

# THE HIND

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A twinge of nausea rose, but Kym drove it back, swallowed in a dry throat, and looked down at the list again. She should have spent more of her water ration to add to the energy bar she consumed. She could afford the ration, and she was going to need to be at her best, physically and mentally. This wouldn't be easy. The whole idea of a list of targeted names sickened her, but this had to be done. It would require all her strength and more fortitude.

She had never killed anyone before.

Kym moved quietly, any slight sounds she made masked by the big ship's constant background rumble. The *Hind* was always murmuring, vibrating, echoing as it drifted along on its endless journey between the stars. The hum of the great engines had been there all her life, powering the grav units and the environmental basics, the light and heat and air and water recyclers. But they did little else despite their power. The *Hind* was adrift, and would be adrift for the next generation and the next and the next after that: forever.

Right now the important part was that the deep purr of the engines covered her movements as she tracked down the fifth name on the list, an old woman named Sudio. Kym had decided that she would be the easiest target, and Kym wanted this to be over with, wanted to earn her permit and get on with her lives.

Kym hurried along the access corridor. Two of the lights were flickering, and several more had gone out, leaving some spaces in deep shadow as she took the shortcut. Kym told herself that she would come back and fix those lights once this job was done. She could fix about anything, and liked doing it. It was a skill she'd inherited from her mother and her mother's mother.

Kym knew the old woman often spent afternoons in the tiny apple orchard amidships. The *Hind's* personnel records were still incomplete despite the years Kym had spent recovering them. But she knew the woman, Sudio, wasn't gardening, wasn't doing any sort of definable job that helped keep the damaged vessel and all of the passengers alive. There were signs of dementia, the newer hand-written reports said. Short-term memory was slipping, and she was barely able to accomplish the simplest of assigned tasks. The report said she was "a drain on resources and no longer productive."

So the ship's council had declared her "deadwood to be cleared," an archaic reference that Kym didn't understand and the council probably didn't either. But the rules and terminology were clear. The list had its deadwood names, and permits were hard to come by, nearly impossible . . . they came only at the cost of a life.

Kym reached an intersection of narrow metal-walled corridors and turned left, knowing it would lead into the orchard that occupied one large corner of the terrarium chamber. From the other direction she heard scuttling movements in the deeper shadows. Kym whirled around to face that direction, afraid someone might try to attack her, some other competitor also trying to cross a name off the list. But the figures were furtive, scurrying away, grabbing scavenged belongings and fleeing into the darkness.

Kym saw and frowned in disgust. Ferals! Uncounted, undocumented parasites who lived in the underbelly of the ship, who stole food and water and bred like rats, without any oversight. Kym would never want that for herself; it would be a hard and dangerous life. But if this didn't work, that would be her life.

Close now, she looked down at the list of names again, reassuring herself that this was what must be done, and then folded it and put it into her pocket. She wanted both hands free as she moved ahead, seeing the brighter light in front of her shining through an undogged hatch, the artificial sunlight shining down on the verdant gardens and orchards that filled the midships.

She reached the opening, walked inside, and instantly smelled the freshness of leaves and orange blossoms and peaches and, beyond them, the vegetable garden. Here, the oxygen came from the trees themselves rather than through air filters and chemical scrubbers.

There was a wonder to it that she'd forgotten, working away at her maintenance job, fixing condensers and wiring and lighting and processors and filter sealants and bypass cards and all the rest. She was so busy, and so good at the necessary work that she did, fixing anything and everything that she could with her dwindling supplies, that she hadn't been here since her childhood, not once in the years since her mother Ana Maria's death.

She heard voices as soon as she walked in, blinking under the bright full-spectrum lights. A few seconds later she spotted the old woman, someone so ancient she must be the oldest person of the nine hundred and fifty-three known and documented passengers aboard the *Hind*. Kym froze as the prospect of what she planned to do suddenly became real, tangible, and deadly.

Sudio had folded her stick-like legs under her and sat under one of the dwarf apple trees. The air was moist and clean. An unexpected smile came to Kym's face, looking at the strangely bucolic scene, not unlike some of the images she'd recovered in the past few years from the remnants of the *Hind's* digital library.

But this wasn't any more real than those pictures from the past. Reality quickly returned. This was the *Hind*, and its resources were limited, and the old woman who sat there faced her end. Kym had to dispose of her, kill her—*murder* her.

Kym had a knife, and now her gut clenched again as she felt the pressure of the blade flat against her waist where she'd placed it. Another wave of nausea roared up inside her as she imagined how messy the act would be. Easy enough in theory, sure, but there would be blood, a lot of it, and if the old woman didn't die fast, if she lingered and looked at Kym . . . that thought was hard to bear.

Perhaps she wouldn't even need the knife. Sudio's neck could be broken like one of the crumbling old pipes in the damaged section of the ship near the bridge. Could Kym do that with her bare hands? She didn't know. Yet.

Sudio sat cross-legged under the apple tree with four children listening to her, all of them sitting, too, cross-legged on the green grass. "And how I wish you had seen those things," Sudio was saying. "The cities and their tall buildings, the endless blue sky with puffy clouds, the farm fields that stretched for miles, the mountains so tall they held snow—snow!—even on the hottest days of summer."

A little girl, seven or eight years old, raised her hand, and Sudio pointed to her and said, "Alyssa? You have something you want to add?"

The girl sniggered, "I'm Genoa, Grandmother Sudio. You always get it wrong!"

Sudio smiled. "All right, Genoa, you have something to say?" she asked in a quavering voice, pointing with a finger at the girl. Sudio's hand trembled, Kym could see, and then noticed the same tremor in her head, a little movement side to side, unsteady.

"I do! Snow is water vapor turned into ice crystals that form complex patterns."

Sudio clapped her hands. "Very good!" And then she added, wistfully, "I grew up in the mountains, where snow used to fall gently from the sky and build up to be knee deep sometimes, children. And it stayed on the ground until the weather warmed and melted it."

"Turning it back into water!" blurted the young boy.

"Yes, Teddy, that's it," Sudio said, and clapped her hands once more.

All the children laughed as the boy said, "I'm Chennai, Grandmother Sudio. You always forget!" And that brought more peals of laughter.

The children, three girls and one boy, appeared to range in age from six to ten. They wore clean, but threadbare, ship uniforms. They looked like they'd had food to eat and clear water enough to drink, and they could thank Kym for the water. It was her work on sealing the core pipes of the osmosis filters that had staved off the water crisis of last year. Doing that had cost her much of her remaining sealant, but for now the water was clear and clean, just like the children. They were clearly authorized members of the ship's complement, perhaps even children of council members.

Sudio pointed unsteadily at the youngest of the children. "I was your age when our ship departed, Kathy," she said.

"I'm Roma, Grandmother Sudio!" the girl shot back, laughing. Sudio smiled and laughed along with them.

Then she went on, "Of course I didn't understand what the voyage was all about. Only that my family had signed up, taking a chance and knowing we would never go back to Earth. My mother took me to a forest on that last week, told me to stand and just listen beside a stream as the water rushed over the rocks, as the wind brushed the trees and made the pine boughs scrape together." Sudio let out a long sigh. "Such a beautiful peaceful sound." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, children, that you'll never know the wind."

"I feel air through the recirculation ducts," said the boy, Chennai. Kym guessed he was about ten.

"And it feels good, doesn't it, Kenny?"—"Chennai!" the boy said—"but it's not the

same,” Sudio said. “You will never have that sense of the vastness of a world, you’ll never smell the flowers and trees on the wind, or feel the warmth of a spring breeze, or the bite of a winter wind so cold it takes your breath away.”

The old woman smiled, “We even saw a deer that day we were in the forest. It looked up at us, just stared, and then it bounded off into the trees.

“It was an amazing day. My mother and grandmother took me that day to burn all those images into my memory. I didn’t understand what a great gift they were giving me. None of you will ever know a world like that, a whole world! Please keep coming here so I can share my memories with you.”

“But we’ll get to a planet soon!” Chennai said. “My dad says so!”

“Maybe, child,” said Sudio, “maybe.” She gave a false but reassuring smile.

These children were too young to understand their fate and the hopelessness of the voyage. At eighteen Kym had been told the real story. The ship would never make it to its destination. Not after the deadly debris shower that had damaged the engines, smashed right through other parts of the ship, including the bridge, killing the command crew. The bulkheads had held, and the ship and most of its complement had survived. But that was more than fifty years ago, and the ship still limped along, repaired as best they could manage, self-sufficient but only barely, with no guidance, no room for growth and not a scrap of resources to be wasted.

Old Sudio had been deemed a waste of those scant resources by the council, and Kym could see why. The hand tremors, the memory problems, the shaky voice. All of that showed that Sudio was past her time.

The woman looked up from under the tree, startled to see pale and anxious Kym looking at her from just inside the narrow access passage. Kym held the scrap of paper in her hand, a page torn from the only paper book she had in her quarters and one of the few paper books left on the ship, *The Elemental Guide*.

Sudio sighed, gave a slight shrug, and waved her over. Ten steps and Kym was there. She could do it right here.

But as Kym approached, Sudio’s eyes brightened and a wide smile emerged. “Juliana!” she said brightly, firmly. “Where have you been hiding?”

Kym stopped, stared. Who did Sudio think Kym was? Kym didn’t know of any Julianas on the *Hind*. The only Juliana she’d ever known was her abuela, Juliana Ortiz. And Abuela Juli, as Kym’s mother had called her when telling Kym about her, was one of the dozens who’d died when the cloud of debris tore through the *Hind* those fifty years ago. Could Sudio have known her?

“You haven’t changed a bit, Juliana!” Sudio said as she slowly unwound from the crisscross sitting position she’d been in and shakily stood there to smile and then walk toward Kym. She was terribly thin and walked as if she might topple over at the next step. A cane would have helped her, Kym thought; but she supposed Sudio didn’t want to admit to her frailty. The *Hind* didn’t have the resources to take care of those who couldn’t take care of themselves. In fact, some council member must have seen Sudio in the corridors or at the mess hall, and that was why her name was on the list.

Kym was disarmed by Sudio’s smile and her pleasant confusion. There was a moment, right at the very start of this confrontation, when she could have rushed in and done what she’d planned to do. But not now, that moment had passed. Now, this was a sweet, confused, innocent old lady who liked to chat in the orchard with the children. Killing her was unthinkable.

“Hello, Sudio,” Kym said, kindly. “I’m not Juliana. I’m Kym. My abuela was Juliana, maybe you’re confusing me with her?”

Sudio paused, confused. She whispered, “Your grandmother?”

And then she seemed to collect herself, stood up a little straighter, spoke a little more forcefully, “Oh, of course you’re her granddaughter. What’s your name, dear?”

"Kym. My name is Kym."

She reached out to take Kym's hand, "I knew your grandmother well, dear."

"That was a long time ago," Kym said.

"Doesn't seem so long, really," Sudio said. "Juli and I worked in forward communications and navigation together in those days, up next to the bridge. I was on q-coms, she was tech repair and guidance." She smiled. "You wear your hair the same way she did. And the way you stand? It could be her right here in front of me, dear."

"You were friends," said Kym, thinking it must be so.

Sudio shrugged, the memories of those days, of that one particular day, clear in her memory. "Yes, we were friends and even more. I thought so much of her. We were all smart, you know, or thought we were, working up in the command decks; but she was so beautiful and strong. I loved her, I suppose. And she was brave! The only reason I'm here now talking to you is because of her bravery."

"What do you mean?"

"She saved my life, dear, simple as that."

Kym's eyes widened. "Abuela Juli saved your life?"

Sudio chuckled. "She was no abuela then, girl. We were all about your age. Almost kids, really, though we didn't admit it. We were running the whole ship, after all! The eight of us were at the end of our regular shift, monitoring the q-coms and checking for any course corrections. It was simple work, really, since mostly we just talked to the *Hind* and told it what to do, since all eight of us had voice control access. Everything was normal. Another minute or two and the third shift would be there and we could go eat some dinner.

"Then we ran into that debris cloud. Dozens of tiny particles at unimaginable velocity. Holes everywhere suddenly! Horns blaring and lights flashing and then a huge jolt as something bigger slammed into some other part of the ship, and I knew some of that debris was big.

"Two of my friends were hit by those bits of debris that punctured the hull and then went right through them, too, and then out the other side of the hull. Tenea and Jacob had dozens of holes clear through both of them from their heads to their waists, right where they sat.

"A cloud of those particles buzzed right by me. By the time I could blink in surprise they'd exited out the other side, leaving more holes in the hull. But they'd missed me and most of the others.

"Most of us just sat there for a few seconds, trying to figure out what had just happened. But not Juliana. She was up instantly. She'd been nicked in the left arm by one of those pebbles, and there was a lot of blood on her uniform, but that didn't stop her. She was barking orders at the *Hind*, running over to check out Jacob and Tenea, yelling at us to get to the bulkhead hatch so we could get out before the ship sealed us in tight.

"I looked over and there was blood oozing out of Jacob, who was slumped in his seat. Tenea was looking at her hand. It was covered in blood from where she'd reached up to feel the wound on the side of her head. She looked at me and asked 'What?' and then she collapsed, too. I thought she was dead."

Sudio's voice was steady and firm as she remembered that day. "I thought I was dead, too, dear. I was your age, you know? Life had really just started. I was on a great ship exploring the Universe and ready to tame a new world once we got there, and now I was going to die, out of breath, out of oxygen, sitting in my seat in q-com."

"But you didn't die. What happened?"

"Juliana—your grandmother!—happened. She saved us all, and died doing it. She got us up and moving as she ran to the bulkhead hatch. The dogs had slapped into place on the hatch, sealing us off to save the ship. But Juliana used our emergency

protocol—Sir Francis Drake—and the *Hind* slid the dogs back, and the hatch, battered as it was, slid partway open.

“She started shoving us through the hatch. I was the next-to-last one to get through, and your grandmother was next, but then she heard Tenea, still alive, call for help and the last thing I saw was Juliana turning around to go back for Tenea. She hadn’t taken more than a step in that direction when the bigger blast happened, the one that tore off the bridge blister, so all that was left to guide the ship was our q-coms and nav quarters, and no one was ever able to get them started again, so on we go, aimless. But it was your grandmother Juliana who saved me and the others, girl. Never forget that.”

Kym was amazed to hear this from Sudio. A few minutes ago Sudio had seemed lost in a fog when she was talking to the children. She’d hardly been able to remember their names. But now, listening to her, Kym knew Sudio’s memories from that cataclysmic day were sharp and true and accurate. And Kym had never heard any of this before. Her mother Ana Maria had been just a child herself in those days and didn’t know any details. There must have been an official inquiry, Kym thought. That, after all, is what led to the council being formed in the first place. But how it all happened? No one really knew anymore. It happened, that was all. And the *Hind* had been limping along since then.

“Grandmother Sudio! Grandmother Sudio!” the children were calling. Sudio turned around to look at them and waved before turning back to Kym to say, “They’re nice children.”

“What are their names?” Sudio asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, dear, they change all the time. Teddy is the boy, I’m sure of that. The girls? I don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” said Kym, and smiled, then gave Sudio a hug and said, “I’d like to hear more of your stories about Earth,” and walked with her back over to the grassy spot under the apple tree.

Kym sat down crisscross with the children and listened for an hour or so before leaving. Such stories! Kym had never heard anything like them, stories of Old Earth and its weather and its people and how they lived.

Abuela Juli must have had similar stories to tell, and surely passed them on to her daughter, Ana Maria, who would have passed them on to her own daughter Kym if her life hadn’t been shortened by pneumonia, something the medroom could have cured, Kym had been told. But the medroom, too, had felt the fury of the debris swarm. So much gone on that horrible day. The bridge and so much more. Control, knowledge, history: all of it gone.

Kym left knowing Sudio wasn’t her target. Certainly, the old woman was the easiest target on the council’s list, but the council was wrong. Sudio wasn’t “deadwood.” Not at all. Kym would have to go to the next on the list.

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Galen Porthos was a productive man in his late forties, physically fit, requiring little costly medical attention, a viable member of the ship’s population—on paper at least.

Unofficially, though, he was vile, violent, and unrepentant. The council must have placed his name on the list because they were aware of what he had done. Many of the hidden spy cams, especially in the upper decks, were no longer functional, but some of the cameras still worked and, according to the dossier they had provided Kym and the other three applicants for a permit, he had raped and beaten at least five women. There were probably more that had not been caught by the surveillance imagers.

He had gotten two women pregnant. One of the victims had terminated the fetus as required while the other, broken and frantic, had left her viable job and disappeared into the lower levels, joining the ferals; so she was off the record, never officially seen

again, but still draining the ship's meager resources, she and her accidental offspring. And though that woman was a criminal and subject to punishment if she and her child were ever caught, the real person who deserved punishment, who deserved in fact to die, was Galen.

Kym thought she could do it.

She had her knife as well as a hammer she had obtained from one of the tool lockers. Killing him would be intimate and dangerous. She would have to move quickly and surprise him, not letting second thoughts deter her.

But how to do it? Galen Porthos would fight back, and he was larger than Kym and stronger. She would have to move fast and take advantage of surprise. It would be risky but possible. He worked down in the engineering decks, those hot, high bays where the pulse engines thrummed and their heat drove turbines to circulate the air and to power the life-support machinery and filtration systems. There would be plenty of places there, narrow corridors and walkways, where she could corner him and get it done before he knew what was happening.

Kym entered through the high bay hatch and anxiously looked around. Galen worked a monitoring job; studying pressure gauges, changing filters, swapping out worn components with jury-rigged parts. The smell of fumes and the ripples of heat in the air struck her as she entered. She breathed shallowly, trying not to cough and give herself away. The smell was oily and held a sharp tang, making her lightheaded. Maybe it was the fumes, she thought, that had twisted Galen's mind, made him into such a monster. Not that it mattered why he was what he was.

She had read and reread the records, studying the reasons why the man's name was on the list. He was dangerous and evil, and she'd convinced herself that he was the one. Now that she was here, it was time for action. If she succeeded, her child would never know the reason why they'd been allowed to be.

The central core of the engineering bay was as large as the main terrarium dome, but with walkways and narrow corridors running off in different directions from that core. In the terrarium the other day, Kym had stood among the crops and looked out at the great dome and felt a sense of wonder. Here the central space was intimidating and crowded. She shook her head, drew down her focus, and scanned the workers.

On various catwalks she saw work crews, everyone wearing stained, gray shipsuits as they monitored the sensors, moving along the catwalks over and around the large pulse generators. She saw nearly thirty people, all of them with their hair cropped short and their shipsuits tightly bound. Loose hair or loose shirts could get you killed in this environment, snagging on a railing or cable support and sending you plunging.

Kym continued walking along the metal deck, looking around, pretending to belong. Her pale blue shipsuit marked her as someone from the maintenance decks, but occasionally people such as Kym were assigned jobs down here in engineering. As she glanced around, searching for Galen, she spotted another young woman about her age who wore a green shipsuit, one of the agricultural workers. The young woman saw Kym at the same moment and frowned before looking away.

Finally Kym spotted the man who was undeniably her target. He was at least five inches taller than Kym with broad shoulders and long hair that he wore banded in a ponytail. He was working with several others on a deck at the top of the high central bay. The deck edged out over the core, with lift cages shuttling workers up and down the curved wall of the bay.

There were metal stairs that led from one catwalk to the next, and Kym thought she might be more unobtrusive if she climbed the steps. But the steps were steep and there were eight or ten flights of them, switchbacks that kept the climb from being too dangerous. Kym knew she'd be too exhausted to kill a man by the time she

got to the high deck. No, she needed her strength. She walked with a determined stride over to one of the lift cages, the open latticework making it possible for her to glance up at the workers gathered around. Did they know how violent and disgusting the man was? Were they aware that his name was on the council's list? Did Galen even know? Probably not. He had committed his crimes and thought he'd gotten away with them. Kym was sure he would do it again. She had no doubt in her mind this was the right target for her. She could live with herself and her decision.

She stepped into the lift cage as another engineer climbed in with her. She punched the button for the top deck and the man nodded, then gave her a second look.

"You're from the maintenance decks," he said. "What are you doing here in our territory? We do our own maintenance."

Kym struggled for an answer and then said, simply, "I'm authorized."

The man shrugged, accepting it.

"From the council," she added foolishly, and instantly regretted it.

He didn't need any more information. He looked at her in surprise, but the cage was moving upward. She felt the air currents, smelled the fumes and thought again of how old Sudio had described the wind and the trees back on Earth. Neither Kym nor the next generation or the generations after that would ever experience those breezes. The terrarium was the closest they would come to the freedom of an open space. But the people aboard the ship had survived and they would continue to survive. The council would monitor the resources. Everyone knew the rules and the consequences.

She furtively touched the handle of the long knife hidden in her pocket. Clipped to the belt of her shipsuit hung the hammer. She still hadn't decided which she would use. She would have to be fast and take him completely by surprise. What if Galen's coworkers tried to defend him? She blanked her mind. No second thoughts. She couldn't afford to hesitate.

The lift cage rattled to a stop at the high deck. The engineer emerged first without speaking another word to her. Kym stepped out. There were fifteen people, maybe more, on the broad deck, which was open to the high bay, an edge blocked by a waist-high guardrail that provided more psychological security than actual safety. Galen was there, laughing, as he and two other men lifted large recycled-mesh filters and slid them into slots. Two other men and two women busied themselves in the machinery taking readings, adjusting fittings. Kym knew their job was critical, refurbishing the filters so the *Hind's* pulse engines, and its ship's complement for that matter, got the cleanest air possible.

Kym took three steps and then noticed the young woman wearing the green shipsuit from the agricultural decks. She had taken a lift cage to the deck just below them and was now ascending the open metal stairs climbing up to the side of the open balcony deck.

No one had noticed Kym yet. She swallowed, made her decision, removed the hammer. Because it was a normal looking tool it would give her an extra second or two. If she drew the long knife and lunged toward Galen the others might react, might stop her. With the hammer, she was just another worker. She lifted it and thought for a moment of her abuela's heroism. She could do this, Kym thought. She could save a life, too. A better life, no doubt, than the one she was ending.

Galen removed a filthy filter, set it down and leaned it against the metal deck. With her pulse racing Kym began to move. The hammer was heavy and deadly. She would strike him in the head, either the back of the skull or the middle of the forehead, it didn't matter.

The moment stretched out for her as she thought of what Galen had done to those women, the way he'd ruined their lives. And he'd done it again and again. The name of Galen Porthos deserved to be on the list.

"Hey, you don't belong . . ." said one of the engineers looking at her.

Kym pushed past, not stopping. The handle of the hammer was slippery with the sweat from her palm. "Galen!" she shouted.

Startled, the man turned to look. His expression fell. Kym knew he must have seen the murder in her eyes.

"He's mine," cried another voice, a female voice. The young woman in the green shipsuit burst onto the open deck on Galen's other side. She ran forward, closer to Galen than Kym and moving fast.

Kym was shocked, her concentration broken. She hesitated. And immediately hated herself for it. Abuela Juli hadn't paused. Abuela Juli had done what had to be done.

The other woman—thin, with close-cropped brown hair—leaped toward Galen, who spun, confused. He raised his hands either to fight or to surrender. The other woman crashed into him, shoved him backward with all her might and momentum.

Galen stumbled backward, tripped on the filter he had just removed, flailed and reached for purchase and the woman drove him into again, shoulder high, and she kept pushing. Galen tumbled over and the woman dropped to her knees, grabbing onto the bar while Galen fell, screaming. He dropped seven decks and slammed with a spreading red stain onto the floor far below.

"Mine," said the other woman, panting. She looked at Kym, who stood there shocked. "Mine," she said again, and thumped herself on her chest. "I chose him from the list. Now I get my permit."

The other engineers were terrified. To hear about things like this was one thing, to see it happen right before your eyes was something else again. One man held onto the bars and peered down, looking at the broken body of Galen far below. Another backed away from the railing and then fell to the floor, where he sat, stunned.

The woman pulled out the sheet of paper the council had given her, waved it, showed the name of Galen Porthos on the list. "I have my permit. He was a waste of resources. He did not deserve life anymore."

Nauseated, Kym felt as if she might faint. She'd been so close. She had been ready!

The other woman paused, looked at Kym. Her face softened, and she said to Kym, "I wish you the best of luck. I really do."

Kym knew she meant it. This was how it was on the *Hind*. A life for a life.

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Shaken, Kym retreated for the day, and then the next day and the next. She buried herself in her work. There were hands-on repairs needed on all decks for broken lights and faulty hatch dogs and worn-out screens and sensors and pipes for other everyday needs. The *Hind* was wearing down, and replacement parts were long gone, along with the mech-printers that might have produced some more. Kym's job was to make-do, jury rig, and extend the lifespan of everything. Some things, like the tubes of silicone sealant and the variety of O-rings and the solder that she used, were almost gone and there would be no replacements. There would just be more leakage and more unsolvable problems that they'd come to Kym for in search of answers. Someday soon, she supposed, she wouldn't have an answer to these problems, and there'd be no work-around and they would all have to limp along as things got worse and worse. But that day wasn't here yet.

She toiled away, unhappily. Time was passing, and it was time she didn't have. Her coworkers looked at her curiously. They could tell something was wrong. She was flushed, volatile, snapping at them, avoiding them when she normally was such a pleasant person. She had excuses for where she had been while preoccupied during her hunt, but she was also concerned because she had to be viable herself, a productive member of the ship. If she didn't do her work and help the *Hind's* complement survive, her own name might end up on the list. The thought sent a twinge through

her. She felt a clench in her abdomen, but she drove it away, forced herself to concentrate on her duties.

She'd been told the old stories about how the ship had been built to take care of itself, with repair bots running around fixing things where needed. But those days disappeared along with the bridge crew and the ship's library and the medroom and everything else that flew away into the void when the ship was hit by that spray of debris. Since then it had been hands-on labor that kept things running.

Kym was very good at what she did. She had a knack for understanding what was wrong and how to fix it, from the lighting strips in the corridors to the air scrubbers and handlers that kept the air clean, to the water filters and piping that recycled the water and moved it around the ship, to the wiring and the printed circuits that labored along manually since the *Hind's* AI had died on that terrible day. All the coding of the jury-rigged electronics had to be input by hand; all the systems that had gone quiet after the debris slammed into the ship had to be bypassed and those bypasses kept functional. Her mother had held the same job, but in those days there was still hope of regaining control, and there were plenty of spare parts to repair things. The O-rings and sealants that Kym had inherited after her mother's death seemed plentiful at the time.

But that was twelve long years ago, when Kym was a precocious ten-year-old, and a wasteful one, too. The supplies had dwindled, and the mech-printers had inexplicably shut down years ago, so there no new parts or lubricants or sealants. Kym was inventive, but there were limits. Plus, there were other things on her mind.

Like deciding what to do. She looked at the names, wondered how many separate lists there were that the council had generated, how much competition she had. That other woman from the agricultural division had surprised her by killing Galen Porthos. What if everyone on the list were killed before Kym got her chance? She needed to have her permit!

Taking a brief break when no one was around to look at her, Kym studied the names again. She didn't know any of them personally, and that was good. But it was odd that there could be so many people she'd never even heard of.

For some reason the council wanted them dead. She wasn't supposed to have any personal stake, wasn't supposed to question. In fact, she could have just plucked a name off the list at random, tracked the person down, and killed them. But she wanted to be more prepared than that.

One name intrigued her and frightened her, both. It seemed like the most impossible target on the list, and Kym realized that might be a good thing. Who else would try to kill Xandi Chan? Xandi was a powerful person, with political clout and many supporters, though she kept to herself. Kym had heard that Xandi was a former member of the council who'd had a falling out with them less than a year ago. She and a few supporters had retreated to a portside haven near the ruined bridge decks, the supposedly uninhabitable section of the *Hind*, parts of it still open to the void and unrepairable. Kym didn't know how they could survive there, but if they could, she could, and without hesitation. Her hesitation had cost her too much already. Just go, and get it done.

She finished her shift. Every second seemed like agony, but she did not want to miss any more hours. Someone would surely notice. She had her knife and her hammer, both still unused for murder. But they would be soon. She wanted this to be over.

She went to her quarters and dug out her hand light. The battery was charged, but the charge never held for more than ten or fifteen minutes. She'd be careful with its use. Then she left to do what she had to do.

She rode the lift upward, all alone during the interminable journey until the machinery stopped working just below Deck Nine. She opened the top emergency hatch

and clambered out into darkness and deep cold. There were scuttling noises and doors easing shut. Ferals. She pulled the hand light out of her pocket and thumbed it on. It cast a thin yellow light ahead of her as she walked down the cold corridors looking for another lift. She found one, but it, too, was stuck at the floor, and had been for a long time from the look of it.

She went on, her hand light fading fast. She found another lift. Stuck, too. She decided she would have to do the rest under her own power. With her hand light almost gone she found an emergency hatch that led into the inside stairs. They were dimly lit, and the handrails glowed in the near-dark. Good thing, since her hand light was about done. She shoved it into her pocket and started climbing.

She would find where Xandi and her people had staked out deck areas. The *Hind's* bridge blister had been torn away long ago, but the rumors were that Xandi's people were trying to repair the hundreds of pinhole breaches in the q-com and nav room so they could fill the room with oxygen, open the hatch doors wide, and try to repair the damage to the control systems and take control of the *Hind* from there. They'd probably kill everyone aboard in the effort. It was a foolish and dangerous thing they were attempting—one misstep in trying to regain control, and the *Hind* might shut down completely. It would be a slow, miserable way for nearly a thousand people to die. At least now the *Hind* was in a steady state, limping along, but keeping the ship's complement alive as it had for fifty years.

Kym's body was shaking, and she felt weak as she climbed straight up the metal stairs from one deck to the next and the next, each time opening a hatch to look around, and then returning to the stairs to climb. It was bitterly cold in the stairwell and in each of the decks she checked out, with nothing more than emergency light-strips here and there along the corridors to hold back the total darkness.

She saw more ferals scuttle away in two of the decks—scavengers, she supposed. It wasn't until Deck Four that she opened a hatch to discover jury-rigged portable lights and heaters. Xandi Chan had fixed this deck so that she could complete her risky effort to take control of the *Hind*. She wasn't like the old and supposedly useless Sudio, or the violent predator Galen. No, Xandi Chan was evil in an entirely different way.

Kym quietly came in through an open hatch. In front of her were people, as many as two dozen of them, shouting as they watched a large repurposed vid screen in the command hub at the front of the corridor. A few of them stood by a hatch door. On the screen there were three people dressed in silvery hard environment suits with tanks and life support packs on their backs. Those suits were meant for work outside the *Hind*, in the void, where Kym was sure nobody had been for decades.

One of them, at the far left on the screen, was slapping his own helmet even as he clumsily turned the wheel to the internal hatch, trying to undog it in a hurry. Another person knelt at the side of a third, who lay on the deck twitching. There were shouts and yells from those in front of Kym who were watching the screen: "Help them!" and "Open the hatch!"

This was a perfect moment for Kym, all eyes focused elsewhere. She touched the handle of the knife at her right hip pocket and the dangling hammer on the belt at her left. She had studied Xandi's image so she knew who to look for. The problem would be getting to her, killing her, and then getting away. Xandi's supporters weren't likely to stop and listen to Kym explain that Xandi was on the council's list.

Kym saw a woman in a charcoal gray suit. She was no taller than any of the others, but she seemed more powerful, larger somehow. Kym was certain, dead certain, that the woman was Xandi Chan. She wasn't more than twenty feet away, standing at the back of the group that watched on the screen as the panicky enviro-suited people tried to save themselves. It was obvious to Kym that their suits had sprung leaks and they had to get out quickly or die.

The timing was perfect, with everyone looking at the screen. Kym took one steady-breath as the moment seemed to stretch out for her. Could she get to Chan fast enough? Could she strike quickly? Could she do what she needed to do?

She could try. She did try, moving briskly toward Xandi. Keeping her arms at her side but ready to raise her weapons and strike. Twenty feet, then fifteen, then ten as she pulled the hammer loose with her left arm and prepared to strike. One of the men heard her footsteps, glanced back toward her, saw what was happening, yelled “Xandi!”, and reached toward Kym to try and stop her.

Kym put on a burst of speed, pulling the knife from her belt with her right hand now, too. Xandi had heard the warning and was turning, seeing Kym and starting to raise her hands in front of her face to defend against the coming, crushing blow of the hammer.

But the blow never came. The man who’d spotted Kym came at her, and another one who’d heard the shout leaped toward her even as she screamed a challenge and threw herself at them, hoping to break through. As the two men and then more closed around, Kym swung the hammer with her left hand, but Xandi stepped back as the nearest man grabbed Kym’s hand. She lashed out with the knife in her right hand, but another man blocked her, catching her arm. She thrashed and struggled, but two more reached her then, and it was over. She’d failed.

Xandi stood silent for a moment, then smiled, crossed her arms over her chest. Kym could see that Xandi felt completely safe with her guardians. Kym had never had a chance.

Xandi spoke loud enough for all to hear. “Hold her tight!” And then she turned back to the screen, where the man on the floor was quiet now, his twitching and thrashing over even as the man at the hatch had finally gotten it open. “Get them out of there! Now!” Xandi commanded. And then, more softly, almost to herself, “We’ll have to try again later.”

The screen, flickering in and out, showed the suited figure from the hatch area going over to help the second figure lift the quiet body of the third into the airlock. In a few seconds all three were inside, closing the hatch manually. Kym could see the wheel close and then, from where they all stood, they heard the pumps getting oxygen into the airlock.

They all watched, a minute later, as the inside hatch opened and the two suited figures stumbled out, carrying the body of the third, which they laid on the ground once they were clear of the lock. The room was very quiet.

Xandi turned her back on Kym, who was held tightly in the arms of her captors, and walked slowly over to the suited figures. She patted the shoulders of the two who were standing, pulling off their helmets. Then she knelt down to reach out with both hands to turn and unclick the helmet of the supine and silent figure. She carefully pulled the helmet free, then reached to touch the man’s face. She closed his eyelids, rose, and said quietly, “He’s gone.”

Then she stood and said loud enough for all to hear. “Tally is gone. He was trying to save this ship, save the *Hind*, save us all. And he’s died in the effort. Should we give up?”

“No,” someone said quietly from the back, and “No,” another said, and then, “No!” they all said.

“That’s what I thought,” Xandi said. “We’ve lost a friend, but Tally would want us to try again. We’re very close to success, to saving the *Hind*! Should we keep trying?”

“Yes!” came a shout, and then more, as Xandi nodded. Yes, they would try again.

Kym watched all this, amazed by what she was seeing, and wrestling with its implications. Could they really take control of the *Hind*?

She was held firmly by a man on each side as Xandi walked over to her and looked her straight in the eyes. “Do you understand what just happened? Do you

understand this man died trying to save this ship?"

Kym's head was spinning. She wasn't sure who was right. They'd been in the q-com and nav room! They'd been trying to repair the *Hind*! If they were able to do that, it could change everything. Everything!

"I had no idea . . ." she started to say.

Xandi just shook her head. "And yet you were ready to take my life because it's on your list."

"I didn't want to. You probably know that," Kym said. "But I have to. It's the only way."

"Ahh, of course," said Xandi, "you're pregnant." Xandi's demeanor changed. In a heartbeat she went from angry to sad, reaching out to touch Kym's face. "Oh, child, I've seen this before. It's a terrible decision you've been facing, and made all the worse because you've been lied to. Like almost everyone else on the *Hind*, you've been lied to and you've believed it. The council knows the truth, that it doesn't have to be this way. But they'd rather lie than lose power. Why do you think they have that list? Why do you think I left the council?"

For long seconds, Kym could only stare at Xandi. Kym had believed what she'd been told, that what she'd been forced to do was best for everyone, for all the ship's complement, because it was the only option. Cruel and unfair, yes, but the only option.

Now, her head was spinning with the realization that everything could change. And maybe she could be part of that change, maybe she could help and these people, in turn, might help her. It was a lifechanging moment. She dropped the hammer and the knife from her clenched fists, and they both clattered on the deck. "Where did you get those suits?" Kym asked.

Xandi smiled, and waved away the men who held Kym. They let go, but stayed next to Kym as Xandi said, "We found six of them in an escape pod that we opened two months ago down in the feral decks. The hatch to the pod was covered by lean-tos and tents in that favela down there. I'm sure it dates all the way back to the catastrophe. We cobbled together parts from all of them to make these three suits usable."

Usable. Right, Kym thought as she looked at the suits. They were tattered and worn, hinged at the hips and shoulders and ankles and wrists. Round clasps at those spots and at the neck where the helmet attached was what kept out the deadly vacuum of the q-com and nav room.

She could see at a glance that the "usable" suits weren't usable at all. The sealants around all those hinges and clasps was long gone. It was a wonder all three of the men hadn't died. "You thought these were safe? After all this time?"

"We had to try," said a voice from behind Xandi, one of the suited men, unsealing the right arm covering as he walked over. "And if we'd had more time, even another five minutes, we might have powered up."

"The main console wasn't holed, Akron?"

His face was grim. "It was holed, sure. But only two small holes running through it, and when you think about the rest of the damage in there . . ." He shrugged. "No one's been in there since they cleared out the bodies fifty years ago, Xandi. It's perfectly preserved the way it was when the room was sealed shut. I'd say we might be able to power it up. Hell, it's worth a try."

He held the suit's right arm up in front. "But first, I could hear the hiss of the air leaking out of these things. We have to do something about that before worrying about getting the main console working."

"You'll need voice access," Kym said. "I mean, the *Hind*'s AI was verbal. Everything was done through voice control. Even if it powers up you won't have access until the *Hind* recognizes your voice and your access rights."

"How do you know this?" Xandi asked.

Kym smiled, committed now to this new path. "I met someone the other day," she

said. “And I think she can help.”

\* \* \*

“I’m very tired, Juliana,” Sudio said as she stopped her upward climb on the metal-grate steps that led to the q-com and nav quarters. “Why can’t we use the lift and go straight to work that way, dear?” she asked, holding the railing for support as she turned around to sit on the step.

Kym sighed. Sudio thought Kym was Abuela Juliana, Kym’s grandmother, and had reached the point now where she couldn’t be persuaded otherwise. It was a long trek from Sudio’s quarters near the terrarium with its orchard, to the q-com and nav center, with its promise for a better future.

Kym had planned on explaining everything to Sudio about the q-com breaches being repaired, about waking up the *Hind*, about waking up the hope of the whole ship’s complement. But that conversation had gone nowhere. As far as Sudio was concerned, it was fifty years ago, and Juliana, her best friend, had come to get her so they could go to work together, like they always did.

Kym tried to straighten Sudio out about it twice, and both times it worked for a minute or two, and then the memory of Kym’s explanation was gone and only the deeper, better memories from her youth stuck with Sudio. So, okay, Abuela Juliana she would be, thought Kym, and off they went.

The creaky, worrisome lift had gotten them within six decks, but no higher than that, so now they were hiking up the stairs, as Kym had done a couple of days earlier, when she’d been intent on death, on killing Xandi. Now, instead, she was intent on saving Xandi and everyone else.

“We used the lift at first, Sudio, remember?” Kym said, smiling gently, “but for this part we have to walk up. It’s not far.”

“All right, dear Juli,” Sudio said. And then seconds later, she added, “But why don’t we use the lift?” And Kym looked at her and smiled, promised again that it wasn’t far.

Nearly an hour later, they’d reached the command hub, where Sudio rested for a while as Xandi and a few others whom Kym had warned about Sudio’s dementia came up to introduce themselves while Kym did a final check of the two working suits.

No one thought the patches would hold for long once the room was pressurized, so the plan was to go through the makeshift airlock into the q-com and nav room, and then, suits on, be ready to take off their helmets and speak to the *Hind* through the main console when the pumps had brought the air pressure up to the Armstrong minimum and filled the room with breathable air. Maybe the air pressure would help the two hundred twelve patches, large and small, adhere to the inside of the hull. Maybe Kym would take off her helmet, breathe the air, and then help Sudio take off her helmet and breathe, too. Maybe Sudio would then remember and say the magic words, and the *Hind* would recognize her voice and wake up so Sudio could give Kym permission to communicate, and the *Hind*, maybe, would agree.

That was a whole lot of maybes, but Kym thought it could work. Kim had devoted her young life to answers, to fixing things, to diagnosing problems and coming up with solutions. She was the one who’d brought the air handlers back online two years ago when they’d mysteriously broken down. She was the one who’d used her abuela’s ancient soldering iron to repair at least a dozen of the drive units in the scattered peripherals that ran the *Hind*’s R/O water scrubbers. She was the one who’d scrounged parts and labored to repair more light strips than she could count. It was because of Kym that the hallways were navigable even in the dim glow from the precious few remaining diode lights.

This was all Kym’s work. Breaking things down and scavenging. Building things back with those parts, making them work even in their imperfect fits. That was what she’d always done. It wouldn’t solve her problem; there were more names on

that list and, in theory, she knew she had to cross one off to make room. But if she couldn't solve her own problem right now, why not try and solve the ship's? Even a small chance of that was worth any risk, wasn't it?

Kym's hand-me-down silicone sealant was gone now. The last large tub of it that she'd inherited from her mother Ana Maria had been used to seal the patches on the hull and seal the two suits that were the last chance to wake up the *Hind*. It wasn't perfect, this patch-job; they'd run out of sealant before applying it to all the wall patches, so that added another Maybe to the long list. But they'd done what they could do, and now it was time to try and wake the ship up.

\* \* \*

Kym knew Sudio was confused about what was happening, as the two of them stepped into the airlock. Sudio's last words before her helmet had been sealed were in a strange little-girl voice that said, "Juli? I'm scared." So Kym had held her gloved hand in her own and walked them into the airlock.

Now, Kym could hear, through the helmet, the hiss of the air being evacuated. Would the suits hold up? Would the patches? She could only hope.

A long minute later the air in the lock was evacuated, and Kym gave Sudio's hand a squeeze and then let go to grab the hatch wheel on the inside to spin it loose. Then, tugging hard on the inside dogs for the hatch, she pushed it open, reached back to take Sudio's gloved hand in hers again, and walked them both into the q-com and nav room. Then, while a frightened Sudio waited, trembling with worry, Kym shut and dogged the hatch door from the outside and stepped back over to take Sudio's right hand in hers.

Kym knew there were dozens of people crowded into the command hub outside, watching them on the vid screen. Kym looked up at the camera and gave them a thumbs up with her left hand. Outside, they started the pumps and the air slowly filled the room.

The wait was a long one, as they'd figured it would be, but Kym could tell the difference as the air pressure rose, minute by slow minute. Twice Kym circled the room, looking to see how the patches were holding. They all looked good for now, but there were a lot of spots where small patches almost touched each other, and she was worried about the hull integrity in those areas. If one patch weakened enough to give way, it might start a cascade of failure that would take out a whole section of hull with it. It would be a catastrophic blowout, but it hadn't happened yet.

The lights in the room blinked twice, the signal that the pressure was at 120 millibars and rising. They could take off their helmets. Kym did that first, took a breath, and then turned to Sudio, who said something unintelligible behind the front plate of the helmet.

Kym unclipped the stays and then turned the helmet a few degrees and felt as much as heard the click of the release. She pulled it straight up and off of Sudio, who looked in Kym's eyes and said, "You're so brave, Juli. I love you so much."

"And I love you, Sudio," Kym said. "You're the bravest one on the ship."

Sudio's eyes brightened. "We're lucky to have each other, Juli, aren't we?"

"We are, but look," Kym said, and waved her hand toward the far wall, covered in patches. The wall was trembling, vibrating, the patches giving way.

"Dear god, what's happened to the *Hind*?"

"We've been holed, Sudio, and the *Hind* shut itself down. Can you help me wake it up?"

"Together? We could do that together, you and me, dear Juli?"

"Of course," said Kym, and walked with her over to the top console, where the one small light was blinking red, a dot of light visible in the wreckage. She'd spent hours the day before in that clumsy suit, connecting what had been severed, not

having replacements for anything, not really knowing what she was doing, but hoping connections might help. And near the end of the day she'd connected two small white wires that had been neatly severed fifty years before by a marble-sized bit of debris, and a tiny spot of hope blinked to life. What did it mean? She had no idea, but it had to mean there was power in the system, something trickling to life perhaps. Maybe.

There was a loud crack from behind her, and Kym turned to look. The bulkhead was trembling and straining. One of the patches that sat in the middle of a dozen more was bowing outward under the pressure from the air in the room. Kym wondered how long they had until that patch gave way and took the others with it. Seconds? Minutes?

She looked back as Sudio looked at the light and spoke in that little-girl voice that had emerged from the deep well of her youth as the light blinked and there was another crack from behind. So it was seconds left, not minutes. "Please wake up, *Hind*, darling. This is Sudio, from q-com control."

There was a third sharp crack. Kym started putting her helmet back on as she watched that patch. By the time she had it on and tight, she'd missed the action. Where the patch had been was just a hole the size of her fist. She felt the air in the room change instantly, could see more patches going even as the pressure dropped, the escaping wind tugging at her.

She grabbed Sudio's helmet and started putting it on her but Sudio fought with her, pushing the helmet aside and saying, "One more try, Juli. *Hind* will wake up, I'm sure. I didn't say it right, that's all. How does it go, dear?"

But Kym didn't know, of course, and could only shrug her shoulders and say, "I've forgotten, Sudio."

"Oh, silly," Sudio said, smiling. "I'm supposed to be the one who can't remember."

She put her finger against the side of her cheek, posing in thought, and then she turned to Kym and said, "I remember. You saved us all, Juli."

And she turned back to the com unit and said, very calmly, in a voice that Kym hadn't heard from her before, a voice that recalled a time a half-century before when Sudio and Juliana and a dozen others had been the best and the brightest.

"*Hind*," she said. "It's Sudio. Sir Francis Drake. Wake up."

And the *Hind* did.

\* \* \*

There is a small orchard in a large terrarium midships. Sitting crisscross on the green grass under the small apple tree there are ten people. There is Sudio, whose face is blank and confused, but who still manages to smile from time to time when some fleeting memory is prompted by the storyteller.

And there are eight children, from ten down to one year of age. Four of them were so-called ferals a few months ago, frightened and even vicious in their struggle to survive. But here, now, maybe, they're getting better. There is, at least, hope for them and the others like them. The council no longer matters. The list no longer matters. An election is coming. Xandi is likely to win.

Three others are children we've met before: Chennai and Roma and Genoa. A fourth child, the baby, is Dothan, the daughter of Kym, who was the daughter of Ana Maria, who was the daughter of Juliana.

And Kym is here, too, on her day off, sitting with Dothan in her lap, wondering if the baby's diaper needs changing as they listen to the stories about old Earth and its blizzards and hurricanes and haboobs and tornadoes and earthquakes and tsunamis and its sunshine and breezes and fresh air and mountains and cities and great oceans and plains.

The storyteller seems to be the tree, which strikes the children as perfectly

reasonable. It is as common and ordinary to them as the garden bots circling through the orchard, and the way the library reemerged from the *Hind's* backups to bring up vids from old Earth and books to learn from in a functioning smart schoolhouse. It's all just as ordinary as the gentle bumps and polite apologies from the *Hind* as the navigational systems set their new course. The *Hind* has been very busy for the past year, and will be for the next twenty years, before they reach their Goldilocks.

"Thank you, *Hind*," says Kym, as the final story for the day comes to an end.

The tree responds with a very polite, "You're welcome, Kym. And the captain requests your presence on the bridge. The R/O water system has another leak, and she'd like a better fix this time."

Kym sighs, rises. "Tell the captain I'll be there in twenty minutes, and make a few of those same O-rings as last time, and a batch of that silicone sealant, too, please."

"Of course," the *Hind* says as Kym stands up with Dothan in her arms. She'll have to drop Dothan off at the creche again, on the way to the water purifier.

Kym turns to wave goodbye to everyone and helps Dothan wave, too. The children wave back. Sudio raises an unsure hand and holds it out toward Kym, who comes over and takes it in her hand to say goodbye.

Sudio manages a small smile and says, "Sir Francis Drake, dear Juli," and Kym smiles back and says, "Sir Francis Drake, dear Sudio." They hug as the *Hind* bongs twice, says, "Course correction," and they all can feel the pulse engines as they light up again to send a slight shudder through the ship and alter ever so slightly their course to the future.