



Posted on FurAffinity
January 13, 2013

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Chapter 4 *A Rough Passage To The Surface*

Crit seemed to have ratcheted the 'won't let you out of my reach' instinct down a bit now, returning to something closer to his normal 'I'm above you all'. Though he still wouldn't back off more than a few steps. Almost as though he was afraid that I might just disappear at any moment.

"Any idea how long that patch is going to hold?" I had to ask him through chattering teeth. God, I hate drugs. There were always aftereffects they didn't list on the package.

"Hours, days? Seasons? You were the one to apply it." He wandered off for a few moments to review the blinking lights on the engineering console. There were fewer flashing red now, but still no shortage of alarms going off.

"Shouldn't you know some of this stuff, Crit? You are the First Officer, after all. Didn't Bulla get you any training?"

His fur leapt to stand on edge. Oh bugger. I may not know his species, but that was never a good sign. His voice was quiet when he spoke, eyes never turning towards me. It sounded like he wanted to spit with every word.

"First Officer was a title. Nothing more. Do not presume upon the relationship that I and *he* had. I am here because I was required to be. Nothing more. I am not here to explore, nor am I here to enjoy myself. I was brought onto this ship because it was required of me. I learned what I needed to in order to accomplish the tasks I was given. Nothing more."

Scrambling backwards on all fours, I tried to put a little space between myself and the golden tower of menace that had sprung up before me.

"Sorry, man. No offence." I entertained the thought of whether I'd be able to outrun him if I needed to. Nope, not a chance. His feline body would chase me down before I could get ten paces.

Once more, as quickly as it came, the emotion was pushed back beneath the surface of his golden pelt. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could still feel the effort it was taking him.

Okay, note to self – never bring up anything regarding Bulla. Not if I wanted to make sure I was still breathing afterwards.

Crit seemed to have managed to compose himself again. He almost looked civil as he turned to walk towards me.

"Let's see if we managed to bring anything online in the bridge," he said, reaching a clawed hand towards me as he spoke. I had to think long and hard before I took it. He might kill me one of these times, but I was good as dead without him.

We made the climb up to the third floor without a word. The journey may have been short, but it seemed to take forever. I almost got the feeling he was laughing at me as I struggled with the ladder. He didn't have any problems with it, but I didn't have nearly as freakishly overdeveloped muscles.

I made sure to let Crit be the first one onto the bridge. I hung back as far as I could. It was a good call, too. A few seconds later the massive dead bulk of Bulla came hurtling through the door, almost falling down the ladder well.

I poked my head into the bridge to find Crit at his normal First Officer's station, not even seeming to acknowledge the two dead bodies that were still sprawled not a stone's throw from him.

He looked up from his scratching at the control panel. "See what you can find at the captain's station. I don't know how to use his systems."

I pulled the MCU from my pack and set it back in its cradle, a few more lights sprang to life around me.

Okay... the transit system was still offline. That was a bugger. I'd *really* been hoping that it would be up and running after we'd patched the reactor, but no luck. The transit drive required almost all the power our systems could pump out, and the reactor, in its damaged state, was only at something like fifty percent. Nowhere near enough to get us back to safety.

Next on the list, the main drives. I'd managed to contain the fuel leak, but they still showed as dead. I guess the hull breach that took out Wilkson must have done more damage than I'd thought. The diagnostics showed that the engines themselves were okay, but the fuel lines were cut. I'm sure they could be repaired, but not by me. And anyway, it wasn't like we had anywhere to go in-system.

Last but not least, communications. Great, just great. Everything checked out as green (amazingly) but there were no signals on any of the routs. Not even the emergency distress. The sensors were in the same boat.

"Hey, Crit?" I looked up from my screen, "I'm pulling a blank here. I'm really hoping that you've got something more than I."

He looked over at me. I must be getting better at reading his expressions, either that or he was starting to fall apart. The lines of stress were clear around his eyes, his entire face seeming to be held together by nothing more than sheer force of will alone.

"Not as of such, I'm sorry to say. I can see only one option."

I rolled my eyes, "Better than the none that I've got. What's it?"

"There is a single class nine planet in the system. Records show that it began semi-automated terraforming about three-hundred years ago. There are no records of any more recent developments."

"Do you figure it's breathable?" A class nine wasn't exactly a pleasant place, but three-hundred years of work could change a lot.

"I would have to assume so."

"Slight problem, buddy," I said, poking a finger at the readouts. "The main engines are off-line. We can't move the *Serius*. We're stuck in space."

For perhaps the first time, I saw a grin pull at his lips. "That is one problem I can solve. I have a key to the captain's yacht."

"The *what*?" Since when did we have a 'yacht'? If I had a yacht I'd never fly on this tub again.

Some type of dry cough that I could only assume was a laugh came from Crit. "Don't get too excited, little-one. It's in about the same shape as the rest of this nightmare. But, if the gods have even the slightest grace for us today, it might still be working. Its only purpose is to ferry the crew back and forth to stations that the *Serius* can't dock at."

"Can it get us home, can it transit?" My heart rate wanted to spike, but I refused to believe that something, *anything*, might be going right today.

He didn't even bother to laugh at that one, just shook his head and turned back to the screens before him. "I'm not that stupid, little-one. It's strictly an in-system craft, and a short range one at that. We should be able to push it to the surface and back again, but nothing more."

Okay, I could deal with that. It wasn't much, but at least it gave us an option.

"Let's make this happen, Crit. I don't have a reason to hang around here, and with our luck the reactor patch will give way any second now."

James' face brightened the moment I mentioned the yacht, but I wasn't quite so confident. I'd only been on it a few times, and I hadn't exactly been impressed.

We left the bridge, and I noticed him grab a chit from the console. I'd seen Bulla do that before, too. It didn't matter. Nothing on this ship worked anymore. If he wanted a trophy, he could have it.

We descended from the bridge on the third floor, past engineering and my quarters on the second, down to the first. There was a maintenance latch on the bottom of the shaft. No one ever paid it any attention, it shouldn't lead anywhere.

I pried it open with my claws. The space below had been hollowed out and attached to a short umbilical tube that stretched to a pewter, bullet shaped fire-plug of a yacht.

The rungs of the ladder were of little use as I floated into the small craft. The anti-gravity of the main vessel didn't extend here, and the craft was far too small to generate any of its own. I drifted the last few heartbeats in. The back-flips of my gut reminding me why my kind had never ventured to this dark, gods' forgone emptiness. Space was so free of all things that it didn't even have anywhere to fall to.

Perhaps we had already fallen as far as one could.

I strapped myself into the command seat. I had only the vaguest idea how to operate the machinery, but I refused to allow James to know that. I'd already shown him far too much weakness. If his frail body could save us from a burning death, then I could get us to the surface.

One of the few things Bulla had insisted I learn as First Officer was navigation. Such was nowhere as easy as it might sound. In the *real* world one could have a map. Figure out where one was, figure out where one wanted to be, and that was it. It was never so easy out here.

The horror of space was the vast distances involved. So great as to go beyond making my head hurt, it reached to the realm that one could only take it on faith. And everything moved. All the planets rotated around their suns, the stars themselves rotating around some unknown centre. They never

stopped, everything forever chasing its own tail until dissolving into dust.

The computers on this ship were so ancient and damaged that they could do little but take a direction and follow it. That left all the calculations up to the pilot.

I took a deep breath and pulled the hatch closed above us. Beside me, James was wrestling into his harness. He gave me a quick thumbs up as I glanced over at him.

"The plan is to shuttle to the planet, get our bearings, check for any signs of civilization, then return to the *Serius*. Got it?"

He just shrugged at me. "Sounds as good as any plan I could come up with. It beats the heck out of waiting here until we run out of supplies."

I stared at the control panel before me for a moment, then picked a button that I *thought* was the right one. Above us, a heavy clunk reverberated through the ship. That was good. It had more than likely been the docking clamp coming free.

Another touch of a switch and we edged forward ever so slightly, though more than fast enough for my tastes. With what seemed to be a deliberate delay, we rotated on our axis. There was no sound but our own breathing as the tattered form of the *Serius* slid into view.

"God..." James' words mirrored my thoughts near exactly. The damage out here was far greater than what I'd ever imagined.

From within, we'd only seen the pinprick holes that had been speared through the hull, but out here there was far more damage. Not only could I see the hull breach far down the spine where James had trudged, but an ugly bubble on the cladding where the radiation of the reactor breach had begun to eat away at some of the less protected sections of the ship. And that didn't even include a spot just behind the bow where *something* had collided with the forward most of the bulk freight compartments, ripping an ugly tare four a good hundred meters.

With how much damage the old crate had taken, I was surprised it was still pressurized at all.

"I don't think we're ever going to get home in that." James' voice was weak. I couldn't help but agree with him.

The calculations to plot our course to the planet, it didn't have a name, were long and complicated. It didn't help that I double-checked and triple-checked everything, coming out with different answers each time.

James just watched me silently.

You may think that it would be easy to find a planet – they are rather large – but that's not the case in the vastness of space. A planet may be big, but you need to make sure it's on the same side of the star as you are, and the fact that all our sensors were out meant that I could only find it by sight.

The engines on the little tug were not exactly designed for these distances, having only been intended for quick hops of a few thousand kilometres to and from stations. But, much to our surprise, they held out as we set off.

I did breathe one sigh of relief. A small vessel like this didn't need the punch of a full anti-matter system, nor did it have the room. It was equipped with a far simpler fission engine. It wasn't that I had much experience with that either, but we did have at least a couple of them back

home.

There was little to do once I committed the flight plan to the computer. Just sit and wait as the multi-hour travel time slowly ticked away.

Silence wasn't an issue for me. I hadn't grow up in it, but I'd long become accustomed to nothing but my own company over these long years. James, however, did not seem to be taking it so well.

"So, uhh," I said, fighting to make small talk. Among my own people it wouldn't have been so much as a thought, but cooped up next to a skinny human like this? "You came on board just before we left dock, didn't you?"

He jumped slightly as I spoke. Every action he made, every twitch of his muscles was hyper alert, almost as if he expected me to reach across the cramped cabin and rip him apart with my claws.

"Yeah." He took a deep breath of the recycled air as he shifted in his seat to look at me. Even sitting down, it was difficult for him to look me in the eye with the difference in our heights. "I'm a bit of a wanderer, you know." I shook my head. "Well, I just kind of slum it around from one place to another. Find a nice city for a few weeks, get a job to pay the bills as I crash. Then when an opening drops in my lap I move onto the next port of call." He laughed. "I wasn't even supposed to be on the *Serius* at all. I just filled a vacancy at the last moment when the other guy fell through. This is what answering an ad on the job board gets me. I didn't even know where the ship was off to, really. Just anywhere other than where I was." He paused for a moment, visibly working up his courage. "How about you?"

I had to fight my mane to keep it lying flat. He didn't know my past, that much was obvious. "Your life must be... interesting. Mine is not so carefree." I spoke slowly, choosing my words with care, "I've travelled with Bulla for the last twenty years. There was an... agreement that kept me with him." I let a slight smile twitched my lips as I continued, "But I suppose that is all in the past now."

The journey to the planet continued in relative silence. Every so often Crit or I would work up the effort to put forth a few moments of conversation, but it never seemed to go far. I didn't have anything in common with him, and there seemed to be a void of topics that the other man would even allow to be brought up. Every time I tried to ask about his species, or even much of anything about his life on the *Serius*, he would clam up and start fiddling at the controls. I wasn't sure, but I don't think half the buttons even worked on this thing anyway.

We both breathed a sigh of relief when a slightly lighter patch of blackness began to grow to encompass most of the viewscreen. Neither of us knew where we were, but we were here.

It only took another few moments to work our way around to the sunward side of the planet. It wasn't exactly an inviting sight.

The globe was about the right size for Standard gravity, but it's always a more inviting sight when a terraforming planet has a green ecosystem. This one was nothing but brown.

There was one thing that looked promising, vast oceans of blue. Their colour looked off... lighter than it should be, but water was always a good sign.

"Are you prepared for descent, James?" Crit's voice was soft, words careful and perfectly formed. He'd been working on his standard over our conversations. There wasn't a hint of the snarling

language left from a few hours ago.

"Let's do this." There wasn't much of value at my station, even fewer of my controls worked than his, but I strapped in and flicked on what I could. "Do you know how to land this thing?"

He paused for a long moment. "I've read the manual on its operation."

"You took us out in this piece of junk, and you *don't even know how to fly it!?*" I had to hold myself back from jumping over the center console and wringing his neck.

He looked hurt for a moment, almost enough to make me feel sorry for him. Almost.

"I would be willing to exchange stations with you if that would help."

I just rolled my eyes. "And I'd be even worse. Just get us down in one piece and I can scream at you later."

"Understood."

He didn't waste any time. No more than seconds later we were starting to heave as the hull encountered the first wisps of atmosphere. This ship, being built for the depths of space, wasn't exactly aerodynamic.

"Uh, Crit? You sure you need to be going so fast?"

He didn't take his eyes off the controls. "We haven't any choice. My readouts have just changed to report the repulsers as offline. If we slow down we'll fall out of the sky."

Oh God.

"And you couldn't have told me this before? Pull up, get us out of here!"

"I can't." His teeth were gritted together, the muscles in his arms standing out in stark relief, even under his fur coat. "I can't pull up."

I frantically began tapping away at the panels before me. None of them could do much more than dim the cabin lights. In the end, it was all I could do to sit back and grip my chair so tight I was sure I was leaving fingermarks in the ceramic armrests.

The pale blue of the oceans below were coming up fast, much too fast. One moment I could still see the whole curve of the planet in a single glance, a blink later and the horizon was gone, nothing but featureless blue to be seen wherever I looked.

Beside me I could hear Crit muttering, his voice slowly growing louder. At first I couldn't make it out, but soon it resolved into the snarling language he'd used on the Sirius. A heartbeat later he was yelling at the top of his lungs. I could barely hear him over the scream of the air rushing around the hull.

The controls were all but dead in my hands, my claws gouging deep furrows in the cheap padding that wrapped around them. It felt like a flashback to the engine room, masses of blinking red lights dancing across the screens before me, hardly any of them making sense.

I pulled up on the yoke, doing my best to bring it into my gut, but it wouldn't budge. If anything it was slowly pulling away. The massive blue plain of the planet swam before me; it was all I could do to keep us from spinning into a roll that would likely send us falling from the sky... as opposed to the headlong rush we were already in.

There were no wings on the ship, nothing to catch the thin air and pull us upwards. I'd flown before, back home, but that had always been on simple atmospheric craft that generated their lift from the nature around them, not through sheer unadulterated speed alone.

I quickly whipped one hand from the yoke, lashing out at a bank of switches in front of me and snapping my fingers back in place before I lost control. That bank of breakers was supposed to engage some form of downward facing boosters, but the gods knew if they even worked anymore.

I couldn't remember a single time that Bulla had taken this craft to a planet, and now I knew why.

A few more seconds and the masses of land and surf began to resolve themselves with terrifying clarity, rushing up to meet us, welcoming our worthless lives into their all encompassing embrace.

A kick from the seat below me and the retro boosters flared on. They were a pack of rockets strapped into the belly of the craft. They were supposedly enough to allow us to hover, though I doubted they could even lift their own weight.

Their upward press was just enough to stabilize our fall. The muscles in my neck tensed as I pulled savagely against the controls, almost afraid that I was about to tear them clean from the console before me.

I hadn't felt this much strain since my first hunt, when I'd ripped off the head of a Ganta beast with my bare claws...

The time for reminiscing was long past; even the split second the memory had taken was enough to nearly send us careening out of control.

I spared a sideways glance at the altimeter, it read something at a little over a thousand meters.

Some small part of my mind jibed that a thousand meters was a huge amount of space, a massive expanse. I glanced again and the readout displayed eight-hundred.

The nose of the craft was pulling up now, but our headlong fall hardly seemed to wane. The fur on the back of my neck was standing straight as I could begin to make out the waves breaking on the sea shore not so very far below.

I refuse to die like this.

I had survived too much. I had repaid my families honour, I had done all that was questioned of me. I refused to follow that foul lizard into the afterlife.

I couldn't hear it over the wail of air that hammered the hull of the ship, heating everything around us, but I screamed. I snarled, roared into the faceless horror that rushed towards me.

And I pulled with all my strength.

Not twenty meters below, we passed the surface. The trail of our jets left rifts in the sand.

And we were still alive.

I nearly yowled in joy, but the moment of inattention sent us rocketing to one side, almost colliding into an outcropping of rock.

Conversation was impossible with the air screaming about us, but I glanced over at James. His furless skin had turned a distinctly unhuman like shade of green. I could only hope I hadn't broken him.

The world streaked by beneath us, nothing but a blur of shapes that sent my eyes spinning. My vision tried to snap to follow each and every moving thing, all it succeeded in doing was giving me a bout of nausea that left me wishing I'd never stepped from the land of my fathers.

Flying with one's eyes closed is not generally considered a good idea, but it was getting to the point where I was almost considering it.

The most I could do was to stabilize our flight; even the mere thought of being able to pull up was laughable. The thrust between the retros and main engines was only just enough to keep us airborne. Anything more was beyond the providence of anyone but the gods.

"We're going to have to set down!" I roared it over the howling around us. James was smart enough to not even try and respond. All he did was to raise his thumb.

Landing. That would be a nice idea. Not as easily done as one might hope.

There were landing struts under the craft... I think, but they would do us no good. They were designed for a nice, gentle, vertical touchdown. That wasn't exactly going to happen.

The brown mountains fell away behind us, throwing us out to sail above the shockingly blue, sluggish waves of some vast, unnamed ocean.

All spacecraft that rated for atmospheric re-entry were supposed to be able to perform a liquid touchdown and remain afloat.

It was better than nothing.

Banking the craft on its side, I fought the controls before me, pulling us along to run parallel to the ragged shore.

I wasn't sure if it was a good sign that the controls were becoming more responsive. It was a positive note that I could force our direction to a greater degree, but gut wrenchingly terrifying in that it meant our time in the air was coming to an end. It would be soon after we fell back into normal operating speed that we'd lose the maniacal force that kept us hurtling in a headlong dash forward.

"Crit?" The roar around us had fallen enough that I could hear James over the wind that screamed outside, "I'm not so sure about this. That doesn't look like water to me."

"I'm open to suggestions...." Unclenching my jaw even just enough to speak was an effort.

He sat in silence for a long moment as I fought to try and keep us level.

When he finally spoke again, his voice barely escaped over the rumble, "Do it."

My lips twitched up in a grim smile. "Your wish."

There was little more to it. We needed to bleed off as much speed as we could before touching down. There was no telling how deep the ocean was. I held us level and straight as we slowly slipped lower and lower.

Beside me, Crit looked like he was wrestling all the demons of hell. I felt useless, I hadn't done a single thing of value since strapping myself in.

To be honest, it was a good thing I hadn't been the one to pilot. Even if I had been able to get this junk-pile moving, I'd likely have broken an arm while trying to stop us from turning in to a tumbling fireball. The muscles on Crit's arms were still standing out. I don't think he'd had a moment's

rest the entire time, and the strain was showing.

He was shaking. Not just his arms, but his whole body. I could only catch a glimpse of his eyes as he kept focused on the encroaching horizon before us, but they were terrified, his pupils huge, white showing around the edges.

At first it seemed like we would never touch down, but it still came too fast, and far too soon.

I knew the moment was upon us when Crit spared a glance over to me. I was no reader of azlin expressions, but undisguised fear was something that seemed to be universal the galaxy over.

I wanted to say something, to reassure him, to tell him that I'd been through worse and we'd be fine. The only problem was that I haven't. Trying to land a stunt like this on a civilized planet with a full disaster team waiting in the wings would be a capoff worthy of the serials, but trying the same on some unknown world that might just as soon eat us alive?

We were dead. Even if we survived the crash we would still be dead.

The ocean came up to meet us a moment later. I expected it to welcome us into its watery embrace, but instead we skidded across its surface, skipping like a stone and leaving a trail of fire on the waves behind us.

Uh... that wasn't good. Water isn't supposed to burn.

For a few moments it looked like we were going to have a near gold metal landing, a few skips and bumps, but bloody near perfect. That was until we slowed enough that the stub nose of the craft clipped a wave. Pulling itself under, it sent us somersaulting back up in the air to catch ourselves again and spin back right side up.

I was more concerned with what was happening a little bit closer to home. The safety straps that had been groaning against Crit's massive weight finally snapped, throwing him through the cramped cockpit, knocking himself, and almost me included, senseless.

There was no one at the controls now, the yoke ducked and weaved on its own accord, well out of my control.

It was the most I could do to reach out a hand to try and keep Crit's head from smashing into anything more. He'd lost a lot of blood back on the Serius, and now more of his orange-red, pine scented life spattered around us like a kid had been through with a ketchup bottle and a distinct lack of supervision.

It felt like we would never come to a rest. But, after long moments, we stopped spinning, left only to gently bob in the waves.

The sight out of the front view screen was not encouraging. There was nothing but blue to see in all directions, just different shades. A pale blue, almost white, of the sky, and a shockingly bright blue surf that washing up against us again and again.

"Crit! Are you still with me, buddy?" I reached down to pull the quick release on my straps. Predictably, it caught and wouldn't let go.

I felt a growl grow in the back of my throat. I had to stop and laugh for a moment, despite everything. I'd only been with the guy for less than a day and he was already starting to rub off on me. A growl was more at home in his repertoire than mine. I had to admit that it did feel good though.

I struggled free a moment later. Crit still had yet to move.

Pulling him from the corner where he lay crumpled, I spread out his too big body over what little space we had. He must be one heck of a fighter, most of his wounds were already healed, having scabbed over so well that I could barely make them out.

His head, however, was another matter entirely.

There was already a bump almost the size of my fist growing between his upturned ears. If he was anything like a human, that was not a good sign.

There didn't seem to be any broken bones, and no fractures to his skull... but he still wouldn't open his eyes as I tugged at his whiskers.

"Crit, come on, buddy. Don't you die on me..."

I let out a breath that I hadn't realized I'd been holding when a long and drawn out moan escaped his lips.

He wasn't dead. That was a good thing.

But what to do now?