolley quickly descended into the darkness. She turned on the HEVA suit's electric light and checked her gauges. Over the suit's short-range communicator came Erin's voice. "How's it going, Ruiz?" Erin asked.

"Showing thirteen meters of depth. Already starting to lose daylight. Suit's functioning fine. I expect to lose communications in about fourteen minutes."

"How're *you* doing?"

"Shit, girl, I got this. You know me. I ain't afraid of nothin'," Lyssa lied.

"I know that," Erin lied back at her.

The communicator went silent for several minutes as Lyssa lost the daylight entirely. Now, she was in total darkness with only the meager light from the suit's electric light to illuminate the murk around her. Even that light would leave her soon. She checked the suit's gauges and made some small adjustments to the valves.

"What's your depth?" Erin asked over the communicator.

"Fifty-three meters. It feels like I'm standing still. It's really disorienting. I can hear the trolley's guide wheel creaking and I can see the cable going past, but it feels like the trolley ain't even moving. I feel weightless."

"Should be familiar territory for a born spacer like you. Is it any easier to move in the suit?"

Lyssa raised her arms and found that it was considerably easier now that the suit was underwater. "Yeah. It actually is a lot easier. Told ya I got this."

"How you feeling?"

"Pretty good," she lied. "I'll be back in time for lunch. Tell them Turd Law assholes they better have a cold beer for me when I get back to the surface or I'm kickin' all their asses."

"Umm, Lyssa...they can hear you, you know. We're all around the communicator up here."

"I know them donut punchers can hear me."

The next voice she heard over the communicator was Matty's. He was speaking in Gonian for the benefit of the other pirates around him. "I have beer you, love. Nice and cold."

Lyssa decided to answer him in Estrellan. Fuck the other pirates if it made them uncomfortable to hear someone speaking it. She was in no mood to entertain the sensitivities of racists. "Matty, didn't I tell you I'd fuck you up good and permanent if you didn't stop calling me 'love'?"

"You have survive dive first. Come back safe and kick Matty Moss ass, love."

Lyssa laughed. She exchanged banter with Erin and Matty for the next several minutes as she continued her descent along the service platform's anchor cable. Eventually, she glanced at her gauges and saw that her depth was 180meters. "Looks like I'm about to enter the tenebricite shadow next couple minutes, guys. Activating my chemlights."

"Roger that," she heard Erin say over the communicator. Even Erin couldn't hide the tension in her voice.

Lyssa cracked and then shook the first of her chemical lights. She mounted it to the right forearm of the HEVA suit. She looked at her gauges. The depth gauge was showing 205m now. She would be entering the tenebricite shadow any second and then she would lose the suit's electric lights and all communication with the surface. She was about to be all alone.

No, not all alone. Something is down here with me.

"Matty? Erin?"

"Yeah what up, love?"

"I just want to say thanks for being my friends," Lyssa said as the suit's electric light flickered a few times and then went out. The communicator went silent too. She was inside the tenebricite shadow now. She didn't know if her last transmission had made it out. Inside the HEVA suit's canopy her own breathing echoed, accentuating her sense of isolation. She could hear the faint clicks of the rebreather circuit's check valves as they opened and closed with her breathing.

The ghostly, yellowish glow of the chemlight illuminated only a small patch of the darkness around her. Vaguely, she could see the platform's anchor cable as the trolley sank along it. She checked her gauges. In the chemlight's sickly glow, she couldn't make out the green arcs on the gauges. She hadn't anticipated that. Luckily, she knew what values the green arcs represented. Likely, without the gauges' simplifying green arcs, any one of the pirates would have lost their shit and died at this point.

What else hadn't she thought of?

The minutes crawled by in dull monotony. The trolley felt like it was standing still, despite the ever-increasing reading on the depth gauge. Gradually, the needle passed the 1,000m mark. Over a kilometer down now. In less than another quarter hour, she should reach the end of the cable, the bottom of the lake.

She didn't know exactly how deep the bottom was, only that the hardpointer's scanners had shown it to be slightly over 1,200m. As she passed the 1,180m mark on her depth gauge, Lyssa began slowly applying pressure on the trolley's brake. At the end of the cable, she knew there would be one of the platform's huge, cylindrical, concrete anchors. It wouldn't be wise to let the trolley slam down at full speed onto that anchor.

Gradually, the trolley's movement along the anchor cable began to slow until it was slower than walking speed. Lyssa felt strangely good, hopeful. Optimistic, even. She wasn't worried about the depth, the pressure, or even the strange sense that she wasn't alone. She wasn't worried about anything. She found herself strangely, intently focused on the braking procedure. She felt good. She felt warm.

Some part of her mind told her that something was wrong, but she ignored it.

The trolley hit the concrete support with more bone-jarring violence than Lyssa had intended. She would have fallen off were it not for the safety chain connecting her HEVA suit to the trolley's structure. In the dim glow of her chemlight, she hadn't even seen the big, cylindrical shape of the platform anchor until the moment of impact. The impact had been surprising, but the moment of clarity it provided was gone as suddenly as it had come. Something was wrong, but she wasn't concerned. She looked around. She could see little beyond the edge of the platform anchor in the dim, yellowish light.

She felt good.

She felt comfortable.

She felt like she was being watched.

But it didn't bother her.

She felt like taking a nap.

Yes. She felt very sleepy.

She wondered how deep she was.

She checked the depth gauge. It's needle showed about 1,220m.

That was pretty deep.

She felt like taking a nap.

The other gauges didn't make any sense to her.

The needles showed numbers, but she couldn't remember what they meant.

She felt like taking a nap.

Something was wrong, but she didn't care.

The needle on the gauge labeled "PPO₂ Inflow" showed 11%.

What is "PPO₂ Inflow?"

She remembered now.

PPO₂ Inflow is how much oxygen she was getting from the rebreather.

That gauge should read no less than 21%.

She couldn't remember how to change it.

She couldn't clear her mind.

She felt like taking a nap.

* * *

Lyssa woke up confused. At first she didn't remember where she was. Then, once she *did* remember where she was, she realized how lucky she was to wake up at all. As her head cleared, she thought to check on the status of her rebreather. To her surprise, when she raised the chemlight to the gauges, she found them all reading optimal values. The chronograph showed that she had only been asleep for a couple of minutes. She'd lost control of her gas mixture. She shouldn't have woken up at all. How had she survived that?

Lyssa had never been religious, but even she had to give thanks to whatever higher power had delivered her from what should have been a permanent nap. "God or whoever the fuck spared my dumb ass: Thank you. Amen or whatever." It was probably the first serious prayer Lyssa had ever prayed in her life.

She disconnected the safety chain which had held the HEVA suit firmly to the trolley the whole way down from the surface and turned to face the edge of the big, concrete anchor. It was difficult moving in the heavy suit, but not impossible. She activated a second and then a third of her chemlights. Now, the light was brighter than it had been, but it was still weak and (somehow) even more ghostly. The weakness of the little pool of light only accentuated the oppressive darkness beyond. Everything was a monochrome of sickly yellow and black.

Nervously, feeling watched, she looked all around her. She saw nothing, but she knew she wasn't alone. Instinct, not logic, told her she wasn't alone. Something was very close to her. No matter which way she turned her head within the HEVA suit's bubble canopy, she felt like the *Something* was always right behind her, just outside her view, just beyond the small pool of light. *It* could see her, but she couldn't see *it*. Not even for a second did she think it was just her imagination. She *knew* the *Something* was there and she knew it wanted her to know it was there.

She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. If the *Something* hadn't attacked her yet, maybe it was afraid of her? "You better be scared, you son of a bitch," she said to the darkness around her. "Don't fuck with no Estrellan chick. I'll give your ass an E-town beatdown."

There was no response from the *Something*, but her instincts told her it was still there. Watching. Listening.

Lyssa had a job to do. The sooner she got started, the sooner she could be done and headed back to the surface.

She checked her rebreather gauges and tweaked the valves. She was ready. It was only a step from where she stood to the ledge of the concrete anchor. The lake's silty bottom was about a half a meter below the ledge. She could jump down easily enough, but in the heavy suit, she would have a terrible time climbing back up.

She secured a guide rope to the trolley because it would be way too easy to get lost down here in the darkness. Standing at the edge, she looked around at the seemingly endless void beyond her small, dim pool of light. The only way out of this situation was forward.

Fuck it, let's do this, Lyssa thought.

Then, with one hand around the guide rope, she stepped off the concrete anchor and fell the half meter to the bottom below.

Problem was, the bottom didn't turn out to be a mere half a meter below. What she'd initially thought to be the lake's bottom turned out to be nothing but a layer of very silty water. She cried out in surprise as her feet fell right through what she'd thought to be the bottom. The lake's actual bottom turned out to be about a meter or two below the top of this silty layer. She landed gracelessly in the muddy bottom, lost her balance, and fell onto her back.

She couldn't see anything. Mud from the lake's bottom was so stirred up by her fall that even the chemlights offered almost no light. It was almost completely dark. She tried a couple of times to stand up, but the slipperiness of the mud and the heaviness of the suit conspired to keep her in darkness and on her back. Her brother, who was fascinated with animals, had once told her how a turtle can die if it's flipped onto its back because it can't right itself. She felt like a turtle trapped on her back. If she couldn't right herself, she would die. She was breathing hard from exertion and fear. The sound of her own breath echoed loud and fast inside the suit's canopy. She realized that in her struggles, she had let go of the guide rope.

Lyssa felt panic rising up inside her. She wanted to give in to that panic but knew that if she did, she would die. Part of her wanted to just check out and let her irrational mind take over. But there was more on the line here than her own life. She had to succeed in this mission. Erin was counting on her. She pushed the panic deep down and forced herself to take a few deep, calming breaths. She dug deep within herself and found that tremendous wellspring of strength she

knew was there. It was this strength which had carried her through the many traumas of her fraught childhood. This was the strength which had allowed her to succeed in a career dominated by men. It was this strength which had helped her survive that horrible day of the Ruin of Estrella, the journey to Gonaways, and the near-starvation of the refugee camps.

And it was that strength that would never let her die here in the mud on this fucking, goddamn, piece of Fourther shit planet!

She checked her gauges. In the near-complete blackout conditions of the lake's disturbed bottom, she had to hold both the gauges and her chemlights up to crystalanium canopy. Even then, she had to squint to see the gauges. She made some adjustments to the valves controlling the rebreather, took a few breaths, and tried once again to get off her back. Using all her strength to lift the HEVA suit, she managed to get herself into a sitting position. Then, she bent one knee and pushed off with her hands. But she slipped in the mud and fell once again onto her back.

Now, she was beyond scared. Lyssa Ruiz was pissed.

"Fuck!" she yelled in frustration. "Fuck this stupid planet! Fuck this stupid lake and the Fourthers and all the factions of the pirates. Fuck this job! Fuck Noémie and their control card! You listen here, God or whoever the fuck: I refuse to die on this hellhole planet! You don't want me to die, 'cause if I do, I'm comin' to heaven and kickin' Your holy ass so hard You'll have to part Your hair to take a shit from now on. You got me? So You best give me a hand!" If this rant qualified as a prayer, it wasn't God who answered it.

It was the Something.

The Something

The water around where Lyssa lay on her back moved as it was disturbed by something large and powerful. The Something grabbed her. She felt herself and the heavy suit she was wearing pulled upwards like a rag doll. The water rushed around her as the Something easily pulled her completely off the bottom, out of the muddy layer, and began taking her somewhere. To its lair, perhaps? She became completely spatially disoriented. She didn't know if the Something was dragging her upwards toward the surface or horizontally along the bottom. She tried to resist, but the Something only tightened its grip on her and continued pulling her through the water. She tried to angle her chemlights to see the Something, but only got fleeting glimpses of its fish-like fins.

Then, the day *really* started to get weird.

Lyssa became aware of diffuse, electric light. But that couldn't be possible, could it? Electric lights can't work inside the tenebricite shadow. She craned her neck toward the source of the light and saw that it was coming from a large, apparently man-made, egg-shaped structure. Before she could figure out what the structure could be, the Something pulled her through an opened hatch on the underside of the structure. Once inside, the Something held her from behind in a small, brightly lit room that Lyssa recognized right away as an airlock. The hatch they'd just come through closed. She heard the sounds of machinery as the water began draining away and the airlock filled with air. In less than a minute, the airlock's cycle completed and only about a centimeter of water remained on the floor.

Now in air, the suit was too heavy for Lyssa to remain standing. The Something helped her to the floor and then let her go. It stepped more directly into her view.

It was an ugly creature. It looked like a cross between a fish and a human. It had the same basic body structure as a human: two arms, two legs, a hairless head, but it had large, webbed feet and hands. The creature had gill slits on either side of its head just behind its lower jaw. And it was tall. It towered over where Lyssa sat trapped inside her stupid HEVA suit. Lyssa estimated the creature to be over three meters tall, but it was also very thin. This creature was clearly built to breathe water and be a strong swimmer. She couldn't determine its sex. It wore only a single article of clothing: something like a wetsuit with short sleeves and legs.

Lyssa realized what the Something was. There was only one thing it could be: some kind of Broadening. Millennia ago, the Broadening had been humans, but hundreds of generations of genetic modifications had turned them into something...*else*.

The two stared at one another. Lyssa no longer felt afraid of the Broadening. She assumed that this must be the Broadening who owned a 10% stake in this planet. She checked her suit's gauges and made a small adjustment to her rebreather.

The Broadening placed a mask-like apparatus over its mouth and then spoke in a strange, computer-like, techno-mechanical voice that was hard for Lyssa to understand through her suit's canopy.

"What?!" Lyssa shouted back at the Broadening.

The Broadening spoke louder as it repeated itself: "I said you can open the suit. The air is safe for you to breathe."

Lyssa thought about it for a moment and then began opening the suit's equalizer valves. There was a hiss and she felt her ears pop. Next, she undid the latches which secured the canopy and lifted it off her head. The effort was almost more than she could bear. Once the canopy was open, she let her arms, still trapped inside the suit's heavy sleeves, thud to the floor. The Broadening was wise enough to stand back and give her some space. She took a few grateful breaths, glad to be partially free of the HEVA suit.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked the Broadening.

"Because you asked for help," came the Broadening's strange techno-mechanical voice from the mask it wore. Lyssa imagined it must be some kind of voice emulator. The mechanic in her couldn't help but want to take the thing apart and see how it worked.

Lyssa thought back to what she'd said. Her angry rant-prayer had ended with a plea for help, she remembered. "I was talking to God."

"Maybe God sent me in answer to your prayer," the Broadening countered.

Lyssa wondered if it was trying to be a smartass. If so, she approved. "Hmph! Name's Ruiz. But you can call me Ruiz. And just for the record: I don't really believe in God. I'm about as Christian as a slot machine showing triple six."

"And I am Dr. Laxmi Yunuen of the Broadening Science Institute. I'm a terraformologist and I'm here to study the long-term sustainability of aquatic ecosystems on terraformed worlds."

Lyssa knew bullshit when she heard it, and this introduction sounded way too scripted to her. Not that she cared what this Broadening was really up to here on Sanctuary. "Hmm," Lyssa said dubiously.

She let the Broadening talk as she wriggled the rest of the way out of her HEVA suit. "I actually saved you twice," Dr. Yunuen said. "The first time was when you lost control of your rebreather mixture and passed out. I came in and adjusted the valves on your suit. By the way, what would possess you to attempt such a dangerous dive in such a jury-rigged suit as that one? Your physiology isn't designed to survive at these depths."

Now free of her HEVA suit, Lyssa was able to once again stand at her full height. At 160cm, she was only about half as tall as Dr. Yunuen. "I came down here to get something important."

"If it was so important, why did you throw it in the lake?"

"Long story. God knows how the fuck I'm gonna find it now."

"What will happen to you if you don't find it?"

"To me? Probably not too much. I'm a good mechanic and these guys need a *good* mechanic. They'll probably force me to continue to fix their piece-o'-shit planes. But I have a friend they'll probably kill when I don't return with the control card to our hardpointer."

"The one called Erin?"

"Yeah. She's a pilot. Pretty good one, in fact."

"She is interesting. She has already walked in many different worlds in her young life."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she was a Fourthier when she was a girl, but she's not nowadays."

Dr. Yunuen studied Lyssa for a long moment. "You're in love with her aren't you?"

This took Lyssa by surprise. "Whoa, doc. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I mean, she's cute and she's my friend, but I'm not in love with her. Love is for suckers. Love ain't real. 'Leastwise, not romantic love."

Now, it was Dr. Yunuen's turn to "Hmm." dubiously.

"Man, mind your own fuckin' business."

"I'm not a man," Dr. Yunuen said.

"Okay, ma'am. Whatever."

"I'm not exactly one of those either."

"Well, then what are – wait, I just remembered: I don't care."

The Broadening reached down the neck of their wetsuit. "This control card you're looking for..." They pulled from within their wetsuit a Noémie control card. "Does it look anything like this?"

Lyssa was surprised. "What the fuck? Where did you get that?"

"I picked it up off the bottom of the lake right after you landed here on this planet. I assumed that somebody might want it."

The Broadening offered it to Lyssa. She reached out to take it, but then stopped herself. "Why are you doing all this? Why are you helping me? What's in it for you?"

"Your first and third questions are simple and share a common answer. I'm doing all this so that I don't have to watch you or anyone else die. I don't like the trafficking of the narcotic called 'lady,' but I'm convinced it's the only way to end this conflagration without further loss of life. Both mercenary companies have agreed to share in the profits and leave the planet. I want them alive but gone so that the Fourthiers can resume their farming and I can resume my research. That's what's in it for me. As to your second question: I'm helping you specifically because you're interesting to me."

Lyssa eyed the strange creature suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, aside from the fact that you're the first person who's ever detected my presence in the lake, you're a more complex proto-human than I've ever met before. You strut, swagger, curse, drink, swear, tell dirty jokes, and get into fights. To all appearances, you're about as prickly as they come."

"Damn straight," Lyssa said proudly. "Like a cactus fuckin' a porcupine, that's me."

This didn't phase Dr. Yunuen. They continued: "But inside, you're soft and kind. You care for people and you're afraid of being hurt by them."

"Yeah, I don't think so, doc. I think you should stick to terraformology and leave the psychoanalyzing to the head shrinkers." She swiped the proffered control card from Dr. Yunuen's hand.

Lyssa had the feeling that the Broadening was smiling underneath their mask.

Third Law

Erin checked her watch. It had only been about two-and-a-half hours since they'd lost contact with Lyssa, but it felt like it had been days. All over the service platform, people were pacing tensely and checking their watches. They all knew the numbers. The HEVA suit's rebreather could keep Lyssa alive for around twelve-to-fourteen hours. If she didn't return to the surface within that time, they would assume she had failed and died. Erin knew she would likely be next if Lyssa didn't return. Not that Erin cared much whether she herself lived or died. She wanted her friend back, safe and sound.

Lyssa's last message as she'd dropped into the planet's tenebricite shadow had come through staticky, but Erin and Matty had been able to understand. "I just want to say thanks for being my friends," Lyssa had said just as her communicator had lost power. After that, it had become a waiting game.

Erin felt so powerless, thinking about the only real friend she had down there on the bottom of the lake trying to accomplish a nearly impossible task without any help. Erin and Matty actively avoided looking in one another's direction. Erin hated seeing her own worry reflected in the skinny, young pirate's face. It was clear that he really did care about Lyssa. Erin wondered if Lyssa might be right: maybe they should offer to take Matty with them when they leave the planet...

But Erin dismissed this thought. The risks were too great. If Matty ratted them out, their one chance at escape would be blown. No, Matty had *chosen* to join Third Law. He had loyalties to them as well.

Third Law. What kind of stupid name is that for a mercenary company?

"What's on your mind, airman?"

Erin recognized the voice. She turned to face Col. Tolbert, the new leader of Third Law. Erin hadn't seen Raith since the election and was afraid to ask what exactly Tolbert had done with her predecessor—not that she actually cared all that much. The older pilot sat on a crate watching Erin with her one natural eye and her one prosthetic eye.

"Other than how Lyssa's doing, you mean?" Erin said.

"That's on all our minds."

Erin thought for a moment. She reminded herself that Tolbert had dominion of life and death over both herself and Lyssa. Maybe she should humor her with some conversation. At the very least, it might be good to get her mind off worrying about Lyssa. "I was just wondering, actually, why you guys call yourselves 'Third Law'?"

Tolbert laughed lightly. "Well, you've heard of the Third Law of Newtonian physics? For every action there is an opposite reaction?"

Erin nodded. She was pretty sure that wasn't exactly right, but she held her tongue.

"Well," Tolbert continued. "If somebody hurts you (and you've got the coin) we will bring a *very* opposite reaction down upon them."

"Ah, I see. That's clever," Erin lied. It was actually stupid.

Tolbert shrugged. "It was the name before I joined up. We work with what we got."

Erin was trying to think of what to say next when one of the lookouts shouted: "Something's coming out of the water! Something big!"

Erin looked to where the lookout was pointing. The lake's surface was being disturbed as some kind of large vessel surfaced. First, the vessel breached the surface and then it kept rising out of the water until it hovered a few meters above the surface. The vessel was huge, about twice the size of the Noémie hardpointer, but it looked like no plane Erin had ever seen before. It was anodized white and had a shape similar to that of an egg. Whereas a chicken's egg has a pointed and a more rounded end, this vessel had two pointed ends. It had no wings, empennage, nor any airfoils of any kind. Erin couldn't see its engines, but she could hear them. They didn't sound like the shrieking spaceplane engines Erin was used to. Instead, they thrummed with a deep, fast pulsing sound. At first, she couldn't even tell which end was the nose and which was the tail. Then, she noticed that on one of the vessel's ends was painted a string of letters and numbers, 330IH, next to the image of a flag she didn't recognize. Tail numbers. So that end must be the plane's tail, but so far as Erin could see the other end had no discernible cockpit windows.

"What in the world is that thing?" Erin wondered aloud.

"Three-Three-Zero-India-Hotel. Broadening plane," Tolbert answered. "Weird, ain't it? I have no idea how it works. That's our friend, Dr. Yunuen."

They watched as the weird Broadening plane moved to hover over the hardpointer. Once in position above the Noémie plane, a hatch opened in the Broadening plane's belly. To Erin's immense relief, she saw the HEVA suit being lowered via a cable down to the top of the hardpointer. Sitting atop the HEVA suit and holding on to the cable was Lyssa. Dressed in her tan-and-light-blue Noémie mechanic's coveralls and with her light blue mohawk fluttering in the wind, Lyssa looked every bit the conquering heroine. In her free hand, Lyssa held aloft the vital control card.

Or at least, something that looked like the control card. Erin had no doubt that the real card was tucked away in one of Lyssa's coverall pockets.

From the service platform's fast-cycle communicator came a strangely modulated voice, as if the speaker were speaking through some kind of machine: "Captain Erin O'Connell, I believe you've misplaced your mechanic?"

* * *

The Broadening didn't hang around to make conversation. As soon as Lyssa and the HEVA suit were settled atop the hardpointer, Lyssa unhooked the cable from the HEVA suit and gave the Broadening plane a thumbs up. Then, Erin watched as the winch cable retracted into the plane, the hatch closed, and then the strange plane pulled away. The strange plane then flew straight up until it was out of sight. Where it went from there, she had no way of knowing.

"Hey! Cum swizzlers!" Lyssa shouted down from atop the hardpointer to the pirates. "Get your asses up here and lend a hand with this heavy-ass HEVA suit!"

The pirates all looked to Tolbert who nodded to them. At that, several of them climbed up the ladder to the top of the hardpointer and began carrying the heavy suit down. Lyssa made no effort to help them. Instead, she just came down and approached Erin with what Erin assumed was the fake control card. She held it out for Erin, but Tolbert grabbed it first.

Tolbert held the card up to her prosthetic eye and examined it closely. Erin exchanged a nervous glance with Lyssa. "I don't see any damage," Tolbert finally said. "You think it'll still work?"

"I don't see why not," Lyssa answered. "It's been under pressure, but it's solid, so the pressure shouldn't have affected it."

"Good. Captain O'Connell, let's start an engine and check systems." Without taking her eyes off Erin, Tolbert shouted to another of the Third Law pilots: "Captain Mackinaw, let's fire up that *Darklander*." She was referring to the AF-28 *Darklander* fighter parked atop the hardpointer. An umbilicus cable trailed from the fighter's engine to the hardpointer's ground power terminal. Capt. Mackinaw climbed up to the top of the hardpointer and then into the fighter's cockpit. He began his engine starting process.

Tolbert handed the card to Erin. There was something in the way Tolbert looked at Erin as she handed over the control card. *She knows*, Erin thought.

"Sergeant Scalps," Tolbert said, "why don't you and Ruiz come with us?"

"Yes, ma'am," Scalps said. Erin knew they were sunk. All she could do now was go through the motions and hope for a miracle.

They all went into the hardpointer's cockpit. Tolbert sat in the right seat while Erin sat in the left. She began going through the checklists for engine number one start. Her ground power terminal was reading power input from the fighter's engine. She could channel power from there to start the hardpointer's number one engine in lieu of the dead APU as long as the control card worked. Nervously, she slid the card into the slot, hoping that Lyssa hadn't swapped them after all.

But alas, when she should have felt the ping from the control card on her QSP, she felt nothing. The flight displays were still showing the error message **CONTROL CARD NOT DETECTED**. She glanced around the cockpit. Tolbert was eyeing her expectantly with her creepy, prosthetic eye. Over her shoulder, Erin saw that Lyssa was watching the proceedings with fear on her face while Scalps, standing behind Lyssa, openly leered at Erin.

"Maybe..." Erin said as she removed the fake control card, blew on the contacts, and went to reinsert it.

Tolbert stopped her. The pirate commander took the fake card from Erin's grasp, broke it in half, and tossed the pieces nonchalantly atop the glareshield. "Cut the shit, O'Connell." Tolbert said as she turned in her seat to face Lyssa. She studied the mechanic with her prosthetic eye. "Give me the real card, Ruiz."

Lyssa was scared, but damned if she was gonna let this old whore see her fear. She thought quick. "What do you mean? That *was* the real one. It's been at the bottom of a lake for almost two weeks now. Maybe the pressure or the water did ruin it after all." Even Lyssa knew Tolbert wasn't buying it. Unconsciously, she backed away from the creepy, old sociopath and right into Scalps. Before she could even think of what to do next, every muscle in her body tensed up sharply. She fell to her back on the cockpit floor. One leg was pinned painfully underneath her. Every muscle in her body twitched sporadically and ached like hell. The air smelled sharply of ozone and burned skin as Scalps stood over her wielding a stun stick.

She saw Erin start to stand up from the captain's seat. Lyssa tried to tell Erin not to get up, but she couldn't make her mouth say the words. Before Erin could even stand fully up, Scalps extended the stun stick in her direction. There was another *POP!* from the stun stick, and Erin crumpled back into the seat. *I really hate these fuckers*, Lyssa thought.

Next thing Lyssa knew, Tolbert was on her. She felt the Colonel's mechanical claw-hand at her throat. Tolbert got right in Lyssa's face. The older woman bared her teeth and hissed in Lyssa's face like a rabid animal. Lyssa really feared for a moment that this woman might try to eat her face.

"Where's it at?" Tolbert hissed. "The real card. Where the fuck do you have it, you piece of shit?" Tolbert began going through the many pockets in Lyssa's coveralls. She threw aside everything she found in Lyssa's pockets, mostly tools, until she found the real control card in Lyssa's inside, breast pocket. Tolbert stood up and Lyssa saw her check Erin's pulse. Tolbert gave Scalps a dirty look.

"It's on the lowest setting. Is she dead?"

"No, but she sure looks it. If blondie here dies, then this whole hardpointer is useless. Do you not understand how QSPs work?"

"Yes, ma'am. Can I kill this one?" He pointed down to Lyssa with the stun stick.

"Not yet. We need her for leverage against the other one. You hear that, O'Connell?"

Erin felt a slap at her cheek. Her entire body ached. She didn't know what had happened. One second, she was trying to help Lyssa, and now she was in pain and unable to move. Her vision was burry. It was hard for her to focus.

A hand slapped her again. "I said 'You hear me, O'Connell?' " Erin recognized Tolbert's voice as her vision started to come into focus. She could see that she was still in the cockpit of 788NC. "You best behave yourself or Sergeant Scalps here is gonna start cutting things off of your girlfriend. You read me?"

Erin blinked her eyes hard, trying to clear her vision. She tried to say "yes," but whatever came out of her mouth didn't sound anything like the word "yes."

Nevertheless, Tolbert seemed to accept her acknowledgement. "Good. You better hope like hell this control card works. I'm not pussyfootin' around with you two like Raith did."

Erin heard Tolbert sit back down in the right seat. By now her vision was clearing, but she didn't feel like she could move. If that had been a stun stick, Erin resolved she never wanted to be hit with one of those things again. She watched as Tolbert slid the real control card into the slot on the Flight Computer. Almost immediately, Erin felt the familiar, invasive sensation of the control card's interrogator signal querying her QuantumScale Processor. Her QSP answered the control card with Erin's discreet confirmation signal. She saw the **CONTROL CARD NOT DETECTED** error message disappear from the flight displays.

Even though every muscle in her body felt like it had a terrible charley horse, she found that she could turn her head a little. She watched as Tolbert finished the engine start checklist for engine number one. Erin felt and heard and her plane's No. 1 engine come to life. She watched as Tolbert repeated the process with the other two engines. By the time Tolbert began checking all of the flight control systems, navigation systems, and the plane's TFG, Erin had regained most of the control of her body, though she was still in pain. Lyssa was on the floor. Scalps had cuffed Lyssa with electrocuffs and now he stood over her. He was watching Erin, just daring her to do anything stupid.

"Well," Tolbert said as she began shutting the engines back down, "everything checks out. All systems are looking good except for the APU and the vertical thrusters. You're a damn fine mechanic, Ruiz. I sure hope O'Connell behaves herself. Would be a shame to have to cut your hands off."

Erin doubted this was an idle threat.

Friends Always Turn on You

That night, there was no return to Sister Judith's cabin. Col. Tolbert ordered the prisoners to be "treated like prisoners." This is how Erin and Lyssa found themselves consigned to sleep on the dirt floor of some kind of shed. They were within the Third Law camp just on the outskirts of Pilgrim's Rest. The only way in or out of the shed was via a locked door with two guards on the other side of it.

When they'd first entered the little shed, they'd been given two buckets. One bucket was full of water and the other was empty. "One's for drinkin', and one's for pissin'. Try not to get 'em confused," the guard had told them. And then he'd laughed at his own joke.

The whole ride back on the steam barge, neither Erin nor Lyssa had said anything. Partially because they were being watched so closely, and partially because their spirits had been so very low after the day's defeat. This had given Erin time to think, and think she had. She thought about how Tolbert had known the first control card was fake. How had she known that? It was obvious, of course.

Now that they were alone in their makeshift jail, Erin finally asked what was on her mind: "Lyssa, how do you think Tolbert knew about the 'old switcheroo,' as you called it?"

Lyssa, sitting with her back against the opposite wall of the small shed, just shrugged. "Dunno. Told you, that bitch is crazy. She's probably had somebody watching us on the low since we first got here."

"Mmm-hmm. And who do you think *that* might have been?" Erin could see from the slight change in Lyssa's posture that she was catching on.

"No. Matty would never. He's my friend."

"Who then?" Erin struggled to keep the anger out of her voice.

"I don't know, but I know it wasn't Matty. Besides, how would he even know? I never told him and I doubt if you did."

"Are you sure you never told him?"

"Hold up. What the fuck you gettin' at? You saying I betrayed you? You better suck them words back in your damn head or I'm apt to come over there and beat your proper-enunciatin' ass!"

Erin wasn't afraid; she was angry. "Where did you go last night after you wandered off drunk?"

Lyssa glowered at her for a moment before answering. "You know where I went. Just 'cause I had a few beers with Matty don't mean I said nothin' about our plan." Lyssa raised herself to her feet. Erin could tell she was fighting back tears. Lyssa wiped angrily at her eyes. "We discussed it, remember? You said no and I wouldn't'a done it without your bein' cool with it."

Erin, now fighting back her own angry tears, rose to her own feet. "Lyssa, do you have a complete memory of everything that happened last night?"

Lyssa was now visibly seething with anger. Partially, Erin guessed, because she resented the insinuation, but perhaps more because she herself knew that it might be true. "Fuck you. Just fuck you."

"Yes, Lyssa. We are screwed."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Lyssa attacked her. Lyssa kicked loose dirt from the floor at her and then lunged. The dirt had caught Erin by surprise, but she managed to close her eyes quickly enough to avoid most of it. With her longer limbs and more athletic build, Erin was able to deflect the first attack, sending Lyssa thudding against the wooden wall of the shed. She hoped that would be all, but Lyssa had other ideas. Lyssa got herself back up and came at her again. This time, Lyssa anticipated Erin's attempt to deflect her attack, so she held on tight. The net result was that even though Lyssa still went down, this time she at least brought Erin down with her.

For the next minute or so, the two women rolled on the ground biting, hitting, kicking, and pulling hair. Erin said nothing while Lyssa uttered plenty of expletives for the both of them. Gradually, Erin got the upper hand in the fight and found herself sitting astride her face-down former friend and pushing Lyssa's face into the dirt.

The combatants never even noticed as the door was unlocked and several of the pirates crowded into the small shed. Only gradually did Erin notice the hoots and cheers of the men who'd come not to break the fight up, but to watch it. In

the end, it was a feeling of mutual embarrassment and disgust that finally broke the fight up. Both women retreated to her own side of the shed. They threw constant looks of challenge, anger, and hatred at one another as they each wiped some of the snot, blood, and dust from their faces. Neither was seriously injured beyond her pride.

"Aww, come on," one of the pirates said, "don't let us interrupt your foreplay."

"I could watch that shit all day," said another.

"Okay, you dickheads," said a third, "show's over. Go on back to your tents and rub it out."

Erin really didn't like these guys.

The next person to speak was Tolbert. She had not deigned to actually enter the shed, but stood outside, just beyond the door. As the pirates filed past their commanding officer, Tolbert said: "You two got that out of your system? I'm not gonna have to chain you two dipshits up for the night, am I?"

Erin exchanged a spiteful look with Lyssa.

"Well, *am I?*" Tolbert pressed.

"No," Erin said.

"Nuh-uh," Lyssa agreed.

They exchanged another disgusted look, annoyed at having agreed on something.

This is why I don't like to make friends, Erin thought to herself. *They always turn on you in the end.*

Brother Azariah

The next day, Sister Judith arrived early in the morning to bring them their breakfast. Far from the fare they'd previously enjoyed at the old midwife's table, this morning Sister Judith served them each a bowl of plain oatmeal with only a little cream and no coffee. Sister Judith barely made eye contact with the two captives as she examined the scrapes and minor scratches from the previous night's scuffle.

The Fourth nurse only said "You'll live." to Lyssa. When she got to Erin, however, she said: "I expect this kind of behavior from that one over there, but I thought you were better than this." It actually hurt Erin to hear the betrayal in the older woman's voice. "Still, it was for the best that we stopped you. Stealing is still a sin."

"We weren't stealing. The hardpointer belongs to *our* company."

"Not the plane, the payment."

"What? Wait... Do you mean the *lady*? You think we were trying to steal your drugs? We were just trying to escape."

Sister Judith looked Erin straight in the eye for the first time. Her voice was earnest as she spoke next. "Tell me honest now, is that the truth? You weren't just trying to make yourselves rich? You really were just trying to escape? 'Cause escape I can understand, even forgive. But stealing I can't abide."

Well, isn't that ironic? You and your ilk stole our plane and took our freedom, but you can't abide stealing? "Honest, we just want to get home. We don't want your drugs. Where did you hear that?"

"That's what the whole town's sayin'."

"Hah!" Lyssa said from the other side of the shed. "Fuckin' Fourthers are all the same. Don't know shit about shit so they make shit up." Lyssa punctuated her disgust by spitting into the dirt.

* * *

Under armed guard and with their legs shackled, the prisoners were allowed, one at a time, to go to the camp shower tent to bathe. When they came to get Erin, she wasn't about to get undressed in front of the leering pirates. She just poured a basin of water cleaned herself as best as she could without removing a single article of clothing. By the time she was done, much of her Noémie pilot's uniform was damp, but she felt marginally cleaner. On the way back to the shed, she was stopped by Brother Azariah. *Great*, she thought. *The very last thing I want today is to deal with this idiot.*

"Sirs," Brother Azariah said to the two pirates escorting Erin back to the makeshift jail, "would you allow me to have a word with miss?"

"Whatever, bro. Just stay close where we can see you."

"Thank you, good sirs."

Erin contemplated her shackled ankles as Brother Azariah led her out of earshot of the two guards. She wanted to run away from whatever conversation he was about to make her endure, but she doubted she would get far. Maybe she would get shot trying to escape? No, that was probably too much to hope for. Besides, the pirates would hurt Lyssa if she did. Even mad as she was at her former friend, Erin couldn't bring that kind of cruelty down on her.

"Erin," Brother Azariah finally said when they'd put a little distance between themselves and her guards, "I'm really sorry."

What is this fool talking about? "That's fine, just please leave me alone."

"Please, don't be mad at me. I didn't know it would be as bad as this. I had to do it for the good of the whole town."

This got Erin's interest. "Fine, explain yourself."

"It's...just...when I heard what you and that terrible woman mechanic were planning to do, I couldn't let it happen. If you took all our crop, we wouldn't be able to pay Third Law. I had to tell Father Elijah."

This hit Erin like a punch to the gut. It had been Azariah—not Matty or Lyssa—who'd ratted them out. She felt really terrible for all the things she'd said to Lyssa the previous night. She said nothing to him. She was trying to process it all.

At her silence, the buffoon rambled on: "Erin, I know you're a good woman at heart, but I think that Lyssa woman is a terrible, corrupting influence on you. You have to understand that what I did, I did for you as much as for us settlers. That woman will lead you straight into the jaws of eternal damnation."

She wanted to punch this guy. She wanted to wrap her shackle chain around his neck and choke him at least until he

lost consciousness. But she held her calm. *I am the pot on the back burner of the stove. You've forgotten I'm there and I'll burn your whole house down. I will burn Azariah's house down. Literally, if I get a chance.*

Erin was stable.

She wanted to know one more thing from him, however, and she asked it now: "Only thing I don't get is how did you find out what we were planning?"

* * *

Erin knew she needed to eat some serious crow.

She waited until she and Lyssa were alone in their little shed-jail. After she heard the door lock behind her, she waited a moment before speaking. She tried to make her voice sound humble and soothing. "Lyssa, we need to talk."

Lyssa just gave her a dirty look and went back to ignoring her presence.

This isn't going to be easy. But Erin had grown up in the church. She knew how to be a penitent. She knelt in the middle of the room with her feet tucked underneath her and rested her hands in her lap. Keeping her eyes demurely on the dirt floor immediately before her, she spoke again. "I found out how Tolbert knew." She resisted the urge to look up and gauge Lyssa's reaction. If Lyssa chose to react violently, Erin wouldn't see the attack coming. And maybe Lyssa deserved the first strike. Erin continued: "It wasn't you or Matty. I was wrong to make accusations without proof. I'm sorry."

There was a long silence. Erin resisted the urge to begin babbling just to fill that silence.

"Who was it, then?"

Erin noticed that Lyssa hadn't accepted her apology, but she was talking at least. Erin chose to consider it progress. "It was that boob, Brother Azariah."

"You're shittin' me, right?! How did that cum cube figure anything out?"

Nothing like a common enemy to bond over. Erin looked up. Lyssa still sat against the wall with her knees pulled up. She had an annoyed expression on her face, but Erin was pretty sure it was (mostly) directed at Azariah. She told Lyssa about her conversation with Azariah and his explanation of his reasons for snitching on them.

"Mo-ther fucker!" Lyssa said when Erin was done. "That slimy, Fourther douche-toad! How the hell'd a wet end like him even figure it out? Tell me you weren't stupid enough to tell him. 'Cause if you did, I'm gonna kick your ass again."

Erin was pretty sure she'd won that fight, but she kept that to herself. "Heavens, no. I would never tell that idiot."

"Well, how then?"

"That's the creepy part. Apparently he's been 'watching over' me since I arrived here."

Lyssa scoffed. "'Watching over' sounds like a nice way of saying stalking."

The next part, Erin didn't know how Lyssa would take, but she felt like it needed to be said in the spirit of openness. "He was especially vigilant whenever you were around."

At this, Lyssa actually laughed. "That insecure bucket o' dick holes thinks I'm tryin' to corrupt you to my deviant lifestyle? Tell me that ain't why."

"I don't think Azariah's puerile mind could actually grasp such a concept. I think he was more worried that you would teach me to swear and not show proper respect to my betters."

"Umm...*what?!'*"

"He actually said that you don't show proper deference toward men."

At this, Lyssa threw her head back and laughed with her whole body. Erin couldn't help but laugh at it a little herself. "You have..." Lyssa said as she laughed and gasped for breath. "got...to be...fucking kidding me!"

"I'm afraid he actually said that."

Lyssa was now down on her side, gasping and unable to stop laughing. "What a...goddamn...*loser!*"

"Yeah, apparently he was hiding nearby that evening when you first showed me the fake control card."

"That's so fucking...creepy." Lyssa was getting over her laughing fit, but she was still struggling to catch her breath. She sat herself back up and began patting the dirt off her clothes. "He was watching us...while we washed the dishes?"

"Apparently so."

"I really...don't like that guy."

"Yeah, me neither."

The Right Reasons

A generation ago, Sister Judith had done something monumentally stupid for the wrong reasons.

It had all started with the arrival of her draft notice from the Olost Ministry of Defense mere weeks after graduating from nursing school. As a member of the First Father Fundamentalist Church of Christ, she would have qualified for status as a conscientious objector. She could have been put to work in a veterans' care home or some other such safe, rear-echelon duty. It would have been a simple matter of filling out the forms, but the eager, young nurse craved adventure. She wanted to serve on the front lines. That was where her skills were needed the most, and that was where the adventure would be. So, she'd simply reported at the induction center and volunteered for front line duty.

For the next three years of her life, she'd experienced horror like she never wanted to see again. She'd seen first-hand mankind's cruelty to one another. Though she was there to heal people, she still felt complicit in the carnage.

She was proud of the aid she'd given to the wounded, but she was not proud of her military service in the way most veterans seemed to be. She was ashamed of it. She was ashamed of all those she'd not been able to help. She was ashamed that she'd survived while other nurses and doctors, friends and colleagues, had died. And she became more and more ashamed as the unending cycle of war and peace between the Olost Federation and the Kell Republic now rolled over another generation of damned youth. Neither side was right, and both sides were wrong. No one, not even the politicians and generals driving the machine of war, understood what the war was about. But the machine rolled on. And she was ashamed that she had once been a cog in that machine.

After her generation's war had ended, she'd sworn to only do good, to ease human suffering, and to serve the Reengineered Christ. She'd even gone to the Great Cathedral in Cook's Dell and sworn an oath before the altar to never again be a cog in an evil machine of suffering. Since then, she'd obeyed that oath.

Until about a year ago.

It was then that the elders of Pilgrim's Rest began discussing hiring mercenaries and breaching their contract with the Safe Harbor Terraforming Company. At the first mention of this plan, Sister Judith had objected, but what weight did her words carry against such an important man as Father Elijah? Almost none.

Then, it had gotten worse. The discussion came around to how they would pay the mercenaries when they couldn't even afford to pay Safe Harbor. It had been Brother Jotham who'd first proposed paying the mercenaries with a narcotic called "lady."

After the war, Sister Judith had seen the ravages of lady on the addicted. She strongly objected to this course of action, but again her objections were ignored. What else could she do? She'd considered just leaving the planet, but she was the only person in Pilgrim's Rest with any kind of medical knowledge. People would die if she left.

Follow the path set forth by me, the Reengineered Christ had said to his followers, and it will always guide you true. It may not always be the easiest path, but stray not, and I will see you through. Sister Judith knew her Fourth Testament. The Reengineered Christ had also said: *Shelter those in peril and give no call to their tormentor.*

The young pilot, Erin's words from that morning rang in Sister Judith's ears. "Honest," Erin had said to her, "we just want to get home. We don't want your drugs."

"We don't want *your* drugs," Sister Judith repeated the words aloud as she sat alone in her tiny cabin, an open copy of the Fourth Testament on the table before her. Those two outsiders were the only two people on the whole planet who didn't care about the drugs currently being loaded onto their own plane. "...*your* drugs." Sister Judith repeated to the empty room. The open testament felt like it was casting the eye of judgement upon her. She knew it must be finding her wanting. She now understood that she was once again a cog in the machine of human suffering. She had failed in her oath, but the Reengineered Christ had sent her a messenger in the form of a young pilot not even of the faith.

"They're not *my* drugs," Sister Judith said decisively as she got herself up from the table. She had much to do today. She had patients to check up on, but she had even more important tasks to accomplish. Her soul hung in the balance.

A generation ago, Sister Judith had done something monumentally stupid for the wrong reasons. Today, she would do something monumentally stupid for the right reasons.

* * *

It hurt Lyssa how cold Matty was to her that evening. He brought "supper" for herself and Erin. He also emptied out their piss pot and refilled their water bucket with fresh lake water. The "supper" he brought them was a single packet of perma-rats they were apparently expected to share. She tried to engage him in conversation, but he ignored her. He never said a word to her, never looked at her. *He must hate me*, she thought. She couldn't say she blamed him.

He finished his job quickly and got out of the shed. He locked the door behind himself.

A few minutes later, she and Erin were trying to choke down the disgusting perma-rat pellets. Perma-rats were said to taste like the inside of a dead horse's asshole (and Lyssa believed it). As they choked down their perma-rats, the scent of hot food drifted in from just beyond the door to torment them. The guards outside the shed-jail were getting their meal. Lyssa could hear Matty's voice outside as he loudly proclaimed: "Here ya guys. Rocks-a-sock. Good and hot. Cold beer."

Lyssa had no doubt that Matty was saying all this to torment her. Her suspicions were confirmed a moment later as the guards began teasing her through the door.

"Mmm," one of the guards said, "good Estrellan food. I bet you wish you had some, don't ya, cupcake?" It sounded like the guard was chewing as he spoke.

"It's so warm I can see it steaming," said the other guard.

"Wash down. Cold beer, friend." Matty said to the guards. This, too, was for Lyssa's benefit. She looked down at the handful of perma-rat pellets she held and threw them at the door. She called Matty a name in Estrellan that had no direct Gonian equivalent.

On the other side of the door, all three men, Matty included, laughed. Lyssa went to her accustomed spot by the wall to sulk while Erin continued to choke the pellets down.

A few minutes later, the men outside got quiet. Then, the lock clicked and the door began to swing open. Lyssa was genuinely surprised to see who came through the door. It was the old midwife, Sister Judith. She was carrying two covered plates of food and a steaming pot of coffee.

Sister Judith saw Erin still eating the perma-rats. "Young miss," the old midwife said to Erin, "did you mean what you said this morning about only wanting your freedom and not wanting those terrible narcotics?"

Erin seemed surprised. "Yeah." She glanced at Lyssa and then back at Sister Judith. "Why?"

Sister Judith glanced around at the open door. She was behaving strangely. Lyssa, a long-time rule breaker herself recognized that behavior. Sister Judith was getting ready to break a rule. Now, Lyssa was interested. What could inspire a pious, old windbag like Sister Judith to break a rule? "I've spent much of the day in contemplation," Sister Judith said. "The Reengineered Christ has shown the way back to His path. If you had a chance to earn your freedom by destroying that lady, would you do it?"

The question had been directed at Erin, but it was Lyssa who answered. "Fuckin' A, I would. My piece-o'-shit mom was strung out on that shit before I was born. I almost died when I was a baby 'cause I was born addicted to lady." The moment felt awkward. Both Sister Judith and Erin looked at her with surprised expressions on their faces.

Apparently deciding to ignore the awkwardness of the moment, Erin answered Sister Judith's question. "I told you this morning, Sister: I'm not interested in your lady. I only want to get myself, my crew, and our fallen comrade home."

Sister Judith puffed out her chest and said indignantly: "It's not *my* lady."

After that, Sister Judith gave them the food she'd brought. Lyssa was disappointed when the old woman pulled the towel back from the plates to reveal fried chicken, greens, and mashed potatoes. She'd been hoping for some rocks-in-a-sock like the guards had gotten. Nasty planet dweller food was only a little better than perma-rats.

Now, it occurred to Lyssa to ask, "Where are the guards?"

"Sleep good, love," came Matty's voice from the open door. How long had he been standing there?

"I dosed their food," Sister Judith said. "They'll sleep til morning, but they'll wake up just fine."

Lyssa switched to Estrellan as she asked her next question directly to Matty. "Wait? You're helping us escape? Why? Don't you know what the other mercenaries will do to you if they find out you helped us?"

Matty answered her in Estrellan. "They're — *We're* — not really mercenaries anymore. We used to be when I first joined up, but things have changed. You guys were right all along to call us pirates, 'cause that's what we're becoming. Especially now that Tolbert's our C.O. It's an open secret in Third Law that Tolbert plans on breaking the deal with Villalobos, selling the lady, and abandoning the Fourthers. That's why she won the election. When she did that flyby on the *Ready Sophia*: that was a signal to all us grunts that she was willing to thumb her nose at Villalobos. That means more

money in our pockets after we sell the lady."

"You'll have to abandon your buddies and come with us, you know."

"They're not my buddies. I never fit in with them real good. Anyway, this company is changing and not for the better. My time with them is limited. Especially since I was one of the few that voted against Tolbert."

Lyssa conveyed all that Matty had said about Third Law's internal politics into Gonian for the benefit of Sister Judith and Erin.

"Just as I expected," Sister Judith said. "I'm hardly the only one of the faith that doesn't trust this Tolbert woman."

"Sister," Erin said, "we'll destroy the crop as promised. But that won't stop Tolbert from abandoning Sanctuary to Villalobos."

"I'd rather see the crop destroyed by you than smoked or injected by thousands of addicts. No, I can't abide being a party to that. And I really can't abide Tolbert profiting from it without even intending to honor our contract." The old midwife's brow furrowed. Lyssa could tell the woman was in a very morally challenging spot. "Anyway, we're already started down His path and He will guide us true. As long as we stray not, He will see us through. I've sheltered you through your peril, but at the same time I've been guilty of aiding your tormentors."

This didn't make any sense to Lyssa, but Erin nodded her head as if she understood.

"Now, you girls eat," Sister Judith said. "You'll need your strength. I'll tell you what we've got in mind."

You Don't Fuck with a Mechanic's Tools

The first part of the escape plan fell to Lyssa. She had to retrieve the hardpointer's control card. Again.

At least this time it wasn't at the bottom of a kilometer-deep lake. It was (according to Matty, anyway) locked in Tolbert's footlocker in her private tent. "Colonel Tolbert isn't there," Matty said in Estrellan. "She's meeting with the village elders and discussing how they're gonna get the lady off the planet in the morning. They're planning on making Erin fly it and holding you here for a hostage."

"Too bad the plane will be gone by morning."

"True that, love."

Erin and Sister Judith waited in the woods near the shed-jail while Matty led Lyssa to Tolbert's tent. They had posed the unconscious guards just outside the shed's closed door so that it looked like they were sitting on the ground with their backs against the door drinking and talking. Lyssa had said nobody would believe that if they happened past, but Matty had assured her that's what guards do when no officer was looking.

Lyssa thought back to the night she had played cards with Scalps out on the platform while she waited for Erin to return from flying with Tolbert. Those men had been on guard duty, watching the hardpointer, but all they really did was drink and gamble.

"Mercenaries aren't real military, love."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'love'?"

"At least one more, love."

Sneaking around the periphery of the camp and keeping to the shadows, they made it to Tolbert's tent without anybody stopping them. "You go in and get the card. I'll keep a lookout," Matty said.

Lyssa just nodded and ducked inside the tent. She found the tent surprisingly spartan for a pirate warlord. There was just a cot, a bath basin in one corner, a couple flight suits hanging from hangers, and a small desk. There was a lantern on the desktop and a plastiform crate on the bare ground right next to the desk. Lyssa guessed Tolbert must use that crate as a chair. And at the foot of the cot was Tolbert's foot locker where Matty said the old sociopath had locked away the control card.

Lyssa was no safe cracker, but this was just a common soldier's foot locker, not a safe. It had only a simple, mechanical lock holding it shut. If she had something to pick the lock with, she could probably open the footlocker that way, but Lyssa knew a quicker and easier way to open it. She dragged the heavy footlocker away from the cot and examined the hinges along the back of its lid.

She poked her head back out the tent's flap. "Matty, gimme your rifle."

Matty looked around but no one seemed to be nearby. "If you fire it, everybody will be on you. You'll be dead pretty quick."

"I don't need a gun. I need a hammer and a punch. Now, gimme your fuckin' rifle."

Matty considered it. He was clearly loath to give away his weapon.

"You'll get it back. Now, hurry."

Reluctantly, Matty unclipped the rifle from his body armor and handed it over. Lyssa didn't fuck around. She grabbed the rifle and pulled it back into the tent. By the light of the lantern, she removed the rifle's cleaning rod and examined it. It was the perfect diameter to use as a punch, but she was gonna fuck up the threads on Matty's cleaning rod, good and proper. She placed one end of the cleaning rod on the first of the three hinge pins and tapped the other end of rod with the butt of the rifle. After about the second time she used the gun as a hammer, it occurred to her to wonder if doing this could make the gun go off. She knew nothing about guns, so she had to just hope for the best.

After only a few smacks on the cleaning rod, she managed to get the first pin out far enough that she was able to grab it with her fingers and pull it the rest of the way free. It hurt her fingers, but she got the job done. "I miss my pliers," she muttered as she set the first hinge pin aside and got to work on the second. In less than a minute, she had all three pins out and she lifted the footlocker's lid free. The front of the lid was still secured to the locker via the lock's shackle, but she

now had full access to the contents.

And the contents proved to be interesting. There were several books inside. A couple were about airplanes, but others were about the philosophy of war from ancient Earth warlords and dictators. One was called The Art of War while another was called Mein Kampf. She also found Erin's useless gun, still in its shoulder holster. She'd definitely be returning that to its owner. Inside a strange, black box, she found a prosthetic eye like the one Tolbert wore. *Must be a spare. Looks expensive*, Lyssa thought. After she smashed it, she put the pieces back into their box. She pushed aside toiletries and personal items of no interest to her. Where the hell did the old bag hide the control card? *Matty, you better be right about it being in here.*

She picked up a makeup bag and even before she opened it to look inside, she recognized a familiar clatter from the bag's contents. Her heart leapt with joy as she unzipped the makeup bag and found her confiscated tools within. The pockets of her coveralls had felt annoyingly empty the past day or so without the familiar weight of her tools. *You don't fuck with a mechanic's tools.*

She quickly slipped her adjustable wrench, her favorite ratchet, multimeter, wire stripper, a roll of electrical tape, and about a dozen other tools back into their accustomed pockets. Her soul felt complete again.

She found Tolbert's data pad and phone. They were both inert at the moment since they were inside the tenebricite shadow, but that didn't stop Lyssa from using her pliers to break their screens. *You don't fuck with a mechanic's tools.*

She still hadn't found the control card, though, and she had been all through the footlocker. *Fuck! If that thing ain't in here, we are proper humped so hard.*

Then, she looked at the books again. One of the books called The Prince bulged oddly. She opened the book and found the control card being used as a bookmark. She was almost as thrilled as she had been at finding her tools. She examined the card closely just to make sure it was the real thing. It was.

She quickly threw Tolbert's stuff back into the footlocker and tapped the hinge pins back into place. She looked around the tent and was satisfied that everything looked just as it had before she'd entered. Tolbert would be pissed when she opened that footlocker, but until that happened, she shouldn't suspect anything.

Escape by Moonlight

Lyssa and Matty regrouped with the others in the trees near the shed-jail.

"Did you get it?" Erin asked anxiously.

"Girl, you know me." She handed the control card over to Erin. "That's twice in as many days I've recovered that thing. I'm gettin' pretty good at this."

"You should get moving," Sister Judith said. "Most of the town is at the meeting in the church with Colonel Tolbert, but that meeting won't go on forever."

Erin turned her attention away from the control card to the midwife who'd facilitated their one, last chance at escape. "You sure you won't come with us, Sister Judith?"

"I can't. I have patients here to take care of. And I have to answer for what I did here today."

"Fuck that," Lyssa said. "Nobody in this mud ball town even knows you helped us. Just play dumb and they'll never know."

"No, I can't. I've already strayed from the True Path. Now that I'm back on it, I never want to stray again. I'll answer for what I've done, maybe even light the way for others. The Reengineered Christ will protect me and guide the hearts of my fellow faithful. I have faith."

"Umm, whatever." Lyssa said. *They're gonna fucking kill her. Fucking zealots.* But she knew there was no convincing the woman to come with them. Sister Judith was a zealot too, after all. *Fucking zealots. Glad I don't believe in God.* Lyssa was conveniently forgetting how she had called out to God down at the bottom of the lake.

"Thank you, Sister, for all you've done for us," Erin said and then embraced Sister Judith in a hug.

"You're welcome, young miss. Just be safe."

Then, Lyssa was surprised to find herself moving in to hug the woman who'd sheltered them all this time. "Thank you," she whispered as she fought back tears.

* * *

Aided by darkness and deserted streets, Matty, Lyssa, and Erin made their way through the town to the docks where the fishermen had tied up their boats for the night.

"You know how fly boat?" Matty whispered in his broken Gonian as Erin looked the boats over.

"Sail. You don't *fly* a boat; you *sail* it." Erin whispered back. "And yes. I grew up in a fishing village."

"Matter which boat, love?"

"Yes. We need one with oarlocks and oars. The wind is really light. We don't want to end up becalmed in the middle of the lake with no oars."

"Not understand."

Erin was about to tell him to never mind when Lyssa whispered laughingly: "Oh, we're taking this one."

The boat Lyssa seemed intent on taking did indeed have oarlocks and oars, but Erin didn't understand what was so funny. "I guess this one will do. But what's so funny?"

"Damn straight this one will do. It's got your name written all over it." At this point, Lyssa began cracking up.

Erin finally saw what Lyssa was laughing at. By the dim light of the two moons hanging in the Sanctuary sky, Erin saw her own name freshly painted on the boat's bow. "Oh, for the love of—"

"—Azariah?" Lyssa interrupted her and then lost herself in heaving laughter.

Now, Matty got the joke and he started laughing at Erin's expense. "I come wedding, love?"

"Don't call her 'love'. You might make Azariah jealous."

Now, they were both cracking up. Erin wasn't amused. Azariah certainly wasn't the first stalker she'd ever had and she knew how dangerous they could be. "All right, you idiots. Get aboard."

* * *

Being the only one who knew the first thing about sailing, Erin was obliged to work the tiller and the sheets. The weak, nighttime wind slowly carried them out toward the service platform where her hardpointer, now loaded with illegal narcotics waited. Just as Erin had feared, they lost their wind entirely about a kilometer from the platform.

Ever since they'd left the dock, Matty and Lyssa had been making jokes about Erin and Azariah, so Erin felt absolutely no guilt at making them man the oars the last kilometer to the platform. Erin sat smugly at the tiller as Matty and Lyssa complained about their blistering hands.

The last few dozen meters, however, Erin pulled the tiller off the transom and took to the oars herself. They all knew that the next few minutes would be extremely dangerous. The platform would be guarded by two-or-three big men with guns. These men would need to be taken out of commission quickly before they had a chance to fight back.

A further complication was that they couldn't be killed. These guards had once been comrades of Matty's. He had made it known back at the shed-jail that he wouldn't kill any of them. He would only use non-lethal means to take them out. Now, as Erin gently, quietly dipped her oars and soundlessly approached the dock, all merriment was silenced. Lyssa sat in the stern with a worried look on her face as Erin glanced frequently over her shoulder at the approaching dock.

Matty was preparing to go into battle. He had never been a true soldier. He'd never even been a true Estrellan police officer. But in the nearly three years since the Ruin of Estrella, he'd been trained and drilled until he thought he might fall over dead. And then they'd drilled him some more. He'd seen his fair share of battles and he was even reasonably certain he'd fired shots which had killed people. But now, he was going into battle outnumbered and unable to use lethal force against people who wouldn't hesitate to use it against him. He said a prayer, crossed himself, and began readying his weapons.

He was going to have to rely on surprise. He was going to have to strike quickly and without hesitation.

So gentle was Erin with the boat that Matty barely felt it make contact with the dock. He gave the women a nod and leapt silently to the dock. He left his rifle in the boat and took only a couple of stun grenades and two stun sticks. He moved silently up the dock, past the looming nose of Lyssa's freighter, and climbed up the small ladder onto the platform proper. At first, he neither heard nor saw anything, but then he heard a cough and subdued conversation from inside the small shack.

He started towards the shack, but then movement out the corner of his eye caused him to hit the deck. He listened and then he heard the familiar sound of someone urinating over the side of the platform. Matty moved quickly into the shadow of a munitions crate and waited for the man to finish. Finally, the trickling sound of urine into the water below sputtered and then stopped. He distinctly heard the pisser groan with relief and then zip his pants back up. As the man stepped back into the light of the small shack, Matty saw that it was a fellow grunt, a guy know as "Ball Bat," though Matty didn't know why. It was probably better not to ask a mercenary why he was called Ball Bat.

Matty watched as Ball Bat went back into the shed. He heard a familiar creak as the big man sat down in one of the metal chairs inside. Matty turned on both of his stun sticks and cringed at the faint humming sound they made. It seemed impossibly loud to him, but no one inside the shack seemed to have heard them. Next, he pulled the pins on both stun grenades but held the fuse levers in place. He prayed one last silent prayer, just in case he'd left something out of his last prayer back on the boat.

And then it was time to go.

He crept silently but quickly to the door and rolled both stun grenades through the door. Then, he crouched down against the shack's outer wall and covered his ears. He barely heard the men inside say "COVER!" before both grenades went off at nearly the same time.

B-BOOM

Matty felt the percussion in his chest and even he, partially sheltered as he was, had to gasp for that first breath. Partially stunned himself, he grabbed his stun sticks and stumbled through the shack's door. There were three men inside. One was on the floor, completely unconscious. One was down on all fours gasping for air. But one (Ball Bat, in fact) was standing up (even if he was leaning heavily on the table for support).

Ball Bat looked at Matty, confused for a moment. "Moss? What are you —?" A look of surprised understanding crossed Ball Bat's face and before he could do anything else, Matty hit him with a stun stick. Ball Bat crumpled to the floor, stunned. Matty then stunned the man who was on all fours. As this man fell, Matty realized he was Sgt. Scalps.

Erin and Lyssa moved in and bound all three men, hands and feet, with electrocuffs. The service platform and Lyssa's freighter were all theirs. Matty stepped outside the shack to let his mind clear in the cool, night air. Lyssa brought a canteen of water. Matty splashed some on his face and drank a couple sips. Within a couple minutes he was mostly back

to normal.

"You okay, Matty?" Lyssa asked him in Estrellan.

Matty liked that Lyssa spoke to him in Estrellan. He always felt self-conscious when he had to speak Gonian. People often made fun of him for his terrible command of that language. But Lyssa always talked to him in Estrellan, and being able to speak well made him feel like more of a man. He answered her in Estrellan: "Yeah, love. I'm okay. Just got a little rattled back there. You guys better get to work on getting us out of here. If the camp on shore hasn't noticed us missing before now, you can bet they heard those stun grenades. By the time they get a head of steam in the steam barge and get out here, I figure we got about thirty-to-forty minutes at best."

"Take a couple more minutes. I'll be gettin' the plane ready," Lyssa said.

Lyssa found Erin down on the dock next to the boat which bore her name. The boat was now full of water and Lyssa arrived just a few seconds before the mast slipped beneath the lake's surface. Lyssa couldn't believe it. "You sank his boat? That was his livelihood."

"Well," Erin said so coldly it gave Lyssa chills, "now he'll have to find another one." And with that, Erin turned and walked up the dock where she disappeared into the hardpointer.

Lyssa wondered, for the first time in days, if Erin had actually burned that plane a few years ago.

Spoils of War

While Erin began preflighting the hardpointer, Lyssa climbed up onto the big freighter's back where the smaller fighter was parked. She then climbed up into the cockpit of the fighter itself. The controls of the fighter were unlike anything she'd ever worked with before, but she found all the necessary buttons and switches easily enough. Within a couple minutes, she managed to get the fighter's engine started and its power output routed, via the umbilicus cable, to the hardpointer below. That would provide Erin with the power she needed to jumpstart the freighter's huge engines.

Next, she accessed the fighter's weapons systems and transferred the control commands for all its ordinance to her personal phone. She felt a megalomaniacal thrill at how much destructive power she now wielded at the press of a button. She slipped the phone back into her pocket and climbed down out of the fighter's cockpit.

By this point, Matty had fully recovered from being dazed and had climbed up to join her on the hardpointer's back. For the next task, she would need his help. They opened up the shipping container. It seemed like a lifetime ago since she'd watched Loadmaster Serpico secure this container to the hardpointer's back. Inside the container, Lyssa saw the spare TFG capacitor they'd brought with them from Gonaways. The capacitor was covered with bales of unprocessed lady and surrounded by several huge, plastic tubs of processed, yellowish paste – Lu-Reban lady, ready to be smoked or injected by addicts.

"That's a lot of lady," Matty said in Estrellan. "Must be a fortune there."

"That's a lot of destroyed lives is what that is," Lyssa said. "Looks like the greedy bastards were even planning on selling my TFG capacitor."

"Spoils of war."

"Well, I've got a better use for that capacitor. You ever see one of those things catch on fire?"

It took them a few minutes, but they managed to get one of the fighter's two EMP missiles detached from its wings. They loaded the EMP into the shipping container and strapped it to the container's floor. The missile's engine output nozzle was mere centimeters away from the TFG capacitor.

Then, Lyssa got an idea. She looked at the second EMP, still hanging from the fighter's wing. It was slightly smaller than she was, so it should fit anywhere she could fit. "Hmm," she said. "Matty, lend me a hand with this other EMP. I got an idea."

* * *

While Lyssa and Matty took care of things topside, Erin was in the cockpit going through checklists and getting ready to start the first of the hardpointer's three, big engines.

PRIM. FUEL PUMP...ON

SEC. FUEL PUMP...OFF

FUEL CUTOFF...OPEN

IGNITION...ENG 1

START...ENG 1

As she pressed and held the start button for Engine 1, she heard a whining from the back of the plane as the values on her engine displays rose slightly for a moment. Then, the readouts on the engine displays for Engine 1 rose sharply and she felt a familiar, satisfying rumble through the aircraft's structure as the engine roared to life. She put her hand on the control stick and fancied she could feel the spaceplane's soul. 788NC wanted to fly.

She repeated the process for engines No. 2 and No. 3.

"Crew Chief Ruiz," Erin said into the boom mic of her headset. "We have a good start. Let's get away from the dock." It felt good to use her friend's company title. This was a Noémie operation. They were finally out from Third Law's and the Fourthers' thumbs. Lyssa didn't respond, so Erin repeated her request. "Crew Chief Ruiz. Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Request tow."

Lyssa finally responded. "Sorry, Captain. We was just taking care of something. I got your tow comin' right up." Shortly after that, Erin felt the hardpointer rise slightly in the water as the fighter lifted off of its back.

* * *

Lyssa hated flying, especially when she herself was at the controls. Granted, this was only a hover-taxi procedure, but she still hated flying. She'd only ever taken the minimum flight training required by the guild for her aviation mechanic's license. The hover-taxi (though considered a basic maneuver by pilots) was the most advanced maneuver required by the Mechanics' and Machinists' Guild and it marked the extreme of Lyssa's flying abilities. Lyssa hated flying.

However, Lyssa was the only one who could use the fighter to tow the hardpointer away from the dock. Erin couldn't do it. If the hardpointer's control card detected that Erin and her QSP were no longer aboard, it would shut down and all the hardpointer's systems, including engines. So, the job of towing fell to Lyssa.

The fighter was so weird to her, so unlike anything she'd ever taxied before, but she managed to get the job done. By the time she had towed the bigger plane far enough from the service platform to assure safety, it was nearly twenty-five minutes since they'd first taken the platform. She doubted if it would be long before the pirates got to them.

Matty had just barely gotten the tow line untethered from the hardpointer when Lyssa became aware of a strange *pling* sound coming from somewhere in the fighter. Before she could figure the sound out, she heard it again, but this time the sound came as a pair. *Pling-pling*.

Down on the back of the hardpointer, Matty was sheltering beside the shipping container. *The fuck is he doing?* And then it dawned on her what the *pling* sounds were just as she heard several more in rapid succession. *Pling-pling...pling-pling-pling*. She looked to the east, in the direction of Pilgrim's Rest and then she saw several quick flashes of light from a dark object in the water. She couldn't make out its shape in the faint moonlight, but she knew it had to be the steam barge and they were shooting at her. *Pling-pling*.

The bullets didn't seem to be affecting the fighter and she was sure the thing was designed to take a fair amount of small arms fire, but even a military aircraft had its limits. She set the fighter back down on the hardpointer's back just as a bullet *pling*-ed off the crystalanium canopy. The canopy was protecting her for now, but as soon as she opened it, she would be vulnerable to those bullets. She would have to move fast. She pulled her utility knife out of her coverall pockets and cut the fighter's seat restraint strap free from the seat. It would serve for a makeshift piece of rope.

"Crew Chief Ruiz," Erin's voice came over Lyssa's headset, "we're taking fire here. Ditch that fighter and we can get out of here."

Lyssa didn't answer. She was busy tying one end of the seat restraint strap around the fighter's collective lever. Once that was done, she took a deep breath and pressed the button to open the canopy. Now, she was vulnerable to gunfire.

As if on cue, she heard a couple bullets *pling-pling* against the fighter's fuselage as she draped the rest of the strap over the side of the cockpit. She climbed out quickly, careful not to pull on the strap. Once her feet were firmly down on the back of the hardpointer, she reached up to the strap she'd left draping over the lip of the cockpit

Just then several more bullets hit the side of the fighter. *Pling-pling-pling...pling-pling*. One of the bullets hit just below the lip of the cockpit. It missed her hand by less than a dozen centimeters as she reached for the dangling strap.

Now, Lyssa was mad. "EAT IT, TOLBERT!" she yelled. She grabbed the restraint strap and pulled. As Lyssa pulled her end down, the other end, down inside the cockpit and tied around the collective lever, was jerked upwards, pulling the collective with it. There was a moment's delay as the fighter's vertical thrusters spooled up, just enough time for Lyssa to let go of the restraint strap, and then the pilotless fighter lifted off the back of the hardpointer.

Matty grabbed Lyssa and pulled her to shelter behind the shipping container. Just then, several bullets struck the hardpointer itself, the container, and the maintenance mech which was stowed in its transport configuration just forward of the container.

Lyssa looked up, trying to find the fighter, but its vertical thrusters had already carried it high enough that she couldn't make the little plane out anymore. She wondered briefly where it would end up, but then Matty jumped from cover and moved quickly to new cover behind the mech. About five-or-so meters beyond the mech was 788NC's open upper hatch. They had to make it to there.

From his shelter behind the mech, Matty was urging Lyssa to come join him. She was afraid to cross the unprotected gap between the container and the mech as the occasional bullet *pling*-ed against metal or rippled audibly through the air nearby. She steeled herself, took a deep breath, and made the dash.

The bullet that hit her felt like a baseball bat to her thigh. She fell just short of the mech's shelter and began crawling forward. Her leg hurt like hell. Matty leapt out, grabbed her by the coveralls, and dragged her the rest of the way to shelter.

"How bad is it?" Lyssa asked.

"I don't know. I can't see good enough in the dark. Can you stand on it?"

"Not sure. Hurts like a motherfucker." Vaguely, Lyssa noticed the wing flaps extending to the takeoff position.

"Okay. I'll carry you." And just like that, before she could even protest, Matty picked her up and threw her over his shoulder caveman-style. With bullets all around them, he ran the remaining few meters to the open hatch and dropped her, feet first, through the hatch.

Luckily, Lyssa landed on her good leg. "Fuckin' hell, Matty!" Lyssa shouted in protest.

Matty himself dropped down into the hatch. He started to climb down the ladder and then just fell the rest of the way, landing on top of Lyssa. Lyssa went to push him off and she saw his head. What was left of his head. She couldn't understand what she was seeing at first. It didn't look like anything. And then it did. It was blood and bone and brain. Lyssa was no doctor, but even she could tell.

Matty Moss, who had lost his entire family during the Ruin of Estrella, who had once wanted to be a police officer, and who'd had a hopeless crush on Lyssa Ruiz, was dead.

Bastards

"Fuck the safety valve! Bolt it closed if you have to. Give me more speed!" Col. Tolbert shouted at the steam barge's boiler operator. "That bitch O'Connell is about to get away with our paycheck. If the boiler blows, you'll never know it."

"Yes, ma'am," the boiler operator said as he used a ratchet to begin cranking more tension into the safety valve's spring.

The hardpointer, now just under a kilometer beyond their bow, had pulled away from the service platform. O'Connell hadn't turned on the freighter's external lights, which was smart, but the big plane was still easy enough to see in the dim moonlight. From the barge's bow, several men were taking pot shots at the hardpointer. Col. Tolbert knew that their rifles couldn't hurt the sturdily built freighter, especially at this range, and likely the men knew it too. It was a waste of ammo, but Tolbert let the men have their fun.

She was more concerned with what her technical specialist was doing. Sgt. Trig was trying to get their portable, fast-cycling communicator operating. "Trigger, that thing working yet?"

"Sporadically, ma'am," Trigger answered. "We must be just at the edge of the tenebricite shadow. 'Nother couple minutes and we should have a reliable signal to our main forces."

"Good. As soon as you get a signal to the terraforming rig, tell them what's going on. Get our fighters and gunships in the air. Tell them to intercept and disable that freighter."

"Yes, ma'am," Trig answered.

"*Just disable.* Make sure they understand not to blow it up or anything stupid like that. That civvie piece of shit is hauling our paycheck."

"Roger that, colonel."

"And tell them to send somebody out here with a fighter for me. I need to be airborne."

* * *

Lyssa had seen some terrible things in her lifetime, but nothing like this. She couldn't make her brain think. She heard a sound and only vaguely recognized it as Erin's voice. She couldn't make out the words, though. She couldn't think. Her brain had just stopped.

"Are you guys aboard?" Erin asked again into her headset and again got no response. "I can't take off until you guys are aboard and I'm still showing the upper hatch open." Erin waited another moment as she listened to more small arms fire *pling* against the hardpointer's outer skin. She wasn't worried about the bullets hurting the plane. The enemy's steam barge was still about a kilometer away and Erin knew enough about guns to know that was extreme range for most projectile rifles. Besides, the hardpointer was built tough enough to withstand the rigors of spaceflight with dozens of containers locked onto its external hardpoints. The bullets were like mosquito bites to an elephant.

What did concern Erin was the unnerving silence on the intercom. "Crew Chief Ruiz, are you guys aboard? I need that hatch shut."

Still no answer from Lyssa.

Erin turned in her seat and looked over her right shoulder. She stared down the plane's central corridor, but all the lights were off. She could see neither Lyssa nor Matty back there. She feared the worst. There was nothing for it; she would have to go back and check the situation out for herself.

Erin climbed out of the captain's seat and made her way down the central corridor, past the crew quarters and into the darkened galley area where the upper hatch still stood open. She turned the lights on and saw what had happened. Lyssa looked stunned. Her eyes stared forward, unfocused. She held what was left of Matty's head in her lap, as though trying to comfort him.

Erin knelt and held her friend, but Lyssa made no acknowledgement of her presence. *She's in shock*, Erin realized.

Erin stood up, ran into the nearest crew quarter. The pirates had ransacked the room, but she found a blanket rumpled on the floor. She took the blanket back out to the galley and draped it over Matty's body. The covering of Matty's head seemed to (at least partially) snap Lyssa out of her trance-like state.

"Erin," Lyssa said, "Matty didn't make it."

"I know. But I need you here with me now. We've got a job to do."

"We gotta fly."

"That's right. We gotta fly and I need you to reconfigure the shield projectors."

"What's wrong with the shield projectors?" Lyssa asked.

Erin could tell that Lyssa still wasn't thinking straight. "Remember the plan? We need to narrow the beam on the shield projectors so we can go where Tolbert's fighters can't follow."

"Tolbert killed Matty."

"Yes, she did. And we're gonna destroy what she cares about, remember."

"Revenge won't bring Matty back."

This surprised Erin. She wasn't even as close to Matty as Lyssa had been, but even she wanted revenge for his death. Why didn't Lyssa? They were running out of time. Erin decided to try a different tack. "Lyssa, if you don't get up and reconfigure those shield projectors, Tolbert's gonna get us too. No one's gonna miss me, but your brother will lose his sister."

At this Lyssa looked her right in the eye. "I'd miss you, Erin."

This touched Erin, but they didn't have time for this conversation. "Then for me and for your brother, please get up and get ready to tighten the beams on those shield projectors."

Lyssa nodded, looked down at the blanket covering her fallen friend and then gently lowered his head from her lap. "Gotta go outside to do the projectors. Can't do that until we're in space. Besides, my leg's fucked up. Bastards shot me."

Erin grabbed a first aid kit off the wall and knelt down beside Lyssa on the floor. "Let me see it."

"No," Lyssa was starting to sound like her normal self again. "You go fly. I'll take care of my leg."

Erin nodded. "Okay." She stood up, pressed the button to close the upper hatch, ran back to the cockpit, and strapped herself back into the captain's seat. As soon as she was seated, she did a quick check that the plane was properly configured for a water takeoff and then pushed the three throttle levers forward. Bullets continued to *pling* impotently against the side of the big plane as the engines started to whine and the airspeed came alive. In less than a half a minute, they were in the air and she was retracting the wing floats and the flaps.

That takeoff had come at too high of a price and no matter what, she was going to get her remaining passenger safely back to civilization.

* * *

Aboard the *Ready Sophia*, Cdr. Tengrove was overseeing the night watch. He sat in the captain's chair with one leg propped up on the console. There was nothing going on and he was bored. He and the helmsman were playing a card game on their phones. Just aft of the bridge, Captain Villalobos slept in his quarters and aft of that most of the ship's crew were in their racks for the night.

The card game was going well for Tengrove. Currently, his helmsman owed him \$34 and Tengrove was holding the Crusader card and two eights. As I'm sure you know, that's a nearly impossible hand to beat in Darklands Lean and Stay. He was about to tap the "Lean" button on his phone when out of the corner of his eye, he caught his communications officer sit up straight suddenly and begin typing notes into her terminal.

Cdr. Tengrove slipped his phone into his pocket, the card game and his winning hand now forgotten. The comms officer, a cute, young ensign named Iris Sebastian, was listening to something over her headset. Despite his aching curiosity, Cdr. Tengrove resisted the urge to query the busy comms officer. Instead, he just kept his mouth shut and let her finish intercepting whatever she was hearing. As soon as Sebastian appeared done, he asked, "Something to report, Ensign?"

"Yes, sir. I just intercepted something on Third Law's command channel."

"Let's hear it."

"Yes, sir." Ens. Sebastian switched on the speaker and played back the transmission she'd just intercepted.

It was a man's voice, one Cdr. Tengrove recognized from previously intercepted transmissions. He was pretty sure the speaker's name was Trigger. "*Point Alpha, Point Bravo, Point Charlie. Alert! From Third Law Actual: Launch all air squads. Intercept and capture Tango Shitbucket. Do not – I repeat, DO NOT – destroy. Shitbucket has payload. Ground squads one and two to Sanctuary Primary. Also, Third Law Actual orders her fighter brought to her at Sanctuary Primary.*" After that, the message repeated.

"Interesting..." Cdr. Tengrove said. "What do you make of that, Ensign?"

"Well, sir, I'd say it sounds like somebody just stole their lady and they're trying to get it back. We know from previous intercepted communications of theirs that 'Shitbucket' refers to the hardpoint freighter they captured and 'payload' is the lady shipment. 'Sanctuary Primary' is their code phrase for the Fourther settlement they're protecting."

"Was the frequency encrypted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any chance that Turd Law knows we've broken their encryption?"

"It's likely they at least suspect it."

"Hmm..." Cdr. Tengrove thought for a moment. "So this could all be a trap."

"That's the kind of shit this new commander of theirs would pull," volunteered the tactical officer.

Of course everybody aboard the *Sophie* knew about Col. Tolbert, Third Law's new commanding officer. That scar-faced, old hag had killed several of their pilots. She was ruthless, sadistic, and bold. This definitely sounded like the kind of trap Tolbert would set. Cdr. Tengrove had a decision to make. Assume the message was legit and this was a good time to kick the enemy while they were down, maybe even capture the Shitbucket and all the lady? Or assume the message was a trick, some trap Tolbert had devised to draw them into a costly battle.

Fuck it. Let's do this, he thought. "Beat to quarters."

* * *

As Erin took off, Lyssa wormed her way out of her blood-soaked coveralls so that she could examine her wounded thigh. She didn't know how much of the blood was hers and how much was Matty's. Her leg still hurt like hell. *Bastards*, she thought. She chose to be angry about her wounded leg, because that hurt less than thinking about Matty.

She poured some isopropyl alcohol on her thigh and cried out as it burned against the open wound.

"You okay back there?" Erin asked over the intercom.

"Never been better. I love this fuckin' job."

Now that the alcohol had washed away much of the blood, she could see the wound more clearly. And she could see what was actually in her leg. She was pretty sure it wasn't a bullet, but some kind of shrapnel. Whatever it was, it had a chromed finish to it. She rooted around in the first aid kit until she found a likely looking pair of forceps. She wondered briefly if it was smart or dumb to pull the object out and then decided it was probably dumb.

"I've done dumb shit before," she said.

"Huh?" Erin said over the intercom.

"Nothing. Just talkin' to myself." Then, she steeled herself against the coming pain. She gripped the shiny, chromed piece of shrapnel with the forceps and pulled it out as gently as she could. "Aaa-AHHH-aaa!" she cried out.

"You okay back there?"

"Just shut up and fly. Captain."

"Stand by for wings and empennage jettison here in a minute."

"Okay." Lyssa sprinkled into the wound some kind of power that's supposed to help control bleeding and prevent infection or some kind of shit like that. Then, she used the wound sealer to plastigoo the wound shut. It was going to leave a cool scar, but it was high enough up on her thigh that only a lucky few would ever see it.

She took several deep breaths, glad that was all over. She pulled her coveralls back on. They were still covered in blood, but she didn't have time to look for a clean pair. Erin was right. She needed to get to work reconfiguring those shield projectors. Their whole escape plan depended on the fact that there was only one place in the solar system where the hardpointer could go, but Tolbert's fighters couldn't follow.

But as she gingerly began to get herself up off the floor, something red and silver on the floor caught her eye. It was the piece of shrapnel she'd pulled out of her leg. Gingerly, she bent down and picked it up. She examined it. She reached into the thigh pocket of her coveralls and pulled out what remained of her favorite ratchet. The ratchet head had been demolished by a bullet and she could see right where the piece of shrapnel had once fit into it.

"Bastards."

Plan B

The steam barge made it to the service platform a few minutes before the pilot arrived with Col. Tolbert's fighter. She hopped up on the wing before the ferry pilot could even get out of the cockpit. She was in no mood to wait on him, so she grabbed his flight suit in her claw-hand and "helped" him to the deck below. She slid into the cockpit, fastened her seat restraint, and was off the deck before the canopy even closed.

She got on the radio and called to the other fighters and gunships under her command. "All right, worms, this is Lefty." She identified herself by her fighter pilot's callsign, not her rank as commanding officer. "I think I know what this bitch is gonna do. She's gonna try to outrun us with a high-speed slingshot maneuver around the planet. Squads seven and eight, you guys wait for her on the far side of the planet and when she comes 'round hit her with every EMP you got. Everybody else, follow me. We're gonna chase her through the slingshot and be right on her ass when she comes out. Cocky civvie bitch actually bragged to me one time how her hardpointer could out-accelerate a fighter. Let's prove her wrong."

A chorus of "Yes, ma'am." and "Roger that." came from all eight squad commanders. Col. Tolbert felt a wicked, predatory grin slide up the side of her face that was still capable of expression as she twisted the throttle open wider. She couldn't kill O'Connell once they recaptured the hardpointer; she still needed that girl to activate the control card. But the other one, Ruiz, would pay for all that O'Connell had done. And O'Connell would watch.

* * *

Capt. Villalobos had been sound asleep when the familiar drum tattoos of "To Arms," the ancient call to quarters, had sounded throughout the ship. He had thrown his uniform jacket on over his bare chest and arrived on the bridge just as the *Ready Sophia* was breaking orbit from SHP 242's third moon.

His first officer, Cdr. Tengrove, gave him an update on the Third Law transmission they'd intercepted.

"I agree," Capt. Villalobos said, "it sounds like Tolbert is losing control of the situation and this might be a good time to strike at them or possibly even take the payload for ourselves."

"And if it's a trap, sir?"

"We'll proceed cautiously. Launch the fighters, but keep them here on station. We've only got five left and I want them protecting the *Sophie* in case Tolbert is just screwing with us."

"If we can get that lady, then we'll hold all the cards, sir. We can still complete our contract with Safe Harbor *and* keep the lady as a spoil of war."

"Yes, and without any prospect of getting paid, I think Tolbert will be willing to leave in exchange for just safe passage out of the system."

"It would be nice to finally hold all the cards."

"Captain," the comms officer said, "we're being hailed. It's the pilot of the Noémie freighter. Calling us on the CTAF. Should I respond?"

"Interesting. Ask him what he wants?"

The comms officer spoke into her headset's boom mic. "Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. S-H-P-Two-Four-Two System Control. State your intentions." Ens. Sebastian's eyes widened as she listened to the pilot on the other end of the conversation make his request. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, standby."

"Well, what's he want?"

"Sir...um, *she* wants to just *give* us the shipment if we distract the enemy long enough for her to charge her TFG. She says she just wants to get out of the system."

She? Capt. Villalobos knew there weren't a lot of female pilots in the Darklands. Could this be Tolbert at the controls of that hardpointer? If so, then this could be a trap after all. But could Tolbert be that sloppy? "Let me talk to this pilot. Gimme your headset."

* * *

After takeoff, Erin wasted no time. She had no way of knowing when bad guys would be coming after them and she was determined to make good their escape after Matty had paid so high a price for it. She felt somewhat bad she'd not

been willing to trust him and she wished there was some way she could make it up to him.

The moment she had enough airspeed, she pointed the hardpointer's nose straight up at the sky and pushed the engines to 75% thrust. As she began her escape procedure, she shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. She watched the altitude tape on the Primary Flight Display change from reading in meters to kilometers. Lyssa cried out as if in pain over the intercom.

"You okay back there?" Erin asked.

"Never been better. I love this fuckin' job." Lyssa's half-hearted attempt at sardonic humor was clearly her way of putting a brave face on what she'd already gone through and what she knew still lay ahead. Erin's heart broke a little for her friend's suffering.

Now, as they achieved escape velocity, Erin began her roll procedure. Immediately, error messages began popping up on the PFD as the Flight Computer objected to Erin's improvised roll procedure. The computer wanted her to fly a procedure that would be optimal for fuel burn, but she didn't want to fly predictably. Eventually, Tolbert's goons would make an effort to catch up to them, but she wasn't going to let that happen. She wasn't going to be where they expected her to be, and she was going to move as fast as she could. Tolbert herself had taught her how to use the planet's own gravity to do it.

Lyssa's voice came over the intercom, interrupting Erin's thoughts. "I've done dumb shit before,"

"Huh?" Erin said.

"Nothing. Just talkin' to myself." Then, a moment later Lyssa cried out: "Aaa-AHHH-aaa!"

"You okay back there?"

"Just shut up and fly. Captain."

"Stand by for wings and empennage jettison here in a minute."

"Okay." Lyssa sounded nearly indifferent to something which would normally have given any mechanic fits. Jettisoning wings and empennage in flight? Don't pilots know what those things cost? If Lyssa were not otherwise occupied, she likely would be bothered by the idea. She certainly had been a couple days ago as they'd first discussed this escape plan over tea after putting Capt. Elof's remains on ice. The cost of the airfoils seemed like such a trivial concern now.

As Erin continued to fly the roll procedure into low orbit, she reached behind her and pulled the circuit breaker for the Cockpit Voice Recorder. She was about to attempt to buy their freedom with a container full of illegal narcotics. Best not to have a CVR record of that. She dialed in the Common Traffic Advisory Frequency and hoped that the *Ready Sophia* would be monitoring it. She took a slow, nervous breath and then pressed the XMT button on her control stick. "*Ready Sophia*. Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie."

There was no response, so Erin repeated the call.

After the second time, a woman's voice came on the frequency. "Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. S-H-P-Two-Four-Two System Control. State your intentions."

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie is low orbit out of Sanctuary with a valuable cargo of agricultural products. We're offering them as payment for safe passage out of system. We need someone to keep these Third Law hemorrhoids off our tail while we charge our TFG."

The *Ready Sophia* didn't respond right away, but Erin had expected that. While she waited for a response, she could dump unnecessary mass from the hardpointer.

They were in space now, so they no longer needed their airfoils. She removed the safeties on the empennage emergency jettison switch and pressed the button. Most pilots never have to jettison an airfoil from a hardpointer in their entire careers; Erin was doing it on her first time out. There was a jolt through the airframe as the entire empennage fell off the back of the plane, taking its mass with it. Next, she repeated the procedure for both wings and they, too, fell away into space.

Now, 788NC was basically just a fuselage with a container and a folded-up mech strapped to its back. The plane had three really powerful engines to push a comparatively small mass of spaceplane. Their plan depended on speed, outrunning the fighters and their missiles. Tolbert herself had shown Erin it was possible. If she wanted to achieve a thrust-to-mass ratio (and thus the acceleration capabilities) similar to that of a fighter, she needed to shed as much unnecessary weight as possible. But she couldn't jettison the shipping container yet, not until *Ready Sophia* agreed to help them.

When *Ready Sophia* came back on the frequency, it was a man's voice she heard. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, This is Captain Ben Villalobos of the *Ready Sophia*. Clarify: You have the *entire* shipment of the...um, *agricultural product* which had been promised to us?" He was being careful about what he said on the public frequency as well.

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie can confirm. We have the *entire* shipment. And we'll jettison it in exchange for cover long enough to charge our TFG."

"How do we know you really have it?"

"Well, before long, you should see some activity from Third Law. I reckon they're listening to this frequency. I'll bet they send everything they have after us."

"What guarantee do we have you'll actually drop it and not just fly off with it?"

"We'll drop it as soon as we're clear from Third Law. If I'm lying, you guys can come after me yourselves."

Villalobos didn't answer right away which was actually helpful, as it allowed Erin to focus on her flying. She was coming around the day side of the planet. Soon, she would reach the point where she was going to have to begin the high-speed slingshot maneuver. She had no idea where Tolbert's forces might be. They were almost certainly in the air by now, if not in space. She kept glancing at her TCAS display. That had been her first warning of trouble when they'd first arrived at this cursed planet.

"Okay, Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, here's the deal," Villalobos said. "You head towards the third moon. We'll meet you in the middle. Once you're under our guns, drop the cargo. We see that cargo float free, and we'll cover your escape. Any funny business on your part, and you won't have to worry about Third Law shooting you. Understood?"

Erin wasn't sure she liked this plan. It put them right under the *Ready Sophia's* guns and therefore entirely at Villalobos' mercy. They would have no options should Villalobos betray them—which he had every incentive to do. He could take the hardpointer itself. The hardpointer would fetch nearly as much on the black market as the lady it was hauling.

"That goat fucker's planning on betraying us." Lyssa said from right over Erin's shoulder. Erin hadn't even heard her enter the cockpit.

"I was thinking pretty much the same thing."

"Going to Plan B, then?"

Erin sighed as she simultaneously pushed the stick forward and advanced the throttles to 90% thrust. Anything beyond 90% was for only the most dire of emergencies, as the engines would tear themselves apart within minutes at those extreme power settings.

"Plan B. We go where they can't follow," Erin said to Lyssa. Then, she keyed the XMT button and said to Villalobos: "Change of plans. I'm leery about putting myself entirely at your mercy after you shot me down once before. We're just gonna drop the cargo and you guys can fight over it."

When Villalobos came back on, he was seething. "You call up here and ask me for my help, and then when I offer it, you impugn my honor? Let me tell you what I'm gonna do. When I catch you, I'm going to take the cargo and your plane. You, on the other hand, I'm gonna return to Tolbert. I'm sure that crazy bitch will—"

Erin didn't hear the rest of his threats. She turned the radio off. "Yup. He was planning to betray us."

"If we're going to Plan B, then I'm definitely gonna need to reconfigure them shield projectors."

"After we dump the container, I'll have to do some maneuvering and then you should be able to get out on the hull to make your adjustments."

"How much time will I have?"

"I don't know. An hour, maybe."

"Shit, that's gonna be tight. There's eighteen o' them projectors on the hull. That'll only give me about three minutes per projector."

"Sorry. I won't be able to slow down to give you more time."

"I know. I'll be in the back gettin' ready."

As their speed increased, the plane wanted to orbit out higher away from the planet, but Erin held the stick forward. She kept the nose steeply down and the throttles open. The stripped-down freighter was accelerating rapidly under the pressure of its huge engines and also robbing orbital momentum from the planet below. 788NC was accelerating much as Tolbert's fighter had done a few days before. Erin had been right. The hardpointer might not be able to maneuver like a

fighter, but it could accelerate like one.

As their speed passed 18milliC, Erin patted the hardpointer's glareshield proudly. They might just pull this off. That was when the TCAS proximity alert went off.

Miss Sophie's Roar

Jon "Sledge" Sanjeev had only been promoted to the rank of Major in charge of Third Law's airborne forces a few days ago when his predecessor, Tolbert, had won election to colonel. Under his command, he had eight fighter squads consisting of a total of 16 fighters and four heavy gunships. Well, he *would* if Col. Tolbert would do her job and leave him to do his.

This was his first operation in his new command, and Sledge really wanted to be the one to capture that escaped civvie hardpointer. It annoyed him that Tolbert, rather than returning to headquarters and coordinating all of Third Law's operations, was up here in a fighter trying to micromanage his command. She seemed unable to let someone else do her old job. But he had one chance to beat her to the punch.

Col. Tolbert had ordered Squads 7 and 8 to lay in wait for the hardpointer as it came around the planet and then launch all of their EMPs at it. Of course, Tolbert had known that this was likely to be rear-echelon operation and she thought she was putting Sledge aside. The real action was likely to be in the chase of the stolen hardpointer which Col. Tolbert was leading personally. But not if Sledge succeeded in his objective.

Sledge's ambush force consisted of four fighters and his own gunship. The fighters had one EMP each and his gunship had two. The colonel had ordered them to launch all 6 of their EMPs at the hardpointer as soon as they got a target lock. So, they maneuvered themselves to the far side of the planet and waited for the rogue freighter to come around.

They didn't have to wait long. Mere minutes after the ambush force got into position, an alert popped up on the gunship's cockpit tactical display. Before he even looked at it closely, Sledge immediately transferred the target information to the four fighters, knowing his gunship had superior targeting scanners.

"That's our bandit," Sledge called out over the radio. "Remember: EMPs only. I'll kill the cowboy that blows up our paycheck. Read me?"

All four fighter pilots acknowledge his order.

"Almost in range," Sledge said.

"Good God! That can't be a freighter, can it? Look how fast it's moving," one of the fighter pilots said.

Sledge took a closer look at the bandit's data and saw that its speed was reading at 21milliC.

"No, that can't be our target. No freighter can move that fast," said another of the pilots.

Sledge had to make a decision and he had to make it fast. There was no chance this thing could be a freighter, but his own scanners were identifying it as a freighter. He suspected some kind of subterfuge. Possibly, it could be a missile which had been rigged to emit a freighter's scan cross section. If he fired all of their EMPs at whatever this fast-mover was and it turned out not to be their actual target, they wouldn't have any in reserve when the real freighter showed up. But Tolbert had ordered them to fire all their EMPs. Sledge had flown with Tolbert long enough to know she was crazy enough to kill him if he made the wrong decision.

"Major, whatcha want us to do?"

Fuck Tolbert. She might be the C.O., but this is my detail. "Squad Seven, take your shots. EMPs only. Eight, hold your fire."

"Roger that," said both pilots from Squad 7. They must have both been itching to fire. They both fired almost instantly. The missiles looked like two shooting stars as they trailed away into the darkness of space. Within seconds, they were beyond visual range, so Sledge was obliged to watch them on his scanner display. It was taking a painfully long time for the missiles to close on the fast-moving bandit, but they were gradually closing.

* * *

Col. Tolbert was in her element again. If she were honest, she preferred being in the cockpit to being in the command center. Here, she didn't have to be the paper-pushing, chart-studying, Fourth-placating Col. Tolbert. Here, in the cockpit of an AF-28 *Darklander* fighter, she could just be the ace pilot she was born to be with the ironic callsign of "Lefty."

She was leading a large force of ten fighters and three gunships as they pulled a high-speed slingshot maneuver around the planet in pursuit of O'Connell and her hardpoint freighter. During the maneuver, she'd gotten brief pings

from something flying ahead of them at the very extreme end of their sensor range. Whatever it was was moving very fast and very nearly outpacing Lefty and her fighters. Of course, it was O'Connell. She was doing just what Tolbert had anticipated. The stupid, civilian freight dog thought she could use Lefty's own tricks to try and outrun her.

As Tolbert and her force came around the planet and completed the slingshot maneuver, it took a couple seconds for their sensors to recalibrate. When they did, they revealed a real shit show. That idiot, Sledge, had lost all four of his fighters. Lefty's tactical display showed only wreckage where the four fighters should have been. Sledge himself, in his gunship, was making a hasty retreat back down toward the planet as three of Villalobos' fighters nipped at his tail. And there, blocking their pursuit of O'Connell's hardpointer was none other than the goddamn *Ready Sophia*.

How the fuck did this happen?

"Squads one and two: go help that idiot, Sledge," Lefty ordered. "Everybody else: stay with me. We're bypassing the *Sophia*. Don't get sucked in to a fight with that ship. Her guns will tear us apart. Keep your speed up and only perform basic evasive maneuvers. Keep on mission."

A chorus of acknowledgements sounded at her order as she wondered again, *How the fuck did this happen?*

* * *

As the *Ready Sophia* drew within sensor range of SHP 242, Capt. Villalobos stood at the tactical station. He watched the Noémie hardpointer come around the planet at a speed he'd never have guessed such a big, lumbering plane as that capable of. Then, he watched it fall into a very predictable ambush. No military pilot would have been that stupid, but this was a civilian pilot.

He could see Tolbert and the rest of the Third Law forces coming around the planet in high-speed pursuit of the escaped hardpointer. Like a chess player, Capt. Villalobos studied the pieces moving around on his board. He and the *Sophie* were still too far out to intercede. Soon, the hardpointer would fly past the ambush and the ambush planes would launch their EMPs at it. The hardpointer was moving fast, maybe fast enough to outrun the EMPs, but probably not. If even one of the EMPs found their target, the disabled hardpointer would be an easy prize for Third Law. Capt. Villalobos could feel the opportunity slipping from his grasp. He needed to act soon.

"This battle is going to be lost in seconds," Cdr. Tengrove said, "and we're minutes from being within range."

"Hmm," Capt. Villalobos knew what Cdr. Tengrove was hinting at. It was risky, but it might work. He thought about it for a moment and then decided it was worth a try. "Call the fighters back into their bays," he said to the comms officer. Then, he turned to his navigator. "What are the status of our TFGs?"

"Both kept charged around the clock, as you ordered, sir. I've also taken the liberty of prepping the computer for a microjump."

"Good man. As soon as all the fighters are in their bays, execute the microjump."

"Aye, sir," said the navigator.

Then, as if on cue, the comms officer announced, "All fighters in their bays, sir."

The navigator didn't hesitate. "Helm, execute."

"Aye, sir," said the helmsman.

As the first of the *Ready Sophia's* two TFGs fired, there was a rumble through the structure and then a lurching feeling. For about a second, the mercenary corvette was in transtachyonic flight. The planet beyond the bridge windows grew closer and larger at an alarming rate. Then, as quickly as it had started, the big ship dropped out of transtach and back into normal space. The second TFG fired and with a lurch and then a rumble. Now, the *Ready Sophia* was out of the proverbial chessboard's back row and in play.

"A-A guns, fire at any target other than the hardpointer. Launch those fighters. Tell them to engage the ambush group and then return to station. They are not to engage Tolbert's pursuit force, got it?"

"Aye, sir." The comms officer relayed the captain's orders to the fighters.

Capt. Villalobos felt the satisfying rumble passing through the ship's structure as the anti-aircraft guns opened up on Third Law's ambush force.

"Sir!" said the tactical officer excitedly.

"I see it," said Capt. Villalobos calmly. One of the two EMPs that Third Law had fired at the hardpointer had switched targets and was now heading for the *Sophie*. "A-A guns primary target that EMP."

Another volley of anti-aircraft fire rippled through the ship's structure. He watched on the tactical displays as the inbound EMP was ripped apart by the *Sophie's* anti-aircraft guns. That had been satisfying to watch, but what happened

next was even more satisfying. The tactical display showed an explosion from one of the Third Law fighters. The fools should be retreating from under the might of the *Sophie's* guns, but they seemed to be moving to engage her fighters. It was so reckless that, for a second, Capt. Villalobos wondered if it was some kind of baiting tactic. Could this be part brilliant strategy on the part of whomever commanded the Third Law ambush force? But then a second fighter turned into a ball of heat and light. *No*, Capt. Villalobos decided, *this commander is a moron.*

He watched as first his anti-aircraft guns and then his fighters made an easy meal of the Third Law ambush force until all that was left was the lone gunship. The hardpointer, meanwhile, continued to flee at an extremely high rate of speed, trying to outrun the one EMP still pursuing it. Villalobos hoped the EMP would get the hardpointer; that would make it easy to capture later.

Capt. Villalobos was hoping his fighters would take out the enemy gunship before it could descend back to the planet below. When he saw Tolbert's main force come rocketing around the planet, however, he knew he had to call his fighters back to the safety of the *Sophie*. Reluctantly, he gave the order, "All fighters back to station." The enemy gunship would be allowed to escape destruction.

"Too bad we couldn't get it, sir," said Tengrove beside him.

"Yeah, but we can't afford to lose the fighters."

"Sir," said the tactical officer. "Maybe this..."

Capt. Villalobos looked where the tactical officer was pointing. A grin spread across his face. They knew that Third Law only had two big troopships and both were currently in the same place: the small service platform near the Fourth settlement. And where those troop carriers were, so too were most of the enemy's ground forces likely to be. "Looks like they're moving to protect the squatters."

Cdr. Tengrove was also grinning. "The main gun, sir?"

Capt. Villalobos nodded. "Fire the main gun. Let Miss *Sophie* roar." It had been a long time since they'd had occasion to fire the ship's 280mm main gun. The main gun was really for ship-to-ship battle, so using it to kill a couple troopships was (perhaps) overkill. But won't it be beautiful, though?

The captain knew his ship. He placed his hand on a metal railing to better feel her. Underneath the rumble of the A-A guns and the occasional launch of a missile, he could feel the huge gun's machinery engage as it swung its barrel towards the planet and prepared to kill dozens of enemy troops all at once. He felt the machinery stop as the barrel found its target. And then, a mighty report shook the entire ship as a bright but brief flash erupted beyond the bridge windows.

On the tactical display, it looked like Tolbert's main force intended to fly right by them at a high rate of speed, but the *Sophie's* A-A guns were doing some damage to them as they passed. He watched as two, now three, now four of the enemy planes blew up under the withering fire. Nevertheless, they maintained formation and made no effort to get sucked into a fight with the *Sophie*. He admired Tolbert for the discipline she inspired in those who followed her. Too bad many of them were following her to their deaths today. Tolbert might be an outstanding pilot, but she was nowhere near the strategic opponent that Raith had been.

He watched on the tactical display as the main gun's shell scored a direct hit on one of the enemy troopships on the planet below. "The other one," he said. "Kill the other troopship before it gets away."

"Aye, sir," said the tactical officer. "And what about the squatter village?"

Capt. Villalobos thought about it for a moment. "No. Let the villagers live. I have a feeling that today will be the end of Third Law. Once their protectors are gone, the squatters will be more amenable to being relocated to another planet. We need not be monsters."

Just then, the *Sophia* shook once again as her main gun fired upon the other Third Law troopship.

"Captain," said the comms officer, "I've got the hardpointer pilot on CTAF again."

"Put her on speaker," Capt. Villalobos said. The comms officer flipped a switch on her control panel and nodded to the captain. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, are you interested in revisiting our offer? I'm willing to reconsider."

The voice that answered him was a different woman's voice with what sounded like a faint Estrellan accent. "Stuff it, lard ass!" this new woman said. "You guys want this shit, come and get it. We're done with you. Noémie out!"

On the tactical display, yet another of Tolbert's planes went up in a ball of fire and the second shell from the *Sophie's* main cannon destroyed the second enemy troopship as well as much of the service platform along with it. But what really caught Capt. Villalobos' eye was the hardpointer. A large object was floating away from the freighter. The tactical display identified this large object as a common shipping container.

Noémie out!

"*WHOO-WHOO! TRAFFIC! WHOO-WHOO! TRAFFIC!*" sounded the computerized voice alert of the TCAS system. On the Traffic Collision Avoidance System display, Erin saw two blue dots coming at them. *This is how it all started the first time*, she thought. She shifted in her seat and steeled her nerves. Last time, she was flying by the book and doing a deorbit burn. This time, she was ready for it. She had expected an attack. That's why she'd made such an effort to pick up so much speed slingshotting around the planet. She glanced at her speed. 21milliC, or 2.1% the speed of light.

The hardpointer didn't have anything as fancy as a tactical display like Tolbert's fighter had had. The closest thing the civilian freighter had was the TCAS, which was really designed to avoid mid-space collisions with other planes. She looked at the speed readout on the two approaching objects and saw they were approaching at 2milliC, relative. Most likely they were missiles, and most likely they were EMPs.

Then, a much larger object appeared on the TCAS. Erin didn't know what it was at first, but then it occurred to her. So far as she knew, there was only one vessel in the whole system as big as that. It had to be the *Ready Sophia*. She didn't know if the pirate ship would fire on her or not, but she was hoping they wouldn't. She was hauling a small fortune of lady.

On the TCAS display, one of the pursuing missiles veered off and seemed to turn towards the *Ready Sophia*. Then, she watched as that missile just disappeared from her screen. She had no idea what all was going on back there, but she was glad that one of her pursuers was gone. The other one, however, continued to slowly gain on them. Missiles were fast, but she doubted if they carried much fuel on them. Eventually, they had to run out of fuel. The only question was whether the missile would burn out before it could close the distance.

She thought about what all she could do to increase her speed and the only thing she could think of was decrease mass. She could jettison the shipping container and/or the mech. She brought up the cargo page on the MultiFunction Display. The mass of the mech was listed as 8,588kg. That was a lot of unnecessary mass. It was also an expensive piece of company property. She'd already jettisoned the wings and the empennage. Likely, those were going to cost her her job. What loss, then, would it be to jettison the mech at this point?

"Don't you fuckin' think about it," Lyssa said from the cockpit door. She was wearing a standard EVA suit, minus the helmet. "I got plans for that mech."

"What could we possibly need that thing for?" Erin asked.

"Hull repairs."

"Huh?"

Lyssa told her what she was planning on using the mech for.

"Oh," Erin said. "That's kind of brilliant. Hopefully we won't need it, though."

"Well, if we do, it's our ace in the hole. So don't jettison that mech."

The TCAS sounded out its now-familiar warning, "*WHOO-WHOO! TRAFFIC!*" and Erin quickly silenced the annoying alert as she glanced at the screen. Six new, blue traffic icons had appeared from the area of the *Ready Sophia*. For a second, she was worried that these were Villalobos' fighters sent after her, but then she saw their speed. They were moving at 1milliC relative to the hardpointer. If she was moving at 21milliC, that meant this new traffic must be moving at 22. The only way for even a fighter to achieve such a speed was by slingshotting around the planet. *Tolbert*, Erin thought. *It could only be Tolbert.*

"Reckon I can guess who that is," Lyssa said.

"Yup. Without a doubt."

"She's gonna catch us eventually, ain't she?"

"Without a doubt."

"I think it's time to dump this shit we're haulin'."

Erin just nodded as she disabled the safeties for the hardpoints holding the shipping container on their back.

"Lemme do it," Lyssa said.

"Okay."

Lyssa leaned over, turned the radios back on and checked to make sure they were still tuned to the system CTAF frequency. Then, she pressed the black XMT button on the right control stick. "Hey this is Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Callin' whoever's drivin' the *Ready Sophia*."

After a moment, Villalobos himself came on the frequency. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, are you interested in revisiting our offer? I'm willing to reconsider."

Lyssa pressed the XMT button again and said: "Stuff it, lard ass! You guys want this shit, come and get it. We're done with you. Noémie out!" And then, she pressed the jettison buttons for the shipping container.

With the mass of the container now jettisoned, Erin continued to accelerate until the hardpointer was moving at 22milliC and the pursuing EMP was now approaching at only 1milliC. She watched it on the TCAS display until it blinked out of existence. She assumed that meant that it had either run out of fuel or gone into some kind of self-destruct. She felt a small amount of the tension go out of her shoulders. Apparently, they had successfully outrun the EMP.

They watched on the TCAS as first one group of six fighters (Tolbert's) and then a second group of five (presumably Villalobos') moved to surround the container of lady where it floated in space. The *Ready Sophia* was coming to join the fight, but the big ship was much slower than the nimble, little fighters. Erin and Lyssa watched transfixed for a minute as the swarm of blue spacecraft icons circled around the discarded container. They saw one of the icons blink out of existence.

"They're killing each other over lady," Erin said.

"Nah, they're killing each other over an even more evil drug: money."

"Better blow it now before anybody else dies."

"Yeah." Lyssa pulled her phone out of her pocket and connected to the EMP she and Matty had placed inside the container before takeoff. She activated the EMP's engine, knowing its outflow nozzle was right against the spare TFG capacitor. As that TFG cap caught fire, it would burn almost everything inside that container. Lyssa gave it several seconds. When she reasoned it must be burning pretty well, she fired the missile's EMP warhead.

* * *

Since the EMP was inside the closed shipping container, none of the pilots involved in the dogfight around the container ever saw the flash. Their fighters and gunships just went dark. Their controls stopped working in their hands and their guns stopped firing. All the men and women flying those planes had to go to their emergency oxygen supplies. As the *Ready Sophia* finally made it to the scene, she rescued her own pilots and took three of the Third Law pilots prisoner. Capt. Villalobos was pleased to claim the three pilots' fighters as prizes and he was especially glad to claim the container full of tens-of-millions of dollars of lady. Until he opened it and found nothing but ash and a melted TFG capacitor. Out of pure spite, he fired a long-range, anti-spacecraft missile at the fleeing hardpointer. He was going to kill the bitch flying that thing. No matter how fast she flew, the long-range missile had the speed and fuel to catch her.

Goodbye, bitch, he thought as he watched the missile slowly gain on the hardpointer. He transmitted on the CTAF frequency. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Captain Villalobos."

* * *

After the EMP inside the shipping container had gone off, Col. Tolbert had been one of those floating adrift in dead fighters. She and two of her pilots were rescued by none other than Maj. "Sledge" Sanjeev in his badly damaged gunship. They were towed back to Sanctuary, where Sledge briefed her on how desperate the situation really was. Most of their planes had been lost as well as both of their troopships and all but about twenty of their ground troops. Third Law (or what remained of it) was now trapped on Sanctuary with no hope of victory or payment. Tolbert's wrath that day was felt by many, but that's another story for another day.

* * *

In the cockpit of 788NC, there were several minutes of relief during which Erin and Lyssa thought they might have just gotten away from all these people. It didn't last, however. Eventually, another blue dot appeared on the TCAS screen. It was far behind them and only approaching at a mere 1milliC, relative. They had no doubt it was a missile.

"We ain't got their fuckin' lady. Who could be firing at us now?" Lyssa wondered aloud.

Her question was quickly answered by a voice over the radio. "Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Captain Villalobos."

Lyssa, still standing in her EVA suit behind Erin's pilot seat, listened as Erin answered the pirate captain.

"Go ahead for Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie," Erin said.

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, I don't know if you have any kind of tactical display in that freight dog piece of shit, but if you do, you may have noticed the missile I just launched coming up your six at about 1milliC, relative."

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie is advised," Erin responded, affecting the practiced air of calmness endemic to those of the pilot's trade.

"You should also be advised," Villalobos said, "that this missile is a long-range, anti-spacecraft missile. It might be coming up slowly, but it has the range and the fuel to eventually close the distance. And if you divert your thrust to try to charge your TFG, the missile will only close the distance faster."

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie is advised," Erin repeated her chillingly calm response. "Good day." Then, she turned the radio off. Lyssa watched as Erin ducted engine No. 2 to charge the TFG and then cut ignition and fuel flow to engines No. 1 and 3. Those two engines shut down. On the engine instruments panel, Lyssa watched as those two engines' core speeds began spooling down.

"What are you doing?" she asked Erin. She trusted her friend, but what she was doing made no sense to Lyssa. Charging the TFG with one engine and just shutting down the other two?

"Another little trick that Tolbert taught me," Erin said. "She might be crazy, but she's an outstanding pilot. You might want to strap in. It's going to get bumpy."

In the bulky EVA suit, it was easier for Lyssa to just sit in one of the fold-down jumpseats in the back of the cockpit. She folded down the jumpseat and began strapping herself in. Then, Lyssa watched as Erin reopened the fuel flow to the two shut-down engines, but left the ignition off. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

Just a Normal Day in the Darklands

Erin was busy. She had never done this, and she'd only ever seen it done once before. Behind her, she was only peripherally aware that Lyssa had strapped herself into one of the two fold-down jumpseats. Erin watched the two engines she'd shut down and when she was sure they had both flamed out, she reopened the fuel flow to them but left their ignitor boxes off. With the engines off, but still spinning from their own momentum, great gluts of highly explosive spaceplane fuel were flowing through them and being dumped, unburnt, out into space behind them.

Meanwhile, the energy from the one engine still running, No. 2, was being directed to the TFG capacitor. This wasn't a serious attempt to charge the TFG. This was merely to keep No. 2 from igniting the trail of fuel they were leaving behind them until she was ready for it to blow. Tolbert had been able to simply shut down the fighter's single engine, but with her APU inoperative, Erin couldn't do that. If she shut down all three, there was a good chance she wouldn't be able to get them restarted.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Lyssa asked.

"I'm a pilot. This *is* what I do," Erin said. It was mostly not false bravado. She shifted in her seat. "Tolbert called it a 'Darklands Sunrise'."

"You're the pilot," Lyssa said. Erin couldn't tell if she heard respect or resignation in Lyssa's voice.

Both, she decided. She put all that out of her mind and focused on her job. She watched the core speed readouts on the engine instruments. The two offline engines' cores had lost most of their momentum. They were now at around 2% max speed, but still spewing their fuel out into space.

"Here we go. Hold on," she warned Lyssa as she held the control stick firmly in her left hand and reached up to the engine ignition switches on the overhead panel. She quickly flipped first the No. 1 and then the No. 3 ignitions on and braced herself for the explosion.

But nothing happened.

Fear and bile rose up in Erin's throat.

She'd let the engines get too slow. They had failed to restart and ignite the trail of fuel behind them.

She repositioned herself in her seat.

She tried to think of what to do.

And then she remembered.

The No. 2 engine.

It was still running, just ducted to the TFG.

She moved her hand to a different section of the overhead panel, the section that controlled the engines' magnetic output ducts. She switched the No. 2 engine's duct from the TFG CAP position to the THRUST position. The moment she did, the energy outflow from the hardpointer's only still-running engine began shooting out into space behind them and ignited the trail of fuel.

There was a tremendous jolt of speed as the shockwave of the exploding fuel hit the hardpointer. Erin felt pinned to her seat as the plane was subjected to more Gs than the inertial stabilizers could compensate for. She felt the stick buck out of her hand. She tried to grab it again, but the G forces pinned her hand back against her own chest. She was worried she might lose consciousness. She tried to remember the limited amount of high-G training she'd received in spaceplane school. She tensed the muscles in her legs and did the breathing exercise she'd been taught. Her field of vision narrowed and nearly closed, but she ultimately managed to retain consciousness as the plane, pushed along by the explosion, accelerated ever faster. Gradually, the G forces reduced as either the plane ceased accelerating so much or the inertial stabilizers caught up with the load. Her field of vision widened and she found she was able to lift her arm off her chest.

Erin grabbed hold of the control stick and stabilized their course. She glanced at their speed and saw that they were now moving at 24milliC. She wondered if that was a sublight speed record for a hardpoint freighter. Likely it was.

"You okay?" she asked. When Lyssa didn't respond, Erin looked over her shoulder and saw her friend in the jumpseat. Lyssa's head was down on her chest. Without the benefit of the high-G training, she had lost consciousness.

Erin ducted some of the No. 2 engine's energy into the No. 1 engine and watched as its core began to spin faster and

finally reignited. She repeated the process with the No. 3 engine and soon had all three engines running normally again.

By the time Lyssa woke up, she had no idea how much time had passed, but she was sure it had been a lot. "What? Where are we? What's happening?"

"Just a normal day in the Darklands," Erin answered casually.

Fucking pilots and their too-cool airs. Lyssa looked at the engine instruments and saw that all three of her engines were running normally. That made her mechanic's heart glad. Then, she noticed their speed. 24milliC "Jesus the reengineered, reanimated, and redesigned Christ! How the tits can we be going that fast?"

"Because I'm good," was Erin's simple answer.

Fucking pilots. She looked at the TCAS and saw the missile was gone, but the *Ready Sophia* was still pursuing them. "Any chance they'll be able to catch us?" Lyssa asked.

"Maybe. Not sublight, but big military ships like that have multiple TFGs. They can often microjump."

"Then that means there's only one option."

"We gotta go where they can't. You sure you can set those shield projectors to handle that much heat and radiation?"

Lyssa unstrapped herself from the jumpseat and stood up in her EVA suit. "I'm a mechanic. This is what *I* do," she echoed Erin's words from earlier. Lyssa then left the cockpit for the plane's only airlock – which also doubled as a baggage hold – which was currently tripling as an onboard morgue.

* * *

In the multifunction baggage hold/airlock/morgue, Lyssa stood in her EVA suit. After leaving the cockpit, she'd put a helmet on and activated the suit's rebreather. Her tool belt hung from her waist.

She tried not to think about the two bodies strapped to the floor beside her, one of which was her friend, Matty. She tried not to think about what it had been like wrapping Matty in that blanket and dragging him in here by herself while Erin flew the plane. Instead, she focused on how nice it was to have a rebreather that wasn't jury-rigged for manual operation. She focused on the job ahead of her. She focused on her living friend, Erin, who was counting on her to get this job done. Lyssa wasn't losing any more friends today.

The light for the outer door changed from red to green, indicating that the airlock's depressurization sequence was complete and it was now safe to open the door to the vacuum beyond. Lyssa opened it and climbed out onto the hardpointer's hull. The sunlight was intense and she had to darken her helmet a great deal to keep from being blinded by it.

788NC looked different now. Its wings and empennage were now gone and so too was the single cargo container which had sat on the plane's back since Gonaways. That seemed like a year ago now. So much had happened.

But Lyssa didn't have any time to dwell. She had eighteen shield projectors to readjust and only about an hour to get the job done. It was going to be tight, but she was a Senior Mechanic with the Mechanics' and Machinists' Guild. She could get this job done.

She made her way to the first projector. First, she used her screwdriver to remove the access plate. Then, she disconnected the mounting bracket and pulled the projector itself out. She found the adjustment screws for the projector's beam.

The shield projectors on a hardpointer are actually quite powerful. Normally, however, the shields' job is to protect dozens of shipping containers clinging to the plane's sides from normal space radiation. Usually, the projectors project a wide, but comparatively weak beam around the cargo. Lyssa adjusted this projector so that the beam it projected would be narrow, but intense. The beam would now only be able to protect the plane itself and (hopefully) the mech still anchored to its back, but it would offer protection from some very intense heat and radiation.

Now that the projector was readjusted, Lyssa lowered it back into its position in the plane's skin. She secured the mounting bracket and reattached the access plate. That was one projector done and seventeen left to go. She glanced at the chronometer on her helmet's HUD. That one projector had taken almost five minutes. That wasn't fast enough. She had to hurry.

She made her way to the next projector. This one went much faster, since she already knew where all the screws were. The projector after that went faster still. Lyssa was in the swing of her work now. She loved this kind of work, working with hand tools. She was so focused on her work that she almost didn't notice when Erin asked over the intercom how it was going. By this point, she had readjusted about half of the projectors.

"Doin' good, cap. 'Bout halfway there. Be done soon."

"The *Ready Sophia*'s dropped off our TCAS range, but they were still heading our way when they dropped off. I don't know how long it takes to charge two TFGs on a ship like that."

"Un-pucker your pussy. We got time," Lyssa said dismissively. She really had no idea if they had enough time or not and she knew Erin likely knew she was bluffing. She ignored whatever Erin said next and went back to focusing on her work. She darkened her helmet even darker. The light was getting intense. She dared not look out over the hardpointer's nose. On her helmet's HUD, she was getting a radiation warning.

Lyssa was just pulling the last projector out and getting ready to make adjustments on it when she heard Erin say over the intercom: "Oh, shoot!" For Erin, this was a four-letter word. "This is bad. *Ready Sophia* just microjumped. She's about a thousand kilometers off our right wingtip."

Lyssa glanced in that direction, but saw nothing. A thousand kilometers was very close in space distances, but it was still outside of visual range. "I don't see shit," Lyssa said into her intercom as she pushed herself to work faster. "And for the record, we don't have a right wingtip anymore. Or a left wingtip. Or an empennage." In addition to this new threat, her EVA suit's HUD was giving her critical radiation warnings. She'd silenced the audio alarms about four projectors ago. *Sure would be nice to have a HEVA suit for this kind of radiation*, she thought ruefully.

"How we comin' on those projectors? Hull temp's getting critical and I'm showing radiation warnings all over the plane."

Lyssa's fast hands were just finishing up the adjustments on this last projector as she said, "Goddamnit, I know how fuckin' hot the hull's gettin'. I'm out on the hull, remember?" Sweat was running down her face. "Think I want my eggs scrambled? You think I want mutant babies?"

"Look, I'm not trying to rush you...but...well, you do need to hurry. Or the plane will melt."

"Pilots. Always want the job done quick *and* cheap *and* right. Always worried about melting or exploding or some shit." She slid the projector back into its housing and began resecuring the access plate over it. "You'd definitely never live it down if you died inside a burning plane. That'd bring shit full circle, wouldn't it?"

"..."

The silence on the intercom was deafening as Lyssa secured the last screw in the access plate for the last shield projector. "Goddamn it," Lyssa said as she began walking across the hull in her grav boots back towards the open airlock door. "It's just a joke. Don't tell me you're butt-hurt about a little joke. You know I don't mean nothin' by it."

"..."

"Girl, you gotta lighten your shit up, learn to laugh at yourself a little bit." Lyssa was closing the outer airlock door by now. "When them asshole pilots give you shit and call you a plane burner, just make a joke and laugh it off or something. Life's a lot easier when you learn to bring your enemies over to your side. How you think I got all them racists on the ramp to accept my Estrellan ass? By the way, I'm in now. You can turn the shields on."

"That was all I needed to hear," Erin said as she flipped the switch in the overhead panel that activated the shields. She looked at the hull temperature and radiation readouts on the MultiFunction Display. Both values started to come down quickly. For Lyssa's many faults, she was a terrific mechanic.

"No, I think *all that* was what you needed to hear," Lyssa said.

Shut up, Lyssa. Erin was getting annoyed. She didn't want to snap at her friend, especially since Lyssa had just lost someone close to her. Besides, Erin had other things to focus on.

She had long ago closed the glare screens over the cockpit windows, but it was still hot as Hades in the cockpit. She couldn't see out the windows anymore, but she knew there was nothing to see out there. If she lowered the glare screens, she would likely be blinded at least temporarily (and maybe permanently). On the augmented view of her Primary Flight Display, all she saw was a wall of nearby sun. *We go where they can't follow.*

Where They Can't Go

Capt. Villalobos had never flown this close to a star before. Even with the bridge windows fully darkened and even with the glare screens closed, the heat was intense. They were having to divert extra energy to life support systems. It had taken a long time for the tactical display to calibrate in the extreme solar radiation and once it did, it was only giving them four-point triangulation on their quarry. This was far less accurate than the eight-point precision target acquisition he was used to. Additionally, the display flickered occasionally as gusts of solar wind struck the targeting array. "Can the fighters fly in this?" he asked his tactical officer.

"No, sir," the tac officer answered. "They don't have glare screens to protect the pilots. They'd cook inside their cockpits."

Capt. Villalobos had expected this answer. He looked at the icon on the tactical display which represented the hardpoint freighter. It was still hurtling downward into the solar atmosphere at the extreme speed of 24milliC. He wondered, *Who is this bitch? She's turned the sun into her protector or possibly her destroyer. She's either an ace pilot or she's suicidal.*

He looked around the bridge. Every eye was on him. "A-A guns. Shoot that freighter down."

* * *

Something about the *Ready Sophia* was bothering Erin. It had been several minutes since the pirate ship had microjumped to within 1,000km of their position and according to her TCAS display, neither fighter nor missile had been launched. This had given her plenty of time to increase the distance between herself and the ship, as she was still moving at the extreme speed of 24milliC. By the time it occurred to her what was happening, the *Ready Sophia* was over 250,000km behind them.

She wished she could keep her speed up, but she knew that if she did, she would bounce off the solar atmosphere, that deep layer of plasma and extremely hot gas that surrounded the star. She flipped the plane around so that she was now approaching the sun tail-first and began a deorbit burn. They were going to have to drop at least partway into the solar atmosphere if they wanted to be protected from the *Ready Sophia* while Erin charged the TFG.

It was as she was doing her deorbit burn that it occurred to her what the pirate ship must be doing. They couldn't launch their fighters so close to the sun and missiles were unshielded against this kind of heat and radiation. Pilots would die and missiles would fail long before they could intercept the hardpointer. But the lead projectiles from an anti-aircraft gun could still pose a threat to her. Sure, the lead would melt before it hit the hardpointer, but Erin wasn't sure which was more dangerous: solid lead projectiles or thousands of droplets of high-speed, molten lead.

"Hold on for evasive maneuvers," she said into the intercom.

"Those pud pounders shooting at us?"

"Maybe. I think they might be." Erin altered their course slightly while continuing her deorbit burn. Her uniform was dripping with sweat and it was getting hard to breathe.

* * *

Capt. Villalobos stared down at the tactical display. The hardpointer, now well ahead of the *Ready Sophia*, was slowing and dropping down into the solar atmosphere. "Our A-A barrage should have hit them by now, even if the rounds melted enroute."

"Sir," the tac officer said trepidatiously, "It's possible the A-A barrage missed. With all the radiation, we don't have a good fix on their exact position. Or the solar winds could have blown the rounds off course. Our gunners know to compensate for the solar winds as best they can, but solar winds can be unpredictable."

"Fuck." Capt. Villalobos had to struggle to hold his composure. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to hit the pilot flying that stupid, shitbucket hardpointer.

"Sir," Cdr. Tengrove said, "a word? In private?"

"Alright," the captain agreed to his first officer's request. The bridge of a warship like the *Sophie* was a crowded place with little privacy, but the two command officers stepped as far out of earshot as they could.

As they huddled together against one wall, Cdr. Tengrove held a data pad up to shield their conversation against lip

reading. Before he even spoke, Capt. Villalobos had a pretty good idea he knew what his first officer wanted. "Sir, why not just let this pecker gnat go? We're spending fuel and ammo. We're endangering the ship. I could understand if we were able to capture the hardpointer, but there's no profit in just blowing it up. Meanwhile, Third Law is decimated and trapped on that planet with no way off and no hope for victory or payment. We should consider mopping up Third Law and then relocating the squatters to another planet. We do that, and we get paid for our original contract with Safe Harbor. Then, we can get out of this hellhole system."

Capt. Villalobos considered it for a moment. He looked around the bridge. All the junior officers were pointedly not looking in their direction. He wondered what they all thought. His position as captain of the *Sophie* was an elected one. He couldn't lose the faith of the men and women he led, lest he end up like former Col. Raith. He lifted a nearby handset and opened a channel to the shipwide PA.

Addressing the entire ship, Capt. Villalobos said: "All hands! All hands! This is the captain speaking. Despite the loss of the *agricultural product* from the planet, this is still a very victorious day for us. Third Law is nearly destroyed and what little forces remain are all that are protecting the squatters against our 'relocation program'. I feel that Colonel Tolbert will surrender once she realizes how desperate the situation really is. Then, it's just a matter of relocating the squatters and getting paid. But one thing remains: that goddamn, piece-of-shit hardpointer. I ask you, my crew and my comrades: should we abandon our pursuit and let those civvie freight dogs escape from us or should we kill the bitches who've cost us so much?"

Capt. Villalobos honestly had no idea what the crew would say as he hung up the handset. For several seconds, the ship was silent. But then, slowly, he became aware of a rumble moving throughout the ship's structure. The rumble was quickly accompanied by shouts and cheers. All over the big ship, fore and aft, port and starboard, above and below, the crew was cheering their captain and beating on whatever was close at hand. All around the captain, bridge officers started clapping. Near the bridge's sealed, aft hatchway, the ship's drummer beat out a couple bars of "To Arms," even though the ship was already at general quarters.

"I think you have the crew's answer, Commander Tengrove. I think they want to see this cursed freighter go boom."

"Aye, sir."

"Okay, new plan," Capt. Villalobos said to his navigator. "They're obviously planning to fly inside the solar atmosphere where we can't get them while they charge their TFG. But they can't fire that TFG in so much radiation. They'll blow themselves up if they try. Sooner or later, they'll have to fly out into open space to activate their TFG. When they do, I want us ready for them. Keep us as close to the freighter as our shields will allow."

"Aye, sir." The navigator gave his captain an admiring salute and then began ordering the helmsman what heading and altitude to fly relative to the star.

Next, Capt. Villalobos turned to his tactical officer. "Tell the gunners to take their shots as soon as the freighter comes back out into open space."

* * *

In the engine room, Lyssa was busy making frequent adjustments to the shields. They were blocking about 99% of the radiation, but this close to the sun, even the remaining 1% was a hazardous level of radiation. Lyssa had left her EVA suit on, knowing it would give her a little extra radiation protection.

Even in her EVA suit, Lyssa's trained ears heard the change in engine noise as Erin switched engines No. 1 and No. 3 over to charging the TFG capacitor. Lyssa glanced at the clock on her EVA suit's HUD. About 45 minutes from now, the TFG cap would be charged and then they could transtach out of this cursed system.

Erin's voice sounded harsh, croaky as it came over the intercom. "Well, we're charging the TFG now. I'm using Engine Two to hold us in atmospheric flight at an altitude of about a million kilometers. Only question is: where are we going once the capacitor is charged?"

Lyssa answered Erin's "only question" with another question. "How the hell we flyin' in atmo when we ain't got no wings?"

"Solar atmo is different from planetary atmo," came Erin's croaky voice. "Our speed creates a significant dynamic pressure on the lower hull and I don't know of anywhere in the galaxy where you'll find a stronger updraft than a solar atmo. Anyways, where are we going when we transtach out of here? With all this radiation, we'll die within a day or two if we don't get to a de-radiating facility."

Lyssa didn't like that croaky characteristic in Erin's voice. "I know of a de-radiating facility near here."

"What system is it in?" Erin croaked into the intercom.

Lyssa didn't answer the question. Partially because she knew the answer would annoy her friend, and partially because she was more worried about the sound of Erin's voice. "Are you staying hydrated up there?"

"Ran out of water. Too hot."

Something was very wrong with Erin. Lyssa switched the shields over to computer control. The computer wasn't as efficient as having an experienced mechanic at the controls. However, Lyssa suspected that if she didn't get Erin some water, soon they wouldn't have a pilot.

Lyssa worked her way forward, stopping only briefly in the galley to grab a few bulbs of water for Erin. Moving through the plane in the bulky EVA suit was awkward, but nothing a born spacer like Lyssa couldn't handle. The plane rattled and groaned as the airframe objected to the rough treatment it was being asked to endure. When Lyssa finally made her way into the cockpit, she was shocked at what she saw. Her friend was soaked with sweat. Her blonde curls were plastered to her head and her pilot's shirt was matted to her skin. When Erin saw Lyssa enter, she continued to hold the stick with her left hand while she grabbed desperately for a water bulb with her right.

Lyssa said nothing as her friend opened the bulb one-handed and sucked it dry. When Erin was done, she took several grateful breaths. Lyssa asked, "How come you ain't got no E.V.A. suit on? You know how much radiation we're getting?"

When Erin spoke, her voice was still croaky, but less so than before. "Haven't had time. Gotta fly the plane. Autopilot can't handle the updrafts."

Lyssa pressed the "EVA" button on the back of the right seat. Within a couple seconds, the seat reconfigured itself to accommodate a person wearing an EVA suit. Careful to avoid hitting any of the plane's controls in the bulky suit, Lyssa gently worked herself into the seat. "Show me what to do. I can handle it for a few minutes while you go get suited."

* * *

It only took Erin a couple minutes to get herself into the EVA suit and back to the cockpit. In that time, Lyssa almost lost control of the plane about four times as intense updrafts from the star below hit them. Every few seconds, the plane wanted to roll to one side or the other and the control stick continually threatened to buck out of her grasp. Lyssa quickly gave up trying to maintain any particular heading or altitude and fought to just keep the plane under control. It was like riding some kind of enraged beast. Lyssa was developing a whole new respect for Erin's skill set.

"You handle it okay?" Erin asked as she eyed the instrument readouts skeptically. She quickly reconfigured the left seat to accommodate her EVA suit and expertly angled herself into the seat. Lyssa gratefully let the pilot retake the controls.

Lyssa scoffed. "Did I handle it okay, she asks. Girl, how many times I gotta tell you? I'm good with my hands."

Erin glanced at the TFG capacitor readout. It was showing 68% charged. She fought the unwieldy plane back onto course, speed, and altitude and wondered how close Lyssa had come to losing control all together. Lyssa was definitely not a pilot. "Another ten minutes and we'll be able to transtach out. I need to know where this de-radiating facility is."

"Nearest company facility is back home at Gonaways," Lyssa answered.

"That won't do. That's about four days from here. We'll be dead from radiation poisoning by then."

Lyssa smiled mischievously. "I know where Ursa Royal has a maintenance hanger close by."

Erin didn't like the mischief in Lyssa's voice as she said it. Ursa Royal was Noémie's primary competitor. It would really annoy the Dispatch Office back on Gonaways that they'd taken the plane in for repairs and expensive de-radiating at an Ursa Royal hanger, but there was something more behind Lyssa's mischievous tone.

"Whatever. I'm probably going to be fired anyway. I'm bringing the plane back pretty badly damaged, without its empennage, its wings, or the container full of spaceplane parts we took out of Gonaways. Oh, and let's not forget that we didn't even accomplish our original mission. I should have listened to Fionn. This was a bad job from the start."

"Of course, it was. That's why they sent us, the bastards of Noémie Gonaways, on this job. *And* they gave us the oldest plane on the ramp. Didn't I tell you when we first met that this was a butt-fucking?"

"Lyssa, I'm really not in the mood for a told-ya-so."

Lyssa shook her head inside her helmet. "I don't mean it like that. What I mean is that they didn't expect us to come back at all. Hell, I'll bet those donut punchers in the Dispatch Office even took out an extra insurance policy on the plane and maybe even our lives. They'll probably turn a profit if we die."

"Well, they might collect on that insurance yet." Erin indicated the blip on the TCAS display which signified the *Ready*

Sophia. "They're just sitting right above us waiting for us to come out. They know we have to fly out into open space to activate our TFG."

"If we time it right, we should be able to get past them."

"Yeah, but before I can fire off the TFG, I need to know what heading to fly. Where is this Ursa Royal de-radiating facility?"

Lyssa laughed a mischievous laugh. "It's in orbit around..." She paused for dramatic effect. "Promisedland."

"Oh, no. Anywhere but there."

"That's right, scenic Promisedland, home planet of some of the Darklands' most accomplished aviators!"

"I hate my home planet."

"Sorry, chica, but we're limping here and that's the only de-radiating facility within range."

Erin groaned as she entered Promisedland's gravimetric coordinates into the nav computer.

"Hull Repairs"

Radiation alarms were going off all over the *Ready Sophia's* Bridge as the helmsman lowered the ship into the sun's upper atmosphere. "Silence that shit," Capt. Villalobos ordered, and a second later, the alarms were silenced. The radiation lights still continued to flash, but no one paid them any mind. The entire crew of the *Sophie* was working as one now to kill this cursed freighter. "It's been almost an hour now," the captain wondered aloud, "how could they still be alive and flying?"

"They must have modified their shields somehow, sir," the tac officer answered. "They must have a really good mechanic on board."

"Hmm," Capt. Villalobos said.

"You know, at the end of the day, these civvie freight dogs in their unarmed shitbucket have proven a greater adversary than Turd Law. Gotta admire them for that, at least."

"I'll admire them when they're a shower of wreckage falling into the sun."

"Sir!" the tac officer said excitedly. "They're turning. Changing heading."

"Navigator," the captain said.

"Aye, sir. Turning to follow." The navigator anticipated his order.

"Where are they going?" Cdr. Tengrove asked.

But Capt. Villalobos could see what these bitches were doing. On the tactical display, he could plainly see where the hardpointer was heading. "There," he said. "That's where she's heading. That's where she's going to make her move." *Predictable. Stupid civvie pilot was going to make the most obvious play on the board. And we'll be waiting for her.*

* * *

"They'll never be expecting it. Guaranteed."

Erin didn't share Lyssa's optimism, but when they'd spotted the solar flare on the Primary Flight Display, they'd both known it was their best shot. They could hide behind the solar flare as they rocketed upwards, away from the sun and out into open space. They would only be vulnerable to the *Ready Sophia's* fire for about a minute or so. This would happen as they flew above the top of the flare and before they entered a region of space where the radiation would be light enough to activate the TFG.

On the TCAS display, they saw the pirate ship high above them turn to follow. "They know where we're going," Erin said.

"Don't worry, girl," Lyssa reassured her with what Erin was sure was nothing but false bravado. "We got this. You handle the flying and I'll handle the...um, 'hull repairs'."

"Roger that," Erin said. She had to trust her friend to do her part just as Lyssa was trusting Erin to do the flying part.

Erin maneuvered the plane around the column of solar plasma shooting spaceward until she was on the far side of it. In the right seat, Lyssa started typing commands into her phone.

As the hardpointer rounded the solar flare, Erin checked the status of their TFG capacitor. It was showing 88% charged. She switched the magnetic ducting for engines No. 1 and No. 3 back to thrust and instantly felt the satisfying power of the extra engines. She pulled back on the stick and brought the nose vertical as she pushed all three engines into the emergency arc. She held the engines at 95% maximum thrust. 788NC was shooting away from the star and out toward open space like a rocket. Above them, waiting for them to emerge from behind the shelter of the solar flare, was the pirate ship with all its formidable weaponry. They had only one chance to disable the pirate ship and it all fell to Lyssa.

"How we coming on those hull repairs?"

Lyssa didn't answer right away, but just kept entering commands into her phone. Half a minute later, as Erin continued her vertical climb towards open space, Lyssa reached up and pressed four buttons on the overhead panel. A series of four *thunks* reverberated through the plane's structure and then Lyssa said: "Hull repairs are underway."

* * *

"That pilot's really good, cap," the navigator of the *Ready Sophia* said to his captain. "I mean *really* good. That flare is

wreaking havoc on our scanner arrays. She's smart enough to keep close to the flare and prevent us from seeing her exact location very well."

"Well, the flare doesn't go high enough to protect her all the way to open space," Capt. Villalobos said. "Soon enough, she'll have to emerge from behind it and when she does, we'll get a lock on her." He turned to his tac officer. "Make sure those gunners know to fire as soon as they get a lock. Don't wait for orders; this *is* their order to fire."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer relayed the instruction to the anti-aircraft gun crews, even though they'd already been given the order twice before.

Capt. Villalobos leaned over the tactical display and watched the icon for the freighter rise behind the solar flare. They weren't even getting a four-point triangulation anymore, just a computer interpolation. Basically, just the computer's best guess where the hardpointer must be based upon limited data. The captain knew his ship, however. *Miss Sophie's* computer wouldn't lie. He had faith in her. He stared fixedly on hardpointer's icon on the tactical display as did nearly everyone around them.

His faith in the ship and her computer was rewarded as the hardpointer emerged over the top of the solar flare and now the computer quickly acquired a five-point triangulation target lock on the bandit. Dimly, as the firing of the ship's A-A guns reverberated like a purring cat through the structure, he heard another alarm going off, but he paid it no mind.

He watched as the pilot turned and banked her big, bulky freighter. "She's taking evasive maneuvers. Keep firing," Capt. Villalobos ordered. Now, the new alarm was really starting to annoy him. He knew he'd heard it before, but he couldn't place it. "What is that alarm? Silence it."

"Um, sir..." said the bosun.

As soon as the bosun (who was in charge of monitoring the ship's hull) spoke up, Capt. Villalobos recognized the alarm. It was a boarding alarm.

The bosun continued: "Somebody just landed a mech on our hull. Looks like it's trying to cut into our hull plating."

"Get it off us!" the captain shouted. "NOW!"

* * *

Lyssa barely noticed as Erin pitched the hardpointer into a vertical climb. She didn't want to think about climbing vertically and she didn't want to think about how close they were to an extremely dangerous solar flare. She didn't want to think about how badly they would die in just a couple of minutes if she failed to do her job. Instead, she poured herself into her work, feverishly entering commands into her phone.

First, she accessed the control for the second EMP missile she and Matty had taken off that fighter before takeoff. As they had stood there atop the hardpointer, she had realized that the missile was slightly smaller than herself. She reasoned, then, that the missile should fit anywhere she could fit. So, with Matty's help, she'd wedged the EMP missile into her maintenance mech's cockpit. Now, she set the missile to detonate its EMP warhead in three minutes.

With the timer ticking down, she accessed the autonomous control functions for the maintenance mech itself. The mech had a basic A.I. that allowed it to perform certain, simple repairs without an operator. Lyssa used her phone to tell the mech's A.I. to commence an emergency hull repair on the ship above them.

And then, she released the hardpoints holding the mech on the freighter's back.

* * *

The computer of Noémie MxMech 4802 came online to find itself falling free through a highly radioactive environment. The A.I. had no idea how it had gotten here, nor did it have any compulsion to be curious about it. Its first action was to protect itself by activating its thermal and radiation shielding. Next, it began to follow its operator's instructions. It had been programmed replace a section of hull plating on a corvette class ship called *Ready Sophia*. Its operator had emphasized that this repair was an emergency and that the *Ready Sophia* was a customer. The A.I. brought its scanners online and quickly estimated where the ship needing repairs must be. It wasn't able to get an exact position because of all of the radiation, but it had a good idea where the "damaged" corvette must be.

The mech's A.I. activated its thrusters and opened the throttles to full, emergency power. It rocketed towards the damaged ship with no thought on its simplistic, computerized mind beyond finding the ship, landing on her, and repairing the hull as quickly as possible. The A.I. spotted a Noémie hardpoint freighter, but it knew this wasn't its objective. It was looking for an independent corvette, a *customer*. The A.I. had been programmed to attend to the needs of Noémie's customers as quickly as possible.

The mech A.I. found that in order to get to the customer, *Ready Sophia*, it needed to fly around a massive column of

erupting plasma. It flew the opposite way around the plasma column from the company freighter so as not to cause a traffic conflict. Within a minute of coming online, the A.I. had positively identified and approached the customer from astern. The A.I. landed the mech on the section of hull the operator had specified and activated the mech's grav anchors and plasma torch. It began cutting the old piece of hull free.

And then, unexpectedly, the A.I. went offline. It never came online again.

* * *

"Get it off us!" the captain shouted. "NOW!"

And then the world went dark.

The tactical display disappeared. All of the alarms silenced. The whirring of the life support systems shut down. The humming of the engines far astern shut down and the purring of the A-A guns stopped. The bridge was completely dark. For a couple of seconds, it was also completely silent. Capt. Villalobos realized right away what had happened. That mech must have been carrying an EMP.

The shields were offline and the ship groaned as the metal of its now-unshielded lower hull began to expand in the extreme solar heat. Soon, the hull and the rest of the ship would literally melt. In the darkness, someone cried. Voices shouted as people began groping desperately for useless switches. Capt. Villalobos could feel the heat increasing quickly.

"It must have been an EMP," Cdr. Tengrove shouted in the darkness. "Emergency procedures! Everybody, emergency procedures!"

But Capt. Ben Villalobos knew it was hopeless. If they weren't in the upper atmosphere of a star, they might have a chance. Without power, however, the ship had no shields, no life support, and no thrust to hold her aloft. *Ready Sophia* would fall into the star. Long before the ship itself melted, everyone inside would be literally cooked to death.

Capt. Villalobos reached down to his hip and pulled his sidearm. It was already getting too hot to breathe in the bridge. He cocked the weapon and placed its barrel against his temple.

His last thought was: *What a way to end my career: shot down by a goddamn civvie freighter.*

Gold Star

They had no idea if Lyssa's mech even made it to the pirate ship or if the EMP it carried in its cockpit even went off. What they did know was that they didn't get shot down. When Erin pushed the TFG ACTV button, there was a familiar rumble and then a satisfying lurch as the plane slipped into transtach.

Neither woman said anything for several minutes. They waited until they were beyond the heliopause and officially out of the solar system. They didn't even bother to take off their EVA suit helmets. They just sat there in silence, stunned just to be alive.

It was Erin who finally broke the silence. "We did it."

"Hmm," Lyssa said, uncharacteristically pensive.

Erin guessed Lyssa was thinking about the high cost of their escape. Lyssa had lost a good friend. Erin was trying to decide if it was appropriate to talk to Lyssa about it and how she would go about broaching the subject when Lyssa brought it up herself – in her own roundabout way.

"You said earlier that we failed in our initial objective," Lyssa began. Erin decided to remain silent and let her friend continue. "They never expected us to succeed or even survive. But check it out: our objective was to bring Captain Elof home. Not only did we survive this bullshit, but we're bringin' back Captain Elof."

Erin knew Lyssa well enough by this point to know that she tended to hide her pain behind a facade of optimism. Talking about Capt. Elof was a roundabout way of talking about Matty. Erin let a long, silent moment pass before saying: "Don't worry, we'll get Matty back to his people too."

Lyssa sniffed over the intercom. Erin was pretty sure she was crying, but when she looked over to her, she saw that Lyssa's suit helmet was completely darkened. "No," Lyssa said, her voice thick, "Matty's people are all dead. They died during the Ruin of Estrella. He was all alone."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"They'll want to dispose of him like a pauper. Make a note of his passing in some stupid government database somewhere and dump his remains into a recycler."

Erin said nothing. She unlatched and removed her own helmet so that she could face Lyssa more directly.

"I can't let that happen, Erin. I can't let them just throw him away like garbage. He died savin' me, ya know? I think he was in love with me."

"Yeah, I kinda got that feeling too."

Lyssa took her helmet off and chucked it dismissively to the floor behind the pilots' seats. Erin saw that Lyssa had, indeed, been crying. Two clean streaks, one from each puffy, red eye, ran down her filthy, smudged face. She wiped at her eyes and nose with the glove of her EVA suit. "Poor, unlucky, breeder motherfucker goes and falls in love with a lesbian." Lyssa chuckled bitterly. "I can't let him just be tossed into a recycler. He's my friend. He ain't garbage."

"What can we do to prevent it? Neither of us are his family."

Lyssa reached back and made sure the circuit breaker for the Cockpit Voice Recorder was still pulled out. "About that, I got an idea. But I'm gonna have to ask a big favor from you. I know you're all straightlaced and shit and you ain't never broke a law in your life, and I hate asking you to lie on official forms and shit, but I was thinking...what if I married Matty in that Fourther church and you was there to witness it?"

"Oh, lord," Erin said before she could even stop the words.

"Nah, that's okay," Lyssa said quickly. "I know that was a big ask, and you don't have to do it if you don't want to, and I don't want to put you in any kind of situation you're not comfortable with, but it was just a thought..." Lyssa realized she was babbling and she shut her mouth before the situation could become any more awkward.

"No, it just caught me off guard is all. I'll do it if you really want me to. I just never thought of you as being married to a man. It seems so strange to think about: Lyssa Moss."

"Oh, shut the fuck up. I kept my own name!"

"Of course, nobody will believe you've still got your gold star anymore."

"How the fuck does a straight girl like you even know what a gold star is?"

Erin shifted in her seat, "I know lots of things."

Ursa Royal Space Dock

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)
Cluster: Backwater
Planet: Promisedland

About seven hours after the independent corvette, *Ready Sophia*, met her fiery demise in a different part of the Backwater Cluster, the sleepy system of Promisedland experienced a strange event: an unscheduled arrival. For a remote outpost like Promisedland, Space Traffic Control saw few arrivals and even fewer unscheduled ones.

The interloping spacecraft just dropped out of transtach and onto STC's scanner displays with no transponder code and no flight plan. Space Traffic Controller Alexis Nevin, a native of Promisedland, knew it was likely just smugglers wanting to land planetside. Alexis didn't care if these guys were up to shady stuff, just as long as they didn't do anything stupid in his sector or annoy him in some way. He was a member of the Aviators' Guild and he wasn't going to rat out fellow guild members if he didn't have to.

He keyed his mic and addressed the interloper. "Unknown spacecraft. Promisedland Approach. State intentions."

The voice that came back on the frequency was hoarse, croaky, like that of an old woman. He noticed that she spoke with no accent, so she must be a local. What did surprise him was what the old woman said. "Promisedland Approach. Noémie Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie. Declaring a radiation emergency. Need immediate vectors to Ursa Royal space dock."

Alexis keyed his mic again. "Um...okay...understood," he sent the vector directly to the Noémie plane's nav computer. "When able say number of souls aboard."

The old woman's voice came back on the frequency as the plane began following the vector to the Ursa Royal space dock. "Two living."

Living? That's spooky. "Uh, Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, please clarify: did you say you had two *living*?" "Affirmative."

"So, are you saying you've had fatalities?"

"Affirmative." It was clear to Alexis that the old woman was having difficulty speaking. Was she really even old? Could that just be what somebody sounds like when they've been exposed to high radiation? Alexis didn't know.

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, be advised: With onboard fatalities, we're gonna have to alert law enforcement." This was meant as a hint that this smuggler might want to think about going ahead and dropping any illegal cargo she might be hauling.

"Ro—" the pilot started to say but was interrupted by a severe coughing fit. She stopped transmitting and came back on the frequency several seconds later. "Roger that. Promisedland Approach, please alert—" the pilot started coughing again and paused her transmission. "Please alert Haru Yamashita on Gonaways—" Another coughing fit.

Did she say Haru Yamashita? Christ, what is this old lady involved in?

"— on Gonaways. He's the head of the Guild. Tell him we brought Captain Elof back."

"Seven-Eight-Eight-November-Charlie, say again?"

"We brought him back. Captain Elof. Tell Yamashita we didn't leave him."

* * *

After docking the hardpointer at the Ursa Royal space dock, Erin and Lyssa both had to be carried out of the plane on stretchers by nurses wearing full radiation suits. The hardpointer's shields had protected them from around 99% of the star's radiation, but even the 1% that got through was an extreme exposure. The EVA suits Lyssa had insisted they wear in the cockpit had also helped a little. Even still, during the seven hours they'd been forced to fly at transtach in order to reach Promisedland, the radiation poisoning had begun working its toll on them.

They were taken to the Ursa Royal space dock's medical bay. Erin offered no resistance as a nurse wearing a radiation suit started an IV in her arm. "How's Lyssa doing?" she asked. Her voice was croaky, her throat unbelievably dry. She still didn't care if she herself lived or died, but she wanted to know that she'd gotten her passenger to their destination

safely.

"Is Lyssa the other one?" the nurse asked. He was drawing something up into an autoinjector. He was a handsome man in perhaps his late thirties. He had black hair just beginning to gray at his temples and laugh lines at the edges of his eyes. "Is Lyssa the mechanic who was with you?"

"Yeah," Erin answered. That was all she could get out before she was gripped by another terrible coughing fit.

"Don't worry about her. She's in the next bay. She's unconscious, but she looks to have gotten a lower dose of radiation than you did."

"I got more radiation and —" Erin had to pause to let another coughing fit pass. "— she's the one that passed out. Tell her I said she's a wimp."

The nurse laughed from behind the protection of his radiation suit's helmet. "Will do, captain." Then, he held the autoinjector against the port in her IV line. Erin heard the hiss of the autoinjector and then...

* * *

"You comin' 'round again?" Erin heard a male voice ask. She recognized it as the same nurse who'd started her IV but his voice sounded slightly different. She couldn't think of why. Her mind was a kind of fog.

"I'm gonna puke," Erin said. And then she retched. For a brief moment, she worried that she might have thrown up on herself, but then she realized the nurse was holding a plastiform bucket under her mouth. After she was done retching into the pan, she fell back onto the gurney. She gasped like she'd just run up a hill.

"Ice chip?" the nurse asked as he held a spoon to her mouth. Erin took the ice chip and felt intense relief as it melted in her mouth. It was possibly the most delicious thing she'd ever eaten.

"Thank you," she said. "You were quick with that barf pan."

"Well, the second time I was. The first time, not so much."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't remember the first time you woke up?"

"Oh, no. What did I do?"

"First time you woke up, you sat straight up and got sick all over yourself."

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I got you cleaned up and changed. That's what I'm here for."

Her head starting to clear a little, Erin took in her surroundings. She was laying on a gurney wearing only a hospital gown and a pair of socks. She wondered why somebody had bothered with the socks. Tubes and wires were connected to almost every part of her body. She felt like some kind of cyborg.

The nurse, she realized was no longer wearing a radiation suit, which explained why his voice sounded different.

"Wait, how long have I been here?"

It wasn't the nurse who answered her; it was Lyssa. "Couple days. And by the way, I heard you called me a pussy. I'll have you know I was walking the halls while you was still lettin' that machine breathe for you like a chump."

Erin turned to see her friend standing beside her gurney. Lyssa looked to be in good health, overall, of which Erin was glad. Lyssa wore a hospital gown and what Erin suspected was a stolen pair of nurse's scrub pants. Lyssa had an IV pole with a bag of fluids hanging from it and a line going into her arm. Hanging from a hook near the base of the same pole was a bag of urine and a tube which disappeared under Lyssa's clothes. It occurred to her that Lyssa had been waiting for her to wake up.

"I never called you that. I called you a wimp."

"Girl, I kicked your ass once, remember?" Lyssa said, referring to the fight they'd had while prisoners of Third Law.

"As I recall, I was on top of you at the end of that fight," Erin said.

"Ah, dick holes. I was letting you wear yourself out."

"Um, is everything okay?" the nurse asked. Erin looked at him more closely. He wore scrubs with the Ursa Royal logo on them and his name, Yakovlev, displayed on his security badge. "She says she's your friend, but..."

"It's okay, Nurse Yakovlev, she's my best friend."

"See? Told ya," Lyssa said to the nurse. Then, to Erin, "This guy wouldn't let me draw a mustache on you while you was asleep."

Erin gave Lyssa a dirty look. She turned to face the nurse again. "So, Nurse Yakovlev, how are we doing, like, health-wise? Are we going to be okay from the radiation?"

"Yeah, you'll both be just fine. And you can call me Andrew."

"No cancer and we didn't get our eggs scrambled," Lyssa said. "Sorry, no mutant babies in your future."

"But," Andrew continued, "I'm sure you realize there's several people who want to talk to you."

"Yeah, I reckon we're in deep shit," Lyssa said.

"Lyssa, I'm the captain. I'll accept full responsibility. You only ever did what I told you to do."

"Bullshit, chica. We stand or fall as a team."

Messages

Erin tried not to think about the fact that Nurse Andrew had "cleaned and changed" her while she was unconscious. She appreciated his discretion, however. Between him and Sister Judith, she was developing a profound respect for the nursing profession. He helped her to a chair beside her gurney. She'd apparently spent the last couple of days on her back. She didn't remember any of it, but it still felt good to sit up.

Erin had no idea what had happened to her phone. She hadn't seen it since that first day they'd landed on Sanctuary. Andrew was kind enough to loan her a data pad so that she could begin going through all her messages.

The first one was from Ursa Royal and it detailed the damage to 788NC. The list of necessary repairs was extensive and expensive. To say nothing of the fact that the plane (or what was left of it) would need to undergo a costly de-radiating process to be considered spaceworthy again. There were several pictures included in the message which showcased melted, buckled, or fatigued skin plating. Several pictures showed large areas of the plane's outer skin coated with what looked like metallic blisters where rounds from *Ready Sophia's* guns had hit them. The lead projectiles had melted before hitting them, but those sections of airplane skin would have to be replaced, nevertheless. Erin could tell from the extent of the damage that she would definitely be fired. She sighed. *Well, guess I'm the plane burner for sure, now, she thought resignedly.*

Her next message seemed to confirm her suspicions that she was going to be fired. It was from her boss back on Gonaways, Chief Pilot Evan Conrad. It was a video message of him scowling at the camera and all he said was "O'Connell, call me as soon as possible. We need to talk." And then he'd hung up.

Great. That's the end of my career. After being branded a plane burner, she knew she was lucky to have gotten a job moving containers around for Noémie. After this, no one would ever hire her as a pilot again. *I just mess up everything I do. I should just go ahead and kill myself.*

There were three messages from somebody called Inspector Braden McIver. This guy said he worked for the Gonaways police and it was imperative that he speak with her before anyone else. Erin would call him back last.

I'm not going to prison. Whatever they try to pin on me, I'm not going to prison.

The last message was from Haru Yamashita. It was only a text message that read: "I'm glad you and your mechanic made it back safely. Don't worry about the plane. Thank you for bringing Capt. Elof back and thank you for your discretion. Call me before you speak to anyone else. I have good news for you."

Of all these people, Erin knew that the most powerful one and the one she should call back first would be the head of one of the most powerful Guilds in the Darklands. But it was Capt. Yamashita's last sentence that really prompted Erin to call him first. She could really use some good news right about now.

He answered right away, but she was surprised to see him wearing casual clothing. He looked to be attending a kid's birthday party.

"Senior Airman O'Connell," he said, "it's good to see you alive and well."

"I'm sorry, sir, if this is a bad time—" she started and then stopped. The significance of what he'd said hit her. He'd called her *Senior Airman O'Connell*, not *Journeyman Airman*. "Wait? Did you just call me..." She trailed off as he smirked into the camera.

"I did. Congratulations. You've made senior airman." He moved out of the main room where children were screaming and laughing and into a side room which looked like an office. He closed the door behind himself to block the sound. "The paperwork's already processed in the guild's computer system."

"But, why?"

"You don't know yet?"

"Don't know what, sir? I just woke up and checked my messages. You're the first one I've talked to."

"Captain O'Connell, every aviator in the Darklands is talking about you. You see, that asshole, Evan Conrad, over at Noémie wanted to fire you—at first. But then *somebody* leaked all the data from your Flight Data Recorder to the entire Aviators' Guild."

"They what?"

"We don't know who leaked it, but we're pretty sure it was somebody highly ranked within the guild." He winked at the camera. "What that data shows is one of the most amazing feats of flying any of us has ever seen. Everyone is talking about how you escaped two pirate factions, got a freighter up to 24milliC, hid in the solar atmosphere to charge your TFG, and then shot down a corvette with a single EMP stuffed inside a maintenance mech."

When it was all laid out like that, it sounded much more heroic than the desperate struggle for survival Erin remembered. She wondered if the FDR data showed the heroism of Matty Moss or Lyssa Ruiz as they did their parts and, in Matty's case, gave his life. Yamashita wouldn't understand all of that, so she didn't say anything about it to him. Then, something occurred to her. "Wait, did you say 'shot down'?"

"Yeah. You don't know? The last scan your TCAS scanner took of the pirate ship as you entered transtach showed the ship without power and falling into the sun. No one's gone out there to confirm it, but it's doubtful they survived."

This bothered Erin. They had only intended to disable the *Ready Sophia*, not destroy her. She wondered about all the lives aboard the ship, maybe a hundred or more. And then she remembered that it had actually been Lyssa who'd sent the EMP to that doomed ship. Did Lyssa know? Erin doubted if her friend would be proud of it.

Capt. Yamashita continued: "Anyway, not only is your reputation fairly well redeemed, but Noémie can't fire you now. All their pilots would strike. And since you're now a Senior Airman, they have to pay you more."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"Just, you know, don't rub it in Conrad's face or anything. He can make your life hell if he really wants to."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

* * *

When Lyssa checked her messages, the first message she saw was a voice message from the phone of someone she didn't know named Sid Stone. She almost listened to it, but then she just assumed it must be a salesman or something. She just deleted the message without listening to it.

She had a couple message from some Gonaways cop named McIver. Pig wanted her to call him back. She knew she would have to eventually, but no rush on that. Another message was from her witless, dickless boss, Terry Roscoe. Roscoe looked please with himself as he told her to call him back as soon as possible. *That fucker can't wait to fire me. That'll make his day.* She didn't care. She had no idea what she would do after she got fired, but she would get by. She'd survived Tolbert. A pissant like Roscoe couldn't scare her.

There was a text message from some joker she didn't know named Haru Yamashita. It read simply: "Don't worry about your job. I had a little talk with your boss and he's agreed that you're an asset to the Noémie ramp crew."

The next message in her inbox showed no apparent sender name or number (which was supposed to be impossible) and it also showed as having been sent from Ciudad Estrella (which was definitely impossible, since Estrella didn't exist anymore). This one was a text message, written in Estrellan. It said only: "Heard what happened. Glad you're safe. I love you, grease monkey." This made Lyssa smile. It was clearly from her brother, Marcio. But why hadn't he sent the message from his own account?

She tried calling him back on his normal number, but no one answered. This perplexed her. Why was Marcio being so evasive? She shook her head. "Wanker," she said.

She was just about to bite the bullet and call the Gonaways oinker, McIver, back when her phone rang. The incoming caller had no picture and their name read as <error>. The call was supposedly coming from Ciudad Estrella. She answered it right away.

"Marcio? Is that you?" she asked in her native Estrellan.

"Who else would it be?" her brother asked. His voice had a familiar, echoing quality. Also, he looked like he was surrounded by trees and sitting near a stream with a ginger cat on his lap.

"Are you calling me from inside the Datasphere?"

"Maybe..."

"Ugh! I hate that. It echoes all weird and shit. Makes it sound like you're calling from the next life or something."

"I hear you almost went to the next life. What happened? How did you end up all the way out in Backwater?"

"Where did you hear all that from?"

"I always keep an eye on you. You know that."

"Marcio, if you weren't my brother, that would be creepy as hell. It's only low-key creepy from you."

"I just care about you is all. You're the only family I got left."

"I know." It might be creepy and annoying that he was keeping tabs on her, but it was also his weird way of showing her he cared.

"By the way..." he began, but didn't seem to know how to proceed.

"By the way, what? Get the dick out your mouth and talk."

"Um, well, who the fuck is Matthew Moss?"

This surprised her. A flurry of emotions washed over from sadness to anger to agitation at her brother's snooping too deeply into her life. "He's...What do you mean? How deep did you snoop into my business?"

"I didn't *snoop* at all. Your name came across on the public data feed for all Gonian citizens — you know, the one that everyone sees, not just us elite hackers. It said 'Alyssa Ruiz (M and M Guild Senior Mechanic) married to Matthew Moss (former Estrellan police officer)'. It's as official as government cheese."

"Ah, Christ. It's on the public data feed? Are you serious?"

Her brother was struggling to hold in his amusement on the screen. "That's what happens when you get married. It's public information. You can imagine how surprised I was to find out my sister got married. And to a cop, no less. I thought you hated cops." He leaned in close to the screen to ask his next question. "Hey, Lyssa, is Matthew a girl's name?"

"Ah, fuck."

Marcio was clearly amused at his heretofore lesbian sister having married a man. "All these years, you never told me you swung for the swingin' meat."

"Shut the fuck up Marcio." She found herself laughing in spite of herself.

"Sorry, grease monkey. You know I gotta fuck with ya. Long as you're happy, I'm happy for ya. So seriously, tell me about this guy. When do I get to meet him?"

Her sadness must have shown on her face.

"What? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Matty didn't make it."

"Oh. Oh, God. I'm so sorry. I feel like such an ass. I was genuinely happy for you. I really was, but I didn't know."

"It's okay. We'll talk about it in person." She didn't want to explain to her brother on the phone that she hadn't really married Matty and that she'd falsified the paperwork. She doubted if anyone was listening in on their call, but she knew better than to risk it. She decided to change the subject. "So what about you? How's things out on Distortion? Still upgrading servers or whatever?"

Marcio's expression changed. "No. Some things have changed. I'm not with my old exnet security company anymore. I'm working a new job now. I'm going into business for myself. Well, I've got a partner."

"What?! What happened?"

Marcio clearly wanted to tell her more, but she could see that he was hesitant to do so. "That's another thing I think we should wait to talk about in person," he said.

* * *

Gonaways Police Inspector Braden McIver leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face. He had just finished telephonically interviewing both the pilot and the mechanic who'd been taken prisoner by pirates. Since they'd been lured by subterfuge out of Gonaways Station, Gonaways had some claim to jurisdiction here. There appeared to be no law or government on this planet SHP 242 (or "Sanctuary" as the victims called it) and the Promisedland authorities didn't want anything to do with it. Podunk little world like Promisedland probably didn't have the resources to handle any kind of serious investigation.

Problem was what the girls had said. Both girls had told pretty much the same story. They had even told the same lies. Braden could always smell a lie. These girls had told some lies.

The lies they'd told were not ones he gave a crap about, though. They both claimed they didn't know what the pirates had loaded into that container that had been on their plane's back as they'd made their escape. They claimed to only know that it was something both pirate factions wanted pretty badly. They both claimed they didn't know how the circuit breaker for their CVR got pulled, so no recording existed of what was said in the cockpit. They both claimed that the foul-mouthed mechanic had married one of the pirates who had then helped them escape. The pirate had subsequently been conveniently killed in said escape.

Why had they lied about the marriage? For a moment, Braden had wondered if the girls had murdered the boy, but

the supposed "widow" seemed genuinely sad that he was dead. She wasn't lying about her sadness. And they both had a genuinely high opinion of the boy. Braden had looked into this boy, this Matthew "Matty" Moss, wondering if he had any money or anything, but found that the kid was as dirt poor as they come. He had not a penny to his name nor any surviving family. According to official records, he'd lost all his family during the Ruin of Estrella. Ultimately, Braden just decided that the girls probably just didn't want Moss recycled as a pauper, so the potty-mouthed little mechanic had just claimed to be his wife. Challenging her claim would be a lot of headache and a lot of paperwork, so Braden just crossed it out of his notes and moved on.

One thing the girls had said, however, really struck a chord with Braden. They had both mentioned it in an offhanded fashion, but to Braden it was the most important detail of their story. When describing one of the pirate leaders, this "Landon Raith" person, they had both mentioned the odd tattoos on his face. "Like flames swirling out of his eyes" they had both said.

Braden had seen tattoos like those before, but on a man named Alister Tasunka. Could this be the same man?

Braden wondered.

He would find out.

Built With Pride

The Noémie hardpointer, tail number 788NC, was once again flying towards the nearest star. This time, she wouldn't be flying out.

Lyssa stood in the hardpointer's engine room and rested her hand on the brave plane's No. 2 engine. She was wearing an EVA suit, as the doors were open and the entire plane was exposed to the vacuum of space. Also, she needed the EVA suit's radiation protection. The plane hadn't been de-radiated after all. The bean counters at Noémie had decided it would be too expensive to de-radiate the whole plane. She was old, well past her prime, and ready to be scrapped. Better to just go ahead and write her off as a loss now than dump more money into her.

Still, as Lyssa stood in the engine room of the plane which had seen them through such trials, she couldn't help but feel like she was losing another friend. Through the EVA suit's thick glove, Lyssa could feel the engine's smooth vibration. Lyssa knew engines and these were good engines. Even after all they'd been through, even after all that had been asked of them, these engines still hummed along like a chorus of three.

"Such a fuckin' waste," Lyssa said aloud, forgetting that she was on an intercom channel with Erin.

"I know," Erin said from up in the cockpit. "This is still a good plane. I don't care what that Ivka woman from the Dispatch Office says about it."

"It would cost a fortune to get this bird de-radiated and spaceworthy again. They're not wrong about that."

It had been some snotty, corporate bitch named Ivka Stoya from the Dispatch Office who'd called them and told them of the company's decision to write off 788NC. At first, neither Erin nor herself had been able to believe what they were hearing. They both held this plane in such high regard that it took them a day or so to see the financial side of the equation.

It was the radiation that ultimately sealed the hardpointer's fate. It would be cost prohibitive to de-radiate the old hardpointer. Because of the radiation, Noémie couldn't even sell it off for scrap. All they could do was drop her into the nearest star and collect whatever insurance and/or tax write-offs they could get for her.

Erin held the throttles at 75% thrust as 788NC flew tail-first in high orbit around Promisedland's sun. This would be the hardpointer's final deorbit burn. Once Erin slowed the plane to below the star's escape velocity, it would enter a degrading orbit until it ultimately fell into the star.

Erin hated flying in an EVA suit. It made everything much harder, especially with the suit's thick gloves. But it couldn't be helped. She didn't want to go through de-radiating again and she *definitely* didn't want that handsome nurse to "clean and change" her again. She shifted in her seat.

Erin reached behind her and pulled the circuit breaker for the CVR. It was doubtful that anybody would ever download the CVR recordings from this plane again, but Erin wasn't taking any chances. "Hey, Lyssa," she said, "how did it go with that Gonaways police inspector?"

"It went okay," Lyssa said. "Hey, do me a favor and check that CVR breaker and make sure it didn't fault out on us again." This was Lyssa's discreet way of asking if their conversation was being recorded.

"It's okay. I pulled the breaker. I don't think that inspector believed us about you marrying Matty."

"No, I don't think he did either. But fuck that oinker. What's he gonna do, go all the way to Sanctuary and ask the villagers if a couple of outsiders were married in their church?"

"I doubt it. It would cost the Gonaways tax payers a fortune and there's nothing to be gained from it."

"Exactly. As long as you stick to your story that you witnessed the ceremony, we're okay on that. And as his widow, I can insist that Matty be buried with the honors of an Estrellan oinker."

"Don't worry about me. I'm glad to do something for Matty. I feel like I owe it to him, especially after I doubted him at first." Neither woman said anything for a few minutes. Erin had calculated the escape velocity of Promisedland's sun to be around 650km/s, and they were still orbiting at over a thousand. She wasn't rushing the deorbit burn. She was actually loath to abandon this good, solid plane to its fiery fate.

"Hey, Lyssa," she finally said.

"Sup, Cap?"

"You do realize what we're doing here today, don't you?"

"What's that?"

"We're burning a plane. At least now whenever somebody calls me a plane burner, it'll be true."

Lyssa was uncharacteristically silent for a moment, as if carefully considering her response. "So you're not gonna let that stuff get to you anymore, then?"

"Nah. You were right; it's time to move beyond that. To heck with Jared Paul. I made Senior Airman in spite of all he did to me."

"Who the fuck's Jared Paul? You know he's a jerk because he has two first names."

Erin laughed. "Yeah, that seems to be the rule." Oddly, she thought about the first boy who'd ever broken her heart. That boy's name had been Danny Jake, but that had been years ago, before she'd even learned to fly. In answer to Lyssa's question, Erin said: "Jared Paul was the owner of the Bug Zapper, the plane that burned. When they discovered it was arson, he blamed it on me."

"Why'd he blame you?"

"We have history, he and I. But that's a long story for another day. I don't want to get into that."

"So if you didn't burn his plane, who did?"

"Honestly, I think he did it himself."

"That don't make no sense. The fuck a pilot wanna burn his own livelihood for?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, but I suspect he had multiple insurance policies on the plane. Additionally, since it burned while parked on the guild's ramp, they would have provided some payout to him as well. What I do know is that a month later, he bought a much nicer, transtach-capable spaceplane. And he got me to take the blame."

"Fucking bastard. I promise if he ever comes to me for repairs, I'll charge him double."

Erin laughed. "Thanks, Lyssa. I appreciate that. But the thing is: I would have burned his plane if I'd thought of it."

"Yeah, I know you would. You got a temper. I saw you sink Azariah's boat. That fuck-nutter, Azariah, deserved it and I'm sure this Jared Paul guy did too."

"Oh, Jared definitely did. But I've been thinking about what you said while you were readjusting the shield projectors. I think you might be right. I do need to learn to lighten up about it."

"Of course I'm right. I'm always right. 'Cause I'm a fuckin' genius."

Erin laughed. Their orbital speed was down to just over 800km/s. Erin weighed her next words carefully. She needed to say some things to Lyssa, but it had to be done carefully. "Lyssa, have you seen the FDR data from our escape?"

"Yeah, I seen it." Some guarded quality in Lyssa's voice told Erin that her friend knew where this was going.

"Then you know about the *Ready Sophia*? How they think she fell into Sanctuary's sun?"

"Yeah, I know about that. Look, I really don't wanna talk about this shit."

"No pressure. I just wanted you to know I'm here whenever you want to talk about that or any of your demons. I know you have them. You're just really good at hiding them."

Lyssa couldn't deny the truth in this. Instead she just said, "Maybe. But not today."

As the orbital speed dropped below 600km/s, Erin checked the nav computer and made sure the plane was on a deteriorating orbit. It was. Now, it was just a matter of time before the plane eventually spiraled down into the sun.

Back in the engine room, Lyssa still rested her hand on the No. 2 engine. She felt the engines throttle back and then power off.

"Well, that's it," Erin said. "Deorbit burn's done. Time to get off."

Lyssa noticed the hesitance and the sadness in her friend's voice. She couldn't help asking: "You do want to get off the plane, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I ain't the only one that's got shit needs talkin' about. I feel like I've gotten to know you pretty well these past few weeks. I know you think about hurtin' yourself sometimes. I can see the sadness in your face and I can hear it in your voice."

"Lyssa, I—" Erin hesitated. "I do get sad. About a lot of things. But I'm okay. I want to live. And thank you for caring."

"Girl, of course I care. You're my best friend. Maybe someday you'll tell me about *your* demons."

"Maybe. But not today," Erin echoed Lyssa's response from earlier.

"We are pretty fucked up, ain't we?"

"Maybe. But maybe we're getting better. We might even be alright someday," Erin said. Then, she added: "I'm going up to start the shuttle."

Before departing space dock with the condemned hardpointer, they had rented an Ursa Royal shuttle and secured it to the Noémie plane's hardpoints. Now that the hardpointer was falling into the sun, the shuttle was their only way back.

Lyssa was about to leave the engine room when she spotted something just above the doorway. "I'll be up in a minute. Gotta do something right quick."

"Okay. Hurry, though. It's gonna get hot pretty soon. Don't want to go through de-radiating again, do you?"

"I'll be along. Just get the engines started on that shuttle."

What had given Lyssa pause as she went to leave the engine room was something she noticed right above the door. She had noticed it once before, but had forgotten about it until this moment. It was 788NC's airframe plate riveted to the spar above the door. It read:

JASKOWSKI AERSOSPACE, Inc.

MODEL JA88

SERIAL No.4278

Ciudad Estrella

Vacuum Welders' Local 173

"We build with pride."

The last three lines were written in Estrellan. Lyssa patted the spar to which the plate was riveted. "Yes," she said in Estrellan. "Yes, you certainly do."

"Who are you talking to?" Erin asked in Gonian. Lyssa had forgotten once again that she was on an open channel.

"I'm talking to the Estrellans who built this plane. It was built in the shipyards of Ciudad Estrella by the Vacuum Welders' Local 173. Did you know that?"

"No. Can't say that I did."

"They really built with pride."

"I definitely can't argue with that."

Lyssa used her suit's sensors to measure the radiation on the airframe plate. It was negligible. She could afford to have it de-radiated herself. She opened the small tool chest next to the engines and found a hand-held plasma torch. Within seconds, she had the rivets cut and the plate free from the airframe.

Next to where the plate had been, some illiterate moron had scratched the words "Go back were you came from!" into the paint in Gonian. In the bottom drawer of the tool chest, Lyssa found a little can of red paint. It wouldn't match the rest of the airframe, which was painted pukey aviation-green, but Lyssa didn't care. She wasn't about to let this noble, Estrellan plane go to its end with some racist garbage scribbled on its airframe.

By the time she climbed into the shuttle and shut the door, Erin had the shuttle's engines fired up and ready to fly. As soon as the door was shut, Erin pressurized the interior and they released from 788NC's hardpoints.

Wordlessly, the two friends rode back to the Ursa Royal space dock. After Erin parked the shuttle on the landing pad, she said: "We got a few days before the starhopper comes to take us back to Gonaways. Want to go planetside and see where I'm from?"

"Fuck it. Why not? Where is that, exactly?"

"Little place you never heard of called Catfish City."

12 April 2020. 05:34.

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About the Author



Sarah McKee is a lifelong aviation enthusiast who holds a Commercial Pilot's License and has been flying since 2000. She's also a bookworm and sci-fi and fantasy junkie. Sarah has been writing off-and-on for most of her life and has recently begun mashing up all of her passions to create a massive space fantasy world which she calls The Darklands.

Sarah was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and now resides in Jacksonville, Florida.

For more works by Sarah McKee, visit her website, [The Darklands Chronicles](http://TheDarklandsChronicles.com), or check her out on social media:

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