

LAZY DOG OUT

Suzanne Palmer

Suzanne Palmer is a writer, artist, and professional computer geek who lives and works in western Massachusetts. Her June 2014 story for *Asimov's*, "Shatterdown," placed second for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Suzanne tells us she took a break from the highly dubious pursuit of writing a novel to pen this riveting tale about trust, teamwork, and deep space tugboats.

Khifi traded the warm embrace of her wife's arms for the pricking of cold air on her bare skin and a regret she knew she would not dispel until she was back here again on the far side of a ten-hour shift. She danced on her toes across the metal floor and out of their small sleeping alcove, sliding the screen doors closed behind her. Lema had more than once suggested she keep her boots at the bedside so she could slip straight into them, but if she did she couldn't sneak out without waking her.

She checked the apartment monitors to make sure oxygen was optimum, all systems running green. Not that they ever weren't, but she required that brief reassurance. Pulling clothes out of the post-wash basket, she shrugged into a sports bra, bright red tank top, and black pants before wrapping her vambrace over her left forearm. Her boots were by the door, and she stepped into their fuzzy warmth with a sigh of relief as they adjusted around her feet. As the kitchenapp kicked on to start the coffee, she skimmed the news, disinterested. There were no big Tanduoou stories, and anything else local worth knowing—and that she didn't already know—wouldn't be on the feeds anyway.

Rummaging through the foodkeeper, she pulled out an oblong shape and tucked it carefully in her backpack that hung near the door. "Khif?" Lema called from the other room. She sounded like she wasn't sure if she was awake or asleep. "Are you stealing the whole loaf of protein bread again?"

"Only half of one, Lem," she said, "and it's the stale one from two days ago."

"It's only stale because you don't eat enough."

"It's only half a loaf because I ate plenty," she said. "Go back to sleep."

There was a long silence, and Khifi had just concluded that Lema had done exactly that when she heard, sleepily, "I love you."

"I love you too," she said. "Gotta go."

She slipped on her jacket and backpack, took her coffee out of the maker, and left the apartment feeling warm enough after all.

* * *

At the fastlane station, she slid her license through the reader and waited the four point three seconds for it to verify that she was rated for the lane and deposit an empty sled in the tube. Climbing in, she made sure the lid on her coffee was fully sealed before she put the thermal mug in her backpack, tied the pack down at the base of the sled, and strapped herself in. She put her hands on the dual joystick controls on either side and ran through a mental self-check to make sure she was awake and alert enough. Once she was sure she was good, she launched herself up into the tube at top acceleration.

Navigating the branching maze of the Tanduou tube system was almost an art. More than one overtired, over-intoxicated, or over-selfestimated tube-noob had turned themselves into a pulpy obstruction in the system before skill-ranked licensing was implemented. It had reduced, if not eliminated, fatality-related delays.

Eight turns, the surface rotary loop, and two timed junctions later, she kicked her sled out the exit for the Paxillo Docks. As she braked the last quarter kilometer into the transit station she could see the city-lit underbellies of ships shifting overhead like a perpetual storm cloud of rusty junk. The bright yellow-brown disk of the near-by planet lurked behind them, a faded sun never quite able to break through.

Her eyes looked for trouble, found none.

Shouldering her pack, she left the transit station and merged into the cramped hallways of the underbelly of the Docks. As she turned a corner toward the central hub, faint footsteps fell in behind her, distinct from the usual heavy-booted crowd. For a half-second she thought about the three knives she had within easy reach, then instead abruptly stopped walking mid-stride. Her follower slammed right into her. She spun around in time to catch the chagrin on his face. He was eight or nine standard years old, although he was small enough to be younger and had the eyes of someone older. "Morning, Mole," she said. "Where's your partner in crime today?"

He shrugged. Traffic in the hallway moved seamlessly around them, uncaring. "Birdie had business."

"You were looking for me?"

"Figured I might run into you," he said, and almost smiled.

She glanced around to make sure there was no one in the halls who could make trouble, then slid her pack off and set it on the floor. She took out the half-loaf and handed it to him. "You okay?" she asked. "No one hassling you?"

"No one new," he answered. When she waited, he added, "I'm okay."

"Everyone else?"

He looked down toward his threadbare shoes, held together with cargo sealant and grime. "Peezy and Gums went off to Notomyo Dock. Gums come back in bad shape, pissing blood, not talking. We not found Peezy yet. Thinking she dead or grabbed."

Well, shit, she thought. "Why'd they go there?"

"Heard about easy stuff to get."

"What're the rules, Mole?"

"No stealing except direct to survive, no stealing more than you need, no stealing from anyone who can't afford to lose it," he said. "Assume everything's a trap."

"And?"

"And don't get caught."

"How do you know this isn't a trap?" she asked.

"*Know* it is. Food's the bait, and the trap is you make me learn reading and numbers and stuff." He broke the loaf carefully into three roughly equal pieces. Putting two deep down in the pocket of his ragged coat, he began chewing on the last. She knew he'd save one piece for Birdie and wondered who the other was for.

"If you learn to run manifests and do other textwork, you could get a job and get

out of the crawl. You've only got a few more years before you're too old to stay down there," she said. "You do that lesson I gave you?"

"Yeah. Tuck's taking a turn now," he said. "Tuck's new. Little. Not a runaway, a drop. Cries all the time. Birdie says we looking after him now."

Khifi watched as he licked a fingertip and meticulously picked up and ate the crumbs he'd dropped on the front of his coat. She remembered being that hungry, once. "Bugs came in last shift," he said, eventually. Bugs were crawler slang for aliens.

"Yeah? Which kind?"

"Hain't seen, don't know. Down in Velatos."

Velatos, she thought. *Shit, I forgot.*

Mole stiffened at her suddenly tense body language. "It's okay, Mole," she said, "I promised Lema I'd run an errand for her in Velatos and now it's too late. Going to have to go after my shift."

"If you do, let me know about the bugs," Mole said. He patted his pocket to make sure he still had the food secured there, then peered through the crowds back down the hall. By the time she'd got her pack back on, there was no sign of him in the swirling tide of merchants and haulers, scavengers and lost.

She headed toward the central hub into the heart of Paxillo.

Tanduou's Docks had spread out over the surface of the tide-locked moon, thickening and growing together until they were one interconnected network of docks and storage facilities, black markets and slums, arms reaching out from individual locii to embrace and entangle each other. The hubs remained distinct, massive metal and stone towers rising toward the constant swarm of ships above, while here and there, at the outskirts borders between them, small patches of the native rocky surface could still be seen, littered with twisted scrap and, sometimes, the remains of the unlucky or unwise on eternal, cautionary display.

The lowest level of Paxillo's hub was a wide concourse, full of shops selling uncertain foods and goods banned on dozens of worlds. Lines of people queued to enter, queued to leave. Always among them were the crawlers looking for dropped food or unattended luggage, a bold few looking to liberate things more actively. Hunting on the floor was desperation or reckless overconfidence; even the best of the best would, eventually, get caught. She knew that all too personally.

An assault of activity, noise, and smells hit her face-on as she merged into the concourse. Normally she found the chaos a comforting unpleasantness. This time, though, one particular smell had infiltrated, tainting the usual, complex mix. That specific cheap Titan cologne had only one devotee she knew of, at least at the level of fanatical self-slathering needed to stand out in this space.

"Fox," Sniv said, using her pilot name as he appeared out of the crowd and fell in beside her, enveloping her in his toxic miasma. "Another long shift? You must be very tired."

"I sleep well," she said, and kept walking.

"I trust you are sufficiently compensated—"

"I am, Sniv, and it's none of your business."

"Ah, but I am a man of all businesses!" he declared. "I know about your past, and I have an offer for you. A simple guide job, well-paying—"

"If it's a legit job, bring it to Quizzie, the Dock manager. If not, I'm certain I am not interested," Khifi said.

"If you reconsider, perhaps we can meet and break bread over it," he said. "I hear you like to share your food with Tanduou's unfortunates, and surely I am begging for your time. Think about it."

Before she could form an answer, he swept back into the crowd, leaving her choking down a blistering reply.

It was neither common knowledge nor a secret that Khifi was once a crawler herself. It was just dumb luck that she was caught by a pilot rather than security, and that he'd had a need to save the world one lost piece at a time. She would spend her lifetime trying to pay that good fortune back. Whatever Sniv wanted of her, it could only be a step backward.

Sniv had left her just a few steps away from the uniformed Dock Security officer half-asleep at his post. She passed through the gate to the private elevators, put her hand on the palm scanner, then stepped into the lift when it opened. The car smoothly rose up the tower to Paxillo Dock Control.

Control was a circular room with a view of the entirety of Paxillo Dock. In the dim light, console displays bathed everyone and everything in a reddish glow. In the center was an elevated platform where the ending shift's Ops manager, Goffs, was slouched in his chair with a deep frown on his face. Inchbug, on air comms, gave Khifi a half-wave as she entered. Khifi smiled and waved back before looking around for her own team.

Sparkle was sprawled in a chair at the end of the room, arms crossed over her chest and feet up on an idle console, eyes closed. Jonjon was at the break station trying to coax the coffee dispenser to break whatever law of physics limited the speed at which even spacer fakebrew could be squirted out first thing in the morning. Redrum sat in a chair, his bony hands already wrapped around a mug, a small smile playing on his face as he listened to Jonjon's low, ritual wheedling.

Khifi walked over to stand beside the machine. "Let me," she said after a few moments and thumped the side of the machine with her fist. Immediately it began to chug out its small measure of low-rent heaven.

"I don't know how the fuck you always do that, Fox," Jonjon said.

"Magic," she answered. *And timing*, she didn't add; the machine had a small but distinct hiccup in its internal rumblings just prior to dispensing. "Just remember to save me some. Quizzie's not here?" Quizzie was their shift's Ops manager, but her larger duties as dock manager sometimes took her elsewhere.

"Dockmaster caught a ride with her down to the Gee. Another trade meet, arguing about the gravity bill," Redrum said. "Stickles is the man in the chair today. He's on his way."

Jonjon relinquished his position in front of the coffee dispenser to her. She took her mug off the shelf above it and poured herself a full cup. Despite Tanduou being independent, the central government of Guratahan Sfazil believed that, simply because they provided a planet for Tanduou to orbit around, they deserved a cut from the dock trade profit. It was a never-ending argument. Khifi's impression was that the Gee's strategy was to wear them down through constant, petty annoyance.

Speaking of annoyances. She drained her coffee with barely a grimace, stuck the mug back in the sani-rack, and went to Inchbug's station to look out the window. "The Rimbolan freighter is still out there?" she exclaimed. "Is this four days now?"

"Yeah," Inchbug said. "Waiting on parts, they say. Damned heap of junk is taking up three dock slots. We've swamped Velatos with our extra traffic, and we've even had to push ships as far off as Oreasta and Luida docks."

"Surprised Goffs hasn't called in a salvage team."

"Yeah, well. I think the only reason he hasn't is that Mr. Balcko is so spun up about it he's shitting rocks, and Goffs is enjoying that."

"Mr. Balcko? Why does he care? If the traffic isn't going outside our cluster—"

Inchbug shrugged. "No idea. Goffs suddenly seems to be all about getting in Balcko's face, and with the Dockmaster off-moon . . . Well. If I were you I'd let it be Stickles's problem and stay out of it. And I'm going to hope your lot or the next has this all settled before my shift comes round again."

Balcko was the manager of the seven docks, including Paxillo, that made up Velatos cluster. That put him high enough up the Tanduou food chain to make life difficult for anyone down at their level, answering only to the Dockmaster himself. “Thanks for the warning,” she said. “You out?”

“Soon as Tumbler and Beanmaker get their feet down,” Inchbug said. “Yebbles is in, and Ryeneck’s waiting on Pits in cargo to give the clear.”

Khifi glanced across the room. Ryeneck was cleaning gunk out from under his nails with the end of a handpad stylus as he talked, mouth moving nonstop, the murmur low enough from here to sound like a cargo-drone losing its engine at altitude.

“There a problem?” Khifi asked.

“No, Pits isn’t even on the line yet. Rye’s lost his head for a controller over in the Odinella cluster, and he’s a-wooning.”

“Over the official lines?!”

“Naw. He hacked into an illegal relay down in the markets and used it to patch an encrypted channel through the public comm system. Can pretty much talk the ear off anyone and everyone on Tanduou all day, so long as no one too high up notices. We’ve got cred riding on how many shifts it takes him to crash and burn.”

“Based on that pilot in Acontias cluster he was in love with last week? My guess is not long.”

Inchbug snorted. “Too right. Hey, speaking of gossip, I hear you and Lem are implanting?”

Khifi sighed. “Fourth try,” she said.

Inchbug shook her head. “I can’t imagine bringing a kid into this world,” she said. “I—”

Stickles walked in, interrupting whatever Inch had been about to say. He looked as disheveled as always, like someone had just dumped him out of a sack on their doorstep. “Almost shift time, gang,” he said. “Give me five minutes to check in with Goffs. Fox, you’re air captain, do what you do best.”

Khifi looked around. She was still missing two of her pilots. Kaiju was always last second, but Knits . . .

“Tumbler is in, Beanmaker docking in five,” Inch announced, just as Kaiju, on cue, ran out of the half-open elevator and pitched himself into the chair beside Redrum, trying to catch his breath.

“Shift change,” Goffs announced.

“Ops commander, checking in,” Stickles announced.

“Ops commander, transferring command and checking out,” Goffs said. He pulled his ID card from the console, stood up, and said one last thing to Stickles before climbing down the ladder onto the floor.

Sparkle cracked an eye open, unfolded herself from her chair, and loomed over Ryeneck until he disconnected his line, threw down his headset, and yielded his chair. He kicked the post as she sat down, and she swiveled around and smirked at him until he left.

“Jonjon, you may relieve Inchbug,” Stickles said.

Jonjon brought his mug over as Inchbug slid off her headpiece and rubbed wearily at her eyes. “All yours,” she said, and let him take her seat.

“I’m still down a pilot,” Khifi said. “I don’t know where Knits is.”

“She called in sick,” Goffs said, as he climbed down from the ops platform. “Stickles was bringing a replacement.”

“Candles is on his way up by tube right now.”

Khifi thought she knew all the pilots in the cluster and most beyond, but the name was unfamiliar. “Candles?”

“New,” Stickles said. “Working out of Novodinia with me.”

"How new?" She narrowed her eyes.

"So shiny and new the wrapper hasn't sloughed off yet," Stickles said, "but only to Tanduou; kid's got time under his belt driving cargo skips out around the Bounds dodging pirates. You won't hate him, and it mostly won't even feel like babysitting. Give him a chance. Please?"

Please? That was unusual. "What aren't you telling me?" she asked.

"He's just not a local, okay?" Stickles said. "Burnout's been giving him a hard time."

"Burnout's an assvalve. Whose tug is he taking?"

"The cluster spare. Beanmaker is hauling it over now, that's why he's running late. Once Candles makes it past review, we'll assign him a permanent tug and home dock. Think about that as you work with him; if there's a happier fit here in Paxillo it'd save everyone some grief."

The lift doors opened and someone very, very tall stepped out onto the floor. The newcomer was well over two meters in height, attenuated and gangly looking. He was also shirtless and hairless. What really stood out, though, were the thick swirls and whorls of silvery-gray that climbed up his torso, along his neck and bare scalp. Contrasted against the spacer-brown of his skin, the effect was startling. As he stepped forward, the patterns shimmered in the changing light.

Not local, indeed, Khifi thought.

Stickles looked up from his seat at the command console. "Candles, just in time."

Candles raised one long, skinny arm, and gave an uncertain wave. "Uh, hi," he said. It was so much the gesture of any awkward teenager anywhere that Khifi laughed. His eyes went straight to her, his face a mask of both defiance and anxiety. Yeah, she could imagine Burnout being rough on this kid.

Khifi thumped Jonjon on the shoulder so that he turned around in the chair. "Hi, Candles. I'm Fox," she said. She pointed to the rest of her team. "This is Jonjon on Comms for the air," she said, "and over there is Sparkle on ground. By the coffee machine is Redrum and Kaiju, pilots."

"You air captain?" Candles asked.

"I am today," she said.

"She is every day," Jonjon said. "Best pilot in the cluster, but don't tell her I said that."

"Best, huh?" Candles asked. That spark of challenge brightened.

She shrugged. "Everyone does their best as a team, or no one does," she said. "Stickles, you got work for us?"

"Soon as you slackers finish up your coffee social and get out there, yeah," he said.

"Okay," Khifi said. "Move, everyone. Candles, I'm going to come watch you go through your preflight checks."

He made a face. *Damn, he's young,* she thought. "Done a hundred checks afore," he said, his Bounds accent thick. "Not needing your eyes on me."

"Yeah, well, you get them anyway," she said, pointing toward the tower lift emphatically. "No one goes out on my watch that I don't know first-hand can handle themselves."

"Trust her, kid," Stickles called down from the command platform.

The lift arrived and Candles followed her reluctantly in. As the doors closed, she turned to him. "You have a suit, right?" she asked.

"Do," he said. "Just the Colony not like it, being closed."

"The Colony?"

He waved one hand loosely up and down his torso. Closer up she could see the silver markings were more of a dense fuzz, and that it rippled gently despite the lack of moving air in the car.

"It's alive?" she asked.

"Yeh. Does it give you fear?"

“Not really, no,” she said, and wasn’t sure if he looked more relieved or disappointed. “You want to talk about it?”

“Gen-mod symbiote,” he said. “Converts rads to vitals.”

Vitamins, she interpreted. “You’re from deep out.”

“Yeh. Suvastia. Jobworld. Family contract got redunded and we was let go,” he said. “Sibs got refuge on Beenjai, I came here with eyes on better work.”

“Well, if you can fly, you should do fine,” she said. “It’s staying out of trouble that’s the real challenge. Stickle is a good lead; his advice is worthwhile.”

“Said same of you.”

Khifi laughed. “Okay, so *most* of his advice is worthwhile. How’d you end up as Candles?” Nicknames were a point of both pride and deep superstition in the Docks; few people went by anything else, especially pilots.

“Burnout wanted to nick me Vacuumfodder. I said I specked he’d find the final cold sooner, and he said, quoting, ‘Boo hoo, I’ll light you some candles.’ So Candles.”

“There are definitely worse nicks. There’s a cargo hauler on one of the skip runs who goes by Assface.”

He laughed. “Don’t mind Candles. Light in the darkness, know so? Growing on me. How come Fox?”

“The pilot I apprenticed with was obsessed with languages. Made sure it was my hobby too. The Earth dialect a lot of our language grew up from had only twenty-six letters in it, and there was a sentence that used all of them, which was, in translation: ‘The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.’ You’ll have to trust me it’s got all the letters in there. Anyhow, my trainer figured I was quick enough to get out of the way of almost any trouble, so Fox it was.”

The lift stopped and opened out onto the tug bay. Her own ship—ugly as shit, powerful enough to push the biggest freighter and most warships off their own paths—sat in its cradle, feedlines connected from ceiling and floor charging its systems. “And that,” she said, waving at it with no small pride, “is my *Lazy Dog*.”

Parked beside it was the smaller loaner tug Beanmaker had brought in. “There’s yours,” she said. “Walk through your checks like I’m not even here.”

“If you be not here, I be doing my checks naked,” Candles said.

Khifi stopped in her tracks. “You’re joking.”

He met her eyes, his somber face incrementally shifting into a grin.

She closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose, trying not to laugh and failing. “Okay, you got me,” she said.

Candles walked over to his ship and she followed. He ignored her, moving over and around his ship with efficiency and thoroughness before he disconnected the spare’s feeder hoses and let them retract. Disappearing inside, he powered it up, then reemerged to walk around the ship’s perimeter, checking the exterior lights. It was only as he stood by one of the two engine pods that he turned to her. “Pitch be low,” he said.

He knows what his engines are supposed to sound like, she thought, approving. And he was right: the pitch was low. Candles stared at his ship for a long minute before he took two steps to his left, listened again, and then began unscrewing the safety grill over one of the half-dozen air intakes for his port engine. “Where I about finding tools?” he asked.

“What do you need?”

“A light, and someit long and skinny.”

“You got it,” Khifi said. She went to the back of the bay, swiped her ID, and pulled open drawers until she’d found a handlight and a long-handled hex driver. She brought them back over to Candles. “These do?”

“Perf, thanks,” he said. He took the handlight, slipped it over his palm, and shone it down into the intake. Nodding his head, he took the hex driver and with his other

hand poked around inside the air intake until he managed to pull out a long, blackish gray lump.

"Sock?" Khifi asked.

"Sock," he confirmed. He shone the light in again, then turned it off and stood with his eyes closed, listening. "Sounds right, now."

"You want me to have a word with Stickles?"

"No," he said, stuffing the sock into a pants pocket. "Best deal back myself."

"All yours then," she said. "Nothing dangerous, understood?"

"Stood. But shit-yourself scary is in play, right?"

Khifi chuckled. "As I said, as long as it's not dangerous. Just make sure it's something you can both walk away from after with no hard feelings. We don't need—"

Her comm buzzed on her wrist, and she tapped it.

"Fox, you done having a nap up in the docks yet?" Stickles.

"Just finishing," she said. "We'll be out in your airspace soon."

"Good. I've just sent Redrum to do a cargo transfer and I need the remainder of the tugs out now. The Rimbolan freighter paid its fees and wants a push back up to orbit to do the rest of its repairs."

"They got their life support back online?"

"So they say. Otherwise in about seventy-two hours we're going to be calling in a bodywagon. I'm dropping the specs to your tug comp. I'm giving you full lead and the roster of waiting ships. Use your judgment. Check back in if you have serious problems. Otherwise, Ops out."

"Well," Khifi said. "I guess he's not a micromanager. Suit up, and let me know when you're ready to fly."

"Got it," Candles said.

Khifi turned to her own ship. The *Lazy Dog* was a typical Tanduouan tug, which meant it looked like a giant cyborg squid-crab with a mean case of engine. She retracted her own feeder lines, did her checks, then climbed the short ladder up its side and slipped down into the cabin. Inside, bathed in the blue-green glow of the console, she felt safe, strong, armored. She had never felt that way before she'd become a pilot, still never felt it anywhere else except in Lema's arms. She was lucky, she thought, that neither got jealous of the other.

She buckled herself into her seat and initiated the internal system checks, then slipped on the comm headset.

"—ox? Fox, you online yet?" It was Jonjon.

"Just now," she said. "What's happening up there?"

"Mr. Balcko walked in. He and Stickles are arguing. I don't know."

"Jonjon, the line—"

"I'm on Ryeneck's secret line. Something's up," Jonjon said. His voice was carefully casual, low. "I really don't like the tone— Uh-oh, gotta go."

She found herself listening to dead air. Shaking her head to clear out a sudden anxiety, she punched in the comm code for the spare. "Candles? What's your status?"

"Ready to go in thirty count," he answered.

"Launch as soon as ready, then proceed to the Rimbolan freighter docked at five through seven clockwise. I'll be less than a minute behind you."

"Got it," he said.

"Redrum and Kaiju, you hear that convo?"

"Yeah," Redrum's gruff voice came on the line.

"I don't like it," Kaiju added.

"Whatever's going on groundside isn't our problem once we're out. Stickles can handle it," Khifi said. The last of her system checks returned green just as she finished speaking. She pulled her helmet down, reflexively checked her safety harness

one last time, then fired up the engines. The *Lazy Dog* lifted off the floor, turning gracefully in the tight space of the bay.

As soon as she got into the bay envelope it sealed behind her, and the exterior doors split apart like a metal egg hatching out onto brilliant sunshine. She checked her airspace display one last time to make sure nothing was in her way, then, satisfied her exit trajectory was clear, slid up the power on her engines.

She smiled, despite her worries, as her ship leapt out into the sky.

"*Lazy Dog* out," she announced over her comms as she turned her ship around Paxillo's tower, the bright orange disc of Guratahan Sfazil filling her peripheral view. She keyed in Redrum, Kaiju, and Candles into a local comm group. "Status?"

"I'm half-way to Luida to pick up a cargo pod," Redrum said. "Turnaround in twenty min."

"Good. Check in when you're on your way back. Kaiju, meet me and Candles at the Rimbolan freighter. Let's free up some dock space."

"Got it," Kaiju said.

The Rimbolan was a massive, oblong ship, pointed and slightly curved at the ends in a shape Jonjon once referred to as a "ginormous fucking canoe." It had come in without prearranged berth or sponsor, paying triple fees for an expedited dock. Off-loading it should have been a two-shift job at most, with three bay arms attached to it, but it had sat there locked up and unresponsive for nearly a full shift before its captain broke silence to issue a call for help. Major systems failure had swamped it with radiation, personnel were sick or dying, and its cargo was contaminated.

In dock, the freighter was covered under a number of interplanetary distressed-vehicle and medical mercy laws. A handful of critically ill and wounded crew had finally been offloaded, at which time it was discovered that the ship, while Rimbolan in manufacture, had been sold to (or scavenged from a junk pile by) a private company out of Temperance Enclave. Another group of crew disembarked and was busy trying to find a buyer for their hot cargo, but no one was taking. Some of them had since disappeared, and the reigning explanation was that they had run away.

What mattered was that the freighter had run out of delaying tactics. She didn't believe they had anything fixed, but if they stayed in dock long enough for Paxillo to call salvage rights over unpaid fees, assets claimed would likely include the crew themselves. How they'd scraped together enough to get back off the ground she couldn't begin to guess.

It damn well better not break in half when we lift it, she thought.

She could see Kaiju's tug *Nobunaga*, its hull painted with green scales, closing in on the far end of the freighter. Candles' tug hovered near the gaping maw of the Rimbolan's wide-open cargo bay doors. "Jonjon, bay doors aren't sealed," she said.

A moment later, he got back on the line. "Ship says doors no longer functional, but assure us the cargo is fully secured inside."

"Has Terrapin verified this?" Terrapin was the Dock Inspector.

"No. Because of the radiation he was unable to go aboard."

"Do we know that there's a radiation leak?" Khifi asked. "I mean, other than the word of the ship's captain?"

"There were exposed crewmembers brought in and sent over to Velatos for treatment," Jonjon said. "What are you thinking?"

She passed over the freighter's bow. "I don't like it. Do we have a waiver from them, in case of damages?"

"No. Why?"

"Because if I were them, and as far in the red as they are with a junk ship, unsellable cargo, and salvagers circling in, I'd have spent the last four shifts taking off

every safety in the ship, and if I finished with that, I'd be taking screws and bolts out of everything else, so that when the freighter breaks apart during our lift, we're liable for ship and cargo and they walk away clean. We're not touching it. Tell them sign a waiver, pay the next docking fee, or yield to salvage."

"On it. Hold tight."

Kaiju started lazy circles around the Paxillo tower, and after a few minutes Candles followed. Khifi pulled up the incoming ship registry and winced at the long list of ships waiting for a berth. Some had arrived only hours after the Rimbolan. Glancing overhead, it was definitely more crowded than usual.

"Fox?" Jonjon came back on the line.

"Here. What's our status?"

"We've got a waiver, but whoa were they unhappy about that. I think I learned some new words. Seems like you called that one right."

"Got it," she said. "Candles, Kaiju? I still don't want this thing dropping parts all over Paxillo when we pick it up. If they're smart, they remembered where we grabbed on when bringing them down and made the most trouble there. So I want you both on the underside instead of top. Candles, take the cargo bay end. Let me know when you're in position. I'm taking topside."

"Which end?" Kaiju asked.

"Neither. I'm going for dead center. The bridge."

Candles' chuckle came over the line. "Perf," he said. "Safest place, 'cause if the ship's rigged the people be all there for the ride up."

"Jonjon, let everyone overhead know that once we get this thing moving we're heading straight up to orbit, and if they're in our way that's their own damned problem."

"Already on it," Jonjon answered. She wanted to ask what was going on in ops but didn't dare, not on the main line.

The space beneath the Rimbolan was tight, but she knew Kaiju well enough to know he could handle getting in there, even upside down. Candles . . . well, as long as he didn't break the tug itself, it was a good test of his skills.

She brought the *Lazy Dog* out over the top of the freighter, close enough that she could make out the shapes of people behind the thick window at the forefront of the bridge. At least one of them appeared to be shouting and making a rude gesture at her. Given that she was just about to drop a giant metal spider down on their heads, she figured they were entitled.

"In position," Kaiju said.

"There most," Candles added. "Three count. Two, one, done."

"Okay. Hold there for a moment," Khifi said. She brought the *Lazy Dog* down to barely a meter above the freighter's bridge. Then she swung her tug's arms down and one by one, like she was smothering prey, latched them onto the sides all around. "Okay. I want to do this carefully. Any time either of you feel like we're moving too fast, you speak up, okay? Candles, I'm going to send the commands to the docking systems to disengage, and then the freighter is all on us. I want you to start lifting your end as soon as you feel the clamps let go."

"Got you," he said.

"Kaiju, you and I get to do the heavy lifting. I want to take the freighter vertical and out. Candles is going to keep the cargo bay end up and pointed in the right direction, and you and I are going to provide the thrust we need to get it entirely out of Tanduou space. If this thing is going to fall apart, I want it well out of everyone's way when it does."

"Ready," Kaiju said.

"Sending the release signal . . . now," Khifi said, and finished the sequence. She felt the drag of the freighter's mass shift almost immediately into a pressure upward as

Candles' end began to climb. She rotated her engines to keep in sync with the ship's angle and began adding lift as Kaiju got his own engines down and joined in.

Her instruments said they were nearing vertical and already close to a thousand meters clear of Paxillo tower. "Let's hope they were smart enough to strap themselves in," she said. "Anyone see signs of structural integrity problems?"

"Some debris dropped past me when we first started pushing, but nothing big enough to cause any damage," Kaiju said.

"Candles, how's your view?"

"Clear and good," he said.

"Then let's push it," Khifi said, and powered up to three-quarters. She could feel the vibration of the freighter through her boots, but it was steady, felt right.

"You guys could have waited for me before you started the party," Redrum's voice came over the comms. Out of the corner of her eye, Khifi could see the Jolly Roger splashed in paint across Redrum's hull as he flew up alongside them.

"There's a small freighter named the *Olympian Razor* from Mars that's been waiting for almost two days," Khifi said. "Check in with ground ops to make sure no debris hit anything down there, then if it still looks good, bring her into dock five. We should be back by the time you're done."

If the Enclavers had tried to engineer a disaster, either they were terribly bad at it, hadn't had enough time to do an effective job, or the old freighter still had some fight left in it. Probably some combination of all three. It soared up out of Tanduou's feeble gravity well with surprising grace. They were well outside orbit zones for either Guratahan Sfazil, Tanduou itself, and the big planet's tiny second moon, Tammou. "Powering down engines to minimum on three . . . two . . . one. Down. Candles, disengage. Kaiju, pop an all-channel navigation hazard beacon on it before you let go. They can scrape it off themselves when they get out of our space."

". . . Done," Kaiju said. "Disengaging."

"I'm untached," Candles said.

Khifi retracted her tug's spiderlegs one by one until she floated free of the freighter. She rarely got much past the swarm of ships surrounding the moon, and the view was beautiful. Guratahan Sfazil was an arid, golden desolation, pockmarked by the slow-growing brown and green skunge of civilization. The half-circle glow of Tammou hung above, and it took her a few moments longer than it should have to notice the tiny glints between her and it. A small cluster of eight ships drifted there, seven small cargos and one sleek, military-style cruiser. A quick check showed them not in the queue for Paxillo, nor any of the other docks in the Velatos cluster.

Jonjon's voice on the comms broke her away from her curiosity. "Fox? I'm on Rye-neck's line again. There's—"

"This is Paxillo ops." The incoming official signal from Stickle cut off Jonjon's connection. "Fox, is anyone currently engaged?"

"Redrum, status?" Khifi asked.

"Just settling the Marsies down now," he said.

"Two minutes, ground," Khifi replied down to the surface. Those two minutes went by in silence until she saw Redrum retract from the new ship safely tucked in dock. "We're clear."

"Cluster Manager Balcko has an announcement," Stickle said.

Balcko came on the air. "Normally this is news the Dockmaster would pass on in person, but as you know, he is downplanet on business," he said. "There was a tube accident a short while ago. One of the Paxillo staff—Airon Gofersen, also known as Goffs—has been killed. It appears to have been operator error. In respect for Gofersen, I am closing down Paxillo Docks for the remainder of the shift."

Khifi couldn't believe she'd heard right. "Goffs is dead?" she asked.

"Yes," Balcko answered. "I'm sorry."

"Should we . . ." What should they do? She didn't know. She wanted to stay flying, as if it wouldn't be real until she set foot in dock again. "Should we finish parking the last few—?"

"Paxillo is shut down effective immediately," Balcko said. "That is all."

"You heard the boss," Stickles said. "Come on in."

She was last down, Candles just ahead of her. Redrum had arrived first and was sitting between Jonjon and Sparkle. Mr. Balcko had already departed.

Stickles stood at the railing at the control platform, his face an unreadable mask. "I'll see you all back here for shift tomorrow," he said. "In the meantime . . . well. Take time for yourselves and be safe."

Jonjon stood up and put an arm around Redrum's shoulders. "I worked with Goffs as my ops manager for four years before I switched shifts, and he was a good man," he said. "I'm heading to the Hellwater for a drink, and I'm buying for anyone who cares to join me."

"I'm in," Sparkle said, putting the headpiece down on her console and standing up.

"Me too," Kaiju said.

"Fox? Candles?" Jonjon asked.

Candles started, as if surprised to have been invited. "Yeah. Didn't know Goffs, but team is team."

"One round and then I'm going home to my wife," Khifi said. She felt sick.

"Stickles?" Jonjon asked.

"Maybe later," Stickles said. "I have to make a call to the Gee, break the news to Quizzie and the Dockmaster. I'd rather they heard it from me."

"Understood," Jonjon said. "We'll be there for a while."

Khifi and the others stumbled into the elevators, leaving Stickles standing where he was, his head hung low, his knuckles pale where he gripped the platform rail.

* * *

The Hellwater was in a dead-end spoke off Paxillo, and had long since earned its reputation as Velatos Cluster's roughest bar, surpassing even the Brood and the Tarpit. Tanduou had started off life as a pirate haven before finding marginally more legitimate business as a shipyard and waystation; here in the Hellwater, Khifi felt closest to those early pirate days. She wasn't sure that was entirely due to the wall of holoportraits of everyone who'd been murdered in the bar, divided into those justifiably killed, those sorely missed, and the largest section in between of those people who fit both categories. A lone portrait stood by itself, labeled "a lesson to others"—a nameless, offworld joker who'd thought it funny to put the bartender's portrait up among the dead and got caught in the act.

Why no one had ever shut down the Hellwater—and right now the Brood was in another sixty-day time out for bad behavior—was unclear, but Khifi figured the fact that it was the pilots' bar was a big part of it.

Now, though, the Hellwater was subdued, almost quiet, and that struck her hard. Goffs had been a pilot before he became ops; it seemed unthinkable that he could be dead when just a few hours before he'd been right there in control with them. *He should be here with us now, dammit*, she thought. Everything they'd been through, all the crazy, dangerous, drunken things they'd done, the idea that he'd die in a stupid tube accident was just wrong. And if he could slip up, which of them couldn't?

Jonjon had claimed a large table toward the back, and the bartender—rarely generous—brought a tray of Sfazili Whiskey bulbs and set it on the table. As he passed by Khifi's chair, he gently touched her shoulder. "Sorry," he said.

Sparkle raised a bulb. "To Goffs," she said.

"To Goffs," the others answered, clanking bulbs. Khifi took a long sip, watched as everyone but Candles did the same.

"You okay?" She leaned toward him and asked.

He made a wry face. "Alcohol hurts the Colony."

"First met Goffs back during the Henrici Dock crash," Redrum spoke up. "We'd both showed up to see if we could help, got drafted as fire crew trying to get to the survivors in the tower. Saved some people, couldn't others, never talked about it after that day. But when he needed another pilot on his team, he knew I wasn't happy in Archasta and called me. Man was calm as ice in a fight, or at the helm, and I can't imagine if Henrici never gave him the shakes how the fucking tube blinked him."

"We get tired, I think," Jonjon said. "We forget to pay attention. Wrong place at the wrong moment and that's the end."

"Ever try to sneak up on Fox when she looks like she's lost in thought?" Kaiju said. "Because she ain't never not paying attention."

"You still have the scar?" Khifi asked.

"Yeah."

"Good," she said, downing the remainder of her bulb, feeling it burn its way down. "Never put your guard down."

"He tried that with me too," Redrum said. "I only kicked him."

"See? Your lesson didn't stick," Khifi said. She pushed back her chair and stood. "Speaking of safe, stay at one bulb or stay out of the tubes, okay? Don't make me come yell at your corpses, because I will and even dead you *will* hear me."

"You aren't staying?" Sparkle said.

"Going to get home while I can," Khifi said. She felt like she should say something else, unsure what wouldn't sound sappy and drunken, when she glanced up at the door.

"Shit," she said, instead. "Trouble."

Burnout and two other pilots from Novodinia were walking in, and from their loose swagger the Hellwater wasn't their first stop. He spotted Khifi's group and pushed through the small crowd to their table. "Came by to pay our respects," he said.

"That's appreciated," Sparkle said.

"I mean, you know," Burnout continued, "kinda remarkable Goffs made it this long, given how shit—"

"You should leave it at just your respects," Khifi interrupted.

Burnout blinked at her, then glanced around the unsmiling faces at the table. He broke into a big grin. "Aw, c'mon," he said, "we all know his piloting skills is what grounded him in a chair."

Before anyone could respond—Redrum was half out of his chair—one of the Novodinia pilots put a hand on Burnout's arm. "We should just go," he said.

"Naw, Stash. Pilots are all on the same team, right?" Burnout said. His gaze fell on Candles. "Except maybe this mutant freak here. I wondered where he slunk off to. Feeding the strays again, Fox?"

He reached a hand out, clearly intent on touching the Colony on Candles's shoulder. As Candles leaned away, Khifi grabbed Burnout's hand and twisted hard. Burnout let out a strangled cry and dropped to his knees.

Khifi leaned forward, still gripping his hand. "Next time you come to pay your respects in Paxillo, you might want to learn what that means first," she said. "Or at least start listening to Stash, who's a fucklot smarter than you."

She let go and stepped back.

"Come on, Burn, let's go," Stash said, trying to help his friend up.

Burnout slapped his hand away as he got clumsily to his feet. "No way," he said, "I'm not letting—"

"House bets on Fox, six to one," the bartender called out. The entire Hellwater went silent, turning to watch. Burnout glanced around, not sure what was happening.

"Burnout, let me be clear," Khifi said. "I've had a bad day and right now I would love an excuse to add your face to the wall. But you're drunk and I'm not, and I wouldn't want anyone doubting for a second that you'd lose just as fast in a fair fight."

Stash pulled Burnout back. "She's right," he said, "and I'm halfway toward killing you myself for dragging me into this asshole move. We're going. Now."

If Burnout still wasn't convinced, the collective groan of disappointment in the bar did it. He shook off Stash, made a rude gesture at Khifi, and stomped out.

"I'm true sorry about Goffs," Stash said, and followed.

Khifi stood there until they were gone and the Hellwater stuttered back into life around them. "Well," she said at last. "That was unpleasant."

Candles stood. "Fox, you didn't need to—"

"I did, Candles," she said. "We're supposed to be better than that, and dammit if I'm not going to act like we are."

She walked out of the Hellwater and stood in the bright lights of the Paxillo corridor. Anger still burned—at Burnout for being a predictable asshole, at Goffs for being dead—and with the shot of whisky to fuel it, felt like it would not die low anytime soon. *Not the right frame of mind for the tube, she thought. Walk it off. Get it out of your system. Go home when you're ready. It's not like Lema is expecting you for another seven hours.*

She did have that errand to run to Velatos.

In addition to the interdock fastlanes, there was also an autowalk between Paxillo and Velatos. She stepped onto the wide, slow-moving platform, leaning against the rail as people rushed past her. Velatos was the central dock of the cluster that bore its name, Paxillo and the others arrayed around it in a circle. It was one of the largest docks on Tanduou, second only to Solaster and Leilaster, also centers of their own clusters. The floor mover briefly skimmed along the surface toward it, an xglass arch crisscrossed by thick beams overhead. Before it gave way again to the monotony of carved rock she could see that Velatos was buried in ship traffic, the usual flotsam of freighters, small cruisers, and scavenger ships. She watched a tug extricate one of the freighters with smooth precision before taking it back up into orbit, trying not to think about Goffs. Already another ship was being pulled down to take its place.

The autowalk was subsumed back into city and ended, depositing her at the edge of the Velatos Market. She moved through the crowd into the concourse. Xie's store was hidden in the back corridors; not many locals had the cred to shop there. As Khifi walked in, self-conscious around the elegant glass that seemed to loom into her path, the bald, heavily bearded man looked up from his counter where he'd been reading on his handpad.

"Khif!" he said, genuinely pleased to see her.

"Hello, Xie," she said. She was suddenly glad of the friendly voice, so thoroughly removed from the day's events. "Lema wanted me to pick something up for her."

He unlocked the drawers under his counter and rummaged through them. "How's her latest project coming?"

"She doesn't talk about the art until the art is done, not even to me. Besides, what can I say other than I love it or I don't get it? I'm useless."

He took a tiny, sealed box out of the drawer and set it on the counter. "Maybe you can convince her to use less wood in her pieces, or work smaller. Do you know how expensive it is to fab in that stuff?"

"She likes the feel of it. Says it reminds her of home. How much do we owe you?" Khifi tapped the box.

“Nothing, it’s on me.” He slid it across the counter to her. “Unnatural fondness for hard-to-obtain organic media aside, she’s made me a happy agent.”

She picked up the box, small enough to easily fit in her palm. “Uh . . . any instructions?”

“Yes. Let Lema open it, or she’ll be quite mad. And tell her I’m eagerly looking forward to her next piece?”

“Will do. Thanks, Xie,” Khifi said. She tucked the box into a jacket pocket, made sure it was zipped in tight, and left his shop. Conscious of it against her chest, she was less afraid of being alone with her thoughts on the long walk back to Paxillo.

The Market concourse was even more crowded now, and when she reached the large open floor she saw why. The Velatos Dock manager and a contingent of her upper staff were escorting a trio of tall, bluish-green, portly aliens across the space. The aliens looked halfway between humpty-dumpties and walruses, complete with meter-long whiskers, and seemed to be wearing gigantic purple leg-warmers on their elongated, flattened feet. *Two legs, two eyes*, she thought, thinking of Mole’s inevitable questions. *How wide a range that covers.*

She checked the time on her vambrace as she waited for the huddle of people to get out of her way, then glanced back up and did a double-take.

“Peezy!” Khifi called.

The girl was pale, wide-eyed, breathing in fast, shallow gasps as she slid along the wall, arms outstretched against it, her ragged coat unnaturally bulged out around her near-starving frame as she followed the aliens. She froze at Khifi’s call, glanced at the departing delegation, then back at Khifi. “You can’t be here!” she called back, her voice barely audible over the crowd noise. “Please, I can’t . . .”

“Can’t what, Peezy? Are you okay?” Khifi asked. She held out her hand as she walked quickly toward her.

Peezy turned her face away and suddenly sprinted into the back of the moving delegation.

All Khifi’s own years spent living in the crawlspaces of Tanduou had honed instincts that hadn’t dimmed; she threw her hands up over her ears and turned away just as something clapped her on the back, hard, slamming her down onto the polished rock floor.

It took her a few moments to piece together what her body was telling her: pain from her hands and elbows where she’d hit the floor, a prickling along the back of her neck and head as if tiny darts of fire had lodged there, sound muted as if her ears were full of sludge. It was several moments longer before she recognized the screaming and alarms and the acrid smell of smoke for what they were. She tried to push herself up, but vertigo and a stabbing pain in her back sent her crashing back down again.

After a bit, she was able to roll onto her side.

The concourse was in chaos. Fire suppression bots flew in and out of the smoky haze as people rushed back and forth through it. Most were bystanders; emergency responders and security were just starting to flood in. A young woman in a med vest stopped and crouched over her. “How badly are you hurt, ma’am?” she asked.

“Not as bad as others,” Khifi said. “I can wait.”

The woman started to straighten up, then spotted Khifi’s badge. “Oh!” she said. “You’re a pilot! Let me get you out of here—”

“No, really, I’m not hurt bad,” Khifi said, not at all sure if that was true. “There was a delegation moving through. It’s hard to think. Are . . .” She knew it was a dumb question, but couldn’t not ask. “Are people going to be okay?”

“No,” the medic said. “No, they’re not.”

She stood up, snapped her fingers. Another medic with an autotravois came over.

"Get this one to the group C triage and checked out."

Khifi tried to stand on her own, but couldn't pull together enough strength to rise. The med shook her head. "It's not special treatment," the med said. "Think of it like this: we need you out of the way, too. This is us doing our jobs."

"Okay," Khifi said.

The other medic lowered the autotravois and helped shift her onto it. Already there was a growing line of injured people on other stretchers, and one by one the medic connected them up and began leading the grim train back out of the concourse.

* * *

They released her from the overcrowded med bay three hours later, a half-dozen pain patches and blisters of plastiskin dotting her back beneath her tattered and grubby red shirt. She had been told in no uncertain terms not to go too far; as a witness, investigators would want to speak with her as soon as the immediate crisis was over. If she wasn't a pilot, she wasn't sure they'd have let her go at all. Even then, going home wasn't straightforward. Sections of Velatos were cut off by blast doors she'd only seen closed during drills. With the acrid smell of smoke pervading everything and the stricken faces of people as they scurried through the newly placed obstacle maze, the doors were more ominous than reassuring.

She was exhausted and more than a little unsteady with the amount of pain drugs soaking into her back. The box she'd picked up at Xie's shop was battered around the edges but miraculously not crushed, and a gentle shaking of the box did not produce the woeful chorus of broken parts she'd feared. It was easier to worry about the box than think about Peezy, or the Velatos Dock manager and her alien guests; word had rippled through the medical bay that Dock Manager Le had been killed, along with her security chief and four of the six Yuaknari visitors. The prevailing theory was that the bombing was Humans First extremists targeting the Yuaknari, but no one really knew.

Bypassing the damaged and cordoned-off areas meant detouring out of Velatos to Oreasta Dock, and from there taking the autowalk back to Paxillo. It was hard to wrap her head around the idea that Goffs had died this very same day.

Reality still hadn't fixed itself by the time she reached the Paxillo tube station, but the meds were starting to make it harder and harder to care. She bypassed the fast lane and went all the way down to the guided tubes, which were computer-controlled, dead-last for priority, and moved about as fast as rock crept across sand. Buckling herself into the sled, she leaned her head against the hard cushioned side and let her mind drift.

She had dim memories of the sled finally arriving, then being at the door to her tiny apartment. Letting herself in, she saw Lema hard at work at her desk, goggles on, back straight, hands moving slowly in the empty air over her tablet as she worked a 3D simulation only she could see. Khifi smiled; the world narrowing to just this place, just the two of them, and things were miraculously, mostly okay after all.

Khifi slipped off her boots as quietly as she could, tiptoed past Lema's workspace, and tumbled, already half asleep, face-first into the bed.

* * *

Waking was a slow climb up, fighting the gravity of grief, exhaustion, and the lingering pull of the meds. Finally, Lema's voice broke through and lifted her the rest of the way. "You awake?" she was asking.

"I am," Khifi answered, mostly convinced it was true.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're a liar, an idiot, and I'm very angry with you," Lema said.

Those also seemed likely true. "Oh," she managed. She still hadn't decided if she was going to open her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I wasn't expecting you back for nearly another hour, and I get up to go beep some food and find you collapsed on the bed covered in bloody bandages."

"Sorry," Khifi mumbled again.

"Why didn't you *tell* me you were home?"

"Didn't want to bother you."

"Idiot. Why didn't you tell me you were *hurt*?"

"It's not that bad."

"Liar," Lema said. "Xie called to ask if you'd made it home safe. What the hell were you doing in Velatos?"

"Dock shut down. Went to get your thing." Khifi cracked open one eye, but could only see Lema's thigh where she sat beside her on the bed. "I may be lying on your box," she added. It was hard to separate out the various discomforts.

"Wait," Lema said. "Why was the dock shut down *before* the bomb? The docks never close."

"Goffs died. Tube accident. Everything's gone all wrong and none of it makes sense."

She was aware of the shift in the bed as Lema got up, and must have dozed off because next thing she knew Lema was beside her again and touching her shoulder gently. "Can you sit up?" Lema asked. It took her a few moments but she did, and blinked blearily as her wife pressed a steaming mug into her hands. "Drink this."

Khifi took a sip; it was one of Lema's expensive, imported teas, a blend hand-picked by monks on Fadsji. She'd always been more of a coffee person, but it was warm and the rich fragrance was comforting. She suspected that was because she associated it with Lema. "Thanks," she said.

Lema reached past her, picked up the half-crushed box, and tucked it out of the way on top of the nightshelf. "So. Tell me."

* * *

Khifi had been nine when she hopped a cargo freighter out of her home colony. By ten, she knew every crawler in Velatos and most from neighboring Myonota and Freyella clusters. She knew the location of every fixed electronic eye and which corners they were blind to, and she could pick out the hum of a floater above all but the loudest crowds. Tanduou thrived by treading the gray area between security and privacy, and crawlers took advantage of the lack of an omnipresent surveillance state in the same way all the back-dock dealers and covert arms merchants did. Systems had been updated and changed over the years, but she'd never lost the instinct to notice and remember them. It was not a challenge to slip out of sight.

Maintenance corridors ran behind the public spaces. The service hatch was right where she remembered it being, the seemingly random marks beside it crawler code for the current nesters. None of them were familiar. Although stories of generations of crawlers were shared and reshared, an oral history perpetuated by the need to get through one day after another and the long slow nights in between, everyone who had been part of her nest was long gone. The crawl only tolerated adults in memory.

She climbed through the hatch and crouched on the far side as the door shut behind her. Crossing into the crawl after all this time was a punch in the gut. Everything felt smaller, dirtier, more unremarkable than it used to.

She turned on the handlight she'd brought. The tiny tunnel leapt into stark relief.

Walking bent over under the low ceiling, she followed a pipe, looking for the remembered crack in the wall hidden behind it. She barely fit through. On the far side was another tunnel, and she followed that until it turned, sloping downward. More pipes appeared from out of the ceiling and walls, slowly filling up her available headspace until she was afraid she might have to get down on her hands and knees. Did she really call this home for nearly six years?

There was another dip in the floor, this one sharp enough that she almost fell, catching herself with hands on the rough rock wall. Once she got down to where the floor was level again, she could walk almost upright. Memories of running, hunched over, through the tunnel and leaping down off that dip into what felt like open space seemed almost fantastical now. *I was always trying to fly.*

From here it was easy. Three turns, and then a long wide stretch where thick sewage pipes ran overhead. Every six hours the pipe system was flushed out with steam, so this was one of the rare places in the crawl that was comfortably warm. It also caused a sticky dust layer to form over everything; she'd spent hours trying to get it out of her hair and clothes until she gave it up as futile.

She'd hoped Mole would be here, or Birdie, but the corridor was empty save for the thick mat of insulation scraps and packing foam that made up the crawler nest. In one corner she spotted an old blanket she'd given Birdie years ago, now coated with the same dust as everything else here.

As she stood there trying to decide where to go next, she saw a rough-cut foam block shift slightly. "It's Fox," she called out softly. "I'm by myself. I came looking for Mole."

After a long moment, the block shifted again and a face peered out from beneath it. The boy's face was swollen, one eye shot red and surrounded by a black-purple bruise. He'd been crying.

"Gums?" she asked. "Can I come closer?"

He nodded, trembling. She moved slowly, taking a pack of vitawafers out of her pocket. Crouching, she held the pack out, and he sat up and took it. He was gaunt, shirtless, and his upper body was covered with ugly bruises and a sour-looking gash crusted with blood. Reaching over her shoulder, Khifi peeled off one of the med patches on her back, shook it to make sure it still had some life in it, then carefully spread it over the cut. "This will help a little," she said. At least it should clear up the infection, if not much else. "What happened? You were with Peezy."

The boy started, dropping the wafers, and began shaking in earnest. "Was here," he said.

"You and Peezy were here? When you got hurt?"

"No," he said. "Man who catched us, he was here."

"He caught you here?"

"No. He was here *now*. Just before you."

Khifi stood, pulling a blade from where she kept it tucked at the small of her back, half-expecting to find someone looming up behind her. The corridor remained empty and she heard nothing but the faint susurrations of the pipes. "What did he look—" she started to ask, but Gums was back under the foam, out of sight. The wafers, moments ago scattered across the floor, were gone with him.

This time, when she turned around again, she was not alone.

"Fox," Mole said. He was standing near the turn in the corridor, a half step from being able to disappear. He looked unhappy to see her in his home territory. She couldn't blame him; adults in the crawl were dangerous.

"I came to ask you about Peezy," Khifi said.

"You seen her?"

"I saw her," she answered carefully. "She ever talk about aliens? You know, in a scared or angry way?"

"Peezy *loves* the bugs. Nearly gotten caught a hunnerd times out in the open, making pictures. Always wants to go see 'em, then talks about it no-stop for days." Mole moved into the room, fear forgotten, and rummaged through a corner of the nest. He came up with a handful of vellum sheets and a handpad.

Mole handed her the sheets. On them were passably good drawings of an E'zon, a Tuarig, and two aliens she did not recognize. The girl had had some real talent. Khifi's eyes teared up, and she wiped them with the back of her hand.

"Peezy not coming back," Mole said. It wasn't quite a question.

"No, she's not."

Mole inhaled deeply, held it, then let it out again. "Okay," he said.

"Can I keep these?" Khifi asked.

"Yeah." He dropped his hands to his side, the handpad dangling from his fingers.

"What's that?" Khifi asked.

"Dunno," Mole said. "Never seen it before right now. None a' ours."

"May I see?"

He held it out. The surface was still shiny, free of crawl dust. Khifi turned it on. The Humans First logo flashed up onto the screen, and she turned it off with a startled jerk. "Are you sure this wasn't here before?" she asked.

"Sure sure," Mole said. "Not like we got so much nice stuffs we can keep any secret from t'other."

That much she certainly remembered from her days in the crawl.

"Gums said there was someone here, the man who'd caught him and Peezy," Khifi said. "You need to go through this whole place and make sure there's nothing else, and then I think you all need to find a different place to nest for a bit. The harder to get to, the better. Where's Tuck?"

"Waiting 'round the corner," Mole said. "What's going on, Fox?"

"I don't know," she said, "but I don't think it's over. Be careful."

"You too, Fox," he said.

"Don't forget Gums."

Mole almost smiled. "Forget nobody," he said, "'til they forget us."

She tossed the handpad in the first flash recycler she found. Two more off-shifts before she was flying again, and if she couldn't be home, she wanted nothing so much as to be a half-hundred kilometers above it all.

* * *

When she rejoined the upper world and the Paxillo concourse, the crowds were noticeably thinned and most were gathered near the center where a column of large screens normally ran the endless litany of trading news, ship arrivals and departures, and gossip. Now, Mr. Balcko's face was on every screen, a dozen mouths moving simultaneously. ". . . has been successfully removed, with no remaining danger to the citizens of Oreasta," he was saying. "I will be following up with casualty information from Notomyo as soon as the emergency teams have finished their work. If anyone has information, or saw anything suspicious prior to either incident, please contact your nearest security officer. Be assured, we will catch the perpetrators of these acts. Thank you."

Balcko's face disappeared, replaced by the familiar scroll of the hourly trade bulletin.

One of the Paxillo cargo haulers stood not far away. Khifi touched his broad shoulder. "Excuse me," she said. "Something happened since Velatos?"

"Bomb in Notomyo about half an hour ago," he said. "They just found another in Oreasta before it went off. Whole cluster is in security lockdown. I tell you, if I find those assvalves what put the bombs? Then someone really get hurt. No one messes with Tanduou, not our people, not our bugs, not our nothing." He looked her up and down. "You're a pilot, right? You get me."

"I get you," she said.

He grunted, nodding, and went back to watching the boards.

Khifi's vambrace buzzed. She tapped it, and Inchbug's voice echoed out of her earpiece. "Fox?" she asked. "Mr. Balcko asked to check if you were going to the security debriefing about the Velatos bomb."

"Yeah. I'm on my way now," she said.

"Balcko said you were there?"

"Close enough for a few new scars," she said. "How are things up there?"

"Balcko called in terrorism experts from Haudernelle. Uberman docked them about an hour ago, but other than that nothing is moving up here at all."

"What about the Rimbolan freighter?"

"The Enclavers loaded up everything they could fit in a shuttle and abandoned it. Unofficially, of course, so we can't declare salvage rights for three more days. I'm heading over to Luida to fill in for a sick comm op, so see you when I see you. Be careful, okay?"

"I try," she said.

"Try harder." Inchbug signed off.

Khifi made her way over to a long, winding, reinforced corridor that ended in thick xglass doors with PAXILLO SECURITY stenciled on them in large block letters. The officer at the doors scanned in her id. "Room three, at the back."

"Thanks," she said, and went in.

Room three was a small, nondescript conference room. Paxillo's head of security, Chief Bell, sat there with another security officer with a Velatos patch and chief's stripes that looked—and likely were—newly sewn on. Two more men in suits sat with them.

"Ah, Fox," Chief Bell said, standing up and extending his hand. "I trust you're recovering?"

"Nothing that'll slow me down," she said, taking the one free chair.

"This is Acting Chief Tres of Velatos Dock. Joining us is Mr. Allen and Mr. Arve, who just arrived from Haudernelle. They're private consultants here at the behest of Mr. Balcko," Bell explained. "If you could go through what brought you to Velatos Dock, anything you might have seen, impressions you have, we'd appreciate it."

"I'll do my best; my memories are kind of fuzzy and unreliable," she said. "I'd gone to Velatos on a shopping errand, and was on the way back. I had just seen the aliens in the concourse when the bomb went off."

Mr. Arve leaned forward and opened a display window on the tabletop. "Ms. Iwalewa—"

"Call me Fox," she said reflexively.

"There is limited security footage of the incident," Arve said. "We've identified the bomber as an illegal underground squatter. We believe she and other 'crawlers' have been actively recruited by a hate group called Humans First."

"I don't think that's likely," Khifi said.

"No? We have the detonation on video." Arve tapped open a picture. Peezy was standing near a column, expression unreadable, the Yuaknari delegation in the foreground passing by. He tapped the picture again, forwarding it. "And here you seem to be speaking to her."

"She looked scared," Khifi said.

"You knew her?"

"A little. I know for sure she didn't hate aliens."

Arve's partner, Allen, folded his arms over his chest. "Hate groups are very good at radicalizing the underprivileged, many of whom are desperate for a purpose or an opportunity to hurt those more fortunate than themselves. Each and every one of them is a ticking time-bomb. You're *naïve* if you think otherwise."

"Mr. Allen, you've been on Tanduou for what, an hour now?" Khifi said. "Tanduou's

crawlers are here because whatever life they walked away from was even worse. They want to be left alone. They don't have an agenda beyond that. They're *kids*."

"So you did talk to her?"

"I asked if she was okay," Khifi said. "She ran off, and after that I only remember the smoke and the alarms."

"So you *knew* she was the bomber and didn't disclose this sooner?"

Khifi sat up straighter, met Allen's eyes without flinching. "I don't know anything for sure, but if Peezy did have a bomb it's because someone forced it on her. Word was someone had grabbed her a few days earlier, and another crawler barely got away with his life. *That's* who you need to be looking for."

"How do you know this?" Arve asked.

"Fox has lived in Paxillo most of her life," Bell interjected. "She knows many of the local crawlers and has a degree of their trust, which has been an asset to us in a few situations over the years."

Arve pulled up another picture. "This was our Notomyo bomber," he said. It was a crawler boy, maybe barely ten. "Humans First propaganda was found on him. He had a handpad we were able to extract the memory from, and it had a propagandist video blaming aliens for the poor conditions so many humans live under. It was compelling. Mr. Balcko has initiated a sweep of all the underground areas to look for additional evidence."

Khifi pounded her fist on the table. "If there's evidence, it's planted," she said. "There have been strangers down in the crawl, going through their things, *leaving* stuff, just like this handpad you talk about."

Allen's eyebrows shot up. "Do you have proof of this?"

She thought about the handpad she'd stuffed in the flash-recycler. "No," she said at last. "But the crawlers—"

"Are not exactly reliable sources," Allen said. "You seem to have a lot of information that you are conveniently only sharing now. If these things happened, why weren't authorities informed?"

"Because no one else *cares* about the crawlers," she said.

"Well." Allen stood up, and after a moment, Arve did too. "We certainly do now, don't we? I believe that will be all."

"For now," Arve added. He was already tapping at his wristcomm as the two consultants left the room.

"Sorry, Fox," Chief Bell said. "We'll get to the truth of this. It just might get ugly for a while, while we do."

She stood. "It's ugly enough already," she said. "But thank you for the optimism."

Frustration propelled her back up the corridor and into the concourse, and a half-minute later she found herself moving through the doors into the Hellwater, half-hoping Burnout would be there and say something stupid to her face.

You're losing it, Khif, she thought. She ran one hand over her short, wiry hair and stepped up to the bar. "A Ceres Triple," she said, and the bartender set one in front of her before she'd even blinked. She downed it in one shot, then stared morosely at the empty bulb until a hand gently touched her shoulder.

She spun, half-reaching for her knife, when she recognized Stickles.

"Saw you come in. You okay?" he asked.

"No," she said. "No, I'm not."

"You want to talk? I know I'm not Quizzie, but you know I've got your back."

Khifi pushed the empty bulb away. "When I went with Candles to do his flight-check, he caught on immediately that his engines sounded wrong. Someone had stuffed a sock in one of the air intakes. Most people don't listen enough to pick something like that up, but he did. A lot of people would've told him he was imagining it."

Stickles nodded. "Told you he was good."

"Yeah, but here's my point," Khifi said. "All that's going on? With the bombs, and saying the crawlers are behind it? Even with Goff's accident. It sounds *wrong*. It sounds like someone has stuffed a sock in Tanduou's engine, pitch is a half-note off from the truth, and I'm not sure anyone is hearing it but me."

Stickles stared down at his hands on the bar. "I trust your instincts, Fox, but damn. What have you got?"

She told him about Peezy and Gums, the Humans First handpad, the stranger in the crawl. "She drew pictures of the aliens, Stickles," she said, pulling the vellum sheets out of her jacket and spreading them out on the bar. "Do these look like the art of hate?"

"No," he said. "But . . . if not the crawlers, why pin it on them? What does anyone gain?"

"I don't know. It makes no fucking sense."

"You told the consultants?"

"Some of it," she said. "I don't think they were listening. I'd be happier if we were relying on our own people rather than outsiders to sort out what's going on."

He considered. "What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know," Khifi said. "Keep our eyes and ears open, listen for everything that doesn't sound right, make sure all the facts are out there before anything is done that can't be undone. What else can we do?"

"I guess just that," Stickles said. "If you find out anything more, you'll tell me?"

"Yeah."

He pushed back from the bar. "I'm covering Ops for your shift again. So maybe we should talk it over then, after we've had a chance to think about it?"

"Yeah," she said again.

"Better than just sitting here drinking all day," Stickles said, "although I won't pretend I don't see the appeal. Go home, Fox. You look like a bomb hit you."

"Har har," she said, but he was right. Stickles left. She swiped her credit chit over the bar, added a healthy tip, and headed home.

* * *

"Khif, I love you, but if you don't stop fidgeting I'm going to smother you with your own pillow," Lema murmured.

* * *

Khifi stomped toward Paxillo's main concourse. She had a crick in her neck from spending most of the night in a chair, and her stomach had wound itself into so many knots she wasn't sure she'd ever feel hungry again.

Her thoughts lost in a maze of whys and what-ifs, she had taken several more steps before her brain registered that someone had whispered her name. She stopped, turned, saw the small alcove in the corridor full of piping, thought she saw uneasy shifting in the shadows.

Walking back, she casually leaned one shoulder against the wall beside the opening, taking out her handpad as if checking an incoming message. "Mole?" she asked softly. He was there, his face and eyes red and puffy as if he'd been crying. She heard a sob, but it didn't come from him. She spotted a tiny, dirty face behind the bigger boy.

"This's Tuck, new kid I told you bout," Mole said.

"You two aren't safe out here, even on good days," Khifi said. "You come across the wrong security guard, and you're going to be joining the bone pile out an airlock. What the hell were you thinking?"

"Nowhere safe in the crawl," Mole said. "Lots of people, no uniforms, but move like authority and got guns. Birdie ain't come back yet and Gums ran away last night and there was alarms and we was scared. Ran into Terkle an' he said same thing

happened over in Luida Dock. Some'a us gonna try to get over to Odinella cluster, but that a hard journ. We got nowhere else to go and Birdie's not here being in charge and Tuck is always crying and hungry and there's doors down and smoke in the crawl." Tears began making fresh tracks down his dirty cheeks. "Can run, but only by myself."

"Mole, look at me," she said, and he raised his face to hers. "Try to find a safe place, somewhere you wouldn't normally go. Doesn't need to be comfortable, just hard to find. If you can't find anything—and this is last resort, you understand?—there's a shop in Velatos Dock owned by a guy named Xie-Yan Che. He's a friend of mine. If you go, you can't steal from him, not even a little, not even once. You understand that? Tell him Khifi sent you. That's my real name," she said.

Mole shivered. "Telling names is bad luck, Fox. If you see Birdie or Gums—"

"Just go," Khifi said. "Be smart. And if you can get yourselves out of the cluster? Take it."

Tuck wrapped his skinny arms tightly around her legs, just for a moment, then Mole grabbed his hand and pulled him back into the dark. She watched after the door closed for a long while and wondered if she'd ever see either again.

She drifted into the Paxillo concourse, eyes on the distant elevators up to Dock control. The footsteps were just part of the background noise, one set slightly offbeat among dozens, until she thought she heard Mole, impossibly, calling her name over the noise.

Oh, you fool kid! she thought, whirling around to confront him for following her out into the open.

She got her arm up just in time to block the blade, but it hit her vambrace with enough force to make her stumble back. Her attacker was dressed in grubby clothes, a young man with wild eyes, dilated pupils, a crawler by all the looks of him except he was too old. "Humans First, Humans forever!" he shouted, raising the knife again.

Around them the crowd had fallen back. "Put the knife down!" she yelled, backing away. "I am not your enemy!"

"You bring them here. Your alien masters!" He rushed her but she was ready, dodging away and pulling out her own knife.

"You don't want to do this," she said. Where the hell was security?

He swung wide and she dodged again, but this time he brought his other hand around to grab her arm, then kicked at her legs. It was a glancing blow, but enough to send her sprawling onto her butt on the floor. He was grinning now.

Khifi threw her own blade. It caught him in the shoulder and he dropped his knife. She scrambled to her feet, cursing the lingering stiffness from her Velatos injuries, and had another knife drawn from her boot by the time he had pulled hers out and was brandishing it back at her. He tried the wide swing again, probably hoping to catch her the same way he had before, but she anticipated the move and feinted to the left, then moved under his swing and kicked him sideways, hard in the chest.

Her attacker stumbled back, landing on one knee. People behind him scrambled out of his way. Getting up, he grunted, stabbed forward at Khifi with her own knife, and when she stepped back out of his reach he turned abruptly and fled through a scattering, panicked crowd.

She stood, breathing hard. Someone had just tried to kill her. The realization of how close he had come—if she hadn't turned, or had turned a half-second later—hit her like a rock, and she turned and ran for the elevator doors.

There was no guard at the gate. She hopped it, scanned herself in, and threw herself into the first elevator that opened, feeling like she couldn't breathe. Tapping madly at her damaged vambrace she tried to call Lema, but it made a sickly buzz before going dead.

The elevator opened onto the control deck, and she was nearly knocked over by the security guard who should have been manning the gates below. "Fox! So sorry, I need to go, there's something going on down—" He paused, getting a better look at her. "—You okay?"

"Someone tried to kill me," she said. She unwrapped her dead vambrace from her arm, only then realizing her jacket was soaked dark with blood.

Stickles was up on the command platform with Mr. Balcko and a pair of guards. "Fox?" he asked. His eyes were wide.

Jonjon was, as always, beside the coffee dispenser. He walked forward and pressed his mug into her shaking hands. She was grateful for the warmth. "Some guy with a knife. He ran away."

Balcko turned to the guard. "Go find out what happened. Have a word with Mr. Arve and Mr. Allen, and send security up. This is unacceptable."

"Yes, sir," the guard said, and vanished into the elevator.

Candles put a gentle hand on her elbow and propelled her toward one of the unused console seats near Sparkle, who was busy on the ground comms.

"We're in full security quarantine now," Stickles said. "Mr. Balcko will be overseeing things from here until his team gives the all-clear."

"When is the Dockmaster returning?" Khifi asked.

"Not until the active situation is over," Balcko said. "Mr. Lohra has elected to remain on Guratahan Sfazil rather than risk becoming another target. In the meantime, as the most senior Cluster Manager, I am in charge." He said that last as if he expected to be challenged on it.

She had no intention of doing so; with the Dockmaster gone, someone needed to run things, and Balcko was right that he was most senior. "Of course," she said. "Just let me know what you need me to do."

"Although we're not open to normal business, I have a cargo crate of medical supplies that needs to get to Novodinia from Astrolyr in the Myonota Cluster," Stickles said.

"Okay. I can take it," she said.

Kaiju stood. "No," he said. "She's hurt. I'll go."

Stickles glanced at Khifi, then at Kaiju. "Of course," he said. "We're still waiting on that medic. It's all yours."

Kaiju nodded and left.

Khifi looked down at her arm. Blood was crusting dark along the slit in her sleeve where the edge of the vambrace had been. Now that adrenaline was wearing off she felt cold all over.

When Sparkle paused on the comms, Khifi asked her, "Where's Knits?"

"Weren't expecting any work to do with the docks shut down," said Sparkle. "I'm only here because we're still shifting some stuff in cargo. Inchbug is supposed to be coming in. It's bad down on the floors, and is only gonna get worse when word gets out that someone tried to kill a pilot. Hang on, cargo biz." She went back to her headset.

Jonjon was explaining the coffee dispenser to Candles and Balcko was busy with Stickles, so she rolled her chair over to Inchbug's empty station. Above, the endless shuffle of ships was at a standstill. Down where the Rimbolan freighter had been, a small, sleek military-style cruiser had taken its place at one of the berths.

"What's that ship doing here?" she exclaimed.

Sparkle put one hand over her mic. "That's the security consultants that Mr. Balcko brought in from Haudernelle. Allen and Arve and crew? Didn't you meet them?"

"That ship was in outer orbit when we took the freighter up," Khifi said.

"Can't have been. First bomb hadn't happened yet."

"It was here," Khifi said. "I saw it with my own eyes, *that* ship and a handful of cargos. I never forget a ship."

"I don't—" Sparkle started to say, when the elevators opened and a pair of security personnel from Velatos came in.

Mr. Balcko stood up. "You two will please escort Ms. Iwalewa down to secure holding and process her for arrest, on charges of aiding and abetting terrorists," he said. At everyone's look of confusion, Balcko stabbed a finger at Khifi. "Right, idiotic superstitious nicknames. *Fox*," he said. "Her. Arrest *her*."

"What!?" Khifi said, already rising to her feet.

"You confessed to Mr. Easson—*Stickles*—that you deliberately destroyed evidence from the crawlers to hide it from our investigators," Balcko said.

Khifi stared at Stickles. "That's a misunderstanding," she said. "Stickles, tell them—"

Stickles didn't meet her eyes. "She was drunk, over at the Hellwater," he said. "Lots of people will confirm we talked. She told me of her involvement in the crawler attacks."

"That's a lie!" Khifi shouted. The security guards glanced at Balcko, then began moving toward her. Both had hands on their pistols.

"Stickles?" Khifi said. "Don't do this to me."

"It's on your own head, *Fox*," he said, looking down at his hands.

"There's something going on here," she said, desperate. "Those Haudernelle security consultants are a sham. That ship was in orbit when we took the Rimbolan freighter up, before the very first bomb. And—"

"If she says one more word, shoot her," Balcko snarled.

Sparkle, Candles, and Jonjon were all staring. "I'm being framed," she said, raising her hands, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. "You all know me."

As one of the guards reached for her arm, the elevator behind them chimed and the doors opened. Inchbug stepped in carrying a tray of takeout.

"Hey, everyone, I brought—" she started to say, then stopped mid-sentence. "—What the hell is going on?"

Both guards turned toward her.

"I know you enough," Candles said, and in one blinding-fast move struck out with a hand, knocking the nearest guard down.

Shit, Khifi thought. She hauled the other guard off-balance toward her and brought his head down in hard contact with her knee. As he dropped, she ran past him, sprinting for the still-open elevator doors.

"Stop her!" Balcko yelled. Stickles was staring, his face pale. The guards up on the command platform scrambled for their weapons, then dodged as a full pot of coffee came sailing over the railing, leaving a spinning trail of near-boiling liquid along its arc.

"It just slipped out of my hands, I swear!" Jonjon yelled, his eyes wide with what seemed genuine surprise.

Sparkle had both her hands raised. "I have nothing to do with any of this!"

Khifi threw herself into the elevator past a still-stunned Inchbug just as the doors closed. With everything on lockdown, and not even the crawl safe, there was nowhere to run except up. She stabbed the button for the docks and hoped Balcko's men weren't going to be fast enough to stop her.

She reached the bays. Slamming and locking the door behind her, she shorted the lock with her knife before racing over to the *Lazy Dog* and powering it up. She wanted to jump in and fly away as fast as she could, but she remembered Goffs, dead of an apparent accident just as everything else started going wrong. She wanted to scream as she moved around her ship, checking everything, listening, hoping, until her breath caught.

A single coupling dangled loose beneath the *Lazy Dog's* belly, just barely visible in the shadows. *That's a cooling line*, she thought, reconnecting it, then checked the others. All six were undone, their ends tucked up out of sight.

Balcko wouldn't know to do that; he wasn't a pilot, had come up through the ranks via security. Stickles, though . . . Stickles who had just tried to send her out on a cargo run.

I trusted him, Khifi thought. *I thought he was a friend.*

He also knew enough to know that the coolant couplings wouldn't change the engine pitch, not until the ship started to overheat. She furiously wiped tears from her face as she reconnected the last of them. Everything else checked out. If she'd missed those, she'd have plastered herself and her ship all over Paxillo and taken the truth, whatever it was, with her.

At the helm of the *Lazy Dog*, she reached under her console and yanked free the tug's beacon. Then she hit her engines and was out and moving up into Tanduou's crowded skies.

Now what? she thought. It was only a matter of time before Balcko mustered someone to come after her. Or no time at all: she could see another tug, coming fast toward her from the other side of Velatos Tower. As if on cue, Kaiju's voice crackled to life on her comms.

"Fox?" he said.

"Yes, Kaiju?" she asked. What else was there to say?

"I'm on Ryeneck's secret love line," he said. "I'm getting some weird instructions from Paxillo control that I do not like. Do you have any insight on this?"

"Does it involve shooting me out of the sky as a traitor?"

"As it happens, yes," Kaiju said.

"This whole thing; Goffs, the bombs, hate groups recruiting crawlers—it's rotten. I started to ask questions and someone tried to knife me, and then my ship was sabotaged. Stickles and Balcko are saying I'm a terrorist, and I have no proof to convince you I'm not."

"Very well, Air Captain, you don't leave me much choice," he said. "I'm going to hail you on the official comms and tell you to land or be brought down, and then I'm going to chase you straight up right on your ass like bugs fucking, in that maneuver that messes up tower radar like nothing else. You better have a plan by the time I need to say I can't catch you after all."

She already was nose up and heading for space, intent on reaching Guratahan Sfazil and the dockmaster. Above her the sea of waiting ships was parting, getting out of her way.

Inchbug's voice cut in on the main comms, which the *Lazy Dog* should have been blocked from. "Transit Sat Four moving into position," she said. "Should have weapons tracking in . . . Oh! It's just rebooted. Signal loss for twelve . . . eleven . . ."

Khifi punched the *Lazy Dog's* engines up to full, Kaiju right on her tail. She couldn't get to the Gee in the time left. Between here and the planet, heading straight out, there was only one thing. "You're gonna want to suddenly break off in three," she said to Kaiju.

The abandoned Rimbolan freighter lay dead ahead, its wide cargo doors still gaping open. Pulling all the *Lazy Dog's* arms into tight formation around the tug's body, she aimed for the opening.

"Online in four . . . three," Inchbug said. Kaiju's tug, the *Nobunaga*, veered, just enough to skirt past the outer hull of the freighter as the *Lazy Dog* was swallowed whole.

She hit the braking jets hard, throwing herself forward against her harness, and hoped the former owners had done a thorough job of taking as much with them as they

could. The *Lazy Dog* had more armor than some light military cruisers, but hit the wrong thing in the wrong way and anything could rip you open like you were paper.

The far end of the cargo bay loomed ahead, closing fast. A large pile of crates floated around the disabled cargo drones. Khifi braced herself as the *Lazy Dog* bowled into the abandoned cargo and came to rest in a pile of them.

She jumped in her seat as something red oozed all over the front window of the *Lazy Dog*. It was a long, terrible moment before she realized it was vegetable pulp seeping out through tears in the flexible crate material currently plastered across her front hull. Inflatable crates and rotten tomatoes. She started laughing, couldn't help herself, nor as it quickly turned to all-consuming sobs. Goffs was dead. Murdered? Stickles had betrayed her to her face. The idea that she might never see her wife again was a tiny seed of a black hole in the center of her heart, threatening to pull in and crush everything she cared about.

No, she thought, pulling herself together. *I'm not done fighting yet.*

Her systems were still mostly green. She'd scraped off a few external antennae, but nothing worse. As quickly as she could, she shut down her engines and used her fine maneuvering thrusters to turn around to face out of the long tunnel from her pile of crates, a spider at the back of its cave ready to jump.

"*Lazy Dog*?" Her comms crackled to life again. "This is TexLex over in Luida Dock, calling on the Ryeneck Line."

She stared at it. Who could she trust? Maybe this was a stalling tactic to keep her pinned down. *You are anyway*, she told herself. "Fox here," she said, keeping her voice as even as she could.

"All of Velatos is shut down and Paxillo control is currently offline," TexLex said. "I assume either because of mutiny, or because the mutiny is over. There's no longer a safe channel between you and your team."

"No offense, TexLex, but I don't know you," Fox said. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"Don't got an answer for that, Fox," TexLex said. "Sure would like to know what kind of a shitwell you got my Inchbug spinning down into, though."

Ah. Khifi knew Inchbug had a partner in Luida Dock. "The crawlers didn't set the bombs, and they're being framed," she said. "If I can get back down, there's someone I might be able to get answers out of."

"And how are you gonna do that?" TexLex said.

"I don't know. I—"

"Right fuck you don't, because you can't. You're stuck in your little hidey-hole. What is that thing Inchbug is always quoting you for? Being your best as a team or no good at all? Well, being a captain means not just leading, but trusting your team, and like it or not you've drafted a lot of us into your mess."

"I trusted Stickles."

"Yeah, well, Stickles is nice enough, but you can only trust him to look out for himself. Asking more from him is like trying to get beer back outta piss. You say it's not the crawlers? Give us a chance to prove it. But do it fast, 'cause half the cluster is rioting and Balcko and his offworld security team are rounding up every grubby kid they can lay hands on. As soon as Balcko manages to negotiate a price with one of the ships in orbit—halfa which saw right where you went and are trying to figure out what that info is worth in both creds and trouble—you're done. Your time is running out."

"You know a mover named Sniv?"

"By sight *and* smell," TexLex said.

"He tried to hire me as a tour guide to the crawl right before this mess started. That can't be coincidence."

"We'll find him. Anything else?"

"Yeah. My wife, Lema," Khifi said. "I don't think Paxillo is safe, and she should get out if she can. Please tell her I love her and I'm sorry."

TexLex's voice was softer when she replied. "Will try, Fox. Hold out if you can."

Khifi disconnected and stared out through the frozen streaks of tomato pulp at the small square of space at the end of her tunnel, braced for the moment when it became the end of her life.

* * *

When her comms came back to life nearly an hour later she wished it was TexLex again, but it wasn't. "Ms. Iwalewa," Mr. Balcko's voice came over the docking control channel. "As soon as I find out which ship is sheltering you, I'm going to blow it and everyone in it out of orbit. Is that what you want? More innocent dead?"

"Find me if you can," she said.

"Or . . ." he said. "I have these buttons here in the Dockmaster's private office. Do you want to know what they do? This one locks down residences. Not unreasonable during martial law. How about apartment 4188 in the orange block of Paxillo Deep? Middle of the night, door already locked, who would notice?"

That was Khifi and Lema's apartment. "Don't—" she started to say.

"Oh, and did you know I can also not only turn off oxygen, but turn on reclamation to filter it back out?" he said. "It's not fast, but it *is* thorough. I wonder how long it'd take to scrub the oxygen out of a space that small? A few hours?"

"Mr. Balcko, Lema has nothing to do with any of this," Khifi said. "Let her go and I'll agree to whatever you want."

"I don't know how much use that would be to me. You've already badly interfered in my business," Mr. Balcko said. "I'm going to think about your offer for a while and get back to you."

Balcko was gone. Khifi let out a cry of rage and punched the console. Even the dampers in her suit glove weren't enough to soften the blow and, needing the pain, she punched it again, harder, until her fist felt on the verge of breaking. She had no leverage to force Balcko to let Lema go, nor any confidence he'd keep his word even if she did everything he said.

One thing she knew, she couldn't just sit and wait for Balcko's next move. She unbuckled from her seat and pulled on her exosuit. There was a spare vambrace in the utility locker along with a handful of idled bots. She slipped on the vambrace with gratitude and synced it to her tug's systems, tucking a crackbot into the exosuit's pocket.

Cycling herself out the *Lazy Dog's* airlock, she checked her sensors. As she'd expected rads were off the charts, but her suit could handle it for five or six hours before it became a concern. She'd be lucky to live that long anyway. She had to shove several leaking crates of miscellaneous goo away from the bay's back wall to uncover the main control console, but it was still live. She pulled a cable from her tug's underside over and jacked it in.

That connection was purely information-transfer, but having the freighter's full eyes and ears in addition to the *Lazy Dog's* would help. It wasn't, however, enough.

There were times in the life of a tug pilot that you had to move someone who didn't want to be moved. Taking the crackbot from her pocket, she thumbed it on and let go. The bot hovered midair for a few moments, then zipped across the short space to attach itself to the console. It extended several hair-thin needles into the case and blinked in escalating complexity. Khifi left it to do its job and climbed back into the *Lazy Dog*.

She didn't know what good having control of the Rimbolan would do her, but she didn't have enough resources to be picky. She was conscious of every breath she took, of another's running out.

Back at the helm, she routed signals from the freighter's sensors to her secondary display. Pulling up her data from earlier, she compared it to the cruiser parked in Paxillo: same ship, without a doubt. The public docking feeds had it listed as the *Es-carre*, with a South Haudernelle registration too recent to be entirely believable.

It had not been in orbit alone, and one of the seven small cargo ships she'd seen it with now sat in dock between it and the Martian freighter *Olympian Razor*. She'd hardly begun a scan before the rest jumped out at her: one each in the other six docks of Velatos cluster. Whatever was happening had been planned well in advance, and she had blundered right into its path. *I wonder what Goffs did to get in their way*, she thought. *And if either one of us slowed them down at all.*

Her console pinged. The bot reported back that it had easily rerouted the freighter's command systems and transferred control to her helm.

Tugs didn't receive public broadcast feeds because they were a potentially lethal distraction in the air, but she piped them in now via the Rimbolan, pulling up Velatos official news. The very first image on the screen was a stillpic of Candles. "No, no," she said, turning the audio up.

"... temporary assignment in Paxillo Docks. He fled during the mass arrest of the conspirators led by Iwalewa, but was later seen being shoved out an airlock by masked people with anti-althuman slogans inked on his body. Cluster Manager Balcko released a statement that it is believed that members of Iwalewa's group targeted him out of concern that during his time working among them he may have unwittingly gained information or been able to identify more members of the conspiracy. Shortly after—"

Khifi closed the feed. *They killed Candles and blamed me for it . . . !*

Anger was a star igniting. She punched her comms, trying to reach anyone on Rye-neck's secret line.

"Can't talk long," TexLex answered.

"Tell me you have good news, TexLex. Tell me someone got to my wife and warned her to get out."

"We tried, Fox. The tube lanes under Paxillo have been shut down for hours now, and cluster comms are keyed to emergency personnel only."

"Balcko is killing her," Khifi said. "Right now. And I can't do *anything* to stop him. And Candles! I didn't—"

"Save the timewidth for things we can't guess on our own," TexLex said.

Khifi gritted her teeth. TexLex was right, of course. "The cargo ships that came in, one per dock."

"Balcko's consultants ordered them. They're rounding up every single crawler in Velatos and say they're holding them on the cargo ships until it can be determined if any of them have legal status, or which are involved in Humans First. And after the latest bombing and Candles's death, it's probably safer for them than out on the floors," TexLex said. "People are angry and not thinking, and no one inside Velatos is hearing a story other than Balcko's. The entire cluster is in riot."

"Kaiju . . . Did he get home safe?"

"He left right after he chased you up," she said. "Said he had something to do, then went offline."

"The rest of my team?"

"Not sure, but we think they're being held on one of the cargo ships."

"I'm sorry," Khifi said. She wanted to cry. "Everyone is going to die because of me."

"Fox! Snap out of it. Lots of people could still get dead if you give up and let Balcko win. The only reason he hasn't wiped out all of your team is that he hasn't got *you* yet. He turned you into his convenient fallbody thinking you'd be easily caught, but

he can't find you. Somebody got word out that if any of the ships in orbit ratted on your location, they'd be cursed by a lifetime of shipping mishaps. Other clusters seem to be unsure what to do or what side to take, so no one's talking to Velatos from the ground either. You and Balcko both backed yourselves into corners."

"But he's got all the cards," Khifi said.

"Not all. We got Sniv. Dirtnapper and TugThug are talking to him now," TexLex said. "Come on, *Air Captain*. You're mid-job and your whole team is on the line. What do we do?"

It was so hard to think. "We need to know everything Sniv knows," she said. "Record it, then send it on every public channel you can get on. Everyone needs to know Balcko is behind the bombings, not the crawlers, not my team. Every single death needs to be marked against him."

"Got it," TexLex said. "Balcko's imported security team is about to sweep here again, so I've gotta be scarce for a bit. Later."

Khifi was beginning to hate the amber light of a closed connection.

She turned the newsfeed back on to watch about three minutes footage of a full-scale riot erupting in Notomyo; a family of Ijt, including their young offspring, had been found butchered outside the closed tube station to Freyella Cluster; the words *Non-humans go home or die!* scrawled in their blue-green blood on the floor. Rioters had entered the crawl intent on finding the perpetrators, and what few crawlers were left were fleeing toward Balcko's cargo ships as the only option left to them. She didn't recognize any of the dirty faces shown being hounded across the concourse, but she knew the fear on them only too well.

She turned the feed off, stewing in her inability to act.

"Fox!" TexLex called over the comm. "Can you get news feeds?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Then hold on for some epic Sniveling," she said. "I uploaded Sniv's confession to a friend over in Solaster, and he's passing it on to others. In about two minutes Balcko won't have anywhere to hide on Tanduou. I'm outta here for now. Good luck, and I'll be back in touch if I reach somewhere safe."

Khifi turned back on the news feed just as Balcko called. "Ms. Iwalewa. I hope you haven't been holding your breath waiting for my call. If you immediately return to Paxillo and hand yourself over to my security consultants and sign a full confession on the terrorism charges for aiding Humans First, I could see being more merciful toward your friends."

"Like you were merciful to Candles?" Khifi asked.

The line was silent for a moment. *Is he trying to figure out if I have proof of that, she wondered, or what to throw at me next?*

"I don't think you've got the right attitude yet," Balcko said.

"And I don't think you have much time left," Khifi answered. "Have you watched the news?"

"I *control* the news," Balcko snarled.

"Yeah?"

The news feed switched over to Sniv's face, puffy and red. "It was Mr. Balcko's idea," he was saying. "All Balcko's idea. He planned the whole thing. I was only an advisor on a few *technical* details, nothing illegal!"

Khifi could hear Balcko shouting at someone over their open link. "Find it and kill it!" he was screaming.

"Problems, Mr. Balcko?" she asked.

"You and your wife are dead," he said.

"I already knew as much," she said. "Just returning the favor." The comm link cut out somewhere amid her last few words.

“—Humans First,” Sniv was saying. “No, I mean, the bugs are easy targets, get people angry, focus that anger on the illegals down in the crawl. Now they’re all packed up and ready to go and who really is going to miss them, especially after this? In a few years we’ll have a whole new crop of ‘em.”

“So this isn’t about the aliens and human supremacy?” someone asked. It sounded like TugThug.

“Noooo, it’s about the *crawlers*,” Sniv said. “We’re just cleaning up the garbage in Velatos and making a bit of profit at it for our troubles.”

Below her, a tug she didn’t recognize soared into Paxillo airspace, deftly undocking the security consultant’s cruiser. It rose quickly with the tug, the cloud of ships above parting again. As she watched, another tug pulled one of the cargo ships free from Novodinia and began its ascent.

“No!” she shouted. Balcko was not going to get away that easy. She ran through the hijacked controls to the freighter, found what she was looking for: three sets of sub-compartment blast doors to the cargo bay. She watched as her distant square of open space narrowed to a slit and disappeared. Two sets fully closed, one jammed at 80 percent. Close enough. The main cargo bay doors were still wide open.

She powered on the Rimbolan’s engines and began drifting toward an intercept point with the cruiser. *Bet you’re not looking up right now*, she thought.

The tug released the *Escarre* as soon as they were through the field of waiting ships. She could now make out the giant yellow smiley-face painted on its nose, Xs for eyes. *Burnout*.

Burnout dipped down, beelining for the cargo ship still on the ground in Paxillo.

“Just you and me now,” she said, eyes riveted on the cruiser. She pushed the engines up to full. The *Escarre* must have noticed her at the last moment because it began to turn, but the wide maw of the giant freighter caught it nearly nose-on. Khifi braced against her console as the cruiser punched through two sets of sub-compartment doors before becoming wedged fast, fully two-thirds of the ship swallowed by the Rimbolan. The freighter complained desperately across her boards about multiple hull ruptures, red and yellow warning lights blinking frenetically. For all that the freighter was already abandoned and dying, she felt a pang of guilt for the catastrophic damage.

She flipped on her comms. “This is the *Lazy Dog*, calling the *Escarre*,” she said. “Are you prepared to meet my demands?”

It was Stickles who answered. “Fox,” he said. “That was incredibly stupid of you. Think what you could still lose. Your wife could still be saved if we acted right now. The question is, do you love her enough to save her?”

“Oh, fuck you and your manipulative bullshit,” she said. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“Do you know how much cred your useless crawlers are worth on the open market? They’re young, they’re tough, they’ve got no one who cares what happens to them. And they’ll be better off, be taken care of and fed regularly in exchange for their work. They’ll be *valued*. This is a private channel, just you and me, so I have no reason to lie. You could save your wife, maybe get a small share of the profit, *and* help your crawlers find a better life.”

“So human trafficking is altruism, for you? What about all the people you’ve killed, whose lives you’ve destroyed? Do you think they don’t matter? You bombed your own people, you killed Goffs, you murdered aliens to cover your actions. Don’t you think that matters?”

“To be honest, not really,” Stickles said. “If not us, it would have been someone else eventually. You just can’t understand that, can you?”

“Where is the rest of my team?” Khifi asked.

“They’re on one of our ships. If you want to see them again—”

"Stop with the threats. Land the three cargo ships you've had lifted and let everyone on board all seven of them go. And then we can negotiate."

"Enough of this." Balcko cut in on the line. "Ms. Iwalewa, I admire your resourcefulness, but we've got a ride coming to pick us up and you won't be coming with us."

The Rimbolan's proximity alarms flared, and she glanced over at the sensors in alarm. There was a tug positioning itself above the freighter's long topdeck, a cutter attached to its underside. Right on cue, Burnout's voice was added to the comm traffic. "Hello, Fox," he said.

"Hello, Burnout. You come to kill me?"

"On Balcko's orders, of course," he said. "Clever of you to get him and Stickles to confirm Sniv's confession on your private line, not knowing you were piping it over the freighter's systems down to the public feeds in Tanduou."

"It seemed a conversation worth sharing," Khifi said.

"Burnout, enough of this; *kill her*," Balcko said. "You have your orders."

"I do," Burnout said. "Now shut up for a minute. Fox, remember in the Hellwater when you said that, if you beat me, you wanted everyone to know it was a fair fight?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Well, this ain't one either. We'll settle this on the ground, if you make it."

Burnout disconnected.

"Where the hell is he going?" she heard Balcko ask, as Burnout's tug fell to one side and headed back to Novodinia.

Khifi smiled, powered up the Rimbolan's engines.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Balcko demanded.

"Escalating," she said. The freighter was struggling to turn, maneuvering engines reporting varying degrees of dysfunction or overload, but once she got it pointed the way she wanted to go the main engines accelerated decently. She wished she could see the bright yellow face of Guratahan Sfazil beyond Tanduou, see its second moon Tammou one more time with her own eyes, but she didn't figure it ultimately mattered; it would hurt just as much to hit.

Someone onboard the *Escarre* figured out where they were going; her boards flared in alarm as an escape pod ejected from the cruiser without being fully clear of the cargo bay and turned itself into a brief ball of fire at the lip of the Rimbolan's mouth. The remaining maneuvering thrusters on that side of the ship went offline, but she wasn't planning to change course anyway.

"Ms. Iwalewa, stop this freighter and we'll let your teammates free," Balcko's voice came over the comms.

"Mr. Balcko," she said. "And here I was hoping the escape pod was you."

"That was your friend Stickles trying to cut and run," he said. "Not much of a loss. So, I'll give you your teammates back and you let us off this ride, yes?"

"No," she said. "You let my teammates free, and you let all the crawlers go, and then *maybe* I let you off this ride."

There was a long pause, then a very hate-filled, "It's a deal."

"I'm not sure that deal's still available," Khifi said. "Let me think about it and get back to you." She cut the connection to the *Escarre*.

Below, she watched a trio of tugs appear heading up from Henrici Dock in the Myonota cluster. They straightlined for the cargo ships that were no longer in dock. The cargo ships scattered, trying to evade, but the sky was still crowded and the tugs faster and more maneuverable. She watched as one by one the ships were pulled back down to ground. A suited team emerged on the surface from inside Luida Dock and swarmed over one. The bright sparks of cutting torches were tiny flares on her display screen.

As if in sympathy, a few more red alerts on the Rimbolan's sensor feed lit up. "What the hell are you up to?" she asked, but she already knew. They were desperate if they were firing the cruiser's weapons inside the cargo hold. So far the last remaining set of doors between them was holding.

The barrage stopped and didn't start up again. The one remaining functional sensor reported exactly what she expected: movement.

Still not that easy, she thought. She activated the hull breach systems. Only about a third of the sprayers were online, but they were most likely enough to fill the bay with fast-hardening foam. She wondered if they'd be able to get back inside their ship before it solidified, or if someone was going to be carving their corpses out as part of a final salvage job. *Assuming there's any piece of us left bigger than a pebble.*

"Fox, this is Siren in Henrici cluster." Her comms reactivated. "TexLex is on the move and offline, and I'm your new designated ears. Four of the cargo ships surrendered without a fight and released all their passengers. Luida and Velatos Docks stormed theirs as soon as they landed. Paxillo's security chief Bell apparently had a disagreement with Balcko's consultants and went missing, but we've got a team from Paxillo, Oreasta, and Novodinia retaking Paxillo Dock as we speak. We think your teammates and Bell are aboard the cargo ship there, and there's signs of fighting inside. As soon as we've got the control room, we'll do what we can to try to help your wife. But it's been . . ."

"But it's been too long. I know," Khifi said. "Thank you for trying."

"This is TexLex back on ground in Luida." TexLex came on the line. "We have another ship incoming!"

Khifi's heart, already shattered by the day, seemed to grind itself to a fine powder of despair. "Not more—"

"It's the *Nobunaga!*" Siren said. "Kaiju has come home!"

"Hey, Siren!" Kaiju got on the line as well. "You miss me?"

"Always, monsterboy. Who else I gonna put my cold feet on when I sleep? Where the hell did you go?"

"I went to pick up some stranded friends," he said. "Where's safe to land in Velatos?"

"Luida is now," TexLex said.

"Then we're coming there. Hang on."

"Fox," TexLex said. "You can slow that hunkashit down now. They ain't going anywhere."

"Thanks, but I've got this," she said. She checked the Rimbolan's sensors again, saw that nothing new had failed and she was still on course for a hard meet with Tammou.

"Air Captain, stop or I'll come get in your way and make you kill me too," Kaiju answered.

"No," she said. "I'm still your air captain, and I order you to stand down."

Another voice came on the line. "I override that order."

The dockmaster.

"Told you I picked up some friends," Kaiju said. "I got through to Quizzie on private channels and found out they'd been cut off from all offworld feeds, and every time they tried to leave they were told there were mechanical problems in dock."

"Fox," the dockmaster said. "You haven't changed course or speed."

"They killed my friends, sir. They killed my *wife*."

"So you think we should lose more people?" the dockmaster said. "What about the rest of your team? Don't you think they need you—that you all need each other—more than ever right now? This is not the only way to serve justice."

"Sir," she said. It felt like begging.

"You still haven't changed course," the dockmaster said.

"Please, Fox?" Quizzie asked.

"Fuck this shit all to hell," Khifi said, wanting to throw and smash and kick something. Anything. She could barely see through the flood of tears as she reached for her connection to the Rimbolan and cut the freighter's main engines, flipped on the brakera. She tapped her comms one last time. "Acknowledged," she said, then shut the line down.

* * *

Kaiju picked up the cutter from Novodinia and brought it up, carefully lifting free the hull plates above the *Lazy Dog*. When there was a big enough hole, Khifi used two of her tug's long arms to push herself free of the freighter. From the outside, the Rimbolan was a spectacular mess. The *Escarre* had nearly split it apart, jagged tears along much of the length of the cargo bay, plates warped and buckled, hull struts protruding like broken bones.

"Whoa," she said.

"Don't forget, they signed a damage waiver," Kaiju said. "I think we're still good." She laughed at that, despite all.

Khifi followed the *Nobunaga* down, and when Kaiju turned toward Paxillo she didn't even think to question it. She climbed out of her tug, walked through post-landing procedures as if she was on autopilot, as if they still mattered, and her hand lingered on the *Lazy Dog's* tomato-splattered hull as she went.

"They retook Paxillo while I was on my way up. We needed our coffee machine back," Kaiju said. As the doors on control opened he held out a hand. "After you, Air Captain."

She stepped onto the control floor and stopped. Standing there was the dockmaster and Chief Bell, and behind them in a semicircle was Redrum, Jonjon, and Inchbug with her arms around someone she could only assume was TexLex. Jonjon's arm was in a sling, and both Redrum and Bell were sporting swollen and bruised faces, but everyone was smiling.

"Welcome home, Air Captain," the dockmaster said.

"You're all alive," she said.

"You should've seen Jonjon," Inchbug said. "Never would have thought he had that kind of a fight in him."

"I bit someone," Jonjon said, beaming with pride.

"I . . ." Khifi started to say, but it was all so overwhelming that she just stood there in shock.

"Fox!" Sparkle called from her comm station. "Foible's team is on the line! She's not there!"

". . . What?"

"Your apartment! Foible and Grippy cut the door down. There's no one *there*."

Her knees gave out, sending her tumbling. Kaiju caught her halfway to the floor, and he and Bell helped her into a chair. She was barely sitting before she tried to stand again. Both men put hands on her shoulders to keep her from rising. "Xie's," she said. "I have to get to Xie's."

"It's not safe to go down there yet," the dockmaster said. "There's still most of a riot going on, screens were smashed, and while everyone on Tanduou now knows your face, not nearly as many know you're not the enemy. I'm bringing in extra security from all over Tanduou to put the riots down. Give me a chance to do that first?"

She didn't want to wait at all, not one extra second, but she knew he was right. She nodded.

"Dockmaster," Sparkle said. "Quizzie is calling from the secure dock. They've got Balcko down using a rescue pod."

"Chief Bell, with me," the dockmaster said. "Fox, will you accompany us?"

“Yeah,” Khifi said.

She followed the dockmaster and Bell down through the tower and into the docking corridors, straight to a heavy door. There were two Luida security officers there waiting outside with Quizzie. “Not a word out of them,” Quizzie said. “They tried the door a couple of times then gave up.”

Chief Bell unlocked the door and stepped back as it rumbled open. Balcko, Arve, and three other men stood waiting. Arve’s weapon was on the floor at his feet; from the expression on his face surrendering his weapon was not his idea. “Dockmaster,” Mr. Balcko said. “I’m sure if you let me explain—”

The dockmaster raised a hand, and Balcko fell silent. He turned toward the other man. “I assume you’re either Allen or Arve?”

“Arve,” Arve said. “My crew and I are foreign nationals and we insist on our right to speak to a representative of our colony before giving any statements or being subjected to any legal proceedings.”

“Both Haudernelle ambassadors expressed disinterest in speaking with you,” Chief Bell said.

“We’re not from Haud—”

“No? You came here under a South Haudie flag. I see no reason to look elsewhere for someone willing to claim you,” the dockmaster interrupted. “Where is Mr. Allen?”

“He and our pilot left the *Escarre* in an attempt to reach Ms. Iwalewa and negotiate,” Balcko said. “They didn’t return and we were unable to get the airlock door open again.”

“You’ll find them stuck in hull foam aboard the Rimbolan,” Khifi said. The dockmaster’s lip twitched up in a faint smile.

“You have no proof of our wrongdoing,” Balcko said. “Only *her* word and that of people obviously under her influence.” He pointed at Khifi. “Sniv is one of her creatures, not mine, as are the crawlers. That’s well known.”

“Let’s ask one,” the dockmaster said. He turned to a familiar if unexpected figure at her side. The change in context threw her badly, having not seen the youth in weeks, and then last scrounging for food scraps with Mole at his side, caked in crawl dust.

“Birdie!” Khifi said.

“Hey Fox,” Birdie said.

“Birdie, were the crawlers being recruited by Humans First?” the dockmaster asked.

“Nope,” he answered.

“That’s good enough for me,” the dockmaster said. He held out his hand and Chief Bell slapped his pistol into it.

“Wait!” Balcko said, raising his hands.

The dockmaster shot him in the head, and whatever thin denials Balcko had left died with him. “Justice, Fox. Properly administered by the authorities, and with no further collateral losses,” he said. He handed the pistol back to Bell. “This is why it’s always useful to have a source of inside information. Right, Birdie?”

“Right, Uncle,” Birdie said.

“Chief Bell, what’s the situation down on the floor?”

Bell had just been checking his comms. “Concourse is cleared, everyone is under curfew until further notice,” he said. “We have a lot of crawlers in cargo warehouses throughout the cluster. Some need medical care, and they’re all hungry.”

“Get food and water to them. Tell them they’re not in trouble and we’ll be talking to them and letting them go free as soon as we know it’s safe.”

“Not all will want to talk,” Birdie said.

“That’s okay too.” The dockmaster turned to Fox. “Now. You wanted to go to Xie-Yan Che’s shop?”

* * *

It was so hard not to run, not to fly across the concourse to that tiny shop. Only the thought that Lema might not be there, might have been caught up in the disaster somewhere else where she'd never be found, slowed her steps until she was a walking war between anticipation and dread.

Xie's door was locked with curtains pulled across the shop windows, but he opened up on the second chime. He looked haggard, anxious, but his eyebrows went up in delight. "Khif!" he shouted, flinging himself through the door and pulling her into an embrace.

"Xie, you're the best agent a sculptor could have, but if you don't let go of my wife and get out of my way I'm going to crush you into a tiny little ball of a man and throw you down the hall," a voice said from the doorway, and Khifi froze.

Xie let go and stepped back, and it seemed almost faster than light could move that her wife was wrapping her arms around her. Khifi could feel tears on her neck, and was struck by a mortifying guilt. "I tried to get word to you, to get you out," she said. "I tried, Lema, but I failed. I thought Balcko killed you."

"You did get word to me," she said.

"What? How?"

Lema nodded her head toward the shop door. Peering around the corner was Tuck. "Mole dropped him off here," Lema said. "He told Xie about the attack on you in the concourse and that he thought we were all in danger, and Xie called me."

"Is Mole still here?" Khifi asked.

"No, he left right after," Xie said.

The dockmaster coughed gently. "Birdie went to find him," he said.

"Are you okay?" Lema asked Khifi.

"I don't know," she answered. "Peezy's dead, and Candles—"

"They couldn't find his body," the dockmaster said.

"What?"

"After he was thrown out the airlock. He disappeared. You know that the Colony are also oxygen-injectors? If he managed to get indoors again fast enough . . ."

"Oh, I hope so. He was a good kid. Good pilot, too." Khifi sagged against her wife. "I still can't believe you're okay."

Lema straightened up. "I'm not okay," she said. "I saw my wife's face on the news as she was branded a terrorist and mass-murderer. I watched riots break out and people forming hunting parties to look for her, and I am *not okay* with that. I don't think we're ever going to feel safe here again. I know I won't."

"What do you want us to do?" Khifi asked.

"Go somewhere else. I can work anywhere, but you . . . you need to choose."

"I've been here almost my whole life. Everything I know is here. Where would I go? What would I do?"

Quizzie coughed. "I wasn't going to pass this on for obvious selfish reasons, and I want you all to appreciate how conflicted this makes me," she said. "The *Olympian Razor*, the Martian ship that's been in dock through this whole mess? Sent me an inforeq as to whether you were on contract and if so, if it could be bought out, in the interests of extending you a job offer. Apparently you impressed them."

". . . What?" Khifi said.

Quizzie rolled her eyes. "It was a terrible idea to ram the cruiser with the Rimbolan, but it was still beautifully executed," she said. The dockmaster held out a hand, and she passed him her handpad with the message on it. "And if I had to guess, they must be Free Marsers, because they seemed just as taken with your willingness to defy authority."

"I know some of these names," the dockmaster said. "They'll treat you fairly and well."

"I don't know," Khifi said. She looked to Lema.

"I admit, I like the idea of being near Earth again," she said, "but it's up to you."

"You'll keep an eye on the crawlers?" she asked the dockmaster, and he nodded. She looked back to her wife. "Then yes," she said. "I can't bear ever living through another day where I don't know you're safe."

"Good," Lema said. "And we're bringing Tuck."

"Do you need me to send someone for your things?" the dockmaster asked.

Khifi smiled as Tuck wrapped his skinny arms around her legs again. "No," she said. "I have everything that matters right here."

* * *

The *Olympian Razor* was already back in orbit when Khifi took the *Lazy Dog* up out of Tanduou space for the last time. A battered but unbroken Mole had seen them off at the dock, Birdie by his side. He declined the offer to come with them. "Learning textbook," he'd said. "Earn my own way out."

"After we dock and transfer, how does your tug get back down? Autopilot?" Lema asked.

"No," Khifi said. She smiled. "Wait and see."

* * *

The *Olympian Razor* took the jump point from Guratahan Sfazil in toward Haudernelle, first of several hops on the long trip to Sol, with a large, spider-like barnacle clinging to its back. If anyone in Paxillo had expected otherwise—and she had no reason to doubt they had—no one dared call her on it.

Systems on minimum, Khifi sat on the small couch behind her pilot's chair, her head on Lema's shoulder as exhaustion settled in. Tuck was asleep beside her, barely a lump buried under a blanket.

"Khif," Lema said, her voice a whisper. With effort, Khifi opened her eyes. In her hand, Lema was holding the small, badly flattened box from Xie's. "Open it."

Khifi took it, popped the seal. Inside was a silver shape, elegant and curving in the distinctive way of all Lema's designs. "It's beautiful," she said. Nodding her head forward she slipped the necklace on and felt the metal warm against her skin. "What is it?"

"An Earth bird," Lema said. "It's called a stork."

"Oh," Khifi said, none the wiser. She closed her eyes and leaned back against Lema, listening to the low hum of the *Lazy Dog's* systems and the slow heartbeat of her wife, both of them reassuring and steady and familiar, and let sleep catch her at last.