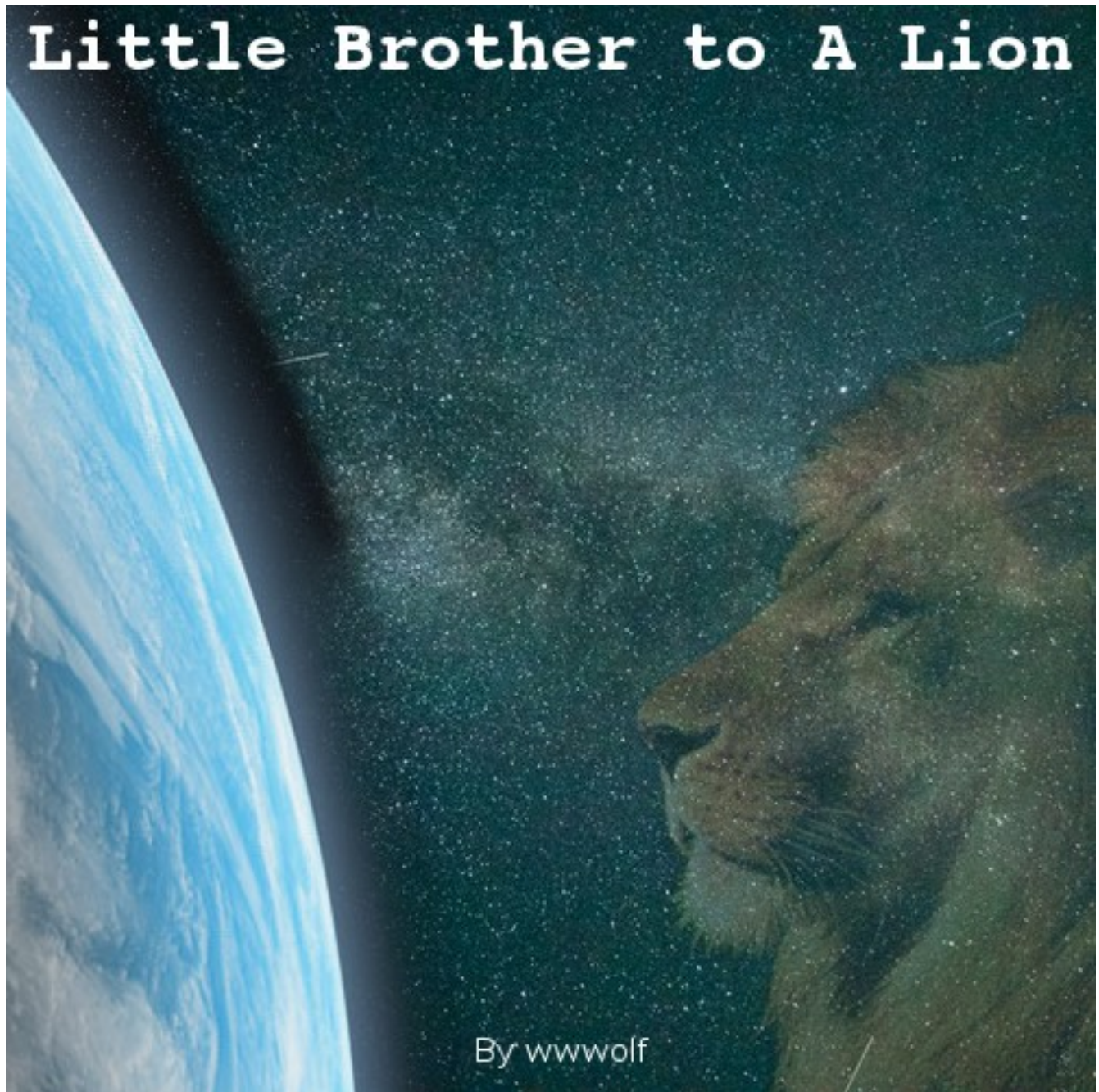




Posted on FurAffinity

February 4, 2013

(Updated February 10, 2013)

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	James Madford. Mechanic, Third Class.....	1
Chapter 2	First Mate Crit Is A Bugger.....	10
Chapter 3	Can a Band-Aid Fix A Reactor Leak?.....	21
Chapter 4	A Rough Passage To The Surface.....	31
Chapter 5	And Not A Drop To Drink.....	41
Chapter 6	Well, One Thing Is Still Working.....	52
Chapter 7	Food. Food, The Problem Is Always Food.....	71
Chapter 8	Why Hide When You Have All the Space In the World?.....	86
Chapter 9	Damnit Crit, I'm a Mechanic, Not a Killer!.....	103
Chapter 10	Back in 'Civilization'.....	121

Chapter 10 *Back in 'Civilization'*

The walls of the city had been a gleaming white once, no expense spared for the main base of a planet wide terraforming project. I could hardly see their original colour now, they were covered from foundation to towering spire in graffiti, a riot of colours and symbols that screamed at any eye that was foolish enough to glance their way.

The ramshackle streets was much the same. There was no plan, no central design. Buildings sprouted up anywhere there was space. Footpaths wandered between them here and there, but no roads. If we hadn't the hover bike we'd never have gotten anywhere.

Not that life in the air was any better. There were rules on civilized planets, but the airspace here was whatever one could eek out. It was a bit of a parody to hear the spaceport calling out directives to the large ships over the radio while the small atmospheric craft ducked and weaved headlong through the air beneath them.

We saw two mid-air crashes during the flight in. One not five meters to our left. There was no grace or subtlety to it, one craft simply rammed the other, their engines catching fire as the two mangled husks tumbled to the earth far below, trailing wreckage. I had to make an effort not to look down when they hit. I could hear screaming from far below, and I didn't want to think that pirates must have families too.

It had only taken us an hour to cross the hundreds of kilometres it took to get here, but penetrating even a few hundred meters in this soup of flying shrapnel took forever. I could feel Crit's grip tighten around my chest every time a craft veered near. On more than one occasion we were mere inches from colliding. He squeezed the breath from my lungs so often that I was starting to wonder if he was doing CPR.

Within the main walls of the city things found at least some small measure of order. Unlike the shanty town beyond, this had at some point in the distant past been planned out. I set us down again, settling the bike into a secluded corner of some dead end alley.

Crit finally released his death grip on me when his feet touched the solid earth.

"Why'd we land, James?" He began stretching his muscles, working out the kinks from our flight. I could hear his joints popping as he bent in ways no human could.

I stretched my neck, feeling my spine crack. "We'll never find anything from the air. If we want passage off planet we'll need to find it up close and personal." I stepped off the bike, happy to feel the hard surface of pavement under my feet. "But that raises another problem. I'm assuming that we're not going to find anyone who'll take us back to civilization out of the goodness of their hearts. And I don't know about you, but I didn't exactly bring a lot of cash." In fact, I was broke. I'd only had a few credits when I'd boarded the Sirius, and I'd be lucky if they were still in my pack after all this.

Crit lifted his lips in a snarl turned smile. "Let me handle that, James." The shadow of a growl escaped his lips. "I can find us resources. There aren't any police to enforce order on this world."

"Whoa, wait..." I tried to reach out for Crit's shoulder, but he was gone before I'd even taken two steps. He leapt clean over the wall behind the bike and was gone. I didn't want to think about where he was going to be getting our slush money from.

There was nothing for me to do now. I didn't have a weapon, and I didn't dare explore. Not only didn't I want the possibility of being elsewhere when Crit got back, but I didn't want to find out just how lawless this city truly was.

I was expecting to hear screams of terror and gunshots in an anarchic city like this, but it was surprisingly quiet. If I just pushed aside the knowledge that this was a pirate base built on the bones of a terraforming plant, I could almost imagine that we were back in civilization.

I didn't have a watch, but it couldn't have been more than an hour before Crit returned. He nearly gave me a heart attack when he landed silently on the cracked concrete not two meters away. He had a splash of blood on his hands and the scorch of a laser burn singeing the fur on one side of his face.

He was about to open his mouth to speak when I held up my hand.

"Don't even start," I warned him. "All I want to know is if anyone is following you."

He rolled his eyes.

"You need more faith, little brother." He tossed a cracked and worn leather wallet towards me. I had to scramble to keep it from falling to the ground. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw it free of blood.

Before I could even ask, he added, "And he wasn't human."

I closed my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. Flipping the wallet open, I was thankful to see there was no ID. There wasn't much within, but a couple hundred credits was better than nothing.

I didn't know what the prices were like here, but I doubted they were cheap. We'd have enough for a night in a dive motel, but little more. I highly doubted that there would be anywhere close to enough to get even one of us off planet.

My stomach wrenched at the thought, but I pushed it aside. I'd worry about that later. Or, more to the point, I'd let Crit worry about it and not ask where the cash came from.

"What's it like out there?" I asked him, hazarding a peek around the corner of the alley.

He shrugged, noncommittal. "Rough. I've seen worse. I've been involved in worse. It's not a ruling planet, but it's better than we have any reason to expect. Just imagine the red-light district of any city, only blown up to a city of its own."

"Wonderful." I stepped around the corner. I hadn't even made it two steps before Crit's hand fell to gently rest on my shoulder. An obvious sign that I was 'his'. I was quickly grateful for the show. The world around us looked less than inviting for someone like me.

It wasn't that I was unused to the grittier side of life, but most of the planets I frequented were predominantly human. That helped even the odds in my favour. You don't have much to worry about when you know that most of the people are on round about the same level when it comes to physical strength. This place wasn't quite the same.

There were more species here than I could count, and only half of them did I even vaguely recognize. Unsurprisingly, most were larger than me. Few were larger than Crit, but they still made me feel like a mouse in a room full of cats.

I got a couple of hungry glances, but the moment they saw Crit folks tended to look away and speed up. Only once did someone venture close enough that Crit growled them off. For a split-second I almost thought it was going to come to blows, but Crit's mane puffed up enough to double his size, forcing the want-to-be mugger back.

Crit seemed to just follow me wherever I wandered, but I hadn't the slightest where I was going. We worked up one street and down the next, no real destination in mind. I had the vague goal of getting to the space port in the center of town, but we needed more money before we went there.

The press of people around me should have been comforting after so long in the wilderness, but the only calming presence I felt was Crit's hand.

I'd spent most of my life in places not so unlike this, so why did I feel alone?

My experience in other towns paid off. I began to make some small sense of the streets around us. There was a sign for a motel on the building up ahead, half burnt out and flickering. I couldn't even read the language its name was in, but I recognized the symbols that meant 'room'.

The scents that flowed around us were just short of intoxicating. I had to hold back the urge to swat at everything that moved around me as James led us through the cracked concrete thicket.

I'd had my moment of excitement when I'd found a mark to get some money from. I'd felt a little ashamed to cuff him over the head and make off with his wallet, but there wasn't much else I could do. James must be rubbing off on me. A year ago I would have just as well killed him to keep him quiet, but now I simply gave that scaled thing enough of a whack to put him down, nothing more.

The urge to protect the little human was just short of overwhelming as the press of creatures closed around us. He was so fragile, so defenceless, like a kitt. This is what my father must feel like with us I suppose.

My hand fell until the pads of my fingers brushed his shoulder. And no matter what I did I couldn't seem to break the contact.

We wandered up and down the twisting streets for hours, seeming to move at random. Eventually he chose a building identical to the hundreds of others we had passed. It looked the same as all the others to me.

Inside was a small office. The lighting was too far into the green spectrum for my tastes, and I couldn't even hope to identify the creature behind the desk. It looked like some freakish cross between Bulla and an eggplant.

A smile sprang to James' lips as we stepped inside. He tried to brush off my hand as he approached the desk, but I stayed with him.

My jaw just about dropped off when James began to speak. His words weren't Standard, or any of the few other languages I recognized, but some sort of bubbling mass that I didn't even know the human voice could make.

The creature on the other side of the desk seemed equally surprised. It responded in kind, though far more quickly and fluently.

I couldn't understand a single word of their conversation. My hackles began to rise as a growl clawed at my throat.

James didn't even turn as he struck me in the gut with his elbow. He wasn't gentle. The hit hadn't hurt, but the fact he'd struck me at all did.

A moment later the two of them were finished. I'd still to say a single word when James slid almost half of our credits across the counter.

The alien spoke again, in broken Standard this time. "Only enough for one bed." He paused eyeing me, then James. "Both male. Don't do your kind here."

I leveled my gaze at the creature, but it didn't shy away. Didn't even seem to notice or care. The hostile intent was completely lost on it.

It wasn't so oblivious when I slowly extended an arm to lay my hand on the worn ceramic counter. Setting my claws on its surface with a click, I slowly pulled my hand back towards me, leaving long scratches in the surface.

The clerk paused at that, looking up to regard me again. I think he got the picture this time. Reaching around behind him, he carefully pulled an access card from the wall.

"Finest single bed room we have." He held it out to me. James took it.

Turning from the counter, I could hear the clerk shift nervously behind us as we walked away.

This place was so cheap that the lift to the suits didn't even work. James swiped our new access card on the door to the stairwell, a small light in the reader flashed green as the lock clicked open.

Ascending to the second level, I could only hope that the room would be better than the stairs. The air in here was musty and the odd scrawl of graffiti tagging the walls. I could smell the piss of half a dozen species, along with less pleasant odours.

We found our room on the second floor. I still had yet to break contact with James as he swiped the card again. The door unlocked obligingly.

I'd been hoping for a refuge after our hard nights on the planet. This room hardly qualified.

Crit still wouldn't take his hand from my shoulder as we stepped through the door.

There was barely enough space in this dive of a room for the two of us to stand, but it was all I could afford with the few credits we had. Crit was pressed up against my back as the door slid shut behind us. I could smell the pungent scent of his alien body far more vividly now that I was surrounded by the more familiar city. And he stank.

"Uh, Crit?" He grunted in response to my query. "You can let go of me. The door's locked.

We're safe for now."

It took a long moment, but he lifted his hand from my shoulder for the first time in hours. There was only just enough space in the tiny room for me to scrunch up on the bed and him to stand against the far wall. Even then we were no more than a couple of feet apart.

"Well," I tried to work a smile to my face, "Here we are, back among the living. We're half way out of here."

He grunted, turning to the small windows behind him. The street was just visible through the dirty and streaked glass.

"And what do we do now, James?"

I shrugged. "Get a couple of hours sleep, then head out in the evening to spend the rest of our cash on food and do the tourist thing as we look for a way off planet."

"Tourist thing?"

"Well, it's what we are now. No one knows we're from the Sirius, and, frankly, I doubt anyone cares. All we need to do is avoid getting ourselves killed until we can get out of here."

"Very well." He grunted and slowly lowered himself to the ground, conveniently blocking the door. "Then we sleep."

"Uh, Crit?" He looked up at me, "I was kinda going to have a shower now that we're here." If the azlin stank to high heaven, I doubted I was much better.

He looked around the miniscule room. There was only one door, and that led back to the hallway. "They don't seem to have provided us with one." He sounded genuinely confused now.

I laughed as I tried to get off the bed, but his bulk nearly took up the entire floor. I couldn't even set my feet down without stepping on him.

"Haven't you ever lived in a dorm?" I asked. He just glared at me. "Its a shared bathroom."

He growled at that.

"Move it, Crit. You can do what you want, but I'm getting cleaned up."

He refused to shift enough to let me get the door open.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight, James." His voice had changed, as though he were speaking to an impertinent child.

I had to laugh at that. "Dude, I don't need you to prove the perv at the front desk right. Do what you want, but I'm not sharing a shower stall with you."

His tongue lolled out as a strangled cough came from his throat. "That, James, is an image I never need again. You are my brother. Don't push any further than that."

"Then we're agreed." I gave him another shove, "Now move it."

It took a while, but I got the great lug to move. He insisted in following me though. Thankfully, the bathroom really was communal, and there was enough room for him to preen in front of the mirror as I washed off in a shower stall.

The water nearly ran black beneath me as I scrubbed a week's worth of God knows what from my skin. The simple act of getting clean was enough to truly make it feel like I was back in society

again.

Through the white noise of the shower, I heard Crit's warning growl. Snapping the water off, I bolted, nearly slipping and whacking my head against the moss covered tiles of the bathroom floor.

Out of the shower stall, I saw Crit staring intently at the door as a small man, human, slowly backed away.

"What's wrong?"

Crit only turned to my voice once the door had clicked shut.

"We were being disturbed."

I had to cough back a laugh. "Disturbed? Crit, it's a communal washroom. What were you expecting?" He looked at me blankly. "You know," I snapped my fingers in front of his nose, his massive hand swatted at me, "Shared."

"I don't do *shared*." His voice was a low growl.

"Well, I'm sorry, *your Majesty*, but you don't really have a choice. Unless you want to roll a half dozen more people, this is all we can afford."

I swear to God that I could see him mulling over the idea in his head.

"Don't even think about it," I warned him. "We don't need any more blood on our hands."

"Fine." His voice came out in a huff. "But we're not staying here tomorrow."

I smiled. "I can deal with that." Another thought occurred to me. "How did you survive on the Sirius with your little, *ahem*, personal space issues?"

His lips twitched up just a fraction. "I had my private cabin. I didn't leave it much."

"For twenty years?"

"How do you think I found time to read the manuals for the drop ship?"

"Fair enough." I turned. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I still have soap in my eyes." I was eager to get back in the shower. I'd only just realize that I didn't even have so much as a towel wrapped around my middle.

From behind me I could hear Crit's cough like laugh.

"What?" I asked, turning back towards him. That was the wrong move, now he was nearly doubling over in laughter.

"That's what your kind truly looks like under your clothing?" He had to pause for breath, "No wonder you have such a fetish for covering up! You look like a shaved monkey! And... and..."

I stepped back in the shower stall and snapped on the water full force before he could continue. Figure it to be a cat to make a comment like that.

One of these days I was going to dye him neon pink while he slept.

Another ten minutes and I was as clean as I could get without a two week binge and purge at a health retreat. I decided to be the prude and call for Crit to toss my clothes over the door of the stall. I *really* didn't need him to make any comments on my manhood not measuring up.

Stepping from the shower, I was rather taken aback by Crit. His fur nearly shone.

There was a pile of shed hair laying in tufts around him, he was so finely groomed as to look like a museum display. His fur had fallen to a dingy bronze over the last week, now it was a near spotless gold with patches of ivory.

The only reminder of our journey was the ugly scar across his nose. That still hadn't healed over. I was starting to doubt it ever would.

He turned to look at me as I stepped from the stall. All I got was a grunt and, "Feeling better, are we?"

I nodded. "Looks like you've been using the time as well."

He shrugged. "I do not plan to be returning home looking like a mongrel. I am the scion of my family, and I plan to start looking like one again." He gave me another appraising stare. "Is that the best *you* can do?"

I shoved him out of the way as I began walking towards the bathroom door. "Sorry, oh dear *scion*, but we humans don't brush out quite as nice as the azlin master race." I turned and stuck my tongue out at him. "That's why we wear clothing."

"Damn silly, if you ask me."

"I didn't." I shoved the door open and walked out into the hallway.

I followed James out, expecting him to head back to the room. He didn't. I was no more than a half step behind him when he made it to the stairs.

I couldn't keep my hand from coming up to rest lightly on his shoulder again. This was becoming a habit.

He twitched slightly when my fingers came to rest, but didn't brush me off.

"So, where are we going?" I asked as we descended in the dim stairwell.

"I don't feel like sleeping. I don't know about you, but I'm looking for dinner. This'll be the first cooked meal I've had in a week. I'm looking forward to it."

My gut rumbled sympathetically when he spoke.

"Wherever you're going, I'm following."

He snorted out a laugh. "I'd kind of guessed that. Do you have a preference?"

"Anything I can order raw." I never did understand why humans demanded *everything* be charred to leather. Cooking can be good sometimes, but limiting yourself to it cuts your options by half.

Back on the street James took off, looking for all the world like he knew exactly where he was going. I almost thought he did.

We wandered for half an hour, seeing every manner of beast and creature mill around us. The sun was starting to set now, and I was happy to see the streets begin to clear by even some small measure.

At long last James bellied up to a street counter under a blinking and buzzing neon sign. I

wasn't sure what they were serving here, but by the smell of it I wanted about four orders.

A human was working. He stepped up to James, but gave me a wide berth.

"What can I get for you and your... pet?" He wouldn't turn to meet my eyes.

I was a heartbeat from reaching across the counter and strangling the worthless little human with my own claws when James' hand came up to discretely push me back.

"My partner and I," James' voice was level, "Will take three orders of whatever the special is. One for me, two for him." A slight smile twitched at his lips. "I'll take mine well done, his rare."

The cook didn't say anything as he threw us a sour glance and walked away. I had to keep from growling.

James and I hardly spoke as we waited. We both leaned against the counter and stared out into the seemingly endless stream of people who flowed past us.

I spent the journey here with an image in my mind of the 'pirates' who had shot up the Sirius, the people I would extract my revenge against. Too bad the dream didn't fit with reality.

There were women and children. Men who seemed like they would be more at home behind a desk than a laser. There were rough, killer stereotypes mixed in for sure, but they were in the minority. The city around us was little different from any other.

The food came quickly. The portions were small, and the meat, even as *rare*, was still overcooked, but it was food. It was nothing like what I would order if I had the choice, but I still would have hugged the cook if I could have gotten a hold of him. Meat was meat, but I'll admit that eating properly prepared food was preferable to raw, steaming beast flesh, and far and away from survival rations.

Both portions were nearly gone when my ears twitched.

I didn't know what it was, but there was something out there.

It took a lot to pull my attention from the food in my hands, but this was enough to do it. I nearly froze stiff, scraps of meat hanging from my chin as I'd been pulling them from the bones before me.

I'd heard the word *Sirius*. Someone was talking about my ship. *My ship*.

I couldn't see him, but I felt James turn at my side.

"What is it, Crit?"

I didn't respond. I only tightened my grip on his shoulder.

There it came again. Ears swivelling on my skull, I turned to try and pick up the voices in the distance, tune out the din of hundreds of other conversations.

"You're kidding! They haven't got that pig-tailed hauler moving?" The voice was rough and faint, at the edge of my hearing.

"Not yet. The fuel lines are patched, but they can't get the systems online. Someone took the MCU, and hacks can't get around it."

"I thought all the crew were dead, killed off by the defence sats."

"Guess not. Someone's got to have the interlock key..."

I nearly screamed as they walked away, voices fading into the general background murmur of the street.

"We're going." I grabbed James by the collar of his jacket and plunged into the crowd, towards where I'd last heard the voices.

Every sound seemed to conspire to hide the prey. I would have killed just for them to say the word Sirius again. For all I knew they could be right beside us, and just not talking.

Twenty steps and I'd almost given up. James' toes still had yet to touch the ground. I was hauling him behind me, his heels skidding on the cracked pavement.

"When does the transport leave for the Sirius?"

Got you.

Around one last corner, and they stood no more than a half dozen strides away. I ducked into the shadows, dragging James alongside me.

"Uh, buddy, you want to tell me what's going on?" James' voice was nothing more than a whisper.

I felt my lips raise, my fangs exposing to the cool night air. "They're talking about the Sirius. They're taking a transport there." I pointed to the figures ahead of us.

James rolled his eyes. "Great. One problem, we don't *want* to go back."

Oh. Yeah. I had to gulp in a breath of air to focus my thoughts.

"But I want *them*. The Sirius is my ship now. They are the people who put us here, and I want them."

"Fine," James waved a hand in the shadows, "Let's see what's up. I'm just as curious to know why where here as anyone else. Let's hear what they have to say."

I followed Crit as he led us up one street and down the next. I never really got to see the people we were tracking. He kept out of sight, following them by scent and sound.

We slowly worked our way towards the center of the city, to the towering walls of the spaceport.

The spaceport was likely the only place on the entire planet that was kept up. No graffiti scrawled across its walls, just towering grey stone that jutted into the sky.

Our targets stepped up to an unlabelled door in the otherwise featureless wall. It slid aside for them as they disappeared within.

Wonderful.

Checking to make sure there were no cameras watching us, I stole up to the doorway, Crit on my heels.

There wasn't much to see. The door was made of solid metal, recessed into the wall. The only other mechanism was a security card reader.

You know... that looks a lot like the reader on our motel door...

Pulling out the key card we'd gotten not two hours before, I hooked my thumb nail into a seam in its plastic, peeling it apart.

There wasn't much inside, but it had enough leads for my trusty old diagnostic unit. It was amazing that my little box had survived the trip all the way from the Sirius, but its screen still obediently lit up when I flipped it open.

The electronics here were so simple as to almost be trivial. Amateurs.

I slid my card into the reader. A small indicator lit up above it as it tried to verify my identity.

A quick mashing of the buttons on my diagnostic box and I sent a shot of voltage through the card, stunning the reader. It wasn't enough to damage it, and nowhere near enough to open the door, but it gave a few seconds of breathing room as the system reset.

My little screen flashed up a few characters as the reader rebooted. Not much, but just enough for me to identify the make and model. Typical. A Sectronics class three. The cheapest thing on the market. Any drifter worth his salt knew how to hack these, but their price still kept them around.

A couple more keystrokes and I pulled up an old program I'd written a few years ago. It cycled the code on my card as quick as the security system could read it. I also had it toss in a reboot every so often so the reader stayed too frazzled to realize it was being attacked.

Sitting back, I just smiled and waited. Not thirty seconds later the little light that had been doing a hyperactive bout of red flashes turned a solid green.

Perfect.

I pulled my little card and diagnostic from the reader and stuffed it back in my pack. I took a second to root around, making sure the Sirius' MCU was still in there. It was.

"After you, buddy." I held the door open to Crit with a mock bow.

I couldn't help but notice that his claws were unsheathed, gleaming slightly under the dull hallway lamps as he stepped in.

The inside of the building had changed little since it had been constructed by the terraforming company. It even still had their logo on the wall every now and then. There were a few more burnt out lights than I'd expected, but other than that the place was pretty well kept up.

I'd expected Crit to stalk through the hallway, keeping to the shadows like any good spy in a serial. Instead he simply strode forward like he owned the place.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when we passed a group of pirates. They were lounging in a break room of some sort. Crit didn't pay them the slightest attention, and they never even looked up as we passed by.

"Hey, Crit? Where are we-" I never even got the chance to finish my question as he raised a finger to my lips.

"I need to listen." He cocked his head, ears swivelling before he turned to walk off down another hallway.

A few moments later we were following on the last dregs of a group that was filing into a conference room of some sort. Crit grabbed me by the wrist as he shadowed them, dragging me along.

We stood in the back of a darkened room with a holoprojector in the center. There were a good dozen other people here. They looked more like a low budget salvage crew than a group of filthy pirates.

One of them stepped up to the projector, knocking ash off the tip of his cigar. It fell into the projection matrix, causing the image to flicker as the system compensated.

"'k you buggers, everyone here?" There was a general murmur. "You blights are the next group we're shipping up to the Sirius. The last crew got the engines ready to run again, but we need some hackers to bypass the computer lockouts and get the ship down here so we can strip it."

The projector clicked to an image of the Sirius hanging in space. Most of its holes were crudely patched over.

"The captain, some wanabe named Bulla, was supposed to bring 'er to us and run off with the insurance money." Beside me, I could feel Crit twitch, his entire body spasming. "'es dead. So's all the crew. Pitty. They would have fetched a good price on the body market."

Okay, this was not cool.

The presenter continued, images of a familiar computer system flashing past, but all I could focus on was keeping my heart from pounding out of my chest.

Bulla had been going to sell the crew as slaves? And what about Crit, he'd been the First Officer?

It was only then that I noticed that the azlin's hand was still clamped around my wrist, hard as stone. He wouldn't look down at me. He barely breathed, kept his eyes straight ahead.

The briefing ended and people began filing out. We were among the first, Crit all but dragging me.

I wasn't sure where he was taking me, I doubt he knew either. He simply kept his eyes level and walked until he'd found an empty room.

"Let go of me." I whispered. My free hand scraped at his grip, but I would of have better luck trying to remove a set of restraining cuffs with a box of toy tools.

He tossed me into the room, following in before clicking the door shut and leaning his weight against it. There weren't any other doors or windows in the small, airless space.

Suddenly, I could smell his alien scent again. I'd become so accustomed to it over the last week that it had all but disappeared. I could smell it again. I wasn't dealing with a human, or any other species that I'd ever encountered before.

"Crit..." I had my back to the far wall now, as far from him as I could get in the small space.

He began speaking, quick and rushed, and not in Standard. I couldn't understand a single word of his guttural grunts and growls, but he hadn't taken a step towards me. Yet.

I had to resist the urge to step up and give him a good slap to the nose to get him speaking Standard again. Thankfully he clicked back into it after a few seconds, without even seeming to realize.

"... you have to believe me. I didn't know, James. *I didn't know*. Look at me, James, that's practically what *I* was." A growl started to build in his throat. "I'd kill that lizard if he wasn't already dead."

I still had my back to the wall, standing just out of Crit's reach. He was ranting now, claws slicing savagely through the air as he described, in rather sickening detail, exactly what it was he wanted to do to the corpse of Bulla.

"Uh, Crit?" He froze the moment I spoke, as if having forgotten I was even here. "You do realize he's already dead, right? Just swear to me that you didn't know and we'll let it drop. Bulla was a bastard, we already knew that. Now we just know how much of a bastard he truly was."

The massive azlin was on his knees not a heartbeat later, eyes still level with my face, he looked at me pleadingly.

"I didn't know, James. I swear to the gods, I would never sell you or anyone else into bondage."

"Fine." I reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder. "I can believe that. Now, let's get off of this hell-hole."

"How?"

A slight smile slipped to my lips, "Well, didn't they say they got the Sirius running again? Let's ride her home. You're the First Officer. Doesn't she legally belong to you now?"

"I... I don't know."

"Wouldn't that be a prize to take home to your father? Your very own ship?"

His jaw dropped open in a grin. I could almost see the thoughts dancing through his head.

The question was rather academic, really. We didn't have many options on what ships we could steal. Booking passage was one thing, but riding out of here on a ship of our own? I could deal with that. If the pirates had patched her up, I'd be more than happy to take the Sirius out of here. I could even guarantee we could fly her.

We tumbled out of the room a moment later. Crit pulled me by the shoulder as we sprinted to catch up to the pirates we'd seen in the conference room. We only just caught them as they entered a hangar bay.

There wasn't much here. If I'd been hoping to make off with a transit capable ship, we were out of luck in this hangar. All the ships here were far too small. The intersystem transports must be under heavier guard.

We'd just entered the hangar when it looked like I'd have to rethink my assessment of them not guarding the smaller craft.

I'm not sure exactly what you'd call a pirate security officer (piSec?) but it was pretty obvious that one of them was headed our way.

He wasn't human. Patchy mats of thick, wiry black hair sprouted from his not-quite-pink skin. The big giveaway was his upturned pig nose. A Mysen. They were used in security the galaxy over. Known for being big on rules and short on intelligence, they were the perfect guard.

Stepping between us and the tail of the group, we got a snort from him as he gave us the once over.

"I don't know you." His voice was rough and guttural.

"I'd suppose not," Crit responded before I could so much as try to think up a way out. The azlin's cultured tones were back, not a hint of a growl in his voice. "I wouldn't expect we'd ever have met." He put a slight sniff into his voice, as if dismissing the fact the two of them would ever have been in the same room before. It took me a moment to remember that Crit's fur was all brushed out now. He looked one small step short of royalty.

"No one but the team gets on the ship." The Mysen put his hands on his generous hips. One of his thumbs on the sidearm that rested there.

A long, drawn out sigh escaped Crit's lips. He turned his gaze to me with a theatrical toss of his head. I could almost see the unspoken words, 'Lord save me from fools, I do not suffer them gladly.'

"We *are* the team," He finally said. Crit bit out every word, as if the mere act of speaking with the guard was beneath him.

"Don't know you." The Mysen was blinking his eyes now, trying to remember his orders. "Only the team gets on the ship."

Crit closed his eyes for a moment, letting out a sigh. "Why do I waste my time with imbeciles such as you?" He cast his gaze upwards, "You don't know me because I was just added to the team. My pet and I," He nodded to me offhandedly, "Were assigned to bring the Sirius in. Call your superiors if you must, but they will not take kindly to yet another delay. We have a schedule to keep, and it will be your pay that's docked if we fall behind."

He paused a moment before adding, "Do you know how much a single minute costs when that ship isn't doing anything?" A slight grin touched his features, lips raising just a fraction to show the teeth beneath. "One thousand credits."

The Mysen's skin paled at that thought. "I need to..."

Crit simply waved an uninterested hand at him. "Do as you will. But you will be responsible for the costs, not I."

I could almost see the lice jump from the guard's skull as his head warmed with all the effort he was putting into this. I had to hold back a laugh.

"I'm waiting." Crit's voice hadn't faltered from the overly cultured, 'I'm better than you' tone he had brought on.

With a final grunt, the guard stepped out of the way. "You're part of the team." After we passed, I heard him mutter, "And I want my pay cheque."

Beside me, I could see Crit's jaw drop open in a smirk.

I had to grab him by the shoulder to force his ear down to a level I could whisper into, "Where did that come from? You never told me you could act!"

He laughed. "Bulla made use of me for a great many things. I did whatever was needed to make him money." He paused for a moment, a claw slipping free from the tip of his finger. "The next step would have been to put the fear of the gods in him."

I rolled my eyes, "I could have guessed as much." I gave his ear a yank while I had him down here. "And where did the crack about being a 'pet' come from?"

"I needed some revenge for that olf back at the restaurant."

"Hey, that wasn't my fault."

He slung his arm over my shoulder as he straightened to his full height again. "Perhaps not, but I have few opportunities to display the *obvious* superiority of the azlin kind." We were approaching the small transport now, and the pirates waiting to board. His voice fell to barely a whisper, "And I have to take advantage of those opportunities I can."

We packed into the small intrasystem shuttle next to a collection of people who looked more like they were from a low budget exploratory company than a group of blood thirsty pirates. Almost everyone on this trip was an engineer or system specialist of some sort.

Crit towered over the men, mostly humans, like a vengeful god.

The moment the hatch closed behind us, sealing us off from the pirate base, Crit's demeanour changed.

It was slow and subtle. I would never have noticed if I hadn't spent so much time with him. When he'd set foot on the shuttle he been upright, bright eyed, and just short of... well, noble. Now that the atmosphere recirculation systems kicked in around us he stooped forward. His eyes, that had been bright and intelligent before, slowly closed to slits. His claws came free and his lips rose ever so slightly.

In a matter of minutes every hair on his body had gone from 'intelligent and easy going' to 'in what order shall I eat you in?'

The last time I'd seen him like this he'd tried to take a bite out of me. Frankly, I was scared too.

It was impossible to try to talk to Crit while we were in here. The transport wasn't large and they had us packed in like sardines.

The guy beside me was starting to show a nervous tick. His eye was twitching every few seconds – every time he looked at Crit.

I leaned over to him. "Hey, what are you here to get done?"

He didn't respond for a moment, just gulped for air as he took one more look at Crit menacing over him.

"I'm, uh, a computer core specialist. Name's Mike. They brought me along to see if I can override the missing MCU. How about you?"

I did my best to force out a smile. I had to wait a moment before responding when the transport's engines rumbled to life and we rose from the ground.

"Name's Madford. The ol' beast and I are assigned as security detail." A rumble came from Crit as I spoke, one that didn't sound like it was completely acting.

"Uh, did you say *beast*?" Mike's tick had returned. I think he'd set it to fast-forward now.

This time Crit raised one of his lips and leaned ever so slightly towards the man. Another growl came from deep inside the azlin. And I swear to God it sounded like 'I want to eat you'.

It took everything I had to keep from laughing outright. I had to get Crit a job in the serials when we got out of here. He could ham it up better than anyone I'd ever met. We'd be rich, he'd make the perfect villain.

A second later we broke from the planet's atmosphere and the sound of air rushing against the hull died away. It was followed soon after by the gravity. This ship wasn't large enough for AG generators, so there was the customary few seconds of scramble as everyone grabbed their belongings before they floated away.

Pushing Crit back slightly from the tech before he had a heart attack, I tried to strike up a

conversation again. "We're just on detail to make sure nothing goes wrong. The big fella doesn't eat people unless I tell him to."

"That's, uh, good to know." Mike was scrambling to hug a portable computer he'd brought with him to his chest. It was obvious he wasn't much of a space traveler. I had all my things stashed in my pack, and that was safely in the compartment under my seat.

"We're new around here," I continued. "They just brought us in for this job. Neat little operation you've got going. I never thought I'd see the day there'd be a whole planet full of types like us."

Mike clutched his computer tighter to his chest, but a wan smile touched his lips. "The city's not as big as it looks. It's the only real place on the whole planet, anyway. We're not all really pirates, you know. The city's just like any other. This system is perfect. No one can find us here with their scanners jammed by the star. And even if they did, they'd never be able to tell anyone before they were shot out of the sky."

"Heh. Yeah, I'd noticed."

"Anyway," Mike was loosening up now, focusing on me so as not to see Crit looming in the background. "It's not like we're all pirates. Sure, everything's based off the money the real scallywags bring in, but look at me. I've never hurt a single person in my life, but I still make a living helping folks turn around a ship once they land it."

Just surviving on the planet had left me with more than enough time to imagine all the things I wanted to do the people who had put me here, but what I was seeing just didn't match up to what I'd expected.

"Yeah." Was all I could say.

"Anyway," he continued, "What we're really hoping to find is the MCU. They've practically turned the ship upside down looking for it. That little thing has just enough logic on it to keep the entire primary system core from responding. I heard they've already gone through all the bodies to try and get a hold of it, but the bloody thing's disappeared."

"Heh." I had to fight to keep the smile from my lips. "Imagine that."

He nodded. "We'll have to replace the entire core if we can't find that chip. I should be able to bypass it if we really need to, but a long term fix would require a whole new computer." He made a sour face. "And that would kill our profit on the ship. I don't know about your contract, but I'm working on a percentage."

The image of this guy rubbing his hands together to sell off the Sirius was at least enough to help me with the idea that he was, after all, the enemy.

The rest of the flight was in relative silence. As old as this transport was, it was still far and above the little dropship that Crit and I had taken to the surface. We made the journey in little over an hour.

Crit was playing the role of monster to the hilt. He still hadn't said a word since we'd gotten on board, and every time someone began talking too loud he would shift his gaze to them. That shut them up pretty fast.

I had the sudden idea that no matter where we went once we got back aboard the Sirius, people would more than likely be happy to get out of our way.

I had my face pressed to the small port window beside me as we closed in on the Sirius. She was still as ugly as a twelve hour shift in the reactor room, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. It was an odd feeling. She was almost, but not quite, home.

I could still see the scar where I'd fixed the fuel line. Someone had come back and done a far better job, the old girl almost looked like she could fly now.

It took a moment for me to figure out what the thing was that drifted alongside her. It was a sleek, arrowhead shape, tethered to the Sirius by a tube that ran to the main hatch. Of all things, it looked like a small warship. A new one too.

"That's the Ulf," came Mike's voice from beside me. He was watching as I stared out the window. I could feel Crit perk up beside me as Mike spoke.

"He was the one who found her. The Ulf transited in and nearly ran into the bloody thing. We're just lucky that no one else has landed atop the old transport, adrift as she is."

"You're kidding me," I said, pointing a finger towards the smaller craft. "No ship that tiny can carry a transit drive."

Mike grinned. "He'd was the pride of his owner's fleet. They got a hold of her almost brand new when the Alcarien navy was stupid enough to put her through her proving trials without a full escort. That little bird is faster and has more firepower than any other ship in the system."

That could pose a problem. There was no way we'd ever be able to ride the Sirius out of here as long as that bird of prey was next door.

I decided to get my eyes back in my skull and focus on planning what the heck we were going to do next. There were a million questions I wanted to pump Mike for, but I didn't want to *look* like I was pumping him for information.

A few moments later I felt a slight shudder run through the ship as a familiar tube latched onto the transport's airlock. We were returning to the Sirius via the same port we'd left her through. Good thing the pirates hadn't figured out that there had been a drop ship moored here before.

Most of the people around us were more than happy to make a quick exit from our little shuttle. They scrambled out as fast as their legs could carry them, pulling themselves up the docking tube and into the artificial gravity of the main ship.

Crit didn't even bother to move. He just sat there, handing out a toothy grin to each and every person who passed until we were alone in the passenger compartment.

I undid my buckle and floated free of my seat, ready to climb my way up the tube when Crit cleared his throat behind me.

Rolling my eyes, I turned back to him. "What?"

He just smiled again. For real this time, none of that 'I'm going to eat you' fakery.

"Aren't you going to unbuckle my harness?"

"You've got to be kidding me."

His grin grew larger. "I'm a *beast*, aren't I? You can't expect me to be going around, doing these things for myself."

I briefly contemplated just how far I'd get wrapping my fingers around his throat and choking

the life out of him. I had to give up on the idea – I'd never even be able to get my hands all the way around his neck.

"As you wish, *your Majesty*." With as savage a yank as I could muster while floating weightless in zero-g, I pulled his harness free.

His hand came up to rustle through my hair like I was some kind of kid brother. "It's nice to be treated in the way I've always known I deserved." He was only able to hold a straight face for a heartbeat before dissolving into laughter. "Alright, let's get our ship back and get out of here."

Feeling the dirty deck plates of the Sirius under my feet was almost like old home time. It didn't last long. Every panel and fitting that could be moved had been torn off the walls and thrown wherever it had space to land.

It didn't take a genius to know they were looking for the MCU that I had stashed in my pack. I almost felt the urge to show it to someone, just to see their reaction.

The first stop we made was my quarters. It was on the way to the bridge anyway, and I wanted to see just how bad the damage was.

I was just thankful that I hadn't left anything of value here. The room was even more torn up than the hallway. Not a single possible hiding place had been left unchecked. The place had been good and ransacked, not even my thin mattress had survived.

Crit had remained in the hallway as I checked my room. He raised an eye ridge at me when I stepped back out. I didn't say anything as I shut the door behind me and began walking.

Word of Crit's, ahem, *presence* must have spread quickly. We past a couple of pirates on the way up the central ladder shaft that lead to the bridge. They both scrambled out of our way.

Up to the second floor, I was still climbing when I realized that Crit was no longer behind me.

"What's wrong?" I was whispering now, not wanting to be overheard by the pirates.

He motioned me on to the bridge with one hand. "You keep going. You checked your quarters, I need to see mine." A pained smile crossed his lips. "They were my home for twenty years."

I nodded. "Be careful. Meet me topside when you're done."

I knew there was someone on the bridge long before I got there. The sound of cursing in a half dozen different languages had been echoing down the ladder shaft the entire climb.

There was easily enough room for a half dozen humans on the bridge, but only one was there.

Mike had looked geeky, but this guy was light-years past him. No more than a hundred pounds, the skinny kid who sat in the captain's chair was up to his elbows in wires and diagnostic equipment that put my little black box to shame.

I couldn't even identify half the stuff he was playing with, but it had to be worth more than everything I'd ever owned.

He looked up at me the moment I stepped through the door, nervous grey eyes twitching back to his screen as I came closer.

"You the hired help?" His body looked like it was ready to bolt for the hills at any moment, but his voice was steady.

"Uh, yeah." I sat in Crit's oversized First Officer's chair beside him. "Name's James. You?"

He dismissed me with a roll of his eyes and returned to the wires and displays that were scattered everywhere. "Matt. Now..." He twisted something deep within one of the consoles, "Do your job and hand me the punch down board over there."

For a moment I considered my chances of grabbing the skinny little geek by the scruff of his neck and tossing him off the bridge myself. Nah, that wouldn't go over well. I knew his type; if I tossed him out, no matter how good the reason, he'd scream to high heaven until I let him back in. And there was no *bloody* way I was going to pull out the MCU while he was here.

I played the dutiful little assistant while he plugged away at the systems.

"So, Matt, you been able to do any good yet?"

His lips pursed out like I'd just stuck a lemon in his mouth. "You try bypassing a series nine MCU and tell me how well you do. The things are too old, and too stupid, to trick." He paused for a moment before adding "bastard" under his breath.

"Matt, I heard that."

It almost looked like he would have tried to slug me if his hands had been free. "Oh shut up."

A moment later, much to my surprise, one of the screens beside us lit up.

"Ha ha!" With a spray of tools and parts, Matt was at the controls a second later. His euphoria didn't last long. "Hell, all we got was some of the secondary system." He pressed a finger to the bridge of his nose as he ran a cursor down a list of options. "Port of call logs... backup up air conditioning... water temperature controls... here we go, crew manifest. That might at least be useful."

"Uh, crew manifest?" This could be trouble. "I'm sure that won't have any-"

"I said *shut up*. It might give us a hint where they hid the bloody MCU."

A moment later he had the crew list on screen, I was relieved to see it didn't include my name. I never *technically* worked on the ship, being more of a passenger.

The first name he pulled up was Bulla. It had his basic bio data along with a grainy black and green photo of him.

"Gah, look at that ugly bastard," Matt said, thumbing through the data. "And not even anything we didn't already know. No wonder he never made it to the planet, aliens can captain ships."

Another twitch of a finger and he was on to the next record. It was Crit's.

"Whoa." For the first time since I'd met him, Matt was speechless. "That is one scary looking mother. What is he, a freaking lion?" He scrolled down the page slightly. "Azlin? Never heard of them." He paused for a moment, staring thoughtfully into the middle distance. "I never saw his body. I searched everyone for the MCU before they jettisoned the corpses." He paled slightly for a moment, turning to me. "You don't think he's still alive, do you?"

One can never accuse Crit of having poor timing. No more than five seconds later the azlin stalked through the door, murder on his mind.

"They tore up my room!" He wasn't even trying to keep to the stupid act he'd held in the shuttle. I wouldn't have been surprised if people on the first floor could hear him bellowing.

Grabbing him by the whiskers, I yanked Crit onto the bridge and slapped the big red button to seal the containment door, locking us away from the rest of the ship.

"Would you shut up! You just blew our cover." I was just short of yelling now, myself.

It took me a moment to realize that Matt was still on the bridge with us. There had been plenty of room before when it had just been us two humans, but with Crit jammed in here it was getting crowded.

The geek was frozen stiff, fingers still hovering over his keyboard.

"Momma," was all he was able to squeak out before Crit had his claws around the human's neck, ready to squeeze.

"Put him down, Crit." I just rolled my eyes, too tired now to even work up any annoyance. "You're not going to kill him."

Matt didn't share my confidence, if his expression was anything to go by. He looked about ready to pass out. He'd have fallen flat on the floor if Crit wasn't holding him up by his neck.

"Someone has to pay for going through my stuff."

Okay, I'll admit I laughed at that one.

"Going through your stuff? God, Crit. Is that the best you can do? They shoot at us, maroon us on a near deserted planet, try to kill us, and now want to steal our ship. And you're mad *because they went through your stuff?*"

He at least had the courtesy to look slightly abashed when I said that.

"I don't like people touching my things," he replied. I'm pretty sure that sounded weak even to his own ears.

"Fine, fine. Give brainiac here a whack over the head and stuff him in one of the closets. We've got work to do."

Turning, I pulled the MCU from my backpack and slotted it into its cradle. Matt's eyes almost bugged out when he saw the little box. I'm pretty sure he would have cussed me a blue streak long enough to reach back to the planet if Crit had given him the air.

It took the systems a good thirty seconds to boot up, and Crit used the time to find a new hobby – human origami. I didn't hear any bones crack, but I had the distinct feeling that Matt would be walking funny for the next few days.

I was still sitting in the First Officer's chair as I pulled up the ship status screen. It took me a moment to realize that Crit's shadow was looming over me.

"Get out of my chair, little brother." His voice was smooth, but I didn't like the sound of it. It made me think he was starting to wonder in what ways *I* would fold.

"Aren't you the captain now, Crit? I thought you'd want that seat."

He paused for a moment before shaking his head. "I want my chair back. Move."

I didn't bother to argue. A quick leap over the arm rests and I was at Bulla's oversized workstation. Matt's wires and circuit boards were still splayed about, but I shoved them away with the sweep of an arm.

The screen before me had the general status of the Sirius. The pirates had obviously done some work. Hull integrity was restored, the main drives were up to fifty percent power... and the transit system was still off-line.

Oh bugger.

"Hey, Crit? We've got a problem."

He didn't look up from the controls before him. "You're telling me. I count at least twenty dirty pirates on *my* ship." His voice trailed off in a growl.

Oh yeah, that too.

The MCU had brought the systems back on-line here in the bridge, but it didn't make any obvious difference in the rest of the ship. The other pirates were still dutifully plugging away at their jobs.

A couple more jabs of the panel before me and I had the same screen that Crit was looking at. There were security cameras here and there throughout the ship, and some of them even still worked.

Paging through the security menu, I began looking for anything of use. Huh, 'Lock Bulkheads'. Well, that was a good start.

Even better, there was an 'Emergency Full Lock-down' option. I was starting to like this screen. A quick press of the button and I heard a distinct *ka-chunk* echo through the ship as over two dozen heavy bulkhead doors slammed shut. A moment later the small portable radio that had been dropped in the corner of the bridge squawked to life.

"Somebody get me outta here!"

I let a small smile slip to my face, but Crit was grinning like a fool.

"Now we just need to do away with them." He began scratching at his screen, claws tinkling on the controls, "I just wish I had auto-guns installed..."

"Uh, Crit," I set my hand on his shoulder, he nearly jumped in reaction. "We've got a bigger problem. They never got the transit drive back on-line. We can't get out of here."

In about three seconds his face fell from astonishment, through fear, to flat out rage. "What? I'll kill them! I'll take them apart with my own claws..."

I tightened my grip on his shoulder, "Just chill. We don't need to kill anyone. It won't help us."

He turned to me, voice blunt, "But it'll help me feel better."

I was almost ready to slap him. "Think about it, Crit." I pulled up another screen on my console, "I've got something better than taking the Sirius." The view was from an exterior camera. It had a nice shot of the silver warship that was docked alongside us.

Crit leaned over, his bulk blocking my view as he grabbed the screen, rotating it towards himself. "You've got to be kidding."

I shrugged. "You think we could pull it off?"

He gave me a wry look as he settled back into his seat, fingers stroking his chin. "It would depend on how many are aboard..."

"Couldn't be more than two or three," I replied, "It's the tinniest transit capable ship I've ever seen."

"Are you sure it can even do what people claim?"

"I'd heard rumours about them, and I'd give my left hand to see if they're true."

He gave me an odd look at that expression. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that. But what about the Sirius?"

"Not much, I suppose." I was tapping on the keypad again, trying to locate each and every pirate on board. "She can't really go anywhere, and there's no reason to risk our lives delousing her."

An ugly grin spread across Crit's face. It wasn't human, and it wasn't the normal drop jaw that I associated with him. It was closer to a snarl, his face contorting, fangs glinting in the overhead light.

"How much, would you say, James, does the Sirius weigh?"

"Don't know..." I tapped the screen a few more times. "We're carrying a full load of raw materials like steel and lead. Millions of tonnes at least. Why?"

If anything his smile widened, giving me the distinct feeling that I wanted to be somewhere else. "What would happen if the Sirius made an uncontrolled descent into the atmosphere, impacting the surface?"

His tone was slow and easy, cultured. But the words left me cold inside.

"A crash landing? Uncontrolled? God, Crit, you don't know what you're talking about. Things like that just don't happen. There are too many safeties in place. Planetary fleets, repulses, retros..."

"But what if it did?"

I couldn't even calculate the sheer force a ship with the mass of the Sirius would have impacting a planet's surface...

"No, Crit. Absolutely not."

"I want my revenge, James. For what they did to me... us."

"You're talking about mass murder, Crit. God, there must be over a million people down there. We can't do that."

"They're pirates, James. There not real people, not like us."

"*Real people*, Crit? They were real enough a few hours ago when we were down there with them. And what the hell is your definition of *real*, anyway? Another azlin? Is that it? What would I be, Crit, what would I be if I hadn't become this mythical brother of yours? Would you be willing to murder me too if I were still down there."

His smile faltered for a moment. For just a split second I almost thought I could see the man who I'd tracked across a wasteland with, the man who had saved my life.

"James," He reached for my hand, but I pulled away, "I wouldn't ever do that. You're not like them. You're... better. You're family."

I shrank away, as far from him as I could get in the oversized captain's chair. "So that's it. I'm family, so I'm worth thinking about. A million people down there, and they're all so many mice. You'd kill them all for a crime that they don't even know they committed."

"James, stop speaking like that." His voice had lost its cultured edge, begun falling to a rounded snarl. "They aren't like *us*. We don't owe them anything. We'll make sure they can never harm anyone again. Then we'll go home where you can become a proper part of the family. That's what's right."

"Do what you will, Crit." I was breathing hard now, my hands shaking. "We both know I can't stop you."