

Thesis: The Chitter
Exegesis: Treatment of the Other
in Science Fiction and Fantasy

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2022

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A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Centre for Creative Writing,
School of Language and Culture

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Acknowledgements

There are so many people to thank for their support and care through this past year. First of all, my family who have encouraged and supported me through the ups and downs of my Masters, and without whom this would not have been possible.

Additionally, I would like to thank my mentor Siobhan Harvey, whose insights and knowledge have been indispensable throughout the entire process. Thank you for all the support and candid advice that you have provided me with. Thank you also to James George and Paul Mountfort, who provided many valuable suggestions and insight in our weekly classes.

A massive thanks to my classmates, who provided a supportive and helpful environment that helped to stimulate my writing and showed me that there is a community of those like me, who loved the art of storytelling.

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This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Abstract

The Chitter is an Adult Fiction novel written from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. It follows two key characters: Captain Arnie and Security Chief Alpha Grek.

Arnie is Captain of the starship Lucian, and leads the exploration of a distant solar system when she encounters an alien race. She has to navigate the intricacies of interspecies diplomacy, while simultaneously battling the demons of her bloody past. Her story is one of personal growth, where she has to face her biases and fears, and overcome them to effectively lead her crew.

Alpha Grek is a Martian, a genetically modified human whose people have only recently been freed from slavery through a violent uprising. Now he must try to find peace and keep his new home safe from threats within and without. He is the embodiment of the Other within the story, and how such characters are often portrayed in Science Fiction and Fantasy.

The story follows the characters through their trials as a crew and shows what they will do with the burdens they carry. While they deal with the threat of first contact with aliens, this story is primarily focused on the struggles of the crew to unite and overcome their preconceptions and biases. Some, like Dr Karo, show the worst that humanity can be, providing a counterview to what the Captain must become to save her ship and crew. She also explores the consequences of humanity's actions in the past, and must decide if allowing others to repeat them is really what is best for those

involved. While she struggles with the Othering of both her new crew and the aliens around her, she manages to overcome this through the events of the story.

Treatment of the Other
in Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Introduction

This exegesis aims to provide the context and research behind the thesis, the novel *The Chitter*. The text seeks to explore several themes and ideas concerning Race and Identity, making use of the genre of Science Fiction as a medium to plumb the depths of these ideas. Concepts such as The Other and Colonialism in Fantasy and Science Fiction, and the themes of Pain and Healing are all present within the text.

Motivation

My goal when writing *The Chitter* was to explore the idea of Race and Identity. I wanted to spark conversation, to allow the story to lead to honest and open dialogue about the pains and struggles that so many people face every day. In recent years the media has been flooded with increasing divisiveness, especially in America. Immigration, education, politics; everything in the world is defined by an us-vs-them mentality. When something confronting happens, it doesn't bring about change. Instead, it seems to divide people even further, forcing us apart and just causing bad situations to worsen. As I have seen this trend growing over time, it has become clear that a way to engage with these heavy topics was needed. Science Fiction has always been a genre that provides a medium for discussion without the weight that more realistic or historically accurate settings often bring. It allows for topics to be explored without the stigma and

preconceptions that people can attach to real world events. "Science fiction has for some time been the repository of special effects-laden blockbusters and iconic television shows."¹ It is not seen as a serious genre, instead as more of a source of escapism. However, it is this ease of consumption that makes Science Fiction the perfect medium for these discussions. Be it the themes of Colonisation in *Dune*, or the fear of the Other in *I, Robot*, what is passed off as creative fun can often, in fact, provide a deep and meaningful method of communicating ideas. Science Fiction is "a fully realized, multidimensional vision, including not only the technological and scientific, but the psychological, cultural, moral, social, and environmental dimensions of future human existence."² It allows the exploration of modern problems through the lens of fantastical ideas.

The story I want to tell through the text is one that explores the healing of wounds and the overcoming of boundaries between people. Hatred is something that we as humans like to hold on to, to dwell within and to never let go. Hatred is comfortable, and it is often easier to focus on hating people you blame than the world which caused the problems to begin with. Societal struggles are often hard to define, difficult to grapple with and seemingly impossible to solve. The differences between peoples, be it their race, religious beliefs or just where they went to school, lead us to make preconceived judgements about others based on our own experiences. Having been the target of such stereotyping and prejudgement in the past, I wanted to explore a story where the characters could overcome their natural biases and work together to achieve something greater.

I also wanted to explore concepts around colonisation. This comes from much of the work I did in the undergraduate degree, which covered a large amount of postcolonial work. Speaking back to the coloniser through the medium of stories and the rejection of ideas around superiority of culture are things that science fiction is known to do. It is capable of containing a wide variety of texts and voices³, and therefore can be used to communicate new ideas and ways of thinking. I found such texts to be extremely helpful in expanding my understanding of the issues around colonialism, and hoped to write a story that could reflect that.

The Other

Science fiction and Fantasy are often highly racialized genres. Be it Vulcans from Star Trek or Elves from Lord of the Rings, the fantastical or diverse races that appear in many of these texts are often confined to very narrow areas of behaviour or interaction. For example, Elves in fantasy stories are almost always portrayed in a very narrow way, often limiting their potential to show real diversity of character and emotion. The wood elves of *Magician* by Raymond E. Feist for example, are universally good and kind, and are treated as the epitome of what humans aspire to. Their goodness is displayed in their physical looks, being “tall, youthful and lithe in movement”⁴. They are held up as embodiments of beauty and perfection, and this implies their inherent goodness. This

biconditional relationship between goodness and beauty can be seen in our cultural mythos as far back as the time of Socrates, who argued that “the correct belief must be that what is good is beautiful and what is beautiful is good”⁵. The reinforcement of this belief in most fantasy and science fiction stories created very predictable characters. While there are a number of engaging elven characters, it is almost always the case that upon meeting a wood elf, you know what to expect.

I wanted to avoid this very railroaded method of constructing the various species and factions within my own story, as I didn't want there to be a clearly good or clearly evil side of things. While a binary good versus evil dynamic is often easier for people to consume, when this same conversation is defined along such a stark line as race, it becomes a lot harder to have the nuanced conversation I wanted to engage with. Both the Chitter and the Martians within my story are characterized by embellished features, which emphasize their differences from humanity, with the Martians in particular often described in a very derogatory way. When Alpha is described as having “small, beady eyes staring out from the piggish features shared by those vat-grown piles of muscle”⁶ it is to show the instinctive abhorrence normal humans have for the Martians, but also allows me to juxtapose his physical looks with his loyal, hardworking nature. I wanted to confront the idea that you could tell if someone was good or evil just by looking at them, and I believe this was successful within my story.

Another reason why I chose to make the Martians and the Chitter further from human was to focus in on the ease with which they were othered by normal humans. Humans found it easier to enslave the Martians because they seemed lesser than them. This parallels the ways that people throughout our own history have tried to justify their

enslaving of others, such as believing that “slaves are beings who are so inferior that they deserve to be enslaved.”⁷ The humans of my story were fine with the enslavement of others because of their perceived inferiority. When someone looks differently to you, or seems less intelligent than you are, it’s easy to confine them to a place in society you would never see yourself in. The fact that the Martians were created in labs, and made to be a slave race for humanity, only made it easier for them to do this.

This is similar to the way that robots were treated in *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov, where robots are used as a labour force in a similar capacity to the Martians in my own story. When a mother talks about how she “won’t have my daughter entrusted to a machine,”⁸ it shows the fears that she has around trusting the robots that have begun to fill their world. To many, they are just hunks of machinery, incapable of doing much beyond working in a factory or other lowly job. The Martians are similarly confined to the lowliest forms of labour, mining for ore in asteroids or serving as muscle for starship work crews. They were sold as being “Tough enough to handle the most dangerous tasks,”⁹ and so were used in the least humane way to achieve their owners’ goals.

Even when the Martians began to revolt, they were treated more as a nuisance than a real issue. Their masters don’t understand that “all life resents domination,”¹⁰ and no matter the conditioning and control they enforced, all sentient life strives to be more than what it is told it can be. Be they Martians or Robots, they will seek to be more than the sum of their parts, and no amount of force can change that drive. Even though the Martians from my story were designed to be less intelligent than normal humans, it doesn’t excuse the way they were (and are) being treated.

Alpha was designed to be an aberration in his own right, as he is more intelligent than the average Martians. Shown by the high rank he achieves aboard the *Lucian*, and also by his leadership of other Martians, Alpha is representative of the uniqueness that can rise within any race or society. However, while such intelligence would be celebrated within most societies, he is still looked upon with scorn by those around him. Upon feeling his presence, Captain Arnie's hand "fell immediately to her sidearm."¹¹ Though he is different, and in many ways better than his erstwhile enemies, he is still seen as a threat by his supposed comrades. Alpha serves to highlight the flaw in thinking that all his people are good for is labour, and challenges similar thinking in our own world.

Unity

Another aspect of Science Fiction that I wanted to confront is the seemingly perfect integration of species that occurs in many of the genre's texts. Be it *Star Trek's* Federation or the Republic of *Star Wars*, many of the most popular science fiction stories that fill our shelves and screens show the extreme homogenization of cultures that occurs when species unite. For example, in *Star Trek* the "space powers in the series tend to underscore that interplanetary diversity is by no means a given, yet most out world "species" are presented in culturally monolithic terms."¹² The Vulcans are defined by their adherence to a logic focused way of life, and that seems to be the

cultural focus across their whole species. Subcultures, like Captain Picard's French heritage, seem to have been completely subsumed by the generic western culture of the time, with almost no indication that different cultures even have a place on Earth anymore.

Within *The Chitter*, I wanted to confront the very same cultural homogenization that is seen through much of the genre. The primary way that I did this was through the crew of the Lucian. The Crew itself is an amalgamation of three cultural groupings: The Spacers, Terrans and Martians. These three factions were at war for many years, and it is only relatively recently that there has been peace between them. The Spacers are miners and traders, who survived in the far flung reaches of the sol system. The Martians were slaves, while the Terrans were the social elite; owners of much of humanity's fleet and the makers of the Martians. The Lucian's crew are split between these groups, and all struggle to cooperate. Because of their history of conflict, the crew is distrustful of one another. I wanted this to be the primary source of conflict amongst the crew, as a way to emphasise the struggle they faced in forming this unified group. Where the crews of Star Trek operate like well-oiled machines, my crew would show the traps and pitfalls that come from the integration of such a diverse crew. Be it the "hundred or so off duty workers from across the ship were in the midst of a full-scale brawl,"¹³ or the dozens of insults thrown against Martians like Alpha throughout the story, I wanted it to be clear that the decision to create a hybrid crew was not a welcome one, and their attempts to unify were not going particularly well.

While in "Star Trek, the people of Earth have united across class, gender, national and racial lines,"¹⁴ the peoples within *The Chitter* are still holding tightly to the

hate and prejudice that created their society to begin with. I felt this was a much more human reaction to their situations and would create more believable and relatable characters. It also helped to present a more relatable world than the semi utopias that are shown in a number of science fiction universes; a world that didn't suggest what we could become but instead challenged what we are now. It is all well and good providing hope for the future, but I wanted to challenge people's thoughts on contemporary issues and help them to engage with it, so the more of our own world the readers could see in my story, the more of a conversation it could spark.

The alien species was an additional element that I used to provide an external threat. While not overtly hostile, at least in the beginning, their very existence was a means for me to begin the process of unifying the crew and helping key characters move beyond their own struggles. I specifically chose to make them a non-humanoid lifeform, as it seems to be a common decision to make aliens look like us in an attempt to help provide a clearer relationship between us and them. The Chitter on the other hand are insectoid in nature, which allowed them to be distinct without making communication utterly impossible. They provide a challenge to engage with, and a potential threat to help the characters in my story learn to work together and not against one another.

Colonisation

The theme of colonisation is one that I engaged with throughout my undergraduate degree, and it is a topic that I enjoy exploring through my writing. It had a strong

influence upon the content of my thesis, as it is central to the plot and to the decisions of the characters throughout.

The original drive behind much of the plot with my thesis is colonisation. Colonisation at its heart is about controlling resources. When the British Empire entered Nagaland, they “were looking for expansion of their area of influence to Burma (Present Myanmar) and China.”¹⁵ Control over territories would bring power and wealth to their people and would help to maintain the British Empire as the world’s preeminent power. This thinking allowed the British and other European nations to colonise vast swathes of the world, all in the name of power and wealth. Anything of value in their newly acquired territories was ripe for use by the Empire, and the exploitation of the land and its people was not seen as an issue.

Within my thesis, the entire human race is built on an ideology of colonisation. The need for space and resources sent humans out amongst the planets and moons of the Sol system, eventually leading to the distinct factions therein. Once the wars of ideology they fought were over, vessels were sent on missions to explore the galaxy, seeking new worlds for humanity to take as their own. The Lucian is one of these vessels, and we see it at the start of the novel journeying into the core of a new star system, where “voyage will be over once we can deploy the homing beacon in the central system.”¹⁶ By starting the entire situation from a point of colonisation, I wanted to show how similar in attitude these humans were to the rest of us. Though this story is set in the future, it is still relatable to our past and present, especially in terms of the way we colonised our own planet.

The other aspect of colonisation that I wanted to explore was how the coloniser often treated the natives in a situation. While it may be true that some colonists in our own human history came with good intent, to spread knowledge and unite humanity, the “significant reasons/motivations for all European colonisers was an inherent desire to colonise, subjugate, dominate and full with ideology of “western supremacy”.”¹⁷ Empires both past and present were most commonly there for selfish reasons, aiming to control and assimilate others into their beliefs and way of life, while also ensuring their own peoples’ dominance in all things. I wanted to challenge this attitude in my work, while at the same time showing it still is a part of humanity and is something that we as people need to challenge.

Much of the world which was colonised by Europe still bears the most obvious brands of the coloniser; the names of its land and peoples. I see this every day, given the history of New Zealand as a colonised nation named by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, in ignorance of the native Māori name Aotearoa. Many places and peoples in Fantasy and Science fiction suffer a similar fate, with the nonhumans of Brandon Sanderson’s *Way of Kings* called Parshendi by their neighbouring human kingdom. “It meant, roughly, “parshmen who can think.””¹⁸ The parshmen were a slave race to the humans, and so the so called Parshendi suffered the indignity of being related to the humans slaves while at the same time being labelled by a name not of their own making.

There is a power in the naming of a people or place, as whomever does the naming has power over them. I represented this in my novel with the way the human crew labels the alien species world as “The Fryer, and it quickly spread throughout the

ship,”¹⁹ even though this has nothing to do with the aliens’ own naming of the planet but instead just makes use of some of its less pleasant features, namely the heat. Even in this small way, the humans are claiming their superiority in this situation, as they would not have dared to name something so precious as another’s home for those they thought of as equals. I wanted it to be clear that at least some of the crew didn’t view the aliens as much more than a fascinating experience, something to gawk at as they continued on their way.

I wanted to have a contrast to the inherent lack of respect that some of the crew had for the aliens, and I decided that Captain Arnie was the best choice for this role. While she has many flaws and is quite often overtly hostile to the idea of working with the Martians and Terrans in her crew, she also understands the responsibilities she has when dealing with the aliens. She understands that, when she is asked to side with one faction or the other, that the ramifications will be massive, and she struggles with this through the whole story. She clearly states that “I don’t know what the right option is if I am honest.”²⁰ I wanted the characters around her to represent the different ideologies at play, with some representing the worst elements of the colonial attitude, seeking every advantage from the situation with little respect for the impact it would have on the aliens as a whole, while others simply saw them as a threat. I wanted the Captain to represent the reader in this situation, someone who is exposed to the entire range of beliefs and can come to a well informed and well thought out conclusion about what to do. While it is true that I struggled to find my way sometimes with this element of the story, I do think that it was the right thing to do, as by engaging with this topic in this way I hope to explore the struggles and repercussions humanity is still dealing with right now.

How The Chitter Relates to other Texts

During the course of the writing process, I used a number of other texts as references for my own style and plot decisions. Many fantasy and science fiction texts deal with similar themes and concepts to my own, and so I made sure to read widely in order to help develop my own skills and improve the story as a whole.

One of the key elements of the story that I focused on was world building. The construction of a coherent world, with defined rules around how things work and what makes everything fit together is a cornerstone of what makes a good science fiction or fantasy story. When creating the world in which *The Chitter* resides, I wanted to keep a large part of the story at least grounded in the realms of scientific possibility. I read a number of books in order to seek context on how to show a world that maintained a coherent logic where the rules of science were used as guidelines for world building.

In the universe of *Divergence*, a Science Fiction novel by Charles Sheffield, there are a number of Alien races which appear throughout the story. Each of these, as well as the worlds that the characters explore, are explained logically through clearly established rules. Throughout the novel he includes scientific descriptions of his various species, such as the Lo'tfians. He explains their unique physiologies in depth, describing them as being "thin-bodied, eight-legged arthropods, with excellent hearing and vision. They have the ability to communicate pheromonally, which makes them the preferred interpreters of the Cecropians."²¹ They are excellent translators, but are

incapable of individual thought whilst in the presence of other intelligent species.

Sheffield uses these entries to provide context for the beliefs, decisions, and actions of his characters, and to make the changes they experience more meaningful. His method was useful when I was constructing my own alien species, the Chitter.

Just as he uses the Lo'tfians' struggle to become an individual as the core of their character, so do I use the Chitters' unique biology and environment to drive their motivations. The Chitter live for only seven years, and so are obsessed with preserving themselves and their culture. Their motivations as a species are defined by the nature of their existence, and their struggles become relatable through that lens. I used this as the source of the external conflict that the crew would have to face, and as a way to challenge my own methods of worldbuilding so that I could enhance how real the world felt while reading it. I believe that, because of the attention to these sorts of details through the story, I managed to create a world that felt believable as a version of our own future, while at the same time allowing me to explore themes that would be difficult to discuss in a wholly contemporary context.

The *Long Earth* by Terry Pratchett and Stephan Baxter contain a large amount of dialogue on the use of Flashback to construct characters. The main character, Josh, is a loner who enjoys being separate from humanity as a whole. He is a hero only because he is prepared by his own lifestyle, but also because of his past. During the novel, we see flashbacks to when he saved dozens of children on Step Day, the day that parallel worlds became accessible to everyone. This event established his reputation, even as a child, as someone who could handle themselves in a crisis: "They tell me Joshua saved them. They tell me he picked them up and carried them back

home.”²² It also established some of his close friendships, which continued into the main story's time period. Another flashback even establishes that he was born on an empty parallel world, allowing him to hear the Universe itself, the so-called Silence. His drive to get away from humanity provides the nudge he needs to go on the book's great quest and highlights his uniqueness within the story world.

I used the flashbacks within *The Chitter* to explore the pain and hurt of the key characters in the story. Alpha Grek was once a slave, who found himself forced into an uprising he did not want to be in. The Captain was a soldier who experienced the horrors of war first-hand: losing friends and comrades in brutal ways even as she killed their enemies in return. Both of these characters are defined by the struggles that they faced in their pasts, and so by showing these moments to the reader I aim to help them understand the choices and motivations of these characters, as well as the challenges that they need to overcome. Without this context, it is almost impossible to see why the Captain doesn't trust her new crew members, or why Alpha is often targeted by those around him with such a vehement hatred. I explored other methods of explaining the attitudes of others through snippets of dialogue or exposition through the story, however these never worked within the flow of the story. It too often interrupted important sequences or sections of dialogue, and so I cut most from the text. However, I did end up keeping a few, primarily before the first flashback occurs, to hint at the context and hook the readers into wanting to discover more.

I only initially added two flashbacks, one each for Captain Arnie and Alpha, showing their lives at the start of the Sol war. I ended up adding a second set of flashbacks later on in the story, primarily to provide additional character building for

each of them, and also to help set the scene for Arnie's show of loyalty to her whole crew, including the Martians, at the end of the story. I wanted to show her (and Alpha) doing what was right despite the consequences, and use that to foreshadow their future actions.

A novel that concerns itself with the themes of Colonisation is *Oathbringer* by Brandon Sanderson. Within the text, humanity has taken over a land by force and subjugated its people, turning them into mindless slaves. The story revolves around the consequences of this event, thousands of years ago, and the war that continues to rage in the current time. The slaves have risen up, and while initially it seems as simple as defeating a revolt, it is revealed that the Martians have been lied to the entire time about who was native to the lands they call home. When they discover that the humans invaded these lands and enslaved the natives, it causes many to doubt which side is in the right. When a main character is asked by an ex-slave "What is a just punishment for enslaving my entire race?"²³ he struggles to come up with an answer. The impacts of the colonial attitudes of the people and the way they wiped out any trace of what really happened all that time ago highlights the lack of empathy they felt for those who are not human.

I used the text as an inspiration for my own thesis as I wanted to explore similar themes around the attitude of the coloniser and how we can look past our differences to see the importance that can be found in each culture and tribe. Captain Arnie, though comparable to figures like Abel Tasman and Captain Cook from our own history, was never intended to be some sort of colonial representative. Instead, I wrote her to be

more thoughtful and introspective, caring to respect the culture of the Chitter while being careful how her actions would impact their way of life.

As an example of how to make use of an external threat, I looked to Dan Abnett's novel *Necropolis*. He uses the enemies of the main characters and their allies as a key unifying factor, allowing disparate figures (like those within my own crew) to work together where they may have usually been enemies. This enemy, the terrifying cult armies of Chaos, are both physically grotesque and ultra-violent. Without the external pressure that the forces of Chaos provide, many of the characters would find it difficult to work together, or they may have become enemies instead. Abnett makes the Other they face as horrendous as possible. When a character encounters them, it establishes why they are fighting in a few simple phrases. "He was the first person in Vervunhive to see the face of the enemy, square on, naked, shorn of armour or mask or visor. Larkin screamed."²⁴ With the external Other posing such a threat, it is easy to unify a variety of characters.

I used the same method as Abnett within my own story, if to a lesser extent. While I didn't want the sheer hatred for the alien and other he uses, I did use the threat of danger the Chitter posed to help the crew work together in a more efficient way. Without the eternal threat, it would be nigh on impossible for them to function within the story, as their infighting and lack of unity would be too consuming.

Reflection

Over the course of writing this thesis, there are several areas where I feel I could have done a better job. The biggest of these was my research, and in particular my research of historical events that correlate with the events and themes in my thesis, such as slavery. Most of my research focused on the literature side of the process, and if I were to do this again, I would ensure that my understanding of the real-world events that I am speaking to have a more direct influence upon the work itself. In this way, I would hope to create a more authentic piece that could communicate more deeply about the themes I was exploring.

Another thing that I wish I could have done is expand the story more. I feel that there is more time that I could have spent in a number of different sections of my thesis, exploring characters in more depth and dedicating more time to exploring their backstories. This possibly could have been done with more flashbacks, however a combination of time constraints and story decisions prevented me from achieving the depth I wanted from my characters.

Worldbuilding is one of my favourite aspects of story creation, and I spent much of my time in the researching and writing of *The Chitter* focused on that part of the book, often to the detriment of other aspects. I spent months researching interstellar propulsion and the communication methods of crickets in an attempt to create a scientifically grounded story. However, one area that I really didn't touch on in my research was the alien technology that manipulated time. I tried to research it, but found the concepts extremely complex and so I gave up on that part of my story's realism. I believe that this was a real missed opportunity on my part, and if I continue with this story I definitely would like to explore this aspect of the world more thoroughly.

One final thing that I wish I had managed to achieve is to incorporate a third point of view character. Early on in my development, I only had Captain Arnie as a perspective to follow the story from. By adding Alpha as another point of view, I hoped to provide a contrast to her heavily scarred outlook on life, and I believe that his perspective helped achieve this. However, I also considered writing sections from the perspective of a third character: a member of the Chitter from whom we could gain the perspective of the colonised to some extent. I was unable to achieve this, but were I to take the time and attempt it I would like to take a deeper dive into the culture and inner turmoil of the Chitter, and use that character as a point to explore some of the themes I may have been unable to fully touch on with the current thesis.

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The Chitter

Chapter 1

The ship tore back into space in a flash of cyan light. Where once stray hydrogen atoms drifted aimlessly, now a vessel of dull metal and pockmarked paint moved. Nearly a kilometre in length, the angular behemoth cruised through the emptiness at sublight speed. Its ion engines glowed as they drove towards the distant star system, a glowing red orb set against the inky backdrop of the void. With bullish indifference, the vessel pushed its way through the drifting cloud of asteroids that surrounded it, the lumps of ancient rock and ice scraping lazily along the hull. The rectangular length of its frame was marred by a gash across its starboard flank, the hull sealed by a film of semi-transparent nanomesh. In an idiosyncrasy of its builders, floodlights splayed light across the ship's dorsal hull, the blocky letters of its name bright for any observer to see: **S.C.C Lucian**.

Beneath its metallic skin, the ship's crew laboured. Hundreds of men and women scurried through the warren of passages that ran throughout the vessel. They were a seemingly random assortment of people from across the Sol system. Most were pale and lanky, clothed in simple grey fatigues that matched the gunmetal of the Lucian's interior. The rest were either short and stocky, their white uniforms pressed and starched in excess, or large hulking brutes who towered head and shoulders above the standard human stock around them, looming in their black bodysuits. This motley assortment of humanity, as well as information, flowed to the nerve centre of the great

vessel, its bridge. Dozens of officers were manning the various control panels and instruments, or carrying datapads as they moved around the still figure of Captain Arnie Fletcher. She sat rigidly in her command chair, eyes narrowed at the datapad a subordinate had just handed to her. She ran her free hand through her auburn hair and turned to Commander Bracken, her First Officer. He stood behind a control console, skimming through various reports that were being sent in from across the ship.

“Bracken, status report.” He looked up from his screen and gave a sharp salute. A tremor in his gruff voice betrayed his exhaustion.

“Translation from Ceres Orbital to Gliese 785 completed successfully. We are approximately where the big brains at command estimated we would end up.” He scrolled through the data and sent over a navigation file to the Captains datapad. “We are in the Oort cloud. Navigation has already begun to plot the best course through the debris. They estimated that it should only take one or two months to get us into the inner system.” The Captain nodded, eyes skimming through the documents Bracken continued to pass over. She snorted irritably as she read a report from a maintenance crew.

“They still haven't repaired that battle damage?” She turned her narrowed eyes upon Bracken, who bore the steely gaze with admirable endurance.

“Apparently the Ceres crews didn't have time before our scheduled departure, so they patched it with a temporary seal of nanomesh and sent us on our way without the resources to repair it. The crews are trying their best, but we don't have the stocks of Titanium alloys necessary to seal such a wide breach.” He looked back down at the

screen, tapping his fingers absently on the metal siding as he pored over remaining reports.

Captain Arnie was about to ask another question when a large shadow fell across her. Her hand fell immediately to her sidearm before she even looked up. Staring down at her was the face of Grek Alpha, the Lucian's Head of Security. He was a Martian, his small, beady eyes staring out from the piggish features shared by those vat-grown piles of muscle. His black uniform seemed on the verge of tearing, strained beyond all expectation by the sheer mass of the genetically modified muscle of the man. He showed no response to her instinctive gesture, displaying either exceptional tact or the well-known mental ineptitude of his people. He saluted ungainly and held out a datapad in one meaty hand.

"Here's that security analysis you wanted, boss." Captain Arnie reached out and snatched the pad away, somehow avoiding the Martians' scarred hands in the process and began to read. Grek shifted his weight from one foot to the other in nervous expectation, the floor groaning at the unexpected strain. The Captain looked up from the report and managed to keep her expression neutral as she met the Martian's gaze.

"You mention tensions between the different crew members as a significant threat to shipboard cohesion."

"Aye, boss - I mean, Captain. When the SCC was formed, and the drive to find new worlds began, it was necessary to fill the holes in most ships' crews with people from other factions. While most of the Lucian's crew are Spacers like yourself, born and raised in the asteroid belt of the Solar system, a third of the crew is made up of Terrans and Martians." He gestured to his uniform. "We are even still wearing our old uniforms.

The war may have ended five years ago, but most of the crew can't trust each other. My teams have already had to break up a number of brawls between different groups since we set out from Ceres, and that was only a week ago." The Captain nodded, avoiding eye contact with fastidious determination.

"I doubt there is much we can do right now. This voyage will be over once we can deploy the homing beacon in the central system. Then we can head home. Perhaps then we can have a look at some ways to solve the issues you mentioned." Grek seemed disappointed with the answer but saluted again before withdrawing to the comforts of his security station. The Captain closed her eyes for a moment, then turned to look at Bracken. "How long before we can deploy the communications array?" Bracken tapped his commlink.

"Ensign, is the comms relay ready to go?" Bracken listened to the response, nodding as he did. "Okay, you have the green light. Deploy." He turned to a crewmember manning the communications console. "They're launching the relay. Synch up with it as soon as it comes online."

"Yes sir," she responded, her eyes glued to the console before her. It was a few tense minutes of waiting before she looked up at Bracken. "We are linked with the relay and have comms with SCC Command back home." Bracken looked at the Captain, who nodded. He turned back to the crewmember.

"Establish a video-link with our liaison officer out of Ceres."

"Sending the request now." She punched a command into the system and smiled as the confirmation message came through. "Putting the connection up on the big screen." The primary viewport ran across the length of the wall and showed a live feed

of the Lucians forward heading. For a moment the feed cut away, leaving a blank screen, before it was filled with the aging features of Commodore Hansen. The woman's face was a mess of scar tissue and adhoc prosthetic implants, which made her appear more like some Old Earth movie monster than an officer in charge of a squadron of vessels like the Lucian. The link was clear, and the woman's voice came across in the distinct monotone of a vocal implant.

“Report, Captain.”

“All systems nominal, Commodore. Successful translation to Gliese 785. Beginning journey to the inner system, where we will deploy the jump beacon and let the science vessels come join us.”

“Sounds like you have the mission well in hand, Captain. I'm sorry Ceres wasn't able to get you fully repaired after that last scrap you had. They are still trying to get through repairs on vessels from the war, and battle damage from pirates was low on the priority list, even for the Lucian.” The Captain gripped the armrests of her chair tightly but smiled in response.

“Understandable, Commodore. We will manage just fine with what we have and will be able to return once the mission is complete.”

“I'm glad to hear it. Good luck, Captain.” With a smile, the Commodore cut the link. The Captain lent back in her chair, her face a mask of calm. Most of the crew continued on their assigned task, but Bracken moved over to the Captains side, scratching idly at the hint of stubble sprouting from his chin.

“Well, guess we are on our own now,” he said, measuring his words carefully. “You didn’t want to ask why we got saddled with a bunch of planet huggers rather than crew from the Ceres station?”

“The Martians and Terran’s are here, at least for now. No point complaining about how hard life is when there’s nothing to be done about it.” The Captain was looking at the screen intently. It has switched back to the starry picture of the galaxy before them. She lowered her voice, so that only Bracken could hear her. “We just have to survive this mission. Once we’re back home, we can fix the ship, and fix its crew.” Bracken nodded, glancing warily at the bulky form of Grek Alpha in the corner of the room, before he returned to his own console. The Captain sat for a moment longer, watching at the unchanging view of space, before standing up. She brushed the wrinkles from her uniform, adjusted the small tank badge pinned to her lapel, and began to tour around the room. The handful of Terran officers and crew seemed almost hyper alert, burying themselves in their workstations with suspicious dedication. The Captain eyed them coldly but continued on her rounds.

“Uhhh, Captain?” Grek’s voice seemed to boom across the already noisy bridge space. Most of the crew turned to look at the ungainly behemoth at his station. She turned her best glare upon him, which caused him to flinch unconsciously. Clenching his fist, he forged on. “Captain, I am receiving reports of a situation in the mess hall.” The Captain strode over to the Martian’s desk and stood before the still seated Security chief. While seated, their eyes were almost level.

“What sort of situation?”

Chapter 2

The doors to the mess hall slid open, and the Captain walked into a warzone. A hundred or so off duty workers from across the ship were in the midst of a full-scale brawl, the conflict filling the massive mess hall. Squads of stun gun wielding security officers stood at the ready at each of the entrances, ready to intercede at a moment's notice. The Captain looked over the roiling mass of humanity, her lips thinning at the sheer chaos.

There were two clear sides to the brawl. The smaller group was made up of labourers and engineering crew, mostly Martians by their size. Vat grown, they towered above the standard human stock around them. They were in the minority in the crew but could do the labour of five men with ease. They were laying into the mixture of Terran and Spacers with gusto, sending bodies flying across the large space with every blow. The floor was littered with the remains of the early casualties of the fight, broken, bloody and mainly unconscious.

Grek Alpha came in behind her, followed by a security detail. The dozen or so men were a mixture of ethnicities, with Terrans, Spacers and Martians working alongside one another. 'Fostering intercultural cooperation' had been the reasoning behind the mash up, but it seemed to be working. Though they each still wore their respective uniforms, all had donned black badges denoting their purpose on the ship. The men and women of the detail spread out alongside their officers; their non-lethal

stun guns grasped casually in their hands. Some of the combatants noticed the armed group approaching them and made for the doors at the other end of the hall. Another unit of security personnel caught them, slapping detainment collars around their necks before leading them off. The Captain looked at Grek, who nodded and gestured to his security detail.

“Let’s get them, lads.” The group opened fire on the roiling mass of humanity. The shots impacted with the outer edges of the brawl, and the air was rent with pain filled screams as a dozen men and women fell to the ground. They convulsed as the electricity burned through their system. Others on the outskirts threw themselves to the ground, pleading for mercy. Grek hefted his own stun gun, custom made for his own grip, and he began to fire as well. More men and women collapsed in pain. A Martian at the edge of the fighting was hit by several barbs, and he crashed down in almost comic slowness, a puzzled frown plastered across his flabby features. Now the security teams at both ends of the hall advanced in unison, firing as they moved, while others moved to the downed crew, clamping collars on their necklaces, before dragging them to the side. The fighting spluttered and died, with those still standing raising their hands in surrender. Shouting could be heard from the midst of the group, and so the Captain shoved her way through with a couple of guards.

What she found was a pair of crewmembers almost nose to nose, or they would have been if they were standard humans. One was a scientist of Terran stock assigned by the Committee to the crew in its mission; a young woman with a set of bionic eye implants that flashed red wherever her gaze fell. The other was a Martian, assigned to a labour gang in the starboard gunnery decks. He towered head and shoulders above

her, only being prevented from pulverising his opponent by the desperate grips of his workmates, who hung onto him through panicky desperation. The woman was either crazy or stupid, launching a set of complex and anatomically impossible insults at her towering foe, which must have gone over his head. The tone, however, did not. With a brutish roar, the giant broke away from his comrades and raised a hand up, preparing to swing it down in a skull-crushing blow.

“Cease this!” the Captain's voice thundered out from the side-lines, quickly followed by “Men, put him down.” There was a buzzing noise as the security taser charged and fired, sending electricity coursing through the Martian's body, causing him to collapse in a heap. The security team moved in, binding the Martians arms with nanofibre bonds. The rest of the crew were surrendering and being led off to the brig in small groups. The scientist, colour draining from her face, tried to merge with a crowd that was rapidly thinning before an iron grip tightened around her left shoulder.

“Where did you think you were going, Terran?” Those iron tones, spoken quietly, lent an image of explosive force under great pressure. The scientist stood very still, wishing to run but too scared to move. The Captain's voice whispered into her ear. “I think you should come with me.”

*

The brig of the Lucian was larger than might be expected from a ship of her size. A dozen small rooms, all linking to a central circular hub and all protected with sealable

blast doors; they were designed to hold several individuals each. The control console at the centre of the hub was designed to provide cover for the guards in case of prisoner escape or attempted rescue. The Martian, called Bull, was placed in a holding cell across from the scientist, who was being spoken to by the Captain via a transmitter embedded in the door.

“Rala Karo, isn't it?” A sneer greeted this statement, but the Captain wasn't dissuaded. “Born on Terra, graduated from the Academy of Xenobiology with honours, and assigned to the Lucian as a shipboard expert on non-Terran life forms for this mission. Have I missed anything?” The silence was deafening, which caused a slight upward twitch of the Captain's mouth. “Very strong-willed, aren't you? My security team interviewed some of the witnesses to your little tirade, and there is general consensus that you went off at the Martian for no better reason than the world of his birth.”

“He wasn't born though, was he?” The words dripped with unrelenting scorn. “Those vat-grown bastards aren't human.”

“Well now, Miss Karo, there was nothing in your file about being such a racist.”

“Whereas everyone knows that the Captain of this ship still has a collection of uniform badges ripped from the clothes of her slain enemies during the Solar war.” The Captain's eyes narrowed, and a single vein on her left temple began to pulse with dark, heat-infused regularity. “And I'm not racist. I'm a xenobiologist, not a xenophobe. I just don't think I should have to put up with those messed up genebreed's. They shouldn't exist.”

“Unfortunately, Miss Karo, due to your recent ... behaviour, you will be confined to the brig for the rest of the mission. We should be returning to Sol in about two or

three months, so I would get comfortable if I were you.” And with that she turned off the transmitter, cutting off the squawk of indignation that came from its speaker. She shoved her way through the overworked security staff and their various charges, making a beeline for the main door. Grek Alpha got up from the interview he was having with one of the bloody bits of meat that had once been a junior ensign on the gunner deck, and moved to intercept her.

“Boss!” he called, but even his gene-enhanced vocal cord couldn't cut through the general roar of conversation filling the room, and in moments she was gone.

Chapter 3

As he lost sight of the Captain, Grek Alpha sighed in frustration. The concerns he had would have to be raised later with her, though he doubted she would listen. He turned to look around at the teeming brig and began moving over to one of the cells holding the Martians. Bull was still glowering at the Terran scientist across the room, and only stopped when Alpha opened the door holding him in.

“With me.” he said curtly, before leading the troublesome Martian out of the cell. He led Bull through the still packed room and out of the brig. They crossed over to the security training area, and they walked past a number of security personnel all sparing or practising with shock sticks. Alpha moved Bull into his private office and shut the door. Immediately, Bull began to spew a stream of words at the Security Chief as Alpha took a seat behind his desk.

“Look Boss, it wasn't my fault. That woman was saying things about us Martians and-” Alpha held up his hand to halt the flow of words, and gestured for Bull to take a seat.

“And what Bull? And what, exactly?” Alpha said, his tone cold as ice as he leant toward the prisoner. While Bull was a large Martian, Alpha still stood a head above him, and took full advantage of the difference.

“She was saying things. About clones, about us.” His tone became almost pleading. “Please Boss, I just got angry. I didn't mean to start a war.”

“But you nearly did. Dammit Bull, I know that fitting into this ship has been hard, but we didn’t survive those years of slavery, not to mention the whole damn war, just to start a new one right here.” Bull hung his head, and Alpha relented.

“Look, Rho.” he said, using the Martian's birth designation with affection. “We were made in the same batch. You served under me for years. But now we are free, and we need to take responsibility for our actions.”

“I know, boss.” Bull said. “You tell me what I got to do, and I’ll do it.” Alpha pulled out an object from his pocket and dropped it onto the desk. It was a knife of some kind.

“Tell me how so many weapons ended up in the hands of that rabble you were in the midst of today.” Bull’s battered face looked confused.

“I didn't have anything like that.”

“And neither did most of the Martians who were having such a fun time giving everyone brain damage. However, most of the Terrans and some of the Spacers had some sort of weapon on them. You wouldn't know where they would be getting such items.”

“I, uh, may have heard a rumour.” Alpha leant back in his chair, making it groan under his weight.

“Why don't you tell me this rumour? I like to hear these things myself.”

*

Grek thumbed the activation key on the lift and it began its swift glide down to the bowls of the Lucian. As it neared its destination the lift began to stutter and start, the magnetic

rails that controlled it seeming to lose connection the further into the ship it descended. Grek calmly rolled with the turbulence, watching as the indicator counted out the levels they passed. Finally, it came to a rest at his destination, and the doors slid open. Alpha left the lift, ducking his head to avoid the door frame as he emerged into the dimly lit corridor. Many of the lights were dark, and those that still functioned were dim, stuttering occasionally with the rumble of the engines. There was a metallic tang in the air, a taste of rust and corrosion that burned in the back of Grek's throat as he made his way along the corridor.

The ship's metal bones seemed to groan with pain as he trudged along the corridor, the floor's metal plates buckling beneath his weight. The walls were slick with green slime, which rippled in response to his presence, climbing higher on the wall in an attempt to escape. Ahead of him, a pair of crewmen sat on discarded supply crates playing cards. Behind them sat a door, light slinking out through the edges. The pair's uniforms were stained and wrinkled, and both had rust ridden shocksticks strapped to their belts.

As Grek approached, one of the men placed his hand down on the crate and gave his fellow a crocodile grin as the losing man threw his cards down in disgust. The smiling man moved to scoop up the handful of credits littering the centre of the makeshift table. He stiffened as he caught sight of Grek out of the corner of his eye. He shot up, his hand reaching for the weapon at his waist. Grek rushed forward, shoes pounding on the plating in a thunderous roar. He slammed into the once smiling man, one meaty paw enveloping the hand grasping for the weapon. There was a muffled crunch, and the man's ruddy skin drained of all colours. The losing man, slower on the

uptake, drew his weapon only to be sent flying into the wall by Alphas free hand. There was a crack as his head slammed against the corroded metal, before he slumped to the ground. Grek hoisted the remaining guard up till they were face to face.

“Where’s your boss?” The man spat in his face.

“Ain’t telling you nothing, vat-freak!” Grek tightened his grip, and the man whimpered as shards of bone ground against one another. Leaning in closer, Alpha stared into the man's pain ravaged face.

“This will go better for you, crewman, if you cooperate.”

“Okay, okay, I'll tell you.” The man waved weakly at the closed door. “He is right through there. Please, just let me go.” Alpha obliged, dropping him with a thud to the floor. Turning to the door, he placed his hand to the security pad. It flashed red. Grunting in annoyance, Grek grabbed the unconscious man's hand and placed it on the scanner. It flashed green. The door slid open with a whisper, and the big Martian strode through into the room beyond.

The space was bathed in shadow, with only a single overhead light hanging in the centre of the room. Once, it had been a storage hold, containing crates and crates of materials needed for a vessel to function in the depths of space. Now, all of that had been cleared away. At the centre of the now empty space was a desk, a real wooden one, imported from Terra itself. That desk was quite possibly the most valuable object aboard the Lucian, its surface cracked and worn by the passage of ages.

Grek barely noticed it’s presence. His quarry was here. Sitting behind the desk, in a chair backed with synthetic leather, sat the Broker. He was a middle-aged man of Spacer stock, his pale skin stretched ghoulishly over his skeleton. He wore the grey

fatigues of the Spacer fleet, but unlike his men outside the clothes were well maintained. He was writing on a pad and didn't seem to notice his guest. Alpha took a moment to take in the rest of the room. Most of it was vacant, beyond the occasional empty crate. At the rear of the room shadows seemed to coalesce like some tentacled behemoth of ancient times, coiling and twisting. Grek eyed it with suspicion before returning his gaze to the Broker. The man put the pad down on his desk and looked up at the Chief of Security.

"Mr Grek. I was expecting you'd visit before too long." he smiled, revealing too-white teeth. "I hope the journey down here wasn't too arduous." He gestured to a crate set before the desk. "Please, do take a seat." Grek accepted the offer and felt the box begin to bend under his substantial weight. He shifted a bit on his seat, eyeing the man across from him with suspicion.

"I have a few questions for you, Broker." At the sound of the title, the man's smile widened. He reached under the desk and produced a bottle and a pair of metal cups, which he set between them. Unscrewing the lid of the bottle, he poured the red liquid into the cups.

"Wine, from the first habitation domes of Mars." he offered a cup to Alpha, who accepted but did not drink. The Broker took a sip, smacking his lips with obvious satisfaction. He smiled again, and his teeth were stained red. "A fine beverage, if a little weak for my tastes." He took another sip, then placed the cup back down on the desk. "So, sir, what can a humble crewman like myself help you with." Wordlessly, Grek Alpha reached inside his uniform's pocket and produced a shunt knife. The small device

looked innocuous, but with the depression of a small button a blade would stab out of one end, before retracting. He placed the weapon on the table.

“My men found this, and a number of other illicit weapons, in the hands of crew members involved in today’s riot.” The Broker continued to smile, watching Alpha with amused eyes.

“How horrible, sir. Do you know how they got them?”

“They wouldn’t say, even when offered immunity for all charges we had on them.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Those men and women were scared more by those they obtained the weapons from, than by all the threats I made.” Grek leaned forward, placing his arms on the table. “You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“Me?” The man raised his hands in mocking surrender. “I know nothing of criminals, sir. I am just a lowly storage clerk. I count and record, that is all.” Grek nodded, and finally took a sip from his drink.

“This wine must have cost you a few credits?” The man shrugged.

“I have my ways. If you like it, I know where I can get you more.” Grek stood and slammed his hands on the desk. There was a loud crack, and the Broker winced at the sound.

“I know what you are, Broker. You run everything down here, and can get everything, for a price. You know all the hidey holes of this vessel, and probably know where a fair few bodies have been ejected out of air locks.” He leaned in close, looming over the smaller man, a mountain of living flesh. “I don’t care for your activities, as long as you don’t risk the security of the Lucian.”

“Believe me, sir, I love this ship. It’s my home, and I wouldn’t want to risk her for all the credits in the galaxy.” The words rang hollow to Grek’s ears. In one swift action he picked up the knife and pinned the broker’s hand to the desk, causing the man to yelp in pain. Grek leaned in closer still, so that his whispered words would be heard clearly.

“If I find that you have been supplying more illicit weapons to the crew, I will throw you out the nearest airlock myself.” The man’s free hand scrambled uselessly over the desk, before triggering a panic button hidden amongst the detritus. From the shadows at the rear of the room, a trio of guards emerged, shock sticks held ready. Grek smiled, this time genuinely.

“Good,” Alpha said, flexing his shoulders in anticipation. “I was worried this was going to be too easy.” The group, a Martian and two Terrans, moved to attack him. Alpha rushed the Martian, and they met in a thud of colliding muscle. Grek’s fist mashed the man’s nose into a lump of gristle, taking a heavy blow to his ribs in response. The blow drove the wind from his lungs but Grek kept going, flooring the large man with a savage cross. The two Terrans charged in, swinging with their shock sticks. Alpha managed to block one of the blows, but the other caught him on the side, and his body exploded with pain as the current flowed through him. His muscles spasmed, causing his arms to flail wildly for a moment. With teeth bared in a rictus grin, he threw himself backward, breaking the connection with the shock stick. The pair came after him but he danced away, far lighter on his feet than should have been possible. One of the men took a swing and Alpha deflected it with a deft blow to the man’s hand. He yelped, dropping his weapon to the floor. His partner charged at Grek, her eyes bulging in their

sockets and a growl of anger ripping from her throat. Grabbing the now disarmed man, Grek threw him into the approaching woman, bowling her over. Behind him, the Broker began to chuckle. Alpha turned around and strode back to the desk. He reached out and yanked the knife from the Brokers hand. The man grunted, but the grin was now firmly back in place.

“I think that this is going to be a very interesting relationship, sir.” Grek gave him a glare, then turned to leave. The man's mocking voice chased him from the room. “Do visit again soon!”

Alpha exited the room, passing by the sluggish guards who were only now climbing to their feet. He tapped his comms, calling through to Sergeant Haskur, his second in command.

“What’s happening, boss?” Grek smiled at the words. He was assuredly a bad influence on Haskur and the other security troops.

“Just had a chat with the Broker.” Haskur’s grin was audible over the comms.

“Laying down the law, boss?”

“Something like that.”

“You need backup?”

“No. I need you to monitor the med bay. Watch out for any cases with severe breaks or bruising, especially of the hands.” The Sergeant chuckled.

“Sounds like I missed a fine brawl down there.” His humour was contagious, and Alpha couldn’t help but smile as he made his way to the lift.

“It would have been too easy with you around.”

“You flatter me, boss. Please continue.” They both laughed for a moment, then Haskur became serious. “If someone with matching injuries comes in, should I detain them?”

“No, just set up a team to trace their whereabouts and close associates. I still don’t have an identity on the Broker, but I have got some DNA to run on the database.” He looked down at the still bloody knife. “We will have to see where that leads us.”

Chapter 4

The Captain's quarters were small, especially for a vessel the size of the Lucian. Most Captains insisted on multi-room complexes being installed, with a central stateroom for entertaining guests, and side rooms for more private functions. On the latest exploratory vessels being built in the Martian shipyards, entire decks were being committed for the use of a Captain and their senior staff.

The Lucian was not one of those vessels.

Originally a police cutter, used by Ceres Orbital to patrol the ever-changing trade routes of the Asteroid belt, it was never a vessel designed for greatness. It had been cobbled together from spare parts and wreck salvage, and her first Captain had been lucky to get more than a hole in a wall for a mattress. Since taking command, there had been little time for Captain Arnie to make the space her own. A small bed, hardly used, clung to the side of the room. The rest of the space was taken up with a small chest of personal belongings and a table with a built-in comms screen. The Captain walked straight over to it, pulling back the chair and seating herself. With a few deft command inputs, she established a secure line with Ceres Orbital. The Commodore appeared on the small screen, rubbing her eyes with barely concealed irritability.

“Captain, what’s happened?”

“I need to know who authorised Dr Rala Karo for this mission, Commodore.” The Commodore grunted irritably but began to punch the data request into her machine.

“What's this about, Arnie? Did she say something insensitive about your mother?” Arnie scowled.

“She instigated a brawl between several dozen crewmembers, and somehow walked away without a scratch.” The Commodore grunted, then squinted at the scrolling information before her eyes.

“Okay, here we are.” Even as she read, she directed the link to transmit the data to the Lucian for the Captain to access. “Rala Karo. Graduate of Terra's Institute of Science with honours. Assigned to assist research on the Lunar Colonies at the tail end of the war.” She leaned into her screen. “Parents were killed in early stages of the war, as was her younger brother. Hung around in the periphery of several anti-peace groups, but no clear links could ever be established. Assigned to the Lucian by...” Her brow furrowed. “That's strange, it seems that there isn't any record of who had her assigned.” She punched some more commands into the system, but no new information presented itself. She turned back to face the Captain. “Arnie, be careful. Something is seriously wrong here. I will have my people look into this, but you need to-” Someone was knocking at the door. Captain Arnie shut off the link, and moved to the entrance, hand hovering over her weapon. She opened the door, revealing the lined face of Bracken. She saw the look in his eyes.

“Bracken?” Wordlessly, he handed her a datapad, which she snatched up and read with darting eyes. She glanced at him.

“Is this correct?”

“To the best of my knowledge. You are needed on the bridge.”

*

The officers and crew all came to attention as the Captain strode onto the bridge. She moved towards a cluster of senior officers who parted like the red sea before her, allowing her to sit at the commands chair and glare out at the world with a furrowed brow.

“Alright people, talk to me.”

The lead scientist on the ship stepped forward. The Captain had never bothered to remember the weedy man's name, believing that privilege should be earned through actions. So far, he had not earned much respect from her. He adjusted his spectacles nervously.

“Uh, Captain, at 18:00 standard we initiated primary scans of the system designated as Gliese 785. Though from this range our capability is very limited but we have directed some, let's say unexpected, readings. We-“

“Get in with it man!” The scientist trembled under the impatient gaze of his superior, shivers running down the man's sticklike frame before he was shoved aside by Grek Alpha, sending him tumbling to the floor. Grek turned towards the Captain, completely ignoring the weak protests from the scientists as he gave an uncharacteristically smart salute.

“Boss, we've detected artificial signals. Radio, infrared and other signs of intelligence.”

“Who got here first!?” The Captain slammed a fist into her armrest. “We are supposed to be the first vessel out this far.” Grek shrugged.

“There have been rumours of pirates and ex-military vessels that hacked into the wormhole points and threw themselves out into the depths of space to avoid the patrols after reunification.” The doubt that laced Grek’s voice was thick and heavy as the confusion that was layering itself over the minds of the bridge crew and senior officers. “I mean, there isn't really anyone else, is there?”

“What are the signals telling us?” Arnie glanced at the stiff form of the scientist, who stiffly adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“What snippets of transmissions we have managed to intercept have been incomprehensible. They are not of any known language or ciphering format.”

“So, what, they have their own method of encryption. Just work at it until-”

“It won’t work, Captain!” The man shouted. Silence fell over the bridge, and the scientist's eyes widened behind his glasses. “I-I'm sorry, Captain. It's just that these transmissions hold no known points upon which to begin decrypting. It's not of human origin.” The silence in the bridge took on a whole new weight. The Captain stared at the reddening face of her scientist. He squirmed like a worm on a hook. A siren began to wail, and Bracken turned to the officer in charge of the sensor banks.

“What's going on, crewman?”

“There's something going on in near space, sir. I am getting some really weird readings.” he leant closer to his console, confusion marring his features. “What the ... these make no sense sir. I'm getting some sort of energy flux off both the port and starboard bows.” The Captain sat down at her command chair and nodded towards the main viewing screen.

“Give me a visual. Both locations.” The crewman tapped a series of commands onto his console, and live video feeds popped to life before them all. At first, all that showed was the blank emptiness of the surrounding space, with the distant stars providing an aesthetic backdrop for their viewing pleasure. Then, with a distinct lack of fanfare, a pair of vessels appeared in flanking positions to the Lucian. With ethereal wisps trailing from their hulls, the unidentified vessels boosted on their engines, turning around, matching the speed of the explorers' ship.

“Battle Stations!” The Captain cried. Another siren began a harsh call repeating the command in a monotone voice.

“Battle Stations. Battle Stations.” Arnie turned to the visual of the ships, trying to discern something about their owners. Whereas the Lucian was an elongated mass of blocks and angles, these vessels were much more organic in their design. They were a series of bulbous segments of varying sizes, interconnected by large airlocks of some kind. The vessels were sheathed in an almost transparent material that draped about them like cloaks. There were no defining features to the vessels besides the large engine blocks, which were part of the largest of the segments, and seemed to form the hub of the ships. She glanced at the chief scientist, who was staring slack-jawed at the image.

“Aliens, I think you were saying?” The scientist gazed at the oddly shaped vessels before them. Still analysing the bizarre readings from before, the crewmember on the console took a second to notice a new sensor reading blinking up at him.

“Uh, Captain? I think they are trying to hail us. I’m picking what looks like radio signals from their vessels.” The Captain, eyes fixed firmly on the screen, gave a nod which Bracken acted on with the air of long experience.

“Put it through on the main speakers, crewman. Quickly now!” The man jumped into action and activated the bridge's speakers. Out of them a rustling noise emerged, rising and falling with varying levels of intensity. The crew stopped in their tracks, listening to the hauntingly beautiful noise as it wove its way through the air, the music of angels in the heaven of yesteryear. The Captain was impassive through all this, and she once again looked at her scientist, causing him to quail before her stone glare. He began to fiddle with his wrist-mounted computer, trying to analyse the sound for some sort of meaning. The song was becoming higher pitched, and Bracken felt it like an itch behind his eyes that grew in intensity with each passing moment. Some of the crew were beginning to clutch their heads in agony. He tried to reach the console and turn off the noise, but a sharp pain shot through his head that sent him crashing to the ground where he writhed about in concert to the rising and falling of the otherworldly song. With an abruptness that was as painful as the song itself, it cut out, the speakers finally falling silent and only the quiet moaning of the collapsed crew to be heard. The Captain stood at the console, only the slight narrowing of her eyes and a pulsing vein in her temple showing the effect the song had been having on her.

“Get up.” Her tone was level, and there was little response to her words. The vein began to become more pronounced, purple against her pale skin. “I said, get up!” This caused a number of knee jerk reactions, with Bracken almost leaping to his feet from the foetal position he had been laying in. He shook himself and moved over to the

scientist who seemed to be struggling to stand. Grabbing him under his arm, Bracken hoisted the man to his feet and shook him.

“Pull yourself together man!” The scientist was limp in his arms, eyes glazed over. Bracken slapped him with a crack, splitting his lip and after a brief look of confusion, causing his eyes to roll back into white as he collapsed into a heap. He stared at his blood-splattered hand with a raised brow.

“We needed him functioning, Bracken.” He looked over at his Captain, who was still standing ramrod straight at the console. “Not bleeding all over my bridge floor.”

“Sorry, Captain. Won’t happen again.” But she was already moving, striding over to Grek, who was on the security comm, taking updates on the ship's status. He muted the comm as the Captain approached, and gave a salute.

“Captain, ordnance officers report a 94% readiness state at-”

“Bring me the prisoner in brig cell 6a.” she said, careful to maintain a comfortable distance between herself and the Martian.

“That scientist who nearly started a brawl? She is consigned for the entire voyage, boss. There are protocols-”

“Just have her brought here now!” With almost indecent haste, the Martian saluted, reactivated his commlink, and began to bark out orders.

Chapter 5

Dr Rala Karo was escorted onto the bridge by a pair of security personnel, her delicate fingers massaging the reddened skin of her wrists where the cuffs had rubbed them raw. She stared around the wide room with barely a glimmer of interest before settling on the figure of the Captain, sitting with elbows on her armrests and hands steepled before her. Her eyes were closed but snapped into focus when Karo approached. The xenobiologist gave a small smirk of greeting.

“What would you like me to do for you, Captain?”

“We have some transmissions for you to study. You are our resident expert.” The Captain nodded towards the comms station. “Get to work.”

A sneer laced her lips at the Captain's words. “I'm no expert in comms. I'm a xenobiologist. Don't insult me with such paltry work.” She held out her hands to her guards, wrists locked together. “I would like to be returned to my accommodations, good people.” Instead of cuffs, a mobile comm was placed in her hand. The Captain's tone was sharp in her ears.

“Listen.” Taking the small device in her delicate fingers she shrugged and placed it snugly in her ear. The crewman at the console tapped a button, and the recorded transmission began to play for her. However, while others had been thrown into disarray by the mixture of the regimented and the chaotic noises, Rala stood there with eyes closed, hand stilled pressing the comm into her ear with increasingly intense pressure

as if she was trying to wring even more of the otherworldly music from the small machine. When the recording was finished, she turned to the Captain with excitement coursing through her body like a live wire.

“What was that?” Her words were almost tripping over themselves to get out of her mouth. “It closely resembles the stridulation of some Earth insects, but at an intensity and complexity that I have never heard before. Where did you get this recording?”

“We received that transmission half an hour ago.” Confusion was eclipsed by shock as the word sunk in.

“You’re telling me-”

“We are currently being escorted by two vessels of alien origin, and we cannot communicate with them.” The Captain let out a sigh, then gestured to the comms console once more. “Get to work.” Rala seemed rooted to the spot by the information. A shove from one of the escorting guards sent her stumbling towards the console. Jerked from her stupor, she began to work. After a moment she turned to one of the guards.

“I’m going to need a headset, and access to my notes and research in my quarters.” The guard gave Grek a nonplussed look. The Martian waved a hand absently in confirmation and the guard scurried off to collect the supplies she needed. The com-net was being flooded with excess traffic as officers and crew from across the ship became aware of the unexpected visitors. The twin vessels had matched their course and speed, but through the subtle repositioning of their direction had forced the Lucian to adjust her course towards one of the planets deep in the system, the apparent source of the thus far directed signals. At this point, all they could do was hope that

Rala Karo was as bright as she claimed to be. Captain Arnie tuned out the urgent communiques on her commnet and gave Bracken a look. With a nod, he called up a senior officer and gave him command, and then the Captain and Bracken headed off.

*

“Well, things aren't running as expected, eh Captain?” Bracken commented, lifting the steel cup of clear liquid to his lips, then knocking it back with a quick motion. He slammed the empty cup back onto the metal table with a distinct *clang*. He reached for the tall bottle, its fading label of ‘Supernova Vodka’ peeling at the edges as he topped up. He didn't bother to offer the Captain some more, she was still nursing her first cup with that distant look in her eye. She had been staring at the bare patch of metallic wall across the room for twenty minutes and hadn't heard any of Bracken's attempts to start a conversation. These requests to share a bottle of cheap vodka in the Captain's quarters always started like this, but Bracken didn't mind. Even as he knocked back another shot, he could see the cold clarity returning to his old friend's eyes as she finally got out of her head. With a subtle change in her posture, she knocked back her own shot and looked at her first officer with amused eyes.

“It certainly is a little strange, Bracken.” She reached for the vodka and topped up both of the cups with a deft dip of the bottle. Leaning back, tilting her chair onto its back legs, she put her slender legs up on the tabletop and sighed as the warmth of the drink spread across her willow-like frame. Bracken was staring at the once again emptied shot glass in his hand and gave out a sigh.

“Why do we even drink this rubbish? I have a bottle of Ceres Wine sequestered in my quarters. Much fancier, and it doesn’t burn years off your life on the way down.”

“You just can’t handle your liquor, Bracken.”

“That’s a fact.” he responded, knocking back another shot. “But I still think wine is a better option.” The Captain smiled, but the expression was fleeting. She leant her head back and stared at the metal-plated roof, swirling the still full cup around absentmindedly in her hand. Bracken reached out to pour himself another drink but stopped at his Captain’s disquieting behaviour. “What’s on your mind, Captain?”

“Aliens, Bracken.” She rubbed her temples and took a sip from her cup. “We always wondered. Are they out there? We spent countless years searching the stars in our telescopes and space vessels, sending out signals of greeting and friendship. Now, on some routine exploration mission that was supposed to be simple in the extreme, we just run into some.” Pulling her legs down, she reached for the bottle and took a swig straight from it. “It all feels surreal.” She stood up and strode to the reinforced glass window set into the wall and watched as the stars continued their slow dance through the void. She could just see the dark silhouette of an alien ship moving at a reserved speed alongside them, about twenty kilometres away. Only the occasional external port provided pinpricks of orange light that helped define its shape. “We don’t know what they want. For all we know, we are being taken back to their world to attend a dinner. Or to be dinner.” She gave a small bark of humourless laughter. Bracken got unsteadily to his feet and staggered over to stand next to her, leaning heavily against the wall.

“We will see what happens as it comes, Arnie. All we can do is face it and do what we think is right.” The Captain smiled at the use of her name. He only ever did that

when he was drunk. "And anyway, if this all goes out the airlock, they'll find that messing with the crew of the Lucian is a big mistake!" He nearly toppled over at the exclamation, and Arnie coughed to cover a laugh.

"Right as always, Bracken." She grabbed his arm to steady him. "Come, let's get you back to your quarters. I'll need you well rested for the days ahead." Hooking his arm over her shoulders, they staggered out of her quarters, and down the corridor to the quarters he had been assigned.

Bracken stayed in one of the smaller chambers assigned to the bridge officers, and so the journey was only a couple of minutes. As they staggered along, he was gabbing away about old missions during the war, of covert strikes against isolated mining asteroids and pitched battles with dozens of vessels firing missiles and boarding pods in a vicious crossfire stretching the kilometres of the void between the opposing sides. He always spoke with such fondness for the good old days. With her imagination stimulated by the effects of alcohol, she could almost sense the acrid smoke clouding the air of her ship, the metallic tang of blood in the air, the screams of the wounded and dying. She shook her head and reached out to hit the activation slab beside the door to Bracken's quarters, sliding it open at the scan of her biometrics. Dragging his almost comatose form in, she lay him out on the small cot. Straightening up, she was about to leave when her comm line, still nestled in her ear, chimed. Taping to activate it, she listened to Grek Alpha's requests for her to come down to security with tired reluctance. With a sigh, she acknowledged the request. Turning back into Bracken's room, she began to rifle through his draws. "Now, where did you keep those hangover pills, you old dog".

*

The security office sat across the hall from the brig and contained the only access to the onboard armoury. Even though it was currently the middle of the night cycle, the room was a hive of activity as security personnel working at various consoles or practising hand to hand combat in an available space at the side of the room. As the Captain entered, one of the men pointed to the back door that led to the senior officer's station. She entered, feeling the door slide shut behind her, and walked up to the large form of her chief of security as he sat at his desk. The hairs on her neck began to rise at the thought of being trapped in here with the creature before her. Alpha saluted in greeting, before turning back to the console before him. He was looking over some report that had arrived for his review. Using one massive thumb to sign off on it, he turned to his Captain, who was now seated across from the massive, custom-built desk that had been commissioned to hold Grek's massive bulk. She looked like a child who had been called to the principal's office back at the Ceres education centre.

“Boss, thanks for coming. I had some things I wanted to talk to you about.” He handed over a tablet, which the Captain scanned over with analytical eyes. “Firstly, I have ordered that the wormhole beacon we were supposed to deploy once reaching the inner system be held back indefinitely, as I don't think we want to have our ships all start jumping into this mess before we have defined the situation.” he paused, expecting some disagreement, but she nodded quietly for him to continue. “Also, with the raising of our security level to Potentially Hostile, I have doubled the usual guard teams on the

engine deck, bridge and armoury, as well as increasing the frequency of random patrols on all decks.” The Captain nodded as she read the last few paragraphs of the report, then looked up.

“Okay, this all seems perfectly executed, Grek.” He scratched his neck, embarrassed by the compliment.

“Thanks, boss. I also would like permission to bring all gunnery decks to combat readiness. Double the labourers on duty, with permission to load up the mass drivers in preparation for combat.”

“I will sign off on that but make it clear that we only fire at my orders.” The Captain stood, expertly hiding the still raging headache that was starting to kick in. “Was this all?” She was already halfway to the door when the Martian shook his head.

“I also want to discuss the scientist, Karo.” The Captain sighed, her anxiety at his proximity causing her hand to begin to shake. She shoved it behind her back, out of view of Alpha.

“Look, I know that she is a troublemaker, Grek, but we need her now. And besides, I don't think she is going to throw away a chance at initiating first contact.”

“I think that is part of the problem, Boss. She's too obsessed with them. I feel that her judgement may get clouded.”

“You're just being paranoid, Grek-”

“I don't think I am, Boss. She is so focused on making friends, she may give away tactical information to gain their trust. I don't believe that her priorities are aligned with the best interests of the ship.”

“Look Grek, I know she may be a loose cannon, but I’ll keep an eye on her and try to reign in some of her more impulsive decisions.” Grek opened his mouth to say more, but the Captain held up a hand to silence him. “I won’t hear anything more on the topic, Alpha. I need to get going.” She turned, and made to stride from the room, but as she did the Lucian jolted beneath them. The Captain staggered, but immediately activated the comms.

“Bridge, what just happened?” The nervous voice of the night shift helmsman came in, sounding far from reassuring.

“Uhh, I think we have arrived, Captain.”

“Where? We are still in the Oort cloud. It’ll take weeks to get even to the most outlying gas giant-”

“No Captain. We have made it all the way.”

Chapter 6

17 Years prior to Present

The Theta 1b mining outpost hung in the darkness of space; a maggot ridden fruit amongst the asteroid belt of Sol. It wandered through the cloud of eons-old rubble, thrusters spaced across its craggy surface pushing it out of danger at regular intervals. Latching on to the underside like a tick was the administration building, from which the mine's tendrils reached into the rock, clawing their way to the precious minerals buried in its depths. Thousands of miners flowed back and forth like ebbing tides, bearing the treasures they had cloven from the ancient stone. Overseers led their work teams with lashes of electrically charged whips, the cries of agony just as common as shouted orders in the noise-filled air.

Grek Alpha led his team back up the winding tunnels towards home base. All wore the fatigues of the Terran mining guild's indentured workers, their Martian bulks shifting uncomfortably under the tight crimson fabric. They all were caked in rock dust and dried sweat, and Grek had ordered that all of them head to the shower block before their one hour of allocated recreation time. There had been a half-hearted groan of complaint, but they followed his orders. They were loyal to him, as he was to them.

"Get them moving, Alpha. We have a schedule to keep." Their assigned overseer, Obarak Tull, waved his hand at the slow march of the group. As overseers

went, Obarak wasn't too bad. He had little time for the Martians, his focus mainly on keeping the unit on schedule and out of trouble. Alpha appreciated that the man kept from using his electro lash except from in the most necessary circumstances. Most overseers seemed to revel in their opportunities to inflict pain on those beneath them, but Tull did his job and allowed Grek to do his.

Turning back to his vat-kin, Grek urged them to pick up the pace. Shaking the weariness from their bones, his brothers began to move faster down the tunnel they had been excavating. Lighting was spotty this far from the main arterial routes, and it was a common occurrence for the power to give out completely in some sections of the mine. They passed through one such area, whose power lines had been cut by another team's mining efforts. Grek reached up and turned on his standard issue headlamp, and the others followed suit, filling the dark with beams of sickly yellow light. They moved carefully through the space, avoiding discarded equipment and fallen rubble as they went. One of the Martians stepped on some loose rocks, which slid beneath his foot, causing him to overbalance. With a bellow of panic the large man fell forward, bowling over the worker in front of him. There were shouts and cries from those nearby, and Alpha began to force his way through the jostling crowd towards the disturbance, Obarak right behind him. Reaching the fallen man, Alpha began to check him over.

"What have you gone and done to yourself, Rho?"

"Sorry boss." The man grunted as he was helped into a standing position, his weight shifted to favour his right leg. "Didn't see the rocks." Alpha smiled, though there was concern in his eyes.

“Looks like you hurt yourself there. Kap! Psi!” Two of the nearby workers moved up. “Help him get to the med bay, then return to our section.” They nodded and hooked Rho’s arms over their shoulders, taking the weight of his leg. Alpha moved back to the front of the team, and they continued onward. Obarak caught up and matched pace beside him, stepping quickly to keep up with the large Martian.

“Another worker injured on the job, Alpha. Not the best look.”

“Mining is a dangerous task. Accidents happen all the time.” They emerged into a powered section of tunnel, and all the men switched off their head lamps. The overseer glanced up at Grek’s face, seeking signs of resentment that weren’t there.

“As long as the guild receives the expected quantities of ore from your team, there shouldn’t be an issue.”

“That’s good to hear.” The words were spoken without sarcasm, but Obarak was sure it was there somewhere. He decided that a more direct approach may be necessary.

“Do you resent your indentured service, Martian?” Alpha almost missed a step, his piggish eyes glancing down at the man beside him with confusion.

“Resent it, boss?”

“Yes, Grek. Do you feel mistreated or used?”

“We were made for a purpose, Mr. Tull. That purpose is to work for your guild. To fulfill your purpose is a beautiful thing, Mr. Tull.” The words may have been rote learnt, but Alpha spoke them with the honest passion of a true believer. “Many people do not know what their purpose in life truly is, but we have been blessed with that knowledge from the start of our lives. So no, Mr. Tull. I do not feel mistreated or used. I do what I

was made to do.” Obarak nodded thoughtfully and the pair fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts.

They finally left the tunnel they had been working and entered one of the great arterial routes that led to the base. Teams of Martian miners flowed up and down the tunnels, which were wide enough to allow teams to pass each other with plenty of clearance. Scattered throughout the flow of humanity were a number of haulage trucks and excavators, their engines clogging the atmospheric filters with smog. Greks' crew cut across the path, joining the homeward-bound rush. They jostled with the crew ahead of them, eager to return home. Their leader was Bajju Alpha, who was a full head taller than Grek was, but didn't have the muscle density to match. Together they broke up the shoving match and kept them all moving, while the squads' respective overseers kept the teams together as a cohesive whole. Grek didn't know Bajju well, he mostly kept to himself and his team, rarely dealing with the other alphas around base. They chatted about their respective workloads and discussed the reports of a cave-in on the tertiary access route that had cut off a number of work teams the previous day. Bajju's lot had been assigned to clearing the way for them to get out.

“It was a mess, Grek. A whole team got crushed in the collapse, and we were hauling as many carts of bodies as we were loads of rubble.” The tall Martian spat on the ground in disgust. “And their overseer wasn't amongst the bodies. Apparently, he knew the area wasn't stable, so he hung back and let the lads work it anyway.”

“I'm sure there is another explanation, Bajju.” Suddenly Bajju's Overseer appeared, an obese man with skin reddened by excessive drink. Anger radiated from

the man in waves, and his electric whip crackled as he swung it at the tall Alpha. The whip wrapped around the Martian's leg, causing him to collapse in pain.

“How dare you question your superiors, vat-scum!” The man was screaming, spittle flying from his mouth in rabid hatred. He struck again and again, each blow bringing a short scream from the large man. Soon blood began to pour from his mouth, and Grek realised that Bajju had bitten through his tongue. The man drew his arm back, ready to rain more blows upon the helpless Martian, but when he tried to swing, the whip wouldn't budge. Turning around, he saw that one of Bajju's team had it clasped in one hand, which was protected by the thick gloves used by all the workers. The aura of rage around the man seemed to intensify beyond anything that should have been possible, as foam gathered in the corners of his mouth.

“Release the whip, gene-bred monster!” The Martian looked down at the man, and slowly shook his head.

“Not right.” he mumbled, nodding to the still prone form of Bajju curled up on the ground. The overseer tugged at the whip, spluttering furiously at the dull expression. With a disgusted shriek, he released the whip and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a compact automatic pistol. He pointed it at the Martian holding the whip.

“Under section 12, subsection 3c of the Martian labour contract, I hereby terminate your employment with the Terran Mining Guild.” With those words, he pulled the trigger, emptying a full clip into the Martian.

The final shots echoed down the tunnel, stopping the passing workers in their tracks. Silence descended upon the corridor, pregnant with danger. The Martian fell to the ground, blood mixing with the dust and grime to form a black sludge that pooled around the watchers' boots. Smoke rose lazily from the gun's barrel as the man calmed down, realising he was surrounded by a circle of Martian workers, all staring impassively at the still body of their fellow upon the floor. Grek Alpha was about to say something, when a roar ripped from the surrounding Martians, and they fell upon the Overseer in a crashing wave of aggression. One brief scream, sharply cut off, was the final sound the man had made. Grek Alpha gathered his team and began to force their way away through the gathered crowd, shoving bodies out of their path with desperate ferocity. Overseer Obarak, running to catch up with the punishing pace Grek was setting, called out over the roaring of the crowd behind them.

“Alpha, what happened?!” Grek Alpha slowed to allow the overseer to reach him.

The man was puffing from the run, but his hand still firmly gripped his whip.

“A mistake was made.”

“By whom?” Alpha shrugged before continuing through the press of workers.

Obarak placed a hand on his arm, stopping him in his tracks. “Alpha, tell me what happened.”

*

When they reached the mining base, rumours were already flowing through the crowds of workers in a tainted tide. The story twisted and evolved like a living thing with each

set of lips that uttered it. Grek Alpha and his team moved towards the guild offices at the centre of the complex, the overseer at his side. The structure was built from prefabricated metal sections which had been welded together, creating a patchwork that lacked symmetry. They arrived at an entry point, which was guarded by several Guild enforcers, their black body armour and yellow fatigues ensuring they stood out in the harsh artificial lighting. They moved to block the group's path, but the overseer waved them out of the way with a cursory "We are expected." The group allowed them through the doors, fingering their weapons as the bulky Martians passed them by.

Beyond the door was a waiting room, in which Alpha told his brothers to be seated. Once they were settled, Alpha and Obarak moved to the end of the room, where a door slid open to reveal an elevator. They moved in, and Alpha was forced to constrict his chest to fit an area designed for normal humans. With a roar the engine began the upward journey, the machinery moving up in leaps and starts as it battled the weight of the occupants. The generic waiting music shared by all elevators stuttered in time with the elevator, until Alpha staggered into the speaker, crushing it. They finally came to a stop and emerged into the offices of the guild representative.

The opulence of the room was astonishing. The floors were polished marble, dug up by the last strip mines on Terra over three decades earlier. The walls were lined with hanging gardens, bearing blossoming flowers from dozens of different species, kept alive by the constant application of nutrient sprays by a robotic servant. A window set against the far wall showed the icy surface of the asteroid, stretching out to the inky black horizon. Staring out the window was a woman, her slim form encased in a black tailored suit. Curls of raven hair fell like water down the outcropping of her shoulder

blades, and her hands were clasped across her lower back. Overseer Obarak cleared his throat, and the women turned to meet them. She was beautiful, her flawless skin the colour of freshly ground coffee. High cheek bones framed a symmetrical face, and her smile revealed a perfect set of white teeth. She appeared in her early twenties, but her eyes bore the weight of years. She moved to meet them; arm outstretched.

“Overseer Obarak, a pleasure.” She shook his hand, cupping his hand in both of her own in apparent sincerity. She turned to Alpha Grek and nodded. “Grek Alpha, welcome. Your team has recorded a consistent meeting of assigned quotas since you were obtained by the guild.” Alpha bowed his head, feeling his skin growing red at the praise. He mumbled a thanks, and her smile broadened.

“You may call me Matisa. I’m glad you came, as the situation seems to be growing worse by the moment.” She produced a remote from her suit pocket, and with a click opened a panel in the wall. A screen was revealed, displaying grainy footage from within the mines. It took a moment for Alpha to realise that it was the tunnel he had just traversed. Hundreds of Martians were rioting, tearing their way through the squads of enforcers deployed to contain them. The perspective flicked between multiple cameras, showing the desperate plight of the guild guards as they were trampled by the bulky workers. Several overseers, their whips crackling and pistols barking, were torn apart by the hoard at one intersection, the crews they had been a part of joining the movement up the causeway to the headquarters. She turned to the pair, smiling slightly at their shocked faces.

“The unfortunate incident that you witnessed earlier, Grek Alpha, was the catalyst for a general uprising of the Martian workforce here in the station. My enforcers are

attempting to slow them, but there has never been a need for an extensive military presence here.” The screen switched again, showing a unit of enforcers firing indiscriminately into the workers as they approached, downing dozens of them in the mad rush. Then men began to retreat, firing in turns as they went, but soon they were sprinting to the next defensive line, only to be caught by the rage filled Martians.

Matisa wasn't watching the screen. She was carefully watching Grek, her eyes appraising as he flinched back from the horror of the screen. “It will not be long before the workers reach these very doors. They will tear all those who are working here apart, and then probably begin to tear apart anyone who seems remotely associated with the Guilds. Overseers, Enforcers, maintenance crew or sympathetic Martians. None will survive. She turned the screen off, allowing it to slide back into its recess with a hiss of hydraulics. Obarak stood there, shaken by the violence he had just seen.

“We must send word to Terra-”

“Terra has enough to worry about right now, Overseer.” There was something in those words that spoke to a deeper worry, something that she was refusing to acknowledge for fear of it consuming her. Her perfect features seemed unable to show any negative emotions, and so she smiled as she gestured to Obarak. “These Martians won't listen to us. They are angry, and that anger has become rage. You, though.” She pointed at Alpha. He was rooted to the spot, a great oak that sees that axes held before it. “You, they will listen too. The Alpha of the best team in Theta 1b, the Martian even the Overseers respect and listen too. You can stop this riot before it becomes worse.” Alpha reeled back, the words hitting him like a punch to the chest.

“Boss, that’s suicide. Those boys are ready to kill anything in their way. They probably wouldn’t even know it was me they were breaking apart beneath their boots.”

The woman smiled; her porcelain teeth set against her full red lips.

“We knew that you would be hesitant, Alpha. That is why I’m authorised to inform you that if this rebellion is not stopped immediately, then the guild will shut down the atmospheric force fields and vent the entire mine into space.” Alphas protests died on his lips, the sheer horror of what she was proposing cutting him to the bone. Overseer Obarak’s face drained of colour, and with a shaky hand he patted Alpha on the shoulder.

“There isn’t a choice, Alpha. The guild has asked it of you, and you have to obey.” The big Martian nodded numbly; eyes fixed on the empty wall as his mind churned. The elevator chimed open at the end of the room, and Obarak made to guide the shocked Martian into the lift, but Alpha shrugged his hand away. He moved towards the representative, who stepped back involuntarily.

“You have no right to kill those workers. They suffer every shift to meet your quotas, and all you give them is the constant threat of pain or death.” he stopped as the tang of ozone reached his nose. Obarak had activated his whip, bloodless face set with determination.

“Alpha, step away from the representative.” Alpha turned to his erstwhile friend, a note of pleading entering his voice.

“Please Obarak, I just need to-“

“No, Alpha. Orders are orders. You need to go out there and stop this.” Grek felt a numbness as Obarak thumbed the safety, the click the only sound in the room. He

sighed and turned towards the elevator. Obarak, searching for any reason not to shoot his companion of the last five years, relaxed his guard for a moment.

Alpha launched himself to the side, tackling the startled Overseer. His hands grasped desperately for the gun. Obarak finger tensed instinctively on the trigger, and there were a number of bangs as the gun fired point blank into Alpha's torso. The pain seared through him, but his muscular frame absorbed the damage with little complaint. He smacked the gun from his opponent's hand, and with a quick blow to the head rendered him unconscious. He clambered to his feet, uniform heavy with blood. And turned to the representative. She stood there, a small pistol clutched in her clammy hand, while she thumbed a commlink for help. As Alpha moved toward her, she flinched back in fear.

"Stay back, Martian!" The fear in her voice caused it to rise a few octaves, and she waved the gun in his direction. He raised his hands placatingly.

"I'm not going to hurt you, boss. I don't want any of this." He smiled, his grotesque features showing teeth from behind his thick lips. Martisa's face contorted into a sneer, and she shot him in the leg. Alpha howled in pain as the bullet cut through his shin, and he collapsed to the floor. Martisa looked down at him in disgust.

"You Martians have been nothing but trouble since you were created." She used the remote to open up another panel on the wall, which had hidden a safe. She placed her hand to the biometric scanner, and it glowed green in confirmation of her identity. "You were supposed to solve all of our labour issues. 'Tough enough to handle the most dangerous tasks.' That's what the Martian gene smiths told us. Those money hungry bastards." The safe door slid open, and she began to rummage around inside. From his

place on the floor, eyes tearing up from the pain, Alpha couldn't see what was inside. "They didn't tell us how dangerous you would be. They probably planned this whole thing."

"What ... what thing?" She turned back to look back at him, and the expression seemed to drain the beauty from his features.

"You really don't know?" She laughed humourlessly, then returned to her searching. "The whole solar system has gone mad, that's what." She withdrew a small data cube from the safe and turned back to face him. "Your fellow Martians have revolted. A week ago, contact with Mars was lost, and now half the Terran fleet is fighting to put down rebellions amongst their own crews. Terra has far bigger problems than some second-rate mining facility in Spacer territory." Her comm link beeped, and she answered, confirming something with brief words. She began to move toward the elevator. Alpha clambered into a sitting position, feeling weak as his rich blood pooled all around him.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving, and as soon as I'm off this hunk of rock, the system will vent the whole mine's atmosphere into space." She smiled viciously, and pointed her gun at him. "If you don't want to suffer, I'm fine with putting you out of your misery now." Alpha groaned as he clambered to his feet, carefully avoiding putting weight onto his wounded leg.

"Thanks for the offer, but I have other plans." It was only then that she noticed the Overseer's gun clutched in one of his meaty paws, a large finger tight against the trigger. Both guns flashed, and two bodies fell to the ground.

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Alpha woke as pain burst across his face. He opened his eyes, and met the gaze of Rho, the Martian's features eerily similar to his own. As his mind began to whirl into action, he noticed other Martians in the room. His Martians. He also noticed that he was lying on the floor.

Rho made to slap him again, but Alpha shoved him off and clambered to his feet. He nearly collapsed from the pain in his leg, but Rho grabbed and steadied him. On the floor lay the representative, her features cold and distant in death. A dull throb in his side told Alpha where her bullet had hit him, and he knew that his blood loss had been severe.

"Rho, what's been happening?" The worker helped him to the wall, and he leant on it gratefully.

"Boss, we don't know. Lots of Martians running about, hurting the guild bosses. Couple of the lads said that there have been several sections vented into space. No one seems to know what's happening." Grek noticed that his team were all watching him, expectantly. He steeled himself, mustering what strength he had to stand upright, to appear as the leader they believed he was.

"Whatever has happened, we can face it. We are Martians, strongest of the strong." He began to walk towards the elevator, barely limping through extreme effort. "Let's get to work."

Chapter 7

15 Years prior to Present

The Lucian was a strange vessel in Arnie's opinion. It had been patrolling the Spacer trade routes for longer than she had been alive, and her Captain wasn't much better. Captain Hakai was many things, but sprightly was not one of them. Under better circumstances he would have been reassigned to the Ceres Navy Academy as an instructor long ago, but these were not the best of times. With Martians rebelling across the solar system and Terra attacking anything not flying their flag, the Spacers were throwing everything that could hold an atmosphere out to stem the tide of destruction. Arnie approached the Captains quarters with a sense of dread and had to steel herself before the door. She pressed a button to request permission to enter, which flashed green. The door slid open and she strode through, attempting to look professional.

The Captain was seated at a small table with the First Officer, a woman named Safa. They were sharing a drink, which made Arnie wring her hands nervously behind her back as she walked over. She performed a parade ground salute, which the Captain acknowledged with a wave of his hand while the First officer failed to smother a laugh behind her hand. Arnie made a point of ignoring the behaviour, eyes firmly fixed on the wall behind them.

"You requested my presence, Captain?"

“Yes, yes. I did do that.” He looked at their stiff posture with annoyance. “Please relax, woman. There’s no need for that blasted academy nonsense here.” Arnie slowly relaxed her muscles, feeling like she was breaking some cardinal rule. Safa laughed again, this time not even bothering to hide the mocking sound.

“A bit uptight, isn’t she?” She said to the Captain, who nodded in agreement.

“When they said they had a Security Chief for me, I didn’t realise it would be some new meat with their uniform still freshly starched.” Now they both laughed, and Arnie flushed angrily. She gritted her teeth and spoke to the Captain, ignoring the still sniggering First officer.

“What can I do for you, Captain?” The old man took a gulp from his cup.

“We have been given an assignment, Chief. Reported raids on a trade hub. High Command wants us to investigate.” Arnie nodded, focusing her mind on the task.

“You want me to prepare for a boarding action, sir?”

“Most likely. Intel doesn’t know if it’s Martians, Terrans or some opportunistic band of pirates. You will need to prepare for any eventuality.” Arnie saluted again, taking a bit of pleasure from the annoyance the Captain displayed at the action.

“I’ll get right on it. When do you plan to jump into the combat zone?”

“Within the hour. There is a final shipment of supplies coming in from the orbital docks. Once that is onboard, we will be jumping.” That was the end of the conversation apparently. The Captain turned back to his drink, and Safa made a shooing motion at her. Keeping her face blank, Arnie left the room, and walked off down the corridor. She passed by a number of crew, who for the most part seemed to ignore her presence. Only the occasional security team member would salute, which she would return

gratefully. The Lucian's unadorned interior had been a shock after the years spent in the lavish interior of the Ceres Academy, but it was the crew she was struggling to get used to. They seemed so unprofessional. Half the regulations she had been taught were essential to the smooth running of a vessel didn't seem to apply to the crew, and who could blame them? Her Captain was the worst of the lot, with no regard for the rules or the importance of setting a good example for the crew. Reports of him commanding actions on the bridge while drunk were surely exaggerated, but not by as much as she might have thought before meeting him. When her commanding officer on Ceres had informed her of the assignment, she had partly ignored the warnings about him. Patrol Captains were always given a bad reputation by the more central fleet elements. Only crazies would want to operate for such long periods of time out in the depths of space, with no company beyond the marauders they hunted. She had fully expected the gossip to be untrue, but he seemed to be as lax and unprofessional as the rumours had said he was. The drinking seemed to be constant, and most of the senior staff didn't have a problem with it. They had tried to convince her to join them, but her training was still fresh in her mind.

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Arnie entered a lift and headed down to her security section. As she walked through the training area outside her office, she watched appreciatively as her teams practised the various elements of their duties, from combat drills to disassembling the various firearms they kept in assigned compartments. She signalled for her Sargent to join her

in the office. He closed the door behind him and scratched the back of his neck idly as Arnie took her seat behind the desk.

“What’s up sir?” he asked. His boyish smile shone with a joy that was hard to resist, and she matched it with one of her own.

“Looks like we may get some action soon, Bracken. Have teams deployed to all critical locations and have boarding parties ready to go.” Excitement radiated from the Sergeant, who had only recently been promoted to the rank. Neither of them had any field experience, and so they were both eager to earn their first blood in the war. He rushed out of the room, almost forgetting to salute as he went. With a fond sigh, she brought up an image of the trade hub they were headed to and began to draw plans for an effective boarding action if it turned out that the place was under enemy control.

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The shuttles accelerated toward the space station, under the watchful guns of the Lucian. The station itself hung in the void, an amalgamation of parts scavenged from a hundred wrecks, gathered to this station by the merchants and scouts who called it home. No part of it matched the others, attachments sticking out at odd angles, counter to any sense of design or aesthetic. Just looking at it, Arnie could see several sections that hadn’t been present on her copy of the station's blueprints. She could tell it was going to be a hard place to search, but that was what they would have to do. When the Lucian had arrived, she had hailed the station, hoping for a response. When none came, the Captain had directed Arnie to take her teams over and see if it was

something more sinister than a comms failure. Nearly two hundred of her best men and women were aboard the shuttles and headed to various entry points across the Frankenstein-esque amalgamation. Bracken was leading a shuttle toward the primary docking bay, hoping to be met by whoever was aboard the station. The rest of them were going to try various auxiliary docking points and private accesses that lay scattered across the hull. Her comms buzzed, and she accepted the communique. Safas smug voice came in clearly from where she was posted, leading another of the shuttles on the boarding mission.

“Your plan seems acceptable for now, Chief. We will see how long that lasts.” She was still angry about being under Arnie’s command for the purposes of this mission. She thought that it was only right for the First Officer to command such a mission, but Captain Hakai had shown a rare moment of backbone and stuck by the procedures on this one. In combat theatres the Security Chief always took command, as they had the training and skills necessary to be the most effective. However, Arnie knew that if things went wrong Safa would swoop in and take command, putting the new blood back in her place.

“Just do your job and I’ll do mine.” Arnie told her. It was obvious that they were already enemies, so there was little benefit in pretending their relationship was anything other than icy. She ended the call and looked up as their pilot began to speak over the ship’s intercom.

“Arriving at auxiliary docking bay Julios. Requesting permission to dock.” There was a pause as he communicated with the automated docking system. “Accepted. The bay doors are opening.” Outside the windows, the steel doors slid open, framing the

dark interior like a set of crude iron jaws. Using the shuttle's manoeuvring thrusters, the pilot guided them in, landing on a small platform shrouded in darkness. The doors closed behind them and the exterior began to refill with a rush of atmosphere. The pilot turned on all the exterior lights, illuminating the immediate vicinity.

"We're in sir. No signs of life."

"Thank you, crewman." She tapped her comms, tuning into her team's squad networks one by one to check on progress. Most were now aboard the station and beginning to make their way into its depths. She turned to her squad.

"Looks like the lights are off across most of the station. Attach your flashlights." With synchronised grace, the team pulled flashlights from their packs and slotted them into recesses on their stun guns. She moved over to the hatch; her own stun gun clasped tightly in both hands. The pilot began to count down and her team took positions, ready to go. As the count hit zero, the hatch burst open and Arnie led her team out at a run, all of them seeking cover and searching for hostiles. Two troops stayed near the entrance, tasked with protecting the team's extraction point, while the rest of them moved up towards the main exit. Light beams cut across the dark, illuminating glimpses of their environment before the team moved on.

They reached the door and took what cover they could against the bulkheads and discarded cargo crates while a couple of men slung their weapons over their shoulders and began to pry the door open, grunting and cursing as they strained against the poorly maintained locking system. Their efforts revealed a long corridor, the flashlights unable to pierce more than a dozen metres into the dark. Arnie signalled for her team to advance. They set off at a slow pace, searching every crevice or shadowy

corner for signs of life. Nobody thought that this was an accident anymore; all other teams were reporting a similar lack of life signs, or the bodies that would have been indicative of some catastrophic event. There was still power on board as shown by the still functioning atmospheric controls and docking bays, but specific systems like the lights or comms were all disabled. There were supposed to be upwards of a thousand permanent residents and crew aboard the station, not to mention the typical visiting trade convoys and smuggling vessels that docked here. So far, none of that was in evidence. It was as if the whole population had been swept away by the hand of some all-powerful deity, leaving not one trace.

Arnie shook her head to clear the thoughts away. She had a job to do, and she intended to do it to the best of her ability. Her team entered one of the primary thoroughfares and began the long trek towards the central command sector. It was hoped that a hard reset would return the station's systems to fully functioning status. Other teams were heading to various key locations, looking for signs of life in the habitation sectors or securing the local merchant funded police forces armoury. Contact was spotty, and the further they got into the structure the harder it was to keep in communication with the other teams. The connection with the Lucian was gone completely, and a few of the younger members of the team were getting antsy at the lack of contact. Corporeal Leto, the tech expert in the squad, moved up alongside Arnie as they entered a small stairwell leading up the levels.

“What is it?” Arnie asked, keeping her torch trained on the stairs above them, searching for a target.

“These lights should be working.” Arnie glanced at him.

“What do you mean?”

“There is power. Something is affecting the lighting specifically.”

“So, what do you think is happening?” Their conversation paused momentarily as they reached a landing which led onto another concourse, which they checked for activity before continuing upwards.

“I think someone has deliberately turned the lights off. The only place to do that would be the command centre, and it is likely that whoever disabled the lights is still there.”

“Well, at least if they are, we might get some answers about what was happening.” Arnie said, and Leto nodded in agreement. There was a loud bang, and suddenly Arnie couldn't see. Something was on her eyes, and she wiped them with the back of her sleeve. Looking down at it, she saw the sheen of glistening blood soaking into the uniform and glanced over at the now faceless body of Leto which was collapsing on the floor. With shocking abruptness the stairwell was filled with the sounds of gunfire and bright lines of tracer rounds. Her team dove to the ground, sticking to the walls in the hope of avoiding the bullets flying all around them. Another member of the team collapsed, blood gushing from several punctures in her chest. Arnie fell down beside Leto's cooling corpse and shouted down the comms.

“Flashlights off now!” The team flicked switches, and the stairwell plunged into darkness. Arnie desperately clutched at Leto's weapon and managed to switch off his flashlight as more bullets pinged off the floor around them. Several muzzle flashes from further up the stairs revealed the locations of their attackers, and her team fired as one,

sending lethal bolts of electricity after their attackers. A couple of screams confirmed their successful hits, and Arnie whispered into her comms.

“Hold fire.” The team ceased their barrage, and silence fell, enveloping them in a straitjacket of fearful anticipation. Arnie could feel the pooling blood of Leto's corpse soaking into her uniform. The only sound she could hear was her shallow breathing as she fought the urge to turn the flashlight back on and seek out the foe. Time dripped past, a molasses that slowly consumed each member of the team in a nightmare of suspense. Finally, Arnie switched on Leto's flashlight and leant away, expecting a hail of bullets. When nothing came, she gave a sigh and tapped her comms.

“Julian, Annete, secure the stairwell up until the next landing. Petak, please collect any vital equipment or personal effects from Falma. I will check Leto.” The assigned troops climbed to their feet, turning on their flashlights, and moved past their commander. With a grunt Arnie clambered into a kneeling position and began to check Leto's uniform. She switched off the flashlight and swung his stun gun's strap over her head, letting it fall across her chest. She searched his pockets but found nothing beyond a small holdout knife and some spare ammo charges, which she pocketed. She looked down at the body in the harsh glow of the flashlights, before signalling the squad to move out.

Further up the stairwell, the bodies of two Martians lay, riddled with shots from the team's stun guns. They were wielding large custom-made rifles capable of fitting their oversized hands, and were dressed in what had once been some sort of work jumpsuit, with the identity markings ripped off. Arnie tried to call in the incident to the other teams, but couldn't establish a link. With squared shoulders the group continued

upward, hunting for more targets. The stairs continued for several more flights before coming to an end at the central hub's emergency access point. The team fanned out, covering the doorway with anticipation. Petak moved forward to access the override code, and Arnie withdrew a flashbang grenade from her pack.

“Careful with your fire.” she whispered to the team as they prepared for the assault. “Make sure of your targets before firing. We don’t want to damage the core systems in there. I for one don’t want to have to trudge all the way back to the shuttle without an atmosphere.” Grim chuckles broke out amongst the team at the words, and Arnie turned to look at Petak. He gave her a thumbs up, and she whispered a countdown into her comms.

“Three, Two, One, Go.” He opened the door, and Arnie threw the grenade in, covering her face as she did so. Her team all did likewise, and there was a loud crump followed by cries of alarm. Arnie lowered her arm and took a firm grip on her shock gun. With a yell she led her team into the command centre, weapon spitting death as she crossed the threshold.

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The room was a large circular affair, ringing around the station's core computer which filled the dimly lit room with a constant buzzing. The whole space was filled with terminals, all set in a series of rings radiating away from the computer from where the station's crew would normally run the day-to-day operations of the ship. Instead, several Martian brutes in the same uniform as the two on the stairs stood around, rubbing their

eyes as the light of the flashbang burned away at their sight. Arnie's first shot hit the closest square in the chest, sending him collapsing to the floor. The rest of her team piled in after her, firing volleys of deadly shots into the crowd of Martians, turning the alarmed cries of mere moments ago into screams of pain. Some of the Martians who had been further from the blast had managed to avoid the worst of the grandest effects and began to return fire with bellows of rage. Her team took cover behind the nearest terminals and began to pick off the still functioning Martians with the ease of long practice. Arnie ducked behind a particularly bulky terminal and heard the pings of bullets punching into the metal surface as the Martians sought their targets. In a matter of moments nearly a dozen of the foe were dead or dying and the handful of survivors were retreating toward the main doors. Arnie stood up, unleashing a series of shots designed more to strike fear than do actual harm, watching with satisfaction as the Martians began to stream out of the door and into the dark of the station.

"After them!" she cried and vaulted over the terminal before her, leading her team in a charge across the body filled space. She could feel the victory, practically taste it. She would show the Captain, the First Officer, all the senior staff. She would-

A gurgling cry to her right caught Arnie's attention, and she turned to see a particularly massive Martian lifting the struggling form of Anette up by her neck. The beast grinned, and with a casual twist snapped the woman's neck like she was nothing but paper. Dropping the corpse to the ground, he looked right at Arnie, and began to rush toward her.

"Contact!" she screamed and raised her weapon to open fire. The Martian rushed with impossible speed and sent her flying into the wall with a shoulder charge.

Something broke inside her and she gave a soundless scream as the air was driven from her chest. She slumped to the door, her mind in momentary darkness. As she finally regained conscience, she winced at the screaming in her ear. Looking up from where she lay she saw Julian, his arm twisted in some unnatural pantomime of its true function. He was staggering away from the Martian, who followed after him with a stun gun clutched causally in his hand. He fired a single shot, killing the injured man instantly, and laughed. It was the laugh that drove Arnie to rise to her feet, even as he snapped ribs ground together beneath her skin and blood pooled in bruises across her body. She had dropped her weapon when she had been taken out by the Martian, so she clutched for Leto's gun where it hung from around her shoulders. The Martian noticed her fumbling, and brought his weapon to bear, sending off a string of shots that thudded home all around her. She managed to pull up the weapon, ignoring the impacts of electrically charged shots against the wall beside her, checked its ammo, and emptied it at the large target before her. Several of the poorly aimed shots found their mark and the big man fell to the floor, cutting himself open on the corner of a terminal as he fell. Clutching her chest, Arnie moved over to the Martian, empty gun still pointed with shaking hands at the body. She nudged it with the gun's barrel, but no response was forthcoming. She tapped her comms.

“Anybody there?”

Petak answered, followed by a couple of others. They had been further along in their pursuit of the fleeing Martians and had been too late to stop the carnage. Petak took his commander's weight, holding her steady as the others secured the area.

Looking down at the body, Arnie coughed, feeling like her lungs were filled with broken glass.

“An Alpha. Must have been injured in the initial fight and come up again once we passed it by.” Petak commented, trying to balance two bodies at once. Arnie shook her head.

“He was uninjured when he killed Annete. This one was lying in wait for us to move past it and ambushed us.”

“Martians aren’t that smart, commander.”

“Apparently, we have been misinformed.”

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It took them several minutes to locate the specific controls the Martians had tampered with to affect the lights. Across the station, illumination strips and overhead lighting flickered into life. They also found a jammer hooked up to the station's power grid and destroyed it with a few strikes of their gun butts. As soon as they did this, their comms were flooded by reports from across the station, and even pleas from the Lucian for aid. Arnie was stunned by the sheer outpouring of panic and desperation and tried to sort through the mess. She managed to locate Bracken's commlink and patched herself through.

“Sergeant, can you read me?”

“Ma’am, is that you?”

“It’s me, Bracken. What’s happening?” Gunfire could be heard through the link, and Bracken took a moment to respond.

“They’re all over us. Half my squad is down, and the rest are wounded in some way. Can you get us some reinforcements?”

“I will see what I can do.” She turned to the rest of her squad. “Secure the entrances, and ensure we aren’t disturbed.” They moved out, and she began to scan the frequencies, hunting for available teams. Most seemed embattled in firefights, and some were silent on the comms. She tried to contact the First Officer but got a grunt from her squad instead.

“This is Trooper Waile.”

“Trooper, this is Commander Arnie. Where is the First Officer Safa?”

“Dead. We got hit not long after losing contact, but she was the only casualty. She didn’t even fire off a shot.” Her death solidified her command over the boarding teams, but Arnie took no pleasure in that fact. She quickly directed the trooper’s squad to link up with Bracken. For the following half an hour, she coordinated a reunification of the remaining teams, slowly containing and then eliminating the Martians onboard the station. She had also contacted the Lucian but had only been able to reach the engineering deck where the security personnel she had left behind were concentrated. From their reports, the Martians had used the comms blackout to commandeer several shuttles from the landing parties and used them to board the Lucian. Arnie felt pain at the thoughts of those in her squad left behind to guard the shuttle. They would have been immediately killed by the Martians, and the pilot would have been killed once they reached the Lucian. No one was able to reach the Captain, and there weren’t enough

personnel to push beyond the defences they had built. Arnie growled in frustration as she contacted Bracken, who was now leading several squads to her location.

“We’re pulling out.”

“But we have them on the run!” After the intensity of the fighting, propriety was the last thing on his mind.

“I know, but the Lucians been boarded. All teams are to fall back to the primary docking bay and secure it until I arrive.”

“On it.” Bracken cut the link, and Arnie turned to see her remaining team before her.

“So, it was all for nothing.” Petak said, his voice resigned. “Leto, Annete, all those we lost. Now we’re handing it all back to them.” Arnie punched him in the face, sending him tumbling to the floor.

“Their sacrifice was not in vain!” she shouted, the others stepped back from the force of her words. She took a moment to compose herself before continuing. “This was never about the station. The Martians wanted the Lucian, or whatever other ship was sent to investigate. We walked right into their trap.” She reached down her hand and hoisted Petak to his feet. “They hurt us, but we hurt them worse. Now we go to fight the real battle. Let them have this station.” She picked up her shock gun from where it had lain on a nearby terminal. She slotted fresh ammo into it, and set the charge to max. “We have a war to win.”

The remaining men and women gathered around Arnie, their steps echoing across the cavernous docking bay. Only about sixty of the original task force members were still combat effective, with another twenty in serious need of the ship's medical bay. Arnie looked around at her teams and saw the determination they all shared. They knew what was at stake if they failed to retake the Lucian. Ammo was shared equally between the survivors, though there was little enough to go around. She noticed a couple sharing a ration bar and nodded appreciatively.

“Everyone load up on calories and nutrients. You may not notice it with all the adrenaline still flooding your systems, but you have already burned through a hell of a lot of energy. I don’t want anyone dying now because they don’t like the taste of standard issue rations.” She reached into her pack and pulled out a bar, which she tossed to a nearby trooper. “We need to be at our best. We are getting our ship back, and I want to know I can count on each and every one of you.” Around the circle, people pulled out ration bars and began to gnaw on the tasteless blocks. Arnie gestured behind them, to a number of small shuttles and maintenance vessels that lay in a line which filled much of the space. “These are our rides. We are moving in teams of ten, with the rest allocated to caring for the wounded and securing the Lucians shuttle bay. Most of you will be assigned to new combat teams, and be under the command of people you may be unfamiliar with. Trust that all of those here are trained and competent personnel and have got your backs. Follow the orders of those above you without question because there won’t be time for hesitancy. We go in hard and fast. Sergeant Bracken will now inform you of your squad assignments.” Bracken began to list off squads, primarily composed of two or more weakened squads merged together under the

ranking Corporal. Bracken and Arnie both would be commanding a squad, with Arnie sticking with her original team along with a couple of others, including trooper Walie, who saluted her solemnly when the assignment was read out. Once everyone had met their new teams and formed up in a rough semblance of order, Arnie laid out her plan.

“We need to secure the ship, but we have no intel.” She used her datapad to project an ice blue holographic depiction of the ship and highlighted several locations. “The only places where the internal sensors can be accessed are the bridge and the security office. Bracken will be leading his team to the security office, while I will head to the bridge.” Lines appeared, highlighting the assigned routes in arterial red. “As we do not know the numbers of Martians on board, the hope is that one of us will manage to get through. With that information we will be able to work with the teams in engineering to retake the ship.” Bracken stepped forward and pointed at a pair of squads.

“Your job will be to support our push and provide us with enough time to recover the necessary information.” He turned to the rest of the teams. “The rest of you will begin a deck-by-deck clearance of Martian forces. Secure each floor and link up with any surviving personnel. The Martians can’t have expected to fly the Lucian themselves, so most of the crew are probably alive. Keep them that way and arm them if you have to. It’s their ship too.” Arnie nodded her thanks to Bracken and began directing each team to a corresponding shuttle. Once everyone was aboard their rides, Arnie led her squad aboard a small cutter, built to move asteroids out of the station's path with its great snub-nosed brow. It was a tight fit for her team, but they managed to squeeze aboard, while she took the pilot's seat.

“Training don’t fail me now.” she muttered under her breath, though from Petak’s concerned looks beside her not quietly enough. She sent the signal to launch. With a coughing roar, the old engines burst into life, and the vessel shuddered as they lifted it from the ground. With a burst of flame, they shot from the now opening air lock, followed by a trail of mismatched commercial and private ships. They boosted toward the Lucian, who seemed almost stately as she drifted in the distance.

Arnie’s team did a final check of their weapons, and she tucked the knife she had taken from Leto’s corpse into her boot as the autopilot guided them in. Taking her seat again, she transmitted her override codes to the docking bays doors. They slid open, releasing a cloud of debris as the atmosphere rushed out. Several bodies could be seen floating away as they entered the space. As the final ship limped onto a free docking point, Arnie sealed the doors, allowing atmosphere to fill the area once more. The teams disembarked, fanning out to secure the space. The detail assigned to securing the beachhead moved troopers to cover the entry points. As they prepared to move out, shots came from one of the entrances and Arnie’s comms buzzed.

“Martians are coming in, sir.” More shots sounded out, and Arnie shouted to be heard above the noise.

“Okay boys and girls, let’s do this.” There was no roar of approval, no cheering or war cries. Battered and bloody, they completed final checks of their weapons and pocketed what extra ammo they could. Grim determination was plastered across each man and woman’s face. Arnie led her team out of one entrance still free of the Martians’ attention.

The venting of the shuttle bay had sucked away what evidence of battle had been present, but the emergency bulkheads had sealed the breach from the rest of the ship. The corridors they passed through were filled with bodies of both Martians and Spacers, broken and scattered like discarded dolls in a child's playroom. Most of the normal humans present were crew, though the occasional body of a Martian or two would show where security personnel had fought and died. Not much was left of them beyond smears of blood and gristle the Martians had stamped into the floor. The squad didn't encounter anyone on their journey to the nearest elevator, though they heard the distant sound of combat as Martians engaged the other teams in the distance. The elevator seemed to be functioning normally, and Arnie's disquiet grew. In the case of a severe breach like this, elevators should have been locked down to prevent hostile access to key decks. Either the Martians had managed to re-engage them after taking the ship, or the assault had been too rapid to prevent access. Both spoke to a sophisticated level of planning and leadership, which Ceres Command would have deemed impossible from Martian forces. Even the Terrans' best shock troops would have struggled to take a ship like the Lucian in this manner. Four troops piled onto the elevator and keyed in the floor below the bridge. Petak, placed in charge of this forward mission, saluted Arnie as the door closed between them. For a minute they waited in tense silence, listening on the open commlink to the heavy breathing of the team members riding the elevator upwards. The elevator beeped as it reached its destination, and the doors could be heard sliding open.

"We're clear sir." There was a collective sigh from the squad, and Arnie let it go, feeling her own concerns lighten slightly at this small win. In small groups, the team took

the elevator up to join Petak, who secured the immediate area around the elevator shaft. Arnie came up with the last group, and she nodded her appreciation to Petak, who smiled at the taciturn thanks from his commanding officer.

“We make for an emergency access point below the senior staff’s briefing room.” She set off cautiously, followed by her team. This area seemed as yet untouched by the Martians and they moved through the silent corridors with vigilant senses straining for some sign of life.

Suddenly, a figure burst from a side door ahead of them and began to flee away. Arnie raised her weapon, finger already squeezing the trigger when she realised the figure wasn’t a Martian.

“Hey, stop!” she called, lowering her weapon. The figure stumbled to a halt, raising shaking hands above their head. Petak moved forward, weapon held at the ready, and ordered the figure to turn around. They did so, revealing a terrified woman in a maintenance uniform. Petak brought her over, pulling her roughly by the arm as he did. She cowered before Arnie, and the chief wrinkled her nose as she noticed the woman had soiled herself.

“I am chief of Security Arnie. State your name and rank.” The women seemed to be trying to curl up into a foetal position in the ground before them, only staying upright thanks to Petak’s firm grip. The woman’s ashen face looked up at her and Arnie saw the terror in her eyes.

“They’re dead.” she said, in a small voice. “All dead and gone.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“They came, the monsters, and they laughed.” Her voice was getting louder, and a note of hysteria began to creep in. “They laughed as they killed us, they laughed as we fled, and those that couldn't escape were rounded up.” Her mad eyes met Arnies, and she felt that look tug at the threads of her sanity. She tore herself away and turned to one of the troopers nearby.

“Give her a sedative. She is in no condition to help us.” The man pulled a needle from his pack and advanced on her. She saw his approach, and began to struggle, begging that they don't take her away with the others. Her voice shrieked as Petak held her firm, and only died away once the trooper plunged the needle into her arm, flooding her system with chemicals. They placed her gently in one of the side rooms, hopefully out of the way of any Martians that might pass through and continued on. Morale was frayed enough by the losses on the station, and to see a crewmember practically insane from fear was not helping. Arnie drove them hard, increasing their pace and trying to prevent them from dwelling further on the horrors that the crew must be being put through.

They reached the access point after a couple of minutes, a small hatch that opened up onto a maintenance tunnel pointed upward. The ladder inside seemed in good condition. The team moved in, mounting it one by one. Arnie took a moment to contact their following support team who themselves were slowly securing the deck in a standard grid search.

“We are heading in. If we don't contact you in the next fifteen minutes, assume that the mission is a failure and link up with Brackens' unit.”

“Yes sir. Good luck.”

They emerged out by one in the corner of the briefing room, carefully unlocking the hatch at the top of the ladder and sliding it to the side. The first trooper poked his head up, one hand carefully aiming his weapon over the lip while the other kept him balanced on the ladder rungs. A whispered "Clear" came through the comms, before he climbed out, moving to take cover behind the central table that dominated the space. One by one, the team took up their positions in the room, covering the door leading to the bridge. Voices could be heard through the door, though the words were too muffled to hear clearly. Arnie moved up, and counted down over the comms, preparing to open the door.

"Three, Two, One, Go!" With those words, she triggered the door. It slid open. She threw herself in as soon as it did so, landing on her belly with her weapon raised. She was firing as she did, hitting a Martian who had been lounging around at one of the rooms' various terminals, sending him flying. Her team followed her in, moving to cover and firing as they did. Martians fell, and little return fire was sent their way. One of the giants tried to grab Arnie but she emptied her weapon into the creature. As the final bulky warrior dropped his weapon from a nerveless hand and turned to run, he was pin cushioned by a volley of fire which sent him sprawling to the ground, his back riddled with now inert shock ammo. The action was over in less than half a minute, and it was only now that Arnie was able to notice the state of the bridge. Blood was everywhere, and bullet holes had ripped across the walls and terminals that filled the room, leaving psychedelic patterns in the metal plating. A pile of bodies, both human and Martian, had been piled against one wall, and Arnie recognised a few as the usual complement of bridge crew. However, it was the Captain's chair that caught her attention. Captain

Hakoi sat there, face looking serenely calm, as he took small sips from a hip flask. He was untouched by either the Martians or Arnies team and seemed utterly unsurprised by what had happened around him.

“Captain?” she said, confusion marring her face.

“Chief Arnie, of course it would be you. You didn't have the manners to die onboard the station did you.” She froze, and the realisation dawned upon her.

“You. You did this.” Another sip from his hip flask, and a slight nod. “But why?”

“Because I could see which way the wind was blowing, Arnie.” He took another sip and sighed. “Cere's command are idiots if they think we can ride out this war and let the Martians and Terrans have at it. All of us have to pick a side. I'm just ahead of the curve.” He went to take another sip, but grimaced when he found the flask empty.

“You're a traitor.” Arnie said, pointing her weapon accusingly at the Captain. Several members of her team instinctively began to aim at her, before realising what they were doing.

“Perhaps, but you will never find any proof. Arrest me!” he cried, standing and placing his hands before him. There was an arrogant smile on his face. “There are plenty of men and women in the Spacer colonies who can see where the wind is blowing. No one will ever believe that an old Captain like myself, with such a long service record, could have been a traitor.”

“No. They wouldn't.” Arnie said, becoming resigned to the action she had to take. “Captain, I hereby declare you a traitor, and unfit to command this vessel.” She shot him through the heart and watched his body fall. One of the team watching gasped, but

none said anything, discipline keeping them functioning even as their world unravelled around them. Petak saluted Arnie.

“Captain, what are your orders?” She stood, rooted to the spot by the enormity of the words that the man had just said. She, as the highest-ranking member of the crew still alive, was now the Captain of the Lucian. With supreme effort she pulled herself together and marched over to the Captain's chair, nudging aside the body of Hakai out of her way with one foot, and sat down. She tapped on the control panel on the side, and entered her override commands, placing herself in command of Lucian's systems. With a quick series of inputs, she brought up the internal sensor and camera network on the big screen. The team all watched the infolding carnage across the ship. Dozens of firefights and close quarters engagements were breaking out across the ship, as the security teams expanded the sections they controlled. The Martian presence was not as severe as expected, with much of their forces being located around the still defended engineering sections. Captain Arnie, her mind whirling, called to Bracken over the comms.

“Bracken, I am now in command of the Lucian.”

“But what about the Captain?” Arnie stiffened at the question.

“He's dead. The Martians killed him.” Those who overheard her gave her confused glances, but she waved them off.

“Okay then. Well, what do you want to do?”

“Continue the purge. We need the whole ship under our control as soon as possible.”

“Aye Captain.” She ended the call and settled back into her chair. She stared at the lifeless body of her Captain, his eyes frozen in that eternal moment of shock.

“You damn fool,” she muttered softly, feeling the weight of command settle upon her shoulders.

Chapter 8

Present Day

Somehow, they had just arrived. The sensors reported that their speed didn't seem to have changed, but that their escorts had enveloped them in some sort of energy sphere, and now they were here.

The alien home world.

The scientists aboard the *Lucian* assigned it the official title of Gliese A. The crew down on the engine decks coined the name *The Fryer*, and it quickly spread throughout the ship. When Dr Karo heard the name, she shouted about offending the aliens and starting an intergalactic war. When Alpha Grek was told by some of his security team, his laughter cracked a window and nearly caused a decompression of the twenty-third deck. When the Captain was told by her first officer, there was reportedly a slight shift in her lips, possibly in an upwards direction. Whether through sheer misfortune or the sheer obstinacy of humanity in the face of momentous occasions, the name stuck.

The human vessel was guided by its companions into a high orbit in the crowded space around the *Fryer*. According to imaging and scans, the planet had very few artificial structures on the surface. While it was suggested that this was just a colony or frontier outpost, the amount of interstellar traffic, combined with a few preliminary translations from the Doctor that the name of the planet was “*The Nest*”, implied some

sort of breeding ground. It was highly likely that this is the home world of The Chitter, as the crew had also named them. Thanks to Rala's efforts, a basic translation of the initial song and later transmissions has led to a roughly built auto-translator based on older designs used to communicate between different languages back on Terra, with significantly augmented capabilities. The first conversations with the aliens had been a bit fraught, as the translators couldn't cope well with the introduction of unknown words or phrases, but they seemed to hold up well enough for basic communication to occur. Now, accompanied by the Doctor, Bracken and a security team led by Alpha, the Captain was taking a shuttle over to one of the alien vessels to meet their hosts.

The mission team all filed aboard one of the old Castaban shuttles, bending their heads to avoid the absurdly low entryways. Alpha had to force his way through the doorway, his bulging muscles barely fitting and causing him to rip his uniform. The Captain pointedly ignored the debacle, instead moving to the pilot's seat and punching the prelaunch sequence into the controls. Bracken closed and sealed the hatchway before taking his seat along with the rest of the team in the low-ceilinged storage compartment. Alpha had to take up two seats by himself. Dr Karo made sure to sit as far away from the Martian as possible, before focusing on some final adjustments to the language base of her translator codex. Outside the shuttle, the hanger decompressed and the bay doors opened onto a perfect view of The Fryer. The Captain hit the launch sequence and began their journey with a sudden jolt as the engines kicked in.

The Castaban class shuttles all used old rocket propulsion engines, which while extremely inefficient were also cheap to produce so were often used by the cash-starved outposts and colonies of the asteroid belt. The Captain had been told to replace

them before this mission due to the perceivable deficiencies in their performance compared to the newer vessels coming out of the Terran Space docks, but she was extremely attached to them, and so had taken the order as more of a suggestion. Besides, these shuttles had been modified with extra armour plating and acceleration, which could come in handy if this mission of the first contact went sideways. Another jolt shook the ship as it accelerated away from the Lucian and headed for the alien vessel named Cave of Enduring Knowledge, according to the Doctor's translations. Outside the viewports, a sight no human had ever witnessed could be seen.

The Nest lay before them, a world slightly smaller than Earth, but otherwise seemingly habitable. It lay in the midst of the fabled Goldilocks zone, that ideal space where conditions for life were just right. However, according to the preliminary scans, its orbit would lead it to swing much closer to this system's sun than Earth, scorching much of the planet's surface. Already, the relatively arid surface of the planet was showing signs of heating up, with a number of forest fires raging across the equatorial regions of the planet. Hundreds of the Chitters vessels hung in orbit, ferrying shuttles to and from the surface or each other. Several other planets and moons throughout the system bore similar concentrations of vessels, but none matched the scale of traffic that could be found here. Not even Terra had ever borne witness to such a gathering of vessels, which spoke of a supremely advanced civilisation. Every now and again, one of the vessels would deploy the strange energy sphere that their escorts had used, and disappear off sensors, or appear as if from the void itself. Presumably, they had developed some sort of faster than light tech that was different to the portals used by humanity, but none of the Lucians experts had a clue of what it could be.

Ahead of the shuttle was the largest vessel in orbit. Its total mass far exceeded that of the Lucian by several orders of magnitude. As they approached the massive jumble of bulbous shapes, a smaller vessel came alongside them and signalled for them to follow her in. The Captain decelerated to match speeds and dropped in behind the small ship, which led them into the tangle of interconnected sections that the alien spacecraft consisted of. They wove between the random assortment of spheres, before entering a hangar bay, which sealed behind them as they went through. They landed alongside the alien ship, and the team began to get ready for disembarkment. Bracken moved to the cockpit and had a look at the sensor readings from outside.

“Looks like a relatively breathable atmosphere. Lower oxygen than we might prefer, and there seems to be a higher level of carbon dioxide than is probably healthy for the team, but it should be fine for several hours.” He turned back to the rest of the team and called out to Alpha. “Have your men carry additional canisters of oxygen and masks in case we need them.” The Martian saluted and turned back to the final briefing he was giving his men. Bracken turned back to his Captain. “Any final orders, Captain?” She gave him a tight smile.

“Let us go meet some aliens, Bracken.”

*

The hatch of the shuttle decompressed with a puff of gas and slid open. The Captain, translator firmly placed in one ear, commlink sitting snugly in the other, was the first out of the ship. There had been a long argument amongst the senior bridge crew about the

correct procedure for this moment. Alpha had insisted that his security team be the first ones out, to ensure that it was safe. The Captain had vetoed that idea straight away, and so with a stride only slightly offset by the differences in artificial gravity, she moved to greet the cluster of figures at the far end of the brightly lit shuttle bay. As she approached, the aliens' features became far clearer. They were large insectoid creatures, which stood at about two and a half metres tall, with a glossy black carapace black as the void in which they travelled. They had two legs and four arms, though the lower pair ended not in some form of grasping hand like with humans. Instead, they had almost shovel-like utensils that grew as extensions of their armour, with a series of ridges along the back. The leading member of the insect's delegation, with a distinctive greying around the edges of its carapace, moved with slow measured strides towards her. It stopped a few strides in front of her and began to rub its shovel-arms together, back-to-back, faster and faster till the noise of the ridges scraping began to create the haunting music that the Chitter used to communicate. Her translator began to chirp out a translation of the noise that it was receiving, in the annoyingly calm computer-generated voice of Dr Karo.

“May the light of rebirth shine upon you, traveller.” The alien paused its communication, waiting for a response, which the Captain carefully gave.

“And may the caves of the ancient protect you and yours, welcomer.” The translator, taking in these words, blurted out a string of slightly mechanical songs from the inbuilt speaker. The insectoid leader crossed its arms in acknowledgement, then turned away, walking towards a nearby doorway. His entourage followed on behind him, leaving the Captain standing there with a slightly bemused expression. Breckan,

approaching with the others now that the ceremonial meeting was finished, noticed the slight slump in the Captain's back as she breathed out her stress. Dr Karo came up beside her, accompanied by the rest of the party. She reached out to grasp the Captain's shoulder, then thought better of it.

“I think we are supposed to follow him.”

“So, it is a male?”

“The striation tones are distinctive.” The Captain gave a small sigh, and shook some of the tension from her body, before signalling for the team to follow her in.

*

The corridors of the vessel were several metres taller than those on the Lucian and stretched off in long curving arcs around the segments of the ship. Random members of the vessel's complement bustled along the corridors, only stopping when they noticed the strangers in their midst. The whole space was filled with different layers of musical communication. While nowhere near as powerful as that first song on the bridge, the constant attempts by the team's translators to interpret the various conversations and messages that filled the air caused much annoyance for the team until Dr Karo adjusted their sensitivity to limit their pickup range. Their host's party maintained a gruelling pace due to their longer stride. Only Alpha, with his genetically modified size, could keep up with relative ease. The rest of the team had to make do with a faster walk, almost closer to a jog in speed, much to the discomfort of the Doctor's deskbound frame. They wound their way through the maze of interconnected corridors until they passed through a set

of guarded portals which led to a series of what the Captain assumed were meeting halls. Here, the parties met once more, with the leader of their hosts turning back to talk to them.

“Valued guests, please stay here with my family members. Exchange words and ask questions as you wish.” He bowed, his carapace hunching over his head as he dipped forward. “You are welcome here. I, and your clan-leader, must discuss matters elsewhere.” Alpha began to voice an objection, but the Captain shut him up with a quick hand gesture. With her head held high, straining against the higher gravity, she strode into an adjoining room behind the giant insect. The door slid shut with a quiet hiss, and the beetle lay down in the equivalent of a sitting position on some sort of rug. Another of the insects, smaller and with an almost white carapace, sat beside him, its unblinking eyes staring right at her. She remained standing a few meters away, watching the relaxing figures cautiously. They remained like that for several minutes, watching, studying, evaluating. Finally, shifting his weight to get more comfortable, the larger insect began to rub its arms together, filling the room with soft music.

“You may call me Director. I have been placed in charge of this interaction by my people’s leaders. Before this, I oversaw the study of pre sentient life throughout our void. I was considered to be the only one who could effectively enact this communication.” The Captain's brow furrowed at the most likely unintended insult. “I wish to make this meeting one that can enlighten both of our species on this momentous occasion.” He gestured one of his other arms at the still silent third member of their meeting. “This is Holy One. He is here as representative of Chitter Priesthood”

The smaller Chitter bowed its head but remained silent. The Captain squared her shoulders.

“I believe that it will be of great benefit to both of our species to learn as much as we can about each other, in the interests of peace and learning. With that in mind, I have brought this.” From the breast pocket of her grey uniform, she brought out a small sphere of a similar material to the walls of the room. The Director banged his middle arms together several times, eliciting a thudding like the sound of bodies falling during a riot suppression. Muscles straining in a desperate attempt to avoid flinching, the Captain placed the device onto a side table. “My engineers built it based on the specifications that your . . . people provided us with. It has detailed records of human history, art and culture.” More of the enthusiastic thudding came in response. The Director reached out and picked up the small object in one of his hand-like appendages.

“This datasphere will be most invaluable in helping bridge challenging tasks ahead.” The insectoid placed the sphere into a pouch attached to his shell and withdrew another almost identical sphere, which he placed before the Captain. “This should help your scientists understand us better. I hope this exchange can foster a better relationship between our two peoples.”

“As do I.” The Director settled back into the seat he was in. The Holy One continued to observe, seemingly content to allow proceedings to continue as they were.

“Now, to the business at hand.” The Captain's eyebrow shifted upwards a fraction, and she shifted her stance to a more officious position. “It is the desire of my superiors that we continue to maintain a good relationship with your species, and therefore we request that you remain in orbit around Nest for the time being.”

“This is acceptable.”

“We also wish to continue to share information about our species and our histories. It is an important step towards understanding each other and will help foster better relations between your people and ours.” The Captain began to nod, then stopped herself. The gesture would mean nothing to the insect.

“Agreed.” Once more the thudding occurred as the insectoid banged its limbs together in some form of celebration. The Director climbed out from his seat and approached the Captain. Leaning down, he placed his head firmly against the Captain’s and held it there for several seconds. The Captain, ramrod straight and with iron discipline hiding her discomfort, endured the experience of cold hard carapace against warm flesh for far longer than was desirable before he finally pulled back.

“Thank the cycle for this productive meeting. Come, let us return to your crew.” They exited the room, leaving the Holy One where he was. The Captain strode over to where Bracken was conversing with a smaller member of the alien’s party. Bracken turned as he heard her approach and smiled a greeting to her.

“Captain. Can I introduce you to the Recorder?” He gestured to the insectoid, who striated in greeting. “His role is to take down all information pertaining to the human race that he can collect. We were just discussing the works of Shakespeare.” The alien nodded its head in imitation of that very human action, making the Captain laugh.

“Yes, writings of this human are of particular interest to our scholars. Such interesting texts, much information to study.” The translator, even with its mechanical simulation of tone, managed to convey the enthusiasm of the creature. “This opportunity, to research another sapient species with such an interesting society and

history, is so exciting for my people!" He hopped from one foot to the other, his arms waving in the air as he spoke. "For example, this war that occurred recently, the Sol War? Such an interesting event, one that I believe you were directly involved in, Captain." The smile slipped from her features, and a wooden "Yes, I was." slipped from cold lips. Bracken quickly jumped in, excusing the Captain from the conversation, and allowing her to move off. Karo was attempting to lie comfortably on one of the rugs the insects seemed to treat as seating. Seeing the Captain, she called out to her.

"It's surprisingly comfy, for something woven from tree bark. Maybe we can ask for a few for study?" She laughed, but the Captain was already walking away, to where Grek Alpha was standing alongside some of his security detail, all with weapons held loosely in their hands. He was eyeing up some of the larger members of the Chitter, who seemed to have metallic plates welded onto their carapace in some form of armour. Looking down at his Captain, he nodded towards the intimidating giants.

"Pretty big bastards aren't they boss?" he realised what he had said and began to stammer. "Excusing my Terran, Captain." She gave a small bark of laughter.

"They are, aren't they? You think you could take them?"

"I don't know. Not hand-to-hand for sure. Depends on how that armour does against taser rifles." He gave a chuckle, more out of relief at the Captain's response than anything particularly humorous. "I might be able to take one, but it would be close." The Captain slapped him on the back, unconsciously wiping her hand on her trouser leg. She moved over to a smaller Chitter with some sort of red colouration who seemed to be lost on thought.

"Hello." The Chitter looked up at her, as if only now aware of her presence.

“Greetings, unarmoured one. You are Captain?”

“Yes, I suppose you could call me that. And you are...?” The Chitter banged one of its arms against its chest in salute.

“My designation is Naysayer. I am an advisor to the Director.” The creature gestured with a free appendage towards the Director, who had joined Bracken in conversation with Recorder. “He is my-” There was a beep of incomprehension from the translator, and the Captain interrupted it.

“I’m sorry, but what is the Director to you?”

“Ah, I see. Your strange translation device, the one your scientist has built, does not recognise it. I’m sure Recorder would be able to help her with that. I am biologically related to the Director. That is why I am permitted to follow in his entourage.”

“And what exactly is your purpose?” The insect laughed, the translator making the sound mechanical.

“To ensure that he doesn’t become too enamoured with himself. I speak in opposition to all his opinions, in hope to expand his thinking. Not that it works.” It banged its arms together as the Director had, showing its amusement. Bracken suddenly appeared at her side with a polite cough.

“I believe that it is about time we were heading back to the Lucian.”

“Thank you, Bracken. It was nice meeting you, Naysayer.”

“Yes, it was a pleasurable meeting. And before you go.” The Naysayer lent forward and played a hauntingly quiet song that only reached as far as her ears and translator. “Be careful. Not all view your arrival with friendly eyes.” And with that the

insectoid was off, lumbering surprisingly fast for his size. Bracken touched his Captain's arm, and she shook her head, before following him towards the door.

Chapter 9

On the journey home to the Lucian, the Captain sat back in the crew compartment while Bracken took the pilot's seat. With the comforting vibrations of the engines growling beneath her seat, she dozed off, and her mind drifted to the images that the Recorder had dredged up from the depths of her mind. Of the Battle at Psyche, and the boarding of the Martian transport vessel, Quantis.

They had suspected that the Martians had a supply point in the asteroid belt that was keeping their ships in the fight along the Ceres front, but it was only a lucky intel intercept that tipped them off. The boarding pods: those dark, creaking enclosed death traps that launched in a burst of momentum toward the Martian vessel. The crash and roar of the breaching pods going off against the hull. The chatter of rifle fire as it bounced around in the black iron corridors, the roars of the Martian brutes as they charged the firing line in a wall of onrushing brutality. The cut-off scream as Cor, her Security Chief at the time, was turned into a smear of bloody matter on the ground beneath the boots of the gene-engineered monsters. The red haze of misting blood as a grenade went off in the mass of seething bodies before her. That fight, right at the end of the war, had cost her nearly thirty of the boarding party, as well as dozens of those lost in the exchange of fire between the two vessels in the time it took for her team to reach the gun decks and neutralise the crews. Then, the storming of the bridge, and the

suicide bomber that killed three of her crew and permanently maimed a dozen more in an attempt to kill her.

She still had the scars from the shrapnel all over her left side. The survivors of the enemy bridge crew were rounded up, including the Captain, who had ordered the suicide attempt. He snarled with malformed lips, his guttural voice spitting obscenities even as the executioner's bullet ended his unnatural existence. The bang of the gun jerked her from the dream, as the shuttle came in for a landing in the Lucians hanger bay. Bracken's voice came in over the comm.

“That's it, everyone. We're home.”

*

The Captain called together the mission team for debriefing after they had returned to the Lucian. They clustered around the briefing table, all tired from the stress of the day. The Captain sat at the head of the table, and with a slight nod to Bracken, gave permission to start.

“Okay team, now that we have had our first face to face interaction with the Chitter, we need to pool intel and see what we come up with. Dr Karo? Would you be so kind as to fill us in on any information you deem as important to our continued operations here?” Karo smoothed out her coat and ran an excited hand through her black hair.

“There is so much to discuss! The data upload we were provided with is still being deciphered, but initial decoding has given us valuable insights into their ecology,

history, lifecycles-" Bracken saw the slump in the Captain's shoulders, and quickly interrupted,

"Important information, Miss Karo." Karo snorted irritably before continuing.

"They seem to have an extremely widespread belief in their star as a deity. Due to the nature of their planet's orbit, most of the planet's surface gets scorched as it passes close to the sun. Apparently, this has led to them only having a ten-year time span according to the data they provided for us. Apparently, this Director who spoke to you, Captain? He is about seven years of age, right at the end of his lifespan. This cycle of death is central to their culture on all levels. We should be careful not to offend their beliefs, so I suggest a full briefing on the subject for all crew interacting with the aliens."

"Sounds good. Would you be able to compile a summary for distribution amongst the senior staff in the meantime?"

"Aye, Sir." Bracken nodded his thanks and turned to Grek Alpha.

"Alpha, what is your assessment of the alien's capabilities and threat level?"

"Well, Boss-" He stopped at the snigger that one of the lower officers let slip at the term, before continuing. "Sir, these aliens seem to have an equivalent capability to us in terms of their technology level. Their sublight engines, projectile weapons and other ship capabilities are in line with the Lucian. In fact, I would say that we are more efficient with our energy usage for the most part. The passive scans that I managed to take-" A squeal of outrage from Dr Karo cut him off.

"How dare you risk our relationship with the Chitter for some unnecessary stunt! They have told us that they only want peace, and you greet them like hostile invaders. Why I ought to-"

“Grek Alpha was perfectly within his rights to perform that scan. He would have been lax in his duty if he had not.” Bracken leaned forward, placing his hands on the table, and staring straight at her. Her outrage subsided, and Bracken nodded to Grek to continue.

“While I was ... investigating, I discovered a massive drain on the ship's power supply, leading to a portion of the ship where my scans could not penetrate. I don't know what it is, but It may be linked to their faster than light travel method.” Bracken nodded, thoughtfully rubbing his hand on his chin.

“Yes, as far as we know they don't have any knowledge of Wormholes or their use in travelling between the stars. They must have some other method; one we do not know about.” He looked to the Captain, who leant forward.

“We do not know if these aliens are friendly or hostile. We cannot assume they are not going to do something that will endanger us, our crew or humanity as a whole. We must proceed with the utmost caution. However, we also must hope that they don't mean us to harm as they claim. If they are hostile, we don't stand much of a chance. Therefore, we proceed with caution. We don't take their word for granted, but neither do we make a hostile move. This is a peaceful contact until ordered otherwise. Is that understood?” Heads nodded around the table and the Captain allowed a slight upturn in her lips to show her support. “Now, get back to it.” The crew hastened to obey, leaving the Captain and Bracken alone in the room together.

Leaning forward in her chair, the Captain sighed and leant her chin on one hand, gazing off with a glazed look in her eyes. Bracken, knowing better than to interrupt her when she was thinking, turned his commlink on and quickly flicked through the various

channels, pausing occasionally to hear reports from different station officers and bridge crew. He paused for a moment on the report from the comms station, then turned back to his superior.

“Captain, there's a message from the aliens waiting for you in your quarters.” The Captain shook her head slightly, as if freeing herself from the thoughts that had a grip upon her, then turned a quirked eyebrow.

“My quarters? Why the secrecy?” Bracken permitted himself a small smile in return.

“Apparently the message was for your eyes only. The comms crew thought it best, Captain.”

“Very well. Let's get going.” With the action decided, the Captain stood up with the measured economy and strode out of the room, with Bracken following at her shoulder. The metal corridor was full of the crew heading onto their shifts on the engine decks, their stained uniforms somehow cleaner than their oil-slick skin. The crowd of noisy humanity, a wall of muscle and anger, split like some biblical sea at the approach of the Captain. She strode straight down the middle of the corridor and Bracken watched as a large Martian labourer, at the head of the crowd and bearing the badge of a crew leader on his sleeve, saw her approaching and waved his meaty paw. He cried, “Outta da way you lot. Make way for the Boss!” It was picked up in varying forms by the other crew bosses, and the men and women of the working crews pushed up against the walls and watched as their Captain passed them.

As they walked, she would nod to the various crew leaders and senior workers, who returned sloppy salutes that were brimming with respect if not professionalism. At

one point, she stopped before one of the workers and called him over. The young man, fear was written all over his face, left the comfort of close-knit bodies and walked up to her.

“Cap’n?”

“Labourer Jolik, isn’t it?” There were mutters and gasps at this statement. Did she know his name? A labourer, the lowest of the low? Maybe she knew theirs as well. He visibly gulped in fear.

“Yes, Cap’n.” She gestured to his leg, which he was favouring subtly.

“Injured leg, Jolik?” He hung his head in shame.

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“Don’t be ashamed, it’s a mark of your efforts for this ship that you tried to keep going. Now, head down to the sick bay, and get the doctors to look you over. Your crew can handle things for today, can’t they?” With this, she looked to the nearby men and women, who gave a roar of assent. She turned back to Jolik. “Now, off you go.” And with that they were walking again, finally leaving the crowd and climbing onto a grav shaft, which took them up to the officers’ quarters. Once they reached her room, the Captain turned to Bracken.

“Wait here. I’ll see what our strange hosts have to say to me.” With that, she entered the room. Her quarters were made up of a single room and adjoining bathroom, no bigger than what the other officers had. Along one wall ran a control station from where she could access the main computers. She sat and opened the communication from the aliens. The simple audio file had been sent on a personal transmitter owned by the Director. As soon as she accessed it, it started to play.

*

Dr Rala Karo sat at her desk in the science lab, pouring over the latest transcripts from the alien communique. Her translation system was handling most of the information with relative accuracy, but there had been a couple of messages from passing ships that they had intercepted which had been almost indecipherable. She hit a button, running the messages through the translation matrix again, but still no luck. Making some quick adjustments, she tried for the umpteenth time, before slamming a clenched fist into the machine with a cry of “damn!”. She leapt from her chair and began to pace rapidly back and forth in her small lab space in the science department set near the forward section of the Lucian. Her outburst must have been noticed, as her assistant Salo stuck her head in the door.

“Everything okay Dr Ka-” she quickly pulled back her head as she avoided the flung paperweight that bounced off the door frame, leaving a dent in the dull metal. “Did you need something?” she asked from behind the safety of the door.

“An assistant with more brains than a protocell, for starters.” Karo stopped pacing, and leant against the desk, staring angrily at the unadorned ceiling above her. The footsteps of Salo scurrying away didn't even register, as a small spark went off in her head. Reaching for her console, she began to type in new commands for the translation matrix, her hands flying across the screen as she imputed the complex algorithms into the system. When she had finished, she reached over to test the system, when a call came in over the comms.

“Dr Karo, I have Grek Alpha requesting entry to the science wing. He wishes to speak with you.” Karo sighed in irritation.

“Let him in, Salo.” She turned back to the translator, activating it and watching the section of text slowly print onto the screen. Before she could check the results, the door opened to admit Alpha, who had to squeeze through the doorway, slightly tearing his uniform as a zipper caught and torn. He cursed quietly, then finally managed to fit through. Turning to face him, Rala put on a smile. “Welcome to my humble lair.” Alpha looked around at the cramped space, full of various gadgets and multiple printouts of failed translations.

“Thanks for letting me in. I just had some questions about the files I sent over for translation.” Rala’s smile grew frosty, and she gestured to the piles of paperwork.

“As you can see, Alpha, I haven't had much luck with the dialect they were using.”

“How about that new printout? Looks promising.” He reached past her with a trunk-like arm, making Rala shudder at the grotesque distortion of the human body. Picking up the translation printout, he ran his small eyes over the document, nodding his head in approval. “This is some fine work, Doctor. Thank you for this.” He turned to leave, only to be stopped by Karo’s angered yowl.

“What I would like to know, *Alpha*, is why you are monitoring the communications of every ship in range?”

“I don’t believe that you have the clearance for that, Rala. You’re still due a stay in my brig.”

“Oh lay off. I just think it is dangerous to be risking our relationship with our new friends over some silly suspicion.” Alpha looked down at the spiky doctor.

“It's my job to be suspicious.” Grek let out a rumble, it took a moment for Karo to realise it was a sigh. “Look, Karo, I know you want to see the best in these visitors, but I have to remain objective.” He gave a bark of humourless laughter. “I have been tasked with keeping this ship safe, and if I have to monitor any and all traffic that these bugs are producing, so be it.” Karo grimaced at the derogatory term for the Chitter.

“I just don't think-”

“That's the problem, Dr Karo. You don't think, or at least don't think of anything other than your precious aliens, no matter how dangerous they could be. We can't trust them blindly.” And with that, the giant squeezed back out of the door.

Chapter 10

Once again, the bridge officers assembled for a briefing at the start of the next day's cycle on board. This was a closed session, no hangers-on or secondary staff present. Only Dr Karo, Grek Alpha, First Officer Bracken and the Captain. They all sat around the holographic display table, with Grek slightly away from it due to the specially constructed chair he had to use. A hovering 3-D model of the Lucian hovered at the centre of the table. Karo had a folder full of further interesting finds she had pulled out of the data sphere overnight, her blackened under eyes proving she had done the translating personally. Grek had already shown Bracken a couple of simulations of hand-to-hand combat with a Chitter, and it had gotten messy really quick. Both were eager to discuss the implementation of training drills to aid in such an eventuality should it ever occur. However, the Captain uttered words to begin the meeting.

“I have received a request for aid from the Director.” Silence came in response. Even Bracken was shocked. She hadn't confided any of the information contained in the message for her before she dismissed him. Dr Karo excitedly tapped her fingers on the folder before her as the Captain continued. “This was not on the behalf of the governing body of the Chitter, but for a dissident group that claims that our aid is essential to their species survival and flourishing.” All the listeners were hunching over, more and more concerned by the Captain's words. She continued to add to their worries. “They want to use our arrival as an avenue to force change through the government. They believe that

we can help them avoid a civil war, one that could end their civilization for good.” She steepled her fingers before her and closed her eyes. “I am sharing this with you in the hopes that you can help me come to a decision as to what the best course of action is.”

“What is the issue they are asking you to help with?” Bracken asked with a degree of apprehension.

“Evolution, Bracken. He wants us to help them slow the march of time.” She ran a hand through her auburn locks, before scratching an incessant itch on the back of her neck unconsciously. “Apparently, there are those in the Chitters ranks who want to extend their people's life spans beyond their natural means. They see us, with our genetic manipulation and mechanical augmentation of our bodies, as the example they need to prove its viability to their leaders.” Bracken gave a rueful laugh, only to be silenced by the look on his Captain's face. “This is not a joke. We are being asked to aid them in the development of technology applicable to their biology with the express intention of extending their lifespans, so they are roughly equivalent to human standard.”

“And what is our response?” Alpha asked, shifting in his large chair in an attempt to find a more comfortable spot. Karo leant forward in her seat, eyes glowing with excitement as she looked to her Captain.

“Well of course we are going to help them, aren't we Captain?”

“Actually, I haven't decided yet. That is why I need your help. All of you.” She gestured to all the officers at the table. “I want to hear your thoughts.” Karo jumped in as the Captain finished.

“We have to help them, Captain. It is the only thing that makes sense.” Karo linked her system up to the projector, screen of data replaced the Lucians vicious silhouette with a representation of one of the Chitter, its bulky form resplendent in the electric blue light of the projector. “From the data they provided concerning their species history it took them centuries longer than us to develop even a basic method of cohesive communication, as every generation of parents were wiped out by the planet's heat before their children could learn anything from them. Almost every technological advancement they have made has been because of their equivalent of Einstein, once in a century intellect, and they don't live long enough to continue their work. Their only method of keeping their people alive for longer is to make use of stasis pods and the like. If we were to aid them, it would improve their people's lives exponentially.” The fervour in her voice was persuasive, and Bracken was nodding his head thoughtfully in consideration, but then Grek Alpha's grunt of disapproval sounded like the rumble of an awakening volcano.

“That is a naive view, Karo, and one that will cost all of us in humanity, whether we are Terran, Martian or Deeper.” The giant stood, his head grazing the low roof of the meeting room. He pointed at the holographic display with a blunt finger. “These Chitter, they have an approximately equivalent tech to us, but we still have no clue about their faster than light tech or the capabilities of their weapons. And as far as I can tell, even the smaller specimens could take on a Martian hand to hand. We have very few advantages against these bugs if things go sideways, but longer lifespans are one of them. Their shorter lifespans are a weakness, one that we cannot afford to risk at this stage over some potential philanthropic act.” The Martian lent forward in his chair,

staring intently at Karo. "We have to think of the long term here and prepare for the worst." Karo avoided his gaze, instead of turning to the Captain with pleading tones.

"Please, Captain. At least consider what the effect could be on our relationship with the Chitter. If they are as dangerous as Grek is making them out to be, isn't it better to have them on our side, instead of attacking us?" The Captain was staring off at the wall, and so Bracken jumped in.

"We should at least find out more about this faction. I'm not convinced that they are anything more than a fringe group of radicals who, no matter the good in their intentions, are still a minority view, hence their need for us. We need more information." He looked to the Captain, who seemed to have come to some sort of decision.

"I agree with Bracken. We cannot move forward without some semblance of understanding about what is going on here." She shook her head. "I don't want to risk a war over some misguided attempt to help people who don't want it. Dr Karo, could you please have a more detailed look through the data the Chitter sent through to us for any more information. I will have a talk with this Director and see if he will share a bit in the interests of cooperation. Dismissed." The officers filed out, Grek and Karo pointedly ignoring the other as they went. Bracken stayed behind, drumming his fingers on the back of his datapad. He looked over at his Captain, and began to say something, but stopped himself. The Captain glanced towards his grizzled features.

"So, Bracken. What's the next play?" The man ran a hand through his closely cropped hair.

"There's nothing in the rule book to dictate what we should do, Captain." He sat down, the weight of years hanging like a millstone upon his shoulders. The Captain

came over and sat next to him, hands steepled before her in thought. "It's a good thing we have never been ones for rulebooks, eh?" Bracken gave a crooked grin.

"No. We have not."

The Director had been delighted with the suggestion that an exchange of representatives be made. He seemed unnaturally enamoured with the idea, and that put Captain Arnie on guard. Once they were all back on the bridge, Bracken had summed the senior staff's thoughts up quite nicely.

"What is the bastard up to?" The Captain had grunted in agreement, but there was a more pressing problem. Who could she send as Ambassador for the SCC?

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Of course, Karo had come forward immediately to volunteer.

"I have the best knowledge of their society, their language. I am currently the foremost expert on the Chitter and would be the logical choice to liaise with their people."

"You have no way of differentiating what is best for these bugs, and what is best for the Lucian and her crew, Dr Karo," Grek Alpha had countered, before pitching his own suggestion, "I, on the other hand, would be perfect for the role. I have the knowledge of espionage and information retrieval necessary to help us find out what the

bastard bug wants.” He and Dr Karo fell into one of their now commonplace arguments, but it didn't matter. She gestured Bracken over, and his face gained a dozen years in an instant.

“Captain, how can I help?” His professionalism prevented his true feelings from showing in front of the rest of the staff, but the dread was plain as day to the Captain's weary eyes.

“I am going to need you on this one, Bracken.” He nodded and saluted grimly.

“It will be my honour.” She smiled, a genuinely warm smile that broke her chilly exterior like the burst of a solar flare.

“Thank you, Bracken. There's no one I would trust to care for the Lucian in my absence.” It took a moment for the words to register. With eyes almost popping from their sockets, he began to raise his voice.

“But Captain, you-”

“This is a mission of the utmost importance. We cannot make a mistake at this junction.” she said, and gestured to Karo and Grek. “Neither of them can keep the big picture in focus. I need to do this, and I need you to keep everything running on this end.” She smiled again, though to Bracken's concerned eyes she seemed to be baring her teeth. “Especially if things go sideways. You'll have to pull me out pretty fast.”

Bracken nodded, not liking the idea one bit.

“I'll do you proud, Captain.” She nodded, and they saluted each other.

“I know you will, my old friend.” Standing up, she tapped her commlink. “Shuttle bay, I'll need a drop off to the Chitters' mothership as soon as their Ambassador is

onboard.” They acknowledged and she cut the link. She swiped at a stray strand of hair, and rested her hand on her sidearm. “Guess I should go pack.”

*

The Chitters’ shuttle barely managed to fit into the Lucians hangar bay. A single sphere of the strange compound that all their vessels were made from floated into the narrow space with the smallest bursts of their manoeuvring thrusters. The Captain was concerned that they may scratch the Lucian’s paintwork, but their pilot could have given Bracken a run for his money, sliding the vessel neatly into place beside the two human shuttles. Once the space was pressurized, a complement of security personnel formed an honour guard for the Captain as she moved to greet the assigned ambassador. A wall slid open on the shuttle’s flank, and a walkway descended to the ground. Out of the portal came Naysayer, the Director’s assistant, his red carapace glowing bright under the docking bays harsh lighting. He was accompanied by a pair of Chitter soldiers, ceremonial spears held in their free hands. All the Chitter wore strange gelatinous bulbs on their faces, presumably to help them breathe aboard the human ship. As they approached, the small Chitter began to speak, his voice formal.

“Greetings, humans. It is an honour to be welcomed aboard your vessel.” The Captain smiled and waved for the bug to follow her, the escort keeping a respectful distance.

“Your name was Naysayer, yes?” The bug nodded, matching the human’s shorter stride with his own.

“Indeed, that is my name and purpose.”

“Do all of your people share a name with your chosen profession?” Naysayer made a strange noise with its arms, which translated to laughter in her ear.

“We do not choose our purpose, Captain. Our purpose is chosen for us. The Holy Ones determine what role best suits each larva and this allows them to flourish into their best self.” The bug seemed to love talking, and unlike many of the other Chitters' musical words, his song bore a lyrical quantity that made listening to it very pleasant. “I was selected to become a Naysayer as I always questioned what was around me and would not accept that there was ever only one way of thinking.”

“You sound like a very helpful person to have around, Naysayer. My own officer, Bracken, fulfils a similar role for me.” The insect laughed again.

“He must be a very courageous man, to question one as competent as you, Captain.” She laughed as well, and it entwined with Naysayer's song into a composition that would have melted the hearts of millions back home in Sol.

“Come, Naysayer. Before I leave, I would like to speak to you in private.”

*

They entered the large room that had been designated for the insect's use. The atmospheric controls and gravity had been adjusted to make the environment more hospitable, and Naysayer almost leapt for joy as he entered the space. The door slid shut behind them, and he turned, excitedly rubbing his arms together.

“It feels just like home. Thank you, Captain.”

“My pleasure.” She pressed a button on the side of the wall, locking the door behind them. “Now then. There are some things I would like to talk with you about. Particularly, concerning the Director.”

“You mean his communique concerning the sharing of technology, particularly in relation to the process of aging my species undergoes.” The Captain sighed in relief.

“Yes, I had hoped you would be capable of discussing that very topic.”

“I am aware that the Director has given you a difficult decision. What you choose to do will have far reaching implications for both of our species, and he did not ask easily. I offered him a number of issues with his plan, but he believed the risk was one that was worth taking.”

“How much support does this . . . group your leader represents have amongst your general population?”

“Most of the common folk have little or no interest in the idea of living longer. They believe that it is only through our deaths that the cycle of rebirth can begin. This is what has been told to us by our holy ones for aeons.” Naysayer began to pace back and forth across the room, arms weaving the story like a painter marking canvas. “However, there is already a method of life extension that is accepted by the rulers. Many of our greatest minds have been maintained in stasis, frozen in time until their expertise is needed again. Some have endured this for centuries, only brought out in the direst of circumstances or for a particular project or question.” He paused, bowing his head in thankfulness. “Thus our people's knowledge is protected from year to year and our

ability to endure through catastrophe and strife is ensured.” The Captain looked at the talkative insect, her brow furrowed.

“So why do you need our help?” Naysayer shrugged helplessly.

“Only a select few can be kept in such a permanent form of stasis. Such technologies can be vastly draining, and there are always factions who believe that any form of life extension is heresy against the great cycle.” The insect leaned closer, his song quieting as he did so, as if he was whispering to her. “The group my master represents is keen for all our people to have the ability to experience a longer, more productive life. And he hopes that you will be able to assist in that goal.”

“I will have to think some more about that.” The Captain turned to leave. “If you need anything, there will be a crew member stationed outside at all times. Your things will be brought up to you momentarily. Thank you for your assistance.”

Chapter 11

As the Captain disappeared through the entrance of the shuttle taking her to the alien flagship, Alpha watched Karo hurry from the docking bay, eyes narrowing suspiciously. The crowd that had assembled for the Captains departure began to follow after her, vacating the bay in preparation for the vessel's departure. Alpha moved through the crowd, which parted before him with suspicious glances and muttered comments. Anger bubbled deep in Alpha's being, a pressure that built at the base of his skull and throbbed painfully as it strove for freedom. Alpha tensed his jaw as he suppressed the rage, shackling it deep inside, as he always did. Just because they were born aggressive did not mean they had to act that way. He pulled free of the crowd, but by then Karo had disappeared. He called Haskur over the comms.

“Sergeant. I need you to run a trace on the comms of Dr Rala Karo.”

“Any particular reason, boss?” The Sergeants' cheerful voice asked.

“Just a hunch. We still don't know how she managed to get a placement aboard the vessel.”

“Right you are, boss. I'll have one of the team get you that information as soon as possible.”

“No.” Alpha was firm, the word stopping Haskur in his tracks.

“But boss-“

“I don’t trust this task to anyone else, Sergeant. Our teams seem reliable, but someone must have been paid off to allow the series of security breaches we have seen.”

“None of our lot would betray the ship.”

“We have to consider the possibility. I trust you, and maybe a handful of others, but most of them could be compromised. Particularly the Terrans amongst the teams.”

“You want me to start running checks on our own teams?” His reluctance was palpable, and Alpha sighed.

“No, Haskur. Just get me that trace on the good doctor.” He ended the call, feeling the anger melt before his guilt. The riot and the weapons found there had been bad, but when the Captain had informed him of Dr Karo’s illicit method of boarding the ship, he had begun to suspect something greater. His comms buzzed and he saw that Haskur had messaged him with an active location of Karo’s comms. Currently, she was headed to the Ambassadors compartment, no doubt hoping to get some proper one on one time with the Chitter and test out her latest iteration of the translating device.

*

Keeping an eye on the live feed, Alpha headed towards the lifts, taking them down to the floor containing the offices Karo had been assigned. There were few scientists about at this time, with many of them heading for the mess at the end of shift. Those that passed him by gave a wide berth, and he could feel the staring and whispered words as they pulled away behind him. With a snort of irritation, he continued onward,

entering the private offices section thanks to his clearance level. Most were empty, and the few that were occupied were filled with scientists whose faces were glued to their terminal screens. Alpha walked up to the office belonging to Dr Karo and placed his hand on the security scanner. It flashed red, and Alpha gazed at it in shock. He tried again but got the same response. He called Haskur back, keeping an eye on Karos position.

“Haskur, she's edited the command codes in her personal office. It won't open for me, and probably won't open for anyone but her.”

“But those systems are linked into the core network, boss. You change one, you change them all, but only the Captain can change that level of security.” Alpha slammed his fist into the wall in anger, leaving a dent in the metal plating.

“She must have severed its connection to the network and plugged in her own commands.” He noticed that Karo had just made an abrupt change of direction and was now hurrying back towards the offices. “Damn, she knows I'm here.”

“Get out if there sir.” Haskur was beginning to panic, though he would never admit it. “If she is a spy, you can't be caught there.”

“I'm aware of that, Haskur. But I'm not leaving here without any intel.” He cut off Haskur's protests, and instead called Karos comms.

“Alpha. What do you want?”

“I'm at your office, Karo. Was wondering if you could provide me with some information I need.”

“Well, I'm heading back now. Just give me a minute, and I will be right with you.”

*

Karo arrived, her face slightly flushed from the small marathon she had just run to get back. She took a moment at the end of the hall to compose herself, then approached Alpha, her customary sneer in place.

“Alpha, what can I do for you? I am very busy at the moment, and I-”

“I just needed your latest translations of the traffic we have been intercepting amongst the Chitter fleet.”

“Oh.” She seemed to deflate for a moment, then anger filled her soul again and she marched over to her door and scanned her hand.

“This spying on our friends is still disgusting.” she muttered, as the scanner flashed green. She grabbed a data slate from the desk and shoved it into Alphas meaty hands. “Take that. I hope your obsession with these costs you dearly.” With that, she sealed the door, locking him outside. Turning away, Alpha began to stroll away, trying to whistle tunelessly through his malformed lips. He tapped his communicator, calling Bracken.

“Are you free to meet me in about half an hour?”

*

Alpha collapsed to the floor, his muscles screaming for relief. Sitting up, a wave of dizziness almost floored him again, and he rested back on his arms. His mouth filled

with a metallic taste, and when he spat it was stained red. He looked up at the man responsible for his pain, and gave a pink grin.

“That arm sure packs a punch, boss.” Bracken smiled and reached out the whirring prosthetic to help the Martian to his feet. They were sparring in the gymnasium, part of the recreational facilities aboard the Lucian. Usually, Alpha would have trained with other Martians, as only they were any sort of match for him. However, Bracken's augmentation made him more than capable of going toe to toe with the bulky gene-breed. With Bracken's help, he managed to climb back to his feet, rubbing his jaw ruefully. Bracken stretched his neck, receiving a number of satisfying pops for his effort. Glancing around the large gymnasium, he could see that a number of off duty crew members were surreptitiously observing the bout.

“Alpha, we have an audience.”

“I did notice that boss. Want to call off the match?” Bracken looked sharply at him and noticed the sly grin spreading across the Martian's face.

“Not in your life, Martian.” He said, raising his hands into a ready position.

“Perfect.” Alpha matched his pose, then threw himself into the fight.

Hand to hand combat was an art. Hundreds of techniques were practised across human space, from mining colony to orbital habitat, and even from ship to ship. Bracken fought the way the Captain had trained him; a loose mixture of martial arts and boxing which made excellent use of his augmented arm's power. He dodged, ducked and deflected blow after blow from the Martian, striking at weak points as they presented themselves. Alpha, for his part, was fighting defensively, keeping his bulky arms up to deflect the lightning quick attacks of the First Officer. They traded blows for several

minutes, never fully committing to an attack, always watchful for the retaliation. As the fight wore on, the crowd of watchers grew, their conversation waxing and waning with the flow of combat. Support was shouted out from dozens of voices, and credits changed hands as bets were placed.

Finally, Bracken made his move. Over the course of the fight, he had been focusing his attacks on Alpha's face and chest, forcing him to focus his attention there. Bracken moved his leg, hooking it under the larger man's ankle and yanking it out from under him. With a roar Alpha tumbled to the ground, arms flailing as he tried to right himself. Several groups in the crowd cheered, calling out supportive words to the first officer or holding expectant hands out to their fellow crew mates, demanding their debts be settled. Bracken moved in, hand reaching out once more to help the Martian to his feet. Alpha grabbed onto his forearm, hand clenched in a vice like grip, and pulled the startled Bracken into a bear hug. Breath rushed to escape Bracken's constricted lungs, and Alpha's arms held him tight, trapping his arms against his torso and constraining his movement. He struggled for a few moments, but the Martian's strength was unrelenting.

"Do you concede?" Alpha's voice was a whisper against the pounding in his ears, but he managed to nod his assent. Alpha released him and Bracken rolled away, gasping in great lungful's of air as he went. Alpha pushed himself up and helped the still struggling Bracken to his feet.

"You were expecting my leg sweep, weren't you?" Bracken asked as his breathing returned to normal.

"You seemed too focused on other areas, it was too obvious when you avoided some obvious strikes." Alpha smiled and gave Bracken a slap on the back, sending him

into a coughing fit. "I needed you to let your guard down and allow me in close. You're too damn fast sometimes." Bracken smiled and looked over at the slowly dispersing crowd.

"There seems to be quite a few members of the crew who aren't too happy with the result." he said, gesturing to several clusters of people, where raised voices could be heard.

"I wonder what the odds were, eh?"

"Perhaps it's better for our egos if we never know." Alpha laughed, his deep voice booming like a misfiring engine through the gymnasium.

"You're probably right." Alpha gazed thoughtfully at the arguing crew.

"I need to let you know something Bracken. I think Karo is up to something."

"Don't you think she is always up to something, my large friend?"

"You're not wrong Bracken, but this time I think it's more than the usual love of aliens."

"Well," he said, as they began to head for the showers. "If you find anything, let me know."

Chapter 12

The shuttle ride over to the Director's ship was uneventful. She had been provided with a breathing filter to allow her to breathe the alien atmosphere without any harmful side effects and had also been provided with the latest version of the translator by Dr Karo. The Captain resisted the urge to scratch at the skin around the filter, which was already becoming irritated by the constant rubbing of her mask.

As the shuttle pulled into the alien's hangar bay she unhooked herself from the chair, threw the small pack of belongings she had brought over one shoulder and began to descend the ramp. Tapping her comm link, she signalled for the pilot of her shuttle to leave as soon as the aliens had given clearance to do so. Ahead of her, a small Insectoid stood alone, its carapace swathed in some sort of cloth, similar to the robes worn by ancient priests on Terra. In one hand it clutched a walking stick made from some strange wood, its surface carved with the language of the Chitter.

"Captain, welcome." The creature said, its limbs stately as they weaved the music of their people. "I am Faithful. I will be your liaison for the duration of your stay." He bowed, in a graceful rendition of the human custom. Captain Arnie bowed respectfully in return, the movement feeling clumsy comparatively.

"Thank you for welcoming me with such honour."

"It is my duty to cater to your needs, Captain. If you follow me, I will bring you to your quarters." The Captain followed as Faithful turned away, his long robe trailing

behind him as he ambled along. They followed a different path to the one on her last visit, entering what seemed to be one of the small bulbous attachments to the main ship's superstructure. Airlocks stood in for doors, and she found herself in what appeared to be an entirely self-contained section of the ship. A bed, cabinets and other human furnishings had been provided, but one of the walls was covered in strange controls and levers.

“Is this a separate vessel, Faithful?” she asked, wandering around the small space.

“Yes, Captain.” The Chitter chuckled with appreciation at her deduction. “This area was deemed best suited for your stay with us. The airlocks at its entrance allow us to modify the environment within your quarters, so whilst you remain here the atmosphere will be as close to the one found on your ship as possible. You will only need the breathing mask you wear whilst you are outside of this area.”

“Thank you for this.” she said, throwing her bag down onto the bed. Faithful gestured to the door.

“Now, if you will come with me, we have an appointment that must be kept.” He stamped his feet, as if impatient.

“With the Director?”

“No, Captain. A request has come from the highest levels of our society. Your presence has been requested upon Nest itself.”

Faithful led her to a separate hanger bay, embedded in the underside of the vessel. They walked upon a semi translucent floor, below which hung several small atmospheric shuttle crafts. They were met by a pilot at the entrance to one of the shuttles, the bugs hunched over in deference to his guests. From the way he was behaving though, he seemed more focused on Faithful than the Captain herself. As they entered the shuttle's passenger compartment, she commented on this to Faithful.

“It is tradition for those of the other castes to be respectful to all of the priesthood. Even for a lowly aspirant like me.”

“So, you are part of your people’s ruling caste.”

“That is so. My order tends to our people's spiritual needs.”

“So, the Director...”

“The Director is something of a ... more worldly leader. He deals with the practicalities of caring for our people.” A custom seat had been installed against the wall. A series of windows lined the walls and as the Captain sat upon her seat and strapped herself in with a leather like strap, the whole vessel shuddered as it disconnected from the mothership. Faithful gripped rails lining the roof with a free arm and let his body flow with the motions of the ship as it began its journey towards the planet.

“And you serve him?” His arms shifted as he laughed.

“Yes, I do. I am his liaison with the Priesthood.”

The Captain braced herself against the shuttle's wall as it descended through the atmosphere. The alien shuttle was a strange vessel, its small bulbous hull containing a rather cramped and utilitarian internal space. While human vessels sought the balance

between functionality and comfort, the Chitter didn't seem to have a need for simple pleasures. The vessel began to judder and the Captain gripped her seat tightly.

"Is there an issue, Captain?" The Chitter asked, seemingly untroubled by the shaking of the ship.

"Just unused to planetary re-entry, is all. I need a distraction. Tell me about this place we are travelling to."

"It is a temple, holy to my order and to the Chitter nation in general. Within its walls, the highest of my order reside." A particularly rough bump in the descent shocked the vessel, and the pilot's voice echoed through the ship's speaker system.

"Sorry for the rough ride, we should be through the worst of it soon." As the last remnants of atmospheric flame stuttered and died upon the blackened hull, the Captain took the opportunity to look out the soot-stained viewport. The air was thick with smoke, great clouds stretching across the horizons and blotting great swathes of the ground from view. As the shuttle slowed its descent, it passed through one such cloud. The air became thick and greasy, the intense sunlight fading to a ruddy glow which came and went in bursts of varying intensity.

They dropped below the cloud line, and the arid landscape of the alien world was revealed. Rolling dunes of reddish sand stretched out for miles, reminding the Captain of vid-clips she had seen as a child of pre terraformed Mars. Standing in scattered pockets lay some sort of bush, the shrubbery leafless and dry in the intense heat. Several of these patches were burning, the flames obscured by the columns of smoke that fed into the great black ocean above them. Fleeing the fire of one area of bush, a column of figures could be seen crossing the dunes. They were animals of some kind,

with large circular shells on their backs, like a tortoise. They walked on six spindly legs which seemed to pierce deeply into the sand of the dunes, providing the purchase needed to scale the unstable terrain. As they continued to fly, more herds of the creatures appeared, all fleeing east along the same path of the shuttle.

The Captain turned back to her guide, and shifted nervously as she noticed that the beetle seemed to be staring at her with its small compound eyes. Noticing the movement, the beetle began to speak, its haunting music filling the shuttle's passenger space.

“You are discomforted by something, Honoured guest. What ails you?”

“It is nothing, Faithful. Tell me again, why is this temple so important to your people?” The Chitter priest perked up at being asked a question, and completely forgot the Captain's discomfort as he launched into a history lesson. The Captain turned back to the window and watched a strange beast that flew by the window, its body covered in a reflective material that would have been blinding if not for the shuttles protected windows. It drifted alongside them for some time, its wings flapping lazily as it rode the great thermal plume thrown up by the burning forests below them. More of the strange flyers surrounded the vessel, their calls revealing vicious arrays of fangs within their maws. The pilot increased their speed, the shuttle boosting out of the flock of predators before descending to the ground below.

Chapter 13

The access hatch on the top of the ship opened up, filling the compartment with a rush of ancient heat. Faithful ascended the foldout stair, exiting the shuttle.

“Please, Captain. We must hurry.” Captain Arnie clambered up the stairs, using her hands to balance as she took the overly large steps one at a time. As she emerged into the harsh sunlight, her breathing mask darkened to accommodate the baleful glare of the sun above them. Already, patches of sweat were appearing across her uniform, and as her hands touched the ship's roof on her way up, she gasped in pain, flinching back as the heat burned her hand. Faithful rushed over, and offered her an arm out of the shuttle. She shuddered at the touch of the creature's chitin clad arms, the smooth surface feeling dead and lifeless.

Standing on the top of the shuttle, she looked around their landing site with an air of confusion. They had set down upon an area of flat sand, surrounded by the rolling dunes that had made up much of the planet she had seen earlier. A couple of dark clumps represented clusters of trees, but here was little else in view.

“Where is the temple, Faithful? Nothing here but sand and sunstroke.” The robe clad chitter, apparently unfazed by the intense heat of the sun, clambered down the side of the vessel and then helped the Captain as she made her way to the sand below.

“You must have faith, Captain. Not all here is as it seems.” And with that he was off, striding through the sand in what seemed to be a random direction, his walking stick

digging deeply into the soft sand beneath him. The Captain tried to follow him, her boots slipping in the treacherous sand around her. Looking down, she noticed that the soles of her boots were beginning to melt, leaving dark gooey footprints where she trod.

“Ah, Faithful?” she called, trying to catch up with him. “How far is this temple?”

“Why, it is right here.” he said and disappeared from view. Captain Arnie froze in place, eyes blinking rapidly as her mind tried to process what had happened.

“Faithful!” she cried out, running towards the spot she had last seen him. As she reached his location, the air around her seemed to gain a green tinge, and her hair began to stand on end. Her forward momentum slowed, the air becoming a molasses that she fought to wade through it. Then, with a shift of pressure causing her ears to pop painfully, she finally pulled free of whatever was holding her and fell to the sand in front of her. Strangely, it was cool to the touch. Arnie climbed to her feet.

“Good, you made it.” Faithful was beside her, his walking stick planted firmly in the ground. Captain Arnie furiously rubbed sand from her mask, questions bubbling forth from her lips in a tide of anger, but she saw Faithful point with his free hand. The questions in her mind fell away as she saw the temple before them.

*

A great structure sat before them, shaped similarly to the vessels in orbit. Light glistened from the frosty white surface, highlighting the arches and hollows that had been carved into it over millennia. The temple had been constructed from glass, the intense heat of the sun melting the sands of the world into a formless mound of cloudy white, which the

Chitter had found and made their own. The facade of the structure bore the carved statues of ancient Chitter warriors, their hands filled with viscous blades and mauls. At the centre of the structure, a great stairwell dove into the earth, dimly lit by the sunlight filtering through the glass surrounding it. The air was cold, but there was no wind. There was only still silence surrounding the pair as they viewed their destination. It felt like the very rotation of the world beneath them had stopped, that the very universe had frozen in place beyond them.

“What the hell is happening?” Arnie asked, staring at awe at the view before her.

“The temple is held within a field designed to manipulate time. It prevents the fury of our sun from destroying it as we approach the Tide of Flame that will reset the Cycle of Rebirth. We are in a space devoid of time's influences.” He began to move towards the great stairwell, his legs seeming to be unaffected by the sands shifting nature.

“But, this level of technology, how did you-”

“Our entire society is on a schedule, Captain. Every rotation of our sun, our old die and young emerge from the earth, ready to start again. Our greatest minds, across millennia of death and rebirth, discovered that the best way to combat the ravages of time was to control it.” He waved his hand at the sky. “Fields like this are rare, and hard to maintain. Mostly, we preserve great minds and thinkers in stasis for when they are needed. It also allowed us to develop our interstellar ships. We manipulate the timestream, removing the time it takes to travel between two points.”

“That's how you were able to bring us into the centre of your system so quickly.”

“It was. We can reach most places in our system in an instant.”

“But then, why have we not seen Chitter ships arriving in human systems all this time?”

“It takes immense power to travel long distances. As yet, we cannot travel much more than halfway to the nearest star before our ships die, lifeless in the void.” They reached the staircase and began the descent. As they went, the golden light of the sun faded behind them, replaced by the white glow of the glass structure around them that lit their path. They journeyed deep into the earth, until the glass turned to roughly hewn red stone, and the only light were ancient glowing globes that hung periodically from the ceiling.

“Why do the priests live here, in the middle of nowhere?” she asked, feeling the air growing colder. As she shivered, her skin turned to goose flesh and she clutched her arms around her tightly.

“Captain, I am sorry.” Faithful said, seeing her struggle. “I did not consider how humans would handle the cold. Here.” and he draped his cloak over her, enfolding her in the rough woollen fabric. She adjusted it until it hung like a toga around her, and she felt her body begin to warm back up again.

“Thank you, Faithful.”

“It was nothing.” He said, clearly embarrassed by her gratitude. He began to walk again, calling back to her. “We are nearly there.” They travelled for several more minutes, as the air continued to get colder. Frost began to line the walls around them, and even with the cloak Arnie could feel the numbness in her fingers and toes beginning to spread across her body.

“We have arrived.” Faithful said, and led her into a wide circular chamber, the centre surrounded by a series of empty rings containing seating. At the centre of the nearest ring, opposite the area they had entered, a trio of Priests stood, carapaces swaddled in the white robes of their order and arms clutching their staffs close. Faithful led the Captain before the group and prostrated himself on the ground. Arnie bowed, unsure how to behave, and rose only when Faithful did so. All three of the Chitter looked ancient, their carapaces having turned a translucent white and showing several severe cracks in their once pure surfaces. The rightmost member of the group took a step forward and raised his staff in the air.

“Welcome Faithful, loyal servant, to this holy place. And welcome to you, Captain of the humans. We are honoured by your visit.”

“Truly, the honour is mine, holy ones.” Arnie said, bowing again. She straightened and took a hesitant step forward. “However, I am confused as to the reason for my visit.”

“We have invited you here for the most important of matters, Captain. We know of the traitor Director’s plans concerning your people’s technology. We know he has asked you to release its power into his hands, so that he may change our society for the better.” The priest on the left moved forward, its back hunched over as it moved.

“We have called you here, to seek your aid, human.” Arnie ran a hand through her hair.

“If you know of his request, you must know that he has made a very enticing argument. Your people live such short lives. If we provide this information, either to Director or to you, it could improve your lives significantly.”

“This genetic engineering,” the first priest asked, his tone considered. “Is it safe?”

“As safe as any other technology. I cannot say that in applying it there won't be mistakes you could make, but that is the same with anything new.”

“What sort of mistakes, Captain?” She shrugged.

“Well, the most prolific usage of genetic engineering amongst my people was the creation of the Martians.”

“The bigger humans, yes?” Captain Arnie was surprised, and she found herself nodding.

“Yes, them. We created them to be bigger, stronger, and more capable at completing many of the tasks that we had deemed too risky to do ourselves, while being less intelligent and more pliable.”

“You made slaves.” The older priest said, his tone accusing. Arnie flinched at the word, but her denials died on her tongue.

“Yes, I suppose we did.” she said, heart heavy. “And they didn't like how they were treated. There was conflict. An uprising, and eventually a system wide war. All because we couldn't help ourselves.” She laughed humourlessly. “Because of the greed and selfishness of a few, millions suffered for decades. I have Martians amongst my crew, but their creation was the cause of much pain for my people.”

“And you wish to inflict this upon us, human.” The centre priest, his robe more ostentatious and staff even more detailed than the others, stepped forward. “You want us to suffer as you have?”

“No.” She raised her hands to ward off their anger. “Of course not. I don't know what the right option is if I am honest. I'm just a Captain. I don't know the first thing about any of this.”

“So why not just let it be.”

“Because the Director made some good points. Because I can see his point, and I wish that his hopes could be realised.” The middle priest climbed down from his dais and approached Arnie, staff tapping against the stone floor. When he reached her, he put one cold hand upon her head, as if in blessing.

“You have a kind heart, Captain. Whatever you choose, it will be what you deem to be best. Whatever happens, know that this was never your burden to bear, Captain.” And with that, the Chitter priests left, retracting into the darkness at the edges of the room. Faithful bowed in their direction and turned to the Captain.

“We must leave now. The shuttle won't wait forever.” They retraced their steps in a blur, the Captains mind churning through the options laid before her.

“I wasn't expecting to be so honest.” she said, causing her guide to pause and look at her.

“This place is a place of holiness and introspection, Captain. You spoke from your heart, and in doing so you gained the respect of the leaders of my order. Though they may hope you don't do as the Director asks, they saw your pure intentions in the truths you spoke before them. Whatever you choose to do, it will be as the cycle was meant to be.” Oddly comforted by the alien's words she returned to their trek, climbing the endless flight of stairs into the stark light of day. They moved away from the temple,

tearing their way through the barrier surrounding them. They emerged into the dark of twilight, as the sun suddenly shifted to below the shifting dunes around them.

“How long were we there for, Faithful?” The Captain asked, gazing around at the dark space, and the dim lights of the shuttle in the distance.

“It is nearing dawn. Time flows strangely in the temple. We only experienced an hour or so of time, but nearly 16 hours of real time has passed since we entered.” Seeing the confusion on the Captain's face, he waved his free arm in dismissal. “It is complicated. It takes years to even grasp the basics. Only the priesthood, and our top scientists, really engage with theories of time in any real depth. Come, we must be away.” And with that he led Arnie over to the shuttle. They clambered aboard, the pilot's voice coming in over the speakers.

“We are ready for launch. Please prepare for atmospheric exit.” The hatches sealed, and Arnie took the time to strap in properly as they began to ascend into the sky. Another several minutes of jolts and bumps followed as the shuttle's engines fought against the forces of gravity before finally ripping free from the planet's grip, boosting towards the aliens' capital ship.

“I'll be glad never to have to visit a planet again.” The Captain muttered as they slowed and moved to dock with the ship. There was a hollow clang, followed by a hiss as the airlock pressurised. From a hatch at the front of the ship, the pilot emerged. Captain Arnie moved to undo her safety bindings, when she noticed the sword clutched in one of the pilot's hands.

“What-” she managed to get out, before Faithful launched himself at the deadly assailant, his staff being wielded in both hands. The priest knocked the sword from his

assailant's grip with a strike that nearly snapped the pilot's hand in half, before using his momentum to knock him to the ground. As the assassin struggled to his feet, Faithful scooped his blade from the ground, and plunged it into the soft belly of the Chitter, bringing the creature's life to an end. Captain Arnie watched in shock as the priest pulled the blade from the corpse and moved over to her.

“Captain, we need to go.”

“What the hell is happening?” she asked, struggling with her restraints.

“Director is making his play. That soldier's job would have been to capture you, most likely to trade for the information he so desires.” Arnie quickly got up from her chair and moved towards the hatch.

“And now we are going to enter his own vessel, swarming with his servants?”

“We cannot use this vessel, as it has probably been locked into its docking port. We must get you to your room.”

“I mean, I have a weapon in my carry bag, but I don't know if a pistol is going to be much help in this situation.”

“Your room is a detachable escape vessel.” The priest climbed the ladder to the hatch and prepared to open it. “When you get there, pull the green lever on the far right. It will trigger the autopilot program, which has been designed to get you back to the Lucian.” He looked at her, and she swore if he had been a human he would have been grinning. “Are you ready to go?”

They emerged from the shuttle into the small bay and were running almost immediately. There hadn't been any guards around, probably because they had thought a single soldier would have had no problem with an unarmed human. They sprinted from the room and down the corridor, running past startled workers and security as they did. Songs chased after them, asking them what was happening or demanding that they stop. Soon, a song began to play over the ship's speakers, ordering the apprehension of the Captain before she could escape. A couple of soldiers tried to grab her, but Faithful managed to drive them off with a flurry of attacks and soon they were in the clear, her room directly ahead. She ran inside and pulled her trusty sidearm from the bag before moving over to the control panel.

"This lever?" she asked, pointing at one of the various controls.

"That's it" came the reply from outside the doors. She yanked it, and felt engines begin to rumble beneath her.

"Come inside. We're about to go." she called out to the watchful priest.

"It's too late for that." Faithful said, as several guards charged into view. "The automated system needs time, so I will have to buy you it." And with that he charged off, sword rushing to meet its new victims. Swearing profusely, Captain Arnie began to fire shots in support, but they did little more than provide momentary distractions as the soldiers battled the priest. The airlocks closed, cutting off her view of the noble priest. She slammed into the wall as the ship took off at speed, heading for the Lucian with comms screaming out to her about who was onboard.

Chapter 14

4 Years prior to Present

Alpha pushed aside the tent flap and began to make his way out into the camp. He scratched at the patches of stubble that were beginning to sprout across his rough features. He walked through the clusters of plastic habitation tents, his boots squelching through the rain soaked mud paths that crossed through the large settlement. The lilac sky of Europa above them was clear of the clouds that had passed through during the night, and there was a crispness in the air that cut through the stench of unwashed bodies and refuse. Squadrons of Martian troops saluted as he walked past them, their black uniforms fresh from the factories on Mars. Almost as fresh as the troops themselves.

Alpha was still shocked at the number of new clones being pumped out by the factories back home. This camp housed nearly two thousand Martians, only a hundred of which were more than 6 months old. The higher ups in the Martians military were insisting that the increases in production were just to help hold the swathes of new territory they had captured from the Terrans and Spacers, but Alpha was privy to the casualty figures from the assaults on Mercury and Vesta. Even by increasing production by almost ten thousand clones per week, they were fighting a losing war of attrition as their forces were decimated again and again. Alpha wandered past the prisoner pens,

where soldiers and civilians captured in the fall of Europa's third largest settlement were being held. Most just lay huddled in the centre of their cages, eyes listless as they sat in their own filth. They were cleaner than usual, the rain having provided a much-needed cleanse for them, but they still wallowed in the misery of their confinement.

A pair of Martians opened up one of the cages and began to haul out the bodies of those who had succumbed to the weather during the night, hefting the frail bodies over each shoulder like sacks of grain and piling them up on a nearby truck to be hauled out of camp. He paused for a moment, watching as a man tried to stop them from taking the body beside him, scrabbling desperately with claw-like hands. One of the Martians backhanded the man and he fell to the ground without a murmur. They kicked him, and seeing no response, added his body to that of his woman in the pile. Alpha forced himself to continue on his walk, headed for the edges of camp.

A wooden palisade, built from timber sourced in the surrounding forest, was nearly twice the height of a Martian, and had been built specifically to bear the weight of the men patrolling its walls. A gate had been set into the wall, built from metal siding torn from the colonists' homes during the last attack. The guards came to attention as Alpha approached, and Alpha gave them a salute in response.

"Can we help you, boss?" The larger of the pair asked, his distended jaw making the words breathy and indistinct.

"I am just going to head out for a bit, soldier."

"For what purpose, boss?" The man seemed a bit embarrassed to ask. "Have to note it in the log." Alpha sighed, exhaustion bearing down on him.

"And who has decided that you have to do that?"

“Batch Commander Coland, boss.” Alpha nodded, his hand clenching unconsciously as the words confirmed his suspicions.

“Well, just put it down that I have decided to go for a stroll, okay?” The man nodded, and looked askew at his partner, who produced a datapad. With slow, methodical motions, he began to type into the slate, speaking the words even as he typed.

“Alpha, Grek, leaving, camp, to, go, for, a, walk.” The work took a couple of minutes, before the Martian finally managed to finish his logging of the event. The one with the distended jaw saluted and opened up the gate, allowing Alpha to continue on his way.

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The path out of camp was less muddy than those of the camp's interior. The only tracks were from the corpse trucks carrying their burdens to the mass grave a few miles to the west of camp, or the occasional foot patrol that was sent to monitor the surrounding area in case of a Terran attack. As Alpha continued to follow the trail, the grass of the surrounding fields fed into a wall of thick, colourful jungle. At the edge of this wall of twisted branches and yellowed leaves, the track turned, running parallel to the thick woodland. On the dirt track lay a body, fallen from the back of the last vehicle to pass through. Seeing the lifeless eyes staring up from the dirt, Alpha trudged into the trees, pushing through the branches as he went. The trees were short, stumpy things, whose only goal seemed to be to prevent passage past them. They stretched their moss ridden

arms out and blocked Alpha's path, but he simply brushed them aside as he went, snapping them with his bulk and carving a path of destruction. This was the same route he took most days, but Europa's plant life was hardy and grew at astounding rates. Only the liberal application of troopers with flamethrowers kept the area around the camp clear of new growth, similar to the strategies employed by the more permanent settlements of the moon.

After another few minutes of walking, he reached his thinking spot. A cliff, overlooking a fast moving river nearly a mile below him, lay free of vegetation. Over the course of his assignment here, he had cleared this area so many times that the plants seemed to be afraid to keep growing to fill the gap. He sat down at the edge and let his legs dangle over the rushing water below. Several large insects, their humming wings nearly as wide as he was, darted across the open water below, pulling writhing fish from the water with their clawed limbs. He watched them for a while, listening to their buzzing as they hovered over the rapids and had their fill of prey. One took off to hunt a bird unlucky enough to fly above them. He observed as the dragonfly chased the small bundle of feathers behind the tree line of the opposite bank, where the bird's desperate calls suddenly cut off. He looked up into the sky, watching as the distant orb of Jupiter floated just out of reach. He sat there for several hours, listening to the audible sounds of the fast-growing plant life straining under its unnatural growth speeds as the plants fought each other for a hint of light. A small sapling had sprouted next to him in the time he had been sitting there, and he ran one finger along the plant's smooth bark.

"You're my ancestor you know." he said, watching as another branch began to form before his eyes. "This whole moon, terraformed to help with colonisation."

Grasping the sapling, he yanked it from the soil, and inspected it. "Genetically modified plants with accelerated growth to help with stabilizing the atmosphere. Make it breathable." Even as he held it, the things' roots were extending, reaching for the distant soil. "But you grow too fast. You made the world dangerous, overrunning settlements and tearing into emergency bunkers as you fought for sustenance." With a scowl, he lobbed the plant into the river, watching it hit the water far below with an inaudible splash. Within moments, fish swarmed the plant, and were in turn swarmed by the dragonflies. "They tried to create a tool. Instead, they created monsters." His comms chimed, and he answered the call.

"What is it?" he asked, his mood making the words sharp.

"Hey boss." Rho, his trusted lieutenant, was bright enough to ignore his leader's tone. "Something has got the commander rattled." Alpha sighed, holding the bridge of his nose.

"What's our genius leader got on his mind?"

"No idea, but he's mustering the new meat on the parade ground for some announcement." Alpha clambered to his feet and started to make his way back into the woods.

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Get the team assembled. Might be we have a Terran raid incoming, so make sure they are ready for a fight."

*

The camp was a mass of confusion when Alpha returned. The gates were wide open and as he entered, a convoy of trucks trundled past, their open topped frames covered with Martians who sat in the back tray or clung to the frames as they drove off. Alpha hurried towards the parade field where the booming voice of Coland could be heard from a speaker system. Rho intercepted him as he arrived, pulling him into an alley between two half built wooden barracks blocks.

“What the hell’s going on Rho?” Alpha asked, staring at the fearful face of his friend.

“We’re moving out, boss. Word’s come that we are to withdraw from Europa.”

“What, the whole unit?”

“The whole invasion force, boss. Nearly a hundred thousand Martian troops and support personnel from across the moon and neighbouring moons.” Alpha pushed past him and walked onto the parade ground. The speech had just ended, Alpha had to push his way through the hundreds of excitedly talking Martian soldiers as they dispersed. None of them were without mutations, a result of the accelerated vat growth apparently. None were too impacted by their defects, but there was little of the unified similarities found in older batches like Alpha’s own. Shoving past the last remnants, he saw Coland standing on a wooden stage, in a deep discussion with his personal guard, Alpha Naso. They fell silent as he approached. Coland’s bodyguard disappeared, scurrying off to perform his master’s bidding.

Coland wasn’t a Martian in the widely accepted sense of the word. For the last half a century, Martians had been the big, dumb labour force of the solar system, and more recently the psychopathic revolutionaries who had sent everything to hell. Coland,

however, was an original Martian. Descended from the first settlers on Mars, he had been amongst the small population of non-vat grown who had sided with the Martian uprising, and for that he had been rewarded. He also considered himself to be something of a parent to the Martian clones, given that his primary role before the war had been in refining the Martian genetic growth process. He was a small man, wearing a custom-made black uniform that bore his name and rank in small letters above his right breast pocket. His face looked like a youngish thirty, with only the faintest signs of age around the corners of his eyes, but Alpha knew for a fact that he was easily twice that age. The man smiled with his mouth as Alpha approached and raised an arm in greeting.

“Alpha Grek,” he said, the name sounding like an insult from his educated voice. “It’s good to see you have returned.” Alpha saw through the lie that was, but let it pass. It never paid to question authority, even in a revolution against the oppressors.

“What’s happening, boss? I heard we are pulling out.” The man nodded, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a cigarette and lighter. He lit it and took a puff, savouring the feeling with closed eyes.

“We are indeed, my boy. Word from on high. The political nature of the war has changed, and we are to withdraw to the fleet until new orders are issued.” He took another puff, the white smoke snatched away by the wind as soon as he let it go.

“I shall see about preparing the men. We may need to take several trips, as the numbers of troops and prisoners far exceeds our access to vehicles.” His senior officer’s face took on an expression of calculating intelligence for a moment, before he smiled jovially.

“Not to worry my lad, part of your worry is for naught. The prisoners are not to come with us.”

“We’re letting them go?” The man laughed, the gruff laugh of a man amused by the words of a servant.

“Not exactly, Grek. Alpha Naso is going to handle that particular issue.” Alpha’s eyes widened and he spun from Coland, leaping from the platform and sprinting towards the captive pens. The man’s shouts for him to stop fell on deaf ears. Alpha waved his men over as he ran. Rho fell in beside him, the dozen or so other members of his team a few strides behind him.

“What’s happening!?” Rho asked, yelling over the rushing of the wind besides their faces.

“They’re going to kill the captives!” Alpha roared back. He began to sprint, shoulder charging anyone who failed to dodge out of the way in time. Ahead, screams and shouts could be heard, followed by the crackle of rifles firing in unison.

Alpha burst from the crowd and skidded to a halt as another volley went off. Naso was directing a team of Martians to clear away the bodies of the latest group of prisoners, their bodies lying in the blood-soaked dirt. Another cage was being emptied, the occupants staring in horror at their friends or gazing vacantly at the sky above them.

“What are you doing, Naso!” Alpha roared, causing the Martians nearby to stop their actions, eyes wide. Naso, his arms a mess of scar tissue from countless combat engagements, pushed past the nearest Martians. His hands gripped the handle of the

shock stick at his waist as he strode towards Alpha Grek, face almost void of all expression.

“What I was ordered to do, Grek.” he said, his tone scornful. “The Hero of Theta 1b is not needed here.” Grek pushed past him and shoved the Martian leading prisoners from their cages.

“No more prisoners will die today. We take them with us. The execution of prisoners will just lead to our people getting slaughtered by the Terrans, or by the Spacers.”

“Not anymore, Alpha Grek.” The upper-class tones of Commander Coland rang out around them. He emerged from the crowd that was gathering, his cigarette still placed firmly between his lips. “A peace deal has been struck. The war is over.” Most of the Martians nearby didn’t react, failing to comprehend the words being spoken, but Alphas' team glanced at each other in shock.

“But then why-“

“Why kill them? Because they are witnesses. No one will ever know what happened here on Europa. Do you have any idea the sorts of actions we have taken to try and claim this jungle-infested hellhole, Grek? The rules that we broke, the atrocities committed?” He gave Alpha another of his emotionless smiles. “Acts you were a part of just by being here?” Now he laughed and Alpha felt his skin crawl at the callous man before him.

“You're a monster.”

“We all are, you imbecile!” Coland cried, still laughing. “Only you never had a choice in the matter. You are in the hole with us now. You can either help us dig faster,

or be buried alongside us.” And with that, he pointed a finger at the prisoners. “Kill them, and let us move on from this place with no one the wiser.” Alpha Grek barely felt them pushing the rifle into his hands. He looked at the prisoners, at the men, women and children with hollow cheeks and empty eyes.

“It would be a mercy now.” Coland said, almost consoling in his manner. Alpha nodded slowly.

“Yes, it would.” he agreed and shot Coland through the chest. There was a perfect moment, as time seemed to freeze. Coland's eyes still bore a look of crafty superiority, but as Alpha watched as his mind caught up with reality as his life poured itself out of his chest in great spurts of dirty crimson. Sound rushed back with a great howl as Naso pulled his weapon out and charged at the shocked Alpha, before Rho and the others opened up with their weapons, shredding him into his component atoms. One of the new blood Martians fired at Rho, catching him in the leg, only for Alpha to end him in response. Some of the other Martians went for weapons, and soon a massive firefight was starting up. Alpha saw several of the prisoners dive to the ground, covering their heads as the air filled with bullets, but many of the others were caught in the crossfire. Alpha felt the rage building in the back of his mind, the pounding of the blood in his head driving him to charge his enemies.

“Stop this!” he bellowed, dropping his gun from twitching hands. All the surviving Martians froze, the words rolling around them like thunder over distant mountains. Alpha fell to his knees and pressed his hands into the mud beneath him. “Enough.” he whispered, feeling his pain gathering in the corners of his eyes. With a shake of his head he climbed to his feet and looked around.

“Everyone, this is done! I am in command of this batch now. I command you all to put down your weapons!” Alpha’s own men placed their weapons on the ground without hesitation. The others stood around for a moment, many with wounds still leaking. Then one dropped his weapon, then another. Soon there was a hail of weapons landing in the mud. Alpha moved over to the fallen forms of the prisoners and checked to see if they were alive. He helped a trembling woman to her feet and looked into her hopeless eyes.

“It’s over. You’re safe now.”

Chapter 15

4 Years prior to Present

The Lucian limped into the Ceres dry docks, her engines dying all the way. Her flanks had been battered and torn, as if by some great beast. Several small tug boats were latched onto her, providing the extra force needed to reach the assigned resting point. Flights of fighters crossed her path, patrolling the near-space of the massive space dock. The structure was a mass of metal struts and half-finished vessels, with thousands of construction drones zooming around on various tasks. As the Lucian slid into its assigned space, a corridor extended out to connect to the ship, connecting with a puff of released air. Down the corridor swarmed a mixture of support personnel and medical staff, their starched uniforms creasing as their owners sprinted for the access hatch, many of them yelling into communicators as they went.

The hatch ahead of them opened and the dirty faces of security troops greeted the approaching aid. No words were spoken as the teams poured in, finding the corridors filled with the injured and dying. Medics rushed to the sides of men and women in tattered uniforms, using scanners to determine injuries and readying doses of painkillers in clear syringes. Repair crews were directed to the lifts, which they filled beyond capacity with each load. Like a shot of steroids to a dying body, the influx of aid fought to stabilise the wounded ship. Soon stretchers bearing the worst injuries were

flowing back over to the dock's medical facilities, and those who couldn't be moved were made as comfortable as possible as specialist equipment was brought in for treatment.

Captain Arnie limped down the connecting corridor, Bracken beside her. His left arm was thrown over her shoulders, and she bore his weight down the corridor, apparently ignored by the rushing figures around her. As she approached the end, a guard in the uniform of Ceres security moved to intercept her.

"Sorry, only station personal and medical emergencies beyond this point." Bracken gave a weak laugh, and raised the ragged stump of his arm, ending only a few inches from his shoulder with a blood clogged bandage.

"Well, if this ain't an emergency, I'd hate to see the other guys." The Captain angrily shifted her uniform to clearly display her rank badge. The security guard's eyes bulged out and he threw together a sloppy salute.

"Sorry ma'am, didn't realise."

"Where's the medical bay, man!?" she barked, ignoring the pain in her own legs. The man started to stutter out some vague directions, but the Captain waved him off. "Help me with this idiot. We will go together." The man hopped forward and boldly lifted Bracken over his shoulder, much to the chagrin of the injured man. He then began to make his way down the busy corridor, weaving through the traffic with practised ease, an exhausted Captain in tow.

They reached the medical bay and were halted at the door by a harried looking orderly with a datapad.

“Only emergency cases are to be treated here. If you have something that can be treated by staff on board the Lucian, please leave. We are nearly at maximum capacity.” Captain Arnie pushed through a handful of crew and walked right up to the woman, stopping mere inches from her face.

“Here’s what’s going to happen here. I am the Captain of the Lucian, and my First Officer here,” she thumbed over her shoulder at Bracken, who was still hanging from the guards’ shoulders. “Got his arm torn off in the stupid belief that being close to a Martian in a firefight was a good decision. He needs an augment attached immediately. Is that clear?” The orderly seemed scared but swallowed and squared her shoulders.

“I have my orders, Captain. While severe, that injury can be treated onboard the Lucian.” Arnie slapped the orderly, bringing tears to the woman’s eyes, before shoving her out of the way and gesturing for the guard to bring Bracken as she strode into the chaos of the medical facilities. The space was a hub of frantic activity, yells and cries filling the interconnected series of medical bays. The stench of blood and antiseptics flooded the Captain's nose as she entered, but she barely paused as she moved to intercept the nearest hurrying doctor. She grabbed their arm, bringing them to a stop.

“Who is in charge of attaching augmentation in this facility?” The man tried to pull away, but the Captain dug her fingers into the flesh of his arm, her nails breaking the skin. The man winced, then pointed towards a closed door nearby.

“Dr Ajita is in surgery right now. He should be able to help you in an hour or so.” The Captain wasn’t listening and shoved her way through the rushing doctors and nurses to reach the door. She burst in and met the wide-eyed gazes of half a dozen nurses and doctors staring at her from around a surgery table.

“Who the hell are you?” The doctor holding the blood slick scalpel at the head of the table said, voice muffled by the face shield he was wearing. Arterial blood formed streaks across it, jetted up from the body of the person before him.

“What surgery are you performing, Dr Ajita?” she asked, ignoring the pleas of the orderly at the door.

“This man is having his eyes replaced with biotech implants. Why?”

“Is the surgery at a vital stage?”

“Well, we still have to-“

“Is the man liable to die on the table!?” She yelled, her temper getting the better of her.

“No, no. Please, what is this about?” The security guard brought Bracken in and laid him gently on the ground. His head lolled to the side, unconscious. The blood dripping from his stump had slowed to a crawl.

“Save my friend,” she said simply and collapsed to the floor.

*

The Captain woke in a metal chair, its cheaply made backing digging into the small of her back with stubborn focus. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and squinted into the brightly lit room around her. She was still in the surgery, but she couldn't see Bracken. The medical staff from before were clustered around the table, working without speaking. A cough next to her caused her to notice the security guard from earlier, offering a cup of something that sent small trails of steam into the air.

“Thought you could do with some coffee, Captain,” he said. She took the warm cup gratefully, feeling the heat flow through it into her hands like an infusion of solar energy. She took a sip and started to splutter as the near boiling liquid burnt her tongue.

“It’s a tad hot,” the guard said, covering a smile. She scowled at him, but took another, more careful sip.

“Where’s Bracken?”

“In the middle of surgery. As soon as they saw how bad he had got, they had him up there and were pumping him full of meds. They wanted to move you out of the medical bay, but I told them you would probably kill us all if you weren’t here when you woke up.” She smiled at that, and drank some more of the tar like coffee, feeling her mind beginning to whirl back into action.

“What’s your name?” she asked, eyeing him speculatively.

“Garth,” he said, taking a seat next to her.

“Thank you, Garth.” He just nodded and watched the doctors and nurses working away before them. Raised voices started to echo from beyond the closed door of the surgery, and after a moment the orderly from earlier reappeared, the bruise left by the Captains slap beginning to form.

“Uh, Captain? Commodore Hansen would like a word.” The Captain cursed under her breath and stood up.

“Please let me know if anything changes with Bracken,” she told Garth, who nodded. She ran her hands down her uniform, trying to flatten the worst of the wrinkles that had formed, and strode out of the room.

*

The Commodore stood with hands on hips, her battle-scarred face watching Arnie as she approached. The Captain came to a halt and gave a sharp salute, acutely aware that her uniform still bore an impressive amount of dirt and grime.

“Commodore, you asked for me?”

“Yes, Captain. I understand that you barged into the active surgery of one of Ceres leading politicians, and hijacked his doctor?”

“My First Officer needed her more, Commodore.”

“I’m sure he did,” she said and rubbed her temples. “You always seem to make a mess of things, Captain. Every time it gets political, you just run everyone over in your haste.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am,” Arnie said, remaining at attention, eyes focused on a small patch of rust that was eating the wall just behind the Commodore's right shoulder.

“I know. Come, you need to debrief me on what the hell happened to your ship.” She turned away and moved off, leading a small entourage of scribes and security. Arnie glanced back at Bracken's surgery room and ran to catch up to her commanding officer. The woman’s stride was fierce, the crowds parted before her as she moved deeper into the dry docks structure. Arnie managed to maintain a jog next to her, the restfulness she had gained from the nap before melting away far too quickly.

“So,” the Commodore said, her eyes still fixed ahead of them. “The Martians finally got you, eh?”

“That intel we were provided with was wrong, ma’am. They had two frigates waiting for us to turn up. We were under fire as soon as we ported into the coordinates.”

“And you didn’t retreat?” They turned left, entering a slightly less congested sector. “It’s standard operating policy to withdraw from ambushes like that immediately.”

“They took out our jump drive with their first volley. It took three hours to patch enough of the damage to jump, but by then we had been boarded and were under constant bombardment.” They reached a small set of offices, and the Commodore dismissed her peripheral as they entered one of them. The Commodore closed the door behind them, and sat down at desk, Arnie taking a seat across from her.

“So you fought.”

“So we fought.” The Captain smiled grimly. “And we won.” The Commodore pulled out a data slate and began to read through it.

“You won, but the losses you sustained during the fighting were significant. A quarter of all crew personnel, and nearly two thirds of all security personnel killed or severely injured. Half of all senior staff are gone. 90% of all ship weapons were destroyed.” She put down the slate, and steepled her fingers. “The Lucian is nearly unsalvageable.” Arnie’s eye twitched, and her hands gripped the arm rests of her chair with white knuckled fury.

“But she won. Both frigates were destroyed. Estimated enemy losses are close to thirty thousand soldiers and crew.”

“Yes. In normal circumstances, I would be handing you and your people medals and giving you all a holiday.” She sighed and rubbed her temple again. “Why today.”

“What’s happened, Commodore?”

“There have been ongoing peace talks between the factions. I don’t know all the details, but today a peace deal was signed. All factions have declared a ceasefire and are withdrawing their troops to their established space.”

“So, the war is over?” Arnie ran her hand through her auburn hair, shock stark on her face.

“I hope so. This thing is being held together by the thinnest of hairs. Your little stunt today could have cost us the entire war.”

“But-“

“Look, Captain. Personally, I think you did nothing wrong. The damn Martians attacked you, and I can see you have been through hell. But I have to protect the Spacer Alliance now.”

“You’re throwing us under the bus,” she said, her face flushed with fury. “Just to save face in front of some bloody gene breeds?”

“I’m sorry, Arnie. It’s the only way to ensure that we don’t lose this chance at peace before it has begun.” She pulled out another data slate and passed over to the Captain.

“You will receive a demotion, and will be reassigned to another ship, as will your senior staff. We will also decommission the Lucian. Her parts will be used to repair dozens of other vessels in need.” The Commodore stopped as Arnie began to laugh, the sound almost manic as it burst from her exhausted body. For several moments she just let the stress of her last few days wash out of her in a flood of noise. As it finally trailed away, she stood, leaning over the desk and matching the Commodore's gaze.

“Now see here, Ma’am. None of that is going to happen. My people are loyal to this alliance, but they are more loyal to the ship. If you even think of trying to punish them for doing their duty, or if you try to take away my ship, I will have no choice but to let the whole system know about all the dark little secrets you would hate to have them knowing right about now. All those operations I did off the books, the raids behind enemy lines, the elimination of spies in our own ranks. All the way back to Captain Hakai himself, and the bullets I had to put in him to save us. You move against my ship, and my crew, and I take you all with me.” The Commodore sat there, mouth hanging open in shock for a moment, before anger darkened her features.

“Where’s your loyalty to the Alliance?”

“The ship is its crew, and the crew is the ship. We are family. We would rather die than betray that.”

*

Arnie wandered her way through the corridors, not really paying much attention to where she was going. People gave her a wide berth, and so she barely realised where she was until she glanced out of the window next to her. Beyond the hardened glass lay the Lucian, her ravaged skin clouded by repair drones and engineers in spacesuits. Every wound upon her callused shell was like a cut upon the Captain’s own flesh, her mind felt the pang of pain in sympathy with the old girl. It was several hours later when Garth found her, still watching her ship.

“Captain?” he asked, bringing her out of her mind.

“News?”

“Yes ma’am. He’s out of surgery.” She smiled faintly, and together they started to walk back to the medical bay.

“Is he awake yet?”

“Not when I left, but the doctors had taken him off the meds that had kept him under for the surgery, so it won’t be too long before he is back up and about.” They walked for several minutes, Garth staying silent as the Captain mulled things over in her mind. As they approached the medbay the orderly outside scurried away, eyeing the Captain nervously. They entered and Garth led her over to the recovery area, where a number of her crew were resting after their treatments. A few of the more aware ones saluted or waved, and she paused to chat with them as they passed, checking in on their recovery and asking about their treatments. Many had sustained severe internal injuries and would be unable to come back to work for months yet. She promised to ensure that they would have their positions on the Lucian waiting for them once they were back up and about. She finally found Bracken, who was complaining to a nurse about how uncomfortable his mattress was.

“Thank you, nurse, I’m sure his bedding is perfectly serviceable,” the Captain said, sitting at the end of the bed. Bracken smiled in greeting, though pain pulled the expression into a rictus grin.

“Captain, I see you’re back from wherever they had you stashed. You wouldn’t happen to have something to help soothe a parched throat, would you? They only have offered me water, but I have a need for something stronger.” She smiled at him and looked at his bandaged shoulder and the new arm beneath.

“How’s that feeling?”

“Oh, can’t complain too much. The metal is a bit cold to the touch, but the Doctor who stitched it to me said it can be configured to match my natural body temperature, so it will be good in no time.” He rolled his neck, and there was an audible popping as his joints moved. “So, when are we heading out again? I have some debts to settle with those big ogres.” She patted his hand, a small smile on her features.

“Not any time soon, old friend. It’s not common knowledge yet, but the admirals have negotiated a ceasefire. It’s looking like we will have peace.” Bracken snorted irritably.

“Those idiots always have to mess with my fun.”

“Yes, they do. You get some sleep, Bracken. I need my First Officer up and about, and not taking a break in some fancy hotel.” And with that she was off, leaving a furiously shouting Bracken in his bed, a smile plastered on both their faces.

Chapter 16

Present Day

The Captain strode through the doors of the bridge and began to make her way through the press of people. Officers and crew were shouting out reports or running with communique. Bracken stood at the centre, watching the main view screen with shocked slackness. She pushed her way through the panicking figures to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned, a weary smile breaking through his bleak mask like the sun clawing its way up from a horizon.

“Captain, I'm glad you're back with us.”

“Not as glad as I am to be back.” Bracken moved out of her way and the Captain took her seat, linking her comms to the shipboard communications system. Her voice began to echo out across every corridor and hole throughout the ship. “Crew, this is the Captain. Our hosts have proven to be less hospitable than previously hoped.” Around the bridge, the crew paused in their panic as the words filled the air with calm assurance. “They think that we will just roll over and die.” She looked around at Bracken, and the rest of the bridge crew, and her lips curved into a savage grin. “It's time we showed them what us humans can do. All crew to battle stations!” As she spoke, she drew her antique pistol and checked the clip. Satisfied, she holstered it. She flicked her comms over to the officer's channel and demanded a report from Alpha. He answered immediately, the sounds of running feet echoing in the background.

“Captain?”

“Report, Alpha. Are your teams in position?”

“We are nearly at a hundred percent readiness, boss. My teams are deploying to all critical locations, as well as key corridor junctions. The gunnery decks are prepared to fire on your orders. I also made sure to secure the Ambassador and his retinue in their quarters.”

“Very good. Stand by.” She turned to Bracken. “What are the bugs doing?”

“There has been a spike in communications between their vessels, and a number of their ships are closing with us.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing more aggressive than a few demands to maintain our anchorage.” The Captain ran her hand through her hair and stared at the sensor readouts with a furrowed brow. She tapped her pad, highlighting a cluster of small signals.

“What’s this return from?” Bracken checked the logs and shrugged.

“Space debris? They seem to have been ejected from one of the alien vessels several hours ago. No signs of life.”

“Any power signatures?”

“Minimal power signatures, nothing that could be-” The Captain's figure stabbed accusingly at the objects, “That’s where the threat lies. Prepare to fire the mass drivers at my command.” Bracken seemed unconvinced, but he signalled the orders. Across the gunnery decks, Martian labourers heaved large magnetic balls into the barrels of the cannons and slammed the breach shut. The electromagnetic coils began to thrum as energy flowed through them, and the gunnery crew retreated behind viewing ports as

the targeting systems began to adjust the barrels. The team leader sent a ready signal to the bridge, where the Captain thumbed an acknowledgement. Bracken glanced up from his screen.

“Captain, we have movement.”

“On screen.” The display shifted to show a magnified view of the debris field. Several objects from amongst it began to shift towards the Lucian, small flares of light indicating the ignition of engines. Bracken increased the magnification, and the small objects were revealed. They were boarding pods, their bulbous bodies narrowing to a drill-like end which was aimed firmly at the Lucian. The Captain nodded grimly.

“Fire on those pods.” Bracken sent the orders through and the weapons jutting out along the length of the Lucian opened up. Lumps of metal were expelled from the barrels with momentous force, propelled through the weightless vacuum. The boarding pods rushed to meet them, bursts of energy propelling them toward their targets. The leading pod was hit by the volley of weapons fire and burst into a conflagration of fire and shrapnel. Another of the pods was winged by a stray shot, and vented its atmosphere into space, followed by the remains of its asphyxiated crew. A cheer went up amongst the bridge crew, and Alpha pumped his fist with obvious relish. The Captain remained calm, watching the still approaching pods with a calculated eye. Bracken ordered another volley, but the Captain caught his eye.

“We aren’t going to stop them, Bracken.” The First Officer nodded, accepting the word of his Captain without question. He turned to Alpha.

“We need to deploy all available security personnel not currently assigned to defensive positions already to prepare for borders.” Grek looked with confusion at the screen, which showed another pod being torn apart.

“But we are slaughtering them.” The Captain turned to look at him, eyes hard.

“Not fast enough, Alpha. Now, do what you do best and break some heads.”

Alpha saluted smartly and began to move toward the door. He paused as the Captain continued: “And would you be so kind as to assign a detail to my personal command?” At these words Alpha gave a savage grin.

“Certainly, Captain.” And with that he was gone. Bracken gave a joyless smile.

“Planning on getting in on the action, Captain?”

“Only if it proves necessary, Bracken. Now, let’s see how many of these bugs we can end ahead of schedule.” And with a wave of her hand, another volley was launched. One of the pods veered wildly to avoid the volley, slamming into its neighbour, and damaging their engines. The gunnery decks were ramping up their rate of fire, and the decks of the Lucian shuddered with the force of the bombardment. A call on the Captains comms distracted her for a moment, and she grimaced as she noticed who was calling.

“Karo.” The Captain struggled to keep the distaste from her voice. “What do you want?”

“What are you doing Captain!” The woman's voice was a screech of indignant rage. The Captain weathered the aural battering with practised ease.

“Protecting the Lucian and her crew, Doctor. Is something wrong?”

“Is something wrong!?” There was audible spluttering on the other end of the call. “You are starting a war with the first sentient life form humanity has ever encountered, and you ask me if something is wrong?”

“We didn’t choose this war, Karo. The Director did. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to stop us all from being ripped apart by Chitter soldiers.” She cut the link. She adjusted the targeting computers parameters and watched as another pod ceased to exist. She looked up as Dr Karo marched in, face a blotchy red.

“You idiot!” she screamed, heading straight for the Captain, hands out like grasping claws. “What have you done!” A pair of crew members intercepted the fuming scientist but struggled to keep her contained as she let loose a string of curses. Bracken stepped forward, ready to carry her from the bridge, but the Captain placed a hand on his arm, stopping him in his tracks. She rose gracefully from her seat and gave Karo her best inspection glare.

“Karo, briefing room. Now.” She didn’t even raise her voice, but before Karo knew what she was doing her legs had marched her out the door and into the briefing room, followed by the Captain. Karo spun around, prepared to jump back into her tirade, but the Captain raised a hand to stop her.

“Karo, I could have a security detail detain you for the duration of the mission. We both know that Alpha would be happy to accommodate the request. However, you understand the Chitter more than anyone else on the ship, so I am willing to let this slide.” Karo stood there, her mouth wide open in shock. “Now that I have your attention,” the Captain continued. “I want to hear what your thoughts are. Without the tirade.” Karo nodded, cowed by the forceful woman before her.

“I, uh, I just am shocked you would fire on the Chitter in such an unprovoked fashion.” She began to warm back up to the subject and grew in confidence as she continued. “There is no good reason for attacking a peaceful race, and-“

“No good reason, eh?” The Captain began to laugh, a low chuckle that started deep inside, bubbling forth in great bursts. Karo seemed to shrink, disliking the sound. “You think that the damned Director gave us a choice? He asked me to give his people access to our knowledge of genetic engineering. From my talks with the ruling priesthood, there are clear reasons why they refuse to touch that science anymore, and it is not my place to put the knowledge in the hands of someone who stands opposed to his own governing body.”

“You refused him,”

“I did. Do you know what he did then, Karo? He tried to have his soldiers detain me, so he could use me to bargain for the information he sought.” Captain Arnie sighed wearily and turned away from Karo. “I managed to get back to the Lucian, but now the bugs are coming here, and I don't think that I will be able to stop them from tearing her apart. So tell me, Doctor Rala Karo, do you think I had no good reason for firing on the approaching boarding pods?” Karo stood there, her mouth moving limply.

A knock at the door revealed a crew mate, who shuffled nervously before his Captain.

“The First officer requests you on the bridge, sir.”

“Tell him I'll be right there.” She turned back to Karo. “Go back to your quarters, Karo. I'll deal with you later.”

*

As the Captain re-entered the bridge, a crewman monitoring sensor suddenly started yelling.

“Contact! Contact! They're below us!” The words were met with a dozen alarms going off simultaneously, blaring out warning after warning across the crowded room.

“Hull breach on Deck 7”

“Emergency bulkheads deploying.”

“Intruders in the engineering decks.

“Atmosphere venting, starboard hanger bay.” The Captain stood before the main screen, which showed the pods latching onto the pockmarked hull of the Lucian and begin to cut their way in with their drill heads. She yelled over the sounds of the alarms.

“Turn those things off!” Slowly the alarms faded, leaving only the muffled chatter of the comms in crewmembers' ears and the rumble of distant guns. Walking over to a locker bolted to the wall, she placed her hand on the security scanner and unlocked it, revealing two dozen stun pistols.

“Share these out. Stay armed for as long as this takes.” As a pair of crewmen began to hand out the weapons, the Captain checked her pistol's ammo. She turned to Bracken and saluted.

“First Officer, you have the bridge. Good luck.” He returned the salute, and with that she was off, striding to the doors.

Just outside, she was met with Sergeant Haskur, leading a security detail.

“You requested us, Boss?” She smiled at the word choice and nodded.

“We seem to have an infestation. How about we go clean it up?”

Chapter 17

The Captain led the security team down the long arterial corridor at a run, the blaring sirens almost deafening as they shrieked warnings to those crew not already fleeing to safety. Ahead, a bulkhead had been lowered to slow the Chitters' advance, but already it was showing signs of decay as the bug's weapons accelerated its flow through time. Flakes of rust fell from the wall like sand through an hourglass, and the Captain halted her team fifty metres from the imminent breach.

“Okay, take cover. They will be coming through soon.” The troops scattered, taking refuge behind structural supports of discarded crates. All had their weapons set to lethal, and the thrum of electrical current buzzed at the edge of hearing, setting the Captains teeth on edge. She drew her sidearm and checked its ammo count. It was an old Vesper pistol, constructed back on Terra before there ever was a need for weapons that wouldn't punch holes in a steamship's hull. It was the only weapon on board that still used ancient lead and steel bullets and could put a hole in a Martian at a hundred paces. The Captain flicked off the safety and readied herself to confront the aliens who dared defile her ship.

The wait wasn't long. With a lack of formality, the Bulkhead collapsed into a cloud of flaked metal, and the first of the boarders pushed its way inside. It was massive, nearly a foot taller than even Grek Alpha, with glossy black carapace and an additional set of arms. In a grim parody of the body armour the humans wore, the creature had

bolted large sheets of sculpted metal onto itself, providing additional protection and weight to their frames.

As more of the creatures entered the corridor, it became apparent that there was little consistency in what weapons they carried. Most seemed to bear some sort of energy weapon, presumably using the same sort of temporal manipulation as the rest of their technology. However, a large number bore weapons clearly designed for close combat, with an array of spears and blades clutched in their four arms. The ones bearing ranged weapons began to open fire, but the splashes of green light only caused minor corrosion on the cover behind which her crew hid. The Captain tapped her comm bead:

“Okay boys and girls, let's bag ourselves some bugs, shall we?” A roar of assent greeted her words, and the unit opened fire.

Barbs of electricity fired in a solid volley, filling the space between the two parties with sparking blue light. The first few shots seemed to have a minimal effect, deflecting off the curved surfaces of the creature's armour and carapace. A couple went down, smoke pouring from their wounds as the small batteries embedded in each shot flooded their systems with a lethal amount of electricity. Unlike with humans, the creatures were almost silent, only the occasional burst of music signalling their communications. They continued to return fire, and the first human casualties began to fall. The green light rapidly aged those it touched till they collapsed, a withered skeleton bearing a final rictus grin. Captain Arnie fired off a burst with her own weapon, and was happy to see that the extra kick of the weapon easily punched through the creature armour, causing wounds that weep a yellowish liquid. Many of the Chitters troops were falling under the

professional fire of the security team. However, those that remained were pushing up fast, covering the distance with great lumbering strides. Sergeant Haskur, his weapons glowing red from the energy it was expelling, turned to her.

“We haven't got much time, Captain. We need to pull back before those things close with us.”

“Too late, Sergeant,” she called, putting a bullet through the head of the closest creature. “They are already here.” Then the bugs were amongst them, their wicked melee weapons slashing and stabbing. The Captain stumbled back, avoiding a blade with more luck than skill, before tripping over the bisected body of one of her team. She fired up into the face of the first Chitter to appear before her, blasting chunks from its carapace and sending it reeling away.

Then, her gun clicked empty.

With a panic driven by pure instinct, she rolled, avoiding a blast of sapphire energy, stowed her empty gun in its holster and reached out a hand, picking up a fallen taser. She fired, sending a bolt into the creature's yellowish underside, causing it to collapse in a flailing heap. Climbing to her feet, she caught a glimpse of Haskur being lifted into the air, hefted high on a long spear that had punched right through his gut. As his body spasmed in its death throes, his hand tightened on the trigger of his gun, sending a volley of death thudding into the sea of Chitter around him. The few remaining humans either died as they fought, flashing blades and flickers of iridescent light reaping them like pebbles before the flood, or were picked off as they tried to flee. Reaching down, the Captain drew a grenade from her belt. Depressing the trigger

button, she threw it into the mess of Chitter before her, and threw herself behind a support beam.

The explosion was muffled, a dull thud that seemed to have no effect on the charging behemoths. Then the world seemed to slow as the shockwave expanded. Bodies of the living and dead were lifted into the air, thrown about like so many ragdolls. Shrapnel cut through even the thickest armour, ripping its way through the internal organs and meat of the Chitter shock troops and the human soldiers with equal ferocity. Captain Arnie flattened herself against her minimal cover, fingers clutching desperately for a hand hold as the shockwave attempted to pick her up, just another doll to add to its collection. A spray of blood and ichor covered her, and then the bodies were falling, playthings scattered by an uncaring owner. By then she was already moving, her legs carrying her down the corridor towards the next bulkhead.

A feeble cry caught her attention, and she saw a man, his grey uniform stained black with blood, reaching out to her. Around him, the Chitter soldiers were beginning to stir. There was no time. She raised her gun, and sent a metal bolt scything into the man's brain, ending his suffering. Then she was off, sprinting with all the speed fear could lend her. Behind her, a haunting song began to play, and footsteps began to thunder on the metallic deck. She called on Bracken as she ran. His voice came in, though the link was choppy as the network became overloaded with traffic.

“Captain, I still have no reinforcements for you-” She began to shout down the link before he could finish.

“Seal the bulkhead in section Theta 3 now!”

“But Captain-”

“Now dammit!” The man was smart enough to obey, and just as she passed beneath the cut-off point, the slab of heavy metal fell into place, cutting the section off from the rest of the ship. She skidded to a halt and had to stop herself from falling to her knees. She tried the link again, but the network was too busy and the call couldn't get through. It was then she realised that she wasn't alone. A couple of dozen laborers stood before her, their eyes wide as they stared at the gore covered figure of their Captain. Most of them were human standard, with a handful of Martians providing much needed muscle. Their supervisor, a woman in Terran uniform, took a step towards her.

“Captain? Are you okay?” She waved the women's concern away with her free hand, before straightening herself and brushing the worst grime from her uniform.

“I'm fine, crewmen. Why aren't you stowed away in quarters?”

“We got sent out to repair a breach at the Theta 5 corridor, but as we made our way the reports came in of borders. We considered going back, but a breach would be too important not to deal with.”

“I commend your dedication, crewman, but that was one of the boarding locations. There are a number of the Chitters troops on the other side of that bulkhead, and they want to get in here.” She pulled her comm link from her ear. “Who in your team is the fastest runner?” The women called over one of the crew.

“Karlos here is the best. We always send him to grab spare equipment when we need it.”

“Okay Karlos. I need you to take a message to the bridge. Inform First Officer Bracken that the Chitters primary thrust is through the Theta primary corridor, and that

the rest of the boarding actions are just to tie up our forces.” She handed him her comm link. “As you go, keep trying to use this to contact them.” The young man nodded, eyes wide with barely repressed fear. “Okay lad, off you go.” The man took off at a sprint, disappearing behind the first turn. The Captain turned to the supervisor: “Okay, the Chitter will be through that bulkhead before long. We need to hold them here until reinforcements can make it.” The supervisor opened her mouth but was stopped by the Captain's raised hand: “I know, your team are not fighters. This is going to get bloody, and I won't tell you that everything is going to be okay. But if the Chitter gain control of this corridor, they can reinforce their assaults on the rest of the ship with ease, and it won't take long for the ship to fall.” She placed a reassuring hand on the supervisor's shoulder. “I need your help.” The woman looked around at her crew, then nodded determinedly.

“We will try our best.”

“Perfect.” The Captain said and passed her the stun gun. “Use this. It only has a handful of shots left, but it should help put down a couple of the bastards.” She turned to the laborers: “Okay, this is going to get bloody. These guys are big, and have a tough carapace reinforced with armour. Use those tools you have as weapons.” She pointed to the variety of wrenches, blowtorches and other items they all carried. “Or pick up the weapons they will drop as they fall. Martians?” She pointed at them individually. “You're the best able to go toe to toe with them. You'll be our front line. Hit them hard as soon as they're in the door.” The big men nodded, clenching their fists in anticipation. The Captain smiled, the expression never reaching her eyes. “Okay, let's do this.”

*

The bulkhead was beginning to disintegrate and the tension amongst the group of humans was palpable. The Captain pulled her pistol out and put in a new clip of ammo. She had one more spare on her, then it would be down to fists. She wasn't particularly hopeful about the outcome if it came to that. With a final sigh, the bulkhead gave way, and a large Chitter soldier wielding four bladed weapons charged through the gap. The supervisor, buzzing from the adrenaline with almost as much energy as her weapon, shot in the chest, dropping it immediately. As the sword fell from its lifeless grasp, the Martians helped themselves, then met its comrades as they began to pour in. It was hard to find suitable weapons for Martian's physiques, so the large blades were a welcome surprise, which they made use of with violent gusto, tearing into the surprised insects with clumsy swipes.

As more of the Chitter fell, the rest of the crew helped themselves to the weapons, and joined the fray, some with screams of nervous fury ripping from their throats as they did. Ichor stained the metal decks beneath them and more than one combatant fell on the unstable surface. Not everything was going the human's way. One of the Martians was hit with a blast of green energy, and his body disintegrated in mere moments, allowing the Chitter to push further into the room. The Captain felled a couple with her side arm, then had to drop it as she rolled out of the way of another blast of emerald. A pair of labourers screamed as they were torn apart by a Chitter warrior. The supervisor used her remaining shots to put the creature down. As the magazine clicked empty, she hefted it like a club and ran into the melee, striking at the creature's

underbellies before she too was eviscerated. Another of the Martians fell, his head landing several metres away, and the line was broken. Captain Arnie picked up one of the oversized spears and hefted it with great effort, before running the first Chitter through with a grunt.

The remaining humans and Martians fell back, falling before the professional attacks of the shock troops. Another Chitter warrior shoved the still standing corpse of the Captain's victim out of its way and made to attack her. It paused as a bullish roar echoed down the corridor. The Captain turned to see Grek Alpha, his clothes stained yellow and caked with gore, leading a unit of Martian security troops in a headlong charge down the corridor. As they ran, they fired volleys of shock barbs at the Chitter troops, downing half a dozen in quick succession. The Chitter turned to meet the new threat, but immediately collapsed as the brutes slammed into them, tearing them limb from limb as they fought hand to hand in the grimy corridor. The Chitter on the other side of the breach fell back, returning towards their boarding pod, harried by the Martians all the way. Grek Alpha approached the Captain, his chest heaving like a bellows as he offered her his comm link.

"Bracken is asking for you, boss." She smiled and held the link to her ear.

"Bracken?"

"Captain, it's good to hear your voice. I take it Grek arrived in time to repulse the breach?"

"Yes he did. That man deserves a commendation."

"I'll see to it, Captain."

"What's the condition of the ship?"

“All boarding parties have either been wiped out or are in full retreat. You were right, none of the other parties were as large as the one you were facing. If they had secured that corridor, we would have had a real fun time holding onto the ship.”

“Have there been any communiques from the Director or the Holy One?”

“Not yet, though it is possible that the comms array has been damaged, as there was some heavy fighting in that sector.”

“Have we managed to capture any of the bastards alive? We may need to interrogate one of them for the information we need.”

“I will send out a ship wide alert, see if there are some damaged bugs we can patch up. Would you like the gunnery decks to take out the boarding pods as they retreat?”

“It's tempting, but we don't want to seem antagonistic. Let them go, unless they try anything funny. And see where they go. I want to know who sent them.”

“Aye Captain. Bracken out.” Arnie handed the comms back to Alpha, who took off after his men. She then went over to the handful of surviving labourers. Most sported wounds of some sort, and one was on the ground, his arm having been hit by one of the Chitters' aging guns.

“We need to get him to the medbay.” She said and helped one of the others lift him up. She looked at the rest of them. “You all did yourselves proud today. I, and this ship, are in your debt.” One of the surviving Martians, his face gushing viscous blood from several wounds, came forward, taking the injured man in his powerful arms.

“The ship is its crew, and the crew is the ship. We bleed for her, just as she bleeds for us.” And with that, the group moved off in the direction of the medbay, Captain Arnie trailing along behind them, lost in thought.

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The damage report was extensive, but not as bad as it could have been. Several compartments had been sealed off due to the breaches in the hull of the Lucian and a number of minor sectors and bulkheads were in desperate need of replacement and repair. However, none of the boarding parties had achieved their goals from what could be seen. As soon as it became apparent that the primary thrust was no longer viable, all the squadrons had fallen back, suggesting that there had been some method of communication between them that the humans were not aware of.

The casualties on both sides had been high. Nearly two hundred security and crew had been killed, and nearly double that injured in the fighting. The Chitter had left behind nearly a hundred dead or dying soldiers, though most of their boarding parties had only been a dozen or so soldiers in size. There had been a couple of wounded left behind, and they had been secured in the brig for the meantime.

There still was no communication from any of the Chitter vessels directly, but from the traffic Dr Karo had managed to intercept, something was happening within the Chitters hierarchy. Vessels had been appearing and disappearing at an ever-increasing rate, and a number of larger, more heavily armed vessels had moved between the Lucian and the Chitters capital ship.

The Captain, having showered and changed, walked into the brig along with Grek Alpha. A full squad of security troops had been assigned to the prisoners, and all of them eyed the bugs with baleful intensity. The insects seemed intent on escaping their confines, and battered at the walls with their heavy limbs, denting the tarnished metal. The Captain adjusted her translator, then approached one of the cells.

Naysayer leant against the wall, his arms creating a soft music that the translators didn't seem to comprehend. The Captain stood in front of the chamber, listening to the haunting sounds as they echoed around the room. The other Chitter soldiers seemed to calm at the noise, ceasing their attacks on the confines and just listening. Naysayer focused his multifaceted eyes upon the Captain, and ended the song.

"Captain! Welcome to my humble abode." The translator made the words seem jovial.

"Naysayer. You seem to be in a good mood."

"And why wouldn't I be?"

"Incarceration is not generally seen as a positive." The Chitter laughed.

"While my environment may not be ideal, I am more than content with this unfolding of events."

"But we stopped your attempt to take the ship," she said, forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"The Director insisted on this plan, against all advice. It seems that he believed you would never agree to the deal he had proposed." The Captain slammed her fist into the wall beside the cell and cursed.

“The Director should have waited. I hadn’t made a decision yet, why the hell would he make such a stupid play for something he could have got for free.” Naysayer gave a good approximation of a shrug.

“Apparently he had been informed otherwise. He never told me how, though I assumed he had managed to access your communication network somehow.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” He shrugged again, head bobbing below the bulk of his carapace.

“There seems to be nothing that can be gained by lying or staying silent. Either you will kill us or return us to our master as a peace offering. If sent back, he will kill us for failing him.” More laughter filtered hollowly through the translator. “If his coup has succeeded, he may just kill you all out of spite.” He moved closer to the Captain and stared into her eyes. “He is power hungry, and proud. Be careful.” With that, he returned to his wall, and began to play again, feeding the souls of his captive audience. Arnie stood there for a while, mind churning at the words he had spoken, before Alpha’s gently placed hand on her shoulder brought her back.

“What are your orders, Captain?” he asked, careful to keep the words from the nearby crew. She gave him a tight smile, and turned away from the cell.

“Let’s get back to the bridge. I’m sure that Bracken has had enough of that responsibility for now.

*

The Captain and Alpha strode onto the bridge and were met with the gaunt features of Bracken.

“It’s good you’re back, Captain. I think my remaining hair has finally given up the fight and gone grey,” he said with feeling.

“You’re as handsome as ever, Bracken,” she said, smiling fondly at him. “Thanks for keeping the place from burning down while I was gone.” She took her place in the Captains seat, watching the live feed of the Chitter fleet displayed on the big screen. Several firefights had broken out between alien vessels, and at least one warship was slowly descending towards the planet below, its hull glowing faintly as it entered the atmosphere, its engines seemingly ripped from their places by weapons fire.

“Let’s move away from the trigger happy aliens, shall we?” she said to Bracken who nodded and began to punch commands into his console. Slowly, the Lucian’s engines flared and began the slow process of turning around. Urgent communiques come in from engineering and security concerning the movements. Arnie rubbed her eyes and set her comms to forward everything to Bracken. Being Captain did come with some privileges, and delegating was one of them. He gave her a sideways glance as more messages began to flood his terminal. She just smiled mischievously and mouthed a quick thank you to him. Alpha suddenly appeared beside her, and she looked up into his underdeveloped facial features.

“Boss, I have tasked my people with running down the breach in security that Naysayer mentioned.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Alpha. Prisoners lie all the time. He probably just wants us running in circles while his boss decides on a new plan.”

“Maybe. However, almost immediately after the final boarding pods detached and made their escape, a message from a terminal in engineering was sent to the Directors ship.”

“You think someone in engineering is feeding the bugs information?”

“It’s a possibility. Could also be the Broker or one of his people, trying to profit off the situation.

“And it wasn’t the genetic data they’ve been after?”

“No ma’am. A data file of that size would have been blocked from transmission immediately. Besides, I’ve had that file under restricted access since we found out they wanted it. Only you, Bracken or myself could have accessed it.”

“Well, let me know what you find,” she said, rubbing the weariness from her eyes.

“Aye Captain.” Alpha saluted and exited the bridge. As he did, the Captain noticed a Terran crew member whispering into his comms.

“Crewmate!” she yelled, standing up. “Off the comms now!” The man fumbled with the thing and gave a shaky salute. The Captain glowered at him. “You know it’s against bridge policy for crew to make calls while on the bridge without permission.”

“Sorry ma’am.” The man was almost whimpering, eyes darting around the room as if searching for some hole to crawl inside. Seeing the fear in his expression redoubled the exhaustion gnawing at her bones.

“See that it doesn’t happen again,” she said and slumped back into her seat. Bracken came over, his face betraying his concern.

“Captain, if you need to rest, I can take over here.”

“Your concern is appreciated, but I’m fine. It’s just been a long day.” Bracken took her words at face value and retreated to his station. As she watched him go, she noticed the same crewmate whispering into his comms. He was trying to hide it by keeping his face turned away from her, but she could see the muscles on his face twitching as talked.

She stood and strode over to him. She spun him around, opening her mouth to let him have an earful.

“What-“ She froze as the cold metal of a pistol pressed against her stomach.

“I think you need to calm down there Captain,” he said, his hardened gaze far different from the fear he had displayed before. He tapped his comms with his free hand. “Now.” Around the room, crew pulled out pistols and tasers and aimed them at the handful of crew who weren’t involved. One of them personally disarmed Bracken, while the one holding the Captain hostage disarmed her easily. The doors to the bridge opened, and for a moment the Captain had some hope that security would be arriving to assist them, but instead it was the smug face of Dr Karo that greeted them. She entered the room, flanked by a squad of armed crew members, and surveyed the scene before her.

“Move the lot of them into the briefing room,” she told one of her team. They began shoving the crew, along with Bracken, into the conference room. Karo moved over to the Captain's chair, and sat down, reclining luxuriously as she did. Turning her head, she gestured to Arnie.

“Bring her here.” The man jabbed her with the pistol, and she stumbled over to Karo. The women smiled at the anger raging behind Arnie's eyes.

“You seem shocked, Captain.”

“You were the leak.” Karo laughed, the nasal sound making several of the armed crew wince.

“Well done, Captain. And here I thought you were truly clueless.”

“We knew you were a plant.” The Captain snarled. “We just weren’t sure who placed you here. Alpha was trying to find out.”

“Ah yes, the plodding security chief. Honestly Captain, I don’t know how you let a creature like that get forced on you.” Karo waved her hand, dismissing the conversation. “Enough of that. I need your access to the data our Chitter friends are requesting.”

“And why would I let you have it?”

“Because I will start killing your crew until you do.”

“Damn it Karo, you hate what genetic engineering did to our people more than anyone else on this ship. Why in hell would you give a power-hungry creature like the Director the chance to make that mistake again?” Karo shrugged, clearly unperturbed.

“I made a deal. I personally do not care what happens to the damn bugs once they fulfill their end of the bargain.”

“What price did they offer you for the information?” Karo slapped Arnie across the face, sending the Captain to the ground. Blood seeped from Arnie’s split lip as Karo stood up and called over to the guards of the briefing room.

“Kill one of the prisoners. Any of them besides the First Officer.” There was a scream, followed by a single shot. Arnie was hefted back to her feet by her guard, and Karo sat back down.

“I don’t care how badly you want answers, Captain. You aren’t in charge anymore. This ship belongs to me now, and my people are purging the ship of anybody who poses a barrier to my plans.” Karo held her hand out to Arnie’s guard. The man gave her the Captain’s pistol. “Now, if you don’t start being cooperative soon, I’m going to go back there and kill more of those poor loyal crewmembers of yours with your own gun.” She waved the weapon in front of Arnie. “You need to decide whose side you’re on here. Those traitors who handed you a bastard crew back on Cere’s station, or those here who are willing to die for your stubbornness.” She switched off the safety, like the toll of funeral bells. “So, what’s it going to be?”

Chapter 18

Alpha had been halfway to the engineering decks when his lift had died. The usually calm journey had only been interrupted by a couple of crew clambering in off the third deck, who had squeezed into the space not designed for Martian physiques. They both jostled a bit for room, but quickly settled down. It was then that the lift slammed to a halt sending them all staggering. Alpha used his hands to keep himself steady, bracing against the lift's walls. The two-crew seemed to roll with the sudden stop, their bodies swaying with the movements. Alpha was about to comment on what had happened, when he noticed the weapons the crew were drawing. With a swing of his arm, he knocked them to the side, sending their weapons tumbling to the lift floor.

“What the hell are you playing at?” he said, as one of them drew a knife from his boot. In such a confined space, a blade like that was a real threat. He lashed out with a leg, striking the armed crewmate in his leg. There was a crack as the bones snapped, and the man shrieked in pain as he slid to the floor, his lower leg hanging at an impossible angle. The other man scrambled for one of the guns, so Alpha stamped onto his hand, pulping it, before rendering him unconscious with a blow to the head. As the crewman with the shattered leg moaned in pain, Alpha tapped his comms.

“Captain, come in.” Static filled his ear, and he cut the link in disgust. Crouching down, he pulled the comms from the ear of the unconscious man. An angry voice was yelling at the other end, demanding to know what was happening.

“It’s done.” Alpha said, trying to pitch his voice higher to mask the volcanic rumble of a Martian accent.

“Barry, is that you? What happened?”

“He is dead, but we need medics here. We are both banged up.” Alpha glanced at the injured man's name tag. “Kal’s leg is pretty messed up. Might need some assistance getting out of here.”

“The backup team will be waiting for you when the lift reaches deck 10.” The man sighed in relief. “We will have a stretcher ready.” He ended the call, and Alpha switched off the comms. Reaching out, he plucked the injured man's comms out, and slipped them into a pocket. The lift shuddered as it restarted its descent, and Alpha watched as the counter approached deck 10. He didn’t bother to collect the weapons on the ground, as they wouldn’t have fit his grip in any case. Instead, he moved close to the door, ready to charge. The counter reached ten, and the doors slid open, revealing a corridor filled with anxious crew. The front pair were carrying a stretcher, and the looks of stupefied astonishment on their faces as the monstrous figure of Alpha appeared before them brought him a moment of satisfaction before he charged into the fray.

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Apparently, the only comms still working were those being used by the traitors. The comm network was all interconnected, with each device hardwired into it. This prevented outsiders from intercepting the communiques without having a direct connection, but also meant that the system could be disabled from within quite easily.

For the rebels to have active comms while the core system was down, they had to have been provided by someone. Alpha knew of only one person on board with the resources and contacts to provide such a service, let alone the quantity of weapons that had been on display.

The lifts seemed to be functioning again, so he had thrown the injured forms of his erstwhile assassins out the doors into the pile of corpses he had left in the hallway and set its destination for the lower decks. Pain was landing up from his thigh, where a lucky shot had managed to punch a hole in him. He tore a strip from his blood-soaked uniform, and jammed it into the wound, trying to stem the flow of blood. The pain was bearable, but he couldn't afford to lose too much blood yet.

As the lift descended, he used the stolen comms to browse through the active channels. Dozens of fireteams seemed to be active ship wide, engaged in running battles with security teams. The bridge had fallen, or so the traitors were claiming. More concerning was the segregation of Martian captives throughout the ship. Any Martians that surrendered were being taken to the cargo hold, while most of the Spacers and Terrans were being allowed to return to supervised work in the areas under their control. As Alpha listened to the various commanders and unit leaders talking, an idea that had been gestating in the back of his mind finally came to fruition. They were all Terran. Every single member of the rebel faction seemed to be Terran, though a handful of Spacers may have been present as well. Alpha cursed as he realised the implications. Disgruntled Terrans had been one of the driving forces behind the rising tensions aboard the Lucian since day one. That had seemed to culminate in the riots early on their mission. Obviously, that hadn't been the end of it. Alpha's mind instantly

turned to Karo. She had been the centre of everything, so it stood to reason that she was the centre of this as well.

The lift arrived at its destination, breaking Alpha's concentration. The doors slid open, and he had a moment to see down the long corridor, right into the gun barrels of the Brokers men before they fired. He dived forward, the volley of shots cutting the air above him to ribbons. He fired a few shots in return, and rolled behind one of the support struts, trying to cram his bulk behind the limited cover. The gunfire pattered out, and the Brokers smug voice called down to him.

"Ahhhh, Alpha. I see that our friends on the elevator failed. I told that Terran harpy her little plan wouldn't work, but why would she listen to a humble businessman such as myself."

"What did she offer you, Broker? You can't be this suicidal. You knew I would come for you."

"Well, yes, but she did pay me an exorbitant amount to provide her with plenty of weapons. Money is a powerful motivator, my Martian friend." Alpha heard the faint scuffing of boots against the floor beyond his view.

"You should have cut your losses!" he cried, and launched himself out of cover. The pair of thugs who had been approaching were shocked at his attack, and he grabbed both of them by their necks, heaving them aloft.

"Fire!" the Broker called, a note of panic entering his voice. Alpha began to run towards his prey, holding the struggling men before him. Their struggles died quickly as their fiends opened up, peppering them with bullets. A couple got through to the Martian, but anger blinded him to pain, as he was almost upon the firing line when he

threw the bodies into the throng. Men and women tumbled down as the carcasses of their friends knocked them over, and then Alphas meaty fists began to tear them apart.

The Broker, his eyes wide with fear, made to run, but in mere moments the last fighter was dead, and Alpha had him pinned to the wall.

“How is she blocking the comm network?” The man squirmed helplessly in his grip.

“I, I, I don't-” Alpha punched his fist through the metal plating of the wall beside the Brokers head. A thin trickle of liquid fear began to travel down the man's leg.

“Don't mess with me, you pint sized bastard. How do I enable the comms system?”

“There's an access point. In my office. It's disrupting all comms not connected to my personal network.” Alpha held the man aloft, and carried him down the hall, and entered the Brokers place of business. The Broker pointed at a small box attached to the wall, Alpha punched it, destroying it with a single blow. He checked his comms and called the acting sergeant.

“Sergeant, do you copy?”

“Alpha, sir, is that you?” The man's relieved voice came in over the comms. “We were worried you were dead.”

“I need you to send a squad to the second deck. We need to retake the Bridge if this situation is to be stabilised.”

“But sir, the ship is being overrun-”

“I don't care. The bridge is the centre of this. We need the Captain, and we need to eliminate the traitors command structure. Get it done.” He signed off and looked at the man still squirming in his hand.

“See, I told you it would work. Now, let me go!” he squealed.

“Unfortunately, your services are no longer required.” Alpha responded and snapped his neck. Discarding the corpse of the once powerful crime boss, he left, heading for the second floor.

Chapter 19

The Captain winced as another shot went off, and the distant thump of a falling body echoed through the silent room.

“This is going to continue, Captain, until there is no one left aboard the ship to support you.” Karo said, idly checking the ammo count on her pistol. “I know that you care for your crew. Just tell us what we want to know, Captain, and all of this will be over. None of you Spacers need to die today.”

“Is that what this is about, Karo? The Martians? You're that petty?” Karo hit her with the pistol, leaving a deep gash across her cheek.

“This isn't some selfish act of hate, Captain. This is just the beginning. With the Chitter as our allies, I will return to Sol and re-establish Terra as the ruling power it was meant to be.”

“That's your big plan, Karo? To use the bugs as a patsy in a new war? It will never work.”

“It could, with your help Captain. I know how much you despise those monsters running around your ship, infesting it. They killed a lot of your people during the war, and now you have to ferry them around while they pollute the very ship you used to kill them for years.” She smiled, and placed her free hand on the Captain's shoulder.

“Come. Join us. You can get your ship back. No more unwanted guests, or missions to the back end of nowhere. You would be free.”

“You don't understand me at all, do you Karo?” The Captain laughed, and Karo hit her again across the face. Spitting blood, Arnie grinned through her red teeth. “I may have hated them for a long time, but they are as much a part of this crew as anyone else is. The ship is its crew, and the crew is the ship, and I will never betray those who fight and die to protect her.” Karo screamed in frustration, and opened up on a console with her pistol, emptying the clip in moments. Turning to the nearest guard, she shoved him towards the briefing room.

“Bring the lot of them out here.” The guard rushed in there, and soon the thinned herd of prisoners filed out, several splattered with blood from their executed comrades. Karo replaced her weapons ammo, and then pointed at the lot of them.

“On your knees.” They did that, until only one remained standing. Bracken, bearing a number of bruises from the guards' weapons, stared defiantly at Karo, his face grimly set.

“I will never kneel to you, traitor.” Karo pointed the weapon at Bracken, and her finger began to squeeze the trigger, but she noticed the Captains tense posture, and lowered her weapon.

“I see. You're worried about your friend, are you?” One of the guards grabbed Bracken and brought him forward, before forcing him down on his knees in front of the Captain. Karo walked behind him and placed her pistol to the back of Bracken's head.

“Now, give me access immediately, Captain, or I will kill your oh-so-loyal first officer.”

“Don't give it to her Captain!” Bracken cried, and a guard forced a bit of cloth into his mouth to muffle him. Karo pushed the weapon forward, pressing into Bracken's head.

“What will it be, Captain?” she asked, but all Arnie was doing was looking at her oldest friend's eyes.

“I'm sorry, Bracken.” she said softly, and he nodded once in reply, his eyes softening. She looked at Karo, and spat in her face.

“Go to hell, you blackhearted minx.” With a snarl, Karo fired, and Bracken fell to the floor, lifeless eyes staring hollowly as his soul departed. Tears began to well up in Arnie's eyes, and she launched herself at Karo, bound hands grasping for the gun. Karo nimbly avoided the attack, and as the Captain fell to the ground, she kicked her in the ribs. Something inside her broke, and her vision filled with stars. One of the guards heaved her back onto the chair, and as she tried to clear her vision, Karo's voice echoed in her ears.

“How many of them are you willing to lose, Captain?”

*

Alpha reached the second deck just after the security team that he had requested. Most of them were injured, and they looked like they had gone through hell. Surprisingly, they were being led by a labourer, a large Martian who was ordering them about with surprising efficiency. As Alpha approached, the Martian turned, revealing that it was Rho, his face a bloody mess and one eye completely missing.

“Hey boss. What took you so long?” The pair hugged, and Alpha swore that Rho was tearing up in his remaining eye.

“What are you doing here?”

“When they started rounding up Martians, I knew things were going to go wrong. I wasn't about to let Europa happen all over again, so I linked up with your boys here, and helped to get them here when you needed it.” He hefted a custom-made stun gun, its charge set to maximum. “I hope you have a plan for getting into the bridge, cause going through the main door will be hell.”

“Of course, I do, Rho. I made sure to study every action the Captain was in aboard the Lucian. Her tactics, the oddities of this specific ship. Let me tell you about her first battle aboard the Lucian...”

*

Another crewman's body fell to the ground, adding to the steadily growing field of corpses Karo seemed intent on planting around them. The Captain now just watched as the woman grew more and more angry, the words spilling from her mouth burning the air as Arnie resisted her manipulations. One of the soldiers, who had been monitoring the communications with the chitter ships, suddenly called out.

“Ma'am, Director is demanding the information. He needs that data to prove himself to the other Chitter factions.” Karo spun around, face flushed with anger.

“Tell him to be patient. We have the ship, and it is only a matter of time before we have the information.” The man quailed under her gaze, but continued.

“But ma'am, he says the priesthood's troops are attacking his vessel. Without the support of the other Chitter forces, he may very well be forced to surrender.” Karo turned and shot the man in the head.

“I am not in the mood for more bad information!” she screamed and pointed the pistol at the Captain. “Last chance. Tell me now, or I take my chances by breaking into the system manually.” Arnie kept her mouth shut, and Karo went to pull the trigger. The room suddenly filled with light as a flashbang went off, blinding them all. Karo’s gun fired, and Arnie screamed as immense pain burst from her hand. Then the air filled with the sounds of shots being fired, and Arnie tried desperately to shake the disorientation from her senses. As she came too, she realised her hands were free of their bonds. Looking down, she saw the mangled mess her right hand had become where Karo’s shot had struck it. Looking around, she saw security personnel finishing off the last of the traitors, and Karo’s lifeless body draped over Bracken's cooling corpse. Alpha appeared in front of her, his body a mess of bullet holes and stab wounds.

“Captain, you're okay. We have you.” She nodded faintly and looked around at the surviving crew.

“You got here just in time.” she said, before collapsing to the ground.

Epilogue

The Captain sat down at her chair, massaging the flesh of her wrist that connected to her new hand. Around her, teams of engineers were patching or replacing consoles and screens damaged in the fighting. Watching their progress, she patted the hand rest absently.

“We will get you patched up soon girl.” A deep chuckle behind her caused her to jump in shock. Alpha, his face still swollen and bruised, limped up beside her.

“Talking to the ship now, boss? That’s the definition of being the stereotype.”

“The ship has brought us through hell these last few weeks. A little appreciation is owed I think.” He chuckled again, and patted a nearby panel.

“Not gonna disagree there, Captain. She’s a good ship.”

“Best in the fleet.”

“Never doubted it.” The Captain eyed him suspiciously, but the Martian's battered face hid his expressions well. She turned back to the primary view screen, and brought up a live feed of the nearby space. Dozens of vessels filled local space, human and Chitter vessels intermingling in a mass of chaotic engine flares and garbled transmissions. The wreckage of the Directors vessel still occupied a vast swathe of the planet's orbit where the priests had destroyed it, and small shuttles were busy combing the wreckage for salvage and survivors. Grek lent heavily against the wall as he moved closer to the screen, his eyes staring at the wreckage.

“We really made a mess of this place, didn’t we?”

“I’ll be the first to admit it wasn’t the cleanest mission I’ve ever been on.” She noted the cluster of identity chips hanging from around Grek’s neck.

“What are those?” she asked. He collected them in one meaty palm, and stared down at them for a moment. The top one bore a single name. Rho.

“Friends. Family.” He tucked them into his uniform. “Memories, for the most part.”

“It’s good to keep a hold of the memories.” she said, staring at the bionic hand as it flexed.

“That was Bracken’s, wasn’t it?”

“It was. He always said his job was to be my right hand, doing the heavy lifting. He would have liked the poetry.” Alpha smiled, and Arnie returned it. The Crewman manning the comms terminal ran over.

“Captain, a call from the Commodore.”

“Put it through. On the big screen, if you would.” The man ran back and punched some commands into his console. The Commodore’s head appeared before them, her face as taciturn as ever.

“Captain, you just can’t help it, can you?”

“Help what?”

“Stirring the hornets’ nest. That Karo woman, she was working for some powerful people within the government. Apparently, they had been in secret contact with the Director’s people for months before your mission was even planned. We are still trying to figure out how, but we do know that the translator she devised for you was already built by the time you set off.”

“So why didn't they provide the information they wanted personally?”

“Apparently, the Director wanted the spectacle and public approval brought on by meeting a large human vessel and obtaining the tech that way. It would have helped to cement his power base and thereby won his little coup before it even happened.” Alpha passed the Captain a cup of coffee, which she took with her still real hand. She took a sip.

“So it was a publicity stunt.”

“One that you ruined. They probably thought you would be more than happy to help some aliens in exchange for destroying the Martians. I must admit, I'm a bit surprised you didn't.” The Captain took another sip, and glanced over at Alpha, who had his face buried in some report on his data slate.

“So am I. Guess I just didn't like being told who my friends were.”

“Well, you are wanted back home at Ceres. There are calls to put you in charge of the latest battleships we have coming out of the dry dock. Maybe even a seat in the admiralty.”

“I think that I have had enough change for a while, Commodore. I'll join you in time. My ships still have a bit of recuperating to do.” And with that, she signed off. Alpha came over, his data slate still in his hand:

“Orders, Captain?”

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