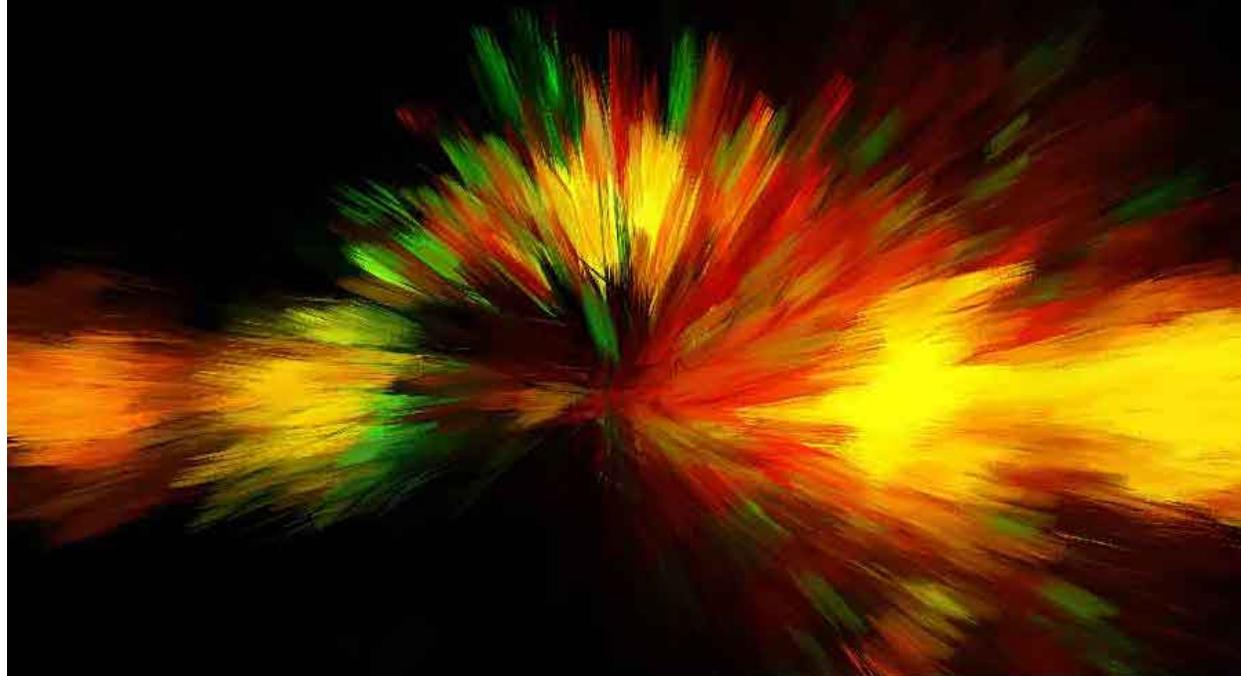


CoM



ATOM'S CRY

-A CHRONICLES OF MAN STORY-

DAVID McFARLAND

Dedicated to:

My wife, Sara, for suffering all of my crazy ramblings about the entire CoM project, and understanding all of the time it has taken away from me.

All of my current and former shipmates for all of the content, good and bad, and for all of you who I modeled my characters after – especially those of you who inspired my “good” characters, for everything you ever did for me, you’ll never know how much I appreciated it all.

For those of you fellow servicemembers who may feel wronged by my character’s interpretation of your group of people, keep in mind that this is a fictional interpretation intended to be especially bitter and disdainful. I know not all Corpsmen suck, not all RO’s shout “IYAOYAS,” and not all topsiders are idiots. That’s just the character’s opinion.

Special thanks to:

Josheua Samuelson, the Creator of CoM

Everyone on the CoM team

Teddy “T-Shower” Wright, for writing the short “10,000 Reasons to Hate the Navy,” (Actually only ~100), some of which I’ve used in this story.

Atom's Cry

P**rologue:**

WHY DID IT COME TO THIS, I ASK MYSELF, WEAPON IN HAND, drawn on a man I barely know, blood and scorch marks around us, most of which didn't show up until after I arrived. The bodies that sacrificed to add character to the otherwise spartan bulkheads are all littered far behind me, contorted.

I've already sacrificed most of my rig to beat him down. My unused arm hangs nearly limp, as do my legs, weighed down by my nearly useless rig. My arm trembles ever so slightly as I train the pistol on his unarmored chest. I become suddenly aware of my labored breath misting in the air in front of me. If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have noticed the chill.

None of that matters. I hover just above the steel deck studded with diamond-grid imprint, holding myself aloft with unseen arms and legs. As much as I can feel numbness in my limbs and a deep, oddly smooth and cauterized gouge in my arm that my body hasn't registered as "painful" yet, all that matters is that I have my mind. That, and a fusion-battery; the last one at that.

The man is almost completely at my mercy; tendrils and fields of gravitons holding him in place as I look down on him, far enough away from him that he can't hope to do anything to me before I can react. I don't pity him. He killed people to get to me. He killed my people... to get to me.

He sluggishly swings a fist. I open fire at the assailing arm but the bullets seem to disappear. If he has energy left to get rid of them, he has enough energy to be a threat. Staring at him, I will my imbedded gravomantic projectors to throw him down the sickly-white walled passageway, slamming him into the far bulkhead, and I don't care that he hits a few protruding wall-mounted circuitry-boxes along the way. For all the drama, I feel like the lights should be flickering or dim, but the pure glow from the ceiling fails to compromise to fit the mood. Slowly, I hover myself after him, making sure to keep just enough distance for safety.

It isn't over yet; my opponent meekly "Are you finally going to end this or not, kid? Have we had enough of these games?" Beyond that strained face he barely looks a day over fifty, though something in his eyes betrays his true age, making some part of him look like a wizened old professor. Kindly, almost, if he wasn't trying to kill me. I know he can see my sweat, my weakness, how weary I am of body and mind, so desperate for all of this to end, and still, he taunts me: "After everything I've done to you, you

don't have the balls to finish me off, like you murdered so many of my people? After what you did at Thesselon?" he hisses.

His voice takes on a mocking quality as if I were some child. "What kind of man do you want to grow up to be?" For the first time, I notice the lines in his face, nearly untouched by time. For a second, I feel as young as he's trying to make me seem, and I wonder if he's got tricks up his sleeve I couldn't dream of. He's been doing this for decades, and I've barely got a year doing this job.

I ignore his line of questioning. "Why did you do it?" My accusations traded for his own, I certainly don't have the same bravado or confidence behind them, but I have my tangible victory before me, giving importance to my inquiry. My vision blurs as tears of rage begin to build. I force them back. I will not show weakness. I will not show weakness. I will not show weakness. Deep breath in, deep breath out. This man started it all. He is the root of all of the evil of my own personal universe. The harbinger of death of everything I've ever held dear, and I could destroy him... but I need to know. Everything he's done up until now seems to make sense, but my intuition says otherwise. His entire organization has a deeper game, and if I get this wrong more people will die. A lot more.

"Do what? Win?" He's forced to close one eye as blood trickles into it. He tries to shake his head in a futile effort to get rid of it and in my rage I slam his head into the bulkhead behind him to punish his efforts. I never actually touch him; I let all the technology surrounding my body do my dirty work. It doesn't keep my conscience from telling me there is a better way to handle this situation, but it can take a backseat today.

Win? I think, and give a snide sneer that barely masks my hatred. My unseen arms made of gravitons grip his skull and whip it to the side sharply, forcing him to look at one of his wrists as it is being crushed into the wall, his fingers splayed out, unable to close into a fist. *Does he think he's winning now?* I should just knock him out, or better yet loose a kinetic round between his eyes. My pride and curiosity won't let my logic take hold. I have to win, and he has to know I've won.

I realize that my arm has been slowly lowering all the while, bending with strain of holding the pistol, but at least the barrel is still trained on his chest. As I straighten it back out, it nearly buckles back down, but in the end my firm stance is regained, the pistol aimed at his face, just out of range of his atomancy.

He laughs, and my blood boils. "This was never about me or what I wanted. This was about the good of the galaxy. I know you well enough, Viper; you're going to complete my work, whether or not I live. There is so much you don't know. But... you will. One way or another, you will." Small flashes of

blue light appear in my vision, centering around his hands, and the bulkhead behind him starts to melt away. I know what it is that's causing that light: Cherenkov radiation. He's using his atomancy to try to fission the bulkhead behind him, and if I can see the effects visibly, then I've just received what should be a lethal dose of radiation for an unaltered human, and a little voice in my ear tells me I've received enough beta-radiation to have a hefty sunburn before long. That's going to be an inconvenience.

This guy may think it doesn't matter if he dies, but he certainly doesn't want to. With forceful gravitic pulls, I snap his arms at the elbows, stopping what was likely an escape attempt in the works. He bellows in pain as his arms shift about like a rag-doll from ancient times or early colonies. I don't blame him, I feel my stomach churn at the sight, but he's attempted to kill me more than once, so my constitution holds firm. I move his arms back to their original positions. Medically speaking, that is an ill-considered move, as newly severed bone could cut vital arteries. As if I cared about that. The tears that well up in his eyes at the pain are each one a sweet little victory. Maybe he will die a slow death of blood loss.

Good.

I could destroy him wholly, right now. I want to. I should. I don't know why I haven't already.

Enraged, I command the forces at my will to slam his head against the wall several more times. While my smile widens with each thunk of his head against steel, I know I'm going too far, if I want to get the information I need. "You think what you did was for the good of the galaxy? You're a naïve, self-righteous fool." Once more, his head is thrown into the metal with a sickening thud. Dazed and still moaning in pain, it's a good long while before he can respond. No one would question if I killed him right now; I'd be hailed a hero. I should put two rounds in his skull, I really should. If I slip up later he could escape. He could kill more people. "What makes you think I'll *ever* do anything you want?" I should destroy him. Why haven't I pulled the trigger? *Right, I need to know his game-plan.* If he escapes now, I'll go down in history as the man who let him murder many more lives than he already has. The galaxy would remember me for being *weak*, if they remember me at all. I need that information fast.

"I'm no monster." He sighs, triumph still in his voice, no hint of the defeat that surrounds him. "I'm just a man. That's what scares you so much. That's why you're acting like a pissy little child right now. You're scared that you might become me, because you know I made you." He's right. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. I wouldn't be what I am, if not for him. After all my failures, the only reason I've made it this far is because... *No, I remind myself, I can't think like that again. Not that path again, I got over that. I came here to make them all regret what they did to me.* That nagging part of me wonders just why they groomed me.

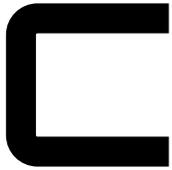
“You’re scared that you might have the balls to throw away your emotions and do what’s right for the galaxy. It’s not like you to be this way. You’re logical. A man of knowledge and science, why are you now such a bleeding heart when there is so much at stake?” I managed to finally curb my anger for a bit, and stare him down. I don’t dare open my mouth at the moment, knowing my words will spill out. He’s right, I’m acting childish, but caring about that is hard. Some deep part of me refrains from letting him aggravate me any further, but the damage has been done.

Wait. What’s at stake that I would care about? What did he mean by that?

Sensing my composure, or maybe my face changed with that realization, he begins trying a different tactic. “If you don’t kill me, you might as well be an accomplice to whatever murders I commit later, right?” A grin slowly reaches his face. He’s right. “Do it! Kill me! I’ve done all I’ve had to do, and you could never stop me. Now do what you have to do; succeed for *once*. Do what you *want* to do! Or are you just going to be a worthless failure... again?”

He didn’t have to tell me that for me to want him dead. I crave his death. I thirst for it. In this moment, nothing would make me happier. So in the end, it’s not my wife’s words I listen to, telling me to be reasonable, merciful, and level-headed. It’s the words of a long lost friend that this man murdered, my friend who taught me to be just and to do the best for the largest number of people. My anger swells, remembering that friend and what this man did to them.

I pull the trigger.



CHAPTER ONE:

#101: This is not a witchhunt

TNV *Dauntless*,
2039 Astra Central Time, 01-29-3398 Sol Date
Inside the Dark Matter Reactor

“Yeah, screw you too,” I say, calmly to the guy in front of me in a calm and flat tone.

Prane responds, a hint of whine in his voice sounding almost pleading. “Dude, I told you I had medical,” He didn’t say anything of it, but there is no use arguing; he’ll insist, and the “medical” cop-out is one he’s used before. It’s impossible to tell someone not to go see the corpsmen, even if they are little more than battlefield medics with a hefty supply of painkillers and inaccurate diagnoses. Honestly, I don’t know if he actually has problems with whatever he claims, but his general demeanor on a grander scale makes me question it.

In the end, I don’t want to be the guy to tell him to get back to work, only to have him keel over from a stroke or something five seconds later. “Just go,” I respond, turning away to keep continuing on with the maintenance, not bothering to try to shove the pad his way. “I’ll cover this one for you, too.” I’ve already been at it for hours, and he was assigned the prime standard calibrations anyway, and I and others have had to carry his weight the whole way. The irony was that this maintenance procedure was assigned to him as punishment for past slights of his; we should have suspected he’d use the same tactics as always. I hear him curse me under his breath; noise carries well inside the reactor, amplifying it. By the time I glance back at the access hatch, he’s gone.

Some instinct causes my head to turn and someone catches my eye: “Hey!” I call out to one of the new guys, “Watch it!” I can’t remember his name off the top of my head – he only just joined the crew right before we pulled out of port. “You’re putting load on that cable!” I speed his way, ready to yank him off, but he has the good sense to move before I get to him, checking where his foot stood; no damage, fortunately, or I – rather, we, as I’d stick around to make sure he didn’t get to sleep before his damage had been corrected – would be in here for many hours longer fixing something that hadn’t been broken at the start of maintenance.

“Sorry, Petty Officer!” His voice quivers in fear so considerably I’d think him doing it quizzasciously if he wasn’t so new. Jeeze, they beat that crap into them early. We’ll have him ‘normal’ in a few months, as normal as a collection of nerds can make someone, but at least he won’t treat me like some vengeful god. I haven’t really been called ‘Petty Officer,’ in a while, at least not by anyone in Reactor Department.

“Just... watch yourself, okay?” I rub my fingers as close to my temples as I can get in my EVA suit. I hate the thing, but it has to be worn in here; can’t afford to have any ‘real’ matter left over in a Dark Matter Reactor, and air counts. That and the space inside the reactor vessel has about as much vacuum as the outside of the hull.

That thought stirs something I should have realized before, and I curse loudly as I realize something, screaming it at the top of my lungs, still on the group channel.

I hear a sigh in response, and a, “Whaaaat?” Wallace asks, not at all curious, but a bit worried about the implications of my outrage. His shoulders sag, even in zero-g. He knows me well enough to know that I’ve just discovered something that is going to create a lot of work for us all.

My eyes trace towards that access hatch that Prane just left through. “Did Prane decontaminate himself before he came in here?” I ask, each word punctuated and oscillating between anger, frustration, and a hint of hope that my suspicion is wrong.

I glance over at Wallace to see him gesturing wildly, obviously pissed off. It looks like he’s shouting curses madly, but his voice channel is muted. Finally, after relaxing, he comes back online and looks defeated. His voice tells me that he knows the answer to my question to be ‘no,’ which is not what I want to hear. “Can we... can we just *forget* about it?” He asks hopefully.

I have to shoot him down. I’m leading this maintenance item. I won’t have the consequences on my head just for the sake of taking the easy way out. “You know we can’t, Wallace.”

My friend nods in a way that lets me know that he agrees, as much as it hurts him to. “I’ll let the Watch Supervisor know... Maybe he did decon, but I doubt it.”

“Thanks. I’ll do what I can. Everyone, be aware, grav-field setting up in the middle of the chamber.” It won’t collect everything, but at least I can gather some of the air or particulates Prane may or may not have dragged in with him, preferably before it leeches into anything. I am fortunately one of the few people on the ship with so many Quality Assurance qualifications under my belt that I can both set up the required level of foreign-material-protection required in this case as well as certify the dark matter reactor as clean when the hefty memory-file of administrative forms is passed around. I am wearing so many different hats right now I must be violating *some* rule on keeping enough forms of supervision separate.

Lifting the pad still in my hand, I flip to the gravity controls screen. “Maintenance-Level Access” borders the top and bottom of the display, with usual controls I’d normally have, plus a few extra. Mostly, I just get priority access to the gravity systems. Before long, everyone is feeling a slight tug towards the

center of the spherical chamber. The new guys struggle, but learn to compensate. Those more experienced, like myself, or Edohara have a bit more practice and take it quickly, adjusting and anchoring ourselves.

My thoughts on correcting the blunder of my lazy and incompetent shipmate – and myself, I should have made sure he decontaminated himself - I only notice the workers I'm supervising because of their motion in the corner of my eye. A couple of them have allowed themselves to drift towards the center, goofing off. I smile a bit, wishing I could do so myself.

Alas, as much as I want to fool around, especially having such privileged access to the gravity controls, that isn't an option. "Hey! Guys!" I shout over the channel, and they get back to work. I drive over to one of them, and cue the procedure back up on my Heads-Up Display, then share it with PC3 Edohara in front of me so that it shows on his as well. He's experienced enough to be trusted, but we don't get to rely on just 'trust,' I have to verifying everything alongside him. "Alright, Edohara. Step... eight-alpha... not applicable," I say finding our place again. "Step eight-bravo." I mentally make a note that we are commencing it, and the text bolds so I can read it easier. "Rotate null-adjust until compensated value reads less than zero-point-five, target is zero."

Edohara dutifully repeats it back, verbatim, and does as instructed while I supervise, his hands spinning a large knob inside the panel. Such is the nature of our maintenance; supervision upon supervision; no doubt the watch supervisor is checking in on our cameras, and should anything go wrong, the recordings of this maintenance by our suits could be pulled for review. "Reading... zero-point-three... four. Fluttering between the two." He states. I can read it myself, but two-point verification is important.

"Zero point four, aye. Good enough." I confirm and then mentally check-off the procedure, with a list of stats on another side of my HUD updating. Soon after my initials show up, followed by Edohara's as he does the same. Onto the next step, then the next, tweaking knobs, reading this, twisting that, verifying another thing, then another after that. All in all, it's hard to pay attention to for hour after hour after hour, but it's vital to certify that we can operate our DMR properly.

At several points we hit snags, but either myself or Wallace are able to figure out workarounds and fixes – usually it's nothing more than understand how individual pieces and components react, as if they had minds of their own, and "soothing" them or readjusting something else, still within its own specifications, to adjust the other.

Still, other than those focus points, and being at it for hours at a time, it's a physically easy but mind-numbing process. My mind drifts...

... Onto a couple of the guys, Hay and Freeman, that are joyriding with their Mobility-Priority level access to the gravity controls again. I can see the allure of the freedom and motion, but they don't have the experience they need to be safe, not here, and I'm only a bit better. I call out to them again, but they report back that they have nothing to do at the moment until one of us senior guys is free to direct them. I sigh, then tell them to take it easy.

"Hey, Chris?" Wallace waves me over to where he and another one of our junior PC3s are inspecting a spike-like focusing tower. The things are spaced all around the spherical core, pointing inward towards an invisible nexus, near where I have the cleanliness-gravity node set up, and a few parts and pieces have drifted to orbit that point. Fortunately, our HUDs have labelled them for us so we can put them back in order. "This look okay to you?" He points inside the opened-up spike and some cableways. Some of them are discolored. They've yellowed, looking almost as if they'd been lightly burnt.

"Yeah," I reply. "Happens with heat and age sometimes. A factory defect with the material; it's something to note, especially this early in the ship's life, but it's not going to cause any problems. We'll want to come back in and re-inspect next time we hit a shutdown-availability, maybe get some shipyard guys in here to look at it."

"What can shipyard bubbas do that we can't?" Edohara asks like he's been struck. I understand the sentiment, it's one I had when I was experienced enough to be competent, but not enough to know nearly as much as needed.

I glance at him, "Not the 'bubba' types, the group of guys we'd bring in are usually ex-Propulsion Controllers like us who know a thing or-"

I'm cut off by a sharp scream and a curse. Wheeling about, I see one of the two I'd told to stop goofing off moments before – Hay - hurtling 'upwards' at a focusing spike, frantically trying to readjust one of the gravity nodes he just placed. It's too close to the spike; he'd likely moved the his allowed high-strength nodes too close to compensate, along with a few low-priority ones, and he's moving it closer to try to flip it to the other side of him to pull him away. My gut tells me it's not enough, and that he's about to be speared.

My mind starts racing – if I don't do anything, he's about to become an unfortunate adornment of the reactor. Everything seems more vivid all of a sudden, simultaneously everything that isn't Hay seems to disappear. If I had longer, I'd feel the telltale surge of adrenaline in the tightening of all my muscles and tingling all over. I rapidly move my hand to my arm and command a new node to appear even closer

to the spike than his; I must overpower the one he's using to keep him from impaling himself on the large, pointed device, and if I suddenly changed his direction of motion it could kill him from his organs impacting his bones at his current velocity, or at least give him brain damage. He shouts when both our HUDs show the new node. *"What the fu-!"*

"Exhale!" I shout, cutting Hay off. At the same time, I move the center node, strengthening it and bringing it closer to me.

"What the fu-!"

"Exhale!" I shout again louder, drowning out his cries.

"What the fu-!"

Well, I guess cursing loudly does involve exhaling, but there is no time to contemplate that. Hay hurtles ever closer to my gravity-node and the spike awaiting his death in terror, screaming while I use the other node, thankful my maintenance-priority access allows more nodes than standard mobility, to launch myself towards him and off to the side at an angle.

Just before contact, Hay whips around the node near the focusing-spike in a gravity-sling; I hadn't expected it to work, and I'm almost as bewildered as he is when he's flying off to the side, spinning as gasses vent from his suit where the spike nicked it instead of skewered. A small trickle of blood hints that he has been sliced as well.

I readjust the gravity nodes guiding me and him to collide with him in midair, grappling him, then use them to slow us to the point where I can slow us the rest of the way to impacting with the wall of the reactor core.

I finally get a good look at his face, now filled with absolute terror in what bouts of consciousness he has, as I slam him to the wall, using a gravity-node to make it feel like "down" for us. He's breathing wildly, but breathing – the suit sealed off his face, thankfully, from the rest of his body. I don't know if exhaling helped or not, but I suspect it might have kept him from internal bleeding in his lungs in rapid decompression. I hope it did, at least.

I grab the sealant from the chest of his EVA suit and give a healthy dose of it across the rip, from which blood is now oozing instead of forming rivulets, now that we have some semblance of gravity.

"Chris!" a voice shouts, and I spin to see a heavy piece of panel hurtling toward us. I forgot to make a counter-barrier above us. Just as I try to do so, it slows, then halts as Wallace did exactly what I should have, saving my life and Hay's. "Thanks," I say, not until now realizing just how heavy my breath is, or just how tingly and immobile my fingers feel from the adrenaline coursing through my system. I

reach up, touching the five-meter by five-meter panel that almost ended my life. “I owe you one.” With a gravity-push commanded at the tether-unit on my forearm, I push it away.

Reassessing Hay, he’s still not doing well, but his suit tells mine that he’s not about to die. He looks closer to throwing up than anything else but better safe than sorry. I key the general communication’s circuit. “Emergency report, emergency report, medical emergency, medical emergency in the reactor core compartment.” Repeating the phrase, I see a little “emergency” blip appear on my HUD as the ship’s AI listens in and automatically informs ship’s medical.

Dragging Hay back to the access hatch and out into the control point area, moving slowly with the gravity fields, we’ve begun to remove Hay’s EVA suit long before medical shows up. His skin appears red all over, but between having sealed him up quickly enough and his suit compartmentalizing sections off, just as if it were a warship sustaining battle damage, most of him is just going to hurt for the next few days.

Knowing that the worst is over, I feel a bit guilty as one single thought begins to fill my head, and seemingly the rest of my body as I inadvertently exhale in response to the idea: This critique is going to *suck*.

“Petty Officer Kierson,” Of course I’m to blame. Who else? Certainly, not the guy who felt like joyriding after I told him not to do so a hundred times. Of course, he’s not here right now, so he can’t be a target. The victim can never be the target, right? “Why were you not properly monitoring your sailors?” The hand outstretched towards me cuts through the air in a traditionally offensive-fashion, fingers and palm flat as if the entire limb from the elbow down were some great, menacing sword. His voice is no less threatening. “You were the supervisor at the time, were you not?”

“Because, sir,” I respond to the officer before me, our notoriously angry Assistant Reactor Officer, one Commander Diedra, “I’d been monitoring them for quite some time and told them on numerous occasions to mind their work. They did not, obviously. I mean, they returned each time I ordered them to, but obviously got out of hand again.” My tone is probably a bit too unprincipled to be respected, but I’ve been stewing over the fact that I’d obviously get the blame for the past three hours since medical carted Hay off. I haven’t eaten for quite a while, either, so that’s not helping my mood, and it’s showing through.

“So, how did you allow this to happen?” The ARO asks, still accusingly. I can tell that no matter what happens here, the result will not be favorable to myself. If I don’t tread lightly, it might not be

favorable to quite a few more people as well. “At what point did you think it was okay for them to keep up their unprofessionalism? Do you think all of this maintenance is a joke?”

I breathe deeply, trying not to sigh indignantly. “Sir, I had informed them multiple times to *not* horseplay. I was maintaining a supervisory role, and one of the other maintenance technicians asked for my opinion. Their horseplay occurred while I was observing what they were doing.” I do my best to explain, using key buzzwords they like to hear like “maintaining supervisory position,” and indicating I had a “no hands-on role,” to ensure I didn’t get distracted.

“Petty Officer Kierson, you sound much too irritated for someone who nearly had someone die on their watch.” The ARO informs me sternly. “You should be glad we don’t mast you for extreme negligence.”

A million retorts flash through my head, most, if not all of them, inappropriate to speak to a man of his station. “I suppose I’m a bit rattled, sir,” is all I can think to say, nearly tripping over a few curse words as I do.

“As you should be. Petty Officer Hay could be dead right now.”

“His actions were his own as an adult, and as far as I know, I saved his life.”

“And your lack of supervision could have ended it!” A voice booms from the back of the room. I recognize it but never knew the owner was in the room with us. “You almost killed him!” The commanding officer bellows. Captain Bonham is far from the most understanding person alive, and his hate for our department is notorious, alongside his general stupidity. “Why did you not remove them from the reactor when they began roughhousing in the first place?”

My face feels warm as it flushes with blood. “Because, *sir*, we don’t have the manning to just kick anyone and everyone out of doing work whenever they make the slightest mistake.”

“That’s bullcrap! I’ve seen your working hours! You’re the laziest pukes on this boat you work for only like a fourth of the day!” I noticed daggers being shot from the eyes of most people who, like myself, own their allegiance to Reactor Department, which is most of the people in the compartment. The CO, Captain Bonham, doesn’t notice he’s offended just about everyone by confusing “watchstanding,” with the entirety of the work we do. Standing watch on the reactor plant, actually operating it, is hardly all there is to this job.

On such a large ship, it’s uncommon to see your commanding officer all that frequently, and he frequently knows little about what goes on in each individual department. It’s even less likely for him to know your name, and if he does, it’s usually not good. “Petty Officer Kierson!” Crap. “If it weren’t for

your Reactor Officer vouching for you, you wouldn't be in a critique right now, you'd be at captain's mast!" Non-Judicial Punishment, more commonly referred to as "Captain's Mast" dating back to ships-of-sail, gives the captain of a ship certain levels of authority, but Bonham is known for stretching the limits of that authority past legality. "If I had my way, you'd be in the brig right now for attempted murder!" Oh, there it is, I was wondering how he was going to spin that one.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" The enraged captain asks, finishing his harangue.

"May I ask, sir: Do you fully expect me to babysit fully grown men?" I know the second it comes out of my mouth that it's too snarky to have said.

The reply is swift: "I expect you to do your job!" I want to reply, but I know deep down that I must take this and lick my wounds later. "Your job is to properly oversee the maintenance item, which even now is only being completed, three hours behind schedule, by other individuals! We are sitting dead in space right now because of you! We should be underway on full propulsion power."

I sigh, and feign defeat, knowing it's the only way I'm going to get to sleep tonight. "Aye, sir." The words are still tangibly bitter. "I don't know if I've quite learned my lesson: What should I have done differently?"

The CO looks about to explode with indignation, but he's cut off before he can detonate. "The second he started horseplaying, you should have booted him from the reactor core." The ARO responds, and about as mildly as a pack of fangbacks ripping into a deer.

I could say any number of things. Chief among them being that if I kicked everyone out of a maintenance item that goofed off even the slightest, we'd have never left port, and such actions as abusing gravity controls are one of the more common things to have happen. If I did say that, some comment about "lack of formality in the entire division," would be made, and none of us in Reactor Controls would ever hear the end of it, least of all me. Beyond that I want to reiterate that Hay is over twenty-years old, and I should not be punished for his stupidity. My responsibility lies in ensuring he completes the maintenance satisfactorily. That he was careless is not, and the military has taken an eternity trying to understand that, always failing. So all I can respond with is an "Aye, sir." At no point am I going to win this. No sense in making it any worse, because for all my justifications, for all my reasons, for all my logic, for all the lack of their understanding, my voice will not be heard.

Instead, men who fear being fired for a potential death of a person who was supposed to be babysat, removed from the responsibility of the most senior individuals by three or four layers of supervision, are lashing out the only way they know how: Shifting blame that they suppose that they might have to

take – and shouldn't – and placing it on the first scapegoat they can find. The more plausible the better. All because they were told as young officers they are fully responsible for the men under their command, without any allowances. They are responsible for making sure they operate the boat properly, make sure they get what they need, and stay out of harm's way of external forces. You can't protect your men from themselves.

They begin problem diagnoses. Various bullcrap – not enough supervision. Not enough preparation. “Should we take away gravity control from all non-supervisory personnel and have supervisors direct everything?”

I am about to pipe up when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn my head to see Chief Takahashi sitting next to me, my divisional chief – nearly my direct superior, with exception of my Leading Petty Officer – who shakes his head, quieting me. Instead, he speaks up. “Sir, that wouldn't work. Everyone needs individual control to make sure these things don't happen in the future, and we simply can't expect our supervisors to be able to micromanage all those grav-fields that would be needed. They wouldn't be able to focus on the maintenance item.”

“Hmm.” The ARO takes the comment, a near parody of the one I would have made, with a grain of salt, but only one. “What about stationing a temporary grav-field operator watch?” The instantaneous knee-jerk reaction he always has: Stretch our manning ever thinner.

Chief Takahashi, though, has the same thought as I do, “We wouldn't have enough manning for such a watchstation. Especially during this maintenance item. We are already strapped as it is.” At the mention of lack of manning, I see Captain Bonham's lips begin to writhe, holding back another raged outburst. I see the moment strike him when he realizes that reprimanding Chief Takahashi would be undermining my own authorities in front of me.

“And what do you propose, chief?” The ARO continues the dialogue.

“That in the future we only do this maintenance item when we are in-port, fully shut-down. We'll need to man fewer watchstations, but we can have appropriate levels of supervision then, and extra manning.” I know for a fact, from some behind-closed-doors complaints, that Chief was arguing for delaying the maintenance item, but that it was the upper chain of command, including the ARO, that insisted it must be done. That nearly brings a smile to my face until I realize that he just very nearly agreed to the restriction of gravity-control from maintenance personnel as well.

“That is an excellent idea, Chief.” Seriously? “I will propose this to the Reactor Officer and the Commanding Officer.” He was the one who proposed the exact opposite not five days ago. “And what of Petty Officer Kierson?”

“He is already temporarily removed from maintenance duties, pending upgrade, which I will handle myself, as will the Division Officer.”

I’m taken aback and don’t hear the following argument. What I do understand is that the ARO doesn’t believe it’s enough, while Chief defends his argument. All I can focus on is how Chief betrayed me, recommending – no, having already taken action in removing me from maintenance duties. A part of me knows that he knows that I’m not guilty of what I was accused, or at least not enough to warrant this. I won’t be able to support the ship. I won’t be doing a critical part of my job. Worse, other people must pick up the slack.

If that didn’t hit hard enough, Chief Takahashi drives the nail home. “Kierson will also be required to be observed during maintenance duties until it can be assured he won’t make further mistakes like this.” The nail strikes, and I feel it pierce my heart. Something breaks. If Chief thinks I’m not good enough to do my job on my own, then I’m probably not... then maybe I *am* worthless.

“Very well.” The ARO says, sounding almost defeated, for all that I actually notice. “But now we come to the matter of the loss of cleanliness.” It takes me a second to realize his error, but perhaps if I correct him early enough, I’ll be able to gain an edge on this new subject. “Petty Officer Kierson, you said prior to the critique that you suspected there was a loss of cleanliness?”

“A potential... potential loss of cleanliness.” I correct.

“Excuse me?”

“Sir, only the Quality Assurance Officer may call away a loss of cleanliness.” I can feel my voice falter a little, the only thing keeping it from breaking down being my absolute confidence on this specific issue. “While I can call it a ‘potential’ loss of cleanliness, even I do not know if we actually lost it. I’ve since been unable to locate Petty Officer Prane, who was supposed to be in medical, to find out if he did fail to decontaminate himself before entering the core. It was a suspicion, that I didn’t trust him; nothing more.”

“So when you suspected you had a *potential* loss of cleanliness,” the ARO accepts the correction, but loads the word “potential” with derision, “Why did you not stop the maintenance item, then and there? You might have avoided all of this.”

“Sir, I couldn’t have known what was going to happen in the past and-” Chief Takahashi nudges my ribs with his elbow as if to say “Shut up!” to keep me from saying anything else stupid. I breathe deeply. Chief doesn’t believe I can stand up for myself, he doesn’t think I have what it takes. No, no, that’s ridiculous, he doesn’t think that. I need to get out of my own head.

I take the wordless advice and continue with a real answer, “ARO, sir... At that point in time, I could prove nothing. Instead, what I could do was create the aforementioned gravity-field in the center to collect any and all particulate that Prane could have dragged in. It is exactly what would have been done to determine if there had been a potential or even full loss of cleanliness anyway. So I followed the Cleanliness Manual, Chapter four, Section three-point-three, in order to save time. As you said sir, we were relying on propulsion, so I wanted to do things efficiently.”

I can tell that actually being able to reference the exact step throws him off balance. It was all rote memorization. All I can think about is how I’m now worthless to the division, that concept being driven home by my own chief. Commander Diedra brings the reference up on the screen in front of us, sliding to the exact page and step, only to find himself at a dead-end. For the next several minutes he tries to nitpick the wording into being able to screw me over, but enough people in the room defend my actions.

With others speaking at length, with no need to interject myself, I find myself for the first time able to retreat within my own thoughts unperturbed since my punishment was delivered, and I don’t like what I see. The more I think on it, the more my face screws up and my eyes begin to burn. I’m worthless now.

He eventually flips the screen back to the in-progress critique form and makes an annotation and “corrective actions complete, recommend completing Quality Assurance Inspection prior to close-out,” and says no more on the issue. A small victory. It still doesn’t correct the fact that now I won’t be able to do a significant portion of my job, all because I saved someone’s life. I don’t want to necessarily be called a hero, but I don’t want to be scorned, either. But maybe I deserve it.

“So, in regards to the horseplay, what were the correct actions that should have been taken?”

There is a long pause before I realize that Commander Diedra was speaking to me. “To incorporate additional punitive action before it gets out of hand.” I say, a bit of question creeping into my voice.

“No!” The ARO spits back, “Didn’t you hear what I said before? To kick them out and discipline them later! We can’t have idiots galivanting all around our equipment like it’s a toy!” He says as if he were speaking to an itinerant child.

“Aye, sir. You’re right.” I want to say so many things that I shouldn’t. Chief Takahashi looks at me as if I were about to say something stupid again.

“So you agree?”

It’s like he’s trying to pull my teeth out one by one. It’s all I can do not to clench them as I reply, as if to guard them. “Yes. Sir,” I lie. “Of course, sir.” With that, he stupidly looks satisfied, as if he’d won some great battle.

Much of the rest of the critique is administrative talk that is far above my paygrade. I want to leave, get some food, go to my rack, anything – until that lump forms in the pit of my stomach when I remember that I’ve been removed from being able to do maintenance; that burning sensation in the eyes, and the feeling of a great weight on the whole body. I can’t focus on anything else. Apart from standing watch, I’m as good as worthless, and any half-brained monkey could do ninety-percent of what I do on watch. The notion hits me hard.

I’m worthless.

I can’t get the notion out of my head. *Worthless*. My mind is swimming, confused. A man I respect says I’m not good enough to do maintenance. I don’t know if he buckled to concede to the ARO, or if he legitimately feels that I’m terrible at what I do. That second thought has its way of eating into my brain and taking hold. I can’t shake it. Every time that thought surges into my brain, I feel like I’m about to throw up. I can’t even keep a small group of guys from nearly killing themselves. I’ve been at this for years, and I can’t even manage a simple task as babysitting kids. I’m no better than Prane, or anyone else who I’ve always thought couldn’t pull their own weight.

I’m worthless. Some little voice deep in my mind fights back, tells me that I should be angry, that I did everything right, but I’ve been awake too long. Hungry too long. I don’t have the will to fight back. What realistic thought I have left is telling me to do whatever I can to just get to sleep, and that I’ll feel better afterwards.

Someone calls my name, muffled, through the hatch. I’ve been standing outside of it at parade rest for a solid twenty minutes. No one told me to stand at parade rest, but I feel like a worthless piece of crap, and some part of me wants people to see me that way. Display myself for what I am. Someone who, even as an E-6, has to stand at parade rest like a nub fresh out of boot camp.

Not wanting to look weak, I try to wipe my face of all emotion, and feel at my face, feeling wetness at the edges of my eyes, rubbing my eyes on my sleeve. Just a moment, that’s all I need to stay strong.

It's a feeble attempt. My eyes and cheeks feel like they're on fire, and I feel icy tears welling up ever so slowly.

I sigh, releasing my arms from their now painful position behind my back, feeling my muscles relax a bit, and open the door. "Come in, Kierson." I nod, and comply. He motions for me to sit, and I comply with that, too. I don't say a word. I'm not sure I could. I feel like someone has punched me in the gut. Chief Takahashi, my own chief and the head of One-Plant, and Chief Evert, Two-Plant's chief, are sitting down in chairs cross from the one they designated for me. No one else is in the office. "Do you hate me, Kierson?"

Chief's words catch me totally off-guard. "What?... No." But even as I say it, a wave of emotions floods me while my mind processes just why I might hate him. For betraying me to the ARO. For not letting me defend myself. At the same time, that same voice as before, the one that told me I wasn't worthless, tells me that Chief Takahashi was running damage control. That there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Good." He said. "I had to use my silver-bullet for you today. Don't let it go to waste." I stare at him with a bit of question on my face. I know what he's talking about. Once one is high-ranking enough, they typically start to earn enough clout that they can get some added pull. Their methods work enough that their suggestions are trusted by those far higher ranking, and every once and a while, they can ask for something that they typically wouldn't get. Usually, this involves getting someone out of trouble, and it's never someone who doesn't deserve it.

Suddenly, most of that brewing distrust of Chief Takahashi, which hadn't had time to take root yet, is being flushed away. I know now that he does trust me. It hardly makes me feel better. "Kierson," he says, "we saw the video from your helmet cam. Before I say anything else: You're too nice. You're not aggressive enough. You're thinking too much like a regular worker and not enough like a supervisor. You're not going to make Chief if you don't get that through your head." The words hit hard, not something I need. My stomach threatens to sick up. I *am* worthless; a failure. I'm working far below where I should be. "You may know the plant like the back of your hand, but that's not enough at your stage. It got you to E-6, but you haven't made any progress. Kierson, you need to learn to take command. You treated your workers like friends, and because of that, they don't respect you for your rank. If you had, Hay wouldn't have almost died." He pauses, then adds. "I know you know our standards. I've watched you do maintenance. What I need out of you is to uphold those standards."

I nod, confirming what he said. It's all true. I don't know how to lead. I'm not where I should be in my career. That dreadful, sinking feeling, like someone's carving out the pit of my stomach, tells me that I'm responsible. That I was foolish for not accepting blame. That I'm a coward and should have accepted it from the start.

"Don't beat yourself up too much." He pauses. "Jeeze, are you going to puke?"

"No," I say. I feel like I'm going to, my stomach is wrenching so hard.

"Don't beat yourself up. I wanted to tell you down there in the critique that you were right: You're not totally responsible for the other guys. They indeed are adults, and Hay, the others, and I are going to have a good long chat about how they need to respect you. You know your stuff and you know how to get maintenance done right. And some of the guys, like Edohara, do respect you, and I suspect it's because you never yell at anyone. Because you are nice. Don't lose that. Don't take what I'm saying to mean that you need to be a dick. Just, more of a dick."

I just stare, trying to make my face so devoid of feeling as to betray just how far into my own melancholy I've sunk. Taking it all in. Emotions still whirling, I try to absorb the encouraging words to no avail. I try to blank my mind and stay strong, but I'm too drained to summon the willpower. "You've got a lot of great qualities. Some of the guys respect you because of who you are, and not because of your rank. Once you learn to hold onto that and keep the rest of the guys in check, you're going to go far, and you're going to do it fast. But not until then?" He asks, eyes expectant and questioning.

"And you understand why I took you off maintenance, right?"

I nod. "Because I can't be trusted." I've come to accept that at this point.

The instant response is exasperated more than anything else. "No, not exactly" he says like he's explaining something very simple, "Because I have to punish you. You made a mistake, and you need to learn a lesson. I know I don't have to do any worse because I know you, and your biggest punishment anyone can give you, Chris, is a reason to torture yourself, because what you do to yourself in your head is bad enough to be a war crime sometimes. I also know that because you do that to yourself, you won't be..." he pauses, obviously trying to find words that won't hurt as if I need to be coddled, "... You won't be focused. You need a break after this, time to think about it and get back to the Kierson we all know and rely on. You'll be back to doing maintenance in no time. We won't even have to reschedule anything. Got it?"

After a long silence, I nod. "Got it, Chief." I have a feeling he's just trying to keep me from being too hard on myself because he feels bad for me, being so pathetic.

“And Chris,” Chief Evert speaks up after a bit of quiet rests on the three of us, “We reviewed the recording. Know that what you did was... I don’t know how to put this...”

Terrible. Irresponsible. Weak. Cowardly. Unprofessional. Any such word would describe it well.

“... Awesome.”

Most of my emotion washes away, not out of mirth, but out of surprise. Apparently, my face betrays that.

“With the gravity-sling. I’ve never quite seen anything like that, not on the fly at least. Or at least not from someone who isn’t a gravtech.” Chief Evert explains, and the other nods.

I still don’t quite understand. “What? I... It wasn’t anything all that special,” I say, self-deprecatingly. At this point in my mood, that doesn’t take much effort or hurt much more than anything else.

“Chris,” Chief Takahashi starts, “Everything you did, recognize the danger, generate the field, catch Hay and seal him up happened in less than *seven seconds*.”

He must be lying. Trying to cheer me up. That whole ordeal was at least twice as long, if not three times longer. I can picture it all in my mind, and try to keep a mental timing of it. I figure somewhere near thirty-seconds seems reasonable.

Until they show me the video. It’s my point of view laid next to Wallace’s. We both spin to see Hay reeling off at the same time, but as I watch, it all seems to be happening much faster than I remember. Not only that, but from both points of view, the combination of the gravity-slingshot and my own gravity-assisted transit seem all the more spectacular. I apparently made more course corrections than I remember, quickly at that, and had to go much further, much faster than I had previously thought.

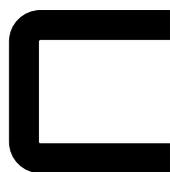
Looking back on my previous memory of the events, everything seems slow-motion, and with filled in gaps that I didn’t realize existed, it seems like it was a blurry and smudged view, now wiped clean and clear. I sit back in the chair, dumbfounded. “That... I don’t remember it like that.”

“Doesn’t matter, the cameras do. Chris, that was miraculous. Dumb luck or skill, it saved Hay’s life, and he owes you bigtime. I’d put you in for a medal if it weren’t for the critique. I still might.”

I shake my head at the thought. Dumb luck, it had to be dumb luck. Before that event I’d had rudimentary training and only some experience with the gravity controls. More than most, but not that much. Heck, with the standard gravity-controls I couldn’t even lift myself in my own rack when I experimented in secret.

A man almost died under my care. I was struck down into insignificance, and now I'm being pandered to like I'm a whiny, screaming child who always gets his way out of sympathy. I just wish I could forget any of this even happened. I wish I could just wake up from it, as if it were some bad dream, and start the day anew.

No matter how much I hope, no matter how hard I wish, I know when I wake up tomorrow, it won't have undone anything. Not for lack of trying, though.

 CHAPTER TWO:

#55: Happiness is finite, incompetence is not

TNV *Dauntless*,
1200 Astra Central Time, 02-06-3398 Sol Date
Forward Galley

Navy chow is supposed to be the absolute best in the military. If that's true, then I feel truly sorry for every other branch as I spin my tray of pasta with sauce – which, to my displeasure, I've just found is a cocktail sauce rather than tomato, – to shun the offensive food, in favor of the separate depressions in the tray holding pudding and rice on the opposing side. The stuff might not be the dreadful printed protein-sugar-biomass nutrient gelatin that so many so many soldiers, refugees, and the poor are foreordained to eating when hungry, but at least the stuff isn't completely drowning in despair and hopelessness.

An odd combination, pudding, pasta, and rice: the three items had been the only three physically appealing items in the chow line. I'm hoping for two-out-of-three as I shove my fork into the mass of white rice. Disappointment is all I get as the rice proves to be more the consistency of mashed potatoes than a collection of individual kernels. Not even hot sauce can save it, which is saying something. These cooks are even worthless than I am, and the poor sods don't even know the full extent of their incompetence.

At least the pudding doesn't cease to maintain a standard, even if that standard is always being ever so slightly burnt; an odd trait to carry, seeing as cooking the pudding is not at all necessary with the state that the Navy receives it, but the latent disappointment is consistent enough to produce a complacency.

The coverings on the tables are remarkably ornate for an enlisted-personnel galley; each table is adorned with a leather – real leather – covering with the ship's crest stitched in. The white walls plastered with half-hearted paintings by the crew, or full-hearted paintings by “professional” artists willing to earn a quick buck, almost give the row upon row of tables a nice atmosphere. Almost enough to make you forget that the food you're eating would be classified as “not for human consumption,” by some government agencies.

Not all my hope is gone yet, though; I pour some soy sauce on the rice. The Navy doesn't skimp on condiments at least. A dash of hot sauce, notorious for making even the worst Navy chow edible, joins the soy, along with salt, pepper, mayonnaise – just about every condiment on the table, and then some. By the end the rice is less a vehicle for the flavors and is more a hidden artifact buried deep within. As I fork a rice-sauce-monstrosity wad into my mouth, it continues to disappoint, but at least it provides sustenance and some flavor. In only a couple of bites, though, I can't stand it anymore, and vote to have a meal of little more than pudding and water, to the amusement of one my coworkers.

Other branches would probably think me spoiled. Some, especially Expeditionary crews, must wind up eating that mass-printed, bland slop. I don't envy them, but their lack of quality is based on necessity. What sits before me is the result of sloth, which means I can hope for better, because I know it's possible. The thing that's putting a bad taste in my mouth is dissatisfaction more so than mashed rice.

The guy across from me, PC1 Spencer, speaks up, "Did you get fooled by the cocktail sauce?" He indicates to my tray with a pointed finger.

I sigh in response, "Yeah. I did."

"I can see why you'd think it was marinara," he mentions contemplatively, "but I don't see how the galley workers do, considering they actually take it out of the package that has a label on it." He laughs a little bit. He doesn't mention my slip up in the reactor core. Does he not care, or has he forgotten already?

"Maybe they thought they could get away with it. Or they're just that stupid," I propose.

"You know what they say: sufficient incompetence is indistinguishable from malice. You should have gotten the sweet-potato fries." Spencer shoves one into his mouth. "They're slightly undercooked, but definitely the highlight of the meal."

"Seriously, those are sweet-potato fries?" I reply in alarm and disbelief, my tone raising an octave or three. The third disappointment in five minutes and my anger is on the rise – the fries, undercooked and under seasoned as they were, looked more like the common shaved-carrots when I'd passed by them in the chow-line, so I'd chosen to pass them up, as the carrots on the ship are notoriously soggy and slimy.

"Yeah, they aren't half-bad, either." He thrusts another one into his mouth, now chewing with his mouth open. Not all sailors are known for their manners. My resolve quickens and I finish off the last of my pudding. "Getting some?" He continues as I get up, leaving my cup behind to mark my spot, intentionally sliding it over the middle of the area marked only by social graces and whatever verbal

defense my friends are willing to front to do away with would-be-intruders. Not even a sign as obvious as a cup still containing both ice and drink is enough to shoo away some of the vulturous or oblivious sailors, both of which there are plenty.

The line is fortunately shorter than when I first arrived, but long enough that I can't keep my thoughts from drift while I wait. I'm in a remarkably better mood than a few days before. It's amazing what a good-night's sleep can do to the senses and train of thought. Six hours after my talk with Chief, with a couple of REM cycles and a meal thrown in, I had a marked increase of my self-opinion, and was rather back to my state of anger and frustration.

Stymieing that, though, is the fact that I still haven't been reapproved to do maintenance. Worthlessness, either perceived or actualized, is still worthlessness. I can't help the division, and that's that.

It did help that Chief Takahashi laid out the plan for proving to the Assistant Reactor Officer that I had been formally upgraded in my level of care and concern, including important buzzwords like "conducting an oral board," and "counselling sessions," which he and Chief Evert had already signed completion for by the time that I had received the forms, and the remainder was reasonable enough to complete in short order. They did, however, assure me sternly that I would complete it within several days and that for any bigger sensitivity maintenance procedures they would be monitoring me, or delegating it to someone else they trusted. All in all, I must begrudgingly admit that the corrective actions and hoops I have to jump through are fair but a bit painful.

I cut my contemplations short as my section of the queue arrives at the chow-line. As always, the guy serving food is none-too-attentive and doesn't care that I've been through once before, or he doesn't recognize me. The ship is populous enough that I don't blame him. I probably won't recognize his face beyond a week from now, not that I can see it well now as it is, through the fog-obscured plastic-panes that separate us.

There isn't a rule against second helpings, as far as I know. There probably is, but there are so many rules that few ever read even half of them and the most of the people on the ship like to invent arbitrary rules of their own for no reason other than to justify their existence. "Fries," I say loudly enough to be heard, but he goes to add an over-cooked burger patty, one-half near-charred brown, the other half still gray from having soaked in the juices of several dozen patties that have collected at the bottom of the hot-well tray, but I manage to deftly maneuver my tray out of the way before he releases it. "Fries," I say it louder, but confusion shows on his face, in spite of the fact that my other hand, unburdened by the

tray, has been pointing to the hot-well tray full of fries the entire time. I know I'm speaking loudly enough, but it takes him a while before he does anything, which is to reattempt to place the burger patty on my tray. I could just accept it, but I wouldn't eat it and that would be wasteful.

"*Fries.*" Now I'm getting a bit angry, all of my unsettled emotions from the past few days welling up again. If it were uncommon for people to only request a single food item at a time his confusion would be more understandable, but the majority of people I know pick and choose their own food items as well as vice running the gamut. The look on his face hints that he's equally pleased to be serving food as he is aware of his surroundings, but he manages to shovel a fair amount of fries on my plate after successfully upsetting me and the several people who have now accrued in a line behind me for the sake of his sluggishness.

When he finally realizes I'm only getting fries, he shoves another load on my plate for good measure. He may be dimwitted, but at least he's generous. Something of a redeeming quality, but not enough to balance him in my book. A job is a job; if you signed up for it of your own free will, it's your duty to be good at it even if you don't like it.

Upon my victorious return with a tray full of way-too-many-fries, I see most of my friends have finished and left the table, leaving my cup as the only indication that anyone had been there. A few guys from the other propulsion plant work center remain, still eating, several seats down. I snatch my cup as I walk over to them, and settle down, listening in on their conversation.

"... can't figure it out, either. I've got nothin'. We've replaced the card so many times that Supply is getting suspicious, and they're refusing to give us back the old ones they haven't sent off to the manufacturer." The only Petty Officer First-class of the group with Spencer now gone, other than myself, says, obviously too frustrated and distracted to eat. He hasn't touched his food and everyone else is nearly half-done.

"What, they think we want to scrap them for parts or something?" The guy across from him speaks up.

"Probably. They get all concerned over waste, fraud, and abuse. Meanwhile, the manufacturer is getting a ten thousand-a-pop for these cards. I've seen the requisition forms; it's ridiculous, twice as much as an aircar for a simple oversized circuit card, and another thousand for the one we just now figured out is perfectly-good and sent back to them for 'refurbishing.' They give back the Navy like, a hundred creds for 'parts' for the good cards and make off like bandits because some Senator signed them a good contract in return for election fund-raising money." Such porkbarrel spending is one of those things that most

sailors are mildly aware of, but feel as though they can do nothing about, especially with the timeframes and distances we deal with making such reports a significant hassle to submit.

They just now seemed to notice me. "Enough fries, Chris?" First names aren't commonly used in the military and technically speaking aren't allowed, but we Mags - short for RMAG, again short for Reactor-MAG, which is again short for Dark Matter Reactor, Mass Altering Gravity Propulsion – a process of derivation quickly simplified once one realizes that we usually write "RMAG" for our department abbreviation on forms - prefer to try to keep some semblance of humanity; the rest of the military might get hung up on straight chain of command and pure professionalism, but we try to keep from being so stiff. It keeps us different than the rest of the military, I think, but it more ensures our sanity remains intact. Though, we still only let our friends and those of equal station use them, of course. Some manner of respect between the new guys and old-boys must be maintained, saving of course for those showing considerable promise, and typically speaking no one cares when we are out of uniform.

I choose to ignore the inquisition on my fries and their implications at my level of hunger and try to tackle their problem. I've heard of their issue with one of their pieces of equipment, and figure it's what they're talking about. "The internal communications card, right?" Someone nods in response to my question. "So it's obviously not any other cards, right?" This time, I ask rhetorically. I'm getting a knowing look from someone a few seats down, who's put down his fork and let a smirk begin to cross his face. "Then the only thing it can be is a cable. Or a fuse, I guess, but you checked those already, right?" I'd heard of their plight a few times before, so I wasn't just rationalizing this out right off the cuff as it might appear.

I'm nearly cut off by the outburst from Stevens, who'd been giving me the look. "That's what I said!" Someone else casually points in his direction, acknowledging Stevens as the originator of the idea I'd just had. "And no one listens to me. At least Chief Evert doesn't. If it's just a loose cable, we could fix it for free. But no. We've got to spend, what is it now, forty thousand creds on this thing? I could buy a house for that!" It's a bit of an overstatement, to which I don't feel like correcting him on.

"Forty thousand?" I ask somewhat incredulously.

"Forty thousand, two hundred and twenty... six." Another, Blake, says, pausing mid-sentence as he recalls the expenditure. As the Repair Parts Petty Officer, in charge of ordering the parts, few would know the information better than he.

"That's a load of bull-crap," I say, then clarify my statement, "Not that I don't believe you, but the fact that it costs that much. This stuff is a decade old in design. There's no way it's so 'high tech' that

it should be so expensive." My little rant receives a few nods, and I curb myself. It's a known situation we have to deal with in the Navy, and most write it off as being 'too much to care about' in addition to the regularly scheduled bullcrap that is our lives. "Seriously..." The ship is new, but the tech is still so *old*. Reliable, for the most part, proven, sure, but that typically translates to "old."

"Actually, the reason for that is pretty simple." Yuichan, the most senior individual of all of us, though equal rank with myself, Jameson, and Stevens, tends to be the more level-headed until there is truly something to be angry about, and even then she takes the route of acting the disappointed-parent, demanding respect through personality rather than wielding her anger like a weapon and hurling complaints like grenades. "The Navy is essentially sponsoring the companies that make those parts."

Stevens looks a little angry, but obviously not at Hana Yuichan; she's much too good a friend, and anyone angry with her tends to earn the wrath of our entire division, Stevens included, for the sake of the respect she's earned, "So they don't have a valid business model and need to let better companies take over," he proposes back.

Hana shakes her head a little "Capitalism. Companies like Halcyon Industries are too big and need to be kept in check. Even if they have impeccable integrity now, they might not in a decade and there need to be companies with good integrity that are also big enough to force the prices reasonably low." It was well known that Halcyon Industries made a show of their integrity and even supported small competitors by giving skilled employees bonuses to leaving to the small companies, at least when it was assured they wouldn't give away secrets.

"Companies like Halcyon don't need competition to keep prices low. Give them all the contracts and they'll probably do everything cheaper and more efficiently. Obviously, look at how much we're paying for this off-brand crap." Stevens ripostes with frustration still dripping from his voice in a way that says he's not going to ever be convinced.

Yuichan doesn't falter and isn't offended by the tone, knowing she isn't the target, "I don't think any of us know the full story well enough to make these sorts of judgements. We're MAG operators, not economists or merchants."

"So you just have full faith in the Navy, then, Hana?" Stevens quips a little too sharply at her. The look on his face lets me know he immediately regrets directing the assault at her, but he doesn't take the words back.

Instead of being provoked, Hana just laughs. "No, no. I've been in far too long to do something like that. I just believe the ends justify the means. If we pay more taxpayer dollars to keep companies

afloat for the greater good, by all means, we should. Keeps jobs open, keeps competition open.” Twenty years ago, those words would have been considered highly-socialist and would have earned disdain, but the Meritocracy of the Threshold of Hadrian has changed a bit over these last few years – handouts and welfare are slowly making a comeback, ironically with these military – and therefore government – policies at their head.

With her level-headedness, the conversation dies down a bit now and moves onto other things as people filter out as they finish their meals. Jameson, the other First Class, has realized his food is cold – it started off pretty close to being cold anyway – and has begun to chow down and savor whatever heat is left, obviously as disappointed as I was. "Long day ahead?" I ask, partway through my fries and slowing.

All I get is a nod. Jameson's obviously hungry now that the discussion has died all of his workers have abandoned him. Through a mouthful of food he eventually asks, “Are you able to do maintenance yet?”

I shake my head, “No, not yet. I can probably get done with the upgrade-form today if everything goes right.”

“If you do, let me know. I could use some help with these repairs.” Working on things located in the opposing reactor plant is usually not done, but this is corrective maintenance, which warrants undoing some of the previously set-forth standards by which we operate.

I shrug, “Yeah, I will. I don’t count on it happening, though, I need to see the RDMC,” short for Reactor Department Master Chief, “and he’s usually working out about this time and usually takes a couple of hours... beyond that, I need to sleep again at some point before my next watch.”

Jameson playfully swats the air with his hand, “Pssh, sleep is for the weak.”

A few others begin to filter in. In stark contrast to my solid-blue void-safety-coveralls, I suddenly realize I'm surrounded by fatigued figures, unfamiliar at that. Not that I'd actually remember anyone wearing fatigues, seeing as we sailors don't wear them when underway, so I usually give such types little time of day. On a ship so large, most groups tend to segregate and claim their own table areas and rarely deviate. I give them an odd look, disturbed by their close presence; there are no assigned tables, but we Mags have essentially claimed the few rows of tables around where I sit by sheer volume of people and repetition.

Most other guys outside of Reactor tend to be rather rude, ignorant, or both, and I'm fully expecting that people who would fill in all other space around two solitary individuals would meet both

criteria. Jameson catches me before I get too many notices and gives a silent hand gesture to signal that they're cool by him.

As they chat amongst themselves, I notice their pins. Drop pins. Noticing that one feature instantly reshapes my opinion of the group: These guys aren't the overly-cocky, self-righteous security types who brag about what they *could* do; they're full-on special forces troopers, the type that never almost never brag about what they *have* done. By and large they have musculature far more intimidating than most of the nerdy-types I work with, though some of my cohorts put up a valiant effort. These guys look like they were born into their physiques, though, and I can't help but feel out of place, like a nerd who has been suddenly surrounded by jocks in the school cafeteria, but the air around them feels as though they belong anywhere they want. Unlike those old days, though, I stand my ground. We nerds have to get some backbone after school, and the jocks have to mellow out. Besides, they're riders; this is our ship, not theirs. I belong here.

"Jameson, these your buddies?" The new arrival across from me asks of myself and Yuichan, and Jameson, mouth still full of food and trying to be respectful, nods confirmation.

"They cool?" Yet another question, this one posed more as an "*are they good enough?*" to vet me for his 'crew.' Good enough for what, to sit with them? Hang out? Simply converse with? I ask myself; the question is rather forward and a bit startling, being said right in front of me. It's almost upsetting how forward he is, as if I weren't right here.

With another nod in response, one of them pats me on the arm. The contact from a stranger makes me a little uncomfortable, but they've been otherwise socially acceptable: arms in, chewing with mouths closed, quiet voices. They distinctly avoid patting Hana Yuichan, respecting the fact that she's a female and might not approve of the touch of men. I know Hana wouldn't mind; she's far from a "girly-girl," to the point that it makes it easy to forget her as anything but a sailor and a friend. The deliberate lack-of-gesture, though, paints them in my mind as at least not being womanizing douchebags like so many other coners I know of. The sort tend to surface when you've been isolated from outside society for so long.

They've passed all of my neurotic tests for strangers. I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume my glowingly sour mood is the reason for I assume they're trying to screen me. They might even be smart enough to hold an intelligent conversation. After all, special forces have similar intelligence-testing requirements as Mags, if not as much constant mental exercise. "Nice to meet you." The first one says again. He doesn't extend a hand, but I wouldn't expect him to, being awkward over dinner.

"You too..." I crank my head over to read his nametag, an act he recognizes and presents the right side of his chest for easier reading on my part, "Ramirez. I'm Chris." I give my first name. I don't know why. I wouldn't have pegged the guy for a "Ramirez" at first glance. He doesn't look to have any Latino or Hispanic in him as far as I can tell, though I suppose his facial features do look more like a Spaniard, not that I'd know what a true Spaniard looks like. Then again, the gene pool is so diverse now that genealogy is pretty difficult to trace just by looks.

Having been quiet for what he seems to think is far too long, Jameson decides to explain the situation once he finally swallows the food he'd be working on. "Ramirez was in my Mag School class. He had a few medical conditions that initially disqualified him from the job, then later on, after they re-rated him, they realized he was okay and was allowed to pick another job. He managed to get Rapid Insertion Forces." Rapid Insertion Forces Troopers, or RIFT, were one of those near-mystical groups of the military. Not quite unicorn status like the Tsalmaveth, but still not the most common sight. Ramirez has to be pretty good at his work too, or lucky, because the med-hold and intermediate training commands haven't seen to slow down his promotions – Jameson and I aren't far apart in time-in-service, yet we're all the same rank, Ramirez matching me at E-6.

"All I had to do on med-hold was work out, against their wishes. I knew I was fine. Leave it up to Medical to know less about medical issues than anyone else. So, after eight months of that, I was pretty much fine to do what I wanted. They gave me Ordnance Electrician and I got to work with a bunch of RIFTs for my first few months. Decided I wanted to do that instead of going back to being a Mag. I figured that out early on."

"Smart. Most of what I do I sit around all day and watch nothing happen. The rest of it is having to deal with politics and idiots." I respond with a smirk. Whereas most other rates tend to be overly proud, Mags take the other route and are overtly bitter to their lot in life. Few souls in my department would blame him for cutting and running for a different job other than being a Mag at the first legitimate opportunity; they'd claim that he'd dodged a bit of a bullet, despite the fact that now he had to actually dodge bullets. I've decided I like the guy well enough to converse with more than just pleasantries; I typically give such guys who put their lives on the line a fair portion of respect for that, but this group of guys feels a bit more than that – they haven't taken the opportunity to gloat about their job, and I get a feeling they don't intend to.

I don't normally screen my conversations, but today hasn't been going well since I woke up.

"Jameson's been telling me that." Ramirez comments. "It's pretty stressful work, though, right? Or is Jameson just pulling my leg?" He jests, as if even he doesn't quite believe that our mutual friend would be lying.

I nod in response, blowing air through pursed lips and puffed out cheek; 'stressful' is an exaggeration. "Ever felt like you had the weight of the galaxy on your shoulders, everything crashing down around you, and in spite of all the underpaid work you did, no matter how many people you satisfied or jobs you completed, you were in a never-ending cycle of pain and misery, having to live among a bunch of useless morons, all the while knowing that the harder you work, the more you get *used* because you're good at your job in an infinite cycle of draining, back-breaking, mind-numbing work? And all the while, of course, the lazy douche at the dinner table next to yours gets paid the exact same as you for *painting a wall* one bland, drab, color, and not even doing that right." The words tumble out, almost stumble out as a cathartic rant.

They listen. I had sort of figured I'd sound like a whiney crybaby to these men, the epitome of machismo. Hana doesn't help, "Chris, you need to learn to be more positive. It'll help a lot." Her directness feels like a fatherly scolding despite her tone. "That being said," she turns her words towards the soldiers, "the sleep deprivation does make it all quite hard on the mind, really, and makes it hard to stay awake when at the same time we can lose our jobs, or at least ranks, for falling asleep, so it does tend to us being either bitter, afraid, or both, since they don't bother trying to really help us get the sleep we need."

"Rainbows, though, they get a full eight hours of sleep. God-forbid they get too tired to add two-plus-two." I contemptuously add, which receives a discouraging glance from Hana. More for my attitude, I suspect. She doesn't usually object to the use of the slightly offensive "Rainbow" term to describe the voidmen clad in their job-based color-scheme.

"How do you get through it all?" One of them asks earnestly while ignoring my new complaint, as if considering my lamentations to have merit next to their experiences, though I get a feeling they're just being nice.

I'm a bit taken aback. "Jokes. Humor." I shrug. "Prayer, mostly."

"Really?" Jameson asks incredulously. It takes me a moment to realize he might not be as surprised by my answer but by the fact that I was the one to answer it. I haven't exactly been a model Christian with my anger and bemoaning. Pangs of guilt spear me, more once I realize I haven't exactly

leaned on my Lord in my recent times of strife, as I've been taught all my life. Instead I chose to self-loathe and judge and hate all those around me.

Before those thoughts can sink too deep, another one of the soldiers hits another one of my sore spots. "Sounds like something might blow their brains out for." One of the RIFT comments.

It strikes a chord with me. There was a time when I'd almost considered it, more as a mental exercise more than anything else: What *would* happen if I died? Would the lazy people in the division pick up the slack? Or would my death depress the other hard workers in the division more than the offset of the hard work of those trying to pick up the slack left in my absence? Though I'd never planned it, or intended it, that one deployment was a time when I was closer than ever to the notion of suicide.

I shudder a bit. Those times are long past; when sleep deprivation and stress combined would bring me to the point of utter mental failure. At least my body buckled before my mind in those days. I dare say I don't think I could ever be brought to suicide for work-related stress, at least. A morbidly comforting thought, I suppose.

My momentary pause in thought prompts a response. I guess my face betrayed my discomfort with the topic. I try to redirect. People always like talking about themselves, right? "I mean, though, I don't get shot at, so I guess it can't be that stressful."

"We've got a lot of boring downtime, but it gets fun now and then. Or, stressful, yeah." Ramirez saves the day by responding to my change of subject. "What's your story, Chris?" My redirect failed, unfortunately.

I shrug, trying to downplay my experiences before I even get to explain them: "Nothing all that special. Went through the Mag training pipeline, wound up here. Qualified everything on time, pretty much. Been on this ship for, oh, five years now? Due to transfer within the year, but no orders yet."

"So you've been here for a while then. Any other ships?" One of the guys, Sands, asks.

"No, just this one. Been in about seven years so far. Don't plan on making it much longer than I can help, either." I respond firmly to the question I anticipate is coming up next. "Just don't want to take all of this crap anymore. I don't regret joining, though." I surprise myself with those words, figuring I'd feel more regret for it, but searching my feelings I find that the words are truthful, even with recent events.

Hana says something about needing to get back to work and bids us all adieu. As she walks away, I see a couple of troopers watching her leave and I get a bit angry as a protective part of me wants to tell them to respect her, but I know Hana can hold her own and needs no brotherly guardianship, and all

they've done to acknowledge her gender is a few glances. I can't quite blame them; while she isn't especially attractive, being deployed for months shifts the curve of what passes for pretty.

"You ever hit that?" One of them rudely asks. Ramirez forcefully ribs him as if to let him know just how unacceptable the comment was. "What? Just a question."

I shake my head, and my frown drives home that he shouldn't have asked. "Married." I hold up my ring-clad finger for him to see. "Besides, she doesn't want to get involved with anyone until she gets out." At least, that's what Hana says.

"That's respectable. Doesn't want to create any drama?" Ramirez says. I nod. Sailor-on-sailor action almost always leads to drama, be it bad break-ups or potential for accusations of favoritism, hence why the Navy frowns upon it.

"Didn't you all just get back from an Op?" I ask, segwaying terribly to a new topic before I talk about myself too much or lash out about their objectifying my friend, and before shoving down the last fry I've decided to eat. I'm interested in what they do. These guys are some of the few around who even I'm willing to admit have it as hard or harder than we do. Like any good Thresholder, I admire fine, dedicated, and most of all earnest, work. I don't have to dodge flechette rounds when I go to work, so they've got that on me. "Are you allowed to-

I'm cut off by what is apparently the funniest joke in the galaxy, as several Void Ordnancemen are laughing loudly – far too loudly to be socially acceptable. Though they're talking loudly, I can't quite make out what they're saying. Were this a one-time occurrence I might just not hate them for it, but they're notorious for their red shirts, stupidity, and rudeness. To boot, they act like a stereotypical brainwashed servicemember, enough to make conspiracy theorist assumptions about the military seem true. They aren't the cream of the crop, to be sure. I'm usually misanthropic about the non-Mags in the Navy, and these guys are the pretty much the reason why. "Freaking mouth-breathers..." I mutter, forgetting Ramirez himself was an Ordnancemen of sorts. "Sorry. Those guys just piss me off."

"No offense taken. I was an OE for a bit. Even we hated VOs for their bull-crap and chanting and crap."

To emphasize his point, I hear someone in the background yell "YAYOOH-YAN!" YAOYAN standing for *You Ain't Ordnance, You Ain't Nothin'*. Obviously, those of greater intelligence – being a good portion of the fleet – rapidly changed the tagline into the grammatically synonymous *You Are Ordnance, You Are Nothin'*. Those wittier than even they just had to point out the double-negative in the original statement. Doing so was often the fastest way to piss off an Ordie and cause him to melt into

excuses of just how 'jealous' everyone was that they got to play with bombs and missiles all day and not learning valuable trade skills and the like.

"But yeah. We just got back yesterday night... or whatever. Guess we don't have days or nights out here, right? Still getting used to this Navy crap."

"How was it... if you don't mind me asking?" I keep forgetting my company. I suppose I'm the socially unacceptable one here at this point. The combat guys don't usually like to be questioned about combat, or at least that's the stereotype.

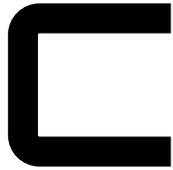
"No problem. It was textbook, but it's a bit of a story. You got time? I know you Mags have a heavy workload and forget to sleep sometimes."

Having just gotten off of watch and having eighteen hours until my next one, and the week was light on maintenance, I did have the time. I'd planned on going and working out, but that could wait.

"Sure. I've got time."

"Eh... I can stick around." Jameson spoke, but the bags under his eyes indicated he might not be staying long.

"So, what had happened was..."



#97: A key factor in remaining motivated is the element of delusion.

TNV *Dauntless*,

CHAPTER THREE: 1700 Astra Central Time, 02-02-3398 Standard Sol Date

It always started off sucking. Before the dropship even left the bay, he had to be in the pod, strapped in, ready to go. There was only room enough for the crew, platoon karii, a rank equivalent to the old rank of lieutenant junior-grade, aka O-2, and a senior non-com or two when the dropship was fitted with the drop-pods. Without the pods, the dropships could easily carry three full platoons – with them, only one. The pods themselves rode low, mounted in their individual launchers, making the large craft more heavy, ungainly, and in every way more cumbersome for the pilot, so just about everyone onboard was getting the short end of the stick somehow. "Are you comfortable, Ramirez? I've preloaded all of your usual settings into the pod for you, along with your usual playlist of songs and camera settings." The Virtual Intelligence in his suit dubbed the Tactical Action Virtual Intelligence Suite, or TAVIS for short, asked him in his characteristic comfortably foreign voice. Some soldiers had chosen to customize their TAVIS as feminine and name them, but this voice option sounded more comforting to him.

"Yes, Tavis. Thank you." He didn't have to be polite to the VI, as it really didn't matter. Doing so wouldn't endear him more to the program's flat personality, but it was close enough to seem human at times, so niceties came naturally to most users anyway. A fully artificial intelligence might do better work, but there were laws against installing an AI into anything labeled "expendable," like a drop pod.

But strapping a person into one, no problem. Navy logic.

"We've got to be there in less than twenty minutes, come on, move, move, move." The platoon leader – a relatively new karii who was still a battle-virgin, but apparently had scored good marks in training – egged them on with all the tenacity of a child at play, which he practically was with many of his men outstripping him in age. They'd dawdled getting in knowing how their situation on the flight line was going to play out, so the strike commander was more than willing to get the operation underway. Once each of the shock troopers gave the green light, the dropship hurriedly took off, then dropped out of the hole in the flight-line before it, exiting the massive carrier to meet up with its partner that had left already, loitering in a holding pattern.

Ramirez patched in his battlesuit's network into that of the dropship, likely as the rest of his platoon was. The first thing displayed was the landing site, a small field barely a hundred yards wide but filled with a wide variety of obstacles and small structures. Several reconnaissance drones had be

launched from the ship early on, setting up a geostationary orbit above the field. Naturally, orbital mechanics dictated that with the ship in orbit they wouldn't be vertically over the target until moments before they hit the dirt. This was a small op, and connecting to the network of the ship itself would simply provide too much information – even the collective sensory data from the dropships alone was getting things a bit crowded. Others and their VI's had already begun to identify targets, indicated by little red circles on the screen in front of his face, and there were plenty of them, such that they saturated the rectangle. It was to be a very “hot” drop.

Before they even hit atmo, Ramirez had a pretty good idea of what he was getting into. Four drop points in a rectangle surrounding the target, essentially a large hill. Each dropship would cover two of the drop points, which were rather close together, naturally forming a pair of assault teams. It would be a race to get to the hill from which they'd be able to get a good view of the battlefield and pick off any enemy survivors they'd missed along the way, or be able to support the opposite side if they ran into trouble.

Needless to say: the platoon coming in second would be buying drinks at the next available opportunity.

It started as a dull roar; the light upper atmosphere barely slowed the dropship as it entered into its parabolic descent towards the planet. Ramirez satisfied that his plot was ready to go, swapped the view to the external feed from the dropship. Astra was a beautiful planet, to be sure, but this was a poor way to see it for the first time. He hated missing the sight with his own eyes, which was a rare enough event that he could count it on his hands in spite of the several years he'd been in the military thus far, even with much of it being in space. At least it was illuminated. Daytime drops were less common than night-drops, for obvious tactical reasons, but they weren't at all unheard of, so most of his camera viewed drops were further tainted by the hand of digital correction. Much of that correction was rather impressive, but still, the mental bias was seated.

As camera feeds began to glaze over with the superheated, super-compressed air that the dropship was compressing beneath them, the real noise started. Dulled by the hull of the ship and their drop pods, none of their equipment was designed to completely block out the roar of the atmospheric entry. With the Angel dropship descending but still oriented horizontally to the planet's surface to cut its speed and drop out of orbit, the now-growing horizon-line stayed in view but now appeared to be consumed in hellfire. Not wanting to see the planet that way anytime soon, Ramirez swapped back over to looking at the overhead view of the battlefield. It was an artificial rendering, but absolutely top notch. As the air

thickened and the craft slowed – though still moving at supersonic speeds – winds began to buffet the ship and Ramirez would have been rocked to and fro in his pod if he weren't snugly strapped in.

"Two minutes to deadline." The comm came over the platoon channel in Ramirez's headset. "Let's not let First Platoon beat us." Young as he was, the kaii had a knack for sounding inexperienced. Many of his enlisted were older than he was – and all of his senior enlisted beat him by at least four years of age. At least he knew better – this phase of his commissioning was more about learning from the senior enlisted. Actual leading would come later, though he was still very much expected to make decisions, albeit decisions loaded with advice.

Ramirez stole one last glance at the external feeds. They were rocketing over a city at breakneck speed, now, dipping and dodging under and over sky-traffic lanes. At one point they did a roll and narrowly missed an errant freighter who'd deemed himself above the harbormaster's directions, though local police vehicles were already trying to reign him in, and nearly gave chase to the Angels, though they knew they'd not be able to match their speed and let them fly on by.

"Thirty seconds to motive-drop," came the call over the platoon channel, "Standby." Each member of the team was itching to get out of their drop-pod. They weren't exactly comfortable, but they were safe enough to survive some of the most hellish impacts.

"Ten." It was the last warning they'd get. Ramirez gripped his rifle, which was still magnetically attached to the pod's holding rack for it. His knees were bent, and his feet against a kick-plate situated underneath him. It happened to be both one of the safest ways to fall and the fastest way to burst out of the pod, especially if he oriented his seat properly.

The Angel settled into it's position over a mile above the target, aligning itself so that when launched, the pods could go where they needed to without creating a mess of things, as half were to go to the northern drop site, the other to the southern. All of a sudden, he felt as though he were in free-fall and he heard a massive '*whoomp*' and a *bang* as the launcher propelled him towards the earth at breakneck speeds and summarily broke the sound barrier. The free-fall feeling was a lie; while the pod did suffice for extra-atmospheric protection, storage for supplies, and a quick way down, it's true purpose was to be a counter-mass compensator to keep the soldier alive. The impact from a free-fall from such a height was deadly already, or at least severely injurious for someone in armor as advanced as Ramirez was. However, this was to be a motive drop, meaning the pod would be propelled with such acceleration that the launch would be equally deadly on it's own were there not safety measures installed. "Good luck, Ramirez."

Tavis seemingly decided to add, giving him a bit of a pre-programmed and randomly generated encouragement.

The pod rocketed through the air towards its target, giving Ramirez no time to collect his thoughts before the pod was abruptly pulled to a stop by the gravity-tether of the launcher over a mile above his head, and the pod's door blew open just as it impacted the dirt, still moving at considerable speeds until it found its match in the planet it was hurtled towards and coming to rest in what looked to be a battle-torn cityscape. Ramirez's sensors came to life as his suit began visually tracking targets for him. The VI suit gave him a "green light," indicator above the opening, signifying that odds were that he wasn't about to be met by gunfire, or at least that his odds would be better outside of the pod than inside of it. Before the door was even settled on the ground, Ramirez was out of the opening, rifle at the ready, safety off. His fireteam's pods were now nearly as close as they had been when stowed in the dropship, moved barely a few feet apart, allowing the shock troopers to slip behind them if need be in an emergency. There was also always the option of a back-exit, in which the seat and meat of the pod was ejected out of the back to opt for safety from incoming fire to leave the front and sides of the pod as a hollow husk of a shield, but this generally left the pod unrecoverable and the trooper a little more disoriented. Fortunately, that had not be necessary.

In his helmet his sensors aimed him to his first target, the suit coordinating with the others to ensure no one was directed towards the same target if there were multiple to be had. Across the field of his vision, faint targeting vectors, all of them green to indicate friendly, swept across his visor's display as they aligned to their targets, a backup to the VI-suggested targeting arrangement.

Before he knew it, the gun was aimed, his finger squeezed, and the recoil told him he'd successfully gotten off the first rounds of the fight – at nearly the exact same time as thirty-some-odd other troopers. Dust hadn't even settled from their landing by the time they slid into their first cover, still mowing down several more armed bodies en route before most of the opposing force, if one could call it that, even knew what was going on.

Ramirez and his fireteam found themselves hunkered down by a fallen decorative pillar that looked like it might actually stop a flechette, but none of his team looked ready to test that. The best way to stop a bullet was to make sure it was never fired in the first place. "Alpha, move!" the fireteam leader yelled over their channel, which on impact had been consolidated down to just their squad to cut down on confusion. As if on cue, Tavis set about to lay out an optimized path, coordinating with the TAVIS of the other suits in the platoon, based on the command suite of the platoon leader. The kaii was obviously

eager to keep moving, and rightly so. They still had the element of surprise and it was wise to use it to their advantage. They'd get that chance.

From several of the small structures, many appearing to be storage containers and tool shacks, pounced more armed assailants. Now Ramirez had a good look at who they were up against. It'd been covered in the briefing, of course, but eyes-on was always a must when picking targets. Civilian clothes with some indication of body armor beneath. Decorative armbands indicating their terror-revolutionary cause – an old, veteran group at that, so they might actually put up a fight. As two of the guys hunkered down a dozen yards ahead of Ramirez, he lobbed a grenade their way, delaying the fuse enough that it wouldn't make the munition returnable. Failing to do so was an easy way to make a full workday much, much shorter. A loud "boom" and a flash of light later and the enemies he'd made note of were down, Tavis told him via his HUD. The other squad began laying down cover fire: Alpha fireteam was to advance with Bravo close at their heels. "Good 'nade, sir." The foreign voice came over his personal channel.

"Quiet, Tavis, I'm in the zone." The VI did well by not even verbally complying, instead saving it's voice for warnings and other situations it deemed important. Readying his rifle to his shoulder, he pressed the advance with his squad mates, who were leapfrogging to get closer to the objective in front of them. They'd cleared their sectors, and for this movement, Ramirez was taking up the rear, covering their exposed sides. An enemy popped out, as was to be expected – intel said they'd be operating on at least a semi-experienced level and would be likely to manage a few minor ambushes on the spot – his rifle trained on the foe before the ambusher could raise his own to level with any of the drop troopers. A short staccato of gunfire put him down; it was difficult, if not impossible, to draw a gun and win against someone with his own at the ready. Foolhardy. He should have surrendered, but that was apparently not their style. That fight-to-the-death mentality meant they were all the more of a problem. Swiveling to the other side, Ramirez caught yet another attempting to ambush, this one quicker, but Ramirez's armor-to-autonomic nervous system interface gave him an edge, coaxing his body to spin about faster than it would on it's own. In a flash this foe, too, was falling.

The fireteam leader reached cover first, and quickly checked forward of their position and their flanks. The second man checked behind them, covering Ramirez. At this point he sprinted into the cover as well, sliding the last few feet, kicking up a small cloud of dust as he did. Yet more concrete; it was more to give them the ability to cover everyone else, as they were now roughly centered on their side of

the field. With their other fireteam advancing on their left and two more fireteams advancing on their right, it was time to start laying down some covering fire.

Switching his fire-selector to automatic and checking his fletcher count – 231 out of 250 – Ramirez swung his rifle over the top of their makeshift barricade and checked for targets. A few behind some cover, but none at the moment were opportune. Each of the four-man fireteam covered a sector – either flank or a left or right-half of the forward second – Ramirez took forward right.

Picking a pair of enemies who were rather well concealed but had been foolish enough to show themselves for a brief moment before Ramirez could take aim, he picked a spot on the ground near their feet and opened fire, kicking up a good amount of dirt with a short burst. For good measure, a couple rounds went to wear he supposed each of their heads would pop out – or rather, on the cover right where they would, just to send of a few chips of concrete as if to say "You move, you die." Watching his tactical network, every so often a new target would appear as *Dauntless*, drop ships, the geostationary drones, and fellow troopers tagged them. Short bursts of gunfire behind them indicated a few enemies who'd planned on getting the drop on them. Short exchanges here and there proved unsuccessful for the revolutionaries, as was to be expected. The technological advantage was against them, and the drop troopers had extensive training. That this was a surprise attack practically soured the impending victory, making it so easy. If he hadn't known better, Ramirez would have called this battle *too* easy. However, like most battles that commanders could pick, that was how it was supposed to be. A fair fight was a risky fight, and that meant losing men.

Alpha squad of Second Squad began pelting the large concrete barrier with their shoulders next to Ramirez and his squadmates, taking up position to cover their own Bravo squad. It wasn't long before both Bravo squads – more fitted for ranged battle, took up far flanking positions to either side as well. The Alpha squads cleared the area before them, and the fireteam leader signaled that Ramirez was the first to be over the wall. Bravo wasn't moving anymore – this was the final assault up the hill. Rifle first, as always, he vaulted himself, closely followed by the others, and put his utter trust in his teammates as he sprinted towards one of the buildings. Just as he reached it, a door kicked open and an enemy rifle swung through, it's trajectory vector coming forth from it's barrel like a sword of infinite length. Petty Officer Ramirez planted a foot and kicked out, catching the foe square in the gut. The suit sensed the action, providing stability on one side of his body and strength and speed on the other – the foe went flying, but Ramirez was off balance from the kick, having far too overextended and forgetting himself, and he fell into the building, the trajectory vector of the enemy rifle racking across his chest as the

revolutionary fell. He flinched mid-fall, expecting a bullet to strike him, but none did. Lucky. Ducking into a roll, Ramirez found himself between yet two more, who hadn't quite expected him either. All three in surprise, they all seemed to act at the same time. A pistol from his hip, Ramirez continued his roll further and put two bullets into the one on his rifle as he rushed the other – who began to remove a small object from his pocket, putting his thumb onto it in desperation. All at once, the building exploded. His suit shut down his external sensor feed to shield him from the blast as the gravity-charge shoved everything out around him, his own shield flaring, and Ramirez was sent head over heels into the one he charged and both of them into the wall, which caved out. As the dust settled, he realized the blast hadn't been very robust – only enough to blow the ramshackle building apart, really, and its construction had appeared shoddy anyway.

His opponent began to rise as he did, and Ramirez clawed for his pistol in front of him on the ground. It was too far, and his foe was closer to a gun of his own. Ramirez's suit helped him from what would have been a struggle to get up and transformed it into the outright intended pounce on his weapon, then the follow-up dramatic spin and firing of a single shot into his enemy.

As his team closed to rush to his aid he waved them off while picking up his rifle, uninjured save for superficial suit blemishing. A few rounds plinked off of his shields as they restored, their trajectory vectors not having showed up, as no sensors or cameras had spotting the shooters, though they now blossomed to life and the team began to scatter to cover. Now he was getting angry, the incident in the shack having broken his game. Training his cross-hairs on the origin, Ramirez opened up with a good decent burst to keep their heads down. It came from atop the hill, where all of the teams had their destination. It would also be a tough nut to crack – while the entire area was a relative wasteland of rubble and debris, the small hill had been made into a miniature fortress, utilizing the better parts of the arena of death they now inhabited. Steel stanchions seemed to reinforce everything, sharpened re-bar threatened to skewer any who would vault over the walls, and it was even roofed in places to prevent a barrage of thrown grenades.

Technology made short work of it.

"Bravo, requesting a fireworks display." Ramirez heard his fireteam leader, Operator Sands, say.

"Good call." Ramirez outranked the man and was technically aboard to train him up, but the younger soldier was competent enough for the job as it was.

Within seconds, soft, yet curt hums were heard as gravity-propelled shells left the tubes of under-slung grenade launchers, followed by a series of short explosions midair inside the makeshift

bunker that ripped everything atop the hill softer than steel to shreds. Even the steel showed signs of buckling.

"Go!" Alpha fireteam moved on the hill, pairing off to enter gaps in the barricades, now made wider by the initial barrage. A short warning signal played over their heads-up-displays of their helmets as the opposing platoon seemed to like the work done by the air-burst grenades and made to imitate. "Down!" Both fireteams on their side of the hill hit the dirt just feet from the barricade, which shielded them from the blasts impacting only moments later. More warnings of danger-close explosions popped up in front of their eyes, and yet another series of explosions.

Yet more warnings kept the fireteams down, yet this time the reports were from flashbangs. "Move!" The team had little to worry from flashbangs. They were friendly, so the suits would know exactly when to cut visual and audible stimulation to protect them, or, as was the case now, merely opaque vision and do their best to cut out the sound and permit anything else. As they rose, however, they saw that the opposing platoon was already pouring in – Ramirez's fireteam did the same.

The entire entrance into the small compound looked about as textbook and professional as possible.

A crowd cheered.

Everyone relaxed and stowed their rifles across their backs.

"Cheaters," Ramirez spoke. Technically, it was how it should have been done. But still, he wanted the win.

"Whatever. We won." The closest of the other platoon spoke. "And technically it's a valid entrance strategy." He shrugged. Ramirez knew that beneath that helmet was a wicked smirk. Ramirez shook his head. "Whatever, without that we would have reached the top first." The other platoon was already taking up positions from next to the rubble to address the crowd, and the far edges of rubble began to float away, lifted by hovering gravity-cranes that had taken up station next to their dropships. Enemies and other parts of the field began to fade away – they were only holograms.

That was the chief reason why Ramirez's instinctively kicking the one who'd attempted to ambush him from the door had been a bad idea. There was some haptic feedback to give the hologram's a "physical" presence, but it was always a bit delayed and never quite right. "You guys used the explosion warning sensors as a crutch and you know it." He called after them, ever competitive. The race to the top between the two platoons hadn't really been a race, but he always lived to compete, especially soldiers during peacetime.

"Yeah, we also let our suits take the brunt of the flashbangs to buy a couple of seconds. The ground around them began to return to its usual flat nature as their half-time show finished, shifting under their feet as the hill shrunk. Ramirez looked up and saw big screens surrounding the sports stadium and a crowd cheering for them. Some of them replayed his breaching of the small shack – apparently, there had been cameras inside as well. It was rather embarrassing for him, and Sands was already approaching him.

"Have some fun in that shack, Ramirez?"

"Shut up, Sands."

"Still on edge from that?" The mirth in his voice was obvious.

"Hey, they said they were going to use training charges. That was a *large* training charge." Sands patted him on the back. "Whatever, man, your shields took it all and they didn't even hit fifty-percent." He chuckled a little bit. "I wish I could have seen the look on your face, though. I'm sure it was absolutely priceless." The camera feeds instead showed a masked Ramirez, a faceless entity looking cool, calm, and professional throughout the ordeal, the matte-black faceplate of his suit thankfully obscuring the surprised look in his eyes from all. Between the adrenaline in his blood and the assistance of his suit, the replays showed him in crisp, almost robotic, and decidedly awesome action with his responses to the scenarios.

Ramirez repeated himself. "Shut up, Sands," this time a bit more congenially.

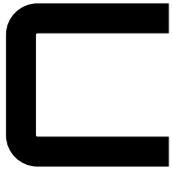
"First Platoon, Second Platoon, form up!" The company commander ordered both of the groups, and they formed up in their rehearsed lines, forming neat rows and columns. It only took a few moments. This was one of the terrible parts of playing friendly with everyone and parading yourself about. Every so often you had to put on a show. Most never had to do actual marching anymore, not after boot camp. The drop troopers of the 23rd Rapid Insertion Forces were in that uncomfortable niche – their job was widespread enough, skilled enough, and cool enough to garner public knowledge and respect above that of the usual infantry, but not so much so that they lived in secrecy. That meant parades and half-time shows like this. Publicity and, in this case, friendship making. Such was peacetime.

Astra wasn't an enemy planet by any means – if anything this was a near desperate publicity stunt. The Threshold of Hadrian lay just beyond the fringes of Alliance Space, with about everyone who hated the Alliance and Hadrian on either side of the narrow trade-lanes they had managed to set up. As such, Hadrian forces commonly visited Alliance space and tried to put on displays of power to entertain as best they could to get the Alliance public on their side.

In unison, the two platoons began to march into the hall leading to the locker rooms reserved for the home team to change into their dress uniform for pictures afterward with the sports teams. As they left the field, the home team began running out around them, giving them mock-salutes and nodding politely. They didn't say the usual "thank you for your service" that was so common from civilians. The players were from a different star-nation, so it was far from expected anyway and the usual greeting was replaced by a bit of animosity, wonderment, and awkward silence. Hadrian wasn't really doing anything for the Alliance other than planning on being front-line cannon fodder for their mutual enemies. Besides, most found it hard to respond to a "thank you for your service" comment without sounding awkward or pompous, so the silence was welcome to the troopers.

After completing some join-drills with the local Alliance defense ships, the Hadrian carrier *Dauntless* would be in an edge-of-atmosphere suborbital flight in the next few days venting heat from its storage banks in the upper atmosphere of the planet, meaning the crew would get some time off, and the 23rd RIF was given a few days off, save for the occasional publicity function here and there, and would be returning to the *Dauntless* just before the rest of the crew would be given liberty.. For the remainder of the day they had free-time, so after the game, most of the soldiers were planning on having the cheerleaders from both sides "show them around the city." Most of the drop troopers found themselves being treated as if they were exotic commodities, with some of the most choice dates on the planet. They were all physically fit, foreign, and top-notch special-forces soldiers and most were rather attractive, aspects that each had their individual advantages when it came to the dating, drinking, and party scenes. Combined: Like shooting fish in a barrel.

They'd get to come back later as well after the *Dauntless* pulled fully into orbit and the rest of the crew were allowed to have their own time planetside, taking liberty, but the RIFT wouldn't be so exotic then with thousands of other sailors exploring Astra City.



CHAPTER FOUR:

#64: Liberty is not just a privilege, it's a target

TNV *Dauntless*,

1200 Astra Central Time, 02-06-3398 Sol Date
Propulsion Plant, Enclosed Operating Station (EOS)

Three days of liberty. That's all I get this time planetside is just three days of “liberty,” which is navy-speak for “not being at work,” and it’s treated as though it’s a privilege. We've been in the void for as many months. Most of the crew gets a full week – I get just under half that. I would be lying if I said it was only annoying; it's mind-numbingly frustrating. The first day we had to start up the auxiliary fusion reactors and shut down the main plant, the second day was my duty day which comprised of nearly twenty hours of rigging the normal operation heat-vent gear and venting the disposable heat-pods, reinstalling replacements, and then refurbishing the previously disposed ones for later use after they were likewise vented. Today is day three of being in orbit, and my first day off, and at noon I'm still not off the ship, so today is likewise a bust. The sixth day I have to be back for the startup of the Dark Matter Reactor before dinner time. I won't even be on watch most of that time, I'll be waiting around, doing nothing but fiddling with my gravity-tether and watching movies, in case of a casualty that the watchteam already present is more often than not capable of handling themselves. In cases where they aren't enough, there is more than enough time to get other people on board to help. But the politics and sensitivity of the job dictates that I sacrifice deserved free time to sit around and do nothing for no good reason.

What all of this means: Being in Reactor Department sucks. Maybe I'll be able to cross rate to gravtech. That'll be the day: the day they let someone out of a Reactor job without a discharge or serious medical or mental issue will also be the simultaneous Apocalypse, Second Coming, and the Singularity.

The joke is that I'm *lucky*. We're on a four-section duty rotation, which means that one out of every four days in port I have to be on the ship. As duty section two, I didn't have pull-in day duty, but by the time I was done with my work, the docking bay was secured for some ceremony involving the politicians of Astra and the Alliance military brass from the nearby naval station, so I wasn't able to leave. Not like I'd have been able to do anything – I'd have gotten little more than dinner and have had to board a shuttle straight back into orbit to be onboard for duty the following day, though eating food not tainted by the Navy would have been nice.

Duty section three and four guys have it similar – most weren't able to leave until the second day. The difference is their port visit was broken up into two-day and one-day segments as opposed to the

three-day block of time off that I get, so while I get two nights in a more comfortable bed, they get only one.

But we're Reactor Department. We get the short end of the stick. That's just how things are. It's day three now, so I finally get some time off.

I've been allowed to continue completing maintenance items once more, and the one I'm presently on is far from the first one I've done since. This is by far the longest one, and not for lack of trying to put it on hold.

I finish up my maintenance turnover – my relief, the infamous Prane, was questionably sober enough to take it on. He took an hour in the head bent over porcelain, on top of waking up late, so he's late to take over the work. As I inform the Watch Officer, one Kaii Nolen, of our turnover, he begins asking far too many questions. "Is Prane on duty? Has he done this before? Why didn't you inform me? What step of the procedure were you in? Does he have the procedure? Has he eaten yet? Should you stay on to let him go eat lunch?" I answer the barrage of questions from the Kaii, the rank just above Ensign, so just about as junior as an officer can get, getting more and more irate; I should have been off the ship nearly four hours ago. I'd be planetside and shoving my face full of food – food that actually tasted like it was supposed to, by now – and I'm hungry.

"Mr. Nolen, if Prane even *felt* like eating right now, he wouldn't be the one relieving me on this maintenance, nor would I allow it. He's bagged me for four hours now. *I am leaving.*" I should be a bit more respectful and answer all of the appropriate questions – after all, the Watch Officer is both an officer and in charge of the Propulsion Plant. If he doesn't know what's going on, issues can arise... but it's been three months since I've been off the boat and I know that my maintenance isn't going to cause any problems, so I storm off, knowing the plant is in a safe condition.

Lucky for me, the Watch Officer either doesn't care enough, understood, or was too intimidated to page me over the announcing circuit to come back. Such disrespect in the rest of the Navy, outside of my field, would rapidly garner outrage and punishment. However, inside my field I'm recognized as being a bit more senior in my position as an operator, and he recognizes he's a junior officer and more senior officers would side with me in a heartbeat, so the slight intimidation factor plays in my favor. It helps that human nature is to avoid confrontation, a fact I'm banking on.

My liberty buddy is furious and is also the only reason Prane made it out of his rack at all. Even as a First-Class with nearly seven years in the military, I'm treated like a child and must at all times in foreign ports be with another individual lest I go rogue and start robbing stores and murdering civilians.

Were I someone with behavior issues or if this planet was known to have dangerous areas, I'd understand. However, most Alliance planets are innocuous, especially for Hadrian sailors and I've always been known as the 'goody-two-shoes' of whatever group I was placed in. However, I enjoy the company and were I not required to be with a shipmate I probably would go out with a friend anyway, but the fact that it's a mandate as opposed to a choice sours the idea.

"Come on, man! Let's go!" Wallace is already dressed out for a night on the town with his pack slung over his shoulder. I practically jump out of my uniform. At least I had the foresight to pack a bag and set out my civilian clothes I'd planned for the day. It takes only minutes for me to sprint back into the lounge. "Come on!" Wallace sprints up the stairs leading to the main deck from our berthing.

"Hold on, Wa-... Ben!" I catch myself calling him by his last name. Since we're in civilian clothes and not on duty, I try to make a point to call him by his first name to at least regain some semblance of humanity, to treat him like a friend rather than a coworker and shed some of the military rigidity so forcibly engrained. I stop to tie one of my shoes and then follow him out. He's already signed us out with the muster-petty-officer in the docking bay, and the ship's facial scanners denote our departure.

Unlike smaller vessels, we're used to having to transit to-and-from planets in shuttles. Astra, and many other worlds, aren't developed enough to have planetside docking-cradles that can support a carrier the size of the *Dauntless*. This means that we're used to having to get on "liberty-shuttles" to make it down to the ground to execute our long-awaited plans for what little liberty we've been granted.

The only two benefits to leaving on a day other than the pull-in-day: No lines to get off, and you usually get to leave early in the planetside-morning. In fact, we get all the way through the docking collar and into the shuttle without so much as slowing down from a fast walk, despite the noticeable shift in artificial-gravity moving from ship's gravity to shuttle-gravity. A young sailor, who is likely doing a ship-to-shuttle transfer for the first time in his life, stumbles a bit, trying to regain stability as he tries to adjust to the lower gravity of the shuttle. Those of us with more experience have almost no trouble, and I don't even break stride at all. Adjusting to changes in gravity is sort of my thing, it seems.

We manage to find seats that are not even in the same row as each other not because there are too many people, but because there are only a dozen souls on the two-hundred-man shuttle and everyone is eager to stretch out as far as possible. Then again, we're leaving late in the day when few other people would be expected to leave and the shuttles are simply round-trip. The benefit has a downside: we wait an additional twenty-five minutes, allowing another dozen people to board. By the time the docking collar retracts and the shuttle begins its descent into atmosphere, I'm fast asleep, taking a much-needed rest.

When shuttle sets down at the spaceport, I've managed to catch up an hour of lost sleep, enough to at least get me through lunchtime and to our hotel. Ben wakes me up as we taxi into our gate, our pilot hovering the shuttlecraft like true professional, a fact that I'm only just barely awake enough to be cognizant of. I rouse and stand, sliding into the aisle before anyone else can slip by ahead of me.

We manage to catch a taxi from the spaceport to our hotel. Both of us are usually quite good at figuring out local public-transit, but being cooped up in a steel coffin for months on end makes one anxious enough to splurge a bit of money on expediting the chance for privacy in a room of your own.

We're a bit too early to check in, so we head across the street to a fast-food restaurant. It's not high class, but to us, having eaten crappy, highly-preserved ship food for three months, it might as well be five-star. It's a restaurant-chain we have in the Threshold of Hadrian as well, but I haven't had it for long enough that everything tastes different, better even, beyond the subtle changes made to adjust to the local palate. All I wind up eating is a sandwich, but it tastes better than I remember sandwiches being able to taste. At this point, a fried shoe would taste delightful.

"Now, what do you feel like doing?" Ben asks as we relax in the chairs at the restaurant. I have absolutely no idea. I hadn't the time to look up what there was to do on Astra before I left the boat. He opens up his pad and looks for things to do while we wait for it to be time to check into our hotel.

The first thing we discover is that like all Alliance worlds with any considerable population, Astra has wonderful public transit, a fact we totally expected. We didn't even need the taxi to get anywhere we wanted to go, which was mostly limited to scenery, a few shows, and food. It had been some time since I'd had good beef, and it is definitely on my list of things to get. Apparently the Astrans have a breed of cow that has extra fatty-layers to survive cold Astran winters, and a nice side-effect is having beautifully-marbled steaks.

Now that we've eaten and are no longer distracted by hunger, we begin to take in the sights around the city, being sure to stay close to our hotel. As beautiful as the planet is, the city tries to one-up it. Dotting most every corner of every street, or hanging in the air are beautiful sculptures, not one alike; some small, some the size of buildings, some are functional, others are not, but all are breathtaking. The fine precision and creativity, along with the vibrant colors spell the work of skilled atomage sculptors, putting each individual element in it's exactly intended place.

Soon oversaturated by the majesty surrounding us, we move on, sure that we'll continue to be bewildered by this city, and with three days we'll have more than enough time to take it all in. We pick up a few necessities and snacks from a small store, stuffing them into our packs. It's rather apparent to us

that there are many sailors about: short haircuts and relatively fit individuals about, all of them staring at everything around them, some of them looking lost, and a number with backpacks or luggage, others half-hung-over trying to find a greasy food joint. To the civilian populace, it would be less apparent. Hadrian and this side of Alliance space are made of generally similar races of people, having come from the same stock at similar time periods in history, so unlike with some of the other planets, we get a bit more room to blend in; the biggest difference is that there is a larger percentage of Japanese and European descendants in Threshold than this corner of the Alliance's space.

Before long we do manage to check into our hotel. I scope out my room— it looks about like the picture from when I booked it. First and foremost, upon dropping my bag, I do something I've wanted to do for a while: I jump and spread eagle belly-flop onto the bed. It's stiffer than I expected and my nose hurts upon impact, but it's worth it. I lay, face down for a moment, savoring the fact that I can fully and absolutely relax – my rack on the ship is nowhere near large enough for this. I might even be acting a bit childish, but I try to enjoy the little things, like being able to flop down, face-first, in a bed.

I revel in the freedom. This is something I'm going to have to remember to do when I get out of the Navy. Enjoy the most silly, little things.

Rolling over, I take in the rest of the room about me. It will suffice – all I really need it for is the bed, bath, and faster internet connection for downloading movies and video games. My personal pad has already connected to the city's wireless network, and I begin to pull up my personal email. A series of emails from my wife are all that really interest me, along with a couple from my parents. They're all used to not getting to talk to me for extended periods of time, and any real-time chat is near impossible, but they never cease to try to reach out to me. I love that about them.

Small pangs of guilt rush over me, but I've learned to quell them by now; I miss her, and I can tell beneath the layers of text and videos she's sent me just how hard this is on her, even after years of practice.

I send my replies, letting my wife Kristin know just how much I miss her and love her, give her a few details of what's going on in my life, and I ask her what she'd like for Christmas.

I realize that she doesn't know about the issue with me being removed from maintenance. The notion of telling her makes me feel like a failure. It's only abated by the fact that I have corrected that deficiency and can and have already done maintenance again. I decide she doesn't need to worry herself with my own struggles and emotions, and suspect she might be hiding things from me as well. However,

I know she is strong enough to manage, but I still encourage her in my replies to share anything with me, knowing she won't, but hoping she will.

I try to purchase things on every different planet I visit; little mementos at least, usually for Kristen, but occasionally larger – or at least more expensive – gifts find their way to put a drain on my bank account. I've already sent her a list of things I'd like to receive from home, which she usually sends by mail whenever possible, or the certified download-codes to have them printed, which never ceases to make my deployments more enjoyable, if momentarily frustrating with her excessive packaging when the “real McCoy” comes through. At least she makes sure the care-packages always arrive intact.

My other task in getting online is quite the opposite experience. Far too few companies these days seem to realize the plight of the space-traveler: Instant access to a cloud network is not an option, at least not one with a planetary database. What this means is that I've had to settle for a few less-than-name-brand media sharing companies to work with, and I often must illegally download my games and movies just to ensure that they stay in the hard-drives on my pad and aren't deleted by whatever program updates I might have downloaded, since I can't stream them as I use them. I've complained, but few companies across the galaxy seem to care. I finally manage to backdoor my way through my personal computer, forcing it to do things the programs don't want it to do. I only know the tricks at all because a few other Mags are rather computer savvy, and I usually have to reference instructions they've jotted down for me.

As I begin to check up on the news since we've been gone, I hear a knock on my door; it's Ben, ready to go start exploring the city. Letting him in, I return to my news articles I'd just pulled up. "Hey, Ben, you been following this, some rioting back on New Pithus?" I spun the display around midair and blew it up a bit so he could see it.

"Yeah, man. I heard about that back on the ship, actually."

I spin it back around and begin to skim it. "Know anything good?" I paraphrase a couple sentences as I read, half mumbling. "College students... government opposition... more democracy freaks?"

"This time the kids want full referenda, not just local-representatives." Ben sits down in one of the chairs of my room. "They're claiming the Prefectural Senate isn't local enough to capture the differences in cultures or local populace."

It wasn't like Hadrian was a vast variety of cultures anyway. The Threshold of Hadrian had split peacefully from the Alliance back in early colonial days and had long since made amends, but the result of the Threshold civil “war” that soon followed and the proximity to Alliance enemies meant that immigration hadn't been prevalent. "Entitled runts." I say, partly joking. Many of the rioters are around

my age or a bit younger. College-age kids and the like. People who want full-fledged direct democracy, something that hasn't existed since the Athenians first envisioned it.

"No kidding." Ben throws up another article on the subject. "We missed that generation bullet, I guess. Anything else?"

"Something about an explosion at a Happyōsha facility, twelve dead. Couple of new music albums out that really upset some people, a few comments made by politicians, more offended people..."

I begin to wonder if we really did miss the generation-bullet, entitlements and being offended at music and mere words as if skin was thinner than tissue-paper. We don't think of ourselves as entitled, but at the same time our parents and grandparents probably would, just as we see this younger – if only slightly younger – generation as being entitled.

In light of past experience and theoretical 'most effective government styles,' when the Threshold of Hadrian's government was set up, they opted to remove one segment of freedom from the people and cut out the democracy bit, making the nation a Meritocratic Republic – that is, the top tier, or the Triumvirate, is comprised of successful, intelligent, and ideally speaking moral and sympathetic individuals who have all served military or federal service without being a screw-up. While intelligence and service records are easy to track, morality and sympathy a bit harder to make note of, though we do have Houses of Merit to make that judgment call. Finally, once all of the candidates have been vetted, they are allowed to run for office in allotted time-slots, and they are still elected democratically. Money isn't a factor, so just about anyone can run – the Triumvirate selection pool is vast enough that character qualities get to be easier to figure out. So, there's still democracy in the system, just not as much as people would like. What, do they want to be able to *buy* their candidates way into the Triumvirate?

We've got a publicly elected Senate, too, if albeit still heavily regulated. I don't know what these kids are complaining about. In spite of the fact that so few people understand all of the facts or politics behind all of the issues, they still want a voice on things they know nothing about. Fundamental issues, sure, but when someone doesn't understand how a dark-matter reactor works, and thinks it's just a glowing black ball of energy, they shouldn't get a say on when, where, why, or how the things are installed to power their cities.

"I think they just want to complain because they don't have to deal with real problems, like, ever. Their biggest problem is having to settle for a synthetic coffee instead of a dirt-grown blend." Life is great for Hadrians; practically a golden age. Crime is at an all-time low, galactically, new luxuries being produced practically daily, and most have more than enough to go around. It's one of the most industrious

nations in the galaxy, homelessness is at an all-time low, and welfare was practically banished for the bodily-able over a decade ago – jobs aren't hard to come by; if you need one, you're assigned one until you can get one of your own. Not to say that the assigned jobs are fun; they aren't meant to be. Maybe that's what they're revolting against. Hard work. Effort.

"Just trying to keep themselves occupied, I guess. Speaking of which, what do you want to do?" Ben asks, shutting off his display, trying to change the subject so we don't waste our time.

I shrug. "Wing it?" The idea receives a nod. I pull up a website as we exit my room, hoping there's some tourism company out there advertising to the indecisive like us.

We walk into the lobby of the hotel and notice various adverts we'd missed seeing before. I grab a small pamphlet designed for tourists and flip through it. "Looks like Astra City has a big light show every night right after sunset." Astra's days, we were briefed, are longer than Terran Standard Cycles, which makes their sunsets last extraordinarily long. From my flight down, in a few brief moments when I was awake, I recall seeing a good number of mountain ranges around the city, which promises to be a spectacular sight. "Combine that with a sunset viewing, it might be worth it to hitch a tram out to one of the mountain parks."

It proves to be a wonderful idea. Within an hour we're in the mountains at an amusement park, riding fast rides, eating unhealthy food in amounts our mothers and naval Fitness Coordinators would scold us for, and playing games. Ben's all-too-ready to get into the combat simulators and sports-related games. He knows I'm normally poor at sports, but I prove to be more than a match in the combat simulators against him, but he has an upper hand in every sports-style competition the park has to offer.

We call it a truce and stick to the non-competitive rides or cooperative games.

I can't get enough of the most mind-boggling amusement of all – the Escher Maze. As if transposed out of the paintings of old, by the namesake artist there are stairs in every direction possible; up, down, left right, surfaces curving around corkscrews, and mirrors at the most inopportune places to figure out which way is up and how to get to the exit. It's all enclosed in a giant building several hundred feet tall and wide, and obviously extends further down underground as well, and it's expertly done.

Though they have signs against it, I toss a few coins in the direction my senses tell me is "up" on occasion to see when they break the gravitational field of the floor panels and succumb to the planet's true gravity, but even that's expertly done. I see a few other people try the same thing and we all get

different results; as soon as they break out of our own gravitational field, they either hover or fly in random directions. The designers planned on people cheating the system.

The place must have its own generator; having worked in the propulsion plant and powering the ship, I know a few thumb rules for how much energy such finely tuned gravity-control must be using up, and I'm thoroughly impressed. Though I'm fairly certain I've found the exit a few times, I intentionally steer us away just to test our sense of direction.

We finally make our way out, but in the fun of it all – for a good portion we were kidding around a bit much and lost our way – we nearly forget to have dinner before the sunset. Making our way out of the park and a train-stop down, still, on the mountainside, we manage to find a diner that looks nice. Not until we sit down and order our food – local specialties - do we feel the effects of the longer days; our bodies have begun to adjust to the sunlight and diurnal cycle, but they aren't ready to commit the requisite energy. Some coffee helps keep us going.

As we wait for our food the sunset begins and the planet's star begins to sink towards the horizon line. We've still got a while to go, but from the diner we've got a good view and opt to stay here for now; it seems as good a place as any. As the distant mountains begin to act as an artificial, premature horizon line, the entire range lights up beautifully. It's a sight like I've never seen before.

"Amazing," is all I can muster.

"Almost makes you like it; you know?" Ben sets down his coffee.

"What?" I pause, wondering what he's talking about. I can only conclude one thing: "The Navy?" My tone is imbued with disgust from my rather recent experiences.

He nods. "Yeah. I mean, would you be sitting here looking beautiful planets like this without it?

Or would you be sitting in a college classroom learning Gen-Eds you'll never use?"

I'd be done with higher-level education by now, or at least working on graduate-level courses, but I get his point. "I guess, but it doesn't exactly make up for it all."

"We get paid to do this, man. We get paid to watch this sunset." Ben's attitude is a bit surprising.

He's never been especially hateful of the military life, but he's been ready to critique it along with me.

Not that I've been as hateful as some people, nor do I regret my choice to join, but I've usually seen the glass as half-full. "More than that, the Brass actually planned this out."

"What do you mean?" I'm quizzical now. He seems to be making pretty big assumptions, or he knows something I don't.

He shrugs as he sips his coffee. "I mean there's someone out there, high up, that actually cares about our mental well-being. Astra City isn't exactly an ideal venting-point. It's not equatorial to the planet. Astra itself has a number of spaceports along the equator that make for much more cost-effective port calls, and it's even got an elevator that makes the process of resupplying and heat-venting so effective we can be in and out of this place in a day and off to doing other stuff. Instead, we're out here and the *Dauntless* had to realign itself into a nearly polar orbit." He takes another sip and sits back. "They planned on this being a bit more of an extended stay. They wanted it to be, for our sakes."

I see his point, and he might be right but I'm still skeptical. "We're the friendship boat, remember? Of course we're here for an extended stay, to show off and make friends. Or, rather, for our officers to make friends and do the dog-and-pony show for everyone and to show off Hadrian's new high-tech carrier. And realigning the orbit doesn't take that much effort, anyway."

"Then they wouldn't let us 'peasants' off the ship." He says 'peasants' in an obviously mocking tone. "How many liberty incidents do you think are going on right now?"

"At least three." It's a guess. Probably accurate, if past experience is anything to judge by. The morons on the ship have their own standards to uphold, most of them impressive on a scale of how much stupidity they can muster. There's even a chance they'll break a record and do something especially irresponsible tonight and get a full division, or even department, on lock-down.

"And that's not going to look good for us, and that's more effort and apologizing on the part of our brass, and less dog-and-pony show for them to be able to put on."

I concede, finally. "Okay, I guess not everyone can be out to get us." I leave it at that as the star illuminating the planet dips further down. Our food arrives, and our noses get enough of a whiff to tell us that it's good enough to keep our mouths preoccupied for a bit, officially ending the conversation. The dishes are difficult to pronounce – something originating apparently from Norway or Sweden, based on the names. Ben and I trade forkfuls via small plates so that we can both try it all. Mine is some sort of fish with a considerable amount of herbs, his appears to be balls of meat. Both are delicious.

We opt to stay and relax further, once our food is done, and continue drinking coffee to stay awake. Neither of us speaks for a long time, just relaxing, watching the enduring sunset through the window. "Nice, ain't it?" Our waitress asks as she refills our coffee, breaking our silence. Her accent is a bit odd but understandable.

"Yeah," I say. "It really is. The whole view and all."

She nods. "It's why I moved up here from the city, that and it's calmer up here. Less hectic and the people are nicer. Where are y'all from, if ye' don't mind? Don't recognize your accents."

"We're Thresholders," I answer, politely.

"Oh, I thought y'all called yourselves Hadrians. What brings y'all this far out?"

"Works both ways, really," Ben replies. "Differs planet to planet. We're here on business, though." His voice grows smoother by the second. That's not saying much, he's not exactly the most suave person I know, not by far, and the change is almost comical, and certainly noticeable. "What about yourself, miss?" Oh, Lord, he's trying to pick her up. Can't blame him, she looks to be about our age, and probably naturally, too.

"Oh, born and raised here." She answers but doesn't pry much further, ignoring the obvious attempt at courtship. "Sorry, got other tables to get to," she shoots him down faster than if she'd used a missile.

By his demeanor, he doesn't seem too disappointed at the result of his failure to get a date for the night, more just generally apathetic. It's almost impressive how quickly he ignores the matter. He turns back to look out the window. "It really is nice. Not just the view, just being able to relax here, you know?"

"Yeah. No responsibility right now. No expectation of having to be on watch or doing maintenance. Just... sitting."

The spectacular view starts to dim as the star lowers closer to being enveloped fully in the mountain range beyond the valley.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Light show." I exclaim and pay our bill in cash; I almost forget to leave a tip. It's one of those odd things that some Alliance planets do, according to our pre-port briefs and training we have to get. Some waiters get upset if you don't tip them, regardless of how good a job they did. On Threshold planets, they'll chase you down the street to give you back your change. Just a bit of the Japanese culture permeating our entire starnation. Tipping is one of the things that they have to beat into us when we leave our home nation. I'm used to the cultural difference enough that I don't even question the motives; Alliance restaurants pay their employees differently than literally the rest of the galaxy, including other Alliance businesses. Something dating back centuries, apparently.

We make it out of the town in time to get to one of the popular viewing points. A crowd has already gathered, but it's sparse enough along this ridge of the mountain range that we get a good front row spot just as the lights begin, and it doesn't let us down.

Until we get a call. *The call.*

Ben's device rings first, and he answers the call. After introducing himself, he doesn't say anything for a few seconds as the person on the other end talks. "Crap! Yeah, yeah, we'll be there... who screwed up?... Oh really? Why do we have to – eh, whatever, crap. This sucks. Yeah, if I see anyone I'll let them know. Yeah, Kierson's right here, too. Yeah... that's, what... eight hours? Yeah, we can make eight hours." His voice was more and more disappointed as the conversation went on. I already knew what it was about.

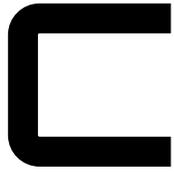
"Recalled." It's not a question when it comes out of my mouth. All this had happened before and it would happen again. I had been really looking forward to seeing the night sky from here, unaffected by glass or cameras. It can really be spectacular sometimes.

"Yeah." He pauses. "Some independent planet just detected a pretty epic asteroid shower. Not a planet-killer, but enough to do a significant amount of damage. I guess they want us to help."

Regardless of our opinions, we're likely to remain in the dark about it all until the rumor mill begins to spread down some answers, not all of which will be true. "Probably someone up on high just wants to get us to respond so he can get a star on his uniform."

Ben remains the optimist, though. "Probably. At least we'll be helping someone else out, though, right?" I'm not so thoroughly convinced, but I let myself dwell on that notion, using anything I can to drown out my disappointment. Maybe I'll have something to take pride in, real pride, something to tell my children's children about half a century from now.

We stay and watch the light show a little longer. Just a little dereliction of duty, knowing no one will know the difference and we won't be the latest people back, not by far. We won't be able to finish watching it, but it's probably for the better. Both of us opt to leave before it's even over to catch the trains while everyone's occupied with the event, having to stop off at the hotel to pick up our bags. I send off a message to my wife to let her know not to expect any more high-definition video-mail for a while, and I say goodbye to the mattress I never got to sleep in, and the hotel assures me that they can't refund me any of the money. It's frustrating, but it's a way of life. The Navy has forms to fill out to try to reclaim any lost funds from hotels due to Navy-related issues, but whether or not that forms gets approved is hit-or-miss.



CHAPTER FIVE:

#165: Getting blamed for things you never knew occurred.

TNV *Dauntless*,

0200 Astra Central Time, 02-07-3398 Sol Date

Reactor-MAG Controls Berthing

Our shuttle docks with our carrier well before our deadline, and every minute I spend until that deadline is painful, knowing I could have done something worthwhile until that point. A number of drunken sailors stumble off with us. They'd obviously attempted to make the most of their last few hours on the planet by getting as slovenly drunk as they could and they'd obviously succeeded. A number were from our own department; they'd be unable to stand watch. We, the sober folk, would be picking up the slack from duties they couldn't perform.

Of course, as soon as Ben and I hit berthing, our early presence is recognized. I've been hoping to get some sleep, but that's a pipe-dream. "Chris!" Stevens, one of the other senior-in-rate guys calls out, "We need to do the pre-op checkoff! You, me, and Yuichan." He sounds half-excited, half-hurried. I rub my temples. "You okay to do that?"

No. "Yes." I'm really not. My eyelids feel heavy. I'm tired and frustrated. "Yeah, I can manage." Tired and frustrated is a way of life for me. At least we'll have Yuichan supervising us, who is bound to make it at least mildly pleasant.

Thirty minutes later, after I've been gifted already prepared data tables and a brief time – surprisingly no resistance from the Watch Officer – I'm headlong into trip-checking all of our protection circuitry. It's tedious, and Yuichan cracks jokes while still informing both myself and Stevens of intricacies of the equipment we're working on that I doubt the designers even knew. I reckon she probably figured all the facts out on her own.

Two hours after that, the only thing keeping me from falling asleep where I stand, due to the monotony of the maintenance item is intentionally kneeling uncomfortably, causing my legs to go asleep for me. I don't want to know how long I've been up for at this point, save for the barely restful naps on the shuttle. I hear the watch officer call out that we've hit true-orbit on fusion power, meaning everyone's finally aboard.

As soon as the last crew member scanned aboard – a feat that for a group of over a thousand sailors, several hundred of them drunk, was rather impressive – the *Dauntless* began to use its fusion

plants to kick it into an orbit to intercept the Astran Space Elevator, which was equipped with heat-transfer lines significantly more efficient than the onboard radiators. They were terrible for actual propulsion by any standards, but they could give enough of a pulse to perform orbital maneuvers and more than enough energy to keep it in orbit despite being in the upper-atmosphere, thin enough to vent heat into more efficiently than space, yet not so thick as to heat up the ship as it passed through at orbital speeds; technically they were suborbital speeds, kept aloft by the engines, as a stationary ship would be both a target and a traffic hazard. The maneuver would take an hour or so, giving the propulsion plant crew little time to settle in, along with several hours to vent heat.

By the time we finish up doing our checks, the mechanics are already rigging the heat-transfer gear for hook-up to the Space Elevator, but I'm too weary to offer my help. I wait around in my office, waiting for my forms to get routed with the intent of not having to be racked out when someone higher than myself discovers a mistake, but I fall asleep sitting in the chair.

"Enjoy Astra?" Chief Takahashi asks as he looks over the forms, waking me up from a bit of a daze.

"Yeh." Is all I can muster, my head lolling back and forth. I'm barely cognizant of anything going on. The data pad with the forms on it gets fed my way a couple of times and I make corrections as instructed. It's understood that I'm tired, and my superiors are more eager to just get their DMR back online.

"Yeah, sucks that we have to leave, but at least we're doing our job, not just playing nice."

I'm not so sure, but I'm not awake enough to voice it. I have a hunch all we're doing is playing nice. Based on the rumors I've heard since getting back on the ship, there have to be at least a dozen Alliance ships in better positions to help.

"Alright, Kierson, good to go." I finally get the approval to leave after multiple people of various ranks and titles have signed off on it – it's been over an hour and I've only registered a few minutes of it all. Our forms process is just about as laborious as our maintenance, and sometimes it can even trump it.

"G'night, chief." I lock-up my datapad as I leave the office, an instinctive process; it has confidential information on it, and we aren't supposed to access those files where personnel not authorized could see them. It still actually leaves a fair amount of the propulsion plant data accessible.

By the time I return to berthing, our lounge is full and people are rowdy, many of them drunk. Those that aren't are being spun-up by those who are, or simply laughing at their antics. Various projectiles are being thrown about in a mock-war, a movie is playing, and more than one guy is passed

out on one of the couches, random objects stacked atop him out of the humor of it. I'm far too tired to join and I don't have enough energy or willpower to tell them to quiet down.

It doesn't even matter. Moments after I hit my rack, I'm out like a light.

I wake to my alarm going off. It starts as a vibration of the implant in my arm, and slowly, gently wakes me as my rack senses that I'm out of my REM sleep, but also not in deep sleep. It's one of the benefits of being in the military – eventually, you'll find people that care about your well-being, and they just might design something that makes your life better. Whether or not it's because you being well rested, awake, alert often means you work more effectively or because you're human like they are – that jury is out.

For once in the past few days I'm well rested, but I'm just as cognizant that I should be waking up down on the planet that, by now, is light years away. If it weren't for my clock and knowledge of how the ship operates, I wouldn't know that we're in a hypergravity-induced subspace bubble, moving faster than the speed of light by several orders of magnitude. I'd managed to sleep through the FTL transition; many people find it disorienting, but when you've done it several dozen times, it might as well be a lullaby. It wasn't quite as harsh as dropshock from falling out of FTL, especially an unplanned drop, but it still wasn't comforting.

A small note hangs in a message above my rack, in a soft, unobtrusive but obvious red light display above me:

Sleepers today. No maintenance. Supply is on in-port hours. It's a nice little system that allows our leadership to let us keep tabs on what's going around and when we aren't needed. I finger the "acknowledge" button, then the little 'x' in the corner and the hovering light-message fades. I glance at my clock – I'm hungry, and the last little bit about Supply Department combined with the late time of 0650 is enough to get me up and about even though I don't have to. The galley is going to close sooner rather than later.

As soon as I do, I see a walking, talking, violation of standards.

"Standards" are usually the double-edged sword that you and the military get to swing at each other back and forth. The military asks you maintain ethical standards, uniform standards, intelligence standards, moral standards, motivational standards, safety standards, financial standards, mental wellness standards, and fitness standards, to name a handful. And then they expect you to maintain them all perfectly. One of the marks of a good leader is to understand the duress of this bequest upon his men. To not screw over the military by getting rid of those who are beneficial to the organization despite not

meeting arbitrary standards. For all the times you want to screw over the military for all the times it's done the same to you, the only times you get to are also when you realize why you love it: The people around you. Enforce the standards strictly, you screw over the military but screw those around you. And usually, the only time "the military" screws you over are when someone has made the heartless-side of that decision. The military isn't a faceless organization like it's portrayed in movies. It's made up of men and women; made up of your friends and countrymen, and some people forget that, even those in the military itself.

They say the military is full of sacrifices, but they never tell you that you'll have to sacrifice your integrity just to keep the lights on. Most of them never realize it. If I and others had upheld standards during the last three PFAs, Ben Wallace wouldn't be in the military right now.

Ben Wallace is a tall, lanky guy. Good strength; can run a marathon in no-time-flat, sharp as a knife, and one of the hardest workers my division has. To boot, he's a friendly guy, the type no one can hate unless they've something legitimately wrong with them. But he can't do a push-up to save his life. He simply has too much height to work against and his arms are too long. Ben can do everything else required of him by the Navy in spades, except push-ups.

And if we'd upheld that standard and hadn't lied about his push-up count, both myself and Hay would have been crushed by a 500 pound metal plate nearly two weeks ago. At the time, when I supplanted "thirty-seven" with an inflated "forty-seven" when asked his push-up count, I felt guilty. Now I'm more than glad I had.

When you enforce standards and rules blindly, you far too often go against them.

As is the case with the guy before me, across the room from where myself, Ramirez, and a few others have sat down with our breakfast. No neck to speak of, he obviously gets by because his neck is so similar in girth to his massive waistline that it gives him the same body-fat percentage as me according to our archaic, draconian methods. His uniform threatens to give way as if being hydrostatically tested, and if I hadn't heard rumors verifying it prior, I'd be able to accurately guess that his uniforms were custom made to fit his massive bulk, and that he's only stayed in the military thus far by pulling various legal precedences and threatening to talk to Senators and the like, with his own higher-ups too unwilling or too busy to play a game of legal chicken. He is the epitome of the argument *for* maintaining standards, yet he manages to skirt them. I can see the statement now, from some faceless chief yelling at a kid for justifiably "cheating" his physical fitness standard assessment. 'If we don't follow the Navy's standards, we'll have more guys like him!' But we *do* have him, even with those standards.

As he shoves his chicken into his mouth, I suddenly hate the Navy all over again. Worse than his bloated stature, he has more than one reason to be shoved out of the military: He's a dunce. A complete dunce. No one appreciates him in any facet of work, and for good reason. He's closer to begin kicked out for periodic exam failures than his excessive eating and failure to maintain body standards.

"Who's the fatty?" Ramirez asks. Normally I get offended when people make fun of others for their size. Many have medical issues causing weight gain. Eaton, the overweight man in question, has no such excuse so I make an exception to my typical rules, this is the military after all and not being a human-balloon is kind of a part of the job description, sure, some are fat but can still do their jobs, but few are this immense. "Oh, that's Eaton, isn't it?" Apparently, his reputation precedes even his girth when entering a room.

"Yup," I say with disappointment, disdain, and disgust, knowing what the next question will be.

"Isn't he one of yours? I mean, Reactor, right?" I was right.

"Yup."

"Wow," he chuckles, "I guess you guys really don't have much wo-"

"Stop. Right. There." I interject sharply. I know Ramirez is giving some good-hearted ribbing, but I've had enough of this over the past two years of having Eaton in my department. "Don't ever compare anyone in Reactor to that dirtbag." I manage to recount the list of reasons why he's still in the Navy, as I have done before, and as I will probably have to do again. PM3 Eaton, two ranks lower than me but in for a year longer, makes everyone in our department look bad. With a legendary circumference, other information disseminates rapidly as well, such as his place of work – it's on his name tag- and thus, our department slowly becomes a laughing-stock, even though he makes up less than one-percent of his department – by population if not mass. It's his weight that gets him noticed. It's his terrible work ethic, terrible motivation, terrible intellect, and a terrible habit of being a crybaby that get him hated. He is the absolute proof that if you complain long enough and loud enough, you'll get your way.

Hana sits down next to us, and instantly picks up on the conversation at a notice of our glances, sidelong stares, and general look of disgust. "Oh, Eaton?" I respond with a nod. "Yeah, he and I were in MAG school together. Well. Sort of. Different rates, obviously, but we were in the same graduating class." She quickly turns to her food. The galley is due to close soon, so she's a bit hurried.

I look at Ramirez and his fellow RIF Troopers. The RIFT are the epitome of mankind of the physical sense, it seems. Lean, not massive in bulk, but what muscle they do have is as taught as steel cable – they exude a sense of raw power. They look like they could wrestle a gorilla into the ground.

Then I look at Eaton. The idiot doesn't even realize he's constantly the center of attention. He's a poor temper – if he knew, he'd try to fight anyone who offended him, or at least tattle on them for “discrimination.” His complaints don't get very far. It's hard to take a man seriously who is supposed to be fighting for his nation but his biggest daily adversary is the zipper on his uniform, especially when the “discrimination” and his morning duel have the same root cause.

If he were nicer, I'd feel sorry for him. Try to help, even. There was a time, when I was new to the boat, that I tried to befriend him. He made the decision for me that doing so was a bad idea. Some people cannot be helped.

I manage to curb my shame long enough to change the subject. "So, excited about saving this planet?" I can't remember the name.

"Ah, what was it... Landon?"

"Sounds 'bout right," I reply. "Probably named after the guy who led the first colony."

An incredulous smirk accompanied the reply, "Sounds like a conceited a-hole." Sands finishes his food before any of the rest of us and sits back. "I heard it was some pirates flinging planet-killing asteroids. Don't quite believe it, but the other rumor was aliens raping everyone, so..."

"Asteroids." I confirm, and I've got some good sources. The rumor-mill isn't always reliable, but it's usually got something to it. And when that chain of rumor-spreaders includes officers, as mine does, they are a bit more credible. "I heard they aren't planet-killers, but definitely enough to do some damage. Maybe a planet-killer in there, though, hard to tell this early."

One of the other RIFT soldiers obviously upset about leaving so soon, scoffs. "I hope there is, these guys calling us in to help them when they can't even help themselves. Whiny fu-"

"Hey!" One of the other guys hits his arm, forcefully enough to move him a bit. "There are people on that planet! Have a heart for once."

He recoils and attempts a recovery, but I can only guess how genuine it is, "I didn't mean I wanted them to die... I just wanted there to be a purpose to us going. For that matter, I don't see why *we* are going, rather than just you swabbie-weenies." He points his fork at me as if I couldn't guess who he was talking about. "What are *we* going to do, get out and push the asteroids?"

"Navy doesn't like leaving anyone behind," I reply. "We don't want to have to come back for you guys, and you probably don't have enough leave saved up."

"Whatever, man," his fork is still pointed at me. "I had one of those hot cheerleaders all to myself, man. She was *great*." He smiles as he reminisces. While he forgoes giving any more detail, likely for

Hana's sake, we all have a pretty good guess at what he meant. The realization of that causes my mind to drift to my wife, and the absence of her strikes like a sudden pain that I'd almost forgotten permeated my every waking moment. All I really want right now is to hold her; that would be enough. Go out, get some good food. Anything, just some time with her would be spectacular, and more than enough to settle for.

With this detour, I've got no idea when that time will come. Having managed to look at a star chart in Damage Control Central now and then, we're going further off the beaten path than our patrol would have taken us, and no doubt they'll want us to continue our parade-around-the-planets and make up lost time, being away from our families, from my Kristen, even longer. I release a sigh in ragged, sharp bursts, trying to quell my emotions. As always, it doesn't help.

My reverie is broken by the expected laziness of the workers about me: "The mess decks will be secured in five minutes!" Great. Something else to focus my frustrations on. If only it was something else pleasant.

I've had enough friends working in the galley to know that they aren't allowed to kick anyone out while eating, but to be honest I'm just about done with my food anyway and confrontation isn't my favorite thing, especially against idiots who think they know everything about their job when they blatantly don't. A lazy person will work like crazy to ensure his own continued laziness.

"That guy. I hate that guy," I point at the speaker. I don't even know him, but I despise him now. "They aren't allowed to kick us out, you know." I begin voicing my complaints to the RIFT soldiers around me. "What's more, they're still on in-port hours because they think they're entitled to it. We ain't in port. We're in the freaking void right now."

One of the RIFT soldiers, more assertive than I turns to shout back. "How 'bout you do your job for another ten minutes so people who do real work can eat in peace?"

The galley worker, two ranks below me, forgets his station – Mags don't usually play the rank game, but I'm willing to throw down my hand of cards to put someone in their place now and then. It's against my nature, but it can be fun from time to time; it's an activity I don't do enough. "What did you say?" He storms over. "I'll have you know we work just as hard as anyone else!" He fumes. His attitude paints him as a fool. One of those guys pent up on propaganda, the sort that idiots need to do their miserable, pointless job with pride rather than finding it of their own accord.

For some reason, I bite.

Spinning and lower my shoulder, subtly displaying my collar devices: "I was on underway hours when we were in port. We're underway, and you're on in-port hours. How about you get with the program?"

"It's because we all had to stock food last night for the disaster relief! We had to sleep!" He argues, but I'm willing to keep this going; his response has enough quiver in it that I don't believe it's the truth, and that he's making excuses. He opened up the floodgates and I've got some hate and discontent to spill.

"And I didn't get to sleep until..." I check my watch for effect. Wow, I don't even have to lie to be impressive, "three hours ago since we first pulled in. I saw *none* of you guys out here at that time, or in any of the passageways, and I know I passed by more than one storage freezer. I begin to turn back to my food, but more anger swells, "And another thing, you guys *never* work more than anyone else – not even other galleys. Every other ship, the galley's guaranteed open eighty-percent of the time, here it's only half the time, and most of that time is spent with you guys goofing off and eating the good stores while we get *this crap*." I hold up a piece of fruit more bruised and battered than a street-fighter "Last night, as I walked through to my berthing, I smelled cookies. Today, I see none. Stocking food? In your faces, maybe."

The RIFT guys are surprised by my outburst, and then decide to play along further: "You guys are sneaking cookies and ain't sharing with the rest of the crew?" The speaker, his nametag reading "Hansen," from what I can see at my angle, slams his hands into the table, ensuring that eyes that weren't on us before most certainly are now. "Good luck ever telling a RIFT what to do, *ever again*." They all turn back to their meals.

A slight, smug smirk crosses my face. "I *bet* you go home and tell your mommy that you fight to defend the nation and keep everyone safe from pilots when all you do is get fat on cookies and sweep up after real sailors."

Hana shoots me a look. *Too far, Chris*. I try to shake the feeling of shame that comes up on me, realizing that I've just become a bit of a bully, but her silent reproach is drowned out by the low hoots from the RIFT soldiers around us.

I haven't quite had my fill just yet, and call back the young sailor as he starts to slink away. My extra rank might not be intimidating, but he's picked an argument with the most stereotypical alpha males on the boat.

"Shipmate! I ain't done yet." I yell after him, and he pauses, knowing I outrank him. "Now, tell all of your lazy-ass friends that there are going to be some changes around here." My voice begins to

increase in volume as I speak, and a little voice inside of me tells me that I'm about to get far too carried away and being far too arrogant. I don't care. "You respect us, we respect you. Do not test us. You *understand* that we work harder than you and we pretty much power every commodity you've got, and we won't have to shove a fist of retribution up all of your collective a-"

"Chris," Ramirez stops me mid sentence. He isn't yelling, but his voice has a level of command to it that makes volume irrelevant, and that little bit of my conscience that was trying to stop me gives me a hint that he's saved me from going a bit too far, and before I was too far gone to stop. He's taken me off guard; I barely know the guy and already he's got me feeling a bit ashamed of myself. What's more, I don't hate him for it.

"Alright, petty officer," he addresses our victim, "You get what this guy is saying. He's pissed off because he works harder than you can possibly imagine, and you and your buddies are going to let us and all the RIFT and Mags eat in peace, not just today. Forever. Got it? Now run along." He doesn't bother to wait for a response, he just shoos the kid off with a wave of his hand as if the guy were a child, though I doubt we're separated by more than a half decade.

Ramirez's tone changes once the young sailor is gone. "Haha, wow, Chris, you're a little angsty." Ramirez chuckles a little as he eats, but something about his posture betrays some uneasiness.

I put a forkful of rice in my mouth and finish it before I reply. "Yeaaaaah. That's been a long time comin'." My mind momentarily drifts to a notion that Ramirez inadvertently implanted: RIFT and Mags getting along in an alliance on the ship. We could be an effective mafia like that, and rule everything.

"That's putting it lightly!" Sands, laughs. "You're alright, Kierson. For a Mag."

"Thanks... but, yeah. You haven't had to live with *that* for the last five years." I finish my food and set my fork down. The galley third-class notices. He obviously knows the rule he was violating before because he begins to approach. I smirk and take a long, slow, and highly ineffective drink of my water, signaling that I'm not done yet. I hold the glass up in my hand to emphasize the fact.

"I can see how that would get on your nerves. I'm surprised you didn't break sooner." Ramirez offers tentatively. Hana remains silent, I notice.

An interesting subject, meant to delay the breakfast, came to mind, "Hey, any of you hear about the rioters on New Pithus?"

"Yeah," Sands replies. "We might be going there. I heard the New Pithan Sentinel just got deployed for security. Not to the revolts, just to sensitive areas. One little spark could ignite everything,

though. The Guard's had their hands full for a while." I leave them to continue talking about cracking heads and whatnot, finishing off my drink before walking away.

Having blown off some steam, I've got a more level head, and I make a detour over to the third-class who we'd chewed out before. He looks frustrated and barely notices my approach. "Look, man. I know you're trying to do your job. I know your First Class probably told you that you were to work in-port hours, so you did as you were told. Thing us, a *lot* of us are getting the short end of the stick, and we don't appreciate anyone else kicking us while we're down. That's not a good thing to do to us Mags," I point to my name tag, with my department title underneath my name, "or to RIFT." I point over at the special forces soldiers, still talking.

"Now, if you're still upset, have your First Class send me a message and I'll settle things with him. But relax, and try doing other people a favor. In good faith, I promise I won't kill power to your berthing tonight, okay?" He's silent, still fuming. The kid probably thinks I'm some stuck-up Mag. who thinks too highly of himself. That's probably true, but he could use getting knocked down a peg or two and a reality check.

Just as I pass by the table I'd sat at before, "Kierson." An urgent, but not commanding, voice behind me speaks, "RTC, now." Says a person who's passing by me at a good clip. I recognize him as one of the Reactor Electrical division's First Classes. "There was a problem after the startup. They want to see all senior guys down there. Apparently, the captain wants to give one of his YFG speeches."

"YFG?" One of the RIFT asks.

"You-F'ing-Guys," I explain. "It means he wants to verbally ream us all for something only one or two guys did," I respond and follow the train of other Reactor first-classes all the way near the end of the ship where the Reactor Training Classroom is. I wish such speeches were uncommon, but the captain likes to butt his way in to yell at his "favorite" department.

Hana meets up with me in the hall. "Chris, that was way too much."

"You heard the douche," I reply, "We deal with that day in and day out. We need to put them in their place." She sighs, but I continue. She can't say it's not my job to do it: "We're First-Classes. We're supposed to lead and teach the new generation of sailors..."

"And you call that teaching?" She's now walking in front of me, glancing back on occasion to make sure I'm keeping pace. With such small passageways on the ship, it's the only way to carry on a moving-conversation without taking up the entire width. She busts through a group of coners – those who work in the forward part of the ship; "the cone," which pretty much includes anyone who isn't Reactor

or Engineering - who are doing just that, and continues. "That was yelling, Chris. That last bit, basically telling him he's a worthless idiot undid any of the 'teaching' you might have accomplished."

"I talked to him afterwards!" I explain as if it made it all better, but I get the impression it makes me look more childish than anything, so I cut her off, "I *nicely* and *teachingly* talking to him afterwards."

"Still. All he sees is 'that reactor-douchebag,' now. You didn't fix anything." We hit a more open area and walk side to side. "Chris, you got angry. That's fine." She stops, and halts me as well with a hand on my shoulder and a look deep into my eyes, and I know I'm about to get one of her 'talks.' "And you do things when you get angry. Just make sure that you're using your anger as a tool, and not letting your anger use you."

Like a child being taught something so very simple, I nod. "I'll try. But... God, I can't *stand* the galley. Those lazy douches call themselves sailors while they screw the rest of us."

"And screwing them over back isn't going to do any good, Chris. As good as it might feel." I feel that pain of shame again when I realize yelling *did* feel good. I put that guy in his place; I told him off and set the record straight, and it felt good. All the children's stories say that being mean doesn't solve anything and it doesn't make you feel better. But now that I think about it, I feel a bit proud of myself, standing up for department and all the hard work we've done.

"You really want to make a difference? Try talking to their chief."

"Hana, that won't do anything. All he'll see is 'that reactor-douche,' too, and what's more, he'll see that he outranks me."

She knows this, of course. "And then when he blows you off, you get Chief Evert stirred up and have him talk to their chief."

"And then he tells his senior-chief that Reactor is being mean." I say, still quite disbelieving.

Hana's look is much the same as my own; that the other should know better. "And then all our master chiefs and theirs get to talking, and eventually the RDMC decides that he's had enough and gets the Reactor Officer to step in, then the problem gets solved."

"Kierson, Yuichan, RTC!" Someone walking by shouts at us. We nod.

"Got it." We both reply in near unison.

"You're forgetting one thing, Hana." I take up the conversation again, "that takes forever to get done. It doesn't solve the problem."

"No, but it solve the next problem." She replies.

"That's not fast enough!" I nearly shout, exasperated with her lack of understanding.

“No, it’s not. But what did you solve, Chris, by making that kid feel worthless?” She turns to leave.

“I put him in his place.” I start after her, picking up the pace to try to not get the worst seats in the reactor training classroom.

“He was already there. And we aren’t any closer to getting fair meal times for it.”

I pause for a second, knowing she’s right, but I don’t want to admit it. The shame hits in force. I really should have apologized in earnest. Or never said it at all. “Remember, Chris, use your anger. Don’t let it use you.”

Apart from the fact that it’s a large space we own, it’s one of the few spaces on the ship where large groups of people can gather, other than the hangar bays. Despite this, and although the only people present are E-6s and up, it’s packed, and not ventilated properly for the numbers intended. Of course, this means that if we must wait for long, it’s going to start getting hot, humid, and overly unpleasant.

I swear the CO knows this because it’s a good thirty minutes before the captain shows, on top of us showing up fifteen minutes before he was scheduled to show up, and we’re all doing what we can to avoid the sweaty discomfort. Someone announces, “Attention!” and any of us lucky to have a seat rise.

Captain Bonham doesn’t immediately order us to sit, like usual. He gets to the front of the room before he says anything. “Sit, fuckers!” Oh, yeah, it’s a YFG speech, or he’d have said “at ease,” as per military tradition. I’ve heard rumors of what the incident was in passing, and in this long, miserable wait.

“You’re all fucking the Navy!” He starts off strong, at least, and with his favorite multipurpose word. “Do you know why you’re all fucking the Navy?”

Someone raises a hand. “Because someone caught a piece of equipment on fire?” They respond without being asked.

“Because you caught a piece of equipment on fire! A vital piece of equipment!” Yes, sir, we know, because some of us must repair that piece of equipment. Those guys – some of them in this room – are going for four days without sleep now, thanks to you. So we don’t need this lecture. Not to mention it was one junior sailor who messed up, and now all the senior sailors are getting yelled at. “You can’t even do something so simple as start up a reactor without royally fucking everything up!” No, it’s not simple, and no, that’s not what we were doing. What does the man think, that all we have to do in order to start up is turn a key and wait for the thing to turn over?

“I feel like I should stand down, pull into port, and refuse to go underway without an entirely new Reactor Department! I can’t trust any of you to do your job right! What do we pay you for?” Everyone’s smart enough to not respond.

Except for one. “Sir, might it be that many of us were running on little to no sleep, and having no respite in Astra, were exhausted and couldn’t be expected to operate properly?” A short-tempered mechanic by the name of Torres responds, his tone betraying thinly veiled frustration. He knows he won’t be heard, and his face is twitching, trying not to release a scowl.

I look over and see someone writing down notes. Notes, on this? The realization hits me, and I take out my notepad as well.

“*Bullshit!* You are the biggest bunch of whiny fucks I’ve ever met!” He yells at the top of his lungs. His face is as red as a beet now. A vein is bulging from his forehead and another from his neck. The man looks hardly like a commanding officer of a powerful warship and more like a child throwing a fit because he didn’t get the toy he wanted. “You all had two days in Astra to be lazy and sleep! If you couldn’t have the forethought to sleep then when you could, you don’t deserve to be in my Navy!” Well, now he’s proving just how out of touch he is with his sailors. Even now, a few of the guys who’ve been so unfortunate to not get sleep in days look like they’re about to pass out, and probably aren’t even able to pay attention.

“As it stands,” Captain Bonham continues his tirade, “I didn’t even want to get underway with any of you! If I’d had my way, I’d have gotten underway with an entirely new reactor department! But they won’t let me do that.” It’s obvious he hates us. “I hate you all!” Wow, I didn’t expect him to be so blatant. “You’re the stupidest fucks I’ve ever met! Each and everyone one of you should be ashamed of yourselves because you are all fucking worthless!”

He seems to ignore the fact that we’re currently going faster-than-light, which requires propulsion and reactor power, as to the lights currently illuminating us right now. “If I had a gun with two bullets and was in a room with a Mag, a Coalition Commie, and Pirate-terrorist, I’d shoot the Mag twice!” It’s always good to know that your chain of command wants you dead.

It certainly doesn’t help that he’s blowing this whole thing out of proportion. One individual caught one of our generators on fire, the whispers around me have informed me. We have more and can easily operate on them. It’s not preferable, but well within planned tolerances. Seeing as he didn’t stay up to get it done and our department did, I don’t see why he’s throwing such an unprofessional temper tantrum.

“You are all worthless little shits are who stealing the Navy’s money! If I was allowed, I’d cut all of your paychecks right now!” Technically, he can, through Non-Judicial Punishment, in which the Captain has authority to punish sailors as the judge, jury, and executioner – well, not executioner, per se, as there are limits to what he can dole out – though he’s stretched those limits more than once with loopholes. Something tells me whatever sliver intellect he has remaining left is keeping him from punishing us in our innocence, though I have no doubt that the military mentality of, “one person craps his pants, everyone wears a diaper,” attitude will prevail in the end.

And, of course, I turn out to be right on that count. “All of Reactor’s liberty is canceled in the next port call!” We were all angry before. Hundred-some-odd eyes now stare at the man like knives. I don’t have to look about to know everyone in the room is looking at him the same way I am. All but two, apparently. The Reactor Officer, I see out of the corner of my eye, storms from the room, silently, but heatedly. He can’t publicly fight back against the Commanding Officer, but something so illicit as denying us all liberty without cause, which is illegal, I doubt he can hold his tongue any longer in the same room. Even the level-headed Hana Yuichan has turned a bright shade of crimson.

Our departmental Master Chief, however, is a calmer man. “Sir,” he breaks the tension, “Might I recommend the punishment only for those involved?”

“You all did it, Master Chief!” Bonham screams in return. “Including you! Who was down there to stop him?” No one answers. If he’s willing to yell at our most senior enlisted man, and so unwilling to listen to what he might have to say, then we have nothing to say to him. He’s already shown in this instance alone that he has not the slightest clue what we do or how we do it, in spite of the fact that he has to attend some of our training schools just to captain such a ship. “You all fucking suck! You’re worthless! You should be ashamed to call yourselves sailors! You can’t even stop one fucking idiot from fucking everything up! How are any of you supervisors if you don’t supervise?” He stops to take a breath.

More people than usual had been down in the plant, supervising the whole ordeal. But things happen, especially when watchstanders don’t have the sleep they need; when they’re driven too hard by a chain of command – this man, who so readily ordered the ship underway just so he could get some publicity to earn his coveted Admiral’s star – who can’t be bothered to ask questions or understand anything about his sailors. A man too self-absorbed to function in his position.

“Since you’re so vocal about it, I want to know what you’re going to about this problem, Master Chief! My office in two hours!” With that, he stormed out. Some else called “Attention” once more, and those who had a chair stood, but slowly, and begrudgingly. Technically not doing so would be cause for

Captain's Mast, though only a self-absorbed, arrogant madman would try someone for that. None of us doubt that Captain Bonham would be that man.

A long minute passes before anyone moves. Master Chief Tanaka stands up. "Anyone got any ideas on how to prevent this issue?" He asked.

"Not try to operate while we're tired?" Someone says loud enough, though not confidently enough as if he'd intended to be heard. It earns a few meager chuckles from men and women still on edge. A few others say things that are borderline mutinous. Most of us are thinking those same things.

I look down at my notes sheet. I've got a fair bit of what his dialog contained.

"Sounds like a plan." Master Chief says to no one in particular. His tone is still serious, almost as if he agreed with everything said by the CO moments before, but those of us who know him already know differently. Like any good master chief, he's good at hiding emotions in front of his men. "So, we've come up with that we're going to ensure that an E-6 or above will stand, let's call it 'Watch Supervisor,' in each plant and will monitor major ongoing plant evolutions, and we'll have another supervisory in each main space doing similarly, acting as a lesser supervisor for any lesser operations."

We're only partially surprised. His proposal is to do exactly as what we're doing already, down to the exact name of the watchstation already stood by the plant's enlisted-supervisor. The message is clear: Master Chief Tanaka is resisting just as firmly as the Reactor Officer, only more calmly. "And as supervisors, make sure all of your watchstanders have gotten at least six hours of sleep within the past twenty-four hours. Otherwise, you *will* get a watch relief for him. If personnel can be found to relieve him, you will do absolutely no operations on that watch that involve that watchstander. Only our wise Captain Bonham can override that order, provided he approves it."

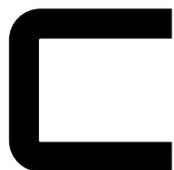
Although literally every word coming from the mouth of the Reactor Department Master Chief is nothing but sarcasm, I can detect none in his actual tone. The RDMC is a professional if I ever saw one.

"I don't care if this means we don't do drills. I don't care if this means we don't do flight operations. I will not have tired watchstanders anymore. Same goes for maintenance." He looks at all of our senior officers, save for the Reactor Officer, who still had not returned. They nod ever so slightly.

Leave it up to a screaming madman to get things done, and not realize he's only screwing himself. We don't have the manning to support this new edict, so the ship as a whole will suffer. This new order means he won't get what he wants all the time; Reactor Department is fighting back. Not mutiny, not really, but we will make sure our men get the respect they deserve.

Regardless, we're all still plastering this all over the net for the whole galaxy to see on our next port call. Probably going to inform some politicians. With the hundreds of people from Reactor Department outnumbering our own senators, messaging them all will be a trivial matter. Most will likely get dozens of messages. Most might not respond, but it only takes one senator on the Defense Committee getting wind of what happened here to get things rolling.

I'll definitely be joining in that group, I think, as I start writing a professional-looking missive on my personal pad and wonder if this is the type of thing that Hana was talking about when she said that I should use my anger as a tool, instead of letting it use me. Probably.

**CHAPTER SIX:**

#119: Common sense is uncommon.

TNV *Dauntless*,

1600 Astra Central Time, 02-09-3398 Sol Date

Reactor-MAG Controls Berthing

"Food time!" Spencer yells and runs out of berthing. I check my watch; he's right, the chow line is about to open up. I follow him out, as does the rest of our little group of friends. We get in line, which has accumulated quite a bit, but not so long that it can't be done in a fair amount of time. That is, of course, if intelligence holds out.

Standing in line should not take intelligence – that is, by most standards. In truth, it takes coordination and observation, and finely-tuned absence of idiocy.

Sure enough, the guy in front of us lacks the ability to meet the expectations I should never have to set. The line snakes through a hatch, and with him at the edge of it, we blindly rely on him to notice when it's time to advance – after all, standing in line doesn't take that much intelligence, does it? By the time he finally opens the door, I notice a massive gap instead of a line, including people at the end of the line in front of him who weren't there before – he delayed moving so long that other people jumped in line, not knowing that the true line had built up further back. After all, with such a massive gap, there couldn't be a line – that would require an unobservant moron standing on the other side of the hatch, wouldn't it?

The idiot puts the icing on the cake – he begins to shut the door behind him. I know he'd seen me in the several minutes we'd dallied before moving. I know he'd seen the line he'd amassed behind him. I know he sees me now. I know he sees the massive gap in front of him that he has to cross first. Or, rather, that he should see all of these things.

I understand people can have bad days where their brains shut down for no explicable reason, but these things – leaving doors open for people, noticing massive drop-offs in the deck that you could break your leg falling down, entire dropships moving around a hangar bay, knee-knockers, et cetera – these are instinctive things. Or, they should be; are supposed to be. The only excuse for not noticing these things is exhaustion: something I'm very familiar with, and even then, days-on-end awake with nothing but caffeine, nicotine, and vitamin B in my veins, managed to accomplish the aforementioned task. This idiot

is obviously not in this state, and more than far from it enough to earn any sympathy. He looks downright blissful, even.

So I shove the door right back in his face. It narrowly misses him, which he proves yet further oblivious to. Oh well. Someone will shove a door straight in his face at some point and catch him full-force. It might be me. Survival of the fittest and all; he'll learn one day the hard way. Knowing his type, it's the only way he will, so I don't bother verbally "educating" him.

I force myself to stay optimistic – there are dozens of other sailors around us who would have gotten just as angry as I, and there are dozens who would have acted properly in this situation and let me through were they in his stead, and many who have in the past. It's hard to notice normalcy or praise it. I remind myself of that, knowing most individuals are competent, the dumb ones are just making themselves more visible and memorable.

While Spencer opts for noodles, I go for a hamburger – they're a constant disappointment, but at least they're constant, or so I assume.

My previous optimism is about to be shattered, slowly. Spencer bypasses the line to get noodles, which are on a different bar entirely, while I wait. The sailor in front of me holds out his tray for a burger and is treated to a patty and a pair of pieces of bread too thin to be called hamburger buns. They take on many of the same qualities, but considerably thinner and wouldn't hold up to the process of eating a hamburger most buns qualify for, smashed and torn as they are.

I'm in luck, though – the sailor also asks for additional items further down the line, and the food service assistant attends to his requests. At that time, yet another is doling out other recently prepared food items to refill trays. She notices the state of the remaining buns. I expect her to run off to grab more, but she surprises me: she reaches down right next to her, out of my line of sight cut off as it is by the stainless steel of the food line, and picks up a bag of hamburger buns; it was already open. Obviously visible to the previous server to boot. I realize, as she pours the bag of buns out into the waiting tray, that the other server was simply too lazy to give the guy in front of me quality food.

My eye involuntarily twitches. I wouldn't notice these things, normally. Not if I were a civilian at a restaurant. I wouldn't get that upset about them, either. Part of me wants to call back the sailor who was given the thinly-cut buns, make him argue for better food, better his place in life, but it's not my battle, and odds are that he doesn't care. The constant, permeating let-down eats at you, though. You begin to expect it.

As I walk to grab a drink, I realize the mouthbreathers are out in full force as yet another moron-of-the-day walks *backward* through the half the length of the galley, nearly bumping into me as he, like so many of this predecessors, failed to pay attention to his busy surroundings.

We need to hold a freaking seminar. Perhaps I'll lead it; *You're on a Warship, Not in High School*, or *You Are Not the Only Person Here*. No, much too long and ungainly. Perhaps a series of seminars. One won't cover everything. *How to Not be a Moron*. Yes, that title works.

Forgoing the idea, I finally manage to sit down.

Spencer is going into a full tirade, much too excited about a show he'd been very much into, and marathoning far too much. Without proper net connectivity or signaling from a local node, we have to prepare and download shows we want to watch and store them the old-fashioned way on hard drives. "It's so messed up!" He giggles. "She just keeps dying and he has to go back in time and save her and he never succeeds, and he's the only one that remembers!" Spencer giggles again, somehow attaining a level of mirth from the depression of the scenario. "She's so annoying it almost makes me happy to see her go, but they always make her look so cute and happy right before they kill her off!" His joy at the dark humor is tad bit psychotic, but to each their own, I guess. He's really a great guy, and reliable, his reaction to sadness is just, well... odd. And that reaction itself is a bit humorous, even. We all must have our own things that keep us going in our line of work, and we all go insane in our own little ways.

He continues, conversing with Ben about the show. Ben, who has seen the finale, is holding his hand to his mouth subconsciously, trying to hold back his words to not spoil anything for Spencer who's much to emotionally attached.

They leave before I do, leaving me alone with little more than an apology; they've got work to accomplish. I still have half my meal, and I begin to dig into the fries as I notice there are a couple of others, sailors I don't know, only a couple of seats down.

I only notice because one of them is being particularly loud. I wish I'd intentionally avoided hearing him. "So, as I'm squatting I can feel my nuts half-descended and they're covered in sweat and –“ Seriously, on the mess decks? He's talking about this on the mess decks? Yeah, the mouth-breathers are out in full force today.

His tale continues on – he's talking to a girl, no less, which is surprising especially with the nature of the subject, which only proceeds to reach levels of revulsion most sailors couldn't withstand. Many women are more than capable of holding such a conversation with, but this is not the sort of thing you discuss publicly, and not in front of a female while doing so. I lose my appetite with some of what he is

saying. Vulgarity is one of the stereotype commonalities of the military, but this is not the setting for it and he's going all out beyond what I'm used to. His tale goes on about the subsequent events of the day involving his lack of showering, genitalia, and sexual misadventures with random women, more lack of showering, and more sexual misadventures, and he appears to be trying to make it sound as gross as possible.

I really should chew him out. I outrank him and he's out of line. I normally don't care what people talk about, but this is too far, and he's much too loud, and people are visibly eating around him, at least a couple as disturbed as I.

Wimping out, I end up throwing away half my pudding – which I'd been looking forward to – and nearly all of my fries, which actually weren't too incredibly disappointing today as they were actually cooked and not especially overcooked.

I don't remember his name, nor would it matter – with several thousand on the ship, I won't recognize him the next time I see him, which will likely be in more than a week. For the rest of the day, I resent the decision, wishing I'd been decisive and corrected the situation instead of just mulling it over. I begin to realize that I don't rectify many situations I'm in where I see someone else being a moron, at least not of my own volition; I just complain about them later, never making a difference. Ironically, I am my own worst pet-peeve.

I should really get on that.

But like most people, I don't like confrontation, even if I know the result will be about as violent as a bunny rabbit. Heck, many of them would act like bunny rabbits themselves, saying nothing apart from a "yes petty officer!" before scampering off, to no real effect. I'm not at all worried about looking like a stickler or a jerk since I'm effectively nothing to these people – if anything I'll look like an arrogant, elitist Mag prick, easily identifiable as such by the dosimetry-disk on my belt. If I advance the opinions of Mags as being cultured, arrogant, and nerdy, it wouldn't be the worst thing I could do in a day.

My resolve quickens, then fades just as fast when I realize I have no one to use it on, as I'm already a hundred feet away from the perpetrator, sans food, sans appetite, and sans willpower to cover the distance just to come out of nowhere with my accusations, legitimate or not.

The rest of my day progresses as might be expected. I stand a six-hour long watch as Reactor Operator. In spite of being one of the most difficult watches to qualify on the ship, a fact lost on most individuals who do not serve in Reactor Department, and only to be outstripped by a scant few other

Reactor Department qualifications, most days you wouldn't be able to find a way to justify just as to why it's so complicated or has such a long qualification process.

Today, like yesterday, and the day before that, and so on and so forth, I watch virtually nothing happen the majority of my time in the chair. The bridge requests more speed. Power adjusts. More energy is seemingly pulled from nothingness and feeds into the propulsion cycle, propelling the ship faster, as requested. The entire process is almost entirely out of my hands. My mind wanders for the vast majority of the watch, save for a few brief merciful minutes of talking to other watchstanders, who are inexplicably quiet today. Talking while on watch about things not related to work are, generally speaking, unprofessional, but it's practically a necessity to break the tedium.

Some of the other guys come down and brief maintenance. I try to listen, and partially succeed. It's intensely boring work of which I have no specific system knowledge, it being mechanical in nature. Such as it is, my mind deviates nearly every moment I don't have it tightly reined in and by the time I get it back under control, I'm wondering how I've begun to contemplate the pros and cons of financially investing in a popular gaming company at least twice, and another time thinking on how much I do really miss my wife. The former has me convinced that I need to look at my finances again to make room for the investiture, the latter having a rather sobering effect on my mood, driving me into a short spiral about the recent events in my life that collectively have me down. A renewed focus on the brief at hand washes those thoughts away.

They complete the brief, and not too long later, the maintenance. I didn't even have to get involved, other than to announce that I had no questions at the end of the brief and other than to ask how long they were going to take. I had to look attentive, after all, and the slightest question generally accomplishes making that appearance.

Just as I begin to feel as though the watch will never end, that my reticular activating system is about to tell my body to fall asleep, and I feel like so many times before: this boredom is unbearable, a crushing force threatening to close my eyelids permanently against an infinite onslaught of absolutely zero excitement and even less activity...

... I realize I'm only halfway through which the watch.

"Ugh." I moan.

"This watch is draggin.'" My watch officer, thankfully different from the one I had to deal with days earlier, says. This one. Fieldman is just standing the watch for proficiency; to prove on a regular basis he still knows what he's doing.

I give a nod, and inadvertently supplement it with a yawn. “They all do.” An idea strikes me. “Can we do something fun? A max-flank bell? Anything?” I ask the watch officer. Occasionally, if the watch officer is game, and the Engineering Officer of the Watch in Central Control is game, our powers combined can convince the bridge that doing random things is good for training value. It honestly is, but that’s hardly our intent.

Behind me, the Fieldman sighs. “Nope, sorry. I got told we have to maintain this bell for hyperspace stability. I already asked before we relieved.” He knew this was going to be a crappy watch, and he was trying to look out for us and most certainly himself; being an officer he doesn’t really *do* much of anything, he just pulls the strings. My already solid respect for the man is renewed.

“Pssh,” I dismiss that notion, “the MAG can take it.”

“Yeah, but we aren’t supposed to tax it.” His words kill the conversation. He’s right, even if the figures his argument is based on are overly conservative and my suggestion is within operational tolerances; the Navy generally doesn’t like the “limits are goals” mentality of the enlisted operators. I swear officers are just around to ruin our fun.

I can feel my internal energy reserves depleting by the second as if I’ve been struck powerless to affect the world around me. I manage to shift in my seat and I contemplate standing up to fight back against the sandman. Perhaps against better judgment, I decide not to. It would be awful to be caught sleeping on watch, but I feel as though I can manage. “So...” I say, trying to strike up a conversation, only to realize my quiver of words is as empty as I am lethargic.

Long minutes pass. “I just want to *do* something.” Jameson says. I hadn’t even realized he’d entered.

“Already had this discussion, Petty Officer,” Fieldman scolds in a monotone voice of boredom. “Have to maintain this bell for hyperspace stability.”

“Nah.” Jameson says, “I mean, like, actually blast these asteroids.”

I nod. “It would be nice. Saving lives. With a warship.”

“It’s not that abnormal,” Fieldman says. “Navies are usually first-responders to natural disasters. It’s been that way since ships-of-sail.”

“I know, but it still feels funny. Fire a cannon, save a life.” I contemplate on it further. After this, I’ll feel like I’ve really done something, I imagine. Actually been useful, for real, not just made a ship move from place to place to make nice and follow arbitrary orders with no real use. We’ve done stuff like this in the past, but nothing of this scale. A ship here, station there, but nothing on the level of an entire

colony planet. “That’d be cool.” To boot, I’d have a good story for later. Any anti-military hippie wants to mess with me, I can say I’ve saved more lives than he has, and seeing as I haven’t seen any combat, I’ll still have a clean-slate on my kill-record, even by proxy of serving on a ship that may have done the killing, so I can ride the high-horse all day long.

It will take some effort to really latch onto the notion that I did it, myself. I can’t take all the glory, since there are thousands of crew onboard, but that’s a given. But at least I can say I did my part. I kept the ship operating. I was critical to operations. Insert other bullet-points to put on the annual evaluation reports.

I reprimand myself for looking for glory. It’s against my faith to look for glory, remind myself. Do things altruistically for the sake of others, not for the self. I’m a bad Christian, I suppose. Still, it will be cool to say, “yeah, I saved a planet, no big deal.”

Hours later, I’m finally off-watch. We finally dropped out of hyperspace partway through, so it wound up being slightly eventful. I set up a download transfer between my personal pad computer and a few other guys in the berthing to download a few shows I’ve had some interest in since I didn’t get many planetside whilst at Astra. A few got some Alliance shows that I’ve never seen, but they tell me they’ve got good reviews. Might as well.

As I set it up, an interesting conversation arises. “Did you hear about what the Reactor Officer did?” One of the other PCs asks, and doesn’t wait for an answer “He told the CO to go screw himself!”

“What?” I ask.

“Apparently some guys in the Reactor office overheard them shouting at each other in the RO’s office. Apparently, the CO is pissed that some nasty things he said to us got all over social media. No news stations are picking it up, but it went far enough that his superiors heard about it, as well as anyone who might give him his Admiral’s star.” I smirk. Mission accomplished, and faster than usual. Apparently, some of the guys were vindictive enough to get the stuff through our communications transfers, rather than just putting in on social media the next port. His illegal ways and poor temper have finally caught back up with him. Some of those Isharans are right; karma is real.

“He wanted to get the entire department together, and the RO told him off. Not long later the XO started handing out trays of cookies to all the offices to say sorry for what the CO did.”

I'm a little surprised. I normally didn't think well of the XO; I always considered him a "yes-man" of Captain Bonham. Perhaps I was wrong – maybe he was just trying to do what he thought was best to hold the ship together. Now that it was falling apart, he could be himself. Perhaps.

"Is anyone getting in trouble?" I am a bit worried. I'd rather not get yelled at, especially being guilty this time. I wasn't the only one to spread out that information.

Not that I know of. Vener, the one who heard it all, said that the RO told Bonham that he wasn't going to touch any one of us, not after that last display of stupidity. He said he'd have him relieved of command if he ever proved himself so incompetent and emotional again."

I whistle. That's a tall order; considering no lives are truly at stake, it wouldn't likely happen. Almost certainly, it's just a bluff. In a manner of speaking, there were ways to do it. As much as our Reactor Officer liked to screw us over, it always made sense when he did, and he always did his best to make sure no one screwed with us. Unfortunately, the CO outranked him, so there wasn't much he could do. "That takes some cajones. Was that all that they said?" I ask.

"That's all that Vener said."

The download is going to take a bit of time, so I set to learning the trade of my new hobby: toying with gravity. I'd done well with the gravity controls allotted us for maintenance procedures, but with lower restriction levels given to general crew, even the simplest of tasks is difficult. I sit in my rack and focus on my target; a pillow. Unfortunately, I don't have any of the high-tech mental-interface gear like some soldiers do, so I have to keep my right arm on my left to control my arm-implant. The pillow, a personal one, not Navy-issue, extremely soft and form-fitting, is a good target. It's light, so odds of it doing damage are slim, and require little power, and as a low-tier necessity for access to the gravitational-network of the ship, I'm not granted high-tier access, so my requests for changes in gravity won't always go through.

I direct a few small gravitational fields to lift the pillow; I started my practices with one big field, but this proved harder to control. A few smaller ones at different points proved harder to master and more complicated, but made control of the pillow much easier; using one large point made it easier to push, but also easier to make mistakes. Pulling-fields also made it easier to lift, but harder to launch at any real speed. Not that I was doing much launching, but a simple rapid change in a pushing field got more results, at least with my limited control capability. By now, though, I've practiced enough times with my pillow and random objects in and about my rack. I've made pens spin in the air, by far the hardest trick with such limited control, but the pillow is the closest thing I have to my next test.

I lay down flat on my back, and cross my arms across my lap, at partially; my right hand has to still be on my left forearm for the control interface tattooed there, but they should be close enough together that there won't be an issue with the center of balance. Concentration is key, not just for my control of the gravitational fields, but my body.

I flex my core to keep my body straight, and program in the first few fields. I feel a pressure on my upper back, lower back, and beneath my thighs, as well as a slight pressure on my chest and legs, but I've done enough math, and I'm lifted up properly. I'm hovering! It's an awesome feeling; having achieved so much with so little.

While I'm adjusting a few fields, working on getting it to where I'm much more resting and don't have to rely on balance adding and taking away fields, I fail to hear an announcement over the 1MC, the ship's announcing circuit. The following one is much more important, but the first one should have clued me in.

“This is the Engineering Officer of the Watch from Central Control: All hands stand by for loss of gravity control and loss of power. This is a drill.” Oh, no. My fingers rapidly type away at my arm tattoo, deactivating fields left and right. I manage to release my left leg by the time I realize I need to be focusing on my head. I brace myself with my leg, but it's not enough. I'd been patched into multiple gravity-stations for reliability, and now it's my undoing. I don't know which of the two reactor plants is already down – I failed to listen to that critical first announcement – so I don't know which gravity stations are going to lose power first. I really shouldn't have been messing with gravity controls while drills were ongoing, which they do every night.

I find out as the fields supporting my upper body are released, along with the berthing's power and the general area gravity; emergency lights kick on and give the entire area an eerie glow, just enough for me to see. The resultant force levers my body up against the rack display above my head. The display surface is sturdy enough to take the blow from my forehead. My head isn't so lucky.

I originally wanted to be a pilot. Pretty much every kid did, the difference is I wanted it past my days of childhood. When it came time for everyone else to start applying to universities and trade schools, I applied to the local Navy Academy to be a pilot. When it came time for my first interview, it didn't go so well. I was too immature at the time to realize just how poorly it went.

“So, Mr. Kierson,” the Captain across from me says – I didn't realize at the time just how high ranking the interviewer was – started, politely calling me, a starry-eyed seventeen-year-old a title of

respect, felt good. It didn't occur to me that it was probably second nature, “What makes you want to join the Navy?”

“I want to serve my nation, sir.” It was a standard reply. A reply I believed in, and truthful, but he'd undoubtedly heard it before; something else that didn't occur to me at the time. It was unimpressive, but he didn't let that show.

“Good,” he smiled. Thinking back on it, he was probably the kind that liked those sorts of patriotic answers. They had merit; a sense of duty and responsibility. “But why the Navy, specifically?”

“I want to be a pilot, sir.” I responded, making sure to keep tacking on 'sir,' to the end of my every sentence. I wanted to show him I was ready for military service – as if being polite was enough to do that.

Sentinel has pilots, too.” Captain Warner responded, almost as if to say it could even be a better option. “And you could probably get stationed near your friends and family.”

“I want to travel. sir. I want to make a difference. Actively make a difference, not just for Thresholders, but for the galaxy. Sir.” It was one of the few good answers I'd thought about prior.

He nodded. “But that would mean leaving your friends and family behind. Are you ready to do that?”

It was something I'd thought about before, long and hard. It would hurt to not see my parents – I'd been with them my entire life – but I was certain I could handle it. Millions of kids my age did it, why couldn't I? “Yes,” I said though I hesitated. Either he didn't notice or didn't care because he continued his line of questioning.

“Do you have a significant other?” He kept probing. He knew my age, so he knew he didn't have to ask about a spouse.

“Yes, sir.” Another thing I'd thought about. “Girlfriend.”

He smiled, “What's her name?” It seemed an odd question. He was probably trying to act friendly while also making me think more emotionally about her.

“Kristin, sir.”

“And she's comfortable with you joining?” He asked.

I wouldn't have said 'comfortable' by any means. “Well, sir, she's not exactly thrilled about it, but she said she'd support me in this decision.”

His questions started getting a bit more uncomfortable for me now. “She seems nice. You're comfortable dragging her into this? I presume you intend to marry her. Life as a military spouse isn't easy.

If you do join as an officer – a pilot, especially – you could be gone for more than a year at a time with little communication with her. Does she know that?”

“Yes, sir, I think so...”

“And you're okay not talking to her that long?”

I paused. Kristin was my world. I'd spent most of the last year nearly inseparable from her. “I... I know it won't be easy, sir, but I can do it.”

“And you do intend to marry her?”

“Yes, sir. I do. At some point. Probably. We've been together a while now.”

He made a note on a pad in front of him. “Hm.” His smile went away. “We generally prefer unmarried men for long deployments. Fewer attachments.” In truth, I didn't have much to worry in that realm. I see now it was a game – to test my dedication and how fast I could think on my feet. At the time, though, I took it as a hit and tried to let it roll off me instead of fighting back.

“Oh.” Was all I said, and there was a long pause.

It was followed by an abrupt change of subject. “So, it says here that your aptitude tests were rather impressive. You score in the top fifth percentile, and only because your language skill section scored lower than the rest. So, no yeoman or interpreter-career in your future.” He laughed. “Actually, you did still score better than most yeoman in language skills. So, you definitely have that aspect covered.

We won't need to worry about you in the schooling aspect.”

Good. I was getting complimented. Intelligence was definitely something I brought to the table. “No, sir. You won't.” I decided to offer up a bit more, feeling a bit more confident. “I am hoping to get a physics or aerospace engineering degree.”

His like of questioning suddenly took a rapid course change. I suppose he was satisfied with education and my future education desires and my ability to succeed in those measures. “So, why do you want to be an officer, Mr. Kierson?” That was a surprise to me – I thought he'd want to go further into talking about my intellectual prowess. I'd been banking on it. It was my greatest attribute, and it was impressive – one of the few things I wasn't wrong about. Which is why, I realize now, he never went further into it. We both knew I was good. I didn't need to be evaluated any further on it – I already had been evaluated by the test. An impersonal test. One that could only compliment me numerically. One that didn't outright say, “You're awesome.” I'd hoped to hear that from this Captain. But, I couldn't focus on that. “I want to lead people, sir.” Suddenly it occurred to me there might be a follow-up question to that.

And there was. “Why?”

I hesitated. I hesitated too long. Why did I want to lead people? I didn't know. "Because... I feel like it's something I can do. Like it's something I'm called to do. What I'm supposed to."

Another followup question. "Why?"

I was running out of answers, and fast. "I'm not entirely sure, sir." While I was failing, I realized it wouldn't hurt to go all out and be honest. "I hadn't really thought on it much, sir."

"Do you want it for the money?"

"No, sir." I didn't want to seem greedy.

"It's pretty good money." The way he asked, it seemed like a lure. Now I realize it probably wasn't as much as I thought, but that didn't occur to me then. If it had been my sole answer, that would probably be bad, but admitting the pay – twice as much as an enlisted – was attractive wouldn't be all that bad, either. "Do you just want the Navy to pay for your college? Get that physics degree you wanted?" "No, sir." Again, I didn't want to sound greedy.

"Why, then?"

"I just feel like it's the job I want, sir." He nodded. It was an acceptable answer.

"So, what does an officer do, anyway?"

"They lead people, sir." It seemed obvious.

"So does a chief." He answered. "Each of my chiefs here on this base is in charge of a good thirty or so men."

He was catching me in a lack of knowledge, trying to see how much I knew about the job I wanted. "An officer leads them. The chiefs, sir."

"Really now?" He asked, a bit amused. "I don't really talk to enlisted guys all that much." He said. "You... lead larger groups of people?" I amended my answer with a question.

"So does a Master Chief. My Command Master Chief here leads the entire base." I hadn't understood what a CMC was. When he told me, I still didn't. I thought that was the role of the Commanding Officer. I was right, I just didn't know how the roles divided up.

"Uhh..." was all I could muster. I hadn't prepared well for this interview. It was spiraling out of control in my head. I was worried about knowing the right and wrong answers. I didn't realize at the time that it wasn't at all about the answers. It was about how I handled them. Research would have definitely helped, and answers would have been impressive enough for him, but the lack of answer wasn't a killer to my hopeful career choice. "I guess I don't know the difference, sir."

"Then how do you know you don't want to be enlisted?"

“Being enlisted, I wouldn't be leading right off the bat.”

“So you think that being a new officer you'll know how to lead?”

I wasn't sure what the right answer was. So, I winged it. “I... to a point, sir.” I paused, then cut in before he could say anymore. “I won't know everything, but I'd know some stuff. I'd have to learn my job first, but I could still be a leader.”

“How would you learn your job?” He asked. When I didn't answer immediately, he realized his phrasing was off. “Do you know what your qualification process would be, being a pilot?”

“First I'd go to college, then flight school, sir.”

As I soon learned from Captain Warner, I was far off the mark. For this one, he gave me the answer. The short of it was that it would be a series of different schools that, without writing down – and I didn't, I couldn't hope to remember my first time hearing them.

“That's good to know, sir.” Was all I had to say to his long list of schools and programs I'd have to go through to be a pilot.

“One last question, then you're good to go, Mr. Kierson.”

It was almost finally over. I figured, in spite of having so few answers, that it was going well. How could any new applicant have these answers, after all? Sure, I wasn't earning the highest of marks, but I was smart. He said so himself. I still expected to make it, at this point.

“If I handed you a thousand credits, right now, and told you that you had to spend them all by the end of the day – no vehicles, no charity, no investing, no just buying a bunch of one thing or giving it away – how would you spend it?”

I didn't catch the question for what it was, not at the time. He wanted to see if I could think on my feet. Apparently, I couldn't because I saw it was a moral evaluation. I realize now that I must have taken a large portion of the interview to be just that, and that's where I went wrong. “I don't know, sir. I don't really have much I want for.”

“Hm. No ideas at all?” He tried to make me see the question's intent, or at least imply I'd been off the mark. I didn't catch the hint.

I tried to think long and hard on it for a bit. “Not really, sir. I could always buy few new electronic devices, but I don't really need them, and I wouldn't have enough of those to buy a full thousand credits worth.”

He sat for a second as if making a decision – whether or not I was good enough, and annotated something on the pad in front of him. “Thank you Mr. Kierson, that will be all. I have your contact information for when we make a decision.”

I stood, making sure to shake his hand as if that last polite act would be enough to cement the fact that I was a good person, a sinking feeling already cemented deep in my stomach. As if being a good person was enough to be a good pilot.

Needless to say, I'm not a pilot now, let alone an officer.

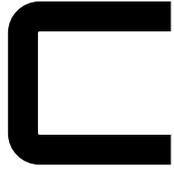
Redness, overlaid with stars and flashes of light fill my vision. I couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds, but by the time I come to, all of the fields that had been supporting me – or propelling me are gone, putting me into a free-floating state. My head throbs, and I'm disoriented, not knowing which way is up or down. It takes a few moments for me to shake the trauma-induced disorientation before I can even let my brain try to work through the disorientation from the weightlessness. The double-dose of vertigo gives me an unpleasant case of nausea, but it subsides as I manage to get my bearings, grasping for anything around me to stabilize myself.

People in the berthing-lounge start laughing, enjoying themselves in zero-g – having properly anchored themselves prior to the loss of gravity - while all I can do is curse my stupidity and pain. I hear a few guys curse as they maneuver their weightless bodies out of the berthing to go start up the auxiliary fusion plants. They're the few designated as part of the casualty assistance team who have to respond to this sort of scenario. It's a collateral duty that looks good on semi-annual evaluations, so they volunteered for it, forgetting that the word “navy” stands for “Never Again Volunteer Yourself” for just such a scenario.

The red I've been seeing isn't just out of pain and the bonk on the head, I appear to be bleeding. Great. I don't feel the pain – yet – from the individual gash, but by the volume of little globules floating in the air before me – a rather interesting sight, actually, with a few having been shot up towards the display above me from the gravity field just recently deactivated. I was going to be cleaning some things up, but this was also technically a medical hazard. I float in my rack, holding on tight and bracing myself. The bridge shouldn't be firing any maneuvering thrusters without gravity control to protect the crew, but I don't trust them by any means. With my free hand, I grab my pillow, then momentary release my grip on the edge of my rack to pull the pillow out of the pillowcase, and begin to use the pillowcase as a makeshift scoop to collect the free-floating blood, or else in about a minute my bedsheets and I are going

to look quite gory. I hold the pillow over my forehead for the next few minutes. I'll need to wash it, but better than washing everything. At least no one will ask why I hit my head; medical will be full of people who didn't properly anchor themselves.

The best part of it is, I promised that third-class in the galley I wouldn't be turning off his power tonight. He's probably going to blame me for this since it's my department responsible for maintaining power. I am *so* getting a message from his superiors.

**#16: Confidence supercedes competence****CHAPTER SEVEN:****2230 Landon Central Time, 02-09-3398 Sol Date****TNV *Dauntless*,****Dauntless Medical**

I apologize for the additional rant. I do that sometimes. Trust me, I'll go full-circle and get to my point, with a few detours along the way.

Life aboard any naval vessel has and will always have certain inherent qualities: Space will be a rare commodity, conditions will be less than ideal for human life, hours will be long, durable equipment will be babied more than their delicate operators. The long and short of it is that the crew will get the short end of the stick. During the age of sail, the crew had to row or live in danger to operate their ship. When we industrialized and fought the World Wars, conditions were sweltering and generally unsafe by current standards and even those of the Atomic and Digital ages that soon followed. Throughout both of those ages, though, when steam powered maritime vessels were the norm, the issue of cooling personnel was only solved when digital electronics required air conditioning; those outside of areas containing such equipment would often suffer, though this steadily progressed to only those working in spaces containing steam piping to be suffering the still sweltering heat, however, advances in the ability to make electronic devices portable, with computers that could fit in the palm of one's hand, giving crewmembers instant access to portable personal libraries, video databases, and games.

This continued to advance further, obviously, giving crews ever more services and creature comforts during personal time, but work always was (and always will be) strenuous on a naval vessel. When spaceflight became more prevalent, the obvious downside was a lack of gravity making life difficult all around. Once we left the safety of the Earth's electromagnetic field to search the stars, radiation became an additional concern in addition to the already known health issues related to being in zero-gravity. Some of these were abated in the newer In-Line ships used for colonization, also known as VertShips, as contrary to their maritime predecessors, decks were arranged vertically so that, as the ships accelerated at 9.81m/s^2 there would be artificial gravity, but only during this acceleration period. Ships were as cramped as ever trying to accommodate both states of the vessel, though advances in artificial intelligence helped to alleviate manning constraints of some vessels, and thereby giving crews, for the first time, a privilege never achieved before: Privacy.

This soon disappeared when humanity mastered gravity control when the Alliance reunited the known galaxy and Eirangard's Artificial Gravity technology was spread throughout the galaxy. Whereas humanity had long been a relatively peaceful species, following the peace between superpowers ironically achieved by the development of nuclear warheads (which to this day remain the most deadly things we've ever used to harm other humans), humanity spread throughout the stars faster and achieved more than ever before.

Colonies already established became local superpowers.

New colonies farther apart than light could travel in a reasonable time meant that nationwide (or, star-nation-wide) communications regressed back to the age of the courier. Ships could travel faster than light, but communications could not. Humanity slipped back in development during the Astrum Diaspora, in a fashion, and the communications breakdown between the far reaches of the species meant that conflict resolution became more difficult. For a time, humanity remained semi-homogenous, but most claimed some allegiance to the Alliance. Then the Fracture occurred when termini were discovered, and star-nations began to crop up left and right, seceding from the control of the United Nations, who themselves formed the Alliance, centered on Earth.

What this mean for me: Wars broke out between these nations, which would inevitably disagree, which meant that a new breed of warships, harkening back to the days of old with laterally-based decks (more efficient for crew travel) allowable through advances in gravity returned to the previously undiscovered playing field of a battlefield: Space. Military vessels had existed before but resembled old colony VertShips.

Now, soldiers were needed on these vessels, more weapons, more equipment, et cetera, which meant less space, which meant things began to revert back to the days of old when it came to crew compartments and amenities. Things began to suck again, though now we at least had gravity, even if it was artificial and easier to utilize to our benefit. We could store things on gravity-charged "overheads," which civilians call ceilings, with little difficulty, though more massive equipment, like fighters, dropships, and anti-ship missiles still required much more specifically purposed generators to keep them in place onboard the vessel.

I also don't have to deal with the heat historic sailors did. Heat is so much of a concern for components across the ship, we have more than enough heat storage and heat venting systems to keep us cool for months of operation without hitting atmo. If we run on almost nil-power, we can go almost indefinitely by simply radiating infrared to space.

I still don't understand, though, why I have to deal with terrible food: our kitchens should be like, automated by now; faster mail: I feel like the couriers are flying blind and sub-light, only happening to show up in the same system as ourselves; and least understandable of all, terrible medical:

“Come back at sick call tomorrow morning.” The corpsman says to the guy in front of me in line. The guy's livid, and for good reason. “*My finger is broken.*” He's not screaming at the corpsman yet, but I can tell the guy wants to. His voice is pained, having waited long enough for the shock to wear off and his body to start letting him realize the damage that was done to his nerves.

The corpsman gives it a cursory glance. “No, it's not, you just smashed it. Come back tomorrow at sick call if it's still swollen. Next!” It is broken. I can tell from here that it is. I've been waiting in line with the guy for a few minutes and saw the swollen, cockeyed digit myself. The corpsman points to me. “Clean yourself up and let the wound clot, put a band-aid on it. Next!” A simple band-aid is not going to fix a gash in my forehead that has to at least be two inches long.

“Corpsman,” I speak up, trying to muster up some courage into my voice. “His finger's broken. You will see this guy, and myself or I'm going to the CMC right now, with blood on my face...” I trail as I realize my error. “No, not you. I don't want an idiot like you seeing either of us. I want you to get someone *else* to see us.” If I got up to it, I might see the Command Master Chief anyway, though I hadn't planned on doing it initially. This guy was ridiculous. I've already seen a number of people walk away with a few injuries; going zero-gravity on a crew that doesn't do it frequently, with over a thousand people on board, odds were that some injuries would happen. Rank has its privileges, as does having some assertiveness, it seems. The corpsman, a little intimidated, walks off, and a minute later two more corpsmen, one the first class like myself, approaches the front of the line where I'm standing with my beleaguered friend. “What's this about you badgering my corpsmen?” The First Class says.

“He said this,” I point to the broken finger of the guy in front of me in line, “wasn't a broken finger, and told a number of guys before us to come back at sick-call tomorrow. So I told him I'd go to the CMC unless the two of us, and the rest of us, got seen for our injuries, and at this point I'm about to write a special request chit to have that corpsmen buy me a new uniform if all of this blood doesn't wash out.” The first class finally looks at my face and swears under his breath and seems to forget all about me badgering his guy.

“Name? Division?”

“PC1 Kierson, Chris. Reactor Department. Division: Reactor-MAG Controls” I give him the information he needs to look me up in the ship's systems to put down my information.

“Do you feel lightheaded?”

No, just angry. “No.” I omit my feelings for all the lack of medical importance they carry. I must be bleeding pretty bad. I look down at my uniform. Despite me holding my hand to my forehead, enough blood has seeped down my arm and face onto my sleeve and collar of my uniform that my wound must look worse than it is, and my hand and forearm are covered in the stuff.

He gestures to the other corpsman to treat the broken finger and guides me into one of the treatment rooms, where I sit down on a bed. “If you feel lightheaded, feel free to lay down.” Finally, I get some treatment by a *real* corpsman. “Now, let's see what's going on here.” He pulls my hand away. “Holy crap, that's brutal.” He lends me a mirror. At first, all I see is half of my face looking like I covered it in red warpaint, but the cut extending from my upper forehead down next to my eye. A nice gash, right there. The guy gives me a cloth to clean my face. Most of it mops up easily enough, though I dab around the cut tenderly. “This might sting a bit.” He sprays the cut with an antiseptic and clotting solution. To distract myself from the impending pain, I set to work cleaning my hand with the rag.

“So, what were you doing when we lost gravity?”

“Just, uh... I was just in my rack.” A half-lie, and terribly delivered. Practicing with gravity control for fun isn't exactly kosher on the ship, and if he's sore that I yelled at his corpsman I don't want him to know. Reasons for injuries it goes into an official safety report. I'm our division's Safety Petty Officer, so the file that goes up to the Safety Office comes by me first, so I can “spruce it up” as need be to look pretty, but the fewer questions, the better. In the end, anything that causes an injury is mitigated against, which means they could take away not just my access to extra-gravity control units, but the entirety of enlisted crew.

He looked back at me, away from whatever he was preparing. “Doing what?” He had a look of disbelief, more out of humor than anything else.

“I was trying to get out of my rack and kinda threw myself.” Okay, that was an all-out lie, but with a cloth covering my face as I said it, hopefully, he bought it long enough.

He laughed, though, a good sign. “Yeah, okay.” I couldn't tell if he believed me, but it was good enough for him to put off asking any further and begin injecting me with more painkiller and mending my wound.

I awake with a start. I'm on watch. Something's off, but sleeping on watch is frowned upon to the point that it would get me demoted, so the feeling of existential dread I'm feeling is well founded. The

obvious problem now is that I haven't verified the automatic logs and placed my digital signature on them, which is just about impossible to forge. If I've missed it for too long, it will raise questions I don't want to answer. The plant pretty much runs itself, but a human operator is always required to be present to watch, and occasionally operate the DMR plant. That means that we have to lay eyes on all status-logs which are automatic, but we have to verify we've seen them and occasionally do some calculations, more or less just to keep us occupied and back up the near flawless computer systems.

I haven't done that, and the readout on my wrist tells me I'm at least five minutes overdue. Not enough to be a problem, but I'll get a talking to. I sit up and try to reach for where my logs should be, but they find nothing but cold metal.

That's odd, reaching for the log computer is muscle-memory by this point, I shouldn't have missed. I'm still disoriented from my slumber and reach again. Metal continues to greet my hand emphatically – painfully in my haste to complete my duty. Why?

I realize that I'm not even in my uniform.

It's as I throw open the shield-curtain for my rack that I realize that I've been victim to a reoccurring dream that always slowly escapes my memory as I wake, leaving behind the feelings and misconception. I can only ascertain that I must have dreamed of standing watch. It's fooled me yet once more. I've gotten as far as actually putting my uniform on before the delirium of the dream went away and my wits returned at least twice before. Looking at my forearm tattoo for the time, I see I've still got thirty more minutes to sleep. Totally worth it.

My head is throbbing now as rest my head on my pillow. They sealed the cut with a healing gel, and I take a couple of painkillers they gave me. It's weak, but it's something. I add one of my own painkillers I keep in my rack for just such an occasion, making sure the combined dosage isn't too much. I can't quite fall asleep. The painkillers aren't immediate enough, and the thirty-minute nap I was betting on isn't going to happen. So, I decide to risk it again. It's early morning, so no one's going to be accessing the gravity-control network. I ought to be safe, but I do opt for only using one gravity-control station instead of two like last time.

I start off with the tiny gravitational fields I remember having employed last, and before long I find myself hovering. I even try moving back and forth in the few spare inches I have in the rack, slowly, with tiny little changes to make sure I don't hurt myself. That would be embarrassing, as I already have to inform my chain of command as to why I have a massive gash on my forehead, which I'm sure will be rather humorous for them more than anything else.

Then I get an idea: It's crazy, but I think I can manage it. I apply more force to one side of my body, and lift up one side a bit. I apply more force and shift around a few fields to my sides to make sure I don't straight up slide out of my rack. I keep altering fields, slowly, getting a feel for my body weight and center of gravity. Before long, I'm upside-down, having managed to flip myself. I continue through, getting myself right-side up again, and then reverse it. I find I can flip myself faster and faster as my trials go on, but my alarm sounding off ruins my fun. I don't even know why I'm trying this. I'm not a gravtech, and I don't have the money to become a gravomancer when I get out of the military. It's a pipe-dream and this is just building up my hopes. I'm probably not even adept at it.

Minutes later, after a rushed breakfast, I'm standing at attention, in formation, on the hangar deck with the rest of my division. I decided to face the music and stand front and center. Instead of getting yelled at, I get the response I expected: Before they even call attention, Chief Takahashi says, just as loudly as if he were briefing all of Controls Division, "Kierson!" between words, he was smiling, "What the hell happened to you?" I've already recounted the real story to several of my coworkers, but I wasn't about to say it aloud in front of everyone just yet.

"Accident last night during zero-g, chief. Bumped my head on my rack."

"I can see that." He chuckled a bit. "Make sure you see our Safety Petty Officer about that so they can write up a report about you to Safety Department."

I don't blame him for not knowing I'm our division's Safety Petty Officer. As far as collateral duties go, it's one of the lesser used. When you work with a division of intelligent people, telling them "Don't be an idiot" isn't exactly important or useful, so having a Safety PO for the division is more of a formality than anything else. This specific duty of mine is little more than routing forms up to higher powers in the Safety Department who can actually make changes around the ship to make things safer. "Chief, I am the Safety PO." I remind him.

"Right. Make sure you keep yourself informed. Do that thing," he says, referring to 'whatever-it-is-you're-supposed-to-do-because-I-have-no-cluse, "and see if anyone else got hurt, too." He gives a thumbs up, and then points to the Divisional Leading Petty Officer, in charge of the whole division beneath the chiefs, technically speaking, to call 'attention to quarters.' Most of what he has to say is typical stuff that doesn't need repeating. Training times and the like, telling people to go to Medical without giving a reason, because Medical didn't tell the division why so-and-so needed to show up, just that they did (inevitably, Medical would also ask so-and-so why they were there, then complain when so-and-so

said, “I dunno, my LPO didn't know either,” and a following five minute debate about who-said-what), or any little things going on about the boat.

Finally, the typical stuff was over, and my chief stepped forward again from the line of leadership facing the massive gaggle that was all of R-MAG Controls. “Alright, so I'm sure you all want to know just why you don't get to keep goofing off down on Astra anymore.” He received some nods. “So, the planet of Landon has a bit of an asteroid problem, with at least one possible-planet-killer. They suspect foul play, but nonetheless, there is a situation on their hands.” Someone behind me must have raised their hand because chief pointed in a gesture for that person to speak.

“So, why us, Chief? There have got to be other warships. We're in Alliance space, for chrissake.” Chief shrugged. “Don't ask me. They don't tell me that kind of stuff. I'd like to think it isn't just us and they don't want to tell us all the ship movements and whatnot, but who knows. All I know is that we're going out there to do our jobs and hopefully save some lives.”

TNV *Dauntless*,

1330 Landon Central Time, 02-11-3398 Sol Date

Reactor-MAG Controls Office

“Anyone back from CO's call yet?” Chief Takahashi asks, peering around a book cabinet to where I'm working, just inside of the door. He's been dozing on and off for the past few hours, trying to do work of his own, but he, like the rest of us, are tired. Normally planetary time-transitions take course over a few weeks, not a few days. It gets hard on the body. “No, no one's back yet.” As Mags, we don't often like to participate in decided “Navy” activities, especially ones that are not required and are attended by tons of coners – non-Mags or Engineering guys. CO's call, where the CO gathers much of the crew and talks to everyone to put out information. Being that this isn't at the regularly scheduled once-every-Sol-week time, like our current CO, Captain Bonham, likes to do.

“Oh, let me know when someone does,” Chief says groggily, his eyes fluttering shut.

“Aye, Chief.” He doesn't hear me, having already managed to doze off in the second after he finished his sentence. I chuckle a little bit, but I feel the effects of the time change myself. I can't wait for leave or civilian life when I'll actually get to sleep in and won't have to deal with time zone changes unless I decide to do it of my own volition.

It's a full ten minutes before one of our junior guys, who we usually send to brave the horrors of dealing with coners, walks in. It happens to be Edohara, and a part of me feels bad for sending one of our more reliable nubs to do the dirty work.

“CO's call?” I ask, a bit hopeful.

The younger sailor nods and sighs disparagingly. “We aren't doing *anything*.”

“What?” I don't understand him, but the look on his face tells me all of our time has been utterly wasted.

“Landon never called for our help.” The planet, rather well populated, doesn't have many ties and is a part of a small, three-planet alliance, not any big hegemony. “So they refused our entry into their space. The captain is hopeful they'll change their minds, so we're going to do a wide orbit of their space and keep track of the asteroid.

“So, wait, what?” I ask. “We left Astra, because... why?”

PC3 Edohara sighs. “Because the captain wanted to help. He said that he never guessed, 'they'd want to sacrifice lives for their personal dignity.' Apparently, Landon is gathering all of their merchant's vessels to dock and latch onto the asteroids and push them away from their planet. Stupid, right?” Very stupid. General anti-asteroid protocol calls for warships or defenses to reduce any large asteroids – meteors, at this point - big enough to penetrate atmo down until they'll burn up. Anything too big should be able to be seen early enough that it can be shoved away, generally by a military scout ship or a well-placed missile.

“So the CO wanted to look like a shining hero? Wait...” I realize something. “We're going into officially un-allied space without escorts? A carrier, in potentially dangerous space, without escorts?”

Chief Takahashi speaks up from around the corner. “Captain Bonham has never been the brightest guy.” It's the first time I've heard him bad-mouth anyone higher ranking in the presence of someone so much lower ranking. “So, we didn't actually get the call, and now they're telling us to do nothing?” He says, recounting what we already learned, since he was probably half asleep for some of the conversation. We nod. He slams a fist into his desk and curses loudly in response.

I know Chief was planning on being able to share a few days with his wife and children this port visit. It's hard to do across so many lightyears. His kids are young, and he's spent more of their lives apart from them than with them. Not having kids, I can't imagine something like that. Ultimately, because our Captain decided to go off on his own, trying to make himself look good, Chief Takahashi is robbed of valuable time with his children. His family had been on a spouse-cruise; a cruise liner contracted by the

military in secret, with no true itinerary, aimed to meet up with the ship at any port call it would stop at. The family members aboard would spend most of their time in FTL, so what was, for example year-long cruise in the real world – and only a six-month cruise for the crew, would be a two-month long vacation for the family. This usually meant cutting ties and quitting jobs, so most families just stuck out the pain of being apart, but many new wives couldn't bear to part for some long, or, in Chief Takahashi's case, his wife likely wanted to travel the galaxy, and this provided an ample opportunity to do so with the added boon of getting to see her husband. Such cruises had high OPSEC – Operational Security – connotations. The family members would know almost the entire schedule of their spouse's ship, so such things were only organized for battlegroups or especially large ships, like our *Dauntless*, and even then, the process was still considered experimental.

Except now, our ship's schedule is haywire. We aren't going to be in any ports at the scheduled times, not without a great deal of effort on the part of the crew, which means pushing the ship hard. All that money Chief Takahashi put into getting his wife on the cruise is now wasted. Worse, the family's time has been wasted. He seems to realize this and slams his fist on the desk when Yuichan and Jameson walk in, looking for more news as well, I suspect.

They jump when the first thing that happens as they enter is the loud “bang” of chief's fist against the desk, and they look a bit scared: Chief Takahashi rarely gets angry, so they look ready to run, but rapidly figure out that he's not angry at any of us when the expressions of Edohara and myself are more of frustration than worry. The two of us recount the news to them while chief rubs his temples and fumes to himself. I can't help but be angry for him. “We need to get rid of him. He's a menace, and he's going to get someone killed,” I consider.

Yuichan doesn't dispute my anger this time, only my intent. “I doubt mutiny would help, Chris. And they'd throw you in jail. Probably for life.” I can tell she knows I don't really mean to overthrow our incompetent commanding officer.

“It'd be worth it.” It probably wouldn't, but I don't care right now.

Takahashi speaks up again, ignoring the previous conversation either out of focused rage or knowing it wasn't serious. “He's always been looking for a way to get that fancy star on his uniform.” He taps his collar, where his Chief's insignia is; where an Admiral's star would go, were he to wear them, “I guess he figured saving a few million lives would be the way to do that, except now he's just wasting navy money and screwing his crew.” Chief continues, anger slowly filling his voice. I'm already pissed

as it is. I can't imagine having a few scarce days with my wife ripped away from me so suddenly. "Worse, I don't know if I *can* be pissed at the guy because he might have actually had good intentions."

It's a thing civilians can't even imagine. Most seem to have breakdowns being away from their loved ones more than a few days. We have to go for months; not that it's easy. I'd love to see my wife. Chief Takahashi had hoped to spend more time with his wife, a wondrous, immensely powerful hope that had actually begun to be actualized, only to be ripped away once he'd had hold of his goal.

I snort in response, sympathizing with the man. "Like he cares about the fact that he's screwing us over." Captain Bonham has never liked our department, much less the rest of the crew, but he obviously doesn't care that some of us only had a few scant hours of liberty; he probably didn't even try to do the math.

Before captaining ships, he was a pilot; not that pilots are bad, but he hasn't made an effort to broaden his education about his crew. He likes pilots and the voidmen more than anyone else. Which means what we see of him is often his unpleasant side. He's required to screen all Reactor Operators. All he asked me was how to scram out the reactor, nothing else – that would be like asking a professional chef how to boil an egg; he blatantly didn't care about the process, though it was thoroughly controlled and very political. He met his requirement and hardly that. Honestly, as dumb as he seems to be, he might have thought it a substantial question. After all, a scram means the ship loses part of it's propulsion and power capabilities for a bit. It has large implications on the mission, if temporary, but recovery from it is easy. If he was worth his salt, he'd have quite a bit more to ask.

But, there is little we can do short of mutiny, and I doubt that would get us farther than life in prison, or death if we happened to be in a war of which we aren't aware and Captain Bonham decided to exercise that right; I don't doubt he would. Often times we just take the pain in complacency, as if it were natural. Those returning from planet-side commands or transferring from other ships inform us otherwise; that other captains do care about their crew, don't yell at them for little to no reason, and don't violate laws. I've yet to see him not give maximum punishment to anyone crossing his path in Non-Judicial Punishment, over which he presides. Those punishments are often beyond what he's allowed to give.

Our rants continue vehemently, with Yuichan even adding logically-backed angst, and it doesn't take long for Edohara to find himself uncomfortable and walk out. He's not used to staying long in the office. Usually only senior leadership, those with special collateral duties, or working on something, like maintenance documents, do so. It's a warship. There simply isn't space for lower-ranking people to stick around in offices that much. However, Chief and I wouldn't have minded if he did stay. Both of us too

lax on such things, Chief being one of the calmer senior-enlisted, and we're too fixated on the nature of the current situation.

As far as we're concerned, as with much of the crew, we've been robbed of a good time. "We're not the major power in the area. I'm sure Alliance policing forces have more firepower than we do." Strictly speaking, it's probably not true. After all, we're in a carrier. We aren't allowed to fire our axial cannon in the general direction of any populated area, for the most part. We've got the firepower to level cities with a single shot.

A bit of guilt starts to set in with Yuichan, though. Sure enough, she'd prove more level headed than I. She starts her new viewpoint, more in-line with her usual self, which chief begrudgingly accepts with a sigh through his nostrils. "No. In all honesty, we are probably the biggest ship in the area. I think. Big Alliance ships don't patrol out this far, just a few small corvettes and a frigate or two. Closer to the Coalition border, sure, but not here. Not near Hadrian. We've probably got enough power and shields to just drive by the suckers and blow all of them away without firing a shot or a gravity-tractor. If Landon isn't asking for Alliance help, either, the only Alliance help they'll get is from those looking to put on Admiral, like our Captain, who just deploy anyway without orders. They might be able to blast a few asteroids with their defensive platforms and whatnot, but they don't likely have anything like we have."

I know she's probably right; Landon should be asking for our help, but aren't, because we are probably their best bet at ensuring a city of theirs isn't turned into a smoking crater. I don't want to accept it, though. I want to be taking a bath, sleeping in, watching a race or two. I want to be having a beer, watch local holonet games. Anything but this uselessness. This worthlessness.

All in all, being deprived of things for months – especially the little things, like weekends, hugging your wife, sleeping in your own bed at night, having all the creature comforts of home, ready access to vast stores of information – it all gets to you. You don't realize it until the purpose that shielded you from the sorrow is stripped away, and I had started to cling to the notion we were going to do some useful good. That little bit of hope is important.

Having it momentarily handed to you and then yanked away for what is apparently no good reason: That destroys a bit of you. Thinking you're going to get something, something you used to take for granted, then having it taken away from you again; that's torture. Civilians-most of them anyway- will never know what it's like to sit in orbit of your home planet for days, being able to see your home city, even, and not be able to get to it because of "work," even if you're just a short shuttle ride away. I silent

curse the mythical Pandora for letting “hope” out of that little box of hers. The world would be so much less depressing without it.

“Hope” is the first step on the road to despair.

The image of things around the ship has changed. Before the captain broke the news of our newfound uselessness and rejection by a potentially endangered people, we thought we were going to be doing some good. That concept – and that hope – is good for the crew of a peacetime military. Making a difference, living up to the title of “hero,” when you go home and actually being able to genuinely say, “thank you,” when someone thanks you for your service, rather than just giving a response you know to be hollow but have no other way to answer.

Newly deprived of all of that, the crew is rather downtrodden. Sitting at my watchstation, I try to focus on work. Ideally, I should be anyway, but like always I'm lost in thought. Today, those thoughts aren't exactly uplifting. “So, what do you think is going to happen to Landon?” I ask no one in particular, but without crickets onboard our ship, something has to eventually break the silence.

“They'll survive.” My watch officer says, apparently devoid of energy to answer further.

The Throttleman beside me – Ben Wallace, whom I went planetside on Astra with – grunts.

“Their plan is stupid. The captain put out how much they're going to have to deal with, to try to make us feel useful, before, you know, he told us we were just going to do absolutely nothing about it. They definitely need a big heavy-hitter in this ballgame, and they barely have the planetary defenses to actually break up the bigger asteroids.”

“They don't.” The watch officer, Anderson, spoke up again. “I saw the plots while I was standing my OOD U/I.” Most officers, like Lieutenant Anderson, have to qualify coner-watches like every other Void Warfare Officer, but unlike the other VWOs, they also have to qualify Reactor watches and perform duties for Reactor. Turning back give him a glance to ask for more elaboration, it's clear that having to pull double-duty like that is what's at the center of his terse sentences and lethargy. He rolls his eyes just a bit. “They've got two asteroids that could do some serious damage, not one. Spectrometers identified one of the two correctly. The second was hidden by it until about a day ago, right after they told us they didn't want our help. We're still feeding them sensory data – they can't exactly reject it – but we spotted the second. It looks like it's got a lot of high-density metals inside. Normally that'd be a boon, but what it means for Landon is that it is going to be hard to move and tougher to crack. There are enough smaller

meteors that the little ships can indeed tractor out of the way, but their planetary defense guns are already firing and plinking away at the bigger asteroids, but they aren't doing much.”

“Think they're going to ask for our help?” I ask. I notice a condition on my panel that I decide, arbitrarily, I don't like. I pantomime moving a switch, reading the name of it to myself, and glance back for approval. “Changing temperature.” Anderson nods approval, and I commit to the action, having felt like I did something, even though it was already within operating bands. I return to my half-facing-my-panel position, looking back at my watch officer. “So?”

Anderson shrugs, “I don't know enough about them to really say one way or the other. I would if I were them, but they might be too prideful. Little planet that wants to make a name for themselves, I guess.”

“I guess.”

“Now,” a familiar but new voice says behind me, causing my head to snap about in surprise towards the newcomer on my other side, “Petty Officer Kierson, sit forward. Act *professional*.” The owner of the voice, I can clearly see, is none other than Senior Chief Stuek, a mechanic. At his command, I sit straight, facing forward, my eyes returning to my panel, as I'm sure his next command is going to be. Senior Chief doesn't even bother looking at the Watch Officer; the only one he isn't senior to. Just to me as I'm the most senior guy around who is still junior to him. So, naturally, our lack of decorum he walked in on is all my fault. “Petty Officer Kierson, you are to be an example to your junior sailors. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Senior.”

“I come in here and see you turned around, away from your panel, shooting-the-breeze with everyone else.” He paused, then turned to my throttleman, Wallace. “Wallace! Did you not just hear me lecture Kierson about posture?” Wallace straightens up. “And you aren't even keeping proper charge of your throttleman!” He points out as if I hadn't been there for his instruction moments before. As if to emphasize his point, a new bell is rung up at exactly that moment, and Wallace begins to answer it properly, now distracted by his duties too much to listen to anything that the ranting senior chief says

Strictly speaking, he's absolutely right. I should be an example to my junior sailors. I should be paying attention to my panel. The difficulty of keeping true to professional discussion was one of the things more understood by superiors. It wasn't possible to maintain alertness for hours with such soporific discussion as reactors and MAG drives nonstop, or worse- nothing at all.

The problem of it, I realize all of a sudden as my gaze shifts to him, is that I hate being lectured by *him*. Sure, it's never pleasant to be lectured like this, especially by the sort that believes in this type of stuff heart-and-soul, but he's absolutely rotund. Horrifically obese. His uniform stretches at every seam, and he has no neck to speak of. How he managed to sneak into the operating station so silently is beyond me, logic tells me his footstep should be thunderous. That notion, a bit humorous, is all that clouds my thoughts as he continues to lecture me. Another one of “those” guys who shouldn't even still be in the Federal Navy, trying to tell me how to do my job. How he hasn't gotten kicked out for his weight is beyond me.

I zone back in just to hear what everyone always hears amidst these slip ups. “If I catch you doing it again, I'm getting you kicked off watch.” Like he'd actually exert enough energy to make it to the propulsion spaces twice in one day.

I nod. “Aye, Senior.”

“Senior Stuek,” Lieutenant Anderson finally speaks up, a bit of irritation in his voice. “That's not your call. That's my call. What's more, Senior, I don't recall you requesting permission to enter, so you can leave, now.” As he speaks, Anderson's tone becomes more and more filled with disdain until it is absolutely dripping, rising in volume noticeably, too. Rightly so; not requesting permission to enter the space was such a novice offense that it pretty much destroyed the credibility that Senior had in scolding myself and Wallace; hence the growing smirks that everyone else in the room share, all turning away from the admonished senior enlisted man to hide them.

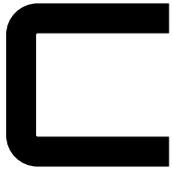
Senior Chief looks just a bit taken aback for just a moment. “Aye, my apologies, sir.” With that, he scampers away, faster than a man so hefty should be able to, louder than when he entered.

It takes a moment before Wallace begins chuckling, however quietly. “Thank you, sir,” I say, looking back at Lieutenant Anderson.

All he does is lift his hand, pointing his index finger down and circling it, to silently tell me to turn around, a stern look on his own face. The Lieutenant was inadvertently reprimanded as well; Senior Stuek may not have had the courage to do it openly, but Anderson knew that if stories of my repeat offense reached higher authorities, he'd also get yelled at. To that end, he wasn't about to have me acting unprofessionally in the slightest – at least not until the end of this watch, in the event that Senior Stuek did decide to return. I could see that much in eyes, along with a hint of understanding that Senior Stuek was indeed right, but not the best individual to deliver the message. His notable girth and thoroughly poor

and pompous attitude, with little good virtue to back it up, had earned him the derision of the entire department.

I did as I was told for the second time in the last two minutes, doomed to survive the next few hours in boring silence with nothing to keep my gaze company but a dull, gray reactor operating panel.



CHAPTER EIGHT:

#156: "Innocence" isn't a thing, anymoreTNV *Akihito*,

0130 Selene Central Time, 06-14-3395 Sol Date

Flight Deck

His very first mission with his very first squad, and it wouldn't even "count" towards his credibility; he was fresh out of his training and yearned for the respect, and knew he wasn't going to get it here. He wasn't even going to be a real RIFT after this. At least, not in the eyes of his comrades. Sure, he'd be a bit "seasoned," to them, but not a real drop-trooper. This wasn't a drop. It just so happened that they were in the area, and something needed doing. It was the first time it had happened for Ramirez. In fact, it was the first time it had happened for many of his platoon. A full half of them were green and had never fired a weapon in anger. Soldiers fell out of practice, and those who had experience left the military in droves either due to "slimming down," policies forcing them out, or simply their contracts running out, so they were replaced by new guys with no real combat under their belts. That sort of thing happened in peace time.

The thing they were about to do did not. Not only were they going to help out local law enforcement, but they had passengers in tow: a group of civilians was going to follow them – and record them.

They'd been assigned to help out with a nuisance Selene was having. Except, it wasn't just a nuisance: some pirates-turned-smugglers – or rebels, or freedom fighters, whatever you called them, which usually depended on whether or not you liked them and to what degree – had gotten their hands on some rather heavy weaponry and high-tech equipment, more than what local law enforcement was capable of dealing with. Selene's Sentinel unit had been mustered, but some Prefectural senator with his hands in all the pockets managed to spin that this would be a great time for a new show "Cry Havoc!" to film their debut episode.

"Cry Havoc!" or "Havoc," as Ramirez came to know it, was a sister to the popular "Unto the Breach," which featured active duty Tsalmaveth units in their combat operations. It had been so popular for combining both reality and action that "Havoc" had been dreamed up to follow RIFT soldiers.

The scene was set for some unfortunate pirates. They were awaiting a transport, in orbit of Selene, to arrive to bring their ill-gotten goods, so that they could distribute them planetside. Once they made it to the surface, those items would be essentially lost forever in the criminal underground that had plagued the planet of Selene for centuries.

All Ramirez knew was that someone had obtained all the information he'd just been briefed on, and he was none-too-happy to hear “too big of guns for Sentinel guys to deal with,” which somehow meant that a green team of RIFT *could* deal with them.

Fortunately for Ramirez, a freshly minted with the rank of Petty Officer Third class – or, combining job and rank, Operator Third-Class, he was too junior as an E-4 for any of the media to pay attention to for more than a few minutes in their “pre-mission” interviews. He simply got asked “are you scared?” to which he replied, “No way, we got this.” He'd followed it up with a corny, “Hi, mom!” and a wave to the camera, as if to emphasize just how much of a deal this was not.

In truth, he was scared. What if he got shot? What if he shot someone? He'd killed plenty of fake guys in simulators, never actually a real person. That was a very real possibility today. How would he cope? He didn't want the entire galaxy experiencing his first post-combat emotions with him – or worse, experiencing his death.

That thought crept into him as he stood in the open bay of the Angel dropship. His boots magnetized as the lumbering beast of a craft took off, holding him to the deck. He magnetized his own hand and put it on the ceiling, stabilizing his entire body; he didn't want to have to use his core muscles just yet, and expending them on simply maintaining upright waiting to go to battle was a waste. The media crew droned on; mostly about Chief Hiroshi. A battle-hardened veteran and experienced gravtech, the platoon's senior non-com was bound to give them lots of juicy footage and action shots. To the glee of the cameramen and host, he'd been assigned to protect them.

He'd even obliged by bringing “a really big gun.” Being a gravtech, wielding the massive Type 90 Anti-Materiel rifle was as simple as wielding a pistol; he could just make it weigh, to him, as light as a feather without much effort. In practice, Ramirez had even seen him fire at targets, accurately, over a mile away – without even touching it or looking down the scope. No doubt that the show's host would like to see that once they were done here. They were asking him all sorts of questions, and despite his normal stoic nature, Ramirez had caught clues that Chief was enjoying the attention, even if he had no love for the camera. The older man, as Ramirez's senior, was a bit of a mentor. He'd taught Ramirez a great deal that his schools hadn't, given him personal advice on how to live “in the real world,” such as buying vehicles and getting an apartment and the like, and he was generally an all-around good leader. The type of guy you didn't want to disappoint because you liked him, not because you were afraid of him. Still, Ramirez didn't want to be on the other end of his rage; he'd told enough stories of some of his more

impressive kills of highly important terrorists, ring-leaders, and pirates that Ramirez felt even a bit safer simply having the Chief around.

“You stay behind me.” Chief’s voice, talking to the shows’ crew, snapped Ramirez out of his thoughts. “MacBeath, you’re on point. Ramirez, breach.” Ramirez nodded, tapping the breaching charges at his hip to indicate he understood. He already knew his role, but going over it again was good practice, and he also realized that Chief was over-exaggerating the directions with hand movements for the sake of the cameras that hovered around him.

Having cameramen and a host on scene was stupid, especially with modern drone technology and helmet-cams, but the TV studio, with all of its fame, had insisted that “getting the right shot was an art that required a human touch.” As if RIFT soldiers weren’t human. Ramirez understood the point, but he didn’t like the notion of protecting people who would just get in the way. They were a liability, but as a lowly E-4, just a Third Class Petty Officer, he felt it wasn’t his place to say such things, especially when he had to call these men, “sir,” like they were officers or something.

The *Kozane dō*-class cruiser, the *Akihito*, remained in orbit not far behind their target, a rather large freighter named the *Baleful*. Not a named that endeared Ramirez to it, exactly. The *Akihito* gave no indication it suspected anything of the freighter, having done nothing more than a simple EM sweep over the area. The ship did have point defense guns normally used to ward off pirates and asteroids, but they wouldn’t be able to fell the shields of the two Angel-dropships easily – but they were something to look out for, and if it came down to a firefight between the ships, the *Akihito* would swat the civilian-craft out of the sky without chipping its own paint.

The jump-freighter was pretty standard. Long and utilitarian with the vast majority of its cargo pods external to the pressure hull; much of the ship was little more than a skeleton sturdy enough to hold the pods, a small crew complement, and the engines to push it. Some sections were more form fitted to sturdily hold cargo, while other pods looked like they were only holding on by the docking collar and a few magnetic clamps, so that more awkwardly shaped units could be hauled, like spherical gas-canisters.

The dropships were able to approach on a rather natural path, as if to pass the *Baleful* on their way planetside. Testing out his tactical displays, he was able to find one displaying their orbits relative to each other. The *Akihito* had been positioned higher in orbit than the target, so the freighter had actually advanced on the cruiser, rather than the other way around, in its lower, faster orbit, and the two dropships had been launched behind the pirate’s freighter, and were able to approach on its relative blind-side. Had it been running its MAG drives, it would be even more blind to their approach, but they had no such luck.

The dropships lurched forward suddenly, not able to keep up their charade for long, and Ramirez's tactical display suddenly showed a pair of fighters rocketing out of the *Akihito's* flight deck, advancing on the freighters as well. Just as they arrived, circling nose-in around the freighter, orbiting it as if being swung around nose-first on a string, Ramirez noted a small message on his helmet's HUD that indicated that his dropship had been detected by the freighter. That fact had been obviously inevitable; the dropships weren't stealthy enough, and the range too close. The pirates could literally look out their windows and see them, if not their parent cruiser.

He audibly heard the “thud” of the dropship as it latched ventral side of the freighter, and then heard the other drop ship do the same, all the other way on the other side. He also heard a few muffled explosions as the fighters took out the point defense turrets that had likely just tried to come online and take out the now immobile dropships. The pirates had waited for the opportune time to do try that gamble, but if they wanted to play it off as a misunderstanding, they'd just blown that chance.

“Go, Ramirez!” Chief yelled, but Ramirez was already pushing his explosive-laden hands towards the deck as the floor opened up, revealing the solid surface of the ship beneath him.

With the bottom of their dropship facing the bottom of the freighter, it would make entry rather interesting, a bit complicated, but mostly unexpected; the RIFT would get a drop on anyone onboard, who would expect a horizontal entry. Getting used to the benefits provided by artificial gravity was an easy flaw to exploit.

“Breaching!” Ramirez yelled to warn everyone, who already knew what he was doing as all eyes were on him, but training made for safe habits, and he triggered the explosive. Dust flew into the air around them, but the panel of metal beneath them was neatly thrown at an angle downwards – or, upwards, rather, as they were on the ventral side of the ship – and away from their hole. “Go!” As he yelled, MacBeath was already through, diving – as to go through the hole head-first and be able to shoot anyone on the other side - and much of the rest of the platoon followed, including Ramirez. Holding up the rear was Chief Hiroshi and his gaggle of civilians in tow like ducklings and one rifleman assigned to act as a shield for them, should they be ambushed.

“Bottom's up!” Ramirez cracked a joke, which he knew was a bit lame, but if they included it in the show it'd be rather fitting; the viewers were in for a bit of a gravity-fueled treat.

Ramirez fell through the hole, then gave himself a bit of a gravity-push to one side and flipped himself midair. All RIFT soldiers had some degree of gravtech training for just this reason, but those who weren't officially grav-techs had little enough aptitude or training to do little more than stay on the floor

or perform complex-gravity-transitions like this one. Before he hit, someone on their platoon-voice-channel had already given the all-clear, signaling the news crew was okay to try to scramble through. “Don't worry, I've got you.” Chief Hiroshi told the crew, who had no gravity-rigs of their own.

As he stood beside the hole, the chief raised an arm, and the three civilians floated through upside down, then were expertly righted and alighted on their feet, all thanks to Chief Hiroshi. It was rather simple, but the civilians were in awe at how gentle he'd been.

He nodded to the assigned riflemen, and they crowded themselves around the cameramen. One of them, the host, held up a hand for a moment. The man wanted to get a moment to say a few words, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they'd just announced their presence to these pirates, who were about to start showing up any second now. The chief shook his head, his armored helmet making the gesture obvious; he wasn't about to sacrifice the element of surprise for a reality show.

The room had only two obvious exits. One was a door; one was a scuttle in the ceiling. The other part of the insertion force would be another level above that, and they'd been designated to perform the sweep of those two floors and engineering while Ramirez's team worked forward towards the bridge, and they'd get the brunt of the work – and action.

Chief waved his arm forward, and the teams found themselves against opposing sides of the wall, ready to advance through the door in two lanes. Ramirez naturally positioned himself by the door to breach, while MacBeath readied himself to fire through it. To his surprise, so did Chief, snapping up his hefty Type 90 – easily 30 kilograms – like it was a child's plaything. Before the signal was given, Ramirez saw his vision widen, more of his teammates coming into his field of view, looking quite distorted. He knew what was happening; one of their auratechs was channeling the light around the team away from the hatch they prepared to go through, intending to hide, or at least obscure, the team from them; any return fire from these enemies.

Before he bothered wasting a charge, Ramirez tapped the panel to operate the door, and sure enough it slid right open. As irised open, Hiroshi fired the massive rifle, and a pirate who'd been ready to do the same disappeared. MacBeath put down a second with a short staccato from his rifle. “Clear!” the pointman shouted; over their radio channel it was crisp and loud, but outside their helmets it would be quite muffled. The group moved forward through the hall, cautiously. Ramirez, near the front of his line, glanced back a moment to see one of the cameramen pop out a hovering drone, which began to circle around and wind through the group.

He snapped his head back forward to see the man in front of him round a corner. His platoon split, his side checking their way, the other doing the same. With the cameramen in his group, that meant that there were now half as many people to be in the shot. Great, he thought, he was going to probably be in the shots they took. Ramirez wasn't sure if that was exciting or nerve-wracking. He hoped they'd be the only guys shooting at him. A few more shots rang out above them. The other platoon had found some resistance. It didn't last long, apparently. What news they had said that these pirates had seen combat against security forces, but the RIFT were special forces units.

Another corner, pointing them back towards the bow of the ship. No more opposition, not yet. This appeared to be the crew services deck; it wasn't exactly the largest of freighters, but it had to be crewed by at least thirty, so they needed some form of galley, bathrooms, and a few berthings. Ramirez saw orders appear on his HUD, designating fireteams to clear certain compartments. Ramirez, inevitably, was on one of those fireteams. He noticed Chief and a few others weren't – they couldn't afford to risk the civilians in so many little close-quarters battles, but they could send in their little camera drones to film the encounters.

Ramirez approached the hatch he'd been assigned and attached a breaching charge to it. Three other members of his fireteam followed suit, and they were soon accompanied by a little floating camera. They nodded to each other, and Operator Second Class Harris, the fireteam's leader, looked at Ramirez. “Breach.”

“Breaching.” Ramirez triggered the device and the door blew off its hinges inward, the little camera drone flying in first. As Ramirez followed the pointman in, he noticed the camera drone eying them, watching their entry. He also noticed that the door had been spun about, and a pirate lay on his back, face half-crushed in and blood all over the center counter of the kitchen Ramirez and his team were now storming through. The man had been killed by the breaching charge.

The breaching charge that Ramirez had triggered.

It was the first life that Ramirez had ever ended. It gave him pause. He'd just ended the life of another human being. He didn't know how to handle it. The act was technically justified – the man's hand still gripped a military-grade sub-machine gun that could have actually hurt the RIFT as they entered, had he not been in the way of the door. The first kill he'd ever made, and it had been an accident of sorts. He'd still have had to put him down, or someone would have, but this made it... different, he thought.

“Ramirez!” Someone shouted, snapping him out of his reverie, and Harris, last through the door, leveled his weapon at Ramirez's face – no – just on the other side of it and pulled the trigger. The rounds

flew over his shoulder, and he turned to see what his fire team leader was aiming at. Another pirate had jumped out from behind a cabinet and nearly blown a hole in Ramirez himself.

“Clear!” the pointman said after a moment. The two men had been the only in the area. Harris approached Ramirez. “You okay?” The man, only slightly superior, looked down at the body of the man crushed by the door, then back at Ramirez. “Don't worry.” Ramirez could see the understanding there, even if his helmet obscured his face. Everyone knew this was Ramirez's first assignment. They'd probably all been talked to about looking out for him.

All he could do was follow him out. As he did, he noticed Harris regarding Chief Hiroshi, as if he were having a conversation with him over a private channel.

Sure enough, Chief approached Ramirez. “You okay, Operator?” Harris must have used a closed-channel to talk to him and let him know about Ramirez. “Don't let it get to you. Don't think about it now. We'll talk later. Now, do your job.”

Ramirez had questions, but wasn't sure what they were, exactly, or how to ask them. So much had been left unanswered, so many thoughts incomplete. With nothing more than a confident “Aye, Chief,” he did as he was told and met up with his fireteam at their next destination, only two hatches down. Cameras flitted about, catching multiple angles of each unfolding encounter. Troopers ran from compartment to compartment, some of their armor now streaked in blood.

Ramirez pushed the thoughts away. He had a mission to do, and civilian lives directly counted on him doing his job. If these media crewmen died now, it would look terrible for the military; RIFT especially. They had considerable armor – better than the RIFT soldiers, as they didn't need as much mobility – but the couple of weapons on these pirates he'd seen indicated it wouldn't be enough. If these pirates really wanted these three civilians dead, they'd be dead if RIFT didn't get in the way.

There'd been a change. Harris hadn't told him, but it was obvious when someone else had taken Ramirez's position as breacher; Now, Ramirez was going to take up the tail, apparently. The rotation of position was a bit of a blow, but a change made on-the-fly to ensure maximum effectiveness of the unit. Harris wasn't sure if he could rely on Ramirez further forward in the fireteam's advancement. *He's not sure if I can pull the trigger*, Ramirez realized. *I don't know, either*. He supposed he would if push came to shove. His training had been impeccable, and he presumed that it would take over. He hoped it would.

The team entered the room with Ramirez in tow. In this room, a four-man-berthing, there was no action to be had. It was a small, straight room with bunks on the sides and lockers against the far wall; Ramirez barely even made it into the room before his team was already turning around and leaving. As

he did, the blast doors behind the platoon slammed shut, isolating them from their entry point to the ship. It didn't take much to realize that the pirates meant to trap them and were probably about to begin their assault. A shout came over the platoon channel, "Mahan is down!" One of the men in another fireteam had been hit. Heavy thumps sounded above; the other platoon was engaging with explosives, or was being engaged with them. As he moved to the center of the room, gravity gave out.

Rather, it was cut. Ramirez focused and forced his small gravity pack to push him back towards the ground before he floated too far from it, and his boots engaged magnetically, holding him down. "Incoming!" Someone shouted, and a small Hadrian drone, deployed by one of the troopers, zipped backwards around a corner. Sparks flew from it as chunks were ripped away by kinetic gunfire from some unseen enemy before it could retreat to the relative safety of the hallway that the platoon now inhabited. Without artificial gravity, the drone just kept floating through the air, crashing into the bulkhead.

Ramirez was out in the open. Ramirez looked to the hatch on his right and extended a hand out to it; all but one of his team had exited, the last now taking up position to use the room for cover. At his command the hatch began to groan, then slowly ripped free, bolts bending as his gravity-pack directed it to be yanked free. Ramirez nearly had to duck away from the door finally flew from it's hinges, but he caught it in time, using his control of gravity to counteract it's velocity and slow it. With a massive 'clang,' he shoved it into the deck and knelt behind it. Without gravity, such action took more muscle than usual, though his suit assisted. MacBeath ducked down behind the impromptu shelter as well, which placed them just about as close to the enemy as possible.

Another small drone, this one unfamiliar in design, popped around the corner to peer at them. Ramirez fired, and the drone flew away from him. Apparently, the drone's operator had seen enough, because the next thing to come around the corner was a cylinder, a bit larger than a fist. It bounced off the ceiling, as if it had been lobbed by someone who'd forgotten they no longer had artificial gravity, but it still functioned just as intended; the flashbang grenade emitted blinding light and sound; the helmets the RIFT wore compensated for the second and tried for the first, but Ramirez still saw enough of the flash that his eyes were still momentarily damaged.

A second object, this one a ball, flew around the corner; this time it looked as though it's trajectory was intentional. However, it stopped mid-air, then flew back around the corner – a scream shortly followed, then a detonation. Ramirez turned to see Chief Hiroshi standing tall, arm outstretched, guiding the gravitational waves that had flung the grenade back whence it came. Chief then took off at a sprint, his large rifle still in tow. He chucked it in front of him, and it sailed through the air over Ramirez. Chief,

however, did not. He released the magnets in his boots and kicked off, flipping himself in air, landing on the ceiling overhead, then re-engaging the magnets. Now upside-down, he continued his charge. A few more experienced troopers followed suit, following behind Chief on the walls, ceiling, and even floor. Most chose the left wall that, when rounded, would have them looking “down” at their enemy, allowing their legs and lower torso armor to shield the most important organs of their body. Stupidly, the civilian cameramen tried to follow Chief down the corridor but were stopped by a few troopers.

No one other than Chief Hiroshi had passed Ramirez's makeshift door-fort, so he got a front row seat. As Chief exposed himself to the cross-hallway, his rifle flipped midair, and started firing into the pirates that Ramirez yet could not see. Chief extended his arms out, then flung his left arm back, his side now facing the enemy, giving them a low-profile. Several weapons flew past him, obviously yanked by electromagnetic force from his gravtech implants and gear. Bits and pieces of makeshift armor did as well. Blobs of blood indicated that at least one man had lost a limb or two in combined gravity-push and pull. Gruesome though it was, this was technological warfare at its finest.

Chief wielded his technopowers as good as any warrior, never quite keeping still. Several rifles he'd just pulled now all aligned themselves with him at his sides, along with his own weapon and fired, just as several pulses of energy weapon bolts washed over him, shielded by an unseen force, his arms crossed in front of his chest, now, as if they themselves were holding the invisible shield. In a manner of speaking, they were, for most of the projectors and coils related to gravomancy were located on the arms and chests of their suits.

Countering the blows, Chief gravity-yanked a locker, meant for storing damage control gear, bolted into the wall next to him, then shot it away from him, and followed it by launching several rifles that had been under his control to follow the massive storage box-turned-projectile. A canister of compressed gas inside the locker detonated, sending shards of shrapnel everywhere. Several suddenly came to a stop in front of Hiroshi, before drifting off on their own.

Ramirez realized every trigger pull was a micro force projection – it would be like trying to imagine oneself with dozens of arms and controlling them all; Chief Hiroshi's brain-implant suite had to be impressive, yet such a thing still took skill beyond what technology alone could grant.

“This is awesome!” one of the cameramen exclaimed, moving forward as those previously holding him back had parted. He made his way around to try to get view of the battle going on from Chief's rear. What Ramirez was seeing was awe inspiring, distracting even; no one had ever seen Chief Hiroshi put on such a display.

It had been going on too long; Chief's initial volleys and the detonation should have ended every pirate in that hall, Ramirez realized. *No*, he thought, *they must have their own technomages*. Such roles weren't uncommon, but if they'd stood up to Chief Hiroshi, they must be good. Chief Hiroshi wasn't just fighting for the cameras; he was fighting for his very life.

The young soldier finally snapped to his senses, recognizing the folly of the foolish civilian, as he passed “No!” Ramirez shouted, trying to give a gravity pull to yank back the cameraman just as he rounded the corner, mere feet away from Chief.

Chief turned and gave a complimentary push on the cameraman, who yelped in surprise as he was pulled off his feet and thrown down the hallway, over Ramirez's shoulder.

He saw it. Most of them probably did. The momentary break in focus was long enough. Chief Hiroshi's own anti-materiel rifle spun mid-air, point blank range, directly at his back. Ramirez's instincts kicked in and he focused as much brainpower as he could muster on the barrel of the gun. The neural-to-circuit pathways flared and a tethered-push sprung out, forcing the barrel to spin and twist; the tether of forces sent Ramirez flying to his right in an arc; the pirate controlling the weapon had likely been better anchored than he. A fraction of a second later, it detonated as the pirate commanding attempted to fire the weapon. The weapon exploded as the round impacted the twist in the barrel, sending Hiroshi reeling and slamming into the far bulkhead, but otherwise unscathed. Ramirez finally impacted a bulkhead himself, now getting a clearer view of the hall from his new angle; as he hit, he now clearly saw the pirate who'd attempted to kill his mentor. Now that Ramirez was firmly anchored against the bulkhead, the gravmage pirate was himself flung.

Ramirez had an idea: Flexing his core and legs, he planted them firmly against the wall at his back – or, he supposed, the wall was now his “ground,” due to the lack of gravity destroying the notion of orientation – and again he focused, this time on the disoriented pirate in front of him, giving him a gravity pull directly towards himself. Airborne from the sudden and unexpected jerk of forces between himself and Ramirez, the pirate had few ways to physically protest other than to orient himself towards his assumed assailant, having not noticed Ramirez. So, the pirate, now pulled into view of the entire squad, used his control of gravity in order to orient himself towards Hiroshi – his back to the rest of the RIFT team. A few opened fire, having a clear line of sight on the man. Had he been able to see the look on his face, Ramirez was sure he would have seen surprise, but the pirate was focusing on Hiroshi, who even while bullets ripped through the pirate, charged and delivered a kick to his chest; the angle was awkward, as Hiroshi still clung to the overhead by his magnetic boots and the pirate was still attached to what would

normally be considered the floor. As his body spun through the air, down the hall towards the team, Ramirez finally saw his face and the life escape his eyes.

And he didn't feel sorry for him.

In all the commotion, no one saw the last assailant until it was too late. The man was suddenly behind Hiroshi in a flash. Ramirez had no idea where he came from. But before anyone could say anything, his fist, charged with technomantic force, was through Chief Hiroshi's chest with a blue flash.

Caught in surprise, it took a moment before anyone responded. Chief fell upwards, a hole where his heart should have been. Ramirez's suit was alarming, telling him something he didn't comprehend. He couldn't understand what had happened; how had the man suddenly appeared? He must have been an auramage, bending light around him to hide. Ramirez didn't have much time to contemplate that, for just as fast as he appeared, the assassin fled around the corner, almost startled to see an entire squad still alive before him, but not before Ramirez got a good look at his hawkish face. A face he instantly hated. A face he wanted to kill.

Several troopers rounded their corner and opened fire, only to be shoved backward by a technomantic push. They bent at the knees, their weapons stripped from their grasp and flung into the wall opposite them.

Someone had been clearing the way and covering for the fleeing auramancer. A pirate, dressed in no special garb, just an ordinary vacuum-safe suit, showed himself around the corner; he seemed determined to take revenge for his fallen friends; several firearms and pieces of metal that littered the area were shot away from him in a shotgun-spray of debris at troopers, but with less control than needed; no one else was seriously injured. Not yet.

Full of rage and anger, Ramirez leveled his rifle at the man. The pirate waved a hand, and the bullets impacted the wall behind him – nowhere close to where Ramirez had aimed. Much of the platoon who still held their weapons tried likewise, with similar results. He repositioned, pushing himself to the same plane he'd been on before, now on the same point-of-reference as the pirate he now faced, and Ramirez slid back into the makeshift door-bunker he'd had before, finding that MacBeath had barely moved position, even if he'd kept up the fight.

Some of the troopers tried thrusting the man back with gravity or electromagnetic pushes of their own, to no avail. Ramirez could make out a large pack on the man's back – the source of his power, a massive rig granting him his technomancy, fed into gauntlets on his forearms to help focus the force. It was crude but effective. Ramirez couldn't tell if he was an auramage or gravmage; it was hard to be certain

in such a short period of time, as the powers often had similar effects, more so in an environment with so much metal.

Yet another pirate rounded the corner with a rifle. The man bunked in with Ramirez took him down with a short staccato of gunfire, then, in turn, was struck by a large piece of debris from the push of the techomancer still standing, blocking incoming rounds. He fell sideways to the ground, partly outside of their cover. Ramirez realized that they were still relatively in-line with the room they'd recently been in. He extended one arm out towards his comrade and gave him a gravity-push, throwing him into the safety of the berthing compartment, where he was caught by one of the other team members. It was just in time – several sharp hunks of metal arced over their barricade and impacted the floor where the man had been so hard that they embedded themselves there. Ramirez had saved his life.

He had to act fast – most of the RIFT had taken up defensive positions against this technomancer and had ushered the cameramen into other compartments. Ramirez was practically all alone now in the middle of the hall, though troopers poked their heads out long enough to fire or push objects towards the powerful pirate; Ramirez assumed he was powerful, or at least his rig was. The man wasn't doing anything especially complex, mostly just throwing projectiles and shielding himself. His comrade hadn't been well-versed in physics, having been thrown off by his own gravitic-pull tethering against Ramirez's, so maybe...

Taking a deep breath, Ramirez focused on the auratech-coil on his forearm, energizing it, and put it up on the back of the hatch that gave him protection and kept him out of sight. He felt it attach to his arm, and with his other arm he applied a small gravitational field to the door, helping him wield it like a shield – he stood upright, spinning the door upright once more, feeling much like a centurion of old as the door, taller than he, took up most of the vertical span of the passage. He couldn't see his enemy, but he knew where the man was. Gritting his teeth and planting his feet, leaning on his impromptu shield, he felt massive pushes on, this way and that, trying to rip the hatch out of his grip. Ramirez's hold kept, and his free hand drew his knife from its sheath on his chest. Keying his radio, he spoke to the other soldiers. "Push me."

He tried to run forward, but the pirate had a nice flat surface – the hatch itself that Ramirez held – to keep him back with. One by one, the older soldiers focused their own gravity-rigs and aura-rigs on Ramirez. It felt as though his body was being crushed from all sides but the assist was enough that he was able to begin running forward. Physics was on his side.

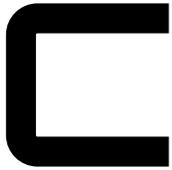
As the pirate pushed off of Ramirez, and the others did as well, the force of Ramirez trying to push off the floor, his own weight, and the weight of the other troops greatly outweighed that of the single pirate, just as he had planned. The pirate was thrown backward with his own push, and Ramirez felt the push against him increase as the pirate hit the wall, now having the entire ship supporting him.

His plan was working but it was now harder to keep going. Ramirez was still able to push forward, foot by foot. He passed by where Chief had been killed, the body still lazily hanging from the ceiling. The thought of his dead mentor enraged him, and he lunged forward, heedless of the fact that he was now exposed to a hallway he hadn't checked; he trusted that Chief had cleared it well enough. The pirate flung himself to the side, and the offset of forces caused Ramirez to spin sideways, his hatch-shield slamming against the bulkhead. Cocking his head to the side as he was pushed away, he saw the pirate with a smirk on his face.

Ramirez raised his free arm towards the pirate, charging the gravtech coils there, gravitational waves pulsing around it, effectively turning his arm into a railgun, able to shoot anything at incredible speeds. Like the knife still held in the hand, now aimed at the pirate. He let it go, point first, and pushed on it with incredible force. His target didn't last.

Turning to meet new challengers, newly exposed, the only people he saw were from the other squad, pouring in from where their enemies had been; they'd taken their portion of the ship and were sweeping back through towards Ramirez's team.

There was no sign of the man who'd murdered Chief Hiroshi so violently, and for good reason. On the far bulkhead, the way he'd fled, was an escape pod hatch. The pod was gone.



CHAPTER NINE:

#58: HYPOCRISY IS THE PRIVILEGE OF RANKTNV *Dauntless*,

1430 Landon Central Time, 02-13-3398 Sol Date

"Sweat Box" Gym

In the time I'd known Ramirez, he'd told me quite a few stories. I often sat enraptured as he did. He was one of the few non-Mags who could entertain me with something interesting about their work; Navy life is often lacking any thrill, so having someone interesting and practically exotic to talk to has been a wonderful change of pace for me. The one thing I realized early on was that he almost never talked of combat. Drills, everyday life, training, the inevitable but unpredictable happenings going on when you give physically active alpha-males only occasional free-time and lots of disposable income, and a couple low-intensity fights, to be sure, but little true combat.

He'd been in multiple battles before, I know. After all, his left forearm was prosthetic. It was thoroughly convincing, but he'd been rather open about it. Knowing about it now, I can tell that it's not sweating. Not that much of him sweats when we work out together – at my pace – but it's noticeable.

In the time since leaving Astra via FTL – we'd actually arrived at Landon since then (I'd managed to sleep through the dropshock, too), he offered to let me and a few others in my division work out with the RIFT. Some took up the offer, others didn't want to be so vastly outstripped by guys who often have little to do onboard a ship except work out, and whose job revolves largely around fitness and being about as "manly" as one can physically be. A couple actually could match them.

Watch rotations being a stalwart obstacle, I couldn't take up the offer much myself. But I'd made the time and he's now trying to coach me on my running form on one of the cardio machines in the gym we call the "sweat box" due to lack of proper ventilation.

Fortunately, my form is good enough that he has few pointers to give other than things I already knew but had been needing to focus on more, such as breathing.

"So, what sort of gear does that thing have?" My voice comes out staggered between breaths. I may be experienced at running, but I'm no athlete. Ramirez is only a few feet from me, on the machine beside me. When he turns my way, I nod to his arm to let him know what I meant. "Got to have some cool stuff, right?" I ask, again, panting a bit as I speak.

"They let me customize it quite a bit. Even got a few auratech and gravtech projectors installed." His voice doesn't betray the fact that his machine is set to force him to work harder than mine is making

me push. “Other than that, standard computer stuff, power sources. Not a whole lot, the projectors take up most of the space; that and the metal struts that actually do the work of what muscles would.”

That surprises me a bit, that he’d be allowed high-tech gear that wasn’t standard issue. “The military pay for that?”

He nods with a smile on his face. “You bet they did. And I get to keep it after I leave, too. It’s a ‘medical aid.’” Ramirez punctuated his words with his fingers, air-quoting it.

I nod, looking a bit contemplative quite intentionally. “Maybe I need to lose an arm.” I pause for a second, catching my breath as I continue to pump my legs, “I might be able to get cool gear, too.” “Not something I’d wish on anyone.” His voice morphs from jovial to solemn in the course of the single sentence, like memories are washing over him. I glance over again and see loss on his face. I don’t broach the subject any further. Forcing another guy to speak about something like that is not something one does, and Ramirez and I aren’t that good of friends.

We run in silence before I try to rescue the conversation. “I would like to be able to be able to do what you gear to do. Technomancy, I mean. It just seems so cool.”

“It can be.” Ramirez doesn’t give any indication that his mind had been elsewhere for the last few minutes, remembering the trauma that caused him to lose his arm. Perhaps it was something more, maybe he lost more than his forearm. He seems to have adjusted well mentally to the artificial limb.

I’m guessing didn’t lose something that day, but *someone*.

“I’ve tried, a bit,” I admit sheepishly. “All ship’s crew are given some level of priority over the extra processes of the ship’s gravity generator. Reactor department made the argument that they needed more than others for a while, but the captain got wise on that real fast and knocked us down to standard, low-priority. I occasionally get to play with higher-tier stuff, once or twice a year, but the last time I did... things didn’t go so well.” I inflect that last part quite a bit with a high-pitched tone. I’d already told him about the debacle in the reactor core, with Hay.

Talking passes the time while working out, but mixing it with cardio makes both tasks difficult, so I’m huffing and puffing as I speak. Well, it makes it difficult for me. Ramirez is still quite fine doing both. “I managed to get myself to float once without high-priority controls... that’s how I got this.” I point to the bandage still on my forehead.”

“That’s how you got it?” He laughs. I nod, a bit sheepish. “Man, I’m going to have to train you.”

I’m taken aback. Train me? “What? With what?” My voice is a haggard now, and I’m having to take deep breaths.

“You can use some of our gear.”

“What? They’d allow that?” Real gear? Actually be able to use real technomancy gear? Not just that, but Special Forces technomancy gear? That means it’s about as good of gear as it comes, apart from the real specialists and Force Multiplier techs. I have a hard time believing they’d let such a novice practice with something so expensive, especially someone who isn’t an adept.

He looks confused that I’d even ask the question, “Uh, yeah, it’s *our* gear. We’re RIFT – who’s going to stop us?”

The differences in our command-culture strike me out of nowhere. He’s RIFT. I’m not. He gets to flaunt and play with his ridiculously expensive gear, I barely get to maintain my own equipment without mounds of paperwork. I don’t get all the same “badass” privileges he does.

I feel like I’m asking stupid questions now but I’ve always been a bit of a worrier, so I keep prodding, trying to find the thing that is going to ruin my dreams. The Navy has a habit of doing that to me. After all, I wouldn’t be allowed to let him play around with the dark matter reactor. He’d be allowed to look at the controls I work with, but even that was questionable. “Your Chief?”

Ramirez waves dismissively. “Nah, he won’t care. Trust me.” It is tempting. It’s my dream come true, though I don’t want to sound too eager. I’m beaten to it. “So, you in?”

My lack of confidence catches up to me. I was wondering where that little bugger had gotten off to. It’s not like I’m really running away from anything on this exercise machine. “I... I’m probably not going to be any good at it... I doubt I’m an adept.”

He waves just as dismissively before. “You’ve got a knack for it if you got as far as you say. So?”

I’m either too out of breath or too excited to speak, so I nod, a smile finding its way onto my face, slowly. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am an adept. Or will be, in any case.

Lights around flicker a bit, then dim for a second. Ramirez doesn’t notice, but the power plant – and therefore the electrical distribution system – being under my cognizance, I do. I squint my eyes skeptically, trying to muse out the cause. A soft rumble begins somewhere overhead, then thunders its way over the gym, some several dozen feet above where we’re running, ending somewhere in the vicinity of the bow of the *Dauntless*.

It’s not something I’ve heard often, but I have heard it before. “My God.” I’m not sure if I’m swearing or starting a prayer as I nearly fall off the machine in surprise. Both, probably. I stop my cardio machine and step off.

“What?” Ramirez asks. “What was that?” He’s not overly concerned. RIFT aren’t stationed on ships long enough to learn all of the inner workings and noises, so they generally just follow the lead of the sailors around them. As if on cue, he stops his machine as well.

“They just fired the axial. We aren’t supposed to be doing that. We aren’t supposed to be getting involved.” Something’s gone wrong, either on our side or theirs.

“The axial?”

I forgot that he didn’t know the abbreviated form of the word, so I do him the courtesy of extrapolating my previous statement with the pertinent information. “The axial cannon. The *big* cannon.” As if punctuating my words. The lights begin to flicker again, dim, and then I hear the rumbling start again.

Firing rounds just over nine meters in diameter, calling the axial gun “big” doesn’t quite do it justice.

The thing shoots projectiles larger than a fighter or dropship, and being solid objects, they weigh as much as some starships. It’s not even an anti-ship weapon, it’s an anti-station weapon, designed to give a fleet standoff-range against large orbital defenses who can afford to lob even larger shells than what the *Dauntless* can. Orbital physics being what they are, it’s easier to lob a shell into a gravity well than out of one, so the *Dauntless* and ships like her generally still have the upper hand over such weapons platforms.

But I have no idea what it will do to an asteroid of planet-killing size. Considering the fact that they still haven’t called away general quarters by the time I’m dressed – I didn’t bother showering, though in hindsight I probably could have; it took me a few minutes to get back to my berthing. If we were in combat, they would have called it within that time.

Now I’m walking quickly through the passageways, my hurriedness oddly enough breaking the norm. It’s a bit eerie everywhere. We just delivered enough firepower to wipe out multiple cities, devastate a moon, or knock out a few orbital defense stations, and things are almost normal. Rumors are beginning to spread; I’m not the only one that noticed, and I overheard conversations that hear correctly enough.

Even the dumbest of sailors should have realized that it was indeed the axial gun firing, for a total of five salvos. However, counter-rumor has spread, that something went wrong with the dark matter reactor. I don’t stop to correct the few I overhear spreading this nonsense.

When I finally make it to my workcenter's office, figuring my immediate chain of command will know at least something, and will likely not be completely occupied by whatever just happened, the information I've gathered is just about as thorough as I hear. No one can account for why the shots were fired, most assume we tried to save Landon from the asteroids against their will, and almost all agree it was probably a good idea. Word has spread that Landon was fighting a losing battle.

It doesn't take long before our suspicious are, quite fortunately, confirmed as the captain's voice comes over the announcing circuit. "Hello, *Dauntless*," he addresses the crew, "I'd like to congratulate you all for fine work today. Just moments ago, we received confirmation that our five shots destroyed the largest asteroids threatening Landon, knocking the worst of the pieces away from the planet. I'm sure you all noticed us firing our axial gun, something we don't get to do all that often, and thankfully, this time, we didn't have to do it in anger. Instead, we have, today, saved potentially millions of lives down on that planet and may have kept that planet habitable. This is something you can all be proud of, and I for one am going to put each and every one of you in for a humanitarian medal. You've all earned it." In spite of his many lavish praises, Captain Bonham seems quite proud of himself. I'm guessing he's glad he's finally done something worthy of earning a nice shiny star to replace his insignia.

He continues, "Each and every one of you contributed today. Without all your efforts over these last few days, none of this would have been possible. I would especially like to thank Squadron for all their work during the emergency sortie out of Astra."

Squadron? I jerk my head back in both surprise and disgust. Looking around, the others in my division are equally perplexed. "Squadron?" I ask, almost in unison with a few others. "What'd they do?"

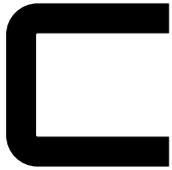
"Nothing." Someone says, voice full of derision, interrupting the captain as he continues to drone on, but the damage is done. And they're right, for the most part. Squadron readied their dropships and shuttles, should an accident happen while we were trying to get our crew onboard, but they didn't even launch while we were over Astra. They did little to nothing to help with the emergency sortie. Opposite that notion: Reactor worked miracles, pulling ridiculous shifts and getting a ship underway when we hadn't even been at full capacity, and we'd barely been thanked for it. Captain Bonham drones on for a few more minutes, but hardly any of us are listening to it anymore. My mind returns to the present situation and I reflect on what we've just done. It may very well have been the right thing to do and may have saved lives, but Landon didn't ask for the help, and we did technically fire a weapon in their general direction that could have done just as much damage if we'd hit their planet, and could have cored any ship in the galaxy stem-to-stern.

More curious, to me, is that it took five shots from our main axial to kill the two asteroids; one should have been enough to pulverize a fair portion of it and deflect each one. I'm not exactly well versed in what our guns are or can do, but I do know about physics: Things moving that close to the speed of light tend to destroy things not moving so close to the speed of light, regardless of size, though at nine-meters wide, the gun of the *Dauntless* could destroy a lot.

I bring this up to those around me, and of course, have logical conclusions of their own. "We probably missed at least once, or perhaps split one of them in two and needed to take out both of the pieces. Maybe it was bigger than we thought, or maybe it was made of something a lot denser than we expected. A lot of asteroids have metal in them, Chris."

They're probably right, it was probably just happenstance.

I sit back and rest for a second, only now realizing I'm still weak from my workout and need to shower and begin reflecting on the now daunting task of getting back to my berthing compartment.



CHAPTER TEN:

#15: Loyalty is a one-way street.TNV *Dauntless*,1140 Landon Central Time, 02-14-3398 Sol Date
Reactor-MAG Controls Maintenance Room

Rather upset at having been bagged at my watch for five solid minutes, with a few minutes of turnover, it takes me a moment notice the near silence in the room, despite the number of people. I dump a curry packet into a bowl and some rice into another – both things I'd kept in storage for a day like today, when lunch seems especially unappetizing – and nearly open my mouth to fume about Prane, who'd gotten distracted long enough by a movie he'd been watching to relieve me late. All in all, it's nothing all that serious, but he's known for doing it and no one's really bothered to verbally correct him. This is the second time he's screwed me over in recent history by bagging me.

“Someone needs to tell Prane to...” No one is looking at me or listening. They're all watching the television intently. I look up expecting to see nudity or some amazing video game scene, but it's the news they're watching. Normally a television that is in a location it really shouldn't be – the

Maintenance Room, for one, is exploited thoroughly in its devious presence, rather than just watching the news which is perfectly benign as far as the chain of command is concerned. Well, rather the screen itself is allowed, the file sharing devices in it and game systems attached are strictly not – not in a space with so much confidential data.

I honestly should have expected what I see now. A courier upload of the response to the “accident”, including an interview with our very own captain, looking quite tired. Obviously, he wasn't really being interviewed, just responding to the first set of questions that had come in the response courier.

“As I said before, I did not give the order.” It's my captain on the screen, with the standard background used for public video announcements. Instantly I know what's happening. “My TAO – Tactical Action Officer, made the call that the asteroids needed to be destroyed. His job is restricted to the defense of the ship in peacetime, and only such offensive response in wartime. My crew was not privy to this rule and obeyed his orders. I do not blame them for listening, as they did what they thought was right, but the TAO at the time should have contacted me before taking such action. It was irresponsible, and should those rounds have hit Landon, they could have done significant damage.”

He's burning the TAO. Captain Bonham might as well have tied him to a post and lit the fire himself and then flown off like the glorious Blue Falcon that he is. He was giving the media everything they needed to crucify one officer, apart from a name – he might have been ordered not to, or the video

could be edited. All I see – all any of us see – is an officer trying to better his career by stepping on others, using them for their benefit as they see fit, then discarding them aside the next when they think they'll be a burden. Not two days ago was this man praising the actions they'd taken to save Landon.

Now he was trying to find his scapegoat.

Worse, he's doing it publicly. In front of the whole crew, like trying to repressurize a ship missing half its hull, pretending he had no part in all of it. "As of this time, Lieutenant Kayama has been detained awaiting courts-martial." Someone curses loudly, throwing out insults towards our CO. Fervent as they are, I believe some of us would say them even if he were here. Chain of command usually means quite a bit on a ship as large of this, but betraying one another is a terrible sin.

This is too far. One moment he tries to take credit for something he didn't do, the next he lets a man take the heat for it. He doesn't have the balls to stand up and defend the fact that we saved millions of lives. If there ever was a time

The Bonham on the screen changes the subject slightly and starting to stammer. "Furthermore, we apologize to the families of those who lost their lives in this accident."

I cock my head to the side, puzzled. "What is he--"

"Shut up Chris!" Wallace silences me, trying to hear what our traitorous CO is saying. This isn't sounding good and makes this whole matter much, much worse.

"We promise to do our best to make things right and ensure their livelihoods." I'm still floored by this new revelation. Did people die in the incident?

"Seriously guys, what? Is he talking about?" I ask strategically in a pause while the CO is gathering his cue-cards.

Wallace speaks up to inform me. "Shard from one of our rounds broke off the asteroid and hit a tug, along with some fragments of the asteroid itself. Five guys died." That floors me. If it hadn't happened, I wouldn't believe it. Usually, they're much more precise with calculations like that. The ship's AI should have-...

The Captain continues, obviously a little flustered now, and noticing that breaks my train of thought. "I have been informed that Lieutenant Kayama's sentencing will happen at an undetermined time. This incident with Landon has broken our planned mission-cycle, and we are long overdue to resume it and have been ordered to return to our previous... uh, previous mission." We were only parading ourselves about Alliance space. He's covering for something, but what?

Why did he seem so flustered on that last part? What difference did it have between the sentencing of the TAO, Lieutenant Kayama, and the loss of the Landon tug crew?

It hits me. The rumors were true: Because he knows there's no one to blame for us being here when we were likely ordered not to be – just himself. He can pass blame on the lives lost and the cannon barrage on the asteroids, but he's fully responsible for getting the ship underway in a hurry and moving it over here, where we weren't wanted. He did it without their permission.

As much as we might have saved lives, the Federal Navy isn't going to overlook the fact that the captain took their new pretty *carrier*, the biggest ship in the entire fleet and tried to use it for his own personal gain, joyriding for a star. And though Captain Bonham might think he can pass the blame onto others, it's not going to help his case any – Captains have been fired for lesser infractions of their own crew.

"He's done for," I whisper. I don't know if I'm happy about that or not. We're about to be the center of the universe – a storm is coming for us; I can feel it. Public outrage, media, headlines, everyone is going to be talking about our blunder around the galaxy. While we might be losing a tyrant, we're going to be getting just as much hurt from everyone else.

Bonham drones on in response to other questions posed by his cue cards, but we ignore him now. "Who, Kayama or Bonham?" Wallace asks.

Someone else chimes in; I recognize the voice as Stevens. "Both of them! Bonham's the ring leader of this circus, and he's bringing Kayama down with him." He pauses. "How many hours of training do you think we're going to have to sit through for this incident?"

"People *died*, Stevens, this isn't just 'an incident.'" I remind him, trying to sober up the conversation out of respect for the dead.

"Exactly," he continues, just as jaded as I expect him to be, "That means *extra* training. I don't know what training we're going to get, but it's going to be something."

I roll my eyes in response. Stevens had a hard life up until he joined the military, one he talks about on occasion, but he doesn't paint his tortured childhood or vile parents in a detailed manner. Most of us grow callous after joining. He started off his career that way and just kept going. I swear sometimes that he can't be happy unless he's suffering.

The timer going off indicates that my curry is done, and I remove it from the cooker. The smell fills the room instantly with the smell of the spices, further distracting me, as well as a few others.

"Dude," Wallace says, gravely. "You got any more of those?" He asks, referring to my curry.

I squint my eyes at him, suspiciously, dramatically pausing before I answer. “Yes.”

His eyes light up. “I will buy one off you for-“

“No.” As much as he values good food, so do I. “These are my food stores for when the galley decides to be extra terrible at their jobs.”

“Come on!” He pleads, his eyes begging earnestly, so much so that I almost feel bad, then he sighs, knowing I’m not going to back down as I turn to ignore him. “Can I at least get a bite?”

It’s my turn to sigh, and I lift up a curry-filled spoon into the air in front of him, which he happily takes from my hand, blows on the steaming stew, and then swallows. The expression on his face is almost as though he’s eaten the ambrosia of the gods, and he gives me a solid thumbs up in thanks even as he sucks in sharply to cool the curry as it burns his mouth.

I wipe the spoon off on my shirt when he returns it, with few qualms about actually washing it. With the diseases I’ve had for no good reason on this ship, sharing a few germs isn’t going to do anything more to me than the recirculated air or tight living conditions, and after enough close-quarters living away from society you start to not care about social norms. Besides, if I do catch something it will mean time off work.

“I’m sure he’ll find a way to pin this on us,” I say derisively, back to referring to the Captain.

Noting the others raising eyebrows in curiosity at my statement as if to ask, “How,” I decide to extrapolate. “Never underestimate that man’s ability to do something stupid.” This he really couldn’t pin on us, but I’m sure it crossed his mind.

I stir my curry around, trying to cool it a bit and mixing in any portions that overcooked around the edges, roasting the spices a bit more to give it added “kick.” This is a lot to contemplate. These new events – this new incident – could change our schedule quite a bit. Military schedules are always in flux, but what we did as a ship could force us to pull in. This could be a good thing, in a way. We could get to go home. No, nothing ever works out that way. Nothing good ever comes out of something bad, especially not with the Navy.

“Was it really so bad that we stepped in?” Someone new asks, one of the new guys who waltzed in halfway through.

“Of course not,” Stevens says. “Overall, we saved lives. Without us, they’d all be dead.”

“Landon doesn’t see it that way,” I say before finally taking a bite of my curry, having scooped it alongside some rice. Still too hot; it nearly burns my mouth. I finally swallow the food, getting it down

as fast as I can. “They see it that we robbed them of saving themselves, making them look weak, and we killed some of their people in the process.”

“That’s bullcrap,” Stevens responds, knowing I don’t believe their answer, so it’s not laced with anger.

“So? As they’re concerned, they wouldn’t have lost anyone. Now a big bad starnation comes about to gloat and in our pride, we kill a few of their people and rob them of a victory. They think we are trying to prove ourselves dangerous to the Coalition, and prove ourselves useful to the Alliance.” Honestly, he’s not entirely wrong. The Threshold of Hadrian is known for puffing up its chest to try to ward off the greedy Coalition patrols, all the while trying to show the Alliance that we are a powerful ally to keep the larger nation ever in the People’s Coalition’s face when they try to bully us. However, Bonham being “just” a captain of a starship, doesn’t necessarily have that level of politics in mind, and dumb as he is, I don’t think he ever could.

Stevens doesn’t believe me, more out of his stubbornness and refusal to believe this whole situation is happening. “Our pride? They’re the ones that almost got themselves killed because they thought they could handle it.”

I shrug as I spoon another bite of curry and rice into my mouth. I side with him on this one, but

I just felt like pointing out the issues we’re facing. Devil’s advocate for a losing side, in my mind. “Like I said,” I cover my mouth politely while I talk until I can finally swallow and finish my sentence. “They don’t see it like we do.”

“So you’re saying we should have let them take those asteroids and said, ‘We told you so?’” Stevens asks.

“No, of course not,” I reply.

“So what’s the point of what your argument?”

I shrug again. “I’m bored.” That’s really all it is. I don’t feel a nation that is so stupid as to let pride risk the lives of millions deserves a defense. I’m just flat out bored. That happens sometimes on a ship. It happens a lot of times on a ship, actually. At least my curry tastes good. With all the futility of our discussions – not being able to do anything about our situation – good food is about all I can ask for in life.

My first real lessons go about as well as I expected it to. Ramirez coaches me on techniques and whatever little blurbs he can remember from his own training way-back-when, and lets me into a suit that

wasn't being used. The first few days involved learning how to use the suit and not destroy things through the added strength and speed, and how to grow accustomed to having the additional sensory information. Getting accustomed to the special forces combat armor is an experience and trial all on its own.

Most of our lessons, including my first real gravomancy lesson, are in the hangar bay. In full suit, we look like just a pair of special forces soldiers, which is fine by me because it means that the coners don't bother us. We might look peculiar, but the intimidation is enough.

"Alright, so, just try to *will* the pen up." I try it out. The pen doesn't move. I shake my head in frustration. "Um..." Ramirez pauses. "That's weird, it usually works for me." Ramirez has been doing this for a while. His brain is far better trained to operate these suits, and the suits are more accustomed to the way that Ramirez thinks. I'm like a baby trying to walk on ground that doesn't know how to be solid. In all honesty, any of the number of commands that Ramirez has had me try – including vocalization – will probably work once my brain-chip and brain have learned to coordinate to do things like this.

I try it a few more times. Ramirez won't have any idea since it's all with my mind. I go so far as to attempt to command the pen, plead the pen, petition the pen, debate with it, about everything other than seducing the pen to lift into the air. A few feet in front of me – the pen remains vigilant in its attempts to frustrate me, just as it has the past several times I've tried to loft it into the air. Mental controls are much different to me than the user-interface displays I'm used to.

"Imagine you're picking it up with your hand." Apparently, different rigs respond differently to different people. Apparently, I don't do well with the "willing" notion of technomancy, at least not initially. My permanent implants are supposed to help me learn faster, but they can only do so much.

I follow the suggestion anyway, to a point. I imagine my arm reaching out in front of me further than it actually can, and visualize it grabbing, then picking up the pen.

The pen wavers. In my focus, I can actually hear it 'click' metallically as it rolls on the deck-plate. I go for it again. Again, it's like I'm "nudging" the pen forward even though it's out of reach.

"Hey!" I exclaim overjoyed. "Finally!"

Ramirez just smiles. "Now, try to imagine another arm sprouting forth from the rig on your back, reaching around to grab the pen. He does sound a bit more excited, at least.

I try. It's odd at first, but I think I get the hang of it. I picture an arm, a humanoid arm, in my mind, and I imagine it's my own. It's not easy. I've only ever had to how to learn to use two, let alone a third one? I can physically comprehend the notion, but trying to will a nonexistent arm is a bit more

difficult than it sounds. My brain protests, knowing that no such arm exists... but an idea strikes. Perhaps I have to go back to basics.

I lift my hand towards the pen and imagine a node above the pen, a point of force. Up until now, Ramirez had only been trying to get me to imagine arms and rods and “tentacles” of force projecting from the gravtech units on my arms, legs, and back. Now, as I imagine the notion of operation entirely differently, the pen *falls* upwards towards the point I’ve imagined. It passes it by a good meter a moment, before recoiling and falling back towards that point, smacking the ground as it tries to find stability between the artificial gravity of the ship and the field force I’ve mentally willed into existence.

Ramirez starts, surprised by the sudden success. “Well, that worked. Now, what did you imagine?”

“Just a node. Not an arm, just a point of increased gravity.” I explain. I mentally picture the node moving. The pen follows in the air.

“I was going to start with tethered and then move into untethered, but this works, I guess.”

“Um... tethered?” I ask, not familiar with the term.

“It’s two different forms of technomancy. If the force you’re using can affect you, like with a field ‘arm,’ that’s tethered. What you imagined, a point or plane that isn’t linked to you at all, that’s untethered. There are pros and cons to both. Untethered is more useful since you can lift things many times your weight, but even when applying the same amount of force as with a tethered force, it takes more power.” As he talks, I begin trying to think as to what implications of these would be. “So you’re actually using two different sets of projectors. I wanted to start with tethered since it was easier for me to work with, but I guess we can do untethered.”

I shift my arm around, the pen following my will. For the next several minutes, I begin moving about the pen, my mentor observing. “Try lowering your hand. You don’t need it for untethered gravomancy,” he corrects. “It’ll affect tethered gravomancy, though, though you don’t strictly need to use your arms.” I do as he instructs. Initially, I struggle with it, but I can make my mind comprehend what I’m doing. Once I see success, my subconscious seems to understand what’s going on and corrects itself.

Several times I accidentally pull other things around us in the hangar bay. I’ve noticed that the point I’ve created has started to be collecting dust from the non-skid deck, like a little planet at the nexus I’m controlling, some of them orbiting, but the air resistance slows them down and they fall into the center.

I get an idea: I create another little node of gravity next to the first, and then “shake” the first node, freeing some of the black dust particles and the pen. After a few quick attempts and on-the-fly adjustments, enough of the dust particles begin orbiting both in a figure-eight pattern to be visible. I start scaling the strength of them, imagining the field growing and shrinking. I notice I’m losing some of the dust to the ship’s own gravity, so I picture a plane force of repulsion pushing away from the deck, underneath the two nodes I’m playing with. A cloud of dust plumes in a circle, the motes entering the orbit of the two nexuses before us.

“Looks like you’re a fast learner.”

“I have to be. You remember how fast-paced Mag school, right?” I remind him, still focused on what I’m working with.

“Fair enough.” He lets me continue another minute, and I even add a third little node for a while, but it proves too complicated to work with in terms of making things orbit, destroying my little orchestra of motes and a single writing utensil. I notice a little drill-tip has joined the fray. That’ll make the Wing maintenance technicians livid, finding out that they lost something – it’s an issue for foreign object debris, which can damage spacecraft engines, so they’re about as anal retentive about it as Mags are about reactor safety, which is saying something.

I’m curious as to how far I can go with my gravomancy experimentation. “How many points and planes can I make?”

Ramirez looks thoughtful, trying to recall. “I think our suits have... seven untethered projectors. One chest, one – no two back, and one on each limb. I don’t use untethered as much, except for movement. They’ve got nine tethered projectors since the military prefers to go for a Dynamo approach rather than Titan or Vanguard. Standardization and all that.”

I give him a look telling him I didn’t understand what he said last. He doesn’t get it immediately, so I extrapolate my confusion into speech. “Dynamo?”

“A Dynamo is a gravtech – or gravomancer, whatever you want to call it – that uses both tethered and untethered forms. It’s harder to master, but generally more useful. Titans use untethered and typically are better as combat multipliers since they can do a lot of shielding or lift heavy things. Vanguards use tethered, and are more like free runners, since they can use the forces to whip themselves around a battlefield with ease, but have a harder time shielding themselves.

“Since you’ve got a pretty good handle on untethered gravomancy, I think we should go back to tethering.” I nod. “Alright, something that might help you is to tell your suit to give you visual inputs on

what it's doing. Just think it." I follow his command, telling the suit I want to see what it's doing with the gravtech projectors. As soon as I do, blue-gradient fields pop into my field of vision around the nodes I'd been generating before. Little data-specs pop up next to each of the nodes, the nexus little bright motes of light. I can see what level of g-forces I'm applying.

"Alright, you shouldn't have to think about fields to maintain them. The suit will do that for you. You can tell it to maintain in place, or follow along with you, or any combination of things. Sky's the limit since the suit knows what you're thinking."

"Cool."

"So, just try to imagine again that you've got an arm – or something – try to reach out from your body to grab the pen. Try your arm this time."

I hold my arm out, glancing at the suit, and imagine a tendril reaching out. As I do, a blue line of force shows up instantly, sticking straight out of my arm. My arm recoils just a bit as it pushes away, but it's more than within the ability of my muscles to compensate, let alone the suit's actuators.

"Go ahead and let me in," Ramirez says. "I want to see what you've got." A message pops up on the visor of the suit, noting that Ramirez has requested access to my own vision. I accept, willing the button to 'click'. At least neural interfaces are something I'm used to, if not the rest of the suit. "Alright, good, you've got the hard part done, at least."

"Being able to see it helps." I think it does, at least. "As opposed to being on my back."

"Right. But now that you can make one on your arm, your brain should be able to comprehend being able to get one from your back. Try to use the tethered force to grab the pen and hold it instead of your little fields over there."

I imagine the tendril moving out away from me. It hardly responds. I squint my eyes in confusion. Instead of moving for me, the tendril begins to flicker and few nodes of untethered force begin to flick into existence. I go back to focus on imagining having a tendril sprout from my arm. The notion is slightly disturbing, imagining a new limb, and seeing it happen in front of my eyes, if only displayed virtually.

"Remember, Chris, the tethered forces act more like a part of you. It's a hard programming limit built in for the sake of safety on your part, because of the limitations involved. You have to imagine it's another limb of yours. You can't just envision it; you have to *command* it." I can tell Ramirez is struggling to describe a concept he understands intrinsically.

"I just don't think I'm cut out for this." The failure is starting to stress me out.

"You're a fast learner, Chris, remember?"

“Yeah, but I’m just not getting it.”

Ramirez contemplates for a moment. “Alright go back to working with the motes of dust and the untethered forces. Try to grab that little drill-bit with the tendrils, but go ahead and drop the pen, it’s not doing you any good.

I comply, having to create a force of gravity literally around the pen to pull it away from the other fields I’ve generated. This is much easier, and I can feel stress melting away as I’m once again accomplishing little tasks I’ve set forth for myself, shifting dust motes back and forth between the nodes to the point that’s become second nature and trivial, and I feel like I’m ready for more, but I also want to revel in my newfound skill.

“Chris!” Ramirez exclaims. I spin my head to see an object flying at my face. My suit pops up a quick warning, but it’s too quick for me to understand what it’s saying. Instead, the suit tells my brain what it’s already thinking: Danger! But the pen is extraordinarily fast, thrown by Ramirez and his suit-enhanced arm.

I react, catching the pen. But not with my hand. About a foot away from my outstretched hand, trying to catch it, a pair of tendrils are wrapped around the pen, holding it in the air. Underneath the helm, I can tell he’s smirking. “Got it.”

I’m a bit too amazed to say anything for a few long seconds, so he explains what happened. “You were able to get the tendrils made in the first place, which means your brain at least understands they have to exist.”

“Yeah, but how did I control them?”

“You didn’t, not consciously at least. You know about the nervous systems you’ve got?”

“Yeah, somatic, autonomic, and…” and like that, the entire operation clicks into place. “My brain knew they existed, but the disconnect was being my brain’s ability to control them via the somatic…”

“But your autonomic doesn’t work exactly the same way.” Ramirez cuts me off. I don’t care about the interruption. He’s just too overjoyed that it worked – that he was able to provide a tangible teaching experience. “I figured you’d be able to catch it out of an unconscious reaction, vice thinking about it. Try to move the pen around now.” It surprises me a bit that someone in the military other than medical personnel knows anything about the nervous system – at least, anyone who wouldn’t automatically classify as a “nerd” like myself or colleagues. On review of that surprise, though, it’s unwarranted. If becoming a gravtech, auratech, biotech, nanotech, or datatech are so intertwined as this in nervous-system

adaptation, let alone practicing all of them, then it makes sense for any practitioner to know a thing or two about them.

I try again to command the tendrils to move towards me, pulling them towards me. “Holy crap! It’s working!” My brain’s starting to make the necessary connections, and the tendrils are clumsily curving around, and deposit the pen in my hand. I move one of them around to make it apply a pushing force on the end of the pen, and it “clicks” as the pen-head extends. I notice it somehow “feels” much easier to accomplish than if I’d tried to do so with an untethered force. I make note of that verbally.

“Right. Like I said, untethered takes more force, and your brain sometimes equates that to strength. Sometimes not. The human brain is weird. You’re using the tethered right now, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I figured, it’s harder for the brain to register untethered into acting on reflex, since there isn’t a body-part to imitate.” He nods as if a theory he had was confirmed.

I look back to the drill-bit still orbiting a good two meters away from us and command a tendril to extend out and grab it. It’s slow going, and I can realize that it’s because my body isn’t used to anything so flexible as a tendril, so it writhes about a little bit as I try to get used to it. I try to imagine it to be more rigid, like an arm, with inflection points to rotate around. It helps a bit, though it isn’t perfect.

The tendril eventually makes its way to plucking the drill bit out of the other gravitational field. It’s still moving, so it takes me a few attempts to manage to grab it. After what feels like eons, I finally have the drill bit in my palm.

“Good. I think that’s enough for today. Craft Maintenance will be wanting that back anyway, I suppose. Come by the locker room after you hand it over and we’ll get you out of that gear.” Ramirez is sounding more and more like a coach by the passing minute. He probably hasn’t ever really had to teach anyone before, but he seems to be getting the hang of it.

Stealing the joy out of an entire division of people isn’t as fun as I’d imagined it. I recognize a couple of the maintenance guys as the knuckle-draggers who crowd halls, but much of the workcenter I disappoint by presenting the wayward drill bit too just downright downhearted, knowing they’re all about to receive a good yelling at and lots of training for the fault of only a few people. I actually feel bad about it all, now. Oh well. It had to be done, regardless of what I thought I was going to get out of it.

I’m soon back in my own uniform, heading back to my own berthing. The usual sight awaits me in the lounge: a few people of the division gathered around with various entertainment devices, at least one person sleeping on a couch or chair instead of their rack. In the wake of everything that went on not

too long ago in Landon, it's a bit amazing how almost nothing external every effects Reactor department. Being in our own little microcosm is almost comforting.

I refrain from attempting to continue practicing gravomancy while I'm on watch and while in public. Being on watch is boring as usual, and some practice would liven it up, but it'd be heavily looked down upon, and it'd be thoroughly irresponsible of me. Apart from my own morality getting in the way, I'm finding my old methods of practice to be inadequate; the old controls and utilizing ship's auxiliary gravity is simply too slow and isn't intuitive. Nonetheless, I've used it in my rack to figure out to become accustomed to my own mass and how my own muscles and joints play into controlling my own body with gravity. This part is at least mostly intuitive.

The rack is extremely limiting, though. The law of diminishing returns holding fast, my restricted experimenting and practicing have had little gain, especially as of late. I begin contemplating moving my hidden activities to someplace larger, but privacy being limited on a warship means that I'm not sure I have many options.

There is one place I can practice – our divisional storage room, intended for personal items like civilian clothing, trinkets picked up at ports, and the like. It's rather out of the way from just about everything and everyone and is really a ventilation -fan space so there are a lot of support structures, pipes, and machinery to get in the way of what is still a cramped location. For all of these reasons, it's also private.

I'll have to let people know when I venture up there, should something happen to me, they'll have to know to look for me if I go missing for hours at a time. Being out of the way, my ability to practice will be limited; I won't be able to practice before I go to bed, after I wake up, or at random periods when I happen to be in berthing. I'll have to dedicate the time. That will only make it harder.

I don't have that time right now. I, once again, must stand watch over reactor plant parameters. It's tedious and regular. The highlight of the first half is the dropshock associated with coming out of FTL, and I have the grand pleasure of going through the process of putting the MAG into sublight-propulsion settings, a tedious process. I don't know if it's fortunate or not that I'm not the principle individual in the goings on with that, it's simultaneously somehow boring and hectic at the same time.

Halfway through my watch, I've settled my plan: practice when Ramirez at any time when both of us are available, which is at least once every four days as best as I can figure. Between then, every other day I should get a period during the night when there will be little to no chance of anyone walking

into our personal storage room. My sleep schedule will have to shift a bit. This is now my extracurricular activity, so video games, movies, and shows will have to take a backseat if I want to excel.

Something pulls me out of my reverie: One of my throttleman exclaims, “All ahead flank emergency!” Finally, something interesting happening on least one watch. Power-limiting bells such as these were uncommon and fun; a rare treat like a child being given a present at random. While we call it an “emergency” bell, that doesn’t mean it is being called up for an emergency. Usually, it’s just someone wanting to test our ability to do so, showing off, some part of maneuvering around a moon or asteroid, or anything other than an actual emergency. I’ve yet to have it be a matter of life or death – except, perhaps, the time the Akrian cargo ship nearly ran into us. Our shields would have deflected them, but the Akrian cargo ship would have likely been lost with all hands as a result.

Flank bells were common enough that they could be made a requirement to perform one, under the instruction of another qualified individual, prior to qualifying without slowing down qualifications, yet, were elusive enough to be difficult to master for lack of practice. We, my watchteam and I, pride ourselves on being one of the fastest watchteams in the fleet at answering flank-bells. Rumor has it that only the Alliance-built *Rapier*-class corvettes, of which the Threshold Federal Navy owns a few, can do better, and that’s by design.

We’re practiced. “Hold throttles!” I command to my throttleman, then quickly spit out a well-rehearsed blurb and point at a number of indications and then switches I intend to operate. “Watoffershiminoufotemperatur’n’pow’a, reactpowis... two-three-p’cent.”. It’s “reactor-speak:” the stating of already complex words so quickly, so slurred, that only the general gist can be understood. It’s almost its own language, and without prior experience, it’s utterly impossible to understand. Communication being what it is, subdialects still get the point across, and get them across quickly.

“Very well, Reactor Operator.” The watch officer replies, his own words quick as well, but a bit more clear. I command several plant parameters to change with a flick of a wrist, and power rises and more energy flows to the engines. This is technically against common practices, but altering things a bit gives us an edge. For an unpracticed watchteam it wouldn’t help at all, however, the additional power at the start gives the throttlemen more wiggle-room and the MAG runs more efficiently. Knowing what we’re doing, and having done it many times before, we know we’ve bought ourselves valuable seconds, which we aim to prove; the watch officer is already timing us.

“Throttlemen, go.” I order them, letting them know they have room to accelerate the ship.

I coordinate with my throttleman, and together we soon find ourselves answering the bell, quite nearly maxing out the power of the reactor deftly. We rejoice, but it's short-lived. Conn rings up a standard ahead-one-third bell much to our dismay, and we groan. Some short communications between the plants prove that we're the victor, by a matter of only a handful of seconds, over the watchteam in the other reactor plant; our eternal rivals, I'll have to give Stevens – my counterpart reactor operator – a good ribbing on how much better I am at performing power-limiting bells.

Just as the conversations die down, the watch officer receives a message, and reads aloud, prefacing that it's from the Officer-of-the-Deck, who he includes as a side note is from Reactor Department; all line officers have to stand OOD from time to time.

“Just thought you guys would like to know why you got that bell. We just met up with the *Howard W. Gilmore*, a *Lodestar*-class destroyer, who is to be our new escort. They wanted to race – we obliged, and you smoked them. Good job, maybe the CO won't be so pissy with us all the time, or maybe he'll just thank the Wing again.”

That was the end of the missive. A few chuckles were had at the last part, but overall, it was good for morale. Rarely given the chance, Mags are always looking to be competitive with one another, and I'm no exception to the rule. I don't know anyone on the *Howard W. Gilmore*, but knowing I've just bested her Mags feels good, especially since the *Lodestar*-class, though old, was built for speed, a fact that's likely been lost on many of my comrades who don't keep up with military equipment or their capabilities, something I'd thought everyone in the military did when I was young.

We'd just proven ourselves and didn't even know it until afterward, which felt like all the more reason to be prideful about it as if we hadn't even been trying to compete, we were just doing our job.

I now feel some level of comfort again, knowing that somewhere nearby there is an escort vessel to help protect us. While a carrier is a force to be reckoned with, it's also a bit of a target, and the period of time we've had without an escort has been tactically unsound, even if we've been doing so primarily in safe Alliance-space. Then again, who would dare assault a carrier? Few ships could hope to outclass us, even between the Alliance, Coalition, Isharan, and Eirangardian Navies there aren't but a couple of handful of ships that could – granted each of their handfuls are bigger than our own.

The rest of the watch is rather uneventful. Shortly afterward, I find myself putting down a quick meal that is just as prosaic as I'd expected, followed by a short nap.

A series of hollow, sickening bangs wakes me up before I'd intended, that tell-tale sound that all sailors grow to hate with a passion. Someone's knocking on my rack or at least one nearby. I cue my shield-curtain to go transparent for my face and nothing but. Sure enough, someone is standing across from me in the aisle. Like all Navy ships, it's hardly so much as an "aisle," as it is a narrow alleyway in the middle of a berthing compartment only a couple of feet wide; nothing to write home about, and even less to compliment.

"Hey, some dude's here to talk to you." It's one of the new guys, Fletchly.

"You couldn't just tell them I'm asleep?" Having just gotten off of watch not a couple hours before, and been practicing gravomancy before that, I'm looking forward to some much-needed sleep.

"Oh." The young man realizes. "Umm... do you want me to tell him that?"

Yes, I very much would have liked him to *have* done that. Still groggy, I ignore the question, since it's now a moot point. "Who is it?" It's not common for us to be called upon by random individuals that Mags don't know, so it's interesting enough for me to consider fully waking, though the fog in my mind argues against that.

"I'll ask." Fletchly runs off, determined to complete the task, totally unaware that he's just slowing down the process by simply following assumed commands instead of thinking things through and asking questions of his own.

I raise my hand awkwardly to stop him. "Wait!" It comes out drearily and as muddled as my tired mind, and far too late for the jumpy lad to hear as he scampers away.

Fortunately, he's back within seconds. "Says his name is Sands."

The name rings a bell, but my sleep-addled mind is having trouble placing it."

"Sands? Sands who?" I ask. The kid is again gone, then back before I can say anything else.

"Says he's RIFT and that Ramirez is getting the gear ready and that he's going to practice with you today," Fletchly says matter-of-factly, satisfied with his information and that it should be enough as if it was some great accomplishment.

Though tiny, it was enough of an accomplishment: the association with Ramirez reminds me who Sands is well enough, and the notion of being able to practice gravomancy again excites me enough for some additional clarity of mind. I could really use the sleep, though, and my work might suffer if I don't get the sleep now. As horribly inadequate and tortuous as my sleep "schedule" is, my body has become adjusted to it. Disrupting it won't help. I might fall asleep on watch if...

... "PC1?" Fletchly prompts me to respond timidly. "Are you awake?"

I sigh loudly, realizing that I've been quite for a considerable time while weighing my options. If I had been asleep, I wouldn't have wanted Fletchly to wake me again. "Ugh... yeah, tell him I'll be there in a minute or two."

The young sailor now gone, I lie in bed for nearly a full minute, trying to will my mind to will by my body to move, but some part of me resists. Not a logical part of me trying to get me to do the right thing, just that lazy, tired part of me that never wants to get out of bed. So odd that they are in agreement, now. I must be going mad.

I finally swing my legs out into the darkness that is my berthing-row and stumble around for a bit in the darkness, trying to find where my coveralls are hung. I can normally don them in just a minute, but lethargy has a hold of me, and though my mind feels clear, I can't will myself to move any faster at the moment.

Once dressed, I walk through the dark berthing to the lounge, where Sands waits, a little smile on his face. "PC1!" He doesn't notice that a good dozen people suddenly look towards him. Common military mistake: Using titles that just about everyone around you has. In this case, I'm far from the only Propulsion Controller First Class around.

Sands is obviously junior and had some things to learn, but I'm not about to underestimate him. He's RIFT, so he's obviously got a good head on his shoulders, and those shoulders probably have as many muscles as I do in my whole body. "Ramirez told me where to find you. Were you sleeping?"

"Yes." I compliment my answer with a slow, groggy nod and half-closed eyes. My body is still slow to wake at the moment.

"Oh, I told your friend not to wake you if you were. I'm really sorry."

I nod again. "'S okay." I'm limited to terse replies, for the time being, it seems, though I try to force out a full sentence. It's slow going: "Practice? We're not supposed to... for another..." I check my watch, "like... ten hours. And is he teaching you, too?"

"What's this 'practice' Kierson?" Someone asks. I ignore them.

"Yeah!" Fortunately, Sands didn't seem to hear the guy ask. "I want to get better, too." This draws a few smirks from the other guys in the berthing, who automatically associate the phrasing with lewd thoughts, though I know they don't actually believe those thoughts to be true, it's just more amusing that way. They'll wait for proper context before drawing actual conclusions; that's the benefit of having smart friends. The downside is they'll still make jokes all they like, and they'll be good ones, too. Usually.

“Let’s go.” I usher him back up the ladderwell before he spills the beans that I’m trying mine had at gravomancy, lest the others think I have some notions of grandeur.

“So, what’s this about?” Stevens asks, smirking before I have a chance to flee as well.

I just shake my head and speak as flatly as I can, trying to act like it’s nothing at all. “Just... don’t worry about it.” My friend goes back to what he was doing with a shrug.

Sands, on the other hand, doesn’t let the matter rest, though away from everyone else, this is hardly an issue. “So, Ramirez tells me that you’re getting good at this.”

“I guess.” I’ve only been practicing a few days in earnest. “I got good with the... uh... untethered stuff.” I have to search for the word, having only heard it a couple times in the context and only just yesterday to boot. “Not so much with tethering.”

“Oh. That’s fine, everyone has trouble with technomancy, to begin with. I was real good with auramancy, but found datamancy to be difficult myself.” Sands says, a bit hurriedly.

This strikes me for a second: “Wait, you’ve done multiple?” That’s rather odd; few people have time or resources for one.

“Of course.” Sands replies as if I’m a child questioning the ways of the galaxy, “Special forces. Gotta be able to do a lot, man.” My stirring mind comprehends now. Special forces don’t have to worry about resources – the military will just throw money at them to get them what they need. As far as time, it can literally be their job to practice this stuff. “My specialty is auramancy. I’m the squad’s ‘ghost,’ these days. I bend light for stealthiness.”

“Oh. That’s cool.” I hadn’t thought about that, individual squad specializations in technomancy. “What about Ramirez? What’s his job?” I ask, realizing Ramirez hadn’t told me.

“He’s one of our dynamos. An assault dynamo, really. Not really specialized, but good with most anything he needs to be. He’s best with gravomancy, both tethered and untethered, though he’s been trying to get really good at shielding with both gravomancy and auramancy.”

“So he’s really going all out as a jack-of-all-trades?”

“Not really. He’s focused almost entirely on assault and combat and ignored a lot of the... uh, ‘finer’ arts. But he can work magic on the battlefield if he sets his mind to it.” Sands was rather heartfelt in that last sentence as if he was impressed with what he’d seen Ramirez do. Now that he’s said it, I’m more curious than ever.

We finally reach the gear room, where Ramirez waits, fiddling with something I can’t see, but he’s in his full armor. He notices us and waves, before turning to someone I don’t know to continue on a

conversation I can't hear. By now, I know the drill with the suits, and I know how to suit myself up, not that was hard in the first place; the suit does most of it for me.

"Took you long enough," Ramirez finally approaches me.

I flip him a rude gesture. "I was asleep. I really like my sleep."

"Sorry. Didn't know. But then why did you join us?" The slight emotion in his voice lends truth to his apology. However, I would have expected Ramirez to tell me to go back to sleep, as understanding as he is.

"Curiosity as to why you wanted to practice at this ungodly hour," I answer back, genuinely.

"You'll see," Ramirez answers, a smirk betraying some excitement. "Head on up to the hangar bay when you're done." He leaves me and Sands alone with another couple of soldiers, who mostly ignore us, other than to politely greet us, then bid farewell. It's rather odd, seeing Ramirez so vague. Often he's rather direct.

As I pick up the helm that goes with the suit, I let my curiosity venture. "Do you have any idea what's going on?" Sands shakes his head in the negative.

It's still not clear what's going on when we finally reach our destination. Normally, the hangar bay is full of people, aircraft, and equipment. However, at this time Ramirez seems to have found a little corner that's devoid of what would normally be a pair of shuttlecraft.

"I didn't want to miss this opportunity, guys." He says after calling us over. "We can use this corner all to ourselves. I managed to convince the voidmen to let me move the boxes and stuff around since their craft weren't here. "

"What opportunity?" I can see that a wide open area can be useful, I just don't know how it will be now. I don't see any equipment around us, other than a good deal of unknown parts and boxes piled up in random areas around.

"Mobility." That can only mean one thing: He intends for me to take flight. All of a sudden, I find myself getting rather nervous; both exhilarated and worrisome at the same time, the last vestiges of my previously near-comatose state flee me. "Sands, Chris here needs to learn how to move around with his gear, and you need more practice with using other people on your team."

I get a feeling he's more using me as a tool to help Sands than he is to help me. That hurts ever so slightly, but I'll get over it shortly. After all, the man's actually been helping me, and the bettering of his own squad has to take priority, obviously. They get shot at in their line of duty, I don't. A quick glance

over at Sands and his face is slightly betraying a bit of – what, shame? Perhaps he didn't want to be seen as needing extra care than the others in his squad, which might be why use chose me for this.

“First, Chris, try to manifest some tendrils or something again.” He grabs Sands and pulls him aside for a moment to chat. I turn and begin trying to visualize the tendrils extended from my arm again. I get them rather quickly this time, but as before they are slow to respond. “Good, now go ahead and attempt to fly around a bit.” Ramirez chimes in over his shoulders. A notice lets me know he's watching my feed – he must have set it up prior to. I feel like that's a bit invasive, but this is his division's armor, so I don't have a right to complain about how he manages it.

I summon a few gravity wells and use them to pull me into the air. It's difficult at first getting used to doing it with fewer untethered nodes. Thankful for my previous practices on my own, I know where I need to put those for maximum mobility. It's also a lot easier now; I merely have to think about what I wish to do, rather than command physical controls with my hands.

Though I feel like I might have a good idea about how to control the suit and it's gravtech projectors well, I can't say for sure that I won't fling myself across the room, possibly to my own death, however unlikely. For now, I move with translation; up, back, side-to-side. I need to get the basics down before I can move onto tricks. Fortunately, it's pretty easy. In no time, I've challenged myself to be several uncomfortable feet off the deck. Should I fall, I'll still feel the shock of impact but it won't be so drastic.

I spin myself about to face the other two. Being in the air, it's less intuitive than controlling my own body. If I want to get good at this art, that has to change.

“Alright, anchor yourself at that height, Chris, and try to tether Sands.” I do as he instructs, and I'm painfully slow to have the tentacles of gravity finally reach my target. “Okay, good,” he says, “Now try to pull him towards you. Sands, don't let him, and try not to use technomancy. Chris, your goal is to get Sands up against that wall behind you.” He points to a bulkhead. This doesn't make sense, based off of what he was telling me before about the goal for the meeting; to help Sands get better at working with teammates.

Sands anchors a foot in front of him, and I pull on him, only to be pulled towards him. I project a field in front of me to push me back and continue pulling. “Feel free to get creative, guys.” Sands moves the arm I have the tendril latched to, and I go flying. I twist my body to have my feet plant against the wall to my right. He sees the move coming, and expertly plants his feet as my shift of anchoring transfers through the gravity tether to him and threatens to send him off balance. Instinctively, I try to grab the

gravity tether extending from my arm, as if it were a rope. My fingers meet thin-air, and actually get pulled towards the tether a bit.

“Try to stay in the air, Chris.” Apparently anchoring myself against a wall is against the rules. Fair enough. I push back off, righting myself in the air, and pull my arm in, again as if the tether were a rope. Once again, I just get pulled towards Sands, who has anchored himself.

Sands steps back, throwing the arm over his head. I release the tendril just in time, and command it to attach at his waist. Off-balance from his attempt to toss me, Sands finds himself momentarily airborne as I manage to pull him from my new anchor, but I fail to properly keep myself from flying further towards him. He weighs more than I do, so I only get closer to smacking into him, and I project an attractive force at my back to pull away from him. He’s on the ground before it makes much of a difference, and he manages to plant a foot. I’m grappled to his center-of-mass, so he has more control over the situation than I’d like. Then again, I’m fighting an experienced soldier. I don’t exactly expect to come out of this as a winner. Still, he’s moved me far further away than I’ve moved him.

I reach and arm back and shoot a tendril at the bulkhead I’m trying to get Sands to reach. As I do, Sands begins walking backward. He’s leaning well away from me, supported by my gravity-leash, and succeeds in pulling me. If I could only get my feet on the ground, I could stop him from making me feel so foolish and maybe gain some ground back.

My tendril finally lashes itself to the wall, and I pull on it. Sands stops, unable to pull me any further. Seeing him fully bend over backward trying to pull me, I release my tether on him, and he starts to fall, a little startled. My pull on the bulkhead sends me flying back in the direction I want us to go, but without a hold on Sands, I’m not actually achieving my goal.

Just as he reaches a hand down to catch himself, I grab him again. My own momentum transfers through, and Sands arches through the air, hitting the deck closer than where he started. I’ve finally gained ground. I use two fields to slam his legs against each other, then pull his feet into the air, dragging him along the deck towards the wall. I’m finally winning! In my surprise and happiness, I don’t notice that he’s made a field of his own, pushing away from me; my arms are suddenly outstretched as the pulling forces go either way, the wall pulling one way, he tugging on the other.

Now that he’s using gravomancy, I know my fight is futile, and Ramirez can see that too. “Good, that’s enough for now.”

I nod, as does Sands, and we release our fields. At least I was able to get him to the point of needing the crutch of gravomancy – though in hindsight that isn’t a great feat, considering the quality and

strength of the gear I'm working with. "Chris, I'm surprised you didn't just pop him up in the air right from the get-go."

"I could do that?" I ask, feeling foolish. Lofting him immediately into the air would have given me the immediate advantage and forced him to use gravomancy. Instead, I chose the hard route.

"I did say 'be creative.' Though I guess that wouldn't have been productive, since Sands has a bit more experience."

"A bit." Sands chimes in, smirking happily. "You did good, though." The praise feels good.

"I'm guessing you've seen better, though?" I ask the two of them.

"Of course." I don't know why I asked. Both a silly question and inevitably going to depreciate my own value, if only in my own eyes at the result of the inevitable answer. "But definitely better than a lot. Some guys early on just try to get into a tug-of-war contest. You at least tried a few things." Ramirez credits. "Mostly I just wanted you to get warmed up and used to moving around and pulling on things before working with Sands, and to gauge how well you can move.

"Now, Sands, you get up as well, Ramirez said, and even he followed suit such that all three of us were in the air, hovering in the hangar bay. Our practice was drawing a few onlookers, though few paid us much mind, and even fewer stayed for more than a few moments. "We're going to play tag. You two versus me, except only Chris," he pointed at me, "can tag me. Sands, you're going to try to help Chris maneuver to touch me." He sent us a message of the boundaries. It was rather small; not much larger than the space we'd already been practicing in, though a few of the thrown aside boxes were in the boundaries. "And you can't tether me or hit me with untethered fields."

An interesting twist on a classic game, I must admit.

"Ready, Chris?" Sands asks and extends a hand out towards me. I use my suit to send a request to him to see his suit's projection-simulations, and moments later I can see a few tendrils reaching out. It's almost eerie, but I allow him to gravity-grapple to my torso with the blue lines, and a red line, shaped like a loop, intersects my torso. The HUD of the helmet informs me that this is an auramantic-line, – shaped electromagnetic force - something I haven't dealt with before.

"Ready." Despite what I thought, I'm not ready. I suddenly rocket towards Ramirez, suddenly. With gravomancy, the impulse is more gradual. With auramancy, though, it's immediate; a jerk rather than acceleration. I instinctively hold up my hands to keep me from hitting a wall and project a gravity-field to stop me, but I feel that same sudden jerk stop me. Ramirez, with a smug look on his face, is clear on the other side of our makeshift arena, standing – on the ceiling.

“Maybe not so mu-“ I’m cut by another sudden jerking force and find myself flying towards Ramirez, who drops from view as I approach. Instead of a nice gentle arch, my trajectory changes suddenly, and I see my target dart away once more. I don’t even have time to try to brake, but Sands does it for me. I feel utterly helpless for a moment. The feeling is almost as bad as what comes next.

I pop the visor on my helm and push myself out of the air and to the ground. Having not eaten recently, I didn’t expect so much to have been in my stomach, but it’s soon on the deck in front of me as I’m doubled over. Someone on the sidelines laughs, then curses, still laughing, as Sands launches me yet again, a disgusting, spray of vomit arching through the air. Fortunately, I stop before I slam, back first, into Ramirez, who catches me as I ricochet away.

I regurgitate again at the sudden stop; this time, it loudly impacts the deck a dozen feet below me. With that, all the grandeur I’d associated with floating through the air and freely flying about falls away alongside yesterday’s dinner.

“Sorry.” Sands looks apologetic, now realizing just how much he’d be throwing me around.

“Yeah! What the hell was that man?” I yell from my perch.

Sands shrugs, “We got ‘im, didn’t we?” The soldier justifies.

“No. *You* got me, Sands,” Ramirez said. “Chris was just along for the ride. That wasn’t the point of the exercise. You’re supposed to be working together, not making each other sick. You’ve got to communicate to be effective.” He alights next to his mentee. “Work together and remember you can’t just toss him around like a toy. He doesn’t have the same body-mods we do,” He points to the small piles of vomit on the ground, “obviously.”

“Right.” He says as if recalling that information for the first time. I know he hasn’t practiced with a “normal” human in years, so I can’t exactly blame him for forgetting. Not exactly, but I’m warranted some small grudge, I think. At least until I get this horrible taste out of my mouth. However, I slowly realize that I’m guilty of just as much assumption as he is. Sands may not even know what an unmodified human can take anymore. His reflexes, everything he’s used to, all technomancy he’s ever practiced, has been purely based around working with modded people.

“You have to slow things down and let him use what skills he has to help you.”

“He’ll just slow me down.” I now realize I’m listening in to a conversation I normally wouldn’t be. They likely don’t realize that I’m in earshot this time. Those discussions they’d had earlier probably went similar to this. “He doesn’t have the skills, and I’m not hurting him.”

“You’re not exactly helping him either. He’s not as good as us, no, but he’s not an idiot and he’s got something to work with. The entire point of this exercise is for you to realize how to compensate for the weaknesses of your teammates, and to realize that you can rely on them to compensate for your weaknesses.”

All of a sudden, it makes sense as to why Ramirez chose me for this as opposed to anyone else. Sands might be skilled enough on his own to be a special forces soldier, but Ramirez doesn’t want his team to see the immediate flaw in one of their teammates – that he can’t properly work with them. Just as likely, Sands probably wouldn’t like that deficiency aired in front of people he has to see on a daily basis. It can’t be too much better having it aired in front of a stranger, but we’ve met and chatted a few times over food, which is the last thing I’m looking forward to, my stomach now finally settling, yet still aching fiercely.

I hardly notice as Sands approaches, my eyes closed and breathing through my nostrils as I am to endeavor to work out the last traces of nausea. “Sorry again, he says, a bit sheepishly for a man of his physical and professional stature. I... uh, didn’t mean to make you barf.”

“It’s uh... it’s fine,” I lie. As long as he doesn’t make it happen again, this training exercise might wind up not being the low point of my day, such as my usual job is. “Shall we?” I drop my visor once more; confident I can begin moving now without risk.

“Yeah.” He says. “This time I’ll try more to position you... rather than fling you, that is.”

“Sounds like a solid plan.” I loft myself into the air on a wave of gravity and give a thumbs-up to Ramirez.

“Round two!” He shouts before bounding to the ceiling. Sands launches me again – much gentler this time, towards a wall. I can see how he’s intending to set me up – I think, so I push off with my legs in a gravity-assisted jump. Ramirez’s jump arches oddly as he pushes himself through the air, avoiding me with ease. Mine changes as well to follow by Sands bequest, but not fast enough. I miss my mark. At least I can control my motion this time, and I can stay pointed where I intend to.

I redirect myself to be able to get a good, firm push off of the ceiling and launch back at Ramirez, who turns midair and launches sideways. Sands sends me on an intercept course, but I send a complimentary push at the same time and find myself moving once again way too fast, but I’m able to slow myself down before I hit anything.

Once more, I find myself moving rapidly back towards Ramirez, who is now wall-running. I point towards a spot in front of him, and at almost that same time I’m hurtling towards it. Ramirez sees me. I

break my velocity, then, instead of directly intercepting him, I hover sideways along with his direction of motion, waiting for him to change direction.

He does, backpedaling away from me, an odd sight to see someone do, running along a wall for a prolonged period of time. I launch towards him, trying to intersect his supposed trajectory. This time, I'm close enough to touch him. As soon as I reach out towards him, my hand recoils away.

“What?”

Ramirez smirks as he drops to the ground, lands, and launches away. “Shields!”

“That’s cheating!” I shout back, and Sands pulls me back towards him.

“Nothing’s cheating!” Ramirez shouts back.

My comrade ponders for a moment, a fleeting thought escaping him as a new idea forms, suddenly. Sands whispers to me, cutting out the suit’s microphone. “Instead of chasing, let’s try to intersect paths. If you chase, you’ve got to match speed. If you can increase the angles between your velocities, you’re more likely to pierce his shield, right?”

It’s a sound theory; it should work. “I’ll set a negative gravity field on myself, about arm’s length. Should counter his shield. You’ll have to make sure only my legs hit the walls, or else it’ll be hard to launch away.”

“It’ll help,” Sands admits, “but it won’t do it all. You’ll have to use some strength and get a good punch in on him. Those gravity shields are made to stop incoming rounds.

I sigh, thinking for a bit. “So, you’ll have to throw me hard. Real hard.”

Sands starts, “You okay with that?” He asks, obviously cautious of repeating my last episode.

I hesitate before I answer. I still haven’t quite gotten the taste out, but I think I can do it. “Yeah. He won’t expect it. We’ve got maybe one shot before he figures out something else.”

“You guys chickening out?” Ramirez taunts, seeming a bit bored.

“Hey!” Someone shouts from behind us. I spin to see a star-cluster, no wings. A chief, one of the craft-chiefs, from the looks of it, a rather upset look on his face. Determined – and hot-headed- enough to not be deterred by the uniforms we wear. It would be admirable if I didn’t already know his kind: Far too self-absorbed, too hateful, and thinking higher of himself and his own rate than others. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Making sure that we can continue doing our jobs.” Ramirez alights next to us in a flash. “Practice. Drilling.” He remarks.

“Not in my hangar bay, you’re not.” The chief spits back. “You’re getting FOD everywhere.” We really aren’t, but we’re not going to be able to convince him of that.

“Then where are we going to practice?” Sands rebuttals. “This is the only space big enough on the ship.”

All we get in return is a headshake. “Not my problem.” Anger begins to swell inside of me. So little camaraderie in this man.

“It is your problem.” I spit back. “Or it will be, when the CO hears you’re not letting RIFT stay combat ready and-“

Ramirez holds up a hand, cutting me off, indicating I raised the bar too far, too fast. Thinking back on it, that big of a leap doesn’t seem plausible. In all honesty, I pulled out of nowhere by my anger and hatred of this chief and those like him. I don’t honestly believe the CO would do anything. The threat was empty, and the chief sees it; that I can tell from the smug look on his face. “Now, Chief,” Ramirez starts again, far more tranquil than I , “We didn’t do anything wrong. We made sure you guys weren’t using this section of the bay, we moved everything carefully, and-“ In spite of Ramirez’s calm tone, soothing voice, and general politeness, the chief isn’t having any of it.

“I don’t care! Who’s your LPO?” Of course, he’d try to go over the heads of anyone talking sense, just to try to spin the story his own way to a more senior enlisted man.

Ramirez removes his helm to stare him directly in the eyes. “I am.”

The chief almost starts. “Then who’s your chief?” This time, he adds a thick layer of malice to his voice.

“All questions regarding our training can and should be directed to Master Chief Shinji.”

It’s plain to see that he doesn’t want to have to talk with someone above his station. Rather hypocritical, because that’s what he’s banking on with us; that his station will be intimidating enough. “I didn’t ask about your Master Chief, I want to know who your – “

Ramirez cuts him off, much more forcefully this time, “You can talk to Master Ch-“

The chief bellows at the top of his lungs, “Did I give you permission to interrupt me Petty Officer?”

Stupidly, I cut in, “Well, it is Navy policy to lead by example, and,”

“What was that, Seaman?” He asks, talking to me as though I’m far out of line.

“Chief, I, like Petty Officer Ramirez, am also a First Class, and I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“I don’t care about what you appreciate!”

“Like I was saying, real leaders lead by example. And you’ve been cutting us off, so our only real example right now is you – “

“Shut up! I’ll have you masted for-“

“For doing the exact same things you’re doing?”

“I’m a chief!” I can see the spittle foaming out of his mouth.

“A-“ Ramirez held his hand up again, silently cutting in.

“Stop, both of you.” Surprisingly, the chief did. “What’s going to happen is that we’re going to put in more formal requests to practice. And we will practice, as we need to, but obviously, we can’t get in the way of your operations, chief.”

“Like hell you will!”

“Chief,” Ramirez said, like a mother catching a child about to commit a sin, standing a little straighter, amplifying the intimidation factor.

“There will be FOD everywhere! And you just expect my guys to clean up after you cavemen?” Assumptions and insults? We’ve got a two-for-one moron here.

“We will pick up after ourselves,” Ramirez explains, politely as though the notion wasn’t obvious.

“And how can I trust that you’ll do a good job?” He asks, as though a FOD walk-down – scanning an area by eyesight and picking up trash and debris – were some monumental task, not something a group of children could be proficient at. I begin to imagine this chief being promoted simply because he was the best at cleaning up the ground, at the end of the day.

“Our suits have scanners,” Ramirez explains, tapping his helmet in his hand. ‘Scanners’ doesn’t quite cover the multispectral, audio, and gravitic array of sensory equipment build into these things, and no one in RIFT calls them ‘scanners’, but he’s using simple words for a simple man.

“I’ll have a talk with your chief.” The chief still isn’t satisfied with the answers.

“*Master Chief.*” Ramirez repeats.

Scowling, the chief walks away. Trying not to look defeated, he butts in the last word: “Pick this up!” and he storms off, trying to look as triumphant as possible. Admittedly, we did make a bit of a mess, and we’d started off by moving quite a bit away from its original location. I pause, wondering where it was all supposed to go when Sands points out that the suits camera feed had recorded the original positions, making it quite easy to put everything back into place, a process we intentionally extend on time with, out of defiance. Not too long, of course, I have things to do before long.

All good things must come to an end, and before long I'm no longer a pretender-special-forces soldier, I'm just regular PC1 Kierson. I would never have thought of myself as "regular," before, I realize. As difficult as my job is, as mentally grueling as it is, the knowledge that it's boring suddenly takes on a whole new air of being mundane, and a fair bit of my pride in my work washes away just like that. I shudder at the thought as I place the helmet in its stowage locker. I decide that keeping some of that pride is vital to my sanity and I cease thinking on the matter.

I try, at least. Brains being malicious as they are, I'm partway into thinking about how much of what I do time-wise is really asinine and could be accomplished by a child with a baseline understanding of the propulsion plant when I rescue myself from myself by posing a question to Sands and Ramirez. "Hey, tell me about your training. I know we've discussed a little bit, but I'm curious."

Sands shrugs. "It's a lot of BS, really." Ramirez nods "We do a lot of combat and specialization training, but we have to go through a month of instructor-training at the start, and the last few days of each course are how we'd teach that skill to others after we've qualified whatever it is we were learning to do."

"You mean they teach you all how to teach others to be commandos?" I ask. I'd heard of such things before – special forces teaching locals how to fight – but I never put much stock in it.

"Yup. Well, sort of. We haven't actually really trained anyone yet. You're my first, actually, so I'm kind of figuring out how to do that part with you." Ramirez takes over the conversation while Sands focuses on taking off a particularly tricky piece of his suit. The recent experience begins to make more sense. Ramirez has classroom training on how to teach and knows the subject matter in depth, but I do recall moments when he seemed unable to convey certain concepts completely. "Obviously they won't be as good as us, or even most soldiers, but they can pull off hit-and-runs pretty well and spread dissent through a population."

"And take down entire governments." I whistle. "With one special forces team." I'd heard of this before, but not from the horses' mouth.

"Usually not that drastic. Most of it's theoretical for us these days, anyway. Threshold hasn't had to do anything that drastic in decades. Even then it's usually a combined-forces-operation, with special forces and locals creating a groundhead for military forces to land on and setting up some of the baseline logistics."

Unlike with Mags, I'm surprised when that they don't go deeper than that. Had I been posed a similar question, I'd likely have to be bluntly stopped in my diatribe. Most Mags who wouldn't take that course also wouldn't dare associate with non-Mags or would have avoided the question altogether.

"So all the cloak-and-dagger talk about you guys isn't true?"

"Meh, to a point. There is still plenty of that in our training." Sands emphasizes "in our training," as if to imply he hasn't seen a lot of that style of action. "Most of what we have done is pretty just law-enforcement type stuff with guys law-enforcement can't handle."

"Technomancers and stuff?" I ask. Ramirez tenses. Not at the word, but I can tell he's recalling something. Something I can tell that I shouldn't ask about. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, I try to figure out how to steer the question clear.

"Yeah." Sands beats him to answering. "Or heavy weapons stuff. Every once and a while one of the old CIS hidden bunkers gets found by some 'entrepreneurs' and they flood the market with the stuff they find."

I nearly lose my train of thought in my relief at the change of subject so directly without having to execute it myself. "Oh, yeah, makes sense... wouldn't that be over a hundred years old?"

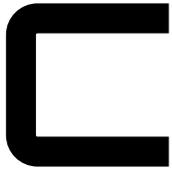
"Still works, and a railgun is still a railgun. It's not just squad-level stuff either. Most of the bunkers have stuff like dropships, fighters, tanks, even the odd nuke or two. One of the RIFT teams found one with few gunships." Sands smirks, and Ramirez shoots him a glare that he'd said too much.

"Wow, I didn't realize they were that big." I finally extricate myself from the last piece of armor and slip back on my EVR around my neck. "Wait... if RIFT found a bunker, wouldn't that mean that they had to go into People's Coalition space?"

Ramirez's glare turns to knives. Sands doesn't notice. "Like I said, the cloak-and-dagger talk isn't all nonsense."

"It's fair turnabout," I suggest, "They always 'wander' into our space, claiming it's 'disputed.'"

"Difference is," Ramirez says coolly, "They have near as many ships as we have people. We can't afford to piss them off."



CHAPTER ELEVEN:

#170: Never trust the bridge. EVER.

TNV *Dauntless*,

2830 Igemari Central Time, 02-10-3398 Sol Date
Propulsion Plant, Enclosed Operating Station (EOS)

One of the only downsides of having to go from planet to planet is having to transition to new sleep cycles, especially ones that don't follow a typical human cycle. There is no way to get used to having to do such transitions. Fortunately, they're made easier by being able to stretch out the transition, so adding and subtracting waking hours and readjusting to the daylight-cycle of the destination can be planned time and made easier.

Still, I'm on my third cup of black coffee right now, and feeling like it won't be enough. It doesn't help that standing Throttleman is about the easiest watch there is, and the lack of activity, even less than Reactor Operator, means that the uncomfortable chair invites sleep even still. This was a bad time to try to fit in my proficiency-watch for Throttleman, which I usually never stand.

"See, the trick is, Stevens, you have to be *one* with your engine." I jokingly gloat. "See, 'Thruster' here and I, we get each other. She may not be mine anymore, but she still knows how well I handle her." I'm talking and making light of our boring watch just to keep from falling asleep. We ran out of stimulants a while ago; the only ones that we have left don't allow "operation of heavy machinery," to which the Navy considers a dark matter reactor to be "heavy machinery."

"What, you going to make love to the engine after we get off watch?" Stevens, equally tired as I am, sneers. He usually is quite fun to be around, even if his humor is dark, but we're all on edge and exhausted.

"God, don't make it *weird*." I retort, still trying to lift all our spirits. "The bond between engine and man is different than that. It's as if Thruster and I were a part of each other, an extension..." Of course, that notion is silly, the main engine itself is over a hundred feet away from me, I merely control it. It's more than one "engine," but the clusters of ion-drives are operated in tandem with each other, and so are referred to as if they were a single unit.

"Kierson, you named your main engine?" The other throttleman across from Stevens remarks. As I understand it, the Propulsion Electrician, or PE as it's abbreviated, PE2 Carlisle is the usual throttleman for this watchteam, with Stevens and I intruding upon PE2 Carlisle and Kaii Turnbull's domain. I take it they get very personal on this watchteam, as I've caught Carlisle using the Kaii's first name, Kaylee, a couple of times, and she using his first name, Gordon. It doesn't seem like they have

anything going on between them, just that they are friends. That level of friendship between officer and enlisted level isn't exactly appreciated amongst Mags, but it's downright a sin in the non-Mag world.

"Nah, man, I didn't name her." I reply, trying to look far more incredulous than I actually am.

"The mechanics did, I suspect. Before I got here. Yours is named 'Turbo,' by the way," I inform him.

"What about the two in two-plant?" he asks, seeming a bit enthused, but only a bit.

"No clue," I respond, after realizing I've forgotten. "I don't even know if they named them."

"They did," a smooth but tired feminine voice responds from behind me. I glance back to watch the watch officer rub her eyes. "They uh..." she yawns, "But their last division officer made them paint over the names. They were... 'Torch' and 'Sputter', I believe."

Carlisle raises an eyebrow. "Guessing they didn't have a good track record for a while."

"Obviously." Two plant equipment doesn't break as often as it used to, likely because it's being taken care of better, now, but it's still something we rib on the two planters for a lot.

Our conversation is rudely interrupted by the punctuated chime of my panel, informing me that the bridge has requested a bell change, asking for more speed. "Idiots." I say under my breath. "We are supposed to be maintaining this bell while venting heat." I acknowledge the bell-change from all-ahead one-third; that is, all main engines to one-third of standard-power - to all-ahead-two thirds, including specific pulses-per-second that they'd like for more minute control of speed.

Even as my Kaii softly scolds me, I'm adjusting the throttle to comply with the order. "What the bridge says, goes." After a short pause, "Even if they are idiots." What it means is that we'll be over the planet longer, generating more heat from the reactor, the engines, and atmospheric friction.

As if punctuating our conversation, her words are overlapped with yet another punctuated, shrill chime asking for a new bell, all ahead standard, with a ridiculously non-standard, oddly numbered pulses-per-second, only slightly off from the standard number. Not enough to do anything significant to speed, but enough to make it more difficult to get my pulses-per-second count to match.

"Why'd they make them remove the names?" Carlisle asks, spinning around in his immobile chair to face the watch officer.

"He figured they weren't respectful of the equipment, and the Reactor Officer agreed, and said they weren't professional." Kaii Turnbull says. "They've even recently been talking about getting rid of the names for our two, along with The Dragon, she references a well-known pump, the previous two installations of which had been notorious for spewing jets of flame, which was not at all included in design-functions. Whereas a coner sailor might get a medal for painting a hundred square feet of wall,

the only thing the watchteam that fought those fires – twice over the course of as many days – received only the nickname “Watchteam Dragonslayer.”

At least it’s a cool nickname.

“Not The Dragon!” I exclaim, this time a bit more hurt, and moreso than if they tried to take Thruster away from me. I’d lost quite a bit of the attachment for the main engine, as my year of watchstanding with her had been a few years back, and not much since. However, The Dragon was a famed piece of equipment in our department, and much more recent as well, just earlier this deployment in fact. The current pump in the support-plates on which it rests is a replacement for the two that tried to kill people, but it still bears both namesake and pride.

And now they want to take that away from us.

“Calm down, Kierson.” Kaii Turnbull says, “They pretty much realized they couldn’t get rid of The Dragon, but your Thruster and Turbo are probably going to go.” I could understand axing names like Torch and Sputter, generally giving a poor connotation, but things like Turbo and Thruster are just products of humor and pride sailors naturally try to generate. The notion that The Dragon is keeping its name doesn’t help quell the disappointment I feel.

I don’t respond, though, not for a good long while. But the fatigue starts to set in again, and I try to get my mind racing again. Even if the notion is stupid... “I wish we could get some liberty on Khepri,” I say. We’re in orbit of Khepri as I speak.

“That’s dumb.” Stevens speaks, still dreary and cross at everything around him. “Khepri isn’t colonized.”

“No, but it is livable. Overheard people say that it’s atmosphere was considered life-sustaining last year, and it’s actually a pretty nice place right now.” Carlisle speaks in my defense. “And after not getting much time on Astra, I could do with a clear blue sky. “Even if there isn’t anything to eat.”

“Actually,” Turnbull says, “Most of the plants they put down are edible. Makes a lot more sense than just grass and a couple of trees. A good number of them are varieties of manna.” Manna is typically not a common food found in the Threshold of Hadrian, at least not anymore. Most of our planets opt for more traditional rice, though some do still sport the rice-wheat-cross superfood, as it is extremely cheap, easy to cook and cultivate, and can sustain an entire diet all on its own. Some planets use it for their own tradition of it being the staple of their colonization, but the few Japanese-regions in Hadrian wanted to hold onto their ties from far further back, and the notion stuck.

“Yeah, but manna sucks.” I retort; honestly it doesn’t, but I’m stubborn when it comes to food. “We’d have to cook it anyway. Still, though, I’d kill to get planetside for a bit.”

Just as we’re getting a new conversation rolling, it’s yet again interrupted.

Another shrill chime sounds, indicating the bridge wants us to answer “all-back-two-thirds.” The engines being powered-in reverse is extremely unusual. Combined with the fact that the pulses-per-second counter flips to the standard number for an “all-ahead-full” bell, it’s unusual enough that I key a communications circuit on my panel to page them. I usually avoid talking with them much at all, not watching to catch their stupidity, as if it were contagious. “Bridge, EOS,” following the standard Navy “Hey you, it’s me,” format of communications, which is used to designate who is talking to who for absolutely clarity, something that is surprisingly easy but surprisingly screwed up by non-Mags, “request to know if you meant to order a ‘full’ bell instead of a backing-bell?”

Seconds pass, and without a reply from the bridge, as would be proper, the indicator flips around to the “full” position. I snicker.

“We should have answered that bell. Just to teach them a lesson.” Stevens says, now lounging in his chair, bored out of his mind. For these small bell changes, he, the Reactor Operator, doesn’t have to do anything.

Kaii Turnbull snorts, “You honestly think you could do their job better than them?”

Stevens spins around and explains, “I *have*. I was on the bridge while we were alongside for an underway replenishment, and they got so annoyed that I was correcting them that they asked if the very same question. I asked the OOD, who happened to be Lieutenant Anderson,” he says the name of the Mag-Officer with great respect, “if I could station myself as an ‘under-instruction’ watchstander. He knew I could do it better than them, so he let me.”

“And?” I ask, enthused.

“After Anderson threw me a bunch of complicated bells, including when I corrected *him* a few times, they admitted defeat.” Stevens finally sounds pleased instead of upset. “I knew stuff they didn’t and was able to pull out references they didn’t even know about... even though they were kept right up there on the bridge. In the end I had Lieutenant Anderson laughing and them generally hating all of us.” Stevens is now glowing a bit with pride.

“As well they should. All is now right with the galaxy.”

I don’t even care when they order up ahead-one-third once more, bringing us back to our original bell. I cut down on the throttles quite a bit, knowing it will take the ship some time to slow

down to the requested speed. “Where were we?” I think for a second to regain my thoughts. “Yeah, Khepri.”

The watchteam is now unenthused by my change of subject, and after a few more attempts to keep everyone talking, Carlisle waves off my efforts dismissively, “Eh, no one cares anymore, Kierson. Khepri would suck. No beer.”

Success. Easy transition. “Can you make beer from manna?”

“Dude, you can make beer from anything. And of course. There is rice-beer, and there is wheat-beer. Stands to reason you can make manna-beer. It’s probably the first invention from the early colonies.” Carlisle exasperatedly elucidates. “They certainly didn’t have the weight-allowances to ship alcohol with them.”

I nod. “Yeah, should have figured. Ever had any?” He shakes his head. The stigma against manna throughout Hadrian means that any alcohol derivative would have an equal stigma, if not moreso. Obviously, it was far removed enough that I didn’t know about it.

Once more the bridge cuts us off. “EOS, answer the bell!” The voice is stern and commanding, as if the speaker through the circuit absolutely knows he’s correct. I glance up at my indications to make sure I’m in the right; I am: We still haven’t reduced our speed enough for me to begin applying power to the engine-cluster. Idiots don’t understand that such a massive warship has something most people refer to as “momentum.” Normally this isn’t a concern in the vacuum of space, but we are in the upper reaches of the atmosphere of Khepri.

“Bridge, EOS, we’re still slowing down.” I reply, keying the communication circuit.

“EOS, do it faster.” They drop the proper formatting of communications, so I do them one better and drop the formality altogether.

“Physics says ‘no.’” I snarkily reply.

Turnbull shoots me a glare. “Kierson...” she scolds as if I were a child getting out of line.

“Bridge, EOS,” I cut off a few words that I don’t hear, but they aren’t using the proper “Hey you, it’s me,” format of calling each other to denote just who is talking to who, so I don’t care, “We are unable to comply with your request. This is a very, very large warship. It takes time to slow down. The only way we can slow down any faster is if you ring up a backing-bell. Until then, you can wait.”

“What?” They ask, again, without the format used to denote which station is speaking to which. If I didn’t recognize the voice from the course of the previous minute, I wouldn’t know who I was talking to.

I make it a point to correct them. They do this type of thing so frequently, it rapidly brings up unresolved memories and feelings. “Bridge, EOS, recommend using proper communications formatting. Presuming you are the bridge, of cou-”

A new voice cuts me off, coming in on the shared-circuit without paying attention, and doing so loudly. “Bridge, Operations Plot, all conditions normal, no new-”

I explode. “*Operations Plot, EOS, I’m talking on the circuit, unless you have an emergency you can wait your turn!*” I shout into the circuit. These idiots can’t be bothered with standard procedures or courtesy. It doesn’t take much intelligence to do, but apparently, they fail at it.

There is a long pause. “Bridge, EOS, do you understand why we cannot slow down any more?”

Another pause before, “Bridge, aye.” They don’t understand, of course.

I don’t think the individual on the other end of the line has ever gotten methods of communicating over the circuits down correctly. They teach it in boot camp, it’s not like it’s a difficult concept. Most probably don’t care because they don’t understand importance, but for us Mags, it’s essential with how many times we must speak over communications circuits vice face-to-face. Doing it properly is important and has a good many number of reasons – written in blood - for establishment in the first place.

“Kierson, you could have handled that more tactfully.” Turnbull scolds again.

I shake my head. “Someone has to teach them that they’re dumb.”

“And you think you’re the person for that job?” She asks as if I were some child trying to justify a silly argument.

“Absolutely. I know what they’re doing wrong, and I have the... firm hand required to teach them the error of their ways,” I’m only half serious.

“And do you think that you’ll ever do any good?” She asks again.

Honestly, no, I don’t. I’ve done this before; I’ll have to do it again. “Gotta keep trying. Got to stay diligent. They’ll learn, one day.” I make sure I sound far too self-assured to be serious.

“Next time, let me handle that.”

“Ma’am, he was talking over me-“ I start, but she cuts me off just as fast.

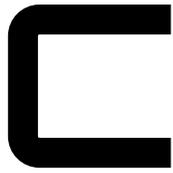
“Not that, Kierson, the ship’s speed thing. I can call the Engineering Officer of the Watch and he can talk to the OOD, who will make sure the issue is fully resolved, instead of you trying to take matters into your own hands. I doubt anything would come of it. “Next time, cool it.”

“Aye, ma’am.” I begrudgingly give up.

As if to justify my annoyance, the shrill, punctuating bell indicating a bell-change sounds again, and speedily, and for an extended period of time, indicating that the bridge is trying to ring up an emergency-bell, including the indicator of “maximum speed.” They do it all the time, fat-fingering the controls. I key the circuit again, “Bridge, EOS, request to know if you meant-“

I’m cut off by the abrupt wail of an alarm. I know the bridge is serious now, asking for as much speed as they can, and desperately, as they manually order the bell to continue ringing, in case we somehow didn’t hear it the first half dozen times. I’ve heard them mess up all sorts of alarms before, and I’ve seen them mess up ordering bells within the past few minutes, but never both. It takes a half second for my brain to register what the wailing klaxon means; what the alarm is.

The collision alarm.

**CHAPTER TWELVE:****#124: Work life bleeding into personal life.****Kingsway, Radiant City****2110 Kingsway Central Time, 12-25-3397 Sol Date****The Kierson Home**

“I can’t believe they want you to leave right after Christmas.” I can’t see her, not in the darkness of the room, but her voice fills my ears with sorrow that extends all the way to the pit of my stomach. I’m going to miss her so much. Another part of me hurts knowing that I won’t miss her enough; my mind will be far too preoccupied to think of her nearly as much as I should. That will just make all of those times I do think of her hurt all the worse.

It’s a long moment before I can muster up the courage to speak softly into her ear. I hug her close in the dark, her body cuddled up into mine. “It was never going to be this close…” I say. “We’re just lucky we got Christmas together at all this year.” We usually don’t. Usually the holiday is robbed from us by my deployment. This day had been almost magical, almost a dream. It was never supposed to be, but with the deployment delayed, I was allowed to cheat fate and steal this one wonderful day back.

“I know, but… at least another day to two. Think of all of those kids who need to spend the holidays with their parents.” I know she is trying to justify spending just a little more time with me, using the kids as an excuse. Underlying her determined voice is a fragile spirit ready to crack. It’s been like this for the last few weeks, longer than usual, every day wondering if I won’t see her again for over half a year. “Maybe I should try to go on that spouse-cruise.” She sounds hopeful of taking that chance to see me again, and I can tell that this deployment, not even started yet, has been and will be one of the hardest on her.

I sigh heavily, breathing in the scent of her hair. A small thing. Something I wouldn’t usually notice, but now, in these last few hours I have with her, I try to take in every last memory I can. “Honey… we talked about that. It wouldn’t work. You have too many commitments to just drop them all for six months.”

“Yeah… but I’d get to see you.”

My heart breaks a little. If I had picked a better job, one that kept me here on Kingsway, this wouldn’t be a conversation we’d have to suffer. I wouldn’t have lost my last three Christmas’s with Kristen. But no, I had to be a loyal patriot to my country and this is what I have to show for it.

Worst of all, the logical part of my brain, now shoved far back behind walls and waves of emotion, reminds me that when is said and done, once I stop letting my emotions get the best of me, I wouldn't have changed a thing.

"I'd like that, honey... you know I would. But that would cause us more pain in the end. You have to work and stuff... you can't let your life go on hold because me." I know Kristen understands that more than most. She never was all that clingy, and I love that about her. She's independent. She's strong. She doesn't need me, but she still loves me all the same.

I hear her murmur an acknowledgment. Then, "But, I don't know if I do want to teach, anyway," she says. The words throw me off entirely; she'd been going to school for much of my early Naval career and teaching here on Kingsway for the latter half of it after I was stationed on the planet.

"But, I thought you loved teaching biology?" I ask.

"I did, and it's still nice... but it doesn't feel right." Kristen admits. "It's not what I wanted to do with my life, I guess."

I try to talk some sense into her. Obviously she only feels this way because she's rather emotional right now. It's understandable; even she, the kind, dedicated, and above all intelligent woman I married can be swayed by sorrow at times. "But you love helping people, and you love kids..."

"I'm not sure I love *teaching* though." She says. "What I really loved was biology itself, I think."

Trying to fix things, I suggest an alternative, "You could try teaching college courses." Kristen snorts in reply, "No, really," I defend, "You're smart enough to do it, you might need to brush up on some higher-level stuff after all of these years, but you've got what it takes."

I can hear her try to shake her head against the pillow, "You're not listening Chris, I don't want to teach. I mean, I won't quit until I get a better option, sure, but..." She trails off.

At least she's put my mind at ease: She won't go off and make a crazy decision to try to follow me by hoping on that spouse-cruise that leaves right after my ship goes underway. "I understand, honey. I don't want you to put your life on hold for me, and you shouldn't have to suffer for following me from duty-station to duty station. Besides, I'll be getting out of the Navy before long anyway."

"No... not that." Her next words are long in coming, and she wriggles out of my grasp to spin around and face me. I can see dried tears on her face. "I kind of want to be a biomancer."

I'm thrown back a bit. "You... what?"

“I’ve researched how to become one. I have a background in biology and genetics, so I have that going for me, and there are sponsorship programs across Hadrian. My STAR score even says it’s the right pick for me.”

If she’s said she’s researched it, knowing Kristen she’s probably developed three or four different plans and has not only chosen the most financially feasible plan, but she’s worked it out to be the best timing as well, and probably the fastest route to completing the training. “Most of those are government. We might get separated.”

“For about three months. We’d see each other after your deployment, if everything goes well, then I’d go off to school. You’d have to relocate our stuff to wherever I was stationed and wouldn’t be able to get a job yet, but we have enough money saved up.”

“What would I do?” I realize after the words leave my mouth that saying that could sound insensitive; asking what I would do while following her around and expecting her to have an answer, when she’s done the same for me, willingly.

“You always said you wanted to take a break before doing anything else after the Navy. If nothing else you could work on getting a degree.” She was before always opposed to me taking a break. She wanted stability, at least having a job lined up post-military if I was to take a few months off.

It’s a thought. “What would you want to do as a biomancer?”

“I don’t know.” It’s unlike her to not have a plan. “Help people. Treat diseases, mend wounds. Create new plant species for colonies. Whatever I want, there is no shortage of work for technomancers.”

She’s right; we could live anywhere we wanted, and once she was a proven technomancer, she could work for almost any guild, if not hospitals or any variety of companies across the galaxy. With my professional options post-military, our options would be more limited, if only slightly, but I honestly could get a job anywhere I wanted; the MAG training program and subsequent operational experience is better than any degree, so my options are honestly quite open.

“It’s something to think about. If it’s what you want... I know you can make it happen.” I lie. I’m not sure if she can, as it usually requires a good deal of money to become a technomancer of any kind, but Kristen needs my support on this. In any case, she has a fairly better chance than the average person, not just for her background in biology, but she’s determined, independent, and intelligent. That’s why I married her. I convince myself she can do it.

My mind drifts. Maybe I could become a technomancer, too. I'm not so certain. My STAR scores weren't exactly ideal for any of the branched forms of technomancy; nanomancy, datamancy, auramancy, and gravomancy. Technically that means I should be an ideal biomancer, which is a centristic catch-all for all personalities. However, unlike Kristen, I don't have a background or affinity for biomancy. It's not my forte. My strengths lie in physics, nuclear engineering, dark matter, and the like. And there's no dark-matter-omancy, at least not yet. As far as I can tell I might be a good atomancer, but that's just a very specific form of auramancy.

Being a technomancer is a childhood dream of most that few can actualize. It's one I had to give up early on. Most aren't adept at any form right off the bat, and training and equipment to become a technomancer is prohibitively expensive for most. Most settle for controlling a few nanobots via standard implants and calling themselves "nanomancers" or surfing the web with those implants and calling themselves "datamancers."

But, childhood dreams of being a gravomancer shattered by the STAR aptitude test, I've settled for using my brain for other things. "I've always wanted to design reactors." I say.

"Always?" Kristen asks incredulously, knowing it's more been a passion of mine to be a gravomancer, if I don't talk about it much. But this is my realistic goal, rather than fanciful one.

"I could use my tuition assistance and the military-college fund to get a good engineering degree." I say. "Most Hadrian planets have good scholarships, too, those that would get me the education I need."

"If you designed reactors we'd still have to move with you."

"Yes, but with biomancy you could work most anywhere." I don't know why I'm entertaining the notion of her being a biomancer as much as I am. She needs support, but I shouldn't be building her hopes up too much. I don't want to have too much hope until we know it's a possibility.

Our talk fortunately continues down paths other than talking about my imminent deployment schedule, until, of course, my alarm goes off. The ship isn't supposed to deploy until tomorrow, but Mags always must be onboard early to make sure the propulsion systems are ready to go. It's understandable, but forcing all of Reactor Department onboard early is excessive.

The alarm notification telling me that it's time to leave brings our conversation back down to reality. "Acknowledge." I speak, ceasing the alarm and drowning us, suddenly, in silence. Neither wants to say what we're thinking. I hug Kristen tightly to me. "Time to go."

I get up and dress. Everything is already laid out for me. My bag is already packed, and most of my stuff is onboard the *Dauntless* already. She kisses me goodbye. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” We kiss again, longingly, as if doing so could stop time and change the world. As our kissing could mean we don’t have to spend the next year apart from each other. As we prolong our embrace, I can feel the wetness on her face as I hold her cheek. She’s crying, but only just. I know she’s holding back, trying not to share her sorrow, but know it’s there, knowing she’s hurting only makes it worse for me. We always fail at this part.

Pain wracks my chest. Emotions aren’t supposed to *hurt*, I tell myself, but it doesn’t remove the fact that it’s hard for me to breathe, and I force tears away from my eyes. I can’t let her see me, cry, too. I can’t let her know how much I’m going to miss her, not yet.

“I love you.” I repeat meekly, and she does the same. Her breathing is more ragged than ever.

I play with the strap of my bag at my shoulder, adjusting it, and walk away. Glancing back, I see the faintest shimmer of light roll down her cheek as light catches the first on what is bound to be a wave of tears. Every exhale is painful as I walk to the elevator.

I’m thankful that the elevator is empty, because when the door finally shuts, my first tears start to fall. We’ve done this so many times, why is it so hard to do? A part of me tells me that I’m being too emotional, and the rest doesn’t care. I just want to spend a few more moments with my wife. If I could, I’d stay with her, but years ago I made a pact with the military that I have to uphold.

I just wish I could stay longer. I check the time. No, I have a shuttle to catch, I can’t delay any more.

Exiting our building, the weather seems to match my mood and one of Kingsway’s infamous storms is blowing outside, accompanied by a hefty downpour. I let my emotions go as I walk. No one will be able to see my face or notice my pain, and I’ll get a rare moment of isolation thanks to the storm, despite the presence of people; I can vent into the icy rain and no passersby will be any the wiser, so long as I keep silent amid the crowds of people in the city streets, which are full of people; the resident of the planet of Kingsway are hardy and used to the rain.

The tall skyscrapers of downtown Radiant City in the distance are barely visible through the rain, but I can still see the space elevator in the distance surrounded by the tall buildings, slightly slanted on one side to weather the ever regular storm circling the planet known as the Clockstorm for its regularity; we’ve been pressing to deploy before it hits Radiant City, trying to overcome setback after setback. It’s not due to be a heavy hitter this cycle, but protocol dictates avoiding it, and unless God-

and-Nation says we transit the last personnel and equipment during it, then we delay the deployment another two weeks.

Odds are, instead, we'll just move up all crew in the next two days before the real storm hits and spend the remaining time in orbit until maintenance and repairs are complete. Two weeks in orbit, just an hour's travel away from Kristen. So close I could talk with her instantly without use of an in-system gravity-chute. So close but just out of reach. No civilian would ever have to deal with this nonsense.

"God, why did I do this? Why did I join the Navy?" I ask aloud when I'm sure no one can hear me, knowing every last word is coming out high-pitched and garbled. "Why did I make a decision I knew would hurt this much? Why did I do something that would hurt Kristen?"

Because you have something to fight for. Something to believe in. Something to defend. I did it because I wanted to serve my nation. Now I'm still in for Kristen. To be a part of a machine that keeps tyrants at bay. Yes, that's it. That's what I tell myself. I'm doing it for her. We're suffering now for reward later. Safety. Security. She'll be able to be biomancer, perhaps.

I don't believe any of my own internal dialogue. I'm stuck in the military. We aren't fighting anything, and the military would function just fine without me. I've never saved anyone, and I never will. I'll never see combat. Even if my ship winds up fighting, we're a carrier. We're going to park far, far away from the combat, launch spacecraft, and wait it out. I'll never see action. I'll never be used, not really. My ship is a "friendship boat." Doing a job diplomats should be doing. Shaking hands, except we can't let foreign dignitaries see us dirty-low-life enlisted folk. Anyone who isn't a senior-officer might as well not exist at all. We're just their personal drivers on a luxury yacht; we're playing pretend that we're "defending a common border" from the unruly Coalition.

I look to the heavens, hoping to catch a glimpse of my prison for the next few months, but the clouds obscure my vision. I'd only see a fast-moving star, and even then, I don't know which one it would be. One of the big ones, seeing as *Dauntless* is currently docked.

My head downturns back to the ground, my face soaking wet, and my body as well, the coat not doing much good at all. Fortunately, my bag is sealed against the elements, but I still can't shield myself from the pounding pain of emotions raining down on me. It's lessened, now. *This is all for the greater good*, I repeat in my head as a mantra. *I'm just not thinking straight. I'm letting my emotions get the better of me. I'll survive this. I have before, and I will again. It will all get better soon.*

I've finally managed to work through my sobbing by the time I reach the guardshack of the Navy shuttleport, which I intentionally bought my apartment near. I'm dry-eyed, save for water I can't

account for, now, a feat that I didn't manage the first few times. Being military, no one judges, not right before a deployment, but there is still a stigma about showing such emotion in front of other men. There are primeval notions we can't shake sometimes.

There are a few other couples around me. I realize I'm the only lone sailor at the spaceport alone, but there are less than a dozen outside the guardshack giving their goodbyes, as most will board tomorrow, as only Reactor personnel need be on board right now. Those spouses who are here giving their goodbyes are just as sorrowful as one might expect.

I clench my fist and press it to my side as I walk, hiding the ring on my finger. Some spouses might scorn Kristen for not "seeing her man off" if they knew. Those spouses can jump off a cliff. They don't know our relationship, they don't know Kristen, and they don't know me. Kristen does know me, and knows what I need to be able to walk onboard my ship with pride. Especially if I want to live up to the professionalism of being a First-Class Petty Officer. I might as well start now.

Being separated by months, what's a few more minutes?

I smile a bit, and sigh, resigning to call Kristen once I get onboard. That thought helps put me at ease – I'll see her soon enough, if not face-to-face, I'll at least get to help her dry her tears. I can be strong for her, still.

I present my credentials and the guard waves me through. "What, your umbrella broken?" He asks. I'd forgotten I had one, and I press a button on my jacket and all of a sudden the rain stops pounding me, a field repulsing it away. Some of it rebounds yet again off the guard's own umbrella-shield and continues cascading downwards. The field does nothing for the wind-chill, hence why coats are so necessary.

"Nah, forgot I had it." I tell the truth. I was too absorbed in my own thoughts. I swear I can hear the guard mutter "wierdo" as I walk by towards the small shuttle-terminal, where there are bound to be other sailors waiting and far too many of them, warm climate-controlled air, and vending machines lacking proper stock, knowing how things go when a carrier deploys. Almost no facilities are ready for the influx of people, and most don't care too much about placating us.

"Forget your umbrella?" A voice speaks up as I sit in the warm waiting area. I didn't even realize I sat next to Jameson. My mind is rattled, for sure.

"Uh, yeah." I say. He just chuckles in response. "I can't wait for this to be over."

"It hasn't even started," Jameson replies. He's too happy for a man about to be removed from 'real life.'

“I’ve had enough of these deployments. I don’t mind the work or the Mag-world so much. I can live with all that. But the deployments suck and the coners always find a way to make it miserable.” I lean back, realizing there are coners all around me.

“True. Not reenlisting?” He asks.

“Nope. *Never*. I’ve done my service. I just want to be done with all of this.”

Jameson smirks, “You know, if you reenlist right now, you can-“

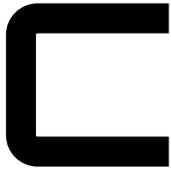
“*Shut up* Jameson,” I cut him off before he completes the age-old inside joke in our department. It’s gotten old and stale to some and have taken on a quality of only being funny in how they get on people’s nerves. That has merit amongst such a disgruntled group of sailors cooped up in a steel prison, but I’m not having it today.

I see a sailor and his wife kissing in the rain outside, their umbrellas meshed together to create a swirl of raindrops around them, a scene so many couples have taken video of to keep around the house that it’s downright cheesy, but right now I feel like it’s downright picturesque. Jameson doesn’t seem to notice, but the scene floods back the memories of my wife. The first time we took that corny picture when we were younger, the first time I saw her cry like this girl is now, and the first time she said ‘good-bye’ to me when I first deployed – and how terribly we cried back then.

I’ve gotten better since then. I miss her, but it doesn’t stab so horribly anymore. When I step onto that shuttle, the finality of it all will set in, and my composure will be regained in a heartbeat, just as it has in the past. In one breath I’ll go from heartsick husband to professional, cold sailor, and I’ll be able to bottle up my heartache and shove it back into the recesses of my mind; once the hope of seeing my wife against is truly gone. Hope is, after all, the first step on the road to despair.

So I sit, quietly, as Jameson drones on about something, and wait for the announcement that our shuttle has arrived; waiting for my hope to be removed so that I can go on with my life.

If everything goes right, this upcoming deployment is to be my last.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

#120: Drilling for the purpose of drills instead of actual combat or casualties.

TNV *Dauntless*,

2850 Igemari Central Time, 02-18-3398 Sol Date
Propulsion Plant, Enclosed Operating Station (EOS)

Crap.

Everything around me seems to slow as my adrenaline kicks in. A part of me tells myself that it’s just my brain kicking in a faster rate of producing the moment-by-moment memories, so it seems like everything is slowing down. Yet another part of my brain butts in and tells me that I need to start doing *something*, but by the time I can think of what that *something* might be, my hand is already about to start increasing throttles while the other is acknowledging the ordered bell via my control panel.

Something isn’t right, though. *We have to make this as fast as we can*, my brain tells me. “Hold thottles!” I yell. “Stevens! Shim, go!” He stares at me for what feels like eternity, then understands. I’ve told him to do as I’d practiced before with my own watch-team, how to coax the reactor plant into giving the most bang-for-our-buck to the engines clusters.

The way we’re going about this is technically a violation of procedure, of course. But this is quite possibly a life-or-death scenario, apparently. Procedures were made for safety measures. If we’re about to collide with something, “safety” is the least of our worries.

Fortunately, Carlisle also listened to me, and as Stevens is raising reactor power, he seems to be hanging on my word, and Kaii Turnbull is frantically trying to call the Bridge and Engineer-Officer-of-the-Watch to figure out just what the heck is going on.

Stevens needs no other coaching; he’s a smart enough operator that he knows exactly what I was asking of him – or, rather, he realized it himself - and puts the plant conditions right where they need to be in no-time-flat. “Go!” I shout to Carlisle, and we begin opening throttles to our engine-clusters. Watching our pulses-per-second indicator, as well as a velocity-indicator, our ship likely has just lurched from our combined effort and the increased power being fed to the engines.

I’m feeling pretty proud of my expert-

-Something grabs hold of my body, and- *BOOOOOOOOOM...*

...EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

...EE

I wake up, groggily, to an eerily lit room, my ears still ringing, my head hurting, and muffled explosions still going on about me. My Emergency Void Rescue Device has deployed around my body, sealing up in tight fashion over my uniform, and a thin helmet surrounds my head. I'm breathing heavily, and fairly dizzy.

My panel sits in front of me, more than half of my displays winked out, the rest filled mostly with various error messages. I can't even see how much force my engine is pushing out.

The inside of my helmet is coated on one side with blood. I wipe my hand over it, and it comes away clean; the blood is my own. I seem to remember hearing something about medicine being delivered, and look around; Stevens is the only person visibly awake. Petty Officer Carlisle and Kaii Turnbull are both slumped over. Stevens, on the other hand, is frantic, trying to do his own job, Carlisle's, and mine at once.

"What happened?" I ask, shouting over the din in my ears. Stevens spins to stare at me.

I can make out him mouthing "We were hit!" but I can barely hear him speak.

"Hit? By what?" I try to say it quieter, realizing I'm shouting.

He shrugs, turning away from me to operate something on Carlisle's panel. Carlisle isn't moving. Stevens, on the other hand, seems focused. Frantic, but focused. Operating with purpose. I glance back at my panel and try to adjust controls.

"They aren't responding." I shout again, inadvertently.

"I know." He answers as the ringing sound clears from my ears. "Ever since we got hit your panel's been practically dead. Based on how we lurched, I'd say whatever it was hit your side. I think your engine cluster's down."

'Thruster's' dead. I only hope Carlisle and Turnbull aren't.

I unbuckle my seat and release the locks – locks I didn't activate. The ship's AI likely saved my life by using the counter-mass seatbelt to keep me, my body, and internal organs in place, and likely the same for Stevens and the rest. "Did you tell Central yet?" He nods.

I cross the small room, behind Stevens and in front of the watch-officer desk, to get to Carlisle. Carlisle's pulse is weak. I have to slip off my glove that only recently form-fitted to my hand – no easy task, since it's supposed to keep me sealed - and his helmet to feel his neck. His suit is already telling me

he's critical and needs medical attention, and it has administered as many painkillers, antibiotics, antivirals, various immunoboosters and stabilizers as possible.

I don't need a suit to tell me it's not going to be enough. Much of his lower half is coated in his blood, pouring out from a puncture wound. I can't see the object from his front, but a quick inspection of the back of his seat reveals a piece of steel jutting out. From the angle, and a review of the EOS compartment, whatever it was shot through the overhead, down through his chest, and lodged either in him and the seat.

Worse, it's gone far enough through him that it's not stopping bloodflow. I grab a medical pack from off the bulkhead just as another explosion wracks the ship. My head sharply cracks against the bulkhead, and I'm thankful for my helmet's cushioning of the blow and that I haven't removed it yet. Stevens, still being acted upon by his counter-mass-seatbelt, doesn't seem to notice as he continues his work of monitoring, adjusting, and trying to recover what equipment he can, pulling up procedures for a few of the things he doesn't have memorized.

"Frequency division pump?" I ask as I set to work patching up Carlisle, filling the small cavity in his chest with sealant-foam. He works up a bit of a wheeze, then a rasp, and coughs. White flecks of foam come out; some of the foam entered his lung, which means it is – or was – punctured.

Stevens nods. "Trying to make sure I can start it up again without it crapping out on me." His voice is strangely calm.

I can see he's in the right chapter of the instruction, but not the right procedure. "Very last section. Very last." I direct him.

While he finds the procedure, I step back to Turnbull's desk and key the communications channel to Damage Control Central. With a bit of added gusto and confidence, I make my announcement, "Central, One-EOS, Watch Officer and one Throttleman incapacitated. Number 4 engine down. Reactor online. Request casualty assistance team."

The response is terse, and accompanied by a roar of sounds and background voices. "Central, Aye." They're in deep, too, if they aren't requesting more information. Whatever happened, it's affected the whole ship.

He flips past a few thousand words in a split second, all the way to the end. "Emergency restart..." he reads, "Start desired frequency-pump." He glances at me. "That's it?"

“Yup.” I look down. “Those things are beastly they can take whatever you throw at them. Don’t worry. What happened to Carlilse?”

He doesn’t answer me. “Increase power on his engine.” I look up and trim the controls in front of the two of us. “You need to keep it stable, Chris. If that engine dies, we won’t have enough to keep this ship from crashing back into the planet. Before you woke, two plant called over and said both of theirs are down, as are the cross-connects. Their reactor is up, but all they’re doing is keeping the lights on. That cluster is the only one left.”

Carlilse gasps in front of me. His suit blares a warning message in the air in front of me, recognizing me as his medical assistance. It’s requesting more drugs it either doesn’t have or ran out of. I search in the medical pack, find the listed syringe, and press it to his arm. A “hiss” tells me that the drugs are injected into him.

I quickly move back to the desk and key the local comm circuit for the reactor plant. “All hands report casualties.” I annotate on the desk for the ship’s AI to take all reports and give me the findings after two minutes, immediately for anything severe with personnel or reactor plant. Hopefully we’re alive in those two minutes. The job of running announcements and coordinating things like this is usually reserved for the Watch Officer, but we’re two watchstanders short right now and one of them needs immediate attention, leaving me to run three different jobs.

“Chris!” Stevens points at the panel. With my off hand, I adjust the controls further, pushing the engine back up to maximum capacity. “I’m about to drop a frequency-pump, so to get the most out of that engine you’re going to have to throttle back with it when it starts to take effect.” I nod. It’s one of those unwritten bits of information – or, rather, it probably is written in the depths of some technical manual few ever read. In this instance, though, I trust Steven’s judgement.

We coordinate the adjustments, and then I check Turnbull. She’s alive, but still unconscious, with nothing more than a nasty head-wound. Carlilse, on the other hand, is getting progressively worse.

“He’s not going to make it.” I say. I begin to notice my fingers are numbing and tingling ever so slightly. I have to will them to move. Good news is that means my adrenaline is kicking in, at the cost of fine-motor control.

“Chris!” Stevens has again noted my absence from the panel. “I need to you to focus here!” He begins to do things on my panel – Carlilse’s – that I can’t see. “I need you *here*. I can’t do this on my

own.” With that, he begins cursing under his breath. I can’t tell if it’s directed at me, his panel, or the situation in general. Probably all of the above.

“Carlilse is going to die!” I shout. Only at that point does the fact really occur to me. For the first time in my life, someone is going to die right in front of me. Someone I could save. I’m breathing heavy now. In spite of the chill in the room, which is now less than what I recall from before the impact, I’m sweating.

“We all are if we hit that planet!” He’s not shouting to make himself heard, he’s angry at this point.

We’re drowned out by an announcement as I move back to try to care for PE2 Carlilse and his panel at the same time. I’ve got my hands full with both. One hand tries to plug his wound further while the other stands ready to adjust throttles.

Bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong... “General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battlestations. Route for general quarters is up and forward on the starboard side, down and aft on the port side. This is not a drill.” The high pitched “bongs” and message repeat once.

I realize I have to, against protocol, talk over the announcement. It’s not providing me any valuable information. As much as I honestly don’t care, not doing so is so thoroughly engrained in me that it takes effort. I have to stand at an awkward angle, reaching over Carlilse. “Lowering vacuum, Stevens.” I note on his panel, “The DMR isn’t going to sustain for long like that.”

I briefly think about attending to my battlestation, as a stretcher-bearer, essentially a worse-off wannabe version of a medic, but the thought flees with the reminder that what is happening in front of me is a much larger issue. I can’t leave until I get a watch relief – or three, in this case.

“Back off throttles for a second.” He orders me, and I follow the command, having an inkling of what he’s doing. “And...” He flips open a cover – for the emergency vent - and a loud “whoosh” echoes through the hull, followed by a silence that is cut off far too briefly. Reactor power dips and then spikes rapidly, but Stevens keeps it under control, but by the look on his face I can tell he wasn’t sure how well what he did would work. I notice that vacuum has stabilized but is slowly lowering again as pressure is added from somewhere.

Analyzing what he did, I key the comm-channel to DC Central. “DC Central, this is One-EOS, we have a containment breach in our reactor, slowly loosing vacuum.”

There is a long silence. “Aye, EOS. Maintain power as much as you can, we are losing altitude. Set Tactical Situation.” We’re far beyond “tactical,” which usually means a modification to procedure to ensure the reactor stays online to keep the ship operational. The situation is “All Hell Breaks Loose,” and is dangerously close to “Do Everything You Can To Keep From Dying.”

“Show me altitude, Central,” Stevens shouts. Instantly, too fast for a human – the ship’s AI is paying attention, at least – a haptic light display flickers to life over the desk. I grab it and toss it towards Steven’s panel, and it nestles itself in the air between our panels. 201,000 meters and dropping.

I hope the guys on the bridge know what they’re doing. We’re high enough – higher than we were, apparently, we managed to get some distance before we were hit – that we don’t need to worry about too much air resistance, we can attain orbit and slowly climb until our orbit won’t decay appreciably. So long as the idiots in the bridge have us aimed right, or if they gave the AI control, it will have made the most ideal course adjustments. “Central, EOS, make sure the bridge isn’t aiming us up. What we need is horizontal velocity.” There is no response, and I don’t have time to repeat it. Stevens looks at me funny.

“What? I know a thing or two about orbital mechanics.”

“Thrust.” He says flatly.

“Oh.” I see I’ve got some room to push the output on the throttles up a bit more, and I give it a bit of juice. Hopefully that helps. I’ve never had to do so much in such a short period of time, but things appear to be stabilizing a bit now.

Moving to check on Carlilse, the door swings open, and upon seeing the scene, Yuichan doesn’t bother requesting to enter, as would be standard procedure. There are a lot of things we aren’t bothering with right now. Tradition and formality flee like startled rabbits when serious stuff starts to go down. “What happened?”

I give her a quick rundown, and she motions for me to return back to Carlilse’s panel while she checks on Turnbull and starts taking notes and pulling up procedures.

“You’re our casualty assistance team?” I note indications on my panel. Nothing has changed. More than ever, I want something to change so I can feel like I’m doing something.

“They’re about to order ‘abandon ship.’” Yuichan says. “The only thing stopping them is the fact that this reactor and that engine cluster might survive and get us into orbit.” As she speaks, I hear a series of ‘thumps’ throughout the ship, followed by a series of shudders and additional, duller ‘thumps.’

“What was that?” I ask. No one answers, because of the three of us, no one knows. I hear another cough and wheeze from Carlilse. His suit’s display blinks at me, requesting more medicine. I administer it as hastily as I can, while my panel alerts me to more changes that need to be made at the same time – apparently things decided to not be stable right when other things started happening. All I can hope for now is to grow two more arms and three more pairs of eyes to pay attention to everything.

“I don’t think he’s going to make it.” Yuichan spares a glance at the deteriorating state of the man at my side. She’s right, but I don’t want to admit it, not again. I’ve spent time and energy on him, to give up now would be to fail. If I had more people, we could get him out of-

-Another, louder series of bangs and shudders wrack the vessel like something is attempting to beat a dying animal, and another, and another. The impacts – the only thing they can be – are followed by a shrill klaxon. “All hands, abandon ship.” Another voice, probably from another station, nearly cuts the first off. “Repel boarders, repel boarders.” The following messages are a series of useless orders overlapping one another. Data fills my helmet; all data about Khepri. Local weather: Sunny, Temperature of likely Touchdown area: 10 Degrees Celsius, Nearest Human Settlement: N/A, Air: Human Breathable. Time to Rescue: N/A.

I curse whatever idiots are failing to communicate to each other. The one ordering ‘Repel Boarders’ sounds like the Captain, I think. I have no doubt that General Quarters, followed by Repel Boarders, and Abandon ship orders are going to create significant confusion throughout the ship. I take the helmet off. I can’t stand to see the “Time to Rescue: N/A” note any longer.

For the next several minutes, Stevens, Yuichan, and I attempt to fight the reactor plant for every joule of power, but our altitude is still decreasing. 192,000 meters. Yuichan gives out a flurry of orders to reactor plant watchstanders around the plant, outside of EOS. Almost no one responds. 191,980 meters. Slowly dropping. Teasingly, but steadily. “Yuichan, we aren’t going to be able to attain orbit-velocity.” My words are punctuated by soft ‘thumps’ echoing through the hull of the ship. Escape pods.

Carlilse stills, no longer unconsciously gasping.

A small chime brings up a display in front of us with a series of projected trajectories. Even the best case scenario trajectory intersects with the planet with “controlled crash” written next to it. The worst case scenario, a nearly vertical line, has “fatal crash” written next to it.

“Chris... go.” Yuichan says. I must have a perplexed look on my face. “Go. Take Turnbull with you.” The watch officer beside her is still motionless, but unlike the man next to me, breathing.

I pretend not to hear, turning back to the panel. “No.” I’m not leaving them. Not in a million years.

“There’s nothing more that you can do that I can’t.” Stevens says. It’s true. Things have started to settle out and we’ve gotten into a rhythm of correcting repeated problems. He’s gotten used to handling the plant in its reduced state, and knows what limits he can push.

“I could do what you’re doing.” I protest. “I’ve watched you. You go.”

“No, you can’t.” Stevens says. I could. He knows it, and my steel-cold stare forces him to amend his statement. “I won’t let you. We can either sit here and bicker, or you can make sure you make it. Someone ought to.”

I grab the throttles in front of me, as if to coax more out of them. “I am making sure someone makes it. *Go, Stevens.*” My fingers are so numb I can barely grip the handle. They’re fully detent forward already, asking for every bit of juice the engines can coax out of the reactor plant. I can’t do any more. “I’m taking this.” A slow rage builds in me. “This is *my* reactor plant. You’re just on a proficiency watch. I know this plant better than I know myself. What if something happens that you can’t handle?”

Stevens tries to argue further, but Yuichan steps down to where I am and pulls me away from the panel. “Chris, you have more medical experience than anyone here.” It’s hardly true. Stevens nearly had a medical degree before joining the military. I’m not even a full medic, I only know enough to keep people alive until real help arrives. “We’re going to crash-land this thing. We need someone physically fit and medically trained to check up on us after the crash, okay? Besides, if something happens Stevens can’t handle, then I can. I trained you, there’s nothing you’ll know that I won’t. So go. Okay?”

“Then Stevens is coming with me.” Yuichan looks at him, considering.

“You should go, Stevens.” She admits.

“I can’t.” His voice sounds more downtrodden than before. Our vision meets, then mine follows him down to his leg. It hadn’t been that bloody before. A spike is sticking out of it. Likely a splinter of whatever injured – killed – Carlilse. He’d managed to hide it from me, or I was just too wrapped up in everything else to notice.

It’s a lame excuse. The odds of me being able to help them later, medically, are slim to none. They’re not likely to make it and my “medical training” amounts to little more than “make the bleeding stop.” I exhale heavily. “Okay?” She repeats. The bulkheads around us would envy the strength of the steel in her eyes. She’s steady as a rock. “Go! Now!”

“I’m not leaving!” I don’t know why I shout it at her, closing in on her. She’s not my enemy, but part of me doesn’t care. I have to fight *something*.

Yuichan shoves me back and points at the door, as much with her arms as with her gaze. “There is nothing more you can do! Carlisle is dead! The ship is crashing! If we make it, we might need you!” She looks deep into my eyes, and every word she says is bitten off harshly. “Don’t be a fool, Chris. Don’t let your anger make you into a tool, use it as a tool.” She repeats from a time days past. “You’re angry right now. You want to do something. You want to help. Chris, get Turnbull out of here. Help her. You can’t help us anymore.”

I pause, and then nod. My helmet goes on. Almost forgetting, I move to pick up the medical kit by Carlisle’s body. I sling it over one shoulder, and do my best to fireman-carry Kaii Turnbull. I’m clumsy, the whole of my extremities are succumbing to that tingly sensation. I’ve never had to do this before, but I finally manage to get her into position where I can stably walk, and make my way out of the room. The workouts with Ramirez paid off, apparently.

As I shut the door, I glance back in. “Thanks. Good luck.” There are so many things I want to say, so many things my mind won’t let me accept. This is going to be the last time I see them, I tell myself, but it doesn’t feel right, like I’m just leaving for a bit, then coming back, and they’ll be sitting in berthing, or eating on the messdecks as I walk by them in passive. I want to let them know that I’ll never forget them, but I can’t get the words out of my mouth. The door shuts on 187,422 meters, and I close my mind to that train of thought as well.

Some instinct tells me to move. Another tells me to run back in, to help fight the ship, to help keep as many people alive as possible. Either way, I have to fight something. Either I stay and help keep the ship aloft – a losing battle, but one I know I can do – or I head on into the corridors of the ship, possibly headlong into these intruders who could kill me outright. That notion absolutely terrifies me, and I can feel my heartbeat racing now in my ears, in my hands.

Somehow, I manage to walk over the wreckage, nearly tripping on a body. Hay, with too much blood around him to be alive. “I saved your life before and you have to go and die *now*?” I don’t stop to figure out how it happened, something tells me there isn’t time, and my stomach agrees, telling me it is about to protest violently should I stay to look any longer. That’d be messy, inside of the helmet.

Everything seems like a dream around me. So much is recognizable, but out of sorts. The lights being dimmer, some of them out, makes it all look alien, like I was transported to another ship of the

same class, close, but not exactly the same. This place was my work and home for so long. Now it's under attack; being destroyed. I can't take it all in. My mind won't let me. I try, prodding, but something resists. I'm not strong enough to overcome the mental barriers put in place, keeping me from fully comprehending everything. I have to move on... but that could mean death. Only the knowledge that I'll die if I stay keeps my feet moving. At least, I think that's what keeps me moving.

More equipment would be littered about but many of the restraints holding it in place for just such an occasion have done their job. It hasn't stopped all of it, though. Some damage control equipment is strewn about. Kaii Turnbull is fortunately a small enough woman that I have a feeling I'll be able to get us both to safety without needing assistance, but I welcome the notion of finding someone to help.

I enter the passageway just outside of the reactor plant. Emergency lighting plays lazily off the walls, barely doing the job to keep the once pale passage from looking like a horror scene. All I can think of is that I have to get off the ship and avoid whoever it is that is apparently boarding us. Killing us.

Boarders. Apparently, this was the result of people, not a freak accident; not some random meteor. Had I thought about it further I would have realized that. Something capable of damaging a carrier doesn't just come out of nowhere.

People are out there who would kill me. People are out there who are trying to bring the *Dauntless* down. And they're succeeding. Suddenly, I don't want to find anyone else. Maybe I'll be able to make it to an escape pod, just the two of us. Fortunately, there are some escape pods nearby, just a hundred feet down the hallway.

I nearly sprint to their location, as much as it can be called a sprint with Turnbull over my shoulders, only to be disappointed. Above each in red-light lighting are the words "LAUNCHED," or "OUT OF COMMISSION." I know for a fact that all of these were perfectly fine before I took that watch earlier today, as I had to walk by here. We must have taken a nasty hit. The next series of escape pods is much the same.

My only chance is to get to the nearest flight-deck. It's up some stairs and a good walk further, and Kaii Kaylee Turnbull feels heavier than when I started out with her. "Just two more minutes of walking," I lie to myself. I have no doubt that some of the passageways towards the flight deck have been isolated due to battle damage and fire or, worse, boarders.

'Thumps' that I know to be the telltale sound of the ship's dorsal cannons loosing kinetic rounds tell me that something out there is big enough to warrant them, which doesn't bode well. The ship is

fighting back tooth-and-nail, dying every step of the way, but not giving up. That's my girl. That's my *Dauntless*. Never thought I'd actually be proud of the titanium-and-steel-prison.

I start lugging Turnbull up the stairs, after dropping her off of my shoulders and drag her up. It's too awkward to have her on my shoulders going up the narrow Navy-ladderwell, and my back and shoulders welcome the respite.

"I got her feet if you got her arms." A voice says from behind me. One of the other watchstanders, PM3 Judith Wood grabs Turnbull's feet. Apparently Wood decided to vacate as well. "Who is that?" She asked, then seeing her face. "Kaii Turnbull..." she mutters to herself.

"Was anyone else down there?" I ask between breaths, hauling the unconscious woman up the stairs. "Mechanics I mean?"

"No one that's not staying until the bitter end. Two plant evacuated, too."

Reaching the top of the ladderwell, I encounter an all-new problem: I'm not quite strong enough to easily get her back up, not having carried her this far. Before, she was slumped over a desk. Now she's lying on the ground. Wood could help, but I don't know how much. She's not exactly a bodybuilder.

I loop my arms under her shoulders and start to pull her down the passageway when a shout stops me.

"Hey! You there! Stop" Bellows a booming, amplified voice. The sound of boots thundering down the passageway strikes terror into my heart and soul. I'm going to die, right here, right now. I don't even have time to try to heroically push Wood away or shield Turnbull, they'll riddle me with holes before that.

The sight of the heavily clad soldiers nearly gives me a heart-attack from fright until I realize they're RIFT, a whole squad by the look of it. I'm saved. My whole body relaxes, but Wood is rigid in fear; it's not often one sees RIFT in full gear.

"Ramirez?" I shout, hopeful. They're all wearing their combat suits, so telling one from another is difficult. That aside, it's not like we have a full division of RIFT onboard, so the chances are good that he's among this unit.

The unit falters a little after I call out the name, and then turn to look at one of them. "Kierson?" One of them moves out from behind the others. I realize he was equally unable to determine who I was, as I've got my emergency helmet on. "Oh, thank Christ Almighty, the Virgin Mary, Father, and whoever the hell else. We were just going to secure the reactor plant. We were told it's the only thing keeping this

thing up.” I recognize two of the other men who are not in combat gear, PM2 Elam Stroud and PC3 Edohara. The rest of the group is unanimously special forces.

Edohara notices me. “PC1!” He exclaims, and I forget that he’s used my rating title instead of actual name, but I don’t care at this point. I nod in response. “Good to see you.”

I don’t respond further to Edohara, instead turning to Ramirez. “Not for long.” I shake my head. “We’re giving her all she’s got and it isn’t much.” I give as quick and short of a rundown of the situation as possible.

One of them relays the information further on and waits for a response. In the meantime, I slouch against the bulkhead and drop until I’m sitting down, with Turnbull next to me. I nod at her when I notice Ramirez looking inquisitive. “She’ll make it, though, even if the boat won’t. Just a bump on the head. I think.” As if on cue, she moves a bit, for the first time since the first impact. Not conscious, but alive.

“Harbis, Raith, Detrick, you go make sure the reactor is safe while we clear a path, then you double-time it to the hangar bay,” a man says with a commanding voice. I presume it’s their Chief. Three of the RIFT operators dart past me, down towards the reactor plant. Something in the back of my mind tells me they haven’t the faintest clue of what to look for or who to contact, but I don’t proffer any help.

The second they leave, another trooper shouts “Contact!” The entire group spins as if joined together, and a few of their rifles burst out a short staccato. Whatever they shot was on the other side of them from my vantage point, so all I notice is that within seconds is that much of the group spins back away to rescan the area.

“What’s going on?” I ask wide eyed and lost. Ramirez helps me up, and the two of us shoulder Turnbull between us.

“We were hit by something. Now we’re being boarded. A good bit of the crew made it to escape pods, but a lot never left their general-quarters stations. Boarders have been making short work of those, but some fought back. Without *proper* weapons, though...” Ramirez says in short bursts of information. He looks tense, I think, beneath his suit. No, not tense. His stance and manner are lithe and agile but ready for danger, like a wolf or a fangback.

“We’ve been escorting groups to escape pods, but there aren’t many left. You’re the last group. We were coming to see who we could get out of the reactor plants. That’s where we picked up these two.” He thumbs towards Stroud and Edohara. “Found them on the way out, they filled us in a bit.” Stroud is holding what looks to be a makeshift *sword*. More like a large machete fashioned from what appears to

be a deckplate, a crude handle made of padding and bits of chord. I have no doubt it's sharp. If a mechanic makes a tool, he does it right. However, the brutish blade is clean.

Edohara is empty-handed. In this setting, it makes his slight frame seem even more meek.

"There isn't much hope for the plant. People, maybe, but most who can are evacuating. Some..."

"I saw Hay," Stroud says, as quiet as if we were already at his casket. I don't respond. I don't want to think about it; about the notion that anything I could ever do is just going to be made futile somehow.

After communicating between each other over channels I can't hear the RIFT soldiers wave us further down the hallway. Edohara and Stroud take up the duty of dragging Turnbull. Gunshot reports sound out on occasion from the front of the group, but I'm shielded from sight of what's really going on by the squad, who are doing a good job of being human shields. For that, I'm thankful. Their suits can take much more of a hit than mine can.

I'm going to die here. I don't know how to fight back, even if I had a weapon. I have no experience with firefights, and I'd probably lose my lunch midway through the fight.

I step over bodies. Ours. Theirs. Now free of any burden, I stop and stoop to examine one body while the soldiers ahead of me scan an intersection for contacts.

The man in front of me isn't wearing any real uniform, though all their clothes appear roughly the same, typical for pirates, or at least as what I'd imagine a pirate to look like; I've never really seen one before. Worn blacks, browns, and tans, with the occasional red. No patches adorn any of the clothes, but there are areas with less wear on each of their shoulders. They're affiliated with some group, obviously, but they don't want anyone to notice just what group, and they certainly don't look military. If he were, he'd have some sort of medical kit I could swipe, but my luck doesn't help me there.

Nothing specific in any of the pockets. Nice gray boots, though, save for some scuffing. Pretty standard, and I think I recognize the company; a civilian one, reliable for sailors for making good seals with vacuum suits, civilian or military. If they met the Hadrian Navy's uniform standards, I'd almost consider swiping them.

He does leave behind something exceedingly useful. His rifle has a readout on the top of the stock reading "120." Full, I'm guessing. No longer worrying about carrying Turnbull, I will my fingers to close around the weapon, and it feels odd in my hands, numb as they are, almost like the hands are not my own, moving stiffly as they are. I try to check the chamber to verify there is a round inside, the edge of the

sliver of a flechette round peaks out at me. It seems like the thing to do; making sure the thing will actually fire. It's not as hefty as the rifles the RIFT are carrying, this is probably a close-quarters-combat weapon, and that's a good thing as I'm not wearing any strength enhancing armor.

One of the RIFT soldiers gestures me over just as we begin to move further. I notice his combat gear is decidedly sleeker and less bulky than the others; I'd grown accustomed to seeing the heavier gear of gravtech-rigs build into the RIFT armor, like Ramirez, Sands, and the loaner gear they'd given me. I decide this man must not be gifted in gravomancy, but some other form of technomancy.

I guess correctly; "Here." He places a hand on the rifle, and the ammunition-counter begins to freak out, displaying incoherently. Just as quickly, it returns to normal. "Had to unlock it for you. You don't have an IFF for that gun." He seems to think for a second, and pulls a chip out of his pocket. "You may need this. Universal Hadrian IFF. Only works for small arms and these get reset regularly, so it's not a huge deal if it falls into the wrong hands, but keep it hidden anyway. It'll work as long as you keep it close." He gives me an approving look as I stuff it into the top of my boot. Now, help guard rear."

"Thanks..." Trailing my voice, I hope he gives a name, as his nametape is hidden from view at the moment by his angle, and partly by the large rifle he has laying across his chest.

"Torvald."

We begin to move again, and I both fear and relish being trusted enough to help ensure the safety of the team, though I suspect I'm an extra, as two of the RIFT soldiers seem to do enough to cover us.

I haven't fully appreciated the size of the *Dauntless* until now. The halls that once took me only a few minutes to navigate from the propulsion plant to the hangar bay now feel to be a marathon of epic proportions, especially when we're moving at a more cautious speed with our escorted in tow, of which I am a part.

I only get a chance to provide assistance once as a part of the rear-guard. "Contact rear!" I hear the shout at the very moment I see the pirates round the corner of a passageway cross-connect we passed a few moments before. They're moving quickly and don't have time to respond. I open fire, but in the heat of the moment, I have no idea if my bullets hit their mark. However, someone's bullets do, because just as soon as the pirates appeared, they're sprawling on the deck, coming to a rest in our wake. One soldier moves further back to peek around the corner with a small hand-held camera.

The dull echoes of gunfire are dying down. I hope it's because we're pushing the boarders back, but I have no clue, and the number of bodies in Hadrian livery scattered through the passageways don't

bode well. Some look as though they did not take the initial impact well. Others look as though they were shot as they ran, others while putting up a fight, and other still like they were left to die in agony.

That could be me. If not for the fortune of the soldiers finding me, it probably would be. I could still end up that way. I stifle quick, sharp breaths, trying to smooth them out, and I nearly miss seeing a survivor.

One sailor wearing the uniform of a spacecraft mechanic weakly reaches out to me as I walk, clutching her side, her hand covered in blood; too much of it. “Don’t leave me.” As if to force action on my part, the RIFT team stops, and one of their medics drops to a knee beside her. I unsling the medical pack from my shoulder and move to assist. The medic looks at me, and I can almost see the quizzical look on his face, as if he knows I’m not medical personnel. He shrugs and turns back to his new patient.

“You’re going to be fine,” he says. “Don’t worry, Petty Officer Kierson and I are here to help you.”

She nods gratefully. “Am... am I going to be okay?” She asks. Her uniform reads “Combs.”

“Of course, Combs.” The medic says.

The medic begins applying a sealant to her side, and beyond that I have no idea what to do, so I slip off a glove and feel her pulse at her neck. It’s weaker than it should be. I don’t have time to feel other pressure points more distal from her heart to get a good idea of her blood pressure. “Yeah, you’re doing great.” I lie. “Side wounds like that just bleed a heck of a lot. Makes it look way worse than it actually is.” I have no idea if that’s true. It probably isn’t.

“Are you Medical?” Combs asks feebly. Her round face looks abnormally pale.

I give a noncommittal sound, trying to make her feel better. “So, Combs, you’re a... VBE?” I ask, trying to change the subject. She probably wouldn’t feel too good if she found out a Mag were trying to save her life instead of the corpsman she thinks I am.

Even through her pained expression, Combs looks offended. “VBH.” Like I could have known better. Her hand tugs at part of her uniform bearing yellow accents. “Yellow means VBH.” Okay, I probably *could* have known that. But right now we could die, so I don’t have time to ask for forgiveness.

“Guys, can she move?” Ramirez leans down to ask. His voice betrays the notion that we need to move. I tend to agree with him on that.

“Just a second. She’s going to want some of these...” The medic stabs her leg with a small pin, and almost instantly her breathing becomes less labored. A second and a third have no visible effect.

“First one was painkillers, second and third were nanites that will help your body heal itself and stabilize your organs. You’ll be fine in no time. Removing the pins, he places a small patch over her uniform to seal the hole.

“Alright, we’ve got to go.” The medic lifts her up effortlessly and has her stand on her own two feet, and motions for me to support her. I still have a free hand for the rifle, but I won’t be able to cover our rear anymore.

Fortunately, we aren’t far from the hangar bay at this point. Unfortunately, the scene is chaotic. Many of the spacecraft are gone, many others destroyed. Some look crumpled, having been powered down and not secured to the deck at the time of impact. Others look as though they’ve been hit by explosives. Various robotics are strewn in disarray, and those intact are scurrying to complete their tasks, ignoring the fact that we’ve been given the order to abandon ship – robots don’t come with us.

The side we enter on is free from combat; more RIFT, likely another fireteam helping people evacuate, has secured the immediate vicinity and is engaging with pirates on the opposite side of the long, wide compartment; it feels oddly small, until I realize the blast-doors and shields have been closed.

I move cautiously, weapon still in hand, “Down!” Someone shouts. Almost as soon as the shout is out, Ramirez does the opposite. He takes a superhuman leap into the air. It’s all I see as I fall into the ground as I’m wracked with pain. Not from any shot or explosion; the rough charcoal-gray nonskid decking of the hangar bay digs into my skin, seemingly, through my suit.

I hear a sharp ‘crack,’ followed by Ramirez hitting the deck next to me, face-down. I don’t dare to turn much while lying down, the nonskid is notorious for being abrasive. While my uniform and vacuum suit should be able to take it, I’m not taking any chances.

Is Ramirez dead? I can’t tell.

After a few seconds, someone shouts “Up! Move!” Before I can get up, Ramirez is thankfully already back on his feet.

“What the-” is all I can summon to my lips before Ramirez answers my unfinished question.

He grabs my arm to lead me closer to shelter. “Grenade. I gave it a push out into space.”

I look at the open hangar bay door to space, an invisible shield holding the air in. “What was the sharp crack I heard?”

“Probably sonic boom. I may have gotten overzealous on the gravity-push but, whatever, we’re alive.”

We approach a newly erected barricade. Its size is impressive for having been erected so quickly out of spare pieces, destroyed craft, and storage boxes. Of course, with gravtechs and auratechs at their disposal, they probably assembled the miniature fortress in seconds.

The troopers report in inaudibly over their headsets, only slight body language gives it away as they key in one by one. I try to listen in, to no avail. Nearby gunshots drown out anything that would be audible through the helmets from the distance I'm trying to hear from. A few handmotions are exchanged, and I decide to take my place with the rest of the rescued crew who, who apparently weren't able to locate a good escape pod. My posse brings the group to a total of nine, including myself. I'm the only one with a weapon, likely because the others found the ones they had didn't work. They explain as much, and I explain that mine was "tampered with" by one of the RIFT.

"So, why aren't we getting on the dropships?" I ask, gesturing to a quartet of the large metal beasts sitting nearby.

"Apparently," Wood says, as though it's been explained to her ad nauseum, "Two aren't ready yet and the space outside of us isn't safe. They've got fighters and we are waiting for the space to be cleared, and they don't want us sitting and doing nothing on board while a single munition could destroy the entire thing." Her tone shifts to near disbelief, either at the reasoning or the situation, but it's thoroughly coated with frustration.

"*Fighters?*" What pirates had *fighters*?

As if on cue to answer my question, four more RIFT soldiers pop through the hangar-shield, guiding themselves to the deck on unseen gravity-tendrils or electromagnetic lines of force. They carry large guns, and I have no doubt they've been trying to do some work against the fighters.

"Alright, space is clear for now!" One of them yells to us. I hadn't realized many of the RIFT had already started to pack up.

Ramirez jogs up, reloading his weapon as he does. I hadn't even realized he'd been helping to reinforce the barricade. "Everyone split evenly between Usher Two and Four." He knife-hand points, using all fingers and thumb to clearly reference the dropships. He hasn't counted how many of us there are, or there would be no "evenly." It doesn't matter. We're all going to get the hell out of here one way or another. "Chris, Usher Two has a set of armor that might fit you."

I can't fight! Not for real! I'm not trained for this! I'll die! All things I want to say aloud, but Ramirez doesn't let me. "We aren't out of the woods yet, and you'll be safer in one of our suits than not. Besides, you might make some use of it. See if the others can fit in them if you can."

I hesitate, and then do as I'm told, carrying Turnbull with me, while a RIFT and Edohara help Combs in. The inside of the dropship is remarkably utilitarian, with a number of massive indentations around the outside that I'm guessing are where drop-pods would be installed, if they were fitted. Without them, the dropship could probably fit a tank or two.

The RIFT, who I learn is named Raith, helps me into the armor quickly. I recognize the name as one of those sent off when we first encountered the entourage, apparently, they've returned. Not a good sign, if we're all retreating back here.

Raith's efficiency in dressing me, like some child's doll, is efficient to the point that all I manage to put on myself are the gloves and helmet. I'm thankful for the help, as the adrenaline causing my fingers to numb up is making fine motor skills require a bit more concentration. He slaps everything else on me, forcefully, then sets to helping the others into what pieces are available. They look confused.

As I power the armor on, it feels a bit familiar. I have no way of knowing if it's the one I'd worn in my practices, but it doesn't matter, it –

"Hello, Christopher, I am Tavis." I hear a distinctly British voice in my ears, and what I can only describe as a pressure in my *mind*, as if something were trying to push on it, but gently. Mentally, I resist.

"You're who?" I ask audibly. Everyone in the belly of the dropship looks at me as if I'm crazy. "Sorry, someone... uh... Tavis?"

The RIFT nods. "He's okay. Let him in." Raith says while fitting a few pieces to Edohara. Having known him for a good long while, suddenly seeing him like this, he looks out of place in the combat armor. I probably look equally odd to him. I feel more comfortable in it than he looks.

"Let him in?" I ask. The pressure seemingly strokes my mind; I'm more aware of it. It feels like something wants to invade my head. It is the strangest sensation I've ever had.

"Mister Kierson, I cannot properly assist you unless you allow me access." Tavis informs me. "In order to allow me access to your neural implants beyond superficial function, I will need you to willingly allow me in."

I hesitate, then decide that this artificial intelligence couldn't do much more harm to me than the pirates wanting to kill us all. I don't know how to "let him in," but I try mentally relaxing and inviting him. Not seeming to work, I change tactics. I mentally imagine a door, and clear my head, and open it.

Functional uplink, but only 65% effective. A thought occurs to me. No, not my thought. Tavis's. It's disturbing, having something else in my head. The thought feels cold and inhumane. Along with it comes a small trickle of knowledge. Tavis is not an artificial intelligence as I guessed, but a virtual intelligence. Not free-thinking or capable of abstract thought, but still good enough with pattern recognition to fool most. He also throws a series of displays on my HUD.

"I have noticed discomfort on your part. I will continue using audible communication unless time is of the essence or you wish me to have further access. You may still push thoughts to me effectively."

"Push?" I think with Tavis as my focus, wondering if it works.

"I have received your previous question." He says in a manner that implies that he can also tell context and inflection of thought.

"So, I assume that you're at least partly stored in the suit, and we're communicating through circuits in the helmet?" I ask to Tavis, thinking at him again.

"That is functionally correct." Good enough for me, I think, not sure if he can read that thought, but not caring.

The rest of the RIFT team begins to pile in, all of them carrying large, heavy weapons in their arms, large ammunition boxes, and their standard rifles across their backs.

"What's this?" I ask, make sure I'm audible this time.

"We might need to shoot our way out. Everyone, helmets on." The RIFT chief says.

I don't quite understand. These guys have fighters, and these guns might as well be peashooters to them, even if they are anti-vehicular. "Are those going to do anything?"

A few of them nod. "The fighters aren't really all that great. They're old. If a few of us can focus fire, we can take one down at a time."

"But you're not all gravtechs and auratechs, right?"

"Doesn't matter. The gravtechs and auratechs can sling the others around." The purpose of Ramirez's training clicks in my head like a piece in a puzzle. I really hope I taught Sands, who is the last to board the expansive space of Usher Two just before the clamshell rear doors shut.

“We’re going to leave the dropship when we get a sign of trouble. Gravity airlock should hold, but make sure you have a good seal on your helmets.” Ramirez instructs the three of us. Four, including the still unconscious Turnbull. I double check her seal.

The dropship lurches, but the jerk is ceased, replaced by a low hum as the countermass generators kick in. “Tavis,” I ask. “Can I get a picture of the outside of the dropship?” Without it, I’m stuck here looking at everyone around me. He obliges, and my vision is suddenly a collection of views of the outside of the dropship, as if I *am* the dropship. It’s disorienting, to say the least, but I start to figure things out. Pirates are moving in on our ship now unopposed by the evacuating RIFT. The boarders are rounding the corners of the barricade, and start shooting at us. I hear the pings off the hull, but the small arms fire isn’t going to be enough.

On the contrary, the engine blast is more than sufficient. Against regulations, our pilot punches full burn before we’re out of the docking-clamp, and we’re out of the hangar in a flash. A brief view of the camera allows me to see the pirates being thrown back or downright run over. Usher Two takes a few pirates with it and they don’t have the gear to survive the fall down to the planet below. If they’re lucky they died when the dropship hit them.

Khepri takes up near half the view, but we’re farther up than I thought we were, based on the ranges displayed on my helmet visor. Between our concerted efforts in the propulsion plant, what seems like an eternity before, we bought ourselves quite a bit of time.

I will the camera to spin about and look at the *Dauntless*, not thinking of what I might see. I never really had many opportunities to look at the ship before. I knew what it looked like, but mostly from pictures. When the immediate vicinity – space – around your ship is so hostile to life, you never really get to see the majesty of such a ship, and you rarely get to see just how ridiculous it is to paint the darn things anything but standard void-optical-camo. Instead, the ships are frequently painted with decorative strips, symbols, things to make it look more a menacing or imposing.

What I see now before me now is anything but. My heart lurches, and I suddenly regret any jokes about just wanting to see my supposed titanium-prison burn. The *Dauntless* looks more like a dying whale than it does a warship. I didn’t even realize we’d exited at an angle. Having only one engine-cluster meant that the ship was poorly balanced, and more power had gone into keeping the thing up to allow for personnel to escape, rather than a safe reentry. Even now it continues to spin ever so slowly.

Worse, the ship is shredded. One entire side has been scraped ragged, and a quick preview shows exactly why my engine-cluster, the affectionately named “Thruster,” was so unresponsive after the initial impact. It is completely and wholly gone, along with a good chunk of the rest of the aft end at a sheer angle exposing the internals of the engineering section like a cutaway diagram. The irony settles on me that the engineering section is what’s usually left out of such diagrams due to the heavily classified nature.

Only one engine cluster is faintly glowing now, accompanied by none of the typical positioning lights. Exposed holes dot the ship where escape pods used to be, and at least one hangar bay looks like it lacks any power inside. Other pockmarks around the ship show where the shields didn’t stop kinetic rounds or missiles, and a few small shuttles and dropships cover where escape pods should have been – that’s how some of the boarding parties arrived, in any case.

The ship – my ship – is dying. It’s not going down without a fight. Two of the heavy kinetic rifle turrets are turned to one side, aiming over where we are flying. Even as I watch, they pound out a short staccato of rounds, silently, only small flashes of light marking the relativistic projectile’s departure.

Spinning to see what they are aiming at, I see two small wreckages, hard to make out through the debris field we are flying through. What strikes my eye, though, is the flare of the shields of the remaining enemy ship, a cruiser. Zooming in on it, I can tell it’s old, but it only looks marginally damaged. It is in far better state than our own ship. The rounds hardly do a thing.

“Fighters!” Someone, I suspect the pilot, shouts over the announcing circuit. I can’t see them on the display. He probably sees them on the GRADAR.

“Tavis, can you show me where they are?” Before I finish asking, eight red blips show up near the cruiser. They don’t appear to be moving; as soon as I note that, distance indicators pop up; they’re coming right for us.

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask.

No one speaks up for a second. “We’ve got a few of our own keeping us company for now. Quite a few never made it off the deck during the first volley.”

“The first volley?” I ask. “Who is attacking us? Why? What with?” My questions don’t feel as disjointed as I realize they are once they leave my mouth.

“Pirates seem to have gotten their hands on a few bigger ships. Cruiser and a few destroyers. We got the destroyers, but the cruiser is left and we don’t have much to throw at it.”

“What about the *Gilmore*?” I ask about our escort.

“We’re flying through it. It took the brunt of the impact of the asteroid. It sacrificed itself so the *Dauntless* could survive. Probably saved us all. Well... us. Not all.”

It takes me a few seconds for the word to form in my mouth. “*Asteroid?*” Even more people are dead? I don’t know what’s worse, the dead or the lack of that ship to defend us. A destroyer on its own isn’t much against a modern cruiser, but the *Gilmore* could have taken on that thing out there chasing us down.

“Relativistic.” Ramirez says. “It even *course-corrected* to hit us. But between the *Gilmore* taking the brunt and the last-minute speed boost we got, it didn’t get a solid hit on the midsection.”

My short-lived burst of pride – I might have saved us with my little alteration of procedure - is squelched by seeing the RIFT gearing up for a fight – with the fighters.

“This is ridiculous.” I say aloud. “Those are *fighters* out there. One shot from them could kill you!”

They all ignore me. Each has the resignation of a man who knows he has his duty, regardless of outcome. All of them know what they have to do, and looking at the steel in their motion, I almost think we have a chance.

With the gravity-airlock in the rear of the dropship, hardly any air escapes as the hatch opens and the RIFT team moves out in unison before the hatch quickly shuts again.

I shift my focus of the helmet display to show the external view of the The team orbits the dropship for a moment before the fly off, and are soon flanked by two of our own fighters.

There is no real rhyme or reason to their pattern. A pair of daring soldiers from each of the two dropships seem to tether themselves to the fighters via either invisible strands of gravity or electromagnetic fields, while the others orbit the dropships.

We are flying – falling – towards the planet, but at our current altitude that will take a bit, as the dropships have to cut horizontal speed in relation to the planet. That puts us as flying towards our pursuers, at a pretty steep angle fortunately, but towards them still. The two fighters break off, heading towards the enemy.

Missiles fly from both the *Dauntless* and the enemy vessel, and the missiles also wink out of existence just as fast as each ship’s point-defenses counter them. At this range, it’s hardly a surprise. Shields flare from the fighters of both sides as the point-defenses fire at them as well.

The fighter missile-volley doesn't last long. Streaking arrows, blue and red, show up on my display and converge on each other and missiles. Two red fighter-blips wink out with a small yellow puff of an explosion.

Zooming in on the dogfight, I can't see what's going on. If I get close enough to make out detail, I can't see everything, and zooming out to see the whole battle, I can't see detail from my vantage point.

"Can you give me a view of one of the fighters, Tavis?" I ask. "Like the one I currently have."

"No, sir. Full electronic-countermeasures are in effect on all ships and craft. We cannot receive high-bandwidth signals that would allow for that." He replies flatly. I get a feeling I should have known.

"Ah." I settle for a zoomed-out view. Another red-fighter blinks out. Four to two. Bad odds, but getting better.

Wait. I jog my memory – there were eight enemy fighters. I've seen three get destroyed.

"Missiles inbound!" The pilot yells over the intercom. The dropship lurches to one side, and I hear "clunks" through the hull as the craft releases active countermeasures. It lurches again. I thrust my arms out to the sides to stabilize myself, and instantly I'm sturdy, moving around with the ship, rather than being thrown about in a harness.

One of the fighters broke off and launched a quartet of missiles at us. They're smaller and juking wildly, so the *Dauntless's* point defenses can't get a fix to get a laser-kill on them. At the moment, they're out of range for the RIFT orbiting us. My video feed closes, and I'm back in the hold of the dropship.

My arms aren't touching anything. The gravity-projectors of the suit are on, and I've got fields and tethers holding me in place.

I get an idea. Unbuckling my harness, the fields hold me. "What the hell are you doing?" Edohara and Stroud shout, nearly in unison as they notice. "Chris, what is it?" I had barely noticed that until now they'd been gripping the harnesses for dear life.

"Does this dropship have gravity tethers for drop pods?" I ask the pilot as I finally make my way up to the cockpit. I know the dropship can do it, but I don't know if the gravity-tethers are a part of the drop-pod modules.

"What?" He asks, surprised "Sit the hell down! *I'm busy right now.*" He's insistent. So am I, but Tavis answers for me.

"No, sir, but it does have some rudimentary gravity cranes." He informs me, and highlights them on my heads-up display in the helmet. Two.

“Can you get me access to them?” I ask.

“*What the hell are you still doin-*” The pilot starts again before I cut him off.

“Not you, Tavis. Can you?” I’m hopeful.

“If the pilot allows it,” Tavis speaks in my ear, and apparently, the pilot’s as well.

He grumbles, but in his focus, he says little else. The view of Khepri before me is a swirl as the pilot makes maneuvers, but Tavis informs me that I, indeed, have control of the gravity-cranes, which are essentially gravity-tethers, but trading speed for strength, so they are short ranged. One mile. Fortunately for me, they are directional.

And fortunately, we’re in space, so missiles need to be closer than one-range to make a killing explosion. If this works...

I cue up the all-around view of the dropship again after sitting down and strapping in. The missiles are finally in range of the heavy rifles the RIFT are carrying. They open fire, and a few launch small guided missiles. The dropship’s gun has already been firing as a part of the evasive tactics. Before I know it, one of the incoming missiles is gone.

One of our fighter’s icons disappears. So does one of theirs, but not the one following us.

I focus on the closest two. “Alright, here goes nothing.” I mentally reach out towards the missiles. Imagining a hand grabbing them. Nothing. Again... nothing.

Alright, relax. I allow Tavis in, and feel a loss of personal privacy as my mind suddenly feels encroached upon, almost as if there is another *me* in my head. But not me. Tavis. He’s cold and calculating, but friendly, somehow.

I reach out again, and something latches. Two missiles shudder. I will the missiles around us – they speed up as I pull them in, and zoom past us in a wide arch. *This had better work.* I think it faster than I can say it, as I don’t have time to verbalize it. The tether acts as an anchor, and the missiles begin a wide orbit before I start to reel them in.

They pass again, much closer this time, much faster, using the gravity-crane’s strength as a slingshot, and I throw them at the only thing I want them to hit.

The enemy pilot was too focused on a gun-kill of my dropship, and I vaguely notice the flashes of our shield deflecting the shots. Fortunately that means that he’s coming straight at us.

The missiles collide with the fighter, catching an engine. The fuel stores onboard explode.

I exhale heavily, noticing the immediate airspace around us is clear. I missed seeing the last missile get shot down, either by the dropship pilot or the RIFT.

As the debris of the fighter showers the dropship, the soldiers outside seem to assemble the parts in front of them in neat balls as they keep anything from hitting their comrades, pulling and pushing the shards with lines of force.

Our lone fighter returns, having dealt with the last of the enemy fighters, with the help of the three RIFT he brings in two. He appears to manage to have saved one from the fighter that was destroyed, but the other is nowhere to be found. All begin to board the dropships again, waiting for planetfall.

The cruiser still plagues the skies near us, and is far closer, diving towards us. Missile after missile leaves her tubes, but none last more than a blink as the *Dauntless*, far away now, tries to keep us alive.

Flames lick the sides of the massive, dying warship. It can't keep up the protective volley for long. It isn't even firing main cannons anymore, and chunks are torn away as it's shieldless hull takes impact after impact from the cruiser's kinetic rounds. I notice a hole that wasn't there before, gutting out a massive section of the ship; the bridge is entirely gone, taken by an axial-round from the cruiser.

The *Dauntless* just continues its lazy spin, trying to bring its ventral point defenses to bear, trying to keep us alive. As it does, I know it's not picking up horizontal velocity. Velocity it could use to save as many people onboard as possible. The ship's AI has abandoned hope for itself, for any surviving crew, and I know Yuichan and Stevens are watching the holo-display in EOS showing actual-trajectory grow ever closer and closer to the one projecting worst-case scenario fatal-crash.

The enemy boarding craft peel away from the *Dauntless*, abandoning ship themselves.

I breathe heavily. The cruiser closes further. It begins bear its guns. Even it knows the *Dauntless* is doomed. If they fire spread-rounds, massive shotgun-shells for starships, it's all over. There is no defending against those, no amount of maneuvering will let us survive.

It's all over. I'm dead already. My body just doesn't know it yet. At least my death will be quick and painless. That knowledge doesn't even bring me the smallest of comfort.

I throw away the display, and hang my head. I can't watch my own death. I just have to sit and wait... but the waiting proves to be even more unbearable, so I bring the display back up, my vision becoming the dropship once more.

Staring at the cruiser, I watch as the guns come even more in-line with our dropship and our partner, who are separating slowly to prevent a single kill from ending us both. The fighter fights futilely, bobbing and weaving, shields and guns flaring.

The cruiser bucks, expanding outwards near stem-to-stern, debris flying from both ends. Parts spew every which way, and entire chunks of the cruiser separate away. A few shuttles, dropships, and escape pods of their own leave soon after, fleeing death.

I clear the video feed to see the inside around me. The dropship goes silent. The pilot stops maneuvering. Apparently, I wasn't the only one watching the overall view. All of the RIFT look relieved, like a million tons were just lifted from their shoulders.

Stroud wasn't, because he notices a change in the rest of us. "What just happened?" He asks. "What?" A few of the troopers shout whoops of victory. Others just lay back and rest their helmeted heads on the walls of the dropship behind them.

Ramirez is the first to collect his composure. "The *Dauntless*. It was maneuvering to fire its axial cannon. It finally got a shot off in the nick of time. The *Dauntless* saved us."

I turn back, bringing up a single video feed and orient it to the dying ship. My dying ship. She is plummeting now, and fast. The barest flicker from the engine isn't enough to keep it aloft, and the light of it is drowned in the wash of flames consuming the hull as the ship accelerates further into the atmosphere. She used all her energy on that one last axial round.

She's nearly wholly consumed in flame as ragged edges cut the atmosphere. Ragged edges are glowing white-hot, and the ship begins to look more like a comet as a trail of fire follows her to the ground. The last signs of power onboard the ship are gone, now.

Her final task complete; the last of her crew safe, the *Dauntless* finally lets herself die.

My breathing becomes coarse and my chest begins to ache. I push back the feelings, focus on something else; the deck in front of me, but these emotions are too vast; I can't distract myself for long. My eyes feel as though they are half about to explode, half swelling shut, and I feel the icy tears on my cheeks before I realize they're coming and I can't stop them, and I can't stop what's about to come.

Overwhelmed, not fully comprehending what's happening, not able to take it, I shudder with ragged breaths. People are dead. My ship is gone. It's falling to its doom. No, no, no. It can't be. *It's a warship*. What can a little gravity do to a *warship*? Emergency power can power the counter-mass generators long enough to survive a crash landing, right? The greater part of my consciousness pleads

yes. That little voice in my head, the rational one, whimpers “no.” I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.

They can survive. They have the AI. They have the heart of the *Dauntless*. It’s an AI, it can figure something out. But what if there is nothing to figure out? What if there never was anything to figure out?

No, I have to stay strong. I try to slow my breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Sit up straight. People are counting on me. People can’t see me cry. They won’t know yet, not with my helmet on. But I can’t stop. This isn’t just one friend, one family member dying, this is thousands dead or about to die.

I realize I’ve been in a sort of state of shock only when that state ends. Seconds, hours, minutes, days, I don’t know how long later until I realize I’m still on the dropship and the roar of descent still surrounds me. Only minutes, I guess. I hang my head in my hands as my chest feels like it’s been hit by a sledgehammer, and a pool of my tears starts to collect in my visor as I’m racked with sobs. I know no one is looking at me, no one but Ramirez. At some point, I think he puts his hand on my shoulder. But I don’t care, because everyone I’ve laughed with, argued with, horsed around with, had memories and inside jokes with, played games with, given orders to and taken orders from, toiled with, sweated with, each and every one of them...

...is...

...is...

...is...

...dead.

All except for Kristen, who is going to think *I’m*...

... dead

...when she finds out.

And I can’t stop the tears, the unhindered sobbing as I slowly accept each and every detail, each and every thing I’ll never again experience. I’ll never be lectured by Yuichan again. I’ll never have a debate with Stevens again. I’ll never be woken up in the middle of my sleep cycle for maintenance. I’ll never be able to complain about terrible galley food again. I’ll never be able to compete over who is better at operating the DMR again. I’ll never...

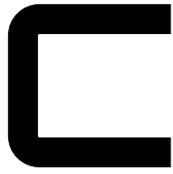
No. They're not...

.... They are not...

They cannot be....

....

...*dead*. Not yet. Not until I see their bodies. If they aren't... *dead*, I'll save them. I'll make Yuichan's empty words ring true. If they are dead, I'll avenge them.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

#157: Boot Camp taught few things of importance.
Usher Two
Dawn, Khepri ~~XX:XX~~, 02-18-3398? Sol Date
Propulsion Plant, Enclosed Operating Station (EOS)

I'm long out of tears by the time someone taps me on the shoulder. I'm vaguely aware of a newfound silence. I can't remember how long it's been. Looking around, it must have been some time. A few tents and survival gear are already set up. A hydroreclaimer is visible a ways away, past the hatch, and it's tank has a considerable amount of water in it. A couple of the other survivors have food out, and Usher Four is touched down on the other side of the clearing.

We're in a clearing. On land. Trees surround our position. Odd trees, like none I've ever seen before; they're relatively cone-shaped, and they don't appear to have leaves. A few leafy trees do dot the area, but the green cones seem to be more prevalent. Still, I know them to be trees.

"Chris. We're here." I nod. "It's time to get up." I know that voice. It's Turnbull. She's awake.

"You're... you're okay?" I ask her.

She looks ponderous. "I'm... intact." It's obvious she's been crying too, but she doesn't have any visible bandages. That's when I realize she's not wearing any sort of vacuum gear. We've got clean, breathable air. A blessing, I suppose. I still have my helmet on. The suit has recycled my puddle of tears that had collected in the helmet into its water reserves. It's used to doing it for moisture from breath, not tears, so it took a while.

I don't respond for a long few seconds. "Good." Unlatching my helmet, I slowly take it off. As soon as I do, I'm greeted by a sharp, intense, woody, almost floral scent. It's oddly relaxing. I almost hate it for being so; I *want* to be depressed right now.

Setting the helmet down, I glance up at her. "I'm sorry... I really tried to save him..."

"So... he..." she pauses, trying to squeeze the name out, "*Carlilse*," she nearly whimper, and tears come back to her newly dry eyes, "... he's dead?" If I didn't have confirmation before that there was some serious fraternization going on between the two of them before, I have it now. I pat the seat next to me, and confirm her suspicions with a nod.

“He went before I had to leave. He wasn’t conscious at the time, so... it... it was painless.” Tears are welling back up in my own eyes, already sore and pained, still burning slightly. If I hurt this much for Carlilse, who was hardly a good friend, how bad will it be when I find out that...

... *No*, They’re alive, I have to think that way until I know for sure.

Kaii Turnbull begins to sob, softly, as she sits next to me. I put an arm around her, not sure what else to do, and we cry together over our loss.

It’s a few minutes before she’s able to say anything again. “Thank you. For... for saving me, I mean. I owe you, Kierson. I’m sorry, I don’t know your first name.” First name are hardly common in the military; it’s not a slight on her part at all.

“Chris.” I reply. It’s almost a very personal admission at this point.

“Thank you, Chris. I’d be dead without you.” She’s absolutely as sincere as can be.

I almost hate myself for my response, more it’s harshness, as I snap. But she can’t see that they’re still alive. It was a freaking carrier! Capable of taking impacts from relativistic kinetic rounds; a little gravity and hitting the ground is paltry by comparison. “*No you wouldn’t*. You’d be alive. You’d be with the rest of them.” She’s being ridiculous.

“Chris-” she looks a little taken aback.

“*Kierson*.” I snap yet again, standing. “I’m not your buddy. I’m not your friend. I’m a Petty Officer, and you’re a Kaii.” My words smack too much of a reminder of her relationship with Carlilse, and her tears start to return to provide her with companionship as I walk away.

We aren’t the only ones in emotional straits. Even amongst the sweet, woody air, the perplexingly fresh air, others are still crying. Only the RIFT seem unaffected, and most of them are not visible in the makeshift camp. I realize now that Usher Two and Four are actually rather close together, looking outward towards the edges of the clearing, with a fair distance between edges of the cone-shaped trees and the dropships. The top edges of the dropships are green-colored; the same as the grass beneath my feet, the adaptive camouflage keeping us hidden from prying eyes. A shimmer in the air above hints at some sort of electromagnetic shield hiding our position as well.

Grass. Real grass under my feet. This fresh, new scent in my lungs. The soft sound of wind. All things I’ve been deprived of for so long. I hadn’t thought of just how much I’d missed smelling things that weren’t vile or metallic. This, though, is something entirely different. I’d been camping before, with my father, but even with all of the military hardware, this is something surreal.

Impossibly tall mountains rise in the distance, untouched by weather until the terraformers began to work. Most visible trees are roughly the same height, all planted at once, their trunks seeming far too thin; either a product of expedited growth or their own nature. Either way, something is off about them.

They're dead. No, they're not. I'd be dead without you. The thoughts invade my thoughts again, unwanted intruders into my mind-palace of odd trees, blue skies, and fresh new scents. A world to explore, and all I can think about is my *dea-not* dead friends.

Focus on the scent. Not the weeping woman behind me. It's so crisp; I don't know how to describe it. It must have its own word for it. Someone is sitting next to a fire, kindling it. It's Edohara, being propped up by boxes of supplies. I walk over to him, doing my best to keep my mind on something other than-

"Hey, Edohara. What kinds of trees are these?" I ask, sitting next to the guy. He's off in his own world as well, a world without tears, apparently.

"Oh, hi, PC1."

"Chris, please." I correct him.

The younger sailor doesn't acknowledge the endearment of me allowing him to call me by my first name. Right now, we all need friends. His response is flat, as if he's distant. "They're pine trees. Firs, I think. We have them back on Himeji in the parks and around the cities and stuff." I have to take him at his word.

"Oh. They smell good." He doesn't respond, leading to an awkward silence. I decide to try to break it. "We didn't have many trees on Kingsway, and my home planet of Pharthan only had decidu-"

His tone changes instantly, interrupting my small-talk. "Why'd you have to be such a dick?" Edohara snaps at me, his head spinning on me, looking me straight in the eyes.

"What?"

"Why did you have to be such a dick? To Turnbull?" I still don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. "You didn't have to treat her like that, Chris. She just lost someone. We all did. And you have to be a jerk to her while she is trying to cope. That is not okay." He throws enough weight on the last sentence to anchor a ship.

I realize what he is talking about. As soon as I do, my own temper flares. "She's given up on them. She's given up on all of them. We can't do that."

Instead of listening to me, he takes her side. “No, Chris, she’s seeing reason. There is no way anyone survived that.”

No one believes me. How could they not believe me? We’re talking about a massive warship with auxiliary power, multiple gravity projectors, artificial gravity, countermass generators... I’d be more surprised to find a wreckage than to see the ship near ready to take off again. As such, I need to put Edohara in his place. “They. Aren’t. Dead. Yet!” My words are clipped and forceful to drive the point home.

“Yes they are, Chris! No one could have survived that crash! No one! Everyone is dead except for us! The pirates even shot down the escape pods and other dropships! We’re alone out here!”

I jump up from the box I’m sitting on before I know it, rounding on Edohara. “They aren’t dead until I see them with my own eyes! We are going back for them!”

“That may not be an option.” Sands – thank God he made it – intercedes. I realize as he puts a hand on my shoulder that my fists are balled and my knuckles white.

Now Sands won’t see reason? “Am I the only survivor with loyalty to my ship and crew? It’s the only option!” Now I’m closer to rounding on him. He moves to stop me. I can tell by the look on his face he wasn’t expecting for me to use the strength of the combat armor I’m still wearing to my advantage. Still, he manages to firmly plant me only a bit further forward than we started.

“The crash site – yes, it’s a *crash* – is probably swarming with their dropships and aircraft. They’re in the same predicament we are. Not a single warship survived that engagement, but they have more men and craft than we do, and they don’t have crewmen to lug around, probably.” The news is a bit shocking. I stop, cooling a bit as he speaks. “We’re investigating with drones if we can go back there now. No sense in flying headlong to our deaths.” With that, he pats me on my shoulder, and moves off to do whatever it was that brought him across our path. Something in Usher Two, apparently, as he walks towards the dropship.

“And Chris,” he continues over his shoulder, stopping for a moment to talk. “If you really believed that they were alive... why did you just refer to yourself as a survivor?”

It was a slip of the tongue, obviously, but his comment infuriates me to the point beyond my ability to respond before he slips away. “So we’re just going to abandon them all?” I scream to no one in particular, or, rather, anyone who will hear. Of course we are. The crew here are beaten and battered

cowards who don't have the initiative to fight, and the RIFT share no warmth for the ship or its crew – they aren't really a part of it, they were just riders. “Are you all going to be heartless *cowards*?”

Scanning the area, looking for supporters, Stroud, Edohara, and Wood look at me like I'm crazy, as do some of the others who I haven't really met yet, and Edohara slinks away to avoid my gaze, walking off towards the treeline of the clearing. There is no sense in rallying Combs or a few of those strangers to my side, they'd be too weak or injured to help me even in arguing, let alone actually go about rescuing anyone. “Fine, I guess all of our shipmates are just going to die! Hope you all get a good night's sleep with that!” A little tiny voice somewhere in the back of my mind says that I should apologize to everyone; that I've gone too far. I don't rightly care. No one cares about anyone else.

Defeated and finding a spot to lay, I can't help but feel like we saved the wrong people, or, if in the heartlessness, any were worth saving. No, that's not a fair thing to think. They're still people, still worth saving, they just need correction. I need to convince them that we can mount a rescue mission, no matter the odds, we have to try.

It takes me a while to realize that I'm still in the body armor from before, and no matter how much I shift around, there is no way to get comfortable; some edge is always digging into some part of my back. There's no reason to try to get in a better position, so I stop moving and just accept it. It's not like I'm going to sleep anytime soon.

What can I do? I can't give up on the ship and her crew like everyone else has. I have to get the majority to agree with me. Better if I can just get the RIFT chief to agree. Fortunately, he didn't see my outburst. He'll be enough to order everyone else to do what is needed. The pilots and Kaii Turnbull are the only officers among us; Turnbull is too distraught to help right now, and the pilots are an unknown factor. Perhaps I can convince them, though, but without the support of the chief...

I realize that I don't know where most of the RIFT troopers are, but logic tells me that they are probably patrolling and setting up camp. Not mounting a rescue operation, that's for sure, as they'd need the dropships to do so. I can see evidence of the perimeter they're setting up in the specs in the sky over my head. Occasionally, a little drone zips over me, not stealthed which would presumably be to preserve power.

“Chris.” A familiar voice calls, announcing near-silent approaching steps. Only as Ramirez gets very close do his steps become more audible in the crisp grass. He still moves like a predator, though. That impression hadn't gotten through so much as now; before he was a friend. Now I see him for what

he is: A killer. An efficient, well-mannered, killer, and I respect him more for it, knowing that he does what he has to and has learned to cope with it so well.

“Yeah?” My voice is still seething. “Come to lecture me about how I’m being irrational?”

He doesn’t answer, which is easy enough to take for a resounding “yes.” Instead, he finds a seat next to me. Getting on my level to talk to me as a friend, but I know he is just going to try to sway me from my altruistic goal. Some friend.

“Chris, you need to calm down. You’re offending everyone. A few of the troopers want to deck you, and your officer is still freaking out.” His voice is practiced calm. Almost as if he were discussing how nice the weather was.

Someone must have betrayed me. Probably Edohara, he probably ran off to rat on me to someone he saw as a better leader. Betraying someone from his own division. “How did you find out?”

“Jeeze, Chris, we all know about it, how loud you were yelling.” He’s not looking at me, as far as I can tell, through his helmet. He seems to be scanning the area, slowly, as if we were still in danger.

“It was Edohara, wasn’t it? The traitor.” Almost as soon as the word is out of my mouth, a quick sensation of pain wracks my head.

Ramirez is on his feet in a flash, but instead of looking for whatever hit me, he’s staring down at me, armored backhand ready for another blow. Now, though, his voice comes out stern. “You will *not* talk about any of your friends that way! They are hurt! Confused! They just lost everything, just like you, and they have no idea how to deal with that! No one in the entire galaxy knows how to deal with loss on this scale! So don’t be so arrogant as to think you’re dealing well with it either!”

I move to get up to be face-to-face with him, but a Ramirez’s boot greets my chest and shoves me back down. “Stay. Down. In your mood you’re only going to make things w-”

I don’t know why I do it. Some little voice in the back of my head finally looses and tells me to take action. I can’t keep letting people shove me around like this, I can’t let them keep making these terrible decisions. Someone has to assert themselves.