

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
Honorable Mention Recipients in Writing



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Malena Lo Prete, *A Portrait of Mothers and Daughters*, Mixed Media, Monacan High School, Grade 12, Educator: Meg Murtagh

2022



VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND

Renee Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

The Fourth of July to the Modern N****

The Fourth Of July To The Modern N****

The six tables in the front of Tevin's pizza shop are empty, making Soulchild and me the only ones in the room. Soulchild is my best friend, and I walk home with him from Tevin's most days. He stands behind the register waiting for me to order, so we can leave. Behind him are three chalkboards. The left one a list of the sandwiches, salads, and wings. The right, pizzas and desserts. The one in the middle has the pizza of the day: Don't You Four Cheddar 'Bout Me Pizza and a pizza cartoon.

Mr. Tevin comes out wiping a powder off his hands and stands next to me, "Lookin' at the pizza of the day? It's got four types of cheddar on it." He looks at the board with pride.

I shake my head, "Yeah. Yeah, that sounds really good."

Mr. Tevin speaks to Soulchild, "A slice of that."

I add, "And a Hawaiian."

Mr. Tevin folds his arms and asks me, "So, how's your aunt? What's she doing today?"

I look at Soulchild and we are holding in our laughter. "She's good, at my grandma's cookout."

He smiles, "That's good. Tell her to stop by sometime." He starts walking back into the kitchen.

"I will. Happy 4th, Mr. Tevin." When he's gone, Soulchild and I burst into laughter.

Soulchild passes me a plate with my two slices on it, "He's never gonna give up on her. Watch, you're gonna have to call him *Uncle* Tevin soon."

I pay him for the pizza, "That's not funny." Soulchild doesn't even tell me the price anymore. I've come so many times since he started working here, I already know it.

He puts his pointer finger on top of his thumb, with the smallest space in between. "It was a little funny, a little."

"Can we go already? It's past 7: 30." I bite into the Hawaiian pizza.

The Louisiana heat hugs us as soon as we step outside. We begin our walk down Frenchmen Street, heading to his house. I ask him, "So it's just me, you, and Musiq tonight?"

"Nah, he's with some girl, Asia."

"And you're not going?" I ask setting up a joke to get him back for his 'Uncle Tevin' comment.

"Why would I go?"

"To serenade her like y'all used to do." I start singing. I copy the dance Musiq, his older brother, and Soulchild would do for every girl Musiq had a crush on when he was younger. I even add in snaps.

*I'm not trying to pressure you
Just can't stop thinkin' bout you
You ain't even really gotta be my girlfriend
I just wanna know--.*

He pushes me, making me mess up the dance. "Shut up, Jaylin."

I start laughing, "I thought I sounded good." Soulchild ignores me. "I'm just reminding you of your roots."

"Those aren't my roots." He rolls his eyes.

"It's how you got your name. How is that not your roots?" He eats some of my cheddar pizza. "That's my food," I tell him.

"It's good," he says, taking another bite.

"But it's mine." I take six big strides across the crosswalk to create distance between us.

He does a half jog to catch up to me, but a car turns fast and cuts in front of him before he makes it all the way across.

He finally catches up, "I'll give it back if you can honestly say you didn't have a whole plate of food before you came by."

I explain, "It's not my fault my grandma had a cookout."

"So you had to eat five hot dogs?"

"It was only two."

"Yeah." He continues to eat my pizza.

"They were asking about you. Your mom was having a good time bragging about her 'driven son' that works, volunteers, *and* gives swimming lessons at the pool."

Soulchild talks with a mouth full of pizza crust, "What can I say, I'm impressive."

"Yeah, but you can take one day off to have fun with your friend." I throw away the plate in the trash can in front of 7Eleven.

"Celebrating a holiday for white people isn't my idea of fun."

"Oh my goodness," I roll my eyes, "You always gotta make the conversation about race."

"No, I don't. I just don't happen to like celebrating Black people's oppression, but that's just me." His tone is more serious than joking.

We reach the part of town that shifts from stores and apartments to cookie-cutter houses and cul de sacs. I try to reason with him, "I get that. I do, but sometimes you have to take advantage of breaks. It's summer, we don't need to work all the time."

"You never work," he snaps at me. I don't know why he has an attitude, but it's getting on my nerves.

I tell him, "Because I'm sixteen! I don't need to work. I need to have fun. I'm not a patriot or whatever, but today

is a day of celebration. Fuck white people. I'm celebrating us being here!"

All of a sudden, Soulchild starts to cry. His sobs build up until he's barely able to speak. He manages to get out, "She's not here. She's not--."

I wipe Soulchild's face, but his tears keep coming. "Who? Who's not here?"

His body folds over and he places his hands on his knees gasping for air. "They killed her. Shot her. She's not here anymore," his voice cracks on every word.

I place my hand on his back, "Soulchild--."

"Ma'Khia. Bryant. She's not here." He and I sit on the sidewalk only a few minutes away from his house.

I didn't want to ask, but it came out of me before I could decide. "Who?"

It's gotten dark. He tells me, "She was a Black girl from Ohio. Sixteen, too." Now, I remember people posting about her in April. My arms wrap around him, and he buries his face in my chest. "Nobody cares. Nobody thinks about her anymore. It's only been three months. They just wanna celebrate, but--." It seems like he stops to catch his breath, but then never finishes the sentence. Soulchild detaches himself from me and hugs his knees. He's crying, but I can't really hear him over the fireworks going off in the neighborhood.

Renee Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

Mom Responses

Mom Responses

In the passenger's seat where my dad should be sitting, there are two boxes. The rest of the boxes are in the trunk, and in the back seat is my ragdoll Leia and me.

"Where is Dad?" I ask my mom in the driver's seat.

"He's with Grandma," my mom says as she drives, heading to our new house.

"He's always with Grandma." I take one last look at the old house.

"I know, Fran, but that's just how it is right now."

That's always how my mom responds whenever I ask about my dad. It's a typical mom response. Meaning, you can't say anything back unless you want to make her mad. I hate those responses, mostly because we both get quiet after them. My mom changes the radio station to NPR.

My dad and I like the old house. When we first moved here from Texas, he said he likes this house because it's really close to his job. That meant he could spend more time with me, and he did. We even made the guest room into a movie room, and when he was home we'd spend all our time in there. The worst part about the new house is when my dad comes back, we probably won't spend as much time together. Since he'll have to drive so far to get home from work.

After driving for half an hour I see an exit sign with a McDonald's logo on it, and I say "I'm hungry, can we get McDonald's?"

My mom drives past the exit "We have food at home." Another mom response.

When we get to the new home my mom asks me for the tenth time, "So do you *really* like the house?"

"Yes, it's nice," I tell her. The tacky bright yellow color of the house is nice. The annoying creaking sound the doors make when I'm opening them is nice. The fact that it is a tiny one-story house with no extra room for Dad and me to watch movies in is nice.

Today I'm at school early because I want to show my friend Rain the new blue dress I put on Leia. My classroom's door has a giant green paper four taped to it. I walk in with my head down, looking at my plaid jumper that all girls wear at St. Teresa's. I head to the cubbies that line the wall to the left of the door. My cubby is in the middle because they go in ABC order of last names, and my last name is Mott. When I reach my cubby, Mr. Fuller, my teacher says from his desk, "Good Morning, Frannie." He's sitting at his desk, which is in the corner across from the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Fuller," I say.

“Did you have a good weekend?”

“No, my dad is staying with my grandma, so I haven’t seen him in a month. I thought he would be home this weekend because *Frozen 2* came out. He had promised me that we would see it when it came out, but he didn’t come.” I put my lunch box and book bag in my cubby.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Frannie. Sometimes adults get really busy. Last night, for example, I was supposed to grade these worksheets, but the Saints were playing the Panthers. I had to watch it! Well, you see where I am now,” he says, talking about the five messy stacks of worksheets on his desk. He puts down his pen, and looks up from the papers for the first time since I walked in, “But adults always find a way to make time for people they love, so I’m sure you’ll see *Frozen 2* soon.” I smile and grab Leia out of my book bag.

I wait for Rain on the blue carpet beside the cubbies because Kyndle, the most annoying girl in our class, has already taken over the table where I sit to make her stupid Lego house. There are three other tables in the room where I could sit, but I only really like my table. My table has a good view out the window, which means I can look outside at the dogs who live across the street when class gets boring. It’s also the closest table to the door, so I can be in the front when we line up and first to the monkey bars at recess. The rug is the next best place in the class to sit. It has pillows around it to sit on and is baby blue, my favorite color.

Rain comes into class ten minutes after me. She goes straight to the cubbies. I run over to her and say, “Rain, look! Look! The dress matches her scrunchie!” She smiles at Leia, then turns to put her lunchbox into her cubby; she takes Amali, her doll out of her bag. Amali is pretty just like Rain. They have curly dark brown hair and pretty brown eyes.

We are heading to the carpet, when we hear, “Rain! You forgot this.” Rain’s mom is standing in the doorway with a water bottle in her hand; she runs over to her mom.

When she comes back and sits on the carpet, I say, “Your mom dropped you off today.” Rain just nods her head. I continue, “But your dad dropped you off Friday.”

“Yeah, they take turns,” she says.

“My dad never drops me off. I haven’t even seen him in a month.”

Rain hugs me, and I don’t think of Kyndle’s stupid Legos, Mom and Dad, or *Frozen 2*. All of those things go away, it’s just Rain and me. Rain lets go of me, and we grab our dolls and start playing. Leia and Amali own a fancy bakery together, and they start to make Beyoncé’s birthday cake.

Rain says, “Our dolls should get married.”

“Why?”

“Cause they love each other.”

“But they just fought over whether to decorate Beyoncé’s birthday cake with blue or pink flowers.”

“So?”

“They just fought,” I say, almost asking a question.

“Just ‘cause they fight doesn’t mean they don’t love each other. They’ll call Beyoncé later and ask her if she wants blue or pink flowers, but she probably wants pink.”

I look at Rain; her hair is messily put in a bun now with many pieces sticking out. She puts her hair up most of the time at school, but never at recess, her favorite part of the day. Rain loves when it’s windy at recess. All the other girls beg to go inside so the wind doesn’t mess up their hair, but Rain loves when the wind blows her hair all around. Even when her hair is messy, she still looks pretty.

She notices me looking at her, “Fine! Beyoncé wants blue.”

Mr. Fuller calls us from the front of the room, “Rain, Frannie, would you like to join the rest of the class?” Everything comes back: *Frozen 2*, Dad, Mom, Kyndle. The rest of the class is heading to their seats even Kyndle has put away the Legos. I pick up Leia from the ground.

Rain responds in a really good Beyoncé impression, “Sorry, I was just getting my birthday cake.” The whole class starts laughing, even Mr. Fuller smiles.

Mr. Fuller responds in his not-so-good Beyoncé impression, “That’s wonderful! Now, you need to put away your dolls and join the class.” Rain grabs Amali, Leia from me, and her water from the carpet and puts them in the cubbies. When we get to our seats, Mr. Fuller starts teaching something I don’t pay attention to. Instead, I think about Rain. She always knows what to do.

After school, I sit outside on the bench in front of the building waiting for my mom. Gabe, a boy a year older than me, is sitting next to me. He’s telling me how being in 5th grade is so much better than being in 4h grade. He brags, “And in fifth grade, we get to eat lunch with middle schoolers!”

“No one cares, Gabe,” Rain says, walking over to us. She sits on the other side of me. Her hand is maybe an inch away from mine. Rain would take my hand sometimes if she was taking me somewhere, but never when we were just sitting. The words, ‘Can I hold your hand?’ play in my head, but before they can come out of my mouth Rain moves her hand. She goes into her book bag and grabs her water.

She says, “I’m going to ask my mom if we can get Zebra Cakes to have at the wedding.” She takes a sip of water.

“What wedding?” Gabe asks.

“Leia and Amali, our dolls are getting married tomorrow,” I say to him, pulling up my knee socks.

“Fourth graders are so weird,” Gabe says before he leaves.

“Is it weird that—?” I start to ask Rain.

“No, don’t listen to Gabe.”

“Fran. Time to go,” my mom says, coming up to us.

I wave to Rain, and she waves back. As my mom and I walk to the car, she asks, “How was school?”

“Good.”

“What’d you learn? Anything exciting?”

“Word problems. I’m the best at them out of the people at my table.”

“That’s good! I was never very good at those.”

When we get into the car, my mom tells me we need to stop at the store. Then she turns the channel to 103.7. Camila Cabello’s voice plays through the car. Honestly, I’m sick of hearing “Senorita,” but I’m happy that music is on and not just because it’s not NPR. When Mom plays music, things are usually better. The last time my dad came back from my grandma’s house, 103.7 played “Scars to Your Beautiful” by Alessia Cara. After “Senorita,” 103.7 plays the song Rain always lip syncs to when she is bored in class, “Talk” by Khalid.

When we get home, I’m so excited I forget to help my mom with the groceries that are in the front seat. I set my book bag down in a chair from the kitchen table. “Dad, I’m home,” I call out into the house. He doesn’t answer. My

mom makes her way into the house with two grocery bags in her hands; she sets the bags across from me on the table.

“Help me put this stuff away,” she says.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask.

My mom takes out a bag of grapes, “With. Grandma.” How? How was he still with Grandma when I just suffered through three minutes of Camila Cabello? “I don’t know when he’ll be back,” she adds.

I feel my eyes start to water, “But you played 103.7.”

Mom looks at me confused, “The radio has nothing to do with what happens between your dad and me.” She pauses, “We think it’s better if we have space from each other.”

Tears run down my face, “Just because you fight doesn’t mean you don’t love each other, that’s what Rain said.”

“Frannie, this is stuff you and Rain don’t understand. Your dad’s not going to be here for a while, and that’s how it is for right now!” Again, she uses that stupid mom response, and I feel the silence running in. I walk past my mom, heading to my room.

I lay face down in my bed. I knew their fights were bad. I remember the first night they woke me up with their fighting. They screamed at each other for hours, and then my dad finally had it. My dad grabbed his keys and left. He came back four days later. He’s always come back, until now.

Maybe Rain was wrong, and some fights are too big to keep loving. What if one day Amali is so mad after days of fighting, she packs a bag and leaves, giving the kids only a kiss on the forehead as an explanation. If she does, then Leia would have to stand in their kitchen and tell her kids that this is just how it is.

Would I have to tell that to my kids too? I hope they don’t just walk away.

I go back out to the kitchen. My mom hasn’t put away the groceries, instead, she is sitting at the kitchen table eating out of the bag of Tostito chips.

I sit at the table facing her, “I hope I love my wife forever.” My mom looks at me with a shocked look on her face. I continue, “And if we fight, I hope that my kids will know that sometimes you can fight and still love someone, and it’s okay that sometimes you can’t.”

My mom hugs me and says, “I’ll remind them.”

Jeddah Arnold

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Peter Cashwell

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Wilbur

A little while ago, I got a longboard. In keeping with its name, it was a long, slender black thing with wheels bigger than my fist. My mother brought it home intending to give it to me for Christmas but decided to give it to me right then and there. She didn't know if I would like it or not.

I named it Wilbur, at the request of my friends. They said I should name it after a YouTuber. I'd never opened a single Minecraft YouTube video in my life, but I love my friends more than anything in the world. So, Wilbur it was.

We kept it in the long hallway joining our dining room and storage room. My mother and I both practiced pushing off, climbing on, and riding the longboard. Preparing for the day when we would finally be comfortable enough to ride Wilbur out in the open.

I could barely contain my joy one night when I realized that I had more free time than usual. It was a perfect night. Temperature in the high 60s, no homework, and college applications a world away. I decided to finally test out my board. My mother's board. The board she had given me.

My mother gives me things, takes me places, does everything that a good mother needs to do to be a good mother. She even says she loves me, every night. After all, mothers must love their children. As I walked barefoot up our street, Wilbur in one hand and my thoroughly unhelpful shoes in the other, I am reminded of the things that my mother does not do for me.

My mother works a high-paying job. \$100,000 a year, she says. She works long hours and never takes vacation days; it's a miracle if I see her for more than an hour. It's gotten even worse because of her company's shift to virtual work, now I don't even see her on drives home. I had always wondered why when I was young, but I've grown used to it now.

I used to be attached to my mother's hip, worshipping the very ground she walked on. Through elementary and middle school, there was no doubt as to whether I loved my mother. Her words were gospel, her opinions were fact. But in every religion, there is the fear of retribution, a knowledge of the fallacy of the truest of love. I knew if I went to her with any problems I might have, she would scoff. Or laugh. Or be offended. Just like her father was with her. She told me about him in detail, somehow not recognizing herself in his shadow. I kept quiet.

Trust in my mother finally broke after she told me her real work schedule. She doesn't work an hourly job but instead has a yearly salary. Meaning she could work any hours she wants and still get paid the same. Suddenly all those lonely hours as a child seemed even more hollow.

It was things like these that quelled the fire of love for her within my soul.

But she still loves me. She buys me things, takes me places, and there is love in her voice. At times. There are also times where there is no other word for the look in her eyes and the fire in her voice but pure, unbridled hatred. Slamming a door full force during one of our weekly fights, keeping eye contact to remind me that if I pushed her any further, it would be my head shoved in between that door frame.

Her hands are soft but poised to strike.

In the end, there is more light than dark within us I suppose. She must love me to have gifted me Wilbur. I look down at the board on the ground in front of me, shadows cast across the asphalt by the street lamps. My bare feet sting from walking along our gravel road to the top of the hill, but it is worth it to take advantage of what little light is left in this warm December sky. I place my foot on the deck of the board.

I push off with one foot, sailing down the street, gaining speed with every inch. My vision blurs in a flurry of orange, purple, and blue. Tilt the feet to avoid the pothole. I used to have a skateboard, I mean I still have it but I never use it because it is too hard to ride on bumpy roads. Too unpredictable.

But this was different. I flew down the hill faster than I had ever thought possible, hair blowing in every direction and a serene calm filling my mind. Mother would be so proud of me, keeping my balance on the very board she gave me. She would laugh if I fell. Only after asking if I was okay. Of course.

As I neared the bottom of the hill, my speed at its peak, I spotted something I hadn't previously calculated when I dreamt up the idea to skate down this street. Three giant potholes, filled with cement to create the most uneven, jagged edges you'd ever seen. Murder for my previous skateboard, and murder for me if I wasn't quick enough.

I wasn't.

The wheels hit the first edge with a sickening thump, and a shock rolled through my body. My balance was thrown off, and my feet tilted every which way in an attempt for security. My mind went to Mother once again, differently this time. I called out to her, hoping she would feel my need.

I called to the mother I knew as a baby, the caring mother who lit up the world with her smile. I called to the mother I knew as a child, the mother that doted on me, but instilled the fear of God into my soul. I called to the mother I know now, locked in her room all hours of the day, creating art for others but never for herself. Or for me.

Of course she didn't hear me, how could she? She was inside the house. And I hadn't really made a sound. I never did.

I was all alone out here on this asphalt, the light from nearby windows the only bystanders to witness my inevitable failure. No guiding hand that had been absent for much longer than I had been able to look for it, no comforting presence that ponders whether to lift me to my feet.

But that was all I needed.

My mind steeled as I dug my heels into the board, my hips shifting and rolling to compensate for uneven ground. I threw my arms out, hands grasping at nothing, chest opened to the sky. That massive, black sky that swallowed all hope of a better life, a better love, a better understanding. With or without the grace of heaven, with or without my mother's help, I was going to stay on that board.

The last loud *thunk* of the wheels could be heard for miles around. At least, it seemed that way to me. My breaths were quick and deep, gulping in the air that I almost lost in a flurry of seconds. Gliding along the flat bottom stretch of the hill, I stood tall and released the tension built in every muscle in my body. I had broken free of the street and its cement-filled scars, I had survived all that it had thrown at me.

My mother may have given me this shaky board, but I alone kept my balance.

Katherine Becker

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Pete Follansbee

Category: Short Story

The Desperate Song

It was quite dim inside. On the front of the wooden counter, smooth, hand-crafted divots were a reminder of Papa's hands: rough, rigid, and constantly cut, but always a reassurance nonetheless. Three candles were lit by the abandoned register. The hanging lights, in 2 rows of four, were described as a honeycomb by Papa, but in truth they always looked more like upside-down flowers. Across the street, through violet glass and streaks of rain, the notorious rusty sign of the truck shop could be seen. Whenever someone asked where the cafe was, the response was always, "just across the street from that obnoxious truck sign." The truck shop had closed years ago, but nobody bought it for fear that the sign would be too difficult to remove.

The bell jingled as a customer walked in, offering Lydia a path out of her trance. She declined. A rare, new customer. Green sweater, long, shiny black hair. It appeared as if the rain outside had attacked her. She sat in the square brown chair at the front of the cafe and picked up the lone red book on the coffee table. Without hesitation, she began to read *The Desperate Song* titled with gold lettering. The cover was soft and peeling apart. Lydia could feel the familiar worn pages as if they were in her own hands, not the customer's. The woman was so silent, a perfect person for the cafe's original intentions. It had been bought by a whiskered man for his dear love, built upon peace and passion.

"We'll call it the Calming Nature Cafe!" Lydia could barely picture the woman so excited. She herself couldn't remember the happiness that she knew must've been present. She imagined the man swinging the new owner into the large, green chair, the one Lydia was always sitting in. The laughter and the green chair must've greeted each other and immediately harmonized. The covering was such that on a hot enough day, a person could sit there and their thighs would stick. Later, they would have to peel themselves out of the chair. The covering was chipping off now, and the color was slowly fading. Lydia imagined the chair in its prime: a deep forest green, the color of the small boxwoods initially installed with the chair. Now the plants had faded too, but instead to a pale brown. Their once springy branches would snap with a poke. Their once deep green leaves now crumbled into Lydia's hands if she was brave enough to touch the remaining few. Most of them had been carelessly knocked off the fragile plant by the man in the back room while expressing his never-ending fury. The plants, however, were not his target. They were just the unfortunate bystanders, who got hurt if they stood too close.

She looked across the street at the truck sign again. She remembered riding in the back of one just like it. Large, white, long bed. Papa at the wheel with the brand-new, hand-crafted counter for the cafe in the back. She must've been only three or four at the time. Carpentry was her Papa's real passion. The truck shop was inherited from his own Papa, whom Lydia had only heard stories about. A gruff man, whose final wish was that his son would carry on ownership of the shop. Papa never considered shutting down the shop. He never would have. The man in the back room, however, didn't care about dying wishes. He didn't care about lost lovers' gifts, either. The cafe meant nothing to him. It was just a reminder of his wife's former husband, a relationship that to him, was gone and never meant anything. Unfortunately for him, he had no choice over whether the cafe was shut down, because it was not under his ownership. It was actually managed by Lydia's mother, still. If you looked at her, you wouldn't have recognized her as the woman from Lydia's imagination. Her skin was polka-dotted, blue and purple and brown, and a limp accompanied her everywhere. Her voice was rarely heard, and if it was, it was a whisper. Lydia followed her lead. If she chose to listen, the uninvited voice of the man in the back room was all that was audible. Lydia chose to shut him out. The Calming Nature Cafe was not very calm anymore, but with effort, Lydia could pretend that it was. The customer in the green sweater still sat, ignoring the voice of the man in the back room just as successfully as Lydia could. At least, it certainly seemed like she was ignoring it. Most times, customers would leave as soon as they came in. The bells would jingle, and before they even stopped ringing, after an embarrassed look, more jingling filled the air. This woman was certainly persistent, though. She really wanted her coffee. The candles at the register flickered in a lonely manner. Reculantly, Lydia got up from the chipping green chair and approached the customer in

the green sweater.

"Hello, ma'am," she greeted. "How may I help you today?" Her voice was dusty.

The woman looked up, surprised. Her sweater came all the way up to her neck. It was dry now. She was on page 37 of *The Desperate Song*. If she made eye contact, Lydia thought she might slide into the dark abyss, so she didn't risk it.

"A dark roast coffee, please, Lydia." As Lydia began to make her way behind the counter, she flicked her eyes back to the customer in the green sweater. She was reading the red book again. She was invested, but she managed a small smile as she realized Lydia was looking at her. Ignoring the odd comment, Lydia began to make the requested drink.

The door to the back room was closer, here. The man in the back room was louder. Lydia's mother was still silent. Lydia imitated her. Words weren't necessary to make coffee. And words weren't necessary to put up with the man in the back room. He was always yelling. Always. The coffee maker was turned on, and while it ran, Lydia looked at the mysterious woman. Her eyes were so dark that Lydia couldn't see her pupils, yet they were inviting. Her skin was beautiful in the violet light as well. For some reason, Lydia knew the exact hue from a distant memory. Who could she be? Why did Lydia recognize the shade of skin? Why did she want a coffee from this cafe, when she could have gone anywhere else? This cafe, though it was advertised as calming, was not at all. Why didn't the woman care?

The door from the back room unexpectedly burst open. The owner was breathless, but didn't say a word. She looked from the customer, who gave a friendly smile before returning to her story, to Lydia, who also gave her a smile, though in a sorrier tune, to the old coffee machine. They sold the large one last year. Customers were rare these days. One pot of coffee was often too much for an entire day. The mother grabbed her child and held her tightly in her arms. "I'm sorry, Lydia."

With one last squeeze, she began to flee the wrath that awaited her, but Lydia could make out the rushed whisper exit the strange customer's mouth. "Two blocks down, one to the right. Gray Rouge." The smallest of nods was given by Lydia's mother in response, just as Lydia began to process the scenario. This was the last sight of her mother. She would never see her mother again. She limped through the violet glass.

Ding! The coffee was done, distracting her. The wisps of her mother's dark hair against the bright backplash of a midday storm were all that remained before they, too, were swallowed into the rain. She was gone. As much as Lydia wanted to hate this customer, she hated the man in the back room more. Still, Lydia wondered, where would she go herself? The only thing that had held Lydia back from leaving alone was her mother's presence.

Looking down at her hands, Lydia saw creamer going into Green Sweater's coffee. She had wanted to ruin the drink, but by instinct, she made the perfect dark roast coffee. Her Papa had taught her how. Lydia thought of the new set of splotches patterned down her mother's arms she had seen during the final embrace. Taking a deep breath, Lydia told herself that this was good. If her mother was safe, Lydia could run on her own. She told herself this, but she didn't believe it. When her Papa passed, the man in the back room came into her life. Now her mother was gone. What evil awaited Lydia? Though she longed to chase after her mother, Lydia knew she shouldn't. If she did, the man in the back room could come out, just in time to see her wisps of hair swallowed by the rain. Then he would know where her mother was, too. It was an awful idea. So instead, Lydia pretended that her mother was still there, in the back room. That was a pretty awful thought too. She ignored it. She handed the green sweater lady her drink. During her first sip, the woman closed her eyes, falling into a memory containing the exact same taste. Looking at Lydia, she said, "It's just like your Papa's. It's just like Jack's." Lydia nodded, and sat in the brown chair facing the woman. It had been a long time since she had heard his name.

That's when the man in the back room made his presence known. A splinter appeared down the center of the dark brown door, carved to match the counter. Lydia winced. A moment later, the whole door had been torn apart. The man in the back room had left his primary residence. With no target in sight, he was not satisfied. Lydia could hear his words, but she tried her best not to listen. They would only hurt if they infiltrated her mind, they would only hurt if she let them settle inside. Her eyes, though, refused to close. Whatever Lydia wanted, they were insistent on watching the horrific scene. The man from the back room pulled his fingers into a large fist. His hands were large, the biggest fingers Lydia had ever seen. They appeared rigid, but not elegantly so. They were not a comfort, like Papa's. The fist launched through the smooth, dark wood of the hand-crafted counter. The noise was audible, even to Lydia. She winced again. He curled his hands around the dying branches of the boxwood plants and tore off the few remaining leaves. Lydia forced herself to look away from the man from the back room's threatening presence. She turned and stared directly into the woman with the green sweater's eyes. She had been afraid to look before, but now it was her best chance of survival. She pleaded in silence with the woman, who was no longer reading Lydia's book. She, too, made eye contact. Lydia was right before. She sank into the comforting abyss of the woman's dark eyes and knew that she was always going to be rescued with her mother. The green sweatered lady would never have left her behind.

The final victim of the man from the back room was the faded green chair, the one Lydia sat in only a short time ago. The covering rained down in pieces. Lydia forced herself not to move. She knew it would have killed her to aggravate the man further. And with that, he angrily stomped away, retreating to collect his fury from the cafe floor. He would be back soon, both the woman and Lydia knew.

The cafe was in ruins. Ceramic shards lay scattered behind the counter. Unused coffee was everywhere. Two candles flickered, afraid. Lydia didn't let herself see the extent of the damage, but the green sweated woman took in every detail. She would never repeat a single bit of what she saw to anyone, anywhere. The memory would always be present, but forever silenced.

Before fleeing like her mother, Lydia grabbed three things. The red book with the gold lettering, a piece of torn green fabric, and a splintering shard of the hand-crafted counter found their way into her hands. After that, the two of them ran. They ran far from the Calming Nature Cafe and her companion, the empty truck shop. They ran from the memories of love and the memories of pain. They ran two blocks down, one to the right. And through it all, Lydia held Papa's hands, through her three final souvenirs and the much softer fingers of his older sister, the woman in the green sweater.

Max Bell

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

clonal quaking aspen

when the roots that pierce
through your old skin
fix you to that splintered stump—
that one we caused last summer—
you'll ask me to adjust your tie
and pin your hair back

i fear this crucifixion will only prove
you cannot be bothered to bleed out

your might swims through me
viscerally
these worn veins pulse in tune
with every scream that erupts from your throat
it always skips the fourth
beat

you don't believe me when i squirm
so i'm still
and you are merciless

you drive your hacksaw between lines of bark
it growls and kills
and you sweat and laugh

in this
i am alone
the vines that caress and strangle my limbs
loop around your teeth
your tongue is still
and i don't remember what we looked like before this

will these roots bury themselves in my stomach?
will they grow out of my skin?
will i resemble you?

organs slit open with sharp messy cuts
the base of your spine protruding through your damaged skin

a dark wound the size of your fist plows into your side
i poke my fingers around the wilting edges of loose flesh
and i pull until the crown moves with it
the blood soaks underneath my fingernails

and i won't get the taste out of my mouth for months

i trace the faint outline of rib
through your viscous insides
they squelch and hiss and
i dig my hand farther

i will find your stomach
and i will clear it of these branches

we meet face-to-face again
between the wind and the dried fruit on the dead grass
you and i sit in this vegetation
amongst lips made of bark
your fingernails are chipping and falling out
and i watch
and i spread

prove to me that trees can stand
prove to me i won't choke on their leaves when they fall

Sydney Brewer

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Lindsey Lecroy-Whitworth

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Melody of the Stars

Melody of the Stars

Once upon a time there was a young shepherd boy who had the job of staying up all night to watch the sheep. It wasn't the most exciting job in the world, sleeping sheep didn't do much, but the shepherd boy hadn't complain. He had loved looking up at the stars and playing a small flute he had made himself.

Every night he would play a new song he had composed to the stars about the peace of the night and the merriment of the brook as it laughed. Stars tickled its glassy surface with their twinkling movement and sparkling smiles.

The boy had often been seen throwing up his head and laughing in great mirth for no apparent reason. Many travelers thought that he had been touched in the head but nobody confronted him about it because the stars seemed to enjoy his laughter. The beauty of them had not been seen the like of anywhere else. Even the hardest of men were softened under their light.

Some claimed the shepherd boy was the cause of it all. But the boy denied it, and the answer he gave was always the same: "I don't control the stars," and would continue in a merry voice, "I only play for them."

His tunes were often wistful and strange. They could not be called sad as so many would claim. They mistook sorrow for longing. On the contrary, they were full of happiness. However, it wasn't the happiness of a bird first awakened ready to get up in their chipper way, but more like the hooting of an owl, slightly startling at first but grows sweeter as the song continues.

That song floated over the countryside like the voices of dreams waiting to be heard. Some of the people who had heard the boy's songs, disliked it, claiming it was akin to distasteful food or horrid smells. Others, however, young in spirit and still having much life left or being pure and kind at heart, said it was the most beautiful dream they had ever endured. For them, the shepherd boy's song brought back lovely memories of innocent and wistful days of youth, or days waiting around the corner.

The reason for such varied opinions was simple: Such pure expressions of truth and beauty shocked those living without the love and understanding of what beauty really was. For some the taste of this purity brought them back from the darkness in the world; for others it only ignited resentment. It had always been more than just a song.

One night the shepherd boy lay looking up at the stars. He dreamed of what the stars were like, up there glittering in the fields of night, dancing in the glades of light, fluttering in the dark sea of sky. A soft treading of feet upon the dewy grass had been heard and the boy got up, wanting to see what was coming towards him. There in the field was a young girl, younger than him. She was walking forward, beaming like only a young child might. White hair swirled down her back like threads of moonlight. Her face glowed out from under it all, pale and pure. Soft lace flowed around her shoeless feet. However, the most unusual thing about her was her eyes. They were not a normal brown or blue that he had seen down in the village, but a pure sparkling silver, like two full moons.

She looked as if she glowed.

“What are you doing in the dark?” The shepherd boy asked curiously.

“I don’t mind the dark one bit,” she answered without hesitation. “Can you play me a song so I can dance to it?”

He, being a considerate fellow, obliged. The song flowed from him beginning slowly, with long, beautiful golden notes that echoed across the hills. Then it grew, and grew, until it became a dancing melody that would make the most stubborn want to dance with all they had in them. The young girl danced and danced in circles, flinging herself about so that her little dress didn’t know where to go next. She flew over the grass like a small ghost, twirling, jumping, laughing and spinning. And soon another one of her kind came, a young woman. She was similar to the girl in appearance with the same silver hair and piercing full moon eyes. She joined the little girl who laughed even more readily than before, spinning and spinning and spinning. The shepherd boy hesitated when he noticed the woman. She shined with a fierce beauty and would challenge the height of any grown man of our race, which would be rather startling if she caught you off guard.

“Go on. It’s all right.” The woman sang and the shepherd boy knew by her voice that she had no faults about her. He continued to play with more beauty than before and soon more of their people walked down. All sorts of different people: rambunctious young men, pretty young ladies, motherly old women, and stately old gentlemen all coming down one by one from the sky. They danced in circles to the sounds of his flute, and the little girl was lost in the midst of gowns and shirt tails. When she had had her fair share of dancing, she went up next to the shepherd boy and began to sing along to his tune. He did not hesitate but played on. She sang something like this:

“Dancing, twinkling, fluttering, swirling,
Wings a-flying, skirts a-whirling,
The glades deep blue, the clearings free,
Dance sweet stars, at least for thee.
Vast in plains of sky so deep
No man there could ever weep
Oh sweet lady of the sky,
Spin your skirts and all shall fly.
Send the wind and set us free,
So that we may dance for thee.
The stars our partners in the ball
Until the daylight comes to call,
Awake we then from sweeter dreams,
To reality, or so it seems
But longing never stops to stay,
Until the ending of the day.”

After she sang with the voice as sweet as a wild flower and meaning every word, she went into another wild dance weaving in and out of the crowd. A flower petal cast to and fro by the wind.

They danced through the night to the shepherd boy’s song in the same wild way, never growing tired and always looking as if they could dance for eternity. Sometimes the shepherd boy thought he was in a host of phantoms, yet he heard the soft pattering of feet on the earth. He looked up in wonder and realized that the sky was empty of stars. He watched them dance in awe.

Soon the boy’s eyelids grew heavy with sleep. He played on, not wanting to lose this dream, this wistful dream, filled with so much joy. Soon the young girl of the stars ran up to the boy and threw her arms around him looking up into his tired eyes. He stopped playing for a moment to look down into hers. She let go, never faltering in her gaze as she said, “Thank you.” She kissed him on the cheek and in the next second she was whisked away in the crowd again.

The boy’s eyes fluttered, He blinked up at the brilliant light of morning. The clouds drifted lazily across the carpeted blue plains. He stood, remembering the past night and looked around. The luscious hills stretched far away as his sheep grazed placidly amongst the buttercups and dandelions, undisturbed. Nothing suggested that the dancing of the stars was not all just a wonderful dream. He looked again, sure he would find something. There, where he was sure the dance had commenced, a small patch of wild roses grew up from the green grass with a singular flower bud blooming at its top. It glowed and twinkled in the rays of the sun. It seemed unearthly, not only in its rapid growth but also in its flourishing lacy leaves. None of the sheep bothered with it, leaving it to bless the fields and bloom in

peace.

As the sun departed the world on the following night, the rose blossomed into its full being, Shining like a fully fledged star in all the beauty of its light. He knew that the girl of the stars had planted it for him. So every night he played for the flower, hoping that the girl of the stars would hear him and smile at his song.

Madeleine Bridges

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Souls

It felt as if there was a single soul in the vast rows of fraying red velvet and mahogany wood looking up at me with watchful eyes. I hit a final broken minor chord on the old ivory keys (of which I would hopefully not touch for a long time) and stood without looking back. I briefly stroked the weathered surface of the old, slightly out-of-tune piano, thinking of how my hand had grown since the first time it had played its keys. I then sped towards the door, flinging it open with a rush of jarringly cold air to see the near-empty parking lot. My mother was waiting in the passenger seat of the lone car. It was cold. Not the beautiful Maine cold, which would come later, when the snow covered the world's imperfections and everything was just a bit quieter. It was just cold.

I approached the car. I hated driving. My sister, Mel, used to love it. Luckily, where I was going, I didn't need to worry about a car. I slid into the front seat and clenched the wheel. Next to me sat my mother. The air was thick with the scent of her rosy perfume.

She inhaled as if to say something, but her question seemed to leave her through an exhaled breath. Her eyes seemed to wander, as if searching for the question once again. After a few more moments, she looked up again.

Finally, she asked, "Olive, where is it you're going off to again?"

I replied, "New York City, Mom." The words echoed in my ears: New York City.

She nodded with a subtle smile on her face. A few seconds passed, and in an instant it seemed to be wiped away, a soft crease on her forehead once again replacing it.

"Now, where is it you're going off to?" she asked.

"I'm going to play in New York City, Mom. . . You didn't hear me the first time?"

Her eyes seemed lost, like they were searching for the answer I had just given for a second time. Something about her felt incomplete, as if a part of her weren't there. We were silent the rest of the way home.

The doctor said it was dementia. She said that Mom would need increasing care as she got worse - that she wouldn't get better. New York seemed to fade further away as I envisioned my future not as a performer but as a caretaker.

"Mom, you're going to need to live with me for awhile," I had told her. My cramped house had barely enough room for two, but she couldn't take care of herself. She couldn't even remember when the stove was on, or if she had eaten yet, or what the time was. It was hard enough to drive her around town to her appointments, let alone New York.

"Why would I do that?" she had said. Her eyes were still searching.

"You don't remember?" I replied. It was a pointless question.

Snow was piled two feet high, pressed against the window in perfect mounds. Continually she sat, barely getting up. Once, she watched the same episode of a show three times in a row. Her mind had returned to that of a child. Each day she seemed further and further away from the woman I thought to have once known.

"Mom, why don't you come with me? We can go on a walk, like old times," I said to her one morning. The snow was finally starting to thaw, making everything drip and shimmer.

"No, not today," she said. Her words were melancholy and lifeless.

"Please, Mom, it would be good for you."

"No, I think I'd rather stay here."

I stepped towards her and put my hand on the soft, wrinkled skin of her wrist. Somehow, her floral scent still managed to surround her.

"Come on, Mom, we're going."

She frowned, the crease on her forehead intensifying. She paused for a moment, searching for words, then said, "No, Melanie, I'm staying right here!" At that moment, I was forgotten. I was a ghost.

"Mom, I'm not Mel. I'm Olive. You know that, don't you?"

Her eyes formed a distant, blank stare towards the door.

“Oh. Well, Melanie will be home soon, won’t she?” she asked.

“Mom, she’s not-”

I stopped myself. What good would it do? I couldn’t tell her she was gone again. I couldn’t tell her that she had already exhaled her final breath surrounded by bent metal and silver moonlight. I couldn’t ruin my mother’s look of hopeful expectation and happiness.

“I’m sure you’ll be seeing her here soon.”

Winter came and went. Everything was soggy from the melted snow. I had to stay close to her most times. She was always asking the same questions, just like the first day in the car. She was stuck on a never-ending loop. She would conjure up random memories from long ago, some of which were joyous and some melancholy and speak of them as if I were there. She would sing part of a song but would mix another song with it. She still kept asking when Mel would be home.

One day, however, was different. On that day, I played the piano again. It had been too quiet for weeks on end. The unbroken silence had made everything feel eerily motionless. Something about the music seemed to perk her up just a bit. I longed for a real audience member who would clap and let out a laugh of joy from time to time. When I began playing, there was a strange occurrence: a faint smile forming on her face.

Suddenly, she said, “What a pretty song that is.” She paused for a moment, then asked, “Did you write it?”

I chuckled and said, “No, I didn’t, Mom. Beethoven did.”

“Well, you ought to play that for someone other than me, don’t you think? It’s oftly good!” she said.

I smiled. She smiled. Her eyes looked right into mine. They were less cloudy, instead a vivid shade of blue, one of which we both shared. They looked wider and awake. They looked happy, and it was contagious.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said. “I’ve missed you,” I said quietly, my eyes towards the floor.

“What are you missing me for? I’m right here, Olive. I’m always here.”

We both sat there for a few more moments, looking at one another.

After pondering how she could have possibly heard me, I stood and slid the cracked wooden bench back. I stepped towards where she sat across the small room and closed my arms around her. I held on for a long time, letting her sweet scent fill my nose. I could feel the slow, gentle rising and falling of her chest. Finally, slowly, I pulled back.

A part of me stayed in that moment forever. There, I was always smiling, still staring into her eyes.

Another part of me had hopped into the car just a few months later. I had driven south and a tad east. I had gotten new shoes that sent a loud echo as I walked across the fresh maple wood of the pristine stage of a concert hall, which was surrounded by buildings twice its height. The heavy door crawled shut behind me, blocking out the rushing of cars and blaring horns from the buzzing outdoors in an instant. It had snowed on my way there. Slowly it had fallen, drifting down then lifting again with the rush of the wind.

In front of me sat a beautiful, jet-black piano which glistened and gleamed under a million reflected lights. I sat before it and hovered my hands over the edge of its blinding white keys. All I could think about was the fact that I was sitting on a stage again. My heart fluttered thinking about the days ahead, when every last one of the seats that filled my view would be weighed down with hundreds of people. For now, however, the rows of seats remained empty.

Instead, it felt as if there were two souls looking up at me with watchful eyes, resting in the fresh velvet ahead. I felt them there and smiled, music filling the air.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patty Smith

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Fawning Mornings

(NOTE: PORTFOLIO ONLY)

"I want you at the barn in two minutes."

I squint in the sudden light, but my mom's already gone to wake Emerson. I force myself out of my nice, cozy bed and check the time on my phone. 4:41 AM.

"I want you at the barn in two minutes," Mom tells my brother. He gives an admirable protest, but she doesn't listen. "No excuses. Both of you," she adds with a shout as she hustles down the creaky stairs. Mom tends to be very severe about unicorns.

Emerson and I don't bother getting dressed; we flick off our bedroom lights and meet in the hall, both of us rubbing our eyes. We go down to the kitchen, pull muck boots over bare feet and jackets over jammies, and head out to the barn. It's dark still, the grass wet and the lines of the forest and fencing shadows on shadows. The only light peeks from the edges of the barn doors. We slip inside and slide back the heavy door to Marching Everlasting's stall. The light bulbs in here flicker dull and orange. I need to replace them, but not now.

Marlast got pregnant back last summer with the other does, but she miscarried early and mated again. Which is why she's fawning in June, pacing in wood shavings with her nostrils flared.

"Watch her horn," Mom says from the other side of the stall. She has the birthing kit with her, but she's leaning beside the hayrack instead of poking and prodding. "Em, could you get warm water?" He nods and darts out. I shut Marlast's stall door and survey her. Her hind legs and tail are sticky with slime. There is so much slime in my immediate future.

Marlast is a beautiful creature, as tall as a horse but deer-sleek, with cloven hooves, big dark eyes, and a distended, swollen belly. She's got a whole being in there. I touch her lightly. She whips her head, the jagged pearl blade of her horn no idle threat. I have been stabbed before and I sidle back.

"Keep it down," Mom says, like I don't know. I did Faerie Bell's fawning all by myself this year.

Our farm, on paperwork and the sign out front, is called Salt Daffodil Unicorn Farm. We're small— only eight unicorns, plus whatever fawns we have around. We go around New England to different small shows, Mom or Em or me riding for a piece of ribbon and bragging rights. Unicorn breeding is fairly common up here, in that you see it more often than you see kangaroos. It's the kind of profession you get into if you:

1. Have money to spare,
2. Like flirting with death on a daily basis, and
3. Are really, really, stupidly obsessed with animals.

Therefore, my mother loves it.

My dad tolerates it, but only because he loves Mom. Emerson and I were infected with the stupid-risk thing early. Unicorns usually seem worth it.

'Usually' somehow encompasses five o'clock on a Monday morning, with my arms and pajama pants caked in wood shavings and afterbirth. Emerson leans against the door, less slimy but in the running. He's smiling the stupid, crooked smile he has when no one's watching. And Marlast's fawn deserves it. The baby is the winner of the slime contest, but under the sawdust and newborn skinniness, he's cute. Uniform dark silver, big eyes, no markings, and even the curl-tipped ears of his sire. Marlast nibbles on his gray-blue placenta and keeps snorting at us.

"He's a beauty," Mom says, almost inaudible. Marlast swats her tail anyway.

"For sure," Emerson says. He fidgets with the top of the iodine bottle. "I think Marlast wants us out, though." It's not even a maybe. She tolerates humans during births because one of hers went south really quick once, but now she

wants everyone away from her baby.

"You and Ailin can go back to bed," Mom says. "Thanks for helping."

We nod. Emerson pushes open the stall door just enough for us to squeeze through. The other unicorns are awake—their heads peer out of the slatted stall windows, watching us. Quibbler, a fawn too young to see out of the stall, nickers. We ignore them all and head back to the house. Already, the sky is pinkening on the east. Daytime in the summer comes ridiculously early here.

We take off our coats and boots and put them back in the rack. "You can shower first," Emerson says. He sniffs his fingers and makes a face.

"You going back to bed?"

"Not at this point," he says. "I'm up."

I shower first, but I'm quick about it. Emerson meets me in the kitchen, our family social room, his hair wet and sticking up in spikes. We end up at the bar counter out of habit. He makes a list on lined paper. I dig my sketchbook out of a pile I was supposed to have taken upstairs and sketch him with a tooth-marked pencil. I always have the most trouble drawing people I know. With Em, fourteen years of familiarity try to work into whatever I'm doing. He barely resembles the little blond kid who cried because he couldn't catch a tree frog, or the ten year old who never stopped watching me.

He shifts in his chair and his entire posture changes. "Hey!" I say. "Stop moving."

He moves again; he looks at me. "Are you drawing me?"

"Yes, and I was almost done," I say. I show him the sketch. Admittedly, he looks like a blurry mass, all curves and sloppy angles and shadows colored in heavy blocks.

"I will try to stop moving," he says, and goes back to his list.

Sketching doesn't work well if you push it. At some point, it's better to step away and stop fiddling. I'm not very good at that bit. I tend to push it too long, get frustrated, and give up. His hair is driving me crazy, the overhead light on the dark wet spikes making improbable highlights. I huff.

"I think you can stop that," he says. "It's making you mad."

Even now, he never stops watching me.

A little past six, I decide there are few things in life better than coffee and get up to make some. Emerson likes his with so much sugar it's a dessert, but Dad's been training me to appreciate it black. *I've found it's good to be simple with coffee*, he told me. *It's generally good not to be picky about much of anything, but coffee especially*. Our coffee maker is so old I'm scared it's going to either explode or come to life and eat my fingers.

Those are the options. It hasn't done either, yet, so I change the filter, grind the beans, and start it.

Emerson sees me moving around and makes two bowls of granola and yogurt, one for each of us. The coffee maker beeps. I pour two mugs, add an unhealthy amount of sugar to one and just a pinch to the other, and sit back down.

"You know that's going to stunt your brain," I tell him as he blows on his mug. "You're growing."

"Back at you," he says, and starts eating. I grin and sip coffee. After a minute, Em nudges my bowl towards me.

"Eat."

"It's early," I say.

"Eat," he repeats. I'm about to argue that I will later, but he stares me down until I take it.

Dad comes downstairs in jeans and a gray sweatshirt, exactly what Emerson and I are wearing. I swear we don't coordinate, but this happens all the time. "Coffee?" he asks when he enters. "That's my Ailin."

"What about me?" Emerson pipes up. Attention hog.

"You're my Emerson," he says. "Unless you've been switched with an alien." He chooses his favorite mug from the cabinet, turtle-patterned with a broken handle.

"An alien who likes sugar," I say. The granola's gotten soft, soaking in the yogurt.

Dad fixes his coffee. "I heard Eliza wake you up," he says. "Any news?"

"Marlast had a nice fawn, no problem," Emerson says. "I didn't get to do anything." The way he says that sounds like he wanted nothing more than to stick his hands up a unicorn and untangle a breech birth today.

"Has Eliza said what she wants to name it?" Dad asks.

"No," Em says. "But I was thinking we could call him Last Frost?"

I toss that around in my head. The baby's mother is Marching Everlasting, and his father Frost Dance. Normally, we don't name them from their parents' names, but it has a nice music to it. "I like it," I say. "Good one."

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Stranded

My family usually goes to Jamaica every year at Easter to visit my dad's dad, Opa. Last year, the pandemic interrupted travel, so we went on Christmas break instead. I hadn't been in a few years—the previous time, I'd stayed in school while the rest of my family went, since their spring break fell on a different week. I hadn't missed it, eating oatmeal at my other grandparents' kitchen table, milking the goats for my mom, and going to class like normal. I've been to Jamaica enough times that it doesn't really feel exciting anymore, just different. This time, I was not allowed to skip.

The entrance immigration system for arrivals in the Kingston airport has never been great, but COVID-19 rules made the whole system even more of a hassle: a disastrously organized set of contradicting instructions, queues, and those social distancing floor stickers, overseen by soldiers armed with guns and no directions. It took the normal three hours with only a fraction of the normal arrivals. Marcus and Evan, my younger brothers, played rock-paper-scissors, and Mom made friends with the guy in line in front of us. Mom will talk to anyone. Dad had to fill out the same visa paperwork twice.

A neighbor of Opa's picked us up, a taxi driver with a heavy patois accent who played the same five reggae albums on loop on the five hour drive to Portland parish. I ended up crammed in the back with the luggage, barely able to see outside through tinted windows. When we finally got to Opa's shoreline property, his old dog, Coco, rushed out to say hello. She killed five other dogs and maimed children, but she acted sweet to us. I used to be terrified of her. Pat, Opa's girlfriend, called Coco off, and everyone hugged and praised how tall my brothers and I had gotten, like we had any choice in the matter. That evening, after unpacking, we all watched the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn at twilight. The planets barely showed through the clouds, just two little specks of light, brushing closer than they would for a century.

My family slept up at the guest house, four octagonal rooms on stilts attached to a full porch. The five of us filled the space pretty quickly, clothes everywhere, sand in everything. I lost my bottom retainer a few days in, and I couldn't find it anywhere in the chaos. After a day of searching, I discovered it in my shoe, all the way across the house from where it should have been.

My parents and I took a walk in the rain, a limping dog hobbling beside us. He raced the taxis. The roads are so potholed, all the way around the island, that the top speed is about 10 miles an hour. On the road, we kept walking past starving dogs Mom tried to feed marzipan, and haughty brush goats who stared down at me with their nostrils. In the dim grocery while my parents were buying rum and sardines, I found a packet labelled "cock soup seasoning." It appealed to my inner twelve year old.

My family swam at least once a day, and I did a few times, until the novelty wore off and I didn't want to deal anymore with rough waves and swim clothes, or trying to navigate the urchin-covered reef. Mostly, I walked around the beach, looking at shells and tiny fish. Opa lives next to a little creek that reroutes itself with every hurricane season. At the mouth of the creek where it met the sea, beautiful waterbirds waded, smartly dressed in black or white feathers. They looked like cranes, maybe ibises, but I forgot to ask what they were called. They could hold so still, when they wanted to, my eyes slipped right over them.

Pat's partially domesticated cats— Small Tiny, Mwezi, and Whitey— squeezed through the wooden lattice walls to get in or out of the house, even when the door stood open. Mom made the mistake of feeding Mwezi cheese once, and then he followed her around, pestering for more treats. Jamaica, or at least the part we visit, has a lot of almost feral animals, cats and scrawny dogs everywhere. No one fixes their pets, either, and Mom often talks about how someone should start a veterinarian clinic.

I kept wishing for ripped jeans, overlarge t-shirts, and my binder, but I'd only packed my summer clothes, and I was stuck with tight tops and swirly skirts and a bathing suit that made me not want to go to the ocean. People couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl, between my haircut and outfits. They asked my mom about it, not me— I don't think I

would have reacted well if they had. I hate that question, hate the idea that people are actively trying to decide for me what I am. I felt trapped, being queer there.

My granddad's cook, Lorna, cooked most nights; brown chicken or fish, and always rice. Once, she boiled carrots until they had the texture and taste of overdone broccoli. On Christmas, we ate dinner at Lorna's, and the congregation of her neighbors talked over my head in an accent I couldn't understand. Someone thought to give my twelve year old brother a low-alcohol beer, and he pretended he knew enough to give a review.

When it rained at night, the ceiling dripped on my face through the mosquito netting. I shared the bed with Evan, and Marcus, the bossy one, took the couch most nights. We argued every night about who would get the fan, and who would have to sleep in the stuffy heat without one.

Mom bought nutmeg from a friend of a neighbor— a full handful of pods for one US dollar, so cheap it was unbelievable. I wondered if they put nutmeg in the ice cream. All the ice cream in Jamaica tastes exactly like eggnog. Opa bought us kids a huge box to eat out of coffee mugs, and snuck up every night to the guest house to have some. We ate so much ice cream.

A deaf guy who lives in town, Jwanzah, came by to hang out and paint watercolor with us. He spearfishes at night. My mom makes a special effort to find him every year, to try to puzzle conversations out of gestures. He has crystal-blue eyes, really shocking against dark skin. I don't usually have the energy to deal with him.

In Jamaica, all the bottled water has a pH of 8.0, bitter in my mouth. The water sanitation isn't great, so we're not supposed to drink tap water; it smelled strange, doing the dishes in cold water, rinsing off the salt from a swim in the ocean. The bottled water also smelled kind of nasty, but I did my best to ignore it.

On Lorna's night off, my mom set the oven to bake chicken, and I struggled to remember the Fahrenheit-Celsius conversion— subtract 32 and multiply by 5/9? The chicken cooked fine, whatever we ended up setting it at. We ate cho-cho for dinner that night, cooked up like eggplant. It was passable, and yet on our walks, we found the fruit dropping off laden bushes and rotting into the ground.

I built a coliseum of driftwood and bleached coral on the beach, and poured into it hundreds and hundreds of snail shells I picked out of the sargassum. Sometimes I'd stand in the sand pools and talk to the ocean, waves lapping at the back of my knees. I planned to do some writing while I was there, but mostly I told my stories to the sea instead of pinning them down on paper.

We sat on the salt-gritty porch at night, looking over the silver sea and the moon through binoculars, arguing about cloud shapes. Dad named the full moon's craters, and Marcus tried to insist that the flickering red-green star on the horizon, Sirius, was a plane.

My brothers kept getting their Frisbee stuck in razor-edged jucky bushes or on top of the garage, and fishing it out with broom handles, or by making Evan climb on the roof. They walked to the corner store every day to buy Pepsi and this vaguely Cheeto-like snack called Bigfoot, since Mom doesn't stop them on vacation. My family was supposed to be on quarantine lockdown and never leave the property, but we were all a little lax about that. I used it a few times as an excuse to avoid meeting up with people everyone expected me to remember. I didn't want to deal with Mr. Shin, who runs a bakery and a shady business selling ventilators all over the Caribbean, or Toya, the bartender who once goaded me into my first and only time trying karaoke.

I reread Terry Pratchett on the deck, over and over, back curled over my book, hiding in fantasy worlds I already knew by heart. My parents kept dragging me out to talk to my grandparents, clean up the beach, play with my brothers, anything they could think of. Mom made my brothers and me do the stretching routine from our martial arts classes; Marcus was mad that I got to be the leader and threw almond flowers at me.

Opa made a special effort to talk to me, when Mom and I were sanding varnish off boards at the picnic table. Mom told me later he was trying to bait me, but I don't trust anything he says, so it didn't get him anywhere. Opa's Dutch accent gets stronger the older he gets, and he drinks even though he's really not supposed to. Most of the time, I avoided him. I don't really like talking to him. We shared a bowl of cubed papaya once, and I counted that as enough bonding.

A mongoose strolled through the yard once with slow purpose, not scared at all. We argued about the plural later. Google said it was mongooses, but I stand by mongeese. Some rich plantation owner imported the animals to control rodents centuries ago, and they promptly took over the island.

Near the end of our trip, the taps in the guest house spluttered and splurged, and when we tried to shower, the handle electrocuted our fingers. Evan decided there were water demons; he named them Leroy and Steve. He didn't know why Leroy and Steve were upset, but he suggested we just not shower.

The last day, Opa's girlfriend offered to take us to a tourist beach a ways down the coast, Frenchman's Cove. I was sick of my bathing suit and on my period, and I said 'no' regardless of how Evan pleaded for me to come see the beautiful cove. He stayed mad about that for weeks.

I passed the drive back to the airport silently naming the pride flags people in this conservative, Christian country had unintentionally painted their cinderblock houses— transgender, pansexual, deminonbinary. Little wooden stands

and concrete shops stood all along the route, selling honey in rum bottles, red ackee pods splitting in the sun, coconuts, jerk chicken, all sorts of things. The driver often had to creep around herds of goats on the road. On the island, the sea's always to one side, the mountains to the other, water and stone, sky gray and moss green. It feels fundamentally different from anywhere I've been in the United States, but familiar in its own way. The humidity presses in with the heat, the wind smells like trash burned in barrels, and the people play their music like a kind of war, volume triumphing over everything. Most people stay on the coasts, squished between the bamboo stands and jagged rocks of the peaks and the relentless currents of the Caribbean. It would only take a day to drive around the island, if the roads were better.

On the plane, New Year's Eve, above the clouds but low enough to see individual houses, I could see across all of Jamaica— the cities and towns along the coast, the high crinkled mess of the mountains, all of it so, so tiny in an endless ocean.

*Contributor's note: Some names have been changed in the interest of privacy.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Identify

Have you learned to name
these analogous doubts
of yourself out
of place? I haven't.

*Identification: the process of establishing
who or what someone or something is.*

Passports only tell so much
about a person.
I like the weight of mine,
name and expiration date written
on the back in silver sharpie
so Dad doesn't have
to open it to know who to hand it to.
Triangulate me--
awkward official photos next to rants
in a red journal,
a toddler ornithologist
caught on video next to my books
organized by color
and height-- the layers add up
and divide out and the answer's
approximate.
Where's the threshold for certainty?
Describe this, I dare you,
with space
for the doubt and the change
because close is as close as
anyone's going to get.

*Identification: the act of associating
strongly with something.*

In time, bone grows into titanium
like elemental is organic.
In time, I associate
with reinforced impositions
until I can no longer distinguish
desire from habit; I've grown
into myself, trimmed by everyone around me.
Could I have been anything, before?
We all could have been anything,
but we're not. We are one,
two, five, forty-six--

we're lost.

The connection is as artificial
in implementation as it is
natural in execution,
no clean breaks possible.

Tear it to shreds,
leave the cleanup for later
and the slow healing, lightning scars
in the trees revealing the places
we've been, the people we've been--
approximately.

Have you learned to grow despite
and in spite
of their expectations?
I'm working on it.

BROCKINGTON, JASMINE

Jasmine Brockington

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

The Note

Tan glasses with a crack in the lens

Overflowing disorganization
peeking from the corner of his eye

Sitting there untouched

It was time to clean

His backpack
The only one he's had since middle school
Patched and damaged

The shriveled memories begin to unwind and find a new place
Trash
Or
Keep

An old note catches his attention
So wrinkled and stained with the ink faded
Edges torn like a pair of vintage jeans

His heart drops every time
Simply throwing it away might fix this feeling

Choking back tears

Slowly
dripping

As if they came from a leaky faucet

Staining the note
The ink begins to smear

His surroundings blur

The world became an image
A polaroid picture gone wrong

"Going to get more groceries, be back soon" - Mom
Our fridge was full; why did she go?

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

at the corner of trans and gay

at the corner of trans and gay waits
a boy with a pink binder, a drawn on beard, and a white skirt.
he sits on the bench for the same bus as me
but i stay standing,
hands deep in the pockets of my jeans.
he tries to talk to me but i
don't open my mouth.
i wait with my feet spread and my chin high.
when the bus comes, we both get on.

the next day, he's there again with
rainbow nails and a flower crown,
sitting with his legs crossed.
he says hello to me and I turn up my music.
there's no one else there but i pass today,
speaking is a death wish.

he comes back again to the corner of trans and gay
like he's not afraid to be there,
like that bench is his no matter who sees him on it.
he sits under the street light. it glows against
his bleached hair and rainbow striped cheeks.
tonight i decide to sit with him, but i still don't speak.

the next week he brings sparkly red nail polish
and opens the cap when he sees me. i sit down,
he takes my hand, and pulls a streak across my thumb.
tonight i glimmer under the street light.
tonight i tell him, "thank you."

the next time i see him, he's head to toe in drag.
beautiful blues and greens hang off his skin.
when i sit down, he pulls out an impossibly large wig.
he teaches me how to put it on.
tonight i am the street light
tonight, we talk until the bus comes.

when i'm there again, his wig is in my bag, and
i'm wearing my crop top and he's in his skirt.
when our wigs are on, we become twin street lights,
and his smile becomes a lighthouse leading mine open.
he teaches me to dance with my hips til the bus comes.

i come back again in my wig and nails and
he's not there.
i wait until the bus comes. he gets there just before it leaves.
we sit down together and i see
blood in his hair and scratches on his face and tears in his dress and
he won't look at me.
i touch his shoulder and he stiffens

tonight i walk home in jeans, avoiding the streetlights.
i don't stop at corners and i hope he doesn't either.
i don't know where he is, but i hope his dress
is in the closet.

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Why I Write

The sounds of clanking keys and pens scratching paper is my lullaby. I am an infant crying in a cradle and this is my back and forth rocking motion. This is my blanket and my favorite toy. I write to teach myself to walk. To walk around the house without falling into corners. To go on my own. To sneak into the kitchen and steal the cookies my mother left on the bottom shelf. I write to teach myself to speak. I had no voice of my own so I crafted one from the people around me. My voice is my father's, my sister's, my mother's, and her mother's. I write to make my own. I use the leftover nails from my childhood tree house, the forgotten insides from ripped stuffed animals, the dead batteries from tv remotes, the burned plastic from old spatulas, and the coins dropped between couch cushions. To many, my voice sounds like a pile of junk and scraps. To many, my voice is not worth listening to. I write to hold my words instead of hear them. I write to keep my voice when I don't have enough power to force a whisper. When the glue lets go and the stuffing falls, or the old batteries weigh too much to reach my tongue, I write. I write to say "screw you" to my vocal cords. I can play my melody without you. My throat is my guitar and my tongue is my pick, but I am a writer. I do not need a guitar or pick to use a pen and paper. I write to hone my craft. I write to teach myself to socialize. I write musicals and symphonies to play in the front of classrooms. I write songs to play for one or a few. To let the scrapes from the burned plastic heal over. To get used to the calluses from the coins and rusting nails. I write for the girl with the voice made from styrofoam cups and take out forks. To let her know it's okay to use what you have. I write to teach myself to love. To give you honey and syrup everytime I see you. To fill my palms with it. To "forget" to wash my hands after sharing it with you. To let it drip on your pillowcase so you can sleep to the smell of something sweet. I write to teach myself to tolerate. To let the spiders make a home in my favorite shoes. To take the last shower. To always move out the way when someone else is walking towards me. I write to live. To hold the air in these asthmatic lungs despite them. To keep my heart pumping like my words are a pacemaker. I write to hold on. To see my grandma's face one last time. To hug her. To hear my father's voice at an inside volume. To refill my favorite stuffed animals. I have more reasons to write than a beach has sand.

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

sleep consumes me

Pieces of me catch between the teeth of sleep
As I slide down it's throat
With resistance as soft as a feather,
I flutter down the side it's stomach
And tickle it like a butterfly.

I slump down and close my eyes
In the rocking cradle of acid

Waiting

For it to turn me to human excrement
Whole. There is nothing it can get from me.
I will enter and leave as a waste product.

I hold my breath as I stick to it's bowelles
Like a tapeworm.
Leaving scars as the only proof I tried
To resist.

I fell to the ground with a wet thud,
Covered in slimy brown.
But it was worth the gurgly lullabies,
It only took a trek up to teeth
For me to finally have a chance to
Rest

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

I Want to One Sided Miss You

I'll let you grab my hand
Intertwine your dainty fingers with my cold ones
And hold on long enough to absorb it

Then let go without warning

To give you a taste of the warmth I'm missing
Until you learn to stop reaching
for any part of me

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

his body

his small, frail body laying next to me
looks so

 warm

i want to wrap around him and
hold on

let my fingers slip beneath his night
shirt and bring him to me

i want him here for...

hours

 no

 forever

i want him here forever.

with me.

i'll answer his phone and tell people he's

 busy

 or maybe just tired

i know what he does

n't

 his family never loved him anyway

what's a missed call or two

how much worry will rise?

it's just him and

i want him to know, he has to

 no

 he doesn't

i'll love him the only way i know

 how?

i'll kiss him slow and deep

 en our em

 brace yourself my love

this is going to hurt a bit

 well

 a lot

but not for long

i grab beneath his arms

he's weightless like a... ghost

 no dead weight

i warm his neck with kisses
and he finds the strength to
stand tall, baby, like you always do
without me
were you happier?

there is no me without
you
are all i have
but you hate me...
tell me you were better before me
everytime we talk
so, baby, i'm doing all i can
for you, i'd give my life

but i have to take you
you're wounded
you're hurt
you're a shell of yourself

baby,
i can't keep hurting you like this

the letter on your nightstand
the apology
is from me to you too
i tied the knot
for you, i'd give my life
i'll hold your waist
as you put on your necklace

it looks tight on you

just quiet down some, baby,
it'll be done soon
i promise
i love you

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

When Walls Crumble, We Close Doors

I stood by the door, building up the courage to quietly open it and sneak to my brother's. My stubby little fingers tried to time the turning of the door knob at the loudest point of the argument to hide any noise I did make. My father's voice rose so high that even across the house I knew his veins were nearly bursting out his neck. I took a shallow breath and tiptoed on the old carpet. It was my mission to move quick enough to not be caught; I didn't want to know what would happen to me if I did. My shaking fingers gripped my brother's door knob without knocking. I didn't know if he was even awake but I went in anyway. The yelling at the other end of the hall turned to loud static as my father's fist broke through the wall like a cannonball. It was so loud, sometimes, I forget it's not still happening.

I swallowed down the fear in my throat and blinked back tears as I opened the door to my trembling brother. He's only two years younger than me, but we were still young enough for that to mean a three inch height difference. His ghostly pale face filled with fear from the door opening until he realized it was me. I crept up to him, watching the tears cascade down his face while trying my best to hold back mine. His entire world was crumbling in our living room, across the table he set cereal bowls on while we watched Spongebob on Sundays. I could only give him one thing right then, a calm voice from a person removed from this. He needed a rock then, and it had to be me. It's not that I didn't feel like crying, I did, but rocks don't cry.

I walked across his bedroom to his bunk bed on a mission. Those six or so feet felt like a minefield, like unknown enemy territory, and I was just trying to rescue the hostage. One creaking floorboard could give away that I was in there. Then we were both compromised. After what felt like forever, I sat next to him. The springs of the bed moved beneath me; he was shaking so bad. My arm found its way around his shoulders and he turned his body into mine. My favorite night shirt was stained at the ribs and shoulder with his tears and snot. I didn't care, it was a small price to pay to see his glossy eyes show a glimmer of comfort in the middle of oceans of fear.

"Do you think mommy and daddy still love each other?" Those words will haunt me until the day I die. I didn't want to lie to him, but I wanted to protect him.

"I don't know. Whatever happens, I'll always be here and I'll always love you." I gripped him a little bit tighter. His heartbeat was so fast I could feel it and prayed he couldn't hear mine. I sang him lullabies slower than normal without realizing it. Time felt warped, almost stilled. The yelling was reaching its climax about thirty feet down the hall, but I was completely oblivious to it. The walls may not have been thick but my brother was safe on this side of them and I had a job to do.

I remember feeling something rise in me. It felt like another emotion I couldn't identify coming up like steam and entangling itself in my already overflowing head. There was so much up there I'm just glad it didn't mix with my words and seep into my brother's ears. He was already hearing enough. He didn't need this concoction, too old for even me. It took every ounce of energy I had left to keep it contained and not squirm at the discomfort of it.

The yelling started to soften, my father was giving up trying to reason with my mother. He never wanted to hurt her, so instead he fully stopped. He slammed the door so loud on his way out the house I remember hearing it bounce and the frame crack. At that moment, I had a choice to make. Should I slip back in my room to avoid my mother finding out I came in and leave my brother alone, or should I stay with him to make sure he was okay? My protective instincts won this battle, and I stayed. Our mother came in with tears in her eyes. She walked across my brother's room like it was *so easy* and sat next to us on his side. I nearly pulled him across me to put myself between them. As far as I was concerned, she had no reason to be here. Then she spoke.

"I'm sorry you guys had to hear that." Her voice cracked like a peanut shell and exposed someone hurt. I had to bite my tongue to not tell her she's the one who started that fight. She was last to yell, she always is, but I heard the

start of this. The taste of iron filled my mouth and a thick river ran from teeth to throat. The moisture gathered in the corners of her eyes. I couldn't tell at the time it was fake, but I've never been able to watch someone cry, real or staged. My protective guard slipped. She made me frame my father as a threat and even though I knew there was a crack in that too, that wasn't my concern right then. My concern was still not crying. My concern was putting my brother's favorite cartoons on with one last hug as I mustered the courage to leave him alone with her. My mother didn't seem like a threat then, but wolves lurk in sheep's clothing. What would she say to him? Would she use her normal being "wronged" as a reason to say something or would she come up with something new, something worse? I took a breath, whispered a quiet good night, and stood up to head back to my room.

The toys covering the floor were the least of my worries; I was too focused on the tether trying to keep me tied to my brother as hard as it could. This trek felt so much longer than the first. I felt weightless, like the room lost its gravity. I was stuck in space. I didn't even realize until I made it back that my foot was screaming from the sharp corners of a Lego. There was still an imprint in my heel when I looked.

That should've been my warning. That should have been what told me to go back, to protect him, but I didn't. I stayed put. I still regret that.

Isabella E Shealy

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Poetry

Mi isla without borders, My island sin fronteras

Mi isla without borders, My island sin fronteras

This is America

In your America, I should speak English.

Your white man's dream of America

An America that can't be my America too.

En mi America, yo puedo hablar en español, en mi América,

You accept my culture and you don't brush me aside

Or group us together.

These words, that groups us together

Words created here, in your America

So you can justify seeing us as all the same

We are not the same

We are not all in some gang

We are not all Mexican

All you see is Juan with a poncho and a sombrero.

Si ella es mexicana, Si ella es dominicana

Y si juntas somos hispanas

Pero primero yo soy Venezolana.

That's home but I am here now

In your America that I wish were mine

My heart, mi corazón está en Venezuela,

Pero mi mente, my mind is in your América

Mis ojos, my eyes look to a dream,

Mi sueño, of a place that is beautiful,

Neither here nor there,

A place without the white man's dream of invisible lines,

Fronteras que rompen mi corazón, borders that break my heart.

And on that far off dream, y en ese lejos sueño

Is where you will find me

Es donde me encuéntralas

Kara Finley

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Shelly Dean, Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Everybody Knew Shawn Brennan

I knew Shawn Brennan. Well, everybody knew Shawn Brennan, but I knew him first, before the money, before the fame, before the grief and guilt.

I met him in a coding class my school was offering for extra credit. Computers have never been my thing, but I didn't have a choice. I needed the extra credit.

The day of the class I trudged down a flight of stairs to the computer lab in the basement of my school. I begrudgingly pushed open the door and scanned the room for anyone I knew. Instead, I made eye contact with a scared kitten hanging from a tree, reminding me to "hang in there." I walked to the back of the room and sat at an empty table.

I thought I was home free, and I began to spread my things out in the hopes that no one would sit next to me. Just as I began my paper sprawl, a boy in my grade slid into the open seat next to me and dropped his stuff on the ground. It was Shawn Brennan. Everyone knew Shawn Brennan. He was athletic, funny, nice, smart, good looking and had two older brothers, who were just as popular as he was. To be honest I was a little intimidated by him.

We were partnered for every assignment. We talked about little stuff like weekend plans and homework assignments. He made the class almost enjoyable. Almost.

Shawn was really good at coding, though I don't know why that surprised me. Shawn was perfect at whatever he did. He made A's effortlessly and was one of the best players on our school's football team. Everything seemed to come easy to him.

Shawn started to tutor me on Saturdays, probably out of pity. I didn't care though, I got to spend my Saturdays with Shawn. I would go to his house in the afternoon, and he would try to teach me Python. I thought it would be awkward being alone with Shawn since, so far, the only thing we had in common was the class, but the conversation flowed easily. We talked about movies, T.V. shows, family, and books. I learned that, like me, his favorite movie was Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. He watched the Great British Baking Show with his mom, he loved to read, and he even told me about the Harry Potter phase he went through when he was eight. I was beginning to realize we had more in common than I thought.

I finished the class with a little certificate that said I had a beginning mastery in Python and extra credit in math that my mom hung on our fridge. That was the end of coding and computers for me, but Shawn went on to major in it in college.

Shawn got into Stanford's computer science program (no surprise there), and I went to the University of California and majored in film production. Even though we were at different schools, Shawn would call me as often as he could, usually rambling on about whatever computer stuff he had done that day. I tried to keep up, but he often lost me by the second or third sentence. I knew he felt the same way when I talked about my classes.

About halfway through our third year, I got the call that would change things forever. Shawn was in the hospital. That night, Shawn's roommate was at a party and called Shawn to pick him up. Shawn was driving them back to their apartment in the rain and lost control of the car. It spun out of control and they ended up jammed in a ditch on the side of the road. It took the fire department four hours to get him out. Shawn got out with a concussion and a broken leg but Shawn's roommate was not so lucky, his injuries were fatal.

Shawn was discharged from the hospital about a week after the accident, just in time for the funeral. I hadn't planned on going, but Shawn asked me to be there with him. There were so many people in attendance, the accident made the news and shook the campus community.

For about two weeks after the accident, everyone at Stanford knew Shawn Brennan. People he didn't even know would come up to him and say, "I'm sorry for your loss". Shawn was polite and would always give them a

small, sad smile and nod his appreciation.

And as suddenly as it began, it stopped. Everyone forgot about Shawn Brennan and went back to their daily routines. Shawn did, too. Except -- that he didn't.

Slowly Shawn returned to his normal funny, intelligent self, but I could tell something was...off. I tried to visit Shawn and check in with him more often. There were times when it seemed like he was someplace else. I could tell he wasn't taking care of himself, too; he had lost weight and complained about being tired all the time. As much as I tried to keep in touch, Shawn started to withdraw, spending countless hours on a "project." One weekend I went to Stanford to celebrate his birthday. I walked into his dorm, and when he noticed me, he shot up out of his chair and slammed his laptop shut.

"What is that?" I asked him.

"It's nothing Amy," he said with a sigh. I remember the way he fidgeted as he talked to me that night, fiddling nervously with all the things on his desk. "Why are you here?"

"It's your birthday. Don't you remember? We made plans like a month ago."

"Oh yeah, right. Let me go change, then we can go" He said it like it was the absolute last thing he wanted to be doing.

"You know, we don't have to go if--"

"Just drop it, Amy! We're going, just let me change. Jesus," he stormed out of the room. I didn't know what to say. He had been getting worse ever since the accident. He was consumed with his "project". Shawn claimed it was just something for school, but I didn't believe him. It had to be something more. Whatever it was, Shawn was obsessing over it in a way that was almost unhealthy. It was changing him. Maybe that's what drove me to open his computer.

I didn't understand any of what I saw on the screen. It was just lines and lines of code. My eyes scanned the screen for anything I could understand, something that could tell me what was wrong with my friend. Suddenly a hand slammed down on the computer.

"Why are you looking at my stuff?"

"I wanted to know what you're working on and since you don't tell me anything anymore, I had to look for myself."

"Why are you looking at my stuff?"

"This isn't healthy Shawn. You're obsessed with this...*project*. It's changing you. Maybe you should take a break," I put my hand on his arm to try to get him to look at me. He just shook it off.

"Please, Shawn," my voice cracked, "Let me know what you need. Tell me how to help--"

"Get out." His voice was sharp and cold. I had never seen him so angry before. He turned to look at me. He had a fierce look in his eyes. If anyone else had seen him at that moment, they wouldn't have recognized him. "Get out Amy!"

With tears in my eyes, I opened the door and walked out.

That was the last time I saw Shawn in college.

Everybody knew Shawn Brennan. Big software companies were trying to hire him. Reporters were trying to get an interview with him. Most people knew who he was. He was the college kid who had written a software program that was going to revolutionize the next iPhone. I guess the only person who didn't know him anymore was me.

He had removed himself from my life. Every time I called or texted or offered to visit, he said he was too busy with school or with his project. Eventually, I stopped calling, and we grew apart. I didn't hear anything about him again until five years later when he sold his software. Then I couldn't go anywhere without seeing him.

In all of the pictures, he looked so happy. He looked like he was in a much better place than five years ago. He looked like maybe he had finally gotten over the accident. I called him on a whim, not expecting him to pick up, but to my surprise, there he was, on the phone, saying, "Hi, Amy! It's been a while. How are you?" like nothing had happened. We talked for a long time and decided to meet for lunch the next week.

When he walked into the restaurant, I almost didn't recognize him. He was wearing nice, designer clothes, he had a nice watch, but he still had his dazzling smile. That grin didn't leave his face for the rest of the meal. We sat down and ordered lunch, his fingers tapping a beat on a menu. We made small talk for a while, and then he did something I wasn't expecting. He thanked me. He said that I was right. He said the accident had left him messed up, and without me, he never would have figured out what he needed to do. I was so happy for him, so happy that he was finally getting the help he needed, that I was willing to ignore that faraway look in his eyes.

All through lunch Shawn had gushed about this "mystery project" he was working on. He said it was going to make a huge difference and help so many people who experienced tragic loss like he had. He gave me vague details about it, claiming he couldn't talk about it in public. It was the only thing he talked about throughout the meal. I thought it was weird, but I was also intrigued and excited to see Shawn so excited over something, so when he

invited me to go to his apartment to talk more about the mystery project, I eagerly accepted the invitation.

When he opened the door to his apartment, I couldn't believe it was his. It was dark and smelled like old food and dirty laundry, a stark contrast to the sharply dressed put together man from lunch. A small window spilled golden light into his messy apartment. There were piles of plates and stacks of cups all over the floor. The walls were covered in newspaper clippings from the accident, drawings, flowcharts, and photos of his college roommate.

"What is all this Shawn?" I asked tentatively, gesturing to the photographs on the walls.

"It's for my project," he replied.

"Are you sure it's healthy to have all of this in your face all of the time," I could see him getting agitated. He began to pace back and forth. This was clearly not a conversation he wanted to have. "Shawn, when's the last time you slept-?"

It was like he couldn't hear me. Shawn grabbed me by the arm and dragged me over to his computer. He explained that he had been working on a program that could connect people with the afterlife. It allowed the user to communicate with the loved ones they lost. He says he had been working on it since sophomore year.

"Shawn! This is crazy. You *need* to let it go. You can't bring him back! Please, come with me. We can get you help-I think you need to talk to someone-"

"I know it sounds crazy, but it's not. I'm fine,"

With that he turned back to his computer and started muttering to himself about his program and the bugs he needed to fix. It was like I wasn't even there. He seemed to be completely unaware of reality, lost in his made-up tech world. And just like that gone was the Shawn Brennan I once knew.

The sun is bright. The cemetery is cold. I approach the podium and begin to speak...

"Everybody knew Shawn Brennan,"

Kara Finley

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Plenty of Room at the Hotel California

I had been pining after Collin for five hundred and forty-eight days. But who's counting?

I had fallen in love with him when he walked into my Algebra class over a year and a half ago. I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him. It was something I thought only happened to the protagonists in cheesy 1980's rom coms. It was painful sometimes. It made me wonder if my love for him would ever die.

Day Five Hundred Forty-Eight

Collin shouldn't be allowed to drive. One of these days, I swear he's going to crash. He's always messing with the radio, flipping through stations, never quite able to find one he likes. One minute we're listening to "Yellow Submarine" by the Beatles, and the next, we're listening to "Love Story" by Taylor Swift. We like to joke that he has "the attention span of a goldfish."

"Collin, I'm getting whiplash. You change the station every four seconds. Just leave it," I said with a smile as I clicked off the radio, "Let's just talk."

"Fine. What do you want to talk about?" Collin said.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Umm. Random..."

"Just answer the question,"

"Not really. Allison does, though. She said she had wanted to be with me since the tenth grade."

"Of course she had," I muttered under my breath. I rolled my eyes and looked out the window. Allison was Collin's girlfriend. She had been falling at his feet for months, or at least that's the way it seemed.

Collin sighed, "Why are you always like this?"

"Like what?" I said, trying to stay nonchalant as I fixed my curls in the reflection of the window.

"You always get so cranky whenever I bring up Allison. Why can't you just be happy for me?"

"I am. You know I like Allison. What are you talking about, Collin?" I said, trying to play it off.

"Well, you sure don't act like it," he said. His eyes were fixed on the road.

"Collin--"

"Just drop it, Julie. It doesn't matter."

He turned the radio back up, letting me know the conversation was over. I stared at my beat-up converses on the floorboard.

Hotel California was playing. It was Collin's favorite song. I saw his face soften, and he began to smile.

"Classic," he said as he started belting out the lyrics. *"I was thinking to myself, this could be Heaven, or this could be Hell. Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way...."*

Collin was still singing and drumming on the steering wheel when I saw a car pull out in front of us.

"Collin, watch out!"

Day Five Hundred Fifty-Five

Collin looked tired when he got in his car at the end of the week. His hair was a mess, and he looked like he hadn't slept in days. He was taking the breakup with Allison pretty hard.

"How was your day?" I asked as he shut his car door.

"Fine. You?" He pulled out of the school parking lot, messing with the car radio.

"Ok. Found out I've got a history test on Monday,"

Collin moved his hand from the radio, content with the station. The beginning guitar riff of "Hotel California" filled the car.

"Hotel California? Again?" I asked.

"It's played every seven minutes on American radio. We're bound to hear it with as much as we're in the car together."

"I feel like I never leave this car."

Suddenly Collin turned to me.

"I just can't believe Allison was cheating on me with him for *months*, and I never realized," he said.

To be honest, I did. Cheating was totally something I could see Allison doing.

I nodded and Collin turned back to the road and drove me home, Hotel California playing in the background.

Day Six-Hundred One

Collin seemed to be getting over Allison. Now that he didn't have a girlfriend, he spent almost all of his free time with me. I liked having my friend back. I hoped I wasn't about to ruin it.

"Are you going to homecoming?" I asked on the drive home from school.

"Maybe. Hadn't really thought about it."

"We should go together... as friends, you know, if you don't have someone you're already planning on going with or something..." I blurted out as my face turned red. "You know what, it was a stupid idea-"

"No, Julie, that sounds fun."

Maybe it was just the light reflecting off the window, but I could've sworn I saw him blush.

Day Six-Hundred Twenty-Two

It's not a date, it's not a date, it's not a date, it's not-

It wasn't a date. It was just two friends, without dates going to dinner together as friends and then going to a high school dance. It wasn't a date, so there was no reason to be nervous.

Collin got in the car with a huge bouquet of flowers. He was all dressed up, and he looked handsome. It was going to be an amazing night.

On the way home from the dance, I wasn't paying attention to where Collin was taking me. I just assumed that he was taking me home, so I was surprised when I noticed Collin drove right past my street.

"You missed the turn. You were supposed to turn down Grace," I said when Collin drove right past my street.

"Yeah, I know. I wanna show you something," he said with a big grin. He kept driving out of town, fiddling with the car radio every now and then.

"So... Are you going to tell me where you're taking me?" I asked after a while.

"Nope. It's a surprise."

"C'mon, give me a hint."

"No, that would ruin the surprise."

I sighed in defeat. The rest of the ride was pretty quiet. When he wasn't messing with the radio, he was tapping on the steering wheel nervously.

"Julie, we're here," Collin said as he suddenly stopped the car.

"Collin, this is a field. You made me sit in the car for twenty minutes just to see a field?"

He opened the car's sunroof and told me to look up at the sky. We were parked in the open field near the edge of town.

"It's... gorgeous," I said, completely at a loss for words, staring at the full moon in the autumn night. Gorgeous didn't even begin to describe it.

"Yeah, it is," He said with a smile. Then he leaned over and kissed me.

Day One Thousand Seventy-Two

"I still have so much packing to do," I said with a sigh as Collin got in the car.

Packing for college was no joke. There were clothes everywhere in my room, scattered in random piles across the floor.

"Can't you finish packing for me?" I whined to Collin.

"Sorry, Babe, I have my own packing to do," He responded, without an ounce of remorse in his voice.

"You suck."

"Love you too," Collin replied as he got out of the car to get gas.

"Get coffee!" I shouted as he went inside to pay. I glanced down at my phone with a smile as Collin's face showed up on my screen. Collin and I had been dating for just over a year, and it still felt brand new. He had told me that he loved me after our first kiss, and things had been great ever since. We had both been accepted into the same college. It was like a dream come true. I was going to spend the rest of my life with him.

What wasn't a dream come true?... all of this packing.

Day Two-Thousand Eight-hundred Ninety-Seven

I couldn't believe I married my childhood sweetheart, and we were driving to the hospital to welcome our first child. Collin turned on the radio to calm my nerves. I was breathing heavily, panting in pain.

"The pink champagne on ice. And she said, "We are all just prisoners here, of our own device."

I roll my eyes. Hotel California...again.

"Our daughter is going to hate this song," I said, gripping the door handle with each contraction.

Day Two-Thousand Nine-Hundred

“Collin, you shouldn’t be allowed to drive,” I said with a laugh.

“Why not?” he responded.

“You’re constantly messing with the radio.”

“I am not,” he said as he pulled his hand away from the radio.

I laughed again and looked back at our daughter. Sometimes I just had to wonder, *how did I get so lucky?* I was the girl who had fallen in love with her best friend. I never would have guessed he felt the same way, but here we were driving Ella, our daughter, home from the hospital. It was like a dream come true.

Collin pulled out of the hospital parking lot, and I turned back around to look at the road. We both laughed hysterically when Hotel California came on the radio.

Collin belted out along with the song, “*You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!*” I smiled, my heart warm with content.

Collin was still singing and drumming on the steering wheel when I saw a car pull out in front of us.

“Collin, watch out!”

Day Five-Hundred Forty-Eight

Somehow I was standing outside of the car. I was so cold. I could hear the sound of sirens and people yelling all around me. Flashing lights danced on the pavement in front of me.

Where was Ella? Where was Collin? I thought frantically.

I could see a car exactly like Collin’s from high school wrecked in the median.

Is that who hit us?

“What’s happening?” I screamed. No one even glanced my way.

I could hear someone sobbing. I looked behind me, and there was Collin. He was sitting on the curb; EMTs were standing around him. His face was pressed in his hands, and he was covered in blood. I started to rush over to him, dying to ask him where Ella was and what had happened. He lifted his head then, and I stopped short. He looked the same but different...he looked so young. His eyes were red, and his face was smeared with blood.

What is happening?

“Collin, what’s going on? What happened? Where’s Ella?” I yelled. He didn’t answer. I could feel the fear take over me.

“Will she make it?” I heard an EMT ask from behind the truck. Thank God, *Ella!* I followed the voices. It wasn’t Ella. It was someone else.

How was that possible? Collin, Ella, and I were the only ones in the car. Did we hit someone else?

All I could see were a pair of dirty converse. The EMT took his fingers off the neck and slowly backed away. “She’s gone. We lost her.”

As he stood up and prepared to pull a sheet over the body, I saw her face. She was a young teenage girl, no more than sixteen years old. Her golden curls were spread across the pavement. Her eyes, still open, she stared right through me.

It’s me.

It *was* me.

They say when you die, your life flashes before your eyes. I guess I always assumed it was your past, not the two-thousand three-hundred fifty-two memories that would never exist. But who’s counting?

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

Broken Glass on Bar Stools Stained

Broken Glass on bar stools stained

You said you'd never date broken glass again.

Wine bottles smashed, trails ridden

fingers cut, candelights lie

red sand.

Get out of the soup cowboy

we've got trails to ride.

You said (the mountains looked pretty

in the morning, you stood beside me

and counted off, the hearts you've broken)

over barstool drinks.

Get up cowboy, we've got a trail to ride.

You said you'd never date broken glass again.

It cut your fingers, too deep

for a man like you, to get distracted over

a pretty woman, over low hung candles

and soft booze.

Get up cowboy, we've got a mountain to cross.

You sung (the valleys looked calm

in the sunlit evening, you sat beside

the devil at your door, who knocked softly

and asked to come in, and) you let her in.

Get up cowboy, we've got a woman to see.

You said you've never dated broken glass again.

Bottles smashed, hearts trampled,

fingers cut, soft booze.

Yet here we are in the din of the low hung bar

near the stained swivel chairs

and soft candle light.

Get up cowboy, we've got shots to swig.

You turned on your stool (and saw her

in the candlelight, you looked like an outlaw

your gun belt hung low, caught the flames glint

and sparked her misters eyes, to the way she saw you

as more than an outlaw, as a challenge

to be met with stances, and open top holsters

flapping to the sandy breeze, you nodded your accord)

and cut your finger again.

Get up cowboy, we've got a challenge in the street.
You said you'd never date broken glass
yet here we are playing with shards in the street.
He asks if you need a count.
You let the sand slip from your fingers
not hot enough to be broken glass.
Fragmented bottles, rusty caps
smashed mirrors, and open windows.
You square your hips
standing beside me
and counted off.

Get up cowboy, you've got a harp to play.

Saloon Sand

The parlor piano plays a mild song
on old sheet music
a two tap dance on creaky floorboards
accompanied by the tipping of hats
trading partners like cards
at dirty green carpet gambling tables.

There's a brush of sand from the doorway
a clinking of spurs
a warm breeze sweeps in
carrying with it the smell of blue gunpowder.

As he walks in
the windows tilt shadows
men tip hats
bartenders spit a little less

Suddenly you know
that ain't no sheriff
but one hell of a foe.

I heard from that fella

that Jillie, Bill, and O
robbed the town bank
two rivers ago.

I heard from that fella

that they all wore masks
covered like kids in bed
but forgot to put any on the horses.

I heard from that fella

that the sheriff caught 'em
from the horse's eyes
the way it wandered, that's the truth.

I heard from that fella

that Jillie and Bill got away
but O was caught with his hands up
and the horse was prosecuted.

I heard from that fella

that Bill got caught because
he forgot to take off his mask.

Went into the general bank to deposit the cash.

I heard from that fella

that when Jillie went home
his momma was arrested for riding his horse
and he had to bail her out with the stolen money.

I heard from that fella

that when Jillie went to bail his momma out
the deputy asked:
“where’d you get this money?”

I heard from that fella

Jillie replied he stole it.
So the deputy arrested him.
When the Marshal came in and asked why.
All the deputy said was:
“I heard from that fella.”

And that’s all I heard from them fellas.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

There be monsters as we sleep

There be monsters as we sleep

Let there be no innocence
nor ignorance
for deviled beings
haunt these sacred grounds.

Shut not both eyes
keep shallow watch on sunset
and arise when the moon shines.

Through filtered clouds
be wary for foes walk untouched
and the sound of a scabbards drag
of feet against cobblestones
shall not demean the soul.

Be there still
as houses pop at night
pipes gurgle and cough
with every child's clenched knuckles
on deep seated blankets
as shields to the unknown.

Let it be forewarned
there be monsters when we sleep

Ghosts are not silent

When I was of flesh,
mortal with organs and fatality a flaw,
I believed ghosts were quiet.
Silent as the night, hidden in shadows
glowing white in flowy drowned dresses
and groaning softly from down the hall.

They say ghosts are quiet; they lied

The door creaks open on worn hinges

past fallen floorboards from collapsed ceilings
and deep cobwebs that hold the shadows thick.

Dust kicks up from my feet
sucked toward the vacuum that is my chest.
The wind whistles in my direction disturbing
the cobwebs and tugging my legs forward.

We don't sound silent.
We're the background music that rolls
into the foreground, sweeping the dust
and cobwebs away in our wake.
The floorboards creak under our steps
the wind whistles in our direction
our bodies groan of fatigue.

We are ghosts
and we are not silent.

How to survive a ghost

Pitchforks, torches, wooden stakes
throw them all out the window.
Followed by holy water
crosses, spell books, and the local wizard.

Do you really want to know
how to survive that strange abomination
down the hallway
in the guest room.
Where the windows all rattle
floors pops, closets open
and bathroom doors shut.
(We can all relate with the last one)

Grab a cookie from the basement
or the kitchen, wherever
you hide your delectable treats.
A good book, a pair of reading glasses
and some warm milk is recommended.
This is all part of the trap.

Take some red paint
a lock, or bike chain
and head up the creaky steps
to the forsaken haunted room.

When you're outside
breath slowly and let the ghost
bumps dissipate from your arms.
Smell the burned toast
and strange afterline damnations.
At once toss the food in!

Cookies, book, splash
the warm milk is on the rug.
Glass shatters.
Slam the door shut.
(Quickly now, quickly).
Wrap the chain around
ceal with lock and key.
Paint the door red
run!

Run not for yourself
nor for your sins
past, present, or future.
But run for we forgot
(we, I mean me, but I'll blame you too)
that ghosts don't care about walls
or doors, or scary bike chains
and red paint.
They go gently where none have gone
before. Before the evil one
the demon, devil, man himself
and sell the soul that binds them
to this physical mortal plane.

The cookies and milk
an afterthought. A stall.
Diversions.
(Take a left here, bus stop on your right).
Plead not with him
go find the wizard you tossed out
pick up the pitchforks
torches to the night
and set this world ablaze.
(Tip the homeless man please,
they usually are friends with the ghosts)

When you stand before it again
as your lone stale cookie
floats in it's hollowness,
do not kneel before the rath
but raise pike and flame
and cast upon it the holy truth
(that reminds me, you need a bible
aisle 5, row 3).
Splash not milk, now water
holier than the ghosts evaporation
(tap water works just fine)
and vanquish this foe from your guest room.

But perhaps
when all is said and done
and now your mother-in-law
resides where appropriations previously
haunted. You'll look back and wonder
if having a ghost for a roommate
was all that bad after all.

I haunt

not those who have sinned
not the monsters of the past
nor the murders of the future
merely the foreman who supervised my burial.

I shall give him company in his last days
hold his hand as he walks in the tunnel of light
and leaves this plane of existence
that I've been trapped on.

I would not haunt my family
tarnish their minds with the realization
that I have been stuck here.
Let them die contempt, happy
with the thought that I will be
waiting for them up above.

I will be waiting for someone else here.
Someone perhaps random
or a neighbor
or an animal.
I'd quite like to haunt a cat
but cats can't be haunted
so I'd like to spend another life with a cat.
Curse its owners to stay up all night
as the kitten and I race around the house
seeing who can knock the most things off counters.

But even that will come to a close
and the cat shall die
and go off to some animal heaven
maybe even an infinite PETCO.

So what shall I do?
Who shall I haunt
as it's my eternal job as a ghost.
I have been waitlisted
given a job I never asked for
but yet my sense of duty
or perhaps continued morality
spurs me on to haunt something.

Perhaps I'll pick an old victorian mansion
meet up with one of my kind.
Figure out what common feature got us both
cast here while the others can run above
to savor in god's light
or simmer below in fire.
It's a coincidence anyway.

I wish I could feel the fire

all I can feel is an eternal rock
stuck somewhere below my invisible thorax
and above my non-existent belly button.

By this point most likely we'll be in space
or dead, which is annoying since then I'll truly be alone.
But I'm an optimistic ghost
so I'll go to space.

Being a ghost isn't all too bad
for I do what every storyteller loves
to sit back and watch a good tale unfold.
Watch humanity evolve, change, perhaps even expand
past our sun to a thousand different suns.
Yes I quite prefer this cold abject reality
to the single style life that my afterlife brethren
above and below must contend with.

You know what
I like being a ghost.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA
Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

The ape, the door, and death

The ape, the door, and death

As much as people like to say they don't,
as much as they protest it outwardly,
they love watching things die.

We get high off the destruction of our brains
the condensing of blood vessels
from alcohol and weed,
and all we do is laugh and clap.
Elated in our self destruction.
The monkey playing with the pin out of the grenade.

News Stations have the highest viewer count during coups,
revolutions, genocides, regime changes
as old frameworks rest heavy in foreign sands,
and old ideas drown old men
like balls and chains around ankles in backyard creeks.

We watch sports built around the beating of others.
The ankle crushing, head smashing
metal drum bouncing games
played in stadiums
shaped like coliseums of the old.

The same marble walled white buildings
where men in red striped togas
watched prisoners be eaten by tigers
and gladiators fake fought to the death
over the roaring cheers of the elated crowd.

We love that good murder mystery
that question of the end of life,
the one that hangs above us like a noose at the gallows
on the Bradford Pear tree branch.
That door that will always remained locked
for the key and code is unique to everyone
and only able to be used once.

That door the ape cannot open,
so the ape ponders.
He invents god, heaven, the afterlife
for the ape wishes not to fear.

For then the imagination is questioned
by another ape with the same door
and death is imagined as eternal-
that gateway you cannot cross back.

So the ape gives death a mask
and a common mans tool,
For death comes to all no matter the wealth,
and delivers the key and lock
to the door that the ape ponders.

It's that question,
the mold to the key and lock,
that fascinates us with death.
As if watching it a hundred times
imagining it in our nightmares
will give us the key to unlock the door forever.

So as much as they repent it
never forgive, never repeat
-the harrows and horrors of death-

People just can't shake the fancisnation,
despite the fact that when that door opens to you

You won't even be around to care.

What to do if it breaks

Stab you blade into his stomach
Twist it
Feel the hilt snap
Run.

Raise your rifle
prep the powder
ram rod the ball
cock the hammer
hear the pin drop
Silent.
Shit yourself.
Drop to your knees
slam on the bayonet
watch as your barrel breaks off.
Run.

Raise your shield
feel the ripples of swords
heard your shield break to axe
drop it.
let them face mars on the field
draw your gladius
Charge!

Do you feel sorrow

for the baseline drummer
rolled over in the creek
his parapet hat saddled sideways
on his head?

Do you feel pity
for the lines of infantry
kneeling to the ground
as if they're praying to god
one last time?

Do you feel remorse
for the artillery turned to dust
as wheels spin off into the sky
and soldiers learn to become cripple?

Eclipse

The call of death comes from the Capital

Under the inky sun
resting on oil-spilled waves
lies a country killer.

Its black titanium hull
contains a nation's hatred
boiled into seven tipped warheads.

It emerges like a crocodile
not a ripple washes from its smooth surface.

It's morning over the Pacific
the clouds hang close to the sun
a humid heat is in the air
and a submarine lies waiting.

A delicate balance of
politics, science, and some pseudo-wars
bring this killer to the surface today.

A massive metal sail stands over the water
watching the horizon for the signal
that could end it all.

George McMullen,
a captain from Ohio

stands on top of the bridge.
His binoculars pressed to his eyes
slowly murmuring for the leaders of the free world
don't throw this world away

Across the world
to their ideological enemy
a tunnel of water
a pocket of air surrounded by death
emerges from the depths.

Ballast tanks are emptied
a quick tapping echoes against the hull
as the vessel surfaces.

It's evening in the Atlantic
the stars are out
the great crescendo of rockets lie in wait
and a killer watches.

The Soviet nuclear submarine.

Two hundred meters long
with sonar bulges at the front
an alligator's eyes
it watches the air traffic;
tracking flights of New York to Paris.
A killer stalks.

Her crew stands
two keys in hand.

Their Captain,
Micheal Obevok
the son of a veteran from the great war,
prays that the Kremlin will not send the nuclear order.

In Washington and Moscow
the phones are ringing.
Voices are popping up
from every receiver
under every desk
as the bureaucrats try not to blow the world up.

On the streets of both capitals the citizens are walking
oblivious to the fact of constant obliteration
that derives itself from a vessel that can hide in the sea.

Red hot fingers on both submarines stand by
their dual plutonium tips
aimed at schools,
houses,
children.

All the things politics pretends to protect
and wars truly fight to defend.

In a little town of Hampshire Colorado
a teacher at the elementary school giving the pledge
does not know that at any given second
the rockets red glare will come not from the speakers
but instead from the back end of a nuclear bomb.

In Washington a peace is quickly made.
The president and secretary of state shake hands
with their Russian counterparts
and yet again the world is saved.

The signals echo from respective governments
blips bumping against titanium hulls
like the salty waves washing over silos.

The Captains and crews breathe a sigh of relief
that there will be a home to return to upon land.

Back under the inky waves
submerged in the oily depths
sinks a killer.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

BRISK Book 1: The Dragon's Shadow

Brief summary:

A new power is growing in the galaxy. Rouge Grand General, Onatia, is trying to tear both galactic governments down. His actions begin to drive those beneath him to question what they are doing. Garson, a member of the special operations team BRISK, tries to maintain order while the galaxy begins to shift around him. A marine falls from the sky in an unsinkable station. A spy stumbles across a career changing case. A lost captain runs blind through the stars in a cat and mouse game with a stealth destroyer. And diplomats, who don't know who they answer to, try to keep the galaxy from devolving into war.

Excerpt:

Intro: Someone, somewhere out there

Grand General Onatia, leader of the Southern Regions and ruler of the skies for billions, sat at his desk overlooking Henrijo Square on Zendon. He had many nicknames: *The snake*, *the bulldog*, but most importantly, *the dragon*. He quite liked the last one. Given to him by a group of black market smugglers, an ex *Inicos* faction that he had hunted down. An old fashioned nickname, but one that still imposed fear, but yet spoke of a traditional time.

He was a traitor, a diplomat, a tactician, but he preferred to think of himself as a loyalist to humanity's biggest cause, freedom. Freedom that had been stripped away by the galactic governments. Sequestering and controlling the galaxy until every star had a flag and every moon a base. Onatia despised them for this. Their self assumed rule of the galaxy was without the consent of the people. He had worked harder than any politician, dictator, governor to earn his position, yet he understood that without a proper rattling of the galaxy, he'd be advancing no further.

And he wanted to advance further.

The Operation at Beketh had failed, but his grander plan would still advance. He still had a fleet, a legion of loyal officers, and a galaxy to conquer. He had stumbled, but he would not fall. That was the job for the other governments.

By all technicalities, he was still employed by the Zendon government but he had long ago mentally signed his resignation. His true loyalties lay only with himself, and the cause to free the galaxy of lazy governments.

He understood that the only way to bring down a wall was a hammer, chaos to order, but he himself was not chaotic. He was orchestrative in his moves. Each strike, each political rise, every chess game he won on the sidelines, all of it would lead to his greater plan.

And then the stars would be his.

Of course, over time the systems he took over would be let free, but first they would need to respect him. Come to grips with the facts that everyone needed a boss apart from the people who took the seat for themselves.

Onatia adjusted himself in his chair.

The only true leaders of the galaxy were those that had earned it. Fought for it, died for it. Everyone else was weak in their pursuit for domination, and everyone else would be under Onatia's heel soon enough.

He murmured that saying to himself. "Soon enough," he said.

Soon enough the Grand heads of State, lazy men born into power like the Emperor, would learn about his treachery. They would try to find him, try to charge him for treason, espionage, and an assortment of other crimes. He did not fear them, for he would be gone before they even received the news. And when they started the long dog hunt for him, he'd be just a shadow among the stars.

Grand General Onatia, former leader of the Southern Regions and future ruler of the skies for Trillions, looked over his desk one last time and walked out.

He had a place to be and stars to conquer. Just as he was the dragon to the smugglers, he would be the dragon to the galaxy.

The Dragon's Shadow

Greyson Fisher

All things lead to something

The Harbini Corridor hangs in tight balance between two superpowers, the Armadan Republic and the Zendon Empire. A relic of the past war, when the fleets stopped halfway through the system, called off by cooler heads who hadn't gauged how a split corridor would leave an open scab on what was supposed to be a closed book.

The Harbini Corridor was composed of six systems, suns with planets rotating around them; Three of which are fully in the Armadan quadrant, and two of which are firmly controlled by the Zendon Empire, the sixth system hangs in the balance. A sun and planet split down the middle when the war ended.

Caught on the edge was the Nebola System. Half of the time the planet entered the Armadan part of the system, then gravitational rotation swung it back into the Zendon side. A tightrope walker that tries to stand still, knowing if she falls then the audience shoots each other and she'll be caught in the crossfire. It was not an ideal circumstance for the system.

But it was ideal for trading organizations. A station was built, Fertili, to manage the affairs between the two superpowers as they passed through cargo haulers and merchant craft. Technically it was all neutral space, so haulers loved the null tax rates. Local governments relished the chance of restoring economic prosperity to the system. The only people who didn't like the arrangement were the galactic Governments, who saw one last place in the galaxy to take over.

The Nebola system was in the perfect place should war break out again in the Harbini sector. Positioned in such a way that at any time fleets could enter Jump Portals and make it safely to other systems. It could act as the real time police of the system, the only problem was that galactic governments don't like to share.

The Armadan government acted on it first. When Fertili swung into their side of the system they activated the drive cones on a dozen commercial haulers turned into freighters and pushed Fertili into a null G stop at the edge of the system. There they, with the advice and considerations of the Nebola people, constructed Crili, a large military establishment equal to the size of Fertili.

It wasn't surprising that the Zendon government was mad. They had the same plans also, but now they cried on Galactic NetReels that the Armadan government had stolen a crucial economic center for the Harbini center. They demanded it be restored back to full service for the betterment of all traders.

To the Armadan government's credit, they'd already compensated the local and galactic traders by giving them pieces of the pie via buying up their materials to build the docks. Even more money was made by the traders when the Armadan government bought up their supplies to build a large shipyard in Serbas, farther back from the Harbini sector but still in the strike range should the change occur that the Zendon navy needed to be taught a lesson.

The Zendon government relented and Fertili and Crili, forming the two halves of the Harbini Corridor, economics and military, were spun up again, hand in hand, as the galaxy began to tumble around them.

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Chapter 1: BRISK

By all accounts, the galaxy hadn't changed much after Beketh. The Zendon and Armadan governments had checked up on their data relays. The fleets had been brought to order. Military stock numbers had been drawn up. For the most part, the galaxy just kept on going. Elections still happened. Tourists still came and went to Haluu. The same mushroom scams were run. Even Braskit was still the governor.

But for Garson, everything had changed. He was no longer just another VESTCO police employee, trying to rangel up some bad guys before his shift ended. Because at his current job, the shift never ended.

BRISK, or Breach-Rescue-Investigate-Search-Kill, despite its aggressive name, was a peacekeeping group. It was run under the observation and protection of McArthur, led by former Marine John Marshal; BRISK was a semi-military group whose main goal at the end of the day was to protect the innocent. They ran their own operations with intel provided to them by various factors of the Armadan military. This meant they had to scrounge for their own materials, and thus they were back on Sisipini Station and in McArthur's makeshift spy room.

"It's just not in the budget," McArthur said again.

"Come on, we both know that the Skipoly Grey needs a refit," said Burta, the de facto mother of the group. Every operations team had one. The grease that made everything run. The caretaker with a lot of heart, but also a lot of skill behind a gun. Burta, who Garson had run into first as Clarissa, was a former special operations drop pilot with a lot of time behind the yoke.

"Look, I'm just telling you, it's not there at the moment. Whenever we get our next payment, then we'll talk about it," said McArthur.

"So you're telling us our *benefactor* doesn't have enough credits to send to us, but he has enough to--"

"Enough," McArthur held up his hand. Only three people knew who BRISK's benefactor was, John Marshal, Burta, and McArthur. "As I said, maybe next time, but for now we'll just have to deal with it how it is."

Garson sat and watched as Burta continued to try to garner for supplies for her ship. Around the room was the rest of BRISK. To Garson's right, sitting in a chair too small for his muscular frame was Timur Daniels, the bulldog of the group. Next to him was his smaller brother, Jeffrey Daniels, the tech wizard. Across from him was Elanie - who Garson was simply introduced to with the explanation that Elanie was the thinker - a doctor by trade. And across from both of them was Burta, still arguing for her ship. The only one not in the room was John Marshal.

Garson didn't know a lot about John Marshal, but neither did most people. He hadn't welcomed Garson with an open arm, but instead a curt nod that came with the professional side of the business. The man was six foot straight, sharp brown hair, a sharp jaw, and two eyes that were witness to the hidden life that he was leading.

Garson glanced around the group one more time. He didn't know if he felt welcome yet or not. Timur was reserved like Marshal, with a personality similar to a rock with a gun, though Garson felt like he had a soft underside. Jeffrey was a tech wiz who didn't speak to many people. Burta had, of course, welcomed him with a hug and a warm cup of coffee. Elania occasionally chatted with him. Garson didn't know what to make of any of it. He didn't yet know if he'd been accepted, or if he even fit.

I mean, what was a cop doing with a bunch of ex spec ops? thought Garson.

The one operation they'd done had been a track and find for the *Komoto*, trying to sniff out where the destroyer had disappeared to. It had been a failure. Neither of the other two galactic governments had been able to find anything either. So for the meantime the only thing BRISK could do was sit and wait on their hands as the galaxy rolled by.

* * *

Long range missile attacks were often considered unruly, unpredictable, and a waste of good resources. At any moment the target ship could shift its vector, even slightly, and that would throw the missiles completely off. Even if the missiles could relock, they'd have to shift vectors and light up their drive plumes, removing any strategic advantage they had. The target ship could then sit back and wait for the missiles to come into range of their defenses and destroy them. On a rare occasion the long range missile attack worked, there was a fair chance it was not sufficient enough to destroy the target vessel. The target could then call support, track the attacking missile vector, and prepare a counter attack. The only way to ensure that the target was going to be destroyed was by placing a frigate or cruiser along the target's route near where the missiles would hit. Not too close as to be detected, but not too far away that it couldn't reach the wounded vessel before support arrived. And if the target vector shifted, then the entire process would have to start all over again. The element of surprise would be lost, and thus any tactical advantage held over the enemy.

On the contrary, placing missiles like mines in space was also deemed foolhardy. While it removed any chance of error once the missiles were launched, the chances of getting your target to blindly walk into a patch of missiles was near impossible. The ship would detect them and destroy them before the missiles could even light up their drives. Thus, a missile was impractical as a practical stealth weapon, and the few chances it got were squandered by the statistics of ensuring the kill was complete. That was what was believed by the entirety of the galaxy.

But if either worked then no enemy ship was safe. They would constantly be on alert, fearful of their own lives. At any time, any ship could suddenly disappear. At first it would be mysterious, but then the threat would be known, and then any ship that disappeared without a trace would be notched down as a victim of a stealth missile attack.

* * *

After the meeting Garson followed the rest of the group into the hallway. The hallways of Sispini hadn't changed much since the incident. Fewer gang members and more guards. The group began walking towards the habitation rooms near the docks, where they stayed on Sispini.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Elanie, she was always the one to broker questions.

"Not like we need the rest time," said Timur, "where even is the boss?"

"Marshal said he'd be back with us soon," said Burta. Garson noticed a slight higher pitch in her voice when she said Marshal.

They passed by a group of people and Timur edged closer to Elanie.

"Any idea where he went this time?" Elanie asked.

"Probably still on station," muttered Jeffrey. Garson glanced at him, the man had a tablet's back open and was fiddling around with it.

"Cleaning up after the riot?" asked Elanie.

"It took us a long time to, so it's probably still happening here," Garson said.

The conversation pittered off.

The group kept walking. Jeffrey diverged at one point to head into a local tech shop. Garson kept his pace steady.

“I think we should break off,” said Elanie abruptly.

“Huh?” asked Burta.

“We’re being followed,” Elania muttered. “Two sets of people back, man in the long coat. Don’t glance.”

“Not much we can do about it,” said Timur, “the tunnels only go one way.”

“We can try to see who he’s following,” answered Elanie.

Timur shrugged and began walking to the right. Garson waited a step or two then cut off on a different path to his right. He found a gap in a group and walked through before stopping midway. A quick glance to his right showed the man in the long brown coat ten meters away. He was doing a quick scan of the crowd, trying to find someone, probably them, thought Garson.

Garson moved off to the side of the tunnel and bought a bagel from a vendor. He didn’t eat it, instead raised it up to his mouth and used it to blend in with the rest of the food eaters. The man in the long coat strolled right by him, an even pace matching with the torrid tempo of the work crowds. The man was looking for someone.

Garson opened up his datapad and put up a private link to the group.

“Still moving,” he said.

“Following me,” Burta answered. “I’m the only one still moving.”

“Just passed me,” replied Timur. “Yeah, looks to be heading your way.”

“Elanie?” asked Burta.

No response.

“Fuck,” swore Timur, “where is long coat?”

Garson scanned the crowd. “I don’t see him.”

“Yeah, neither do I,” snapped Timur. “If that son of a bitch did anything.”

“Timur,” cautioned Burta, “don’t do anything stupid.”

“Too late,” Timur’s line cut.

“Garson, go follow him,” ordered Burta before she too dropped the connection.

Garson looked up. He thought it would be easy to follow Timur, but the man had blended into the crowd so well that it wasn’t until he heard the startled shout of someone being pushed out of the way that Garson could find him again.

Timur was a dozen meters down the pathway. His large frame doing him wonders on pushing through the thick crowd. Usually he didn’t even have to brush up against people, they just naturally moved out of his way. The polar magnet moving through its opposites.

Garson set after him, swerving through the loose crowd on the edges. Momentarily he’d lose Timur for a second, but soon after he’d come up again. Timur stopped at an open pathway, caught Garson’s eye as if he’d known he was there the whole time, then moved into the cubby rooms.

Shit! Garson moved up to the entrance of the cubby rooms. The last time he’d been in one was when a maniac was threatening to blow up two stations, capture a third, and send the whole galaxy reeling on the path of war.

This cubby room looked deserted. Paper wrappers strewn the floor. A few pieces of a tablet lay in the corner next to three casings. All in all, not the worst. But a far sight from a clean sight. Garson heard from up in front the sound of Timur moving through.

Garson pushed past the boxes and cans, following the man as Burta had said. The cubby rooms were so small that at several points, doors became blind corners as boxes stacked too tall created artificial blank space. At one such point Garson rounded the corner at a jog right into Timur’s back.

“Shh,” said Timur, holding up a thick finger. Garson could see his other hand wrapped around a SE-72 light pistol, the go-to weapon for police officers and military units around the galaxy for its reliability in all fields. Timur indicated right about the corner. “Here.”

“Let’s wait,” whispered Garson, “reinforcements could be here.”

“Then let’s take them,” said Timur.

“No, I mean for our side,” Garson tried to steady his breath, jogging wasn’t fun after a decade of walking in point three G. “So we can handle this safer.”

Timur shook his head. “Fuck that, we got him pinned now.”

“Well let’s wait a second-” Garson was cut off when Timur flung himself around the corner and began firing. Four quick pops followed by thin streams of orange and green dust filled the air as the self propelled projectiles left behind their fuel.

Garson pushed in behind Timur, drawing his weapon and dropping to a crouched stance, sighting on his target. The man in the long robe was there, laughing to Garson’s surprise. So was Elanie, who was similarly laughing up a storm. The man was pinned to the floor by three quick dry gel rounds on his arms. Timur was puzzled for a second, then he too began laughing.

“What?” asked Garson.

The long robed man glanced at him. “Elanie be a good sport and tell him who.”

“This is your boss, John Marshal,” said Elanie with a cast of her hand to the ground.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, John Marshal came to see them again. It turned out it was a routine thing of his to follow his group and test their ability on counter surveillance. A critical ability when “one was waist deep in enemy shit,” he said.

He started by addressing each member's ability in the operation. They were in a light bar, one of the many on stations, with candy pink and blue lights that made insults cheap and allowed people to speak and say things they otherwise could not. Garson ordered a glass of tiv in memory of his old job. The sharp blue taste stuck to the back of his neck while Marshal went through their performance.

“Elanie, as usual, you forgot to blend in, instead trying to speed walk. Caught my eye instantly. I was actually after Burta this time,” Marshal took a sip out of his canteen. “Timur, you rushed in too fast. If that was live ammo in either of our guns, we’d probably both be dead. So you royally fucked up. You should have waited for Garson to cover you. Or at least wait for a distraction.”

“I got you though boss,” said Timur. He took another swig of his Hetfield craft beer that came from using medical alcohol and paste sweetener. It was a beer that allowed you to get drunk as fast as you could.

“Yeah, that’s why I said both,” Marshal, there was a playful smile behind what he said. He glanced at Burta. “Burta, wherever the hell you scooted off too, congrats because I lost contact with you after two seconds.”

Burta beamed with pride.

“And Garson, nice bagel,” said Marshal, there was no humor behind his voice, just a simple report to Garson.

“Shoot,” Garson murmured.

“I suppose there’s a second reason you’re here?” asked Burta, her eyes danced for a second in the pink and blue glow of the cheap bar lights.

Marshal sighed. “Yeah, I suppose there is.” He leaned back in his chair and fished out his datapad. The light pooled against his face. “McArthur sent this a few minutes after you guys left his place,” he slid the pad over. It was a news report.

“Grand General Onatia just deserted the Zendon Empire, took a sizable portion of their Southern defense fleet with him,” said Marshal. “This probably happened a few months ago, most likely right after the Beketh incident, but only now is the state media getting hold of it. They've been spinning in their chairs for the last few months doing damage control on the potential war.”

“How long till this gets traction and his name is on everyone's lips?” asked Burta.

“Ten days max,” said Marshal, “but it won't do much because no one knows what a sizable portion of a navy is because most civilians don't know how big their navy is.”

“It's small, right?” asked Garson. “I've been out of the military intel game long enough to no longer know the numbers.”

Marshal shrugged. “Not as small as our media makes it seem like. But hey, even one ship is a dangerous ship at this time.”

Something tingled the back of Garson's mind. He'd heard Onatia's name before, but he just couldn't remember it.

“I hope you came for something more than just a news report because we could have got that from our tablets,” said Burta.

Marshal eyed her. “Maybe.” He flipped to a new screen. A small asteroid was on the screen. “We've got intel on where the *Komoto* was holed up for a while before it attacked Beketh. I want Timur and,” he glanced around, “where's Jeffrey.”

“Buying tablet pieces,” Timur finished his drink. “So me and Garson then?”

Marshal shook his head. “Garson, you're too new right now. Timur, take Burta and Elanie with you on the Skipoly Grey. I'll have Jeffrey link us up to you so we can examine the evidence.”

Garson was too tired and relaxed from the tiv to feel the sting of the words. He finished his tiv and retired back to his room. When he woke up, he would feel the sting of those words.

* * *

The ARN Light Cruiser *Techimia* was an old ship. Resembling a large cylinder with a rounded top, she was a ship built for a war in the past. Two generations out of date. One of her drive cones badly needed an update. The comms array was finicky. The G-Drive was an early model, meaning occasionally it would cut out during declaration and make everyone feel sick and choppy. But the worst thing about the ship to the crew was the constant repairs they had to do on the filters surrounding the air scrubbers. The *Techimia* hadn't seen much combat. Two skirmishes with pirate ships. But somehow, the air filters kept getting clogged with silo fluid remnants that were used for mass firings of missiles. But the *Techimia* had never fired a swarm of missiles. She was a light cruiser, not a destroyer or a battleship. Her SOP for battle was to fire her one stern mounted LOD cannon at ships and PDW guns modules located along the edge at any missiles they sent or ships that got too close. And when the ammo went out, she'd cut her G-Drive and burn like hell for the safest port. If worst got to worst, then she might fire one or two of her nuclear warheads at the attackers. She only had Twelve missiles and two ports to fire them from.

But the ARN *Techimia* hadn't needed to worry about any attacks on that voyage. They were safe in neutral territory, around five million miles from the Nebola system. A short hop between the system's official Armadan embassy and a relief effort for a wounded Cargo Hauler who'd lost his drive when an out of date wire popped, frying the whole system.

The *Techimia's* crew for that matter were excited to be on the ship. It meant overtime pay, no worries about pirate attacks since the alert had been sent straight to the Armadan embassy, on the station Crili. The only thing the crew weren't excited for was the cleaning of air filters, which they'd been doing for the last two hours.

Gunnery Officer Henry Threefor should have been on the bridge, but he led by example, which meant he was shoulder to shoulder with his team cleaning out the air filters. He thought it raised the moral of his comparably small, yet crucial, team to see their senior officer working in the shit with them. He had also liked the idea. But as he pulled out yet another greasy mess of a filtration system built before he was born, he was having second thoughts. *Why couldn't I have stayed on the bridge like all the other officers?*, he thought. He grabbed another black stained greasewad of what was supposed to be white metal woven like cloth. Instead it felt like wet wool, and it smelled like industrial oil, but most of the ship smelled of that.

Henry dumped the mess into the bucket next to his feet and went to grab a set of new filters when his data tablet buzzed. He pulled it out, a request from the bridge was pending in bright orange. He stepped out of line and another man in his team took his place.

He moved down the light grey and blue hallway until he was far enough from his team. It was a good officer to work with his crew, but a questionable one to share potential classified info. He slid the request though and raised his table to his mouth.

"Officer Threefor here," he said.

The connection buzzed and for a second Henry was confused. *Had he somehow declined the message?* But then a voice came through.

"Officer Threefor, captain Carwhile requests you on the bridge," squeaked the always nervous voice of comms officer Jasper.

"Copy that, tell him I'm coming up." Henry cut the transmission.

The bridge of the *Techimia* was also outdated. Sitting squat in the ridge of the ships aft section, too close to the potentially hazardous reactor for modern ships, and without any of the propelled visibility offered by a raised bridge. But the *Techimia* wasn't built for atmospheric engagements, which was why she was only used in space.

The bridge itself was also outdated. The Captain stood at the direct center on a slightly raised platform. He had a good view of, at most, half of the work stations. Modern ships had the captain on a raised platform near the back, and the crew stations displayed in front of him or in officer pits where secondary officers could check on their work and report back. Along the edge of the *Techimia's* bridge were monitors displaying various piles of information.

When Officer Threefor entered two of the ten spots were taken up; Comms officer Jasper was at her station, she gave him a shaky wave when he entered. Navigation officer, Kennel Sprites, sat at his station snacking on some chops that he'd saved from lunch, watching the flow charts come in from the wounded Cargo vessel. Henry sat next to him. The Captain was not yet on the bridge. Apart from them, the command deck was quiet.

"Chops?" offered Sprites, offering him the salty sweet snack that often passed as a meal when on tour. They were good, but Henry wasn't in the mood for them.

"No thanks," Henry said. He'd washed his hands quickly on the way up, he wasn't about to get them dirty with Chops.

He checked over his station. Monitor directly ahead, general monitor slightly above. Control panel in front. He slowly went through his checklist, the same one he used when they took off, and the

same one he would use when they landed. It was just a rhythm, a sense of normality that got him in the mood to lead. He finished ensuring that had proper ammunition numbers and that all systems were green. The door swished open, and Henry heard the unmistakable cough that rattled around the captain's throat.

“Captain sir, you called for me,” he said, spinning his chair around.

Captain Phillips had once been a young man, but a lifetime of sitting in a chair at varying levels of gravity had worn him down in a matter of twelve years. He was only fifty one, but yet he looked like he was in his mid sixties. Unlike most of the ship, he wasn't out of date. The captain had served on a destroyer for most of his career before being transferred to the *Techimia* after his old ship had taken a nasty hit to the port engine that broke the ship's reactor. The *Techimia* at that point had been run by the ambassador at the old embassy, just really sifting around at dock, only used if necessary. At that point, another ship, the *Watsu*, a modern heavy cruiser, had been guardian of the edge of space and Armadan interests in the system. But necessity arose and the *Watsu* was called to a different system to put down pirates and that's when Captain Phillips had been called in to lead the *Techimia* as the new expedition cruiser of the system. In reality, just another piece on the board, environmental clutter where nothing lived.

Henry had come aboard a year later. Even though all of that was five years in the past, and Captain Philip's hadn't run a destroyer much less been on one for half a decade, he still operated the *Techimia* like one. Right down to the torpedoes and run drill. That put a lot of pressure on Henry's back, whose whole job was to use the *Techimia's* guns and not anything else.

* * *

Garson still felt the sting of the words a day later. Timur, Burta, and Elanie had headed out on the Skipoly Grey for a half week journey to the rock and back. Marshal stayed in his room until he abruptly left, grabbed Jeffrey, and disappeared once again, leaving Garson alone.

Garson sat for a few minutes, rolling the small complementary scale of Beketh between his thumb and pointer finger. He wanted to fit in, but he was running into the reverse of the problem he faced this time. Instead of the boss liking him and everyone else not, Marshal distrusted him while the rest of the group thought him good enough. But since Marshal was the boss, in more ways than one, that meant that everyone in the group distrusted him.

Garson sat down on the edge of his bed, his datapad poking into his side. When he was alone with them, one on one like the previous night with Timur, then he fit in. But whenever Marshal came around... Garson shook his head. Marshal just needed to see him prove himself, only then would he accept him. But Marshal wasn't giving him any opportunities. It was the same old feeling every child had faced with a parent, to be trustworthy they must earn trust, but the only time to earn trust is when they were given something worth it, thus were trustworthy. So they were stuck, and Garson was stuck.

It wasn't even like last night's mission was anything hard. Just fly out to a rock, scan it, come home. Hell, Burta had trusted him to do more when she tasked him to follow Timur and potentially cover his back in a gunfight. But then again, she had probably known it was a drill, thought Garson negatively.

He pulled out his datapad, relieving the small nip in his leg. The screen had been replaced by Jeffrey, but it was still the same old tablet that Garson had had back on Haluu. He pulled open the tracking information on the shuttle, slowly watching it head for the edge of the systems elliptical that would put it on a collision course with the rock.

Onatia, the name swam back to him from the previous night. He'd heard that name before. In his subconscious the image of Johnson with a gun taunted him, drawing him closer. He thought back to that

moment, where the cubby room could have encompassed his last moments, but the strange luck of his actions had saved him. The overloaded gun, the bullets missing course.

Onatia says hello. Those were the words! Garson realized. He would have jumped out of bed but he didn't want to disturb the neighbors below. He tugged open the news article from the night before. A whole feed of similar articles began popping up.

"Grand General Onatia deserts Zendon navy" slammed the title of the SerDock Times in all capitals.

"Zendon High Table lays ruling on all vessel Captains that may affect your package," spat the yellow journalist page of the Blugal.

"Zendon Emperor speaks passionately about the trimoughts of justice," propagated the propaganda network that was the Zen-Reels, the news neckpiece of the state sanction news department. Garson clicked on their site. Whatever they were allowed to say about the event would mean what the Zendon empire was really thinking.

"Traitorous Grand General runs from duty," was the only article that mentioned Onatia in anything other than the title. Garson began scrolling through.

"Possible links between Armadan special ops and desertion among ranks," Garson stopped on the article. It was possible, and it wouldn't surprise him if McArthur knew about something like that, but Onatia's actions in Beketh wouldn't be in the interests of the Armadan government because they'd hurt the bottom line.

Garson swiped down on the article and brought up another page, the reports from the Beketh incident. All accessible to the public, but yet so many in the public continued to read the flashy headlines about rumors of what had occurred during the incident.

He kept going back to the mission in his head. Something about it didn't make sense to him, like Marshal had forgotten something. Garson picked up the ball and began rolling it again between his fingers. All the information about the *Komoto* had been gleaned earlier when it flew between the stations. Sispini's sensors had a whole package on it that had floated from one government agency to another before finally being added to the naval database and forgotten about. But from what Garson had heard, the data package was loose, not even a drive signature, just the general schematics of its externals.

High Officer Lesio was still out there, Garson knew it. The *Komoto* was most likely a stealth ship based upon how easily it had snuck in and out of the system, which meant that if it wanted it could be a satellite around the system.

But then it would need to refuel and rearm at one point, realized Garson. Satellites have to resupply eventually. Even Beketh had a few that would need to be managed from time to time. Two of the older ones just simply have their fuel tanks topped off every five years so they could keep flying and keep scanning for any possible changes that were likely to happen a millennia after human civilization collapsed. Too large of a number for Garson to think about.

He put down the bead.

The satellites had scanners. He picked up his datapad and watched the projected path of the *Komoto*. It sailed right by the planet, no doubt in sight of at least a single satellite. Garson pulled up the satellites orbits during the Beketh incident and played them back. Two satellites had been in range of *Komoto's* path.

Garson clicked on them.

"Access locked" snapped the main screen in dark red letters.

He curled up his fist. He needed access codes. If McArthur's full clearance codes still worked... Garson paused and then went for it. The letters hovered for a moment on the screen until dissolving into light green.

The satellites' names popped up. The *HaberfordPhoenix011*, a radar satellite for the gas mining colony that never occurred. The other was O-2133, an ancient probe bulked up with sensors and scanners. Made by an Empire that had faded into obscurity it had failed to upload after the Beketh incident.

Garson raised an eyebrow at that information. Satellites usually didn't forget to message in. They weren't people late for a job, they were programmed for the exact time and second to upload. And O-2133 had been doing its job for centuries, so it wasn't like the programming was fresh, it was probably burned into the motherboard like electronic muscle memory.

He sped up the satellite watch. As O-2133 came over the equinox line and disappeared. He pulled the time back, then forward. O-2133 disappeared again. It was just a tiny blip on his screen flicking out, but to Garson it could mean his chance to be accepted by Marshal, and thus BRISK. He flicked the playback one more time, comparing the before and after. O-2133 was gone, but the chase couldn't stop there.

* * *

Captain Phillips cleared his throat and took position at the center of the bridge. He touched his display and pulled up the local system map. Since in reality the system would have been so large to show it on a 1 to 1 scale would be near impossible, it showed relatives. Orange and yellow lines marked incoming and outgoing ships, while a solid green line, their line, ran out of the system and into the darkness towards the flashing yellow light, the downed cargo hauler.

"We have a situation," said Captain Phillips. "The cargo hauler doesn't have any I.D., no drive signature to trace it by, and no transponder code worth anyone's salt."

"So they're running dark?" asked Sprites.

"Looks like it. Or at least we're until a faulty wire stopped their progress," said Philips. "But we can't confirm the wire story either."

Henry pondered. "The ship might have been running from something," offered Henry, "that's why it was running dark."

Philip nodded. "But then why didn't they radio that in?"

"Perhaps they couldn't have without incurring the wrath of whoever shot their reactor out," said Sprites, "an old 'you talk and I'll blow your brains out' situation. So they radioed in for water and help."

"So we should prepare for boarders?" asked Philips.

"I don't think so," said Henry, "our rescue plan didn't even involve docking before cleaning up that radiation dump."

"How close until we can see the ship on our scans?" asked Philip.

"We can see it now, but our scanning won't be enough detail to determine the origin of their ship's issues, for that, we'd need better scope," said Sprites, "so give it about half an hour."

Philip nodded. "Curse this old ship," he muttered.

Henry chuckled and Philip shot him a smile.

The minutes moved by. Henry double checked his list and sent out an order to his men to finish up and move back to their battle station. He didn't check to see the "why" that would come in from Sergeant Hunny. Henry sighed, Hunny was as smart as him, but she needed to learn how to follow orders before she would be ready to take his place when he retired.

"Data's coming through now," said Sprites thirty four minutes later. "I'll project it up."

A large hologram of the broken ship replaced the map of the Nebola system. The cargo hauler was of basic design. A large mainframe with three drive plumes, a reactor, a Gama Drive next to it, the bridge, and then crew corridors. Four large pillars extended off the front of the craft, giving support to the millions of cargo crates that were held by magnetic clamps. There were no walls holding in the boxes in the middle, just the boxes on the outside. *Why have walls when you can make those walls out of boxes and carry more*, answered Henry to the question he had asked as a kid. Sprite rotated the hologram around until the back end of the ship was enlarged. A large black blister had popped near the reactor, taking out one of the drive cones and damaging the other two. There was no debris field, which meant some form of inertia had propelled them away, like a missile.

“That doesn’t look like a reactor mess-up,” said Philip.

“It might be,” said Sprites cautiously, “the wire could have led to the housing and that caused the reactor to explode.”

“Reactors don’t explode just out of one side,” said Henry. He studied the reactor damage a little more. “Looks like it took a pretty large hit. I’m thinking of a missile, since the debris was flushed away. If it was a reactor explosion, there wouldn’t be a ship to look at, and a power explosion wouldn’t have thrown the debris so far away.”

“The reactor could have vented all out of that side,” argued Sprites, “or at the very least the air pushing out of the hole would’ve taken the debris away.”

Philip leaned in, the top of his head caught the edge of the hologram, which flickered, like water when a pebble is dropped on the other side of a pond. “A missile would have destroyed it. And so would a reactor malfunction of that magnitude. Can we get comms?”

Jasper spoke up, and after having been so silent Henry jumped at her voice, she’d surprised him.

“Comms are down sir,” she said, “on their ship that is.”

Philip cleared his throat. “Fuck.” He looked over at Sprites. “How close are we?”

Sprites spun his chair around to check the math. “Just over a million clicks out.”

“So we’re outside of any reactor explosion,” said Henry, answering the captain’s unasked question. “But we’re too far out for any real relief effort.”

“Considering the situation, I don’t know if I’d call this a relief effort anymore,” said Sprites, he spun his chair back around to face the captain. “I’d advise calling in reinforcements.”

“We took two days to get here,” said Philips.

“But a ship on a more intense burn could get here in eight hours,” Sprites pushed, “or a larger capital ship with a personal Jump Drive could be here in much less than eight. War games are going on in the edge of the system with Constantine and his fleet. The *Relentless* is two hours away. If she emergency jumps now-”

“Cut the drive,” ordered Philip.

Henry felt the ship change dimensions for a second as the drive cut before the G-Drive came in to slow them down. The process of stopping a ship going many thousands of clicks an hour in just a matter of minutes only made Henry’s stomach tingle. When they used the G-Drive in battle, usually for an abrupt stop and turn, he knew from experience it felt much worse. That’s why usually captains stuck to the more conventional laws of physics and either loped around their opponents or burned through them. The only real thing that the G-Drive had gotten rid of was the old brake and burn maneuver, which was much more uncomfortable than any sudden Gama Drive operation.

Henry felt the weightlessness for a second, his legs bobbing up. He clicked his boots to the floor, rolling on his heel to engage the magnetics. Next to him Sprites bags of chops were staying in a slowly

decaying orbit. Henry grabbed them out of safety. If they had to burn suddenly, it wouldn't be like the brake, they would feel it. For his effort, Sprite had spun around and was now entranced with something on his screen. Henry nudged him with his fingers.

"What is it?" he asked.

Sprite shook his head. "No idea, but the computer just cut in with a collision alert and then cut out again."

"Report," ordered Philip.

"It looks like nothing sir," said Sprite, "but the computer might be in need of replacement."

"Does anyone else have any issues?" asked Philip.

Henry shook his head, "None at the moment sir."

"Fine, so it's not the computer then," Sprite said, "I'll run diagnostics on the array."

Henry chuckled.

"What's so funny?" asked Sprite.

"Nothing," Henry waved it off, "just the nervousness of being out here near a wounded ship with no cover and suddenly our military hardware starts acting up."

"That's one way to express you're scared," said Sprite with humor in his voice.

"Add to that," started Philip but he was cut off by the nav computer. Three sudden harsh beeps blurted out.

Sprite spun around in his chair, tracing his finger along the monitor.

"Three ships, all no transponders just broke the flight pattern," his finger stopped, on the green dot, "they're headed for us."

"How far out?"

"Can't say, they might accelerate. Latest is twenty minutes."

"Fuck." Philip stormed up to his command station. "Officer Henry, have your men ready at their stations."

"Already are sir." Henry turned around to his own station, flipping through the stations.

Captain Philip pressed his finger to the command display. "General Quarters, battle stations, we have potential incoming vessels. All hands report." The battle readiness klaxons began playing in the hallways, a soft high pitch wail that was masked by the sounds of footsteps running for battle stations. Quickly the bridge was filled with the rest of the necessary personnel. Two more operations staff. A secondary navigation Officer. Gunnery Sergeant Hunny took her seat next to Officer Henry Threefor.

By the end of it, the bridge was feeling almost cramp to Henry, but Officer Threefor made no mention of it, he was finishing his task log. All systems are green, hot and ready to go.

* * *

Garson left his room for the McArthurs room. The amount of dishes and station radars that the wires connected to had to have picked up some scramble of data from the satellite, or at least its projected route. Garson knocked on the door.

"What is it?" asked McArthur, coming out with a halfway shaven beard. When he saw Garson he ushered him inside. "Something up?"

"Yeah, I think we have a rogue satellite," said Garson.

"Wouldn't be the first time," McArthur sighed and sat down.

"Wouldn't be?"

"Satellites go missing all the time. Usually it's just a software error or the relay dish didn't correctly orient itself to accept the broadcast. They show up in a few days," said McArthur.

“Yeah, this has been months,” Garson handed over the datapad. “O-2133 disappeared from all scanners, radar dishes, and relay detection programs after it came close to the *Komoto*.”

“What makes you think that the *Komoto* didn’t just scrap it when it came close?” asked McArthur.

“Because of this,” Garson pointed to the momentary blip as O-2133 crossed the equinox line. “It was there, for a second, but then it kept on sailing.”

“So you want me to track something that’s been gone for months?” asked McArthur.

“Not track, compute. If we can find the approximate flight route of this satellite, we can determine where it’s gone,” said Garson. “And think about it, this satellite probably got a better image of the *Komoto* than anything else in the system, this could be our lead to where the *Komoto* is.”

McArthur sighed. “Alright,” he held out his hand, “hand it over. I’ll get a tech to work on it.”

“Thank you sir,” said Garson.

McArthur nodded with a tired smile. “Let’s see if we can round up this mess. You heard about Onatia, right?”

“Yeah, he worked with Lesio,” blurted Garson.

McArthur almost dropped the datapad. “He what?”

“Johnson told me that Onatia said hello, making me believe that Onatia worked with Johnson on Beketh. And since Johnson worked with Lesio, Onatia must have worked with Lesio.”

“That’s a lot of mentally leaping son,” McArthur put down the datapad. “But it’s not unreasonable.”

“Why does it matter that much?” asked Garson.

“Because beforehand we-” McArthur cleared his throat, “-I thought Onatia was working alone. Trying to set up his own little kingdom, create a gang, sell some illegal substances. The whole fleet tactic would be to ransom ships back to the Zendon Empire in exchange for his safety.”

“But now we know he’s working for the Galactic Militia. Probably created it.”

“A man of his talents wouldn’t just leave something as significant as information on one of his stealth ships on the plate.”

“That means he doesn’t know about it,” said Garson.

“I’ll call back the group, you go tell Marshal, he’ll be impressed.”

* * *

“Weapons hot,” called Henry.

“Comms, give me a cluster tight beam to those three ships,” ordered Philip.

A buzz came from the central command station.

“Comms open.”

“This is Captain Philip of the ARN *Techimia*. You are currently on a course that puts you within illegal range of our vessel. If you are here for relief effort, change course. Respond at once.” Philip shut down the recording.

“Comm arrived,” reported Jasper. Her voice had grown solemnly steady.

“Sir, they’re speeding up,” said Sprite a second later.

“Give them time,” said Philip, “I don’t want to blow some innocent relief ships up in the middle of nowhere, that won’t look good on the nightly news.” He paced across the tiny bridge. “Give me scans of the ships.”

“Yes sir.”

On Henry's top monitor the scans of the three ships appeared. If they were relief ships, then they were ready to also protect the wounded ship from a sizable navy. Officer Threefor counted off the guns and types in his head.

"Equivalent to two light cruisers and a torpedo skiff," said Sergeant Hunny to him, "they're coming in hot."

"Report," barked Philip.

Henry hadn't realized that Sprite had gone silent.

"Reports suggest a converted freighter into a torpedo skiff and two light cruisers made from the bare bones of medium haulers," Sprite stammered. "We can take them sir."

"Officer Threefor, weapons ready?" said Captain Philip, much less a question, more an order.

"Already locked," replied Henry.

"Good, standby." Philip took a deep breath. "Comms, open another channel to us."

"They'll be in effective range in five minutes, we'll be in their effective range a minute after that," said Sprite.

"Comms open."

"Unknown ships, this is Captain Philip of the ARN *Techimia*. You are currently on a bearing that puts your course within the effective range of both of our guns. Power down your drives and respond or we will fire." Captain Philip took a breath. "There will be no other warning." The tightbeam died as Philips' finger was raised from the panel.

"Message received."

A minute passed in silence. A buzz had filled the bridge. On Henry's lower display, the image of the green lit systems of the ship was replaced with a green line marking the effective range. The unknown vessels were marked with red triangles, flagged as foe. They'd positioned themselves with the two cruiser equivalents on the outside and the torpedo skiff snugly between them.

"They're not changing course." reported Sprite.

"Time?" asked Philip.

"Three and a half minutes until they're in our effective range."

"How many until they can shoot at us?"

"Four and a half."

Henry looked at his own display, ready to give the order to fire.

"Officer Threefor, target the destroyer," said Captain Philip. Henry could hear the stretched pain in his voice. The man was clearly thinking of his former crew. "If they do not change course, fire. That'll be the least casualties."

"Yes sir," nodded Henry.

Sergeant Hunny leaned over. "Torpedos, missiles, or LOD?"

"We'll use the torpedoes only if we have to," he typed the order to use the LOD against the torpedo skiff acting as a destroyer and sent it.

Hunny nodded and resumed her position.

"Navigation, if they do not respond, I want you to burn parallel to the cargo hauler, pull them as far away as possible," ordered Captain Philip. "We can take them out there as well as we can take them right here, but I don't want anyone on that hauler being hurt by a stray round."

"Yes sir," replied Sprite.

"Any response?" asked Philip.

"No sir," Jasper shook her head.

“Two minutes till effective range.”

The bridge was quiet. Henry watched his monitor as the three ships steadily approached the green line, marking the edge of where the *Techimia* could fire her LOD cannon and they couldn't dodge. Any missiles fired would also have a better chance at hitting their target, but Henry didn't like using the missiles. The left cruiser on his display blinked, its dotted line shifting more to the left.

“One of them is changing course,” reported Sprite.

“Any idea where it's going?” asked Captain Philip.

“It might be trying to prepare a flank for the other two,” said Sprite. “If it continues out there, it'll be risky for us to push that way.”

A notification popped up on Henry's screen. The second cruiser, the one on the right, was doing the mirror thing.

“Second cruiser braking off. Following the footsteps of the first cruiser. They look like they'll try to box us in and come at us from three sides,” said Sprite. “We can still take them.”

Henry watched the destroyer now. The LOD gun was lined up perfectly. Two seconds after the destroyer crossed the green line it'll be nothing more than a cloud of expanding dust and vapor.

“Sir, we received a reply from the *Relentless*,” reported Jasper.

“I wasn't aware we sent a message,” said Captain Philip.

“They say they're locked in an engagement with two torpedo skiffs and are unable to help,” reported Jasper.

“Did you send the message?” asked Captain Philip to Officer Sprite.

“I did what I thought was right,” said Sprite, ready for a reprimand.

“Thirty minutes ago I would've given you a talk, but the situation changed. It looks like this is planned. Our nearest support is also tied up, meaning this is planned. Someone, somewhere out there, decided to send five of their ships out. Two to bog down our closest allies, and three more to attack us,” said Captain Philip. He strolled around to the edge of the display. “Someone, somewhere out there wants something.”

“Sir, the ships will be in range in thirty seconds,” said Sprite.

Captain Philip moved around to his seat and sat down. “Hats on, this might get wet.”

Henry watched his display. *Someone, somewhere out there*, Captain Philip had said. Henry thought about that. Who would be crazy enough to attack a warship of the Armadan Navy, the largest galactic superpower? What the hell could they gain?

“Ten.”

Henry watched his monitor.

“We're broadcasting tactical info to the *Relentless*. The ships match drive signatures, they're from the same shipyards,” reported Jasper.

“Five.”

Henry watched the skiff blink. His hand waited over the fire button.

“Two”

The target ship dotted over the green line.

“One.”

And the *Techimia* exploded into an expanding cloud of vapor and dust. The four stealth composite covered missiles that had hit it traveling just under twenty G had been one part of a cloud of fourteen of them, all launched twelve million clicks away six months ago. Just before the *Komoto* had left for Beketh.

The *Techimia*'s sensors hadn't been wrong, they'd just been confused. The sudden flare of the drives from the nearby ship made the old ship think someone had just lit up their drive on a collision course towards them, but the drives cutting out made it recalculate. Perhaps it was a neutron star exploding a hundred thousand light years away. But the *Techimia* would never know.

Across the galaxy, just two systems away, where the Armadan Warship *Relentless* engaged in combat with two fleeing torpedo skiffs, she stepped into a landmine field of missiles. Her scopes, no matter how modern, had not seen them. The last thing the navigation officer onboard the clean, precise bridge had seen was a flagged alert that someone was on an intercept course with them, right before one of the Armadan navies capital ships blew up.

Someone, somewhere out there had planned this. Someone had fundamentally changed the way war was played. Someone with bigger plans, with bigger ambitions than just blowing up two ARN ships.

Chapter 2: Wait and Go

A captain's first loyalty was always to their crew. Their food, their housing, their comforts, their survival all rested upon the captain's ability to do their job. During times of warfare, the Captain had to choose between loyalty to their government and their crew.

Captain Kash thought about that as he stared at the monitor on the wall. The answer seemed simple to him. He'd already betrayed his government, left with a traitor to found what constituted a bare roots terrorist organization. Sure they called themselves freedom fighters, "soldiers of the people", but Kash knew if he was classifying them from his old position he'd have referred to them as terrorists. For if firefighters fight fire, what must freedom fighters fight? But if he was placed in the situation again, forced to choose between Onatia's orders and his crew's safety, what would he do?

Kash mulled this over. The monitor in front of him blinked as the new flight plans from the Nebola sector updated. Blue lines marked arrivals, orange lines marked departures. The *Komoto's* computer shifted their flight plan slightly to accommodate for the mission's goals. Kash sipped on his tingly mint military tea.

If he had to choose again... he furrowed his brow. He couldn't choose. The answers were both too close to home. On one hand his loyalty to the Grand General rested, the ship he'd been endowed, the service he was expected to pay. On the other hand were the lives of his crew, the men and women that had signed on to serve for him, the lives he was expected to protect.

He finished his military tea and tossed the husk of a cup in the recycler. The monitor blinked again, the flight plan moving slightly to the right to keep out of the other ships' scanners.

All of what surrounded him was the future, and Kash hated thinking about the future. He knew that any move he made in the present was subject to the moves of others, which could wipe away his plan like shifting sands on a winter beach. Kash sighed. He turned to face the full bridge of the *Komoto*.

For the first time in six months, the destroyer was running at full staff. The crew of five hundred, plus the additional thirty for the attack team, allowed for the *Komoto* to move as it was built to. Only Onatia told them to wait.

* * *

Marshal was waiting outside of his door when Garson arrived. The man nodded and stepped forward, his tall frame making him seem like a giant in the tight habitation corridors.

"McArthur told me that you had something special," Marshal said.

"A satellite, a probe really. It ran near enough to the *Komoto* that it probably has good scans on the ship," said Garson, "better than anything we'll pick up from an asteroid."

"And we know how?" asked Marshal, his voice held a level of suspicion.

"Good research," Garson passed him the files digitally. "It's something I picked up from my cop days."

Marshal nodded. "Let's see how it holds up," he said, sounding slightly impressed. He started scrolling through the document Garson had prepared on the way over. "Flight plans?"

"McArthur and I calculated them," said Garson, "it's likely to be in that area and the Skipoly Grey will pick it up with its scanners."

Marshal closed the document. "I'll call back in the Skipoly Grey, let's see if this pays off," his mouth had a thin smile and Garson realized he wasn't the only one who thought heading out to an asteroid was stupid.

* * *

Timur sat with his legs resting in midair. The small room they called the cafe, or the messhall when arguments happened, encompassed him. He liked it there, it was close to the food. A slow hum filled the room from the rotating bowl of chops he was warming up. Most of his decisions were based on food. He didn't like to think when he wasn't behind the barrel. He'd rather let Marshal lead him. And usually what Marshal said was right.

Zero-G made him feel like standing on the edge of the cliff, leaning forward to that perfect point where you waver but don't pitch. He couldn't remember the first time he'd been without gravity, it was like that ex that just keeps coming back.

Or was that gravity? he pondered his metaphor.

The cruise out to the asteroid had been a normal trip on the Skipoly Grey. A quick ten minute preflight check up, double sealing doors and ensuring that the O2 worked. It was less of a check-up than a habit, like tying your shoes before you headed out the door. But Timur wore slip ons, he found them easier to wear while in the shit of things, a trait he'd picked up from his bullfrog days.

He didn't reminisce on combat like a lot of men his style did. The fascination with blood, guts, and a few too many stories about making it out by the hair on their chin. He wasn't like that. Timur Daniels had a certain respect for war, one built on many foundations of fear. Fear not for war itself but because he knew how deep he could get into it. The adrenaline rush that drags you down until you're ten feet under and setting sediment charges to blow up a dam.

Timur shook his head, a motion that twisted his body in Zero-G. He stopped himself from going down that thought road. The small datapad buzzed in his pocket.

Fuck, thought Timur, he'd have to get out of his comfortable position. He cupped his hands and hollered, "Marshal wants us back, we're chasing after satellites now."

He folded himself back into a standing position and clicked on the magnetic soles. Why couldn't Marshal's message have waited until after his chops were done?

* * *

Kash moved around the crew on his deck. Half of them were new to the ship, recent add ons from ships that have left the fold of the crumpling Zendon navy. How Onatia had convinced a strike team- a command team built to rival that of the Armadan marines - to leave, Kash could not guess, but he was grateful for the increased crew. Most of the new recruits were still settling in, showing their loyalty to the new cause through chants and bravo measures of stupidity. Kash tolerated it for the time, but soon he would have to reign them in, a destroyer was not a daycare for extremists with itchy fingers.

Which was why Kash despised Issac, the new fire control Officer. The man was one of Onatia's personal recruits, a man who had sought out the late Grand General to join the Galactic Militia personally. He despised the Armadan Republic for what seemed to Kash as a blood lust justified behind a loose pretext of loyalty to one's cause.

Then I guess he's a model soldier, Kash mentally muttered. But Kash didn't need any more soldiers, he had thirty of them downstairs. In a way, it made sense for Onatia to personally assign one of his most devoted followers to the spot on the ship which controlled the weapons. A way that Kash wasn't particularly fond of, since it meant that Onatia perhaps didn't fully trust him, or his special guest.

Kash glanced towards the right side of the bridge where High Officer Lesio chatted with the NavTag Officer. She had been on the ship ever since the failure at Beketh. Kash had kept an eye on her for signs of strain or stress that usually accompanied a senior officer when their plans failed. Stress that manifested into strain on the ship and its crew, a crew Kash had a job to protect. He glanced one more

time at Lesio. She seemed to be fitting in with his crew, and the only time he saw her stressed was after their meeting with Onatia.

One that had not gone well.

For the entire meeting at the HubLet Station, near Beketh, Onatia had sat there with his brows furrowed and his lips thin. He hadn't said a single word apart from "go on" when Lesio stumbled across her words describing the incident. Kash had sat there, silent next to Lesio as she tried to explain how Onatia's plan had gone wrong. When the meeting was up the room felt like a petri dish about to explode. Too many experiments. Too much pressure. And a lid that was just loose enough. A carefully collaborated science experiment to test the bigger plan.

Kash had felt a fear that all of their plans would die right then. That leaving the Zendon navy hadn't been a career advancer, but the executioner's blade. But Onatia had nodded at the end of the conference, said "Don't you worry, just wait." and left.

So the *Komoto* had waited. Kash had no doubts that Lesio had been in contact with Onatia, it was clear to him that she had some strange love for him or his power, and that it was killing her on the inside.

Kash moved back to his place on his bridge, past Issac who was simulating a battle, one where the AI opponents would not win nor have survivors. Kash resumed his post of watching the *Komoto*'s computers run a flight plan for a mission he did not understand, in a war which he did not know was hot or not. So he returned to his question, the crew or his government, where did his loyalty lie?

He glanced back at his crew. By essence they were just an extension of Onatia, so if he was loyal to them, he was loyal to the Galactic Militia in the end. For the moment that satisfied his curiosity and he returned to waiting in a ship bred for war.

* * *

Garson lay on the soft *star mattress* in his room, comforted by the pressure of point three G barely weighing him down. It was strange that most stations defaulted to point three G instead of half, thought Garson. It did make moving heavy things easier, which was why bodybuilder champions joked that they should have competitions on stations so people could break records again.

Garson sympathized with the bench pressers, having all the weight in front of you but feeling nothing. That was how he felt with the stacks and stacks of data piled into his datapad. Something just felt off about all of it. The Satellite, O-2133, was a step in the right direction but something was missing. He sighed and rolled over, the *star mattress* conforming to his body shape.

The slight smell of ginger hung in the room. A relic of the air systems still scrubbing out all the gunpowder and nitric acid from the riots five months earlier. The Beketh incident had only been five months ago, and yet it seemed like several years when Garson tried to look back on it.

He flopped on his back and stared at the pale white ceiling, listening to the subtle changes in pitch as the circulation fan sped up, slowed down, and sped up again.

Whatever was Onatia planning? Garson thought. *It definitely had to be bigger than Beketh.*

* * *

High Officer Lesio, though that rank technically belonged to an enemy government now, sat cooped up in the third officers room on the *Komoto*. At first glance, she believed her room to be nothing more than a place to catch some sleep before heading up and leading the charge on the enemy. But now she knew different. It was a cage.

Though not any ordinary cages, for those have bars and bars can be broken. The things that kept Lesio inside her room, cooped up reading stolen classified files on her datapad was the very thing that cannot be broken for the well being of the prisoner, the mind.

So she was stuck. For walls are only walls until the key of freedom is handed over and she could remove herself from the cell which she had constructed. But cells are only for convicts, people who had sinned under the eyes of the law, and since Lesio's mind was the law here, she deemed herself a sinner for her failure at Beketh.

Lesio furrowed her brow and concentrated on her documents, her mind still reaching back to that system. That failure.

The words hung in the back of her mind for a moment, white text on a blank black background before fading into the subconscious, drowned out by the rapid fire pace of nerves.

Everything had been laid out for her there. She had the ample opportunity to move. And she'd gotten so close. So close that Onatia had begun his first step. And then she'd failed, and Onatia had tripped. She chastised herself for that failure.

Her failure.

Lesio took a deep breath and closed the classified document. She had needed to appease Onatia, especially after their last meeting where his silence to her had felt like the gallows where no one drops. She picked up another datapad, reading off reports picked up by hijacked comms arrays.

Onatia had made it clear he needed ships, needed to even the battlegrounds. She knew he had ships. Zendon ones, not many bigger than a cruiser, but still they had guns. She only had the *Komoto*. She took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling. She needed orders, the ship needed orders, otherwise they could not move.

She had her cell. And Onatia had the key.

* * *

McArthur made it his duty to know everything in the Beketh system. He'd almost failed five months ago with the incident, but was saved by Garson. Thus, anything Garson noticed that he didn't, he paid special attention to.

McArthur ran his finger down the satellite info. Something troubled him about a military officer defecting his post and leaving with the fleet to go make a new home. There was something to defecting at least to the other side, because then at least loyalty to one government could be called into play. But this Onatia guy, McArthur scratched his chin, he was a loose card in a splitting deck.

The *Komoto* was a key part in Onatia's plan, McArthur knew that. A former Admiral himself, he knew that certain ships relegated certain jobs. You didn't send your second best to go start a war, you sent your finest. McArthur marked that down on his sheet. The *Komoto* was central to some plan Onatia had running.

The other thing that troubled McArthur was that it wasn't just a Captain, or some rogue Admiral, it was one of the inner circle. A goddamn Grand General had deserted. A man who had no reason to leave the Zendon Empire. Everything he wanted was provided to him. The best food, clothing, housing, and companionship that came with an autocratic dictatorship. The man was a god in that world, but yet he had thrown that all away for something else. And that was what bothered McArthur, he couldn't figure out what Onatia wanted.

Power, *sure*. But he already had power beforehand. It wasn't money, that wouldn't concern a man like Onatia. McArthur almost put it down to insanity but Grand Generals usually didn't get their position by having bad brains. So it had to be something, but what he did not know, and that scared him. Whatever it was, Onatia would have to act fast now that both sides knew of his current status.

Deserter, McArthur shook his head. *He could have at least come over to our side.*

* * *

The Skipoly Grey arrived back at Sisipini within four hours of the message. A gentle reminder sent out by McArthur that the Skipoly Grey wasn't a pleasure drift yacht made Elanie hit the jets and head home. Timur wasn't too grateful for the full three G burn that made it feel like a small rock was on his chest. He cared less about that, than the fact that he had to put down his chops and would have to heat them up again.

At dock Burta, Elanie, and Timur exited to find Marshal already waiting for them, McArthur at his side. The dock had been cleared out. A few boxes lay, deserted, on the floor.

"What's up?" asked Elanie.

"Good intel from some digging Garson did," Marshal said, "the kid found out about a satellite that went rogue."

"So what's the plan?" Burta questioned.

"Jeffrey, Elanie, and I will head out on a ControlBurn Skiff, the *Dusty*," said Marshal. "Burta and Timur, you'll stay here with McArthur."

"What about Garson?" asked Timur.

"He'll stay with you, I'm not risking him to find a satellite," replied Marshal.

Timur noticed the rush in Marshal's voice but didn't press on it. He made eye contact with Elanie, who nodded, and it was settled.

"Ok, will do," Timur said. He moved to the side, allowing Marshal down the docks towards a smaller ship waiting to refuel.

"Well that was fast," said Burta, slightly annoyed. Timur glanced her way.

"Something's up, but I guess we'll find out later."

"Why didn't they take the Skipoly Grey," Burta glanced over the ship. It needed upgrades, but not repairs. Maybe something else was up.

Timur shrugged. "Something tells me Marshal has a reason. Marines don't do shit without a reason."

"Or an order," added McArthur with a slim smile.

* * *

Garson woke to the slight rumble that conveyed a ship leaving port. He yawned and dropped out of bed, reaching for his tablet. A message was there for him.

"Leaving Port, heading for O-2133 on 2G burn for three days. Be back in a week." Marshal.

Garson rolled back into bed. He hadn't been invited again. Marshal still didn't trust him, even after he'd found the datapad. What the hell would it take!

* * *

Chaos is not an element brought about by anything other than order. For chaos to exist it must derive itself from a carefully crafted set of steps. They must be unnoticed, like stairs that do not creep in the dead of night. It must be an elaborately subtle plan, one of those paradoxes that comes together once, and only once, but with terrifying results. Like the atom in the fission chamber, breaking only once. For often plans may not be subtle and remain elaborate, for the very definition of subtle is staying unnoticed. Elaborate plans rely upon the complexity and confusion of various moving parts, gears in a massive crank, all rubbing against each other and generating friction. Friction that makes noise, noise which draws attention, and destroys the element of surprise. Thus to have a subtle yet elaborate plan, one must be extremely careful and patient, two things that Onatia had proven throughout his life.

But a plan, like a security system, is only as good as its weakest link. The part at which no one thinks of, but everything could collapse if it fell through. The third brick in the arch, the one casted too

soon, too weak to do anything else but fold under the pressure until the arch came down. And if it was an arch, it was just a few broken bricks, but Onatia had a lot more to lose. He was a dragon, and dragons have hide to be stolen. Hide that brings a pretty penny, a uin of value, out on the petty market. And those that know where the dragons hide is, thus where the dragon is, are the weakest link in its arch.

Onatia sighed and sipped his faint green mint tea. Locally sourced.

His hide was strong, yes. But it was not invincible. His teeth were strong, already capable of crunching through warships. His eyes were sharp, watching and waiting at every turn. But his mind, the most critical part of all great strategists and schemers, was a piece of coal turned diamond by the pressure of the galaxy. And when unearthed...

He took another sip of tea.

That would be a day the galaxy would long not forget.

Chapter 3: NetReels

As is the case with all governments, time is both an eternal enemy and the best of allies. The Armadan High Council, retiring after a long day of debating over matters that would be of null importance to most citizens, were two days relay delay from the Border Systems. The Zendon Empire, comparable closer, was only a day away, but even still wars had been decided in much less time.

Since the Galactic Governments were so big, and thus information traveled at seemingly slow paces, news often traveled slower than the events that preceded it, putting Governments on the back pedal when they had to react to crises. After the last war, where strategies had lost due to the course of time, both governments enacted a sort of self rule to the different sectors and fleets. Creating almost separate states under a single head government. The same Federal and State system that worked down the line on planetside. Governments could act independently with the assumption that all of their actions would follow the guidelines of the state. But since the state was at least a day away from hearing about it, this gave Governments impunity to act as they saw fit, and occasionally with dire consequences for the galaxy as a whole.

* * *

The news arrived in a sealed enviroled, printed off by a collective relay transmitter that kept tabs on the southern border fleets. The paper was folded, sealed, and shipped by people who would never understand the consequences of their actions.

The letter left the CNR, Central Naval Records, from the side door into a transit shuttle to the home of Armadan government, the senate. The shuttle pilot thought little of his job as he flipped through broadcast stations, tuning in to one before switching and listening to another for a few seconds. The mail crates in the back were full of paper and physical drives, the classified news of that day.

The check in site was a pair of five platforms, all horizontal to the ground with white marks indicating where shuttles should land. The pilot, through the tranquility of routine, went through the motions of lowering the shuttle gently down to the pad.

A pair of low paid security personnel, not well trained enough to properly protect Senators but loyal enough to be entrusted with arguably the most important function of Government, delivering information.

The letter was handed off to an SJSM, Senior Joint Security Member, who in turn handed it off to the briefing staff for the High Chairs daily classified news session. The letter was strange to see in a world full of little black and white SSDs, so it was passed along from the briefing team to the personal security staff of the High Chair, all the time not being opened.

The senate guard of Rhino soldiers, men in black and grey armor tasked with the sole purpose of keeping the High Chair safe, received the letter which they passed onto the JCF, the Joint Chief of Fleet. The JCF looked at the letter, opened it, and rushed into the High Chairs office.

The High Chair was presently in the bathroom, finishing up his morning activities before he had to face the Senate for another day of rigour debating on a topic no one cared about. Such were the pains of democracy, he remarked as he straightened his suit, but he had other people to sort out the necessary affairs of the galaxy for him, much for discrete people.

When he exited the room the JCF was waiting for him, never a good sign.

“What is it,” the High Chair asked. He wasn’t in the mood to hear about budget cuts or the necessity for a new carrier task force.

He JCF handed over the now classified letter, “We just lost two warships sir. Unknown the enemy are involved.”

The High Chairs hand stopped moving the letter. He thought about it for a second. It wasn’t a matter that the senate needed to be concerned about. “I’ll have some people look into it,” said the High Chair.

The JCF nodded and moved away, believing the High Chair was referencing the ASD, Armadan Security Division, who would then pass it along to the SASD or IAT. Wrongly so. The High Chair had a different group of people in mind for the mission at hand.

* * *

Captain Bigani, a private hauler for thirty odd years, sat in a comfy place knowing retirement was only a few dozen trips away. Close to a galactic year, but still doable for the sixty two year old. Bigani leaned back in his flight chair, checking over the final preparations for that month's haul.

His massive ship, the *Lust and Forgive*, was a converted class D colony ship with the interior stripped out to give way for a massive pressurized storage room. Almost five hundred meters long, it was larger than most destroyers and cruisers. Bigani made the purchase a decade prior and never regretted it. People paid more when they thought their cargo wasn’t touching space. It made hauls much more profitable.

Bigani flipped through the last of the checklist. A few hundred boxes of Rigona, a fruit made in the Nebola Sector that smelled sweeter than it tasted, a testament to most things in life. The seller wanted to oversee the delivery personally, which meant a physical meeting with the captain.

Massive cargo haulers like the *Lust and Forgive* never saddled up next to stations or ports, or at least the small to medium sized ones. Often they stayed a few dozen clicks away, allowing people to load their cargo with ease.

He checked the flight plans, the delivery was coming in an hour, he’d notify the crew.

* * *

Garson never found life to be as easy as when he was staying on Sispini. There was just something to having the convenience of a food stand twenty steps away from your bed at all hours of the day. Even back on Haluu he had to make it down a flight of steps, around the curve of the station, and wait in line to get some resemblance of food. But on Sispini, food seemed to be the hottest commodity around. Couple that with the low gravity and low calorie/muscle stress and Garson knew that without his previous intelligence training that he would have ballooned up quicker than the situation in Beketh had turned south. But just like Beketh, his previous training had saved him.

He finished his set of rows and allowed the pulley system to recalibrate. It was designed to constantly push him to pull harder, increasing muscle mass, and thus calories burned. A thin sheet of sweat lay across his brow.

The gym in Sispini was well stocked to carry at least thirty people all working out at the same time. But for the moment it was just Garson and Timur finishing their sets.

Burta had stayed in her room for most of the day, doubtlessly watching a new set of shows. Garson let the weights down slowly, hearing the satisfying clink as the magnets reconnected. Burta had tried to introduce him to some of the shows, but he failed to find the pull of drama in romance flicks.

The door opened at the head of the gym and McArthur walked in. Garson glanced up from the row machine and paused.

“Place clear?” McArthur asked.

“You made it, tell us?” said Timur. He walked over and clapped McArthur on the back. “Come to join us for a few sets.”

“I’ll make myself busy here tonight,” McArthur laughed. He swiped his datapad across the door, locking it. “For the meantime, something’s happened.”

Garson perked up and walked towards the two of them. McArthur nodded and Timur gave him a pat on the back.

“On the station?” asked Garson.

“No, on the outskirts of the Nebola Sector,” said McArthur. “Two warships were lost. The ARN picked it up with a relay, which sent it over to the ASD, and it made its way up the chair of command.”

“Who sent it to us?” asked Timur.

“Someone along that route did,” replied McArthur curtly. He still wasn’t giving up who their sponsor was. Information like that was sensitive.

“So you want us to find it?” asked Garson. This could be his chance.

McArthur nodded. “Currently the Skipoly Grey is the only ship with a capable hull to take the JumpDrive out to the Nebola system.”

“Are we going to wait for the rest of the group?” asked Timur.

McArthur shook his head. “It’s too time sensitive.”

“How long will the trip take?” asked Timur.

“Two weeks, from here to the Nebola System. Then another few days of burn to get to the location.”

“So two and a half weeks?” asked Timur.

McArthur nodded. “The other group will be arriving back here around that time.”

Timur shrugged, it sounded good to him. He looked over to Garson.

“You in?” asked Timur.

Garson nodded, “I’m in.” He tried to retain a calm appearance but on the inside he was giddy, this was his chance to show Marshal he could do it.

* * *

Onatia sat in the back of the transfer skiff, checking the time. It was almost time. The final domino to be placed. He glanced out towards the object he could not yet see with his naked eyes. The first steps of his grand plan were about to begin.

* * *

First Lieutenant Grimes, a tall man with a thick chest and a face that looked like a curled up fist, stood overlooking the third platoon of Marines, Rico squad. A collection of eighteen of the best that the Fifth Marine regiment had to offer. The regiment was stationed on Crili, with barracks near the south docks where their mother ship, the *Samathan Cruise* lay berthed. Rico squad, consisting of Charlie and Barker teams - nine men each - were under Grimes command.

A Marine first and foremost, he’d graduated from Righters school for the NAS, Naval Assault Squad, more professionally known as the Marine. He was selected for the officers path, moving quickly along until his first deployment on the field as an adviser to a Brigadier General during the Monotreal siege. The General must’ve thought him smart of something, because he was rushed up the chain of command to his first squad position, First Lieutenant.

The men of Rico squad had been an odd bunch at first, but Grimes believed - no knew - them to be the best that Fifth regiment had to offer. They’d trained together and he’d seen how the two teams operated, rotating around each other like independ corkscrews, but also coming back to save the other

squads neck. In a way they were brothers who loved each other but would never admit it. The squad was a sort of family, and that made Grimes the father.

He watched from the slightly raised platform as Rico squad performed the instructed drills of loading and unloading from the launch pods. Designed so that at any moment the entire regiment could deploy down to the surface of Nebola in the instance of system wide war. Try to protect the capital city of Lioni.

Grimes watched them go. They were getting better, his family faster. He checked the most recent times. Still not the best. But he'd get them there and damnit if he wasn't willing to drill them into the floor just to establish their place and the best loading squad in the whole platoon.

* * *

The bridge, or cockpit as some called it, of the Skipoly Grey was an older design. Like everything else on the ship, the cockpit was tilted 90 degrees when laying on the ship's belly, so the floor faced the main thruster. This reduced the need for any attempt at artificial gravity. During thrust the seats could flip directions so the bottom was always facing down, keeping everyone from passing out. There were five seats in the cockpit. The one slightly raised on an additional platform was the pilots. Allotted more monitors and controls, plus complete command over every major system on the ship. Along the bottom row were the rest of the seats, two on each side.

Standard Armadan light destroyer bridge layout. A Weapons, NavTech, ComStat, and Technic officer would all commonly sit there. But since BRISK ran such a small crew everything could be done through the pilot. But out of deference to tradition and simplicity, the rest of the crew commonly took the other seats to fill those roles.

Garson buckled himself into the NavTech seat of the Skipoly Grey. Two large consoles were in front of him, along with a third smaller one extending out from his armrest. Timur sat across from him, leaning backwards in the off kilter gravity.

"Feels odd doesn't it?" asked Timur.

"Been here before," said Garson.

"Right, back when we transported you over for the first time," Timur said.

"Alright gentlemen," Burtas voice broadcasted over the ship. "Buckle in and sit tight, we're leaving."

Garson gave a thumbs up and slapped on the headset behind his chair. He knew it could get loud. For the moment he rested on his back, his legs slightly suspended in the air. From his monitor he could see them moving, slowly at first as the thrusters moved and positioned them away from the station. They entered an elongated orbit. He watched as the rotating Sispini slowly grew farther and farther away. For the moment they were essentially in zero-G.

"Clear," Timur said.

"Lighting her up," said Burta with a grin.

Garson felt a deep vibration rocket through the ship, like a massive wave crashing down on a rock beach. The wall suddenly rolled into floor, and the floor into wall, until weight became normal and his chair clipped into position.

Timur let loose a whoop of joy. "Holy shit, it feels good to be home!"

Garson laughed. He was just glad to be on his way towards proving Marshal he could be part of BRISK.

* * *

Bigani stood at the front of the *Lust and Forgive*, which had been transformed into a special airlock for ships to dock and unload. Behind him were mountains of cargo kept in place by magnetic rows and latches.

“So he wants to dock and come in for a bunch of fruits?” asked his XO.

Bigani shrugged. “Sellers do as sellers do. We’re leaving shortly after anyway.”

“Alright, as long as it’s alright with you,” the XO rolled his shoulders, feeling them crack and pop with pressure. “Should I call the rest of the crew?”

Bigani shook his head. “Nah, this is just a simple matter.”

The two stood silent, hands clasped in front of them, as the small skiff slowly docked outside. The blue and grey airlock doors slid open a few minutes later, letting a small carpet of smoke sweep inside.

Bigani immediately knew something was wrong when it was more than the seller. Four other men were with him, all with hands in pockets. The seller wore a light grey suit that spelled trouble all over it for Bigani. But he was the seller, and it wasn’t like he was going to steal the ship or something.

“You the seller?” Bigani asked.

The man nodded. “And I presume you’re the captain,” he glanced towards Bigani’s XO, “and this is your XO?”

The XO nodded. “Where’s your cargo?”

The seller indicated towards the airlock doors. “Unloading it now. Felt like I needed some protection when I came onboard.”

“Well nothing here is going to hurt you,” laughed Bigani. “Not unless you shoot first.”

“Whoever said I wasn’t?” asked the seller with a raised eyebrow. Things became quiet. The groups glanced at each other.

Bigani’s XO reached down for his waistband.

“You better not be thinking-” Bigani’s XO barely had time to get another word off before he twitched and fell, a pair of beaded holes punched in his shirt. Bigani looked in surprise as the man clattered to the cheap floor.

“What the fuck is this?” he asked, he thought he knew the answer. He hated dealing with pirates.

The seller took a step forward and extended his hand. “I’m Onatia, and I want to buy out your ship for one last cargo run. Whether you like it or not, this ship is now the property of the Galactic Militia.”

* * *

High Officer Lesio and Captain Kash sat in the empty briefing room and watched the recording of their orders for the second time. The blueish grey light cast deep shadows under their eyes as both contemplated the effects of what they were tasked to do. To Onatia it was merely just another move on the board. The orchestrating of pieces to play into his hand. But to Kash and Lesio, it meant radically different things.

“So he wants us to sow the seeds of terror,” Kash said with barely veiled disgust after the recording was done.

“It’s more he wants us to even the playing field,” answered Lesio.

“Terror,” said Kash again. “What the fuck. We’re only one ship. We can’t just start attacking cruisers and destroyers without at least a decent possibility of death.”

Lesio shook her head. “I don’t think he wants us to do that. I mean he made it clear he was already moving.”

“Yeah, with the whole ‘I predict you have yet to hear rumors of my actions’ line. But so what? Unless he’s started blowing up Armadan ships somewhere-”

“Who's to say he hasn't?” asked Lesio.

“What do you mean?” Kash turned his body to face her instead of the silent wall where the recording had been projected.

“Our relays have picked up several messages about ships going missing. They’re saying someone out there is using stealth torpedoes,” Lesio said, leading Kash towards what she thought, “the same stealth torpedoes that we-”

Kash raised his hands in defense, “Alright, alright. So we fired a few of them on a long trajectory route to the Nebola sector, what about it?”

“I think Onatia’s already started to strike.”

“Then why does he need us to help?” questioned Kash.

“Because we’re his golden goose. His secret weapon. Most of his-our fleet is older models. Frontline ships with additional troops. Like the reinforcements we have onboard here. But his fleet can only be used so much, I think he wants us to start building up our own fleets,” Lesio said, “shadow fleets.”

Kash would have scoffed at the word but he had to admire Lesio’s thinking. “So what do we do now? We’ve only got so much ammo in the *Komoto*. We don’t have any torpedoes after Beketh and our missile tracks are almost empty.”

“I think he said we’d be expecting a resupply sometime soon.”

How big is this operation exactly? thought Kash. What did Onatia have at stake?

Chapter 4: Long way home

Garson found Timur spread out in the dining hall. The trip out to the Jump Portal had been a quick one. Almost at a constant one point five G thrust, Garson found it slightly uncomfortable to move yet still bearable. Yet he was confused as to why Timur had complained about the lack of zero G. Now he knew.

“So this is how you spend your trips?” asked Garson.

Timur shrugged. A motion that slightly altered his center of orbit around himself. “Better than a gel couch or seat.” He glanced around the room. “Also has more food.”

Garson laughed with Timur. “That’s true,” he said, moving for the refrigerator. He grabbed a condensed fruit cup and moved back towards the doorway.

“The first time I was on this, you were flying,” Garson said, he tried to lean up against the wall but in null G that only nudged him towards the center of the hallway. “What happened?”

Timur shrugged again. “We switch off. She’s the better pilot, I was learning.”

“Learning the rig of the ship?” joked Garson.

Timur nodded and became quiet, something was on his mind.

“You know why Marshal doesn’t trust you, right?” asked Timur.

Garson stopped scooping the reddish yellow mixture into his mouth. “No, not really. Is it that I’m new?”

“No, it’s because you were approved by McArthur,” said Timur. “Everyone else was approved by Marshal, and had to work their way up after meeting us several times and proving their worth. But you just come out of the middle of nowhere with the approval of our highest ranking member,” Timur paused, “I think that scares Marshal.”

“Because he fears I’ll take his spot?” asked Garson.

Timur nodded. “Exactly. And Marshals a born leader, and like all born leaders,” Timur stared at Garson, “he doesn’t like people taking his spot or hurting his team.”

* * *

Onatia was not a troubled man, he knew that. He was not an insane man, he knew that. He was not a predictable man, he knew that. People bowed before him instinctively, he knew that. There were many things he knew about how to use himself to the best of his abilities for his plans. Few questions remained for him in the galaxy. And those that did were trivial at best. The certain location of a stockhold of weapons, the whisper secrets of a cult of blackops agents sent out to kill him. But what he could not wrap his finger around was the fact that neither side had yet reacted openly to his disappearance.

That troubled him. When governments were quiet, that meant they were actually doing something. When they were loud they blustered, like all hollow men do, trying to cast a shield of protection around them lest they be knocked down to their feet by worthy men. Onatia smiled to himself. He was a worthy man indeed. Better suited for the position of leadership than any other person in the galaxy.

Better than the crooked governors and senators of the Armadan Republic. Fueled by money to spin in positions greased long before them, causing no friction, producing no results. Still, he had funded several of the governors personally, putting his idea of the dais of one of the governments. Far more worthy than the bloodline inherited by the Emperor and his high table full of cronies. Onatia grumbled to himself.

But the silent governments. Onatia was the one who was supposed to be silent, quiet in his approach. Tying together the bullies shoes until they tripped into one another and fists were raised. It was far easier to topple governments by letting themselves do it. Politicians harkened for the chance to do something, even if it was the wrong thing.

Onatia was satisfied with the plans he had drawn out. The one that had already been enacted. Let the dominos start to fall before the governments were to speak.

If the governments were to be silent, he was to be dead quiet. Let a shadow be noticed before him. And let the shadow's shadow consume all those that wandered into it.

* * *

Marshal stood behind Elanie, one hand on the shoulder of her chair, as the apply named burner skiff *Dusty* slowed to a stop.

"These are the trajectory coordinates," Jeffrey said after a second, rechecking to be sure. "We can set up a sweep pattern to try to locate the satellite."

Marshal nodded. "Sounds good. Elanie plot an elliptical course around this position. I want enough fuel to make it back home easy."

Elanie began typing away commands on her console.

"Jeffrey," Marshal said after a second, "what are the chances of picking up this satellite with our sensors?"

"Well since the best we have is a two generations old LiDAR, I'd say not the best." Jeffrey was a nerd at heart and didn't have the same enthusiasm that Elanie carried with her.

"I bet we can do it," said Elanie. "Given enough time," she put in as a clause in case they couldn't. Then it would be time's fault. People always looked for something to blame apart from themselves or things they couldn't change, Marshal thought.

"Just keep us scanning and tell me if we have any updates," said Marshal. He headed towards the head of the *Dusty*.

The *Dusty* was an old burner skiff. One of the ones people used to hop around systems in. Three decks, all cramped. An old G-drive that made the vents smell of ionized vegetables when it turned on. A half bathroom with nothing more than a simple toilet. A pair of bunk beds that acted as crew cabins. It was a long way from the Skipoly Grey.

Marshal closed the bathroom door behind him and began his climb back up to the bridge. Another thing, no elevators, Marshal grumbled.

Things like that used to not bother him. But he was agitated lately, and he knew what had started it.

Beforehand, whenever McArthur had offered someone to BRISK they'd been too high up the food chain to act as anything more than a resource sharer should the option come. Like Captains or Cardinal Officers. People with lots of power who couldn't be bothered to be boots on the ground. But then McArthur had met a cop, a good one at that, but still a cop and offered him to BRISK.

This was someone that BRISK could use. They'd decreased size a few years back to a small ops team and a tiny resource pool. Marshal would have probably accepted Garson as he did anybody else, give them some gruff and then move along. But McArthur had been the one to accept Marshal with the sole objective of making him head of BRISK after the old guy, Johnson, moved along.

Marshal was a Marine. Shit like death and wounds happened. You signed onto the job for stuff like that. But Marines had a very simple command structure for one reason, and it wasn't because they

were stupid, it was because they hated internal politics. It caused stress in senior officers, wondering who was going to replace them and put them back on track to be a civy.

Marshal stopped at the second deck, taking a few moments to rest and recollect his thoughts.

It wasn't that Garson would replace him anytime soon, it was that McArthur hadn't asked him for his advice. If he had he might have said yes, Garson was a good candidate. But Burta also deserved a shot. She was the mother bear of the team and she'd make an equally good, if not better XO for BRISK than Garson.

Stupid infighting always made things complicated. Marshal hated complicated shit. He liked it straight forward. Bad guy good guy. His guys were always the good guys. Usually his gut told him where to look and if it was a dead end he came to his team or McArthur for help. Only now he wondered if going to McArthur would increase the man's determination to trade him out for someone younger. Someone better fit for this job, a cop and not a Marine.

Marshal shook his head. He needed to see Garson do something right. He at least owed it to the youngster, if he was getting replaced, to train him well. Give BRISK a fighting chance with their new XO. Marshal decided that when they came back to Sispini he'd invite Garson out for a mission, teach him the ways of the old ropes.

* * *

Master Sergeant Brico Mallo reserved a quiet peace for times of great stress. There was something to be said for the surrounding quiet when all you heard in the hallways were shouts. Shouts of treason, espionage. False rumors that perpetrated the very layers of his own government. He winced at that thought. It wasn't his own government, it wasn't anyone's government really, it was the Emperors.

The Zendon Empire had operated under the authorization of an Emperor for ten generations. The thought being that the only true people who knew what was best for the government were those of the bloodline that founded it. It was like being in a spiderweb, if spiders had only one egg. The Emperor always had just one prince (or princess as had been the case several times). That child was indoctrinated by the spider, the thoughts of the past clouding the judgement of the future.

Truth be told, Brico thought, he didn't mind that much. An enlisted man himself, he'd been drafted into service at the age of twenty one to serve as a grunt on the front of a war that had never come. Sparks had been shown, a few fiery whispers, but it wasn't until he was higher up in rank that the war truly did happen. And what a war that was.

Brico had committed himself towards the service of his military the day his government lost the war. He cautioned himself against thinking of it as his military losing the war. They'd been held back by inept leadership at the center of the spider's web. So who could really blame Onatia for saying he was done after so many years of hard service only to be handed a slap in the face when his efforts were curbed stopped by the very people who demanded success. What path was there to be for a man like him, not related to the blood line, not entrapped in the makings of power, the cords of the spider's web. So Onatia had torn free. And that was something Brico could respect, a man fighting for his freedom.

But what Brico could not come to grips with was the displacement that Onatia had caused when he'd left the pool. The water that he'd taken with him. The partial portions of fleets that had disbanded, and the many more that were undoubtedly left, sleeper agents, cords waiting to be cut in the web. But the unfortunate thing for Brico was that he too had become part of the web, all of them had. By staying behind, by rejecting the offer unannounced to him, he had symbolically tied himself to the web without saying a word. And when someone threatened the web, Brico knew he would have to fight back.

* * *

If life was an obstacle course, a mouse in a maze looking for the block of cheese, Edward Hoss reasoned he'd just found the cheese. Edward Hoss was technically a private worker on the *Lust and Forgive*, a hand aid to help with reactor pipes and coolant flushes. But that wasn't his real job. He was an enterprise spy for the commercial sectors of the Zendon Government. Technically a military intelligence officer, his job was that of boredom; Jotting down cargo crate numbers, locations the large hauler went, all shit the Zendon Empire could find out by picking up a shipyard manifest. But then it got interesting, when the gunshot went off.

Hoss had been in the back of the ship, fixing one last pipe before the reactor could potentially return to full one hundred percent power. It took being around gunshots long enough to notice when there was one and not just another pipe falling or wrench tumbling. Note to the wise, they didn't have any echo, they were sharper.

"Fuck, who dropped a wrench," said Billy, the lead deck hand. The rest of the workers muttered and laughed. Hoss joined in with them, but he'd known it was a gunshot.

"Hey, excuse me guys, need to hit the head," Hoss stepped down from the mobile ladder. He needed to find out why someone had just shot. Was it an accidental discharge of that bullish XO that Bigani kept around.

The *Lust and Forgive* was massive. To Hoss it was the biggest ship he'd ever been on. So big it could probably carry several ships he served on in the pressured hanger with room to spare. He had moved down towards the end of the hold, stopping when he neared the front airlock. A man, slightly plump, had stood in front of Bigani. The XO was dead on the ground, gunshot to the chest.

The seller took a step forward and extended his hand. "I'm Onatia, and I want to buy out your ship for one last cargo run. Whether you like it or not, this ship is now the property of the Galactic Militia."

That had been the cheese in the mousetrap. He'd just found the man his Empire was looking for, and also his way back into the intelligence service he liked. Hoss smiled at the memory of it. The mouse game had just begun.

Chapter 5: Trails

Kash preferred to watch when ships were loaded up. He found, as a captain, that he felt safer with his cargo when he saw it stored. Like a passenger in a shuttle, keeping a careful eye on where his luggage was put.

The *Komoto*, just as Onatia had promised, was being resupplied. Kash hadn't expected it to be this way though.

The massive Cargo hauler, *Orange is the Way*, was saddled perpendicularly to the *Komoto*, with the cargo hauler's bow facing the midsection of the destroyer. A cargo lift had been erected there, ferrying the massive torpedoes from the cargo hauler's hold. Kash did not ask where they had gotten them, but he noted that instead of cheap knock offs - like *RazerBlades* or *Switchers* - Onatia had somehow gotten his hands on fourteen *Comats* - massive torpedoes able to crush the hull of a station if they had the chance. And several *Harpoon*, guidance torpedoes.. Essentially silo missiles but meant for ships instead of planets, the *Comat* torpedo was deadly at any range.

A wide airlock tunnel ran from the main door on the side of the *Komoto* to a DIY breach on the *Orange is the Way*. Kash didn't trust any airlock that wasn't built by professionals would have preferred to simply EVA the whole process, as was being done with the torpedoes, but Lesio had insisted they allow the crew some walking time. Kash had relented and allowed Lesio to do her thing. She was better with the crew that way.

"Look at those things," Issac let loose a soft whistle. Kash glanced back. The boy still had a blood lust that disturbed him. "How many ships do you think we can take with those?"

"Enough," said Kash gruffly.

"What are we going after first? Few Armadan ships?" Issac asked in the same way a man might ask the butcher what steaks were for sale. Kash curled up his fists. He believed in the cause. He would follow the cause. But his crew came first. And unlike steaks, ships had knives too.

* * *

Jump Portals were mankind's best friend in a world where time was his number one enemy. Individual stars were hundreds of light years apart, distant quadrants of the Galaxy that would have taken many generations to get there, even if they could get a ship close to light speed. It just wasn't worth all the effort.

But scientists had come up with a crazy idea, one that some rumored had put them in this galaxy in the first place, the Jump Portal.

The Jump Portal followed one basic shape. A massive half circle curve, almost five miles in diameter and made of stark white phosphide lenses that created the blocky surface. The object looked like an overhead shot of a bird mid flight, both wings fully extended to the wind.

The idea behind the Jump Portals was that the galaxy wasn't a single sheet, instead a ball of sorts. That if you could punch through the surface instead of going along the perimeter, you could get to your target much faster. An object a hundred light years away might only take fourteen weeks of travel. Long enough to make the individual star systems feel apart, but not so long that it was unbearable.

Information, light relays, traveled even faster. Positioned on the relays they essentially created a mirror image of the information and sent it at billions of times the speed of light, much faster than any human could bear.

Humans for that matter, could only take around seventeen times the speed of light, and even that was close to unbearable. Anything over fifteen wasn't pleasant, and anything under ten was too slow, so most ships jumped at fourteen.

But it really wasn't the ships jumping, it was the sun propelling them. The way the Jump Portal worked was by wrapping the sun around the two curves, the wings, of the portal. The lenses then condensed the light and the ship, turning them in the correct direction, and firing them off. The ride through a Jump Portal was often dizzying, confusing at first, plus unpleasant as you were literally encompassed by light you could not see and at the mercy of the star that shot you.

This mode of transport left two realities. You always knew where people were coming into a system from. And if a Jump Portal was shut down, a system was cut off.

Of course there were people who built workarounds, because that's what humans do, find solutions to problems they've made. People like that were handsomely compensated for their work. Work that allowed for the unregulated use of Jump Portals. A strategic ability that often resulted in massive battleships having personalized Jump Portals for the opportunities when they needed to come from somewhere their enemies didn't expect. But even those Jump Portals were watched and every government knew which ships in the galaxy had that ability. Thus a database was formed where every object was labeled, every device known, because the capabilities of such a device could change the scope of the galaxy.

And that was something Onatia needed to change.

* * *

Garson really didn't like Jump Portals. The worst was when his stomach scrunched up. They said it was because of the flexible walls and the subtle, yet there, G-force effects that occurred when ships entered Jump. Just because it was light propelling them and not reactor mass didn't mean the laws of physics were left behind. Or at least, not most of them.

After his conversation with Timur, Garson had felt slightly off in the Skipoly Grey. Awkward, as if everyone else had known about something and just not felt the need to tell him. But for all he knew, it was just Timur who knew that. He shook his head, his stomach rumbled, he needed food.

He didn't find Timur in the mess hall, too much gravity to hang around and grab a bite of food. Garson opened up an opaque silver plastic cabinet and crabbed a box of Chops, spilling some out onto a plate that he thrust into the microwave. Still there with humans for what seemed like an eternity in time. He watched the thick pink salty snacks rotate under harsh yellow light. It was satisfying, calming almost to listen to the humm and pop as the electrons bombarded food.

"You look tired," said Burta from behind him.

Garsons shoulders jerked up in surprise. He turned around to face her. "How long have you been standing there?"

"You have that tired face that speaks of stress, what is it?" Burta moved to the bench based table and sat down.

Garson stayed at the microwave for a moment before following her. He took a seat and looked at Burta. She was a mix between old and young. Her face barely had a wrinkle to it, but her twin set brown eyes had seen several lifetimes before them, and not in the way that soldiers say it, but in the style of mothers who'd watched their kids grow up before them. Garson decided he could trust her.

"It's that I don't feel like I fit in," he said. He took a breath. "There's this thing like Marshal won't accept me, and then it feels like the rest of you won't either. Like I'm back at basic and everyone's

testing me out, but it's gone on for a lot longer than normal. Like there's something wrong with me." Garson stopped, he realized he'd pulled his hands together. "Do you understand me?"

Burta squeezed her lips and nodded. "I don't think it's you, I think it's like what Timur said, it's because McArthur promoted you. I was here the last time McArthur did that. He did it for Marshal. The both of you are very similar. Both of you are leaders, are headstrong, and both are usually right." She sighed. "I don't think people dislike you, I think people are trying to judge you. Timur likes you, that's for sure. Jeffrey is in his own world, so he doesn't care. Elanie is still trying to judge you but likes what you did on Beketh. And I for one am impressed by what you did there too. I think Marshal likes you, but he's also still judging you. I just think people want to see you do a good job. Do that and everything will finish their assessment of you."

Garson nodded. "Alright." His mind was scrambled in the way that often comes after getting information that answers the questions but leaves more. He looked up and nodded his head. "Thanks, so let's go get this job done."

* * *

High Officer Lesio told Kash the reason for putting across the airlock bridge was for people to walk when in reality it was put up so she could get away from her cage and start the mission. Kash had a dislike for pirates, that much was clear. Why, she could only guess it was from his training. But she, on the other hand, had no moral stipples about straying from training when it suited her and the Galactic Militia goals.

The interior hold of the cargo hauler was wreckage, literally. The large beams of ships that Lesio half recognized were there. Three "small" torpedo skiffs, privately owned, and a light Armadan transport shuttle with holes peppered through its cockpit. Along the far wall was the ordinance, enough to blow up them, the *Komoto*, and the next nearby hundred thousand miles of space. A pleasant thought to start her mission with.

She'd worked with cargo hauler pilots before and knew their practices well enough to know that they usually had contacts in the underground. The seedier places of town that were more keen to buy leftovers that they couldn't get elsewhere. The Captain, as with all official and unofficial unloads, would be on the bridge.

The bridge of the *Orange is the Way*, a strange name that was most likely not the ship's original name, was larger than the *Komotos*. Featuring a real set of meter tall windows stretching along the outer rim instead of the digital panels that Kash favored, which fed live video from external cameras. The effect was the same, but the meaning was different.

With the cameras you weren't actually there, with the windows the danger of space was inherently right in front of you. The Captain sat in a recliner in front of the lead window, sipping on something a little stronger than Lesio would have preferred for the completion of this mission.

"You the Captain of that ship?" asked the hauler.

"The Commander more like," she said.

The hauler nodded and got out of his chair with a grunt. He walked over to Lesio and extended his hand. "Might as well meet you, since we'll be doing business together," he gave her a look that told Lesio how much he liked their business. His face was that of an old bull, a broad grizzled jaw with plump cheeks and deep set dark eyes.

"I assure you it will all be worth it," she said.

"It fu-" he stopped himself. "George Hannersin."

"High Officer Lesio," she shook his hand.

“Ex Zendon then?” He raised an eyebrow.

“You know your military structures?” asked Lesio, it might be good to know the hauler's past and what his future loyalties might be, apart from cash of course.

“Worked ten years against y'all. Fighter pilot stationed outside the Crili complex in the Nebola system,” he said with a gruff grin. “That's one military base if I've ever seen one.”

“How many ships?” she asked, an idea was forming.

“Enough. Usually a few battleships, a dozen cruisers and frigates, five or six destroyers, and one or two Warships. Plus the assortment of light carriers and shuttles. More than enough actually,” Hannersin paused, “why?”

Lesio smiled and shook her head. “Not why I'm here. Do you have any contact with the underground?”

“Ah,” Hannersin let the word fill the air. He paused. “They won't help you with Crili.”

“I just need to know,” said Lesio, “tell them they'll be-”

“Well compensated, I know the gig. We've got a few crew mates onboard from the local Pelios gang. They usually run a few scavenged light cruisers.”

Lesio nodded her thanks and left. Onatia needed ships, and Crili had them.

* * *

Edward Hoss was no stranger to the spy business. A four year tour at the Hedge, the Zendon main spy school and training grounds had taught him more than one thing about the art of espionage. For it was an art, but a slow and stale one at that. Twenty years before him it had been quick and exciting for most agents on the field. An information game where the mice, agents, always fought each other for that golden piece of cheese in the maze of the galaxy. But nowadays it was slower, duller, as tensions had cooled. He wanted to protect his country, but now he was just protecting a company.

Then Onatia had showed up and dropped the golden piece of cheese at his feet. And damn, did it smell good.

He could have gone then. Left with the information of where the man had been. Tell Hedge who'd send out Pursuer droids and kill Onatia. Retire to maybe a desk office where at least he could have adequate coffee. But no, he was going to stake this one out, play the long game in the short term world. Onatia was a cheese too priceless to let up, and he had to let it age a little bit before selling.

He glanced around the sleeping quarters. There was a rumble along the floor. The *Lust and Forgive* was moving, the cheese was aging, and Onatia was up to something.

* * *

Issac hated the Armadan people. Not the government, not the military, not even the companies, but the people. Armadan citizens stink to his nose. The vile and squirm of the galaxy. The root cause of all problems and the spawn of all evil. They were ruined people, crooked people, and like the trees back on his homeworld, they needed to be cut down.

Issac could not pinpoint where this hatred came from. Maybe it was the minute things, like the way they slightly held their eyes on him too long when he was in their stores. The way they knew he was an outsider, and outsiders didn't belong with them. Not an outsider as in a Zendon citizen, but an outsider as in a legacy planet colonizer. Someone who had stood up to the galactic rules and planted their flag on a planet to make sure their family could survive. That kind of outsider.

But it could be bigger than world things. Like the way they'd finance and subsidized the companies who'd come over with “protection” of the local fleet and bought his land for what essentially was stealing. A tenth of uin for what it was worth. And the Armadan government, for how transparent and

representative it was, said nothing. The Armadan Navy, for how noble and bold it was, did nothing. And the Armadan people, for how fucking carrying and sensible they were, heard nothing. He was spewing old hatred now, and he knew it.

The Armadan Government was hypocritical, and Issac hated hypocrites. At least the Zendon government was honest about what it did, what it was. An Empire, serving one man till he died and was replaced by an heir. It wasn't good, but at least it wasn't a hypocritical government. It did what it said, and the people dealt with it. There were no fluffy lies, no cheap drinks, no wasted words. The Emperor said one thing, the Empire did it. Issac could respect that, even if he disliked it. But at least they weren't hypocrites.

He took a deep breath and focused back on the task at hand. Staring at a monitor waiting for Captain Kash to give the word to fire. He glanced over at the Captain. The man must've hated Armadan people as much as he did. For what they had humiliated him at Beketh and before. There had got to be some form of old hatred in those veins.

Issac ran his tongue over his teeth. *Fucking Armadans*. He'd kill enough of them soon, he'd done so in the past. A vengeance for his history and a redemption for his future. The *Komoto* hummed, the reactor warming up the main drive.

"Feir, pull us away," said Captain Kash to Navigation officer Feir.

Issac straightened in his chair, waiting for orders and waiting for the live feed from outside the ship. Slowly, at first, the *Orange is the Way* fell away, seemingly sinking away into space. White puffs at the front and down the side of the *Komoto* indicated ODTs, Omni Directional Thrusters.

"Light up the drive," ordered Captain Kash. Lesio moved over to his side and whispered something in his ear. Issac noticed the moment's hesitation on his face before he caved and nodded. "Set coordinates for the Jump Portal."

The cargo hauler slipped away, barely a streak on the screen as Issac was forced firmly in his seat by the two G burn. He smiled despite himself, whoever they were going to kill this was going to be fun.

Chapter 6: A dancer routine

The problem with humanity is time. Time is the quintessential currency of history. The allotted moments a man had under the stars and sun. Time is valuable, and like all things valuable, it is often stolen.

* * *

A man was not a man if he had not earned it, the same went for leaders. However for leaders, unlike men, the effects of their actions carried more weight than any man would ever lift. But so many had earned their posts not by merit nor skill but by bloodline and lies. Emperors and their princes, senators and their sons. They were worthless in the grand scheme of things, but like all things worthless, they often ended up in the most worthwhile positions. Sticky gum between gears.

But there was a solution to such things. A child would often start with a stick, a broken branch of a dying tree to push the rubbery worthless items from out of between the gears of whatever machine he needed to use. As the child progressed he came to understand there were different ways to get rid of the gum, acid was a particular favorite. But acid was a simple man's game and often melted the gears one wished to save from a sticky death. A more cautious man would first look for another machine, and when that didn't work, he'd remove the gears that the gum was stuck to, saving the machines by sacrificing just a few parts.

Onatia was doing the same, only with politicians instead of gum, and governments instead of gears.

The Galaxy wasn't a broken place, just a slightly off kilter one. A machine that was starting to run slower thanks to the gum stuck in its gears. But should it keep running, and it had to for the safety and survival of the human race, the gears would stick and the machine would fall apart. In a way it would cause chaos, a principal agent that Onatia practiced and used. But unlike the agents of chaos he employed, Onatia was no such man. A careful man who orchestrates his steps long before he ever steps into a building. He was no fan of chaos as a child is no fan of stuck gears. But just like the child, sometimes you have to clean the machine to get it started again.

Orchestrated chaos to avoid wide spread chaos, like detonating charges to cause small avalanches to stop the big one that was bound to happen. A few governments, local at first. The removal of gears, scare off some of the gum before he'd be forced to pull out the larger gears. Replace them with gears of his own, supplement them before the machine built new ones. Scabs growing over open wounds, skin which had once harnessed disease.

Onatia leaned back in his chair, the deep brown fake leather cushioning him in the light acceleration burn. The gears would soon start to be unscrewed, lightly at first. He knew his golden rule, never use the stick, it drew too much attention. He glanced at the monitor across from him. But he feared not all of his officers followed that rule.

* * *

Coming out of Jump wasn't all that difficult. Depending on how much initial velocity you were given would change where along the line you came out. But even that wasn't a line. At any given point a hundred ships could be along the track vector for the Jump portal, which made coming out randomly a game of chance with low chances and high stakes. Since local governments didn't want to close off portions of their systems so that people could safely randomly depart Jump, the galaxy came up with a different solution. The PLANE solution.

The Planetary Latitude and Altitude Neprotus Equation simply put was a calculated formula designed by Dr. Neprotus, an Armadan weapons manufacturer, that told computers where and when ships would generally be on the given day their ship came out of Jump. Then with that calculation in mind it plotted a safe route to drop the ship out of the maneuvering bubble for those ships, thus ensuring no two ships collided into each other. Like all things in the galaxy, to Garson's mind it was only a test of time until something broke.

"Coming out now," said Burta with a calm voice. After her and Garson's conversation he'd found it in him to approach Timur and become social again. Caught off guard by the man's eagerness to take him up on the scarce amenities and activities the ship had to offer, which was just AR combat training.

The Skipoly Grey didn't rumble or shutter as it popped from a hole formed in the galaxy's skin. And no sooner had they departed than the hole reformed and the Skipoly Grey recalibrated.

"Well, we're where we want to be," said Garson, "twenty million miles from the Nebola system. Crili and Fertili are both pinged on our maps."

"Ships course is two million off to our East," replied Timur to the unspoken question. Even on the ship and in space they used planetary measures of navigation. An old habit humans hadn't shook for generations.

"We should follow that and then see if we come across a trace of anything," Garson opened up the local navigation port, tracing his finger down the projected line of the *Techimia's* flight path. "Looks like the cargo hauler they reported stranded isn't there anymore."

"So that's a probable cause to believe this was a staged attack," said Burta.

"No questions about it on my side," Timur said, sliding over his screen to watch the nearby ships. "Doesn't look like much on our scans. A few empty haulers coming in and out."

"It's a trade route," Garson shrugged, "there's going to be haulers all over it."

* * *

Captain Kash stood on the bow of the bridge to the *Komoto* with a grim look on his face. His subconscious bounced momentarily at the fact he hadn't considered the bridge to be his. At the moment it wasn't even Lesio's, it was Onatias. The presence of his orders even carried enough weight to control the bridge. Kash's lips were pressed tight in discomfort at his current set of orders.

Pirates had never been his fancy. Too quick to change sides, loyal to the one thing that could be manipulated the most, Uin - money.

Money was a passover from the ancient days of barter and trade. Taking its form in a multitude of ways until a galactic convention had been called and a singular piece of currency had been derived, the Uin. Usually a chip around an inch and a half long, a sixth inch thick, and silver metal. Internally it was loaded with a prepaid amount of digital currency that was connected to a general mainframe. Each piece, each Uin, had a specific amount of digital credit tied to it. That credit could at any time be loaded back onto a user's account via a tap or a user could offload currency to the physical form of the Uin. But as the Uin was essentially tied to the stability of both the bank and the galactic markets at all times, it was an easily manipulated object.

Kash had always questioned the legitimacy of physical currency. There was no inherent advantage unless you were stuck at an end of the road planet with no uplink and had to buy something. But the people there were more likely to rob you and run off with your ship than accept your useless piece of metal with a motherboard inside.

It was untraceable, apparently, noted Kash with quiet distaste. If you needed to buy something without your spouse knowing, like a cheap ride with an escort on a vacation, then Uin was your go too.

That's why pirates loved it. Like prostitutes they collected the physical currency in mass value, storing it in crates and boxes to be smuggled away until the proper use. But there really was no "proper" way pirates were going to use their money.

More substance, more cheap sex, more shitty ships. The only thing the money did right was attract prospective workers, people who wanted a cut out of the makings. But even they, like the prostitutes on brothels planetside, were just cheap shots to the pirate bosses. A fling of Uin in their direction like a cheap handjob for the humor of watching them scramble for it. The tasteless sensibility of life.

And that was why Kash disliked pirates, because they had a cheap look at life. That people were nothing more than Uin to them, a cheap fling. To Kash they were worse than Issac, because at least somewhere in Issac he had to understand that the people he was shooting were people. People he believed were worthless, but people nonetheless.

Pirates didn't see that. They only saw Uin in their way, and unlike businessmen who had the decency to follow some subset of rules, pirates flung that to the air to stick to cheap walls. All pirates cared about was sex, money, and shotty laughs, thus in Kash's eyes they had a cheap look at life.

* * *

McArthur had never been a fan of espionage, despite when it suited him. A shoot straight kind of person, similar to that of Marshal, he didn't like sneaking behind peoples backs. But he knew when the High Chair wasn't telling him something, and this was one of those times.

McArthur had always had a good friendship with the High Chair, Micheal Veneers, a man he'd know for close to two decades. But despite the inherent trust that comes with such friendships, McArthur still had installed a closed net system to keep an eye on his friend to make sure he didn't become a threat to the galaxy.

At the moment it didn't seem so. The High Chair was in another meeting with the financial people, bureaucrats whose whole job was too bicker about money that at the end of the day would barely change. A two percent bump here might jostle the markets in the border zones while hurting the markets back home. Choices that didn't mean shit for the normal person's day.

McArthur set the observation system to standby. He'd go over those recordings later. Anyway, they were almost a day old at this point, and the information contained by them was another two days late if it came from the border systems. McArthur shook his head. He needed his people, BRISK, to start finding leads in the water.

* * *

Lesio had no qualms about using pirates. To her they were the downtrodden people of the galaxy who'd taken up arms to earn a living. It wasn't *their* fault that they'd had to turn to piracy, it was the galactic governments fault. Deregulation or too much regulation, either way, they were the downtrodden and Lesio was here to help them.

In her game of chess they were neither the pawns on the board nor the broken pieces to the sides, they were the hands who'd help smash the pieces off the board. The cargo haulers would be the palms who put those pieces back together.

Lesio met with three of them, all representatives from the local Inicos faction. Smugglers, gun runners, pirates from the Nebola system who'd had a tough time in life and decided to fight back. Lesio could respect that.

She'd been overjoyed when Onatia had given her the orders to acquire him ships, and even more when he'd sent a personalized message telling her that he believed in her. Kash would say it was Onatia

reminding her that he had an eye on her. But to Lesio it was personal respect from a man she'd done nothing but attempt to please. And finally the notice that she'd been waiting for had arrived.

The room where they sat was the small crew lounge next to the deployable Strike Team quarters. A bunch of rogue Marines and JSOC operators looking for a chance to fight. The pirates didn't tell her anynames and brought with them a squad of four mean looking grunt whose job was to take a bullet if anyone started shooting, Lesio guessed. The pirates all wore simple clothing, light purple chests and dark blue pants, but it was clear who was superior by the quality of such clothing.

The middle man, with his fairly new clothing, sporting a bullet hole to prove he could take what he wanted, led the negotiations. He had a soft pressed face with a set of lower teeth slightly tilted to the left.

"So you want our ships?" he asked.

"No, I want your assistance," replied Lesio.

"What will we get in reward?" asked the lead pirate.

"Two things. Uin up front and later on the removal of such powers that chase after you, a return to normality," Lesio offered. *But if we end up in control and you're still pirates then our conversations will happen over metal tables in jail*, Lesio knew.

Clearly the other side was thinking along the same lines.

"What's stopping you from chasing after us like the Zendon and Armadan navies have? Where is our assurance of safety?" The lead pirate folded themselves forward in the chair, hands clasped out in front.

"In your aid to our cause we will forgive all deeds done to accomplish the end goal," said Lesio calmly but with a stern look in her eyes. Deeds after the goal is accomplished won't be as forgiven.

"We hear rumors that your number already has a fleet. They've struck in the Nebola sector before," the lead pirate said to his companions, "a destroyer, the *Technima*." He'd just played a hand that told Lesio he knew everything that happened in the system. Not even her own spies had picked up on that.

"We're separate factions, but to the same goal," Lesio played it carefully.

"So are they the enemy?"

"No, friends. But strategically it's wise to have more than one fleet," said Lesio.

"So we're now a fleet?" The lead pirate arched an eyebrow. "A moment ago I thought we were just pirates."

"Fleet is a loose term," Lesio waved her hand. She had felt herself slip there, almost losing the conversation, it could not happen again. She steeled her lips. "But yes, your actions would be orchestrated by me in accordance to my motives. But paid handsomely to do so."

"And when not in your service," the lead pirate asked.

"You'd be allowed to continue your activities as before. Granted that you didn't go after any of our ships."

The lead pirate paused, thinking for a second. "Our rate is high," he said.

"We can afford it," said Lesio.

"And if you can't then the Armadan navy would probably be glad to cover us to know of your whereabouts," said the lead pirate. He'd just thrown down his last card. An agreement to the terms stated but with blackmail lining the edges.

"I wouldn't have expected anything less," Lesio smiled and stood to shake their hands. "I will be in contact shortly."

“Of course,” the lead pirate replied in customary fashion. “We wouldn’t expect anything less. As for the moment, enjoy the Nebola system.”

Chapter 7: First move

Jacob Fisher, captain of the Frigate, *Armalay*, wasn't a big man, but his suits always looked small on him. He wasn't the best looking man on the ship, but that didn't mean the ladies at the docks loved him any less. He was, as they said, *a man on the up and up*. Except the up-and-up had led him down a long one-way passage that ended in a wall. The only thing of his on the up-and-up was his desire to retire. Even the captain was just a figurehead position. The ship basically flew itself. And the junior officers, enlisted personnel, and new additions of scientists took care of everything else. The only reason he was here was in case someone needed to bounce an operations question off him. He was just the supreme authority, the god only occasionally asked for help. And that left a lot of time for deep thoughts.

Space was massive, he noted. It had been on his mind for a few days ever since he took stock of their fuel levels. Well he didn't take stock, a junior staff officer brought his attention to it. The *Armalay* was a frigate on a mission. Protecting a massive scientific vessel hauling a jump portal out to an unexplored system. A massive scientific exploration that put the lives of everyone at risk, but whoever said discovery came without cost. Or potential cost.

He looked down at his monitor. As much as flying for the protection of scientists bored him he couldn't help but be awed, yet terrified, by just how big space was. Ships in the expedition group ranged, on average, over twenty thousand kilometers from each other. And that was for the tight group action. Usually they'd be no less than a hundred thousand kilometers from each other.

That was what the net reels always got wrong. *How damn big space is*. Even in the action movies, flying through and under asteroids. They just didn't clump together like that. Jacob knew, especially since he was flying through one.

Asteroids were even more spaced out than the ships, with one or two ever hundred and fifty thousand miles. They were easy to predict, and even easier to steer clear of. The *Armalay's* navigation and detection team hadn't even needed to sweep the area twice, that was how predictable the rocks were.

Hate to run into one though, Jacob thought. Sure the rocks were far apart, but usually they were also big. Bigger than most ships humans had made, and definitely bigger than any ships in the expedition group. They'd be easy to detect. *But still...* Jacob switched on the POLaD, an object usually used in combat to predict where and when to fire. That would give the gunners an edge up if they had to blow up an asteroid. The only problem was that it pulled energy away from the LiDAR.

He was a superstitious commander. *If something could go wrong, it would*, was his motto.

Jacob returned to his helm station and double checked their position on the map. One of the few jobs he checked on was where his ship was. He trusted the navigation officer, but still *whatever could go wrong, would*.

The formation of the fleet was that of a blob. Around the edges, north, south, east, and west, were four destroyers - They still used magnetic pole markers despite floating in the void. Wherever the lead ship pointed was north -. The next rim in were the six Frigates, including the *Armalay* near the South of the formation. One more rim in was three Cruisers and five light carriers. At the very center was the science vessel built from the old husk of a warship, the *Aurora*. None of them, by official records, were warships anymore, just assets of the GFSDA, the Galactic Further Scientific Development Agency.

The *Aurora* was a testament to the new focus of a significant portion of the Armadan government: science. With war seemingly behind them, the government had decided to focus on expanding other fields apart from weapons. That included exploration, which was the *Aurora's* task. The *Aurora* was crewed by almost seventeen hundred, over half of that of scientists. It was joked among the sailors that by the end of

the tour the entire crew of the *Aurora* would have doctorates in something, since the trip was taking so long.

Long indeed, thought Jacob. They'd left seventeen months ago and were only just approaching the halfway point. They couldn't take Jump Portals anymore since there weren't any where they wanted to go. So they had to bring them along. An entire third of the *Aurora*'s cargo bay was the necessary supplies for the construction of a Jump Portal, a revolutionary feat that used a nearby sun's energy to shoot a ship literally through space. The thought of it always gave Jacob shivers.

If something can go wrong, it will, he remembered.

But for the most part, nothing on the trip had gone wrong. They had exited the last Jump Portal two months ago in the Nebola system and went off at a leisurely point seven five G. He had another sixteen months of it.

At least it'll be a relaxing year and a half, he thought. They were heading to some planet at the edge of the galaxy that showed promise behind a reliable jumping off point for further explorations. Journeys Jacob knew he wouldn't be privy to, he considered the current trip to be the last in his tour of service.

And with scientists onboard, the convoy traveled at a moderate .75 G. And it wasn't like they were the only nerds aboard the frigate. And like all nerds, they were territorial over what was theirs.

The navigation and detection team shared the same cramped room that had been host to a long series of arguments about who got to use which devices. Nicknamed the NavDeck, or NavDec, depending on who you asked.

At the end of the first month in deployment, sick and tired of the bickering, Jacob had changed up the crew shifts so that at any given time there were only as many people in the room as there were monitors. It had worked, but there was still a little bit of resentment between the two on who got to use which monitors. Jacob had simply said *first come, first serve*.

Jacob needed the eyes of his ship to be looking out and not staring daggers at each other. They were the pre-warning system, and anything important that happened on the ship went through them.

* * *

Marshal had always considered BRISK to be a holding point against the chaos of the galaxy. The famed protector of the innocent, as McArthur called it. But, as Marshal looked around the tiny kitchen on board the burner skiff, if he couldn't keep the chaos out of his food making, what was he to keep it out of the galaxy.

Marshal had tried to make food for Elanie and Jeffrey. Tried to was the kind way of saying it. The verbal excuse of innocence in a specific field. A shrug of sorts. Before him lay the wreckage of dinner. Two small bowls, one for mashing and one for cooking. A bag of heat dried flour. Some spices with their caps off. An opened bag of yellow stigers, a sweet mineable candy like fruit. The results were in the cooking bowl, a mashed up soup of sorts that resembled what you might feed an animal, much less a human.

"Someone have trouble?" asked Elanie, leaning up on the doorway.

"You can't make decent food on this ship," Marshal gestured to the mess.

"Make that's why they call it a mess hall," commented Jeffrey.

Elanie's face cringed in an ironic way. "Low blow."

"Do you want to help?" asked Marshal.

"I'll pass," said Jeffrey, "I can cook anything but food."

Elanie moved over to the counter. “So what was this supposed to be?”

“Chefs rulla,” said Marshal. He had his tablet open to the ingredients page, but that hadn’t helped much.

Elanie looked at the image on the tablet; A fluffy doughy bread with a golden tint along the top. Then at Marshal’s creation. She couldn’t help but laugh. “What did you do?” she asked after hiccuping several times.

Marshal scrubbed and spun the bowl around. The mixture stayed still, rock hard at the base. “Maybe too little water.”

“Looks like we’re having rocks for dinner,” said Jeffrey, returning to the counter with a small bud of water. Elanie laughed. “I think there’s a way to fix this,” she said, reaching up into the cabinets. Marshal watched her bring down the yeast. “Let’s start again,” she said with a smile.

“Don’t we all wish that,” Jeffrey took a sip of his water.

* * *

The bridge of the *Armalay* was full of staff personnel. Protecting government scientists wasn’t an easy job. But as Jacob glanced around the room, he realized that more than a few of the people on the command deck weren’t actually his sailors.

“Captain Fisher,” Dr. Leod, an energetic scientist, ran his hand through his light grey hair. He was getting old. The thin skin under his eyes was opaque.

“Just Jacob thanks,” Jacob said, extending a hand to Dr. Leod.

“I was most impressed by your navigation team's use of LiDAR and SSOW on detecting those asteroids,” Dr. Leod said.

LiDAR was the closest thing ships had to human eyesight. People could see since light bounces off objects and enters their eyes, space ships did not have that luxury. In the void there was no light to randomly bounce off objects, so the ships had to make it themselves. Of course it wasn’t visible light, but instead strong radio waves that bounced off an object's hull and then were reflected back to the ship’s scanners. But because space was so large, there was a delay between the LiDAR pulse being sent out and the message being received.

That’s where SSOW came into place. SSOW, or Super Shadow Object Width was a fancy gadget that could find the holes in space. The places where something had just been. Space, for all its emptiness on the human level, still was made up of something. And SSOW detected those tiny particles, and when they were brushed aside.

Unlike LiDAR which pulsed every second on passive mode, SSOW scanned in three hundred and sixty degrees at all times. The only way SSOW worked was by constantly scanning and comparing the image to the last. It measured trajectories, paths through space that were hard to hide.

“Thank you, I will be sure to pass on your compliment,” Jacob responded. He would pass on the compliment along with a soft word to the team leader to try to stop the scientists from sneaking in. Not for the navy's safety - since most of their tech was already out there on the black market - but so a scientist didn’t accidentally touch a hot instrument and take up a med bay bunk. Jacob had already had two of those instances and the paperwork hurt him more than the scientists burned fingers.

“I studied this after all, but I want your report on it after all, how does the ship manage all the data coming in from the sensors?” asked Leod.

“Computers,” was Jacob's one word answer to most questions. But Dr. Leod wanted more, he was a scientist after all, and scientists always wanted answers. Jacob was obliged to answer since Leod was technically of equal or higher rank to him. “I mainly come down to the SSOW backup. By using the

SSOW, we can create a predicted flight path for an object based on a single detection of the object and the ‘shadow’ it leaves behind. Then when the LiDAR relay comes back we compare the object's size, description, and mass in correlation to the SSOW's data to create a realistic flight plan of the object or ship. And that's going on every few seconds--”

“Even during battle?” asked Dr. Leod.

“No sir,” Jacob shook his head. “During battle we increase the active scanners, LiDAR and POLad, along with passive sensors, mainly SSOW, to find ships. It gives away our position, but the hope is that it gives up theirs too.”

“I remember POLaD,” Dr. Leod nodded his head in memory. “A little bit outdated if I say so myself.”

“I'll agree with that,” said Jacob. “The Zendon navy has a few new tools that we're hearing about.”

“Any on our side?” asked Dr. Leod.

“None I know anything about,” Jacob gave Dr. Leod a smile to slide the lie through. You never knew who might be working for who. *Technically that wasn't true*, Jacob thought as Dr. Leod walked away, *the Armalay was due for one of the newer scanners, HCSI, whenever she got back to port*. Jacob hoped to not see the doctor again for the whole trip. What a weird fellow. But a smart fellow. Hopefully the bad guys never got their hands on him.

* * *

High Officer Lesio stared at the display board on her bridge, the *Komoto's* bridge. Her fingers were laced together, in silent contemplation she studied the board. They were twenty hours from the first transit point in the Nebola system. The queen moving across the board of night. From there they'd rendezvous with two smaller skiffs, pirates she'd bought out. Mercenary rooks. Then they'd begin hunting down the pawns, working their way until the docks of Crili were full, and then the queen would capture the king.

To Lesio it was a solid plan. A fairly simple one, a little blunt near the edges, but a good plan nonetheless. She walked down the narrow aisle of the bridge, passing by the fellow loyal officers. Each of them had a role to play onboard the *Komoto*. Even if it was as simple as managing staff. Each of them was crucial, paramount even, to her greater plan. To Onatia's greater plan.

She headed left, down the hallway towards her personal barracks. The hallways were quiet, a silence that spoke of the importance of what they were doing. Of the history they were reshaping. So crucial was every piece of the *Komoto* that she didn't even see them gossiping at the end of hallways like most shipmates would. Lesio was impressed, she would have to tell Captain Kash.

Kash had always been a friend of Lesio's. Sometimes overbearing in how he guided her, too strong of a hand on another person's boat. But a friend nonetheless. A good bishop to accompany the queen. He even led the queen during the last battle, a battle that had failed due to her.

Lesio still blamed the defeat at Beketh on her own actions. The foolish choice of picking a preexisting VESTCO officer, Johnson, instead of assigning one of her own covert agents. The man had been foolish, and she had been weak to pick him. But in plans as great as Onatia's, one would often forget that the little gears made the whole engine turn. *The Pawns that decided the battle*, Lesio thought.

Pawns like that police officer G. Lesio didn't know where he was now, all she knew was that he had left the station. But he was one such pawn, only working for the other side.

Beketh hadn't been defeated, she rephrased the way she thought about it. It had been a slip up. A momentary mistake on one side - her side - that had allowed for certain actions to take place. Actions that

had stalled the greater plan for the moment. The pawn blocking the queen's move. But the pawn forgot, the queen could take him.

Lesio paused at her door. The steel grey finish reminded her of the ports on Tersia, the station she'd ruled properly. A queen in her natural environment. But now she was here, on the crest of the wave, the whole ocean undiscovered to her.

What would she find out?

* * *

Edward Hoss picked up a few things from the men Onatia had left behind: They were the Galactic Militia. They were here to help. And you were to get the fuck out of the way.

Hoss was used to the last one. Usually "invading" forces didn't take too kindly to the local populace until after the initial hostilities had ceased. But there hadn't been a war yet on the *Lust and Forgive*, not yet. There had been a battle, a momentary one lasting all of about two seconds. From draw to shoot. Nothing more significant than that. One man's death. But wars had been fought on less.

Hoss's job was simple. Without word from his supervisors he'd stopped caring about what cargo they carried and began studying the potentially new enemies. He couldn't rule them yet as enemies because the Zendon Empire was in the business for friends and the Galactic Militia could suit that purpose nicely.

Hoss walked down the spacious cargo hold, checking off box after box. Doing his job as he was supposed to. Except his eyes wandered. Towards the men with guns stations at the far end of the hold. On the overseers platform. Where the XO used to stand.

The Galaxy was a changing place.

But Hoss could smell the cheese.

Onatia had left the *Lust and Forgive* as quickly as he'd come. But the men he'd left behind told a story of how the Galactic Militia was run. Hoss was an intelligence officer and it was his job to know such things. Onatia had left behind twelve men, separated into two classes, officers and guns. The officers, two seemingly sergeants, controlled the guns, the grunts on the field, the men on the overseers platform. At all times one officer was on the bridge with at least two guns. At the same time, another officer was on the overseer's platform with two guns. That left six guns to roam the halls, their purpose to be decided.

Onatia trusted his men, that much was clear. Or, at least, he trusted his officers to control his men. The command structure was similar to that of frontier Zendon strike teams in both the size and distribution of soldiers. Two with each officer, another six to twelve left to roam. That made the officers fairly well protected while not bunching everyone together in a tight place.

But Hoss was trained by the same people who'd made such protocols, thus he knew how to exploit them.

The problem with roaming soldiers was that often there was the loner. The guy who just didn't fit in with anyone else. During switch changes, when the soldiers were rotated from guarding to free roaming, he was the guy that nobody buddied up with. The loner also usually posted himself near quieter parts of the ship, happier to read a book or watch a show than go gamble away credit he didn't have with his non-existent buddies.

That loner was a liability. That loner was Hoss's exploit.

The problem with the strike team function is that inherently no one is supposed to memorize anyone else's face. Thus the loner, who anyway spent vast amounts of his time away from his bunk mates, would have a fuzzy face to his crewmates. And a fuzzy face was a face Hoss could fill.

* * *

Garson watched the screen read back information at him. It would be a long day for a job like this. He rolled back the relay footage. They'd been on track for the lost ship for two hours now, not a single piece of debris had floated by their scanners. The *Skipoly Grey* had changed course twice, one to track a loose burner path which just turned out to be displaced ions from a cargo hauler, and another time when a private shuttle had gotten too close and the computer had locked onto the drive cone. After that one Burta decided to turn off the main drive and allow the ship to float. She said it would be another day before they finished running over the suspected path. Ample time for Garson to catch up on sleep.

* * *

Jacob leaned back at the bridge, his back resting against the helm, slowly counting down the hours until they could escape the asteroid field and enter the strangely empty void of space once again.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. He glanced. Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Maddie.

"Sir, a word please," she whispered.

Jacob knew better than to make his officers speak where they were uncomfortable. Perhaps it was about someone on the deck. An internship relationship that hasn't worked. God how uncomfortable those meetings could be.

Once they were out in the hallway he asked, "what?"

"It's the *Aurora* sir, she's disappeared." Maddie handed over the data slide. "She was last on scans twenty minutes ago."

"Busted scanners?" he asked. *If it can go wrong, it will.*

"Negative. We flashed the *Shimerion* and she responded that the *Aurora* had also disappeared," Maddie replied in a hushed voice.

No wonder she had wanted the conversation out here in the hallway. Word that the *Aurora* had disappeared would throw panic into the crew and passengers alike. A massive former warship doesn't just drop off radars.

"A massive former warship doesn't just drop off radars like that," he said. *But the Shimerion, the newest ship in the fleet, had also been unable to detect the Aurora...* his thoughts trailed off somewhere he rather didn't like. He glanced at Maddie. "Are you the messenger or did you find this out?"

"Lieutenant Herbert sent me up here," Maddie said.

Jacob clapped her on the shoulder. "Then you've been a good sailor." He could see she was tired by the way she was holding her arms to the sides. "Go take a shower and get some rest. Once you wake up this should all be over."

If the *Aurora* was truly lost, then so was Jacob's hopes of returning home. He knew that the whole fuel economy approach at the moment was with the perception that at the end of the journey they'd just be slingshotted back to the Core. If the Jump Portal wasn't built, then most likely they'd run out of fuel and starve before a rescue operation could reach them. They currently only had enough fuel to turn around and run back to the Nebola system.

Jacob took the center lift down. He could tell that for once, someone hadn't followed his orders, because he could hear shouts and bickering from the moment he stepped off the lift.

"For sake," he muttered, storming down the hallway.

To his surprise, there weren't more men than monitors. If anything, there were less. They were bickering about the *Aurora*.

"She can't have just gone off screens like that, it's got to be the SSOW equipment again, it's been foggy for a few weeks," shouted one officer.

“The *Shimerion* can’t see her, and she’s got better tech than us. Plus the SSOW shit is on your team Charles,” snapped back lead navigation officer Herbert.

Jacob recognized the other man as the head detection lieutenant Kelly.

“Gentlemen, please,” ordered Jacob. He’d heard some things he hadn’t liked about the SSOW equipment, and that should have been told to him, but he’d let that slide now. “What’s the status of the *Aurora*?”

“By all accounts she’s gone,” said Kelly. He paused and glanced at Herbert. “But this fool—”

Jacob held up a hand, silencing them with his authority. “There will be time to debate later. First, we need to find out whether or not we just lost our Capital ship.”

“Yes sir,” they mumbled at the same time.

Any officer that dealt with computers for a long enough time felt that their opinions were always correct. Jacob had seen it time and time again. Herbert and Kelly were no different.

“Any chance it’s the equipment?”

“Slim,” said Herbert.

“But not out of the question,” countered Kelly. “The SSOW stuff has been on the foggy side for a few weeks.”

“I should have been alerted of that the moment it happened,” said Jacob.

“Sorry sir. We worked out a work around using the LiDAR to double bounce,” said Kelly. He nodded his head at Herbert. “Herbert had the idea.”

Jacob mentally jotted down that Herbert would make a good XO for a scouting ship if he could come up with workarounds for technology on the fly. Or at least a high ranking technician. Jacob could put a good word in, but first they needed to find the *Aurora*.

“Where was she seen last?” he asked.

Herbert flipped on the main monitor at the head of the room. It showed a two dimensional map of the asteroid field and the fleet.

“Here,” Herbert jabbed his finger down roughly two hundred thousand kilometers away.

“How soon till we’re in LiDAR range for debris?” asked Jacob.

“Give or take thirty minutes, at current speeds. But we’ll blow by that point with far too much speed to gather any really good intel.”

“Also granted, we don’t know that she’s destroyed,” interrupted Kelly. “She could still be on the same course.”

“What’s the message delay to the closest cruiser to the *Aurora*?” asked Jacob.

Kelly pulled out a datapad and scrolled through a list. “Five seconds.”

“Get me in contact with her,” ordered Jacob.

“Here or the bridge?” asked Kelly.

“Here. Then transfer full control to the bridge. I want the crew on drop-down three mode, no unnecessary noise,” said Jacob. “I have a feeling that won’t be lifted until this whole ordeal is done.”

The waiting logo came up on the main screen. Thirty seconds went by, nothing. After a minute Jacob grew impatient. Where was the cruiser? It couldn’t have disappeared.

“Check that the cruiser has received the message,” he ordered.

“Um,” Kelly was silent. “We’re not able to establish contact with the ship.” He ran his finger down the rest of the list. “Or any of the other ships.”

“I’m starting to hope it’s our internal systems,” said Herbert.

Kelly nodded. “I’ll flash the,” he paused again.

“What?” asked Jacob.

“The *Shimerion* isn’t on our communications systems anymore.”

“Check scans,” ordered Jacob.

“No *Aurora*, no Cruisers, no *Shimerion*, holy shit,” Herbert traced a line down the screen, “the SSOW is picking up fast moving shadows. POLaD hasn’t detected anything yet. LiDAR trying to ping, it puts two blips within fifteen thousand kilometers of us, give or take a hundred kilometers.”

“What do you mean shadows?” asked Jacob.

“It’s when a very fast object is detected by the SSOW, usually small and compact. Occasionally can just be space dust,” explained Kelly.

“Blips are closing,” Herbert's voice was tight. “Seven thousand kilometers.”

“Shit, they’re pulling some hard Gs,” whispered Kelly in awe.

“Yeah, like close to twenty seven,” quickly calculated Herbert.

Twenty seven, Jacob thought. That was too fast for any manned ship.

“Shut us down, now!” he ordered. “Pull G-drive. I want a complete stop. No signatures. Put the ship on sleep mode.”

“Sir what?” Herbert asked.

“I think we’re under attack,” said Jacob quietly.

It dawned on the two navigation officers. They went about the business of shutting down the *Armalay*. All it took was four simple button pushes and the ship was just a patch of blackness against space. Nothing could see the *Armalay* unless it hit them with LiDAR, and from the *Armalay*’s past military experience and the light absorbent black paint that came along with it, that would be a very hard thing to do.

Jacob floated in the quiet dark purple of the navigation and detection room, listening for the sounds he could not hear. He knew something had just happened to the fleet he was in, and it would be a long time till he got back to the docks.

Someone had just stolen the *Aurora* and her convoy. More importantly, someone had just got access to an unauthorized Jump Drive.

Chapter 8: Hinges

Everything hinges on something. Everything relies on something to rotate, to survive, to continue moving. Sharks in the water, doors to food, nations and war. But hinges were also points of weakness. A hinge could be removed and the relying party suddenly stranded. The fallen down door, or in Onatia's plan, government.

Great men hinged on small things. Tranvela and his diplomatts, Virulent and the jump portals, Hersia and his kettle runners. They were all big men in history, devoted libraries of research. Onatia was not like them. He survived by being quiet, unlike them. He was resourceful, unlike them. He was observant of the tides of history, unlike them. He was smart, unlike them. Not to say that the great men of history were duds, but they had opened the door to the galaxy and simply never taken the time to step through. They'd wasted the opportunity that Onatia yearned for.

Onatia hinged on many things, but right now it was cargo haulers. He watched the filtered display seep into his room as the cargo haulers moved under the cautious eye of his missiles, picking up the pieces of the dead. Their doors open to the vacuum, allowing the burned husks to float gently into cargo bays where they could be repurposed. The feed was old, a half day, two systems away. The hammer was being built to knock out the hinges, but for the moment, the hammer was the hinge to Onatia. A complex mental game of figuring out who was and what wasn't a hinge. A review of assets, of sorts. Which ones were his, which could be, and which would flip on him. It wasn't the first time Onatia had to take stock of his resources, all good commanders made sure their side was ready for battle before taking the first step into "no-mans-land".

Somehow that term had come along with warfare as it bloomed into space, despite the fact that there was no land and battles no longer took place between two massive entrenched armies. Onatia paused, *or at least they hadn't for a while.*

The key to breaking the Nebola Sectors hinges on the same fact that had led Beketh to be an ideal target of his, the border system status. Few systems held it, and fewer still were of any importance. He'd learned from Beketh to ignore those without major fleets nearby, they just weren't worth his time. And besides, when the fleets showed up usually someone had figured it all out. He didn't like people figuring it out. For his plans to work he had to make people act from the gun. Shoot from the hip.

Not think, act.

If you defined the battlefield, you won the war. Onatia measured his assets list. Half the old southern fleets, 52 combat ships in total, more than most systems, but not enough to fight either government. Half of those ships were small independent craft. The rest were a mix of warships and support shuttles that scuttled any hopes of a direct engagement with the enemy. So if he couldn't cause the enemy to fall by his act alone, why not use the enemy's enemy? Pit the Zendon Empire against the Armadan Republic. Bring both of his opponents down until in their grave they were still grappling at each other's throats, not truly understanding who had caused them to do such.

He stared back at the recording of the cargo ships moving around the wreckage that was now on a trajectory course outside of the asteroid field in which it had been ambushed. His missiles had worked again. Two years in the making, first finding where the ships were headed, then setting a trap in their place, and then putting the cargo haulers - commandeered vessels for the war of shadows he was to win - on a trajectory to meet up with the wreckage before anyone else could find it.

He had a skiff and destroyer en-route to oversee the final clean up. The destroyer would collect the remaining missiles and bring them back. He was starting to run low on stealth composite. He tapped his finger to the screen. He'd have to fix that as well.

He double checked the list of captured ships, or hulks in this case, one last time. Cross referencing them against the list of active ships sent out on the mission. They weren't adding up. Onatia took a deep breath.

Strange... he pondered, hadn't there been another frigate?

* * *

The Skipoly Grey was reaching the end of its drift. Sensors still hadn't picked up a whiff of anything. Garson sat at his monitor, not defeated but disappointed. The LiDAR had been pinging constantly, tracking inbound and outbound ships to the Nebola system, but still nothing. It wasn't that the scanners were off. They worked, and Garson was sure of it. They'd even picked up the bursts of air from dud drop pods dropping from Crili as Marines ran evacuation drills. But still, no debris from the apparently missing ship.

The lights had been turned down low on the bridge of the Skipoly Grey. A light purple that hung right above the floor and shadowed Garson's eyes. It made the light blue monitors stand out a lot more. Kept him more attentive. Not at all a bad thing after a long shift staring at bleak results.

The stairs clanged as Timur pulled himself up them. The metal at the bottom of his boots clicked with each step in the null G float.

"Anything?" he asked.

Garson shook his head. "Not yet."

"Are you sure we're in the right area?" Timur sat down at the station next to Garson's. He handed him a cup of warm coffee.

"This is where the distress call came from," answered Garson.

"We've got a cargo hauler coming up in two hours. Drive plume is to us. We'll have to start moving," said Timur. He tapped his monitor to get a better look at the area of space around them. "Cargo lanes are looking empty for the most part."

"Yeah, it all started tapering off in the last few hours," Garson sipped his coffee. The sugar made his tongue feel like there were little popping bubbles on it.

They sat in the quiet comfort of silence for a few minutes. The light from the monitors kept them awake in the shadowy room as they contemplated the seeming failure of their mission.

"Where do you come from?" asked Garson.

"What do you mean?" Timur glanced his way.

"You're military, but I can't figure out which branch," Garson answered.

"Marine, with Marshal," answered Timur, "actually served in the same division as the guy for two years. Then I was contracted into AR-SOp, or the slop shop as we called it."

"Spec ops," said Garson. He'd heard of the slop shop in his work with the intelligence division.

"Then we contracted with BRISK on a mission to rescue some people from human traffickers, a mission the navy couldn't use assets on, and Marshal remembered me and brought me into the ground," Timur shrugged. "I'm just a grunt with a gun."

"But you make some really good coffee," said Garson with a smile.

"What about you?"

"Intelligence work for the navy. Got tired of it, dishonorably discharged, lost my pension because of that. Wound up on the street outside of the naval base, thinking my future was ruined, when a

representative for VESTCO saw me and thought I could be of service. Of course then I thought that meant actually doing something of importance, but then I landed on Haluu for a twenty year tour, and you know the rest,” Garson said.

“You look young for a guy who's had twenty years under his belt as a security officer,” joked Timur.

“I only got seven in when the incident happened,” Garson said, “I’m thirty four.”

“Thirty eight,” said Timur, stretching back in his chair, “but really that doesn’t mean a thing anymore. You can be thirty seven somewhere and forty two somewhere else.”

“Galactic clocks,” pointed out Garson.

“Still changes,” shrugged Timur. “I know a guy who's fifty back where he grew up but is younger than me. Times just slower in space, people age less. Hell, that’s why most people who get it lucky money wise spend their last years out in the vacuum. Make it all last longer. And with the aging drugs you can last forever up in the place where nothing grows.”

Garson chuckled. “Guess us navy guys got lucky. Probably saved a few years up here.”

“Yeah, just for the navy to squeeze it out again,” joked Timur. He put on a tough voice, similar to that of a drill sergeant or senior enlisting officer, “make the galaxy go round.”

Garson was about to joke back when the monitors flashed. The LiDAR had just picked up something new.

“Debris,” said Garson, he leaned in close to the monitor. “Drifting slowly away from the cargo hauler.”

“It’s not hit,” Timur clicked a few buttons on the monitor. “Yeah, nothing is broken on that. Could it be our friend?”

“The *Techimia* was around here. It’s drift path is along this line,” said Garson, “but where’s the rest of it?”

“Cargo hauler could be blocking it,” answered Timur.

“Let’s get Burta up here,” said Garson.

“Not yet, she’s sleeping,” Timur held up a hand. “They haven’t seen us yet.”

“Let’s make sure they don’t,” said Garson. Something in his gut rolled over and told him not to alert the hauler. “How much time till we hit the hauler?”

Timur checked the countdown timer. “An hour and forty two,” he answered. “We’ll have to light up to avoid them in an hour and twenty, twenty two minutes away from impact.”

Garson nodded. “Okay, until then let’s keep silent and record,” said Garson. “I’ve got a feeling about this.”

“I won’t question you this time, intelligence officer.” Timur cracked a smile. “But part of me still wants to send a missile up their drive.”

“And if they start to show aggression I won’t stop you, but until then the quiet cop is the one who busts the big guys.”

Timur gave Garson a nod and the Skipoly Grey floated closer, the onboard computer wiring silently as the cargo hauler scooped up the *Techimia*, unaware how badly it was about the screw up Onatia’s plan.

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Hoss heard the vacuum alarm. It wasn’t a standard procedure to open up the cargo bays, but someone was doing it anyway. The *Lust and Forgive* had been on a drift orbit for almost a day by then, until suddenly they’d lit up to cease their momentum. Hoss knew that if he was the captain of a stealth

operation, he'd just blown whatever cover they had. But clearly the Galactic Militia officers onboard didn't know that, and he wasn't about to go tell them. The faster they screwed up, the faster he got a promotion.

The alarm forced people into the tight EVA suit rooms, where they were greeted by one of the Galactic Militia officers, instructing them to assemble at proper unloading stations. The only problem being that there was nothing to unload. They'd dumped all their cargo two days prior and Hoss bet it was scooped up by a smaller vessel to be sold on the black market. The revolving plan, make your agents pay off their fees, thought Hoss. Not the worst move by Onatia, but a classic one from the Zendon Intelligence Divisions.

When Hoss assembled at his unloading station he found that the cargo doors had already been opened. *Was that a ship?* Hoss could see something floating in the near distance. It looked like the ruined husk of a ship.

"Stand by stations. ETA for work is ten minutes. Hands on bars, check your partners cords," came the steely voice of Bigani over the intercom. That man never fucked around when it came to vacuum security. One wrong move and suddenly he's having to carve a large part of his paycheck out to pay for someone's death.

Hoss went about the motions of checking the man in front of him. Tapping the shoulder three times he confirmed it was all properly set up. He stared out the windows overlooking the cargo bay, so what was Onatia's plan with this ship?

* * *

Grimes moved his men through the last of their draining exercises for the day. Hands ducked behind his head, knees perched above the ground, crunches were one of the hardest exercises to do with combat armor on. The bleak white armor of the Armadan Marine, built to blend into the stark white hallway corridors of fancy stations, wasn't the lightest thing in the world. While not as heavy as the suits Mech-I men had to wear, it definitely made it hard to work out. And even harder for Grimes, since he was supposed to lead these men. And the men were not in a good mood that day. He heard the occasional grunt and curse.

He finished his final crunch and looked behind him to where the rest of his squad was coming along. A few were having trouble, but he put that down to the fact that he'd been working them hard. Much harder than most other squads, and definitely more frequently than anyone else in the 5th Marine regiment on Crili. He'd have to give them a speech, pat them on the back, tell them how good they were. Otherwise morale would fall faster than a drop pod in the atmosphere.

Grimes stood up and waited for the platoon to come to attention. It took a few minutes as the last men finished up. But when they were he started speaking.

"There's a reason you train this hard. There's a reason we're here. And that's to protect the people back home," he started off with some steel in his voice. It was the same basic shit every drill sergeant said at the end of graduation. The same basic recycled speech anyone gave to a bunch of grunt. And they knew it. But he was going to change that. "I'm going to be honest, we're not the best squad in the platoon. That's on all of us," Grimes watched their eyes tilt towards the floor, towards their boots. *Damn, that didn't make them feel good, but it wasn't supposed to.*

Grimes softened his voice. "But that doesn't matter. Crili doesn't matter. The Nebola system doesn't matter. The Armadan government," he paused, waiting for their eyes to look up from the floor, "doesn't matter. What matters is that you have the back of the guy in front of you. Because at any moment the area around us can change, and we can't do a thing about that. The only thing we can do is keep our

friends close and our enemies at the end of our barrels. So when you train, don't think about the stations, don't think about the loyalty to the government, think about the guy or gal to your right and left, and think about keeping them alive."

He had his men's attention now.

"So that's why you train. You train now so they can train later. You keep them alive so they keep you alive. And goddamnit, that's what's going to make us the best squad in the whole platoon," he finished with a shout.

The troops responded with an echo of shouts, their chests high, eyes determined to be the best squad. Grimes smiled in return. Yeah, fuck it, he thought, they were going to be the best damn platoon of Marines the regiment had ever seen.

* * *

Kash watched the final replay of the reports come in. They were fully stocked. Fourteen torpedo tubes loaded, another twenty eight in storage racks. Seventy missile tracks ready, a pair of scorpions in each. The *Komoto* didn't have silos, so it wasn't loaded with any heavier than necessary missiles. A dozen decoy devices and twelve class three harpoon guidance weapon controls were new additions to the ship. The harpoon guidance weapon controls could be fired right before a torpedo to give it more accurate data on where the enemy ship was. Often guiding in on the ship before stopping short to allow the torpedo to hit. The final thing on the list, something Onatia himself had ordered for them to carry, was a new paint job and transponder. While the *Komoto* had been dark for almost a year, it was finally given the proper transponder codes to blend in with the frontier Zendon fleet.

Kash both respected and resented the new additions of armaments. As a Captain who had signed an invisible accord with himself to protect his crew at all costs he'd just obtained the necessary materials to do so. But with those materials came another unspoken promise, an agreement that his chief weapons officer, Issac, was all the more willing to carry out. The principal idea of keeping his crew safe contradicted the mission the weapons carried.

He heard Lesio approach him from behind. It was the way she carried her feet, too quick to be anything other than a person with a plan, or in Lesio's place, a person who thought they were the original maker of that plan. Kash turned and smiled. Truthfully he was grateful to see Lesio, but he knew her visit came with orders that would be unpleasant to him.

"I suspect Onatia has given you your first set of orders?" asked Captain Kash.

"More like he gave me a set of directions," Lesio curtly handed him a small data packet. A flat square object that Kash stuck into the back of his datapad.

"I knew about the Nebola system, but I never expected this soon," Kash said. That was a lie. He'd expected it even sooner, but he prayed for it to come much later. But a man could only choose his weapon, not the battlefield nor the time at which he was to die.

"Captain, have you looked at the navigation board anytime soon?" she asked with a thin smile. They were already inside the technical Nebola system. Five hours away from her rendezvous.

Kash felt his heart go cold when he found out. He knew they were on the move, but he expected it to be nothing more than a slingshot route to somewhere else in the void. Nothing this sudden or this soon. His finger hovered over the board for a second before swiping the information away. Fucking pirates. "So what will be our orders Captain?"

"Proceed with due course. Keep the strike teams posted, they might have some boarding action soon. Weapons run and the sort."

Kash nodded. "Already done."

“That’s why I picked you to be my Captain,” she said with a glimmer in her eye.
Kash smiled. *And that’s why Onatia picked you to be his puppet*, he silently commented.

* * *

An hour out from when they’d have to light up the drive the computer beeped again. Timur leaned over to see what it was. He and Garson had been having a conversation about Marine gear and the uncomfortable shoulder straps.

“Well fuck,” he whistled.

“What?” asked Garson. He had wanted to make a joke but the onset of fear in Timur’s eyes stopped him.

Timur displayed the image on every monitor on the bridge. “That’s a cluster missile. Stealth coating rubbed off the front. I can’t see the back, but the Skipoly Grey is smart enough to know what it is.”

“So we’re dealing with missiles here?” Garson asked his rhetorical question.

“Unconventional to say the least,” said Timur, “I mean, we don’t even know who did this.”

“I do,” Garson tightened his lips, “you don’t win a war by being predictable. Onatia tried a similar stunt in Beketh, using missiles to take out stations instead of ships. It failed, but only because he didn’t put his full back behind it.” Garson waved towards the monitor. “Now I guess we see what happens if he puts his full back behind stuff.”

“That’s a Light Cruiser,” said Timur with a raised tone. “You don’t just go blowing that up for fun! That had a whole detachment of Marines on it, probably!”

“We’ve got another match,” said Garson. “The cargo hauler is collecting two more missiles. Yeah, it’s definitely one thing.”

“I think that was obvious from the start,” Timur crossed his arms. “Anyway, I think we’ve seen enough. Let’s blow up this fucker.”

“Not yet,” Garson held up his hand. “If we just found a lead on Onatia, the guy the whole galaxy is looking for. The guy who almost killed us all at Beketh, I’m not throwing that away.”

“That’s a dead Armadan ship! That’s a bunch of dead people. My people,” Timur slapped himself on the chest with a closed fist. “I’m not letting those deaths go to vain!”

“Neither am I! If you blow that cargo hauler up now, what do you accomplish? The *Techimia* is long dead,” snapped Garson.

“They need vengeance,” the marine part of Timur didn’t understand this. The enemy was there. He had a very big gun in his hands.

“You blow up one cargo hauler, another will take its place. Hell, you blow one up and maybe next time we’re the hulk of a ship the hauler is picking up,” Garson didn’t realize his face was flushed till he caught a glint in the reflection of a monitor. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. “McArthur tasked us to find this ship, we found it. But now we have the opportunity to find a lot more ships. Ships that could lead to the big bad guy.”

“How many ships do you think he’s killed,” Timur stuttered off. He was still in shock that they weren’t going to avenge the deaths.

“As many as he can,” replied Garson. The fear was also building up in him, but it had yet to burst. He had a string here, a string that could lead him to Onatia. He wasn’t going to throw that away. He was the cop on a deadbeat case, and he just found the first victim. Now he had to find the murder.

“I’ll go tell McArthur,” Garson said with an edge of fear in his voice.

“I’ll go wake Burta,” replied Timur. “I think she’s slept enough.”

Chapter 9: Gut feeling

Jacob Fisher was stranded on the bridge of his ship, a frigate, the *Armalay*. Around him the ship was set in stealth mode as it drifted through the graveyards of its convoy. No unnecessary movement, no talking, and absolutely no one apart from the captain and his deck officers on the bridge.

Thin red bands of light filtered across the diamond shaped bridge. At the back was the captain's chair with the necessary equipment. Surrounding it was where the techies would have sat. Five meters in front of that was the deck part of the bridge, the open space surrounded by tall monitors that gave the appearance of windows into the empty vacuum outside.

"Possible contact, range twenty thousand kilometers west," reported lieutenant Herbert. Head detection lieutenant Kelly stood a few feet away at a separate panel, looking for possible shadows picked up by the SSOW. Even in space they used planetary notions of direction. The front of the ship always faced north with everything else oriented around it.

"SSOW isn't picking up anything else. No more shadows. Could be the *Shimerion* finally breaking up," said Kelly.

"We haven't yet blown past the *Aurora*'s debris, so she could still be out there," offered Herbert.

"For god's sake man, she's gone," snapped Kelly.

"He's right Herbert," offered Fisher in a calm voice. "But there's a chance they might have survivors."

Kelly scoffed. "No offense Captain but unless they were packing a very small and very capable EVA suit, they're dead. We'd have picked up any craft-" two short beeps came from the monitor.

"Irony?" asked Captain Fisher.

"No sir, not any rescue craft," Kelly tapped on the monitor a few times. "Either the LiDAR equipment is also shot to shit like the SSOW-"

"Something I should have been told about early," lightly reprimanded Fisher.

"-Or there's a cargo hauler bearing two-fifteen by negative one seventy-five." In space, fast movement directions were given by two circles. The first was a horizontal circle, three hundred and sixty degrees all around. The next was a half circle perpendicular to the first, to properly orient the approaching craft to the ship. Because space wasn't 2D.

"A cargo hauler?" asked Captain Fisher.

"The SSOW picked up shadowy movement two million kilometers away yesterday, but Kelly and I wrote that off as something else," said Herbert.

"That would be the relative position of the lead cruiser," Fisher said, trying to keep a straight face despite the pressure weighing down on him. "Anything else picked up in the last few days?" They'd been on the drift for four days.

"Negative sir," Kelly noted. "On board the crew is becoming slightly restless, but we're keeping them calm with DTEs (Digital Training Exercises)."

"Externally we're going to need to fix the SSOW before I can hope to properly pinpoint anything past five hundred thousand kilometers," said Herbert.

Fisher nodded. "As for the moment we need to see what we're up against, because I'm pretty sure that our entire convoy wasn't just taken out by a few cargo haulers."

"And then what sir?" asked Herbert. "We're two months away from the jump point. The Frigate has enough fuel, but the enemy probably has more missiles than we do."

"We wait, and we see. Then we act," said Fisher. "Until we act, watch and record everything."

* * *

Captain Kash stood to Lesio's right as the *Komoto* drifted through space towards its target. Around them the bridge buzzed with activity. Several officers stood around discussing internal gossip while their comrades practiced final training simulations for the ambush ahead. Outside the ship two pirate skiffs sat next to the *Komoto*, their drives cut and trajectories matched.

"Stand by, weapon hands on ready," said Kash as the count down timer spilled into the T-minus five minutes category. "All hands man stations."

The bridge buzz began to die out. Officers took their seats and the smell of death seeped from the vents. A thick scent that clogged the back of throats and left a hole in people's chests.

"You ready?" whispered Lesio, a nervous anticipation in her voice. This was a chess move long in the making.

"My ship is," replied Kash in a collected voice. *But my crew*, Kash pondered, *my crew is not safe*. He had long ago determined his crew went before the mission, but in this case, in order to protect one of his crew he had to risk the rest. Lesio needed to impress Onatia or it would be more than stern words for the both of them.

Lesio leaned towards Kash, her hands cupped together in an attempt to shield the butterflies from her stomach. One would think it was her first time in combat, but it was not, she just always got like this.

"The skiffs have been told to aim for the drive cone. Can your men handle that if they fail," Lesio muttered under concealed breath.

"My officers can handle the ship, the pirates, and still have some to spare," replied Kash. He was confident in his crew, he just wasn't confident they'd all be safe.

"T-minus three minutes," the counter called out.

The bridge buzz hushed to a zero. The anticipation of the moment was upon them. No more did officers gossip about who was sleeping with whom. They instead sat steady-fast at their stations. Below deck men stopped going to the bathroom and instead sat next to torpedo racks or missile tracks. The queen had her fists balled.

The *Komoto* was a thing of war. It was over 700 meters long, with fourteen torpedo tubes, thirty PDW's, a dozen missile tracks, and two massive LOD cannons; one on the bow and one on the stern. Her hull was painted in a light stealth coating and built to absorb all light so as to make it invisible to the LiDAR scanners, she was a ninja carrying a lot of heat. To Lesio she was the queen that would be played perfectly in this game of chess.

To her left and right the bishops stood waiting as the gullible rook was led right into their trap. The pirate skiffs, *Jafzi* and *Kima*.

"Coming up on target," said Kash in a stern voice. "General quarters!" He wasn't looking forward to his.

"T-minus thirty seconds," called the countdown timer. The displays in front of Kash and Lesio turned from the space outside to a tactical display of the battle. Already both forces were inside each other's minimum engagement distance. The green circles overlapping the ships. This would be a quick one despite who won. A two piece chess move, thought Lesio.

The klaxons began ringing up and down the ship. The queen called together her forces. The rooks began to move closer, the pirate skiffs armed weapons and turned on sights. They'd pop up on the enemy scans like a christmas tree, too bright to miss. But the black space between them, that the enemy ship would miss. The *Komoto* would stay hidden. The queen hidden behind a playing card.

“Armadan Cruiser two seventy by forty,” reported the communications officer. The pirate skiffs were feeding them targeting information. Time to target, twelve seconds.

Kash held the *Komoto* steady. They would wait for the moment to attack.

“Pirates are firing torpedoes now,” snapped the secondary comms officer. “Fish in the water.”

Time to target, six seconds.

“Fast movers!” PDW fire began curving out from the Armadan cruiser to hit the pirates' missiles. Time to impact, two seconds.

“Armadan Cruiser two fifty by eighteen, trying to turn!”

Streams of PDW fire lanced out from the distraught Armadan Cruiser as it tried to defend itself. The tiny turrets swiveled and fired on the incoming pirates torpedoes. The cruiser flipped its belly towards the attackers, exposing four more point-defence fire points. If space had sound all the Kash would hear was a constant buzz of fire.

The pirate ship *Jafzi* turned to the right, putting herself right in the line of fire.

“*Jafzi* took rounds to the side!”

The *Jafzi* tilted slightly in response, firing three more torpedoes. Time to target, six seconds. Two torpedoes blinked out and disappeared on Kash's display.

It was time.

“Weapons officer, fire torpedoes two and seven,” ordered Kash. They wouldn't need harpoon guidance weapons for this engagement. Stealth would do.

Issac pressed the switch, a bloodlust smile scarred into his face. Outside the ship two torpedoes jettison from the front of the *Komoto*. Spinning to the right, the pair of solid tipped torpedoes fired up their miniature drives and dove for the target.

Time to target, five seconds.

What was night suddenly became day. The mid section of the Armadan cruiser buckled. For a second fire and smoke ruptured from the broken hull. Shards of ship spun out across the battlefield. Two more explosions leapt from the back of the cruiser as the pirates' torpedoes took care of the drive cones.

“And checkmate,” whispered Lesio.

Kash didn't turn his head but he could hear the smile on her lips. And good for her, she'd just completed her first mission for Onatia. He stared out at the broken Armadan Cruiser, it's crew frantically trying to call for help. But nothing would come of it, the waves were being jammed by the radar team on the *Komoto*. Bad for them, was all that Kash could think.

They'd had a captain too, one who'd pledged safety to his crew. But he'd failed, and in the process, part of Kash felt that he'd failed as well. He'd placed his crew in safety. One of the pirate skiffs had been gutted by random PDW fire. But they were pirates, and Kash had no respect for pirates.

* * *

McArthur often straddled the legal and shady realms of reality. While he was in constant contact with the High Chair of the Armadan government, a close friend at all times, the contact was not one that would hold up in court. For BRISK was on paper a privately funded militia. A hit-group the High Chair's opposition would say if they found out. And that McArthurs primary job, to make sure they never found out. The galaxy was willing to turn a blind eye in the interest of continued security, but a blind eye only went too far. Sometimes even the blind hear things.

McArthur starred the most recent report from Marshal. Still nothing. But Garson's report. McArthur felt shivers run down his back. If Onatia was starting to take out ships, what the hell was the

Armadan navy going to do to respond. Usually in warfare you could see the other guy. Had a gun or two trained on him. So when he shot you, you shot him.

Not here.

Scattered defense reports were coming in, mostly forwarded to the High Chair, others picked up by McArthur's agents scattered throughout the government. Someone had taken out a light cruiser, another a science convoy had failed to check in -but people were skeptical about that one-, cargo haulers had gone missing from berths, and most recently an Armadan cruiser had been ambushed. No one knew by what.

Speculations ran wild, and often speculations became a graver threat than the threat itself. If you couldn't see the monster in the dark it was human nature to see it as the biggest baddest thing in the existence of the galaxy. Usually it wasn't. Onatia probably didn't have a massive fleet. Onatia probably didn't have a jump portal. He wasn't a god. He wasn't a mastermind. He was just another super terrorist who had found some new way to fight war, and he was going to kick their ass for a while. It wasn't a supermonster in the dark.

McArthur stared at the reports coming in. Usually it wasn't.

* * *

Issac's hands shook with what had to be happiness. Shock never took this long to go away. A buzz had filled his head like a PDW rattling. He gotten back at the Armadan navy. He'd kicked them right up the ass. Two torpedos, his torpedos, had blown apart one of their ships of oppression. He'd gotten back for his family, for his planet, for his honor. And goddamnit, it felt good!

The edges of his vision were still foggy, little blips and clicks of light fizzing in and out. The bridge had mostly emptied, but he still played the battle on repeat. Watching the external cameras as suddenly a ghostly white and yellow bubble popped into existence for a second. Running the same video from the torpedoes as the hull of the Armadan Cruiser dove closer and closer until the video feed stopped. Then he played it back again. It felt good to be in control.

The *Komoto* was now on the move again. His fire display board feeding him data collected by radar and detection teams. Two cargo haulers were moving in. One to pick up the husk of the ship, the other to ferry survivors out of there. The rumor was they were going to work camps. Against any fair terms of war agreement. But who said they had to fight fair. That was their enemy's mistake.

Issac would have much preferred to send a second set of torpedoes to finish what the first had started, but Kash had said they needed to ship intact. Much better to let a few go to kill them all later, Issac thought with a cold smile.

Kash had hesitated before firing those torpedos, Issac knew it. Most of the crew didn't know. Lesio certainly didn't know. But Issac knew. A good captain would have spat those out in a second and followed up with missile tracks. But he'd wanted to let the Armadan cruiser have a chance. Wanted to let the enemy get a second roll in the dice game of life. Issac bit his lower lip. He hadn't gotten a second chance, he'd just had to roll with what the dice had spilled. Why should the enemy?

He stared at the empty spot where Kash usually stood.

Better yet, why should Kash?

* * *

Kash stood below decks with his hands tucked neatly behind his back. In front of him was Lesio, behind him was the door to her room.

"You called me here?" asked Captain Kash. He'd put on his professional voice. Lesio hadn't called him down there before.

“I want your report on today’s battle,” she said.

“We won,” Kash started just over her head. It was an old trick to make them think you were looking at them while allowing you to pretend to speak to a wall. It fooled his body into being more professional.

“Ammunition spent?”

“Two torpedoes. One missile track that got caught. Nothing else. Pirates expended twenty missiles and an estimated fourteen hundred rounds of PDW fire in the forty second engagement,” said Kash. Thank god he’d been looking at those figures before being called in here.

“General report?” Lesio asked coolly. “Of the crew and the Captain.”

“Is something wrong?” asked Kash. “You’re often less formal.”

“Nothings wrong. General report,” she repeated.

Kash took a breath. “Crew performed well. Torpedo teams could shave a few seconds off reloading. But that’s negligible since that’ll only come into effect if we’re planning on firing all torpedos together as a salvo-”

“I’ll have them trained on that,” Lesio pulled out her datapad and put down a note. “How did the Captain do?”

Kash felt an invisible hand tug at his collar, wishing it was looser. What the hell was she asking?

“He, I, performed duties as requested,” Kash lowered his eyes slowly to Lesio’s forehead.

Something was afoot.

Lesio pursed her lips. “Kash I can’t have you delay again.”

Oh fuck.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Kash said, tilting his head.

“You delayed and the *Jafzi* took a hit to its port side,” answered Lesio.

“I delayed to get a better shot,” Kash knew it wasn’t a full lie.

“We had a clean shot at the start!”

“Not clean enough,” snapped back Kash. “Onatia wants us to be silent. We can’t engage first.”

“You think I forgot that? I’m the one Onatia entrusted with this assignment, not you, so don’t take his words and mince them to suit your meanings!”

“Maybe he gave it to you because he doesn’t trust your conscience to stop you,” Kash dropped his eyes to meet hers. Their voices were raised. No doubt people had heard them.

Lesio’s voice was like steel against rock. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

Kash lowered his voice. “This isn’t a fucking game. He’s not your king, you’re not his queen. Those are real people we just killed out there. Think about that.”

“They’re the enemy!”

“Says who? The guy who tried to blow up a station?”

“You were part of that,” Lesio pushed back.

“Don’t flip the tables here.”

“I’ll flip whatever I want,” she snarled. “If you’re too weak for this position then I’ll find someone better.”

“I’m not too weak for this position, you’re too weak for yours, and that’s exactly what Onatia wants.” Kash stopped. He collected himself. “Good day commander. Sorry for my outburst. Think about my words.”

Lesio paused. “Maybe he picked me because he saw my commitment for the cause,” she was looking for anything to grasp onto. To her he was still her king, but now she was unsure whether she was his queen.

Kash shook his head. His voice was calmer now. “He picked you because he likes things he can control.”

Chapter 10: Under Misty Skies

With the move from surface to space combat, many euphemisms and jargon came along too. Where there were airplanes there came shuttles. Where there were cargo ships came cargo haulers. Battleships turned into mobile stations of death. And submarines became the everyday equivalent to space combat.

The combat between two ships in space was most often compared to the combat seen between submarines. Both did not have a visual on the other as fights took place over vast areas of land, and both could not hear the other. So they waited for the other side to move, to start to turn on its propellers, to light up a drive.

Then they struck.

It's ironic that even torpedoes were carried over from the submarine days. Though completely different from the water born varieties, they still were launched from tubes that were "flooded" with vacuum before the robust missiles could fire. Truthfully, all that a torpedo was was a smarter than average missile with a larger payload. Torpedos could dodge, chase ships for days, and some could even redock with the mother ship if they weren't expended in the fight.

So spaceships were submarines in a milky void, not unlike the deep water beneath most planetary atmospheres. Combat took place over vast ranges. Both sides were sitting still and waiting to hear the other, which was why most "combat" between the Zendon and Armadan forces consisted of their detection team ships slipping behind enemy lines and sending back what they saw in the eventuality that war broke out in the next hour.

Looking down at the unsettling reports coming back from the Capital, Master Sergeant Brico Mallo was starting to believe war could break out in the next hour.

"Another report came in sir, looks like almost a third of our remaining forces have at least one saboteur onboard," said Lower Officer Keli.

The small-ish ship he was on, the *Cuttaway*, was a light frigate that would have designated a medium carrier in the modern age. Built for the massive war fifty years ago, it was a stark example of the complacency of the modern Zendon fleet. Instead of fancy gadgets and overly trained officers, the Zendon navy of old had relied upon a simple yet effective strategy, raw numbers. A strategy that it seemed the Armadan navy had also fallen victim to, building new fleets every year to cover a galaxy that wasn't expanding anymore.

"Tell Captain Regies that," said Mallo. He rubbed his chin, a light stubble remained from the previous night's shave. "And tell him to await our arrival. I want the 31st border patrol to be ready for some exercises."

Master Sergeant Brico Mallo had been given the uncomfortably hard task of cleaning up the border fleets that Onatia had left ruined in his wake. Among those one had stood out in particular, the 31st border patrol guarding the Nebola System.

The 31st patrol consisted; of two frigates, more modern than the *Cuttaway*, a light carrier, and four destroyers, the same model as the infamous *Komoto*. All placed to defend an area roughly the size of a solar system. Too little, too much. The Armadan navy wasn't helping to quell Mallo's fears. A recent build up in powers in the sector had led the 31st patrol to get nervous and contemplate retreating at the first sign of battle. Mallo was here to fix that.

He read the most recent report. The scout ship the 31st had was behind the enemy lines, farther back than Crili with both a bead on the station and two shipping lanes. The scout ship was most definitely

on the Armadan scanners, apparent by the near passby two days prior when a pair of Armadan sniffers - skiffs armed with heavy LiDAR equipment meant to hunt out hiding ships - came within twenty thousand miles of it, pinging away at its hull. The equivalent to ding-dong-ditching, but with torpedoes instead of bags of burning shit.

Mallo put down the final report and folded his hands. The Zendon fleet was outnumbered, outmatched, and by all accounts, doomed to put up a fight if one came to them at the Nebola Sector. He marked it down on a sheet, next to the dozens of other systems facing the same problem. If war came now, the Zendon Empire might not be able to hold even half of its systems.

* * *

Edward Hoss knew the numbers were against him. A dozen eyes in the group, probably all of them willing to rat him out for some extra cash, but he just had to take the photo. If he never got digital evidence of the Armadan Light Cruiser being collected by the cargo hauler, his government would take the blame from it, and his government could not afford to fight a war.

Zero-G felt like that moment before you tip your chair over. The precious few seconds where everything seems suspended. Instead of falling in your chair, you stay there, suspended in that moment as everything flies by you. Everything moved in space, but since it was so large, everything seemed still in the relative. Hoss knew they were moving at some astronomically high speed in match with the broken Armadan ship. But that speed seemed non-existent because he and everything around him moved at the same speed. So suddenly, everything became still. But should something engage retrograde and go against the current velocity, it would shoot away into space. And that was a fact Hoss was counting on.

He fiddled with the blue and black screen of the cheap burned data-pad that his government had given him. He had two more back in his bunk, so it was fine if he lost this one. The Armadan Cruiser was close now, and from Hoss's view just outside of the cargo-hauler, he could capture everything in a 360-pano shot. He flipped on record and did a slight spin.

“Hey, watch it!” gruffed one of the men to his right. “Get tangled out here and you’ll die.”

Hoss counter acted the new term of velocity with a slight retrograde burn from his arms thrusters. Two quick bursts and he was back to normal.

“The hell was that?” the team leader slapped Hoss on the head. “Next time, don’t mess around.”

“First time in space probably,” mumbled the man to Hoss’s left.

The team was spread out in a V shaped cluster. The team leader in front of Hoss, one man to both sides of Hoss, one man behind him. Hoss was surrounded, which made the next part all the more tricky.

“Coming up, feet ready,” said the team leader. He clicked his heels together like Dorothy and the soles of his shoes glowed a bright red for one second, magnetized.

Hoss clicked his heels and oriented himself correctly. The back of the datapad had a port to upload data. One of those standardized ports that all pieces of technology usually had. *Make’s everything easier*, thought Hoss. His EVA suit had a port connected to the right arm mounted display. Pity that would also have to go.

In order for the retrograde to work properly he had to make the datapad lose velocity slowly. Too fast and it would break the pad. Too slow and everyone would see it.

He plugged the end of his datapad into the display on his arm, sliding the timer for the transmitter to activate for thirty minutes.

“Ship coming up in a minute!”

The back of the display on his arm was connected to three feed lines of monopropellant, the stuff that made cheap thrusters work. If he suddenly lost a piece of equipment, the device could go slow enough away and still look realistic. Hoss popped a finger under the display on the right arm of his EVA.

Good-the suit was also cheap. Hoss shivered slightly. It was good for him right now, but the fact that he'd been flying through space with it as his only protection made his belly do a double take. He dug a little deeper with his thumb, putting pressure on the cheap fabric. All he needed was a hole, the rest would do its part. He felt the fabric pop slightly, the lines becoming weaker. He dug deeper.

Pop.

The skin beneath that area suddenly chilled, the heat of the suit being expelled out as the cold vacuum rushed. The arm at his elbow sealed off to prevent further air loss. At the same time the now exposed coolant lines froze, expanding quicker than the poorly built tubes could hold them, and also the grey tubes popped. The new force of momentum tore the hole bigger, dragging the display and datapad off the suit, exposing the top of Hoss's right forearm to space.

It was the worst sunburn of his life. Instantly tingles ran up and down his arm as nerves died and his surface blood began to freeze and boil at the same time. That's when Hoss started screaming.

"Motherfucker! What happened," the team leader spun his suit around. "God! Mereel, get a click on this guy!"

The man to the right of Hoss, Mereel, thrust over and put a sticky pad over the wound. The pad adhered itself to the torn fabric, cutting the loss of air and stopping the numbing pain.

"Holy shit, holy shit," Hoss kept repeating over the comms.

"What the hell happened man?" Mereel asked.

"Coolant popped," answered Hoss, clutching his arm that was starting to burn.

"Jesus..." Mereel looked at his arm. "Hey boss, you want to radio back in that next time they send us out with better suits?"

Hoss ignored the following conversation, only watching his datapad slowly drift out into space. No one paid it any attention. It would start broadcasting soon. And for Hoss, that information was worth a freeze-burned arm.

* * *

"Shit, something just popped off into space," said Timur from his monitor. They'd slowed the Skipoly Grey down to match perfectly with the *Lust and Forgive*, close enough now to use hull mounted cameras to study the ship. When they determined the ship didn't have any heavy duty scanners or relay towers, they'd decided it was fine to use the G-drive to slow down. The energy waves wouldn't be picked up by anything on that ship.

"How big?" asked Garson, stepping up behind Timur.

"Small. Like width of an arm," replied Timur.

"Can we pick it up?" Garson asked.

"We can't just go around collecting space trash," said Burta from her seat above them. She was keeping the Skipoly Grey and *Lust and Forgive* from getting too close.

"It could be a datapad," said Garson. "Someone might want us to find it."

"He's not wrong," Timur focused on the screen. "But it's moving too fast, it'll be out of our grabbing range by the time we roll by it. If we light up to catch it, I'm sure they'll see that."

"So we'll just hold for the moment," said Burta, leaning back into her chair. "So this is Onatia's grand plan? A bunch of cargo haulers picking up dead ships?"

“They can go anywhere. No one suspects a cargo hauler,” said Garson. “Shipping lanes are full of them. Ports berth them all the time. Onatia doesn’t have the assets yet to go to war, so he’s going to use whatever he can scrounge up.”

“So why are we sitting here?” asked Burta. She had been slightly caught up to speed.

“Because before now we haven’t had any contact with Onatia, and the whole damn galaxy is looking for him. Now we have contact. Not only do we have contact, but we have something we can trace. A line of thread that we can use to unravel the ball,” answered Garson.

“Oh,” Burta sat back in her seat. “Still feels boring.”

“Investigative work always does,” sighed Garson. “But that’s how you beat the bad guys.”

* * *

“We got something!” said Jeffrey.

The bridge was just him and Marshal; Elanie having gone downstairs to take a shower.

“Where?” asked Marshal.

“Bearing two-one by five. It’s barely off our vector line,” Jeffrey pointed at the object. “Too far away right now, but we’ll get closer to see it.”

“How soon?” Marshal put a hand on the back of Jeffrey’s chair. This could be the probe.

“Two hours would be the best passage.”

“I’ll send a message back to McArthur. Once you grab it, do you think you can decode it?” asked Marshal.

“Given enough time it won’t be a problem,” smiled Jeffrey.

“Then let’s catch this sonofabitch.”

* * *

Captain Jacob Fisher sat cross legged on the floor of the bridge, waiting for death to strike. The bridge was quiet, both CompSci officers having returned to their bunks for a quick five hour nap. That’s what most people forgot. Those ships didn’t run entirely on one crew, they had shifts. There was the “morning” and “evening” shift, although on ships that didn’t mean anything. But Captains were the most prone to forgetting that ships didn’t have just one crew, since they usually only interacted with one crew while the other was sleeping. For Fisher it was the morning crew. The one with all the senior officers. As he sat on the bridge, the night crew came in.

“Good day sir,” saluted third rank lieutenant Rogers. He took over the CompSci equipment while Kelly and Herbert were asleep.

“Evening Rogers,” nodded Fisher.

“Sir, the *Armalay* can run itself, you need some sleep,” Rogers was a cut to the chase kind of person. He didn’t mince words.

“Give me a few minutes,” yawned Fisher.

“Alright sir. But I’ll have some coffee called up if you want to join us.”

Since the ship was in stealth mode only half of the bridge was full, the rest of the non essential crew was still bunked downstairs.

“Rogers, set pips to two. Turn off the LiDAR,” said Fisher.

“Yessir,” responded Rogers, turning the knob for LiDAR completely off. The left monitor blinked out, went to standby, and then opened up to a mirror image of what the SSOW was seeing. There were a lot of question marks around the *Armalay* now.

Fisher took a sip of the warm coffee the navy steward had brought in. There was something to be said for wanting to retire, it made you be a lot more careful when it came to everything. He didn't want to risk having his LiDAR seen and a torpedo sent down his ass.

"Two blips," Roger twisted the knob for the SSOW equipment to focus in. "Three blips now. Range indefinite."

"Just means it plus a million miles," answered Fisher. He took another sip. "Ship or what?" He swore to god if it was another cargo hauler. They were like vultures to his slaughtered pack. But someone had shot his pack first, and he was determined to find out who so he could avoid them.

"Negative sir, too small," said Roger. "Might be reinforcements?"

"You hope too much," Fisher laughed. He thought for a second. "Turn on LiDAR for a second. Five pings. I want them spaced like distant solar rays."

"Yessir," Roger turned back on the LiDAR cans. To make the *Armalay's* inquisit about the new ship as stealthy as possible, it would disguise the outgoing light waves in a pattern similar to that of distant solar rays. While this would give them a foggy picture, it was going to be better than anything the SSOW equipment could produce.

"Two minutes, then we'll get results."

Fisher passed the time by finishing his coffee and taking a piss. He was going to stay up this shift, he had to, for his crew, his ship, and his retirement.

"Anything?" he asked as he reentered the bridge.

"Yeah," Roger pointed to the display. "We've got a problem."

The Aduze class Zendon destroy was most commonly referred to by the Armadan ships that hunted it as the misty shadow. A stealth ship at heart she was near indivisible to anything when it came time for her to be. But when she wasn't, she was able to punch upward, taking on cruisers and occasionally battleships. Four torpedo ports made for a small firepower, but each torpedo was bigger than some small shuttles. A pair of duel mounted missile track repeats could spit out two missiles every second for three minutes straight. In short, she'd tear apart the *Armalay* with just the push of a button. She was death in a cold black shell.

"Fuck," whispered Fisher.

"Trajectory has her on a orbit around the field in four hours, I suggest you get some sleep sir, this could get dicey."

"Thank you Rogers. Turn off the LiDAR." Fisher left without another word. They'd switch over to passive scanners from now on.

Roger was right, he'd need the sleep.

* * *

Burta, Timur, and Garson met in the gallery. It had become their tradition to at least have one meal together every two days. If not a meal, at least a conversation over cold drinks. The cargo hauler conversation had haunted them somewhat, so Garson decided to lighten the mood.

"Celebrity crush?" he asked after they'd all sat down with their particular poisons. Garson still preferred the taste of Tiv, while Timur and Burta liked BesneHard.

"Hmm," Timur leaned backwards in the point one G. "Hard one. Remember that chick from the JaneDue movies?"

"You mean JaneDue?" asked Burta.

"No no, the side chick. The one who always showed up late to the battles with some machine or another. They'd call her monkey grease?"

“You wanted to date her? The one with crazy hair and low eyes?” Garson laughed.

“Hell yes!” Timur was emphatic. “Everyone in my team did. That chick could have got the best gig of her life just performing for our division.”

“Yeah, and the sorest groin,” Burta chuckled.

“What about you?” asked Timur, pointing at Burta.

“Eh,” she shrugged, “no-one in particular.”

“You know when people say that, it’s usually because they know someone in real life,” Garson smiled, “come on, tell us.”

Burta waved them off. “You go, I’ll think about it.”

“Sammy Renolds,” Garson said.

“No way,” Timur turned to look at him. “I knew her.”

“You did!”

“Tall, brunette, a little bit off centered nose, two freckles on her nose,” answered Timur, “that your Sammy?”

“How the hell did you know her?” Garson leaned over his drink.

“Hey, just because JaneDue didn’t do our gig didn’t mean nobody did,” said Timur.

“So Sammy Renolds did your show?” Garson leaned back. “Damn!”

“Should’ve been a Marine, what can I say,” Timur shrugged.

“Our special gigs were just old-defectors coming out and us writing down lots of notes.” Garson turned to face Burta, who was running her finger over the lip of the cup in a circle pattern. “What about you?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Aw come-on,” Timur said. “What’s a celebrity crush going to do?”

“It’s not a celebrity crush,” Burta looked up over her glass. “It’s someone on the team.”

“Well it’s not me,” said Timur, “you rejected me long ago.” He glanced at Garson. “Him?”

“Nope,” Burta shook her head.

“Marshal,” answered Garson softly. “You knew too much about him for it to be anything less than a passing fantasy.”

Burta nodded slowly. “But I can’t.” She took a deep breath. “I can’t date him, even though we both want to. The galaxy has to come first. We date, we distract ourselves from this cause and then what happens? A madman starts playing god, starts killing innocent people. No, we can’t do that.”

“God damn,” Timur sucked in his breath.

“That’s a lot to put someone through,” said Garson. “It’s okay to date someone.”

“You should tell Marshal,” said Timur, “you two could marry, raise kids, leave this whole fighting war shit to tomorrow’s generation. Go home and rest for the service you’ve done.”

“Maybe when we get back, maybe when this is all over,” said Burta, a little red eyed, “but until then not one word about this to anybody, not even to each other. Hopefully you forgot about this all.”

Chapter 11: Foreign Eyes

As is often the case with most wars, information is more crucial to victory than any bullet, missile, ship, or nuke. Information is the quintessential knowledge of where your enemy is, and thus how to fuck him properly the best. Thus, because it is so crucial to the war, like to any bullet, missile, nuke, the enemy came up with a defense. In the case of information, it was the ability to hide in the near endless vacuum of space. Entire fleets could be moved from orbit berths to the deep vacuum in a day, less time than the information that they were moving could be relayed back to a respective government. But just as armor had stopped the first swords, now the attackers had to come up with a play of their own to best this defense. The first lead shot to a knight's chest. Silo ships.

Silo ships were designed with a dual purpose mindset. The primary was to collect intelligence. Equipped with the top of the line LiDAR, Radar, EMS, Heat, SSOW, they were meant to be the near perfect recon vessels for a war that everyone hoped would never come. Even with their passive sensors on they could detect air traffic and commercial rail lines on the planet's surfaces from the edge of the target system. And if they needed a better picture...that's where their second purpose came in.

Governments of the galaxy understood that the easiest way to win a war and thus minimize the time fighting was to take it directly to the enemy. In the case of Silo ships, it was in their name. They carried several high density planet busters; weapons that would scar away any life on the surface of the unlucky celestial object they hit. But they were the Silo ships secondary responsibility, for to fire them, thus activating their active sensors, would give away their position to the whole enemy sector fleet. And while they may win the war, most men aren't that sacrificial. Nor that bloodthirsty.

Any first strike involved them, either firing or being fired upon. They were always out there, governments knew it. So to move one, thus potentially alert of its location, was a move used only for the most dire of times.

The *RedRunner*, an Armadan navy Silo ship moved swiftly through the dark. Her drive extinguished, transponder cut, weapons hidden, she was merely another rock bouncing through the cosmos, another unknown object on the sensors of Nebola. Only this rock was looking for a lost Armadan Cruiser.

* * *

The bridge of the *RedRunner* was a gentle downwards slope, like a soft leaf in the morning snow. Her crew of two hundred hummed gently in the metal can. Decks arrayed parallel to the main drive and a Gama-Drive taking up the area right ahead of the reactor; the *RedRunner* was no different than any other ship in the fleet, except for her forward decks. Where there were usually torpedo racks and officer quarters there were five large tubes. Inside each tube sat a silo-missile roughly the size of a small ship, 50 meters long and three wide. Able to crack the surface of a planet and break apart a moon, it was the end of all life and the beginning of all wars.

The crew of the *RedRunner* constantly ran firing drills. Planets didn't move unpredictably, thus the trajectories for targets were mostly set, but it was better safe than sorry. The crew would rush around the missile, attaching live feeds to stagner ones, flipping on firing switches, and letting the vacuum flood the tube.

Slowly the crew of two hundred became accustomed to their task of preparing death for a planet, slowly they became indoctrinated in the subliminal belief that those they struck were not human like

them, like their families; forgetting that the very same people on the other side thought of the galactic divide the same about them.

* * *

Three dots chased each other across the screen. The LiDAR was picking up something, and it was close.

Marshal stood on the bridge of the *Dusty* for the seventh day in a row, watching the time to intercept slowly tick down. The object, hopefully the probe, was close now. Both the LiDAR and passive sensors were picking it up, and if the *Dusty*'s old sensors could find it, then it was bound to be close.

The burner skiff that McArthur had given them didn't have an airlock or cold storage, aka vacuum pod, so Marshal's plan was to begin decoding it by linking it to the ship. Then they'd fly a two day hard burn back to *Sispini*, where Jeffrey could really get to work on it.

Marshal missed the Skipoly Grey and its large airlock. His mind wandered, tracing the Skipoly Grey, the mission, the crew, back to Garson.

Marshal didn't know much about Garson. McArthur had hired him, same as he'd hired Marshal, and that scared the team-leader of BRISK for he feared being replaced. But he'd already mulled over that, ground it into the dirt and decided when he got back he'd take the youngster under his wing. If someone was going to replace him on leading BRISK, they ought to be good at it.

He was a Marine, and sure Marine's are egoistic, because you don't join the most brand-name branch for any other reason, but he wasn't stupid. Armadan Marines are taught on the third day of training what command means, how to lead a team, how to step down. The first thing his instructor said that day was "a bad leader is one who refuses to step down, because a good leader knows when it's his time and that he's done a good enough job".

Marshal contemplated for a moment. Yeah he'd been a good leader to BRISK, bringing in the new crew. But he wanted Garson to be better, he needed Garson to be better, because as he thought about Onatia he wasn't sure if he could handle the Ex-Zendon Grand General.

* * *

The wreck of the Armadan cruiser slowly spun around the center of its axis. The twisted metal chunks and burned hull floated in a gentle cloud around the dead ship. Tiny lights, probably hallway-lamps flickered, casting quick glows from the interior of the ship. The enemy bishop was dead, and the queen had led the charge.

Lesio watched the clean-up process from the bridge of the *Komoto*. Her conversation with Kash still hung in her head. What was he doing? Trying to mess up this for her? Was he just stupid? Or was he correct in firing when he fired?

Lesio ran her thumb over the back of her hand, a calming method she'd learned through watching her mother go over bills. No one noticed it and it slowed her stress. She breathed in slowly. They'd changed the air-filters the night before, so the light scent of crystalline mint cooled her lungs.

Her purpose in this mini-war was to serve Onatia, but what was her purpose in his mind? She saw him as a god, a man who could do no wrong, for bad men do not end up in positions of such great power through work. He was right in his pursuit of the weak governed and the creation of their own government. Too long had the galaxy stagnated. He was the king to her queen.

But why?

Her mind danced around the question. A quick pawn move.

Lesio wasn't accustomed to debriefing herself, she was too good at it with other people. She knew the signs and how to stop them. But even still, she'd accomplished the first objective of the question, to shake the person's belief in their story.

Onatia had approached her after a general strategy conference. A king among pawns in an Emperors game. The hallway had been softly lit, green carpet, dark wood. Modeled in an ancient style with a comforting presence. A stark contrast to the bright white lights of the GSC. She'd been a lowly sergeant then, serving to a Captain no one remembered, when Onatia approached her.

He'd been a recently appointed Grand General at the time. He wore the look well, those dark intelligent eyes and determined look. Some part of Lesio had fluttered then, a fleeting glimmer into what-could-have-been. But no, she could not.

In a way her new-found loyalty sprung from the well of Beketh. He'd entrusted her with that. And trust creates a bond that only lies and failure can shake. Lesio had liked that bond, and she hadn't lied to him. So she was to repay it by completing the new objectives, by capturing ships and turning them over. By stacking the pawns and rooks and bishops upon each other under she built herself a tower; the ladder for the queen to reach the king.

And then maybe, she'd give the king a kiss. Fall into the bed of power, struck with the lightning of Onatia.

Until then, she had a job to complete. A Grand General to impress. And several cargo haulers to move.

* * *

The *Dusty* finished the rendezvous orbit around the probe. A hundred meters at apoapsis, the highest point, and ten at periapsis, the lowest point of the new orbit. The probe recognized something, but it's depleting battery couldn't spare the charge to check out who. A passed out homeowner about to receive help from the firefighters.

Jeffrey strapped himself and Elanie to the grab-rod right below the small door airlock. They wore the nicer EVA suits that BRISK members packed with them at all times. Slightly bulkier than their frames with good movement and a clean HUD, the suits were Jeffrey's favorite toy.

At the periapsis, a slight indication from his eyes to the probe fired a quick burst from the back thrusters. At a meter-per-second the *Dusty* slipped away and the probe enlarged. Around him was nothingness, the pool emptied out at midnight.

Every breath he felt the slight curls of CO2 roll up under his nose, monetarily fogging the edge of his helmet. Jeffrey could feel the light vibrations echoing from the LS pack as the filters scrubbed the CO2 from the air. His hands were extended out in front of him, a leap paused mid jump.

"It's coming out, give or take fifteen meters," said Elanie from her spot on the side of the *Dusty*.

"Once you grab it, loop the harness around and bring it back," echoed McArthur from the bridge.

The voice echoed slightly in the EVA suit. A distinct trait that made him feel like a giant in his own very small universe.

"Copy, coming up," he tapped his mic off again, enjoying the bliss of space.

The probe body wasn't all too damaged. A few corroded parts from spending the better part of the galaxy up in orbit around a gas giant, but overall nothing majorly bad. A broken RCS thruster was all Jeffrey could find on the outside. He clambered back around to the front, dug a cord through the loop, locked it to his harness, and fired back towards the slip.

“Coming in with the package,” Jeffrey said. His body felt at peace in the null-g. Arms floating in their own orbits. Breath coating the viewplate. Legs extended but no pressure from gravity. God, he lived for stuff like this.

* * *

Kash knew he wasn't confined to corridors, but he also recognized that with the slightest word Lesio could make him be, and that was a situation he wanted to avoid. His crew did not need to be put in the position of picking sides. His principal job was to protect them, and that went against all of that.

Onatia was more crafty than he'd imagined. Or at least Issac was. It had to be Issac who told Lesio. No one else would have known that he'd waited as long as he did. In battles only the commanders and fire-team operators understand how crucial seconds are.

The bastard had ratted him out. Kash sighed. The universe was cruel like that. In a perfect world Issac would have been corrected, stopped from the rampage that he was destined to go on. But no perfect world existed, so Kash's job was to make sure that Issac didn't hurt any of his crew. That Onatia didn't hurt any of his crew. He looked at the ceiling from his bunk.

But he'd failed.

Lesio was corrupted. Issac was tarnished. Undoubtedly parts of his crew were more loyal to the Grand General than to Kash, thus they were also corrupted. So who was he to protect when most of his crew didn't want it?

Himself?

Chapter 12: The probe

The drop pods were lazily organized. Twelve light grey elongated rectangles with heat dispersing armor on their undersides all suspended in a single line. Back hatches open, ramps extended to a general gathering ground. Beneath them was nothing, space itself. The undersides of the drop pods stuck out of the station like bumps on the back of an elephant. To the ordinary observer they were just another bunch of air circling vents, pieces of the great beast to keep the machine alive. But they were much more than that.

They were *Crili*'s last hope of survival.

The drop pods were built to take twenty two Marines and two ground vehicles each, but the designers knew in the case of an emergency the panic would be too widespread for the team leaders to do much more than load everyone up and hit the release switch. At that moment all twelve drop pods would spin away from the station. Decouplers would explode them from their berths while tiny RCS thrusters would orient them on a "crash course" for the surface of Nebola. There it was expected for the Marines to wait for the fight to be brought to them.

The only problem with the escape system was that the politicians hadn't been included in the conversation. Over a hundred of them resided and lived in *Crili*. They had families too, and many of them were willing to thrust this fact under the noses of any station chief. A card they pulled out for sympathy, a common card in a politician's hand. So the final two drop pods were reserved for politicians, or the lucky few that were close enough to make it in time. The Marines had been ordered to wait, and when it was clear that they wouldn't, a safe guard was installed.

Each politician had an access code on the back of their lanyard that they carried at all times. Before any drop pod could be launched, the code needed to be entered into one of the pods. An insurance that at least one of them would make it off the station.

First Lieutenant Grimes thought about this grumpily as he ran another simulation drill with the other squads in first platoon. It had been brought up again during maintenance.

It wouldn't matter how fast he loaded his men onto the pods because a slow politicians could get them all killed. His men were the fastest in the platoon, so godspeed to them. But it probably wouldn't help in the long run.

Clearly the other officers were thinking the same thing, several of them grumbling about access codes and fingerprints. Sure they were on the same side, but sometimes a Marine could hate a politician more than the real enemy.

* * *

The probe's core was older than anything Jeffrey had ever seen. So old in fact that the software he was running didn't recognize it the first time around, and that was set for two hundred years in the past.

They had suspended the probe on the outside of the *Dusty* using the EVA lines to create a harness. From there Jeffrey had jerry-rigged an access line from the main computer on the bridge, through the airlock, and up to the back of the probe. That was the easy part.

The hard part was figuring out what it had seen. The probe's computer had twelve different software iterations, and it seemed like the probe had backlogged on two of them. Meaning that at any one point, one-sixth of the probe could suddenly jump backwards in time. Another problem was the access codes, since governments, even dead ones, didn't like people going through their junk. Jeffrey had pulled a few breaker codes from old memory and siphoned them in. They did wonders.

Machine learning to Jeffery wasn't anything more complicated than fixing a fence or painting a door to a normal person. Yes, it could be frustrating and sometimes tedious work, but it wasn't mind churning. It was just two strokes of the brush, just two flicks of the finger to instal a new line of code. Red paint, blue paint, green lines, black SSDs.

That was another problem with the probe. SSDs had always been a standard among the galaxy, but at the development of the probe there had been a shift going on with the composites of them. Liquid SSDs had been something new, something faster, but liquids were prone to freezing and boiling in space, two things you didn't want to happen in your fancy piece of technology. So they'd used the old fashioned ioned cloud, which degraded a lot faster than anything Jeffrey used. Not fast enough to notice in a lifespan, but definitely fast enough to notice in several of them.

Several logs were corrupted, but Jeffrey sidestepped that. He didn't need to know how Beketh had transformed over multiple centuries, he was looking for something more recent.

Jeffrey had always been the odd kid in class. A youngster in his grade, he was kept out of the party scene by his older brother Timur who saw that the young kid was a technical genius. When his brother went off to the Marines, he was shuttled into the cyber intelligence agency, then to a private firm, then back again for another small tour, and then contracted in BRISK by his brother, who was running a protection rig for a senator with important information.

Jeffrey had found BRISK not more different than any of the intelligence agencies he'd worked with before. At first he was convinced it was just another Dark-Op cell contracted out by some minister of defense, security, borders, etc. But BRISK was different; unlike other operation cells - where the members kept quiet and conversation was rarer than a good piece of meat on a station - Marshal was open to him, Elanie was welcoming, and Burta kept a good eye on him. It was a strange family dynamic, but a family dynamic it was.

The second log showed sparks in activity, twenty hours before the *Komoto* would have passed the probe. Jeffrey marked it down. Perhaps a drive lighting up. If the probe got a good read on that then he could roll over that back on Sispini. Get an accurate fingerprint of the ship they were hunting.

But until they got back to Sispini, there was nothing more he could do. He put down his paintbrush and retired to the recliner as the *Dusty* orient towards Sispini and kicked on the drive for a hard 2-G burn.

* * *

There were two options before him, run or hide. The primal response, flee or fight, weight in the postprimal world of space exploration. The monkey with a stick that found himself strapped in a metal can fighting other metal cans.

Fisher contemplated this. His body suspended midair in the null-G. He'd unstrapped his magnetized boots and allowed himself a little bit of time to relax in his cabin before he went back to the bridge. But he kept coming back to that question.

Run or hide.

The run option was simple enough. Spin back towards the nearest safe port. They had enough food to keep the ship going during the burn. There was enough fuel for four of such burns. The *Armalay* should have enough PDW rounds to fend off the lucky torpedo that got close. The only problem was, he didn't know how many more destroyers were out there in the dark. The one at the wreckage was scary enough. But if more emerged from the night, and with his busted SSOW scanner he couldn't tell if they were out there yet, then he was boned. He'd walk right into a trap and his carcass of a ship would be scooped up by the vulture-like cargo haulers. Once he lit up that drive he'd put a target so big on his back

that he was bound to be shot at. And undoubtedly the person who killed his convoy wouldn't want anyone to know it had happened.

Hide. He could hide. They'd been doing it well for a while now. But the crew was growing restless. He was growing restless. Sooner, or later, something would go wrong and one of the ships would pick them up. And when that happened...

He shook his head at the thought. He'd been forced back on the run.

But if could hide successfully, maybe another week, maybe a few more months, then when the enemy left he could sneak out successfully and tell the whole galaxy what he saw. He'd been appointed a metal or something and allowed to retire in peace.

Fisher sighed and took a deep breath. The air filters were getting stale, something they'd have to replace if they wanted to survive long. A mundane task under the right conditions, but the threat of exposure under current ones. He spun one of the shoes with his foot.

If he ran, and there were other ships still surviving, would they run? Would they join him in his break for freedom, or would they hide. Fisher knew he'd run for freedom, join the escapees. Lend aid in any way he could.

Maybe everyone was waiting for someone to do it? So why shouldn't he lead the pack?

* * *

Grimes led his squad through rifle practice. The core guiding principle behind every soldier, Marine, naval officer, and commando was the same; the rifle is my main weapon. And in the place of that rifle was the MAR.

Medium Assault Rifle, 39 inches long, with the distinct look of a tempered plastic triangular handguard. Molded in black plastic, alloy, and metal sliders it had a side-fed adaptable magazine-well. Adjustable stock, heat shedding front grip, and adaptable for any Marine needs. CQB, install a new barrel and barrel shroud. Want to snipe? Put on a new Comoled optic, slap on a bipod, and you're good to go.

The adaptable magazine fed three distinct types of ammo for all enemies the Marines would meet. Projectiles were the universal standard; .34 caliber, self propelled, and made of hardened tungsten, lead, or alloy, it made the perfect use for humans. Most Marines carried three magazines of projectiles, each holding fifty rounds. HER, or High Energy Rounds, were meant for droids, specifically Pursuer droids. Built to take advantage of the gun's saper technology, the energy was spooled as it fired, creating a sharp twang to each shot. And then the go-to for when you didn't know what you were firing at, Plasma. It wasn't actually plasma, though it did burn through things. Carried magazines that fed ninety rounds, a plasma magazine was the most common weapon for any armed force outside of space docked Marines for the tendency for it to shoot straight for a mile, leave a big burning hole in the target, and not explode. The Marines on Crili didn't have that luxury. The air pressure was just right enough that a good shake of a plasma container would set the whole thing off. And that was not a risk any self preserving First-Luintentent wanted to deal with.

So they trained with HER rounds, which had minimal recoil and a much softer noise than the other two ammo types. But it was better for the men to get to know how to use the guns then blow up the station or leave holes in the wall. But it did leave Grimes wondering: what if they ran into an enemy other than a droid?

* * *

An assurance of victory was one thing very few people had access to. Generals, kings, dictators, presidents, gods, had wished for it. Maybe in the end of their campaigns they could smell it, but until that moment they were as unsure of their final plan as the grunts on the ground. Most likely the generals were

more unsure since they couldn't see the flow of the battlefield until after the fact. Until after the enemy had time to regroup elsewhere.

It was even more troubling for generals in the modern era. Where communication could take days to get back to central command. Time that bypassed the critical turning moments, the points in history where a country's fate could be decided in a day. Time nullified that ability for generals to do that anymore. Fights were usually pre planned ahead of time, where ships would move in response to where the enemy moved. But plans could be discovered and turned into traps. So the most advantageous move was to put a commander right where they had evolved to move away from, in the thick of the battle.

Onatia had done such a thing. Moving his most trusted, or at least most loyal, commanders onto the frontlines of his advance. It was bold, but in war that usually wins. The side that decides to hold its cards too close to its chest, not allow itself to lose anything, is the side that forgets that any war can be its last war. Once an enemy had decided that, agreed to that mindset, then they have lost. And Onatia was happy to let his enemy lose. For they were unworthy to lead, and mindsets such as theirs tarnished the ability of the galaxy to respond to anything external its boundaries.

A leader must trust his frontline commanders to do as he orders, and for Onatia that was paramount. He had been one of those commanders once, and he had deserted. He knew how easy it was. How much weaponry he had just placed into their hands. Thus this was a test trial, and like all test trials, he had contingencies in place to ensure it did not go out of order.

* * *

The traffic around *Crili* and *Fertili* was heavier than it had been in the past year. Hundreds of shuttles, haulers, miners, skiffs, commercial cruisers, military craft, clouded the station like a swarm. The cloud grew exponentially thicker the further you approached the actual station. Thus the need for station controllers, or lane-nazis, came.

With so many ships, so many humans in one piece of space, it was likely that someone could crash into someone else. People needed to be herded. Guarded from crashing into one-another as they tried to dock with the twin stations.

James Hanock, a station controller on *Crili* for thirty years, watched his map in awe. The traffic bridge around him bustled with activity. An octagon shape with rows of monitors around the sides and the stench of coffee from the machine two seats down. It was the typical ground traffic control translated to space.

"There's more of them today than some entire weeks," he gasped to the station head, and older woman, Ms. Mazel.

"Just keep to your work and make sure we don't have to fix out any accident sheets," she said with an achy voice. A smoker planetside she couldn't continue the addiction on the station since nicotine and particulates ate through O2 filters faster than acid. So she'd switched over to solvents, little pills the width of a pinky that satisfied her addiction but kept her in an eternal bad mood, only made worse when she had to do paperwork.

James Hanock belted out coordinate corrections to a wayward civilian craft who was approaching on the incoming vector of a commercial miner. If any collision happened it would spread throughout the crowd of ships, one ship hitting another, making a cloud of debris that would close *Crili* and *Fertili* for months as they tried to repair damages. A buckshot blast that would exponentially grow.

"*Jackal* clear for berth C-22," read out Hanock in a monotone voice. That would be the Zendon System head, or some other name. The guy who represented their half of the story. He was probably here for another month-long "talk", where he binged the brothels and occasionally met with spies. That was all

fine and good with Hanock, people had to relax sometimes. Just occasionally he wished it wasn't on his station. Politics could get so complex sometimes.

Hanock also worked with military ships. Feeding information to a pair of cruisers leaving their docks to join the two warships that had left the day earlier. A training session that had been rescheduled. He checked his calendar. Another one was today but with the cloud overhead, he was unsure if that was the best idea. Even firing a dummy torpedo in this crowd could cause more than one accident. Not to mention the PDW gunners who were supposed to test fire on it. Stray rounds could probably take out another dozen craft.

He crossed the training event off his calendar and sent a message to the Commander in charge of *Crili*. Another day maybe. An alert came up on his screen and he flagged it then swiped it away.

Silently three cargo haulers undocked and slid away from their berths, beckoned by the invisible hand of their new master.

Chapter 13: Foreboding Days

Kash's ears rang from rage. His hands were balled white, nerves shot to shit, jerks accustomed to fear. His scent had gone out of the room, as had his loyalty to Lesio. He had a duty to protect her, but it was becoming harder with every passing day. Today she had broken the illusions of a deep-in-thought-captain-stranded-in-bed by bringing two Recon officers from the drop pod. An officer deep in thought didn't warrant such a level of protection, only a prisoner deserved such things.

Kash sighed and sat up in his bed. He'd stared at the thin blue LED strip for long enough. Lesio would come sometime, they'd argue, they'd agree, and then hopefully all of this would be over.

Lesio came at the end of the day shift, flanked by a pair of strike-team Marines, overkill for such an occasion, but Lesio was a fan of the dramatic arts. Kash had calmed down and was watching a set of netreel highlights.

"High Officer," Kash said, stepping up. "I'm surprised by the amount of security you seem to think I need." A fog hung between them.

"Perhaps it's more for our protection Kash."

"And who is us?" asked Kash.

"The good guys," said Lesio. "The people who are doing their duty--"

"To a traitor who deserted!"

"As did you," pointed out Lesio. "You left, you ran off with a warship - this ship, the *Komoto*."

"But at least back then I'd known who I was fighting with."

"So it's just the pirates?"

"Yes," Kash lied.

"You still believe in Onatia?" Lesio raised a lantern to clear the fog.

"Of course," Kash gave one of those slim politician smiles, the ones that came with family photos and news conferences. The ones that said he was lying but there was nothing the other side could do about it. Lesio needed him, it was clear by the way she was asking if he had learned from his sins.

"And you won't hesitate again?" Lesio crossed her arms. "Not to complete your duty."

"Not for a moment," Kash said. This one wasn't a lie to Lesio, it was just a difference of understanding when it came to loyalty. He struck the match and lit the lantern.

Lesio took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I'm glad we could have this conversation."

"Where do you want me, High Officer?"

"On the bridge Captain." The fog cleared. For the moment.

Both smiled, Lesio for she had gotten back her Captain, and Kash for he had retrieved the protection of his crew. But both should not have smiled, for their objectives were at odds with each other and threatened to send the entire unstable relationship of the *Komoto* in a corkscrew into the nearest star.

* * *

The Cargo-hauler began moving. Garson focused the external cameras on the event. The massive four engines burned bright white for a second before fading into a soft blue. The wreckage of the *Techimia* no longer floated as before, now safe in the belly of the whale. A pair of red lights flicked at the front of the long craft, signaling the closing of the large doors.

"Looks like they're moving," said Timur, "wanna pop em?"

"Follow them," replied Garson. Somehow he'd come to guide Timur in this manner. "And make sure to keep our distance."

“They’re burning hot,” said Burta from behind them, she was standing over the large central display. “Any attempt to match course will catch the attention of everyone in nearby space, including the *Lust and Forgive*. We can’t calculate a curve vector because our delta-v is too minimal. The only thing we can do is wait and just keep Grey’s scans on her.”

“What’s the model of that hauler?” asked Garson. “In the navy we used to run drills on boarding them sometimes.”

“An older one. A class D colony ship,” said Burta.

“Nothing but active sensors for that one,” said Timur. “I know enough about colony ships to tell you that lighting up now with a soft burn will probably be fine.”

“Blind as bats-” whispered Garson

“-if bats were whales,” finished Burta.

“An old navy saying,” smiled Garson.

“Chief of staff for a small frigate back in the day,” Burta said. “Did rotation land-side.”

“That’s how she knows how to shoot for anything other than shit intel boy,” Timur said with a lighthearted tone.

Garson laughed and then focused back on the hauler. “You said a light burn? How light?”

“Anything point two and below. It’ll allow us to follow them, letting the gap bridge out more until we can match their course and speed without gaining attention,” Timur said.

“And the rest of the ships?” asked Burta.

“They won’t see a thing,” answered Garson. “If the closest ship can’t see us, and the majority of ships out here only have shitty LiDAR for avoiding debris fields, then we’ll just look like a shadow of the burn on their screen-”

“-If they pay us any attention that is,” Timur said. “So let’s do it”

“We can get moving in two minutes,” Burta scrambled up the ladder to the pilot’s seat. “Drive needs to be warned and the computer needs to know our target and limits.”

“Sounds good,” said Timur. He clicked off his mag-boots. “I’m going to enjoy the few last moments of zero-G before we burn again.” He headed down the stairwell towards the mess hall.

“I’ll join you mate,” said Garson. He rotated up in the air, letting his body stretch out. He would miss this, and he felt like it would be a long time till he was in zero-G again.

* * *

Lesio knew Kash was lying, just not about what. Was it the loyalty to Onatia, the crew, or pirates? Maybe all three, maybe she was just being superstitious. When Issac had brought the word to her, she’d immediately recognized him for what he was; a good loyal soldier of the Galactic Militia.

She’d moved him up a rank and made him a permanent fixation on the bridge. At least now she knew that she’d have someone to report on everything wrong Kash had done. It hurt her to feel that way about a captain she could not trust. A hand that was not fully responsive. And it seemed like it had hurt Issac too. He’d clearly looked up to Kash, and to have that trust of duty betrayed!

Lesio shook her head.

No, that was the worst thing any XO could do. A senior officer owed it to their juniors to return their loyalty, and the juniors vice-versa. She knew how it was to be both. A senior to Issac and the *Komoto*, and junior to Onatia. And she owed him back.

The map in front of her showed Crili station spread out over its long orbit. It was a gross violation of intergalactic law by the Armadan government. Restricting the access of the freedom of movement for the station. Removing the cultural heritage that had hung so long as a symbol of peace in the system, and

to the larger galaxy. The fixation of the Lioni saying, “you do no harm, we do no harm.” And so neither side did harm to Lioni for most wars. But she was no longer a side of that galactic conflict. Both of those governments were enemies to her. But Onatia needed ships, the Crili had them.

It had a lot of them.

The most important thing to her was the warship, the *Salute*. She knew of several others that had left for wargames somewhere else in the far system. But the Galactic Militia needed larger ships, and needed them now, so she would not hunt the wargames down. Larger ships were a status symbol. A message to the rest of the galaxy that they were there. That they were willing to do what it took. That they were legitimate.

Until such a time as they were recognized the Galactic Militia were just the dead pieces. The pawns, rooks, and bishops that were lost. They needed bigger pieces. They needed kings and queens. Lesio considered the *Komoto* one of them. A stealth destroyer that had already taken out an enemy. But Onatia needed something grandeur to ride in. Something with a pronounced punch, and to Lesio’s knowledge he didn’t have that.

The elongated Orbit of Crili was predictable, but to get to the chest of pieces, she had to go through Fertili. Fertili would always be in the way, that was to her advantage. With civilian ships packed too tight the station couldn’t use PWDs to shoot down her torpedoes and missiles. The sheep would protect the wolf from the farmer.

Once Kash had told her that he didn’t like pirates she’d distanced herself from them. Not entirely, as it was good to have the unruly of the galaxy kept in your line of sight, but she’d ensured that the current operation could be done with just the *Komoto*. Perhaps that would please Kash enough to fully rejoin them in spirit.

Currently he stood just a few meters to her right, looking over crew reports of the day. Something Lesio had neglected, so it was good to have a captain back aboard.

“You’re going to need to move the *Komoto* in an orbit with the station,” said Kash.

Lesio glanced over her shoulder, he was still looking at the crew reports.

“I can see the reflection,” Kash turned around on his heel. “Otherwise the torpedoes and missiles will have to travel farther, and the LOD cannon won’t be able to hit all the time.”

“How would you suggest doing that? We’re not even close to the station yet, and lighting up our drive is suicide.”

“The *Komoto* has a G-drive, and we currently have a lot of angular delta-v. Translate that using thrusters to create an orbit with less than five thousand kilometers difference from Crili.” Kash pointed to the graph. “With that close of space it’ll be as if you’re standing right over it.”

“Do you think the crew can handle it?” asked Lesio.

“With reasonable efficiency,” Kash smiled. He paused. “Why Crili?”

“Why not?”

“It’s the largest station in the Harbini corridor, that’s not an easy target. Why not go after other small ships? Cruisers, destroyers, runners, skiffs?”

Lesio sighed, he didn’t get it. Didn’t understand how she needed to get in good faith with Onatia. “All those ships have been taken,” she said, “all the meat in the sea, all the pawns on the board have been chipped away. Leaving scraps for us to pick up. Scraps are good for dogs and street fights. This is a war, and we’re no dogs. We need to hit something big to be respected by the sharks in this sea.” She paused. “If we keep hunting after little ships and little scraps, what will we ever prove? That we can protect small cargo-haulers? That we can take down something half our size. If we tell the galaxy that’s how we fight

then we'll never win since they have the numbers. We need to show them that we can hit hard. That one of our ships is worth twenty of theirs! Then they'll treat us with some decent respect.”

Kash gave a thin grin. She was wrong about them not being dogs, because she was certainly a bitch, he thought. “Of course commander,” he said with a pleasant smile. She was going to force him to not protect his crew, to not follow the mission he'd set out to complete, by attacking this station. Ships were one thing. But once you crossed that thick black line, took out a station, there was no stepping back.

Lesio gave him a smile and moved from the bridge. Her two strike team Marines followed step, Luetantns Heg and Mellon respectively.

At her door she told them to; “Wait here.” She wasn't akin to having sailors into her cabin. Inside she took off her duty shirt and poured herself a small shot of Tiv. She'd picked it up on Tersia, a by-product of agents on Haluu, and it had grown on her.

The queen was in a precocious position. One of her bishops now could be untrustworthy, all while playing a ghost game to a king she hadn't seen in months. The enemy knew she was out there, but only she knew where they were. She'd taken one of their rooks, but now the queen threatened to move to take a chunk of the board. To accumulate the pieces before she took over the whole board and collapsed the game.

Lesio took a sip of the Tiv, letting the tingly sensation rest on the back of her tongue.

A queen was no queen without her pieces, and the *Komoto* had no pieces nearby. But it was a Zendon ship, and after Crili, after her plan, the Zendon fleet would come. If she could hide amongst like-minded pieces, perhaps she could score even more soldiers for the fight. Take more off the board and teach the enemy what it was like to lose. Let both sides blame the other and let the war start like it should have around Beketh.

Like the queen amend her wrongs to the king, let Lesio become good in the eyes of Onatia. She finished her glass of Tiv and put it on the counter next to her bed. Now the queen must get some rest. Lesio closed her eyes and rolled into the foreboding shadows of sleep.

* * *

Master Sergeant Brico Mallo patrolled the space right on the edge of Zendon territory in the Nebola sector. At his request the frigate, light carrier, and four destroyers, had been placed in a convoy group to await the incoming reinforcements. No need in having them run border security. The small skiffs, over a dozen of them, played the part of the wall very well. Nothing got past their active sensors and everyone knew where they were at all times, thus they knew where the Zendon line was. Where Zendon rule began.

Nothing got through the line unnoticed. The sensors folded and overlapped such vast areas of space that only the most determined individual could get over, and that would take months of climbing high, then leveling out, flying straight, cutting drive, and waiting. Mallo was sure there were individuals like that, but it wasn't his job to catch them.

His job was to ensure the safety and security of the Zendon borders, and that meant keeping the border fleets in check. And the only way to make a sailor stick to his place is to bring in even more sailors with the message that if anyone moves, they'll be shot by their comrades. No sailor wishes to die that way.

Mallo opened up his morning briefing over a steaming cup of tea. The navy steward had become quite good at brewing over the journey. He took a sip and began reading.

Two more ships in the Brominia sector had disappeared overnight, crews and transponders dark, deserters most likely. But that was good news. Two to the three yesterday. The tide was slowly stopping.

Another pair of relief ships were being sent out to a coal mine accident on a moon in the Zendon home system which had put the moon's life support systems on the edge of collapse.

His support ships were two days out. Three more cruisers, four destroyers, a dozen new skiffs, and five frigates plus a missile boat. No new carriers, he detested them. But usually you couldn't pick what the government sent you. The spider controlled the web after all.

Finally, the last thing on his agenda, a wide beam message had been picked up by the skiffs, and it carried a Zendon security code.

Mallo clicked, diving into the rabbit hole.

It was a set of photos, something in space and the interior of a cargo-hauler. A short list of data accompanied it:

“Lust and Forgive, cargo-hauler, under control of Onatia. En-route to pick up the destroyed Armadan Cruiser. Potentially destroyed by Onatia. Photos of the new interior plus cruiser.”

No agent name, no command code to prove to Mallo that this was legitimate. Not even a set of coordinates, but Mallo guessed the spy didn't even know where he was. It could be fake. Some hoax by someone, maybe even Onatia, to get him looking in the wrong direction. The galaxy was full of people like that. People who relied on the bad luck of others to get by. But to Mallo this looked legitimate. He couldn't care for the photos, but he could care for the information that Onatia was potentially in the system. Or if not him, at least his influence. And Mallo had a debt to settle with that man.

* * *

Two days.

Kash stared at the screen. He'd plotted it all out. It would be a close orbit to Crili. Lesio had told him no more hesitation, so he knew she wanted to act fast. When the orbit was cleared she'd maybe wait thirty minutes before firing. But he didn't even bet it would be that much.

In two days Crili would be a mess, the Nebola sector would be chaos, and the galaxy would be one more step closer to war. A war that Kash was unsure he could protect his people from. The *Komoto* could die at Crili. They had enough firepower, but Lesio was betting on the civilian ships protecting them. Kash sighed and learned over the board.

Two days and his life would be shit, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Onatia could truly be evil. Not bad like pirates or fooled like Lesio, but truly a man of evil. He'd tricked Kash into his trap of power through quick promises of progression and a new ship. He'd lied to Lesio to make her join him, and he now threatened the galaxy with them. But that was just a mad-man's words. What made him evil was how far he'd convinced Lesio down his well of ideas, and Kash knew that was just the start of it all. The toe dipped into water, but the toe came out dark, so how midnight black was the bottom of the pool?

How far was Onatia willing to go to prove his point to the galaxy.

And that scared Kash. Not knowing how far. Most people he could guess. A little war here, a few shots there, but with Onatia who knew. Perhaps this was it. An attack on a station, he sure liked doing that. Or maybe it was more. Throwing rocks at planets, toppling governments with sleeper agents, building fleets of war.

Kash moved away from the board and stared at the “live” feed from outside the ship. Nothing was live until you were there. But this was as close as you got unless you were on an atmosphere-capable ship with windows.

The stars seemingly didn't move, the endless void non ending. In the distance he knew there was Nebola, her fleets, her stations, her doom. But he couldn't see that now. All he could see was the ship around him and the mission he was about to fail, the crew he was about to put in harm's way.

Chapter 14: Crili

In the best interests of all navies, both system wide and intersystem spanning, there must be a way to get a ship from dock to the field of combat. On planetside, where gravity is no more your friend than a drill sergeant is your drinking buddy, the attempts to get a docked ship to orbit require immense quantities of energy and leave all involved susceptible to an attack. So most navies had realized that the best place to put docks was on a preassigned wide orbit around a low gravity planet. This way there was no gravity to fight against, just momentum, which was easy enough to cancel out and redirect with a few quick thruster blasts. The ship could then go on it's own prescribed orbit, until it was far enough away from the docks to light up it's main drive and burn out of there. Those moments of drift were known as the slide zone.

It was common knowledge that space was massive, thus ships often stayed way out of each other's way, but the opposite was true at docks, both military and civilian. The closer you get to a dock, the exponentially more crowded space becomes. Ships that usually traveled at hundreds of kilometers from each other might find themselves less than two hundred meters off each other's sides. Ships so close that main drives were cut off for fear of catching someone with the flame.

This held the same for military ships, even more since the advent of civilian small ships entered the market. Large warships could do nothing but bide their time until they were out of the crowded zone to light up their drive. Even during war, ships still abided by these rules. Space stations were pricy to build and neither side wanted to blow them up by burning too close, because at the end of the day one of them would own it. So they kept to the slide zone rule, no drives no matter the emergency.

But for the moments a ship was on the drift, after being cast out from the docks, it was vulnerable to attack. The ship's orbit was known, so it could not dodge incoming fire. It could not light up it's drive for it was too close to the main docks. The fear of slagging their industrial complex kept the impatient captains quiet. It could fire, but only with missiles and torpedoes. PDW cannons could throw the precise orbit off just enough that the ship could end up ramming into something else. And so the common saying was put into effect for all pirates looking to reap a quick bounty. *Hit them in the slide zone.*

* * *

"Comestat-array-traffic, traffic bridge respond," coughed the old speaker next to James Hanock's ear. He was on traffic control again, and so were the rest of the staff. The airspace surrounding Crili and Fertili was so crowded that they'd had to bring up the military scanners to make sense of the scrambled scene. Someone had broken the coffee machine, so for the first time the traffic bridge didn't stink of sugar. The old speaker rattled again. James pressed the talk button.

"Traffic bridge here, go ahead," he pulled back his finger and leaned in his chair.

"Two-by-six cargo haulers moving away, clear. Four-o-ten civilian hauler engine jam, overhead dock 2. One-over-three cruise ship moving away from berth 19..." and the list went on.

The display next to Hanock, which usually represented the entire airspace of Fertili, was now focused down on docks 1-24, and even that was a crowded mess. He watched as a cargo hauler slowly moved away from berth 4, identification number 206 blinking in the process.

When the "sky was clear", meaning there weren't many ships and a lot of room to move, the display was green. It was red now, a dark brown red. Ships usually had less than a length apart, and some less than that. Cruisers, haulers, transports, skiffs, and shuttles were all bunched so close together that the whole thing might just crash the computers for the sheer task of keeping track of everyone.

“One-over-three, adjust course port two, bow negative three,” Hanock said over the radio to the cruise ship.

Even Ms. Mazel wasn't able to grumble about paperwork or huff over longing for nicotine as she sat two stations to Hanocks right, conducting movements for another set of docks. The work was so much that the Armadan naval assets had been frozen for fear of accidentally colliding one with a civilian ship. The only ships up in the air were a few skiffs patrolling through the lanes, pinging everyone, everything, with their radar.

* * *

High Officer Lesio stood at the bridge of the *Komoto*. The attempt at kindling the fire of war at Beketh had failed, but at least she had escaped with her ship. And what a ship it was. Over 700 meters long, with fourteen torpedo tubes, thirty PDW's, a dozen missile tracks, and two massive LOD cannons; one on the bow and one on the stern. Coated in sensitive stealth paint and armor, she was invisible in space to anything but the most advanced military scanners. The *Komoto* wasn't the biggest ship in the galaxy, but for her size she could punch upwards. She was, in High Officer Lesio's eyes, the queen to the greatest fleet the galaxy would ever see.

Around her the crew was manning battle stations. Below her, the great docks of Crili and Fertili, sister ports, bustled. Two large cargo haulers were coming in from around the backside of the planet, two hours in bound. Lesio counted down the battle plan in her head. She had to get it right this time, to make up for her mistakes at Beketh, to prove to Onatia that she was worthy to be the queen to his fleet.

She moved along the angular bridge of the *Komoto*, momentarily glancing over the shoulders of the young sailors who had committed themselves to the grand cause of the Galactic Militia. She stopped behind the weapons officer, the only man on the bridge who was not new to combat, for everyone else this would be their first taste of blood.

“Officer Issac, what does it look like from our end?” Lesio asked.

Issac glanced over his shoulder, confirming it was Lesio. “All tubes loaded and ready, five more standing by on each tube. PDW standy charging, can be fully operational in two minutes. LOD cannons loaded, waiting order to prime and fire on designated targets.” He said in a cool and calm voice.

The *Komoto* was floating in a pre-prescribed orbit ten thousand kilometers above the ports. If the ship had windows there would be nothing to see. But good thing the ship didn't have windows, because the *Komoto* was on a stealth mission and windows only served to bounce off light. With passive scanners on they were standing by for just the right moment to launch: when the cargo haulers rounded the equinox line.

She checked the path tracker on the cargo haulers, no delays, still twenty five minutes out from the equinox line.

Lesio had been given a job by Onatia, to increase the size of the fleet. She had heard of his action in the deep of space and decided to replicate it, only this time with a far grander scale. Onatia had been picking off random Cruisers, Destroyers, and the odd Warship. But Lesio would get all of that and more today.

The twin ports of Crili and Fertili had been stables in the Nebola System for over two centuries. The home of thousands, all living in comfort while they packaged ships coming in and out of their system with goods built by the hands of the little man for the mouth of the wealthy. *It wasn't fair*, thought Lesio. Not a single person on the station had worked a day in their life. Maybe their ancestors, maybe those who built the station, but the generation today simply sat at desks clicking icons on monitors and made a fat

buck. They hadn't earned that, they hadn't even earned anything. And today, Lesio vowed to pull that staple out of the system.

The stations were built with a massive spire down the center, with pads and hangers bumping off from the edges. A massive elevator system ran down the center of the spire. The only thing that made the two stations hold different names were their functions. Fertili was a civilian hub of transport, located on the side of the station closest to the planet. Cargo haulers would dock there, unload some of their merchandise in exchange for fuel and a bed to sleep in. Crili was the military docks of the Nebola System, and a minor detachment of the larger Harbini Corridor navy stayed there. Lesio was after Crili, but to get there she'd need to go through Fertili.

The navy here was a majority of Armadan ships, mostly frigates and cruisers. The two destroyers were parked at the end of the docks, maintenance being done that would never be completed. Another cruiser was on the drift, setting up an exit route. Behind it was the crown piece of the Neobal sector's security, the A.R.N. *Salute*, a warship worth seven cruisers in firepower alone.

She tapped Issac on the shoulder. "Get your people ready," she said. The haulers were five minutes inbound.

"Always have been," he replied in fashion.

Lesio moved back to her command station. The queen readying her strike.

* * *

Grimes despised mundane tasks, and he knew his squad did as well. Third platoon Marines, Rico-squad, wasn't trained in combat just to carry supplies from a light hauler to the drop pods. Two other platoons from the fifth Marine regiment were helping out, the sixth and Delta. They'd formed a long line of soldiers in half battlegear, black undershirts and white armored legs, all carrying large metal boxes to waiting drop pods. He passed two of his men and gave them encouraging smiles, the same smile he dropped when he put down the last box. Sometimes you had to lie to raise morale.

"All set captain," he said to the man who'd brought them the supplies. "Good luck out there in the fray."

* * *

On the control monitor before her, the various pieces were coming into play. The *Komoto*, the queen of this short game, lay at the far top of the board. The two cargo haulers, rooks pushing hard, were slowly emerging from the far right side of the monitor. The station, a collection of knights and bishops protecting a central king. Lesio would take that king.

The rooks passed the equinox line and Lesio fired her thirty five dual breaker tipped pawns. A long column of red triangles descending in a ballerina's move. A corset dance piece, a quiet twirl of a flower, the exhaust flames of a station killer.

The *Salute* was on the start of its drift when the *Komoto's* missiles were picked up on its scans. A large collection of civilian traffic was in the way, ships with inadequate scanners to detect the missiles heading their way. The Captain of the *Salute* sent an emergency message to the head of Station security, but it was already too late.

The pawns sped up, their fuel tanks emptying in a massive two hundred-G acceleration. The cruiser - the station's bishop - began firing bursts of EM energy at the missile's predicted path, but without the drive plumes, it could not see anything. And so the ranging calculators drew up blank while the threat board screamed bloody murder.

Lesio glanced at her watch. T-minus forty three seconds until the missiles hit. Already the *Komoto* was loading the LOD cannons. Thirty seven paws were heading for the station. A single lone piece of metal screaming ahead of them.

The cruiser never saw the shell that smacked through it. The titanium composite projectile punched through the reactor, plunging the ship in chaos faster than the external sensors could recognize a hole had been made in the hull. The technicians at the reactor had no time to think as the various neurons in their head were pounded by Gamma rays, sending a light bulb popping effect through the brains of the nearest seven technicians.

The *Salute* brought up both PWD guns on the first missile it detected, less than a thousand meters away from the hull of the ship. The missile disappeared in a cackle of light; internal components exploded, the fires hushed out by the vacuum. The captain no longer cared about the slip-zone rules. His ship was his to protect. And god help anyone who got in his way.

“Torpedo tubes on me,” Lesio ordered. “Missiles to distract, follow with guide harpoons and all tubes.” Issac relayed the information down to the fire teams, a dog obedient to its new master. Kash watched from the far corner with a grimace on his face.

Above the station the *Komoto* fired another salvo of missiles, deplettings its stock down to one third. But Lesio knew that would be made up for soon.

The Cruiser was dead, if not dying. Two bow nozzles were firing in oblong beats as the internal pressure system tried to contain the spreading vacuum. The captain of the cruiser, in a moment of panic and vengeance, ordered all missile tracks to be fired in a spready pattern towards the origin of the attack. The order was never given out as a stealth coated torpedo slipped between the firing arcs of the non respondent PDW cannons and slammed into the upper deck of the cruiser, right into the main fuel line.

The explosion would have been deafening for the nearest ships, except that space doesn't carry sound. The only thing the awed passengers of the station could do was watch as the cruiser ripped itself apart in a fireball that poofed out as quickly as it had started.

Lesio winced, she had hoped that the cruiser could be taken intact, but such hope rested on luck, and she had already spent all of her luck on the battle today.

The *Salute* died next. This time, more quietly. Two stealth torpedoes slammed into the rear drive cone and reactor, forcing the Captain to order an entire evacuation of the ship for fear of a radiation leakage. Eva suits jumping from a sinking ship.

For a moment it seemed like that was it. A sudden surprise sudo-terrorist act on board two active on duty ships. A topic of the nightly news and some legislation, but nothing more. Nothing worth fighting a war over.

Hanock looked up from his station. He'd been busy redirecting a civilian cruiser when the chaos had started. What had he missed? Two new bright orange spots on the radar, two ships had collided.

“Prepare E-docs and rescue skiffs, I want inbound and outbound ship tracking,” he called at once, his training acting in the moment.

“Sir, there aren't any inbound flight paths, the ships just exploded,” another tech said frustrated over his board. “Radars could be overloaded through.”

Hanock turned to the live feed of the *Salute* breaking up. “What the hell was that then?” A bright light flashed in the distance, like a large amount of drive plumes lighting up at once. “And what the hell is that?”

The missiles hit the station. Explosive arrows stabbing into the docks.

Fertili shook with the first wave of missiles. The civilian docks sheared off, dozens of small time passenger liners streamed towards the low gravity moon below. On the station entire hallways were suddenly slammed with a wall of flame as the rich oxygen met fire - before being flushed out by the vacuum. A massive ball of glass curled out from the northern end of Fertili as the satellite dishes were hit.

Hanock jumped from his chair and dove for the EVA suits. Both his desire to live and his duty fought themselves. He should keep on leading ships- No! He should slap on an EVA helmet to stay alive.

The ground beneath his feet rumbled as the support structure suffered its first hit. Fertili was meant to take this pain. Monitor flashes red in strobe effects as ships above them collide in the chaos. He slammed a hand on the E-EVA. A suit made of grey rubber with a light- up blue and white helmet He tugged on the suit, clasped the helmet and watched hell.

Various PWD cannons had begun to whirl off at the missiles. The emergency override codes allowed them to sweep to cover the stations - to sweep into the civilian lanes. Hanock watched as a civilian skiff spun silently to the right, shards of debris exploding from its side as PWD fire racked back and forth across the station.

The second wave hit Crili. Pawns crumbling bulkheads.

Grimes knew something was wrong a split second before the alarms started. It was the distant rumble that set him off. Then the hallway lights dropped red and the klaxons began ringing.

“To the drop pods!” he shouted. Rico-team didn’t need any encouragement as they bounded towards the miniature hanger.

The station swung and bounced. Grimes tripped twice. Once a cadet helped him to his feet. The next time he had to push himself off the ground. Crili was under attack, and he was in the thick of it.

His platoon had been doing manual labor, their armor was back at the barracks. Their protection wasn’t with them. If this was war, he wasn’t going in unarmed.

Grimes grabbed a soldier, he couldn’t tell if it was one of his in the pitching red light.

“Grab guns and armor!”

The armory had been auto-opened during the chaos. Marines shuttled in and out, determined looks pressed into half of their faces, sloppy fear cresting on the rest. Grimes shoved his way through the troops and grabbed an armful of MAR rifles. His mouth tasted salty as he lugged it back towards the drop-pods, towards a war he had hoped never to fight.

The dry docked destroyers exploded first. A stealth-covered torpedo smashed through two decks before detonating just a door away from the ammo racks of the first destroyer. The responding explosion sent chunks of metal into the second destroyer, which promptly exploded, leaving behind a jagged edge of the station where once there was a dock. The three dry docked frigates and two cruisers began firing in arcs to shoot down any incoming missiles. This worked for a minute before two LOD cannon rounds from the *Komoto* smashed through the reactor of one, and turned the bridge of a Frigate into dust.

On the drop pod, his hand laced around a secure belt, Grimes felt a firecracker against the foundation - a ship exploding on the dry dock. The vibrations echoed out across the station, startling some as they feared the station was about to collapse.

“Where the fuck is the politician?” snapped a soldier a row below him.

“Silent, keep your watch posts ready,” ordered Grimes. It was no time for hysterics.

The Marines waited for damnation. Sitting in their hollowed out metal seats, rifles strapped between legs, armor clipped over faces. They waited for the missile to hit them. For the metal to cave beneath them. For death to welcome them.

Grime’s right hand bounced over his leg. Let it happen. Let it be quick; he prayed. He glanced to his right, the door to the loading dock was still open. The red rotating alarm lights glimmered off his white helmet.

There came a pop and everything went silent.

The loading ramp slammed shut. Seats buckled. Lights shut off. And everyone screamed like a little girl.

The drop pods exploded out of the back of the station, spinning around towards Nebola. Looking merely like another piece of the wreckage, the last of the *Komoto*’s missiles paid them no mind. That would be a mistake.

The docks were chaos from where Hanock sat. A cloud of silvery snow, debris from the missiles, floated above the station in a permanent cloud. But still, death came. He watched as Crili buckled, as the destroyers tore themselves open, as the galaxy entered a fresh war. Every time Hanock breathed the rubber around his neck flexed and expanded. His cheap blue and white helmet cast the bridge in a hazy blue light.

“Who’s doing this?” shouted Ms. Mazel. She had neglected to put on an EVA suit.

“Hell if I know!” Hanock threw his arms up. The rubbery exterior made him feel silly “Zendon, pirates, terror-”

The traffic bridge slid away in silence. Hanock’s head hit the front of his helmet. Spit glued itself to his visor. Ms. Mazel disappeared in a flash of fog. The bridge crumpled away. Hanock watched everything spin. He was in space. Oh shit! He was in space!

A quick jab to his EVA suit corrected himself. The traffic bridge was gone. The right half spread out across the station in a straight line. Pieces of debris spun slowly in odd orbits around themselves. Hanock bumped into something - he turned -someone.

Ms. Mazel was spread backwards. Her hand pointed out, head flung back, legs curled underneath. Hanock’s mouth filled with bile. He’d never fully liked the woman - but - he threw up. He couldn’t take it anymore. The chaos buzzed in his head. His nerves were shot. His co-workers were dead. And someone had blown up his station.

He clicked on his emergency wideband signal, mixing it with the thousands out there, and slowly drifted above Fertili as the last of the missiles fell.

It was chaos at the docks. Chaos that Lesio had asked for, but more chaos than she wanted.

“There goes another one,” said Issac as the Frigate exploded in a sphere of metal chunks.

There came impressed murmurs from around the deck. Captain Kash looked up from the corner where he sat. He was the only one apart from High Officer Lesio who knew this wasn’t going to plan. Lesio kept her face calm, but her attack was working too well. Onatia couldn’t do anything with scraps, he needed warships.

“Should we fire another volley? Missile tracks ready.” asked Issac. “The cruisers look like they might break away.”

“No, hold off of that for now. Fire with LOD cannons, aim for drive cones, we don’t want to deplete our missile stores any more,” Lesio said with a shake of her head.

“Yes ma’am,” Issac relayed the order. In reality, the battle was already won, but Issac had hoped to see another Armadan ship die. The whole reason he’d joined the Galactic Militia in the first place was to kill Armadan soldiers. Soldier’s who’d taken his home from him. So he sent the order, but adjusted it slightly.

The Armadan Cruiser exploded. *Shit*, thought Lesio.

“Another one, good kill Commander,” Issac offered Lesio a smile.

“The kill was all yours,” smiled back Lesio. But he knew what she meant. There weren’t supposed to be any more kills.

“Cargo haulers coming within range of the station, time to leave?” asked Captain Kash. He had stood up from his back corner and was now at the side of Lesio’s station. Lesio regarded him as a bishop who knew its place. The bishops were often right on the time to leave, that was their whole job.

Lesio glanced at the array of chaos displayed below her. She estimated twenty thousand dead. Not bad for a chess player, but too many for Onatia’s needs. Only five ships had survived of the original eight she had wanted to bring in. But hopefully the warship would make up for it. The cargo haulers would have fun fitting that in their holds.

“Indeed it is. Turn us away from here and power on the drive,” Lesio ordered. She turned privately to Kash. “Keep the bridge under control, I have a call to make.”

Kash nodded and stepped out of her way, watching her go. He turned his attention back to the bleeding station, the cries of help being echoed over all major channels. All those captains had crews to protect too.

Chapter 15: Swift Currents

Death was out there. Jacob Fisher watched the monitors for any sign of movement. LiDAR was shut down, only EMS, SSOW, and HED were operational. The *Armalay* had sat dormant for almost a month. The crew ran silent drills as the scientists hunkered down in their bunks. Everyone waited for the torpedo to whistle towards them, but none did.

Fisher rubbed the back of his hand with his thumb. The destroyer had disappeared from the SSOW scans when it reached half-a-million miles from them. Cutting drive and disappearing into the void. But he knew it was out there. Destroyers were lions to his pack, the cargo-haulers vultures as they tore apart the fresh carcasses of the slaughtered.

Fisher took a deep breath. The air smelled of fresh mint, new filters had been installed, a testament to how long they'd been silent.

If he ran he knew the destroyer would show itself, perhaps even other survivors would join him. But that was a long hope, one captain was taught not to rely upon.

"Captain, bridge is awaiting orders for the day," head detection lieutenant Kelly said. His cohort Herbert had taken the day off to nurse a headache. Fisher had called up Roger from his sleep shift and promised the young man he'd repay him with a double rest shift, but he needed all of his best hands on deck for today.

"Orient craft to the nearest escape vector," said Fisher. The balance game he'd been playing had just toppled, cards going wild as run won out over hide. The *Armalay* could do it, he was sure. "Prepare active sensors, I want a firing solution on that destroyer as soon as we start to burn."

The *Armalay* technically didn't carry any torpedoes onboard, but escort ships weren't meant to defend themselves with just missile tracks, LOD cannons, and PWD fire; so Fisher had ordered his crew bring onboard five torpedoes.

"Should I alert fire team leads?" asked Roger, his eyes had a faint redness around the edges.

"Yes," Fisher nodded, "keep me posted on when they're ready."

"Will do, sir."

The bridge suddenly increased in activity, like a wave had just suddenly lifted them all out of their seats. Officers moved around with determination, radioing down to torpedo tubes as the Comps-Sci stations were brought back online downstairs. Fisher felt a determination fill his throat. It would all come down to the first few minutes. Whether the destroyer could pop a torpedo out before his ship could reach thrust proper thrust. After that it would be a waiting game, with the plays predicted days in advance. Either it all worked now, or it never would.

The Galactic Militia destroyer *Ferda* roamed the debris field, sniffing the carcass of space like a wolf looking for prey. Her thirty-five year old head officer, Captain Domico, stood at the bow of the bridge like a bird of prey.

"No contact, day five," noted his second in charge, chief of engineering Kaskat.

They'd been prowling the left-most debris field for five days, trying to find where that mysterious ping had come from, the sunlight that should not have been so far out in the cosmos.

"Permission to engage active sensors?" asked Kaskat.

"And let them get a solution on us?" snapped Domico. "We will keep looking. We are a stealth ship, I will not let that advantage be lost."

"What if they reveal first?" asked Kaskat.

“Then we strike.”

“Engineering reports ready, weapons ready, Comps-Sci ready, bridge secured, all hands stowed,” reported Roger. Kelly stood to his right at the lead Comps-Sci station, ready to blurt out information for Fisher.

Fisher gripped the cold leed bars in front of his chair. It was now or never.

“Launch.”

It was now.

“Contact!” shouted Kaskat. “Drive signature popped out of nowhere.”

The screens on the *Ferda* popped over to the new target. An Armadan cruiser or frigate, no way to tell at this range. No torpedoes launched, full burn predicted.

Domico moved at once, shoving junior officers out of his way. “Weapons prepare launch tubes.”

“Yes sir.”

The *Ferda* was a stealth ship, so it was best if they fired first. Got the act of surprise.

“Bring us up to battlestations. I want a match burn with that vessel. Onatia was clear on those orders, no one leaves this graveyard alive.”

“Contact!” Kelly spun around in his chair. “Two-five-one by three-nine. Looks like a destroyer.”

“Looks like our friend has come to play,” Fisher sat up in his chair. “Is communication on the job?”

“They’re standing by sir.”

“Wide-beam all information collected by our scanners, I want someone to hear us.”

“Sir, that will only make us bigger targets,” said Roger. His voice was slightly strained under the four-G burn that was pushing everyone into their seats.

“Torpedo fired!”

The bridge went deathly silent. It had been so long since anyone had fired on anyone. Fisher was annoyed.

“Battlestations, remember your orders. Weapons return fire with two torpedoes. PWD teams, take that torpedo down,” snapped Fisher. “Navigation, continue course plot, increase burn to six-G. I want us well out of here.”

“Yessir!”

The asteroid field that Fisher had lived in for the past two months fell away. He looked at the map and whispered good-bye.

“Torpedo en-route,” reported Kaskat, he’d straightened his voice with a sharp glance from Domico. “PWD tracking.” There was a flash on the screen. “Our torpedo was taken down. Theirs is still closing.”

The bridge was silent as the *Ferda* hummed. A flash on the screen.

“Torpedo down, orders?”

“Increase burn to match,” said Domico. “Relay message to cargo-haulers, ‘we won’t be here for a while’.”

“Done sir. ROE?” Rules of engagement.

“Clear to fire,” Domico said with a sliver of a grin. This was what all destroyer captains liked, a good hunt to start the day.

“Torpedos two and three are away.”

Outside the *Ferda* two puffs of white gas expelled another set of torpedoes.

“Two more,” Roger said. “PWD fire tracing.”

“Keep course. Another five minutes and we’ll be out of range,” said Fisher.

The *Armalay* was now burning eight-G, just at the threshold of flank speed for the humans onboard. The ship itself could keep going straight for another twenty-two hundred G’s of pressure before any valve of the system broke loose. But ship speed wasn’t determined by the vessel over the long run, it was determined by the resolve of the crew to keep going faster despite the injuries. Internal bleeding was a whole lot better than being turned into dust.

The entire bridge of the *Armalay* was pressed flat to their seats, arms pulled back by invisible bands and heads only supported by gel cushions. Orders were now given via voice activation.

“Missile track one, clear for fire,” gasped out Kelly, he hated high-G burns.

“Firing!”

On the port side of the *Armalay* a slot moved out of the way for a long row of missiles. Clipped together by magnets on a rail guided firing system, the tiny-torpedoes were called tracks. Track one, a long list of death composed in the form of point-five-by-three foot missiles, spiraled from the side of the *Armalay*. Tiny puffs of RCS thrusters oriented the missiles before they sped off towards the star slightly brighter than the rest of the lights in the void.

“Missiles incoming!”

The contact screen on-board the *Ferda* switched over to a wide scan of the battle. At the top of the board a red marked triangle, the *Armalay*. At the center of the screen was the *Ferda* with green circles covering its target. And between the two, thirty shapes closing, and fast.

“Computer predicts only 50% accuracy of hitting them all down,” said Kaskat in a nervous voice.

“Tilt to bring PWD’s around,” ordered Domico.

The bridge shuttered slightly as the *Ferda* tilted slightly downward to bring the blind PWDs near the back into full firing range of the missiles.

Slowly the missile count dropped. Dots flickering from the target board.

“We got them sir,” reported Kaskat.

“Course projection,” Domico snapped. Time was everything in this game.

The board switched over to a three-D projection of them and their target. The target's course was shown in a red line heading straight, while the *Ferda* had a curved blue line. The tilt to bring the PWDs had altered their course.

They’d just entered the long game with their target.

* * *

Onatia understood the long game. He understood what it meant to wait, to wait for your enemy to slip up. Apparently, he hadn’t passed that message along.

“Another one sir,” his aide came in with the daily briefing. Only today’s had been longer than most. “Looks like more rescue ships are moving towards Crili.”

Onatia huffed. “Thank you, that is all.”

It had to be Lesio. She was the only one he'd assigned to the region. She was determined, loyal, and obedient to the bone. But she was also foolhardy, reckless, and rash when it came to following plans. She was jumping out of her seat after he'd told her to wait a few months when most other captains had simply stayed still. If she messed this all up... he crumpled up the paper he was reading. She needed more supervision, especially in the event that something went wrong and she started to spill. Operations like his could not happen so fast; just like a stealth vessel could not reveal itself until it had an accurate target bearing.

Chapter 16: Atomic Clocks

Time is everything, and everything is time.

In the long span of human history, time has often been an annoyance of being late to work or the point at which you cease existing. The watchtower that judges when a book is done, or the period of acceptable mourning after a loved one has died. That was the time of the sub-saharan fields. The twenty-four hour time, between sunrise and set. The time of the ape. That all changed when they leapt from the gravity well, but the ape didn't.

Time on Nebola was two days ahead of Armadan and a day and a half behind the Zendon Capital. Time regions across various corridors were so complex that they required completely different maps to lay them all out. Even in independent systems it could take hours for a message to cross the vast reaches of space, hours that translated into victory or defeat.

The Armadan government was still waking up to budget cuts on naval expenses and riots outside from the let-off dock workers. The Zendon Empire was still running a who's-who game of blame as they tried to pin the massive intelligence failure of Onatia on someone. The Nebola government was still blurry eyed from the early wake-up call regarding an attack at Crili, too soon to realize the full damage, too late to stop anything. And the *Komoto* had slipped away, running back towards the cargo-haulers that the Skipoly Grey was following. Each piece separated by time so vast that it spanned worlds.

Humans had come a long way from standing bare chested on the sun-stretched vasts of Africa, but they hadn't evolved fast enough to understand the concept of time. And in wars such as now, time meant everything.

The only thing that had evolved was the ability for captains to lead, for individuals to act on their own base. A powerful and dangerous thing that commanders all around the galaxy respected and resented for different reasons. They missed the sudden action power of a commander on planetside. The ability to control troops in an instant instead of waiting days, listening to the dreadful reports until the battle was resolved and they could act again. And even that was delayed by time.

So commanders sent their best leaders, the ones picked by the new wartime evolutionary standard of decisiveness. For if a leader could not act in the moment, then the moment would act upon them. A troops listening to a commander ten steps back would find themselves buried in a mass grave under the dying sun. But occasionally, as with the *Komoto* burning sunward, it would have been better for the commander if the ape had never left the well.

* * *

The drop pods landed with an umph. They burned through the atmosphere, their lower heat shields dispersing the worst of the air resistance and friction. Six drop grey drop pods, all carrying two racks of fully armed Marines, minus a diplomat and his briefcase - his briefcase reserved its own seat - and everyone was pissed to hell about an enemy they didn't know yet.

As the heat grew, and the wind resistance heightened, the pod's paths began to diverge. While four continued towards the pre planned route of the capital city Lioni, Grime's pod and another cut off.

His pair drop pods hit the edge of a forest full of tall standing trees that bled out into brush and scrub until the land became dry. Flares lit up underneath each drop pod as the final countdown for impact began. White air streamed around them as the curvature of the planet's edge flattened and they broke Mach 16. The time hit zero, the chairs in the pods hissed and swivels on gimbels, and the final landing stage began. A pair of four engines per craft exploded with pent up energy for waiting so long. Ten Gs slammed into the backs of everyone. The Marines gripped their teeth in determination, while the

politician bit his tongue in pain. Slowly the air around the pods stopped forming and the ground of Nebola stopped rushing at them. Everyone tasted blood in the back of their mouths.

The final ten minutes were of silence. If this was a live battlefield there would be Tri-Senterans and Buzz-Flies to protect them, small fighters built for air-to-space combat. But instead it felt as if the whole system was at war with no one. No AA missiles struck them from the sky and turned them into burning debris. No howls of O.A.Cr., Orbital Assault Cruisers, firing belt-down shots into the surface of the planet. Simply the quiet of the drop pods air-conditioning and the occasional click and hiss of their gimbaled seats. No known enemy, no awaiting attack force, no one to blame; but that didn't change the dead people in orbit above.

And for Grimes, that was the scariest battlefield he could have ever walked onto.

* * *

The *Komoto* didn't have enough drinks for the party Lesio wished for. They'd done it. They'd beaten the enemy, stolen their ships, - or the remains of them - and she'd proved herself to Onatia. He still hadn't responded to her victory speech she'd sent him, along with the various recorded images of the event over Crili. But he would, he had to - for her. The queen had proved herself to her king by stealing white's rooks and bishops and breaking his pawns.

Kash had crept away after the battle, but that was no concern to Lesio, he was still probably nursing resentment from not being the one to fire.

The days after the battle went into a blitz as the *Komoto* sped sunward, towards the waiting hidden haulers and their scrapyards of ships. Miniature drinking parties with the other officers on the bridge, Issac had caught her eye several times. Several times soldiers came up to her and congratulated her. Men popping their heads into her room to offer words of thanks. The entire strike team made her a cake. It was as big of a party as the *Komoto* could hold, but it still wasn't big enough for Lesio.

Finally, after the fifth day of having nothing but alcohol for lunch, Kash came to see her.

"I wanted to offer words of congratulations," he said, his arm resting on her door frame. "For taking out *Crili*."

She'd taken so many sobriety pills that she wasn't sure at first if she was hallucinating.

"Thank you," she said, her stomach doing a flip from the new dose of pills. She needed to stop drinking at lunch.

Kash took a deep breath. "But I've done some review of the battle and wished to talk with you."

"About what?" Lesio said on the defensive.

"How we might have made the biggest mistake yet."

Lesio felt like a suckerpunch had been delivered to her stomach, or maybe that was the pills again.

"That's just because you're not a true believer," she stammered out.

Kash's eyes darkened over, she'd pissed her bishop off. The door to the cabin closed with a hiss.

"You don't ever get to call me that," Kash snarled. His hands grabbed the edge of Lesio's shirt.

"While you've been drunkenly partying, I've been taking account of this ship and the greater galaxy. There's no way we weren't spotted by somebody, and now that somebody is going to tell one of the two galactic governments, who are going to do everything in their power to kill us - just to prove a point you don't fuck with them."

"The Zendon government won't. We took out the major enemy establishment."

"The Zendon government will! If they don't it'll look like they started the war-"

"Good, so we got what we wanted." Lesio was smug.

“-A war they cannot win. So where will that leave them? Playing the politics game until they can find us and blow us up. A power game, show that they don’t like deserters. The Armadan government will be a little slower, but once it finds out we were there no amount of excuses of drinking with politicians will change the silo missiles bearing down on us.” Kash took a deep breath. “High Officer, you may have won the battle, but whatever war you hoped of fighting, we’ve just lost.”

“Get the fuck off me,” Lesio pushed Kash away. Her eyes had a faint redness from the betrayal of her bishop's loyalty. He was just jealous of her love for Onatia, that had to be it. “You’re disgusting.”

“You’re disillusioned, and you just got us killed,” said Kash cooley. He’d failed his mission and it was her fault. The door snapped shut behind him.

“You’re relieved of your post!” screamed Lesio.

Kash stopped midway down the hallway, paused, then continued on. Lesio had just relieved him of his post, and his guilt of failing his mission to protect the people that served under him. He glanced around the hallway, already seeing the vacuum seeping in. He didn’t know when, he didn’t know how, but he knew that soon the *Komoto* would be dead, and he needed to get off before then.

* * *

The Armadan High Council, the High Chair, his aides, the various ministers, and several professional bodyguards paid to sacrifice their life for their principle, sat in the small war-time room. The ministers all complained about the cramped space while the High Chair sat patiently silent, waiting for them to finish. Finally, after what seemed like ages of hearing the MoA complain about her cramped legs, the briefing began. Presented by an SJSJ, Senior Joint Security Member, who had been given the information by a member of the ASD, Armadan Security Division, tasked with studying the Nebola sector.

“The situation is dire sir,” the SJSJ began. He ignored the rest of the ministers and focused his attention on the High Chair and the JCF, Joint Chief of Fleet, the two men who could do something about the situation.

“Three days ago the ports of Crili and Fertili were attacked by an unknown assailant. Due to the high traffic surrounding both ports, neither could fully defend itself. Reports are scattered, but we believe both ports to be inoperable with major fleet losses.” The SJSJ flicked to a new photo, a tactical map of the Nebola sector. “We lost one major warship, the *Salute*, along with all other cruisers and destroyers docked to berths at the station. This puts us, for the first time, at the mercy of the Zendon presence in the sector.

“But we were lucky to be conducting fleet-week, a once a year week of rotational training with assets. Of such assets, we were able to scurry away our two other warships, the *StarBurn* and *Birthright*. They’re currently deployed in a far orbit outside of the Nebola sector, playing war games with the *Windless*,” the image zoomed out until the Nebola Sector was a dot on the board. A new red circle detonated itself in space. “We can have them back in action in four days with a hard burn.”

“Who’s the commander in charge?” asked the High Chair.

“Captain Constantine sir.”

“He’s one of mine,” answered the JCF. “A good man, a little bit headstrong, but one of my best field Captains.”

“Put him on necessary action only. If the diplomat needs him, then he’ll come.” The High Chair rotated the conversation. “Any word on this being a Zendon first strike?” The High Chair leaned back in his chair. His black and grey three piece tuxedo felt off in comparison to the crisp military suits surrounding him. He would have to ask some dumb questions today to get the right answers.

“If it were, it would be a bad one,” answered the SJSM.

“How so?”

“Well,” the SJSM turned towards the board. “The Zendon patrol fleet, recently buffed by reinforcements, is in a holding pattern on their side. No other strikes have occurred to any major military assets in the galaxy.”

“You said they were reinforced?” the JCF folded his hands forward. “With what and when?”

“Three more cruisers, four destroyers, a dozen new skiffs, a missile boat, and five frigates. And yesterday, one day after the attack above Crili.”

“Do you know if they were delayed?”

“Unknown sir.”

“Thank you officer, dismissed,” said the High Chair. The JCF waited until the man left the room to begin his parade.

“It had to be a Zendon first strike,” the man paled. “They target our docks, then bring in extra ships. By the time we know it's happening all over the galaxy it'll be too late. All we'll be able to do is watch as our front line is crippled.”

“I know how the fucking board works,” said the High Chair. “If this isn't, then we'll attack unprovoked and start the biggest bonfire in the galaxy.”

“And you're okay letting them take the first move?” asked JCF.

“We have other assets to back up our front lines,” answered the High Chair. “And if they attack then we can counter attack!”

“No if our fleets are taken out first.”

“So you doubt the ability of your commanders? Of your fleet?” pushed the High Chair. The two men were leaning at each other now.

“I doubt the ability of any campaign but an offensive one winning us the upcoming war,” the JCF breathed heavily. “Our ships are the only way we'll win this war.”

“I hope not,” said the High Chair. “That's why I've already asked for a diplomatic solution.”

“Sir what?”

“Our negotiator, Robert Ridler, jumped at this opportunity. Let's see if it can resolve this issue without any more shots being thrown.”

The JTC let out a sigh. “Yes sir. Should I arrange a protection convoy?”

“I already ordered him gone.”

“Without my approval?” The JCF asked in a shocked dismay. This was wartime, the elected leader of the free galaxy couldn't go around sending people off to the enemy without warships.

“Last I checked you weren't the votes I was pushing for,” the High Chair said with the hint of a smile. “I only strive for the people's approval.”

JTC mentally rolled his eyes. The High Chair strove for the chancellors and senators approval, the people with the real votes. He didn't care about the tiny people on the ground, they didn't carry enough votes. But the High Chair was an honest man, so the JTC relaxed his expression. He probably thought what he was doing was for the good of the galaxy - or at least the Armadan side of it.

“Well let's hope your Ridler man can get that approval.”

* * *

Fisher felt the four G on his back. His chest hurt, sure, but his back was what was killing him. The *Armalay* had been pushing four G for almost a day and they'd already lost someone to stroking out.

“Cut her back,” hissed Fisher through clenched teeth.

The computer responded, pulling the *Armalay* from four, to three, to two-point-seven. "Safe burn reached," it blurted.

It felt like someone had taken off the stack of books and replaced them with a slightly heavier than normal backpack. But a backpack he could manage. Fisher gripped the gel padded armrests and looked at the monitor to his right. Five million miles ahead of their target. Slowly that number would shrink with the decreased burn, but that gave him time. He calculated it on the computer. A lot of time.

He stood up, feeling his muscles and bones resent the higher than normal gravity. Robert was pushed back at his station. "Robert, begin pumping out alert messages across all channels. I want someone to at least hear us."

Robert nodded, a hard thing to do in the heavy G.

Fisher sighed and moved back towards his seat. They had two months until either ship was back in firing range of the other with anything apart from faulty long range missile attacks. The battles would be predicted days in advance with every move calculated like a well oiled machine.

This really would be the long game.

* * *

The *Dusty* cooled its engines one last time as it executed a low one-kilometer orbit around Sisipini station. The burner skiff stank on the inside, having been run at heavy G for the two day journey back. But now the backbreaking forces of gravity were off and the crew could get to work on their mission.

"Tethers still holding," Marshal swung himself around the outside of the *Dusty*, keeping an eye on the probe they'd snatched.

"Tethers tight on this side," Elanie responded from her eccentric orbit around the burner skiff.

"Clear for release," Jeffrey said over the comms, not so much a question as a request.

Marshal gently thrust towards the probe, the body of the *Dusty* rising to meet him. His HUD read out the velocities and trajectories of all craft in the area, which just happened to be him, Elanie, the dusty, and a probe that could hopefully finger the biggest bad guy in the galaxy.

Marshal's sense of space shifted as the hull of the *Dusty* fell under his feet and became the floor. The mag-pull boots made a quick hiss-click sound that no one could hear in the vacuum. He bent down, creasing the suit as he did so, and tugged the rope holding the probe down free.

"Tether's released," he said over the comm. The rope gently drifted up and away from the craft, guided by his momentum. He took a few moments to watch it gently drift away, the starlight glinting nicely off his HUD.

"Probe coming free," reported Jeffrey over the headset as he transferred his control module from the *Dusty* to probe O-2133.

O-2133 had been dead for months, or so it would seem. A thin layer of ice coated near the bottom of the RCS thrusters from where a last ditch effort to switch its orbit had gone wrong. So it had drifted away, seemingly forgotten by the galaxy around it. Sensors were only so good when they had something to look at, and in the void there lacked the substance of the systems. With nothing to observe, no way to communicate, not even a basic tracking program built into the ancient model, it had simply shut down - closing its eyes in the robot way.

But one day it's sensors had seen something. A blip, a radar cross scan bumping against its hull. The old probe began to stir. A drive plume burst snapped the attention of the one active camera. Battery juice began pumping, muscles moving. An old proximity alert system had a seizure when it was attached to the *Dusty's* hull. The computer, the brain inside O-2133 began to wake up again.

In its half dormant state, attuned to the condition of a coma for a human, O-2133 couldn't tell where it was, despite having arrived at the very place it had served centuries. Its computer was still whirring, quickly, but not quick enough to tell what had put it out in the void.

Slowly the probe orbited towards Sispini. Red and green lights flashing on the docks led it closer towards the target point. Puffs of white from the RCS thrusters maneuvered it closer. Turning the craft until its one active camera stared back at the system, back at Beketh.

O-2133 knew what it was looking at. Several centuries of servitude around a planet makes one very adept at detecting it. Slowly the probe's camera took in the rest of the system. Haluu to the right, a supply shuttle making a breaking turn to enter orbit. Tersia to the left, several small pods hung in close orbit, probably dropped off cargo from the supply shuttle.

The hooked arm latched on first, clicking into place just above where the lower main antenna was. Two more tethers were extended by dock hands in EVA suits as the bay doors opened and O-2133 was led in.

The walls of the station accosted the view of the system. If O-2133 was a human perhaps it would have shaken and screamed in protest of being removed from a view so beautiful. But instead it did nothing. A brain still catching up to the present. An eye focused on one last good view. And arms that no longer existed.

Marshal watched the probe slowly disappear into Sispini before re-entering the *Dusty* for the final trip down towards the station.

"Do you think this will work?" Elanie asked over the network.

"It has to," Marshal said. "Otherwise Onatia will stay one step in front of us."

Chapter 17: Drive plumes.

Everyone fights for something. No-one believes themselves to be the bad guy, for they all have a purpose. A kid, a story, a law, to win this for. The sheer lack of creativity denies them the ability to think for a second that perhaps the other side is fighting for the same reason. The same lost kid, the same old story, the same new law, only under a different flag. But they forget that out in the void, colors lose their shape and drive plumes are all that's left behind.

* * *

Garson kept a hand on the torpedo controls at all times. The drive plume of the *Lust and Forgive* was an easy target for even the worst of ships, and the Skipoly Grey was not the worst of ships.

They'd been at a one-G burn for two days, keeping match with the *Lust and Forgive* as it sped out of the system, then back in, and spiraled sunward. The Skipoly Grey's scanners had picked up four other cargo haulers all doing the same. Same vectors, same speeds, same estimated arrival point. With their communications darkened so as to not catch the attention of anyone, and sensors focused inward on the cargo haulers, they'd missed the cries of help echoing across the system from Crili.

"Cutting drive," Burta announced from the pilot's chair above Garson. With the courses of the cargo-haulers plotted they'd decided to stay in a wide two-million mile orbit around them. Keeping well away from any scanners.

Timur welcomed the return of zero-G, feeling himself rise slightly in his chair. His muscular frame, though a welcome attraction to the ladies planetside, always made him feel cumbersome under thrust. It just weighed too much. But in zero-G - he unbuckled his chest scraps and pushed away from his chair - damn did it feel good.

"Count is up to twelve cargo-haulers," Garson announced from his seat, and the Skipoly Grey had firing solutions on all of them. The firing solution wasn't as good as a target lock with only passive sensors, no LiDAR, but it still could take out all of them with a simple push of the button. A button that Garson definitely would have pushed if he'd learned about Crili.

"Ammunition is holding," Timur clicked through the post-flight checklist. "Down a little bit on reaction-mass and RCS propellant, but enough to circle the system at least a dozen times."

"What type of torpedoes do we have again?" asked Garson. He was putting together a battle plan that the Skipoly Grey could execute on his word.

"Let me check," murmured Timur as he scrolled through the listings. "Two-Harpoon guidance weapons, five D-3 busters, four Jalco busters, and two Glycol-5 station killers."

"Glycol-5?" asked Garson, turning around in his chair. "I spent all of my credibility on Haluu trying to find that shit."

"Yeah we know," Timur said, "and you did one hell of a good job of it."

"So much so that you beat us to finding out about the large gangs on our station," said Burta, climbing down from her pilot's chair. "I would advise using those against something other than a cargo-hauler, a little bit overkill."

"Yeah I got that," Garson tried to lean back in his seat, but in zero-G there was nothing to lean against, something he was sure he'd never get used to. "Scanners are up," he tapped a button on the screen, "and recording."

* * *

To Jeffrey the probe was like that old piece of art everyone but you dislikes. The one that's full of the odd colors and strange shapes that gross people out. But to you, something pulls you in. In Jeffrey's

case it pulled him in up to his elbows. The innards of O-2133 were from four governments ago, and labeled in ways he didn't even understand. But he knew that throughout the course of building machines, some things always stayed the same. Computer logs were always directly linked to motherboards. Sensors usually ran through patch networks before being daisy chained to said logs. And logs usually looked identical to each other.

He pulled the motherboard gently up, careful not to hurt anything. O-2133 wasn't technically living, nor dead, but it made no sense to break the probe. They could always send it out to continue its basic function.

It was a mess of thick black wires behind the motherboard, dozens of rubber inputs and outputs, plus several boxes - bingo!

Jeffrey bent down, smelling the soft scent of rubberized metallics, and began gently taking out the probe logs. Luckily they'd been installed with handles and clips, so the process to remove them was fairly simple. Push down gently for two seconds, wait for the click of the springs depressing, and tug upwards. By the end of ten minutes he had all twelve logs.

On the *Dusty*, sitting in the cheap gel chair, he'd found the second log to be full of unusual activity. On a basic log, the "write" lines were straight and simple, the probe having done the same reading a million times before. But as with a human, a computer's memory logs spike with activity when met with something new. Show a man a blue box a hundred times and after the third his brain stagnates with the monotony. But then toss a red square suddenly in there and his brain shoots up. Nerves bouncing signals together, trying to put the picture together of what the red box was. More so for computers, and especially computers that had been looking at the same picture for the last few centuries.

"What do we have here," he muttered, plugging the compatible end of his data-strip into the log. The strip would then uplink the log to the large monitor in front of him.

He ran his finger down the activity. All the same. He pulled the strip and re-entered it to the next log. Same. Pull, plug, same. All monotony. All the same readings. All Beketh underneath, stations above, supply shuttles inbound. Same, same same.

Until the last log, which had been apparently rewritten several times by a computer with not enough storage. There was a sizable spike in activity. Jeffrey pulled open the specific data-log file. It was the one twenty-hours before the *Komoto* made its way around Beketh. The one he'd seen on the *Dusty*. A drive plume emerging from the vast darkness. He ran the log forward until there was another spike, one that far outpaced anything else recorded by O-2133.

He clicked on the file name and opened it up.

"Holy shit," he gasped.

This was when the art-piece made sense. When the strange and confusing shapes and circles molded together to form something beautiful.

The log had everything. Drive signatures had been pulled, rows of torpedo racks, hull composites, even the inch-by-inch shape of the ship. Everything they'd need to identify the *Komoto* from millions of miles away.

Jeffrey opened up his data-pad. The Skipoly Grey needed to see this.

* * *

Brico Mallo knew what it smelled like when shit hit the fan. This wasn't it. This was when the whole septic tank smashed into the AC unit. And it smelled awful.

Crili was dead, or dying, it didn't matter. What mattered was that someone had done it, and he was sure a whole lot of fingers were ready to blame him. Ready to blame the Zendon Empire. Ready to start a war. A war Mallo would lose. A war Onatia wanted, one he would win.

A war he'd already started with cargo-haulers. If only Crili hadn't happened he could have tried to sniff out the cargo haulers that the data-package from the spy had contained. Uncovered this whole damn mystery. But now they were playing cats in the alley over a dropped trash can in a border system with several million lives at stake.

The problem with border systems was the uneasy facts of truces. That neither side truly trusted each other but instead lapsed into a silent trust of non-combatants that when broken spilled the ugliest flavor of war into the water, blood war. A blood war was a concept taught at the central defense and strategic attack ministries on Zendon. A war fought over bodies lost, revenge for the fallen, and fought with a religious fervor on both sides. A war that usually meant the end of a system, so desiccated with the hulks of ships and debris of battle that to fly through it was akin to taking a shotgun blast to the chest. And the only way to stop a blood war was to prove you were on the other guy's side.

Only problem, no one knew whose side had started the war.

So Mallo had regrouped his ships, pulled back the torpedo skiffs and sniffers to his side of the board. Made damn sure the other side knew he wasn't ready for a war. But he also knew what he'd just done to his defense. His job in the Emperor's web was to protect the spider eggs. To protect the spider's eggs, the systems under Zendon control, one must have a finely laid net to catch any predator. But by clumping his net in one place he'd left wide holes in others, which made it easy for predators to slip through. He knew he'd have to extend his net again soon, he just hoped the other side didn't take that as aggressive.

He picked up his data-pad. There were hidden ships out there. Some were covert Zendon black-ops. Others were Armadan silo ships, ready to scuttle civilization on a planet. But some were the tiny terrorists who'd just made his job a whole lot harder. And Brico Mallo knew a few things in this galaxy, one of which being that he didn't like people who made his job harder.

* * *

The *Komoto* sped towards the cargo-haulers.

The Skipoly Grey rested in a wide orbit around them.

Crili station burned in the background.

The queen slid across the board.

And a message sent from Sispini was halfway to its destination.

The Galaxy had rolled its dice, now all it had to do was wait.

* * *

Two days had gone by when Garson's tablet buzzed. He looked at it quizzically for a moment before checking the sender. Why had Jeffrey sent him a data-packet?

"Hey Burta, you want to check this out?" he asked up the ladder.

Burta had pretty much lived in the pilot's chair during the whole orbit. Whenever Garson went to hit his bunk for another five-hours of shitty sleep, she was still there. When he rose and got himself a quick drink, she was still there. Timur on the other hand had run from the bridge the second it was clear to and had lived in the cafe. Garson had laughed with him over lunch in zero-G, but when offered to join him on the bridge, Timur shook his head. "The bridge is a place of work, and this little vacation is my break. In my line of work, you take breaks when you get them, because oftentimes they can be your last." Garson had nodded his head and went back up to the bridge.

“Yeah, what’s up?” responded Burta.

“Data-packet from Jeffrey looks big and important.”

“Upload it to the Grey, she can take it.”

“Alright sounds good,” Garson tapped the edge of his datapad against his monitor, linking the two together. Instantly the fast computer of the Skipoly Grey raced for the data packet, scooped it up, and began unpacking like an anxious parent home from a long vacation.

What had taken Jeffrey several hours to find and sort out took the Grey less than twenty seconds to display on the big screen.

“Holy shit,” Garson gasped, in a mirror reaction to Jeffrey’s.

“That’s the *Komoto*’s file,” said Burta after a second. “The fingerprint we’ve been looking for!”

Every ship kept a list of fingerprints on file, a catalogue of ships they’d run into so that later on it would take less computer power to read the transmitted and identify the ship. But even with a transponder off, a fingerprint could still be used to identify a ship. Government kept long lists of fingerprints on warships of enemy vessels, especially silo ships. And the only way to change one’s fingerprint was to change every aspect of the ship itself down to the very drive used to power the ship. And since not everyone had spare drives laying about, and the process could ruin the integrity of the ship, most people didn’t bother to switch out drives, forever keeping their fingerprint the same.

But the file Jeffrey had sent contained more than just a basic drive fingerprint. It covered every inch of the ship. From the torpedo ports to the location of RCS thrusters. Now if the *Komoto* went on the drift, drive cut and transponder dark, the Skipoly Grey could still finger it. Still find it out in the dark. And that was every stealth ship’s fear, because it removed their only advantage on the playing field. The ability to stay and remain hidden.

“Skipoly Grey is running a wide scan of the space around us for the *Komoto*,” reported Garson.

“And what are the chances of that picking up anything?” asked Timur sarcastically.

The monitor pinged. The Skipoly Grey had picked up something approaching.

“I swear to god,” muttered Timur, rolling his eyes. “The chances of that...”. Timur turned around his seat and strapped in.

“Drive is away from us, behind the shadow of the ship,” said Garson, “won’t be able to confirm for a few more minutes.”

“And if it is?” asked Burta. She, it seemed, was starting to take Garson to be the leader of this mission.

“We never trust Timur’s luck on anything again, and split and run.”

“Fire off a few torpedoes?” asked Timur.

“At this range it’s not worth it,” said Garson.

“Not even to slag a cargo hauler?”

“They’ve possibly got innocents on board,” Garson pulled the monitor towards him and began tapping out commands to the Skipoly Grey. “We should probably get combat helmets on, because it could get frisky here.”

Combat helmets were EVA helmets that latched to flight suits. In the event of a ship depressurizing from a hit, the CoHel would keep a person alive long enough that they could return fire. Connected to the ship’s main oxygen tanks, the helmets had air in them for months for the three crew of the Skipoly Grey. The CoHel’s for the Grey were ex-Marine NovTech helmets that were generously donated by the sponsor of the ship.

“Torpedos are armed,” called Timur from his station.

“We’re going to be shifting here in a second, buckle in,” said Burta.

Garson clasped on his white CoHel and stared out the digital HUD of his helmet, which quickly configured itself to a display of every tactical readout the Grey could throw at him. The suspected *Komoto* was still rapidly approaching the group of cargo-haulers.

“Torps ready,” Garson gave a thumbs up.

“Maneuvering.”

Garson umphed when the RCS thrusters dug him back into his seat. The chair hissed and snapped on the pair of gimbels as the Grey rolled slightly. Now with a drive pointed towards the cargo haulers, nose aimed at the nearest Jump Portal, all they could do was wait and count down.

The suspected *Komoto* curved for a second and cut drive, putting out a residue heavy heat signal picked up by the Grey. The contact blinked green once, *Confirmed*. The computer asked him if he wanted to indicate friendly or not. This was the Grey’s first time interacting with the *Komoto*.

Garson shivered thinking of Haluu. Of Johnson. Of the dead kid. The slinking torpedo boat that still occasionally haunted him at night. The station fell away from him. The silos. The docks. He grit his teeth. Red.

Enemy contact.

“The Grey’s blinking at me right now, enemy contact one point five million kilometers off,” said Burta.

“Yep, it just popped up red on my screen too,” responded Timur. “Garson, what’s your play?”

Garson felt a clock ticking inside of his head. This could be it. He could get back to *Komoto* this time. Take it out. Give High Officer Lesio the good boot of Karma. He selected the Glycol-5 torpedo, large enough it almost constituted a missile. And what an ironic way to do it.

“On my mark spin up towards the Jump Portal. Keep the cargo-haulers between us and the *Komoto*. She’s faster than us by a slight margin, but we have the jump on her.” Garson primed the Glycol-5 torpedo. He felt the slight vibration as the arm disengaged the D-3 and slid the Glycol-5 into position. He wanted this to be a one shot deal.

“Harpoon?” asked Timur.

“We’ll need it to guide the Glycol-5 into position,” said Garson.

Timur took a deep breath and shrugged. “Alright.”

Garson closed his eyes. Thinking back to Haluu. To Johnson, Braskit, Lesio, the airlock, the mobs, the station chefs, the smells of the coffee in the morning. His mind settled on the sabotaged silos. The premeditated build up acts of war that Lesio committed. The way she was willing to sacrifice everyone on all three stations just so she could get her war. Not a moment's hesitation. Not a tear-drop in the bucket. Well, she hadn’t cared enough to wait for Garson to have his chance at life, why should he wait for her.

The monitor buzzed with the confirmation.

Outside the Grey the harpoon guidance weapon deployed first, cutting out of its port, no drive yet. Followed closely behind by the Glycol-5 heavy torpedo. The grey and black body of the harpoon titled, the tiny RCS thrusters aligning themselves with the target a million miles away. Feeding raw navigation guidance to the Glycol-5 heavy torpedo, the harpoon launched.

A bright blue dot appeared in the void for two seconds before a second oranger one joined it. Both torpedoes leapt into action, hyenas on the hunt, as they pushed plus sixty-G’s on the one-and-a-half minute flight towards their targets.

The *Komoto* bulked slightly, surprised at the sudden aggravation spurred from the deep void. Turning sidewise it tried to line up a shot. Ice sheared away from PDW cannons hardly used as golden flares lit up the night.

Cargo-haulers began spurting contact messages over the radio-waves as the Grey sent jamming signals towards the *Komoto*. Radars pinged, dropped silent, then spurted with action as every non-military computer in the area went haywire.

The harpoon spun to a stop a hundred thousand kilometers away from the *Komoto*, a round had taken out its drive. The Glycol-5 slammed through the twisting debris, tiny pieces of torpedo bouncing off its dual ignition tip.

Internally the clock was ticking down, towards the final firing solution. A fast action LiDAR scanner bounced light like a bat does sound. Each return signal grew closer still, faster, and faster! The Glycol-5 pushed plus eighty-Gs, the chrome dueded drive-cone breaking apart at the atomic level from the heat.

Eighty thousand!

Seventy!

Speedometer racing up, contact drawing close. The torpedo dropped the silver pellet in the Glycol-5, beginning the last reaction.

Fifty!

The pellet dropped gravity, hitting the Glycol-5 contained right behind the nose of the missile.

Thirty!

The silver atoms began bonding with the Glycol-5, shredding their way through the atomic complex to mix with the compatible atoms.

Twenty!

Lost atoms began to draw towards each other. Superheating the condensed space.

Ten!

A PDW round struck the cone, curving into the Glycol-5 mixture.

Nine!

The corrosive compound latched onto the cheap PDW round made of hardened aluminum alloy and tungsten. The atomic mixture of silver was broken, and the flash began.

A million kilometers away the Grey reported a hit, the flash of light echoing through the void. This was a lie.

The plasma ball at the center of the growing sphere of superheated Glycol-5 pushed outward, determined to bring heat to the desolate cold place. The aluminum alloy bonded with the remaining silver atoms, stopping the extraneous expansion process.

The explosion rippled outwards, consuming the torpedo casing. Flecks of iron superheated to plasma before atomically disintegrating as they supercooled. The detonation lasted four seconds of awe-inspiring terror. A gaseous cloud of dispersed ion atoms, blinded by the light of an aborted sun.

Anything within four kilometers of it was dead, twenty more if it had happened with an atmosphere. The *Komoto* was eight away, and very much alive, and very much enraged. Blinded for only the moment.

“Contact is dead!” whooped Timur.

The slightly charred stealth signature of the *Komoto* slid through the dissipating greyish blue cloud of ions, LiDAR actively pinging away on the Grey. They’d just stabbed the eye of the wolf, and now it wanted blood.

“Shit, no it’s not!” Garson spun around in his chair. “Burta, mark now! Burn!”

The Skipoly Grey leapt at once, pushing corner-wise to the *Komoto*. Garson’s long range torpedo attack had failed, but only slightly.

“We’ve got four fast movers,” the computer spat out an image. Four beads of red spiralling towards the Skipoly Grey at high speeds. Garson felt the heavy G’s roll into his back. The computer would need to handle this one. He smacked on the auto-aim and allowed the chair to snap backwards to compensate for the heavy Gs.

“Six G,” hissed Burta from pursed lips. “Keep them legs clenched. Don’t let the blood pool.”

There were two grunts of confirmation. From now on she was the pilot, and while Timur and Garson were her friends, they were only cargo at the moment. She pulled the Skipoly Grey in a wide circle around the cargo haulers, overlapping lanes of fire on the incoming torpedoes, which blinked out and dropped off scans.

The *Komoto* spun counter-clockwise, pushing over the assembled mass of cargo haulers, determined to cut-off its prey.

Shit! Burta tugged the Grey to the right, curving their route into a cat-and-mouse game of tag. A game that the *Komoto* would win. Time seemed to stretch, pulled out by the gravity like playdoh over a fire.

“She’s pushing seven Gs to track us,” reported Timur. His chest felt heavy against the thrust. “The fuck we going to do.”

“Working on it,” Garson said, sticking his tongue against the back of his teeth. The Glycol-5 had failed, but it had confused the Skipoly Grey. Two more fast movers. Vibrations of PWD fire. If they fired another time, would it fail? How good was the crew of the *Komoto*? Time to see.

He selected a D-3 torpedo and dropped it. Allowing the torpedo and spin away from the ship for a second before lighting up and diving towards its target. It got half-way and disappeared. Fuck.

They were the lead of this chase, meaning anything they shot down would be moving twice as fast as anything the *Komoto* fired up. But that also meant that the *Komoto* had an advantage on torpedo ports. The Grey had to push the torpedo out of the way of the ship before diving down. But what if they didn’t?

Three more fast movers. Time to roll the dice, Garson thought. Back in the intelligence agency there’d been a saying. “If you’re standing on train tracks and don’t know where to go, jump, otherwise the train will squish you.”

He couldn’t keep on staring at the screen and waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the path to emerge for him. He had to roll the dice. Two of the three ways would kill them, stay on the tracks or jump onto the wrong side, but the other way - the right side of the tracks - would keep them alive. Garson bit his lip in an accident, the taste of coins filled his mouth.

He switched off the PWD auto-aim, instead manually aiming bursts. Letting the missiles die closer. Let the enemy think their computer was becoming overloaded. Garson sucked in a deep breath. He had a plan. A jump to the side of the tracks. A roll of dice. He opened up a direct communication to Timur.

Timur didn’t like it, but he couldn’t say much else. They had the CoHels for a reason.

Garson flicked another torpedo into the tube. The Grey had a pair of LiDAR scanners used to detect forward incoming objects. He glanced at the screen. They wouldn’t need them for a few minutes. He flipped them around and began pumping electronic signals at the *Komoto*.

“What the hell was that?” said Burta.

“Just give me a few minutes. Kill the drive when I tell you too!” Garson said, whistling to keep the air in his lungs.

“Ok,” the line went dead. No doubt Burta was doing the same whistling.

The *Komoto* fired off six torpedoes this time. Garson placed one hand over the fire and detonate button of the Glycol-5 torpedo and used the other it to guide the PDW cannons. Yellow tracers spiraled off into the void, several had no doubt hit the *Komoto* from the glowing holes on the nose. Hopefully he'd hit someone, but probably not.

To Garson the clock in his head began counting down. The fourth torpedo died. He released the Glycol-5. The fifth torpedo spiraled silently away. His hand hovered above the detonate button.

“Timur!”

The Glycol-5 torpedo dove down, drive signature hidden by the body, right into the sixth torpedo. The doors on the right side of the Grey opened, venting the air in a massive burst that rivaled the suddenly dormant drive cone. The Skipoly Grey, hidden behind the vast plasma cloud expanding from the Glycol-5 torpedo, spiraled suddenly, and silently, into the void.

Garson's chair spun, clicked, hissed, then spun again. Each time to a new center of gravity and the velocity fields switched.

“Ah! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” screamed Timur.

The *Komoto* cut the main drive and slammed on the G-drive to avoid smashing into the plasma ball. Sensors stunned from the massive energy out-put, and having just watched a ship seemingly turn into a puddle of magma, it turned and slinked away.

Garson let the air slowly out of his lungs in a long exhale. The chairs kept hissing and clicking on gimbels until Garson reasoned they were far enough away to reorient and burn towards the Jump Portal.

“Holy shit,” Timur turned at Garson, “that worked!” To Timur, a man accustomed to saving others' lives with violence, to have his own saved was an unpayable debt settled in the arms of Garson.

“We're repressurising,” Garson said, his hands shaking from the shock. It was useless to try to stop his hands from trembling, just the body expelling its excess pent up energy in a large burst.

The Skipoly Grey's hull popped slightly with the atmosphere restored. A plastic bottle refilled. Garson sighed and pulled off his helmet to see Timur racing towards him to give him a bear hug.

“Holy shit!” Timur said, pulling Garson tight against his chest. He put him down and held him at arm's length. “If that doesn't make you good in Marshal's eyes, I don't know what will.” The adrenaline rush made his body tingly. He held his hands up, they were shaking.

Burta clambered down from the pilots chair to give Garson another hug. “You're crazy, and that's exactly what we need.”

Garson was flustered and in shock, so he just stood there for a few seconds, taking it all in, before welling up. God damn, did it feel good to be included.

Timur bent over and whispered, even though no one else was onboard, “so when are you going to ask out Marshal?”

Burta gave him a playful slap. “Maybe. But you two birds better keep your mouths quiet. Maybe when this is all over and the *Komoto* is ash.”

* * *

Lesio stood still in the kind of way a kitten waits to pounce. Only she wasn't fighting, she was ready to kill. Her right hand gripped the recyclable grey cup so hard that it had crumbled under the pressure. She took a few breaths. High-G never was good for stress.

The bridge of the *Komoto* had been quickly pressure sealed after a round opened up the vacuum. The glowing hole was hidden behind quick-patch sealant plates meant for that sort of job. The round had traveled down the length of the ship before stopping in engineering. All that remained of its progress was a seat torn down the middle, like some wild beast had split it, and the remains of a technician carted away in a plastic bag.

Kash wasn't on the bridge anymore, he now fully resided in his room. Their confrontation, his dismissal, and the guilt both had felt after the fact - though for different reasons - left them in an unstable balance. And since Lesio had to be the head of the *Komoto*, the silent queen sailing through the night, Kash had been resigned to his room.

But the *Komoto* wasn't as silent anymore. The first explosion had thrown up so much EMS, Ion, and Radar data that two sensors popped. Overloaded by what they were finely tuned to sniff out, they found themselves drowned in the substance. Two black marks were all that remained top-side of them, two holes in the stealthy coat of the *Komoto*. Then came the PWD round. The clean LiDAR signature of the *Komoto* was now broken up by a jarring hole in the front.

Lesio gripped her cup harder.

The *Komoto's* computers had recognized the ship as hostile from their last encounter - Beketh. The last place she'd failed. The place she'd proven herself unworthy. And the Skipoly Grey had been there. It had taken out her people on the docks. It had caused her failure.

And it had caused her failure here.

The cup popped under the pressure, caving inwards along her thumb line. The remaining water filtered out in the null-G that came with repair.

Because of the Skipoly Grey, because of her lack, of the ships lack, to see it before, she'd compromised the entire operation. Potentially ruined the secrecy and stability of the cargo-haulers to do their jobs effectively. To blend in with normal traffic. But at least she'd gotten her revenge. At least she'd seen them die, avenging her operation at Beketh. The queen had stabbed the pawn.

She tossed the cup away from her, watching it spiral slowly. It spun clockwise around its center of axis, crossing the null G. Like debris from a battle, like a ship could under no thruster and the tiniest tap of thrusters.

Unless she hadn't...

Lesio pushed the repair technician that was standing in front of the central command monitor. The display she'd watched go white when the Skipoly Grey died. When the fireball exploded in front of them. Like it had before when their torpedo had failed.

She played back the loop. Played back all of the active sensors.

There! Two minutes after the fireball. The faintest reflection of LiDAR off something already too far away to engage. To others it was a glitch, to the computer it was a glitch, so it was not reported. But to her it was proof that she failed again! The queen had failed her king.

Lesio slumped over the central display, cursing the galaxy, cursing her luck, and cursing the Skipoly Grey.

* * *

Grimes registered the heat on the back of his neck first. The cooling pack in his suit must have broken in de-orbit. He tugged off the sweaty full-head white helmet and stared at the brush around him.

Forty men, twenty from each pod, plus a diplomat, with curled back hair and soft cheeks, of some rank who kept his briefcase shut. They were spread out in a thin perimeter protection line, safeties off and fingers close to triggers. A small encampment had been made in the shade between the two drop pods.

Boxes lay scattered about in improv defense positions, where maybe they'd hold out a few minutes against an armed force.

Their radio was broken, another casualty of the landing. A pair of technician specialist marines were working on some solution to fix that. Grimes hadn't bothered them, he was too exhausted to.

When adrenaline wears off it feels like the world you once stood on comes crashing down on your shoulders. Knees buckle, heads slouch, and everything feels like shit. He tucked his MAR over his chest and took a sip of water, cupping his hand beneath the lid in case he spilled any. Water would become a precious supply soon... Grimes looked at the drop pods and the radio they hid, probably.

He stumbled over to a box, his heavy armor bouncing the sharp sunlight of mid-morning. It was mid-morning, wasn't it? He hadn't experienced anything like it in almost five years. Stations don't give much in terms of fake-sun-simulation, and Crili didn't want to deploy Marine squads to the ground for training. Apparently they hadn't thought it necessary. He glanced around at his staggering men. That had been another mistake of theirs.

The final mistake came in the form of the drop pods. The project had probably been shoveled out to some civilian contractor who hadn't dabbled in defense. The thought was that no-one would ever use them. Because no-one would dare attack Crili. Because that was an attack on the Armadan Republic, and that meant war. And in a galaxy with only two-superpowers and a perpetual cold war that allowed people to become too comfortable, everything just made sense, everything pointed at no-one blowing up the station. He stared up at the flares cutting through the sky, not flares, debris burning up.

But someone had. And Grimes hadn't been prepared for it. Neither had the drop pods. He glanced over at the pair of burn marks on the nearest pod where the heat-resistant material had torn and formed a rift. An air-made fin to steer the pod in the wrong direction. The pod was slightly sunk into the ground on that side. That was the problem.

When drop pods go from ten-G's of decel to point seven of surface, most times the gimbal chairs plus special training keeps the soldiers and civilians alive. It didn't this time. At least it didn't for First Lieutenant Kempo, whose neck snapped on impact. The only man to die on landing, and the only other commanding officer apart from Grimes. And since the diplomat wasn't opening his trap about who-what-when-and-where he worked, that made First Lieutenant Grimes the commanding officer for forty tired, nauseous, and pissed off Marines.

Not the job he'd been looking for. But Rico's squad had just expanded, it was time he did so too. He slapped back on his helmet and made his way out to the perimeter line. He had men to lead.

Part 2

Interlude: Onatia

There was a certain presence to a powerful name. A gap of air that forced itself into a room. That rush of eyes, squeaks of dress shoes turning on dance floors, and the flourish of dresses as every eye, every body, every particle of attention focused itself on the manifestation of power. The rich man, the senator, the famous sports player, all of them dropped their silly conversations of their world and focused instead on you - on the power. And then, you knew, they would follow you. That you could lead.

That was Onatia's dream. Simple, easy, affordable for the galaxy. The proper people leading. Not the self-elected, not the bloodline appointed, but those that actually commanded that gush of air. Those that deserved to lead. Those that would no longer gum up the petty politics and instead focus on the real work of the galaxy. Sure there was a misguided goodness when it came to the fact that politics and power no longer revolved around the military, the necessity of conquest, and instead on the equitable rights of people, the land swabblers of petty pieces of greenery. But that had led to weak governments. Weak leaders. And weak was something Onatia detested.

But it was one thing to be weak, and another to be foolish. To not understand the basic concepts of leadership, starting with how to obtain the masses that would follow you. Lesio didn't understand that. All she knew was how to kill, and it's one thing to kill people, and a whole other thing to lead them.

That was what Lesio didn't understand. She was misguided. But out of this misguidedness could come opportunity. A bent cannon was, after all, not a broken cannon.

It could still be used as a bomb.

Chapter 18: Nebola (Two-Weeks after the attack on Crili)

The capital of the Nebola system had for so long been forgotten. Lioni, a city among a mainly natural planet full of deserts, trees, shrubland, and savanna. The lone light reaching for the sky. When Crili and Fertili were built the attention of the system focused there. And with the docks came the floods of people that accompanied trade routes, all of which, to the dismay of the Prime Minister of Nebola, did not venture down the gravity well and instead froliced on the stations that provided anything.

For so long the citizens of Lioni looked to the night sky, towards the riches held above them - tantalus and his golden fruit - and could do nothing but stare. Their system, one which had been forgotten for so long, colonized by people without a pursuit, had never been rich. So uncreative as to name the system and the planet the same. Nebola. It had always been there. Just there. Just Nebola. Just Lioni. Just people.

And then the sky rained fire and the galaxy broke apart. The Nebola system had almost become another fallen planet, another group of rock-hard citizens whose planet's surface was turned to ash by constant fighting. The fleets had waited above them. Just at the edges of their systems. Springs ready to bounce, ready to leap forward, ready to joust - with Nebola in the middle. Sandwiched in a war they didn't start, a war they didn't fight in, a war they didn't want to happen. And then someone had switched the off switch and the skies grew blue again.

Fertili and Crili were built. Spun in an elliptical orbit around Nebola. Dangling candy to a baby. Lioni, a tiny metropolis built in the wide valley between two tectonic plates and surrounded by deep tan shrubland. A civilization that hadn't stretched far, and above it was built something a hundred times its worth. A temptation. No wonder jealousy bubbled between Lioni and Fertili. It was the perfect cooking conditions.

When finally the riches of Fertili and Crili fell to them it came in iron rain. Chunks of metal and alloy, sprayed out from the debris field at thousands a miles per second, crashed into the smooth surface of Nebola. For days the cannons, an installment by the local division of Marines that had hiked there, around Lioni thundered. Great blasts of red tearing the artificial asteroids of the sky. Out of their world.

To the eyes of the citizens of Lioni, even in the last moments of Fertili and Crili, all it did was take from them. Take their sleep. Take their piece. Take their land. Take their lives.

A testament of the station lay in the center of the city-outskirts. A piece of metal, probably a docking clamp, fifty feet high and black silver, stood ragged out of the earth it had hit. Around it remained the wreckage of a small house, scattered bags, wood, philments, tossed across the street like confetti. And painted in big white letters on the side of the wreckage: "Fertil-". The "I" had been cut off.

It was no wonder the citizens of Lioni despised the stations above.

* * *

The thing people forget about space debris is that it stays in the place it was tossed, James Hanock thought. Fragments from the solar-arrays would stay in their half-sembient orbit around Fertili for the next century, until the tiny differences in their orbits - barely a rounding error - tossed them back down towards Nebola. The cloud that remained was a thick cloud of razor sharp pieces that walking into would be like a thousand razor blades to the face.

Crili was worse.

Military officials never like to lose face in a situation like this. They prefer to fight on the front lines until either there are no front lines or no men to fight the battles with. To be told that if they tried to

leave the docks they'd be sentencing their ships to a slow death in de-orbit was a slap to the face. A slap that they didn't need after the roundhouse kick of losing a majority of the station.

Water was down. Food was up, but barely up. O2 and filters were slowly going. It was the edge of the cascade that would tip Fertili and Crili into hell. And there was barely anything anybody could do about it.

Of the hundred thousand people that lived and worked on Fertili, a good third were dead, another third were missing, and the remaining third were confined to narrow stretches of space. Crili was, yet again, worse off. They had two-hundred-thousand, and could only count for sixty thousand of them. The other hundred-and-forty-thousand were presumed dead. It was a situation no general liked to face.

Repairs to the station would take years at best, a decade was optimistic, and no telling how long until the debris field moved to allow them to start. At the moment it was every twelve hours a gap showed up on the side of the station facing Nebola - where some of the wreckage had been blasted into deorbit cycles.

The station lost 60% infrastruc on the attack, another 10% was evacuated due to maintenance concerns, and the remaining 30% was not much to look at. With mainly the few reactors running plus two generators, the station stank of recycled air and foggy water. A far shot compared to the Fertili-Crili of before.

James Hanock knew this better than anyone else. When the traffic control center had exploded, and tossed him on the edge of Fertili, he'd only survived thanks to rescue EVA's performed by the marines remaining on the station.

The other marines got off as well, so that was maybe a good two hundred of the "missing" that were still alive somewhere, noted Hanock. He was trying to keep track, trying to make one good record of everything. But like all massacres, all great disasters, it was hard to get numbers out of the human story. So they were left there, mumbling to themselves, each piece of sorrow another mouth that no longer opened, all waiting for whatever the galaxy had in store for them. Because anything was better than living in a four-by-four room with six other people.

* * *

The Armadan government, for all its size and power, never seemed to give diplomats the ride that they wanted.

A CZ-104 Transport Shuttle, commissioned from an old Marine squad based on a moon that was used for exercises only, was the ride for Diplomat Robert Ridler. Forty feet long, nose to tail, the CZ-104 was not a comfort machine. Built in the early days of the last war for mass-production it contained a raised rectangular cockpit for two men - back to back- and a cargo-style drop pod slung underneath. The access to the cockpit was through a hatch and ladder that dropped down into the detectable pod, which was just a pressurized box with a row of seven seats along each side, a bathroom, and a gun closet.

It was a ride for men who probably wouldn't see the surface, thought Ridler. One of those metal grey-you-see-everywhere looks that calms the mind right before a two-on-two flak round turns the shuttle into just another piece of debris. But luckily, Ridler wasn't riding it into battle. Unluckily, he was riding it into a diplomatic meeting.

Diplomats are like teenage kids who compare dick sizes, Ridler always found that joke amusing. They just cared too much about looks. What vehicle you drive, what type of shoes you have, which brand name was on your hat. It was all style to them. Style sells, especially in meetings like the upcoming one. But the CZ-104 wasn't stylish. It wasn't even Jump capable.

They'd had to hitch a ride on a relief cargo-hauler headed towards Crili. But at least that had given Ridler some time to stretch his legs. He could go for some of that now. He'd been strapped to his chair by a pull down metal harness for the last eight hours, and he had another seventeen to go. His legs felt like melted lead, and every hour he had to stretch them to make sure they were still there. The damn shuttle started throwing off crazy alarms any time he took off the harness. Another reason it was one of those "last you see" things on the battlefield.

Accompanying him to the diplomatic meeting was the usual entourage of "dick-pluffers" as Ridler liked to think. The technical term was aides, but he knew they would only aid him in getting coffee and holding papers. As if backpacks were too expensive to provide diplomats with.

The only members of the shuttle that weren't "dick-pluffers" were the Marine team tasked to him. Ridler wasn't akin to that name. Marine was something of a by-gone era. When soldiers jumped off ships to foreign beaches and shot it out with bad guys. Most "Marines" were just ground-side troopers deployed to ships or off-planet stations. And since before heading to space all of those had been in the water, they were called Marines.

He thought of the team across from him as more spec-op. Dressed in civilian clothes with a simple black vest slung overtop, they each carried a Partner-P223 sidearm - the most common spec-op sidearm in the world. Slightly stubbier than most side-arms, the P223 had less kick and was commonly a lot more quiet. But since they cost almost three times more than the SE-72, they were kept for more discrete groups. Ridler had been in the room when the ASC, Armadan Security Council, had signed off on that bill.

Ridler checked his watch. Sixteen and a half more hours to go. A full week and a half after Crili had been attacked. The galaxy worked slow.

* * *

Brico Mallo had not been instructed on his visitor's name, only the items he would need. The man stood five foot-seven with curly black hair. His eyes were not those of a general, nor a soldier. Calculating, but malleable. Like if you could stare into pudgy's soul as you moved it with your palm. For once it hardened it would never move again. A diplomat Mallo had reasoned.

The man had been escorted by two-Pursuer droids. Scary-fuckers whose job was to hunt anybody down and take them out. The first Pursuer stared at Mallo, its dual optical receptors, placed with the larger one just above the other, peered at him momentarily, most likely taking temperatures and heart readings that would also go in the after action report. They stood in parade stance, their thick rifles squared to their chests.

The Pursuer droids were the pinnacle of Zendon weaponry. Having decided long ago to transition the main ground forces from human to droid in order to ensure that loyalty was complete. If only they'd learned that with the navy.

The droids stood six-foot-five and weighed just over a hundred and fifty pounds. Clearly the most recent variant, Delta-Gen2, had a pair of tiny black-and-blue atena on their heads. Shaped like a pentagon with tall sides and a sharp chin, the droid had an intimidating stance.

Everything about the droid had been chosen for the precise role they would play. Optical sensors meant for mid to close range engagements. Hub style communication arrays allowed the droids to both communicate with each other and commanders up in space. The entire body was insulated and pressurized, so the vacuum wasn't a problem for the droids. They possessed top of the line reflexes, though this reduced some of the armor. The center mass of the Pursuer droids was heavily armored, able to take several shots before giving way. The droid's name wasn't randomly picked either. It was named

Pursuer for a reason, and that's because that's what it did. If you gave a Pursuer droid a target, it would find that target and do exactly what you asked of it. It didn't matter if it was weeks, or months, or years, the droid would always find its prey.

Mallo kept this in mind as he led the diplomat through what he had requested. Data-sheets. Time-specs. What the ships had seen. What the station reported. Did it report? Yes, yes, no, yes. Over and over again. Either he was a diplomat or the best damn interrogator the Emperor had ever sent. The two weren't so different after all.

"Anything else you require?" asked Mallo after a final pause.

The diplomat sighed and shifted on his feet. "What do you know about Onatia?"

"He's a traitor," said Mallo. "The man who most likely perpetrated the attack on Fertili-Crili."

"Will he attempt to intervene with these peace talks?"

"Most likely. But not in ways you would expect," answered Mallo. "He wants a war, and this is his best shot in a very long time."

The diplomat nodded. "Has the Armadan side sent anybody yet?"

"A shuttle arrived early today, looks like it's burning towards Lioni."

"Thank you Captain-"

"Master Sergeant," corrected Mallo.

"Master Sergeant," finished the diplomat. "Can you spare me a shuttle to reach the surface?"

"Always." Mallo watched him go and the droids clomp away after him. He shuttered when they were gone. Those damn things always gave him the freaks. And to bring what constituted as programmed assassins to a diplomatic meeting was not smart.

He picked up his data-pad. A new message from CHC, Central High Command, had reached him. Reinforcements were approaching, something to do with showing force during the diplomatic peace talks. Like bringing a bunch of guns to peace talks would take anyone's mind off the awful coincidence that right after the enemy's station blew up, you brought in an invasion sized fleet. Mallo couldn't do anything less than slap himself. What game was his government playing!

* * *

The thing that Robert Ridler always kept in mind was that whenever he went away, stepped out of the scope of power that entangled the Armadan home system and entered the galaxy as a representative, anything he said or did was law, until said otherwise. Since time stretched for days to get a message from one person to another, he was the live in-person version of his government. That was a power few people had held before.

He technically could have authorized the seizure of a more-proper vessel to take him to the meeting. Shakedown a few custom agents. Even inated a first strike attack should he deem it fit. But all of that was temporary law. Anything he said stayed in place until the Armadan Senate decided otherwise, and since he usually said what the Senate liked, he was picked to be a chief diplomat.

The shuttle ride was still hell on his legs. Unlike conventional space-craft, where the floors are parallel to the engines - thus creating a false sense of gravity - the CZ-104 "dropship" was meant for atmospheric flight. And like all atmospheric ships, it had the floor placed perpendicular to the engines. This was all good and fine for flying where there was another presence of gravity, but it sucked when there wasn't. What was already a bad flight became worse as the hours went on. Sitting with numb legs, pressure pushing on one side of his body in a metal encased gel filled seat. Sheesh, he would need a good shower and nap before he even met with the opposition.

That's what they were called, right? Usually it was easy. *They did that, we did this.* But this time, with Crili-Fertili, no one was sure who did what. Was it rouge Zendon agents? Did Lioni hire a hit out - Ridler chuckled at that one, the city was far too poor to waste money like that. Or was it perhaps the elusive Onatia that his High-Chair muttered about?

Ridler didn't know, and anything he didn't know his aides didn't know, and anything his aides didn't know... well that wasn't good intel to go into a meeting on. And he bet the other side didn't know any better than him. He sighed. Another seven hours to go. Where would they be landing?

* * *

Senior Representative Bezi knew none of the luxuries of power that his colleague Ridler did. He could not enact the law, he could not strip down ships, he couldn't even go into meetings by himself without an "official aide of the people's Empire." Aide, he reasoned, stood for Pursuer droid. The real official representative from the government, the one with the gun who'd blow your head off with the slightest order.

The Captain, what was his name... Bezi thought for a moment... Mallo. Mallo was a good man, seemed dutiful, though a little backward-ish. The man had pulled back his forces, which was good, but kept them in a holding action, which was bad. You didn't want the enemy to think you were waiting for something. You always wanted to lead.

Bezi checked his watch, six hours. The small shuttle he'd borrowed from Mallo was a single deck, forward to back cockpit-cabin-engine design. The type that you'd see anywhere in the galaxy. Only it wasn't meant for "deep-space" travel. It wasn't even deep space! Bezi grumbled to himself. Deep-space was when all the stars shone like each other. They were so close to Nebola's home sun that if they'd stayed there any longer he'd have concerns for radiation and cancers.

It didn't mean the ride was comfortable, but at least the seats faced away from the engine so it just felt like riding in a very fast car. The type that presses you against your seat to the brink of where you swear you'll feel the metal interior of your chair, but you don't, and instead you're engulfed by gel.

The cabin of the shuttle, Bezi bet it was a Hutson-009, but he didn't know ships well enough, was eight feet wide and twenty feet long. Five rows of double set chairs allowed it to look like something that should ferry people, not diplomatts. The wide space at the front of the cabin made Bezi wish there was a bar there. He could go for something to drink. Especially with being surrounded by murders.

After the leave of Onatia and the departure of a good chunk of Zendon assets, the Emperor had made an executive decision to move Pursuer droids with any human asset that had the potential to leave. And what was the potential to leave? If you worked in government, it was the Emperor's answer. If you were anything higher than an aide you constituted a pair of "bodyguards", but whose body were they really protecting? The Emperor's ego or you? Bezi knew the answer. The Emperor could always get more people like him.

Onatia's desertion and the fair stripping of ranks that followed left both a hole in the Zendon military structure and the always apparent need for redesign. On most missions like this he'd be accompanied by the System-Chief, the man who knew the workings of the place, all the best restaurants to eat at, what the enemy thought, how they slept, and where to visit when the mission was done. There wasn't that position in the Nebola sector anymore. He'd been killed while visiting a diplomat on Fertili. His body was probably one of the ones forming the debris field around the station.

So that left the uneasy question, who was in charge?

Was it him, for he spoke for the Emperor. Was it Mallo, since he had all the fire power? Or was it some other guy who'd swoop in from nowhere and claim power before being stabbed in the back by

everybody after they all shook his hand and licked his boot? Bezi bet it was the last one, but hoped for the first. It would be pretty nice to have power after a while.

He wanted to tap open a communication to the pilot and ask where they were going but he knew better than that. He wanted to look like he knew everything. And asking such unnecessary questions would only detract from that. Anyway, when they landed it wouldn't matter where he was, it only would matter what he did.

Bezi stared out the simulated window next to him and watched the solar system slowly drift closer as his tiny speck of a shuttle raced towards a meeting that should have never happened.

* * *

Mallo watched the stars. The SER, or Simulated Environment Room, was a rounded bulb in the center of a flat still ship. A skylight into the heavens that humanity had so long dreamt for, and now fought over. Wasn't that the path of humanity? Work towards something, then scuffle endless over who runs it, until hatred and revenge block out the cooler minds from solving the problem.

Someone had done that here. They'd started a fight over old-wounds and expected it to heal something. For someone to learn a lesson, they always said. But no-one learned anything apart from how to kill the other guy faster.

Thoughts like these would get him court-martialed back home. The web of the spider was not a web that liked being shaken, and ideas like his shook things. Mallo watched the glossy white stars in the deep void. A peaceful trance with himself, a spot of meditation on a ship of commotion.

Both diplomats were heading for each other now. Two shuttles, two governments, preparing to hash it out over a topic neither of them fully knew but suspected the other was behind. The Zendon navy was just trying its hand again or the Armadan navy wanted an excuse for war. Same old, same old. Even with the data-records Mallo had provided of the "battle" far away, he still wasn't sure of what he was seeing. Was it a massive malfunction, or was there really a ship in the heat of it all.

The door to the SER buzzed.

"Come in," Mallo waved it open.

Junior Techie Mirtha stepped in, clearly a little bit flustered, but who wasn't at this juncture - the people who weren't scared of the Galaxy were the people who scared Mallo.

"Sir, it's for you," she said, handing over the data-chip. "Came in this morning off the *Suzuko* scanners, looks like something sunward."

"Thank you Mirtha," Mallo bowed. He waited until the girl left before plugging it into the display system. It was easier than watching it on his data-pad and much more comfortable. The *Suzuko* was a sniffer ship, one of the ones he'd pulled back to show he didn't mean anything aggressive. Pulling back a spy usually meant you weren't in the long fight.

The digital stars above his head were suddenly flushed out with an IR scan of something. Foggy white blobs of heat popped up like clouds - explosions - followed by sudden lesser translations of drive-plumes being lit. A battle. Someone was having a battle in his half of the system.

Mallo ran his hand over the replay button. The IR image was fuzzy, but it was more than two-ships in the AO. More like twelve or so. Big ones at that, putting off a lot of waste heat. Two bursts, big explosions, but no ships died.

Glycol-5 came to his mind. The flare of the galaxy. No surprise his ship's scanners had picked up on this little random event. Anything that suddenly burst to life that bright would catch the attention of every scanner in the galaxy.

He watched the first ship run, curving around, then burning hard, disappearing... Mallo waited with anticipation, not realizing he was leaning forward, elbows on knees. Where was that first ship? Why did the IR scanner keep looking at the space?

There! A tiny blip. Indistinguishable from the rest of the galaxy. Potentially an ember or something radioactive burning up. But it came on too fast, too sharp, to be anything other than a drive plume. The first ship got away. The IR scan cut off and Mallo leaned back in his seat, scratching his chin.

There was a battle in his system, just on the edge of his territory. He could do something about it, but ordering ships around was another man's job. He looked down, his feet were still stuck in the spider's web. He'd have to wait until the Emperor made the decision of who was to lead. And the Emperor had to make it fast, otherwise Mallo feared he might shake the web.

* * *

The CZ-104 pilot, a man in his mid-forties, had flown Tri-Senterans for most of his life. Used to the snappier response of the fighter and the ability to punch it without worrying for passengers was something he would miss. But the CZ-104 wasn't helpless.

Two twin cannons perched right beneath the wide cooling tubes that rotated the wings towards and away from the craft. In deep space you didn't need wings like that, but it never hurt to have them out. A trio of cluster missiles were positioned right beneath the main cabin, right beside the portable flare launcher and IMS jammer. That would do nothing to keep the CZ-104 safe from a torpedo, but it might help in the case of an air-to-ground missile.

The pilot shifted in his seat. The flight gear he'd been provided was also meant for ground. In space you had to expect to be flung into the vacuum at any time, and thus you wore basically Marine armor but without the heavy gear. Same helmet, dark grey with breathing tubes, and a basic life-support vest. But the CZ-104 gear was just a basic combat helmet, no breathers, and a loose flight suit. He stretched his arms. It gave him the heebie-jeebies. No one deserved to go into space like this.

His radio buzzed for a moment, sounding like someone was switching channels. Probably just passing through the scattered radio-waves from the broken antenna system back on Crili. Poor bastards hadn't even seen it coming. He tapped his ear, receiving a set of new instructions. They were heading for the city instead of the station. He copied affirmative and shifted the flight plan accordingly.

Across the system, past the sun, just inside torpedo range of a lone Armadan patrol boat, a pilot for the Zendon shuttle was doing the same. He'd just bounced over a new frequency and was being redirected, towards Lioni. He also nodded his affirmative and shut down the communications, not understanding that he'd just enacted Onatia's first step to make the Nebola system the hot-bed for the next war.

Onatia put down the receiver and watched the shuttle trajectories move slightly. After the word about Lesio and her battle after her failure at Crili he decided he needed a more personal hand on the matters. Let Lesio run wild, let her blow things up, let the bomb begin to tick louder. She would need direction, as all martyrs do, but soon she'd be the biggest play in his game. Until then, Onatia picked up his data-pad, he had diplomacy to break down.

Chapter 19: Talking tables

The thing about neutrality was it was a double edged sword. At the same time it brought peace, it also brought uncertainty for a little while. That question of who was really on whose side, made even worse that the galaxy had become a two person game of cards. But neutrality also brings a stagnated feeling, a peace that everyone feels easy to slip into. An older brother's shoes, a girlfriend's scent. But with that easy feeling comes complacency. The desire, then demand, then perceived reality that truce truly is forever. That no-one wants to go to war, that war only breaks things while peace builds them. But then the galaxy had the table pulled out from under their little peace game, and someone broke the truce.

* * *

The *RedRunner* watched Crili die. Watched Fertili fall. Listened to the scattered reports that were less answers and just more questions. They'd practiced drills for this. Fire on the Zendon fleet, glass Nebola if necessary. The countdowns were set up. Timers perfect to the second. In fourteen hours the only thing left standing would be them, Crili, and the few scattered cargo haulers in the system. And even those could be taken care of. The system could be purged. They waited for the word. But the word never came. Instead all that came were the obligatory "stand still" call signs. The words that made it seem like peace was still a thing and that they hadn't moved into a state of war. But they had, and it seemed like the enemy was right there!

Still nothing happened. No new ships to Crili or Fertili, so the word had gotten out. A blocked convoy at the edge of the system. But blocked by who? No navies were in the area. It seemed like for the first time in history, the Galaxy was waiting for someone else to make a move.

* * *

Something was wrong, Hanock knew it. The debris field outside was shifting. He'd told his computer to plot each piece with a red dot, and a yellow dot for where it had been the day before. Yesterday the red and yellow dots overlapped, a few slightly apart. But today that wasn't the case. The entire west side of the station debris was sliding away. What Hanock thought would take years was taking only weeks, the rounding error bumped up a few percentage points.

Debris would start falling on the planet in just three hours by his current computer model, and it wasn't just some scraps this time. If the station was a corpse, it just dropped an arm. What equated to a Richter level 3 extinction event was about to occur beneath him. Anything five and higher meant death for everything, four was a nuclear winter, three was destruction to habitat.

Hanock scratched his chin. The computer models were bad and good. Bad for the short sprint, good for the long run. With the debris field shifting, suddenly an entire half of the station would be open to supply shuttles and the like. That meant getting the fort back to life. They'd grown to calling Crili-Fertili the fort of the damned, full of the damned and dreary. Hanock didn't care what name they called it, as long as he was able to keep doing his work.

He plotted the likeliest path for the debris, a massive savana next to deep brush, east of Lioni by two hundred miles. Nothing should be down there, so hopefully it would be a win-win for everyone... he glanced at the screen, except for the people of Lioni who'd have a few sleepless nights. He drafted an emergency statement and beamed it out. Better to warn people than not.

* * *

The first night was spent in the same chairs they'd dropped in on. Soldiers still wearing the battlefields finest armor, or so the advertising had said. No one slept, but everyone pretended too for the

sake of the guy next to them and the hope that he might rest where they could not. It was a bunch of hot-wires slowly cooling off, and soon they'd put out steam.

Grimes woke with a sore neck. He'd managed maybe four hours, better than most, but worse than what he liked. There wouldn't be morning PT that day, hell there might never be morning PT in his life again. The semblance of normality was too far a concept for him to grasp. He stretched his neck, heard the reassuring pops, and unstrapped himself from the seat. His gun had been moved away from his seat, propped against the wall. Someone had cleaned it. Grimes balanced it in his two hands. The sights would need work, but apart from that he was grateful.

He missed the washer. His underlayer, aka jump suit since Marines were expected to fight in all climates, smelled like dry breath from yesterday's sweat. He glanced outside, the sharp sunlight stabbing against the metal ramp. He would miss the cool shade during this shift.

Outside a more secure perimeter had been set up. Space twenty yards away from the drop pods, a complete circle of empty boxes, downed trees, and quickly dug mini trenches ensured whoever attacked them wouldn't have a good time. Grimes sighed, most likely no-one would attack them. If they wanted to, they already would have. Wars were fought too fast to be anything different. He moved over the wet grass to where Corporal Downing was standing over the radio.

"Does it work?" Grimes asked.

"No."

Fuck.

Grimes took a deep breath. The helmet already felt stuffy. Downing had donned his when Grimes had approached but now regretted it for the extra heat it brought. Most of the AC units had failed soon after landing.

Grimes noted the junior's tired stance and took off his helmet. Sometimes it helped not to be too formal about things.

"How is everyone?" Grimes asked in a quiet voice.

Downing shook his head, "Not good. Bunch of the boys are tired as shit, but their duty comes first for them, even in front of sleep. Even though it should be soldiers first, duty second."

Grimes nodded. He understood. Marines would always place others in front of them. It's part of the personality trait that made them put on armor, jump outside a spaceship, and duke it out with the enemy for the same pay a year that a desk worker gets in a comfy office. Selflessness. One hell of a drug.

"Just make sure no-one starts breaking down," Grimes gave Downing a pat on the shoulder and moved on.

There were other things to do that day, but the radio had been the biggest one. Without a radio they couldn't tell anymore where they were, worse, they could barely tell where they were themselves. They'd have to rig something up, and soon. Grimes turned left at the perimeter, walking down its side. He glanced momentarily at the dropship where a body bag was coming out. First they needed to conduct a funeral.

It wasn't typical that Marines died from injuries sustained outside of combat. Usually they took a bullet to the chest, a pressure change to the organs, or an explosion to everywhere. Most of the times the burials took place back home, with a family and an urn to seal in the wall. Remember the fallen was the most common word. Grimes always thought that distasteful. Dead Marines usually didn't fall, they spiraled off into space.

But it wasn't his place to say what or when was distasteful, today it was his job to complete the act. As head officer of the now forty man Rico squad, he oversaw the burial ceremony. Even the snapshot diplomat whose name no one had wriggled out came to watch the burial.

It was a simple hole, two feet deep, six feet long, four feet wide, dug twenty yards from the perimeter at the edge of the forest. A tree overlooked the whole ordeal as two sweat Marines in just jumpsuits shoveled away for an hour under the shade. That was probably the reason for the tree, not the semblance of nature or anything.

A guy from Kempo's squad said a few words. But Marines aren't the best at words so it was just a bunch of nodding and a few tears. Even bears had to cry a time or two.

They lowered the white stretch bag into the hole. Grimes watched with empty eyes as they solved the dirt back on top. That could have been him. That could have been his seat that failed. That jerked too much to the left before snapping to the right. Fuck.

No words were given after the hole was sealed. No drinks, no water to spare. The whole ordeal was wrong, all of it was wrong! Every goddamn part of it. No one was shooting. No war was playing out. But here they were. Dressed in BDUs and BA ready to fight the fucking enemy! Grimes squeezed his fists. Nothing about it made sense. They were at the whim of the galaxy. And for Grimes, a man who didn't like others to lead him by the string, that was enough to make his head split. He watched the others slowly disappear back towards the perimeter, to take up positions again for a battle none of them expected to fight anymore. Grimes couldn't do that to them. Couldn't leave them on their own. He had to step up and lead them, even if it was pointless. Because they were Marines - he glanced at the soft dirt next to him - and Marines were supposed to die in battle.

* * *

Usually de-orbiting didn't make Ridler clench his thighs like some first timer in space. Every few seconds his seat would click, which wouldn't be a problem if they were gimbaled, but they weren't. So every breath Ridler waited for his seat to snap off the wall and slam into something. The pair of spec-ops officers sat with their heads gently rested back and eyes closed. Feigning sleep, thought Ridler nastily. The shuttle jumped, coming out of the burn and entering the upper atmosphere.

The CZ-104 was built for conditions like this. Long industrial wings adjusted to stabilize the shuttle before the RCS thrusters cut off. The rear boosters activated, a deep blue, and the shuttle leapt towards Lioni.

Ridler relaxed in his seat, the pops having disappeared. So the meeting would happen planetside, as if the station had never happened. What arrogant pricks.

In the cockpit the 3D map of Nebola stretched below him, and just beneath the glass canopy was the real planet. The pilot felt at home as he steered the shuttle across the land in a gentle curve towards the capital city, not noticing the lack of the other shuttle from the opposition.

Bezi checked his watch again. He'd synced it with the pilots on board countdown timer, twenty minutes. He glanced out the digital window, the planet still rotated beneath him. So they wanted to have the meeting on the station, to try to play the victim card for actions that were not his. Bezi cracked his knuckles and stretched his arms. That meant they wanted something from him, something he probably wouldn't be authorized to give.

* * *

Mallo listened closely to the veiled bullshit he was being served. “For reasons one or another we cannot...” blah blah blah. Mallo turned down the recording. So capital wasn’t going to give him any assistance here apart from another boatload of weapons. Ships that wouldn’t look good in the face of a travesty on the opposition's side. He needed some form of leadership or rank, even if it put the diplomat above him. They needed to be unified in the current climate of chaos, and the Emperor wasn’t going to give him that justice. Wasn’t going to let him protect his web.

Mallo shut off the recording and tossed it away. Goddamnit. He probably should have had one of the legal experts come up to his private corders to listen to the recording with him, but that would do no good, they’d only agree with everything the Emperor was saying. Which meant that the web was too sticky for its defenders to raise arms and protect it. At least it meant when everything turned shit-side he could blame it on the inability for his government to act. Then they’d kill him, but that was that. There was literally nothing else to do. Maybe wait for some developments in the negotiations. His government was screwed. He checked the data-pad for more time. They wouldn’t even tell him the concentration of the reinforcements he was receiving. Which usually meant it was big.

* * *

The CZ-104 shuttle leveled off as it approached the city limits of Lioni. It’s wide wings shifted slightly as the shuttle dipped its back end lower than the front, creating a drag. Humming, the pilot switched on the pair of four landing thrusters on the bottom of the “crate”, aka the sitting area for the diplomat. Quick bursts slowed the momentum of the shuttle down so it could flutter to the platform. Three more bursts. The quick clank of landing gear ending. Shuttle wings rising. And contact. The shuttle bounced slightly, a feeling only the pilot experienced, of the stomach pulling back before pushing forward. Just the final momentum being absorbed by him. He clicked the button marked “ramp” and beneath his feet, the front section of the crate lowered. So simple he could have done it automatically, but the pilot enjoyed the thrill of flying.

Ridler exited the ramp into the warm sunlight of Lioni. He’d visited planets like it before, just on the edge of the goldilocks area and with cities just around the equator. People who liked the warm temperatures. Not his people, but people he could deal with.

The senior aide to the prime minister was waiting just beyond the ramp, a folder under one arm and the other arm raised to shake. Ridler took the man's arm, a little too stiff but waiting for hours could do that to people. They walked back to the waiting car, a six wheeler meant for off road. It stood like a squashed beetle, long, wide, and flat.

“Does the prime minister expect us to go joy riding?” asked Ridler as the rest of his party entered the vehicle. They sat along the edge of the car, with an open area in the center of the cab.

“He just wants to be prepared for anything,” the aide smiled and nodded.

So they don’t feel safe, Ridler noted as the car rumbled away from the platform. It’s wheels made a hiss click sound on the metal before melloying out to a low rumble over the dirt. He glanced back toward the platform and made a mental note to never fly in a CZ-104 ever again. Those shuttles also didn’t feel safe. And both required the same answer, more money from the Armadan government for upgrades. Ridler stared at the floor of the car. Yeah, Lioni needed the money if it was still using cars.

Cars hadn’t been phased out for a long time on most planets. Powered by electric grids and hydro-batteries they were affordable, and cost-effective in a time when most fuels for space travel could cost more than the ship itself. So it made sense to only use the costly fuel when necessary, and not to shuttle people around where cars could take them. But as metropolis grew, and more people moved into

cities, roads slowly became a thing of the past. With the ground cluttered by mankind, governments looked to new solutions for quick travel. Trains were always a favorite, especially the supersonic variant. Next to that came public shuttles, bulky things that followed pre-programed paths through the cities.

Of course neither solution fully erased the problem of crowded sidewalks, those would always exist, but they were the best solutions. Much better than the more radical measures of population control through contraceptive means. Forcing one, two, or three child limits. Restricting the people's freedom. Those individuals always forget that the more people there are, the more ideas float around, and the more solutions occur. Why do cities with small populations rarely pull out a good candidate for the Armadan tech-schools? Because they simply don't have enough people for smart ones to come out regularly. So early cities always encourage reproduction. Like colonists or bacteria, the first few generations' job was to spread like wildfire through dry bush.

He leaned back, checked his watch and waited. Why didn't he hear the roar of the other ambassadors shuttle yet?

Bezi was thinking the same thing about Crili. Led onboard by a pair of Armadan Marines he met and nodded with the current Armadan head of station, Captain Penny, a mid sixties stern faced woman, before being shuttled away to a waiting point. His droids had been permitted on the station with the condition of a double lock being put on their necks. With a word it would go off and deprive him of his "guards". Bezi was fine with that. His aides shuttled around the waiting room, clearly nervous as they traded glances. This was the enemy's territory. Not theirs. And for once the enemy had a decent reason to shoot someone. For his part Bezi sat still and waited. Sooner or later the Armadan negotiator would show up.

Except he didn't. Two hours went by, no shuttle. Then three hours, still nothing. At four hours, his stomach grumbling, Bezi stood up to knock on the door. This was no way to treat a diplomat.

The Armadan Marine outside jumped at the knocks and opened the door a peek.

"Yes sir?"

"Where is the other diplomat?" demanded Bezi.

The Armadan Marine looked puzzled, but Bezi couldn't tell that behind the mask.

"I will get on that right away sir," the Marine closed the door and opened a comlink to his chief of rotation.

Back on the surface a similar job was taking place. Except under different assumptions.

"I always told you the Zendon were low life," scolded Ridler. Four fucking hours! He'd waited that long so no-one could show up. What the hell was going on.

"They drag us here, and then what?" asked Lioni's prime minister, Shesa, a late forties woman half Ridler's size. She wore loose clothing for the warm weather. Ridler still felt stuffy after his shower.

"Nothing," answered Ridler. "Let us stir, shit like that. They're planning a war, I know it. Hell, everyone knows it. They lost the last one now they want back. So they'll blow up our station, drop a few bombs on this city, and swarm the system with their navy."

Shesa shook his head in dismay. She'd met the Zendon system-chief a few times when he came down to the planet. The man seemed nice enough, her age with a thin quiet look. A gentleman of the old times. He hadn't seemed like he wanted war. But then again, not everyone on each side did. She had opposed the last war, and the stations of guns built above her planet, but then it had fallen and she was to

carry the guilt. Shesa sipped her drink and steeled her again Ridler's next rant. The man could pent up anger like nobody else. Hopefully he got it all out now. He better not do it in front of the other diplomat.

* * *

The Emperor's web was stickier than most, especially now considering a portion of it had been ripped away. But sometimes that added residue, that increased stickiness only resulted in the web being unable to defend itself. Mallo hadn't asked to be tasked with this new objective. He hadn't asked to be sent out to the far away fleets to help shore up defenses. But he'd done his job well. Completed what he'd been sent to do. But now, after all his service, he was being put in a position where he couldn't defend the thing he'd built. The only way one could actually act on their own would be self-defense, but would the Emperor consider that treason?

He could see why Onatia had left. But he wasn't Onatia, and he had no desire to become the man. Mallo was no traitor, he held a loyalty to the people under his command. But his loyalty was first and foremost to the spider at the center of the web. And until that spider got its act together, Mallo was stuck to the web like everyone else. He stared at the foggy IR recording again. If only he could move now. If only he could attack. The pieces were coming together, the spies story, the IR video, and attack on the station. Onatia wanted Nebola to be the next fire to turn down the thawed peace, Mallo held the extinguisher, he was just unable to use it.

* * *

Bezi had employed the useful work of spies over the years. Throughout his career he'd made sure to have them on every pay list, because information was more valuable raw than regurgitated through bureaucracy a dozen times. He sat in the chair directly across the room from the door where the Marine stood guard. There had been no word in or out about the shuttle or the diplomat. Part of Bezi hoped for the best, but his official stance would have to be "no comment" if anything had actually happened. But Bezi remembered that the station chief - rest his soul - had installed a fairly robust spy network throughout Fertili and even gotten contacts into Crili. So all Bezi had to do was open up his datapad, log into the secure server, and listen to the news piling back to him.

"Yeah that's a negative on my end Mark, no shuttle descending," the datapad logged the user as *Lioni Tower*.

"Not going to do Anderson, I'm calling the pilot."

"Copy."

A new voice joined the line: *CZ-104a*.

"Wassup."

"Lioni here, we have you registered as landed. Can you confirm?"

"Yeah, I landed about four hours ago. What's going on?"

"Any sign of the other shuttle while you descended? Debris? Did you match or confirm courses?"

"Negative. Has something happened?"

"Not yet." *Clink*.

The datapad buzzed as it changed relay lanes.

"Anderson, the pilot said no other sign of the shuttle."

"Any communication with Crili?"

"Buzzed, no confirmation. It may be up there."

"Do we tell Ridler to ride up?"

"Not yet. He's still pissed about the other diplomat not being here. We don't make him potentially run a dry errand up to the station."

Bezi closed the datapad, satisfied with finding the answer. Neither shuttle pilot had known where the other was going. Neither diplomat had done this intentionally. So that only left two options, foolhardiness or malpractice by an external agent. And Bezi bet it was the latter. The galaxy didn't make him to sit around, so he took action.

"Jacob," said Bezi, marching up to the Marine. The Marine shifted slightly, stunned the diplomat knew his name.

"Yes sir, no news yet about the shuttle."

"We both know that's a lie," said Bezi softly. "My men need a quick escort."

"I cannot do that sir, the station is on lockdown."

"Exactly why we need your escort."

Bezi could see the Marine thinking, gears whirring for something to hit, then click. "Where to sir?"

"My shuttle."

"You're leaving already?" Jacob was playing the game. Good, thought Bezi, now they both were on the same table.

"Unfortunately so. Please see to it that I can get to my shuttle."

"Your pilot needs to be informed."

"Thank you," Bezi nodded and headed back to his seat. He hoped the Armadan diplomat wasn't doing the same thing. It would be awkward to pass each other during flight.

The door opened and Jacob left. Bezi waited, his legs crossed. The aides waited and watched, chewing on nails they didn't have. A clock in the corner ticked, every two seconds letting loose a sharp snap.

"Mr. Bezi," called the Marine entering the room. He was dressed in the same outfit as Jacob had, white armor, white helmet, gun slung over back, faint view of black BDU underneath. His chestplate had two notches where Jacob only had one, so a higher rank, probably a Lieutenant.

"Come on," Bezi said to his aides.

"Please follow me sir," the Marine waited until Bezi was at the door before moving down the corridor.

It was apparent that the station was a wreck. Two points on the hallway had quick seal technology applied to them, the gel slapped onto the vacant holes to keep pressure in the station. At one spot in the hallway the Marine paused and allowed a gurney to be pushed past them. The disaster wasn't old enough for everyone to have died yet from their injuries. Bezi winced every time the station creaked, fearing some old sealant or connector was about to bust and send them spiraling out into space.

The Marine walked with his back straight and arms stiff. Everytime they passed a hallway, there would always be two other Marines guarding the door. The station really was on lockdown. His group stayed tucked close together behind him. They were in enemy territory, but every time he passed a stretched behind folded all Bezi could think about was they were all human. And that was information so valuable you had to experience it first hand.

* * *

The Emperor was not a troubled man, nor a lazy man, but he was a divided man. The Zendon Empire, his empire, spread across more space than humanity had even hoped to hold when they first left the gravity well. And that divided attention meant he couldn't always see everything at once, so he appointed people to oversee such things. Usually that meant commanders on the battlefield held the final word, but after Onatia that was no more. The Emperor reviewed his map again. Protests, feuds, coups,

diplomatic meetings, all more than ever before. Someone was trying to play with his borders. Make him fold inward.

Onatia.

The best and worst man in the Emperor's book. The man who'd taken so much from the empire yet left the powerful reminder that without a strong hand, seeds of rice slipped through. The Emperor sipped his drink. But a singular strong hand was easy to avoid. He needed something better. He needed commanders on the field who he could trust. He opened up the list of faithful commanders on his larger monitor.

The Emperor was getting old, mid eighties, so he preferred to sit down and look at the big text. Twenty messages from his man in the Nebola sector, Master Sergeant Brico Mallo. A man the Emperor had kept close to home for his steady mind on matters happening in the palace. A man who never stepped beyond the Emperor's boundaries.

The Emperor sighed and thought for a second. Mallo would be in the Nebola sector. One of the hot-areas identified on his map. If anything happened, it would probably happen there. Someone had sent Mallo supplies, all-be-it not the best move in the current politician climate, but it would make sure Mallo was able to defend himself. The man could not be that stupidly loyal not to do anything as his ships were attacked.

The Emperor closed the list. Maybe another day he'd appoint some sort of sovereignty to the man's actions, but the movements of Onatia still touched close to home. He returned to his map and watched the galaxy flicker around him.

* * *

The Zendon shuttle came down at the city limits. Ridler would not bow to the snake by meeting him there. The man did not deserve it after making him wait so long. So Ridler and Shesa sent the same aide as before, the same weird off-road vehicle as before, to pick up the opposition.

That was what they really were. It didn't matter if nobody knew who started it, the Zendon Empire was the enemy. They'd been that way for the last few wars, and they'd be that way for the next few. The diplomat, Ridler checked his data-pad, Bezi, was just looking to try to use the situation for his government's benefit. Maybe even start a war over it. That was the only plausible explanation for the increased naval presence on the edge of the system.

Ridler passed the time with a drink as Bezi steadily grew closer. The dick-measuring contest had been scrapped, and now Ridler had to show he was boss. This was his home-turf, Armadan-turf. He wasn't going to get kicked around by some half-level Zendon diplomat.

The car rolled to a stop at the foot of the head-palace steps. Two Armadan Marines stood at attention as the Zendon diplomat, a medium sized man with a slight belly, exited the vehicle. Ridler made no attempt to head down the steps to greet him. He was in control here.

Following Bezi out of the car were the Pursuer droids. Immediately the Armadan Marines tensed, fingers hovering right over their safety. The two snipers posted on the building switched from the back of Bezi's head to the droids. Trained assassins usually didn't travel with diplomats.

Bezi marched up the stairs, his eyes slightly bleary from the long day of travel and waiting. Ridler gave him a slim smile as he crested the steps.

"Diplomat Bezi," Ridler said, slapping his hands over the man's one extended hand. He had twice as much firepower as the other man did. Or, he could. That would require a call.

"Mr. Ridler," Bezi nodded. "How gracious of you to host us here."

“How gracious of you to come,” Ridler squeezed the man's hand and dropped it. “I presume you're not too tired to start?” Ridler always wanted the opposition tired and delirious the first meeting. It allowed him to get one step ahead where it mattered most, the first day.

“Of course not. The luxury of sleep is one that diplomats must forgo.”

“Then let's cut to it,” Ridler opened the door for his guest and led him down the hallway to the right.

The “palace” of Lioni, which hosted the Prime Minister's quarters, the ballroom, and four meeting rooms was arrayed like a massive X. Each wing had a special function. The entrance, and grand steps, were led up the west side of the X, between two wings, emptied into the central foyer. The political lounges, including the four meeting rooms, were arrayed to the right of the main foyer, displayed in such a way that a guest had to walk past the expansive collection of artifacts the Lioni people had found on their planet. Ridler hardly glanced that way, a show of power that he was too good to indulge in the history around him. Too powerful to care.

Another pair of Marines flanked the door into the political lounges that split off into the diplomat rooms. Reinforce the fact that this was their territory.

Ridler paused at the door and glanced at Bezi's two Pursuer droids. “As you know, only aides are allowed into the rooms.”

“Of course,” Bezi nodded and told the droids to stay there. Their programming would understand, and both of them were grateful to be gone of the killers.

The political lounge was spacious. Chairs set around low coffee tables and lights dangling from the tall ceiling. Armadan home money had funded this building, not the local's money. That was clear from the start to Bezi. Another show of what the other's government could do that he could not. All of the Zendon Empire's treasury was being emptied into one military project after another.

The meeting room was far less spacious. Oak wood panels, soft brown chairs, black lining against the grey carpet, hidden lights in the ceiling, and a massive symbol of the Armadan crest on the far wall - lest they forget whose territory they were in.

Ridler's aides had already set themselves up on one half of the table. The head chairs would be reserved for the diplomats only. Bezi's aides rushed to get themselves situated and for a few minutes the only sounds were rushing papers and clinking chairs.

“Shall we?” asked Ridler once the noise died down.

“I think we should,” nodded Bezi, “you're the host, you can start if you wish.”

Ridler nodded his thanks. Of course he would start, that arrogant prick. “I'm not going to mince words, time is crucial and it's running out quick. We're concerned with the rapid increase in Zendon power across the station. Coupled with the fact that we just lost our major military asset in the region and we're starting to feel as if a war is about to happen. We request financial aid to help with the damage sustained to our station and to this planet. We also demand an immediate reduction in the size of your force in the region.”

Bezi nodded slowly. So the Armadan side was going to do what they always did, blame it on them. But then again, in a typical meeting Bezi would just blame it on the Armadan side and then they'd stalemate for several months. But Ridler was right, they didn't have months.

“The Zendon government wants to state with the strongest terms that we knew nothing about the attack on the Armadan stations of Crili and Fertili. We reproach the idea of any such attack having occurred and we are willing to help with the transportation of medical resources to the station from our fleet.” He put down the paper. They hadn't given him much to work with. Shit.

Ridler nodded once at the end. He knew the Zendon side would balk at the attack being their fault, and the medical supplies were good, but he bet he could squeeze them for more. They really didn't want to seem like the attack was their fault. Who could blame them. All their money was going down the war path, the Emperor probably wanted peace for a generation or two so he could get his government and society back together. Pity that wasn't what Ridler was looking for.

"Medical supplies sounds like a good way to get your people on the station. Financial aid is all we requested," Ridler said.

"The Zendon government doesn't have the financial resources you request," said Bezi. "And I'm sure the people onboard Crili would love some more medical supplies. Afterall, my team and I were just there."

"And once it comes out who perpetrated this attack?" Ridler raised his eyebrow.

"Then it comes out and this meeting will conclude faster than either of us could have guessed. And our respective governments will start hunting down the real perpetrators."

Ridler nodded again. So Bezi really thought it was someone else. Ok, fine enough.

"What about the fleet on the border?" asked Ridler.

"The patrol fleet?"

"Sure, whatever you want to call it. Why is it amassing?"

"Reinforcements were sent in order to ensure the Armadan navy didn't try anything stupid and attack."

"And what about the fact that our navy currently consists of nada," Ridler waved his hand through the air. That would change in four days, he just needed to put the call in that night.

"We did not know that when we deployed the ships," said Bezi calmly. He knew his government had fouled up that one but he couldn't make concessions yet.

"Yet you deployed them in a rapid manner."

"When one's neighbor is performing more active wargames than ever before it's good nature to have one's defensive force on standby."

"Defensive force?"

"Yes."

Ridler raised his eyebrows. "Ok. And your peacekeeping guards?"

"Can we stop with the word games?" asked Bezi. "Our job is diplomacy." He stifled a yawn.

"You sound tired Bezi," Ridler put real concern into his words, "let's put the diplomacy to a rest for tonight and pick up tomorrow."

"I'm amenable to that," Bezi nodded and left. His aides followed him. One of them would surely lead him to the room that had been provided.

Ridler waited until the door slammed the mutter, "asshole."

"He's good, boss," agreed Ridler's final aide, still packing up his papers.

"He's good at maneuvering around the conversation."

"That's what diplomats are paid to do. Generals are the ones who do the real work, the real change," his aide said, packing up.

Ridler shot him an accusatory glance. "Then why don't you go work for a general?"

"Because I want to show up home alive," the aide finished packing and left. The door slammed behind him, leaving only Ridler in the room. He took out his datapad and stared at the screen. Fine, if generals were the ones who made the change, then it was time for him to make some change. He sent out the message, Captain Constantine should be in the system in four days. Then maybe the negotiations

could gain some ground. Until then it was the same old game, played by the same old players, just fresh new faces.

* * *

The deck of the *Windless*, the proud Command Warship of the Seventh fleet, stretched out twenty yards to a semi-circle of windows. Several junior officers, deck sergeants, and command lieutenants scurried around command modules there. But the main action took place in the circular dip that filled the middle of the command deck.

Captain Constantine sat in the command chair right before the pit, built in such a way that in high tense moments when comms cut out, the pit and captain could yell to each other. Constantine wore his standard flag bearing uniform, the white cut top, black boots, and grey pants with red stripes. Technically a uniform from a different arm of the military, but nobody dared to push Constantine on that one.

Captain Constantine was what one man might call eccentric and another man might call a monster. Appointed commander of a research base after the former commander was killed during an ambush in the woods, Constantine held out against all odds for seventeen months. After this ordeal and the subsequent victory in that sector, Constantine used the political presegious that came with his name to jump from the army to the navy. Confident in his skills as a commander, he cut a path through the ranks like a scythe through corn. If you got in his way, you ended up out of the way and out of the navy.

Constantine stroked his chin and stared out the digital windows that surrounded him. The *Windless* was surrounded by her sister warships the *StarBurn* and *Birthright* cut through the choppy waves of space like lava through butter. There should have been a third warship, the *Salute*, but sadly she had perished when Crili drowned.

Constantine had received the word about Crili in the same fashion that the RedRunner had, by preparing all weapons and ready to go to war. No one dared attack the Armadan navy like that and get away with it. But unlike the RedRunner, which stewed in its impatience to just get the job done, Constantine had received direct word from the JCF that his services would be needed and all he had to do was wait. And wait he did, until his person datapad pinged with a message.

Preceding the message was the usual code-index, a long line of numbers that recognized the sender as Diplomat Robert Ridler. The message itself was uncharacteristically short for a diplomat. Weren't those guys usually more poetic than straightforward. This one must be swinging by the string of his pants. But the message was what Constantine had hoped for, so he wasn't going to complain.

Lieutenant Commander Nev stood to the right of Constantine's seat. He'd been picked up by Constantine's rise to power as a very good informant on all things the Captain needed to know. Constantine passed over the message.

"We're still missing our carrier task force," commented Nev, he paused, "but I have all faith we can take them. The Seventh fleet is as strong as ever."

Constantine forgot Nev was also a consistent boot licker. Nev passed back the datapad and Constantine glanced in his direction. "You forget Nev why they call a fleet a fleet and not an Armada. A fleet acts as one, a fleet is unstoppable because it is diverse." Constantine waved his hand at the ships out in space. "Currently we have an Armada. Powerful yes, but not unstoppable. We will wait for the reinforcements before beginning rejoining the system."

"Are you sure Captain?"

Constantine gripped the datapad. "Positive."

"And what about the urgency of the message?"

"How soon will the carrier task force arrive?"

“JTC expects it to arrive within the end of the week. That makes deployment time from now two-weeks if you wish to finish the wargames.”

“I do. Relay a message back to Ridler, informing our diplomatic friend that we’re undergoing repairs. It’s been two weeks since Crili, they can wait another two.”

“I will do sir,” Nev nodded and left.

Constantine turned back towards the massive windows. Two weeks. He’d play his part soon enough, but first he needed his fleet.

Chapter 20: New Dice (One month after Crili)

Sispini station still spun, McArthur was still in charge, and Tersia with Haluu still orbited in a tight stance of neutrality. But it felt like everything had changed. Like the tectonic plates started to move, then stopped, frozen in the tracks of bureaucracy. They still moved enough that there was damage surface-wise, but not enough for anything major to be done about it.

Garson sat on the bridge watching the latest feed from the Nebola system. Over a day and a half old, it was still current news and they were getting it faster than the Armadan council. It showed a wide array of Armadan ships piling into the systems and taking up positions outside of the ruined Crili. Like anyone could do anymore damage to the station anymore. Massive warships, the report identified them as the *Windless*, *StarBurn*, and *Birthright* all hung just outside of Crili's danger zone, with their heavy weaponry clearly pointed at the Zendon fleet in the far corner of the system. By the time war came Garson wouldn't even have time to react, but hopefully whoever was in the station there could.

The rest of the ships, a cluster of cruisers and several light-carriers - full of stock Tri-Senterans and BuzzFlies - established the first trade route Crili had seen in almost a month. The news reports bulletin ran in deep red below the pressing image of a light carrier escorting a cargo hauler towards the station. Each time Garson glanced at it, the single number had ticked upwards, the total death count. Forty-six thousand was the estimate, but some "experts" predicted it was as high as sixty. Garson rubbed his eyebrow. Jesus.

They were so close to catching the killer in a nuclear ball of fire, but they'd lost that opportunity due to the fate of the galaxy. Timur and Burta had performed perfectly. Garson knew he fired at the golden opportunity. So it had to have been the missile. Fate rolled a PWD shell right into their path and blew the whole thing up. Damn it, but fine. Fate had rolled in their favor before.

"Sispini in ten, turning on G-Drive," said Burta over the intercom. Throughout the Jump she and Timur had been practicing like crazy on the simulators, both wanting to be the best pilot. When it was finally determined that Burta won, Timur "took" them all out for a round of drinks. Which just meant he served them liberal amounts of alcohol from a storage cabinet that was all theirs. But at least he had done the pouring, that made Garson feel the symbolism a little bit more.

After the terrifying events sunward in the Nebola, during the quiet rush towards the Jump Portal, the crew had done everything together. The Skipoly Grey's nav computers could handle piloting them back home, so they didn't need anyone on the bridge until it was time for manual control. The almost month of travel back home, since they couldn't burn hard towards the Jump Portal, had left the Skipoly Grey a tired old ship. One that needed a bigger crew.

"Sealing pipes isn't what a gunner is supposed to do," complained Timur over the radio.

"Well if you want a ship to pilot, you should probably do that," Burta said.

"Last I checked water wasn't necessary to shoot bullets."

"Yeah, we have booze for that," laughed Garson.

"You keep telling yourself that. Sispini in five," Burta flicked off the comm button.

It was just Garson and Timur in the chat.

"Do you think she will?" asked Timur.

"Hell, I don't know," said Garson. "Why do you care so much?"

"Because it'll be a learning experience."

"And you haven't learned enough?"

"Not whether some things work in carefully structured environments like BRISK."

“I’m not going to ask but assume you also like someone on the team.”

“I don’t know yet.”

Garson left it at that and allowed Timur to cut off the comm. The faint buzz of the Skipoly Grey filled the air around his ears.

“Sispini in two, get ready to come home.”

His gimbaled chair shuttered slightly as the G-Drive activated and the perceived speed of a spacecraft that wasn’t accelerating dropped down to almost none. Now it was the job of the traffic controlled on Sispini to get them into port. Garson leaned back and closed his eyes. Listening to the sounds of the ship before he’d see BRISK again.

* * *

Onatia came to meet Lesio personally this time. His old Grand General's uniform had been folded and pressed nicely. The seven star ribbons hung like gems just underneath his breast pocket. Someone had recently waved and shined his boots, but Lesio wasn’t here to care. She was here for another reason.

“Can you explain yourself?” asked Onatia over a table full of appetizers. Whoever ran the ships dining hall probably thought it a perfect excuse to please the commanders and get rid of his week old fruit.

“About what?” Lesio asked, folding her arms. She would realize later down the line this was the exact pose Kash went into that made it in her mind to have him locked away for being a traitor. But she wasn’t a traitor, was she?

“This,” Onatia slid over the first image of a broken Crili, snapped from a news report. Then another image, then another. Each showing the tattered station holding on for dear life.

“And?” Lesio looked up at him, defiant. If the king was not going to respect the king then the king didn’t need the queen.

Onatia’s voice was calm and level, something that should’ve scared Lesio. “You messed up. None of your plan worked. The area around the station is too patrolled, too carefully monitored for us to pick up anything past what the first scoop achieved. And even those cargo-haulers have the possibility to be seen. To be tracked back to us.”

That was it, those first three words to confirm what Kash had said. The Kash who had been a traitor. The Kash who Lesio thought Onatia would want gone. And now the Onatia who was acting like Kash.

“How?” snapped Lesio.

“You just brought the galaxy's focus to a system where I was supposed to be invisible. Now with so many cameras in the system, so many investigations, doubtlessly someone is going to pick up something which will lead back to one of us.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“I’m going to continue to play my part.”

“Which is?”

“None of your concern as long as you play your part perfectly well.”

“And that’s protecting cargo-haulers, isn’t it?”

Onatia shook his head and couldn’t resist a smile. The bomb thought he was disarming her. But that was what you did when you wanted bombs to be rocks. And Onatia wouldn’t win this war with rocks. He needed bombs.

“I have something for you,” he pulled out a data-chip roughly the size of a palm.

“What is it?”

“It’s necessary for your next mission.” He put the chip down on the table.

“What’s my next mission?” Lesio asked, sliding the chip over to her half.

“The Zendon and Armadan fleets haven’t been this close in this system since the last war. My contacts on both sides say tensions could fly at any time. I need you to reconnect with the Zendon reinforcements task force heading for the Zendon lines and wait.”

“Why wait?”

“So that it’s not too suspicious and it gives me time to move.”

“How soon does the task force arrive?” The queen could please her king.

“A week at this point.”

“So what do I do until then?”

“Watch the news and report back to me when you’re with the task force,” Onatia moved away from the table. “And one more thing.” He slid over a captured data-packet sent from the Zendon fleet to the Zendon diplomat. It was the IR foggy-image of her battle with the Skipoly Grey. “Next time be more quiet.”

“What about the people on the ground? The diplomats?” asked Lesio.

“I’m taking care of them.”

Lesio watched Onatia go, watched the dragon's shadow slip out of the room. She stood up from the table and left immediately to her room.

Once inside, with the door closed, and sound proof systems on, she cuddled into a ball on her bed. She felt sick and overjoyed from that meeting. Two emotions that weren’t supposed to mix. Onatia was disappointed in her work, but not angry. And he wanted to keep using her. So maybe she was of value. She rolled over in bed. Part of her asked what she was thinking, the rest kept pushing to fight for the cause.

But what was the cause anymore? She’d been in the Galactic Militia for a shorter period of time than the Zendon navy, and yet still came away confused at what they were fighting for. But she knew what she was fighting for. Maybe that’s all that mattered. A dedicated leader who was willing to win for their personal cause might pull the ship through. Lesio fell to sleep over these conflicting thoughts as Onatia moved back to his perch to watch the negotiations crumble.

* * *

“For the last time, the move to position Armadan fleet assets over Crili was not a pre-aggression to war,” sighed Ridler. He’d said this so many times to Bezi, yet every time the man failed to get it.

“But yet you call our reinforcements to our fleet an act of what?” snapped Bezi.

“Yes! Because you’re adding firepower to beat our firepower,” Ridler threw his hands up. The aides were glancing back and forth. Diplomatic meetings weren’t supposed to go like this. “Look. We can forgo the task-force as long as you release funds to aid the station.”

“I’ve stated before that the funds to release the station are tied up elsewhere. We have medical transports on standby, as they have been for the last two weeks.”

“Tied up where? In more fleet assets to throw at us. No thank you. We have our own medical transports.”

“Then you don’t need our help, despite us offering it,” Bezi leaned back, “wouldn’t that look bad for the thousands who will doubtlessly die during the evacuations.”

“And it’ll look better with your face also plastered on it?”

“For you, yes. Then we can both blame each other and get off scot free,” Bezi picked up a piece of paper. “Anyway, the news needs something to report on. So until you give it political stuff it’ll keep looking at Crili.”

“How can your medical transports help? We already have way more than enough,” Ridler nodded to his aide who’d suggested the question.

“By providing appropriate care,” said Bezi.

“Which our ships already have.”

“Not enough of it.”

“We do have enough, and adding more won’t help. It’s not like we can dock them all at once. We can only ever bring through two medical ships each time.”

“So let us help, unload the wounded onto our ships,” Bezi tried to give a smile but it came off condescending.

“And let the galaxy say our ships aren’t capable enough? Thank you, but no thank you. The Armadan medical service is the best in the galaxy.”

“Apparently not since so many still die on Crili from your help.”

“From a lack of resources! Resources our ships can bring,” Ridler took a deep breath to calm down. This fucking prick.

“How about we take a break and come back in an hour?” asked Bezi. A show of hands confirmed the decision and the diplomats stumbled off to get water, food, and a quick nap each. They both knew the obvious. With neither side having a definitive leader, this negotiation would go nowhere.

* * *

The shrieks of metal against metal would usually raise alarm on the *Armalay* but pushing 2.7 G, barely the tolerable limit, was never good for doors meant to be constantly open.

“Would you please leave that door open in the future,” asked Fisher, squished into his seat.

Robert stumbled onto the bridge. Having to grab the emergency handholds in order to fold himself into his seat. The gel cushioning immediately encompassed him.

“How goes the chase?” asked Robert sarcastically.

“Fucking great,” Fisher said through clenched teeth. His foot was hurting really bad from the bruise that couldn’t heal in the high-G. But internal bleeding in the foot might kill him in a year, a missile from a chasing destroyer would kill him in a minute. He’d take the year.

Over the last month they’d been shooting a constant stream of messages over the data-relays and just through conventional space. With most of the crew entering an emergency comatose like state, the captain and his deck hands had been the only ones to constantly be awake. Even the scientists, who’d been trying to help downstairs, had to be stopped and put back into beds.

“Any responses?”

“We won’t know for a while,” answered Fisher. “Our hope is to tell them where to meet us, and when we show up, they’re waiting.”

“What’s the likelihood of that?” laughed Robert.

“Better than facing down that destroyer.”

“Crew is looking a little shit for face, but they can manage. We already lost a scientist to stroking out, so we’re keeping an eye on the rest.”

“Shit. Who was it?”

“O’Neal, if you know him? Reaching the end of his life anyway, late nineties, grey curled hair, talked really slow. It was quick at least.”

“Should I slow us down?” Fisher asked, but he knew the answer. In situations like this it was best to ask anyway.

“Not unless you want to lose the rest of the scientists.” Robert punched in an order to the computer and the lights throughout the ship dimmed. Night watch, again. “You might want to head to bed.”

“I’m already there,” Fisher said. He’d been sleeping in the gimbaled chair since they pushed away from the dead convoy.

“Yeah I know, I mean real bed,” Robert said. “Get a sense of normality. Put time in perspective.”

“And you want me to get exercise?”

“Sitting in two-plus G constantly with no to little movement isn’t good for you. Bone decay for one, tissue stagnation-”

“Yeah I’ve heard the rest.” Fisher sighed. “Alright. I’ll go to sleep in my real bed. Robert, you have the con.”

“Thank you Captain.”

* * *

The attack came late in the night. When Grimes was fast asleep in his drop-ship chair and the only people on patrol were the paranoid ones. After tonight, Grimes promised he’d never put them on patrol again.

The sounds of bombs and gunfire snapped Grimes awake faster than cold water to the crotch. The snap-snap-snap-hiss of someone’s gun running dry followed by a scream forced Grimes from a stunned position to a crouched one. His MAR had materialized in his hand, trained intensely on the door. The rest of the drop-pod also woke up. Their hands scrambling to don helmets and grab weapons.

Grimes smelled the smoke underneath the helmet. The rabbit-fire chitter of a stationary weapon filled the air, followed by the smashes of something impacting the ground. No explosion. A dud. Grimes had a job to protect these men, so protect them he would. The bechokong of gunfire, the report of souls departing their masters’ wake.

Leading the charge out of the drop pods he entered a warzone. Hunks of metal stuck up from the ground. At first he thought someone had blown up the second drop pod, but it was still there. The night lit up with the reddish glow of muzzle blasts. Two fires oozed in the distance, dancing slowly from leaking fuel. But they didn’t have any vehicles.

Grimes processed this all as he ran for cover. He saw men shooting into the woods, so he raised his weapon, looked for movement, saw a branch flutter, and fired. The MAR quicked in his hands, the three projectile rounds turning the branch into sawdust. The weapon felt unbalanced in his hands. It had been so long since live firing the damn thing.

He crouched. Eyes open, HUD scanning, he only saw the readout of his men moving. Blue markers showed them, but he didn’t see any red markers yet. No-bodies headset had any contact. What the fuck. EMP? The HUD should have picked up some form of movement. Spotted it, flash in red. No. Nada.

Grimes checked his comms, they worked, flipped through the channels, they worked, and tested his helmet, it worked. So no EMP.

He raised his gun to just above the knee and called for a cease fire. Slowly the quick snaps of gunfire stopped short. Two fires burned to his right. Oil leak and some idiot had shot a HER round into it.

“Has anybody seen anything?”

A chorus of no’s. Fuck.

“Has anybody-”

Slam, poof, crack.

Eyesight dark, head tumbling, internal ear confused. Pressure of something on chest. Hand broken. Cracked helmet.

Grimes’s head ran through the checklist. He was alive, check. That was the start of something good. His helmet had a crack down the right cheek, where his eye could peer out. The rest of the helmet was pitch black. An explosion... something killed it.

His breathing was hollow. Like every breath he took his body recognized but he couldn’t hear. Flashes of light filtered in from the crack along his cheek.

He reached his fingers underneath the edge of the helmet and snapped off the battle latches. Cool air ran over his face, forced from somewhere else. He stared towards his feet. A layer of dirt, maybe an inch thick, covered his upper chest. Ten meters away smoke rolled from an impact sight. He couldn’t hear anything. Not even the clicks of the forest. Grimes was stunned.

He pushed off the ground, stumbling around as his inner ear spun. The world spun. Forest floor rising up to meet him. Slam, blackout.

He woke at the edge of the drop pods ramp with a medical ID attached to his arm. Two Marines stood guard, though Grimes could see no return fire. The Marines turned to face him and gave him a thumbs up. He was still deaf. One of the soldiers held up a data-pad. Trauma to outer-ear from concussion blast.

“From what?” Grimes shouted. He thought he only asked. The words came out slightly off, like with a slippery accent.

The soldiers pointed at the crest of dirt near the middle of camp where a large metal shape was sticking out. It was curved near the top and shredded down the middle. Debris from the station. Around it lay two bodies, the casualties of the night. They were being treated as best as they could, but you could only save the living afterall.

Grimes felt himself slip away and allowed it. A submarine disappearing once again beneath the rolling waves of sleep.

* * *

Marshal gave Garson a hug when he disembarked. Elanie followed with a peck to the forehead and Jeffrey was absent. Timur and Marshal bear hugged, one hand clutched between chests as they let go. Marines were always Marines.

The docks of Sispini buzzed with activity. Several dock workers immediately rushed to the Skipoly Grey and got to work. Garson watched them go for a few seconds before rejoining the group.

“I heard about the Glycol-5 stunt,” said Marshal. “Thanks for keeping my people alive.”

“Thanks for telling us where to look for the *Komoto*,” Garson smiled. “How did McArthur react when you told him about that?”

“I think he said ‘that crazy bastard’ and laughed.” Marshal stopped at the edge of a hallway and lowered his voice. “That’s the kind of shit we want to see on BRISK. We don’t have enough money to run into every fight. But what you did out there, that was inspiring.” They kept walking, the rest of the group already having made it to McArthurs spy room.

The man himself was waiting for them in the room, a glass in hand. And for the next ten minutes they drank and laughed. With everyone situated McArthur walked to the back of the room, dimmed the lights, and moved to the front again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem.” The screen flipped over to an image of the Nebola sector.

* * *

Grimes woke up on the floor of the drop pod. His helmet and gear were off to his right side. He still couldn't hear anything. The second time waking up with it wasn't as scary as the first, but he still began to hyperventilate before a soft pressure was applied to his arm. He tilted his head to look. A medpack had been strapped to his BDU - Battle Dress Undersuit - to administer fluids. Around him five other Marines lay with medpacks strapped to their arms. Along the wall, a few more slept. A Marine with a red cross hastily painted on his white armor came over. Grimes asked him how many days and then he pointed at his ears.

The Marine held up three fingers and moved on. Three days he'd be out of combat. It should have been less. It shouldn't have happened at all. Grimes cursed, sighed, and rested his head back on the ground. The air smelled of faint lemonade, but that was just the medicine patch. What he wouldn't do to get off this planet.

* * *

The meeting started with a few minutes of silence for Crili, as suggested by Bezi. The first move that had impressed Ridler. Maybe the Zendon twit had a little bit of compassion for his fellow human.

“We respectively decline any offers of medical aid at the moment,” Ridler said calmly. After their last meeting had ended in fire, he'd taken the opportunity to do some breathing exercises with a good looking coach. “We currently have the situation under control. But we thank you and the Zendon government for their offers of help.”

Bezi nodded his thanks. “The Zendon government wishes to see this whole affair come to a close without the need for further loss of life.”

“As does the Armadan government.”

“The Zendon government also, yet again states the attack on Crili was not of our nature and we would not break such a valued truce with a neighbor.”

Ridler nodded. The amount of times Bezi said it wasn't them was starting to make Ridler think it actually wasn't them. It was a shitty first strike, and the Zendon navy didn't do anything shitty.

“The Armadan government appreciates your statement,” Ridler paused, “we'd also like to discuss removing the weaponry in the system. After last night's rain of metal, I think we both understand how war can touch the lives of many.”

Bezi nodded again. The debris from last night had taken the lives of fourteen in the city. And the sounds of wheezing air followed by soundwaves with no explosion would haunt Bezi. After a lifetime of being on the front lines as a diplomat, silent explosions weren't his thing.

“I will see what I can do about that. At the moment both of our command structures are in shambles and I suggest we work towards fixing that,” said Bezi.

“Agreed,” Ridler pushed away from the table. It was the ten minute mark break. They'd break for breakfast and more negotiations around the tables followed by another three hour long meeting. Diplomacy was something. But at least no-one had started a war yet.

Chapter 21: Games of chance

Captain Constantine stood at the foot of the bridge onboard the *Windless*. His uniform had been cleanly swept and ironed, and his hair had been toned to just the perfect amount. He could have taken any one of the women on board the bridge back to his bedroom. But he wasn't here for that conquest, he was here for a different victory.

Securing the trade routes to and from Crili had been simple. Establishing his reign of control over the station. If he wanted something done, they'd do it, because otherwise he'd throw them all back to the void. That was power.

The planet would be harder, but he bet they would soon need supplies shuttled down. And who would do it? Constantine. Thus making him yet again the hand for which everything fed. That was the kind of power he liked.

But the only problem was the diplomats on the ground. Technically Ridler outranked him in the situation, but if things turned violent, then Constantine would be approved for command. It was the old saying of "when in peace let the old men talk, but in war let the young men fight". Ironic that Constantine was older than Ridler, but that saying had been made well before humanity had ventured into the stars.

Opposing him was the well-rounded Zendon patrol fleet. Soon to be reinforced by extra ships at the end of the week. That was all fine and good. He didn't need to win the battle to have control over the station, all he needed to do was have the other side initiate the attack. Then with war on the cusp of reality, the diplomats could get to work while Constantine hollered for reinforcements from Serbas - which would come ready to fight - and then the Zendon navy would back off. They could not risk a war, so they would pay the price of concessions and yield the system to him.

Not to Armadan, no to the fleet, but to Constantine. He would unofficially retire, pass over command to Nev, who'd he retain a strong control over, and be at peace with a system under his belt. It was a simple yet now reachable wish. Before the plan had been to start a war then take over a system nobody knew or cared about. But now - now he was on the footstep of the enemy and about to take a piss right in front of them on their previous lawn. He had it all mapped out. Crili would need rebuilding, with his companies taking the profit. Lioni would need funding, new business, with his underground contacts taking the cut. Constantine would become the hand to feed the station, not just a ruined wreck of Crili. And that was a wish he was willing to pursue.

Constantine touched his monitor, bringing up comms to the *Birthright* and *StarBurn*. The two warships were his wolves in this game of aggression. The *Windless* had to stay back. The wolves would move slightly away from the station, bringing along their respective convoys - fresh meat to dangle out. Constantine had no regrets about using such terminology in his head. In life, as in breakfast, sometimes you had to break an egg to make an omelette. Except he didn't like eggs. Too dehydrated on ships. So what was a few ships gone in this theater of aggression?

He keyed the proper code and sent the message. The monitors surrounding the bridge zoomed in on the *StarBurn* lighting up her four massive drives as the triangle shape slowly moved away. An O.A.W, she could have been used to hover over Lioni, but that wasn't Constantine's plan. Not yet at least. Alongside her five escort ships also were suddenly blocked out by the bright flares of their drives. The cameras adjusted the glare for a second and the ships came back in view. Officers along the bridge lines stopped what they were working on and watched the procession occur. Constantine had given very specific orders to make the move slow, in order to draw as many eyes as possible. Hopefully stir the pots

of the Zendon fleet a little. He was sure whoever had attacked Crili would attack again, and this would be the perfect spot.

* * *

There were many old sayings throughout human history, but the one that rung the most true to Onatia the day he met was Lesio was that “it’s better to keep yourself behind loose cannons”. That way they don’t blow you to chunks when they accidentally go off. The same was true for Lesio. She would go off. But Onatia had kept himself out of the firing line. Kept her still on his side just for a little bit longer. Waiting for the cannon to go off when someone else stepped in front of it. And then he could reap the rewards.

From his chair onboard the *SilentDuck*, a stealth ship he’d “stolen” from the Zendon fleet, despite it having been under his control for decades, he watched and studied the system. The *SilentDuck* was a small craft. Three decks tall, a hundred feet long, and with a crew of seventeen it didn’t strike anyone as the place to put the most highly valued member of the coup they were technically trying to start. But that’s exactly why Onatia took it. Because no one looked twice as a slightly expensive working ship on the drift. It was just clutter on the screen. And clutter is exactly what Onatia wanted.

Extended from the ship in all directions were massive relays. The relays had been stored in the rear compartment where usually there’d be another crew space. Each of them was ten feet long and five feet across, in the shape of a “t” with the lower end sticking out farther than the top and sporting a massive antenna. This was the center of anything Onatia ever did.

When trying to conquer a castle, generals used to lob dead men infected with diseases into the main square. When trying to topple a government, spies spread harmful rumors. When trying to start a war, Onatia was manipulating the truth. Each side had a certain number of dominos, and once those fell, then war was inevitable. Not enough had fallen in Beketh, that was annoying but fine. Enough would fall here. As long as Onatia kept his game going.

The relays had a secondary purpose, recon. The whole reason Onatia was able to learn and know so much, and the reason for the other dozen people onboard the craft plus the five supercomputers in the back. Condense, store, show information. Anything anyone sent was liable to be seen, scanned, and stored. Onatia knew Bezi had been assigned Puruser droids; he had a man working on hacking them. He knew Constantine had sent out orders; he had a woman copying them for further study. He knew when and where everything was going to take place, and that was how he played his game.

Back on the field when he was chasing spice runners and human traffickers Onatia would often keep them alive for the sole reason of information. While other generals tossed out their lemons into space, Onatia squeezed them dry before composting them. Why waste good intel? Why let a life go to nothing? Better yet, why let a death be pointless?

The death of the Nebola system would serve something. It would create a war to tear down the wrong governments and resurrect the proper one. Until such an event occurred, Onatia would be sitting in the *SilentDuck* watching and listening to space. Just background clutter among the stars.

* * *

Ridler watched the move with cold hands behind his back. He’d wrapped them together so tightly in tension that the left one had gone numb from blood loss. He didn’t let go. Two aides stood to his right, carefully whispering possible solutions and countermeasures to whatever Bezi was going to propose. All Ridler could do what stare at the screen and think; what the fuck was Constantine doing! The man was making a preemptive move on the neutral space between the two governments. He was by essence of his

presence expanding control of the Armadan galaxy for the first time in decades. It could be seen as an act of war.

“Meeting in two,” the aide said.

Ridler nodded. He needed a cool glass of something. His throat was parched from just imagining the yelling he would have done.

The meeting room doors opened with a rush of displaced air. All but three seats were taken. Ridler's aides took their positions. One seat remained open at the head of the table. Bezi watched him from the corner of his eye. Ridler remained standing.

“Mr. Ridler, are you okay?” asked Bezi coolly. “Because this morning I was sure we discussed ramping down military action, not instigating it.”

“Do you remember how parents would make decisions for you that you couldn't control,” said Ridler softly.

“Excuse me?”

“And then they'd force you to follow their actions despite it not being what you wished?”

“I'm not following you.”

“How'd they say no despite the correct answer for your situation being yes. The lack of understanding from being above.”

“I'm not following, say what you want to say.”

“This wasn't me,” Ridler pointed at the screen in the back of the room, where Constantines ships were moving. “And I'm pretty sure that wasn't you,” he indicated to the far screen where a constant image of Crili rotated. “So we're just two shit-bags sitting around a table arguing over things we have no control over.”

Bezi tilted his head and stood up. “Okay, I follow you. What do you say we do?”

“Draft a statement,” said Ridler. “Draft a goddamn statement that says we represent our governments and any action done without our permission doesn't count as our governments.”

“Someone's playing ball here and you want to exclude them,” observed Bezi.

“Exactly. We don't know who it is, but we know we don't want to start a war.”

“The only thing our governments agree on it seems.”

“We talked about command structures, correct?” Ridler asked in a rhetorical question. “So why don't we fix them today.”

“Make ourselves the head,” concluded Bezi.

“Exactly. All we need is a piece of paper, two signatures, and the hope that the fleet above doesn't disagree.” Ridler moved towards the edge of the room.

“And if it does?” Bezi asked.

“Then it doesn't matter who is in charge because we'll all be rubble.” He picked up a pen and a piece of paper.

“You know if war starts the law for both of our governments states they will have command authority,” pointed out Bezi.

“Then let's beat them to that, pull them back, just in case they start barking and break off the collars,” Ridler held out the paper. “We'll have someone draft a document.”

“Perhaps even a new law?”

“One day maybe. Today it just stands as long as our government says it does.”

“Which hopefully will be forever,” Bezi nodded his thanks and moved to his side of the room.

“Sir, should we discuss this first with Constantine?” quietly asked one of his aides, Rebecca if he wasn’t mistaken. Ridler looked down at the young woman. She had sidled up to him.

“Are you crazy?” Ridler said with disgust. “That man is the whole reason we’re in the mess.”

“And he’s also the only thing standing between us and kissing the Zendon heel,” whispered Rebecca.

“Rebecca, please,” Ridler passed over the paper. “Have someone draft a statement and bring it back to me.”

Rebecca bit her tongue, she was after all a former officer onboard a warship and moving without the permission of the captain was something that irked her. She glanced at Ridler. Fine, she’d draft the statement. But when Constantine balked and said no, she’d be there to tell him “I told you so”.

* * *

Edward Hoss had hoped someone would have found his information. Or at the very least done something. But now, with his butt glued to his seat during another high burn hide maneuver, he was pretty sure no-one had. Or if they had they hadn’t acted on it. He stared at the ceiling where the light fixture moved slightly. That wasn’t safe.

They’d docked recently to unload the husk of the ship they’d stolen. It had been sent on a preplanned trajectory to probably some workshop Constantine was building. But Hoss didn’t know enough details to send another message. Anyway, he wasn’t going on another space walk in a long time after he’d burn boiled his arm. He glanced at his right forearm. Two inches down from his wrist a scar started. Roughly in the shape of a block, the scar extended down his arm before stopping a inch before his elbow. He’d had it in a medbay sleeve for almost a week before all of the damaged tissue had been repaired. But even afterwards it had a faint leathery texture and a burned look to it. The doctors said it would take pigment transplants to fix. Since the Zendon government didn’t cover those in the medical plan, it looked like the end of Hoss’s spy career. The cheese had grown stale, the mousetrap remained open for far too long, the mouse had run away.

Hoss stared at the ceiling. Either that light was going to drop on him or something else was. He hoped it was something that would save his career.

* * *

“...we have a problem,” restated McArthur. Garson was sitting to the right of Timur and left of Marshal, squarely in the center of the semicircle of chairs. McArthur plugged on the slideshow. “As we all know, the Nebola system is in a shit-show right now. Especially since Crili was just destroyed and two fleets are facing it off.”

“McArthur, we know this,” said Marshal, “what is it?”

“Onatia,” McArthur flicked to a new image. A battle scan of the Skipoly Grey vs the *Komoto*. “It’s him again. Garson, Timur, and Burta found wreckage ships being picked up by cargo haulers. Engaged with these cargo haulers and came face to face with the same ship that flew through this system. Two systems. Two areas of things going to shit. And one ship that ties it all together.”

“It could be Lesio,” offered Garson. “Not that it has to be, but it could be.”

“Could is a loose term. Lesio and Onatia have worked together since the start. We know Onatia likes pitting people against each other, it’s how he almost caused a war here. The same war he’s trying to start over in the Nebola sector.”

“So what’s the solution?” asked Elanie.

“We stop him.”

“How, we can’t do much from over here?”

“Exactly,” McArthur snapped his fingers. “We’re taking the Skipoly Grey back to the Nebola sector.”

“Shit,” muttered Timur.

“We just got out of there barely alive,” complained Burta, “BRISK doesn’t want to head back.”

“BRISK’s job is to protect the innocent,” answered McArthur, “and currently there’s a lot of innocent people over in the Nebola system who might get hurt. Staying over here with a two day news time difference and a week of travel won’t help anyone. We need to Breach over there, rescue a few people, investigate this shit show, secure the system, and kill the dick head who started this all.”

“Oh, so that’s what BRISK stands for,” mouthed Garson.

“Yes, and it’s also because we’re BRISK when it comes to responding to mission calls.”

“Did he call?” asked Marshal.

“Yes. He said it’s urgent. Information shows the JTC might have been bribed to put Constantine in the system.”

“So we have a loose Armadan captain in the system?”

“Not loose. Potentially dangerous. Most likely the man just wanted another combat victory under his belt so he could become an admiral.”

“Fun,” Timur rolled his head back in his seat. “Where’s Jeffrey?”

“Working on the second part of this mission.”

“You already sent him!” Timur said, sitting upright. He didn’t like anyone sending his brother anywhere without protection.

McArthur waved him off. “No, he’s at the station. He’s the one who gave me the first pile of information. He’s been long range monitoring bursts coming in and out of the system. It looks like the Zendon fleet is building up another reserve force, in case they have to attack.”

“Which is exactly what Onatia would want.”

“Which is exactly why we need to go.”

Garson took a deep breath and sighed. “When I first fought his plan on Haluu he was tricky. He most likely has contingencies if we come through, more than that, he will fight back when we try to stop him. Our objective should be to locate and destroy the cargo haulers, or at least give the coordinates to them so the Armadan navy can capture them.”

“And if they can’t?” Elanie asked.

“Then Onatia wins this battle but we try to stop the war,” McArthur said.

“Sounds good to me,” Marshal said, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed in a defensive position. “We leave tomorrow. Give my people some break.”

“Agreed,” McArthur said. “Until then, try to enjoy the station some more. Everything is on me.”

BRISK smiled and filed out of the room, only leaving McArthur and Garson.

“You know he’s got something big planned,” said Garson. “And you’re getting more information then you’re telling me, what is it?”

McArthur shook his head. “It’s something to do with outside of the Nebola system. Something not related to Onatia.”

“Not yet you mean.”

Chapter 22: Dock leave

The *Komoto* was still paired up to a cargo hauler as they burned towards the next staging sight. With the Zendon reinforcements making their way from the jump portal to the patrol fleet, there was only one rendezvous point for the *Komoto* to slip in. The only explanation Onatia had to give to the commander of the relief reinforcements was that the Emperor willed it. And since no decent commanding officer of the Zendon navy would ever dare disparage the Emperor's name by lying about what he had or had not willed, it was assumed that the *Komoto* had been ordered to join the fleet.

Bigani, the still Captain of the *Lust and Forgive* marked the coordinates on his map and allowed his ship to be towed by the destroyer. Dissatisfied with how he was being treated by the Galactic Militia and the way they had profited from the capture of his ship, he had decreed that no member of that party be allowed to step onboard his cargo hauler. Onatia had suggested, which Bigani correctly assumed to be a demand, that the crew of the *Komoto* be allowed to dock and stretch their legs one last time before launching away again. Bigani relented, he didn't care where the crew of the *Komoto* were going, he just wanted armed guards off his ship.

Kash's room was a cell this time. The door was locked, and two armed men from the strike team stood outside at all times. After he was "relieved of his post", Lesio sought it to relieve him of his dignity. Instead of busting him down to ensign or at least stuffing him in the brig, she simply locked his door and made the crew pretend he didn't exist anymore.

Food was served twice a day by the same stone faced soldier. Kash had come to call him rock-head, for lack of creativity. Boredom would have driven Kash mad, but Lesio didn't want that. She wanted a dull, void of meaning, former captain who was now stuck in his room. He was given a datapad, a set of books, a card of decks, and ironically a chess board. Who was he to play against? It wasn't a digital copy, hell it looked used and old. Kash turned the board over, probably one of Lesio's old ones, he thought.

His room became a cell as the days wandered on. His only sense of feeling came when the ships combat klaxons burst red and the alarms came on. Pressed into his bed at high G he felt alive. Like a captain again. Like a man.

But then minimal G returned and he turned to face the one person chess game he'd constructed. Sometimes at night he'd try to press himself into his bed, try to feel like he was under high-G again. But it would never work. Always a foot or arm would float up in the null G of space.

Kash knew the sounds of the *Komoto*. Lesio forgot it was his ship for a far while longer than it had ever been hers. Tasked with crewing the vessel, leading the vessel, and on many occasions fixing the vessel, he knew what each creak meant. So when the airlock attached and the *Komoto* let out a two second sigh of pressure change followed by a quick bump-bump of radial disks locking, Kash knew they had docked. He didn't know what, all he knew was it was most likely his best chance off the ship.

Hoss felt the *Lust and Forgive* slow to a dead stop. The ship was too large for him to hear the pops of pressure equalizing and airlock doors opening, but he knew that was what had happened. Cargo haulers don't just stop for the hell of it. Either they burn towards a port, or an objective, and the only time they stop is to dock with another ship.

Naturally curious, as that was the state of a spy, he donned a pair of deck overalls and a welding helmet and made himself available. The crew of the *Komoto* met them midway down the massive cargo

hold which used to be taken up by the scattered remains of an Armadan cruiser. They'd held a quick burial in space for the perfectly preserved bodies they found before moving on with the task of dissecting the ship. Hoss expected that to be the same job today, but instead he found the cargo hold still empty. The ship docking hadn't brought anymore husks.

The red and orange lights that ran along the floor paths lit up the underside of his face. Two steaming vents, clogged from the High-G travel, lofted grey and white smoke into the cavernous ceiling. The difference between the two ships was apparent immediately with the crews. Where the crew of the *Komoto* wore naval uniforms, all different shades of grey, the workers of the *Lust and Forgive* had on overalls, slacks, work boots, and many - including Hoss - had on welding helmets that concealed their faces.

Two flares lit up in the corner, someone was working on a drone. The welding workers slowly shuffled over there, too many to help but they wanted to look like they were doing something. Hoss tossed his equipment into a storage bin and tried to mingle with the crew of the *Komoto*. Tried to gain some form of intelligence he could report back. The only clear thing he got from any of them was that there had been a battle nearby. One that the *Komoto* had participated in. Hoss nodded and smiled, mentally putting down a list of things he'd need to do to confirm and then report the incident.

Kash kneeled next to the edge of the door, right where the sliding contraption met the frame. The designers hadn't been perfect in their sound proof structure since Kash could press his ear against the foam and hear out into the hallway. He was listening for the rustle of boots and the sound of dispersed air. He heard neither. That meant the hallway was mostly clear.

He knew the strike team troopers usually took a break mid-day, believing him to be a non threat. Since the *Komoto* had just docked with something, they were most likely off ship. No-one guarded his door, no-one in the hallway, Kash was scott-free to skip the ship and bail.

Every time one of his meals came, Kash tried to break off a piece of the tray, keep a utensil. The previous meal, noodles and meat sauce, he'd managed to steal a halfway decent knife. Not that the utensil would do him any good in a fight. He needed it to open the door.

Semi-pressure locked soundproof sliding doors, aka any ship door built in the last hundred years, all had the same problem. In order to achieve uniform pressure through the ship, establish a sound barrier, and create a vacuum at the doors edge they'd had to install a set of pumps in the frame. The pumps were controlled by a set of lasers that only activated when an object was a specific distance away from them. Too close, they'd deactivate, too far and they'd not start. This was built so that in an emergency, when the power cut off and the ship was being bordered, the doors could fall freely and the pressure locks would keep them in place. Kinda.

The designers had installed the foam and rubber padding to ensure a proper lock. The frame of the door was even protected on the outside to stop people from doing exactly what Kash was about to do. But the designers had wanted a way for people to get out of the rooms incase of emergency. And Lesio hadn't thought about that when she put Kash in his room. Of course she hadn't thought about a lot of things, so it probably wasn't a trap.

Kash ran his finger down the rubber edge of the door frame, feeling for the weak spot where he could hear outside. His finger stopped midway down the door frame, where the pull of air was real. There.

He picked up the knife and pushed it through the gap, slightly widening the rubber as he did so. All it would take was a single laser to mess up and the pumps would deactivate. Kash had fixed enough doors to know this problem, how to fix it, and also how to break it again.

He slid the knife down the rubber edge, cutting slowly. The rubber rolled around the knife like, well rubber. Kash wasn't good at analogies or metaphors. He was good though at leading people, and in this case the people he was leading was himself. He slid the knife further down. Come on!

The door frame gave a pair of clinks and the pumps disengaged. The door shot upright and Kash stared right into the surprised face of rock-head, the strike team trooper.

Instead of doing something stupid, like punching the man, Kash body slammed him.

A typical strike-force trooper weighs over two hundred and fifty pounds fully loaded. Stone-face or whatever his name was no exception. Carrying a pistol, ammunition for a rifle downstairs, armor, a vest, and an emergency EVA suit, he had a carefully balanced mass. Too far either way and he'd tip. That was what Kash counted on.

Rock-head hit the floor with the impact of both his weight and Kash's push. That was enough to cause his skull to bounce and his brain to slam into it. Concussed and with blood dripping from the back of his head, all he could manage was a gurgle before passing out.

Kash stood in semi-horror before bolting down the hallway. He was doing this. Hold shit, he was doing this!

At the end of the corridor he took a right. He could run blindfolded through the ship and still make it to the airlock. The only people he passed were a pair of techs he swore were sleeping with their bosses and a petty officer who merely waved at the Captain.

"Enjoy the fresh air sir."

"Fuck off." Kash turned to the left, his heels sliding before gaining traction again.

The airlock was a little more crowded, so Kash slowed to a light trot as he slid through the crowd. Pushing some of them aside he made it out into the cavernous hold of a cargo-hauler. He stared up at the impressively far away ceiling. He needed to blend in.

Hoss knew something was off about the man when he stopped in his tracks like a freeman on holy soil. He stared up at the ceiling, awed by the presence of it. Hoss looked on for a second longer before heading over.

"Hey man, are you okay?" asked Hoss, lightly touching the man's shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," he was out of breath. He looked slightly cooped up. Like he'd stayed in a room for a while.

"Are you with that ship?" Hoss asked, nodding his head towards the crowd coming out of the *Komoto*.

"No, not anymore," the man looked around, "what's this ship's name?"

"The *Lust and Forgive*," Hoss extended a hand, "Edward Hoss."

"Kash," Kash shook his hand.

"Want to come with me?" asked Hoss, the man looked like a former commander or something. The insignia had been removed, forcefully, from his suit. So maybe a deserter. His clothes looked stale. He'd been wearing them for a little while. Perhaps even a prisoner.

"Where to?"

"Anywhere but here, crowds too thick."

"Lead the way."

Edward Hoss couldn't help but to think as he walked Kash into the changing rooms to get him a fresh new disguise that he was grateful the lightbulb hadn't fallen on him yesterday. This looked like a revival of his career.

* * *

Ridler stood at formal attention in his respective end of the meeting room. Dressed in a dark blue suit with a thin grey collar, representing the lost station of Crili above - a quick add on by Rebecca - he waited for the arrival of Bezi.

Drafting the statement had been simple enough. Constitutions had been written in more time, but then again this statement wasn't supposed to lead a government, only control where its action had effect. Written by one of his aides, then reviewed, revised, and touched on by Bezi's aides, the final piece of legislation, officially titled the Nebola Concords since diplomats lacked creativity - which made them good representatives because it's never good to let a dog off the leash - would be a stark new entry into the political world.

Never before had diplomats decided for themselves that they would claim anonymity from their respective governments, but still retain the ability to say what their governments thought. It had been implied before, but so had not peeing your pants during a meeting. The piece of paper would only certified its existence.

Bezi came down the stairs dressed in a similar fashion to Ridler. Instead of a dark blue he'd opted for a tasteful red and grey suit, rolled with tiny strings of gold near the cuffs. Probably cost a fortune, just to measure dicks one last time.

The piece of legislation did one more thing; it let the diplomats speak their minds. It actually allowed for the proper discourse needed in a situation like this. It stopped with the dick measuring and actually pulled down the pants. Ridler glanced at his priceless watch, another useless artifact, another piece of stuffing in the pants.

"Diplomat Ridler," greeted Bezi, his hand extended in a soft manner. There would be no hard handshakes during tonight's procession. The mood was co-operative, thus only the softest of grabs and squeezes were given.

"Diplomat Bezi, I hope tonight goes off without a hitch."

"I hope the news cameras are a live relay back to the station," said Bezi. "Let the people up there know we're doing something for them down there."

"I hope they see it that way."

"They will," Bezi offered a kind smile and moved towards the door to the right.

Outside of the door, in the central diplomatic room, a small stage with a podium had been set up where an aide was currently reading the piece of legislation out to the cameras. That would get cut down later. Edited into spoon fulls to feed to an audience who understood nothing but liked feeling like they did. The news would saturate them with the information, which the audience would immediately leech away to friends and family members, feeling like the big-shot who knew it all. Of course it would all be forgotten in a few days, the news would find a new story, and the cycle would repeat.

The diplomat's job was questioned. Or more precisely, smiling for the cameras while reporters who'd just read the bill asked theoretical questions. Bezi and Ridler had decided not to send an early copy out, lest Constantine get word and try to move his fleet closer to the neutral zone. The second piece of legislation, a cease-aggression pact, would see that all fleet duties be put on hold apart from the relief effort. That would appease the cooler of heads.

Ridler stood to the right of the podium as questions began. They'd agreed that neither should stand behind the podium and when asked why; "To remember the fallen of Crili." That was quickly established lie by Ridler. The real reason was because Prime Minister Shesa, who was supposed to be

there, was actually two stories above snogging a senator. Just another layer of diplomacy to make the bill seem even more legit.

“Wouldn’t the fallen of Crili want leadership?” asked a new reporter from the *MoonsShine*, a weekly tabloid piece that had no business talking about leadership when six of its seven board members were all daddy-money employed from the previous board members, who’d also been family appointed.

“Ms. Alastan, is this anything other than leadership?” asked Ridler. They’d been briefed on the reporters names before the event. “We’re taking charge in a seriously dangerous environment. Without proper communication between both sides, and proper leadership,” he pointed to Bezi and himself, “this problem will never get solved.”

“You mention leadership, yet aren’t the fleet heads in command now that it’s a battlefield,” asked *AgencySix*’s stunning redhead reporter. Eye candy, thought Bezi briefly, how the Armadan media loved to circuit those around.

“Was a battlefield,” Bezi stressed the first word. “It is no longer a battlefield.”

“But haven’t preliminary moves been made, like the advance of the Armadan fleet?” followed up the reporter.

“Those will be curtailed after this meeting,” Ridler smiled at the reporter.

“How so?”

“With the legislation we passed today, plus the additional legislation drafted and soon to be passed after this meeting concludes,” answered Ridler. His hands hung in front of him. The pants had been dropped, metaphorically.

Bezi was thinking the same thing. “And the same goes for the Zendon reinforcements, which have been tasked only to provide medical aid and to keep to their respective boundaries.”

Ridler gave a side-eyed glance to Bezi. The sly bastard, he thought whily, he’d put him in a trap during the meeting. Only one way out. “Medical aid that the Armadan government will be gracious to accept.” And with that he’d just changed the course of the meeting. And the diplomats' relationship. This would be a cooperative, not hostile, experience, since you couldn’t back down what you had said in front of the cameras.

“Thank you for your questions,” said Bezi ten minutes later, waving to the cameras.

They departed the stage and back into the meeting room, Bezi in front and Ridler right behind. “I should have seen something like that coming.”

Bezi shrugged. “It’s the least I could do. Hopefully my government will forgive this document in exchange for getting those medical supplies past.”

“I presume there are spies onboard those ships?”

Bezi glanced at him. “Mr. Ridler-” so he’d gone back to the “Mr.,” “that both doesn’t concern you and more importantly you’ve just changed your government policy.”

“By allowing foreign ships to dock with our military stations,” said Ridler glumly.

“Exactly,” Bezi snapped his fingers.

“This was a war zone, next time it won’t be so easy,” pointed out Ridler.

“Next time this hopefully won’t happen. And if it does, then hopefully we’re a few levels higher in the bureaucratic chain pool so we won’t have to be in this shit show.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ridler leaned against the wall. His aides were filling out the door. He watched them go. “Want to grab a drink.”

“Another time Mr. Ridler, tonight I have to go pray my government doesn’t send a message to those assassins outside of my door to kill me for displeasing them.”

Ridler nodded sadly. “At least with the marines you can barter with them.”
 “Droids can be so unkind.”

* * *

Two hours later Mallo stared at the report bouncing around the system. The Nebola concords, shitty name, good premise. It finally put the burden of who to follow, who to blame, whose head would either rise a level or drop to the ground. It would be that guy. The diplomat. What’s his face, Bezi? Mallo was beyond grateful. He leaned forward over the datapad and flicked through the video. He could get a full copy later, but the watered down version had what he wanted. The diplomats answered the questions correctly. Spoke the damn political language of vague indecent meaning. So that meant they weren’t insane. Mallo crossed that off his “shit to be nervous about” list.

Constantine had the opposite reaction. He cleared the bridge, apart from Nev, and exploded.

“What the fuck does he think he is!” yelled Constantine at the top of his voice. He was so mad he began forgetting his grammar.

“A diplomat sir,” answered Nev quietly. He knew it was better to let Constantine get the cursing and gruffing out of his system before talking things over.

“That motherfucking roach picking bitch,” snarled Constantine. “If I ever get a hold of him alone in a room I’m going to drag his balls over a cheese grater.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that sir,” commented Nev meekly.

Constantine ignored him and continued on his tirade. “I mean, really! Really! He calls me in. He asks for my help. Asks to secure the system. Then backs his shit up and tries to reprimand me! That fucking losy fucker didn’t even have the decency to give me a warning.”

Nev rolled his eyes in the background. He’d advised against moving the fleets forward.

“That fucking fuck fuck!” Constantine was running out of steam. Nev usually knew when Constantine started saying fuck over and over. “We’ll get this slimy asshole back. Kick him so hard up the nuts that he goes prepubescent. You know what I mean Nev? That fucker.”

Nev nodded and said yes. Constantine loved saying fuck, which made sense because it was about half of his life off of the *Windless*, the man was a boar. Constantine took a few deep breaths then flung himself back into his chair.

“What do you suggest, Captain?”

“Give the order to the *Birthright* to turn around but order the *StarBurn* to “kindly” leave her supply ships there and return to overwatch station 6.”

“Sir the order.”

“Was to me and not the *StarBurn*. Captain Hankle and I have an understanding. Relay the order.”

“Yes sir,” nodded Nev and stepped out of the bridge. He could have simply done it there and then but he felt Constantine wanted more alone time. That was fine with Nev. Once that man was promoted the *Windless* would finally be his. It wasn’t like he could keep serving under the same guy, was it?

* * *

Time is an oddity. At the same atomic time as the *StarBurn* received the message to desert her convoy ships, the Skipoly Grey punched off from Sispini. Angling towards the nearby Jump Portal it began its burn. Two hours later, after an unsuccessful search for a missing ex-captain Kash, Lesio was forced to pull the plug and depart the *Lust and Forgive* to join up with the Zendon reinforcements. Slowly the stars dwarfed beneath the drive plumes and humanity rolled forward, forgetting that colliding with

something at such their breakneck speed would result in chaos that only a few on Crili had truly witnessed.

Chapter 23: Dark waters

High Officer Lesio stood at the centerpiece of her chess board. The queen commanded the space. Pawns stood in wrecks around her. Crili floated in the distance. She had struck hard, struck fast, and now all eyes were on her. What would she do next?

The search for Kash had gone exactly as Lesio predicted, a failure. The man had clearly thrown himself out of an airlock after assaulting the strike team trooper. Sure, Lesio was planning to do the same thing, but it still pained her heart that after all of the betrayal he couldn't even let her have her one final moment. She wanted to watch the fear multiply in his eyes as the airlock door sealed shut beyond him with a "wumph". But no. The man had done it himself. Sunk his own boat. And now the queen was left in the center of the stage, a spotlight on her back, and no sidekick in sight. She slid the datapad Onatia had given her on the monitor, uploading the file to the mainframe. Probably just registry numbers for the *Komoto* to make it look like a Zendon ship. She hadn't bothered to look through it. Onatia wouldn't betray her.

The bridge of the *Komoto* was a quiet affair. The techs slowly murmured in muted voices as engineering staff slid replacement parts into the battered system. The attack on the *Komoto*, almost a month old now, had left serious engineering issues. Decks 1 and 3 were still occasionally subject to power loss, followed by false CO2 emergency sirens. No one knew what triggered them, but it kept the strike teams awake at night with their O2 masks next to their beds. The water tank had been punctured by a PWD round, shearing a hole through the bridge and the subsequent two decks until it hit the main tank. Two officers had been plastered to the wall by five hundred gallons of pressure. They still weren't out of the medical bay. The final issue was the munitions.

The *Komoto* held fourteen torpedo tubes, with two torpedoes behind each tube as spares. They were now down to only one spare each, a third of their reserve gone. The cargo haulers hadn't carried any missiles suitable for them. PWD ammunition was down by forty percent, holding just level at sixty-one capacity. Onatia had explained that resources were being used elsewhere. And apparently the *Komoto* had to donate some as well. A databank from storage had been brought up and transferred over to the *Lust and Forgive*. So no resupply. Missile racks were back to full capacity after a refill. Lesio kept all this in her head while planning the attack.

Sneaking into the Zendon reinforcements had proved far easier than expected. They relayed the proper authentication codes, shifted drive trajectories slightly, and suddenly they're on course to intercept. So one problem out of the way, two more to go.

The news of the diplomats hit the *Komoto* right as the morning shift was coming onto duty. Lesio had muttered some curse words and got to work. Her attack would occur the same as before, try to make the Armadan fleet think a real attack was happening. Make everything go haywire around the neutral zone. Slip away.

And originally that had been that. Stay still and wait for more orders. But Lesio had a feeling these were Onatia's final orders before the war started, so she better play her part. The queen turns to face the board itself.

Onatia had mentioned he could handle the ground, but what if she helped him? Proved herself more.

Two diplomats were on Lioni. A small city, a tiny capital, an easy target. No doubt it would be guarded by various defense systems, but Lesio didn't want to nuke it, she wanted to infiltrate it.

Since the start she'd had a strike team onboard. Provided by Onatia, the men were capable and loyal. They'd stayed silent and kept to their decks despite having seen no combat for almost a year. Having seen nothing but ship decks, hallways, and false stars. That could drive a land focused person insane. So Lesio was grateful that they hadn't tried to start any riots.

Their two decks were called "1" and "2" but were more like cargo pods attached to the bottom of the *Komoto*. They were built in such a way that they could be dropped or flung away in the moment. Almost like drop pods, only slightly more maneuverable. Also able to be picked up and transported by a CZ-104 shuttle. The most standard and widely used shuttle in the galaxy for the various pods - thus roles - it could carry.

The queen slowly slid forward a step, bringing up her rooks.

If the diplomats went down during the fighting, no one would notice. No one could stop a strike team. Thirty men total, last time Lesio had counted. A few had left here and there, usually because Onatia had wanted to beef somewhere else up. But the remainder were well equipped, well trained, and loyal to a t. Something Kash could never have understood. Not like he ever would, with him floating out in the big black.

* * *

Kash stayed silent for most of the day after the *Komoto* left. He knew Edward Hoss was watching him, trying to guess who he was, but Kash wouldn't let him. In his pocket, not the overalls pocket but the fancy captain's pants underneath, was a pair of coded data pods. Tiny objects the length of a pinky nail, they held every record of the *Komoto*, its previous wearabouts, and every cargo hauler it had encountered. Since the *Komoto* is a stealth destroyer, thus an infiltrator unit, any ship it docked with got the full treatment of an interrogation: Spec Numbers were pulled, sheet data was combed, records of interactions were taken, door codes, access logs, drive plume datap; everything from the captain's favorite brand of whiskey to the out of order light on the third deck.

Kash laid on the stiff mattress beneath Hoss's bunk. Provided to him, free of charge, the bunk smelled new - or as new as you could get on a cargo hauler -. Clearly no one had slept there in the last month, so that was a plus. The second plus was the good view of the hallway it gave him. Positioned just to the right of the door, he had a full view of anyone coming down from the main entrance towards their room. Sure, he couldn't see anyone exiting the rooms to his right, but they didn't matter. If an event were to occur involving Kash, it would happen starting with that door opening and strike team commanders marching towards him.

Kash had witnessed several of them onboard of the *Lust and Forgive*, usually standing around with rifles propped up near knees and heads on a constant swivel. It wouldn't do to get shanked while on the job.

Hoss waited for the new guy to say something. But he never did, so Hoss just kept staring at the ceiling. Earlier, months earlier, when the *Lust and Forgive* was first abducted he'd had a plan to knock out a loner and steal his uniform, thus gaining access to the command consoles. Hoss had just forgotten about that plan, too much other shit going on. The scent of the cheese being kicked up by all the feet walking nearby. But he'd been able to get the information out, which was good. Except no one had listened apparently.

He turned over on his side, thinking.

"You're part of the *Komoto*'s crew, aren't you?" asked Hoss. The room was empty.

"Already told you, not anymore," said Kash.

“What were you?”

Kash thought fast. “Engineering?”

“What did you work on?”

“Air filters mostly,” said Kash, where was this guy going with this stuff?”

“Did you ever deal with doors?”

“How so?”

“Like fixing panels and the like,” said Hoss.

“No. Why so many questions?”

“Because the door stays open at night and I’m sick of it,” Hoss pointed a hand at the sliding door.

Kash felt some of the pressure go away. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Did they ever tell you what they’re doing on that ship?”

Kash saw the bunk room flash away into the bridge of the *Komoto* for a second. A nightmare scenario where Lesio laughed at frozen bodies from Crili reaching out towards the ship. Issac pounding his fist down in joy as racks of missiles expelled themselves.

“No.”

Hoss rolled back over so his back was against the mattress. Kash had taken a little bit to answer. People usually don’t take that long unless they’re remembering stuff. Stuff they’d rather not talk about.

“Ok,” Hoss said, not at all convinced with what Kash had said.

* * *

Fisher closed his eyes onboard the bridge. Around him the ship hummed in a soft manner, like a horse chiding during a long sprint. His back slightly ached from the gel cushioning, he arched his neck to relieve some of the tension.

Fisher felt the same pain that Hoss did, that no-one had received his message. He checked the computer model. They should have entered the edge of the Harbini corridor, the closest piece of colonized space. Maybe the computer model was off for a few days. And he couldn’t know until he got to his destination, not unless they started responding now.

He checked the time table. Three more months of this burn and they’d be back. That’s all he had to endure. Three more months. The bridge of the *Armalay* was flush around him. The crew hunched back in their gel seats. The scientists downstairs who were on the edge of stroking out. All of it weighed on time, and time would do what it did best, tell.

God damnit, three more months.

* * *

The Captain of the strike team, thirty seven year old Buller with two twisted scars under his lip, met Lesio right outside of the bridge. Summoned ten minutes earlier he departed the game of poker he was playing with great haste. When he noticed Lesio’s eye hanging on the scars he explained they were from an old lover.

“She didn’t like my taste in music,” said Buller with a grin. He had a voice like the rumbling of a gator, something had fallen down there long ago and wasn’t coming up. “So she said I shouldn’t sing anymore.”

“I’m not surprised,” Lesio said coolly. “I have an assignment.”

“Yes ma’am,” Buller straightened to attention.

“Can you handle dropping to Nebola?”

“Never been there. But any ground is our ground.”

“You’ll need to take out diplomats,” Lesio handed over the data slips. “Once completed, send me the code at the bottom of the assignment.”

“Anything special done with the bodies.”

“I’d prefer no-one knew it was us.”

“As always.”

“There’s a pair of CZ-104s on the platforms. That’s most likely your easiest way in.”

“How do you propose we get them?”

“Medical crates is the disguise of your drop pods. They’d fallen off from a ship during battle.”

“What battle?”

“None of your concern,” Lesio gave him a look that said if he didn’t stop pushing he’d have more scars. “You can expect little resistance.”

“Diplomats don’t travel unguarded,” Buller said. He picked up the datapad. “Bezi and Ridler. Zendon and Armadan.”

“Any estimates?” asked Lesio.

“On guards?” Buller shrugged. “Used to work security for a few people this high up. The Armadan side was always touchy during diplomatic meetings, so maybe six or seven Marines in the compound. The Zendon government might send a bodyguard. Diplomats are always replaceable. At the end of the day all they really are are talk pieces.”

“So you can handle that?” Lesio said it as a question, but it was more of a statement.

“Easily.”

“Go prepare,” Lesio shoed him away. She re-entered the bridge. Another problem solved, now only to fix the final one, the battle looming in the distance.

* * *

Captain Hankle, the man in charge of the *StarBurn* and the convoy ships watched from the distance as the lone ship joined up with the Zendon reinforcements. Equipped with the latest observation technology, the *StarBurn* could see anything across the system.

“They’ve matched trajectories. It’s confirmed they’re bringing along a stealth destroyer,” reported senior CompsSci officer Myles.

“As if it wasn’t obvious earlier.” Hankle said. He was a big man with a sharp cut face, an imposing figure, but yet a kind and sarcastic leader. It always offset the new crew at the start because they expected yelling from a man like him. But Hankle wasn’t the yeller, Constantine was.

Hankle understood power when he saw it. He respected the fact that power would be dangerous to him. Akin to sticking feet in too hot of water. Some could do it. Some could even relax in it. But Hankle preferred to be on the outside, as Constantine waded through, to turn on the cold water. Hankle loved the cold. Sometimes Captains from other ships, when visiting, would comment on how his bridge felt like an ice box. The first thing he did on the warship was have an engineering specialist jerry rig a path around the preset standard for all Armadan naval ships and drop the temperature ten degrees.

He’d placed his convoy ships just as Constantine had requested, still far over the neutral zone. Hankle fully realized what Constantine was playing with, but power didn’t come to those who waited for life to take them up on the chance. Power came to those who took it. Or better said, power can to those who worked for it. And Constantine was working for it.

The convoy he’d left “stranded” was a pair of light armements cruisers -loaded with enough explosives that one good PWD round could turn the nearby space into the center of the spun for a second- an Armadan light Carrier - capacity of eight fighters, six Tri-Sentence and two Buzz Flies - and a

FastAction Destroyer. They would make for good bait. Better than that, they'd give the *StarBurn* enough time to enter the combat zone.

Over a thousand meters, shaped in a simple triangle, the O.A.W - orbital assault warship - that was the *StarBurn* weighed an estimated one hundred and ninety tons dry docked. But to weigh the damn thing would take the biggest scale in the existence of the world, so the word estimated was used. A combined arms fleet battle doctrine had inspired the creation of the *StarBurn*. Since ground combat was coming back in flavor, the new line of O.A.W's, O.A.Ca's, and O.A.Cr's, had been built. No destroyers were made for orbital assault yet, the class of ship seeming more fit to fight in space than anything else.

The *StarBurn* carried a wing of Tri-Senterans on its undercarriage, hung on lowered racks that could be concealed by a massive bay door. Five CZ-104 shuttles plus two A.F.R. B-202s - Action Far Range Bombers, model 202 - for ground assault. Fifteen torpedo tubes arrayed on the top decks, since torpedoes could be launched from anywhere guided to a target. Bubbles of PWD clusters were at the tip of the ship, along the bottom spine, the top spine, across the trenches, and on the top of the slightly raised bridge. Built unlike other ships where the bridge was commonly concealed inside of the hull, the bridge of the *Windless* was raised a good fifteen feet to allow increased visibility during combat. This impressive warship, the ice box, was to be Constantines hammer when the time came. Captain Hankle watched the lone ship slowly adjust its course further. And damn would it feel good to finally use the warship. The galaxy had waited too long, blood was thickening in the waters and the fleets were hungry.

Chapter 24: Runabout

Burta recollected the party they'd had on Sispini. The cheerful grins and drinks they'd handed out. The glizzy vibe that accompanied a job well done. She had excused herself from talking to Timur about the Skipoly Grey and made her way across the floor to Marshal. They'd talked for a bit, back and forth about the average oblong things people discuss, they were both engaged, dynamic conversation, words flipping back and forth, and she was about to pop the question when McArthur said his famous words "we have a problem".

Burta pulled the elastic bands back against her chest in the strange gravity that accompanied the Jump journey. Her forehead was gliss with sweat. The bands tethered on the edge of stamping back, but Burta held them in place.

She held her family in place. Kept her sister and brother from running away when their parents had disappeared. They lived in a small townhome on the edge of a valley city. One of the ones colonists make right before they consider themselves full civilizations. Near to the food, surrounded by the pretty nature, innocent in its picking, foolhardy in its development. The city was frequent to floods. Deep trench water that would rise to knee height on the ground streets. Burta and her siblings waded through the gunk for five hours to reach home, only to discover a door unlocked and no skiff shuttle in sight. Parents gone, maybe disappeared to look for them, or perhaps just had enough of raising kids. Burta hoped for the former but wouldn't bet against the latter. For nine years she raised her brother and sister, forgoing higher education so they could have a chance. She was their stepping stone, the cement in the ground that kept the building stable. And then they too had disappeared, and Burta was left without a family to support.

The loosened the slack around her hands, still keeping a fighters grip on the soft orange rubber.

For a while she danced around the question of just having her own family. She dated a few guys. Even married one for a short spree that ended with her leaving him for the navy and him leaving her for a better girl. Both were content, neither spoke to the other again. Her time in the armed forces was like stepping into a black room with your eyes closed and then opening them. It left you wondering whether your eyes were really open? Whether what you were seeing was real. Like that final moment in a dream. Where you remember everything, but the closer you look, the fuzzier it gets. On an operation clinic deck, after a long day's work, she came across Marshal. She was his first recruit.

At the time BRISK had been much more loosely defined. Technically run by McArthur, it contained a dozen ex-Marines straight from dark-ops missions. Used more as an assassin squad than a peacekeeping agency, BRISK had buckled during the waning years of pirate expansion. Risky operations lost people. Marshal slowly worked his way up the ranks, guided by McArthur. And then one day, light spilled into the dark room, and Burta realized - next to Marshal - she was the longest serving person in the ground. So she became the mentor and mother to BRISK.

The slack lessened as she pulled back. Her upper body remained straight as a board as she slowly tilted backwards, the elastic bands still tucked in her hands. Then came the false feeling of zero-G, that moment before you fell down, when everything seemed to hold on itself.

And what was a mom without a dad, even a slightly missing one as Marshal. After Garson he'd been around a lot more, but she could remember the early days when he'd disappear on operations for weeks at a time.

She stayed in the false G for almost a minute, resisting the two forces pulling on her.

It wasn't until two operations ago, when he'd been gone for a month and she began to worry, that she realized she was starting to love him. Perhaps not love when he disappeared, but Marshal had the type of body she desired, had the voice that soothed her heart, and the eyes that danced with her.

The slacks tightened, then lessened, and she fell to the floor.

"That was impressive," commented Garson, helping her up. "Never seen someone just say zen like that."

For a moment she saw Marshal's light blue eyes staring back at her. But they faded back to Garson's. "Thanks," she smiled softly, "how's the crew?"

Garson shrugged and sat down on the mat next to her, getting ready for an abb workout. He neglected them too much. "They're good, I think Timur is still watching that new *Nes* documentary in his room."

"He watches too many of those," said Burta softly. "Sooner or later he'll start commentating on us like Freddy Johnson does."

"Hey, in his words 'he's a freak of nature, I'm a freak of nature, so we get along'," Garson laughed. "Did Marshal ever put together his game plan?"

"I'm talking with him about that after lunch," Burta stood up from the mat, which now had an imprint of her sweaty butt and back.

Garson bobbed his head. "Hopefully we can get this done and over with." He paused and looked up. "If you really like him, you should probably ask him out before we go back into the battle."

Burta nodded a thanks and left the room. She kept underestimating Garson as some new-kid on the street. He wasn't. The kid had been the cop of the street before he ever joined BRISK. He had some people skills and Burta knew to pay attention to that. But she was also nervous. And nervous people don't like to be rushed.

* * *

Mallo stared blankly at the massive command monitor. The deck floor muttered softly with the snap action footsteps of the crew around him. With the reinforcements so close, there was a need to get things done. Supply charts were being drawn up, strategies for if war broke out, potential war games to be played.

Mallo kept staring at the screen. What game was Constantine playing?

It was apparent to him that the diplomat's message got through since the main warship, the *StarBurn*, pulled off, but the convoy had been left behind. If Mallo didn't know any better, Constantine was trying to start a war.

Usually when one man tries to start a war, it's because he either has more firepower or knows more than the other guy. Mallo looked at the map projected on the command monitor. Constantine had more men now, but wouldn't in two and a half days when the reinforcements arrived. If he wanted war, and wanted to win it, he should have attacked now.

But he didn't.

So he knew something more. What could he know?

The Serbas defense fleet, the largest fleet in the galaxy, was a two day sharp burn away. They could be in the Nebola system before the fighting finished. The Harbini corridor was that valuable to the Armadan government to station their best fleet there. So Constantine knew that, but so did Mallo. His reason had to be something else.

Perhaps he knew about Onatia. Or better yet, knew that someone out there was causing trouble. And by laying out bait for them he hoped to catch them in the act. Yet again, too obvious. Mallo had

talked to those who'd played against Constantine before. He usually had two plans. The obvious one, and the one no-one saw coming.

The obvious was straightforward, Constantine wanted to start a war since he had a big backup nearby. That was easy enough. Now the one no-one saw coming.

Mallo stared at the board and willed himself to think. Nothing, nada.

The information he had at his disposal was this: Constantine's ships, the IR foggy scan, the spies data, and whatever Bezi was feeding back to him.

Bezi! The now leader of the Zendon elements in the sector. Bezi could do something here. Mallo picked up the foggy IR scan. If Bezi authorized a "search" in the area of this battle, it could yield results. He popped it into a message and sent it away. He felt time slipping beneath his feet, he had to act fast.

* * *

Fisher's alert had indeed come to the Harbini corridor, but perhaps not in the way he had expected. During the high frequency chase, during which he'd sent out several messages, all of which were on a wide band, the message itself had become cluttered and funky. Only giving out coordinates and a time. Most people ignored this. But the sub-message, the one scripted by default in only Armadan server readability, was still crystal clear, and had just entered the Nebola System. Traveling faster than light, it flashed the system in an hour and kept going. Passing through the jump portal, past the neural network of the galaxy, and was picked up on by an old Armadan "destroyer" pushing for Nebola.

Garson heard his datapad ping. A message had just come through the naval priority alert tab. Garson didn't even know they still had that. Wasn't that for emergency messages? He opened up the message and spit out his coffee, fuck, he had to go tell Marshal.

* * *

At the same time that Garson was ruining the wall of the Skipoly Grey with coffee, the High Chair sat around with his board of advisors. A bunch of old stuffy senators plus the JCF and General Secretary of Defense, who gave the word board in board of members a more meaningful feeling.

"What is it?" asked the High Chair. He'd called this meeting, but the two men looked strung by their pants to tell a story.

"It's two things sir," said the JCF. "Constantine and Ridler."

"Fuck," whispered the High Chair. "What happened?" he waved his hand.

"Constantine's pushing the neutral zone like a crazed dog and-

"We fear for Ridders safety," said the GSD in a monotone voice.

The JCF shot him a look of disgust for interrupting him before moving on. "We need to ensure the diplomats' safety."

The High Chair nodded. "I can have a team work on that."

"We mean urgently, if the diplomats die and war breaks out, we'll be up in our necks before I know it," stated the GSD. "I propose we enact the session committee of no-confidence on Constantine."

"Like hell you will," said the JCF outraged. "Constantine's pushed his bounds but he's by no-means not a good Captain."

"He broke the government's law," said the GSD stubbornly. "And I live by the law."

"We know," sighed the High Chair. No wonder the GSD was only invited to formal pirates and events. The High Chair leaned forward, his elbows propped on the edge of the table. "What does Constantine have?"

“Three warships, the *StarBurn*, *Birthright*, and *Windless*; all good ships with good commanders. Convoy wise we believe he has three destroyers, five cruisers, two supply ships, and four LACs - Light Armadan Carriers,” the JCF spelled out for the High Chair.

“I thought the technical term was ALCs, Armadan Light Carriers?” asked the GSD.

The man’s brain is a brick, thought the High Chair, but that’s why he’s a career bureaucrat, because solid bricks make good walls.

“Will Serbas reinforce him?” asked the High Chair.

“They have to, it’s naval law,” the GSD said.

The JTC rubbed his hands together, “not like we could tell them not too anyway.”

“Fine enough,” the High Chair pondered for a moment. “What do we have on the ground to protect the diplomats?”

“A team of Marines from Crili, no idea where the other ones are.”

“So we’ve lost Marines over there?” asked the High Chair.

“Two drop pods out of the six launched,” answered the JTC glumly.

“Last time we contract VESTCO for drop pods,” said the High Chair. “Ok, this is doable. You two go sit on your asses. Thank you for bringing this to me. If Constantine starts a war send a message to the Serbas fleets that if they move the Silo ships in the system will turn the docks into atoms. I can deal with the diplomats,” the High Chair rose from his chair and led them to the door.

* * *

Onatia sucked in his breath and stared at the message popping up on his screen. Another request sent from Mallo to Bezi, this time about the IR scans. “Request to investigate the area to settle the matter,” the letter said. Onatia flipping through it. He could alter it, but that was too obvious. He could delete it, and maybe Bezi would die before the captain and diplomat would meet again and Mallo could ask why his request was never permitted. Chances and choices.

The Pursuer droid hack was coming fairly along. They’d broken through the droids initiative processors the night before, resulting in a creepy hack that had resulted in the droids simply switching places outside of the bedroom of Bezi. Not yet there to killing the diplomat but a step in the right direction.

If the message was deleted, that would work in Onatia’s favor. Increase the uncertainty and stress on Mallos back. Make him react stronger when his ships leapt up to attack. Let the man understand less about his real enemy. But for that to happen and for Onatia to get away, the Pursuer droids needed to be ready. And there was still work in that department.

Onatia sighed and moved out of the bridge back to his private corridors. Running an illegal war was never going to be an easy operation. He’d much rather have preferred to be leading fleets. But this was the action necessary to accomplish the that dream. And he’d worked so hard that he wasn’t going to let some diplomat and a captain stop him. The old leaders, the sick deposits made by bloodlines, would be torn down. The rightful would take their place. And to make that happen, perhaps the dragon in the shadows would just have to steam a little bit more.

Chapter 25: Full steam ahead

The skies around Lioni darkened as the days grew. Debris fell in clusters, often leaving behind silky trails as markers to their otherworldly penetration. Twice a chunk of the station came close to the city, only to be shot out of the sky by a turret emplacement set on top of a the diplomatic building.

In the space above and around Nebola, tensions thickened. Constantine moved his fleet ever so slightly into battle ready positions, holding just above Crili, while the *StarBurn* kicked around near the neutral sector.

Zendon reinforcements, and the rogue tic of the *Komoto*, sped towards the patrol fleet at great speed, drive plumes open, chutes closed, and torpedo tubes flooded.

The galaxy was stacking its chips on the board, red or black, and the ball began to spin.

* * *

“Not happening,” said Marshal, “no way.”

They were standing in the hallway just outside of Marshal’s quarters, where Garson had pinned him. The clock above the door pronounced “twenty hours left in Jump”. Red lining was the only form of art on the otherwise sterile grey walls.

“He’s in trouble!” complained Garson. He was holding the datapad with the wideband emergency alert on it. “Being chased by an unknown destroyer and all he wants to do is meet at these coordinates.”

“Which happens to be at the edge of the Harbini corridor, right near Zendon space. It’s a trap.”

“And if it isn’t and you-”

Marshal held up a hand. “Look, I appreciate your desire to help but it’s just not possible.”

“Because the Skipoly Grey is needed where?” asked Garson. He couldn’t just let this Fisher guy walk into the coordinates and have no-one help. “The guy is coming in three months. We’ll be done here before then.”

Marshal sighed, and crossed his arms. “We don’t know that. Our *benefactor* has asked us to politely protect one of the diplomats on the ground. That could last a week, a month, a whole year.”

“Who are you bringing?”

“Timur and Elaine,” answered Marshal. “And that doesn’t mean you can lift off and run away once we’re down the ramp.”

“So you want the Skipoly Grey to just sit on a pad?”

“No, our benefactor wants it up in the air, near Crili, to keep an eye on Constantine.”

“Which we can do what about, should he decide to start a war?”

“You have torpedo tubes,” Marshal said calmly.

It was now Garson’s turn to sigh. “Yeah, we’ll last maybe a few minutes out there.”

“You’re coded as an Armadan ship, the PWD might not kick in until the last second for the *Windless*.”

“And when it does and we’re next to the biggest fleet in the system,” asked Garson.

“You run to the real biggest fleet in the system.”

“Jesus, this plan is screwed,” pronounced Garson, “but I’ll do it.”

“Knew you would,” Marshal patted him on the shoulder and moved down the hallway.

Timur was in the “armory” when Garson arrived. Ten feet across and seven feet tall, the room was a little box packed with enough munitions to arm a small army, and it seemed like Timur was going to do exactly that. In front of his legs was a traditional briefcase, extended a little bit on either end.

Around it were various parts of guns. Garson recognized the butt stock of the MAR, the index trigger of a P223, and the slide of a SE-72. But there were definitely more. Screws, springs, several pieces of metal, an open magazine. And all of it surrounds an empty, but ordinary briefcase.

“You know you’re going to the ground?” asked Garson.

“Knew it since I was invited on the mission. You either bring me for two things, to bust some head on the ground or help Marshal with flying, and Burta has that one covered.”

“So why’d you come with us before?”

“Because the skiff was full and it looked like you needed someone else on this ship,” Timur was too busy disassembling a MAR-S to look up.

“Are you planning to arm an army?”

“Yep.” Timur screwed out the barrel and placed it next to his bench. “Me.”

“And Elanie,” said Garson.

Timur’s head picked up a notch. “She’s coming?”

“You should probably bring something for her.”

“Shit, I told Marshal just to bring us. Two guys with nothing to lose can do a lot more harm than one guy with nothing to lose, a girl, and a guy who likes her.”

“Figured about as much,” Garson said. He glanced around at the racks. “You know more about guns than me, but you’ll probably want some vacuum poppers if you’re in enclosed spaces”

Timur glanced at the tall rack, he’d never used those. “Thanks.” He’d wait to use those. No telling where they’d end up fighting.

“Try to bring the diplomat back alive.” Garson said with dry humor as he left the room.

* * *

The *Lust and Forgive* shuttered with the vibrations of a drive plume slowly cooling. The cargo hauler had so much mass that the force needed to move it even at one-G were equivalent to the force needed to move the Skipoly Grey seventeen G. As the drive plumes slowly cooled down and the one G turned into point five, into point three, into null, the ship underwent the shutters.

Waste heat, energy, and momentum were slowly absorbed and then spat back out into the void. Near the top of the large pressurized chamber bubbles formed and metal began warping. It was common for a ship of this size, and not much concern for it’s normal crew. It scared the shit out of Kash.

They were in the cafeteria during the second day, almost done with their third shift when another series of shutters began.

“Fuck me,” hissed Kash through clenched teeth. “Why can’t they fix that?”

“It won’t break, trust me,” Hoss stabbed some lettuce with his fork. The ship was so big that usually got fresh produce from the small garden near the reactor. Probably some health risks were included, but Hoss didn’t care as long as he got his iceberg lettuce and tomatoes.

“Sometimes this ship makes me miss the *Komoto*.”

“Well usually we don’t shoot down other ships, so don’t miss that.” Hoss plopped the lettuce into his mouth and felt the satisfying crunches. “Anyway, you’ve been on this ship two days, give it some time.”

“Fair point,” grumbled Kash as the shutters subsided.

Hoss waited a few minutes before asking his question. “I think we were in a battle a few days ago, were you part of that?”

Kash glanced over, trying to look innocent but he bet the spy could see through that. “I was engineering, we wouldn’t know.”

“You mean didn’t?”

Fuck. “Yeah, didn’t, sorry, slip of the tongue,” Kash shoved some more hass onto his fork. The salty substance was addictive and probably horrible for his digestive tract. “Why do you care about a battle so much?”

“Just happen to be a curious guy,” Hoss crunched on a juicy tomato cut.

“You’d make a damn good spy.”

Hoss only slightly choked on his food, it wasn’t every day his target guessed his identity. “Yeah, I guess I would have.” He bent his try and scooped up the remaining tiny cuts of lettuce with his fork. “Captain’s quarters would have all that information.”

Kash chuckled. “So you want to go break into the captain’s quarters?”

Hoss pushed away from the table and picked up his empty tray. “Third floor, second hallway on the right.”

The captain’s quarters on the *Lust and Forgive* had been mainly abandoned by Captain Bigani in favor of the bridge and the accommodations provided there. Instead the quarter’s had been turned into a makeshift databank, where excess runtime could be sent and random tasks were processed. It had been a “gift” by Onatia, more of a payment in Bigani’s book - but you couldn’t say no to a gift provided by the same guy who’d held you at gunpoint.

There used to be armed guards, ex-strike team soldiers, but Onatia had called them away to guard the arguably more valuable bridge. So the captain’s quarters were forgotten by everyone, apart from Hoss. From day one they’d had something to do with his plan, but now that they were the hub for the ship’s memories, they were the centerpiece of his plan. And now he had the ability to do that because Kash knew a way to get the doors open.

Kash headed up the stairs with a conspicuous glance to the left and right. His shoulders were hunched forward and hands in pockets. If anyone saw him they’d immediately finger him as up to no good.

“Walk normal, trust me,” Hoss said, while calmly leaning on the wall outside of the door.

“Just nervous.”

“Well nervousness can be concealed. Walk like you belong and people usually believe you do,” Hoss rolled his shoulders. “Let’s get cracking.”

Kash moved up next to the door and tried the standard four digit pin that most doors on the *Komoto* used. “Nope. So it’s not standard.”

“I didn’t bring you up here to help me get the door open that way,” Hoss stuck a knife he’d brought up from the cafe into the gap between the access panel and the wall. He wedged it and pushed. The front of the access panel popped open. “You’re an engineer, you know how to work this?”

For the second time in a week Kash found himself facing a door he had to open. “Yeah, no problem,” he lied. The internals were a pair of tiny transformers near the bottom, pinky sized cylinders wrapped in wax paper, and twelve wires leading to the respective numbers on the pin board. If the pumps failed, then the door had to open. But if the lasers failed, then the pumps would stay dead locked. It was a game of chance. Something Kash wasn’t too fond of, but had usually worked in his favor.

He held his hand over the right transformer, then hovered above the left. Choices. Fifty-fifty. He sized up the moment and grabbed the left one, tearing it away from the wires. The door clanked open.

“Good job,” Hoss said with a smile.

The captain's quarters were tiny. Smaller than the bunk room Kash had shared as a cadet. Taking up most of the space was a wall of SSDs, all storing information. In the center of the room, the most recent addition was the database. A printer sized contraption made of a steel exterior and with a single monitor on the front. It had a table like design, with there being enough leg space underneath for someone to pull up a chair and take a seat.

Hoss stepped up and began tapping on the screen. Red, red, red.

"It's locked," announced Hoss.

"By what?"

Hoss tapped five times on the screen, Kash leaned over and made out there was a keypad. Hoss was trying codes. Red again.

"How many tries do you have left?" asked Kash.

"Seven."

Red, red.

"Five."

"Who provided this?" asked Kash.

"Onatia, why do you ask?" Hoss was typing again, but he hadn't clicked 'enter' yet.

"Because it looks like one of the ones we had in storage on the *Komoto*."

"It arrived recently."

"So probably during the *Komoto*'s docking," said Kash, bending down to get a look at the underside. "Yeah, right here," he rubbed his finger along the indents. "T-114, the *Komoto*'s ancient caller number."

"So do you know the code?"

Kash stared at the screen. "Maybe."

He tried the obvious first, starting with T-114. Red screen. Four tries to go. Then *Komoto*. Red screen, three left.

Lesio had provided this. Lesio loved chess, she envisioned herself the queen of the board. He'd thought her insane, but clearly she carried the concept everywhere she went in life. Kash sighed, "Damn it."

"You don't know it?"

"I do," Kash muttered. He typed in *Queen*, clicked enter.

Green.

"It was Queen. The commander of the *Komoto* loved chess. Envisioned herself the queen on the board."

"The galaxy isn't not 2D," pointed out Hoss. Only a few people would know that information.

"Exactly."

"You were the captain of the *Komoto*?"

Kash felt the air freeze in his lungs. He let it out slowly. "I was." He glanced at Hoss, who wasn't surprised by the information. "And you're a spy for the Zendon government."

"I usually wouldn't reveal that, but since we'll need to be honest to get off this ship alive," Hoss extended a hand. "Good to finally meet someone on the same side."

"I wouldn't call it that. I want to get out of here, you just want to go up the ranks. Probably want to be an instructor at the Hedge."

Hoss shrugged. "I just want to keep this career alive."

"And I'm center to that?"

“At the moment, yes,” no use lying thought Hoss.

“So you’ll want to turn me in?”

“If I can’t get this ship, then yes. But if I can commandeer the ship, and get a personalized account of what happened on the *Komoto*, then we can go our separate ways.”

“No use wasting time. Grab these banks, get out your recorder, I’ll talk on the go.”

* * *

Bezi and Ridler sat opposite each other at the normal table. The same coffee stains were there, the same slightly fuzzy industrial seats. Even the room's lights were constantly the same. But the mood had changed.

“I never understood why we fight the way we do,” announced Ridler.

“Agreed,” seconded Bezi. “Why fight when we can talk it out.”

“Let cooler heads prevail.”

“Although some navies don’t like to back down.”

“I already sent a message back to my government and Serbas, if Constantine attacks, or any attack occurs in the neutral zone, no backup and no responsibility.”

“He’s a bugger, isn’t he,” asked Bezi.

“Should have heard his tone when talking to me earlier today,” laughed Ridler. “It was like I strangled his son. He could barely control himself.”

“Well good thing our governments agreed on the bill.”

Ridler nodded his head. “Reinforcements for your patrol fleet are how many days away?”

“One day,” Bezi announced, cracking his back.

“Good stuff, and then once everyones gone we can head home,” said Ridler.

“First to arrive, last to leave.”

“Let’s hope we can leave.”

The two diplomats chuckled together. Outside of Bezi’s room, the Pursuer droids switched again, this time flicking their guns off safety for a moment.

* * *

Onatia watched the progress with great interest. The Pursuer droids would be paramount to his operation. Take out one, or both or the diplomats and you have the recipe for war. Get lucky and score a few Marines, then you’ll have a war of proper cause.

He’d intercepted Mallo’s IR scan the night before, along with Fisher’s message. A lot of data was streaming through the system, but that was only to be expected.

Mallo would be taken care of during Lesio’s attack. He would be honor bound to join the fray. While Fisher, well Onatia had a special plan for that. He switched his screen and watched the *StarBurn* for a few seconds. Oh yeah, he had a plan for Fisher.

* * *

Burta switched over to manual as the Skipoly Grey cut out of Jump and bloomed into the Nebola system. Her eyes were a little sore from staring at the screen for twelve hours, but she couldn’t do anything else. She had tried to approach Marshal earlier today, only to find Garson was already talking to him. She loved the kid as a son, but couldn’t he leave her a little space to talk to Marshal. Whatever. They were on a mission, it was only expected the guys would talk to each other about guy stuff.

Burta plotted a course to Nebola, just a simple system burn that would take them away from the high traffic areas. They’d be at Nebola in a day, arriving just at the same time as the reinforcement fleet.

Four G constant, but the crew could take that. She powered up the purple lights, dimmed the crew cabins and announced they were preparing to burn hard like a bottle.

Maybe once this was all done she could talk to Marshal. Maybe then.

Chapter 26: In-town

All across the system tactical clocks counted down towards zero. The arriving Zendon reinforcements a triangle on a curved line ending in the singular dot at the edge of the system, the patrol fleet.

Medical transports, destroyers, cruisers, shuttles, hulkers, all began their deceleration. Some of the older models had started it sooner with a flip and burn. The two pincers came together. And on boards across the system, what was once two smaller triangles became a larger triangle. For some, Mallo, Bezi, Ridler, that was a good thing. For others, Constantine, it was a problem. And for one man, waiting on the edge of the solar system, with a private array of missiles, it was a play about to be performed.

* * *

Timur hated entering the atmosphere in anything other than a drop pod, because then you knew it was supposed to shake and give off a racket. In his mind ships weren't. The Skipoly Grey especially. It was supposed to be cool and smooth, always reliable, never faulty. Well it damn sure sounded faulty right now, he thought.

The Skipoly Grey was re-entering with its drive plume facing the ground burning hard retrograde, trying to steam off as much momentum as it could. Brake skids had extended to slightly dampen the momentum the drive plume had to shove off. The ship rumbled and all Timur could do was hold onto his armrests for dear life. He glanced above him at the cockpit chair. It wasn't Burta's fault either, but he couldn't blame himself for asking her why it wasn't a smoother ride. The computer of the Skipoly Grey was handling everything now.

The Skipoly Grey shook, like the cork of a bottle popping off, as it cleared the final rumble and they cleared the upper atmosphere. The ground rose below them. External cameras were momentarily cut out by clouds, which the Skipoly Grey cut through, only leaving a thin trail of water vapor behind. The drive plume slowly began to kick on again as they neared Lioni.

Timur allowed himself to breathe and relaxed in his chair. The rumbles were over and the smooth ride of the Skipoly Grey was back. He glanced around the "bridge", to the members of BRISK up there. Garson was handling comms, Jeffrey was on CompsSci and talking directly to the computer, and Burta was above his head. Elanie and Marshal were downstairs doing the final prep before leaving. Timur caught himself thinking about Elanie but shook it off. Not the time, and not again.

The Skipoly Grey landed with a crunch of the landing arm. Unlike conventional shuttles, rocket oriented spacecraft had to land on their butt. But since their butt was a drive cone that made travel possible and wasn't rated to hold the weight of the destroyer skiff, landing arms were used. Not really arms and more of large clamps that held the bottom of the rocket while a gunray was wheeled over to the side door. Like a station, except with gravity, humidity, and a whole lot more sunlight.

Timur almost threw up when he stepped off the Skipoly Grey. It had been a whole two years since he'd stepped foot on a planet. It was a natural reaction, but an unpleasant one. The sudden shift in the conceived norms of gravity followed by the seemingly blinding sunlight and lack of close context made for an uncomfortable experience. For all humanity had tried to make space travel seem like you never left planetside, nothing actually beat the experience of the primal brain rejoining feet with ground, the spinning inner ear aligning itself to a horizon, and a sun that could give you cancer. To come from a sterile environment to this was enough to give anyone a bad case of the planet aches.

Garson did throw up. A decade he hadn't been down to a planet. Hell, he was almost a full bastard, except for his previous experience growing up on a planet. People belonged on the ground, and Garson had withheld himself past his bodily limits.

At the end of the gunray their bags had already been laid out.

"Looks like our benefactor told someone we were coming," commented Elanie.

"We or another group," Marshal shrugged and lifted two of the bags. "Everyone grab two, that way we can only make one trip."

A dusty offroad six-wheeler was waiting for them at the edge of the tarmac. The driver had evidently left, but there was no one else around, so the vehicle had to be for them. All but Burta clambered in. She explained she didn't feel safe with no-one being near the Skipoly Grey. They all waved her goodbye and the six-wheeler took off.

It wasn't the smooth ride Timur needed.

"Timur you look sick," pointed out Elanie.

"Planetside aches," explained Marshal from the driver's seat. He'd preferred to drive. "Garson had them too."

"You get over them in roughly two days, the same amount of time it takes for your inner ear to adjust correctly," commented Jeffrey from behind his datapad.

"Any pills?" said Timur in a weak voice.

"There should be a few in the bag. They'll make you tired, so be careful with how many you have. Too many and we might have to drag you to the hotel."

Timur found them in the fourth bag. A clear orange tinted bottle with a white cap. He took the prescribed amount, and when offered to Garson the man waved them off.

"I'm out of this planet in a few hours anyway," Garson explained. "You need them more."

The six-wheeler stopped at a four story building two blocks away from the prime minister's palace that doubled as the diplomatic building. Marshal went in alone and exited with four room passes.

"There's only three of us," said Elanie, "why four passes?"

"I don't think any of us want to sleep next to fourteen pounds of explosives," said Marshal. "And anyway, be grateful, the whole hotel is packed with journalists and doomsday watchers. They think some crazy shit is going to happen soon."

"Which it won't, with us here. Or if it does, it won't seep out into the street," Timur stretched and stood up, once again feeling the vertigo. The sidewalk seemed to sway in front of him. He followed his marine training, focused his eyes on a distant point, and put one foot in front of the other. And sometimes that's just how life had to go. One step in front of the other.

The six-wheeler auto-drove itself back to the landing pad, where Garson and Jeffrey disembarked for the nearby bar.

* * *

"Grab your shit," Marshal said as Timur and Elanie put the bags down in the fourth room. "Clothes, toletirites, data-pads, and IDs."

As the other two went about collecting their items, which had been wrapped in plastic bags, Marshal staked out the room. Two blocks down, exactly in line of sight of the window he was staring out of, was the east side of the diplomatic building.

"What are you staring at?" asked Elanie.

"Anyone tries to go into the diplomats' living quarters from the east side windows, we'll know," Marshal said. "Or at least this camera will know," he patted the tripod and magnified camera he'd set up.

“Today's task is simple. Our job is to protect the diplomats without their knowledge. So to do that we've got to set up cameras recording anything and everything that goes into the building. Anything suspicious goes in, we follow.”

“So who's on what in the “shit-case” scenario that someone walks in with a gun?” asked Timur.

“You and I will go across the street, through the service entrance, up the steps, and protect the diplomats. Elanie will stay back here with this,” Marshal bent down and tugged a LR-202 magnified sniper rifle. “I know you're not that good with guns, but all you have to do is point and shoot. You'll be on the rooftop.”

Elanie stared at the gun for a few seconds. “And if I miss?”

“That's why Timur and I are in the building.”

“We need more people,” said Elanie.

“Garsons too new to put him in here. I like the kid, but I'm not risking the kid. Burta is our fly girl. And Jeffrey, well I'm not risking him either,” said Marshal.

“So we're worth the risk?”

“Yes and no. I think you'll handle yourself just fine, so the risk factor is removed, but this mission also has to be done. It don't think the tired marines or the two JSOC spec-ops men in there can protect our diplomat for long,” explained Marshal, “BRISK's job is to do what other people cannot in the goal of long-term safety.”

Timur pulled out his custom MAR-S with the removed stock, click action trigger, and IR sight. “So what do we do till the bad guys show up?”

“Set up cameras and watch.”

* * *

Two hours earlier Grimes had watched the silk spray of clouds being dispersed, followed by the tiny spec of a rocket pushing through. Shuttles he couldn't care about, but rockets could only land in certain places, places with landing pads, and usually landing pads meant civilizations. Grime's had a new helmet on, Kempo's helmet. With resupplies in short order, Grimes had given out the order that if the dead weren't using it, the living should take it, to try to live a little longer. The order had gone out for food and water mainly, but was also applicable to armor. Soon the six dead, five from the debris, and Kempo, were dug up - pockets raided for food, ammo packs and AC units scrapped, and armor distributed. Grimes didn't watch in disgust or anger, for times were desperate enough.

The diplomat seemed to watch this behaviour with great interest. His hands constantly in his pockets, his briefcase never far behind. He was an oddity to Grimes, but at this time, everyone was an oddity.

Grimes sighted the new trail and mapped it out in his head. If he was facing west, and the trail was cutting north, then Lioni had to be roughly north-west. The shuttle had broken through the cloud cover, with a drive plume off, meaning the city was close, but not too close. Grimes looked at the clouds again. Back in his old Marines days they didn't start burning till fifty miles away, but usually didn't break cloud cover till eighty. So somewhere between there. Seventy sounded good.

Seventy miles north east, with heavy gear and weapons. Rough terrain, but not too bad since a good huff of it would be flat savanna and low brush. His HUD calculated the time to be a thirty six hour straight hike. His men couldn't hike farther than eight hours a day without risking serious strain, so seven and a half hours per day made out to be around five days. A five day hike to civilization. Grimes stared at the clouds. Yeah, his men could do that.

He glanced back at the diplomat who was sitting under the cool shade. But he didn't know if the diplomat could.

* * *

The bar served cool drinks and shade, both of which seemed to be in high demand on Lioni. A planet slightly closer than most to the sun, but still within the goldilocks zone, the builder of Lioni had made the decision to place it directly on the equator. Good move for crops and ease of access via shuttles, but bad move for people who liked the cold.

Garson felt his armpit sweat cling to his shirt. He'd only been out there for a few hours. He gulped down his sweet cocktail of the local craft sodas. The bar only served alcohol in the evening. Garson stared at his watch. By his count it was well past midnight, but on the planet it was just past noon. He heard the stirring of a shuttle passing low overhead. Two of the bar guests, shuttle pilots by the look of their garment, paid their tab and walked out.

Garson looked out the window as they went. Another CZ-104 shuttle was landing with no cargo underneath.

"They keep coming and going," said the bartender. He'd noticed Garson watching.

"Any idea where?"

The bartender shrugged. "As long as they pay their tab and aren't disrespectful I don't care."

"Anyone pay them to do that?"

"Since they pay their tab, yes. Medical supplies are supposed to be arriving in a few days, and some will be landing in the forests. So the pilots are training to pick them up," explained the bartender.

"Fun," commented Garson as the shuttle took off and the two pilots that came off headed towards the bar. "Looks like you got more customers."

Jeffrey and Burta showed up to the bar an hour later. Burta had been cleaning the final air recyclers while Jeffrey recalibrated the sleep schedule so the crew would match with the people on the ground.

"So today's the long haul?" asked Garson over another soda cocktail, it glowed a faint blue in the soft purple light of the bar's far corner. He couldn't stand the sun anymore and enjoyed the darkness of the bar's corners. Made him feel at home, like how he should have been sleeping.

Around the bar the first shift of off duty patrons began drinking. Garson watched them out of the corner of his eye. He was used to bars like this. Where the shadows concealed the tell tale signs of a stubborn drunk - the beetle-like black eye of an alcoholic. He rested his hand on his waist where his data-pad was. In a do-or-die situation it would work.

"Just stay awake another five hours then sleep for seven and you'll be golden," answered Jeffrey.

"Can't wait," said Burta sarcastically. "Any idea on when Marshal wants us to lift off?"

"He says to wait a day," said Jeffrey. "Incase they left anything or need anything."

"Makes sense," shrugged Garson. "Any more information?"

"The Prime minister's palace looks secure, but Timur said he could crack into it if given the chance," said Jeffrey. He had a glass of cool ice water in front of him. "But I bet he couldn't."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that," said Burta. She sipped on her light yellow tangy tea and soda cocktail. The bar seemed to specialize in cocktails. She screwed up her face from the bitterness.

"Anyway, we've got another five hours away, anyone up for a card game?"

"I'm down," said Garson.

"I don't see why not," answered Jeffrey.

“Then let’s play and waste some time away.”

They played a simple game of dress-down poker. A multiplayer mix of solitude, trying to match and beat cards, with five card hands and a tab on the line. At the end Burta announced with a victorious voice, “naked!” and slammed the game's final ace down onto the king. Garson and Jeffrey would be paying the tab for that night.

* * *

Pursuer droids are built for one purpose, and that is to kill. Unlike marines or other machines, that is the Puruser droid's only purpose. Everything else is coded around that. For instance if you wanted to protect a diplomat, you’d send a special code to kill anyone who got near the target. If you wanted the droids to act as patrol guards, order them to kill anyone who crossed a line. Every order demanded the word kill, for without it the Puruser droids could not understand their place in the galaxy.

Engineered to remove the need for a manned army, the Pursuer droids allowed the Emperor to be the only man in the galaxy who could unequivocally say “total war”. Whereas other governments needed to let their armies sleep and rest, a Pursuer droid could keep working. Keep killing, keep winning. Unlike other models of droids, which needed to recharge every month, the Pursuer droid had an expected lifespan of seventeen years. The joke amount officers at the Hedge was it wasn’t the battery, or the components that made the droid last so long but instead the desire to finish the mission. To accomplish the task it was assigned to complete. That usually resulted in someone dying.

The Zendon army had sensed the potential of Pursuer droids from the start. Equipping most of them with state of the art technology they kept a fair amount back to be used as front line troops in case of large scale combat. To fill up those reserve numbers, VESTCO incorporated was brought into the equation to make another droid. A heavysset brother to the Pursuer.

Designated the A2CM - A2 Combat Machine - or simple CAM, for its single observation lense, it stood six feet on the dot, weighed three hundred pounds, and was akin to a bodybuilder who forgets about the legs. A heavy top body protected a central nervous system, complete with ammunition storage, motherboards, sensors, and an explosive battery. Both arms had ball points for exposable weaponry that could pop out from the forearm at any moment. Usually equipped with G23 Mini-Gattlings, the CAMs could turn a party into a massacre with the click of the button. And that was their problem. They were too bloodthirsty and cumbersome for even the cold hearted generals back at the Hedge to use in anything other than the subjugation of a people. So they filled the reserves and never looked back.

That was thirty years ago.

When Onatia was still a rising Grand General, contempt with conquering the South regions, he deployed CAMs in multiple battles. The droids were loyal, able, and came with a bloody reputation. They usually put a town under his heel in under five minutes. Just the threat of a deployment of CAMs could give so-called rebels cold stomachs and reduce the risk of war. But as he looked at the crooked politics and petty games played by pawns, and realized how much power had been taken by people who didn’t deserve it, he began fugging numbers.

On average, Onatia lost five CAMs per town taken, over double the average. In reality he lost less than one, but he was beginning his plot. The “lost” CAMs made their way into storage containers shot out into space for a war he would one day fight. Fudged numbers was how he got away with stealing so many ships before he was caught, before he tore away his fleet. But eventually someone must come to collect those fudged numbers. He’d already used up the other ones he’d stolen on traps and magnetic pods.

Onatia picked up his datapad. The *Lust and Forgive* would play the part of the collector perfectly. Contempt with his plan. Satisfied Nebola would be the spark of war, Onatia began preparing himself for the bloody conquest that would follow the fake war.

Chapter 27: Packing

Strike team leader, Henry Buller, was not a man to be trifled with. Two hundred and seventy pounds, almost pure muscle, and standing six foot five he was the biggest man in the room at all times. And should he be dwarfed in size by some other grotesque figure, his face made up for that. A thick jaw, rounded near the edges, heavy set eyebrows that concealed bean black eyes, and two twisted scars under his lip from a mad housewife. Buller gingerly touched the scars as a reminder that even with his muscle, with his guns, with his bravo, a simple woman could still hurt him. He'd been so impressed with her show of force he allowed her to leave the house alive. That was better than most people got after they attacked him.

Buller wasn't a traitor. Or at least he didn't think he was. Raised to be an operative since the age of thirteen he'd served in all major branches of the Zendon army. Dishonorably discharged after breaking a wussy naval officer's back, he'd been picked up by the Hedge - the Zendon intelligence agency that kept the dirtiest secrets. It didn't matter to them that he'd attacked a senior officer for taking his place in the dining court, in fact some of the higher ups liked his brutality. Onatia had been no exception.

One morning after clearing out a town, the Grand General had come to talk to him. Asked him what his role in the galaxy was. Buller just said he fell where the wind pushed him. Onatia had clapped him on the back and flew away in his shuttle. Leaving the strike team to pick through the sandy remains of the seaside town.

Buller's mom had described her second son, him, as a domino that doesn't care how it falls and is loyal to a T. Akin to a bulldog, except without the master servant complex, Buller stayed loyal to those who happened to tell him where and what to do. How to do it, and then they were moaning in pain on the table with at least one arm broken. Buller didn't like being told how to do something. But strangely, he did like being told what to do.

Without a purpose Buller feared becoming like his dad. Washed up, drunk, out of work, wasteful. Buller wasn't wasteful. Half the time, when Buller was a kid, his father wouldn't even recognize him when he came home. The proficiencies in alcohol, an honorary PHD, had sapped his mind of everything apart from where his wallet was, what his PIN was, and where the market to buy beer was. Everything else was secondary. Nothing mattered because life had no purpose to the man. No job to set as a reference to time moving by.

Buller had his men split up twenty-ten. Two teams would be on the job. He'd lead team one, the twenty man assault team, while his secondary officer Ronalds would take the ten man scout team. Strike teams often worked like that, few men, more officers. Rapid communication and absolute excellence. Buller had been working and training these men for over three years so the moves were natural to him.

He hadn't been told when the drop would come so he acted like it was any second now. He'd put Ronald and the ten men in the other drop pod, pulling the rest of the men into his bunk room - making a snug fit. Weapons had been pulled up, mainly HE-44 assault rifles, bulky things with snub barrels and collapsible stocks. Cheap, easily, reliable. Plasted metal. Boxy magazines. Light rubber furnishings around the grip. Even Pursuer droids used them with their adaptable claw like hands.

They'd been given a schematic of the Prime Minister's palace. Five stories high, reinforced windows apart from the east side where renovation still had to take place. Diplomats would be staying on the east wing, third and fifth floor respectively. Two entrances, service and main. The scout team would determine the most "appropriate" entrance, but Buller bet he could blast his way through just about anything.

Thirty men total, for maybe sixteen armed and confused guards. Buller estimated three to four casualties on his side, total loss for the enemy. He glanced around the room at the other men sleeping, reading, and fixing guns. No-one was going to trifle with them.

* * *

Outside the full view electric windows, the whirlwind of Crili was taking place. Evac transports, medical aid, even the rogue newsreel shuttle, were trying to land on the now four available landing spots. Constantine had everything at his disposal out there. Three frigates, two cruisers, the lone destroyer, and four LACs. They were there to maintain order and establish the false presence that Constantine wasn't trying to bait a war.

That little detail was not known to most of the crew of the ships, who instead believed they were simply there to protect the dying station. Constantine however was growing impatient.

"Why haven't they attacked yet," he hissed to Nev. Of course Nev wouldn't know anything, but Constantine needed to beat up his thoughts on someone. And Nev was the only one onboard who knew about his grand plan.

"The *StarBurn* is still very close," Nev pointed out, "relatively speaking."

"What's her ETA if the battle where to start now at the convoy?" asked Constantine.

"Forty minutes. We're an hour and ten away, the *Birthright* is an hour and thirty."

"Any decent commander could take out three small ships in less than that," complained Constantine. Why weren't they attacking!

"Granted sir we'd see them start to move."

"How soon can they reach firing solutions on our ships?"

"The convoy?"

"No, the fucking station," Constantine waved his hand impatient, "yes, the ships."

"Thirty minutes."

"So they'd have ten minutes before the *StarBurn* came on them."

"Yes sir."

Constantine leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling where pipes had been exposed and then plastered over. He had other business to take care of. Maybe even knock out birds with one stone. "Order the *StarBurn* and Captain Hankle exclusively to move to the far edge of the system."

"Far edge? How far should I say sir?"

Constantine grabbed the datapad and put in a set of coordinates that had been exclusively provided to him. Even Nev couldn't know about this.

"Sent."

"May I ask what that was, sir?" asked Nev.

"Just a random thing sent to me by a spy."

"An enemy silo ship?"

"An enemy ship."

* * *

Onatia watched the *StarBurn* begin to move. It was perfect. Just along his predicted path. Where the dozen magnetic pods had been laid as traps. Once the *StarBurn* walked through there it would be captured, cleaned, and outfitted as his command ship. And then he could deal with the problematic Fisher.

* * *

Elanie rested the LR-202 sniper rifle on the tripod, her face buried against the cold alloy of the stock, and the sight gently hovering just above a window. They'd set her up on the roof. The waist high

walls made sure no-one could look up and spot the sniper standing there. And no other tall buildings were in the area to contend with observers looking down. All things considered, it was a good plan, except for the part of her using the sniper rifle.

Elanie had never been good with guns. Almost kicked out of the navy twice after she shined her rifle instructor's shoes with a bad round she had kept away from direct combat. And now she was here. On BRISK. With another rifle in her hands. Only this time her targets wouldn't be paper targets half a shooting range away. They'd be human, a quarter of a mile away.

She squinted through the scope. It was currently set to black and white IR mode, though it had seven other features - from basic sight, to NVG, to MGS. The rifle was what video-game players called hit-scan. Meaning wherever she pointed the barrel, it would arrive at the target instantly if it was under five miles. The tungsten .68 caliber round traveled at plus Mach 7. Most bullets had a velocity 2-4 mach. The laser pointer at the end of the barrel sent a message to the bullet in the chamber for exactly how much propellant it needed to burn in order to snap-hit. That was near the equivalent of tenGs suddenly being slammed into an arm.

Only through the LR-202 could a human handle the recoil. The rounds were still self propelled, but the kick to get them moving so fast still generated enough recoil to separate a man and his arm. Elanie kept this in mind as she switched sight modes. She still preferred not having a gun at all, but at least with this one, hit or miss it was win-win. Hit, help the team. Miss, don't kill somebody.

Fifteen feet away, at the northeast corner of the rooftop, facing the east side of the Minister palace, Timur and Marshal stood with binoculars. They were studying the building.

"I still think they're going to hit the east side," commented Marshal.

"Why? Service entrance and main entrance are a lot easier."

"Not close, look at the main entrance," Marshal pointed to the front steps, which were being guarded by an MG post and three Marines. QSU - Quick Set Up - walls had been put in place. An armored car was near the road, probably an additional four Marines backup waiting there. "No doubt another sniper or MG nest somewhere else watching that area."

"Ok," Timur shifted the view in his binoculars to the small white service entrance door. "What about the service entrance?"

"Only a few people have cards," Marshal put down his binoculars and held up the neck tied red card they'd found in the bag. "We're one of those lucky few."

"So just blow it open," Timur shrugged.

"Hard. Three inches of steel doesn't blow open easily. Anyway, behind that is probably another guard and some trap. They've got it locked down tight."

"So why the east side?"

"Windows. Easy to rappel down from the rooftop, or rapple up from the street. Keep in mind the diplomats live on the third and fifth floor and you have the easiest entrance in the building. Just knock down a few windows and introduce yourself."

Timur sighed, defeated. He was used to this banter. Usually Marshal and him traveled as a duo when missions required this soft of... expertise. Not so much a delicate operation, as one that needed fire power and good people behind the rifle.

"So why bring her?" whispered Timur. He wasn't comfortable bringing Elanie. If she got hurt he wouldn't forgive himself.

"Because we need a sniper," said Marshal.

“Is that all?”

“Otherwise she’d be doing nothing. Just sitting on the ship.”

“I could have sniped,” hissed Timur, putting down his binoculars.

“I need you by my side. Shit’s going to be crazy in there.”

“So just leave her up here, by herself? Countersniper could take her out.”

Marshal sighed and crossed his arms. “Look. Drop it. Elanie needs more gun practice? She’s not good at it and won’t give it a try-”

“So bring her into a battlefield to get her spirits back up?”

“Trust me,” Marshal said. “Anyway, no-one else on the team could do it, and Elanie has doctor precision, she’ll be good on the scope.” He raised the binoculars. “Look, BRISK needs feet on the ground training. We have it, Garson might have it, but the rest of BRISK doesn’t. And until they do, well we’re just another asset for our benefactor. And assets are replaceable.”

“I just hope she doesn’t have to use it, hopefully the idiots will blow themselves up.”

“Well then we’d be out of a job,” Marshal chuckled.

* * *

Grimes tugged his foot out of the mud. Retract seven hours a day, make it more like ten. The muggy edge of the savanna, where grasslands met deep forest, was marked by increased precipitation and thick clay mud.

It was the third shower that day. The rain clinked off their armor as thick droplets splattered mud around them. Red mud caked his legs. He slogged through it. The MAR and pack on his back forced him to lean forward, try to equalize some of the weight. All around him men were doing the same. Except for the diplomat, who with hands still in pockets and briefcase hooked up one arm, seemed to stroll through the mud.

Grimes watched him go, his breath foggy up his helmet, what was with that guy?

* * *

When a king and rook trade places it’s called castling. As if the king had fled into his fortress and remained there. In Lesio’s book, Mallo had done the same. He’d protected himself with his walls, his rooks, and made a mobile castle. The only thing he hadn’t counted on was an infiltrator.

The queen slipped under the veiled line of the rooks, a heavy blade in one hand, a grenade in the other. The knife was for Mallo personally, the grenade was for the fleet. And hidden beneath the rolls in her dress was a gun, the strike team, that was for the diplomats.

The *Komoto* floated in a loose circle, like a rotating cylinder in a revolver, around the *Cuttaway*, Mallo’s ship. The *Cuttaway* was a light frigate, an old light frigate. Lesio estimated one “rogue” torpedo could take it out. The only problem would be doing so while initiating a war against the Armadan fleet.

Every five hours the rotation of the Zendon patrol fleet and Armadan convoy ships put them in optimal strike distance. Only thirty minutes burn time, less actually for the *Komoto* since her range was so long. But every twenty six hours the time went down to ten minutes for a six minute stretch. During those six minutes the *Komoto* could leap from the fray, sink its teeth into the convoy, smack Mallo, fire away the drop pods, and disappear once more.

Lesio stared at the screen. The next interval like that was in thirteen hours. She needed to get the crew ready. The hammer on the revolver would be cocked, and the bullet would take out the chamber.

Chapter 28: New Skies never shone so bright

Lesio entered the bridge in full dress. Polished black boots, straight ironed jacket, the five medals of valor and victory, and a holster with no weapon in it. The countdown timer was now nearing zero. Only fifteen more minutes till the two fleets were neck in neck. Fifteen minutes and the queen would move.

Issac sat with impatient urgency at the weapons control station. The plastic safety covers had been flipped up. His eager pose straddled the buttons. This would be his chance to strike back. To kick the Armadan government one more time. Only instead of an odd death of a cruiser, it would be a deliberate act of war.

Around them the fleet rotated in an orbit around the *Cuttaway*. Massive bullets with drive plumes and torpedoes. And the hammer that would not be cocked by Mallo. That was fine by Lesio. It would only make his death easier.

On the threat boards torpedo trajectories had already been drawn up. Three to the *Cuttaway* when they launched, followed by six harpoon guidance weapons streaming towards the collective Armadan ships, and finished with eight more torpedoes to take those ships out. Lesio ran her finger down the commander's monitor. She'd read the advice given to her by munitions and supply. Only four torpedoes would be left once the deed was done. But the *Komoto* could live on that. The queen after all had other weapons in the system.

The *Yulion* was a small escort carrier. Positioned roughly beneath the *Cuttaway*, it's purpose was simple: create a meat shield. Unlike in the Armadan navy, small-craft - aka fighters - weren't seen as valuable assets. Instead they were more like tokens to be tossed to dogs. To give the bigger ships a chance to run away. Their one and only purpose was to create scatter on the scanners, to catch missiles and PWD rounds. The players in tag who sacrificed themselves.

Except unlike in the child's game, fighter pilots didn't get to volunteer for the service. Drafted from the lower score ranks of those in the academy aiming to be shuttle captains or bomb-a-ders, fighter pilots had the lowest morale of any Zendon military branch. Doing the job of drones as people. And it wasn't much better for the escort carrier captains.

Captain Brigadier Major HansField had once dreamed of being a skiff or snoop pilot. Flying low behind enemy lines with sensors digging up every little dirty secret. Instead he'd been drafted from his ranks after getting a slightly below average score on a routine cleaning quiz. *Who gets busted out of the academy for dirty socks in his drawer!* he'd complained. Apparently he did.

Now his purpose in life was to fly around the dead. The ferry of the damned was a common nickname for Zendon escort carriers. Ship people from place to place with an operations casualty rate of seventy-three percent, plus an additional ten-percent suicide rate. And the poor schmucks who survived only did so to die again in a couple of months or years that it took for another battle to break out again.

But it wasn't the Zendon Empire's fault. No, they were just adapting to a problem the Armadan navy had brought along. If the Armadan navy would stop starting wars, then maybe the ferries of the damned could stop sailing. HansField shook his head. Until then he was just another grim reaper in a universe full of them.

Issac let the cool air soothe his crooked lungs. As a kid he'd taken up vaping to ease the pain of servitude and beatings from his father. They hadn't told him it would cook his lungs later. But then again, you only live for so long.

He sat with his back hunched forward and his chest almost covering the board. The flight plans for the torpedoes and missile racks had been drawn up the night before, so it would only take three button presses - but he was determined for them to be his three buttons to press.

The sad thing about space was that death never felt real. It was always a blip on the monitor, some ash you flew through, maybe the floating body of an enemy. But you never got to watch them fall until after-the-fact. Until the datacores of the torpedoes relayed back up with the central antenna and downloaded to the mainframe. Those were the moments Issac loved. To relive the end of life. To watch a hull fragment under the pressure of a torpedo. To pretend to hear the christening bells of klaxons and emergency life-support systems slam supply doors shut, protecting life until the second torpedoes inevitably struck.

It was a cold-irony that ship fights in space were like battles in the wild west. The first person to strike was the person to win. Once a ship lost command-control with its torpedoes, often the moment it was hit by such an object, the game was over. And then all the ship could do was wait for the second torpedo, the one sent in case the first one never made it, to slam into the bulkhead and disperse their atoms to the universe.

To kick the dirt in the face of the Armadan government one more time. Issac hovered his finger over the fire switch. The clock read two minutes and thirteen seconds. He was right as a kid you only live so long. So why wait any longer?

Mallo saw the torpedoes before he heard the emergency beacon. Four of them, breaking off from somewhere. A deep-space attack? A possible mutiny! He rushed for his forward command station as the *Cuttaway* dived around him.

HansField also saw the torpedoes emerge. Only now he also saw the *Komoto* kick on its drive and burn towards the Armadan convoy. Shit - he thought - it's time to end this for all. He slapped the reins of the ferry of the damned and leaped once again into the fray.

Lesio stared at the clock. Early. Two minutes early. But hopefully the flight plans of the torpedoes could work. Programmed into the launch sequences was a flight plan for the *Komoto*. Her chair hissed on gimbels as three G acceleration took her. She glanced at Issac. Bloodthirsty, but still loyal.

The four hard tipped torpedoes dived straight down towards the *Cuttaway*. Blue burn signatures flicked to red. Fuel cells decreasing. Ten G acceleration. Time to impact: twenty seven seconds. Eleven G acceleration.

Mallo glanced at his station. Was that a ship moving?

The PWD cannons on the *Cuttaway* clicked and whirled to action. Frost snapped off in shards from the cold metal. Computer systems aligned the targets, routes, and countermeasures in point two seconds.

The torpedoes spun like a perfectly thrown football. The *Cuttaway* rose to meet them. Sensors on the torpedoes faced forward in a ninety degree arc. It never saw the other ship that wasn't supposed to be there.

The frigate *Komoco* rupted along its spine. Two dozen torpedoes detonated at once. The space around the ship turned a light blue. Two torpedoes slipped by it, unscathed.

Lesio gasped. The timing had been off. The *Komoco* was a spreading debris field. It was supposed to be out of the way. Ready to fight. She glanced at Issac, who was still hunched over his fire board. He better not be preemptive this time.

Mallo watched the threat board go bright red as the *Komoco* erupted. The ammo-depot had exploded. Those missiles had been meant for him. Someone hadn't planned properly. He stared at the moving stealth destroyer. Or perhaps someone had fired early.

The third torpedo shifted trajectory with its RCS thrusters. Moving slightly to the left. New targets since the first two had died. Thirteen G acceleration. Time to impact eight seconds.

Hardened alloy rounds zipped from PWD barrels on the *Cuttaway*.

The fourth torpedo snapped violently to the right. A chunk of momentum had taken out the forward tip. It spun for half a second before detonating.

PWD cannons clicked left, keeping a steady stream on the torpedo. Round after round.

Fifteen G acceleration. Four seconds. Time slowed.

Round-2212203, fired from the sixth barrel of the aft mounted PWD cannon, mined from rock on a stolen moon during an illegal occupation, ignited its tiny amount of monopropellant and speed through space towards the third torpedo. The *Cuttaway* dropped beneath it. If it could see, it would see nothing - that is for two seconds.

The fuel cell on the third torpedo had been harvested from an old prop motorcycle. Composed of steel rich aluminum housing, it was not built to last long under a lot of pressure. That was fine for the torpedo however, since its target was three seconds away.

The faintest glint shone off the upper edge of the PWD round. The gold colored lead lined upper casing splintered into flak. Stars were directly to its front. Nothing else. One second. An endless abyss. Such a sad place to die. But peaceful. Two second. The torpedo emerged like a barracuda breaking to foam underwater. Once it wasn't, now it was.

Clang.

The flak punched through the fuel cell, cutting off the drive, moving the torpedo just out of trajectory range of the *Cuttaway*. Time resumed its human pace and the object sailed through the fleet and out into the abyss.

Lesio slammed her screen. All torpedoes down. Mallo would live. She glanced forward. T-minus five minutes till contact with the Armadan fleet. No doubt they must be shitting their pants. A beacon popped up on her screen. Strange, another ship had joined them in the fray.

The *Yulion* throated up like a drag racer. The premium engines of an escort carrier were built to outpace anything in the combined fleet. It's whole job was to place itself in the middle of conflict, so no wonder for the extreme engines.

Stuffed in his chair at seven-G acceleration, HansField hadn't had the chance to wonder whether the torpedoes were really the enemies.

Across the space in the neutral zone a quick emergency message was sent out to the convoy's command ship, the *StarBurn* - which was still sailing through space towards the predetermined meet-up spot for Fisher, though Hankle didn't know about that. The message would have a six minute delay, arriving precisely at the second the battle was supposed to start.

Issac didn't have the chance to lean his neck forward and glance at the results of the first torpedo strike. He reasoned it had gone well, for he was an expert at killing, especially killing cowardly traitors like Mallo. He flicked on the combat display screen. Four combat green circles. One for the *Komoto*, three for the convoy ships. The *Komoto* would envelop them well before she was touched by any green circle. A new dot popped up on the stage. A new green circle. Was that an escort carrier?

A separate message spit itself out from the Armadan convoy carrier, a system wide announcement that they were being attacked by Zendon forces. Along with a preliminary scan of the assault group. Which, strangely enough, only contained two ships.

Triple effect klaxons rang down the halls of the Armadan escort carrier *Pineway*. Three notes, followed by a deep rumble of a bomber taking off. The fighters, bombers, and interceptors were attached to the side of the thin craft via magnetic locks and fed directly into the main passage. Pilots in their grey jumpsuits rushed down the crowded hallways as technicians cleared each ship for launch. On the bridge, conveying with the frigate and cruiser, the captain of the *Pineway* watched the countdown timer click towards zero. They'd have to run into the battle to survive this one, no other way around it.

The communication lines between the ships were swamped with terror and the jagged edge of duty most had signed up to not serve. It was supposed to be peacetime in the galaxy.

"Safety switches are set to off-"

"I know, I know, just get the messages out."

"Does anyone remember the proper code for engagement?"

"21121."

"Order a complete launch of the fighter wing!"

"Yes-we need them out here!"

"I'm fucking swamped-"

"The is *Pineway* over, please repeat."

"Launch fighters."

"Do we set missile paths to target all ships?"

"What is the permission of engagement?"

“Sorry, repeat?”

“Engage all ships- let’s take the fight to them!”

“Copy- standing by.”

“*Pineway* here, again, repeat?”

“Accelerate to match burn. Clear for all fire.”

“Well fuck, we’re doing this.”

“Convoy ships accelerating to match the intercept,” reported Issac from his station. “Permission to engage.” It wasn’t a question anymore, just merely a statement. But Lesio was the captain after all, and a queen couldn’t win the game if it couldn’t keep its pawns in place.

“Hold fire,” ordered Lesio. “Stay steady on course. What’s the other ship joining us?”

“The *Yulion*, escort carrier,” reported the Comps-Sci officer. “Permission to hail them?”

“Granted.”

The bridge was silent for a second apart from the hissing ventilators. Then a ping.

“This is Captain HansField, who am I joining into battle with?”

“We need your fighter captain,” said Lesio. “Spread them on a seedy line between us and the rest of the fleet.”

“Of course. Over-and-out.” The line clicked dead.

The bridge chuckled.

“Someone’s new to this sport,” Issac grinned. “Over-and-out,” he mocked.

Lesio shot him a glance. “Keep silent and don’t fuck up again.”

He nodded in submission. “Yes ma’am.”

HansField clicked off the line and slowed his escort carrier down. They wanted a line between them and the fleet. Clearly that meant they were the first prong. The sacrifice to keep the rest of the navy safe. They could understand and relate to him. To the escort carrier who’d been playing that role for so long. He clicked the release button and began deploying his men.

“Green zones clear!” shouted Issac over the high pitched whine of the ventilators. Someone should have cleaned them. Wasn’t a captain supposed to organize for that? Oh right, theirs was out the airlock.

“Clear for fire!” The ship shuttered as the G-drive slowed them slightly.

“Clear for fire,” repeated Issac.

“Fire!”

“Tubes away.” He pressed down on the third red button.

Outside, guided by the pre-fired harpoon, eight torpedoes popped from the ship. The *Komoto* slowed slightly to allow the torpedoes a second to get up to speed.

“Torpedoes clear and away.”

The eight torpedoes flanked to the right, curving hard around the green zone of the first Armadan ship - a light cruiser- before diving down towards the Armadan frigate.

A quick flash on the board confirmed a kill. The bridge erupted into conversation and shouts as the battle continued.

“Six torpedoes remaining.”

“Missile racks are clear for combat.”

“Copy.”

“Fighters screening ahead of us. PWD cannons permission to engage?”

“Hold for now. Threat board is negative on that.”

“Four torpedoes remaining, the carrier is keeping us at bay,” reported Issac, turning around in his seat to face Lesio.

“We’re within engagement distance for enemy ships!”

“Two-three-two, by six-oh, four confirmed launches,” the threat board updated with an overlay of the torpedoes paths.

“PWD are clear for combat,” shouted Lesio over the din.

“Zendon fleet has not moved.”

“Armadan vessels holding.”

“Two torpedoes left. Armadan carrier running low on PWD ammunition,” Issac slapped his monitor. “God damnit!”

“Clear to engage with harpoons,” Lesio flicked her fingers towards Issac. He nodded.

“Harpoons engaging.”

The Armadan carrier flipped to the right to bring around another set of PWD cannons. Once again they rattled off a few thousand shots before depleting the reserve ammunition. Screens of golden light ended in flashes of confirmed contacts with torpedoes. Four harpoon torpedoes died. The two live torpedoes sped towards the carrier.

“Are we clear to engage with the LOD cannon?” asked Lesio. “Range?”

“Range is clear. Shifting to target,” Issac gave her a thumbs up.

The bridge shuttered as the *Komoto* turned to face the carrier with its bow. The LOD cannon dialed in on the target, range to target, time of delay, and programmed all of it into the five foot long projectile being loaded. Five seconds later - right as the final harpoon torpedo spun off into space - the *Komoto* lurched.

Lesio’s head hit the back of her hard chair. That would leave a bruise, she subconsciously rubbed her hand over it.

The tungsten alloy composite flew at the equivalent of sixty G. Traveling far faster than any missile or torpedo, it had one purpose in the galaxy - to obliterate. The only modern military device to not be self-propelled in space, it relied on the ability to travel fast and silent to hit its targets. Missiles could be evaded or shot down. Torpedos could be jammed and sliced to pieces. LOD rounds couldn’t. They were invisible, discrete, and above all else deadly. What you couldn’t see killed you.

The *Pineway* ruptured like a stick splitting in two. A broken nose. The back end stayed perfectly still, unaffected by the sudden shift in momentum. The front end curved wildly to the right. Or it looked like it curved. What gave the impression were the tiny fragments that made up the once mess-hall, main corridor, and three Tri-Senterans that had been swept up in the initial hit. Survivalable if that was the only problem.

The LOD round hit directly behind the bow of the ship. Cutting through two water lines and the central power computer. Water, turned to ice, jutted from the gaping hole in the side of the ship. A pinkish blue from the cleaning chemicals. That was the problem for the *Pineway*. The waterlines.

From the *Komoto* it looked like someone had stopped mid motion and froze an explosion. The *Pineway* looked less like a carrier than a floating ice chunk. It's dual reactor engines glowed a deep red in the cooling state under six feet of ice. A glacioid covering of debris floated just above it, like *Nebola* and *Crili*, only on a thousand-nth of the scale. Lesio stared in awe as the final cruiser began its retreat.

* * *

Captain Hankle heard the fast beat march shoes of his chief of communications. A squarely faced woman with a ponytail wig. She denied it, of course, but everyone knew it was a wig. She never changed her hairstyle. Not even in bed according to the technician who'd slept with her.

She saluted him and handed over the transmission.

"The convoy is under attack."

"As expected."

"They're requesting assistance."

Hankle stared at the board. They were on course towards the target Constantine had wanted them to check out. "How long ago?"

"The battle began six minutes ago, twelve minutes ago we got the first warning."

"Why wasn't I informed?"

"We couldn't do anything at that point. I thought it was perhaps just another Zendon move to match them."

"But they fired in their own mists."

"How do you know that?"

"I have my own officers down in communications," Hankle smiled coolly.

"But you didn't move sir?" she asked with a stubborn face. Everything to her was protocol.

"You expected me to?"

"I-uh," she stumbled.

"We have our orders here. There are our orders. The convoy will act as they have been trained. Constantine will deal with the Zendon fleet."

"Yes, of course sir," the chief of communications nodded and strolled quickly out of the bridge. She was shivering slightly.

Hankle shook his head. It was a little cold on the bridge, but not that cold, just a nip below perfect. He sighed and sat back down in his captain's chair. Was that a thump he just felt?

* * *

Garson was woken up by Burta knocking loudly on his door.

"There's a war and you don't want to sleep through it!" she hollered.

"Coming," Garson shouted back. Jesus, that was one way to wake up. He rolled out of bed and stuffed himself in his jumpsuit and deck shoes.

On the bridge Jeffrey was relaying with Timur on the ground. It would be just a quick take-off and land. See what they could do to help out. Maybe stop a few people.

Garson shuffled past him to his seat. Slipped on his CoHel and checked the vacuum seals. "Ready on this end," he gave a thumbs up to Burta.

"You better be. We're looking at the start of a war up there."

"Any movement on our - the Armadan side -" Garson had to correct himself.

"Yeah, Constantine is deploying his whole fleet."

"Did it start in the neutral zone?"

“What do you think?”

“How many survivors.”

“One cruiser.”

“That bad huh?” Garson turned to his monitor and did a quick check of munitors and the ship. They had enough for a quick fight. A little bit more than the ink a squid pushes out before running away.

“Buckle up, this is going to be a quick assent.”

Jeffery looked over at Garson. “Let’s hope it’s a quick war.”

* * *

Onatia smiled to himself. So the queen played a smooth hand. Perhaps not as smooth as he’d liked, but still smooth enough. Constantine was reacting how he liked. Mallo looked dazed and confused. And two Armadan ships scuttled to the stars. Not too bad for a loose cannon. But the bomb hadn’t gone off yet.

He glanced at his clock. The CAMS should be clearing out the *StarBurn* right about now. His replacement officers would be brought in to fill the vacant uniforms and positions. Then he’d make his merry way over just as the galaxy broke out into war.

He finished watching the battle. It looked like the escort carrier had been used by Lesio to shield her from any potential attacks by the Zendon side. Not the best move. One that certainly intimidated her. But she could potentially blow it off. Anyway she would be dead by the end of this campaign. Just another chess piece dropped off the board in a real man’s game of war.

Chapter 29: Muddy creek

“Fuck me in the balls!” shouted Mallo in a rage. He was in his quarters. Dressed in a basic officers dress uniform. And the whole system around him was going to the shitter.

Two of his ships had flown off and attacked the Armadan convoy. Sure, they were in the neutral zone. Sure, they had guns on them. But the permissions of engagement were “not unless provoked” for both sides! And now since the debris from his fellow ship, the *Komoco*, had sailed into his LRCR, he couldn’t talk with the diplomats.

He slammed his finger against the intercom to the bridge. “Bring me status updates every two minutes.”

There was a faint buzz and then the traditional service reply. A blank yes-sir from a forgettable face on a forgettable ship. That was supposed to be the *Cuttaway*. No where, nothing to be seen. Just another routine check up. But ever since Onatia had crawled out of the southern reaches with more of the Zendon navy than he could carry, Mallo had been picking up his shit on the Emperor's dime.

“Sir, urgent,” the intercom buzzed.

“This is the captain, go ahead,” Mallo grumbled.

“The *Yulion* is returning to the fleet.”

“The escort carrier?”

“Yes sir. Should we engage in it?”

“Negative. Hold it in steady waters. At least fifty clicks away from us. And get the damn comms array back up and working!”

“Yes sir, working on it sir.”

The line went dead and Mallo went back to thinking: fuck, fuck, fuck fuck! He was about to die in a war he didn’t start. Why couldn’t the universe ever throw him a goddamn bone.

* * *

The Marines tugged forward. Their line was becoming increasingly thin. The space between pockets of men now stretched from a dozen to fifty meters. That wasn’t good for moving through unknown territory. And Grimes knew he was to blame.

Ever since the first sluggish day he’d marched forward with urgency. Kicked over hills, chopped down bushes, and didn’t give a damn who he left behind. He was determined to make it to the city, or god be with him. That wasn’t how a leader was supposed to act.

His helmet propped under his arm, the MAR on the ground, he watched his tired soldiers trudge past. A good clump of them were still to the front, pushing northeast. Keeping the pace Grimes had set. But another subset, four men and the diplomat, were all to the rear.

“Sir permission to speak freely?” asked Corporal Downing.

“Granted,” Grimes sighed and moved away from his resting spot.

“The diplomat burned himself out after the second day. He can’t keep up this pace.”

“He’s already way behind the column,” Grimes pointed out. “We’ve got an objective to make it to.”

“And we’ve been keeping him safe,” responded Downing. “Look, sir. I know you want to make it to the city soon, but all things considered, if we keep up this pace not all of us are going to make it.”

“How many of you can make the pace set by the forward group?” asked Grimes considerably.

“Me and Joshua. The diplomat, Reynolds, and Henry are all struggling,” reported Downing.

“Tell Reynolds and Henry to jog up to the front and give their stuff to the forward group, then wait for us up there.”

“Us?”

Grimes hefted his MAR back over his shoulder. “I’m joining you Corporal. Just like you said a while back, soldiers come first, duty comes second.”

* * *

The *Komoto* shifted on its back, burning hard away from the area of contact. For almost an hour the crew was subject to six G acceleration. Then like a switch, everything went off. The *Komoto*’s drive was cut, and she sailed in a prescribed far orbit around Nebola.

“Stand by for pod release,” Issac announced. He’d justified taking over this responsibility by saying anything fired from the vessel was subject to approval by the weapons officer. A bunch of bullshit but the other guy had backed down after seeing him in his bloodrage earlier. In reality Issac just wanted to press another button.

The *Komoto* vibrated softly as the clamps on the pods disengaged. Softly, like mail filled with helium, they began to float towards the gravity of Nebola.

Buller’s heavy frame shook slightly when the pod detached. His feet quickly made up for it by switching positions and adopting a wider stance. His hands were laced above him on the strap tied around a pipe. The air in the cabin smelled of tangy spice. Some kid must be smoking it again in the corner. His fellow strike team operatives all lay in entry positions, backs to beds, heads facing up in the quiet solace that comes contemplations before battle.

Those moments where you wonder if everything was worth it. The trauma, the sleepless nights, the aches, the lost guys, and the scars beneath your lip. For Buller that was an easy answer. He’d do it all again for that rush.

The pods, Buller and Ronald, began to move rapidly away from the *Komoto*. RCS thrusters snapping them into a tight percripted orbit with a touchdown zone already locked. A hundred clicks outside of Lioni, side by side. But they were just metal boxes with tiny heat shields. Who really knew where they would land? Time to impact, twenty seven hours.

* * *

Constantine hadn’t felt like this since he first lost his virginity. The long conquest now vanquished. The moment of triumph on the horizon. That energetic high that gets behind your eyes and stays there.

But instead of being in the back of a diplomat’s car with his daughter, he was straddling the bridge of the *Windless*. The bridge was silent, his orders. He wanted to taste this moment - let it last.

“Sir, reports from our convoy, they are Oscar Mike,” reported Nev.

“Send an affirmative. Spread Bomber wing-1 to the right, keeping three klick dispersion between each fighter.”

Nev nodded and returned to his work.

In front of him, stretching off the bow, was his fleet. His ships, all drive plumes blue, burning towards an enemy they would beat. He hadn’t heard any word from Hankle yet, but he expected him to be arriving soon at the target point. He checked his watch. The *Birtright* should be moving away from the ruined docks of *Crili* soon. The pincers of a crab reach up to snap away the crown of the system from the cold Zendon hands.

Yeah it felt better than sex.

* * *

Ridler stormed into the diplomatic meeting room, his hand clutching the peace agreement he'd signed only a few days prior. Bezi was sitting in the far corner on his side, in a huddled conversation with his aides.

"What the fuck was that?" he demanded of Bezi.

"Do you think I have any idea?" Bezi snapped. His eyes were bloodshot from stress and loss of sleep. He'd been nicely catching some z's when the whole system had decided to go shit-storm on him again.

"Two Armadan ships down in the course of six minutes. Two Zendon attack vessels," Ridler slapped down the peace agreement and pointed to the screens. "They all show the same stuff in your room as mine. Look at the fucking news! You attacked us!"

"We had no idea it was coming," Bezi said apologetically.

"But it still fucking happened! Do you know what know happens?" shouted Ridler. "We're confined to quarters and supreme command authority is handed over to the psychopaths up there!"

"I know, I know!" Bezi held up the palms of his hands. "But if you'd just listen to me for second-"

"I'm done listening to your bullshit! First you didn't know you were going to the wrong place, now you don't know your government is initiating a war!" Ridler pointed his finger at the ceiling. "Do you know how *those guys* settle arguments?"

"By yelling and bitching?"

Ridler ignored the jab and kept going. "By blowing each other and everyone else in this system up! They don't care about your coffee cups-" Ridler slapped the cardboard cups off the table, "or your miniature design maps for buildings-" he pushed over the architectural model of the diplomatic building, "or the, or the," he stammered looking for something to push over.

"The pens in my hand?" asked Bezi coolly.

"The pens in your hand!" pointed out Ridler erratically.

"Mr. Ridler, may I remind you a diplomat is supposed to keep a cool face."

"A cool face won't help when it's seven hundred degrees after a nuke lands half a city away."

"No but it might help us here," Bezi leaned forward. "We don't know who started the attack. I'm already getting rumors it was a mutiny by a pair of ships."

"Well those ships weren't fired upon by your side, were they?"

"But they did fire on my ships," Bezi said in a chilly voice. "No-one fires on Zendon ships and gets away with it. Need I remind you of our rules of engagement."

"So what? Two ships mutiny, take out two of my ships, and suddenly disappear." Ridler pulled out a seat and plopped into it.

"Yes and no," Bezi said. "They didn't disappear, that's the problem. The carrier was caught going back to the fleet before it was stopped and ordered to enter a far orbit."

"So they want to quarantine it."

"The stealth destroyer did disappear."

"Stealth destroyer?" asked Ridler. "Wasn't this a medical mission?"

That caught Bezi off guard. "Yes, it was." He paused and turned to one of his aides. "Go get the manuscript for all ships in the reinforcements convoy."

* * *

Mallo heard the familiar chime of the communications officer ringing into his room again. He had dressed down to a simple black shirt and loose grey pants. His boots floated in the corner. Zero-G was good for the mind. Needless officers were not.

“What is it?” asked Mallo.

“Sir, I thought you’d like to be informed that the communications relay had been repaired.”

Mallo almost wished gravity could come back on and drop him to the floor. That was how important this information felt.

“Hold on one second, coming to the bridge,” he shoved off the wall and towards his dress locked.

Ten minutes later he was on the bridge, stuffing his shirt into his waistband. “At ease,” he waved his hand. “Also lower the dress code,” he said. “Men don’t have to care what they wear, I just want this ship back in order.”

All he received was a simple nod.

Mallo sat down at the general communications system and opened a wide-band message. What would he say to potentially calm this shit-storm down? The universe had thrown him his bone, and now, like a good dog, it was his job to chew on it.

Ridler was about to deliver another impassioned statement of how the psychopaths would come and take away their papers when the intercom buzzed. Someone was on the general net-reels, and it sounded important.

For four minutes they sat in the empty silence of the room as the monitor buzzed. A standby screen of the Armadan flag in blue had taken over.

“What’s taking so long?” complained Ridler.

“Patience, most likely a transmission delay.” Bezi stretched his hands.

“Then how come someone told us it was on the net-reels?”

“They probably have to screen it,” Bezi offered.

“Of course they do-” Ridler was cut off by the screen flicking from a standby mode to a man standing on the bridge of a ship. The ceiling pipes could be seen behind him.

“I am Master Sergeant Brico Mallo of the Zendon navy. The same Zendon navy who just suffered a fatal mutiny and the loss of one of our ships, the *Komoco*. I did not approve of this attack. In fact this attack was planned without my knowledge and without the apparent knowledge of the rest of my fleet. A single unknown stealth destroyer moved without authorization and engaged both the Armadan convoy fleet and my own fleet, resulting in the loss of the aforementioned *Komoco*. I cannot promise swift justice, but I can promise justice.”

The message cut off.

“Well,” said Ridler, sitting back down in his seat, his hand gripping his chin. “That’s going to have some implications.”

Constantine had just been cock-blocked. He stared meekly at the holo-reel. The various requests from captains to turn around filtered through the bridge. His hands began to tingle. This had never happened like this before.

“Sir, orders?”

He could still save it. He could wait. Bide his time. Come back another time and take another system. Serve the government just a little bit longer.

“Nev, turn the fleet around to prepare a statement.”

Onatia swallowed dryly. He'd been mistaken. Not killing Mallo hadn't been a mishap, it had been the biggest damn mistake of them all. He should have made that the priority. Blamed it all on Armadan infiltrators. Yes, that would have worked. But no, he'd let Lesio go in again and mess it all up - again-. So now, here he was, dickless, in a galaxy that probably wouldn't fight. He turned to see the technician look up at him. Probably was a loose word.

Garson sighed when he heard "stealth destroyer". A single chorus of "Lesio" rang the bridge. BRISK leaned back in their seats. It wouldn't be a quick up and down, they were in this one for the long-run, again.

* * *

Grimes tapped the side of his helmet and ordered the forward teams to stop. It was getting dark on Nebola. Local time 9pm. "1-2, this is actual, hold," he released the grip on the button. A buzzy affirmative followed over the line. Grimes held up his hand for his team.

"We're stopping for the day," he announced.

Joshua and Downing moved around the perimeter, doing the usual sweep with weapons hefted to shoulders. Joshua carried one of the new SSW-19s, a light machine gun. He swept the knee high brush with his barrel. Henry and Reynolds folded out their sleeping mattresses, tore off helmets, and collapsed.

"Sir you can sit," said Grimes. The diplomat was still standing, still holding his briefcase. "Let me take that for you."

The diplomat tugged the briefcase closer to his chest and waved Grimes off.

"Don't worry, he barely speaks," called Downing from the perimeters.

"You got anything?" asked Joshua.

"Negative. Perms clear."

Grimes chuckled. "Call if by the real thing."

"Perimeter," mocked Downing.

Grimes heard the same thing over the comms from the front of the line. Perimeter clear, establishing forward position. "Solid copy, actual out."

"Front's clear. They're making a quick camp. We should be near the city tomorrow." Grimes grunted when he sat. His legs were killing him. He began unclipping his chest armor. "We'll know for sure when we rest tomorrow night how far away it is based on the light pollution."

"Shooting star," Downing pointed. He was laying on his mattress, virtually by Grime's side. As the officers in the group it made technical sense they slept close.

Grimes glanced up. "Nope, rocket. Burning hard." The red orange glow of a rocket disappeared into the dark wafty clouds.

"Wars afoot?"

"Let's hope not. Our lives will be hard enough explaining how we're alive without some Company commander ordering us back into the battlefield," Grimes snorted. He tugged off his shoes and rolled onto his sleeping mattress.

Downing rolled onto his side. "Something's up with the diplomat," he whispered.

Grimes nodded. "Likes that briefcase a lot."

"Won't sleep without it."

"Same shit you told me before, what's new," Grimes cut to the chase.

Downing shrugged. "Sometimes the way he looks at us I wonder if he's even our diplomat."

Grimes glanced over his shoulder to where the diplomat was resting, a good twelve feet away at the edge of the perimeter. Him, a Zendon diplomat? “Even so, we’ve got a job to do.”

“Yes sir we do,” Downing sighed and rolled onto his back, his hands resting in the navel of his chest. “Even though sometimes I wish the job wasn’t so hard.”

“Just wait till you’re a real officer,” Grimes chuckled.

“Hey, watch it,” Downing smiled and rolled his head to look towards the far treetops. “Maybe if I’m a real officer you can be a decent company commander who gives his troops the proper training.”

Chapter 30: Falling debris

The drop pods rattled. At first it was just like a tin can in the background of a town fair. You know some kid is there. He knows it’s annoying. But it’s drowned out by the bullshit. Then the rattle turned into the cheap tin pan in your momma's hand. Yeah, it’s there. Yeah, it’s kinda scary. But you know your momma will never touch a big man like you. Then the rattle dropped into the pipes on a bumpy dropship about to hit point, and that’s when Buller knew they were about to hit atmosphere.

The drop pods slammed into the clouds. Like baby hands through coffee cake they cut straight through clouds. A hammer to glass would have done less damage. The pods bounced with the air resistance. Brake skids extended, wobbling the further down they went, threatening to snap off. With a near final umph, the landing thrusters kicked in and burned retrograde - dropping the surface speed to a more survivable crash.

Buller’s pod rolled twice. It hit the ground with an angle, catching an edge and cartwheeling. He’d prepared for this, strapped into bed like an insane asylum patient. Some of his other men had not heeded his advice. Two men were knocked out, heads banging against steel edges of beds followed by the sick thumb of an unconscious body hitting the wall. Buller didn’t wince but he did look away. Those men would have to be left behind - he glanced at his mission plan - or worse.

When the two drop pods had separated from the *Komoto*, they had been ten feet apart. As de-orbit occurred and transorbit velocities curved, that ten feet had become ten miles had become a hundred miles. Now as Buller’s pod rolled and kicked up dirt, before stopping seventy miles from Lioni, it’s sister pod - commanded by Ronald - landed just off the marching path for a lost group of Marines.

Shuttle pilots from Lioni received word from air traffic to initiate a retrieval operation. Two CZ-104 shuttles, packed with only a pilot, co-pilot, and field officer, lifted off and angled right towards the forest.

* * *

Grimes felt something register on the back of his neck. It wasn’t sweat. It was that tingly sense that comes from knowing something bad is about to happen. He turned around. A white trail was headed his approximate way.

“Down on the ground!” he hollered, dropping to his belly and placing his hands over the back of his head. The rest of his Marines and the diplomat did the same, dropping to a fetal position. Hands over neck, legs spread. Hug the ground.

Nebola shook around them when the object hit dirt. Vibrations cascaded out like dice from a player's hand. Rolling and rattling along the board until the subjects came to rest. When finally the last trees stopped shaking Grimes pushed himself up to a crouch and brought up his gun. Nothing in sight.

“All clear, probably a final bit of debris.”

“Something could be in the trees,” whispered Downing.

Grimes looked up, birds were flocking back to their nests. If there was anything beneath them, even the rogue Marine, they fled. Flocking little birds, but who could blame them, humans were a new species to them, and anything new was a threat.

“I’ve got faith in the birds.” He pointed to the birds.

“1-Actual, this is 1-2, what was that? Over.”

“1-Actual here, debris most likely. No need to check it out. Over.”

“1-3 here, another debris sailed over us around the same time. Kept going North east, towards the city. Over.”

Grimes sighed. “1-Actual here, 1-3 keep marching, 1-2 wait for 1-3. This is 1-Actual out.” He cut the line.

“Now what?” asked Joshua, hefting his SSW-19.

“Keep marching,” Grimes shrugged.

They made it about twenty feet before they heard the whine of a shuttle.

“1-2 here, is that a shuttle? Over.”

“1-Actual here, sounds like it. Hold positions, will investigate. Over.”

Grimes slung his MAR over his shoulder and listened for the shuttle. The noises of the forest dimmed it first, but then it came back. The trees swung in dispersed air. Then-

“Holy shit!” exclaimed Henry.

It passed right over them. Grimes immediately recognized it: a CZ-104 shuttle. Cargo “Z”, named since it could pick up anything with the “Z” standardization: From dolls in boxes to truckered down tanks.

“Follow it,” ordered Grimes, breaking into a light jog after the shuttle. His feet ached after so-many days of march, but his training kicked in. Five steps, breathe, five steps, breathe. Focus on the path, not the gun bouncing against your lower back or the heavy armor sagging down your legs. Five steps, breathe.

The shuttle easily outpaced them, dropping out of sight above the tree branches. But it was heading in a straight angle. A path the Marines could follow. The diplomat was having more trouble.

“Reynolds, stay back with the diplomat,” gruffed Grimes through thick breaths.

“Copy sir.”

In his peripheral vision one of the white-clad marines slowed to a light jog to allow the diplomat to catch up. Grimes wasn’t about to let this shuttle get away though. His feet stamped over branches and up wet grass. The shockwaves had dropped all the condensed moisture from the upper leaves onto the ground. Up a mound, down a mound. He pushed through flat terrain at a light jog to allow Downing to catch up.

“You good?”

“You good?”

“Just get to the shuttle,” huffed Grimes. His lungs were killing him.

“Copy that.”

He kept running. Five minutes passed, nothing. More grass, more twigs, more trees. Then the hum of a shuttle slowly came back. It sounded like it was hovering, observing the area. Grimes stopped at

a low grassy mound a hundred meters away from the medical pod. It was sitting in the still steaming dirt. The heat or reentry being absorbed by the water molecules of the ground. That thing had entered fast.

Three hundred feet above it, the wings of the CZ-104 were slowly raising into landing mode. But it wasn't coming down.

"Joshua here sir, Downing is right behind," Joshua dropped prone and extended his bipod, sweeping the scene.

"Area's clear," sighed Grimes, "but the shuttle won't come down."

"Why don't we come out?" asked Joshua.

"Because how odd would it look to see three dudes in dirty white armor, carrying guns, come out of the forest in the middle of no-where. If I was that pilot I'd turn us around and get out of here before we're shot," Grimes shook his head. "No, we've got to wait for them to come down." He rested the foregrip of his MAR on the soft grass and sighed his electronic scope that updated to his HUD.

"Downing and Henry here," the other two Marines crept in, crouched, weapons up.

"Area clear," Grimes said. "Kind of boring."

"Lot of running for not a lot of fun, maybe we should have joined the running team if we wanted better pay than a Marine," Downing joked.

"Would have been a better career choice."

Reynolds and the diplomat came last, lagging up the rear with tired coughs from the diplomat.

"He's pulled something I think," reported Reynolds.

"Lie him down and give him something to drink," said Grimes. "Henry, you're our medic, right?"

"No sir, that's Stiny in the front. I'm just an assistant."

"Then assist," Grimes waved his hand at the downed diplomat.

"Yes sir."

* * *

Buller unstamped himself from his bed. He dropped to the right instantly, gravity weighing heavily on his body. The drop pod was still at a tilt.

Other men were moving awkwardly across the pod. Buller joined them. Snapping a HE-44 folding stock out before clicking it back in. He donned a JK-1 Helmet, with the earmuffs and headset for general communication. He'd only use that in the forest, the hallways of the diplomat building would be too tight. He slapped on his vest, hit it twice with his hand. Felt nothing - perfect. Five magazines for his gun, another two for his hidden pistol. He'd only use that if he had to. Finally he tested his earpiece, all clear.

"Gentlemen," he announced to his strike team. "We're going to wait until we hear the clamps of the shuttle. When that happens, I want two of you up the ladder at once. Then our pilot will follow. Take as little time as possible. This ship only had one extra room not counting us, the bathroom. Clear that before announcing anything safe. I don't want any lucky officer taking a shit to shoot our pilot and null the mission by black-out crashing us in the forest. Is that clear?"

A chorus of grunts and yes-sirs. Good. They were pissed off by the landing. Pissed off soldiers were soldiers who killed easier. He needed men like that for this mission.

On the other side of the equation Robert was looking around in total confusion. The lights in the drop pods had snapped off with the landing. They were using their only flash lights to secure and check luggage and weapons.

"Anyone hear anything outside?" asked Robert.

Nope. No shuttle, no nothing.

Robert had a HE-44 clutched in his narrow hands. The stock was out and pressed to his thigh bone where he was keeping the weapon at waist level. Two magazines were stuffed in his pants plus another one in his pocket. In the other pocket was a grenade. They hadn't thought to retrieve the vests from the other drop pod, so they'd make do. Their drop pod was on a slight tilt, but nothing that should have stopped the shuttle from picking them up.

"If the shuttle doesn't show up for another hour, I'm going to go take a look," announced Robert.

Dusk was falling so Grime's ordered them to switch on thermals.

"Won't be much help, the medical pod throws up too much heat." Downing adjusted the sights of his MAR.

"How fast did it burn through?" asked Reynolds. "I mean, to let off that much heat for this long, it should have burned up in the atmosphere."

The diplomat was propped up with his back to the grass wall next to them, sucking on a sugary drink from an MRE.

"That was the last one," commented Downing sadly.

"Do you like sugary tufe?" asked Grimes.

"Never hurt to have a sugary drink on the field," Downing said.

"Yeah but that one tasted like piss," laughed Henry.

Grimes leaned forward against his gun. Scopes still clear. Shuttle still hovering above the treeline. The underside of the craft was facing them. The pair of red landing and orange grabbing lights blinking in a slow pattern. Its wings were still slightly raised, pushing down air on the forest floor and marines.

"How much fuel do they have to just hover?" complained Reynolds.

"I don't know what they're doing," Grimes said.

As if by response, the shuttle began dropping. It dipped through the tree line, brushing against leaves on its descent. The magnetic claws on the bottom of the craft bent slightly, trying to snag the medical drop pod, but it failed. The shuttle tried again, but each time it came too close to clipping a wing to a tree.

"So that's what it's doing," whistled Downing softly.

"Couldn't get down without damaging the property."

The shuttle backed up until it was in the clear zone and landed. The gear coming out of the bottom of the craft's cooling tubes. Four wide set feet. A ladder extended and at the same time a door opened.

"I've got movement," Grimes said. He swung his rifle towards the medical pod which had just opened its door slightly.

"Yeah, people coming out of the shuttle, non targets."

"Negative. One man, mid-thirties," Grimes adjusted the sight. "Looks like a gun in his hands. He's aiming for the shuttle!"

Two shots rang out against the forest and the pilot dropped from the descending ladder.

"Fuck!" Downing roared and dropped behind the mound.

"Weapons clear," Grimes snapped back to the training stamped into his head by a drill sergeant back on SantaMico.

"Weapons clear!" repeated Downing, racking his weapon.

"Weapons free!" Grimes flicked off the safety with his left thumb.

“Weapons free,” Downing dropped his bolt. There was a satisfying click of metal.

“That’s body heat, not atmosphere heat,” Reynolds said exuberant. He should have figured that out himself.

“Switch off heat, turn to NVGs,” ordered Grimes. “It won’t do to get flashed by your rounds.”

“Obviously,” Joshua pushed his body against the SSW-19 and chattered off a few rounds. Grimes began popping shots in the direction of the drop pod. Tracer fire splattered against the metal walls. The man who had shot the pilot began sprinting for the shuttle. The door to the drop pod lay open. Four more heavily armed men jumped out and followed the first man.

Grimes swung his barrel around, tracing the first man, and squeezed the trigger. The shot went right in front of the man.

Robert stopped dead in his tracks. That fire wasn’t his men. That was someone in the hedge line. Flashes of light! He turned and pointed at the hedge line, but in the darkness with the flashlights and the orange tracers, no-one could see him. He stared at the hedge line. See, another flash of light-

Grimes watched the man topple backwards. He sighted on the second man and squeezed his trigger. The MAR bounced slightly in his hands, followed by a “pop” report of the high density plasma escaping. Another man dropped, hand bouncing against the trigger for his HE-44, hazing the ground. It was so damn easy. The third man fired a burst at the shuttle, shattering the pilot's window. Bullet holes and bloodstains. Fuck. Crew down. Grimes squeezed the trigger twice. Miss-miss.

The quick shots. Not loud like the media reels get wrong. Instead quick the wide, like a palm slap to life itself. A slap that takes the soul and leaves the body behind.

Reynolds had joined in with his MAR fire, covering while Downing scuttled across the ground in a crawl.

“The fuck is he doing?” shouted Grimes.

“He’s got a grenade, he’s going to take out that drop-pod,” Reynolds leaned forward and fired another two shots.

The remaining men on the ground, Grimes counted seven plus one near the drop pod, had begun shifting their fire towards the hedge. Projectile fire, orange trails from tiny boosters, stabbed over them. Grimes rolled to his side, his back to the ground, head facing right, gun up, and returned fire.

The ch-tat-tat-tat- sound of the SSW-19 stopped.

“You good?”

“Guns out of ammo, one moment.”

“Fuck.”

Pop-pop. Grimes heard his gun click empty and he changed magazines. Slapped the bolt receiver and he was off again.

The dirt in front of them hopped up like popcorn on the stove. Tiny craters from mini unguided missiles. Grimes felt the heat underneath his eyes. Two men broke off from the ground and made a run for the shuttle. Covering fire followed.

Grimes ducked his head as the air above his head became lethal. He peeked up to see feet retreat up the ladder into the shuttle.

“Two in the shuttle!” he called over common comms.

“Weapon back up!”

The SSW-19 re-engaged. Chopping through the dirt. Two men jerked and rolled backwards. Grimes leaned forward. Man by the drop pod looking at Downing! Grimes swung his rifle around and let two sail right into the kids chest. Kid. Oh fuck. The kid disappeared into the shadow of the dropod. A silent coin dropped down a grate.

“Shuttle revving!” The sound of the shuttle's secondary combustion engine filled the noise. Grimes tugged out his plasma magazine and inserted an energy mag. He flipped on full auto and dumped into the cooling tubes. So much for a shuttle ride home.

The drop-pod exploded on the other end of the battlefield. Red and orange fire raged from the twisted metal. Four men left alive on the ground. All firing at them. All enemies.

Grimes shifted his aim and began moving down the line with the rest of the Marines. Dead-dead-dead-dead. The last man sat upright from the SSW-19 round slammed through his shoulder, pushed into a seated position by the momentum.

Blue smoke rolled across the mound from the gunpowder and heat-dispersion. Grimes clicked his safety on and tossed away his empty energy magazine. He hadn't been doing anything for that last firefight.

The adrenaline had taken over his old training. His white coated armor was covered with a faint black near the shoulders. Where all the bullets had flown by and left their residue. He registered the stench of charred metal.

Movement, corner of his right eye - shuttle cockpit.

He raised his gun and dumped the rest of the plasma rounds into the shuttle cockpit. The scattered windscreen disintegrated and the enemy soldier rolled out of the ladder opening. His hand was still clutching the HE-44. Grimes kicked it away. Training. He looked down. The rounds across the dead man's chest would deny him the ability to use his gun - but still- Grimes bent down and tore out the receiver of the gun, training.

He stared at the battlefield. Ten enemy men, five Marines. Two-to-one ratio, and they'd won with no casualties. True, they'd caught them blinded, but it was still impressive. Training had let them do this.

“Cockpit is clear, monitors flashing,” called Reynolds from the cockpit. The dead bodies of the flight crew had been laid out in the grass. The enemy bodies had been tossed out. No difference in reality, just difference in mentality towards the enemy.

“What do you mean flashing?”

“Looks like Zendon code,” Reynolds bent down. “Yeah, timer. I think it's a bomb.”

“Fuck! Get out of there right away.” Grimes charged towards the shuttle and waited for Reynolds at the bottom of the ladder. When he turned he was surprised to see the diplomat, cold faced and staring at the shuttle in a half-awe.

“What's the matter?” the diplomat asked.

“Finally he speaks,” huffed Reynolds clambering down the ladder.

“Zendon bomb package. Oldest play in the book. Deny the enemy transportation.” Grimes pointed at the cockpit. Reynolds hopped down from the ladder and clapped his hands together to shake off the dust. “Area isn't safe sir-”

“Let me deal with it.” The diplomat clambered up the ladder and into the cockpit.

“I'm following him,” Grimes said. “Hold my gun,” he tossed Reynolds his MAR and climbed up after the diplomat.

The cockpit was a disaster. Both the pilot and co-pilots seats were shot to shit. The bathroom had bloodstains in it. And there was the fact that no windscreen existed anymore. The only thing that

remained was the main monitor. The one the Zendon agents had rigged and the diplomat was now crouched over.

“Can you explain what you’re doing,” asked Grimes. “So we can get out of here.”

“I’m not surprised you took them on,” the diplomat said. He tapped on the data-pad. Something lit up green. “This is an older Zendon strike team security 1313 code. Meant for if the enemy is to win the battle, to destroy the battlefield.”

“How do you know that?”

“But we’ve moved on from such codes. So it only makes sense this was one of the strike teams who left the Zendon Empire with Onatia,” continued the diplomat.

“What do you mean we?” Grimes reached for his gun.

The diplomat turned around. “It’s disarmed.” He extended his hand. “I’m the Zendon system-chief for Nebola. And it’s been very nice to work with you.”

Grimes kept a wary hand on his rifle. “Say that again.”

“The Zendon system chief,” the diplomat still held his hand out front.

Grimes took it gingerly. “So you mean-”

“I’m the technical enemy. Yes. But today we fought the same enemy.”

“While you drank soda.”

“While I drank soda, exactly.”

Grimes pulled back his hand. “Mr. Zendon system-chief, where do we take you now?”

“Nowhere. I’ve set this up as a beacon for any nearby Zendon ships.”

“There are none.”

“There might be soon.”

* * *

Mallo stared at the projection board. Constantine had technically halted his fleet, but several reserve units were still moving forward. If the reinforcement fleet kept position it would be to play a dead man's game. They needed to move in case Constantine decided to attack out of spite.

“Lock the carrier to us,” Mallo called out to the bridge. That order would be followed.

The fleet needed to split into three tentacles stretching into deep space. The farther away the better, though of course some could move closer to the Zendon lines - they’d just need to do so silently. If the main force was shown falling away, creating a cloud of drive plumes to attract the attention of everyone like the Armadan navy had done, what was to say a few ships couldn’t slip by.

The *Cuttaway* would need to fall back, but the scout ships and sniffers could push around like the great arms of the kraken. Watching and observing the Armadan navy and the airspace around *Crili*. That would buy time. Buy time to court martial the carrier and figure out what-the-fuck was the stealth destroyer doing in his reinforcements in the first place.

* * *

Onatia felt the fear grip the back of his throat. A sniffer ship was coming close. Almost too close. Was Mallo onto him. One of the techs looked up and asked him what they could do.

“Hold still, just hold still.” They still had to play the silent card. They could not win their war by being loud. He looked down at the report progress of the Pursuer droids. Just two more days. They’d be ready by tomorrow, local time seven-thirty.

Chapter 31: Landing zones

The message hadn't sent. The one they'd "sent" two weeks prior. The one with the data banks on the *Komoto* and every ship the *Lust and Forgive* had dealt with. Someone out of network had blocked it. Someone with very powerful relays.

Hoss rubbed his head and tried the circuit board again. They needed to find a way to bypass all known networks and just get to one guy, Mallo.

"Won't work," Kash said. His stomach rumbled. He hadn't been eating much lately. "Onatia has those relays. Onatia owns this ship. Even if you can get a DM just from this circuit board, he'll still see it and block it."

"So what can we do?" Hoss tossed away the feud-end, it dangled from the corded wire.

"I'm not the spy," Kash raised his hands.

"And you weren't that good as a captain," Hoss grumbled.

"I saved lives."

"Which then turned around and did what?" snapped Hoss. "Tossed you back in your cell."

"And how much have you been doing on this ship? Picking up our spoils?" Kash jabbed back.

"Not my war to choose. You got to choose. You chose wrong."

"One fucking good spy you are. Reveals yourself to the enemy."

"You looked friendly and I needed your help."

"God damnit the Zendon Empire is screwed if you're on the spy paywall." Kash tossed his hands up in the air.

Hoss turned around. "Just say what you want to say."

"You're doing this wrong," Kash said.

"How would you do it?" Hoss raised his hand and closed his eyes. "And if you say 'I'm not the spy' I'm going to take this heat splyer and jab you right in the balls with it."

"I'd take over the ship," Kash said coolly. Though he did move his hand to cover his groin.

"And just fly away?"

"Fly towards the Zendon or Armadan side blasting light waves, get their attention."

"I think a ship flying at them would get their attention enough."

"But it would prove it wasn't hostile. If you show up there with the party lights on, you show you want to be seen, and usually an enemy doesn't want to be seen if its a cargo hauler," Kash explained.

"So we take this and run?"

"Exactly."

"Whose to stop Onatia from blowing us up?"

"A good samuratin I guess. Someone who likes to protect the innocent," Kash shrugged. "Now put down that fucking heat splyer and let's get some lunch."

* * *

The CZ-104 shuttle began its descent towards the city at local time eleven o'clock. Wings spread out, lights flicked on, and engines slowly revining down it made its descent. The two twin turbo-shaft generators whined from the increased load. A mechanical complaint, but one the now deceased crew could do nothing about.

Buller stared at the five bodies packed in the corner. Two of his downed men, and the three dead crew. He remembered sticking his HE-44 in the face of the surprised captains before ordering him and his men downstairs. The man hadn't been scared, he acted as if he'd been hijacked all his life. Well that lack

of fear didn't help him when Buller put two rounds through his back. Lesio had been specific on that rule. No-one knows they're in or out. And if they're caught, blame it on the Zendon government.

The shuttle cleared the final landing checkpoint and made its way towards the westernmost platform, next to the cargo bays where the vehicles were stored. With a clicking of landing gears extending and wings raising, Buller took a sigh of relief and went to check on his team.

Twenty men stood with NVGs slapped over their eyes. The cabin lights had been turned off to allow for more secrecy when they exited. Buller didn't want a beam of light letting everyone on the platforms see his team. Two of his men carried SSW-19s, stolen from Armadan Marines. Another man manned a portable anti-tank device. Near the back, three men had LR-SARs slapped over their backs, long range single action rifles. The rest of the strike team had tugged on vests, rolled HE-44s over their shoulders, and tucked projectile magazines into pouches. No need for energy or plasma, this was purely a human on human interaction.

Buller slapped down the extending stock of his HE-44 into the butt of the bolt receiver. On his side he carried a Ne-22 shield pistol, with the included fifteen round hop-up magazines. Some kid had given it to him once after losing to Buller's knife. When he looked down at the NVGs, the glint almost looked like blood.

Buller constantly kept around a bullet with his name carved in it. A past girlfriend of his had given it to him as a third month anniversary gift. She'd said everyone had a bullet with their name on it, so it was better if he carried his around. He'd laughed at her then, but now gently pressed it against his lips. Wouldn't do no harm.

He moved down the line. Checking gear and munitions. Like a father to his many wayward sons. So many of them carried grenades with handcrafted messages.

If bullets have names on them, grenades have "to whom this may concern" stamped on the side. Buller chuckled at that thought.

"Good to go," announced Buller after he tightened the vest straps of the last man. No need to do it apart from the need to show who was in control. With men like this you needed to show you were in control.

The back of the "medical pod" had a drop down hatch. One where the strike team could squeeze out of and crawl away from. Technically they also had front doors, big ones where everyone could leave at once, but Buller was more cautious than that. That was a rookie mistake for someone like Robert to do.

His magazines caught on the cement more times than he liked. Forcing him to push-up and then crawl forward again. At the edge of the building with the vehicles in it, he stood up and stopped. His NVGs showing the green heat signatures of his team approaching. Anyone with NVGs could see them. Buller looked around. No Marines in heat-absorbing uniforms, so no close by NVGs. They were fine, for now.

Buller tapped his head and silently led the team forward. HE-44 raised, IR laser on, scanning both sides of him. He stopped a few feet from the entrance to the cargo-building. He could see the grey-ish outlines of 6x6 wheelers. They'd only need two. One for the rapple team and one for the scout team.

Buller waved his hand forward. He skirted around the edge of the massive door. His head checking up and to the left. The man behind him covered his six by looking to the right. Nothing. Building clear.

In the darkness they waited like moss. NVGs off to conserve battery and guns folded neatly in laps. No talking, just waiting. After an hour, when it had reached midnight, Buller checked his data-link with Robert. Not a pip. That wasn't good.

Robert had orders to contact him when the shuttle picked him up and if anything had gone wrong. Since he hadn't been on his comms for a while, that meant he'd been hit before he could even contact Buller.

"Roberts down," Buller hissed through a tired throat. "Follow me."

The strike team clattered as they stood. Several muffed their yawns with palms of hands. A whir as NVGs turned back on and HE-44 stocks extended with clasps. Buller kept his chest close to his chest as he checked out the cars.

The 6x6 wheeler was the most common car of any small nation in the galaxy. Fuel efficient, runs on both electricity and combustion oil, it was renowned for off-road excellence and reliability. Housing up to twelve men, two in the front, ten in the back - five on five benches - it was perfect for transporting around the big families you commonly got on colony worlds. You gotta populate somehow.

Buller waved his hand at the snipers, AT, and SSW-19s, they would take car two while he rode up front in car one. He tapped his wrist. Comms were clear between vehicles. He raised his wrist and swiveled his fist. Mount up. First stop, city limits.

* * *

Mallo stared at the display of his fleet. The sniffer ships had successfully started to move behind enemy lines, their drive plumes missed in the vastness of space. His fleet had pushed out in three parts, each moving separately away from the neutral zone and the battlefield. They weren't here for war. And Mallo had one more play up his sleeve to prove that.

The *Yulion*.

During times of combat and war, Captains and Commanders of fleets had the permission of the Emperor to initiate court-martials in order to keep their troops in line and their orders followed. These court-martials were commonly referred to as drawn out executions. The jury was rigged, the judge was rigged, and the defender was too ashamed to say anything other than "sorry".

Mallo had never known nor met Captain HansField, but he would today when he and his crew were brought onboard the *Cuttaway*. The crew would most be saved from the executions, but their careers in the navy would be ended. Mallo mentally shrugged at that thought. They were all fighter pilots anyway, he was probably saving their life by saying they were no longer fit to fly into bullets so the armor of a ship couldn't do its job.

The start of every Zendon court-martial began with an arrest by a senior captain of another commander. Court-martials of lower troopers occurred within barracks, and anyway those never really mattered because you could always get another rifleman. But captains required a "proper" hearing. One with videos and evidence before you could toss them out an airlock. Unsavory by Mallo's preferences, but the orders given to him by the Emperor when he became Master Sergeant.

The *Yulion* was connected to the *Cuttaway* by a single airlock. At all times Mallo had his strike team guard the entrance and exit. No-one thought without his word.

Mallo paused the display of his fleet. He wouldn't do anything in stopping this war by staring at numbers that didn't matter and already had happened. He could do something by quickly court-martialing the captain. One life to save billions.

"Captain," Mallo opened a direct communications line to the strike team commander standing outside of the *Yulion*. "Arrest Captain HansField and bring him to my quarters."

"Yes sir."

In the grand scheme of things, no-one would miss an escort carrier. No-one would miss its captain or its crew. But they would miss the war it was supposed to bring. And that was something Mallo would

stop at all costs. Even if it cost him a ship or two. The spider's web was worth protecting from fire since Mallo knew he'd be one of the first consumed by the flames.

* * *

Marshal stared out the open window with his thermals on. Somehow throughout human history they hadn't figured out how to make the damn things look through melted sand. Something about heat dispersion. He clicked through the color settings and range dynamics.

The diplomatic building was five stories tall. Shaped like a massive X, constructed out of two massive V buildings that met in the center along the main hallway. The right V, the one Marshal faced, was the diplomat building. The left V, if you were facing it from the entrance, was the minister's palace. Marshal didn't care about that.

He scanned the high windows of the diplomatic building. Easy to rappel down and cut through them, so he had Elanie on the roof for that. But timing was everything.

By the time they saw the enemy coming down, they would need to break from the hotel in their gear, sprint around a thousand meters, cross a door, up to floors, to a room they only knew on the map. Not the best intel scenario, nor the best combat one-either. But it was the best of the worst available options.

"Boss, you still awake," groaned Timur from his bunk. He'd moved into Marshal's room in case they had to get up and go protect. No need to waste time by knocking on doors.

"Go back to bed," muttered Marshal kindly.

"Copy that. You too," he rolled over and began to snore again.

Marshal resumed scanning. The hallways looked wide on the schematics, but doorways tight. Such a shitty scenario for an attacking force. But the walls were hollow and thin, which meant ease of access if someone had planting charges. He looked at the bag on the floor. He had such charges.

But the real problem came down to protecting their man, Ridler. If Ridler wasn't in his room as the schematics said, then the real problem started. Finding Ridler in a massive building with enemies. Enemies who'd probably shoot on sight. Shitty scenario for BRISK.

Unbeknownst to Marshal, five blocks away at the Prisler hotel, Buller was thinking the same thoughts. His hands clutching a pair of old Sv-11 thermal binoculars, his mouth sucking on a cold piece of chops, he contemplated the task ahead of them. The easiest way in was the rapples, but they'd need cover from outside fire. They could try the main entrance but he didn't have enough time. An assault that scale would require more munitions and more men, something that would take Lesio a good month to deliver. She wanted the diplomats dead soon.

Buller checked his watch. They'd landed at eleven, started driving at twelve, it was now two in the morning. He raised his binoculars again and performed a sweep of the nearby buildings. Get two snipers to cover them on the rooftop and they were set. He'd send those men out in the morning. Silent communication, just expect them to be there. Strike team efficiency. He popped another piece of chops into his mouth. At seven the following night, when the sun would shine into the windows, blinding the people behind them, he'd scale. He checked his watch. One thirty-two, he needed sleep if he was to lead these men into battle.

* * *

Grimes ordered his squad to stay by the downed shuttle. The front unit had heard the gunfire of the early night and rushed back to their commander. With MARs raised and thermals on, they'd emerged

from the treeline to find their commander standing in the middle of what used to be a battlefield. There were quite a few complaints about having missed all the action. Grimes told them to shut it.

Still the heat rounds were visible on the thermals, glowing orange next to pale white outlines of bodies. The drop pod still burned until two marines shot with foam. Not much they could do for the shuttle except like it sit and cool in the night. The most surprising thing was how fast the marines turned on the information from Grimes.

“So he’s the enemy but helped us,” said one confused.

“Get used to it,” Grimes knelt down next to the first man he’d shot. “These guys weren’t his, he said. They used old codes and clearly weren’t trained properly enough.”

“Not as trained as us you mean.”

“Exactly. And training means everything,” Grimes stood back up. “Now get back to cleaning up this field.”

“Yes sir.”

They set up fifty-fifty watch. Half of the expanded Rico-squad sleeping, the other half standing around with weapons drawn looking through the bushes. Grimes didn’t expect to find anything, but he liked the safety.

The system-chief, for his part of not only saving the team via turning off the shuttle bomb but also turning it into a transmitter, received a generous supply of sugary sodas. When Grimes went over to ask how soon the pickup was, the man shrugged.

“Truth be told I’m counting on the patrol fleet to help us out here, but who knows if that’ll come to our aid. They’d need sniffer ships close to Nebola to pick out our signal, the needle from the haystack that is the Crili disaster. So more likely an Armadan ship cracks our code and sends down aid,” the diplomat answered.

“So you’re counting on our spies to be better than yours,” asked Grimes.

“I’m not counting, I’m relying. It’s a fact I’ve known for a while after handling operations in this system. The Zendon government is big, it’s scary, but it’s wildly inept at putting out anything other than good ships. Sure it says quality over quantity for the fleet, but look how that treated them.”

“So you’re saying they don’t produce good field officers,” said Grimes.

“Or strike team operatives,” the Zendon system-chief waved his hand around the field. “All they do is train them, hype them up on propaganda so they don’t think about the crimes they’re committing, and then send them out into the galaxy to die. Wrinse, whipe, repeat.”

“And how is the Armadan government different? I felt no sympathy while killing today.”

“They aren’t except they train you twice as long,” the system-chief finished his soda from a bag. “And clearly they give you better food.”

“Don’t get used to it, they’ll have to figure out something to do with you when they pick you up,” Grimes smiled and patted him on the shoulder before moving away.

“Don’t worry, at least I’ll go back to my comfy office,” called the diplomat with a laugh.

Chapter 32: Airlocks

Court Martials were supposed to happen in cold wooden rooms furnished by old fluffy seats. Not in the empty cafeterias surrounded by seven strike team soldiers and with the judge, jury, and executioner, all sitting on the same bench used to serve hash browns. The lights had been dimmed along the edge of the room, casting all attention on the man in the middle.

The defendant, captain HansField, now stripped of his military badges and shoulder cuffs, was handcuffed and strapped upright on a steel chair in the middle of the room. His hair and eyes were pulled back in a dazed confusion. He mumbled curses at the jury for the entire duration of the trial.

The judge, Mallo, reigned with silence. He let the prosecution, a field officer from the *Cuttaway* make his case to the jury. It didn't matter. They already knew how they would all vote. Even HansField knew that by his posture. It would be a quick trial, a quick prayer for the damned, and a quick exit out the airlock. Time was beating faster in the galaxy around them.

"Any closing defenses for former captain HansField?" asked Master Sergeant Brico Mallo. He wore his officers cap today, with the brim tugged close to hide his eyes.

"That I acted with impunity under directive five of the wartime doctrine! That the SOE didn't give the standard operating procedure the mind of thought! That I'm being tried here by a member of the wounded party! All of this makes no goddamn sense!" shouted HansField hoarsely. "My men were destined to die no matter what. We had a chance to take on the enemy and you held me back! You should be on trial here for your treason and cowardice!"

"That's enough for former captain HansField!" roared Mallo, slamming his fist down on the table. No gavels for today's meeting. Not enough time to bring them from storage.

"You and you're treacherous cowardly officers in the bridge couldn't do me the decency to look me and my men in the eyes despite us taking shots for you!" HansField kept on going.

"Officers, please restrain the defendant for contempt in court," Mallo waved his hand at HansField.

Two quick yes-sirs followed by men emerging from the shadows and slapping a gag over HansField's mouth. The defendant's eyes kept moving in a crazed manner, slapping over everyone in the mock-courtroom.

"It is the decision of this jury that the defendant is found guilty of treason and contempt to sabotage the rightful leadership of this fleet," read communications officer Gerion. He'd been on the bridge that day. He sat back down after giving the jury's decision. HansField had been right, but it wouldn't change a damn thing.

"Then it's the ruling of the judge that the defendant be subject to a stripping of position and subsequent execution," Mallo winced as the words came from his mouth. It had to be done. For the good of the galaxy.

HansField roared through his gag, the sound barely muffled, as two armed guards dragged him - still in the chair - out of the room.

Mallo rubbed his forehead. He waved for the rest of the courtroom to follow the damned captain.

"Sir you need to be at the execution to verify its completion," said one of the guards softly.

"Of course," Mallo stood. "As if space wasn't enough of a final solution," he muttered.

The procession met empty hallways. All crew had been called to active stations during the retreat. If you weren't sleeping or shitting or eating, you were servicing weapons or standing by at action stations.

“Sir, this way,” the strike team soldier waved him to the right. They were going to the emergency airlocks.

“Someone will need to step in there with him,” said Mallo. “So that the safety locks don’t engage.”

“Commandant Quin already volunteered,” answered the guard. They quickly approached the stopped procession. A flock of full vultures surrounding a floundering fish.

The lights around the emergency airlocks were dimmed red near the floors and a light grey at the ceiling. Tiny LED lights embedded into the walls shone like cracks of sunlight through bullet holes. One of the airlock doors was standing open, the ventilator fans standing ready. An air suit locker was ajar, Commandant Quin already strapped into the red plastic body.

“The procession can begin,” announced Commandant Quin, the executioner. He picked up the chair with HansField in it. Taking a step back he entered the airlock, tapped in the proper authority code, and let the clear door side shut around him.

A hum broke the mutters of the men in the front. The ventilator fan about Quin depressurising the airlock before the outer door opened. HansField gulped and gasped. The air was running out. With a final hum and sputter, the fan stopped, and the outdoors opened to the stars.

HansField gulped like a fish. Even in space, where there is no air, the human brain cannot process the possibility. Determined to breathe it forces the mouth to open and close as the lungs artificially expand and dilate. Even in death the lizard inside the human is stubborn.

For a minute Mallo was forced to wait and watch as HansField kept gulping. Twice his hands moved to turn on the privacy shield but he knew there were men who wanted to watch this. It disgusted him but to them it was vengeance. After about a minute Quin floated back to the airlock and shut the door. Ending the viewing show. The fan hummed again, pumping air back into the room. With a final flush of the fan, the inner door popped open and Quin stepped out.

“Congratulations Master Sergeant,” Commandant Quin held out his rubbery hand.

“Oh what soldier?” Mallo shook it.

“On your first court martial sir.”

“Hopefully my last.”

Quin shook his hand sharply and let it go. “Most likely not if the galaxy keeps this pace up.”

* * *

Bezi and Ridler checked their tablets at the same time. An identical message from Master Sergeant Brico Mallo. In five minutes it would be system wide news. But until then it was the diplomat's little treasure.

“So it wasn’t Mallo,” announced Ridler softly.

“We knew that from the start,” said Bezi.

“Constantine didn’t.”

“Well he does now.”

“What does this mean for forieng policy?” asked Ridler.

“It means court martials are still in the books,” Bezi shrugged.

“It means captains can kill who they like on their side,” pointed out Ridler, “that will be interesting to see what the governments think of that.”

“They’ll think what they always think, self-command for independent navies,” answered Bezi.

“Fair enough,” Ridler swiveled in his chair and took a sip of water. “But what of the other implications?”

“What do you mean?”

“By doing this Bezi just announced fleets are still in control of the board. If captains can make moves like this, then it means we’re not top of the food deck,” explained Ridler.

“So we’re still technically in a state of war?”

“Not war. Those are decided in a few days of quick fighting. We had that here. We’re in a state of mop-up. But still, it means until Mallo relieves his power, we diplomats on the ground can’t make any decisions,” explained Ridler.

“You’re not wrong,” Bezi had to give the guy credit. The Armadan diplomat was sometimes smarter than he let on. “So what’s the game plan?”

“We retire to our rooms for the day and come back again tomorrow morning to see if Mallo has relieved his power.”

“Why not wait on Constantine?”

That got a chuckle from both diplomats. “Because that man will never give up his power.”

“Days early,” Bezi stood up from his chair. “Care to join me for a drink at the bar?”

“You first,” Ridler waved on the Zendon diplomat.

* * *

Across town two cars left the four story Prisler hotel. Both stolen 6x6 wheelers, they carried Buller and his split up strike team. In one car were his snipers and two men with HE-44s. They would travel up the road and to another hotel, where they’d scale the roof and set up overwatch. Jammed in his car, way past occupancy, were the remaining sixteen men. They would park one block away from the diplomatic building and wait for the day. Wait and sleep until the sun hit the windows and blinded the occupants. Then they’d rattle up and breach.

The car with the snipers stopped off at the hotel where Marshal, Timur, and Elanie were staying. Clutching long bags and dressed in cargo pants with jackets on, the conspicuous foursome made their way to the elevator through the lobby. Past Timur who was filling up on the free breakfast. With a strupen waffle in one hand, Timur followed the group to the elevator and got in with them. He asked them what floor they were heading to.

“Maintenance, rooftop,” answered one of the jacket men coolly.

Timur shrugged and popped the button. “Mind if I join you?”

“Company business, can’t,” the man said.

Timur nodded and finished his strupen waffle. Elanie’s rifle was on the roof. And these so-called maintenance men would see that first time they turned right out of the elevator. Not a good situation for BRISK. They needed to stay silent, and not get noticed by a heavy jacket maintenance folk. Timur gave the group the once over as he left the elevator for Marshal's room. Two were packing under their jackets, which looked like compact rifles. He’d need backup.

“Roof now,” Timur burst into the room with Marshal in it.

“Huh?” Marshal looked up, his binoculars in hand.

“Four men, two clearly armed, two with heavy bags, are heading to the roof. No communication equipment of any kind,” said Timur quickly.

“Got it,” Marshal took a deep breath and scanned the room. No time to get the MARs, they’d go pistols only. He grabbed his P223 while Timur took two magazines for his P223. “Were you already carrying downstairs?” asked Marshal as Timur tugged out his gun from his waistband.

“Always.”

“Anyone tell you you’re a dumbass,” laughed Marshal. He heard the reassuring click of the bullet popping in.

“Every day in the mirror some big guy does,” Timur held open the door.

“Stairs,” Marshal indicated with his head.

They sprinted down the hallway, pistols clutched in hands. They passed no-one. Up the stairs, and out onto the rooftop. Less than thirty seconds.

Timur slowed to a crouch, his P223 held out in front of him with one hand. He favored the strong man tactic of having his other hand free to punch people. Marshal kept both hands on his SE-72. They slowly swivled around the first AC unit towards where Elanie’s rifle lay.

The gravel underneath their feet crunched. Timur winced with every step. Hopefully the loud whirr of the AC units hid the noise until it was too late. He smelled gun grease a few steps later. And voices. Excited voices.

“Two to the left,” hissed Marshal through his earpiece.

“I’ll take them,” Timur responded.

“Don’t rush,” Marshal warned from their encounter on Sispini. “Don’t run in there without backup.”

“Too late,” Timur moved quickly along the rooftop. Stopping at an AC unit he peeked around the corner. Two men had propped up sniper rifles and were scoping the west side of the diplomatic building. Marshal had been right about their plan of attack.

Timur looked around the area. Nobody else within sight.

With his P223 raised he flicked off the safety with his thumb. Putting the sights perfectly together on the first man's head he squeezed the trigger.

The sniper collapsed against the wall. His buddy barely had time to turn around before Timur tapped off another shot. The gun barely jerked in his hand. Like a light handshake. Responsive trigger, thought Timur pleasantly.

Across the rooftop Marshal heard the two quick shots. Like dropped books they were muttered out by the whirring of AC fans. He was halfway across the rooftop when he heard another voice. A man, mid thirties, just to his right over the cooling ducts. There was the clank of metal being walked on followed by an affirmative and out.

Marshal ducked around the side and fired twice into the man's midsection. The HE-44 he was carrying exploded in his hands. Pushing forward, still in a crouch, Marshal followed up with three more shots. He felt the puff of air of exploding gases. The SE-72 tried to rise up but Marshal kept it on the target. No movement, man down.

“One man down, my location,” whispered Marshal.

“I know, I heard the explosion. Was that a gun?”

Marshal looked at the dead man's charred hands. “HE-44 most likely. Carrying projectile rounds. They’re here to hurt people.”

“Too bad we brought their medicine.”

“What?”

“Like feeding someone their medicine.”

“Timur,” Marshal sighed, “just shut up.”

Timur taped his earpiece twice as a reply and moved towards the elevator entrance. He caught the fourth guy aiming in Marshal’s direction. Timur stood up, tapped him in the shoulder, and clobbered him on the side of his head.

“Downed,” Timur shouted across the rooftop. “All clear.”

Marshal stood up and gave a thumbs up of thanks. The man laying in front of Timur groaned.

“Prisoner?” asked Marshal.

“Disarm him and throw him in a closet for the cleaning crew,” said Timur.

“Good idea, we’ll be out of here by then,” Marshal bent over and tugged out the HE-44. “Good quality guns. Strike team?”

“Most likely. Basic tactics to fit. Small teams. Most likely no radio chatter. Very superstitious about that.”

“Means the attacks tonight.”

“Yes it does,” Timur nodded.

“Let’s go tell Elanie to get up on her gun.”

* * *

The order came from Onatia, Bigani read, directly from the man who was so graciously paying him to captain his own stolen ship. What a generous guy, thought Bigani sarcastically. Twit.

The order was a set of coordinates. A whole debris field of them. The targets were small cargo containers that could be stacked easily inside the hold of the *Lust and Forgive*. No idea what the mysterious *dragon* needed with them, but the job would be done. Onatia didn’t get his name from being nice to people who displeased them, and Bigani wasn’t about to become one of those people. He picked up the generation intercom.

“We’re moving out?” asked Hoss. They were in the bunkroom alone, general shift was on, but on a ship this big you could miss a few of those before people started noticing.

“Captains don’t give out extra chow unless the crew is about to be confined to bunks for a long burn,” said Kash.

“It helps to have a captain as your bunkmate sometimes,” Hoss said. “So about that thing you proposed yesterday-”

“I didn’t propose anything, let’s get that clear,” Kash pointed at Hoss. “You’re the spy here. Any idea during your operation is your idea.”

“Unless it’s proposed by a rogue captain. But enough about that. How would we take over and fly the ship?”

“The bridge,” Kash said. “Duh.”

“No wonder your old shipmates tried to dump you out of an airlock. Your attitude is just the worst,” Hoss laughed. “No really.”

“We’d need to get to the bridge and override any flight systems elsewhere on the ship. Are there any of those?”

“On a cargo hauler?” Hoss shook his head. “The bridge is the one place you can fly the ship. It’s built that way in case they’re boarded. Once the bridge is locked down, it’s locked down until they open it back up.”

“So we have to get up there before they lock it down, simple,” shrugged Kash.

“So simple, why don’t we do it now? I mean now’s as good as a time,” Hoss rolled over in his bunk.

“Now now?” Kash looked over.

“No, now tomorrow. Yes you idiot,” Hoss slapped him on the side of his head.

“Goddamnit, sometimes you make me wish I was still a freedom fighter,” Kash sighed and rolled out of bed.

“Good thing you're not, otherwise who else would I have in this job apart from my snoring bunkmates.” Hoss walked out of the room.

The bridge was unguarded, which was a little bit surprising. During most shifts there was one to two men up there, rifles across chests, and heads on the swivel. The corridor where they stood was a good fifteen feet from the entrance door. The hallway was narrow, four feet across and ten feet tall. Pipes ran along the ceiling. But compared to most of the ship that wasn't all that different. Space was a pricey commodity on a spaceship.

“So what's the plan?” asked Kash. “If we're going to do this now.”

“I walk in, talk the talk, and you fly.”

“What about the captain?”

Hoss shot him a glance. “He's never been the biggest fan of Onatia.”

“All we have to do is get to the bridge and start burning. After that no-one can stop us without risking slipping and turning into goo in the hallways,” explained Kash. “So this is the important moment.”

“Fun.” Hoss grumbled and headed to the door.

It was a simple three-key chain-code door. Hoss tore off the outer housing and tugged out the wires until it opened. Old door lock, crude entry. The door swiveled to the right and disappeared into the ceiling.

Inside was an almost empty bridge. Two radar technicians, and Bigani at the captain's chair.

Hoss and Kash entered slowly, coming to a stop just a few feet into the room. Bigani had watched their whole procession in.

“I'm sorry, but who are you?” asked Bigani.

“Please get out of the seat,” said Hoss sternly.

“Do you have a gun?” asked Bigani.

“Do you?” shot back Kash. “Step out of the seat.”

Bigani shrugged. “Fair point. My guard should be back soon with a gun. So tell me who you are, and quick.”

“We're here to rescue this ship,” explained Hoss. “From Onatia.”

Bigani's eyes went wide. “Ohh,” he mouthed. “Well act fast because the guard is supposed to ‘protect’ me from ideas like that.”

“My honor. Strap him,” Kash hit the general high-G alarm and sat in the captain's seat. It wasn't too unlike the controls back on the *Komoto*. Same accelerator, different general switches, different colors, same control read-outs. Ah, there were the manual controls.

“Does this have a gamma-drive?” asked Kash.

“Yes. Old one,” said Bigani.

“Good, that makes my job easy,” Kash opened up the accelerator and flicked on the outward lights. “Let's go desert to the Armadan navy.”

“Always my dream,” Hoss smiled. “Two Zendon agents leaving their government for the enemy.”

“Well I already technically left.”

Hoss strapped into his seat. “You came back, that's all that matters.”

The floodgates at the back of the ship opened, leaking fuel into an open tap, and the drive plume on the back of the *Lust and Forgive* burned bright. A general message of their travel plans blasted to the

galaxy, they were innocent in all of this, and they were turning themselves in. That should catch some heads by surprise. The massive cargo hauler gently rumbled up. Bigani was surprised at how gentle it felt, even as they pushed past one G.

“You’re pretty good at this!” hollered Hoss over the loud din of the coolant pipes kicking in. “You should be a professional cruise pilot after this.”

“Like hell you’ll catch me flying around tourists,” laughed Kash. “No, I think I’m more likely to get court-martialed and thrown out an airlock.”

“Not if you disappear,” Hoss winked.

Kash shrugged. “Then maybe, we’ll never know till we’re there.”

“Let’s do this,” Hoss sat back in his seat. “Thirty-five hours till we’re home-free.”

“Thirty-five hours,” repeated Kash softly. He had a feeling they weren’t home-free yet. He still had debts to pay with his old crew.

* * *

Constantine stood mumbling on his bridge. Nev stood by his side, reading him the news of the day. The bridge around them was quiet. All officers were on duty recalling ships to escort duty for Crili station.

“And finally we broke an encrypted Zendon security code coming off of Nebola today,” finished Nev.

“Zendon operatives on Nebola?” asked Constantine eagerly.

“Negative, Armadan marines.” Nev handed over the report. “Really odd stuff.”

Constantine sighed. “Order a B-505 shuttle to be dispatched to pick them up.”

“And the Zendon system-chief?”

“He’s an operative if he knows those codes, but don’t do anything to him,” Constantine shook his head. “If we had actually had our war we could do something, but fleet command wants to see more humane treatment of enemy officers.”

Like a decent human would do, thought Nev quietly. “If only we were at war sir,” Nev smiled and left the room. Sometimes Constantine disgusted him. But after all, the man was a genius, and geniuses had controversial thoughts.

* * *

The Pursuer droid outside Bezi’s room momentarily switched positions with its counterpart. Some tiny antiviral packet had buzzed and clicked in the background like an annoying fly but the OS had whipped it away. The droid knew where it was, what it was doing, and what its mission was. A new target, a threat board, had popped up on its screen the day prior. A hit, with a time and date. Bezi, the diplomat. No sooner had it appeared that it was flushed away again, the OS fighting whatever viral contamination had seeped into the system. But the droid remembered, or so as far as droids could remember. It waited and watched for the board to come back up again, because this time it guessed it wouldn’t go away. The droid catalogued the time. Just after two in the afternoon.

Chapter 33: Dusk

The birds quipped in the trees in the background. A gentle breeze blew over the central plaza in front of the diplomatic building. And a car full of men in guns waited just beyond it. They sat with their heads down, eyes shielded from the dying glow of the sun. It touched the top of the diplomatic building, splintering into fragmented rays, before disappearing into misty shadows. That was the sign.

“Go, go,” hissed Buller. He grabbed his long bag, gun, ropes, explosives, and huffed it over to the west side of the building. The sun was to their backs here. Sending warm tingles down spines as skin absorbed heat from sun rays.

Two men hustled up to the front, carrying what looked like portable anti-tank tubes. They let out a hiss, CO2 gas expanding out the front in a pop, and black nylon rope shot five stories up. Spikes at the front of the rope dug into the concrete on the roof. Then men slipped on their waist carabines, snapped them to the rope, and pushed off the ground.

Likewise on the far side of the building, just emerging from the bar, Bezi and Ridler bid each other good night and headed up to their respective rooms. The hallways were dimly lit and the staff was lax. The two spec-ops officers from Ridler's shuttle were nursing a bud outside the diplomats room.

The Pursuer droids outside Bezi's room switched positions again.

Buller popped on his carbine and pressed off the ground. The world's perspective rotated ninety degrees, the ground becoming the wall, and the windows becoming the ground. With his collapsed stock HE-44 dangling off his back, he began climbing up the windows. The sun split beams between his shadow, a constant mild flashbang to anybody inside. Not that it would matter if they were seen, the strike team couldn't be stopped. He glanced to his right, over to the rooftop where his men would be, they should have an easy night tonight.

On that rooftop Elanie paused on the man looking at her then moved up the line. So far she counted fifteen scaling the windows. Another set of feet. Sixteen. To her left Marshal and Timur nodded at each other and took off for the building. ETA, five minutes.

Elanie rested her cheek on the cold stock and raised the sights up the line. Momentarily pausing on the side of each enemy. Once they started drilling then she'd start shooting. Until then, no reason to make them think it was anything other than their sniper team here. She hovered her middle finger over the trigger. The shots wouldn't miss with her doctor precision.

On the glass Buller stamped up another step. He looked up. The first man on the left line was about to reach the target's floor. Buller took another step, his blood pooling in his head. They wouldn't know what hit them.

Elanie saw the top man reach into his bag and pull out putty explosives. She allowed him the briefest second to put it down. To let her let him live. But he leaned forward and she took the shot.

The body didn't snap to the side so much as wiggle. The velocity of the round zipping through the target so fast it didn't have time to grab hold. The man's hands slackened and the putty dropped.

She paused, breathing seemed hard. Like any doctor she felt concern for the man. A potential patient. A life she'd taken away when her job was to give. But, she reminded herself, these men were trying to take many lives away.

She lowered the sights to the second point man, who was looking down at someone. The sun glinted off the glass of the building. The dying of a day. The slide slammed back and forward. The dying of a man.

Buller glanced up. Did his point man really drop the pudgy? Of all times to slip up and have butter fingers, now was not that time. The man was hanging by his carbine on the line. Arms weak. It didn't sound like there was a gunshot. Had he passed out.

"Check him out," shouted Buller to the second point man.

The man turned around. "What?" he yelled over the wind. They never tell you about the wind. It gets so much more violent the higher you get on a building. The man cupped his hand to her ear.

"Check him out!" Buller clicked on his radio.

"Ok-"

The second man's arm disappeared in a flash of red and white. Followed by the momentum from the buller swinging him around the line like a dancer on a pole. His back smashing into the glass, feet still, head rested.

"Sniper!" hollered Buller over the line. They had a drill for this. It would be fine. It had to be fine. He pushed off from the glass, aiming his HE-44 at the glass, and fired a burst. The trick worked. His bullets sent fractures through the glass and his flat feet broke the window with the impact of his swing. Around him he heard his fellow men doing the same.

Elanie watched as the men opened fire on the building and disappeared through windows. She couldn't see him any more of them. Better yet, she didn't want to hit any more of them. She tugged away from the scope, kneeled over, and threw up. Her stomach convulsing from the promises she'd broken to herself. She was horrible with a gun, she wasn't supposed to be here!

Bezi looked up from his magazine. Were those gunshots? He sat up on his bed. What was going on?

Outside Bezi's room, the Pursuer droids received their new orders. Assisination protocols had overruled the previous guard ones. There was no sympathy from either droid as they flicked off safeties. They had a job to do, and a job they would finish.

Most Pursuer droids, and just droids in general, generate a lot of heat, which has to be dispersed somehow. On average, a droid will have a heat sink and some sort of exhaust vent near the upper back of the torso, which makes a low humming sound. But Pursuer droids, designed initially to be assassins and recon units, needed a different way to get rid of the heat. So they stored it. Temporarily, it was removed in a quick and quiet process that revolved around a rotating cylinder absorbing the heat. That resulted in what was described as the "whirr". Droids, as droids do, developed different times to get rid of the heat. Most models do it in noisy environments, where it's less likely to be noticed, much like fart. But with Pursuer droids, they had to stand still for a moment, let the heat sink exhaust, which led them to do it right before they did a lot of movement, like killing someone.

The door to his room opened and the two Pursuer droids entered. They held their rifles tight to their chests. The silver barrels seemed to hover in the evening sunlight. There had been a faint whirr just a second before. Were the droids activating to protect him?

“What’s going on?” asked Bezi in confusion. “I heard gunshots.” His adrenaline was keeping him calm for now. That wouldn’t have to last much longer.

The droids clicked and swiveled their barrels toward him. The tracking software pin-pointing the exact resting places for their bullets. In unison they fired. Three shots each. Extended arms, one hand holding the grip of the HE-44F. Perfectly controlled wrist movements to counter recoil. And before them the diplomat fell dead.

In Bezi’s final moment he held on that the droids were shooting something behind him. That the Zendon government would never turn its back on him. His hands clutched the first shot. Programmed for his stomach so his hands would move away from his face. Six shots. Mined from minerals the diplomat had argued control over. Built in factories that paid taxes that went to him. And fired from droids he’d believed would protect him. He’d been wrong in almost every way.

But Bezi had been right on one thing. The Zendon government wouldn’t betray him.

-The Pursuer droids lowered the smoking barrels back down to their sides. Mission complete rang in red across their screen.-

But the Galactic Militia was more than willing to make a matry out of him.

Buller heard the shots echo from upstairs. They sounded like shots from his men. Six of them. Perfectly synchronized with the loading of new rounds via the bolt. He clutched his gun and charged for the stairs, four of his men behind him.

Upstairs six men of the strike team huddled behind beams in the coffee cafe. The windows behind them had been blown open by their shots. Glass shards impregnated the fine green large fiber carpet beneath them. Two coffee cups leaked brown liquid from where rogue shots had sprayed. They looked down the hall, to where the shots had come from. Those hadn’t been theirs. They flicked out the stocks of their HE-44, checked the bolts, safeties, and raised them to the hallway. The next thing out of there would be dead.

Downstairs Marshal and Timur had just reached the service door. Both of them held MAR-S, the stockier barrel and trimmed down sights for CQB action. They had black vests on, with projectile magazines shoved in. Preloaded two days prior, they were ready for this. But as they slowed to a job in the expansive shiny grey kitchen, they realized they had no-idea where they were.

Upstairs the Pursuer droids swiveled and moved for the doors. Neither reloaded magazines. Down the hallway, one of the spec-ops officers raced for Bezi’s room. His P223 automatic was held in front of him by one hand. The sights trained on the open door of the diplomats room. His feet skidded to a stop, the rubber heels of his break-action-combat-boots burning on the marble floors. In front of him two Pursuer droids were walking his way, behind them was the whacked diplomat. He raised his gun but the Pursuer droids were faster.

Instantly taking in the situation the lead droid calculated each shot with perfection. A three round burst sliced up the spec-ops officer's chest. His death hand squeezed the sensitive trigger of the P223

automatic. Two rounds detonated on the Pursuer droid's heavy chestplate. The droid raised its gun at the groaning officer on the round, and without a code line of hesitation, tapped two perfect shots.

A faint blue haze covered the diplomats room when the Pursuer droids stepped out. The gunpowder and projectile smoke clouding up the ceiling like cigar sweat.

A door swung open, seven white armored Armadan marines stamped out. MARS raised, laser designators set on the droids.

There wasn't even a pause.

Like a wide sword sweeping across the hallway the droids fired. Perfectly calibrated recoil control saw to each marine grasping his chest and collapsing. The clatter of armor synchronized perfectly with the dry clicks of empty magazines. The droids reached for spares from the dead. They were after one more target when they heard noise from the hallway.

Down the hallway, the thin walls of the building did nothing to mask the quick shots of the droids. Buller tapped the back of his men and indicated for them to go forward. The twelve man strong strike team moved down the hallway, guns raised towards the corridor.

Downstairs the final two strike team soldiers hunkered down behind an abandoned food cart. One of them clutched an incendiary grenade while the other occasionally peeked around the sides with his HE-44. They had faith that Buller would come back for them. Wait- someone was coming around the corner.

In the darkened corridors of downstairs, where the shadows of sundown didn't reach, Marshal and Timur flicked on thermals and moved cautiously. Twice they stopped and waited for what seemed like ten minutes when people scurried in front of them. Listening and waiting for the telltale sound of a hidden gun. But it seemed like all the action was upstairs.

"Shots," Timur indicated with his chin towards the ceiling. They couldn't tell how many, but it was a lot all of a sudden.

"The diplomats might try to make it down here," Marshal said.

"If they're both still alive," Timur rounded a corner. His MAR-S held gently in his hands. A food cart was at the end of the hallway. He saw something move. Like a head ducking back.

"Contact," Timur whispered, pressing back against the wall and hiding in the crevice of a door.

"I believe you, but where," Marshal was kneeled down, half his body covered by the door, the other half peeking out with a gun.

"Food cart. Right side," Timur pointed.

"Don't point!" hissed Marshal.

A chorus of shots rang down the hallway. Flashes of bullets igniting clanged from the end of the hall. The iconic sound of gunfire pulsed in their ears. Something was tossed their way. It rolled and bounced off the carpet. Timur dove, grabbed the ball, and tossed it back. It landed behind the food cart. The gun fire stopped. Timur looked up from where he had pushed himself into the carpet. The food cart suddenly flipped with a fireball. A puff of an explosion followed by grey slices of metal splintering out.

"Oh, grenade," said Timur. He brushed off his legs.

Marshal gave him a pat on the back. "Good work."

Timur moved towards the food cart, his gun still raised. The evidence of two bodies was spread out over the blast radius. The doors closest to the grenade had been knocked down, the farther away ones had been peppered by debris. What sounded like a cacophony of gunshots erupted from upstairs.

“Upstairs,” said Marshal.

“Where the hell is that?” complained Timur, lagging behind with his MAR-S strap caught under one leg.

Third marine sergeant William Hunting heard the shots of the droids from up the stairs. He was crouched, one knee pressed against the gravel rooftop. The barrel of his MAR rested on the doorframe. His HUD showed the laser signature pinging off the door. At the squeeze of his trigger, anything that came through would be dead. He heard another set of shots.

For weeks he'd been positioned on the roof with a HEMG, shooting down debris as it rained onto the city. He'd formed a bond with the city. He'd protect it, and in turn it fed him. He wasn't about to let some terrorist take that away.

When Mark had led the first battery team down the stairs, Hunting had decided to stay up. But when he heard the approaches of gunfire and the clattering of marines, Hunting felt a spurring in his chest. He gripped his rifle forcefully. Urging his comrades to open the door and give him the all clear. But to no avail.

“On me,” Hunting crunched the gravel beneath his feet and descended into the darkness. His HUD adjusted, going bright green for a second as HES and NVG turned on. His heart beat increased in his ears. He tugged the door open and slid out into the hallway.

Mark and his seven marines were laid out on the floor, heads resting against the wall. Too quick for them to do much but explode into the hallway. Hunting steadied the rifle in his hands, pushing the stock against his shoulder.

His spine prickled. The NVGs were blurry in the shadows. Too much time spent near the flashes of cannons. Sun spots hung in the top right corner. Hunting heard the steps of his men behind him. Breath clogged the bottom of his HUD. He slid one foot in front of the other.

It wasn't a groan but a whirr. A powerfan turning on. A lion's hum.

The floor fell beneath him. A powerful arm smashed him into the ceiling and flung him across the hallway. He felt his arm snap. He rolled to a stop at the wall.

The droids moved through the marines like they were enjoying it. Arms were torn off. Chests punched through. Two marines were body lifted and crushed against walls. Hunting let out a moan for his men. He shoved himself off the ground and ran.

Down the hallway there was another man. A security officer perhaps. The thumping pain from his arm restricted his mind from seeing the gun raised towards him.

Buller watched the marine come closer. Out of the shadows, emerged a white knight. A man who'd done his job for him. His men, the strike team, were spread out alongside him. Buller did not see into the shadows. He did not see what had caused the marine's arm to pop. He simply saw a job well done, raised his gun and fired.

The Pursuer droids turned on their heels. The code matrix slowing them down slightly. No need to get too bloodthirsty. They picked up their guns and moved down the hallway. Towards the gunshot. Towards death.

Marshal tugged up the second floor. Huffing and grunting. He should have run more. His rifle slid uncomfortably along his back with every stride. Behind him Timur felt the same pain.

Buller pulled his men back. Tonight was not going well. Two of his men lay dead along the wall, plastered there by gunfire. From what exactly? He glanced over the food cart. Two Pursuer droids moved their direction, the synchronous fire and perfect recoil smashed the walls around them. God's own death machines.

Around him men jumped up randomly and fired off magazines in the droid's direction. Sometimes a round would hit, the metal of the droid crunching into a crater, but the droid kept moving. Buller tugged out a grenade and flipped it over the barista's bar in the coffee shop. Through the open slit he watched it land and explode. One of his men grunted in pain. Friendly fire. The droids just kept walking.

The strike team soldier with the SSW-19 moved forward in a crouch until he was next to Buller. Without communication, Buller grabbed the man's extra magazines. The SSW-19 propped up and began firing.

A dull pump noise filled the hallway. Buller was confused until he glanced around the open split. The droids metal cracking. The SSW-19 was on point. Metal popped and riveted as small arms fire peppered the Pursuers. The first one fell, its knee joint exploding. The second one focused on the SSW-19, fired a two-tap burst, and retreated down the hallway. A body collapsed next to Buller.

"Body check?" shouted Buller over the din of small arms fire racing down the hallway.

"Four hit or hurt!"

Down to eight. "Group on me," Buller pushed himself from around the bar and headed down the hallway. He tugged out his empty magazines and chambered a new one. The magnetic seal clicked.

At the end of the hallway, past the dead diplomats room, there was a fork. Left, or right. The carpet ended into marble. Splitting up would be suicide, but running into one of those droids was suicide anyway. He looked down either hallway. At the end of the right hallway he saw what looked like a head peeking out.

"Right, guns up, shoot anyone on sight," ordered Buller. He swung up his HE-44 and moved down the hallway. Each book squeaking on the marble.

Timur pushed open the exit of the stairs and walked into what had been a battlezone. Two tables were rolled over. The coffee bar had been shot to shit. The hallway was far worse. And there was a dead Pursuer droid on the ground. Timur poked his finger through one of the holes. Always a fun feeling.

"Timur stop that, this way," Marshal waved.

"Copy," Timur jogged after him, passing two dead men on the ground. A third was laying on his side, hands clutched around a thigh. He groaned. Alive. The police would bag that one.

Timur found Marshal crouched at a fork. His gun aimed down the right hallway. There was movement in the shadows. The dim orange light made depth perception really hard.

"Just shoot?" asked Timur.

"And waste our diplomat, not likely," Marshal shook his head. "Follow me," he took off down the left hallway. "We're going to blow through a few walls."

"You go that way," Timur switched off his MAR. "I'll flank the other way. We'll go in together. Like you said we should've back on Sispini."

Buller stopped when the spec-ops officer called out to them. The sundown light sprinkled through the skylight windows above the officer's head. Making him an easy target while Buller stayed in the dark. There was the smell of fried dough in the air. An abandoned dinner cart just at the end of the hall.

“Friendly?” the officer shouted.

“Friendly,” responded Buller.

“Show yourself,” ordered the officer.

Buller waved at his men to stay still. He stepped out of the shadows. His massive frame makes the hallway seem small.

“Who are you?” asked Buller, moving towards the officer. “This is our area.”

“Stand where you are,” the officer fingered the safety off. A dull click that died to Buller’s footsteps.

“Can’t do that. Is Diplomat Ridler safe,” asked Buller. In the background there was gunfire. It sounded from the corridor Buller hadn’t gone down.

“Yes,” the officer kept his gun where it was but flicked back on the safety. If the man knew who his principle was, then they were probably on the same side.

“Good,” Buller stopped two feet away from the man. Easily within striking distance, but he needed the pistol lowered a little bit more. “Show him to me.”

“Why?”

“To confirm he’s safe,” said Buller with a smile. Never hurt to smile and act like you belong.

“Alright,” the officer turned his back on Buller to open the door. Suddenly a thick arm wrapped around his neck. A heavy hand on his head.

“Easy does it,” whispered Buller. The officer croaked a reply and kicked his legs. Buller picked him off the ground. His arm digging into the man's neck. His hand wrapped about the man's head like a basketball. The man squirmed. But in the initial moment he dropped his pistol. He was done for, and he seemed like he knew it. Buller was a python and the officer a mouse. He could feel the rapid pulse against the hairs of his forearm. A mouse with quivering whiskers. But Buller was a strong snake. A domino that fell where it fell. He was loyal to Onatia, to Lesio. And this was just part of the job that had to be done.

When the officer's legs stopped kicking Buller held him for another minute. The pulse slowed against his forearm. When it finally stopped Buller kept holding. He held until one of his men tapped him on the soldier. And then finally did he drop the dead man. His boots slapped against the floor, his face smacking the marble.

“Sir, blast puddy,” his soldier handed him some grey clay. There was a fear in the back of his eyes. Watching an officer choke out a man does that to people.

Buller waved him off. He was on an adrenaline high. He could kick down the door. Not some blast puddy. He stared at the handle. Always better to check if it’s unlocked. The lights flickered in the hallway. His men turned and moved. They’d check it out while Buller dealt with the diplomat.

Two minutes before the officer was choked out in the hallway, Ridler stuffed himself into a closet. Pushing his shoulders past heavy furnishings, he felt trapped like a badger. His chest was pressed against the wall, his mouth angled up at the ceiling. He breathed softly. Fearing every creak of the wood expanding against his chest would give him away.

There was a quiet click of a doorknob opening. The sound of footsteps.

Buller entered slowly. His pistol raised at eye level, one hand extended out, the other holding his belt. He didn't know where he got the stance, but he reasoned it made him look like a cowboy. And who doesn't want to look cool before killing people. Only psychopaths don't.

Ridler edged farther into the closet. It was maybe three feet deep. The front layer was covered in fine suits. The floor littered with suitcases. The intruder smelled of the stench of a man who hadn't washed in a while. Ridler's back prickled. Then he heard a clump, like someone setting down a heavy book on the table outside the closet.

Buller put down his pistol and made his way to the bathroom. That's where people always hid, in the shower. Their private space. Where no-one had disturbed them before. In fight or flight, they always went there. Their safe, special place. Where being nude constituted a certain privilege of access. Buller wasn't shy about that. He'd killed with his junk out before. How else do you strangle a hooker? He stomped towards the bathroom. His back to the white doored closet he hadn't decided to check-

-His gun was on the table right outside the closet. The safety off, and a red light indicator of a chambered round. The door to the room hung open, but it didn't look like anyone was there. Had the lights gone out? Ridler wrapped his fingers around the pistol. He hadn't held one in so long. Not since the bodyguards had trained him to aim and shoot. Not like he had cared. He'd always thought there'd be people to do that for him. The man was opening the bathroom. He was tall, muscles ran down his back, his feet were spread in a duck walk, and his hands were balled into fists. A neanderthal. Except this one carried a special thunderstick.

Buller tugged open the shower curtain expecting to find a cowering diplomat. Instead the clink-clink-clink of iron links pulling back greeted him with an empty white stall. Like a modern art painting. Only this one was supposed to have the image of a scared man in it. Light moved across the shadow.

The primal eye, genetically designed for thousands of years to register miniscule movement at the edge of a shrubland savanna, sent an emergency alert to the brain. In the tenth of a second it took for Buller's right eye to take in the change, his brain stiffened his spine. Adrenaline that was already coursing made his veins run cold.

Movement in the mirror. He patted his side for his gun, oh shit.

Ridler saw the man freeze. He must have seen him in the mirror. No other way around it. He leveled the sights on the back of the man's head. Or at least tried to. The gun wobbled in his grip. His wrist didn't have the balance trick down yet.

"You here to kill me?" asked the man in the mirror.

"How could you tell?" Buller asked slowly.

"Most men don't leave the safety off if they're planning to do anything else."

Buller chuckled. "Funny enough I was here to do the same thing to you. So are you going to do it or not?"

"I heard a commotion outside, was that you?"

"No it was the devil," Buller shrugged.

“So you.” The man in the mirror shifted his stance. So new with a gun. Didn’t know how to hold it yet. Probably had one shot in him. 50-50 chance of hitting. After that the recoil would give Buller the chance to move. But 50-50 were still long odds if you were betting your life in the exchange.

“By now I’ve usually killed the guy,” Buller watched the figure in the frame hesitate. “So are you going to do it or stall?”

“Why do you ask? What would you know?”

“Fella, I’ve stood where you stand more times than you’ve actually represented something. You shoot or you don’t. Simple as that. Either tug the trigger or hand over the gun.”

“And you’ll shoot me.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. So the man had some wit about him.

“I came in here to string you like a bird,” Buller shrugged, “so consider it merciful.”

Ridler’s breath caught in his lungs. He’d had people say they were going to kill him. He’d had old lovers give punches. One even pulled a knife. But never before had the statements scared him. But this man, he delivered the line like a pizza man. He was here to deliver a slice, only instead of pepperoni it was with his knife. He felt his hand numb on the gun. Shoot, or stall.

There was a thump from the hallway. Stall.

“So shoot or stall?” asked Buller.

“Get the fuck on the ground,” rasped Ridler. The man was a monster.

“Where else are my feet?”

“Bad joke, on the ground.”

“You’re the man with the gun,” Buller shrugged. “Just try to hit my head. I’d offer you that much mercy.”

“Coming from a man like you that doesn’t mean a lot.” Ridler indicated with the gun, pointing it at the ground.

“At least I can stomach looking in the eyes of the people I hurt,” Buller said.

“I never hurt anyone. I only ever said what my government wanted me to say,” Ridler moved his jaw, it felt stiff.

“Weird having power isn’t it?” Buller said, slowly lowering himself chest-first to the ground. “Actually being able to do something without your government saying so? It feels so... alive.”

“Monster,” Ridler snapped.

“Monster is a word of perspective. I prefer murderer.”

“You’re messed up in the head.”

“Maybe you’ll make that more literal than figurative,” Buller pointed at his own head. “Or maybe you’ll keep stalling.”

“Stay on the ground!” Ridler shouted. Buller’s hand had begun to move.

Outside the door Timur touched his headset. “Clear.”

“Clear.”

“Breach?”

“Breach!”

The wall in front of Ridler exploded, caking him with plaster. Buller pushed away from the carpet. His hands reached for the diplomat's throat.

The door to the room swung open. Ridler turned around, the heavy weight of the gun in his hand pulling his rotation off balance. Two holes. Two men. With assault rifles. Both pointed at the assassin pushing himself at Ridler.

In his final moment all Buller saw was white. Phosphorus from the self-propelled round. He didn't have time to think of anything witty. Any last comment. Instead the domino fell over one last time and laid to rest. He was allowed the one mercy he wished for. A smooth quick death.

Timur lowered his MAR. Outside the open door there was a dead Pursuer droid, two dead strike team operatives, and a destroyed food cart. Steam hissed from the barrel of his gun. He rubbed his neck. In its final moments, the Pursuer droid had tried to choke him out. Dropping the formalities of the gun and moving back in time.

"Was he a friend of yours, if so, sorry," Timur choked out. His neck really hurt. Probably bruised tissue more than anything else.

"No," Ridler raised his hands. Marshal recognized his suit. Only a diplomat would have a suit that fancy.

"Drop the pistol Mr. Ridler, I don't want you accidentally shooting someone," said Marshal. He kept his barrel facing the ground, but his hand was on the grip in case he needed to swing it up.

"Mr. Ridler, would you be so kind as to follow me," Timur said. He started moving down the hallway.

"Who are you people?" asked Ridler.

"The people sent to save innocent folk like yourself," Marshal answered.

"Who sent you?" asked Ridler, rubbing his hand through his hair.

Timur saw movement down the hallway and fired a burst, downing another strike team operative. Neither he and Marshal answered the question as they moved out of the building and boarded the 6x6 wheeler left behind by the strike team operatives.

"Mr. Ridler, please buckle up, we're going to a safe house," said Marshal.

"It serves strupen waffles," Timur smiled. He packed his gun in the carryon rack and sat back for the ride. Slowly letting the adrenaline seep off him. He looked down at his hand. The usual jitters from adrenaline seeping out. He grinned. Thank god something was back to normal.

* * *

Garson glanced at the system wide communication network. It was flooded with the same relief vessels as before, plus additional calls of help from ships near the neutral zone that had been hit by flak from the battle. But another strange thing had just happened. A ship had appeared from nowhere.

Along the neutral lines, now only thirty hours burn away, cargo haulers had started blasting out light signatures and burning towards Armadan lines. Ships usually didn't just come from nowhere.

"Jeffrey, what do you make of this," Garson indicated at the board.

"Someone wants to defect," Jeffrey shrugged. "Or at least doesn't want to get shot."

"Makes sense, looks like an old Onatia cargo-hauler," Garson said. "How it was out in the blue like that. Hidden by the void. He likes doing that."

"He does like being mysterious," said Burta. She sat in the pilot's chair. "So are we going to help them or not?"

"Was about to ask that," Garson pointed at her. "Let's burn hard."

"Sounds good to me," Jeffrey shrugged. "Just let's try not to get into another battle."

“Ammunition is basically kaput,” Garson agreed. “So we’ll try to stay out of trouble.”

“Four torpedoes, six missile racks, and thirty percent PWD,” said Jeffrey. “I’ve been monitoring data-spikes like my mission said. We could try to re-arm at one of the missing ships, and as long as it’s not trouble.”

“In this system,” Burta sighed, “everything is always in trouble.”

“That’s because we’re near Onatia,” said Garson. “Anything involving him goes to shit.”

“Because we’re in the dragon’s shadow,” Jeffrey flicked on the warning lights and the Skipoly Grey kicked off for the *Lust and Forgive*.

* * *

Timur tried to separate behind the iron sights and everything else. When he wasn’t shooting, he wasn’t thinking about it. He carried that mental wall with him ever since first combat. Yes, adrenaline carried over between the two, like a hook or link between two worlds he didn’t want to collide. But Elanie hadn’t learned that lesson yet. For her, life was a fluid flow from point a, to b, to c. Timur didn’t have such points. He had behind the barrel, and everything else.

Elanie was sitting in the hallway outside his room, her hands cupped and head bowed. The diplomat had been booked in the empty room next to hers. She was whispering a prayer, something doctors scorned at until the vital signs started dropping, and then everyone without the scapple muttered the holy words.

“Hey,” Timur said softly, sitting down next to her. “How are you feeling?”

“Absolute shit, I broke a promise,” her voice sounded hoarse. She’d been crying.

Timur bit his lip and nodded. He didn’t know what to say.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked.

“I’d rather not, but I’ll listen to you,” he said.

“It felt too easy. Like everything I’d worked at in medical school was a joke. That a person built up by twenty years of life could be taken away, just like that,” she snapped her fingers into a closed fist. “Like that,” she whispered.

Timur tilted his head towards his splayed feet. “Yeah, I get that.”

“And when I was there, all I could think about was saving you guys. Shooting those guys so you could live,” Elanie clutched Timur’s hand. “I never thought bullets could do so much damage.”

“It’s not the bullets,” Timur whispered. “It’s the momentum behind them that hurts. Momentum is the article of change in this galaxy. How fast you can do something determines its impact.”

“Saving my friends,” Elanie continued.

“Part of the mission,” echoed Timur solemnly.

“But they had friends too.”

“Bad friends. Bad people.”

“But they were people too-” Elanie exclaimed. They were lucky the hall was quiet and the doors thick.

“Can I give you some advice,” Timur released her hand and dropped his voice. “When you’re behind the butt of a gun, no-one except for the guys on your team are people. They’re all robots, out to get you. They’re not good people, not bad people. Not people with families or colleagues. Just a robot at the end of your reticle. After the battle, cope with it however you want-”

“You’re not,” Elanie said. Her eyes had reddened up.

“That’s my coping mechanism.”

“Just lock it all up?”

“Forget about it,” explained Timur. “Forget you were ever there. Forget anything you saw. Remember going in, relish coming out. Because all that matters is that you get the people you like out. Today we remember only seeing the alive diplomat and BRISK-”

“Not the dead people?” asked Elanie.

She was in shock, Timur reminded himself, it was common for people like her to ask the obvious. “No, not the dead people. Just think they were never there,” Timur grabbed her hand. “Just remember us making it out alive.”

Elanie nodded. “And other people?”

“They cope with alcohol, like Marshal,” answered Timur. “Some cope with sex, drugs, more shooting. Other’s never cope fully. They just walk around half-awake, permanently shell-shocked. You don’t want to be those people.”

Elanie pushed herself up from the floor. Timur rose with her, letting go of her hand in the process.

“I think I’m going to get a beer,” Elanie announced.

“Drink and stew on it tonight, that’s fine. Get black out drunk. But tomorrow don’t think of it. It’s like sex you try to forget,” said Timur. “And I think I’ll join you for that drink.”

“When did you get so talkative,” asked Elanie with a coy smile.

“Just a side-effect of the adrenaline wearing off,” Timur held up his shaking hands. “Just one more thing to help me forget.”

* * *

The marines sat around the fire tended by Grimes. Downing, Joshua, Reynolds, Henry and the Zendon system-chief were being cast a glowing orange by the sizzling flames. All the wood in the forest had been dry, so the fire popped and sputtered. The marines had their helmets and upper body armor off. The dirty white leg armor stayed on, too hard to change back into if a fire-fight started. Their weapons were collected in a pile next to Grimes, opposite the Zendon system chief. No one made a point of that, but it was expected that the old enemy couldn’t sit next to the guns.

“So what made you do it?” asked Grimes. The shadows moved like tap dancers across his face.

“Do what?” asked the system chief. He’d taken two pieces of armor and used them to make a backrest. He was laid down staring out the tree line at the stars. The smell of woodsmoke and the incandescent glow of the stars made him feel sleepy.

“Be a spy,” said Grimes.

“Ugh,” the system chief groaned and rolled upright. “Alright, I’ll set this clear, I’m not a spy.”

“But you employ them.”

“Sometimes, yes. But also diplomats and...”

“Just diplomats and spies? Two sides of a coin I wouldn’t like to touch,” Grimes laughed. The rest of the marines quietly stared at the flames. A false reflection of orange could be seen glinting off their eyes.

“The spies are usually nicer,” shrugged the system chief.

“You won’t tell me your name though,” Grimes pointed at him with the fire stick, the end still a fading red glow.

“Can’t, confidential,” the system chief picked up some twigs and rolled them through his fingers.

“Do you ever talk in more than just one sentence phases?” asked Downing. “Or have we been fighting an illiterate enemy this whole time.”

“Downing, be nice,” Grimes mumbled. He looked at the diplomat, who was still rolling twigs between his fingers. “Was it patriotism?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” said the system-chief. “What makes you jump out into space with a gun and a chance to die.”

“Just bored I guess,” Grimes shrugged.

“A man like you doesn’t get bored.”

“Exactly, because I joined the Armadan marines, still haven’t answered my question though.”

The Zendon system-chief chuckled. “Whitty, I like it.” He stared at Grimes. “I’ll tell you my story when you’re honest about yours.”

“Hey now,” Downing interjected, trying to change the course of discussion. “Did you know, and I heard this from another marine, that most cities have more bugs per square mile than this forest.”

“Sometimes,” Grimes shook his head. “Downing where did you hear this?”

“Marine on guard with me.”

“Kelly?”

“Another fun fact he told me was that there are more bugs on this planet than humans in the entire galaxy.”

“No more fun facts, please,” Grimes held up his hand. He looked at the system-chief in a way of explaining. “Kelly has a fascination with bugs. Was an entomologist in undergrad.”

“Before joining the marines?” the system-chief asked with sceptisms.

“How else are we going to pay for the mind-fuck drugs to kill the stress this job brings,” Grimes chuckled. “Nah. We have real homes and real jobs to go back to once all this is done.”

“So you’re like a reserve force?”

“Most of them, except think of it as extended. They serve five years, paid college, university, medicare for twenty more years, the whole package.” Grimes pushed the stick into the fire again.

“But you?”

“Made a career out of this I suppose. No girl to go back to like some of these guys. No home but my bunk and my armor,” Grimes flicked over a log. “You?”

“Same,” the diplomat shrugged. “My only home is Zendon.”

“You still believe that after all of this?” asked Grimes.

There was the chain-saw sound of Downing snoring. The man had passed out. Grimes checked the rest of his mini-team inside of Rico squad. The rest were also down for the count. He indicated they should lower their voice and the Zendon system-chief agreed.

“I believe there’s something worth fighting for in my government, otherwise why has it lasted so long. Bad things don’t last.” The system chief nodded to conclude his statement.

Grimes slapped a bug on his neck. “Tell that to this forest.” He pushed another log closer to the embers. “So patriotism is your answer for why you joined?”

“Something like that. It was this or grow old and poor on a place nobody cared about. And it’s not like we’re all the good guys. The Zendon government has done some messed up shit.” The system-chief’s blatant honesty surprised Grimes.

“I guess I joined because...” Grimes paused. “There’s no one way to put it. Not a single answer to why I came here and did this. I guess I just want a better future for people down the road. Call me selfless, but that’s what we all are. Every marine gave up a family they loved, or people they liked, or even just simple good food to come to the middle of nowhere and potentially die in a battle that’ll be covered up.”

“So not patriotism?”

“The poster girl was also cute,” Grimes said with a smile. “I guess I wanted to meet her?”

“Did you ever?”

“Nope. Turned out she was computer generated. Like the rest of the shit we eat and drink.”

Grimes tossed the stick into the fire. “And part of me was bored.”

The system-chief closed his eyes and nodded. The crackle of the fire was getting to him. “One last thing,” he yawned. “Whatever war we wake up to tomorrow, I hope we can both be on the same side. Maybe find you your poster girl.”

“And put your old home on the map,” Grimes smiled. “Good night.”

Chapter 34: The whole chess board

Pieces in chess don't ask questions, they only follow orders. Black pawn to D-3, die to white rook, swipe in with bishop to capture white rook. The pawn never asked why it was going. It never questioned the orders of the king. It merely responded for the greater good. And the bishop, when it died four turns later, it never tried to retreat. It didn't look around to shove some other piece in front of it. Not that that wouldn't be interesting. But it stood its ground like a good soldier and took the flak. And the two rooks, when they pushed together, acted off each other like a sling and rock. Smashing through the enemies pawns and knights. That's how good officers should act. Not ask questions, not retreat, and always push up together.

Clearly the Zendon navy no longer had good officers, thought Lesio sourly. She squeezed the holographic display of the board closed. She couldn't win against the computer anymore. She hadn't been able to for the last three weeks. It felt like some sort of defeat. Like when a man can no longer rise at night. But unlike that scenario, there was no pill to fill the inadequate ability to vanquish one's digital opponents and a board made out of filtered light.

The strike team had hit half its goal the previous night. The word was already coming out from Lioni. The first stretchers out had been Buller, Bezi, and an Armadan spec-ops soldier. The ambulance crews had tried to cover the bodies with white-sheets but the wind had blown open the cold truth. Bezi lay with his mouth ajar in shock, one hand clutching his stomach, the other frozen to his side in rigor-mortis. Buller was barely recognizable, only from his scar along his jaw. And the news filled everyone in on the last man, Sergeant James Hatler, an Armadan special operative tasked with protecting diplomat Ridler, who hadn't been seen for almost seven hours since the attack.

Lesio felt defeated and betrayed. First the attack on the Armadan convoy had failed to fuel a war, now the strike team had died in the process of completing the backup plan. What had gone wrong? What possibly could have stopped them? She stared at the news broadcast a little bit longer. They were bringing out droid parts. Pursuer droids had taken down her team.

Lesio didn't gasp but she felt something go absent in her chest. Surprise at the reveal of the information. So her men had gotten to Bezi and then been stopped by the Pursuer droids. She said a quiet prayer of relief to them. At least they'd gone down fighting. The body count was at fourteen so far, counting the diplomats, guards, and "terrorists" as the news called them. So there were more of her men out there. Men who could accomplish the mission. It wasn't over just yet!

The intercom from the bridge buzzed. A junior lieutenant reported movement she might want to see. Lesio swelled to herself and took the long way up. Past the crews scrubbing the air filters, passed the bustling cafe, all the way up the maintenance staircase on the outer shell of the ship, and through the side entrance to the bridge.

"What is it?" she asked. She'd been having a deep moment with herself for once.

"Ma'am, this," Issac handed over the data-pad. Ever since Kash dropped himself out the airlock, Issac had slowly taken over his position as Lesio's right hand. She was convinced the boy had a crush on her. But after watching him relish the videos of torpedoes slamming into targets, any feelings she might have had back died in the resounding explosions and staticy footage.

Lesio opened the data-pad and read the transcript. "What is this?" she asked. "Why is it six hours old?"

"We thought you were sleeping," Issac said in defense.

“Well for information like this I should have been woken up with cold ice,” snapped Lesio viciously. The fucking pawns were moving again without her orders! “Why hasn’t it been jammed?”

“Out of range.”

“When is it in range?” asked Lesio. She stomped over to her station. “Put the ship on general alert. We’re going to burn towards it.”

“That could put us in range of the Armadan fleet,” Issac held his breath for the response.

“Weren’t you the one foaming over getting to kill some Armadan ships!”

“Yes ma’am, of course ma’am,” Issac spun around to his station. “Nearest intercept is in six hours, hard burn, three G minimum,” he stalled.

“Good, trajectories and course now!” Lesio snapped her fingers impatiently.

“There’s another ship burning towards it,” muttered Issac. The ship's readout was on his screen, and the last interaction with that ship hadn’t been good.

“Say again?”

“Another ship is heading towards the *Lust and Forgive*. A small old Armadan light-destroyer. More like a shuttle with guns than anything else,” Issac nodded. Something in his eyes must have given it away because Lesio cursed.

“Ships name, now!”

“Skipoly Grey.”

“Goddamnit!” If Lesio had a book she would have thrown it. “Fine- we’ll deal with them and then the cargo hauler.”

“Intercept time places us within medium reaction distance from the Armadan fleet, and lighting up our drive will give away our position,” pointed out Issac. “We could fire a few long range missiles and-”

“No more non-personal missions. Every time I’m not there, the mission goes to shit! So no, no long range missiles, no more strike teams, no more fucking firing before the clock stops counting! We’re doing this now, and we’re doing this my way. Fire up the drive,” there was quiet on the bridge as Lesio steamed, “now!”

Issac turned around to his station. Fine, they were doing this. But maybe Kash had been right on something. Lesio could be a nut job.

* * *

“Someone we know is trying to intercept us,” called out Burta.

Garson saw the registry pop up on his screen. “Reroute flight plan away from the *Lust and Forgive*. She’ll want us more than the cargo-hauler.”

“I’m not sure about that,” said Jeffrey. “If she’s smart.”

“She’s not,” Garson said. “What she is cunning. She can do shit you never saw coming. But actually finishing the mission, no, she sucks at that.”

“Case and point, the diplomatic building,” said Burta from the pilot's chair. “Her work.”

“And it failed,” Garson looked over at Jeffrey. “Just stay on reply comms with the cargo-hauler. Keep them informed that we’re trying to divert a possible hostile.”

“On it,” Jeffrey said.

The crew of the Skipoly Grey were pushed into their chairs by a light one point five G. The lights around them had dimmed red and purple, allowing for the bright blue monitors to stick out more. On his screen, Garson kept a careful count of munition and began plotting combat actions.

“How much munitions do you think the Armadan navy can give us?” asked Garson.

“What do you mean?” Jeffrey sent the message and looked over.

“Like after this, a refuel, a re-arming,” asked Garson.

“I can ask.”

“Send it.”

“Done.”

Garson switched his board to the green circle representing Skipoly Grey’s effective combat range. Nothing was in it yet. He zoomed out. In the far right corner, the trajectory displayed by a yellow line cutting up the board, the *Lust and Forgive* burned like there was no-tomorrow. On the far left, a trajectory intercept line marked in red, the *Komoto* steadily burned towards them. Its red circle, a hostile combat range, was larger than the Skipoly Grey’s. Better missiles made that difference. Garson glanced at the threat board. Just two colors, green and red, just two ships, the Skipoly Grey and the *Komoto*. Like an old western stand-off in the desert. This should be fun. Time to intercept, two and a half hours.

* * *

Onatia sat down in the captain's chair. His crew was splayed before him. But in front of him was a problem. Fisher. One month away and with detailed scans on his ships in the far void. But around him was the solution. A ship that embodied Onatia’s personality perfectly. A cloak and a dagger. An intercom request popped up on his board. He listened to it, and slowly his face paled. What was Lesio doing now?

* * *

It should have been obvious that the Skipoly Grey would show back up again. It was in their nature to be in places they didn’t belong. Lesio tapped out a fire on authority message to Issac. She wanted to make this personal for the man who’d stopped her two times now, first on Beketh, and now in the Nebola system. The queen was going to crush the pawn and win the board back.

* * *

Onatia would have slapped himself on the forehead if he’d had the time. No, time was too precious now. It should have been clear to him from the start that Lesio was too hot headed. Good at leading a ship, but too bold. But then again, bombs aren’t made out of elements that don’t react easily.

* * *

Hoss glanced at the radar scan of all the ships around them. They had only another twelve hours of constant burn to go. The ship rattled and shook, but according to Bigani, that was usual.

“Getting crowded out there,” said Kash.

“Don’t crash into anything.”

“You think I’m that bad of a captain?” Kash shook his head and leaned back in his chair. This was his crew now, and he had a job to protect them. Even at the cost of his old crew.

* * *

Constantine heard the ping from the communications desk. The officer picked it up with hesitant confusion. The bridge was mostly empty. Just a few personnel on duty.

“What is it, officer?” asked Constantine.

“Sir a request from a ship calling itself the Skipoly Grey for more ammunition after its engagement.”

“Is that ship on our registries?” Constantine asked.

“Negative sir.”

“But it has our direct communication link?”

“Yes sir,” the officer nodded.

Constantine rubbed his chin. He stared at the digital stars out the fake windows, where real stars were being recorded by cameras. Everything was so fake in this world. Fake promises of systems. Fake wars. Fake messages.

“Don’t reply, it’s a scam,” Constantine waved to the officer.

“It could be a grey level ship, spec ops,” the officer hesitated.

“It’s not.”

“Yes sir. Should I launch the shuttle now? Lieutenant Commander Nev had boarded.”

Constantine waved his fingers. It would be done. So who was this Skipoly Grey?

* * *

“Shuttle breaking off from the *Windless*,” called out Garson.

“See it, looks like its bearing around the bottom of the fleet and towards Nebola,” Burta leaned over from her pilot's seat. The gel cushion was making her butt numb. She wiggled.

“What would they want there?” Jeffrey asked himself. “It could be aid related. Don’t shoot.”

“Wasn’t planning on shooting, don’t worry,” Garson held his hands away from the fire control options.

“Oh, usually when you call something out I’m used to the people around me shooting it,” said Jeffrey. “Sorry.”

“All good man. Just know we’re not going to shoot anything until it has shot at us.” Garson put his hands gently back around the controls. He keyed a negative response to the computer asking to plot a track and fire solution for the marked shuttle. In the bottom corner of his screen time slipped away. Time to intercept *Komoto*, one hour.

* * *

The problem with space combat was that both sides could see each other. Both sides could plot out courses on supercomputers driving explosives and result in spectacular ten second battles where both sides died. It was the same problem faced by navies on the water. Except there the range of weapons meant when you saw an enemy you could press a button and no-longer see an enemy. Space was too big for that. So both ships rocketed towards one another. Both crews gripped onto armrests in high-G. As Supercomputers and targeting readouts tried to outcompete each other in a game played with lives.

* * *

Estimated time of intercept, five minutes.

The clock stared down at the board of players. The pieces of chess lay frozen on the tiles. The great sides of the board covered the thousands of dead and broken pieces. The spotlight was no longer on the queen, or the rook, or the bishop. Instead it rested on the pawn. The dozens of the little pawns each ship carried, packed and loaded with explosives and backed by drive plumes.

Lesio felt her heart give the little flutter accustomed to children back to school on their first day. That momentarily belief struggles where virtues and values weigh up against each other. Was it really worth it? This fight? This war. Yes, it had to be. It had to be, because she was too deep into it for it not to be. Not only was she trapped by her values and roles, trapped by her self-imposed resobility to Onatia, but she was trapped by her time.

If it wasn’t worth it, what was that time worth? Nothing. It was a waste of time. And Lesio was not someone to waste time. The clock was staring down at them. Two minutes. Had three minutes to run that fast. Was time moving so quickly. It wasn’t quicksand, or gravel, but mud. Mud that you slip in and then lie in, for if you get out of it, what was the point of getting your clothes dirty. So you enjoy the cool

presence as the hot sun beats down on your face. For if you don't, what was the point of all that wasted time? All those wasted pieces.

"Ma'am, it's time," called Issac from the front.

"Fire two-by-three. Pull G drive, switch us over them like a bat," Lesio ordered. There came the clunks or torpedoes firing into the void followed by a weightlessness in her stomach as the *Komoto* swung up and around.

"Contact," blurted out Jeffrey.

"Got them!" Garson switched over PWD to automatic. The red circle had overlapped them first, but now their green circle was driving towards the red dot. On the cameras, he watched as the *Komoto* flipped up and onto its back. "They're trying to keep their cameras on us, so no more Glycol tricks."

"They learned all right," said Burta.

"They're also keeping their bridge away from us," Jeffrey said.

"Another thing they learned," smiled Garson. The green circle flashed twice. Got them. Garson tugged on the controls.

Outside the Skipoly Grey, all four torpedoes sprang out from their pods, followed by three strings of missile racks. For a moment the cameras were blinded by the drive plumes. There were whooshed and clatters as missile racks ran empty and re-cycled new ones. The torpedoes split off ahead. They angled away from the *Komoto*, pushing to the space directly in front of it. Garson had a new trick up his sleeve.

The missile kept their unguided course, creating a long range shot-gun blast that the *Komoto* had to slow down to avoid. PWD fire raced out from the ships, tracking each other's movements with golden rain.

The torpedoes snapped past the *Komoto*, their drive plumes going dark as RCS thrusters tilted them back around. The missiles kept the main attention of the *Komoto*.

"Fire, all but three," ordered Lesio.

"Yes ma'am," Issac said. He should have warned her. They were too close to the enemy. It was a risky move. Something that wouldn't work. But he was as blind in his loyalty to her as she was to Onatia, so he didn't say a word. The *Komoto* pumped out her remaining torpedoes, sending them on a spiraling path towards the Skipoly Grey.

"Bring us into PWD range," Lesio said, standing up to try to look impressive. The queen was about to deal the striking blow to the pawn.

"Copy," Issac mumbled, switching on PWD fire.

The general navigation officer glanced at his board. Where did those torpedoes from earlier go?

"Fuck!" Garson shielded his face as the bridge of the Skipoly Grey exploded around him. Golden shells left glowing circles through walls. BB bullets through cardboard. The metal popped and squirmed. Air seeped from the wounded bridge.

"Fine controls are down!" shouted Burta. "I'm left with the drive plume to navigate by."

"That's fine," Garson growled. He flicked on automatic PWD fire to trace the *Komoto*. Lesio had been smart enough to fire those torpedoes, the automatic control AI had targeted them instantly, despite being below minimum arming range. They'd been left open to dry. He heard the rumble as the PWD cannons returned fire.

Issac only saw the trails of light shift direction on his board. To him, with the rest of the ship between the bridge and the PWD rounds, nothing happened. But below decks hallways disappeared to invisible spears. But what was worse was the engines. The drive cones had been facing the enemy. Protective rings disintegrated and fell off into the void. Fuel pumps snapped off, spinning directionless in a decaying orbit. Momentum cut off the *Komoto's* legs.

“PWD cannon fire at 10% left,” said Issac.

“Melt it all!” Lesio screamed.

Issac swung back around to his monitor. The blood loss was gone. The crew of the Skipoly Grey had to be dead. They'd peppered every part of that ship. It was a surprise they were still even alive.

Garson heard his air tank pop off. It was like a vacuum cleaner had been turned on, a heavy pop, and then the sound disappeared. To his right Jeffrey squirmed in his seat, straps too tight to his chest, as rounds cut through the air above him. Garson tried to call for help. Nothing. His communication wire must have been fried off. He checked his O2 bank. Four minutes on personal oxygen. Maybe a little bit less thanks to all the extra breathing. He controlled himself and turned back to the monitor. There was a glowing hole through the side of it. He wasn't going to let BRISK down now.

Almost twenty seconds after the torpedoes went silent, they turned back on. A momentary flicker of bright light. The final stage of the fuel cell snapping to life. The *Komoto* never saw it. All sensors were on the Skipoly Grey. And even when the SSOW equipment picked up movement, it was too late. The final 2% of the PWD fire raced out to meet them and met nothing. Sailing free, the torpedoes skidded over the top of the *Komoto's* hull, pulled up, and detonated. The stealth armor that had hidden it for so long charred off. Pieces of the black flak hovering just above the kill zone.

Lesio clapped her hands over her ears. The ringing was intense. Like her brain was smashing against the skull and the compressed liquid was popping with force. A constant dull sound that splintered over and over. Pushing her ear-drums against themselves. She grabbed her chair and tried to sit down, missing, and falling flat on her butt. The ringing slowly stalled to a din. That or she'd gone deaf. She tried to shout at Issac to shoot but the words sounded a world away. She was the foggy bottom of her head. The tiny back part of her brain. The walls of her skull were too thick. And all the queen could think, with her dress in tatters, was that she hoped she'd stomped on the pawn.

The torpedoes hadn't just fried the stealth coating of the *Komoto*, thus rendering her visible to anyone with a decent LiDAR, they'd also fried the frontal antenna. So as the Skipoly Grey roared back to life and hobbled from the battlefield, her opponent swirling in a cloud of debris, nothing on the bridge of the *Komoto* went “ping”. Instead the crew lay dazed from the shell-shock, High Officer Lesio was no help as she whispered about pawns, queens, and kings.

* * *

It wasn't until an hour later that she regained full consciousness. A tiny shrill sound was in her ears, just an afterthought of the loud ringing from earlier. She bet it would annoy her in a few days, if she had that left. The displays across the bridge were fuzzy with static. Someone must be jamming them. She had to open a communication relay with Onatia. Get him to help. He always helped. Lay in the mud some more.

He picked up at once. His impressive face filled the screen with a hard look. His eyebrows were furled, his jaw clenched. He must have been waiting for her. So the queen had squashed the pawn then.

“Yes?” he asked. A mission report.

“We took care of the Skipoly Grey. We need assistance with the *Lust and Forgive*. My king,” Lesio bowed. She was a little bit shell-shocked.

Onatia would have laughed but Lesio was serious. “You don’t seem to understand what your mission was,” Onatia said coldly.

“To attack the Armadan convoy, start a war.”

“Correct. Not to attack the diplomats or this Skipoly Grey.”

“I thought you would enjoy that, and they were stopped by a Pursuer droid, not that you could tell me about that beforehand,” said Lesio. “And the Skipoly Grey was noticed by us. You clearly were blind to that.”

“You weren’t supposed to send anyone there!” Onatia roared. The dragon's shadow had been compromised. “The Pursuer droids your team expertly took care of were the droids supposed to kill the diplomats.”

“Well-what,” Lesio stammered. “We have to win this board king.” She felt woozy in the head.

Onatia tiskted and shook his head. “You really don’t get it. You don’t understand any of it. You don’t try to take the board, you just win one square at a time.”

“But we won this square, now the next!”

“No. I’ve won this square. You messed it all up. You’re the piece who won’t follow orders.”

Lesio felt the spit dry in her neck. Did he really just say that? “Take that back.”

“You’ve single handedly messed up both of my operations,” said Onatia impassively. “You’re not needed anymore.”

“So what are you going to do? Lament to me how I did that?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t have that luxury of time.” Onatia glanced at something off screen. “And neither do you anymore.”

Lesio stared at the screen with her mouth agape. Onatia was communicating with her without lag. No time delay. He was close. Close enough a torpedo could get him. If he died, then she could take over. The queen overthrew the king. The board taken over once again. The simple fairytale.

Lesio moved erratically across the bridge. She could find him. She could kill him.

“Lesio,” boomed the voice of Onatia. When she didn’t respond he continued. “You don’t try to win the board at the start of the game, you just carve out your place. Make peace with your pieces.”

Lesio stared back in confusion and then everything became white.

Lesio died in the same way the crew of the *Techimia* died. In a confused state from nothing they’d ever seen. In the same way Lesio’s fourteen torpedoes, the ones fired and forgotten about - The ones Onatia used to perfect his long range torpedo strategy -, smashed through the hull of the Armadan light cruiser, they crushed the hull of the *Komoto*. Ever since Lesio had started to become a threat to his plans, Onatia had drafted a set of torpedoes on her. At the moment she engaged Skipoly Grey and lost, he fired. The bomb's timer had ticked to zero and became a dud. Thus the bomb was disposed of. Across the galaxy military sensors swiveled in on the bright blue expanding explosion of the hidden stealth destroyer. The old testament to the Galactic Militias game in the system. In another sense of irony the debris from the destroyer drifted down the same path of the debris from the station it killed. Slowly falling and

burning up in the atmosphere over Lioni. The queen had been misguided about her king, because in the end, they hadn't been playing chess at all.

Garson listened to the static of the explosion. He took a few deep breaths to process it all. The Skipoly Grey had keyed him into the conversation between Onatia and Lesio. He hadn't seen faces, but he'd heard their words. Heard the final muffled scream of Lesio as the warning alarm went off. He slowed his breathing.

As the Skipoly Grey cut off from the battle, Garson had swung around his seat and grabbed an emergency O2 tank. Filled with enough gas to cover him for two days, he believed he was set. He still didn't have comms with the rest of the crew. He jammed the O2 bottle into the space between the armrest and the seat next to him. A wire poked out of the wall next to him. Might as well start repairing the ship.

When the comms cut back on ten minutes later - after Garson had snapped two yellow lines back together - all he heard was Burta mumbling to herself: "I should have asked him out before this."

"Asked who out?" asked Garson over the comms. He knew the story, but still it didn't help to key Jeffrey in.

"Marshal," said Burta. "I meant to ask him out a while back. Back during that party where McArthur thrust us back into this shit storm."

"You like Marshal?" asked Jeffrey, stunned.

"Yeah, but she hasn't been able to do anything because she doesn't want to get in the way of his mission to protect the innocents of the universe," explained Garson.

"Ask him out," Jeffrey said. "It's not that complex. Especially at your age."

"What do you mean with that comment!"

"I mean both of you are mature adults. Adults who can have strictly serious conversations with each other," Jeffrey shrugged. "You're not love-struck teenagers, so don't beat around the bush."

"I'm nervous," chided Burta.

"You just shot up an enemy ship while taking gunfire," Garson laughed, "hell I don't think any of us can say we're scared right now. Everything seems insignificant compared to that."

"Look, Burta," Jeffrey started slowly, "you and Marshal are compatible. Like DSD ports, so all you-

"Thank you very much," Burta chuckled. "Alright, alright."

"You said when the mission was over you'd do it," said Garson.

"Fair's fair," Burta sighed. He could hear the smile over the headset. "Alright. But get comfy, because we're about to burn hard so we don't run out of O2."

"Fairs fair," replied Garson.

* * *

Grimes heard the whirlbird sound a shuttle above them. It sounded big. Grimes huffed up the edge of the hill, his rifle behind his back, and watched the large black B-505 shuttle land. It's spooling engines slowed to a cool hum. Two massive black wings raised up to the forest ceiling. The ramp at the middle of the shuttle lowered gently to the ground. Two men came down the ramp, one marine and one officer.

"Mr Zendon system-chief," Grimes said. "I think our ride is here."

The Zendon case officer looked up from the small fire he'd been tending. "So I was right, your operatives can crack our old codes," the system-chief smiled.

“I think we can crack the new ones,” Grimes shot him a smile. The cool breeze of the forest afternoon felt good on his forehead. “Downing,” Grimes turned and called, “assemble Rico squad.”

“Roger-o,” Downing gave him a salute and marched down the hill to the ashy shuttle and the marine camp.

“So you really think these are some new bad guys?” asked Grimes.

“I know they’re new bad guys. The old ones didn’t fight like this,” the diplomat leaned against the slope of the hill. “They’re infiltrating us to tear us apart.”

“So does that mean we’re partners now. Zendon and Armadan.”

“Officially, never. We’re still technically at cold war in several parts of the galaxy. But unofficially I’ll be recommending to my superiors better communication between the parties.”

“So a new war. One with three parties?”

“It’s been long overdue for someone else to contend for the position of a new government, let’s just hope they don’t kill that many people in the process,” the diplomat snuffed out the fire with the heel of his shoe.

The Armadan officer and marine approached their position.

“Lieutenant Commander Nev,” announced the officer, extending his hand. “I’ve been tasked with rescuing you.”

“Who’s your boss,” asked Grimes.

“Captain Constantine and the Armadan council,” answered Nev in an impassive face.

“Then we’re rescuing you,” chuckled the Zendon system-chief.

“You must be the spy,” said Nev.

“You call the shots, I just look into them,” the system-chief patted his chest. “Anyway, I’ve been called many names. Most of which we don’t say around petty companies.”

“Once you get him to talk he never shuts up,” Grimes shook Nev’s hand. “First Lieutenant Grimes, commander of Rico squad.”

“What happened to the other officers?”

“One died on landing, the other is one my rank junior,” Grimes reported.

“I heard you took shots,” Nev said.

“We sustained combat. Zero casualties apart from the first few days from the crash landing. A total of ten enemies were killed.”

“And these must be your men,” Nev turned towards the Zendon system-chief.

“No, no.” The Zendon system-chief waved. “Actually, about that we’d like to have a word.”

They explained it very clearly to Nev. Someone new was in the process of trying to shake up the normal order. Someone who really wanted to start a war. Someone with Zendon resources, and now potentially Armadan ones as well. Someone who couldn’t be trusted in anything other than chaos.

“Wow,” muttered Nev, looking over the shuttle battle scene. The bodies of the strike team had been buried along a nearby creek. “I’ll be informing my superiors of this.”

“Good idea, us too,” Grimes nodded. He slapped a bug off the back of his neck. “If it’s not a problem with you, I’d like to get off this planet as soon as possible. I’ve taken enough point nine G for the rest of this year.”

“And sunlight too,” the Zendon diplomat pointed to his tan hands. “I think I’ll say I was away on vacation.”

Nev nodded and headed up the slope. “We’ll be off in ten minutes.”

“Any last words for this planet?” asked Grimes. “Probably the last Armadan planet you’ll step on for a long time.”

“Try not to cause a war next time,” the Zendon system-chief whispered to the ground. “We’re already fighting over enough pointless rock as it is.”

“Until next time,” Grimes raised his hand.

“Until next time,” the Zendon system-chief shook it and smiled. “Maybe once and a while ‘should be’ enemies can be friends.”

“Especially if there are bigger enemies around.”

Chapter 35: Creeks run deep with mud

It should have been poetic that the skies opened up and rained during Bezi's funeral, but it was more of a nuisance than good taste. The senior representative was given all the honors. Someone had found the Zendon System-Chief and brought him in on a shuttle, strangely flanked by a first marine lieutenant.

Ridler didn't care about any of that. He stared at the soggy grass and the urn that was being slowly lowered into the ground. The rain dripped down the back of his necks, giving him the chills. He wrung his hands over his wrists and bit his lip. It would have been more appropriate to cry, the mood was in the clouds. But Ridler found himself unable to. Bezi had been a good colleague, a friend at times, but above all else a good man. A man who'd been ended suddenly and without cause by a force no-one in the crowd seemed to know. It wasn't one of the governments, it wasn't a gang, it was something new on the horizon. Something Ridler promised himself he'd find, and he'd take down. If not for Bezi, for Crili.

The station was being evacuated. It was going to be carted out to the Serbas docks and scrapped for new ships. The wartime effort was ramping up again with the increased action in the Nebola sector. More money for businesses, good. More work for men like him, bad.

The perfect galaxy was the one where matters could be settled man-to-man. Where you didn't need big navies, or corridors crowded with diplomats and representatives. Ridler shook his head. To the audience it would look like he was sad over Bezi, but he was truthfully more sad over the way the man had died. Alone, in his bedroom, not even a mistress on hand. And that got Ridler thinking. He'd never had a wife, a kid, even a girlfriend longer than a rotation on a planet. Maybe it was time he got to doing that. Even if it was a secretary he only saw on weekends. Someone to remember him by. Bezi would have no-one apart from Ridler. His government would prescribe a placard, increase security programs in Pursuer droids, and that would be it. The aides would forget about him, tiny mobile robots that shifted from representative to representative. The only man who'd remember Bezi was the man who so actively fought against and with him, Ridler.

Two workers stepped out of the line with shovels and filled in the hole. Nothing to be said or done. Case closed. He checked his data-pad, and his schedule was empty for the first time in a long while.

"Mr. Ridler," Timur stepped up.

Timur, Marshal, and Elanie had formed a body-guard contingent around Ridler after the chaos at the capitol. Everywhere he went, they went. At first it was unsettling, and then it just became weird. It was clear these people weren't acting out of the good of their heart. Someone had ordered them to be there. But they liked being there. 'Protecting the innocent' as they had once said.

"I asked a while ago, but who do you people really work for?" asked Ridler. Timur was leading him down the hill towards the car. Marshal was at his six. And Elanie sat in the driver's seat. Their progress was slow and cautious over the slippery grass.

"Classified," said Timur.

"So you don't know," Ridler sighed. He looked behind him. "You seem to know."

"Someone high up the food chain in the government," said Marshal.

"How high up?"

"You might say he's the highest," Marshal shifted his weight to each foot.

"What government?"

"The senate, the military, and the intelligence divisions."

"So the whole government."

Marshal nodded. “Were his shadow agency. We do the things he wishes the government could do, but technically can’t. We’re funded through several grey businesses and contracts. Given a wider leash to do what we see fit.”

“So by essence a shadow militia group,” Ridler said.

“Whose emphasis is on protecting the innocent,” Timur stopped at the car and tugged open the food. “After you sir.”

Ridler clambered into the backseat and looked around. “Where to now?”

“A shuttle is waiting for you at the platforms, and then I guess back to Armadan where you can mull about who we are,” Marshal gave Elanie a thumbs up and she started the car. “Until then you’re our passenger, and hopefully we’ll never see each other again.”

“Why?”

“Because usually when we show up, shit goes south,” explained Timur.

“Why didn’t you come to either funeral?” asked Ridler. “You always stayed to the side and out of sight.”

“Shadow agencies don’t like to announce themselves. And quite a contingent of that crowd, including the Zendon System-Chief, are good at memorizing faces.” The car turned right down the main road. “We were there, just in presence.”

“I could use people like you,” said Ridler. “Like as bodyguards.”

“A lot of people could use people like us,” Timur said. “Look up ex-marines, they usually have the credentials you’ll want for good bodyguards.”

“Where do I find people like that?” asked Ridler.

The car rolled to a stop at the platforms and Marshal tugged open the door. The rain had mellowed to a light drizzle.

“Out there Mr. Ridler,” Marshal gestured to the waiting shuttle.

Ridler would have cursed. Another CZ-104 drop ship, with another contingent of marines waiting at the ramp. His stomach wound up in anticipation of the unpleasant ride.

“There are some marines in there, go talk to them,” Timur said.

“Thanks for the help,” Ridler said.

“Thanks for getting yourself out of that room earlier. We just made sure the bad guys didn’t follow you,” Marshal shook his hand.

“I’ll be seeing you around,” Ridler hopped out of the car and made his way to the shuttle.

“Why do I have a feeling he’s telling the truth,” Timur asked in a low voice.

“Because both of us tend to be attracted to shit-storm places,” Marshal answered. “Now let’s get back to our hotel, so we can pack, and await the arrival of our ride out of here.”

* * *

The story would be told for generations of sailors to come. A cargo-hauler, flashing lights like a disco, with the iconic name of *Lust and Forgive*, docking with Crili. The lanes around Crili had mostly been opened of debris, either through it falling down on the planet or being picked up by whiffer ships. And now, with the orders to vacate the station, the cargo-hauler couldn’t have arrived at a better time. As the hungry and tired crowds of Crili boarded into the pressurized hold, Hoss, Kash, and Bigani stood on the bridge.

“Did you hear they’re going to be giving me double pay as a humanitarian special,” boasted Bigani. “And they’re covering all food costs, so the cafe is all you can eat!”

“Don’t forget there’s a reason they’re doing that,” pointed out Hoss. Two hours earlier Armadan special forces had sat them down with Constantine and they’d been allowed to explain their story, including handing over vital information packets. The scanners on the *Lust and Forgive* were shitty, but not that shitty. They’d picked out dozens of cargo-haulers, frigates, and skiffs that were still connected to Onatia. In return for the information, with a show of gratitude, the Armadan navy had covered both of their arsres by using them to ferry out the station traffic and pay off all debts Bigani had owed.

“See, cruiser captaining isn’t that hard,” Hoss clapped Kash on the shoulder.

“You know the last time I came to this station I blew it up,” Kash remembered with a pale face. They were on the drift away from the station now. “I used this required drift to catch the enemy ship’s belly up. Ships just like ours.”

Hoss took a deep breath. “Sometimes you do a lot of bad shit before you start your good chapter. Without you, Bigani and I would still be knee deep in the galactic militia’s shit storm.”

“We need to talk about you being a spy,” Bigani pointed out.

“Later, go catch some chow,” Hoss gave him a dismissive wave.

“Just try not to blow anything up,” Bigani shouted from down the corridor. “Or send yourself into space.”

Kash laughed at the memory of Hoss telling them that tale. “I seriously can’t believe you cut open your suit in space.”

“Just my arm,” Hoss held it up. The forearm was still darkened, but at a distance you couldn’t tell anything was off from the rest of the body.

“So where do we go from here?” asked Kash.

“I’m a discovered spy, you’re a deserting enemy captain,” Hoss said. “The galaxies guess.”

Kash looked out over the ship. “Cruiser captaining isn’t that hard.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?”

“When we get to port I might sign up. I have the credentials for it.”

“I’ve heard I’m going to head home with the station chief.” Hoss cracked his back. “Which either means being shot for revealing myself, or promoted for ‘ingenuity and character’.”

“Which only works when they win,” Kash chuckled. “Hate to break it to you, but you missed that flight.”

“They’re rendezvousing with the *Lust and Forgive* before she goes through the jump portal.” Hoss stood up. “Honestly I should get packed.”

Kash got to his feet. “Hey, if I never see you again, good luck out there. Try not to zap off too many people’s groins with splyers.”

“You try not to command any more rogue stealth destroyers and we’ll call it even,” Hoss shook his buddies hand. Then he paused and saluted him. “Captain Kash.”

“Been a long time since I was called that,” Kash returned the salute. “Mister spy Hoss.”

Goodbyes were always a little awkward between parties that never expected to see each other again, thought Kash. He sat back down in the captain’s seat. Hoss would go do his thing. Bigani would take command of the *Lust and Forgive* once they got to Serbas. And Kash, well Kash had to go find a new crew to protect and serve. Even if that crew changed out as frequently as lude images on a hand terminal. He switched the cameras to the retreating station. Still the debris floated like moon dust over the pale surface of the empty station. Once he’d come there as the conqueror, now he was leaving as the savior.

And of Lesio, Issac, and the *Komoto*. Kash took a deep breath. His eyes itched as they welled up. That had been his life once. And lives were hard to forget. But that one he must. He raised an imaginary wine glass. To the chess player, the mad man, and the dead ship. To his old life. He flicked on the image of the crowded hold. And now to his new one.

* * *

The crew of the *RedRunner* didn't breathe a collective sigh of relief but instead a simple shrug. They had been geared up for war. Eaten their MREs and drank the coolslide. They'd been placed at the edge of their high, ready to drop down thunderous silent death across the system. Swiftly cleaned the system like drain-o in a clogged pipe. But the High Command had ordered them to pull back. To close down the silos and carefully fold back into the abyss lest they be spotted. They were the bomb nobody wanted to see. So the crew hustled silently along the bulkheads; for even the silence required outside seeped into the officers onboard. For the environment affected the man. The *RedRunner* sent out a single message, twenty megabytes long, a confirmation of orders received. Just another pawn in the chess game Lesio had lost.

* * *

Epilogue.

Hoss stood in front of System Chief Via, an associate of Hedge, who spent a period of time on the surface of Nebola. The office around them was decorated in a mix of fine leather, dark oak, and low lights. To many it would have looked like the cabin you saw in the shows you watched as a boy. But to Via it was a constant reminder of his home. Except for being on the woody slope of a far forest moon, he was now surrounded like layers of metal and steel in the warship *Julio*.

Hoss raised his chin and squared his shoulders. So he wasn't being shot, he was getting the medal. And not just any medal. The medal of royal accomplishment, the big star on the chest of a kindergartener that lets him skip grades one through four and go to fifth grade.

"Congratulations Edward Hoss," Via shook his hand. "I'm proud to have a field agent like you on my staff."

"Thank you commandant Via," Hoss bowed. "Without your training I could not have accomplished my goals."

"Of course," Via escorted him to the door. "You're to return to Zendon to file an official report with the Hedge and then why don't we see about getting you a better position than the spy on an old cargo hauler."

Hoss felt himself blush with pride. He was going to be an actual spy. "That would be wonderful sir."

Via indicated to Hoss's arm. "And while that's a good scar, we should get you some long sleeve shirts so you're a little more conspicuous."

Hoss wrapped his hand around his scar. "Sounds great sir."

"Then let's see about finding this Onatia."

Kash wandered down the hallways of Serbas. They were wide, white, and even had a green streak down the middle. The station was so massive that you couldn't see the curve from the hallways. Everything looked straight and polished. But what else would you expect from the premier naval establishment of the ARN.

Shops with bright sky blue advertisement boards were to his left and right. Food, merchandise, ships, nails. Anything you wanted, you could buy. And not even at half bad prices. But Kash was looking for something else to buy.

A salesperson came up to him. Dressed in a simple suit, tan pants, blue shirt, white vest. Middle aged woman, blond dyed hair. Looked like they grew up on the planet and transferred over to the vacuum. He'd spotted a few bastards earlier, people who'd grown up in the vacuum, but she wasn't one of them.

"Can I help you find something sir?" the sales person smiled.

"I'm looking for the cruise line offices?"

She stood next to Kash, he looked down - she had strong sweet perfume, like cotton candy, too fake for his tastes - and pointed directly down the hallway. She flicked open her hands and a tiny map expanded along her wrist.

"You're going to walk down until you pass Blow-Bobbies, great electronic shop, take a right there, keep going until you see StarGaze-CruiseLines," she smiled and headed back to her shop.

Kash said thanks and headed down the path. The people here felt slightly fake. Too much commercial product use. Not enough of the human element, as he liked to call it. The blue signs, commercial, faded to yellow, cruise lines. He approached the first open counter he saw. Royalty Express cruises.

"Are you interested in a trip? A new destination?" the sales clerk asked. "A way to go somewhere else?"

"Yeah," Kash smiled at the clerk, "I'm looking for a job."

BRISK met up again at the platforms and then promptly decided to take a shuttle back to Sispini. The Skipoly Grey would be an auto-driven home, where it would remain until repairs could be done. Nobody wanted to ride back in a piece of Swiss chess. After a long ride home, one where most of the crew slept or played cards, McArthur met them at the gates of Sispini.

"Welcome home!" he boasted. His arms were flung open. "I hope you're rested, I've got a party set up."

BRISK nodded and smiled at each other as they headed down the corridor towards the party. They dropped off their bags in the rooms next to the docks. The foot traffic on the station had increased noticeably. New workers, new security. Something big was going on.

The party took place yet again in McArthur's spy room. Food had been set up along one table. Cheap chips, lab grown cheese and meat, imported bread. A few bottles of wine. Everything McArthur could scrape up by himself. Garson bee-lined for the tiv.

"What's with all the new people?" asked Garson with a blue stain around his lips from the tiv.

McArthur chuckled at the comment. "Well clearly you didn't hear. The high chair- I mean benefactor-"

"Ahhhh," pointed Garson.

McArthur held up his hands with a sheepish smile. "He's really impressed with us at the moment. He's giving us funding in the now, and future funding via work projects on the station, which feeds tax money to me-"

"And to us," concluded Garson. "Witty little guy, isn't he?"

"No, not the dumbest at all," McArthur shook his head. "But this means we'll be seeing more action."

“What else is new, the galaxy is going downhill, I guess it’s our job to push it back up.” Garson took a sip of his tiv and remembered his old boss Johnson. Things had gone downhill before, but he’d managed to keep everything stable. Same thing in Nebola with BRISK. Hopefully the same thing everywhere else.

Across the party, sitting in the pair of chairs closest to the corner, Burta was whispering to Marshal. She laughed at all of his jokes and kept her smile on. But truthfully she wasn’t listening to his tale through the diplomatic building, she was working up the courage to ask him out.

“-and that’s when the droid grabbed him,” Marshal shook his head and showered her where the purple bruise was on Timur. He was going on about pushing pudgy onto the wall as he heard the diplomat banter. She rested a hand on his knee.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Burta said quietly.

Marshal sensed the tone shift and stopped talking about the battle. “Yeah, what about?” He smiled gently.

“What do you think of me?”

Marshal was quiet for a second. To Burta it felt like the whole world had pulled back. Like a slingshot about to be fired. And she was the rock at the back of it. Just waiting for the giant to say “go”.

“Well,” Marshal furrowed his lip. “You’re a good member of the team. You’re clearly a strong woman. You’re a mother to all of them.”

“What am I to you?”

Marshal swirled his drink. He looked down at his shoes. Then up to Burta. She could see it in his eyes. “You want the real answer?”

She nodded slowly.

“I think you’re cute,” said Marshal.

Burta breathed a sigh of relief. Then she started laughing. “We sound like a bunch of drunk teenagers.”

“In a way I guess we are,” Marshal joined in on the laughing.

“Do you want to go out?” Burta calmed herself down. “We’re both operatives on a blackedout spec-ops team. So let’s cut to the chase.”

“True time is a precious commodity.” Marshal intertwined his fingers with hers. “There’s a good restaurant just down the curve.”

Burta smiled. “I think I’d like that.”

Marshal gave her a peck on the forehead and led her to the door. He met Garson’s eye and nodded. “Thanks mate.”

Garson raised his glass. “Always.” Burta similarly raised her glass to Garson and followed Marshal out of the door.

Garson watched the door close silently behind them. Timur tapped him on the shoulder.

“What was that about?”

“I think the two of them are going to start dating,” Garson said.

“Oh... good for them,” Timur nodded with a smile and walked away. He was sitting next to Elanie. He had no plans to ask her out yet. Just sit, brood, nod, smile. No reason to rush it. Everything that should happen would happen. So he kept up the small talk and let the galaxy move by him.

Garson did the same, only with Jeffrey and McArthur. Talking about gadgets and gizmos, not thinking about what else was really happening in the stars. BRISK had done enough thinking for the past few months. They needed a break. And after that, work usually came to them.

Constantine wrung his hands together. The soft crease of leather gloves satisfied his roaring mind. In front of him, towed by two cargo-haulers, and pushed by thousands of tiny little skiffs was his lost station, Crili. Fertili was technically still a part of him, but for the ease of communication, he had just switched over to calling it Crili. That had been the initial target after all. The military complex. The station to let Onatia win his war. But he hadn't even started it yet.

Constantine had been given orders by the JCF to pull back to Serbas. Rally up his fleet numbers and just sit and wait as the galaxy moved around him. He stared at the report in his hands. He was to record all lost ships. Slowly he tailed them off. The convoy, including fighters. He marked all of them. Too lazy to figure out which ones had actually made it back. When the death certificates came the individual pilots could contend that. He checked his direct link to Captain Hankle, not a word. He checked off the *StarBurn*.

Nev approached silently from the behind, holding a datapad. More needless paperwork. More bureaucratic red lines to cross. More shit to deal with since his deal with the devil hadn't gone through. He signed off on the document and sent it. The Nebola system should have been his. He should have been communicating with contractors to repair Crili instead of hull it away to be scrapped. He stared coldly out the digital windows. A testament to his defeat.

Onatia sat silently in the darkened space of his new office. He registered the clock ticking down and not much else. Nebola had failed, but the grand plan could still work. He just needed somewhere else to start it. He opened one eye. Twenty two days. And he needed one captain to not make it home safely.

James Hanock, a station controller on *Crili* for thirty years, watched the map of the Serbas ports with awe. It was bigger than anything he'd ever dreamed of working or living on. A legitimate supercity in the clouds. Except they were a good hundred miles above the clouds. A supercity in the stars. There, that had more ring to it.

Hanock had stayed on *Crili* until the end. He had watched over that station for more years than more people stayed married. And in a way, the destruction of the docks had been the start of a nasty divorce. One where the station took everything, water, life support, food, people, from him and he wasn't even left with the kids.

But he'd been called off the station at the end. A restraining order of kinds. Except one that came packed with a new job, a new uniform, and a new station. He watched the tiny dots enter and exit the various cross labeled zones of the Serbas docks. Commercial, shipping, military, con, oil. Everything that came up through the planet went through here. He was the gatekeeper for billions of people, nay, trillions of people on the other side of the gates. He flicked through his station readouts. Ms. Mazel would have liked it here. No accidents for fourteen years.

Word was coming out about some mad man, Onatia, who'd perpetrated the attacks. He glanced around the station control room. The two armed marines flanking the door. The various grey suited technicians popping gum and sitting at monitors. He felt a spurring sense of patriotism. These people had put him back in a job. Gave him a new purpose after Crili. Onatia could invade the Zendon fleet, take all he wanted. But like damn he would ever infiltrate the Armadan navy.

Chapter 36: Lost and surrounded (One month later)

Jacob Fisher gritted his teeth for the seventh time that day. His whole mouth felt like lead had been pumped into it. His gums stung, his teeth itched, and the back of his throat felt like something had laid down and gone to sleep. High-G sucked wind.

The monotony also got to him. Day-in-day-out same people, same place, same chairs, same stars. Sometimes it felt like they weren't even moving. He had slowly retreated into himself. Becoming a hermit aboard his own craft. Forgetting faces and names, instead only remembering rank and objective. He had only one, get home, retire. He glanced at the countdown clock. It was fast nearing the red-zone for the G-drive. When the combined force exerted by the thrusters couldn't be absorbed by the G-drive without risking critical damage. And when that's your only brakes on a road with no friction, you can't risk that.

He opened up the tactical map of their high-speed chase. The last SSOW ping on the destroyer was almost a week old. That's odd. He clicked the scanner again, sending a high-density LiDAR wave in the vicinity of where the stealth ship should be. Two minutes passed. A response from the system.

Nothing.

The destroyer had dropped off the chase. Stopped its pursuit. The G-drive must have given out. That or it was scared of what waited for it at the end of the line.

Fisher checked the galactic map. He was nearing the technical edge of the Nebola system. A good two week burn from anything made by humans, but still a backyard in the galactic scope of things. He began slowing the *Armalay*.

It took three days. Convincing Comps-Sci to stop thinking their computers were broken. Convincing the scientists they wouldn't be handed over to the "bad guys". Eventually everyone on the damn ship was fine with it slowing down so they didn't skid into the void. With a rumble that felt anti-climatic, a ship that once traveled point three the speed of light slowed to a gentle zero-G.

"Captain, a ping."

A hailer. "What signal?" asked Fisher, unbuckling to enjoy the minimal G.

"Personal captain to captain, ARN encryption," the Comps-Sci officer said. He once had a name, but no more.

"Play it out."

"It's a message sir."

"Then read it out."

"It says it's the ARN *StarBurn*. Positioned at the edge of the system when it picked up our distress beacon. It originally had orders to arrest us for munitiony against fellow ships, but now requests a meeting with the captain," the officer looked up, "face to face."

"Good, then let's do it," Fisher waved his hand. "How far away?" The executioner tired of the jury stopping the hanging.

"Not far. Less than a day."

Fisher resumed his seat. Time had such a different meaning after watching it fly by. Half a year felt like yesterday to the captain. He could vividly smell the air of an old memory. And so, his brain in a semi-coma, the half-day flight to the edge of the Nebola sector felt like the same time to roll a pair of dice. And then there they were. Floating outside of the visual range of the *StarBurn*, but within live feedback.

"We're simply requesting an escort captain," Fisher said again.

"And I'm saying I request a meeting."

“How long?”

“Not. Dock your ship in our forward bay.”

“Fine,” said Fisher. It was probably a junior captain wanting to show rank. Pull his weight around the room. That was fine with Fisher. Annoying, but fine.

The *Armalay* orbited closer to the *StarBurn*. The two ships used only thrusters at this point to establish a proper seal. As they grew closer Fisher realized this wasn't some junior officer by the sheer scale of the ship. That, or they were at a state of war and all the old officers died in a bombing. The *StarBurn* was three times the size of the *Armalay* and properly pressure sealed for atmospheric flight. The triangle bored shape of the flagship marked the status of its captain. With a final clump and snap of docking walkways, the two ships were joined.

The other captain met him at the boarding walk. His suit was slightly too small for his rounded frame, but Fisher just smiled and nodded.

“Good to meet you captain,” Fisher said, “I hope we can get this over with quickly. The faster we get to *Crili*, the faster we restock and change crews, the faster we can head out for survivors.”

“Son, we've got a lot to talk about,” the other captain led the way. For a large ship, the hallways were uncommonly sparse with people.

“About what?”

“*Crili* is gone. So is *Fertili*.”

“What happened?” Fisher asked. “Was there another war?”

“Almost one,” the captain seemed to hold on to that thought for a little time. “A rogue attack by a deranged individual destroyed most of the station.”

“It must have been a warship.”

“Nope, just a simple stealth destroyer.”

“You're pulling my string, I know it,” Fisher cracked a smile.

“Sure I am Captain Fisher.”

“And your name is?”

The other man escorted him into the empty bridge. It was an expansive V shape, and completely devoid of life. A metal circle, it looked fused on recently, to cover battle damage. The entire front one-eighty degrees was covered in a real time display of the stars outside. Fisher had seen enough of those to immediately interpret them as fake, so he regarded them as tvs.

“Bridge is a little bit cold,” he complained.

“AC unit is broken. We'll get it fixed soon. But you think this is cold, just wait.”

“Will I want to?”

“Those are actually real,” the other captain pointed out.

“How cool,” Fisher said. The man had yet to give him a name, and had just dodged another question.

“What did you find out there?” the other captain asked.

“Name and rank, now,” Fisher said. “Otherwise not a single word.”

“Onatia, Grand General,” Onatia smiled. “You probably don't know me.”

“Wait,” Fisher mentally ran over some info. “Grand General, that's Zendon right?”

“Was,” Onatia said coldly. He didn't like being reminded of that past.

“So a joint task force? Makes sense, border system and all.”

“Sure.” Onatia nodded. “Give me a second to get my authorization codes. I left them in my room.” The door swished shut behind him. And then another door after that. It sounded like it was

pressure sealing, like an airlock. Fisher cocked his eyebrow. Well that was strange. There was the faint hum of an air conditioner in the background. Pulling or pushing air like desk workers with paper.

Then everything went silent.

At first Fisher didn't realize. It felt like a flash bang to his nervous system. Shock, or something of the like. His skin prickled in the oddest way. His eardrums floated in their own soup. His lungs began to burn. He gulped for air. His saliva bubbled. His chest ached, lungs burned. Heart throbbed. He gulped again. Fish on land - Fisher in space. He bit into space. Trying to rip oxygen from the void. Nothing. His heart thumped, a trapped prisoner on a sinking ship. The tear ducts next to his eyes bubbled, blinding him. He reached out. Trying to reach something, even if it was the next life. From his viewpoint, as the walls of the ship dropped away from him - Tiny grey bursts of RCS -, space looked so huge to him. Like a tiny kid in the belly of the bottom of a room. Looking up at the expansive walls. Nothing around him. A beach where the sand and ocean fell away to a mirror of the clear night sky. His skin stopped prickling. Odd. Nerve stems burning off. His brain felt foggy. An early morning high. He gulped for air. His lungs had numbed to a cold hunger. Fisher tried to close his eyes but felt he couldn't. And with that thought he did what he always wanted to do and retired to his final home.

Onatia watched the captain slowly spiral away from him into the void. A sad fate for a captain of that excellence. So good that he'd forced Onatia's own destroyer to pull off the chase in fear of running out his G-drive. The only man who could have bested him now floated in the abyss, gone in the expansiveness of space. As Onatia watched him go he recounted his new plan. The one he'd handle personally. No more handing it off to lesser officers. From now on it was him, or nothing.

Beneath him, in the vast folds of metal that made up his new capital ship, codes and data were being stripped from the *Armalay*. Even though he had perpetrated every action that would be in that book. It was always good to know how the enemy thought. And even better if you knew how they acted. If you looked like you belonged - he looked around the empty bridge of the *StarBurn* - you'd fit right in. And when you fit right in, you can kill whoever you damn please.

So, quietly, the dragon in the stars lit up his drive plumes, sheathed his sword, and let his shadow retreat from above Nebola where it had rested so long. For all things lead to something.

Calvin Fitzgerald

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

For All Those Gone

Its Darkness

Small, always small. Hidden behind the back of the mother, or the head of scraggly hair.
When it walked it felt the Earth collapse beneath the feet, the limbs phantoms, the teeth clenched.

You lost yourself, didn't you? Though the light enters your eyes you see nothing,
the sea of black, irises the same as your pupils, the waters so rough they split you in two
and though they see someone, something before them, you glaze over.
The sounds start and stop, start and stop, but there is no recognition.

It will think that it remembers.

When it closes the eyes and the darkness begins, the words will be formed, the right ones,
and the laughter, the laughter from the smile so wide it hurts the face, the stomach sore from it.
It will think that it remembers, but what is a memory, and what is born of the darkness?

Rose

Pale blue eyes beneath
sandy lashes.
As if you were looking out
at the world, looking out at
thunderous seas
of people, staring.
Surrounding you
with blinding lights.
The little girl
trapped in glass. Laid to rest
on wooden pedestal.
Immortal girl, living only
in blurry photos,
in rumors on the streets.

When you wake, there are
these strangers. These strangers
you wouldn't have,
shouldn't have seen.
You cry out
for your father,
For the man that trapped you,
the man that loved you
more than all.

Little Rose,
the strangers
will forever approach.

Even as the years pass, even as
your name and story are forgotten.
They will not grant you
peaceful rest. Until, someday,
someone sees
your still-bright eyes
and knows you
not only for your death.

1973, Pascagoula

Specks on the surface
of that old wooden pier.
The dust
that coated your fingers.
The rain of salt
covering young man
and old.
Crab pots.
Broken lines.
Yellow dogs.

What did you see?
What about
those blue lights up above?
That noise, splitting
open your ears,
those hands
like razors
Eyes like ghosts.
And did they really stand
twice the size of a man,
settled in our skin,
watching you,
faces splintering
into open metal wounds?

Were you afraid?
Or did you just
do as you were told?
Maybe you didn't say a word,
didn't mind
because men like us
don't make it
unless we fight
every step of the way.

To Wade

You don't know me,
but I know about you, and her,
and her and her and her.
I know you'd smile
that stupid smile.
They loved that, didn't they?

Ladies man,
funny man,
Uncle, brother, son.

You don't know me,
but

They took you in the night
from your own house.
Dropped a pack of cigarettes
on the front porch.
Still stumbling.
He told you
it was okay. *It's okay, Wade,
don't scream, Wade.*
But you screamed
and screamed and screamed.

Endangered missing,
cold case,
6'2", caucasian, male.

You don't know me, Wade,
but God, I know you.

Kyndle Fuller

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Tea Engagement

There was a ring in his teacup, but his girlfriend didn't know. He wanted this to be nice even though he thought tea was disgusting. This was her favorite thing to do, so there was no better way to propose.

The room was pink and orange. Like a sunset, but the colors didn't blend as much. He assumed this was her favorite one. It was headache inducing, how bright it was. It was also quite boring with no one else there, but that was better.

Her sundress was a pale orange—almost pink—to make her stand out or blend in depending on what she wanted to do. She insisted he dress nice. He had a white polo and tan khakis, he felt like his attire made the room brighter.

The waiter poured the tea into their cups for them. They were supposed to have proper etiquette here. He didn't know anything about it, so he followed what she did. *Pick it up gently. Pinky up. Sip, don't slurp. Set the cup back down, the same way you picked it up.* He couldn't help but slurp when it got to the bottom, he didn't want to swallow the ring. Pressing the button, he called for the waiter to get more tea.

They got biscuits and pastries, but there was etiquette for those too. *Pick it up gently- you don't want it to flake everywhere. Take a small bite, over the plate. Set it down lightly. Don't chew too loud. Cover your mouth when you chew.* He was over this occasion. Why couldn't he eat his pastries in peace?

He decided it was time. He couldn't chicken out, not after going through this. He still didn't like the tea, but he finished off most of the tea, so when she wasn't looking he switched their cups.

She started to drink her tea and her eyes got wide. He was excited, this is what he had been waiting for all day. He got down on one knee about to say those four words.

She started coughing, pounding on her chest, and opening her mouth, but no words came out. He was there, in this sunset room, on one knee, watching her lose air. He felt completely removed, and couldn't feel anything anymore. There was no way to help her.

The girl reached for him. *Who was she? Why did she matter?* This was a mistake, he didn't need to be tied down. He had a chance for freedom.

Looking her in the eyes, he smiled and left, not wanting to be there when she died.

Zoey Gassmann

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Flash Fiction

The Freedom Tree

The eerie, thick fog surrounds the lost boy. His sea-blue eyes try to see through the fog but cannot adjust to the environment. All he can see is an old, weary pine tree. The boy looks at the tree in awe and starts to walk like a wooden toy soldier to the tree. As he approaches the tree he starts to talk. "Oh great pine tree, I am lost, I can't see. But with you, great pine tree, I will be able to see. Together we can touch the sky and watch the sea of clouds fly by."

He moves closer to the tree and begins to hum a tune. The old pine tree sways in the wind dancing to his song. The tree moves its leaves, trying to carry the boy's tune. The boy looks up to the tree, slowing down the tune that was once carried in the wind. "Oh great pine tree, please teach me your ways. You sway to my tune that I just played. I wish to be like you, almighty tree, please let me see."

The tree starts to move. Three huge branches from it point in three directions. One to the left, one forward, and one to the right. The boy stares at the tree in confusion. The tree looks down upon the boy, "What does it mean to be free to you dear child?" The boy jumps back, not in fear but in shock that he met a talking tree. He quickly calms himself. "Freedom is the wind. The wind always carries the birds to fly, water to cleanse and feed plants, and every season it always carries something relating to the time. Freedom is the wind because it is also needed to live a good life." The boy smiles at the tree after saying this. The tree is amazed by the answer the boy gave.

The tree stops to think as the boy starts to lay on the morning dew grass. The tree ponders what the child had said. Freedom is like the wind... The tree turns to the boy. "I grant you one of my branches." The boy rolls over to look up towards the tree. The boy asks, "What do your branches mean?" To which the tree replies, "One is to have a fulfilling present life, another to have a fulfilling afterlife, and the other is to have a fulfilling beginning life."

The child's mind wanders through thoughts. "Oh great tree, I know what happened to me. I died and was buried under your shade. I know you are trying to make me smile, but let me wander here for just a bit longer. I want to stay with you, I don't want to leave. I want to play games with you and we can learn old play cues."

The tree starts to wither, its leaves start to fall. "It was nice knowing you young one, but it is time for you to run. Become free like the birds and start to fly or else we will both die here alone."

The boy hugs the old tree. "Please don't leave me to wander the world alone, Tree. Please stay with me." The boy starts to cry, but the tree will never reply..

Jessica Horton

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Lloyd C Bird High School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Alycia Bailey

Category: Humor

This Again

His death left a giant hole.

That is, in the literal sense. Benny and I were on a vacation, heading up North to Portland on spring break. The roads were slick, the air was cold, and Benny and I had just gotten done arguing over where to stop for dinner. When huge raindrops began to drum on the windshield, I told him, "drive carefully." Guess what he didn't do? He didn't slow down, thank me, or silence the horrible mixtape that was blaring through the speakers. Benny sped up just to spite me. We slammed right through the wall of a nursing home and died on impact. *Men*.

Of course, as luck would have it, I died a full hour after him. First I was given CPR, and rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. It was the weirdest feeling. I could hear and feel everything, but I couldn't move a muscle. My brain felt like it was buffering like it was on dial-up. I nearly drifted off into a nap, when a grinding hum filled my head and the black blur behind my eyelids turned to blinding white. The whole affair was just plain inconvenient. I woke up standing upright, and nearly lost my balance. I stood in front of a set of pearly gates straight out of a Sunday School children's book. On the other side I saw Benny. This halfwit was blowing raspberries at me like a child. He turned to some old guy with a ring of keys and said, "don't let her in here."

The old man asked him, "do you know her?" and Benny shook his head.

"I'm his wife!" I shouted.

"Aw... I thought maybe I'd finally gotten rid of you," Benny snapped back, "and what took you so long? Got lost?" He snickered.

"I hate you, Benny."

The old dude chimed in, something about *loving thy neighbor*. I told him to shut his piehole. He barked back that I could wait outside the gate then, which grabbed Benny's attention.

"Wait, no, I think I take back what I said," Benny exclaimed. His voice was quiet and shy, and dripping with regret.

"Are you positive? the man interrogated.

Benny nodded in response.

"Very well then." The gate was opened before me and I wandered inside.

"So we're dead now, I guess," my loving and sensitive husband said.

"You're a real genius... Yeah we're dead. No thanks to you," I replied.

He groaned. "Accidents happen, baby. You know I didn't mean to." I wanted to punch him in his big, dumb, stupid face. I was showing him mercy, really I was. Even this imbecile deserved a bit of sympathy.

"I'll sue you. You'll be hearing from my lawyer."

"You don't have a lawyer."

"I knew a girl who's roommate's father was a lawyer."

"You think Heaven has divorce attorneys?"

I shoved him, and he laughed. I loved that laugh. We walked together, but we were both kind of lost. There were angels all around, but they didn't seem to pay us much mind. There were some other dead people too, standing around and chatting. They all looked happy to be here. I laughed at the thought. Who could possibly be happy to be dead? I supposed not everyone was killed by their simpleton husband. There was an old lady holding her grandkids close, and a young adult reuniting with his dog. There was a peaceful atmosphere up here, much less chaotic than the busy city life we usually shared.

Suddenly, Benny muttered my name. I looked up to see him staring at his hands, which were glowing pale white and trembling. Before I could comment, a familiar buzz surrounded me and the vibrant scene of Heaven swirled into a darker, more muted setting. The smell of a hospital hit me like a train. I looked around. I was in a hospital bed, hooked up to a few monitors. There was another bed directly across from me, which Benny was starting to wake up in. "Are we alive again?" I wondered out loud. Benny motioned to a heart monitor set up next to me, the hills and

valleys beginning to pick up from a flatline. His began beeping a few moments after mine.

I pulled the patches and tubes out of my arms and sat up. My hair was a tangled nest, and the hospital gown clung to my skin uncomfortably. "You're a hot mess, babe," Benny stated.

"You look as ugly as ever," I shot back. I got out of the bed with a tired groan.

"Hey hey where are you going? You were just dead." Benny scrambled to stand, pulling me back towards him by the hand. "You can't just go wandering off. Where you gonna go?"

I thought about it as I yanked my hand away, nearly dragging him out of the bed. We were likely miles from where we crashed, and nowhere near our home state. Still, I wasn't going to wait around for something to happen. I grabbed the stack of my clothes off a desk and marched into the bathroom to change. When I was finished, Benny was pouting at me from the bed. "What?" I knew I was being a little too mean to him. The realization only struck after I snapped at him.

"Oh, nothing. You can figure out a way to get home by yourself," he sighed.

Just as I turned to walk out of the room, a buzz shook me to my core. I thought maybe we'd never been brought back to life at all, because once again the boring beige of the hospital turned to silky white clouds.

"Aaaaaand we're back." Benny huffed.

"You're a real Einstein, Ben. What do we do now?"

"Maybe we can talk to that old man again," he pondered, "Maybe he can help us figure out why all of this is happening."

I agreed that it was worth a shot. "Be nice," I chimed.

"Be nice? I'll pound it outta' this guy if I need to." Retorted Benny as we approached the familiar white gates. But before we could inquire about our return, he demanded the same answer from us.

"What are you bozos doing back here? You can't just pop in and out as you please. What do you think the gate is for?"

"We thought maybe you knew, *o' glorious gatekeeper*," Benny exclaimed. I elbowed him hard in the shoulder.

"Your snide remarks won't be tolerated here." I was glad someone finally agreed with me. But before I could taunt Benny, we were ushered away from the gate by angels, and it was slammed closed.

I sighed heavily. "Crazy old men," Benny muttered. I fixed my eyes to look at him. "Excuse me? You just took away the only help available to us. What exactly are we supposed to do now? What exactly did you think was going to happen?"

Benny studied my frustration. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. You're pinning this on me?" he questioned, "You haven't come up with a single solution yet. You just despise all of mine."

I mulled it over for a moment. Benny was sorta-kinda-a little bit right. But I wasn't going to admit that. "Well, you, you-"

Thunder boomed through the cloud at our feet, cutting me off and causing me to flinch. Benny's arms were wrapped around me, and I was hugged close. I raised my arms to push him away, but I recognized a spread of worry across his face. I wondered how someone could jump from angry to protective so quickly. I couldn't begin to ask before hums surrounded me like fruit flies, and the hospital room once again swirled into vision.

I tried to come up with something to say, stepping gently away from Benny. He had this look of mischievous satisfaction, I first thought. But upon closer inspection, I realized his smile was genuine. "You hate storms... You always have." I glanced out the window, which stretched over an entire wall of the room. Rain was falling hard outside, the raindrops racing down the glass.

I was on my way home from college one weekend when we met. It was one of those days when the rain starts to fall, and doesn't stop for an eternity. I was standing at a bus stop late at night, my hair, clothes, and ticket all soaked. Everything was cold and wet. I was fed up, and ready to go back inside and forget about visiting home for Thanksgiving. But then, some frat boy I'd seen around came zooming down the street in a red convertible, and showered me with muddy water. I cursed him out, he honked his horn at me in annoyance, and later on after break he asked me out.

"*You* made me hate storms."

"Oh, not this again!"

Baylee Huber-Cohen

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Genevieve Dowdy

Category: Humor

2nd Period Woes

2nd Period Woes

The quiet click that my nails make each time I pick them must be infuriating for the poor soul forced to sit next to me. I sneak a quick glance in her direction. Her pencil is working diligently across the page and she lets out a weary sigh. Her eyes are still glued to her work and my eyes flick down to her paper filled with jostled handwriting and squiggles that are anything but purposeful. It's an unusual sight for someone who typically has flawless handwriting every class. She sighs again and I shift my gaze back to my jagged nails. Only then do I notice the repetitive shaking of our table. "Oh." I say and my knees still their irritating tap against the table that ultimately messed up the girl's perfect handwriting. I see her take an eraser and carefully maneuver around her work, scrubbing away the marks my anxious tapping inadvertently caused her. I stare at my hands. I wish there was a clock in the room, it would make my contemplating much more cinematic. I rustle through my bag, searching for something to occupy my mind and my hands as I wait for class to be over. I pull out a piece of paper and some pens, letting my hand guide me through drawing nonsensical figures and shapes. It's the only thing I can manage to create with my unusually shaky hand. I feel the table bounce and realize that my jittery knees are the culprit once again. What a pain. I set the pen down and slide my hands under my thighs, hoping the pressure will remind myself to not disturb those around me. This isn't such a problem in other classes, but the old folding tables and standard classroom chairs make a deadly combination for a girl who's seatmate is less than a foot away. With my hands securely trapped under my legs I allow my mind to wander once more. I envision the tick of the nonexistent clock showing me how much time we have left in this class. The metronome in my head does a stellar job at keeping me grounded and secure and I applaud my ingenuity in my head. I hear the teacher give a five minute warning for the bell and the telltale rustle of students packing up around me is all the sign I need to shove all of my work into my green tote and sit patiently while I wait for the bell to ring. The girl next to me is still cramming in last minute work and I admire her tenacity towards a simple class work assignment. The bell rings and I allow the others to file ahead of me as I leisurely shuffle to the door. The teacher is by the door collecting our assignments for the class. I glance at my own sheet gripped firm in my hand. It's blank save for a few mindless squiggles. Now it's my turn to sigh. "Oy vey." It's only 10am.

desmond jacobs

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Flash Fiction

Tick Tock

Tick tock

Tick tock, tick tock. The sound of ticking envelopes me, encases me, drowns the world around me, and leaves me wondering, "Do I want this?" The tick-tock of the clock continues, saying not to worry, yet at the same time, telling me time is running out. The ceiling beckons me, it's so simple, compared to the world around me. A loud CLANG filled the room, seeming to bring with it misery, dread of what I knew must happen, yet was still the most distasteful thing I had ever done. Or will do... The hour was up, just 15 minutes left, 15 minutes of waiting, waiting...

I pushed myself up, staring at the room around me, hoping with all my heart, that I wouldn't be seeing it anymore soon. Every little thing about the room broke me, shattered my inner will, from the black draping curtains, to the locked doors, to even the closet, with so many clothes filling it that it was to the brim. I paced the room, again, doubting my decision, yet again, with absolute certainty, knowing what I had to do. 10 minutes left I realized as I looked at the abysmal grandfather clock in the corner, marking how close it was to the event. I had been locked here for months... as far as I knew at least, it could have been a year, or two. They didn't let us know how long it had been.

I smiled suddenly, realizing that I would forever love this next moment. Then the fact that it soon would all be over, seemed so funny. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't, I couldn't stop myself from spiraling down a path that I so didn't want to go into yet was inevitable. I groaned suddenly, "Stop" I told myself, "just don't let it happen... don't... resist." I tried so hard, yet I couldn't stop, when I tried to tell myself to resist... I couldn't. But what was I meant to resist? The clock? My feelings? It was all so confusing; it is still so confusing. And in the background the clock is still, doing its tick-tock, tick-tock. "I'm meant to resist this!" I told myself, I'm going to where I can't go back.

"NO" I wanted to yell so bad, I wanted to scream, to laugh, to cry, to celebrate, to die, to live, to even throw myself to the clock that is still, doing its tick-tock, tick-tock, and hugging it. I collapsed, falling onto the floor, losing all of my strength. Then I understood, "it's a dream! An illusion, a sensation, an unreality!" my strength, running back, and I jumped around boyishly, screaming my triumph, knowing that I could not, would not be going crazy, because it was all a dream. Wasn't it? And even though I danced, and I was happy, some small, minuscule part inside of me that was still sane, saw what was happening, and I stopped.

"NO," the sane part in me yelled, "I WILL NOT LET THIS HAPPEN!" And as I dashed toward the window, the tick-tock of the clock seemed to waver, and my confidence began to magnify. I reached the window, shattering it, standing in the wind. I knew what had to happen, I knew this moment would come when I was first brought here, yet I refused to believe it. And as my last moments on this earth were spent, I let go of the support that held me up, to be free, one last time, times up.

Alena Johnson

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Clover Hill High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rhonda Clopton

Category: Poetry

A Natural Journey

A Natural Journey

With the tip of the rat tail
My mommy parts my mane into four sections.
Saturating each strand with oils, detanglers, and water.
She reaches for the brush,
Holds it up to my head,
And drags it through the entwined strands.
CCCHHH, CCCHHH, OW!
The pain raises my eyebrows, stings my eyeballs, and travels to the roof of my mouth
Causing a screeching yelp.
With quivering lips
Tears trickle down my cheeks.
I look into the mirror to find: A beautiful little girl,
whose yet to find a product that can bring her gorgeous hair to justice.
Brush bristles
Fall off like leaves on a tree
And burrow deeper into my hair.
After plucking out the bristles,
She grabs the wide tooth comb.
But, as always, my hair prevails.
SNAAAAAAP!!!
There she stood,
Holding half of the comb in her hand.
The other half in my hair.
My mommy explodes in snickering chuckles.
All I can manage from my small plastic chair
is a scold (Silencing her laugh to a giggle).
I reach in and grab what is left of the comb,
Tossing its poor soul into the garbage with the ones who have come before ...
“I’m sorry sweetie,” she says, “but soon you’ll have to tame the beast on your own.”

My mama divides my kinky curls into four sections,
Saturating it with oils, detanglers, and heat protectants.
Using a blow dryer, with a comb nozzle pick attached,
She dries my dripping wet waves like the sun dries wet sand.
She pulls the blow drying comb through my thick hair.
Pop, off came the nozzle pick.
POP, POP, POP!
Restless,
I get up with an aching, tingling butt.
I watch the seat cushion slowly rise from the impression I left, but I shortly sit back down.
My mama, carefully, unboxes the deadly weapon: The Iron.

Slowly and carefully she presses each curly strand on my head,

But such

A

Repetitive

Process...

Makes...

me...

ZZZ...

I wake up to an alarm of tears

I dozed off right into the torch that was frying my hair, and now, my ear.

I look through my teary vision,

I look into the mirror to find: a somewhat older girl who has finally caved into peer pressure and the harsh beauty standards enforced by society.

Hair spray penetrates my squinting eyes.

My nose burns from the burning-hair fumes.

And my heated hair prickles and itches up and down my back.

Running water flows through my field of weeds, taking hours to fulfill it's quench of thirst.

I begin to shampoo.

Sulfate Suds rolled into my eyes.

My stubborn hair trapped my fingers in it's entanglement as they continued to massage the scalp.

I look into the mirror to find: a girl, an average teenybopper, and her

Once Beautiful Hair, cursed;

done wrong by the hands of a cruel hairstylist who slipped something in it.

My Hair: Damaged.

So unattractive that it repels water.

Long, stringy straight strands circumferencing my head.

My Hair: another victim to a cold-hearted, perm pimping hairstylist.

Using the tip of the rat tail

I split my mane into four sections.

Drowning each strand with oils, detanglers, and water

Each squirt absorbs into each crimped twirl.

I drag my hands through my wet hair and detangle it.

I chase the Kinks away.

I lift up my arms and begin to braid my recovering, heat damaged hair.

I begin to braid, pulling each strand tighter than the last,

Still battling mulish knots.

When I'm done, I allow my arms to fall, like a curtain,

and reveal two ravishing French Braids.

I see: A dazzling Queen

and her long dark brown crown,

Perfectly framing her stunning glamor and glow.

Aiden Jun

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Deep Run High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Mia Tambellini

Category: Poetry

Passing

i used to pray to god
that you would be sober when you died
that not any drop of alcohol would be left in your body
that you would not die alone

i used to pray to god
that you would know how much you meant to me
that i didn't need a dad who owned a car
that i didn't need a dad who wore a clean white dress shirt to work
that I didn't need a dad who bought me shiny things

i used to pray to god
that you would not be in so much pain when you returned from work
that your injuries would heal quickly—
 they never did.

i used to pray to god
that you would be nice to mom
who comes home from late night work
who carries so much burden on her tiny shoulders

i used to pray to god
that you would pass peacefully
with a clean body and a clean soul

when you were found,
you were dead,
you were not sober,
and you were not dignified

i pray to god
that you know you left us too early
that you know how much you are missed
that you know i still love you

Imani Koiner

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK

orange is the new black. that's what i remember from a flickering screen. i don't get it--are prisoners the new minority? being called a thug is bad but being called a *black* is worse. i know. from experience or not, that doesn't matter--look at my skin. that's all the working white man had to see before he shouted and flushed and grabbed my shoulders with throat-crushing hands. he forced me out of the store, called it his land, and the curb caught my foot; i tripped onto concrete. i cried--what else is a young girl expected to do? don't get back up and turn around. he'd see your glare. he'd see your frown. he'd go to the register, reach over the counter. mama wouldn't be able to yell your name in time. papa would be at work, coming home to a home one daughter less.

white man shoots young black girl. it'd go on the news for about a week or two. a new hashtag. a new "help this black family" donation link. a new girl who hadn't lived past her sweet sixteen. a new black mother who outlives her child. a new father who can't hold his daughter's hand as she walks down the aisle toward her fiance, a blank face covered by a white veil. she'd be accused of being a thief by white man. white man doesn't go to jail until hashtags go viral. but, maybe the television was right. maybe orange is the new black.

Scott Langston

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

Final Departure

The runway slips neatly back, Tires removed
An aircraft relaxes into the upper atmosphere
A transverse crossing the moon

Inside, Parallel to the passing thunder of clattering fuel boiling
in wings, rows of personages, Businesspeople in fallen plaid shirts,
Slick wrinkled black pants, Rows of smart, mismatched ties,
Walked out, Burned out stubbed-shoes Tourists, Now a minority
in this season, Sprinkle the aisles like candy, Popping colored
outfits and lingering trends, Flight attendants scouring through
them in search of hungry mouths, And yet, they are all singular
in mind, Hollow, Aimless staring, practically corpses, only to be,
reanimated when the wheels once more pressed ground, Somewhere
below, some hundred souls chase their containers, awaiting their return

Hollow because, This is time wasted, This is a doorway,
A passing highway sign, A sacred nothingness before action
Before apartment buildings and squarish windows, Before
thirteenth floor offices, Before monotony and expected result,
A passenger disposes a drink to a flight attendant, who exits
in exhale, impatience

The sky grows darker now, Blacker than night, Blacker than
Poison, Sorrowful as rain, It goes unnoticed in denying expectancy

An hour has passed, The jet continues its drift, re-entering the lower
atmosphere and thrusting towards civilization

Another two hour fall, Impatience grows, Shot glasses and seat-rests
sigh against tapping fingers, There has not been a single light, A single
sign of anything, Just darkness, Sifting through sunken portholes

A mood has washed over, A rising cool, A tremor defying walls of
predictability, Everything is known, The clocks tick, The computers
whine the planes rise and fall to land, The lights burst and seam out
through twilight everything is known, And so the thoughts go amongst
minds, *I want everything known, I want to go to the office I want to go
home to the cities, I want the ticking clocks, I want the whining computers,
I want to be safe, I know this is to be safe*

The jet grows aimless, Zigzagging across predetermined locations, The
pilots search, Control towers do not respond, Radios have fizzled away, The
ground remains a dark sludge.

Clarity, A moment thereafter, Moonlight falters and simmers gently against
poisoned cloudscape, now thinly cut, open like window panes, And in that
moment the sky refracts, split revealing, perhaps out of pity, Muted landscapes
now exposed, And a hundred-something people stare down agape windows into
the earth below, They stare in utter incompetence, Comprehending the mimic,
the translation of a city that they glide over, The steep, entangled skyscrapers
rise from blackened air, No less steel than shadow, The horrific scorching and
fire that graced them having long been snuffed out, Floor by floor, they fall into
the wind like ash escaping a chimney, From one, an elevator, solidifying rather
than disintegrating, falls sixty floors into murky black, There is no city, There is
only a joke, A parody, a culmination and collaboration of millions, falling in moments
to an unforeseeable hatred so pungent that could only be made by those same
millions in rejection of themselves, And in that imitation, Is every soul, every mind,
every heart of those plane occupants, And they come rushing home, Rushes of
realization, denial, acceptance, death, dream, crushing, emptiness, Everything that
could make them whole again, All together, no baby-steps or gentle mood changes,
All together, all rushing, And yet, there is no reaction, No words are spoken, The
hollow monotony has continued in exterior But their minds are frenzied, Searching
the wreckage for meaning, But it has none, It is a memorial to human failings,
To anger and failing negotiation that had been so distant in the passing newspapers
and radio talks, To the release, the rapture of repetition and therefore the end of
humanity, They refuse truth, and continue their sombered searches, But it has
ended, Mirrors break, Simmers sail distant, The sky exhales and collapses once
more, Swallowing moon, Barren nature merging again with the architecture that
had attempted to escape it

Then comes the thinking, The cabin remains silent, Exception is the engines which
continue pushing forward on dwindling consumption, The lights have dimmed noticeably
in the cabins, And so with it has gone clumsy shuffling to and fro, The cabin remains
silent, But there is internal heated tension, Every passenger, pilot, and flight attendant
becoming a collective of conception, A debate, A philosophical construct, A passing
thought, a passing flight, soon to return to reality and footsteps underneath, There is
fear, There is clutched rosary beads and religious artefacts, There is a watching
nothingness from fallen eyes, There is quiet fidgeting to distract inevitable existentialism
There is quiet in the tears that are falling, There is fear, There is fear in truth, Truth in
release, Release of patterns and lives made of patterns, Quilts of activity, Activity
release, Release of ticking clocks and whining supercomputers, Talking secretaries
and office heads, Multi-colored suburbs,-raised brick apartments, Car drives and forgetful-talk-show-host, Taxi
ride-rush to impatient places, Activity released, Release
of sunlight and winter moon, Mulberry bushes and oak trees, Solemn summers-joyous
passing autumn evenings, Windows to little gardens, Windows to little places and little
souls, Activity released impermanently

There is no more time, No tomorrow no minute no hour, The only increments measured
are the slowing engines, Soon they will be with us now, Soon the radioactive ink beneath
will be above, And the plane will sink into it all, Thought will be displaced into reality, And
so thought is commodity, Thought will be thunk, collectively, Of all the things, And all the
worlds, Little globes sparkling, Lives encapsulated and remembered, In this temporary time-capsule, In this
temporary vault, This sacred place that now holds all knowledge
and all of the human race, This cradle and nurture, Uncomfortable seats and
spazzy-aged design, Now molded into brief sanctuary, Will everything
be played over again, The act of repetition being memorialized
in a repetition, a repercussive memory of was and were, A
dream in the daylight hours, moments before the awakening,
Moments before, Sorrow, honor, regret, anger, love,
tranquility All played over, All felt again, The lights

stem into long, fizzled strands of electric imbalance,
And the engines fade expectedly, All felt again
All played over, All departed now, The
memories and memory of memory
has slept, And so, The
world has slept
Into slumber,
Into night.

Lileana Lewis

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

My Name

My Name

Hi, my name is girls camp
taking summer days and innocence
using sleeping counselors as an excuse
that she had forced herself on
you, an excuse for why you
cry when the doctor brushes thigh,
or why you lie to friends, when you
say you don't want to swim with them
as if the water is the same as
the hands that invaded you
Hi! My name is father
who doesn't believe sexual assault is
possible, if it's not man and woman
Hi! My name is mother's abusive ex who
pushed me down the stairs
Hi! My name is family stress that
pushes until I bend and break
my back under the pressure of
your expectations
Hi...
I am the flowers
given through smiles and laughter
I am the friends who'd drive miles
come pick me up when father forgets
Hi, I am every single person in this room
lifting me up and showing me
the light at the end of the seemingly never ending tunnel
Hi! I am every single poet who
writes about the fight of mental health
Hi
My name is Star

Malena Lo Prete

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Monacan High School, North Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Matthew Ehret

Category: Poetry

Shadows of Youth

Sitting on cracked street corners,
Wrinkled hands folded together as they wait
For young men to run through them
Flinging their ease around.
Old men that wear little hats
And dress as if nothing has happened,
And wait alone at the same restaurant
They go to
On the same day of every week.

Their wives have passed,
And their lovers have left,
And their kids have grown.
They eat dinners they've eaten before
And watch the same tv programs they used to.
It reminds them of freshness and newness
And of when rooms were full.

When I see old men
That sit on corners
With their power taken from them,
I think of mi Tio.
Te Recuerdo.
I think of the times I've met him,
The way no one cares for old men anymore.
His little juice cups,
And the TV that doesn't show
The programs that remind him
Of home cooked dinners and full tables.

Where did wiseness go?
When age was currency, a triumph?
When I am an old woman,
When I wrinkle and age
Will I too
Be disposable?
Will all those I know,
And all their unique peculiarities,
Be treated like
A relic of a time that has long since passed?
What will I do?
When one day
We are all just

Waiting.

Molly Maloney

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Elizabeth Bradbury

Category: Critical Essay

Why the United States Should Break Its Alliance with Saudi Arabia

Why The United States Should Break Its Alliance With Saudi Arabia

The Saudi-US alliance has survived a long debate of ethics versus practicality, where the latter has prevented its collapse; as the practicality of the alliance decreases, however, and its ethics are increasingly questioned, the alliance is clearly seen as a violation of American values. The alliance started in 1931, largely due to Saudi Arabia's oil supply (Bureau Of Near Eastern Affairs). It has remained because of such oil, even though Saudi Arabia is infamous for its oppressive and theocratic government, its oppression of women, and its human rights violations. The United States should end its alliance with Saudi Arabia because it is a country that does not value democracy, and the current American practice of allowing Saudi Arabia's regular human rights violations comprises the U.S.'s position as a leader in human rights Development. Furthermore, the alliance with Saudi Arabia is unnecessary as the United States is not actually reliant on Saudi Arabia for oil.

The United States should not be allied with Saudi Arabia as it is an absolute theocracy, which goes against the U.S.'s core principles of democracy and violates human rights. Saudi Arabia "is an absolute monarchy" as well as an Islamic state, making it a theocracy (Schiavenza). The United States was founded to be the ideal democracy, so allying with Saudi Arabia hypocritically contradicts the paramount principle that created the U.S. The alliance deteriorates the United States' reputation as a democratic global leader. The U.S. self-proclaims that it "advance[s] a freedom agenda," which is impossible if it aligns itself with Saudi Arabia ("Human Rights"). The State Department states that "supporting democracy . . . promotes such fundamental American values as religious freedom" ("Human Rights"). By allying with a country that doesn't support Freedom of Religion, the United States supports the violation of its own values and human rights. The United States should break its alliance with Saudi Arabia because of its opposition to democracy and the U.S.'s core values.

In addition to compromising American values, the United States should end the Saudi Alliance because Saudi Arabia actively ignores and violates human rights, which the U.S. aims to protect. According to the HRMI Rights Tracker, Saudi Arabia scores a 1.0 out of 10 on respecting and protecting "Civil and Political Rights", and scores a 2.4 out of 10 on "Safety from the State" ("Saudi Arabia"). Saudi Arabia scores an average of "Very Bad" and is "worse than average" in all aspects of protecting human rights ("Saudi Arabia"). This data shows how Saudi Arabia doesn't respect human rights and that it is an oppressive state. A "central goal of U.S. foreign policy [is] the promotion of respect for human rights," meaning that the United States violates its own principles by remaining in the Saudi Alliance ("Human Rights"). Saudi Arabia especially violates the human rights of women. Saudi Arabia is a very "gender-segregated . . ." country, and most "women's rights [are] dependent on a male guardian's permission" (The Week Staff). As "women's rights are human rights", these rights are not rights at all (Wallstöm). Saudi Arabia violates the right of No Discrimination, as it discriminates against women. By staying allied, The U.S. allows and accepts Saudi Arabia's extreme lack of protection and regard for human rights. Remaining allied with Saudi Arabia goes against the values the United States represents, meaning it is unacceptable and immoral for the U.S. to stay in the alliance.

The most cited reason that the U.S. stays in the alliance with Saudi Arabia is because of Saudi Arabia's large role in the oil market; however, this is not a valid reason for the U.S. to remain allied because the U.S. does not need Saudi Oil. Primarily, the United States is using less oil altogether. The U.S.'s Consumption and Imports of oil have decreased since 2019 ("Oil and petroleum"). Since American oil usage as a whole declines, there is increasingly less value in allying with Saudi Arabia for it. The United States aims for "net-zero emissions by 2050," so oil usage

should continue decreasing ("Oil Dependence"). Furthermore, the U.S. only imports 8% of its oil from Saudi Arabia ("Oil and petroleum"). The United States currently does not need Saudi Arabian oil, and in just 30 years it would not need to import any oil if it stays true to its net-zero plans. Remaining allied with Saudi Arabia for oil is not a wise long-term commitment, or even a long-term reason. The United States should not ally with Saudi Arabia because of oil as it is not reliant on Saudi oil and grows to be independent from any oil at all.

The United States should terminate its alliance with Saudi Arabia because they actively oppose the United States' founding principles and regularly violate human rights. Saudi Arabia violates the human rights of the Right to Democracy, The Right to Opinion and Expression, The Right to No Discrimination, and especially violates Women's Rights. The U.S. ignores these violations to stay allied with Saudi Arabia for its oil, which compromises its values and policies of promoting democracy and human rights. Its use of Saudi Oil, however, is minimal and declining. As the alliance's practicality disappears, its unethical nature damages the credibility and the reputation of the United States. If the United States decides to stay true to its word, itself, and to its identity, it cannot continue to ally with Saudi Arabia.

Gabrielle Marshall

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Mary Hopkins, Daniel Spiziri

Category: Poetry

Buzzing Bees

Buzzing Bees

They gave me a task. A mission.

Create a story they said

A string of letters that test the limits of imagination.

That was all it took.

Jotting sentences as they pop pop in my head. Just like bubbles.

Yes, that sounds good.

The words tumbling onto the post it note pad.

I scamper to write one sentence quick enough before another swarms me.

I'm bursting with so many ideas.

Overflowing like wildflowers that magically appear in those fields.

I'm writing and I feel free. I'm sitting cross legged at the kitchen counter.

But who cares?

Not me.

Because I'm writing and it's great.

I'm not alone. I have so many thoughts with me.

My thoughts and a number two pencil.

Free falling into a world filled with winds of words.

Words that become a sentence. A sentence becomes a passage. Which becomes an essay. A book. A life. A story.

My head buzzing like one billion bumble bees.

Gabrielle Marshall

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Mary Hopkins, Daniel Spiziri

Category: Poetry

Power of Hope Today

The Power of Hope Today

Today's hope is a flickering candle that dwells in a snow-dusted window,
circulating the prayers of Christmas mornings.

Today's hope is the crisp daffodil in colorless photos,
containing the soul of a small
child

who only wishes and knows of
peace and love.

Today's hope is the sparkling eyes that
truly believe in achieving
anything to reach unity.

Today's hope is the palm to palm connection
bracing each other for the climb neither expected,
but couldn't abandon.

Today's hope is peering
beyond

the lingering barrier,
but still recognizing the diversity in ourselves.

Today's hope has been dimmed and tossed recklessly,
but still generously stays with us,
for we cannot help but come back
like wide eyed children to candy.

We are said to be weak to rely on such strength,
about we are only believers.

That spark

That gives science a baffled case

And oceans an infinite plane,

is the eagle that dips

and soars

and fights,

which stands for

the hope of

today.

Eli Martin

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: St Christopher's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Humor

Virginia State Fair

The Virginia state fair, located in Dublin, Virginia, is always a great time. My family and I try to go every year. The fair is a very interesting place, with very interesting people. My favorite activity at the fair is the lawnmower race, there is nothing quite like watching grown men race around a dirt track on lawnmowers. It's a lot like mario kart, but instead of the fun cartoon characters it's mostly overweight redneck men who have nothing much better to do with their time. The intensity of these races is unmatched, with the winner winning free admission and free corn dogs at the next fair. The promise of unlimited corndogs the following year really gets the racers going. I also really enjoy the healthy food options at the fair. The healthiest being fried butter on a stick. The rides are normally pretty fun, and my favorite is the big ferris wheel. When you are at the top, you can see the entire fair. My cousins and I used to enjoy playing I spy at the top.

When I was around ten, my entire family met up at my grandparents and then went to the fair like we normally do. I had not eaten anything all day, and was craving food. I proceeded to eat an ungodly amount. After eating, my cousin for some reason thought the best idea was to go on the spinning apples ride. As I approached the turntables, I had a very strange feeling in my stomach. It was almost a warning that I should not be going on this spinning contraption after consuming what had to be at least three pounds of funnel cake, two corn dogs, and a slushie. I told them that I was in no way stepping foot on this apparatus that was seemingly made to make you throw up. I failed in my stand, and my cousins carried me on. As the table began to spin, I realized that this ride wasn't as bad as I thought and I wasn't going to throw up. As the ride progressed, I could tell that my realization was incorrect. My cousins began to intentionally make the table spin faster, while I was trying to slow the table down. At this moment...it was between life and death, well more like between chunks and no chunks. As the table began to spin faster and faster, I could feel the amazingly healthy food I had eaten earlier start to inch its way further and further up my esophagus. Saliva began to flood into my mouth, and at that moment I knew that I needed to get off the spinning table immediately.

As the ride continued, I tried my hardest to focus on one central spot, but its a lot harder to focus when in the back of my mind I was thinking about the possibility of throwing up on my grandmother. That would be a horrific scene. All that was going through my head was "don't throw up...don't throw up...don't throw up." As I was on this childrens ride, fighting for my life, the object began to slow down. I was so relieved that I made it through what felt like an eternity of fighting the funnel cake to stay down. But, immediately as I got off the table, I realized that I lost the fight. An assortment of funnel cake, corn dogs, and a medium cherry slushie rained from my mouth onto the grass beside the ride. At this point, I was just relieved that I did not throw up while on the ride. That would have created an even larger mess. After this unfortunate situation, my cousins carried me to the porta potty like I just suffered from a torn acl, so I could regroup. That day, I learned that I will never eat that much funnel cake again, and also that I will never be going on a spinning ride ever again. The Virginia state fair, a place where memories are made.

Judy Ma

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: J R Tucker High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Jason Golos

Category: Short Story

The Fragrant Consort

XIANG FEI

In the 25th year of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, a concubine from western China entered the imperial harem. It is difficult to differentiate fact from myth regarding the stories about her to the extent that her existence is questionable. There are two main perspectives about the truth regarding this woman, one of the Manchurians who reigned during the Qing Dynasty, the other of the Uyghurs, the people that she belonged to.

The Manchurian perspective claims that she was the daughter of Afaq Khoja, Iparhan, a woman of great beauty, but perhaps her most notable trait was the naturally produced perfume-like scent she had. (Some sources say the scent was produced from her perspiration.) She was sought after by the Emperor and taken to the Forbidden City to become part of his harem. At first, she was unhappy living in a distant and unfamiliar environment, homesick. She did not have any feelings for the emperor; either. However, the emperor doted on her, building mosques and villages to please and show his devotion to her. His devotion to her won her heart, and she was the emperor's most favored wife until the day she died. When she died a natural death, the Emperor sent roughly a hundred people to return her body to her home, a process of three years, costing many casualties.

The Uyghur perspective claims that she was taken as a war trophy by the Manchurians and given to the Emperor. A well-known part of this perspective was that she hid knives under her sleeves to prevent the advances of the Emperor. Some sources say that the knives were for revenge. The cause of her death in this perspective is muddled. Some say that she was killed by the empress dowager, for her behavior. Some say she was poisoned. Others say that she was molested and killed by eunuchs. Whatever the cause, the Uyghur perspective claims that her death was not natural.

Act IV

“Huang shang!* Huang shang has to seek justice for chenqie!** This woman committed witchcraft against chenqie, causing chenqie's miscarriage! This woman dared to curse huang shang's unborn child, huang shang's own bone, flesh, and blood!”

She kneels on the ground, her white under robes spread around her, stained with her own blood and tears. Her qing dynasty-styled hair is tilted, the typically slicked back hair plastered onto her face. She has no jewelry, no makeup, no hairpieces. No one could suspect that she could be the wife of an emperor. She ketous***, the dark red mark on her forehead shows it is not her first time doing so. Her voice is hoarse as she speaks again.

“Huang shang, chenqie knows that huang shang's feelings for chenqie have diluted throughout the years; chenqie does not blame huang shang. But huang shang cannot neglect huang shang's own bone, flesh, and blood! Huang shang can send chenqie away, even to the cold palace****, but please give chenqie justice for huang shang's unborn child!”

Before her, sitting on a bed is the emperor. Wrapped in rich blue fabric, he is a dragon, commanding. Next to him stands another woman, a phoenix in stark contrast to the one kneeling. She is wearing the casual clothes of an imperial consort, the soft blue fabric orderly. There are jade bracelets on each of her wrists, three earrings on each of her ears, and intricate floral hairpins adorn her hair, all made of precious stones and metals. She holds a bracelet of Buddhist beads, slowly turning the beads over with her fingers, one by one. Molded around her ring and pinky fingers are bronze, bejeweled coverings over her nails. Those two fingers are slightly lifted, talon-like. She doesn't need to put those fingers down. Nothing she does would require the use of them.

In the middle of them all lies a small wooden figure of a pregnant woman, a needle protruding from its bloated stomach

“Consort Shun,” says the standing woman, her voice smooth and silky. She walks over to the middle of the room and reaches over to take the wooden figure from the ground.

“I implore you to stop damaging your body,” she says politely, before turning and kneeling before the emperor. Consort Shun

glares at her warily. “Huang shang. Chenqie has some words to say.”

She bows her head.

“Go on,” replies the emperor.

“Chenqie has some words to say to huang shang and would like to say it here. However... chenqie feels that huang shang may be displeased with chenqie’s words.”

The emperor views the scene before him as if to contemplate a decision.

“Very well. Speak, Consort Rong, my Xiang Fei.”*****

* Huang (皇)- emperor; shang (上)- up, higher; together it means Your Highness. Used to refer to the emperor, as the use of the emperor’s birth name was forbidden to be said.

** Chen (臣)- a word commonly used for the subordinates of the emperor; qie (妾)- concubine, wife; together it was used by the wives of emperors as a substitute for terms “I” or “me” when speaking to the emperor or the empress dowager (sometimes, to other members to the royal family, as well)

*** Ke (磕)- to knock; tou (头)- head; together literally meaning to knock one’s head, ketou (also known as kowtow) is a gesture that displays the highest form of respect or subservience. It is performed by kneeling and bowing so that one’s head will touch or hit the ground.

**** The place where the wives of the emperor will be sent for misbehavior, or if the emperor simply does not desire them anymore.

*****Xiang (香)- Fragrant; Fei (妃)- Consort

Act V

“Good! Cut!”

Applause fills the film set. The set designers had outdone themselves this time. The bed on which the emperor, or actor, to be more accurate, sat on was handcrafted, the designs engraved onto the mahogany wood crafted painstakingly to replicate a real artifact from the Forbidden City, from the time surrounding the reign of Qianlong. The calligraphy set behind the bed was a sight to behold, the strokes elegant and purposeful. It was done by a famous calligraphist whose work has, historically, been sold for in the millions upwards. Everything from the curtain drape embroidery to the bedsheets was carefully produced under meticulous research.

The actors and actresses crack a smile and clap along with the crew, stepping off to change back into their regular attire, the costume crew hurrying after them. The rest of the crew begins to fuss over the set, everyone excited for the end of a long day filming.

“Great work, everyone! We only have a couple of days left of filming, so clean up quickly, and go home so we can work hard for the next few days! Let’s end strong!” the director shouts. “Xiao Tao!”

The director made a beckoning gesture towards the actress playing Consort Rong, Xiao Tao. She turns, in the process of removing one of her earrings. She makes her way through the bustling crew to reach him in an isolated corner.

“Yes, director?”

“Tomorrow we’re going to film the scene, will you be ready for it?”

“The one right after this one?”

“No, the other scene. The climax of the entire show. The one everyone is waiting for.”

The director says this with a strange type of excitement.

“Oh, that one? The one where I try to assassinate him?”

“Precisely. I spent so long with the screenwriter to come up with a vision for it, and my vision is very specific, you know.”

“I-”

“You can’t just attempt to assassinate him. You have to look like you want to assassinate him, but at the same time you have to look like you don’t. You want to because of the grudge you have against him, but you have to look like you love him.”

“You’ve already-”

”And then, the empress dowager will enter, claiming that a ‘woman of beauty will be the ruin of the Qing Empire, far too distracting to the emperor, tarnishing his judgment’-- at that moment,” he says this with a type of enthusiasm rivaling that of children on Christmas mornings. “You will look at the emperor in a look of betrayal,” he pauses. “If you didn’t understand any of that, you just have to look at him like you hate him, but also like you love him.”

Xiao Tao looks at him, expressionless, “You’ve said this multiple times, ever since we started filming.”

“Do you want to hear what everyone else is too courteous to say to you?”

The crowded, loud set suddenly seemed like a buzzing background. The director’s hand was wrapped around Xiao Tao’s arm like a vise.

“Well, do you believe it’ll be said for the good of all of us? I’m not sure what you’re trying to say here.”

“The media is waiting for this show to air so that they can start their wave of articles about whether you’re going to begin your descent as a failed star because of your acting skills. They are waiting for the show to fail because you’re starring in it. There’s already been a buzz that we cast you only because of your face, not your acting skills, which is true to some extent.”

The hand on her arm was starting to hurt, just a little.

“Director. Why are you saying that now, when there’s no use for it? You were the one that bribed the casting director for me to play the lead role. We’re less than a week from finishing filming, why-”

The director looks around before whispering into Xiao Tao’s ear furiously, his coffee breath nauseating.

“What do you think they are going to start writing if your acting receives a negative reaction from the public? If my wife finds out about how,” he stops, takes a deep breath, steps back, and combs a hand over his hair before beginning again. “You know how the media is. You know how far they go, how much they dig. They’ll do anything for stories. If, for any reason, they find any truth, anything with any sort of evidence... well. You and I, who’s the one with more to lose?”

“Director, if you didn’t want things to turn out this way, you wouldn’t have made those decisions, especially the one to cast me. Also, how does the quality of my acting have to do with anything?”

He turns away, clenching his jaw.

“Just get it right tomorrow. You’re playing a woman in a harem show, it shouldn’t be hard.”

Xiao Tao, turns, leaving flashing a smile at the crew members that walked past her, no residue of the conversation left on her face.

Act I

“Xiao Tao!” he says. “You’ve decided to come!”

“Of course, director, how could I skip this opportunity?” she says.

“Well, go ahead! Sit down!”

They’re at a café, in the far corner of the room. As low as Xiao Tao is in her career at the moment, she is still somewhat famous. The director was not someone without any fame, either. Once they’re both sitting with their coffees, (“My treat,” the director had said.) he begins, “So how long have you been in this industry?”

“Oh, since I was eight years old, technically speaking. But I was just in a couple of commercials here and there. Nothing too much. I did have a couple of smaller roles in some big films from when I was sixteen to... I think eighteen. I’ve always done some modeling and shoots, but those have been relatively small. I’ve had collabs with bigger brands before, but those have always been rare.”

“You’re selling yourself short, don’t tell that to a man that’s going to be making a new star! Just think about the surprise you’ll be to the public. I’m telling you right now, they will love you so much. I’m going to make you the top of the world.”

“Does... does that mean I have a role?”

Does... does that mean I have a role.

“Of course! Xiao Tao, that’s something that you can rest assured about. I even got you the lead role.”

“Oh, that’s something,” Xiao Tao replies, stunned. “That’s really... something. Thank you so much for helping me. I honestly just expected a supporting role, you really didn’t have to get me the lead role.”

“No, don’t say that,” the director furrows his brow, leaning back into his chair. “I chose you because I see potential in everything about you: your appearance, your posture, your spirit... everything! You just didn’t have good scripts for your past works.”

“Well, I hope you can take care of me,” Xiao Tao laughs. “I’m sure you have an excellent script for me?”

“I’ll be happy to show it to you,” he winks. “I promise you it’ll be good.”

It was.

Act VI

Act VI

Celeb Gossip Blog

Xiang Fei- Closing Thoughts

Jiang Xiaochen

Xiang Fei had just finished premiering yesterday, and I am heartbroken over that show. I’m sure all of us women watching the show were. Of course, we ladies also had so much to swoon over; the famous, “Speak, Consort Rong, my Xiang Fei,” line was absolutely heartstopping!

To recap the show for our readers, Xiang Fei is a must-watch harem drama set in the Qing dynasty. Like most other harem dramas set in the Qing dynasty, it is set during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. We follow the protagonist, Consort Rong, who is taken from her home in western China to marry the emperor, and from there, the tragic romance that ensues.

*The ending of The Fragrant Consort was absolutely breathtaking. I was bawling during the scenes that depicted the last moments of Consort Rong’s life, the acting was something special. Personally, I can’t stop thinking about those moments where she held the wine that was about to end her life. No words could describe the immeasurable pain in her eyes. The juxtaposition between the emperor that loved and cherished her when she first entered the Forbidden City and the one that didn’t even see her for the last time when the empress dowager granted her death***** is just devastating.*

The funeral procession was also gut-wrenching. You could tell the hurt of the emperor, and the contradicting emotions he had: betrayal and regret. He wanted to remain angry at Consort Rong, but it was obvious that he regretted allowing Consort Rong to die. The chemistry in this show was something we have never seen before.

Overall, this show was definitely a five-star rating for me, I loved it. I can’t wait to see more from the director, he has yet again outdone himself with the orientation of the show. The set design, casting, stylistic camerawork, and so much more were all refreshing to see. His eye for actresses was once again proven by Xiang Fei. Xiao Tao, the actress playing Consort Rong was cast by him...

***** This comes from the term qisi (賜死), meaning to “grant death.” This was a euphemism for essentially forced suicide, a replacement of formal execution.

Act II

“Xiao Tao? Xiao Tao? Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m a bit dizzy, director,” she mutters. “I don’t think... I think I should go home.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

“I’m not sure...”

Stand up.

Ground too close.

That hurt.

Hand on wrist.

Pull up.

Confusion.

Hand on back.

Director.

Director's car.

Camera.

Act VII

"Xiao Tao, the media claims that you have been sent to what has been dubbed as the cold palace for celebrities at this point in your career, what do you think about this matter?"

A swarm of cameras and microphones crowd Xiao Tao's vision. Her skin crawls; it reminds her of a pulsating mass of ants.

"How do you feel about being cast in The Fragrant Consort, only because you slept with the director?"

"Do you feel guilty doing such acts with a married man? Do you have any statement or apology for your fans?"

"Do you believe you have any chance of having a comeback to this industry?"

"The Fragrant Consort did quite well on the premiere, but the reviews are significantly lower now. Do you think you brought down the ratings for The Fragrant Consort because of this scandal? Do you feel remorse for this?"

Xiao Tao surveys the crowd in front of her, silent. She places the brown paper bag of groceries she was carrying onto the ground. She reaches into the handbag that she carries with her and pulls out a phone. Something is pressed into it, and she puts the phone to her ear. The clicking sounds of camera shutters rain down on her.

"Director?" The camera shutter clicks intensify. "Where are you?"

A pause.

"At the convenience store alone? I see. I hope you have a wonderful day."

Act III

Director's bed.

"You've always loved your cameras, didn't you?" Xiao Tao whispers.

Silence.

She turns, eyes glistening, "You planned this from the start didn't you?"

"I'm not a philanthropist, I'm a businessman. You came for the role."

He says this with ease, leaning back on the bed frame.

"When did I ever say-

"Oh don't start on that. You don't talk, you get the role. No one sees anything. No one knows about anything." he pauses. "I'm fairly reasonable. It's not like you don't have anything you can use against me. I have a wife. If you tell anyone she'll know."

"You never saw anything in me."

"Well, I did see your pretty face," he said with a bemused expression.

She starts crying, tears falling silently.

"You're acting like you aren't getting anything out of this. I'm going to make you a star! I'll make you into something, you were

nothing before getting this role. The media? They're already talking about you just because you're in my show! Do you know how many girls throw themselves at me for my roles? Even a fifteen-year-old can understand the rules of this industry. You're twenty already! Does it not make sense to you yet?"

Slowly, his voice fades into the background.

Selah Miller

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Open High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: M. Victoria Carll

Category: Poetry

Religious

In the big building with the big windows
And the unlocked doors that only open for some,
The rows of empty chairs stand waiting
And watching the stage with the tissues on its stairs
And on the stage there stands a pulpit
The crosses dressed in purple stare down the spot
Where the rough men come hunting for souls.
When the chairs fill up with vulnerable faces
The choir or the band will serenade themselves
And the song will never be very good
But you will raise your hands
Because it is the thing to do
And you know that your mom might look favorably your way.
When he takes the stand
That big rough man who comes hunting for your soul
He will spit your fears at you,
That your efforts will not be enough to open those pearly gates
The way your little arms could never open those big unlocked doors.
But you make the efforts just the same.
Devastated each time a prayer doesn't bring forth a palpable answer.
Maybe you won't feel like you're drowning anymore
If they dip your head under the right kind of water.
And people say congratulations and they say you're inspiring
When you're just a seven year old, scared out of her mind.
So when the rough men think they've trapped your soul you can breath,
No longer being hunted. You can look around.
You've been searching for meaning in the walls and the songs
Cause they told you it was there
But you can't find it.
And you're tethered by your fear.
The only scissors I could find are dull
But one day we'll be free.

Clare Mullins

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Shelby Mugford

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Lawless

LAWLESS

Paion's head was spinning. He was laying flat on his back in Hell's Garden, the sun ruthlessly beating down on his face. His wings, broken and battered, were pressed beneath him, throbbing with dull pain. He licked his dry lips, finding himself more parched than he'd ever been before in his life. Paion forced himself to sit up, though he felt like curling up in a ball and disappearing.

An endless, sandy desert known as Hell's Garden was spread before him. The horizon bore no hope of salvation, only a wavering line where the golden sand met the bright blue sky. To his left was a border of sorts, where the sand stopped abruptly and changed to bright, springy green grass. Everything past the first few blades of grass was blurry as if he needed glasses to see it. What he assumed to be a tree had been degraded to a chestnut smear dotted with green at the top. Paion was too tired to reason, to think. All he knew was that he needed water, or food, or some way out of the sun. He rose to his feet, wincing as his sore, blistered feet burned against the scorching sand. Slowly, he limped over to where the sand ended and the grass began. As he approached, he could make out a small, blue blob.

Water. He thought with relief. Paion broke into a run, his soreness forgotten. As he flew past bright green grass, he crashed directly into an incorporeal wall. Dazed, he fell backward onto his back. He felt the dull pain of a bruise forming on his forehead as his head throbbed from the sudden impact. He laid there in the sand, trembling. His mind was still foggy from unconsciousness and fatigue, but he was beginning to piece back information.

Hell's Garden was New Chanistanya's prison. A barren desert surrounded by a ghostly, impenetrable wall. The only way in or out was a powerful key possessed by the current King or Queen. Criminals were thrown into the Garden and perished within days, if that. A perfect system, according to the King. Paion shuddered and rolled over, hugging himself. He felt queasy and disoriented--the sun seemed to only get brighter every second that passed. He tried to unfurl his wings.

Perhaps I could fly over the-- He gagged in pain as he tried to spread his wings. He dared to open his eyes and look at them. His once-majestic albatross wings were mangled and bloodied. Paion's nausea returned at full force and he returned to his curled-up state, using his mutilated wings to shield himself from the harsh light above.

Paion couldn't keep track of the time. He sat in the shade of his ruined wings for what seemed like countless hours, trying to steady his breathing and not focus on his inevitable demise. After what felt like forever, the ringing in his ears had company. A soft patter. Not just a soft pattering, but a familiar sound: the distant clattering of hoofs. Paion urged himself to stand, to shout and wave his arms, but his limbs felt like heavy lead sinking in an ocean, and he could not gather the will to move.

The beating of hoofs grew louder and louder until suddenly, he felt himself being yanked up by his ruined wings. Paion screamed out in pain as he was ruthlessly dragged through the blazing sand. He pried his eyes open to see a tall, bearded man with his large, meaty hands gripping onto him by his wings. He could see the horse that man was riding on was whinnying wildly, leaving a spray of sand behind it as it galloped forwards. Behind them was a pack of about half a dozen riders, all wearing wide-brimmed leather hats and breezy clothes. Paion heard the man laughing, his mocking voice ringing in his ears.

"Let me go!" He shouted, swinging wildly up at the man. Streaks of pain shot through him as the man tightened his grip on his broken wings. Paion raised his legs into the air to keep himself from being dragged across the sand.

Eventually, one of Paion's flailing fists collided with the man and he was dropped. Paion fell on the ground, spraying sand into his eyes. As he tried to rub it out of his eyes, the man and the other riders circled him, their horses rearing from the sudden halt and throwing off a few of the riders. Paion scrambled to his feet, heaving for breath. He didn't understand. Anyone tossed into Hell's Garden died within hours. *How did a group of people manage to survive for this long? Where did they get clothes...and horses?!* Bewildered, Paion stepped backward shakily.

Slowly, one of the horse riders, a young woman with blazing red hair, raised a crudely constructed spear aloft, aiming it at Paion's heart. Abruptly, a loud, piercing cry rang across the desert. It was the most disturbing thing that Paion had ever heard. The only thing he could compare it to was an animal in pain or the scraping of metal against stone. The shrill wail only grew louder and louder, drilling into Paion's ears. As soon as the call began to grow in volume, the color drained from the horse riders' faces, and they instantly turned their horses, fleeing into the desert horizon. Paion clutched his head. The sound grew louder and louder as if the creature making it was drawing nearer to him by the second. Paion squeezed his eyes shut, trying in vain to tune out the abhorrent noise.

As suddenly as the cry had begun, it stopped. Confused and exhausted, Paion opened his eyes. A short figure was standing on the dunes, opposite of the direction in which the horse riders had fled. The black cloak they wore was adorned with beautiful, gold-trimmed shards of amethyst. In tanned hands, they held a small, drill-shaped whistle carved from a wood that Paion didn't recognize. The figure deftly slid down the dune, leaving a long cloud of sand spraying up behind them. Paion turned to run, but his legs buckled beneath him from exhaustion.

"Please, be not afraid, my friend." The figure pulled back the hood to reveal a kind, androgynous face with warm, chestnut eyes. Well-kempt curly brown hair was kept back in a ponytail. A few scars on their face and their crooked nose betrayed hints of a violent past.

"Who are you?" Paion called out hoarsely.

"Oh..!" The figure chuckled. "Please, pardon my manners. The name's Ulixes." They continued, drawing nearer to Paion. With quick fingers, they untied the cloak around themselves and held it out to Paion. "Here, take this. You are not accustomed to the heat of the garden."

Paion eyed Ulixes with suspicion but took the cloak. It was made of the scaled, leathery hide of an animal he did not recognize. He draped it over himself, shocked to find that it cooled him off immediately under its shade.

"...Good to meet you. I'm Paion."

"Nifty, right?" Ulixes grinned. "I was lucky enough to find the body of a recently deceased Night Wyrms. Their hide is incredibly heat-deterrent." Paion shook his head, unsure if he had misheard them.

"What? You're...please tell me you aren't serious."

"Hm?"

"You said...you said that this cloak's made from the hide of a *Night Wyrms*." Paion echoed, running his fingers over the scaly cloak. He refused to acknowledge that it did resemble the drawings he'd seen of the beasts. "Those things went extinct a long, long time ago."

"I wish," Ulixes said with troubling earnestness.

"What do you mean? That's impossible. What you're saying is impossible--" Paion trailed off, his dry throat failing him.

"Here," Ulixes generously produced a small flask of water from their pocket. Paion silently thanked them and drank the flask in a single swig. Significantly more refreshed, he continued.

"The Night Wyrms are all dead," Paion stated. "We exterminated them hundreds of years ago."

"I'm afraid you've been misled. The rulers of New Chanistanya hold more secrets than they let on. It's true that we nearly extinguished them, yes, but two young Wyrms were left alive. The queen at that time decided to banish them to Hell's Garden, probably because that was less of a hassle than killing them." Ulixes leaned back and put their hands in their pockets. "So, the next thing you know," They shrugged. "We've got a population of Night Wyrms in the Garden. That's why I have a whistle to mimic their call," Ulixes held up the whistle that they had blown previously. "Everyone here knows what it is and to be afraid of it."

Paion was trembling. Not only was he banished to the deadliest place in the world, but there was also a thriving population of terrifying creatures that could swoop down and devour him at any second.

"You look injured," Ulixes observed. "We should return to camp. Herta can get you patched up." They took Paion by the wrist and began guiding him over the dune that they had come from. As they trekked across the seemingly endless expanse of sand, Paion couldn't help but ask Ulixes questions.

"How do you *survive* out here?"

"Oh, well, most people form communities to make hunting and gathering easier. Those horse-riders are a good example. They're led by that man with the beard, Tiberius. Bunch of ruffians, them. They like to raid other communities. Tiberius is a first-gen. Explains a lot, heh."

"What? 'First-gen?'"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ulixes said. "That was rude of me. I'm not trying to imply that all first-generation prisoners are violent."

"...Are you implying that...what, some people are...are *born* here?"

Ulixes chuckled. "Well, yes. I'm third generation. My grandfather was the one banished here, not me. I've lived here for my entire life." Paion blinked at Ulixes. He couldn't imagine living his whole life in a barren, scorched desert with

no way out. Ulixes turned away and continued to walk eastward at a brisk pace.

“So...you’re a part of a community, too?”

“I’m the leader of a community. Well, currently. We vote every year.” Ulixes explained. “I’ve won four years in a row, unopposed.” They added with a hint of pride. Paion nodded as they trudged onwards, trying to ignore the aching pain of his shattered wings and his blistered feet. The sun traveled past their heads as they walked onwards. The Night Wyrms cloak certainly helped to cool him down, but Paion’s stomach growled with hunger and Ulixes’ small flask didn’t have enough water to quench him.

“I’m glad you found me,” Paion said, breaking the hour-long silence that had gone by. “I’m pretty sure that the horse-riders were going to kill me.” Ulixes nodded.

“Most likely, yes. Their camp is located near the border, just so they can kill and loot any injured prisoners who get tossed through. The rare few that are unhurt upon entry join them. I’m afraid that they weren’t interested in inducting you, in your wounded state. You’re lucky I was scavenging nearby.”

Paion made a sour expression. “Who’d ever want to follow that meat-headed brute?”

“Don’t be deceived, Paion. Tiberius is more clever than he seems. And he’s much more persuasive of a man when he’s looking for recruits.” Ulixes said. “Ah, look!” They exclaimed suddenly, pointing at the horizon. Paion squinted. He could spy the faint outline of two blocky shapes. Ulixes broke into a trot, and Paion hobbled behind them as fast as he could manage, spurred by hunger, weariness, and thirst.

As they grew closer, the shapes revealed themselves to be two large silken tents with beautiful embroideries, surrounded by four other, smaller tents. They finally reached the dune that the tents rested upon.

“I’m back!” Ulixes called out. The once ghost-like camp exploded into activity as a person came running out of the largest tent. She was a beautiful, tall, middle-aged woman with silver earrings and charcoal black hair that snaked down to her ankles.

“Ulixes, who is this? Why is he wearing your cloak?” The woman asked.

“Paion, meet Herta,” Ulixes said, motioning to the woman. “Herta, meet Paion. He was tossed in a few hours prior, I think. Tiberius and his posse were attacking him, so I blew the whistle.” Herta nodded and approached Paion. She furrowed her brows as she inspected him head to toe. With delicate fingers, she gently took the edge of his wing and began to spread it.

“Tell me when this hurts,” She said.

“...Ow...ow, ow, *ouch*, stop, please!” Paion cried out in pain suddenly as she spread his wing.

“Unideal.” The woman commented to herself as she began to look over all of the bruises and cuts Paion possessed. She clapped her hands together. “Well, Mister Paion, it seems that your wings are broken, you have severe sunburns and are dangerously dehydrated and exhausted.” Herta rattled off. “But fear not--I have herbs and equipment that shall ensure you a speedy recovery. Please, follow me.” She turned on her heel and began to walk up towards the largest tent. Paion followed as fast as he could, eager to lay down and rest.

The tent was far larger than it had appeared from a distance, a tall, cream-white silk color. Embroideries of herbs and flowers Paion didn’t recognize decorated the hem of the tent, which flapped in the faint wind of the Garden. Paion followed Herta into the tent, about ready to fall over. Countless shelves stocked with bottled liquids and bundles of plants were on one side of the tent. The other had four cots, one of them occupied by a sleeping figure facing the wall. Paion took a seat on one of the springy cots. It felt like the softest, plushiest beds that he’d ever had the pleasure of sitting on. Herta rummaged around through the shelves and brought back a spoon, a mystery bottle, and a metal flask. She carefully poured out a spoonful of the unknown liquid. The dark purple liquid was reminiscent of wine if wine were made of stars. It shimmered like nothing he’d ever seen before--gleaming in the late afternoon sun that streamed through the tent.

“Take this,” Herta ordered, handing him the spoon. Paion obeyed, eager to taste the mysterious substance and quench his thirst. It tasted quite bitter, to Paion’s disappointment. It had a strange sensation, fizzling in his mouth and stinging his throat as he swallowed it. A few moments later, he felt the same prickling sensation in his wings, in his ribs, in his arms, in every bone in his body. Paion shivered at the uncomfortable sensation. Herta handed him the flask.

“Doesn’t alcohol make you *more* dehydrated?” Paion asked as he took the flask.

“It’s not liquor, it’s medicine. Specifically, my great-grandmother’s recipe. It is a mixture of several native plants--”

“*Plants?* I haven’t seen a single blade of grass in this wasteland.”

“That’s because you’ve yet to see the underground of Hell’s Garden. It’s lushier than you would think. Plenty of useful plants and roots, and a decent amount of springs.” Herta explained as Paion opened the flask. He grimaced--if the concoction in the flask tasted anything like the previous medicine, it was going to be unpleasant. Herta noticed his hesitation. “Well, what are you waiting for, lad? Down the hatch,” She said, tapping her foot. Paion sighed and drank the flask. It reminded him of foul, extremely minty milk. Halfway through downing the flask, Paion nearly spat it out.

"I know it tastes terrible," Herta said with genuine empathy. "But it will make you feel much, much better when the morning comes, I promise you." Channeling all of his resolve, Paion managed to choke down the rest of the vile brew. Herta left the tent for a few moments, returning with a cup of water.

"You must be thirsty after lying outside in the sun for so long." She said, giving him the cup. Paion thanked her profusely and quickly drank the water. It was clear and cold, washing away the foul taste of the medicine. "Rest well," Herta remarked. She turned and abruptly walked out of the tent without another word of goodbye. As Herta left, she closed the entry flap to the tent, enveloping Paion in rich darkness. It was only until a few seconds passed that he realized that he was still wearing Ulixes' cloak. A bit embarrassed that he'd forgotten to return it, he took it off and folded it, placing it on one of the empty cots. As Paion crept back to the cot he'd been assigned, he felt himself growing even more tired. Every step, he felt the weight of the day pressing down on him. He laid on the cot on his stomach, so as to not hurt his wings, and instantly felt himself drifting off into sleep.

He was trapped in Hell's Garden, the harshest, most ruthless place in the world. Night Wyrms flew against the cold, starry skies, shrieking at the moon as they scanned the horizon for prey. Tiberius and his pack were out there, somewhere, tending to their horses and preparing to jump any poor soul who was tossed through the gates.

Hell's Garden certainly has no shortage of horrors. Paion thought as he buried himself in the soft sheets *But it has no shortage of beauty, either.* Paion called the rolling, golden slopes to mind, the gorgeous, cloudless blue sky. The kindness of Ulixes, of Herta. *How could I ever repay them?* He asked himself. Ulixes' words clung to him. *'My grandfather was the one banished here, not me. I've lived here for my entire life.'*

Paion felt a feeling of resolve in him--a new goal. Break down the walls of Hell's Garden and escape. Show Ulixes and their crew what the outside world looked like.

I won't make you regret saving me. He thought, determined, as he slowly fell into a deep sleep.

Kevin Omohundro

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Christopher's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Water

The water looked like mud. It was so thick that anyone drinking it would ingest more dirt than water, and I had to pump enough through my filter to sustain twelve people. Leaning over the disgusting liquid and trying not to fall in, I stuck the filter tube under the surface, the end immediately vanishing from sight. I began to pump. After fifteen minutes, the bag with the clean water was noticeably tinted brown—undrinkable.

This was my first day of a 40-mile trek through Philmont Scout Ranch in the wilderness of Cimarron, New Mexico. I was the second-youngest Scout on the trip, but I was also the Crew Leader for the trek, as elected by my peers. I was terrified.

I'd always known that clean water is an issue for a huge number of people, but I was not prepared for how it felt to tell my crew that we would not have any clean water that day, and that we would need to ration until we reached the next campsite.

"Sorry guys, but it looks like we're not gonna have any fresh water today. We still need water for dinner, so everyone needs to share some so we can cook. If you need extra, let me know."

From our first days in Scouting, we're taught to "Be Prepared," the Scout Motto. School intensifies this sentiment, with preparation being the go-to for quizzes, tests, or exams. I'll admit that knowing the material is helpful for an AP exam, and if I had forgotten the water pump entirely, we would have been in a much worse situation, but preparation isn't everything. That night, we dealt with the problem by sharing what we did have, and no one was too thirsty by the time we got fresh water.

Four days later...after bee stings, lightning storms, ripped clothes, and altitude sickness, we made it to the top of Baldy Mountain. It was the main goal of our trek, both because it is the steepest and most difficult hike on the reservation, and for many people because it's the only place on the ranch with cell coverage. There really is nothing like making an Instagram post at 12,441 feet, wind whipping at your face, miles of wilderness in all directions.

After spending time at the summit, we made our way down, passing groups going up. One of these groups approached us. Immediately, I could tell something was wrong: They had not brought enough water to make it through their trip, and wondered if we had any extra, so that they wouldn't have to turn back. After the first day's complications, we were wary of sharing such a valuable resource, but in the end my crew's opinion was unanimous: we should donate what we can. We gave them half our water, leaving us with a meager amount with five miles to go.

These challenges at Philmont gave me a new perspective on the fact that hundreds of millions of people live without clean water on a daily basis, and this new perspective kindled my desire to make a difference. Since Philmont, I have dedicated my volunteering to benefit the James River, I have run around Belle Isle, and I have rafted down my favorite sections of the river, the James becoming a perfect resource that I had rarely used before.

Philmont ended up being an incredible experience; not because I was completely in control of the trip due to my preparation, but because of the difficulties that we overcame in the moment both as individuals and as a crew and the opening of my mind to the global challenges arising from the lack of clean water. When I walked up to that muddy creek at the first campsite on my trek, I never would have expected that the experience would change my life.

That's life, though: unexpected.

Hailey M Pierce

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

A Letter to Otherkin

Personhood is constructed.
So do not whimper when the public doesn't see you as a person.
Your humanity may only be physical,
In that your hands shiver and crust without shaggy dirty fur,
Your body, fragile and cracked in the sun.

The world fears progress and the breaking of uniformity.
Normals like snowflakes carrying symmetrical white spears,
The troops marching tenfold in a circular motion.
Those who are afraid of your mask ripping off,
Are the ones accepting that humans can't be monsters,
That animals have no souls.

And one day, the time might come where you are all accepted.
So do not whimper when the world doesn't see you as you.

Marshall Purvis

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA

Educator: Shannon Cassano

Category: Dramatic Script

The Coma Procedure

"ACT 1

Scene 1

(Standing in the dark with their head down and a bag over it is JAMES. A projection screen or something of the sort lowers onto the back half of the stage, behind her. After a beat, the projector itself powers to life, showing the following slideshow:

"In the year 2062, government became obsolete"

(beat, transition to next slide)

"All forms of crime near vanished, keeping the average civilian safe."

(beat, next slide)

"It was a utopia."

(beat, next slide)

"To many older generations, it seemed impossible, not without strings attached."

(beat, next slide)

"But the question was not if there was strings, but rather what to do with them."

(beat, next slide)

"And so I present:"

(beat, reveal next line of text)

"The Coma Procedure"

The projector powers down, and the lights onstage power up, putting JAMES's bagged head in full view of the crowd. JAMES comes to life, moving around a pantomime kitchen.)

JESSIE:

(Offstage)

Hurry up Cynthia, we wanna start at midnight on the dot!

JAMES:

I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying.

JESSIE:

I have a bowl of popcorn and your first R-Rated film waiting just for the birthday girl!

(JAMES's movements slow.)

JAMES:

I've actually been wondering about this whole thing.

(JESSIE enters the stage and grabs her by the shoulders, softly massaging.)

JESSIE:

It's growing up. We all have to do it, and at least you get to do it with your best friend.

JAMES:

(turning around reluctantly)

Jess, I have something to say.

JESSIE:

Spit it out then, the popcorn's getting soggy.

JAMES:

I get that we've been friends since like 9th grade, but i- well, you see, i-

JESSIE:

If this is about Mark, it's totally fine that you're dating him now. And it's also fine if you want to break up, me and him are just friends now. It's all up to you, Cynth.

JAMES:

No Jess, I need to say that I love-

(The lights power down with a large mechanical sound, and JESSIE exits.)

JAMES:

Jessie? Jess-

(A spotlight beams directly onto JAMES's face and a multitude of mechanical sounds like clanging and whirring play in the background as the projection screen raises. SAM enters, and begins to attempt to wrestle the bag off of a resisting JAMES's head.)

SAM:

Arms at your sides, kiddo. Don't make this hard, I got 20 more to go before lunch.

JAMES:

What the hell are you doing! Where's Jessie? I-

(SAM finally gets the bag off of her head, and JAMES throws her hands in front of her eyes as the rest of the lights go up. SAM takes a step back and puts his hands behind him.)

SYSTEM:

Hello *(robotic speech)* James, *(back to normal speech)* I'm happy that you've come to join us.

JAMES:

My name isn't-

SYSTEM:

If you could please remain silent while I brief you on your quote unquote "new" life. It is of great importance that you understand and retain the knowledge.

JAMES:

But I-

SYSTEM:

Reply "Affirmative" to agree.

JAMES:

I can't- fine, affirmative.

SYSTEM:

Good! Now, *(robotic)* James, *(back)* for the past two years you have been living inside The System, a state-of-the-art virtual reality designed to accommodate your needs and provide you with a streamlined yet perfect adolescent experience. Sadly, due to laws structured within my programming, at age 18 I am required to release you into the quote unquote "real" world to live out your life to the quote unquote "fullest". Due to the high-dopamine nature of the system, you may have noticed that your body had been altered within to provide you with maximum happiness.

Depending on the features you were given, you may be able to regain them living out your life in the real world, through rigorous training and/or performance enhancing substances. Physical body aside, you have retained your thoughts and memories, although it is important to keep in mind that individuals in the system may not bear any resemblance to any sort of outside counterparts and/or doppelgangers. Now, if you would give me a second to pull up my mental files on you?

(beat)

Ah, that makes sense. Would you please consent to a survey?

JAMES:

I don't know what- fine, I'll do your survey.

SYSTEM:

Very well. *(robotic)* James *(back)* have you had any experience with mental illnesses or other threats to your mental health within the system?

JAMES:

No?

SYSTEM:

Affirmative or negative?

JAMES:

Negative.

SYSTEM:

Did you have anyone close to you within the system?

JAMES:

Affirmative?

SYSTEM:

Who?

JAMES:

A best friend named Jessie, two foster parents, Josh and Evonne Flynn, and a couple other friends. Are they out here?

SYSTEM:

Negative. How has their loss affected you?

JAMES:

A lot? Like, a hell of a lot? I haven't gotten a chance to, like-

SYSTEM:

Have you ever consumed mental stimulants? Drugs, alcohol, etc.?

JAMES:

I guess no, can we get back to-

SYSTEM:

Affirmative or negative, please.

JAMES:

Negative, but-

SYSTEM:

Would you consider using them and other pharmaceuticals in the future to aid with mental health?

JAMES:

Negative, I mean I don't really like the idea-

SYSTEM:

Finally, is there any physical features you had in the System that you would like us to guide you through retaining?

JAMES:

I mean, yeah,-shit- affirmative, I used to be female!

SYSTEM:

Very well. You have been deemed unredeemed, you have 3 days. I hope you enjoy your stay in the Storage Chambers, ask *(robotic)* Samuel *(back)* if you need any help, I will be checking back in.

(A sound similar to headphones being unplugged is heard, and a couple seconds of silence remains.

SAM steps forward and places a hand on JAMES's shoulder.)

SAM:

C'mon kid, let's get you to your chambers.

(Fade to black)"

- Excerpt

PURVIS, MARSHALL

Marshall Purvis

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA

Educator: Kathryn Mayes

Category: Humor

Seen

SEEN

A Farce in One Act

(normally my name would be here but I don't believe that's allowed for the competition)

(Contact Information)

CHARACTERS:

CHRIS: 18, owns a fake ID but still has to invite himself to parties, which I believe tells you just about all you need to know.

KEV: 17, the type of person to say "I lurve you guyyyyysss so much you'rrreee like my favwrit peepel" after a single sip of alcohol. He always prioritizes those around him, but never really listens to what they actually need, so he mostly just gives out corny inspirational quotes as advice.

FRANK: 18, sits slightly outside of the circle in every friend group and just listens to what other people say most of

the time. Would *like* to be nice and popular, but he doesn't quite get social cues, so at some point in his past he just gave up on social interactions completely.

SEEN: Believes himself to be the purifier of sin, the Arbiter of Good and the Slayer of Evil. Kinda a dick.

SCENE 1:

The lights come up onstage. The only pieces of furniture are the wooden chairs that the characters are sat in. The only visible objects are a whiteboard and pen leaned against FRANK's chair, a pocketknife clearly taped beneath KEV's, and a safe next to CHRIS's. Written on the whiteboard is the code 602540. Various Puzzles are littered across the floor. A bomb with a clearly red wire is set up in the background.

A microphone rotates counterclockwise on a coffee table in the center, next to a gun. CHRIS (with a bloody bandage over his eyes, currently barely asleep), sits SR. FRANK (with a bloody bandage over his mouth is just kinda staring), sits SC and upstage, and finally KEV (with blood leaking from his ears is still heavily knocked out) sits SL.

On the second rotation, CHRIS stirs. He tests his bonds groggily, stretching against the tape binding his legs and torso to the chair.

CHRIS:

Where in the fuck am I? Why can't I- MY EYES! MY FUCKING EYES ARE GONE!

The mic rotates to FRANK, who turns his disinterested gaze to CHRIS freaking out, and then rotates past KEV and back to CHRIS while he says his lines.

CHRIS:

AM I DEAD? IS THIS WHAT HEAVEN IS? Or wait- I don't deserve heaven. Is this hell? It actually seems decent enough for hell, like I really expected more fire-

A loud buzzer sounds, and the intercom system turns on. A figure in the sound booth puts a mic up to his mask.

SEEN:

You are in a hell, of sorts. Your own personal one. I wanted to wait for your third friend to awake, but I suppose I'll start now. I have cut out your eyes.

CHRIS:

What the fuck, man. I mean, I don't wanna be that guy, but my dad's wife had sex with Jeff Bezos, so you're like lowkey fucked now, dude.

SEEN:

If you have stopped talking, I can further explain your... situation. You three have led sinful lives. Your gluttony has cost the world more than you could even imagine, and I'm here to make you pay.

CHRIS:

I don't know if you heard the Bezos thing, but I can totally pay whatever you want, man. I even work side jobs, so I could hook you up with free regal tickets if you want.

SEEN:

It's more about the immaterial things. The pain you have caused people. For instance, your friend, Kev, is it? He never truly listened, always going in despite what anyone around him ever said, causing death and disappointment. So I took from him his ears. Frank, he never spoke up for those that suffered, just simply watched. So I took from him his tongue. And you, the worst of all, never saw those around you as people, using and abusing them for your own gain. So, I took away your eyes.

CHRIS and FRANK seem to think.

CHRIS:

Wait, that's not how that works at all.

SEEN:

What?

CHRIS:

You did it wrong. You took away the wrong things.

SEEN:

How?

CHRIS:

You were supposed to take away the things we relied on. Like, you would take away my mouth and Frank's, like, hands or something. The way you did it is objectively the least punishing.

SEEN:

Well I don't think you're quite getting it-

CHRIS:

No, I get it, it's just that, like, Frank is gonna come out of this fine. I mean, I'm gonna be blind, which kinda sucks, but like it's not my biggest problem. I can still, like, fuck bitches blind. Actually, I might have sex with statistically more women.

SEEN:

Well once Kev wakes up I can explain why that won't happen.

CHRIS:

Ok wait did you cut off my di-

FRANK has thrown a pebble at the side of KEV's head, causing him to flail around and scream.

KEV:

WHERE AM I, WHAT'S HAPPENING, WHERE'S GOD, IS THERE A GOD? WHY DID I DEVOTE MY LIFE TO A RELIGION WITHOUT EXPLICIT REASSURANCE AS TO THE NATURE OF HEAVEN, WHY CAN'T I- Oh hi Chris.

CHRIS:
Thank god, we can start now.

KEV:
What? Oh hi Frank!

FRANK waves

KEV:
What's with the bandages?

SEEN:
I will tell you what's with the bandages.

SEEN laughs maniacally while KEV remains unresponsive.

KEV:
Can you guys hear me?

SEEN:
Ah shit.

CHRIS:
I don't know what you expected, man. You deafened him.

SEEN:
Oh wait, I planned for this one. Frank, there's a whiteboard against your chair.

FRANK picks up the whiteboard and sets it on his lap, code side down.

KEV:
Ayo what're the numbers on that?

FRANK flips over the whiteboard, but half of the numbers have been smudged or removed at this point. He shrugs.

SEEN:
You ruined the fucking NUMBERS?

KEV:
Dammit, bro, you smudged the numbers. This is obviously some sort of saw trap. You mighta just killed us, man.

The whole room goes silent. FRANK shrugs.

KEV:
It's ok, dude, no biggie. So is there, like, a guide here?

SEEN:
Can you please write down that he's deaf on the board? This is honestly just frustrating at this point.

CHRIS:
Yeah, like watching a puppy run into a glass door. Except for that I can't see. And there's no door, I'd assume. And if there was, it wouldn't be glass probably. Honestly the only similarity is that Kev's a bitch.

FRANK writes down "Chris thinks you're a bitch" on the board and shows it to KEV.

KEV:
What the heck, man.

CHRIS:
Did Frank write that down?

SEEN:
Yes.

CHRIS:
Goddammit Frank.

SEEN:
Ok, i'm gonna say the rules now. We all good? Frank, you gonna write this down?

FRANK softly shakes his head.

SEEN:
Fucking wonderful.

CHRIS is disgusted, FRANK seems intrigued, and KEV is wildly confused.

So basically the deal is, in the center of the room, on the table with the rotating stand, is a gun. Fully loaded. The deal is, if one person dies I let you free. If not, I'll make it much more than one person, by like- by exploding the- listen, I'll just blow the room up, ok?. You have 5 minutes. Time starts now.

(He presses a button up in the booth, and puts his head in his hands)
dammit, what the fuck am i doing here, man. I suck at this.

(he pauses)

Oh fucking hell. Why would the mute button *not* be the red microphone? That makes no-
(He presses a button in the booth. The microphone mutes.)

Everyone just kinda looks around.

CHRIS:
Y'know, for a dude with the ability to blow a room up, he didn't sound terribly confident about his ability to blow the room up.

FRANK nods

KEV:
What?

CHRIS:
Like, one would think he'd feel safer in his masculinity than this, right? He cut out my eyes, for christ's sake.

FRANK shrugs

KEV:
What?

CHRIS:
I mean, it almost genuinely makes me think that maybe he-

KEV:
What?

CHRIS:
Ok, Frank, can you please ask him to stop saying what? It's getting on my nerves.

FRANK flips him off

KEV:
Why did Frank just flip you off?

CHRIS:
Frank, why am I still friends with you. Like, honestly.

FRANK shrugs

CHRIS:
Cause you do this shit all the time. Remember sophomore Hoco? I asked you to- Well, I ask you to do shit all the time, and you screw it up. And not in the like, accidental way, like, I know you *can* do things, cause I know that you can do shit, but you always- you always like fuck it up, just for me! And it feels very antagonistic.

FRANK shrugs

KEV:
You should look in that safe.

CHRIS:
What sa- (feeling around) Holy shit! There's a safe!

CHRIS picks it up and messes with it, FRANK stares at him.

KEV:
Oh wait, that's what the numbers were for!

SEEN:
Of course that's what the fucking numbers were for, you dumbass.

CHRIS:
Wait, the ones you guys messed up? Dammit, guys, you killed us!

FRANK shrugs and writes "WE = DEAD" on the board, and shows it to KEV

KEV:
Ah, don't be such a debbie downer, we'll be fine.

CHRIS:
Kev, we are literally going to die. And if I get free and have to choose who to kill, I'm choosing you.

FRANK shows KEV a board saying "He hates you more now"

KEV:
C'mon, Chris, cheer up! It's like a puzzle room! By the way, were the rules of this explained yet?

CHRIS:
YES, dude! Oh my god, I'm gonna have a stroke. Jigsaw knockoff, you are the fucking worst.

SEEN:
I'm honestly not even proud at this point.

CHRIS:

Well- you shouldn't be.

SEEN:

Like, from my point of view, this was already a failure. You smudged the numbers, for god's sake.

KEV:

Oh wait, (Facepalms) I took a lip reading class! Oh my god, that is gonna be so handy! Chris, say something.

CHRIS:

I'm gonna kill you first.

KEV:

He said "I love you"! Or maybe "Olive Juice"? I can never tell the difference...

CHRIS:

I take it back, I'm killing myself first.

FRANK writes "he's killing himself" on the board

KEV:

Ohh, don't do thaaatt.

CHRIS:

It's becoming a better option by the minute.

SEEN:

No, wait, if you do that it ruins the trap.

CHRIS:

Why do you keep assuming we care about the integrity of your jigsaw trag?

SEEN:

(mumbling)

I dunno, I thought maybe you wanted to play a game

CHRIS:

Well I don't want to play the game. I am actively opposed to playing the game. It's a stupid fucking game, dude. It has no originality, no, like, fun twists or shit, and it's structure hinged on somebody not smearing some numbers on a
FUCKING WHITEBOARD!

KEV:

Listen, dude, I can read lips, and while I get that AVE stocks are at an all time high, you need to bring that energy to an all time low! We have a saw trap to escape.

CHRIS:

You've gotta be fucking kidding me.

SEEN:

Okay, honestly, I'm basically done with this whole trap thing. I think it's better for everyone if I just detonate the bomb. At this point, it just feels like a favor.

CHRIS:

NO! DON'T DETONATE IT! I NEED TO CALL MY DAD!

FRANK looks vaguely uninterested.

KEV:

What's happening?

SEEN:

Ok, Frank, be a dear and please write down on the board that he's about to die. I wanna get everyone's last words sorted out.

FRANK doesn't

CHRIS:

Please, man. I just wanna have sex like once. I'm a virgin, bro...

FRANK writes "He's a virgin"

KEV:

Forreal? Wow, I assumed cause of the attitude and everything you had sex a lot.

CHRIS:

(defeated)

Don't rub it in, Kev.

KEV:

And don't you talk about it like all the time? And wait, what about that time you said you got wild with Jessica after prom?

CHRIS:

I wanted to seem cool, man. She dumped me and I went to Taco Bell to drown in Baja Blast.

SEEN:

Jesus, this is sad. Yeah, I'm just gonna put on the music and blow the place.

CHRIS:

Music?

SEEN:

I was thinkin about how cool it would be to kill sinners with like a baller song in the background. Do you guys listen to lil darkie?

CHRIS:

...what the fuck, man... What'd we even do...

SEEN:

Remember that party you guys went to last night? That rager?

CHRIS:

Yeah?

SEEN:

You didn't invite me.

They sit in silence.

CHRIS:

That's a stupid reason and you're a prick.

SEEN:

Ooh! Here's the music! I can't hear you-

I'LL MAKE LOVE TO YOU by Boyz II Men begins to play

SEEN:

Not really what I- ah, fuck it.

A bomb timer starts ticking down in the background. The figure walks out of the sound booth.

CHRIS:

Listen, guys. I get we're gonna die. I'm ready to accept that. But I want you to know that you mean a lot to me. You're so much more than my friends. And even though I bitch and I moan, when it comes down to it, I would give up my life for either one of you.

FRANK wipes a tear from his eye. The room goes silent except for the ticking and the song.

KEV:

Ok, I couldn't lipread any of that, so if you could say it slowly, or- oh wait, Frank is actually writing it this time.

Thanks, bud. I really hope we find a way outta this, cause I don't wanna be stuck here forever, y'know? Like, genuinely, the last thing I wanna do is get stuck in one place. That's a nightmare. And I hope that when we do get out, you guys can come to my house for dinner one last time, cause with college, and everyone moving away and all, I just really wanna make sure we have some good memories before we go...

CHRIS cries a little, and FRANK is still furiously writing.

KEV:

Sorry to bring down the mood, I just- Is that a wire cutter?

SEEN:

(from outside the building)

HOLY SHIT, THE AMAZON COPS?!?

Blackout, everything explodes. WOULD'N'T IT BE NICE by The Beach Boys starts playing, at the chorus.

Fin.

Marshall Purvis

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA

Educator: Peter Barringer

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

What Makes Me Lose Track of Time

Time. What is it? I have not the faintest clue. And often, like many others, I am at a loss to define the term. It is a contentious subject, after all, no other concept can be loved and despised in such a way. Free time is boring, until it becomes used time, but if you have a sense of time used, it in some ways becomes boring once again, which leaves us with a single goal: to lose track of it. We all have that one activity that makes us lose track of time, a hobby or particularly engaging task that draws your attention away from the ever-present ebb and flow of the universe. And for me, that hobby is writing.

Writing is not only a beautiful art form in and of itself, but also my personal main form of expression. For I have no skill when it comes to painting, drawing, hell, even music. Name an instrument, I could not tell you a thing about how it operates and most definitely could not use it myself. So, once I realized my absurd lack of artistic skill, I simultaneously realized that my creative spirit was not dampened at all by an inability to indulge it, and I turned to the one art form that requires no skill whatsoever: free verse poetry. This was my first way to lose track of time. I would fill page after page with insipid metaphor and withering simile, and for a while I would be proud, but soon the lack of structure got to me. So I switched to novels.

Now, to be clear, I have never finished a novel. I have started 5, none of which had a single redeeming quality. Some have been praised by English teachers, almost solely because of my willingness to participate in writing in any way, shape, or form. Others I have simply kept to myself, because even my hopelessly ignorant mind can recognize when pressure is put upon it, and my mind despises pressure. So, writing became a more personal thing.

As it transitioned to a more personal thing, I decided to go back closer to my roots. Poetry I can finish. But poetry did not hold the same magic back then, so I instead tried for a short story format, and absolutely succeeded in terms of captivating myself. These stories had structure, but felt not unlike poems, with every word debated and examined. It truly felt as though I was creating something beautiful. On a similar note, I later discovered that short stories could come in the form of screen and stage plays, which managed to tie in my current academic focus as well. It was at this point that I received far too much encouragement from those around me, and decided that this would be my new career goal.

As one might expect, this goal did not last long. That is not to say that I do not still write, I absolutely do and there is still so many more genres and styles to explore, but at some point one must see that their musings do not quite live up to those they idolize, and at another, later point, they must see that they do not even live up to the standards of more average, contemporary artists. The fact is, there is no money in bad art, and not everyone can create stories worth sharing. And so I lay in rest, my mind spitting out the occasional monologue or sentence in Iambic pentameter, which I hardly bother to record. But still, even in death, writing succeeds in busying my mind.

Marshall Purvis

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA

Educator: Peter Barringer

Category: Flash Fiction

Pension

Pension. My pension was due today. I dashed downstairs, check in hand, nervous as always. Couldn't be late of course. Nervous as always.

"Pension is due!" I yell to my roommate, Harold, as I breeze past the door, nearly misaligning my hand. Deadlines make me nervous. Pension day even moreso.

"Today?!" He shot up from his seat, heels sparking against the floor.

I could feel him rushing behind me but I was far too nervous to look back. Pension was due.

I rushed down the street, pushing past people, feet cracking the stone, sending out a panicked cacophony. The bell began to chime, and I began to fear, but the Room was just down the street.

Throwing open the door, I ran into the Collection Room. A man stood by, waiting.

"Pension is due" The man said. He had a mask covering his full face. Masks make me nervous.

"I know."

"Good. You look nervous."

"I am nervous. Pension is due."

I looked behind and couldn't see Harold. Suppose he went to write his check. I felt nervous for him now.

The man in the mask shut the door with a decisive click.

"Deadline reached." He stated calmly.

I gulped.

The man in the mask guided me to a back room. Back rooms have always made me nervous, but my right eye readjusted to the dark quickly enough.

He sat me down on a chair. I handed him my check. It was slightly damp with liquid, for I was nervous.

"Your last carpal ligament and a lateral deltoid? You're a generous man, Mr. Reid"

I shivered as he placed restraints on my flesh-clad wrist, then my metal one.

"I'll see it back someday?"

The man in the mask hoisted his drill-akin object above his head in preparation.

"65, I believe. That's when you should be seeing returns."

It was laying there, strapped to a leather chair, that I had an unusual thought. One I had never had before.

"You think the Pension program will still be active by then?"

"Of course, Mr. Reid" The Masked Man responded, turning a dial with utmost focus. "I can't possibly see why it would fail. The Pension Program, if nothing else, can be trusted."

I sure hoped so. Gazing down upon myself, it didn't seem I had much more to give.

Marshall Purvis
Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA
Educator: Peter Barringer

Category: Poetry

Poems from the Busy City

*One who is lonely is blind
many, many lives
run parallel
So be rest assured, whilst you stare at the moon,
someone always admires the setting sun:*

RHYMED VERSE FROM THE STREET:

*'Tis a well known hypocrisy,
yet it's never less distressing,
to see the beggar craft joy for the poor,
whilst the rich fluff feather bedding.*

NARRATIVE POETRY ON A BLACKOUT:

*When the bus shuts down, the city goes dark, every bulb has burst.
The People begin to panic,
The world is torn with worry.
But a man still rests his hand upon,
The shoulder of a shivering child,
And thus, though not previously bonded by blood or by skin,
They bonded that day.
The day that the city went dark.*

AN ODE TO THE WEALTHY:

*A life of copious sin still weighs
heavy upon a beating heart,
even if that sin was twice removed.
Guilt, you can't outsmart.
'Life on high! Life on high!'
Your peers may gloat with glee.
But life on high, won't satisfy,
for bloat can't give rest to thee.*

FREE VERSE FROM A CHIMNEY SWEEP:

*'Why?' He called, his face abused by beating sun
'Why must you deal me this hand?
I must clean, there are so many above me!'
But the sky was silent.*

A HAIKU FOR THE SILENT MANY:

*A simple joy, yes
But oft, no less satisfied
Are those who listen*

...

Marshall Purvis

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Dale High School, Chester, VA

Educator: Shannon Cassano

Category: Short Story

The Hole

The Hole

Dr. Robbins was an esteemed Archaeologist, and he had just gotten the most interesting tip.

He paced around the stone platform, examining the inscriptions with great interest.

“Runes from an unknown culture...” he mumbled, nibbling on his eraser. “Possibly get a more local translator in here?”

He walked up the stairs to the raised platform, and found something of even greater interest.

“A... hole?”

Dr. Robbins crouched over it, measuring with his eyes.

“Odd hole, seems to be the epicenter of the structure, as though it was built around the hole in the first place. I’d assume... outhouse? Odd that it’s set so high... And the radius looks to be about 2 feet, far too large... Depth is-”

He took a glow stick from his satchel, cracked it, and tossed it in.

It fell for an inordinately long time, and eventually he lost sight of it. It never seemed to hit the ground.

“Unidentifiable? Oh boy.”

Dr. Robbins paced atop the stone platform, circling the lip, searching for some sort of information.

“Seems to be completely- *urk!*”

His foot comes to rest on a loose stone brick, and it comes free and falls down the hole. His foot follows it, and despite his flailing arms, the rest of his body does as well.

After a time, his screams did stop, but it would’ve been impossible for an onlooker to ascertain whether that was due to the hoarseness of his throat or simply how far he had fallen.

Timothy was a good kid.

At the time, however, he was dangling a doll overtop an overflowing trash can and snickering.

“HEY! TIMMY! DROP THAT!” His younger sister, Sarah, did not seem as enthused by current events.

“Get it from me! C’mon! I’m gonna drop it!”

“MOM! HE’S GONNA DROP ANNIE IN THE TRASH BIN!!!!”

Timmy laughed and threw the doll in, sticking out his tongue at Sarah.

“Timothy!” their mother called, annoyed. “Go outside and play nice with your sister.”

“Ok Mom!”

Timmy rushed to get his shoes on while Sarah picked her doll out of the trash and tentatively wiped off any remaining trash bits and pieces. She wiped her eyes and headed outside with her older brother.

“Think I can climb that tree?” Timmy prodded, seeming to have completely forgotten about his bullying mere moments before.

“No way!” Sarah giggled. “That thing’s a pole!”

“What, you don’t think I’m strong enough to get up without branches?”

“Nobody could climb up that-”

Sarah was abruptly cut off by the appearance of one of Timmy’s friends, visibly brimming with excitement.

“Tim! Hey! Tim!”

Timmy spun around and rushed towards him, and they both did a slightly obscured handshake that Sarah craned her neck to catch. Soon after, the friend’s darting eyes caught her and his head tilted, quizzically.

“Why are you hanging out with your *sister?*”

Timmy looked between both Sarah and his friend.

“She was just- I mean, it’s not like I wanted to, I just have to play with her or else mom gets mad.”

Sarah looked crestfallen, and the friend’s face curled into a smirk.

“Heh, yeah, Moms are such *bitches*, amirite?”

Timmy and his group of friends had just learned how to curse, and they were using this ability to the fullest extent. “Yeah, totally, huuuuuge bitch.” Timmy said, smiling. He shared a high-five with his friend, turned around, and offered one to Sarah. She happily took the bait, and he pulled it away at the last moment, snickering.

“Anyways, Tim, I found this cool shack in the woods. I haven’t gone in yet, but if you think you can get open the door, we could explore it!”

“Sick! Let’s go!”

Timmy grabbed Sarah’s arm and dragged her deeper into the woods, following his friend in.

After a time, the 3 children were face-to-face with a ramshackle hut, grown over and abandoned, in the center of the woods.

“This is so cool.” Timmy said, staring at the hut, transfixed.

His friend ran to the door and began pushing with his shoulder, grunting.

“Errgh- Tim! Help me out!”

“I will, I will! Give me a sec!”

Timmy ran his hand over the surface of the wall, his mouth parted slightly in wonder. Then he hurried over to the door and with one clean push, it swung fully open.

“Wooooahhhhh!!!!”

They stood at the threshold to a simple, but striking area. No furniture was present, just stone stairs, leading up to what appeared from the floor to be a wide, yet empty pedestal. The stairs were inscribed with art and runes, none of which the kids payed much attention to. The ground itself was cracked stone blocks set atop dirt, and the whole room had an ancient feel, choked with dust and, sans footsteps leading up the stairs from previous visitors, largely untouched. The boys were excited to venture on, clambering eagerly up the stairs. Sarah waited at the door. Suddenly, both boys stopped partway up the steps, and Timmy’s friend took a half-step back.

“What the hell is-”

“That is a big fucking hole, alright.”

Sarah, intrigued, started up the steps herself, just as Timmy’s friend headed tentatively back down.

“Tim, I don’t-” the friend took a large gulp, visibly sweating. “I ain’t too good with heights.”

“Hah! Pussy!” Tim grinned widely and headed further up. “Who taught you ‘bitch’ lessons? Even Sarah is heading up!”

Encouraged, Sarah sped up on the stairs, as the door swung open again and then quickly closed behind the retreating form of Timmy’s friend.

“What a pussy.”

Timmy dug his fingers into one of the loosened stone bricks that made up the stairs, and with surprisingly little effort slipped it free.

“C’mon Sare, let’s see how deep this goes.”

Timmy leered over the edge, staring into the overbearing darkness. Sarah reached the second from the top step and looked up at him.

“What’s the brick for-”

Timmy chucked the brick in the hole, bouncing it off the smooth walls several times, sending out ringing notes and shrapnel with each strike as it disappeared into the perfectly cylindrical abyss.

“What the-”

Timmy backed away a bit after seeing this. The brick, it seemed, had never hit the ground.

“It’s like, infinite!”

“that’s... cool?” Sarah interjected, searching for approval.

“Totally.”

Timmy looked down the hole, back at his sister, and a wide grin spread across his face.

He yanked the doll from her hands and sent it flying down the hole.

In the moments after, Sarah was in far too much shock for the impact of the action to register, whilst Timmy threw his head back and cackled.

“Ha! I got you so good!”

Sarah, the realization kicking in, began to cry.

“No wait, don’t-”

His voice filled with genuine worry and regret, Timmy looked back at the hole, as though it might spit the doll out suddenly.

“I’m sorry, I thought-”

Timmy tried to envelope Sarah in a hug, but she was angry. In this moment of anger, she pushed him weakly with a

single hand, to the right side of his chest.

With a yelp, he fell straight down the pedestal's stairs, body contorting with each blow as it raced to the floor. His skull hit the ground with a decided crunch, and the stone floor began to turn a dark crimson as the blood flowed across it.

For a while, Sarah simply stared at the spreading blood, shocked and transfixed.

But after a time, her gaze drifted back to the hole. The abyss almost swirled with anticipation.

Timothy *was* a good kid.

Fin.

Smrithe Rajesh

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: J R Tucker High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Novel Writing

Table for Two

Brief summary:

Naya is a high school girl who is extremely timid and just went over a harsh breakup. After meeting a cute stranger at a local coffee shop, she opens up more and discovers a new side of herself she had never seen before. With the help of her new coffee shop friend, she starts coming out of her shell as their relationship develops into something more than just friends.

Excerpt:

Could this day be any worse? Naya had just been dumped. Hard. By none other than her boyfriend of two years, Ryan Kingsley. He decided that the best way to break up with her was on the day of their anniversary, in front of a gas station. After about a good fifteen minutes of them fighting, she refused to go back into his Toyota so instead, she was left out in the rain, shivering next to that same gas station. Naya hadn't really pictured her two-year anniversary to end up like this. If she had known that she was going to be abandoned, she wouldn't have worn the tiny black dress with three-inch heels. But then again, she wasn't a time traveler, how was she supposed to know that Ryan had lost interest in her? Naya shakily held up her phone to check the time. 9:20 p.m. Her mom was still a good ten minutes away, and standing out in the cold was not going to do her any favors. She opened her front camera to take a closer look at her face. Her mascara was runny and her hair was wet and matted. Naya took a deep breath and tried her best not to look like she had been crying for the past half an hour, which she was. Her body was covered in goosebumps and the last thing Naya wanted to do was to get a case of hypothermia, so she looked around for a place to stay until her ride came. She squinted her eyes to see a small café in the near distance. The words "Sucrose Café" were surrounded by huge yellow lights in the shape of a coffee mug. A bit cheesy, but in a way, comforting. Naya took off her heels and started to walk to the front of the entrance. A small jingle came from the bell and she stepped inside. Instantly, the smell of grounded coffee beans and fresh muffins hit her nose, the smell exhilarating her. "Welcome!" the girl at the front spoke., "How may I help you?" Naya scanned the room to see several pairs of eyes staring at her. I mean, she did look like a walking mess, so it was to no surprise that she was getting a few weird stares.

"Hi um, I'm sorry, I don't have any money on me but can I-" Naya spoke when she was suddenly cut off by the sound of a man's voice behind her.

"Can we get an iced tea and an um?" The man turned around and looked at Naya with a warm smile. "Do you need anything?" She was initially going to decline the man. After all, he was a stranger. But the loud rumbles from her stomach proved her otherwise.

"Just a blueberry scone will be fine," she replied sheepishly to the man.

"Table for two please," he replied as he handed Naya her scone. She didn't know why she was following the man over to their supposed table, she didn't even know why he was being so nice to her. But after such a horrible day, the kind gesture was what she really needed to brighten her day. "Take a seat." Naya hadn't been able to notice the man's features but now that she had a closer look, he was actually very handsome. He had warm brown eyes and dirty blonde hair with a nice smile to add to his whole good guy exterior. It made her feel good inside just looking at him. However, there was something that caught her off guard, he had a small scar on the left side of his cheek. It was only really noticeable when you were looking at him close up, but she found that to be sort of unique. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what brings you around here?"

"It's kind of a long story."

"Do you have anywhere to go?" Naya looked down at her phone, her mom still wouldn't arrive for another five

minutes.

“Well if you don’t mind, I guess I could tell my story before my ride comes.”

“I’m all ears.” She then explained how she got here and how her ex Ryan had been dating her for two years when he had suddenly dumped her. As she was explaining, the man across from her kept listening attentively, waiting for her to finish without abruptly interrupting her. It was nice for him to listen to Naya vent out her frustrations and although she had just met him, he made her feel comfortable enough to spill any details. It was much easier to open up to a stranger than it was to open up to her friends. It wasn’t like she was ever going to see him again. When she had finished explaining, she looked up to see those same brown eyes glaring at her. “Wow, you weren’t kidding when you said that was a lot.” She gave out a soft laugh and darted her eyes back at him.

“Yeah sorry about that.”

“No no, I’m the one who asked. Look, I may not have all the details about this situation but lemme give you some advice. If a guy treats you like that, then he’s not worth your time. Relationships may come and go but your true soulmate will always be there for you. No matter what.” Naya chuckled and adjusted the hem of her dress.

“I don’t believe in soulmates.”

“Well.. why not?”

“I don’t really think it’s just one person,, I mean how would you even know?”

“Well whether or not you believe in soulmates, they’re definitely a special someone out there for you. Just keep looking and you’ll know.” The sound of a loud engine revved in front of the cafe and inside sat Naya’s mom, waiting impatiently.

“That’s my ride,” she said and started getting up from her seat. “Before I go, can I ask what your name is?” He smiled at her and responded.

“It’s Landon, nice to meet you!” And just like that, he was gone from her sight.

Anna Jane Reed

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

A New Hope

I wander aimlessly alone through the streets. My eyes wander from house to house. The once lively window sills with flowers flowing from brightly painted pots are now gray washed and weathered. The paint has chipped away and the flowers have withered. In a way, these flowers are similar to our lives. Once fruitful and lively; now desolate and achromatic.

Eight years ago a plague swept through our nation. It came so fast that we had no time to react. It was like a Tsunami hurdling at a sand castle,; destroying it beyond repair. Over 100,000 people had died in the first week of the plague's rampage. Today over a billion have died; including my family. I'm alone. With no loved ones and no friends. Everyone has barricaded themselves in their house in hopes of keeping the virus away from their family. Family. What an interesting concept. A group that shares DNA that has agreed to be there for each other no matter what. I know it's silly to resent my family for dying - they had no control over it - and I'm sure they want to be here with me, but they left me alone to fend for myself.

I come upon a grassy patch of land just outside the city limits. It is the only one for miles around. It's surrounded by trees and flowers. This is where I spend most of my time,; here I can pretend for a while that there is no pandemic, and that my family isn't dead. I'm just lying in a small meadow waiting for my parents to come back from work, and procrastinating chores and guessing what's for dinner.

I've slipped into a dreamy state when I hear a shout, "Kid! You can't be here! I could have you arrested for trespassing on government property."

Startled, I jolt out of my sleep and stood up to find a man a bit taller than me in a blue uniform. I haven't seen one of those in years. Officials would wear them when the government could still protect us. I open my mouth to ask him who he is, when a woman in a lab coat runs up. She calls, "Leave her alone, she's just a kid." She turns toward me and asks, "What are you doing here? That man might have arrested you!"

Still in shock I try to answer, "Um...I've come here a lot, and no one has ever been here before. Who are you?" Quickly, the woman replies, "Come with me and I'll explain."

I don't know who she is, but I truly have nothing to lose, so I follow her. She leads me to a wall of thick spiky bushes, "We aren't going through *that*, are we?" I ask.

"In a way," she replies.

A door opens to reveal a small lab with tile floors and counters on every wall. "What is this?" I ask.

"We're developing a cure," she says with a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"For the plague? I thought that the government shut down all vaccine production," I ask.

"They did," she responds, "but as the government fizzled out a group of scientists that had worked for the government reunited and set up our lab in an old government stronghold. We've been working here since."

"Do you have a cure?" I ask.

"Yes," she responds.

A million thoughts start to swirl in my head. A cure? A cure that can make our lives normal again? I haven't felt hope in a while, I've been scared that if I start believing in something again that it will be ripped away. Cautiously I ask, "Well, can you release it?"

She hesitates, then says, "There are still a few problems. The cure is a gas; the science is complicated but if you directly inhale it you could die, but if the gas could be absorbed through your skin the solution would be diluted, and you would survive."

"How is that even possible?" I question.

"The formula is uncomfortably close to that of poison gas, but we have tweaked it so it should only target the plague," she tells me.

"Should?" I repeat, "Isn't there anything you can do to make it safer?"

"If everyone were to wear a gas mask there's a 99.9% chance that everyone will survive," she answers.

"So let's do it!" I shout excitedly.

"You want to help?" she asks in disbelief.

"Of course! I want to help make our lives normal again! Why wouldn't I want to help?" I say.

"Don't you need to get back to your family?" she asks, sounding concerned.

I hesitate, I've never talked to someone about what happened to my family. She's a total stranger, she seems like she wants to help, but you never know. I decided to trust her again; there really is no reason that I shouldn't tell her about what happened.

"My family died from the plague," I say in a quiet voice.

"I'm so sorry," she says, sounding genuinely sorry for me.

I respond, "It's okay I guess, I know how to fend for myself."

"Oh, but that's a lot to go through for a child," she tells me.

It feels good to hear someone say that. I've been through a lot, but I know it could be worse. Just some acknowledgement that our circumstances aren't normal is all I really wanted I guess.

"Do you have a family?" I ask.

"No..."

I seem to have hit a sore subject. I don't want to push her but I also want to know what happened.

"Do you want to talk?" I ask cautiously.

"You're only a child, you wouldn't understand," she replies.

"I promise I understand loss," I gage her reaction and continue, "I know what it's like to feel alone and like *you* should have been the one to die."

"Alright then," she says.

She leads me over to a table with two chairs and we sit down as she starts to tell her story. "I had a husband before the plague, he was an officer for the government, but when the plague got bad and the riots started he was killed defending the capitol. The decision to not produce a vaccine was quite controversial."

I was stunned; I didn't know there were riots. I didn't know people were killed for defending their country in a time of crisis.

After a pause, she continues to tell her story, "I had a little boy, but I miscarried when working on the cure. It wasn't ready yet and I knew there were problems with it, but I didn't think that something meant to save lives would take my son's," she paused then said, "You were right, earlier, when you suggested I had survivor's guilt. It was my decision to continue work that killed him, he should be here, and not me."

Tears started rolling down her face.

I tried to comfort her by saying, "Without your work on the cure; there wouldn't be one, and many other people would lose their lives. You were just doing what you thought was best. You had no way of knowing that I would kill him."

I hoped that I'd helped her, but I couldn't tell.

She started to speak; hushed at first, "But I did. They warned me I could hurt him. They said there was a chance he could be affected. I didn't listen."

She started to sob. What was a slow trickle was now a steady stream of tears. Unsure what to say I stumbled through a sentence that was meant to be comforting, "Well, there's nothing you can do now except help save as many people as you can."

She started to dry her eyes, but I don't think it was because of my interpersonal skills.

"What was your family like?" I ask

I don't know what it was, maybe it was because she was so vulnerable with me, but I felt like I could tell her about my family.

"My mother, she was the most caring person you could ever meet, her smile was like a warm fire on a cold day," cheesy, I know, but I didn't know how to explain it any other way. "And my dad, he was a genius, always building us toys custom fit to our liking. And my sister..." a whole new wave of emotions swelled up inside me as I described my sister, "she was full of energy. She would come with me to that spot you found me and pick flowers for my parents and teachers. If you were having a bad day you would always find that she left flowers by your bedside table."

"Your family sounds amazing, I wish I could have met them," she said

"They had their faults, but they were pretty great," I told her

I finally talked to someone about my life, and it felt...healing. At that moment I realized I had not learned her name.

"What's your name?" I asked

"Maria," she replied

"I'm Addie," I said. "We should probably get to work soon."

"I think we should," Maria agreed

We had worked all night long. Setting up the dispersing devices and telling everyone in the area to put on their masks. We drove vans door-to-door, and we sent out flyers and an email. We then waited for one week so we could make sure everyone knew what to do.

"Dispersing in T-Minus ten minutes!" Maria called out.

This is it! In ten minutes our city would be free from the plague, and we could send it out to the rest of the nation. Maria walked over to me and said, "I'm really glad I ran into you the other day. You've helped me come to terms with what happened to my son, and now we can release a cure for the city."

"I'm glad I ran into you too. You feel like my mom in a way," I confessed

"I'm happy to be that for you," she said to me

"It's time!" One of Maria's friends called out, "Cure launching in 3, 2, 1!"

A slight clicking noise came from the control center.

"Well that was anticlimactic," I said

"Something is wrong, the system isn't working, someone will have to go out and manually turn it on!" Another scientist called out

"I'll do it!" I shouted

But Maria put a hand in front of me and said, "No, I'm going out. I'll be fine, I have a mask." She gestured to the gas mask sitting on her face.

"Ok," I said, "We will be out in a minute to absorb the cure once it's released and the monitors are working."

She exited through the door into the grassy field.

We waited for what felt like an hour when a scientist called out; "Good to go, let's go outside!"

We filed outside and wandered through the hazy fog until we stopped and the sight of a body lying on the ground.

"Maria!" I shouted

Her mask had broken. I could see a large crack down the middle, but what had happened? She looked up at me and started to wheeze. Her breath came in short as she reached for my hand. I started to take off my mask to give it to her, but she shook her head and said, "I didn't save him, but I can save you."

I knelt down next to her and started to cry as the movement in her body stopped.

Maria had sacrificed herself for me. I needed to make the rest of my life count, and that started with spreading the cure.

My tears slowed as I stared at the ground. Once again I was alone. But this time I was left with a new hope.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Earth Boy

Pretty black boy in the woods
on the ground with his eyes closed,
arms open, legs crossed.

He's a tree hugger with a purpose.
He nuzzles his face against
damp bark, scratching, and bleeding

into shades of brown.
He's warm and safe.
More than he has been in a long time.

His fat cheeks tingle when ants and
beetles crawl between his toes,
up his legs,

onto his chest
pushing and pulling him
down. He welcomes their influence

and digs his hands into the dirt below.
He lets it swallow him
whole. He knows he won't come back up and

he doesn't want to.
He wants to go back to sleep.
Ruin the people who

forced him to wake up in the first place.
The ones with so much to say.
He wonders if they'd finally shut up

if he was gone. If they'd finally stop to take
a breath once he couldn't.
They were wrong

every time
they told him his skin shone
the color of smooth milky chocolate.

They must have never seen the wonders of dirt before.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

Incentive to Kill

The first time it happens, it's an accident. Alex is in her senior year of high school. She's worked hard to rid herself of the slightly sociopathic reputation she'd garnered as a child. The lack of emotion behind her eyes unsettled anybody that would dare look at a young Alex Baron. Even when she began to act more like a normal kid -her stern glare replaced with a youthful smile- she was never exactly.....normal.

If anyone from her past could see this moment, they'd know their wariness of her had been warranted.

Ok. She thinks to herself as she drops the limp body of the football team captain to the ground. So I killed someone. What now?

She glares at the blood on her hands in irritation. She had worn a white t-shirt that day and now it was ruined. *What an inconvenience.*

If only Colton hadn't tried to sneak his hand up her skirt, then she wouldn't be in this situation. She laughs to herself as a memory of her parents forcing her into kickboxing as a preteen flashes into her head. What would they think of her if they learned what she did with it? She breathes out a heavy sigh and begins to formulate her plan. Her grandfather was a known handyman throughout their small town; nobody would be concerned if Alex was seen with his tool box and a few shovels. They would only assume she was taking an interest in his habit. She decides she'll drive Colton's possessions to the beach a few towns over and dispose of them there.

There was absolutely no need to panic.

"Yo, blondie." She hears from behind her.

Alex jumps, panicking immediately. A person appears before her, seemingly out of thin air. On instinct, Alex moves to incapacitate them; she couldn't have anyone find out about this, even if that meant having to dispose of another body. A finger pokes at her forehead, pushing her back with oddly strong force.

"No need to get violent or anything, I'm just doing my job. It's Alexis Baron, right?"

Alex gapes, finally stopping to take in this person. They're.....beautiful. Even while they frowned at her in impatience and annoyance. They were small, smaller than Alex, but she somehow *knew* that they could knock her down with little to no effort if they wanted to. Alex finds herself at a loss for words as she studies the person before her. They don't seem at all surprised to see Alex with her entire upper body splattered with blood. They seem bored if anything.

"Are you gonna answer my question or just stare at me like a freak?"

"P-pretty."

Alex slaps her hand over her mouth after the word slips from her lips, uncaring about the somewhat wet blood staining her palms. This interaction was somehow more mortifying than killing a man.

The person rolls their eyes but Alex notices their mouth twitch upward into a small, barely-there smile.

“Okay then, I’m gonna assume you’re the right person and move on.” They say. They snap their fingers and a small glowing cell phone appears before them. “Colton Hayes, 18 years of age, beaten to death by Alexis Baron with her bare hands. Impressive. Gross but impressive.”

As they speak, they type into the phone, completely ignoring the way Alex’s jaw drops.

“Alex.....I go by Alex.”

They nod with disinterest without looking up and continue to type.

“Who....are you?” Alex asks

“Kali, but mortals usually call me Death I guess.” They say, waving Alex off and not looking up from their phone. “Hey, are you ever gonna do this again? Because dealing with this would be a ton of work and I was kind of in the middle of something. If you don’t speak of it again we can just pretend that nothing happened so I can go back home.”

“Uh, that sounds...good?”

“Awesome!” With another snap of their fingers, Colton’s body along with any evidence that it had been there to begin with, vanishes. Alex looks at her newly clean hands in amazement. She looks up excitedly to where Kali had been standing not more than a few seconds before, but they also seem to have vanished.

“Hey! Kali? Death?” Alex looks around the football field, hoping to catch one last glimpse of them, but comes up short.

She smiles down at her hands, making a decision then and there that she **would** see Kali again.

No matter what it took.

~

The second time it happens, it’s deliberate. Alex is finally in college, and in one of the largest cities in the U.S. She’s worked hard, and Columbia was ecstatic to accept her with a full-ride scholarship. By all accounts, she’s the ideal student. Perfect grades, the perfect amount of extracurriculars, student council president, and captain of the soccer team, with two regional championships under her belt.

That’s why she knows that this time, she has to be smart about it. She can’t risk getting caught. Even if she suspects that Kali will show up and possibly rid her of any incriminating evidence once more, there is no *guarantee* that they will.

She *really* hopes they’ll appear again, though.

She chooses her target carefully this time. Evalyn Harper. Someone no one will notice is missing. A homeless woman she’s been watching for months. Alex has never seen her interact with someone else more than a polite conversation with strangers. She was completely alone.

On a dark, foggy night, Alex makes her move.

Evalyn dies quickly of blood loss; Alex fucked up and hit the more important arteries by mistake. She considers a career change at that moment, as she’s wiping blood off onto her jeans. Maybe a surgeon would be more practical than a lawyer. She had to become aware of the most fatal parts of the body, so as to not make these sorts of mistakes again.

Her train of thought is cut off as Kali materializes before her, a small, annoyed frown on their face. Still as visibly bored as Alex remembered.

Still as effortlessly beautiful as well.

They look a little different this time. Instead of the thrown-on robes that they were wearing when Alex killed Colton, they're dressed in a fancy cloak with a gold-encrusted necklace of sorts. The cloak had a hood but Kali was choosing not to wear it, in favor of wearing a giant pair of headphones instead. They looked prepared this time.

"Hello, Alexis. I was wondering when you were finally gonna get the balls to do that. You've been stalking this lady since you got to this city. Creep." They were frowning when they said it, but Alex picked up a hint of amusement in their tone.

Alex silently looks at Kali for a while, trying to take them in as much as she could just in case they pull another disappearing act on her. "You've been watching me?" She finally asked.

"Don't flatter yourself." They say. They snap their fingers and just like last time, a floating cell phone appears out of thin air. "I watch all of you 'at risk' mortals. It's my job."

With a wave of Kali's hand, the body and evidence disappear, and they mutter to themselves as they type Evalyns information into their phone.

"I thought you told me you'd never do this again." They huff.

"Do you do this for everyone like me? Help us?" Alex hopes the answer is no. She wants to be the sole focus of Kali's help, of Kali's attention.

Kali looks into Alex's eyes and for the first time, Alex sees a hint of apprehension in their expression before it promptly disappears.

"I'm not helping you and it'd be smart of you not to question me, Alexis Baron."

"I-I'm sorry, I don't mean to offend. You're just.....extraordinary. I'd like to learn more about you."

Kali stares at Alex, expression unmoving but Alex could see something going on behind their breathtakingly golden eyes.

After a few seconds of excruciating silence, Kali looks back to their phone and rolls their eyes. Alex would've been hurt if not for the almost invisible blush that rose to their face as they went back to muttering to themselves. They continue to scold Alex with a bored tone and a slightly flustered aura about them.

As they disappear into nothingness once more, Alex feels a piece of her go with them. She's never felt this way before. She didn't even know it was possible for her to feel like this. She felt empty before Kali. And she feels empty now, but it's not like the emptiness of her childhood. When Kali was here, Alex was almost bursting with everything she began to feel. She feels empty now that Kali has gone.

As a child, her parents were worried that she'd never be able to love anything. They were afraid she was incapable of compassion.

And to an extent, they were right. She'll never feel anything for the lowly mortals she's been surrounded by all her life. But with what she feels for Kali, the *intensity* of this twisted version of love, she's not sure she'd ever want to. If she has Kali, why would she ever need anything else?

~

The third time it happens, it's an apology. Alex is once again, careful about it. She doesn't leave as much of a mess for Kali to clean up.

When Kali arrives this time, they're in a jet black suit, and their hair is slicked back. Their hands are adorned with gorgeous-looking rings and they stand up taller and straighter than their usual slouchy, bored posture. They seem less prepared and a lot more annoyed than last time.

“I was busy.”

“You look magnificent.”

Kali softens a bit. Just enough for Alex to notice, and with a wave of their hand, another of Alex’s victims disappears without a trace.

“I was in a meeting y’know.” They sigh, snapping their phone into existence again.

“Did you want to be there?” Alex asks. She noticed their tense demeanor as soon as they appeared, and appreciated how it seemed to dissipate a bit as they laid eyes upon her.

Kali chuckles, and it’s the most beautiful sound Alex has ever heard. She wants to hear it again and again and again. She wants to be the reason that Kali is happy.

“You’re perceptive Alexis. I’ll give you that.” When Kali puts their phone away this time, they linger for a few seconds. Giving Alex the opportunity she was hoping for.

“I wanted to apologize for last time. If I made you uncomfortable or anything of the sort.”

Kali cocks their head to the side and stares. They look Alex up and down as if trying to read her intentions. “Not uncomfortable,” they whisper as if it pains them to have to explain themselves. “Just.....confused I guess.”

“About what?” Alex asks, taking a few steps toward Kali.

Kali fidgets with one of their rings for a minute in silence, but Alex doesn’t mind. She could watch Kali just exist forever and be ecstatic about it.

“I’m confused about what exactly it is you want.”

With that, they disappear once more.

Alex stands there for a while, replaying their interaction in her head with a small smile on her face. Alex decides then, that it’s time to explain herself. Kali didn’t deserve whatever distress this confusion was causing them. They deserved the world. And Alex would do anything to give it to them.

~

The fourth (and fifth, sixth, seventh, etc) time it happens, it’s a grand gesture. Alex has never really liked messes; in fact, she often goes out of her way to avoid them at all costs. But this- this *horrifying* display of hers, is the messiest thing Kali has ever seen. The mangled bodies of people Alex couldn’t care less about lay motionless on the floor, arranged in the shape of a heart. The warehouse reeks of fresh blood and fresh roses. Alex smiles at Kali. She stands tall and has an air of confidence about her. She smooths down her crisp white suit, spreading a bit of blood onto it in the process, and she holds a large bouquet of white roses with small drops of blood falling off of the petals. She looks rather proud of her accomplishment.

Kali looks as if they would rather be anywhere else. They hesitantly take a step toward Alex. “You can’t be serious.” they sigh.

Alex motions to the writing on the grey walls. Though it was a bit hard to read, Kali sums it up as Alex asking to *court* them. They feel themselves begin to soften a bit, and they let out a small chuckle at the sloppily written message that had been painted onto the wall in blood. The amount of blood begins to stress them out the longer they look at it, though, and the thought of the amount of paperwork this would be started to outweigh the horrifying yet adorable dorkiness of her admirer.

“Oh, I’m deadly serious.” Alex’s eyes light up with anticipation as she watches Kali read her message. They’re dressed in a black baggy hoodie and basketball shorts that were much too big for them this time. Much more *casual* clothes than you’d think the personification of death would walk around in. They were much more casual clothes than Alex had ever seen them in during their previous meetings.

Kali groans as they look back at the bodies. Their voice bounces off the walls and a loud echo makes Alex's ears ring. The walls of the warehouse shake and Alex's eyes grow wide as a goofy grin spreads across her face. Kali's eyes start to glow a brilliant whitish gold before they slam them shut and take a deep breath.

"Ok I'm working on my anger issues, I am working on my anger issues," they mumble under their breath. "Are you really asking me on a date right now? This isn't some weird serial killer shit you're doing?"

Alex nods excitedly. "Absolutely."

A loud buzzing sound interrupts Kali as they open their mouth to respond. They roll their eyes and hold up one finger to Alex as they snap their fingers to summon their phone and answer it. Kali's eye twitches as the voice on the other end speaks urgently at them.

They tilt the phone away from them and point at Alex with a glare. "I have to go. We'll talk about this later, *please* don't kill anyone else while I'm gone. This was. . . endearing and I have to admit, you are intriguing, Alex Baron. But if I have to clean up any more bodies because of you I'm going to go *insane*."

They snap their fingers and in an instant, every bloody body that lay still on the floor disappears, along with any evidence that they had been there to begin with.

Alex stares in awe at the display of magic. "You are fascinating and effortlessly perfect. I'd do anything for you, Kali."

"And you're a moron who doesn't know what she's getting herself into." Kali laughs. "I'll return in 4 hours tops. If you haven't killed anyone else by the time I get back, *maybe* I'll think about going out with you."

"Deal!"

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

A Century in Purgatory

Somewhere between conscious and unconscious. Alone, isolated, but still hearing voices. Countless voices. Day after day of people passed by as she screamed for help, banging on the walls of her own head, hoping someone, anyone, would hear her. Panic attacks plagued her for the first year. The first year was by far the hardest. Watching her colleagues try and fail over and over again to get her out. She screamed the loudest when they all gave up. Her body, unable to move, but her mind unable to stop. She observed as society moved on. They forgot the magic that once spread across the nation. They developed, they adapted. Without her. Her prison stood in the middle of a beautiful stretch of land. People surrounded her at all times, living their own lives, stopping by to take photographs with her, chatting away about all they knew about her and her history.

She feels a wave of relief wash over her every time they talk about the past. Her mind calms down for a second every time they remind her that she's not forgotten. Even after 100 years, they still remember.

"Who is this statue even supposed to be anyways?" She hears. A tall young woman stands at her feet, messy bright green hair flowing in the wind and hazel eyes shining in admiration as they rake over the statue.

Well, most of them at least.

~

Had Ivory known how long her friend planned to keep her outside today, she wouldn't have come.

"We'll be quick," Echo had said, "we're just having lunch." And like a trusting idiot, Ivory had believed them. Now here they are, three hours later, Echo dragging Ivory towards every little cool thing they see in the park. They gushed over a spaceship-themed hot dog stand for nearly *twenty minutes*, only to leave without any hotdogs.

"Look Ive! The stars are painted the colors of the Eskonian flag. Isn't that epic?!"

"How many years in prison do you think I'd get for killing you?"

"Well you're 21 now so you'd probably get about 30 years. If you had murdered me when we were kids like you kept threatening to, it probably would've been a lot less."

"That was rhetorical you asshole."

"Shut up and come take a pic of me in front of the cart before the vendor gets back."

Had Echo actually bought Ivory lunch as promised, she probably would've found their excitement endearing; instead, Ivory's hangry mind was trying to determine the best way to dispose of their body.

"Let's take a picture!" Echo says. They shove their phone at Ivory before posing next to the bronze statue in the center of the park. Ivory rolls her eyes, breathing another sigh as she half-heartedly snaps pictures of her best friend and the stupid statue that Echo stops to see every time they're at the park.

"Weren't you here with London like two days ago? Why didn't you make her take your dumb pictures?" Ivory

asks, tossing Echo's phone back to them.

"Oh I did, I just wanted more. Hey, you should totally get a picture!"

"Absolutely not."

"C'mon Ive. Don't be a bummer."

"Maybe I'd be more willing had I been fed as I was *promised*."

"You're still stuck on that huh?"

"I hate you."

"No you don't." Echo smiles as they pull Ivory into a bear hug. "Tell you what: if you take a pic with the statue, I'll buy you as many burgers as you can eat right now."

"Hmm, tempting. Hand me your wallet."

"Why?" they ask. Slipping it out of their pocket.

"Because," Ivory says as she grabs it, "now I have a hostage. If you deprive me of food again, I'm burning this."

"You're so dramatic." Echo shakes their head and pushes Ivory towards the statue. "Go. Pose."

"Who is this statue even supposed to be anyways?" Ivory asks, running her finger over the smooth bronze hands of the statue. She admires the craftsmanship as Echo tries to find a good angle for the picture. She finds the attention to detail captivating. The woman's face is twisted in cold anger, and her hair, despite being made of bronze, flows behind her as she raises her sword.

"Sometimes I really wish you hadn't slept during *every* history lesson last year," Echo mumbles. "Her name is Princess Melori. She's the savior of Eskon. She had cool magical powers and stuff. This was the only interesting part of that class. How do you not know this?"

"Professor Stagfords voice put me to sleep." Ivory shrugs. She continues to poke and prod and the statue until she feels it grow warmer beneath her fingers. She pulls her finger back, startled, but then reasons that it's midday, and bronze heats up in the sun. Nothing weird about that.

"Did you take your picture yet?" she asks, backing slightly away from the statue.

"No, be patient! Good lighting is no joke. Also didn't I tell you to pose?"

Ivory rolls her eyes again and turns her attention back to the statue. She pauses, eyes narrowing. "Hey idiot, is it just me or does this thing..." and she can't say it. She can't say that it somehow looks like the statue has gotten a little softer around the edges because that...that's *crazy*.

And then it moves.

Echo is still engrossed with the stupid *angles*, so they don't see it, but Ivory freezes in place. It'd been the tiniest movement, almost small enough to convince her that it was all in her head, but then, with a great gasp of breath, the statue collapses, and Ivory only barely catches it-her, in her arms. They both fall to the ground as the park goes silent, save for the sound of Echo finally snapping a picture. Ivory realizes a few things all at once. What has fallen into her arms isn't a statue, but a beautiful girl, blonde hair falling limp and shimmering in the sunlight. She seems not too much older than Ivory herself. Her skin is soft to the touch and she smells a little bit like lavender.

She also seems to be on the verge of a panic attack.

Echo hurries over, and they help pull Ivory and the girl up, but Ivory pays them no attention when they look to her with questioning eyes. The girl is frantically looking around, trying to catch her breath, and gripping her sword so tight her knuckles are turning white.

“Hey hey, calm down,” Ivory says, “lower the sword. We’re all friends here. I think.”

The girl looks at her and stares. Her eyes slowly looking Ivory up and down, then quickly looking around again, noticing the small crowd that has gathered around them.

“You’re Princess Melori right?!?” Echo says, snapping more pictures with their phone. Ivory sees the statue lady’s eyes flick towards the phone with slight irritation.

“Echo, go...deal with the crowd please.” Ivory says, nudging them towards the people staring. “Are you...okay...Princess?” She asks.

The woman stares at her again, a ghost of a smile appearing on her face as she lowers her sword to the ground.. “Fine as I can be for someone who hasn’t been able to speak for 100 years. Sorry about the sword, I was...startled.”
“100 years?”

“It would’ve been more had you not come along, fair maiden. I’ll admit I didn’t think it would be you, you don’t look anything like her.”

“Uhm, wha- huh?”

“Perhaps we should find a more...quiet place to discuss this if you don’t mind? It’s a bit of a tale...”

“Um sure?” Ivory pauses, sighs, and lets her brain take a rest for a second. “Are you hungry?”

“Oh I’m starved,” the girl chuckles, “it almost feels like it’s been a century since my last meal.”

Ivory blinks, letting a small smile spread across her face.

Was that sarcasm? Was I just subjected to sarcasm by a magical warrior princess?

“Ok *Princess*, how about we go back to my apartment to talk. It’s probably not a good idea to stand around in a public park with a giant sword.”

Melori chuckles quietly. “Great point, young maiden.” And as the tension starts to dissipate from her body she starts to look around again. She takes in everything she couldn’t see from her viewpoint as a statue.

“It’s Ivory. You can call me Ivory. And how about we walk to my place instead of driving? It’ll let you take in more of the stuff around here.”

A wide smile spreads across Melori’s face and her eyes flicker with excitement. Ivory giggles at her childlike wonder. She tells Echo she’ll meet them at their apartment later, hugging them tightly as they tell her to be careful, and walks Melori back to her place, avoiding the stares of the wide-eyed people on the sidewalk. She orders takeout from her favorite burger place (with Echo’s money of course. She totally kept their wallet) and smiles as Melori’s eyes look at everything around them in awe. The princess stares at the bright neon sign in front of the burger joint for 5 minutes in complete awe before Ivory finally snaps her out of it.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Princess.”

“You can call me Melori, you know?”

“This is more fun though.”

She laughs and tears her eyes away from the sign. "Sorry it's just- I've been stuck in that statue for *so long* and so much has changed. It's amazing. Like how does this sign even work?! Sure, I was mostly conscious in the statue but the most I ever got to see was people taking photographs of me with those little phone thingies and rowdy children getting much too close to my face."

"You were conscious in there the whole time? You could see and hear everything?"

"Pretty much yes. The only thing I couldn't do was talk. It was like being stuck in my own head, watching that park through my eyes, like a movie screen. It was a bore if I'm being honest. No one there but me left to contemplate my life decisions and hope you came along at some point."

"How do you know about movie screens?"

"There was really nothing better to do than listen to people talk when I was stuck in there. I learned a lot. It's nothing compared to all this though. I'm trying to stay composed but there's so much going on out here! There are so many people and it's so bright and hectic. It's complete chaos and yet I find myself becoming fond of it. It's becoming quite the task not to freak out and go running off every time I see something cool."

"Well why don't you just freak out. I wouldn't stop you. In fact I'd probably be going insane if I were in your shoes."

"Well it's simply impolite to freak out in front of a lady."

Ivory lightly punches Melori on the shoulder and throws her head back with a loud laugh. Melori beams as Ivory's chuckles draw some attention from the crowds surrounding them.

"You're a lady too you dork."

"Potato potahto." She shrugs.

"Speaking of potatoes, I bought like 7 orders of large fries. It's an atrocity that you've never had them and I guarantee that once you start you won't be able to stop."

"Let us make our way to your home then Lady Ivory. We have much to discuss and much to eat. "

Ivory grabs their food and lets Melori continue to take everything in. She smiles when Melori squeals with excitement at a corgi they pass on the sidewalk. She takes the Princess's hand in hers when she tries to follow the dog's owner down the street and tries to hide her blush when Melori squeezes and starts swinging their intertwined hands in between them.

When Ivory closes the apartment door behind them, she tells Melori to make herself at home and places their food in the kitchen. When she turns back to look at the princess, she sees her smiling sadly at a photo of Ivory, London, and Echo displayed on the coffee table.

"It's been a long time since I've seen *my* friends, Lady Ivory."

"Did they know you were in the statue? Did they try to save you when they were still alive?"

"They're not dead." She says. "Not all of them at least." A tear falls down her face as she looks away from the picture. "And they couldn't have known I was in the statue. Because I was the last of us to be subjected to that fate. Their statues are still out there."

"Wow, okay. I guess it's time to talk about whatever the hell is going on here. Why were you stuck in there Melori? And how did I get you out?"

"I suppose I've left you hanging long enough," Melori chuckles, patting Ivory on the shoulder with a watery smile. "We can eat while we talk about this right? I wasn't kidding about being starved."

Ivory pours Melori a glass of lemonade and smiles at the pleased expression on her face when she takes a sip. After they've each had a burger (or 3 in Ivory's case) and a few fries, Melori clears her throat.

"Are you aware of a woman in your family tree named Dray. Dray Acker." Melori spits out the name with disdain, looking away from Ivory as she says it.

"Yes...she's my great-grandmother. Died before I was born. Why do you know about her?"

"Well...that's the woman who cursed me and my friends. She wanted my magical power, and she stopped at nothing to get it. My friends, Victoria, Luna, and Lysa, were caught in the crossfire. She used them to draw me out, then...well I'm sure you can guess what happened next."

"Statue?"

"Statue." Melori nods. "She drew power from me in my statue form until she finally realized what I kept trying to tell her. The power was too much for her body, it was killing her. Fast."

"And what does this have to do with me?"

"The curse could only be broken by her, or someone who shared her blood. It was as simple as a touch really. But not one of my remaining colleagues could find a descendent of hers after her passing. They were sure she didn't have any children, and they gave up on us."

"Does that mean I'm magical or something? Because magic is super rare around here nowadays. It still exists of course, but I think I've only met one person able to wield it"

"Well, there's dormant magical ability in everyone around here. You guys just don't know how to access it. We passed some very magically potent people on the way here."

"Hmm, interesting, let's put a note in that for now. What about your friends? They still need to be de-statuefied right? Do you know where they are?"

"I know where they were 100 years ago. Our statues can be moved though. I don't want to inconvenience you..."

"Inconvenience me? I'm the only one who can do this Melori. Do you see any other descendents of Dray Acker anywhere around here?" Ivory paused, looking around dramatically, bringing the smile back to Melori's face. "You get my point. To start off I guess I should teach you how to use the internet. That'll probably be a big help in finding your friends. You can find anything there."

"Lady Ivory, I am eternally in your debt. Your kindness will not go unappreciated. I can't wait for you to meet my friends, they're sure to love you."

"Don't mention it Princess. I'm not just gonna leave innocent people as statues when I could easily help. Before we get to that though, I'm gonna finish these burgers! I bet I can eat more than you!"

"You dare challenge Melori, Princess of Eskon, hero of the nation you call home? I'll be sure to wipe the floor with you."

Ivory beats Melori easily. And she cackles at the Princess as she lay her head on the table, groaning in pain and staring up dejectedly at Ivory as she finishes yet another hamburger.

"You're cute when you pout Princess." Ivory chuckles

"And you, are a sore winner Lady Ivory." Melori says, gazing fondly at Ivory as she jumps out of her seat and starts doing her "victory dance".

"Adorable." Melori grins.

Ivory catches Melori staring at her mid dance and smiles, grabbing her arm and making her dance around the apartment with her. As they make eye contact, swaying through her kitchen, Ivory can't help but be a *little* glad that her evil great grandmother cursed the Princess, if only so she could meet her. And as Melori pulls her closer, a faint blush rising to her cheeks, Ivory thinks she feels the exact same way.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

The Type of Girl

Erin is the type of girl who gets amazing grades. The type who's the captain of the soccer team, and the class president. She's the type that has a perfect GPA and perfect attendance, unless you count the day she had the flu (she doesn't). Erin is the type of girl who radiates love and positivity. She believes in the worth of everyone. She makes sure all of her friends know their importance. Teachers praised her, and her coach used her as an example of excellence.

Erin *isn't* the type of girl who sneaks out at two a.m. because girls like Casey come knocking at her window. The sharp green-eyed, leather jacket-clad girl tapped against the glass, urging Erin to *come with her, please*. Erin isn't the type of girl that forgets how to function when a gorgeous, tattooed girl is balancing on the tree outside her window again, begging her to come on an adventure with her in the dead of night. Erin isn't the type of girl who throws on a hoodie and sweatpants and sneaks out with girls like Casey.

And yet here she was.

Erin yet again, found herself mesmerized by the glow of Casey; a bright burning gold energy. And though they've done this countless times before, Erin is once again enchanted by how smooth and careful Casey is when she's being so reckless. The motorcycle slides across the street like the ground is made of ice, but she knows Casey is still in complete control. She swears there's a microphone held to her chest, the rhythmic thumping of her heart letting Casey know the effect she had on her. It was that rush, the speed of Casey's motorcycle as it shot down the road like a bullet that made her feel so alive.

Casey grips her hand tight, as they hop off her bike. They stand at the top of a cliff and Erin pauses for a second, basking in the wonderful decision she made to escape with Casey into the night. She always gets caught up, just for a minute or two, at how beautiful Casey looks in the moonlight, her eyes soft as she pulls Erin into her side. As always, Casey held onto her tight and mumbled into her shoulder, "I love you, weirdo."

As they climb back onto the bike and peel off into the night, Erin knows she's safe and loved, because Casey never lets her forget it.

Casey is the type of girl who climbs tall trees to knock on the windows of pretty girls. She's also the type of girl who would slip into said pretty girls room and purposely leave some of her belongings behind on the pretty girl's floor. Hoodies, rings, jackets, anything she can leave behind to make sure the girl knows she'll be back soon.

She's also the type of girl who blasts music from the speaker she carries around in her pocket at 2am once she escapes with said pretty girl. As soon as they get out of the neighborhood, she'll crank up the music, the thumping of the base matching the thumping of their hearts.

Blasting horrible indie songs, they cruise across town, waking up residents sleeping through the night. And though Erin gets nervous about waking up the town and being so loud at this time of night, Casey tells her that it's not personal, this is just their way of announcing their love to the world.

Erin gives her that wide, lovestruck smile that's only ever been reserved for Casey, and she cranks up the music even louder.

Erin knew Casey wasn't her type of girl. She usually went for the safe girls. The girls that were careful. The type of girls that made her parents happy. The easy choice. But those girls always slipped away. They never seemed like enough. As if they were never really what she wanted.

It was only natural yet also completely unexpected that she'd fall hard for the girl who was everything those other girls were not. She fell for the girl who smoked cigarettes to look tough, the girl who got into fights on an almost daily basis for her entire sophomore year, the girl who gave Erin the freedom to express herself. The freedom to not be so perfect.

Casey was both an addiction and an enigma at once. She was the girl who skipped school, yet was always near the top of her class. She didn't have much money but she didn't hesitate to leave small presents in Erin's locker nearly every other day. She was a rush of adrenaline and freedom, and Erin couldn't get enough of her.

On another 2am joyride they cruised across the street as they usually do, Erin wrapped tight around Casey, her braid falling apart and hair whipping in every direction. She normally hated the feeling of her hair losing control, but with Casey, and only with Casey, it felt right to let go.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Binded

It's too tight.
How long has it been there?
You can feel it even when it's gone.

Do you not see the problem?
It's too much.
It's spreading.

Beyond physicality
through the arms, the legs, the chest
the eyes, the nose, the mouth.
It spreads to the speech, the mood, the posture
through the fake smile, and onto the way you interact.

The source exchanges itself
from stress to pain
from her words to your hand
that lazily grips the hunting knife.

You tried to warn her
as you stumbled across the room
hacking into your fist
spitting out the taste of rusted iron
and wiping the red onto your shorts.

You didn't mean to scream, really
but it was too much, and it just
wouldn't
stop
spreading.

She didn't get it, why didn't she get it?

It was too tight
but ripping it off
and tearing it to pieces?

You rushed at her with the curved blade.
If she didn't understand,
then you'd make her.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Linked

boy of blood, betrayal,
leaves in blonde hair, eyes brimming with the past
of a protector, a defender,
a sharp jaw, a scarred chest, a hero
is that it? is that why I dream of being him?
what about the word *hero* chains my energy to his?
call me a hero and I'll embrace femininity

not my own,
i'm not like him.

but that of the princess we have to save, and that of the young ladies in town
who cradle my cheeks and run hands over my chest
flat, bare, loud
with the pounding of my heart as she rests her head under my chin

i think about him a lot
the hero strikes the inside of my skull with his blade
do I live up to him? do my arms fill out my shirts as his do?
if I speak will they all know that I could never be him?
if I picked up his sword could I save her the same as he does?
do I bleed a hero's blood, or is my sweat too gentle for this quest?
does imitating him make me real? if he never had the honor to be?

the Link between a savior and a *boy*? he and I. he can wear dresses and
they'll love him anyway
he'll love him anyway.
i'm in his armor and it's still not enough

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

The Complexities of Gender: A Self Portrait

Don't turn back. Keep your eyes shut.

Looking forward you'll see a stranger.
Their intentions are unknown.
Will they be kind?

You were the stranger once.
You weren't kind.

Keep your eyes shut.

Behind you,
she's burning.

Screaming in anguish. Desperately reaching for you.
She's calling out to you.
She's suffering.

You promised it'd be quick and painless but she's dying so slowly.

Don't turn back.

She loved you.
She still does.
She'll never stop.

Even as she's lit aflame,
and it's your grip that tightens around the lighter.

You weren't kind.

Did you even try to be?
Open your eyes and face them.

You deserve this.
They deserve this.

You inhale the smoke,
and you open your eyes

.

In front of you, he is ever changing.
The lighter is no longer in your hand.

He crushes it in his,
and it crumbles to dust- flowing into nothingness as a light breeze carries it away.

His form ripples and swirls,
and she stops screaming.

Don't turn back.

He smiles kindly,
but not to you.

She laughs,
relieved.

You exhale.

He is ever changing
And though the fire dissipates,
the smoke remains.

He remains.
They remain.
Shifting.

His form is uncertain and she still loves you.

He loves you too,
but he is ever changing
and you weren't kind.

She embraces you from behind, it burns but you *don't turn back*.
She wouldn't want you to.

She forgives you,
and whispers in your ear.
Tells you not to dwell, worry, or cry.
Though her own tears of liquid fire land rhythmically onto your shoulder.

He cradles your hands in his,
tells you to close your eyes and inhale.

You collapse,
and when you awaken,
you are ever changing.
She's embracing them from behind,
and he is cradling their hands in his.

They all smile at you.
You smile back,
and flow forward into the unknown.

Hannah Rouse

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

Fractured

When our hearts break, so does the world. Creating splits and fissures in the land around us. From small heartbreaks to the ones so deep and so scarring that we don't know if they'll ever recover. Of course, most people don't stay in their grief forever, but the world doesn't heal as we do. Even if we move on and let out grief and sorrow go - those cracks and crevices don't fade or fill in. They stay, absorbing into the fabric of existence. Because some scars are just too deep and too painful to ever be completely erased. No matter how much we want them to.

December 1st, 10:22 pm

She's not gone. Felicity is not gone.

She can't be. She was here just five hours ago - leaving for Sherry's house. She was on her phone, and just walked out of the door.

She's not gone. She's not gone. She's not gone.

But she isn't here either.

She's out there somewhere, lost.

Zarina grips my hand - her fingers lace through mine. But I can't move. I can't breathe. Nothing in my body wants to work how it's supposed to. My arms are numb, my ears ringing, my legs, frozen. I feel the tears begging to be released out of their cage inside me, but I am too stunned and too weak to let them out.

I should blink. I should breathe. I should do something other than sit here.

But I can't.

The police talk to us, about Felicity - about where she may have run to. They think she ran away.

But Felicity wouldn't run away - she didn't run away.

I need to find her. I can't be sitting here talking about her to the police - I need to be out there looking for her.

I need to-

"Mr. Samuels?" the officer's voice breaks through my thoughts.

"I need to find her." I realize my fingers are resting on the doorknob.

Where I plan on going I don't know. *What I plan on doing* I don't know that either.

"Mr. Samuels, I understand this is hard for you. But trust me when I say, we will do everything we can to find your daughter." There is genuine pain in his voice, in his eyes.

"Alistar, please" Zarina begs. I'm overreacting, she's fine, she'll be fine, the police will find her and everything will be okay.

But no.

Nothing can or will be okay until she's here. She's somewhere out there, somewhere that isn't home. And no matter what it takes, I am going to find her.

Even if I have to search the whole world just to bring her back, I will.

December 2nd, 11:05 pm

26 hours, 42 minutes, she's been missing. For 26 hours and 42 minutes, my little girl, my daughter, hasn't been safe. I should've made sure she got where she was going. I should've checked on her 3 hours later when I saw her car was still in the driveway. I should've done something other than assume she'd be fine. Because things always seem fine, always seem like the bad things would never happen to you, and then when they do - your world, held up by that belief, shatters.

If I had just been a little more cautious, just a little more protective, just a little more present, maybe she would still be here.

The cold outside has somehow made it into my body, even though I should be protected by the walls of a home

our family spent years inside. But those walls are crumbling and leaving behind only ashes and dust. Zarina and I put up pictures of her everywhere we could. Pictures of our daughter's smiling face line every street. Her beautiful, smiling face. Seventeen years worth of memories are strung up for everyone to see, so they can help us find her.

I can't just sit back and do nothing. I have to be out there, I have to help look for her.

"I know what you're thinking Al," Zarina whispers, almost as if words are too much to handle.

"I have to go. I have to be out there." My words, apparently, are also too much.

Words have more weight than we give them credit for because the words left unsaid between us feel like a concrete wall separating our worlds.

December 4th, 5:44 am

Almost 3 days.

Almost 72 hours, of nothing but silence.

72 hours of unanswered calls. 72 hours of texts left unread.

72 hours of missing a missing girl. My missing girl.

Every spare moment left in my life is spent looking, refreshing the website, calling an officer for the 14th time for updates that lead to no more answers than I started with.

Our tears stain the walls of the house, absorbing into the emptiness that comes with loss.

We spend days searching, and we spend the nights praying. Praying for answers, for any sign that she's there, but silence is the only thing that greets us.

Though maybe the answers would be more painful than the wondering.

At least if there is no definite, we can hope, which may just be the only thing holding us together.

December 10th, 10:27 am

They're stopping the search.

No evidence - they say regretfully.

No reason to believe she's anything more than a memory now.

Just another missing girl.

As if every trace of Felicity has been erased from the world, and all that's left is a stack of hopes and dreams and thoughts collecting dust in the corner of her unentered room.

I pull Zarina into a hug - and the world inside me resumes. For just a single, excruciating moment, I am present. Not a ghost floating through the empty space I called home.

But shoving the comfort away, we welcome the desperation like an old friend, letting it into the remains of our house, allowing it to split the walls, the ceiling. Locking doors and closing windows and growing mold in the corners. It's a wonder our house is still standing.

The police may have given up, but I refuse to believe that my daughter has been reduced to a statistic. I refuse to let myself think that she is anything but okay, anything other than alive and waiting for us to find her. Because she has to be alive, she has to be out there somewhere. People don't just disappear, they don't just walk away one day and leave nothing in their wake. There has to be something, anything that gives even the slightest hint that she's alive. And whatever that is, I'm going to find it.

January 1st, 1:17 am

Sleep doesn't come easily anymore. It always had for us, until she went missing.

How can we sleep not knowing where she is, but knowing she's not here? Knowing she's not in the next room, sleeping as we should be.

I just want her back. I just want her to come home. I want to hug her, to tell her how much she means to me. I want to hear her laugh, and see her smile. I would give anything. Anything to have just one more moment that isn't only a fading memory.

The Holidays came and went. But really, what did Zarina and I have to be cheerful about? All we have left is each other, and we are both too broken to support the other.

A month has passed now. 31 days of missing, of hoping, of losing, and then falling back down, before eventually picking up enough left-over strength to do it again the next day, only to get the same answers. 31 days of silence and memories that may never be shared again.

It feels like a piece is missing, the spot where Felicity sat at the table is empty. The room she slept in is kept shut and unentered, because going in knowing she wouldn't be there would feel like saying goodbye.

Goodbyes like that are only for when you know someone isn't coming back, and all Zarina and I have left is the hope that she will.

February 28th, 3:26 pm

No.

No, this can't be happening.

Hit by a car- they say.

May not wake up- they say.

They say they're doing everything they can to help her, but the odds aren't on our side.

I look at her, eyes closed, surrounded by machines that are almost the only thing tethering her to life.

There's nothing I can do for her here, the doctors tell me. But I don't want to leave.

The only place I can go is the empty building that used to be home and the bed with an empty side next to me.

March 4th, 2:42 pm

When the heart monitor stops, so do I. Again I forget that I need to breathe and blink, in order to stay alive.

I never got to tell her how much she meant to me either. I didn't get to see her smile one last time before she died. I didn't get to hug her, or laugh with her, or say goodbye.

The people you love aren't supposed to die. Spouses aren't supposed to get hit by cars, and children aren't supposed to vanish into thin air.

Her eyes will never open again, her heart won't beat again.

And she will never see our daughter again.

I walk up to the house, and it feels unfamiliar to me. The rooms and hallways are the same, but it's not the home I know and love, it is only a house that used to hold a family. But now stays full of ghosts. There's no one left here to fill it with life, so it has none. It's not a home anymore, it's only some walls I'm trapped inside.

Piece by piece I feel my heart breaking apart, knowing that those pieces can never come back until I find Felicity.

Zarina is gone, she isn't coming back. Felicity is all I have left to hope for, so I'll search until I find her.

March 7th, 10:53 am

The world doesn't stop, even when you need it to. The world won't put its agenda on pause for a funeral, or for a broken man to grieve his missing child. The world keeps going, it keeps spinning, the sun keeps shining, and people keep living.

Condolences float around the room like oxygen. As much as I don't want to, I need them. Even though words will never be strong enough to fix whatever is left of the life I once knew, it still feels good to know that I'm not alone - even when I feel like the only thing that seems to comfort me, is the hope of finding something that may not still exist.

So I swallow what's left of my tears and pain, and make a promise to Zarina. I will find Felicity. Find the little girl who made our lives worth living.

6 years later

I open the front door regretfully. As much as I hope it is, a small part of me knows Felicity isn't there. A small, quiet part of me buried deep inside knows that once 6 years of nothing pass, the silence is probably not temporary, no matter how much I want someone, anyone to make a sound.

A boy, around the age Felicity would be by now, stands there. A hazed look in his eyes, almost like he isn't really here.

"Can I help you?" I ask, and he just looks at me for a second.

He bites his lip and opens his mouth to say something. Before closing it and sighing. His eyes are bloodshot, dark bags under them as if he hasn't slept in weeks. Pulling out a slip of paper from the pocket in his hoodie, he moves his eyes to stare at the ground.

"Take it." He whispers, keeping his eyes trained to the porch under his feet. "Take it before I have time to change my mind."

Confused, I cautiously take the paper from him. He turns away from me, sighing again before walking away. I am left with only questions, though I'm used to it by now.

All I've gotten from the past 6 years is questions that may never be answered.

I open the paper. As much as I don't think it's smart, or safe, I feel like it was given to me for a reason, and it would only be right to find out what that reason is.

The paper is crumbled, aged, and stained, almost as if it had been thrown out several times.

I killed her. It reads *I killed Felicity.*

This feels like a joke, like something that isn't real. She can't be dead. She can't be.

Otherwise, what have I spent the last 6 years searching for? A girl who could never have come home, no matter how

much she wanted to or needed to? If she's really dead, how could she not have been found by now? If he really killed her, how did the police not find him?

And why now? Why come and tell me 6 years after she'd been dead and you've gotten away with it? Why?

I loved her, but she didn't feel the same. If I couldn't have her, no one could. It ends there. The words just end. It can't be real. It can't.

She can't be dead.

But somewhere, the same part that knew she wasn't at the door, needs to believe it's true. It wants to end the suffering from the last 6 years and finally have an answer. It needs this, the knowing, to put itself at rest.

With this knowledge, I start to make my way to Felicity's room. The room that I haven't been able to enter for 6 years, the room that has stayed empty waiting for the girl it belonged to, to come home.

I sink down to my knees and cry.

I cry because she was gone this whole time. Because I spent 6 years searching for a missing girl, and she was dead from the start. I cry because there's nothing else to do. I cry because I now know I would never get to say goodbye to my daughter, never get to tell my little girl how she meant the world to us. And I cry because I lost them. Felicity and Zarina. I cry with enough pain to create a crevice as deep as the Grand Canyon, and with enough tears to fill it.

The boy, Jack, pulled on the door handle and slipped inside the house of the girl he once loved. He hadn't been thinking earlier. Why had he delivered the note? It wasn't meant to actually be sent, just to relieve him of having to live with it. Now Mr. Samuels was probably going to call the police, and Jack couldn't let that happen. He'd avoided being caught for 6 years, he wasn't about to give it all up now.

Jack wandered around the house for a while, silent as he could be until he found Felicity's bedroom. Alistar Samuels sat on the floor, clutching the paper with Jack's confession on it, and openly weeping. Without a second of hesitation, Jack ended all of Alistar's suffering with the simple pull of a trigger.

Because if he couldn't have Felicity, no one could.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Ode to Odes

Oh ode, you are the most lackluster, pretentious of prose,
A meandering train of thought about a singular, boring subject
Looking for what is and isn't there in a pencil,
Contemplating the grand philosophical implications of a dust bunny
Like a soccer mom ranting in between sips of boxed wine;
And like that soccer mom, who's four boys are named Aiden, Brayden, Hunter, and Jaycob,
You are as annoying to write, with the average depth of a kiddie pool as subject matter.
Limericks are funny, haikus are thoughtful, you just suck.
I would like to go back in time to whatever pompous ponce in a powdered wig sat down
To put to pen and paper, his beliefs about his overflowing chamberpot, or his plague boils,
And punch him directly in the throat for his insolence.
So thank you odes, for being an easy, artsy punching bag.
You are the kale of poetry and the PT Cruiser of writing.
I would rather transcribe a page-by-page account of a beige wall drying in Iambic Pentameter while "Doing Your Mom" loops behind me, gradually increasing in volume until it fills my skull and my lungs and my whole being with pure disdain for humanity,
Screw you.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Short Story

Neat Neat Neat

A three egg plate, all scrambled, with toast, strawberry jelly, and sausage. That's what Corner Boy orders after school, when he's finally worked up the confidence to walk inside, choose the stall to the left of the bathroom on the far wall, and has polished off a cup of cocoa. At least, it's what he gets during the winter months.

I jot it down, give him a nod so he knows I got it in, and turn back toward the kitchen. I nearly collide with a balancing act of plates but narrowly slip by. The ticket gets run through on the rotating wheel and spun toward Chief in the back.

"Corner Boy?" he asks. He doesn't look up from his own balancing act, a flat top speckled with eggs, bacon, burgers and pancakes.

"Who else?" I grab the kettle, scoop some Swiss Miss, and top the newly-christened cocoa with a mountain of whipped cream and a smiley face made with chocolate syrup. It's a nice touch he never asks for, but he lights up like a christmas tree when I set it down in front of him. I move down the line to the booth in front of him.

Two guys are sitting there, mildly overweight, mid 30s, construction gear. I assume they're patching the roof across the street. One is noshing on a plate of fries while the other nurses a coffee: two creams, three sugars.

Coffee turns to me and does the little eyebrow flick that signals he wants to ask me something. I don't know why he can't just say it, but whatever.

"Can I get you fellas something?" It's how he wants to start it. I say my line, all sweet like he wants, and then...

"What do you think of this new curfew in town?" He follows up with the real discussion topic. Fries rolls his eyes and grabs the ketchup bottle.

"Don't make the poor girl talk about that. You fish for her opinions every time she comes over."

"I just like talking about things. Is that a crime?"

"No, but it's annoying."

"Yeah, says you," he turns back to me, "Curfew. Go."

"I'm not the biggest fan of it, but whatever gets us through the crime wave faster." I say. You don't want to get too in-depth or political. That's how you lose tips. Vague statements that waver both sides.

"Exactly. Whatever it takes." Coffee turns back to Fries, like I'm a grand authority on curfews and not a 16 year old server. Fries rolls his eyes again and turns to me.

"We're fine dear. Thanks for asking." I take the hint and turn my way out of the conversation. It's a slow day, no one else in my section to check up on, so I head to the kitchen and wait for Corner Boy's food to come up.

You would expect Chief to not be a talkative person with all that he has to manage, but I think it soothes him. He's a madman around the griddle, salting and peppering and tasting and pulling those eggs right before they're gonna burn so they've got the best kind of crisp. He's large, both height and weight, and has a birthmark on his forehead that looks almost like a four-leaf clover. He dabs the sweat away from it regularly with the raggedy towel draped over his shoulder.

"Gotta keep my luck up!" He says, spinning around to open a device and slide a waffle onto a plate. With the reggae music going in the background, it almost looks like a dance.

He's juggling unrecognizable breakfast platters, sliding them off to the side for later completion while cracking wise about his family.

"...in between rounds, amiright? Could always use another spatula." I catch the last half of a joke, probably at his son's expense, as he slides a plate across the divider that I recognize. I grab Corner Boy's platter and walk out onto the main floor.

There's another set of customers in a booth near the door, and two gentlemen at the counter looking over the menu. The one in the booth looks frazzled; a white lady, roughly 25, but with one of those faces you can't really guess. She's got a set of thick, coke-bottle Lennon glasses that magnify her eyes a good bit. She's got a laptop out

and is frantically typing away at it.

I walk to Corner Boy's table and place down the tray. He grins and reaches for the salt and pepper shakers by the napkins. I've never seen someone drown a plate of eggs in pepper like Corner Boy.

I step away so he and his food can be alone and walk over to the newest patron. Jane (she looks like a Jane) is still typing away at what looks to be essays as I approach.

"You ready to order?" She doesn't hear me, I don't think. Her earbuds are in and I can faintly hear indie music pouring out of them.

"Ma'am?" I heighten my voice a bit but to no avail. I finally tap her on the shoulder and I swear she jumps a foot tall.

"Sorry!" She near-shouts.

"You're fine! You're fine. What can I get you?" I put on the sweet voice and all is forgiven. She's loose now, unscrunching her shoulders and reaffirming the frames onto her nose.

"What would you recommend?" She asks. Usually, that's a vanity question; the person's already made up their mind, now they just need someone to confirm it as right. Something about the way she says it, the stresses on the syllables, makes me think it's genuine.

"I think we've got great breakfast sandwiches, personally. I'd get the ham, egg, and cheese sandwich with hash browns." I figured it'd take me a moment to think about it but the suggestion just stumbles out of me.

"That sounds heavenly. That, please. Oh, and can the hashbrowns be extra crispy?" She says it like it's some grand request, like if I don't accept it she'll shrink into nothing.

"Can do." I flash a grin at her, and she responds in kind. Her teeth are gapped in the front.

I walk back, slide the order onto the spike and cater to the two men at the counter. One wants steak and eggs and I catch him sneaking whiskey into his coffee after I drop it off. The other gets a toasted english muffin and a pad of butter, and once the check comes he throws a wad of cash on the counter and runs off with the muffin in his mouth.

The day goes on and on. I drop a carafe of coffee and it shatters on impact with the ground. I get three orders wrong, I take too long getting change, one bitch of a woman whines and cries her way into a free meal. Corner Boy is still in the corner, longer than he normally stays, ordering the occasional odd and end so we don't tell him to move: a plate of fries, another hot chocolate, a Cuban sandwich. He sits there, scribbling in a notebook and watching it all happen.

It's when I go on a bathroom break that he leaves. I'm in and out in three minutes but like a phantom he's gone. I go to clear his table, and in between the ketchup bottle and the table is a 5 dollar bill and a drawing of me, balancing plates and blowing a stray hair from my eyes.

Audrey Ryland

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: The New Community School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Tory Hendelman

Category: Poetry

August Doubts

Blank space pouts all day

Tired sun has gone to bed

Will we meet again?

Isabelle Saadatmand

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Veritas Classical Christian School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sunny Rosebro

Category: Short Story

Over and Over again

Breathe in, breathe out. Count to ten. Don't worry about the outside world. When the world gets blurry, they tell us the same things, over and over again. I've tried to count the days since my parents put me here, but it seems impossible. When they dropped me off, it was January 6th, or maybe the 8th? And it's been 5 weeks, I think.

"What's the date?!" Emma, my roommate, screams. "I need to know what day it is! My brother's birthday is coming up and I need to know!"

"Shhh." The nurse says, pulling her aside. "Don't worry about the outside world. You're safe here. What's happening out there doesn't matter right now."

She won't tell her the date, and I can't keep track anymore. For her sake I wish I knew. They could at least have the decency to let her know when her dead brother's birthday is. She thinks he's still alive, or maybe she just wants to think he's still alive.

Everyone here seems crazy in some regard, though I suppose that's the point. Welcome to the local psych ward, where you can send all your crazy children and hope that the doctors can medicate us into normality. Adults come here too, but since they can check themselves in, why would they? Why come here if someone isn't forcing you?

We aren't really crazy, or at least I'm not, though everyone probably thinks that of themselves. My parents deemed me unstable after I punched my classmate. They told the staff that I'm aggressive, a danger to others. They never even thought to ask why I did it, what might have lead me to the 'outburst.' They never let me explain how he cursed at me, how he told me I'd never be worth anything, how he said that no good thing will ever come of the weak little girl who can't even pass a 9th grade history class.

Once Emma is calm again, we're called into the cafeteria for breakfast. Apple sauce that we can eat with a spoon, and only a spoon. I hate it. Mushy food for breakfast lunch and dinner, soft enough so nobody needs to do anything more than scoop. Wouldn't want us attacking each other or anything, would we?

I don't pretend I don't know why most people are here. It's rare that anyone is sent in for being a danger to others, usually it's people who are considered a danger to themselves. I guess that makes me special.

"Hey there, Juliet." Fray slides into the chair next to me, somehow making it look cool to sit in these stupid padded chairs. "Whacha got there?"

"The only thing they ever give us." I say, half jokingly.

Fray might be the only real friend I've got here. Emma's sweet and all, but she isn't really *here*, and everyone else keeps their distance. Don't want to risk getting too close to the 'violent' one, I guess. Fray doesn't care though. He listened when I explained what really happened, and he did so without judgement or accusation in his eyes. Even the doctors' faces couldn't manage that level of kindness.

He's not crazy either, he just doesn't want to exist anymore, and people don't tend to like that. Not that any of them really care about him though, they just won't let him go. As much as I hate the feigned kindness, I'm grateful for it in his case. I want him to keep existing.

"Hurry up Jules." He nudges me, just barely. "We have to get to group."

I notice he's already gulped down his apple sauce, and I attempt to finish mine as quick as I can. The nurses are watching, making sure everyone finishes their meals.

Group is better when Fray is there, though some days he's out. I presume he's talking to one of the doctors those days, being given another pill to force his brain into thinking it wants to live. The group leader is some psychiatrist who's been asked to babysit us for the day, and she seems to be forcing the smile on her face, probably to seem welcoming.

"Okay everyone, today we are going to go around and each tell the group about something that makes us feel safe. It can be anything, from a food to something we had as a child." Her plastered smile even comes through in her voice. "How about you start, Emma?"

The young blonde girl nods, and I notice her clenching and unclenching her fists for a moment before speaking. “My brother makes me feel safe.” She whispers, just loud enough for us to hear. “When my parents fought... when they weren’t around he always read stories to me growing up.”

Pity enters the eyes of the group leader as she nods at the next kid in the circle. We go around until it gets to me, and I find myself revealing more than I intend to.

“The color yellow.” I say, almost as if I’m talking to myself. “Not the bright kind though, I mean when it’s pale, like when white paint I added until you could hardly call it yellow. It’s warm, almost like light itself, and all white things fade to it. It’s a warm color of old forgotten things, like the letters my grandparents used to send each other that they kept in a box to show me when I turned 13.”

This gets a smile from the group leader, and a strange look from Fray, as if he’s questioning why I’d give something so personal away. Then it’s his turn.

“I like knives.” He says with a smirk, resulting in a glare from the leader.

We go through lunch, and coloring, and dinner, and then it’s time for bed. The day feels no different than any other when I go to sleep.

Soon enough, I’m awake again, and Emma is crying to a nurse about the date.

“I need to know what day it is!” She screams. “My brother’s birthday is coming up and I need to know!”

Breathe in, breathe out. Count to ten. Don’t worry about the outside world. When the world gets blurry, they tell us the same things, *over and over again*.

Alainie Satterfield

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Burnt Out

Burnt out

You watch Jasper's cigarette smoke waft away in the wind, carried away into the trees, and keep to yourself that you've never seen him smoke before. You wonder if he did it during your relationship, and if he did, what *else* he could have possibly kept from you.

He wants to know why you're here and you do too. Some stupid reason flows out your mouth before you can think of a real answer. He doesn't believe you. You say you're here to get your stuff from the house but you came during his one break of the day and knew he'd be home. Some sadistic fuck in the back of your mind wanted to see him again. Just who are you trying to fool here? Certainly not yourself. Maybe the voice in the back of your head. His icy blue eyes freeze you in place with their stare. He tosses the cigarette and starts to get the keys out of his pocket. You don't know where to look so you watch the flame in the cigarette die out. Littering was always a flaw of his but hey, everybody has their flaws. When he stands up to give you the keys you take a step back out of habit. Pictures of broken glass, bruises, and tears flash through the back of your mind. This opposition is the one thing that seems to finally catch him off guard. You feel the satisfaction itching the back of your brain.

But Jasper composes himself and holds out a set of keys in front of him, feet planted on the sidewalk, daring you to take them. You walk forward begging yourself not to trip over the cracked concrete that you always asked if he was going to get fixed. You reach out a shaky hand, your fingertips grazing the cold metal of the keys, but he yanks them back. Of course, he would turn it into a game. You're staring at his dirty, white Converse, gritting your teeth in frustration. Why can't he just make this easy? You don't need to look up to know he has his signature smug ass grin plastered on his face, he thinks he is so incredible. He asks why you're here and you repeat yourself from before. Stuff. He simply asks again. You repeat louder. And get this, he tells *you* to calm down, and that he's "just kidding." You snatch the jagged keys out of his hand, and they dig into your palm, making imprints of his lock into your skin.

You push past him and drive the key into the lock, remembering the night when you did the same indignant motion. That night, you were so excited to tell Jasper about the job promotion and how you got out of work early just to tell him about it but instead of congratulations, you met his second girlfriend for the first time and heard the flush of your two-year relationship go down the drain.

Court Scoven

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA
Educators: Genevieve Dowdy, Mary Scurlock

Category: Poetry

A Void Filled by Sadness

A Void Filled By Sadness

My heart is void
And yet its full
My feelings dull
My tear ducts dry
My smile is gone
And my hope is fading
My eyes are dark
My pencil's breaking
My light is dim
And the boats keep crashing
Ashore of this void
Filled by rocks
And mud
The staircase is long
And I keep falling down
Tumbling in a spiral
My broken crown
The gems all gone
My heart the thief
And I watch as my love
Rips a hole
In my soul
Letting all demons in
And the death of an angel
Life begins to strangle
Me by the neck
And there is no escape
Why did life have to mold me
Into this ugly shape
My song is silent
My voice is not heard
The darkness keeps scaring
Away all the birds
My life is driven
By the hope that there's more
But when that hope fades
My life will close the door
My life is holding on
Like a loose tooth to a mouth
And my heart has tied a string
And keeps slamming the door

All the color in the world can't save me now
The sky fades to white
And the ground to black
As I sit here in silence
Surrounded by people
With hearts so full
The happiness is shining
Except for in
My corner of the room
The true meaning of life
Is to die and be forgotten
Isn't it funny that your legacy relies
On other people being saints
In a world full of sinners
Other people being clean plates
After gluttonous dinners.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

The Truth About Morrigan's Quarry

The Truth About Morrigan's Quarry

Growing up, I heard many stories about Morrigan's Quarry. In a small town like Camson, it was the only place for reckless teens to go and do things back then. There was no sneaking out as the neighbor next door would catch you before you had even left your driveway. Want to skip fourth period? Classes were so small that the teacher would notice you were gone before they even pulled the attendance sheet out. Camson was spotless with no graffiti, trash, or chipped paint. Eyes were everywhere making sure everything was perfect. Well, everywhere but the quarry that is.

That's what I heard at least. The truth was I went straight home after school each day. The kid with the perfect grades who volunteered on Sundays at the food pantry wasn't exactly the daring type. I would have much rather stayed home and read whatever books my mom had brought home from the library. I never felt like I was missing out because I didn't really know what happened. The unspoken rule was "what happened at the quarry, stayed at the quarry." However, that didn't stop the occasional story from leaking causing a flood of whispers between classmates.

From what I could tell, there was nothing really special about it. I had seen pictures, and it was nothing but a cliff fifteen feet above freezing water that you could jump off of. Supposedly the fun lay in the mystery behind why the quarry was abandoned but I didn't get that either. I read history books about the town and couldn't find why anyone believed that there was something to be uncovered. Multiple sources stated that Morrigan's Quarry was closed after the materials weren't making enough money to pay off employees with injuries they got on the job. The drainage pumps were turned off and it filled with water. That's as far as it goes, yet everyone who went there wanted to believe a more sinister tale.

I'd heard many rumors from classmates who thought they knew the real story. Though they all began the same way. Each one claimed that the newspaper stories and history books were just covering up what truly happened. One kid said a worker died fixing one of the pumps, causing the flood. Another said they were looking for some sort of magic buried beneath the town but couldn't find it. What I'd heard the most was that the workers found something while mining that scared them. An evil that they didn't want the rest of the world to be exposed to. Classmates used the mysterious injuries employees came back with after a day at work as proof for the theory. There were details about the injuries in the books I read, but none of them were mysterious. Cuts and scrapes, even the loss of a limb, could be explained by faulty machinery. It was obvious to me that students just created stories to make Camson seem a little less ordinary.

A week before the summer vacation of my eighth-grade year, Finn drowned in the quarry. He was a year younger than me and I wouldn't even know the name if it wasn't for his death. His friends say that he cut his leg on some old metal structure hidden in the water. It was bad enough that he wasn't able to swim back to the small gravel shore. His body sank and there was nothing the town could do to retrieve it from the depths of the water. The police believed the story Finn's friends told them even with no evidence. Drowning became the official cause of death. I saw then how easily history was written. Finn became nothing but an unnoticed blemish on Camson's perfect record.

Morrigan's Quarry was completely abandoned because of Finn. Reckless teens no longer used it as an escape from the constant eyes of Camson adults. They were afraid, and rumors were used to lessen their anxiety. As weeds consumed the diving cliff, more theories about the mysteries of the quarry grew in classrooms and group chats. They were all outlandish claims such as the "evil" that scared off the workers had survived the flood, making Finn its first victim. Some even believed that the quarry itself was alive and consumed Finn. The lack of a body was their only evidence.

I grew up and left Camson without ever visiting the quarry. I had no reason to believe it was ever there at all.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Spring Awakening

Spring Awakening

Let the past fill the mind
as memories of spring haunt
those during moments awake.
Remember the sins associated with falling
petals from trees made virulent.

The fatal words spiral around
opinions obviously disregarded,
making light of serious situations.
Light, something to look for, whether
it's an ember or glow from the sky.

The agenda cleared of all but one task,
to find the color of loss.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Acknowledgement of My Cliché

Acknowledgment of My Cliché

When the world cracked in two, where did you go?
I stare at the ravine, the crack that we made.
A look over the edge, are you still down below?

To understand what caused us to finally outgrow
and lose childish feelings was an inevitable delayed.
When the world cracked in two, where did you go?

I mourn in our "special place," the meadow
where knots were tied to make love an accolade.
A look over the edge, are you still down below?

I want to acknowledge the journey we lived, though
memories of joy let sorrow seep through to degrade.
When the world cracked in two, where did you go?

It's a tragedy, a cliché I know I borrow
from every love story. The ones the theaters played.
A look over the edge, are you still down below?

We ignore one simplicity of love's status quo.
There are no happy endings; you're lost I'm afraid.
When the world cracked in two, where did you go?
A look over the edge, are you still down below?

Eshani Sonti

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Novel Writing

Aliens

Brief summary:

Whitespace and his crew are sent on a journey to explore the ups and downs of space. During their exploration, their ship shuts down and there's no way to contact anyone from their planet. Deciding the best course is to refuel their fuel tank on Earth, the crew sail to Xmorph. Turns out, ASAN is keeping something from them. Expecting to find pain and torture, they're surprised to find beauty, kindness, and...love.

Excerpt:

Chapter I

Whitespace hops up on board and instantly makes his way to the control deck. Behind him, Coral and Dandy were discussing the emergency plan. One could not be too careful when observing in space. Dandy and Coral both had similar expressions of excitement, but Wale looked nervous. He walked up to Wale and gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "It'll be fine, I've been in space before, remember?" Wale nodded and smiled at him in gratitude. "Thanks, Whitespace." Whitespace nodded his head and went out in search of the emergency kit. It was on a cabinet above the kitchen space.

He stood up to reach it but it was high above his body. Grunting, he stood on his tiptoes and reached for the kit. Still, it was far too high to grab. Whitespace rolled his eyes with annoyance and huffed. Even at twenty-two years, he was still the height of an average woman. Just like his dad, said the dark part of him. He tightened his fists and took a deep breath to calm himself. He didn't like talking about his dad.

Coral and Dandy both held their bags in front of them as they situated into their bunks. Whitespace eyed the bags; they were both very large in size. One of them could hold a large dog. "Why are your bags so big? We're going into space, not to a fashion show." Both Dandy and Coral had sheepish looks on their faces. "Mom packed it, blame her." Said Coral, while Dandy said, "Blame mom." Whitespace shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Pecil can't pack everything for you. Besides, you guys are twenty-two years old, it's time you start acting like one." Dandy and Coral grinned and saluted him with their right hand. "Yessir!" They said together.

Whitespace shook his head at them but still smiled. It was hard to be angry around those two twins. "BOARDING COMPLETED. LAUNCHING SHIP." The ship's auto-control system called out as everyone made their way to the seats. They situated themselves into the hard fabric of the wool seats and put on their space helmets. The ship started moving intensely and Whitespace started feeling sick in his stomach. Still, he had to be strong for the rest of the team, so he held his breath as they launched into space.

He woke up with a killer headache and rubbed at his head to get rid of the pain. He opened his eyes and blinked his eyes at the loss of sunlight. He looked around to see that Dandy and Wale were still sleeping while Coral was nowhere in sight. He unbuckled his seat belt and got up. Er..well, *tried* to get up is the proper word. He crashed down onto the floor and grimaced as his legs ached in pain. He got up unsteadily to his feet as he looked around for Coral. He found her in the kitchen in an odd position. Her back was to him but her right leg was frozen while her left leg was swaying gently. Her shoulders shook with every breath she took.

Was Coral crying? He trudged ahead and accidentally walked onto a fruit bar. Her head whipped around and he stared at him the same time he stared at her. Her usually happy face was unusually pale and her eyes were red with tears shed. Her chin was trembling uncontrollably as she stayed frozen in her spot. Whitespace blinked, making sure his vision wasn't fooling him. "Coral, are you okay?" He whispered to her as he walked closer to her. She didn't speak, just shook her head vigorously. He walked closer until he was only a foot away. Leaning in, he wrapped her in a hug and waited for her to push him away, but she didn't. She just wrapped her hands around his arms and silently cried into his arms.

Whitespace was stunned. Coral had never acted this way before. But he just stayed silent as her tears bled into his shirt.

Whitespace held her for a few more minutes before he backed a step away from her. "Coral, I'm asking you this as your captain. What happened?" Coral still had the stunned look on her face. "They lied." She said sadly.

Whitespace frowned and gripped her arm. "WHO lied?!" Her eyes went wide, "ASAN, they told us that we were supposed to go to space to investigate. But really, we're spying on the aliens."

Chapter II

Whitespace felt as if his limbs were frozen. He let out a high-pitched laugh and shook his head. "No, no way. There's no such thing as aliens, those are only stories for kids. And would ASAN keep such a secret from us? No, they wouldn't." Coral nodded, "Maybe, but look at this." Coral took out her Xpad and typed in the password to her Zmail. The first thing that caught my eye was the *IMPORTANT* tag on one of her Zmails. Using her pointer finger, she clicked on the Zmail:

Sent 20 years ago..

IMPORTANT:

To: Captain Capwick-

From: ASAN

Captain Capwick, we've gone through your data panel and we've determined that there really is a population of life living on planet Xmorph. We think it would be appropriate to disclose any information about life on Xmorph. You can think of this as a mission, a mission not to open your mouth about ANY OF THIS to anyone. Not even your family can know. We hope your mission to Xmorph is explementary.

Whitespace opened his mouth several times but could not form any words. His tongue felt glued to his mouth. How could ASAN lie to them? Whitespace tightened his fists into balls and pinched the bridge of his nose. Captain Capwick went on a mission 20 years ago, and he never returned. Captain Capwick was a very famous explorer. He was even the first to land on the red planet of Jules. Whitespace was only 3 years old at that time but later he was told about Captain Capwick. The public was told that Capwick was studying different types of meteors when he was suddenly lost in space. How could ASAN lie about such a big matter? Questions revolved around whitespace's head like bees around honey.

Coral suddenly grabbed his arm and held it in a deathly grip.

"Do not tell the others." Her face was loaded with determination. "Dandy and Wale are more...vulnerable than us." Her voice paused. I nodded, I wouldn't want Dandy or Wale to know the truth either. Coral shook her head and let out an angry sigh. "All this time, when they asked us if we saw anything unusual..." She just shook her head and gave a pathetic laugh. "I guess I should be happy. We just found out that there's a new race of life on Xmorph." Whitespace gave her shoulder a squeeze, "Don't blame yourself, Coral. There's no way you could have ever known." Coral's eyes flashed and she stood up unexpectedly.

"But I did know!" Whitespace eyed her closely and frowned. "What do you mean?" Coral raised her hands up to her head and rubbed furiously. "I--" She didn't get to finish because the kitchen door burst open. Wale's eyes were wide as he shouted out, "Emergency in the control room!"

We rushed to the control room like the ship was on fire. Dandy was near the control panel, desperately clicking different. My eyes grew wide, "Hold it! What's going on?!?" Dandy said nervously, "The ship went past the docking point." Cursing, he grabbed a hold of the control wheel and tried to navigate back. The sound of rocks grinding

against each other rang into our ears. From the corners of his eyes, he could see the crew covering their ears with their hands. Grimacing, Whitespace tried once more to move backward but the stubborn space ship only went forward. He tightened his fists and took several deep breaths to calm his heartbeats.

Dandy walked up to him and put a comforting squeeze on his shoulder. "Hey, we missed the docking point. So what? We'll just turn around and get right back up there!" Whitespace shook his head, "You don't understand, our ship's navigation systems are failing. It can only go forward now." Everyone froze, none of them made a squeak. "Woah, no. So you're saying that we're lost in space. But we can still contact ASAN and request backup." Coral shook her head, "If the navigation systems failed then our contact system panels probably failed too."

Wale's mouth opened to speak but not a word fell out. Finally, Dandy was the first to speak. "No, no way. I'm not going to accept this." He grabbed his hair and closed his eyes tightly as tears poured out. His face was the color of Coral's new red lipstick as he slumped down onto the floor and began crying. Coral sat down beside him and hugged him while he cried. Wale was too frozen to even move. "It's ok, I'll find a way out of this," Whitespace told them.

Chapter III

Whitespace walked quickly over to the digital map and looked over at it. Yup, it was official. They were in the middle of nowhere. He ruffled his brown hair and stared intently on the map. They were in the space between Xmorph and Jules so getting back to back to Xena would be difficult. "Whitespace!" He turned behind him to see Coral with hurried and worried eyes. "We don't have much fuel left!" She cried. "Fudge." Whitespace cursed as he bounded towards the fuel storage. The fuel tank was less than half full. Sighing loudly, he swore intently. "Ok. Well then, we'll have to land on a planet." Wale's mouth dropped open, "How can we do that? It's not as if we're going to find a fuel tank on any planet." Ignoring him, he turned to Coral and gave her a nod. She nodded back to me with a worried look. She knew what Whitespace was thinking, "We're going to Xmorph."

Both Wale and Dandy looked at Whitespace with confusion. "Why would we go to Xmorph?" They asked at the same time. Whitespace looked at Coral, and she sighed sadly. She said again, "Well-" She stopped and paused for a moment. Wale and Dandy looked at each other in dismay. "We have to follow ASAN. You know the rules." Dandy shook his head furiously, "But how-" Whitespace shut Dandy's mouth and tried to walk away. But they held his shoulder and stopped him from moving another step. "Do you even know how Xmorph is?! What if- What if we go into trouble..." He saw the tense in Wale's eyes. It seemed as if Wale thought that Xmorph was the worst place we could even go to. Whitespace sighed and patted Wale's back. "It will all be fine." Wale turned back and said in a furious voice, "How can you be so sure that Xmorph won't harm us?" Whitespace groaned. "What if it doesn't?" Whitespace crossed her arms and stared at Wale into the eyes. "What if it *does* harm us?" Wale said nervously. Whitespace let out a big deep breath and walked towards Wale. "I am going. Whoever wishes to come, follow me."

Whitespace ran over to the control board and transitioned the gear to land on Xmorph. Coral came in behind me and fell down against the seats. "Now what do we do." Whitespace smiled at her. "Now coral, we wait." She narrowed her eyes and swore underneath her breath. "You know, what your doing is prohibited AND dangerous. Xmorph is a planet we know almost nothing about. And besides, even if we do make it back to Xena, we will have to tell them that we went to Xmorph."

Whitespace sighed, "I know." She looked at him with an incredulous look on her face. "You know what could happen, you know that we could die and you're OK with that?!? Her voice took on a high-pitched quality. Whitespace shook my head and tried to ignore the bubble of rage inside my head. "Your just angry that Dandy wouldn't come with us." He concluded as he shifted gears. Coral raised her fists but dropped them after a minute. "What-what will happen to Dandy if he doesn't come with us?" Whitespace took a long look at her, "The fuel tank will run out and he'll be in here with no oxygen. What do you think will happen?"

Coral covered her mouth and cried silently. "You'll have to convince him to come with us." Coral nodded, "And what about Wale?" She asked him. Whitespace stared hard at the panel board. "He'll come with us." Coral glared at him, "How do you know that?" Whitespace didn't look at her, "Because Wale is smart, he knows what'll happen if he stays." Coral shakes her head, "And Dandy is not?" He peeked at her from the corners of his eyes. "Dandy is not what?" Coral sighs, "Dandy is not smart?" Whitespace did not respond. Dandy was smart, but he didn't realize when things got desperate. Whitespace looked at Coral intently. "Dandy is smart but he doesn't know when to accept the

truth." Coral didn't speak nor did she look at him. "Are you going to tell them the truth about Xmorph?" Coral shrugged, "Now that we're going there, what choice do I have?"

Whitespace walked down the aisle with Coral on his heels. Wale was eating a chocolate bar while Dandy was nowhere to be found. Whitespace saw Coral fight off tears when she didn't see him. "He's mad at me for siding with you." She whispered with guilt. He shook his head, "Coral, it's not your fault. Don't blame yourself." Coral didn't respond. Wale stared at Whitespace as he walked up to him. "Wale, are you with us?" Wale's face was blank as he nodded his head once. Whitespace smiled at him from the last resolve of energy he had left. "Good. We...need to tell you something important.

Wale listened carefully as Whitespace told him about the aliens on Xmorph. "Now that we've cleared that, are you sure you want to come?" Wale grimaced, "If I don't then I'll die due to oxygen loss." Coral smiled at him, "That pretty much sums it up." Wale looked up at Coral, "Is Dandy coming with us?" Coral shrugged, "I don't know." Whitespace cracked his knuckles. "Dandy will be fine. He'll eventually realize how silly it is to stay" Coral raised her head to the ceiling. "Maybe he's right. Maybe Xmorph really is more dangerous than we assumed."

Amanda Tan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Z. Thornton

Category: Critical Essay

Can We Possibly Escape Time?: A (Literary) Exploration, Indignation, and Conglomeration

Street artist Banksy's documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, American writer Jennifer Egan's novel, *A Visits from the Goon Squad*, and screenwriter Charlie Booker's "Black Mirror" episode, *Men Against Fire*, all present the passage of time as a form of artistic expression and characterization. While each story contains different characters an encompasses a different genre, connections are formed through the nature of time within each work. Banksy's documentary follows the "real life" adventures of Thierry Guetta, a flamboyant Frenchmen who tracks his every move through a camera. Egan's novel examines the lives of several characters including a music producer, a publicist, and a college student. Her story is told out of chronological order, leaving readers to deduce the developing personalities and connections between her characters. Booker's episode shifts to portray military and technology and the foreshadowing of the worst possible future. The influence and inescapable nature of time remains interwoven throughout each creator's work.

1.

Is art represented by society or is society represented by art? Street artist Banksy's documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop* portrays the life of artists in snippets of rough footage shot by a Frenchman, Thierry Guetta. However, the whole documentary is revealed to be a ruse, Thierry a hired actor, and his art show at the end is ultimately a ruse. Banksy introduces the documentary as a study into the person who wished to present street art, but had the cameras turned upon himself when he became a more interesting subject than the art he was filming. His motive behind the camera borders between appreciation and obsession. His relentless tracking of every move suggests his desire to be included as a participant opposed to an observer. However, he does not plan to actually compile the footage despite telling the artists he encounters that he plans to make a documentary. His orchestration of filming as a ruse dilutes the power of his camera and his declared purpose behind following the artists. Thierry's obsession with the mysterious allure of street art is therefore disguised by his supposed documentary. Guetta begins by documenting his cousin Invader then continues to follow other artists including Invader, Banksy, and Shepard Fairey. Thierry's travels allow him to gain experience and he presents his own street art show, under the name "Mr. Brainwash". He is a public success, selling millions worth of street art, leaving Banksy and other street artists mildly jealous and surprised. The documentary explores the definition of art and the premise of its creation. Can Banksy's overarching role in the creation of his documentary represent a work of art? The answer is an exploration of creativity and into the mind of the actual consumers of the art. Banksy's study of Thierry in his film expresses the film's use as a reflection of public opinion. Thierry's role as a cameraman who doesn't actually plan to compile his footage insinuates his participation as an observer and not an artist. Thierry appears to capture art rather than create it, however, his eventual success through his art show displays facets of public opinion that would consider him an artist. The authenticity of art is questioned by Thierry's documentary and the fakes he sells. Public opinion praises him, while street artists like Banksy and Shepard Fairey who use their art as a form of anonymous expression, differ in their opinion of Thierry. However, the public cultivates art's consumption and meaning, therefore somewhat dictating the effect and power of an artist's work. Banksy's documentary compares the importance and impact of public opinion and the opinion and expression of the artist.

2.

Time matters. Thierry's final statement in the documentary about whether time will tell if he is a real artist or not represents the medley of public opinion and personal ideas he has presented. He has revolutionized street art through his profit incentive show and his examination by Banksy highlights his importance as a societal representation

of how art is consumed and produced. Thierry's last line encompasses the significance of time and the perception of his work. His rapid fame connects him to the figures in Jennifer Egan's disruptive novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which characterizes the passage of time and the interconnected lives of each individual. The novel follows Dolly, a former publicist, Scotty, a "Flaming Dildos" guitarist, and Lou, an older man who indulges in a lavish lifestyle.

Dolly's fall from grace explores her desperation and development as time passes. A famed publicist, Dolly decides to host the year's most discussed party. She plans to invite several celebrities and entertain them using suspended trays containing water and oil. Colored heat lamps cause the mixture to swirl and the guests are amazed by the mingling colors. However, the trays begin to melt and as they fall, many party guests sustain burns and utter ghastly screams. As Dolly absorbs the scene, she forgets to call 911 immediately, leaving disaster to ensue. Dolly faces legal action and is shunned from fame. Egan describes her demise, stating, "She had overlooked a seismic shift -- had conceived of an event crystallizing an era that had already passed" (143). Dolly's regret is rooted in her misplaced timing. The importance of time in her perception illustrates her presence in the novel as a reflection of the passage of time. The irony within Egan's quote lies within Kitty Jackson, a former movie star who has also fallen from grace. Together, she and Dolly attempt to portray a genodical general as humble and quaint. When Kitty and Dolly first meet, Dolly notices "a scatter of raw pink patches marr[ing] the skin above [Kitty's] wrist" (149). Kitty proceeds to explain that many celebrities self-inflicted burns following Dolly's incident. Time transpires to create an infamous event that lives through scars, real and created, on Kitty's arms. Dolly's plan to host a memorable party is fulfilled though the passage of time presents her as stunned by Kitty's desperation to be considered a guest. Dolly and Kitty's unethical work of portraying the general as a citizen and not a murderer returns them to the spotlight. The fluidity of time underscores their journey. Dolly's tenure as a publicist secures her image, yet the hush money from the General secures her daughter's future. Dolly's life fluctuates as time dictates her actions. Kitty's scars represent Dolly's malignantly iconic party. Kitty's work with the General reignites her film career and she is a jockey in her newest film. She takes advantage of her time out of the spotlight to create a new image of herself. Together, Dolly and Kitty exhibit the fluctuation of time and the influence of fame.

Scotty's ache for his high school band days enhances the entrapment of the past and apprehension of the future. As high school students, Scotty and Bennie are both members of the band, the Flaming Dildos. After they have graduated high school and their careers unfold, Bennie becomes a successful music producer, finding he has more talent in showcasing musicians than performing himself. Scotty is an elementary school janitor, remaining disconnected from the changing technological world around him, and fishing in the river to sustain his diet. He meets Bennie in his office, bringing a fish as a gift. As they sit together in the office, Scotty realizes that while he is entangled in his past high school glory, Bennie fears his former band days. Scotty describes his temperament, declaring, "behind Bennie's smile, the fear was still there: that I'd tracked him down to snatch away these gifts life had shoveled upon him" (102). Scotty's thoughts represent his attitude towards life as an unpredictable force and therefore the indeterminate nature of time has led to Bennie's success. Bennie views Scotty as a symbol from the past and an object of fear whereas Scotty covets the past. However, later in the novel, Bennie decides to organize a show for Scotty in an attempt to revive his talented guitar playing. Alex, a former friend of Bennie's, notes the crowd that has come to watch Scotty perform. His show is set to be a widely publicized event, but Scotty himself is nervous and believes he has renounced his former glory. In an attempt to bolster him, Bennie says, "'Time's a goon right? You gonna let that goon push you around?'" (332). While Bennie's offer of encouragement is meant to raise Scotty's spirits, his words also reinforce his opinion of the passage of time and his fear of the past. Egan's description of time as a "goon" trace back to Kitty and Dolly's experiences with failure and fame, creating connections within the novel through the unstoppable force of time. Egan describes Scotty while he is performing as "a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that registered as pure. Untouched" (336). Scotty's reemergence defines him. He represents the fierce wrangling of time through generations and the bold presence he carries embodies redefinition. Similar to Kitty and Dolly, Scotty's performance is a resurgence of his former personality and articulates the fluctuation of time. The gravity of his playing resonates with the crowd because of his disappearance from the spotlight for so long. Time becomes the object for his newfound fame.

Egan's novel highlights the unpredictability and influence of time. Through Kitty, Dolly, Scotty, and Bennie, time builds the foundation of each character. Their interactions and development are spurred by the experiences they share. Kitty and Dolly attempt to outrun their past and establish their newfound popularity through morally questionable means while Scotty embraces his past and is fueled by his former glory. Egan's use of the past, present, and future in her writing explores the complexities of each character and their shifting personalities. The passage of time emerges as a prominent reflection into the lives of each character.

Technology and military remain interconnected, though their future together is unpredictable and often depictedly darkly. Dystopian television show "Black Mirror" details the horrors of technology and the consequences of the future. The episode titled *Men Against Fire* examines the relationship between technology and the military. Soldiers are implanted with devices that cause them to see people as large disfigured insects. They are dubbed "Roaches" and ordered to be exterminated. The MASS implants use a form of augmented reality to distort the perception of the soldiers so they cannot distinguish them as a human. After hearing a sharp ringing, Stripe, a young soldier, sees a desperate mother and her child holding a device in front of them. He attempts to save their lives but is knocked unconscious by a fellow soldier, Hunter. Stripe is revived by Arquette, a psychologist who is viewed by the soldiers as a father figure. Arquette shows Stripe footage of him killing innocent people and gives him the choice of lifetime imprisonment or having his memories erased. He explains that DNA checks separated people with genetic predispositions to illnesses from others but the military sought out a way to eliminate empathy in order for the "weaker" population to be "exterminated". Thus, the MASS implant was born. The final scene ends with Stripe standing in front of a home as a decorated officer, with a beautiful bride walking towards him. However, the home is revealed to be a dilapidated building, and there remains no footage of Stripe's decision. *Men Against Fire* presents Stripe as the explores themes of xenophobia, conscience, and reality. The "Roaches" represent ethnic groups that have been targeted through propaganda which aims to criminalize them. However, soldiers like Hunter who are blinded by their implants are unable to distinguish their actions and therefore powerless over their own will. Technology distorts perception and alters reality, an inescapable phenomenon that is further examined by the lack of Stripe's decision. When he is finally given a choice of freedom from the effects of the implant, his suppressed moral morality renders him unable to process his actions, thus presenting the continued control of technology over his life. The ending scene could suggest that Stripe has chosen to have his memories erased and is now a successful officer. The dilapidated house could serve as a metaphor for the unescapable guilt that he will never be able to feel; his home is a hoax of success. However, he could also be imprisoned and fed images through his MASS that leave him incapable of escaping from the power of his false reality, immobilizing him for the rest of his life. Stripe's character explores the intertwining of military and technology and the moral dilemmas that arise from their connection. Technology is capable of eliminating rationality and the military possesses a responsibility to develop ethical strategies. While "Black Mirror" serves as an extreme, the tangible quality of each episode is equally off putting. *Men Against Fire* represents the gruesome capability of military and technology and the human role involved.

I thoroughly enjoy "Black Mirror" and its many thought provoking chronicles of technology, however, this episode struck me as somewhat rooted in history while alluding to the future. Despite receiving lukewarm criticism from reviews, I found that the episode was direct and echoed a classical dystopian tale with portrayals including the calm, scientific character who justifies the deeply flawed society, the criminalization of people who are different, and the main character whose crisis consists of uncovering the ruse of society. The classical character tropes coupled with the realistic horror of technology functioned as a twist on the passage of time. Through thoroughly executed media, the future depicted in the episode appeared real, while the underlying story embraced figments of the past. I believe that the future presents possibilities that we are incapable of understanding, but "Black Mirror" is able to capture snippets of a potential trajectory.

4.

The underlying theme of time connects each work and lays the foundation for a broader discussion. Each author subtly crafts their stories by using time as a central focus that serves to convey character traits, public opinion, and horrific foreshadowing. Time is used as a tool for greater literary understanding. While Banksy's documentary is revealed to be a prank, its creation is an artistic device and Thierry's parting words represent the culmination of his experience, whether real or fictional. Egan's dilapidated characters reclaim their bold personalities through unethical means and self proclaimed confidence. The past is feared and the future is embraced. Stripe learns of his atrocious society and the inescapable wrath of technology and the military but loses his moral capacity. The fabric of time stretches to cover the themes, allusions, and expressions within each artistic work.

Amanda Tan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Pete Follansbee

Category: Poetry

Bleak Spaces/Devouring Indignation

Bleak Spaces:

Those cerulean walls,
Washing away,
the time that has passed;
Yet opening the gaps between us.

Stretched lines and sharp corners,
Inverted until we feel only the lilt,
Of moments lost.

Closing in as if a cage
wishes to trap us,
But can't for the wires,
bend when we're near.

Barely visible light scraping at the edges;
Prying its way in only to find,
Two faces staring blankly,
At those cerulean walls.

Devouring Indignation:

I wish the world would open its mouth;
And chew until I dribbled down its chin.

Like the juice of an overripe peach flowing,
Onto the sticky fingers digging into its flesh.

When I finally come roaring back to life,
Fragments of the stone I've landed on,
Will still dig into my skin.

Skylar Trujillo

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Flash Fiction

Crazy Father

Chapter One

Sarah was walking home from school while she was watching tik tok on her phone. She suddenly heard footsteps walking towards her from behind. She looked back and saw no one and turned back around to keep walking thinking it was her imagination. She heard footsteps again so she made a right and still heard the footsteps she turned around and said, “hello, anyone there”, no response. She started to walk the other direction thinking it was going to stop but then someone popped out from around the corner.

Sarah was worried about going home today from school because she found out that Ivan wasn't the one who was following her from school. She walks home looking left and right everywhere she goes and sometimes she looks behind her if she feels like someone is running towards her.

She calls her mom to tell her she got out of school and on her way home, * rings*, no answer. She calls her grandma and brother but still no answer. She looks on Life360 which is the tracking app her family has, everyone is at the same place but when she looks closer it says there is an abandoned house. She gets nervous and starts to dial 911 but when she was about to press the call button she gets a call from an unknown number she never seen before. She answers the phone but it hangs up when she answers it. She gets a message that says “if you want to see your family ever again you have to live with me”, as soon as she saw the message she knew it was her dad. It all started when she was nine and her dad wanted to take custody of her when her mom and dad got a divorce but her mom claimed she had a better environment for Sarah and had everything Sarah needed as far as food, clothes, and etc. Turns out Life360 was wrong and they were all at home. It's the finally the next day and I'm ready to figure out who is following me. After school; I'm so nervous now because its like something at school today made my confidence go down. I'm just going to look on my phone and watch Tiktoks, someone taps her on the shoulder. She turns around and it's her father. Father, was it you who was following me. Yes, it's because i miss being part of the family.

Willow Walton

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

#Self-Portrait

Brown shaded orbs hide behind heavy
20/40 lenses, give raccoon shading,
Witnessing varying bronze physiques spill crimson ichor.
"I want my momma"
A selfish request answered with faster death, and expected silence.
#BlackSquaresTuesday fading as soon as last summer started,
Hidden by #WhiteHatredWednesday on the next.
A family losing a father means free trip to the White House
Instead of reparations, it's fair.
We are silent (*or maybe we are silenced with fake justice*)until the next.
And then the next.
And the hundreds after the priors.
These present day melanated legs treading a stretch of concrete of tired leaders
Wrapping close behind. Black Panther auras feeding through spiritual touch,
Expecting change.

Xiaochun Wang

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sejal Vaywala

Category: Short Story

The Pink Pastel Room

The dim, yellow light of the candle on the cabinet flickered, and the shadow of its flame crawled over the pastel pink walls, wickedly dancing around the room. On the far left side sat a gigantic wooden bed decorated with silky curtains on the top and intricate engravings on its rails. Above the cotton mattress was a beautiful girl, appearing younger than the age of ten. In contrast to her dormant state, her long silky hair was tidily tied into pigtail braids. She was dressed in an undergarment and a formal stay, which were tied to a pale pink petticoat and gown by white lace. Her long eyelashes rested on her bottom lid as those tender cheeks attained a faint shade of blush. Her hands were calmly placed on top of her stomach.

In the corner of the room, where the feeble candlelights could barely pervade, stood a young man. His silver armor suit shimmered as the light occasionally hit its surface. Unlike the girl in bed, he was wide awake and vigilant, putting a hand on the handle of his sword.

As dawn soundlessly approached, the growing morning sunlight gradually eclipsed the candlelight's subdued luminescence. Just before the brightness could fully illuminate the bedroom, the young man standing in the corner hurried over to the window. He pulled down the heavy curtains, returning the room to its original dimness under the wavering flames of the candlelight. The eerie silence resumed. The young man carefully stepped back to the corner, in which he stood for the entire evening.

The sullen tranquility was soon interrupted by the girl's increasingly heavy breath. Her hands were no longer resting on top of her stomach; instead, they drifted down the sides of her body as her fingers tightened to clutch onto the sheets beneath her.

Huff. Huff. Huf — GASP!

The girl sharply wheezed and suddenly jerked up from her bed. Her eyes were wide open, exposing her dilated pupils. Her heart was wildly bouncing against her chest, and her knuckles were pale from tightly holding the sheets. Now the returning consciousness was slowly pulling at the strands of her nerves, allowing her to distinguish reality from dream. Even as her breathing finally quieted down, she could still feel the lingering tension in her skull, yelling at her to get up and run.

At the same time, the young man in the corner looked untroubled by the girl's abrupt and violent awakening. Rather, he composedly walked over to the bed, and his steps were so quiet that they were nearly inaudible. He spoke nothing, and only gently patted on the girl's back until her breathing eventually calmed down.

"Umbrian?" Her voice was still a bit hoarse from dehydration during sleep. Her dry lips were barely moving, and sound seemed to have come out from the bottom of her throat. She was still slightly shaking as she held onto Umbrian's arm, yet those beautiful eyes were hollow as she stared into nothingness. Slowly, as Umbrian carefully patted her back, a hint of vigor returned to her eyes.

"I'm listening," Umbrian whispered as he untied her pigtail braids, lightly stroking her ginger hair.

"I dreamed of it again," a quiet sob escaped from her throat, and her voice was shivering as she muttered "I saw fire. Lots of fire. The burning stack and the blinding smoke were terrifying. It was chaos. They were yelling at each other, so I yelled at them. I warned them that they were wrong. But none listened to me."

"It was just a dream." Umbrian softened his tone as his slender fingers ran through her hair to remove the knots, "You should forget about it, Caroline. Dreams possess no meaning, so you should not allow them to phase you, my princess."

Caroline fell quiet again. The room, though decorated according to a delightful color scheme of pale pink, falls back to a melancholy state as the trivial warmth of the candlelight could not permeate through the embedded brisk gloominess in the room.

Finally, as if she could no longer stand the somber atmosphere, Caroline anxiously asked, "Is the nurse coming today?"

“Ma’am always comes, Your Highness,” Umbrian answered as he gently braided her hair back into pigtails, “She is supposed to check on you everyday.”

“I’m not sick,” Caroline asserted, raising her voice for the first time, “I am *not* sick.” She repeated, as if she was confirming it to herself.

Instead of responding, Umbrian put a clip onto the top of her head, making sure that the shorter strands of her hair were not falling before her eyes. After a long pause, he sighed, “I do not know the answer. Your Highness, if I am allowed to be completely honest, I do not think I would be able to accompany you if they did not believe you to be sick.”

“Are you going to leave me, Umbrian?” Caroline clutched onto his arm, pleading, “Don’t leave me. *They* have all abandoned me. I don’t want you to leave, too. Then I would be all alone, and there would be absolutely no one standing up for me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Umbrian smiled, holding her hands for her to relax, “But there will be one day, eventually, when you would no longer need my guidance. You have a strong soul, Princess.”

“But I always need you!” Caroline exclaimed, turning around to hug Umbrian as she buried her head into his chest. He quietly circled her with his arms, hugging her back.

Before any of the two were to speak again, a sudden knock came from the door. Without any permission, the door creaked open, and the intruder decided to enter. A middle-aged woman in a semi-casual gown shuffled herself in with a wooden tray, on which sits a couple jars filled with dark green liquid.

Umbrian quickly returned to the corner of the room, where the dark shadows could act as his natural camouflage.

“Good morning,” She nodded at Caroline before setting the tray down onto the cabinet without noticing Umbrian’s hiding place.

Retrieving her attention back from Umbrian in the dark corner of the room, Caroline glanced at the woman and nodded back, “Good morning, Mrs. Whitmarke.”

“How are you feeling today, Caroline?” She smiled at her and sat down on the edge of her bed, holding onto her right hand, “You do not seem to be in the best state. Tell me, child, is there anything troubling you today?”

“Thank you, Ma’am, but I am all well,” Caroline tried to pull her hand back, but it was tightly trapped between the nurse’s palms, “I simply woke up from a terrible nightmare. I would feel better in about a minute or two.”

“I am sorry for the awful night of sleep. Here, I brought these herbs with me. They might make you feel better,” Mrs. Whitmarke at last let go of Caroline’s soft, tiny hand as she reached out for one of the taller jars on the tray.

“She’s not sick.”

Umbrian’s voice argued from the corner, unexpectedly cutting through the conversation like an icy cold blade.

Pinching her nails down at her own palms, Caroline’s muscles tensed as soon as Umbrian spoke the first syllable, and her breath uncontrollably grew faster. Yet the nurse did not spare a glance at him as she held the jar before Caroline, looking upon her with an encouraging expression in her eyes. The flickering flame of the candle casted both light and shadow across her face, resonating with the sparks in her intensive gaze. Squeezing the jar in one hand, she failed to reach again for Caroline, who, instead of returning the eye contact, was examining Umbrian’s vacuous facial expressions.

“Umbrian said I’m not sick,” Caroline turned back, meeting Mrs. Whitmarke’s reassuring gaze, “He’s right.” She added firmly, again.

The nurse raised an eyebrow, but she did not seem annoyed. Rather, she appeared to be confused yet engaged, as if she was observing something incomprehensible but interesting. “Are you listening to him, dear? Are you listening to him right now?” She asked eagerly, unable to hide the anxiety in her voice.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Caroline nodded as she became a bit unsatisfied with her questioning, “Umbrian is a great knight, but no one ever listens to him except for me. People do not realize how brilliant he is. They do not *know* that he is always right.”

“He may be,” the nurse shrugged, finally moving her gaze away as if she had given up on interrogating her, “Yet I have no authority to judge the accuracy of his words. You should be fully aware now that everyone, including myself, should listen to the Doctor in this place.”

As the nurse turned away from Caroline and took out a device to take some notes, she heard a strange, consecutive tapping noise. It was not the sound of the tip of a pen brushing against the linen paper; instead, the tapping noise sounded so unfamiliar that it felt abruptly out of place in this particularly quiet room.

The nurse, facing back and blocking the faint light that came from the device, did not notice Caroline’s unwelcoming reaction to the sound, so she kept on tapping. The sound was amplified in the silence of the room, and Caroline imagined that it was growing louder and louder as it continued. The noise scratched her eardrums, pierced through them, then bounced back and forth within her skull, and —

“Ahhhh!” Caroline screamed, scratching her scalp and destroying her braids, which were just tidily tied only a

few hours ago by Umbrian.

Startled, Mrs. Whitmarke dropped the device on her hand onto the floor. The sound of steel crushing against the floor interrupted the tapping sound, echoing in the bleak darkness of the room.

Shaking, Caroline managed to direct the tip of her index finger at the object that fell out of Mrs. Whitmarke's hand.

"What is *that*?" Caroline heard herself asking. She thought she would have screamed it out loud, but it came out more like a weak, shivering question; her voice sounded so distant and muffled that it did not feel like her own. Staring at the square, foldable, black device on the floor, Caroline sensed a sharp pain slicing through her brain.

Without answering Caroline's question at all, Mrs. Whitmarke calmly bowed down to pick the black object up. Checking to see if it had been damaged, the nurse held the device up again and unfolded it. As Caroline could now have a full view of it, she saw some blue light emanating from the side of the object which was previously folded in when it was dropped to the floor.

"Take it away!" Caroline neurotically shrieked, "This doesn't belong here! Take it away, Umbrian! Help me!"

But no one was there to answer her call.

She wiggled on the mattress, but it no longer felt soft and embracing. The sugary pastel color began to fade from the wall, which was deteriorating into a forlorn ugly gray. Although the wall was now fully devoid of any fantastic color, Caroline found it more blinding and unbearable to look at than before. Clutching onto her pale pink gown to find support, Caroline realized that her own clothing had changed as well; she was now wearing some lined linen clothes, something that was extremely unfit for someone of her status.

Instinctively, Caroline looked for the Umbrian in the corner, but the young man in the knight armor was no longer there. He was nowhere to be seen as if he had been snatched by the hideous claws of the evil shadows into the grotesque and dilapidated gray walls of the room. The entire place turned unfamiliar and worrisome within seconds, and everything happened so sudden that Caroline thought she was about to go completely insane.

Watching the little girl madly hitting against her own head, Mrs. Whitmarke calmly took out another rectangular black device, which was much smaller than the one that she was previously holding. Tapping on the object for a few times, the nurse held it up against her ears.

"Hello? Yes, this is Nurse Whitmarke. Patient number 13 is having an attack; apparently, the last medication wasn't working."

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

Broken Piano

My cries are music to your ears
So I hear
I start off slow
Nails scratch at ivory and tap broken strings
Bitter twangs
My fingers hang from strings
Suspended from your own
Lifting gently to force down on notes that once held so much power
Voices muffled
By an untuned piano
How lovely we could sound
If I was not forced to play the same two sounds
In and out in and out
Of course the blame falls on my body
Recreating the beauty of the sliver of moon
That rests so high and illuminates my own tears
Dead women sing with me
Dissonant voices harmonize with a broken piano
Sing with me, shadow people
And let our silent voices sound sweetly
With the notes
Of my broken piano

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

Monster in my Closet

There is a monster in my closet
With claws of night and pincers of regret

She wreaks havoc upon my dreams until my words have no meaning
Crawling in through my gaping mouth and resting behind my eyes

Still as the dust that settles I stay
Begging her blind eyes to see

Ebony words in my throat block my own from spilling out
So hidden they remain, begging to be free from my mind

When I speak of this monster the truth remains wary
Nightmares seeping into reality

Crawling over my sleeping self
The fine hairs of her spindly legs brush down my chest

Screaming with me is the voices of a thousand women
Their shadows standing next to mine and reaching for a body they cannot touch

Eyes red as the dead robins blood staining my dog's teeth
Bore deep into me seeing past where I am able

My mother raised me to be strong
How disappointed she would be

Contempt stains my view and abhorrence my tongue
Piercing me with her bladed words, I can no longer speak of sin

Blindly she turns her head away from my tear stained cheeks
Flowing sweetly as the creek behind my grandmother's house

As a child I listened to life's sweet symphony
Now I am deaf to music I once loved so

Daisies and marigolds bask my tired soul
Luring the monster back into my closet

There she will stay until night overcomes day
And I am once again bathed in darkness

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

We

Take my words and hear them as your own
I have created a never ending hatred
Why must truth muddle the niceties we shared
Though truth is a generous descriptor
My bladed words pierced in places I am not allowed to see
An hour on Tuesdays
A glance across the dinner table when my eyes are cast downwards
Is we her and me or you and us
A cycle of we's which I do not wish to be a part of
Do you think I cannot see
That we as us are the same
If you can love someone who caused so much pain
What does your love mean
An obligation
The space we shared ruined
By suburban desires
My isolation is not new
A solution meant to be simple
Is now a conversation meant to be avoided
Wait staff wondering why we as you avoid college names
I know love does not mean nothing
And it is not your fault I have to wonder if it does
Now I am her who I hated so much
Making you cry at night and pretending not to care
Can I love myself if I am who I loathe
Deflected blame and rejected self
Nothing is my fault because when neurons are meant to fire
I suppress with smoke
Listen to my mind my emotions have proven to be no help
Read written words because actions are meant to be louder
Gaze past mistakes cut with silver and smothered with red
You do not hurt me
I want to hurt myself

Annika Yaratha

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Shannon Elsea, Mary Hopkins

Category: Poetry

Our Differences Complete Us

Remember Those Days

Do you remember those days? When nothing worried us? Do you remember those days, when we wore matching outfits and dresses? Do you remember those times when our mom did our hair all fancily? And everyone complimented us? Those days.

Do you remember those days when I could burst into your room and not worry about privacy? Those days when you were still taller? Do you miss those days when you didn't have ballet or homework all the time? Remember those days? When college was a mere prospect in the future? No mail came for us. Where did those

days go? Did those "performances" for our parents fade away as we grew older and more mature? Did those games we used to play vanish abruptly? Do you remember those days when we raced from fence to fence in our backyard? Those days when we had nothing to do? Those hugs to our dad when he came home after work: being on call so very late? Do you remember?

Remember those days?

Sorrow

**Hearts let you take a leap.
Hearts protect from all but sorrow.
There will not be any consolation.
Rain clears away all but desperation.
It will feel like there's no morrow.
The road from there'll be steep.**

**You'll be left alone in isolation.
From the wind you'll have to borrow.
your sobs, your tears they seep.
They will stain your cheeks, streaks.
Your terrors the wind will holler.
You'll be left without determination.**

**You will be in anguish
You will be abandoned; alone
Through the tops of the trees; there hangs your dread
Strung together, one by one with the thread
That creates a world that's unknown
Darkness, that can't vanquish.**

Rejection, to the love that's left, did shred.

**The bravery was overthrown.
Happiness is that wish
Hope; fears can extinguish.
Love from your heart, it can't be shown.
Let's not fight our chosen fate strung by thread.**

There is a Power in Children

You may look down on us. You may think we're less than a person just because we're more petite.

but we have an imagination that overcomes any belief we're not old enough to understand the prayers we repeat

you may think that as a weakness, but to the knowledge of adults, the innocence of youth is concrete

and that innocence to us is a strength we haven't experienced the cruelty of deceit

you may think we are nothing but a distraction. You may think we're messy and anything but sweet

but we can do things adults can't even dream of. We own a continuous joy that is impossible to distinguish. We can imagine a world that's complete

despite the challenges we face. We wouldn't even consider that people of color are incomplete

and a friend is a friend as long as she makes us happy. We have the power to change things because we don't have conceit.

we don't care if democrats or republicans like something. We do anything just because it's the right thing to do and we're strong enough to admit defeat

an author once wrote "There is a power in children. There is a belief. A strength. A joy that makes just about anything possible."

I believe that with all of my heart. And there's nothing adults can say or do to compete.