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TYLER

The disruptor blast hits the Betraskan right in her chest.

She shrieks, and her armload of e-tech goes flying as she collapses in a drooling heap. I vault over her as she falls, ducking as another disruptor shot hisses past my ear. The bazaar around us is crowded, the mob parting before me in a panic as more blasts ring out behind us. Scarlett is running right on my heels, flame-red hair plastered to her cheeks with sweat. She leaps over the unconscious Betraskan woman and her scattered goods, offering an apologetic shout.

“Sorryyyy!”

Another blast rings out. The gangsters chasing us roar at the crowd to step aside. We leap over the counter of a semptar stall, past the gobsmacked owner, and out the back door into another packed, humid street. Hovercraft and rotor bots. Pale green walls around us, red skies above, yellow plascrete beneath our feet, a rainbow of outfits and skin tones ahead.

“*Left!*” Finian shouts over comms. “*Go left!*”

We left it, barreling into a grubby alleyway off the main drag. Hucksters and fienders stare at us as we sprint past,

boots pounding, trash flying. The tiny gangsters chasing us reach the alley mouth, filling the air with the *BAMF!* *BAMF!* of their disruptor blasts. The whoosh of charged particles rushes past my ear. We skid behind a dumpster full of discarded machine parts, looking for some kind of cover.

“I *told* you this was a bad idea!” Scarlett gasps.

“And I told you I don’t *have* bad ideas!” I shout, kicking through a doorway.

“Oh no?” she asks, cracking off a shot at our pursuers.

“No!” I drag her inside. “Just less amazing ones!”

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Yeah, let’s back it up a little.

About forty minutes, maybe, before things got quite so shooty. I know I’ve done this before, but it’s more exciting this way. Trust me. Dimples, remember?

So, forty minutes ago, I’m sitting in a crowded booth in a crowded bar, music thumping in my ears. I’m outfitted in a tight black tunic and tighter pants, which I presume are stylish—Scarlett chose them for me, after all. My sister’s squeezed into the booth beside me, also in civilian wardrobe: blood-red and formfitting and cut as low as she likes it.

Sitting opposite us are a dozen gremps.

The place we’re in is a dive, all pulsing light and smoky air, stuffed to the rafters. There’s a broad pit in the center of the room where I guess they hold some kind of blood sport, but fortunately nobody’s killing anyone else in here right now. Drug and skin trades are going on all around us, the small-time hustlers of the station and their daily grind. And along with the smell of rocksmoke and the speakers’ thudding deepdub, a single question is buzzing in my head.

How in the Maker's name did I get here?

The gremps sit across from us—a dozen small, furry figures crammed into the other side of the booth. Their slitted eyes are fixed on the uniglass Scarlett has placed on the table between us. The device is a flat pane of palm-sized transparent silicon, lit up with holo displays. Rotating a few inches above it is a glowing image of our Longbow. The ship is arrowhead-shaped, gleaming titanium and carbite. The Aurora Legion sigil and our squad designation, 312, are emblazoned down its flanks.

It's state of the art. Beautiful. We've been through a lot together.

And now we have to let her go.

The gremps mutter among themselves in their own hissing, purring tongue, whiskers twitching. The leader is a little over a meter tall, which is big for her species. The tortoise-shell fur covering her body is perfectly coiffed, and her pearl-white suit screams “gangster chic.” Her pale green eyes are edged with dark powder and have the gleam of someone who feeds people to her pets for kicks.

“Risky, Earthgirl.” The grem’s voice is a smooth purr. “Rrrrisky.”

“We were told Skeff Tannigut was a lady who could handle a little risk,” Scarlett smiles. “You’ve got quite the reputation around here.”

The aforementioned Ms. Tannigut drums her claws on the tabletop, glances up from the hologram of our Longbow and into my sister’s eyes.

“There’s regular risk, Earthgirl, and then there’s the risk of twenty years in Lunar Penal Colony. Trafficking in stolen Aurora Legion hardware is no joke.”

“Neither is the hardware,” I say.

Twelve sets of slitted eyes swivel toward me. Twelve fanged jaws drop open. Skeff Tannigut looks at my sister with astonishment, ears twitching atop her head.

“You let your male speak in public?”

“He’s . . . spirited,” Scarlett smiles, giving me a side-eye full of *Shut uuup*.

“I could sell you a pain collar?” the gangster offers. “Break him in?”

I raise my eyebrow. “Thanks, but—*hrk!*”

I clutch my bruised shin under the table and glare as Scarlett leans forward to look the syndicate leader in the eye. “If you’re feeling so generous, let’s skip the foreplay, shall we?” She waves at the holo image of our Longbow. “A hundred thousand and she’s yours. Weapon passcodes included.”

Tannigut confers briefly with her colleagues. Not fancying another boot to the shins, I keep my mouth on the right side of shut and study the club around us.

The bar is lined with bottles full of rainbows, and the walls are lit with holographic displays—jetball games and the latest economy reports from Central and news feeds of Unbroken ships on the move in the Neutral Zones. This station is a long way from the Core, but I’m still surprised at the number of different species here. Since we docked two hours ago, I must’ve counted at least twenty—pale Betraskans, furry gremps, hulking blue Chellerians. This place is like a dirty slice of the whole Milky Way, dropped into one dodgy, suborbital melting pot.

The planet we’re floating above is a gas giant, a little smaller than Jupiter back home. This station hovers in the

stratosphere, suspended above a storm that's four centuries old and twenty thousand clicks wide. The air is filtered, the whole floating city sealed inside a transparent dome of ionized particles crackling faintly in the skies above our heads. But I can still taste the tang of chlorine gas that gives the storm its color and this station its name.

I take a sip of my water. Glance at the coaster beneath it.

WELCOME TO EMERALD CITY! it says. DON'T LOOK DOWN!

The gremps have stopped conversing, and Tannigut's glittering eyes are back on Scar. The gangster smooths her whiskers with one paw as she speaks.

"I'll give you thirty thousand," she says. "First and final offer."

Scar raises one perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Since when do gremps do stand-up comedy?"

"Since when do Aurora legionnaires sell their ships?" the grem্প asks.

"We could have stolen this baby. What makes you think we're Legion?"

Tannigut points to me. "His haircut."

"What's wron—*hrk!*"

"All due respect, but the whys aren't your concern," Scarlett says smoothly. "There's no tech anywhere in the galaxy like the tech that comes out of Aurora labs. One hundred thousand is a bargain, and you know it." Scar tosses her flame-red bob out of her eyes and manages to look nowhere as desperate as we actually are. "And therefore, madam, I bid you good day."

Scar is rising to leave and Tannigut is reaching out to

stop her when the commotion starts at the bar. I look toward the noise to see what the fuss is, notice that the various jetball games and stock reports on the displays have been interrupted by a special news feed.

My stomach flips as I read the message at the bottom of the screens.

AURORA LEGION TERROR ATTACK

A big Terran asks the barkeeper to turn it up. A bigger Chellerian bellows to put the game back on. As a small fistfight breaks out, the barkeep drops the volume on the deepdub, cranks the news feed through the pub's speakers.

“ . . . over seven thousand Syldrathi refugees were killed in the attack, with the Terran and Betraskan governments both expressing outrage at the massacre . . . ”

My heart drops and thumps in my chest as I watch the accompanying footage. It shows the gunmetal-gray blisters of an ore-processing rig nestled on the flank of a massive asteroid, floating in a sea of stars.

I recognize the structure immediately. It's Sagan Station—the mining rig our squad was sent to on its first mission away from Aurora Academy. We were captured by a Terran destroyer there, held captive by the GIA. They obliterated Sagan to silence any witnesses who might have seen them taking Auri into custody. There's nothing left of that place but debris now.

Hard to believe that was just a few days ago . . .

As I watch, a ship swoops in and fires a barrage of missiles, immolating the station. But as the footage freezes on the attacking vessel, I realize it's not the lumbering, snub-nosed hulk of a Terran destroyer firing the kill shot. The

attacking ship is arrowhead-shaped, gleaming titanium and carbide, the Aurora Legion sigil and its squad designation emblazoned down its flanks.

312.

“Great Maker . . .”

I glance at Scarlett. The voice-over rises above the worsening bar brawl.

“The perpetrators of the Sagan massacre are also wanted in connection with breach of Galactic Interdiction while being pursued by Terran forces. The joint commander of Aurora Legion, Admiral Seph Adams, released the following statement just moments ago. . . .”

The footage cuts to the familiar figure of Admiral Adams, our Aurora Legion CO, decked out in full dress uniform. Dozens of medals gleam across his broad chest. His cybernetic arms are folded, his expression grim. He taps one prosthetic finger on his forearm as he speaks, metal ringing softly on metal.

“We condemn,” he says, “in strongest possible terms, the actions of Aurora Legion Squad 312 at Sagan Station. We cannot explain their motives, save to say that this squad has clearly gone rogue. They have violated our trust. They have broken our code. Aurora Legion Command offers every assistance to the Terran government in its pursuit of these murderers, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the slain refugees.”

Photographs flash up on the screen. The faces and names of my crew.

Finian de Karran de Seel.

Zila Madran.

Catherine Brannock.

Kaliis Idraban Gilwraeth.

Scarlett Jones.

Tyler Jones.

Under each of our names scroll more words.

WANTED. REWARD OFFERED: 100,000CR

And it's about then that my stomach feels ready to crawl right out of my mouth.

I glance at my sister wordlessly. We need to move. Scar's already snatching her uniglass off the table when Tannigut's claws sink into her wrist.

"On second thought"—the gremp smiles with pointed teeth—"a hundred thousand credits *does* sound like a bargain."

Scarlett looks to me. I've always said it's funny being a twin. Sometimes I feel like I know what my sister will say before she says it. Sometimes I swear she can tell what I'm thinking just by looking at me. And right now, I'm thinking we need to get all the way out of this stinking bar and off this stinking station.

Like, yesterday.

Scarlett slams the heel of her palm into Tannigut's nose. She's rewarded with a loud crunch and a shriek of pain, a gout of deep magenta. I grab my sister's bloody hand and drag her out of the booth as the other gremps howl and leap at us.

The brawl over the remote control at the other end of the bar is now in full swing, and I figure a little more chaos isn't going to hurt. So I blast a gremp in the face with my disruptor, knock another's fangs out of its head with my boot, push Scar toward the door.

"Go! Go!"

Someone screams. A barfly goes sailing into the wall above my head. Three gremps jump on me, clawing and biting. I kick and blast them free, roll across the floor and up to my feet, burst out the front door behind my sister and into the labyrinth of streets that make up the Emerald City.

The station covers eighty levels, a hundred kilometers wide. The lower levels are taken up by an inverted forest of wind turbines, which harnesses the immense storm currents below and turns them into energy. The city is interconnected by a huge lattice of transparent public transit tubes, powered by those same currents. And it's into one of these tubes that my sister and I leap face-first.

"Grand bazaar!" Scarlett shouts, "COMPLYING," the computer beeps, and before I can blink, we're being whipped along the tube on a cushion of ionized oxygen.

"Fin? You reading me?" I shout over the rushing current.

"Um, yeah," comes the response. "*You catch the news, Goldenboy? That was not a flattering photo of me.*"

"Yeah, we saw it. So did half the people in this city, I'm guessing. Including the syndicate we were trying to sell the Longbow to."

"*No deal, I take it?*"

I glance behind, see a pack of gremps whipping along right on our tails, disruptors ready to fire as soon as we're out of the pressurized tube.

"You could say that," I reply. "We're coming back through the bazaar, I need you giving us directions. Tell Kal and Zila to prep for launch. Every bounty hunter, lawman, and half-baked do-gooder in this hole is gonna be after us now."

"*I did tell you this was a bad idea.*"

“And I told you. I don’t *have* bad ideas.”

“*Just less amazing ones?*”

Emerald City is whipping past the transit tube outside, dozens of levels, thousands of secrets, millions of people. The clouds around us swirl and shift in beautiful patterns, like watercolors on wet canvas. The walls and archways and gleaming spires under the ionized dome are tinged pale green by the chlorine storm below, the skies above like bruised blood.

I knew we’d be pushing it by even coming to a station as remote as this one. It was only a matter of time before word got out that we’d gone rogue, and I knew the Global Intelligence Agency would be gunning for us after Octavia III. But I should’ve known they’d come at us sideways. Framing us as the perpetrators of the massacre *they* committed was smart. Something I might’ve done if I flushed my morals into the recycler. By painting us as killers of innocent refugees as well as Interdiction breakers, they’ve cut us off from Aurora Academy and anyone who’d help us.

I can’t blame Adams for disavowing us. But he took me and Scar under his wing when Dad died—I have to admit it hurt, listening to him call us murderers. And though it makes sense for him to cut us loose after we’ve been accused of galactic terrorism, part of me is gutted he could ever believe it.

“Heads up, Bee-bro,” Scar calls.

“NEXT STOP, GRAND BAZAAR,” says the computer.

“You ready for this?” I ask.

My sister looks back at me and winks. “I *am* a Jones.”

A rush of air from the other direction slows us to a perfect stop beside the tube doors. We bail out, scramble into the

sea of stalls and noise that is the Emerald City Grand Bazaar. If I had a moment, I'd stop to admire the sight.

But as it is, I figure I've only got a moment before we're both dead.

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We burst through the doorway from the alley and into the kitchen of a Betraskan greasy spoon, the air filled with the sweet smell of luka nut oil and frying javi. The chef is about to start yelling at us when he sees the disruptor pistols in our hands. Then he and his cooks wisely decide to go on break.

The gremps burst in behind us, and Scarlett and I unload with our disruptors. I take out four (98 percent on my marksmanship exam), and the others bail back into the alley outside. Before they can regroup, we're running again, out the front doors of the crowded diner and into the street beyond.

A teenage human pulls up on a hoverskiff outside the diner, climbs off the saddle. As his feet touch sidewalk, I sweep his legs, catch his falling passkeys, and leap onto his ride. Scar jumps onto the skiff behind me and offers an apologetic shout to the owner as we take off.

"Sorryyyy!"

We zip off into the thoroughfare, drones and manned vehicles bobbing and swerving around and above us. The traffic here is pure chaos—a perpetual high-velocity rush hour, three layers deep, and I'm hoping we can lose our pursuers in the crush. But a disruptor blast at our backs lets me know . . .

"They're still behind us!" Scar shouts.