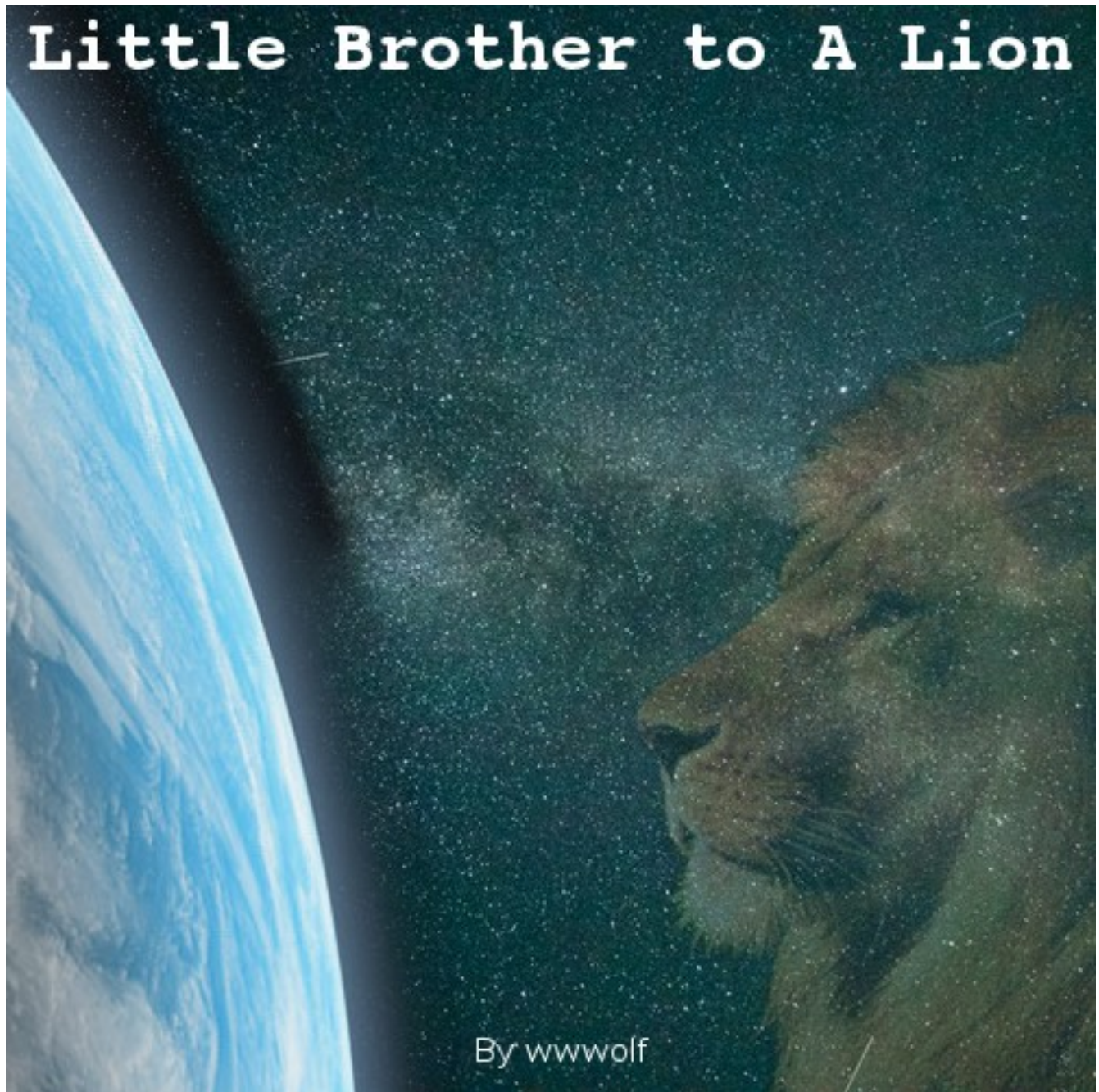




Posted on FurAffinity

February 6, 2013

(Updated February 10, 2013)

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Chapter 11 *Catch A Falling Star*

Why was he like this? We'd won.

Why couldn't James just see we needed to end this? They had tried to kill us. They were pirates, scum. They'd made their choice when they decided to live down there.

We could end this once and for all, wipe the planet clean. We weren't the first to be trapped by these evil creatures, and, unless we killed them all, we wouldn't be the last.

I tried to puzzle my way through the maze of screens and menus before me, but Bulla had always been careful never to teach me how to fly the Sirius. It was only a matter of seconds before I was lost, chasing my own tail.

"Don't press that button, Crit. You'll overheat the reactor and kill us all," James supplied as my claw tip hovered over yet another unknown control.

Pushing the screen aside, I leapt to my feet, body moving faster than my brain as I reached out for the frail little human. In less than a heartbeat I had him dangling from my claws, toes scraping the floor.

"Why are you doing this, James?" I had to fight to keep my words in Standard. "I just want to make the galaxy safer for you. For everyone."

His face was still as stone when he replied. "You want to make things safer, Crit? Go home. A precious few can ever say they've had the blood of a million people on their hands. That's what you want?" I nearly dropped him. "If you do this, you'll likely kill more than any of them ever have. Why should you live after having killed so many? Even if they are pirates, it's blood all the same."

He slipped to the ground as my fingers went slack. My claws left long tears down the front of his shirt. I scraped his flesh just enough to leave shallow cuts that quickly welled over with his alien red blood.

"Fine." I walked to the nearby wall to lean on a unit of displays. I couldn't stand the thought of returning to my chair. "What do we do, James? It's always up to you it seems. What do we do?"

I was still fighting to get my breath back as Crit turned to me. Fire still danced in his eyes, but his fangs were gone.

I guess that meant I'd won.

It took me a long time to answer. In the distance, I could hear our sealed away shipmates clanging on the bulkheads. We'd need to let them out sooner or later.

It wasn't that I *wanted* to leave the pirate threat here, they'd likely killed hundreds, if not thousands. And the fact that they would have taken Crit and I into slavery was not a pleasant thought.

"How about we split the middle, buddy?" I began poking at the controls in front of me. Crit had spent twenty minutes trying to lay in a course for the ship. It took me under two.

I could feel Crit's presence looming behind me, his shadow falling heavily across my screen, but he stayed respectfully back.

"What are you doing, James?"

The grin that came to my face this time was real. I couldn't hold it back. "Pre-programming a flight plan. And landing sequence." He looked at me oddly until I continued, "There's enough fuel to run the main engines at a quarter burn until the Sirius makes orbit around the planet. A nice slow journey like that would take a couple of days. After that, the landing repulsers ramp up to one hundred percent for a nice, slow, gentle touch down. Right in the middle of town." I couldn't hold back a laugh, "This old bird is ten kilometres long, and heavy enough to crush anything she lands on."

Crit's eyes lit up. "It would destroy half the city."

I nodded. "Yep. They'll have more than enough time to evacuate, and then we'll take out their infrastructure."

"But won't they stop it?"

My grin grew wider. "They can't change a locked course without the MCU, and they'd never risk shooting down a ship the size of the Sirius. If they blew the Sirius apart they wouldn't have a single nice, controlled landing, they'd have a million tons of heavy metal hail showering down upon them."

The smile on Crit's face was wide and tight lipped now. "How long will it take?"

One last stab of a button and the board before me turned a solid green. "There's a twenty minute delay before it starts. Access to the bridge will be sealed tight, but all the other bulkheads will open. It'll start broadcasting its flight-plan over every frequency we're capable of."

Crit shook his head slightly. "Do you have to let them go? They were all over my ship."

I just sighed. "And soon your ship is going to be all over their city. And that reminds me." I popped the latch on the cupboard, letting Matt's limp but still breathing body come tumbling out. "Toss him off the bridge, will you? We don't want to be giving him the opportunity to override any of my commands."

Sealing the bridge tight one last time behind us, Crit and I began descending towards the first floor, and the main airlock where the pirate ship, the Ulf, was docked.

"Don't you want to grab anything from your quarters, Crit?" I asked as we passed the jump off to the second floor.

He shook his head, but refused to look down the hallway towards where he'd spent the last twenty years. "There's nothing left, James. And, anyway," He huffed out a heavy breath, "There's nothing worth remembering from that time. Not anymore."

Down on the first floor, we made our way towards the main airlock. Now that I had the same hallway under my feet it felt like it had only been hours since I'd been here in my spacesuit, fresh from the spacewalk when this had all started.

One of the first commands I'd issued when I'd taken control was to seal us off from the pirate ship, but keep all our latches in place. I couldn't tell what they were doing over there, but I wasn't worried about them going anywhere. If they tried to leave the latch head on our docking tube would tear a chunk out of their hull.

All the airlock doors were shut and sealed, but they responded happily to my commands. There wasn't much room in the decompression chamber, but I still shoved Crit into a corner so whoever was on the other side of the door couldn't see him through the small inset window.

I was still wearing the clothing that we'd lifted off one of the unfortunates yesterday. For all intents and purposes I looked just like a somewhat geeky pirate.

Waving my hands and banging my fists, I did my best to raise a clamour, knocking against the exterior door of the Ulf.

I could command all the doors on the Sirius, but I hadn't any control once we started interacting with the other ship.

The ship's hull was a spotless, a shining chrome that looked like solid quicksilver. This was a *nice* ship. It even had an intercom built into the hull.

I could just see the pirate on the other side of the door. He was dressed much the same as me, but his face looked weathered enough for him to have been on shift twenty hours straight,

I couldn't see what he was doing, but a moment later a thin and reedy voice came through the small speaker next to me.

"What's going on over there?"

I rolled my eyes and tried to look exasperated. It wasn't a difficult act.

"Matt tried to hack his way past the MCU again. He must have gotten some interlocks crossed and bloody well near locked down the whole ship. Any cutting tools in your kit over there? We're going to have to carve our way through some bulkheads to get to the folks who got cut off."

A tired smile crept to the man's lips. "God, someone ought to put a collar on that boy. This is the second time." A moment later I heard a hiss as the door before me slowly began to move aside.

The hatch of the other ship shuttered for a moment, my reflection blurring as it moved. A second later it popped out a few centimetres and began recessing to the side. It slid slowly, agonizingly so. It took every one of the few nerves I had left to stand there calmly and wait.

Even then I couldn't keep my eyes from darting to Crit who was now slinking forward, belly to the floor. A moment later he was pressed up against the other ship's hull, next to the door and out of sight of the other human.

"Alrighty, mate. What was it you needed?" The pirate took a step forward, ducking slightly to make it through the hatch.

He didn't even have time to realize his mistake. One moment he was rolling his eyes, a slight grin as he strode calmly towards me, the next he was on the ground. There was a puddle of blood slowly growing from his head, but I didn't have time to worry about it. This was a military ship, and

they more than likely had cameras monitoring everything from the bridge.

"Toss him." I pointed back the way we'd come while I began typing at the closest of the Sirius' terminals.

Crit had already hefted the body by the time he asked, "Why? He's-"

"I don't want to hear it." One last click of a button. "Move!" I began running towards the hatch of the Ulf. Crit was right on my heels, but his tail was still no more than an inch from being caught by the closing doors.

"What did you do, James?" The azlin had his tail cradled in one hand, as though he was afraid I was trying to get rid of it.

"Uncoupling the ships. We can't go anywhere as long as we're still connected." The Ulf's own door snapped shut as I pressed the emergency close button. I hadn't any time to spare, a moment later the Sirius' final clamps came loose and there was vacuum between the ships.

"Duncan, what's going on down there?" The voice came from a speaker next to the control panel. It took me a moment to find the camera – it had been smashed out.

Well, that made short of my irrational hope that there might not be anyone else aboard.

Putting the best panic I could into my voice, "Hello? Hello? Something's wrong, the ships just came apart!"

"Who is this? What's your name?" The voice on the other end had just jumped from curious to suspicious. Drat.

"My name is James. I was aboard the Sirius when things began to go crazy. Duncan was going to come over and help, but something's gone wrong."

"Right..." Somehow, I didn't think I'd convinced him. The closest bulkhead slammed shut, locking us in. "You can stay right where you are until I raise someone over there."

This was not good.

There was no mute button on the control panel, but a quick gesture, and Crit's fist smashing it was almost as good. This ship was strong, military class, but it was still designed with only humans in mind.

The inside of the ship wasn't quite as exciting as its mirror finish. We were in a small room no more than two meters cubed, and it was, unsurprisingly, battleship grey. The only things about were the two airlock doors, the now smashed console, and us.

I smacked my fist against the door as I began pacing. This was hopeless. As a military ship, it was designed to repel armed boarders. There was nothing that me and my tools, nor Crit and his claws, could do to open it.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

I was moving faster now, nearly flying as I paced from wall to wall, around and around Crit who stood serenely in the centre of the room.

"What are you doing, James?" He was moving so fast as to almost be a blur in the dim light. I didn't like this new ship. The air smelt off. Like it had only ever known humans.

"What do you think?" He hardly paused for breath as he began tugging at the twisted metal of the computer that I had smashed in. "We need to get out of here. Now." I cocked my head before he continued. "Once he realizes that he doesn't want us, all he needs to do is open the outside door and we'll be sucked into the vacuum."

Oh. That wasn't good.

He was still tugging ineffectively at the reinforced metal of the computer case. It didn't even bend under his efforts.

Coming up behind, I gently lifted him, my hands under his shoulders, and set him to the side.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Get it off." He gestured at the metal faceplate. "Get it all off. I can't interface with the computer if it has its armour in place."

I shrugged. "Okay."

The sharp edges cut at the pads of my fingers, and James' hyperkinetic pacing didn't help, but I had the small control panel stripped bare in a few moments.

"Good... good." He was pushing me aside almost before I'd got the last of the panels away. His wires and probes were out as he lay on the ground beside it.

"Bugger it all!" His body was halfway within the machinery, but I could still hear his voice. "I can't. I just can't. It's all military grade. There aren't even any diagnostic ports, and all the cables have tamper cancelling sheaths."

I extended a claw, scratching my chin. "Why are you so worried about him opening the outside door, anyway? All ships have overrides to prevent accidents like that."

He pushed out from under the computer, an assortment of wire clippings littering his chest. "Only on commercial ships. This is a military vessel. They're designed to be able to do exactly that."

"Oh." I cocked my head again, "But what if it was a computer failure? Wouldn't they need some way to prevent that?"

A slight smile parted his lips as he disappeared back into the wall. "I'm starting to like the way you think, Crit."

Component by component, the control console came out to lay on the floor between us. It hadn't been ten minutes since we'd been locked in here and James had it looking like a scrapyard.

The only part of the system that was still in place was the speaker. It squawked to life a moment later.

"What the hell are you doing down there? My board's going red."

James pulled his head back out from the wall, his fingers trailing a wire with a microphone attached.

"Hey, man, I ain't doing nothing. I'm just sitting here." He had to snap the input off before he began laughing.

"Now what, James?" It was nice to know that we were no longer in danger of being flash frozen, but we were still trapped.

"Well, that could be a problem..." He looked at me, then back towards the hole in the wall. "You're not supposed to be here."

There was more than a little complaining, and I think I learned a few new azlin curses, but soon enough Crit was stuffed behind the wall along with all the computer equipment, now crunched.

It was all I could do to keep the intercom system working. Everything else had to be sacrificed to make room for Crit's massive form.

Setting the final panel in place, I could hear Crit growling something under his breath that didn't need translation.

"You going to be okay in there, big guy?" I began gently screwing on the panel, loose enough that he could force it off.

His voice was weak, there hardly being even enough room for him to draw a breath. "I'll be *fine*."

I rolled my eyes. "Just don't fall asleep in there and forget about me. I'm going to need you to help me take over this tub."

All I could hear now was a low growl as I twisted the final screw with a thumbnail.

Back up at the console, I had to wait a moment before flicking on the mic. I didn't want our friend to hear the last of Crit's complaints.

"Hey! You going to let me out of here?" There was no response for a moment, I was afraid that I hadn't gotten the system back up and running.

"Fine, fine." The pirate's voice came over the line. There was more static than there should be. "I'm not even sure how to fly this thing. Just stay where you are and don't try anything stupid."

"Yeah, sure." He couldn't see me, but I rolled my eyes. "Like I've got any choice."

The Ulf wasn't a big ship, it only took him a minute to walk here from the bridge.

There was a large window built into the inner air lock door. He stood on the other side, a gun in his hand as he peered through, watching me.

To be honest, I felt a little naked. I'd stashed my backpack behind the wall with Crit, I didn't have anything but the clothes on my back.

Unlike the exterior door that had to worry about armour plating, the interior one was designed for just this purpose, to let the crew inspect incoming passengers before allowing them access.

All I could do was hope he didn't notice all the scuff marks I'd left on the floor and wall.

Reaching out, he flicked a switch on his side of the door, snapping on a speaker, "What the hell is going on over there?"

I just shrugged and did my best to look innocent. "Don't ask me. Matt tried to bring the systems online again, and everything went haywire. Duncan was coming to help us, but he got trapped when the airlocks cycled."

"Can you fly this thing?" He jerked his head to the ship around us.

"I can try."

Reaching forward again, he flicked the seal on the door. A long hiss and it began to open.

He kept his gun trained on me. It was some older model of low wattage laser, safe for use shipboard. Folks don't use kinetic guns on spaceships – too much chance they might puncture the hull. Lasers like his weren't enough to damage machinery, but they could heat up skin and clothing enough to leave a person screaming on the ground.

"Fine." Seeing him up close for the first time, the pirate was older than I expected. He had a retreating hairline of peppered grey and a thick mustache. "Get us hooked back up to the Sirius." He narrowed his eyes slightly, "I don't trust you."

We headed to the bridge. I was relieved to see the inner door of the airlock stay open behind us.

My ears were pressed flat to my skull by the mass of junk that was packed around me. I could barely hear anything from what happened on the other side of the wall, but the hiss of the door was unmistakable.

James had gotten the pirate to let him out. Now *I* just needed to escape.

I had to wait for what seemed like forever. There was no telling how far they were from the airlock, and I couldn't chance the possibility that they might hear me kick the wall out.

That gave me time to think. Far too much. James was human, so was the pirate – that much I could tell from his voice. What would stop him from betraying me? Hadn't he been the one who valued their lives so highly, hadn't he been the one who prevented me from killing them when they so sorely needed it?

I would have shaken my head to clear my thoughts, but there wasn't the room.

We'd come too far together, and he was my brother... but yet. He wasn't. Not truly. I called him brother, and in my world he was, but what of *his* world?

I strained my ears but couldn't make out a single voice, not a solitary footfall.

That was the plan. I had to keep telling myself that. He was with the pirate. That was it. That was all. I would wait until they were occupied and take them unawares.

It was simple. Really, it was. Then why did I feel so frightened, cooped up in here, all alone?

The last two times I'd been alone I'd almost died or worse. First James had saved me from a death at the hands of the reactor, then he'd saved me from myself.

I began to shake, an involuntary shudder running down my body to the tip of my tail. I didn't like that memory.

Alright, enough is enough. I need out of here.

I didn't have enough room to get any leverage. It was all I could do to flex one arm. I pushed. The panel was supposed to pop off. James had only loosely screwed it in place. It was supposed to fall right off when I put pressure on it.

Nothing happened.

Pushing again, I could hear it shift, hear the metal rattle.

Nothing changed, but the close darkness was suddenly cloyingly tight around me.

I sucked in a breath of foul, chemical ridden air. Even that was all but beyond me. Everything was so tightly packed that I could hardly breathe.

I mewed.

The gods help me, I mewed like a two day old kitt.

The last time I'd made a sound like that was when my father had come to tell me that I'd been traded for the family's debt.

No. No, I wasn't going to think about that now. Not ever.

I couldn't keep the images from my mind as I began to shudder, trying to pull into a ball. But I couldn't even do that.

It had been a dark night, even the moon had been in hiding. We'd all known what had been coming, but no one knew who the sacrifice would be.

I'd told James the truth when I'd recited the tale, but there was more. I hadn't been chosen because Father wanted me to go out, to learn. He'd chosen me because I was first born, and he'd favoured my brother.

He'd sent me out because he didn't expect I'd ever return.

Those hadn't been his words. No, Father was never so undiplomatic. He had explained it to me exactly the way I had to James. But he was my father. I knew. Everyone knew.

No one had laughed or jeered when I'd stepped on the ship with Bulla. They all simply stood there in silence. I was the first azlin to ever truly leave home.

It was an honour, to be sure, but I hadn't wanted to go.

I wanted to be home *right now*.

I could feel tears running down my face.

There was only one person I could seek out who would suffer my company, and he was the one who had locked me in here.

James' backpack was still clutched in my hand, the one closest to the wall panel. That simple sack had served him many a time – could it not do the same for me?

Twisting and straining, there was hardly even enough space for me to worm my fingers into the fabric that lay right next to them. I was fortunate, I suppose, that there was so little space in here. It meant the pack was pressed tightly up against me, putting more of its contents within reach.

I couldn't look down at the pack, and it was dark as sin in here anyway, so there was no way I could tell what I now held.

Rubbing my hand up and down the small, flat shaft, I heard a click. My hand spasmed in pain. I almost dropped it.

My fingers were slick with blood now, its scent filling the tight space, but I knew what I held. A small pen knife.

Its blade was short, no more than a few inches, but it was sharp – as my split fingers could attest.

Worming my hand again, I pushed it slowly through the junk that had been piled around me.

Much of it was sharp, it left long gashes in my flesh where it cut into me.

I was there. I could feel the cool metal of the wall panel against the back of my hand. It moved slightly when I pressed on it.

Where was Crit?

The pirate, I still didn't know his name, had marched me at gunpoint to the bridge.

Okay, I'd be in techno-heaven if I wasn't so scared out of my gourd.

The bridge was as fancy and spotless as the outside hull had been. Everything here was hyper-modern. It even had that 'new ship' smell.

Not that it helped me much once I was sat down in the pilot chair with a gun to my head.

"Get moving. I want to be docked with the other ship again," the pirate said.

"Okay, okay, dude. Just give me a minute." I wasn't kidding, I didn't know *any* of these controls. Everything around me was circular, even the displays. They were all lit in shades of sea-green and pulsed light and dark like an ocean tide.

"You said you knew how to fly this thing!" A note of panic was slipping into the man's voice. James' first rule of conversation: never piss off a guy holding a gun to your face.

"I know how to *fly*. I never said I knew how to fly *this*. Just give me a moment." I tentatively reached out to tap a button marked 'pre-flight'.

As soon as I touched the display the button went from a cool green to a bright orange. I felt a slight shudder run through the ship.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the other man clutch the back of my seat, his knuckles white.

"What's wrong?" I asked, trying to stall for time as I rooted through the control menus, looking like I was doing something. "The whole problem is just another system glitch on the Sirius."

His voice was tight as he spoke, "I don't like being out here alone."

I shuddered slightly as he said that. I could understand the feeling. Where the hell was Crit?

Pressing James' pocket blade up against the panel, I could only just hold it in my claws without it slipping from my grasp. The breath nearly froze in my lungs every time my grip shifted. I could just be trapped in here forever if I lost that little tool.

Or until James came to rescue me. If he ever did.

The ship shuddered. The junk around me shifted, giving me just that much extra space.

Pressing and prying, I worked one of the loose screws that held the wall in place. There were four anchor points, but only one I could reach. Fidgeting and worrying, I slowly pressed the blade back and forth in the thread. My grip was hopeless and my leverage nil, but slowly, ever so slowly, I *thought* I felt the screw slip.

There was no real way to know. I couldn't see it, and one part of the screw felt the same as any other as my little blade fought for bite.

Seemingly without warning the screw popped loose, one corner of the wall panel bursting forth. The other corners still held, but the weight of all the junk that pressed close around me shifted at even the slightest extra space, some of it spilling out to scatter across the floor with a crash and boom.

"What was that?"

I nearly leapt from my seat as the pirate pressed the barrel of his gun to the back of my neck. I'd heard it too. The pirate had left the intercom channel open to the airlock.

"Who knows?" I tried to sound calm and relaxed. Or at least as calm as anyone can sound with a gun trained on them. "This is your ship, not mine. Something probably shifted and fell over when I brought the engines online."

Dodging back and forth through the screens before me, I opened and closed windows as fast as I could while I searched for the toggle to disengage the intercom. None of the displays were right.

"What are you doing? That doesn't look like the engineering system." The pirate was hunched over the back of my chair now, trying to focus on the screens as I whizzed them by.

"Of course it's not." I gritted my teeth and clicked faster. "It's security. I'm finding out what fell over."

"Oh." He paused for a moment, "I don't care. Just get us re-docked."

"Sure, sure." Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had a screen with half a dozen toggles before me now. One shut off the monitoring in the airlock. A second turned on the ship wide intercom, broadcasting our voices to anyone who could hear. I hit them both.

Even the slight space created by the debris shifting around me was enough to work some leverage. No longer in the dark, there was a band of light where the wall panel had bent. I pressed towards that small sliver of artificial light. It was too white, too cold, but I pressed towards it anyway, my arms aching as the metal groaned and bent under my weight.

With a sudden pop, another screw slipped loose. Then another. The panel fell to the metal floor with a clang as I and my surroundings spilt out.

It was all I could do to breathe for a moment, to blissfully take in a full breath and expand my lungs after having been confined in that tight space.

I could have laid there for hours, days, but this was not the time.

Pushing to my feet, I raised my head, almost fearing to look at the airlock door.

It was open. The previously impenetrable glass had slid aside to welcome me. I did not waste the invitation.

James' pack across my back, a strange weight even after all this time. I stepped through into the ship proper.

Voices echoed around me, enough to make me jump until I realized they were too metallic, too artificial to be real.

"I said to dock us!" The same voice as the pirate I'd heard earlier.

"I'm trying, I'm trying. I've never flown this class of ship before!" James' answered back. He was scared. There was an edge to his voice that lifted my lips.

"Try faster." The man's gun jabbed into the back of my neck again.

I was running out of ways to 'miss' the docking tube. My twenty minute timer on the Sirius must be up. Someone over there was manning the thing and trying to make the link-up.

I had to keep goosing the throttle and pulling us off course to keep that thing's magnetic clamps from gripping to us like some sort of oversized metal lamprey.

Running my hand across the control panel, I sent us spinning off into the void once again.

"You bastard!" The pirate was not happy.

Oops. I guess he saw me that time. I could just hear a growl echoing down the hallway before I felt a stab of nerve searing heat between my shoulders.

The bridge doors were only a few steps away. I could hear their voices now, and not simply the echoed ghosts of them over the intercom.

"You bastard!"

I sprinted forward when I heard the yell, a growl clawing at my throat.

A human stood over the pilot's seat. I couldn't see James.

The stench of charred flesh was heavy in the air.

Two strides brought me onto the bridge, the pirate turned, raising his eyes to me. And raising, and raising. It was obvious that he'd been expecting another human. Not me.

The bridge wasn't large, but there was too much equipment for me to sprint, and too little space to leap.

I only saw the briefest glint of metal in the man's hand before he brought the weapon to bear. Pulling my legs up, I fell behind some boxy computer station. Everything here was too small, I had to lay with my chest to the ground to even hope to keep from sight.

I'd no sooner kissed the floorboards than I felt a needle thin wave of heat wash over my back. It missed, but was still enough to singe my fur and send my nose twitching at the reek of burnt hair.

The pirate was screaming now, but it sounded like little more than random syllables, straight gibberish.

Popping my head over the counter that shielded me, I could see him again. He hadn't sought cover, but rather simply stood where I'd found him, next to the pilot's seat. My new position let me see the form that was slumped forward in that chair.

James lay motionless, a white and blistered burn to the back of his neck.

It took every fibre of restraint I had not to claw my way over the console before me and charge the murderer.

Oh gods, James...

My breath was panting in my ears, tinges of red edging my vision.

Another needle of cauterizing heat brushed my shoulder. That ended any thoughts I might have of playing the vengeful brother.

Sucking in a breath, I ducked back into safety. I needed to think.

James' pack was still slung over me. I pulled it down, clutching it to the ground and tearing it open with my claws. The meagre contents fell to the floor around me. Including the knife.

I clutched it in one hand, so tight my knuckles popped.

Rising over the counter before me again, I threw it at the pirate. I had little experience in this form of combat, and less with knives. He was scant feet away and I managed to strike him, though only with the blunt handle of the blade.

The force I'd thrown it with was enough to knock him off balance, sending him spinning to clutch at the nearby equipment.

That was enough. By the time he next looked up, I was there. Claws engulfing his face, my other hand ripping the gun from his grasp, almost taking his fingers along with it.

I held him for a moment as he squirmed in my hands, utterly powerless against me. My grip tightened, I could feel his skull beginning to bend as I began to crush it between my fingers. He was screaming incoherently. And his voice was like that of James.

It wasn't that he sounded like him... not really. But they were both human. I could see as much of my little brother in him as I could in any man.

James had fought with me to save the lives of the other pirates, the same ones who had tried to murder us before. And now I was about to kill this one, no more than inches from his body.

The growl that had been building in me was loosed full force now.

Releasing my grip from the pirate's head, I wrapped my hands around his body, dragging him off.

There were, thankfully, two air locks on this ship, port and starboard. I threw the pirate into the undamaged one.

Shoving the man into the lock, I tossed a spacesuit that I'd grabbed from a nearby locker in with him.

"Be thankful you killed a compassionate man." I slammed the door shut with as much force as I wanted to use to snap the bastard's neck. It did little good. The door still clicked perfectly into place.

There was a simple dial on the side of the airlock door. I set it to slow cycle and walked away. I never even bothered to check if I'd tossed in a suit with a propellant pack that would allow him to make the journey to the Sirius.

Oh dear gods, James was dead. What was I to do now?

My feet took me unerringly back to the bridge where James was still slumped in the pilot's seat.

Wait. He was gone.

My hair stood on end. He had to be dead, I swear. I'd seen the wound to the back of his neck. He had to be dead.

Sprinting out of the bridge again, I only made it steps before I heard a rustling from a nearby supply cupboard.

Throwing the door aside, I nearly fell on my own tail as I saw James rooting through a box of gauze and compact presses.

I think someone had just hit me with a freaking star yacht.

The last thing I remember... well, there wasn't a lot of 'last thing'. I'd been on the bridge, and the pirate had been shoving his laser in the back of my head.

Now I was alone. I'd woken up with a mother maggy of a head ache, and a class fifty-something sunburn on the back of my neck.

God. I guess I should count myself lucky that most shipboard weapons aren't designed to kill. I was going to have one heck of a good scar back there, but I was more or less still alive.

I couldn't really remember staggering out of the bridge, but I was in a closet now. Good thing, there were medical supplies in here.

I'd only just gotten a box of something or rather broken into when the door behind me was slammed open with a boom that nearly sent me jumping off my feet.

About half a heartbeat later a pair of tawny arms were wrapped about me so tight I could barely breathe.

"Hey, Crit. Uh, miss me?"

He didn't say anything as he carried me onto the bridge, setting me back down on the pilot's chair. Looking me up and down, he finally smiled.

"Die on me again, little brother, and I'll send you to the underworld myself."

"Right, right." I still had the box of compresses in my hand. I let out a sigh as I pressed one of them to the back of my neck.

Taking a seat beside me, he looked down upon my smaller form. "So, James, where do we go now?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Home, I guess. Wherever *that* is."

Author's Note:

And there you have it, folks. *Little Brother to a Lion* in all of its glory, for better or worse.

This was, in fact, the forth full length story I ever wrote. Coming fast on the heels of *Police Dog*, LBtaL was intended to be a somewhat lighter and quicker story than what I'm accustomed to writing. It was inspired by the serials of yore, along with the pulp science fiction of the fifties.

For those of you who read my previously posted story *The Hunters*, you've more than likely noticed some resemblance between Crit the alien Azlin and English the Lion. This was... not unintentional. I'll fully admit that *The Hunters* had a fair impact on my life, and many of the secondary characters from that story went on to – in spirit at least – star in stories of their own. Crit may have no direct relation to English, but you could say they were cut from the same cloth.

The fast paced nature of *Little Brother to a Lion* was a purposeful change from the slower, more sedate opening of *The Hunters*. While I enjoyed the world-building of the earlier story, I always felt it may have started too slow, causing some readers to wander off. To try and pick up the pace I made sure every chapter of this story had at least one major action scene.

I mentioned above that LBtaL was inspired by the pulp sci-fi of the fifties. This, in broad strokes, is true, but there was one particular source that got the story off the ground. Those of you who lived through the nineties will likely remember Star Trek The Next Generation. I wasn't a huge fan of the show, but I did watch it on occasion. The episode [Allegiance](#) was what tickled at the back of my mind that day. While not a particularly memorable episode, it did have a sequence where Capitan Picard is trapped in a room with a starving alien. I think you all know what *that* inspired.

Overall, I'm relatively happy with LBtaL. The extremely limited cast let me play and experiment with the two main characters a lot more, diving into their very different backgrounds. This was also the first book I switched back and forth between two points of view.

However... I never did feel satisfied with the ending. It's *okay*, I guess, but sealing Crit behind a wall just wasn't what I had in mind. Then again, I never could figure out what I had in mind for him.

So, there you have it. It doesn't have the personal impact of *The Hunters*, nor the social commentary of *Police Dog* (next up), but I don't mind the story one bit.

Here's hoping you enjoyed it and, as always, I'm more than open to comments and critique.

Roar.

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