

Requiem for the Fallen  
All the Wrong Moves

Prologue

“The accused will rise.”

At the Judge’s command Jack stood to his feet. Throughout the entire court martial he had alternated between anger and despair. It had taken all of his will power to force his legs to stop tapping. Now, he simply felt numb. The speaker for the tribunal read off the litany of charges against him but his voiced seemed to come from far away. From the corner of his eye he could see his brother, Al, clenching and unclenching his fists. Finally he was snapped back to reality by the tribune’s words.

“We find the defendant guilty of all charges. He shall summarily be stripped of rank, all commendations and his name shall be stricken from Fleets rolls.”

He pounded his gavel and the three left the room. That was it. Years of service, climbing the ranks and one gavel strike took it all away. Al was immediately at his side. Dear baby brother Al, the only family to attend. Mom and Dad had refused to attend the first court martial of a Baker in history. Seven generations had served in the Consortium Fleet until he ruined their streak.

“This is ridiculous” exclaimed Al. “We’ll appeal.”

“There is no appealing a court martial” Jack replied. “It’s fine. I’ll just have to figure out something else to do with my life.”

“Well, whatever that something else is count me in.”

“Don’t be silly. What about your job at Fleet Shipyard?”

“Forget about it.”

“What about mom and Dad?”

“Forget about them too.”

Jack smiled for the first time in weeks and drew Al in for an embrace. Stepping back he looked him the eyes and said “Ok baby brother.”

“The two Baker brothers in business together; who could defeat a combo like that?”

Two Years Later

The ship rocked with explosions and sparks flew from consoles. Jack felt his safety harness draw tight and his head snapped back against the seats. Stars danced in his eyes.

The intercom chimed. “Dammit Jack, we can’t take much more of this” Al said.

“I know! I’m trying to get us out of here. Do we have FTL back yet?”

“The FTL is all kinds of banged up. We won’t have that back for hours.”

“Then you just worry about your job and let me worry about mine.”

“It would go a lot faster with a little help. Can you spare anybody?”

“Not from up here. It’s just the three of us. Call Marath.”

“Oh yeah, because a former slave girl who’s only training is in how to look sexy while serving Hors d’oeuvres is gonna be a big help down here” Al shouted.

“You’re the one who insisted on bringing her along. Just take whatever help you can get.”

He hammered his fist on the edge of his seat to cut the connection.

“They’re coming around for another pass, shields are almost out!”

He jerked his head up. On the main view screen he could see the Toltryn ship arcing back their direction. Even at sub light their speed had carried them far away from their quarry. They were approaching rapidly however. The compact triangular profile became clearer.

Jack swiveled his chair around to his right to face the tall Mutaran at the tactical station. "Thran, is the targeting system back up?"

"Negative Captain. I've got manual only and the port front pulse cannon is off line."

"Damn. Las, can you line us up to get a shot off with the starboard cannon?"

The short Iné woman didn't answer. Her fingers danced across her console. The ship began to flip end over end.

"What are you doing" yelled Jack.

Las didn't answer that question either but seconds later Thran was yelling as well.

"Aft Cannons are lining up."

"Well hell, don't wait for me, fire."

Las must have switched the screen to the aft view. The Toltryn ship was rapidly gaining on them but we're met by a barrage of crimson energy pulses. The ship shuddered under the repetitive impacts before veering off.

"Sure would be nice to have some Singers" Thran said.

"Yeah yeah yeah. As if we could afford the launcher much less a compliment of singularity missiles."

A chime sounded. "Incoming message" Thran announced.

Jack hit the communication controls and the screen changed to the image of an alien with lime green cracked skin. "Give it up Jack. You can't outrun or out shoot my ship."

"If it's all the same to you Sark ole buddy I think we'll keep trying anyway. Dying isn't really on any of our agendas today."

Sark hissed at him. "Very well then. The death of your crew will be on your head."

The communication cut off. Jack looked back down at Las. "Any more tricks up your sleeve?"

She kept her eyes on her controls and shook her head once as a reply.

"Yeah, I didn't think so. Ok, here's what we're going to do. Make for the fourth planet in this system. Maybe we can put it between us and them and but ourselves some breathing room."

He felt the engines kick in causing the ship to shudder. Tapping at his console he brought up an overview of the system that showed Alert's position and their pursuers. Pursuers who we're gaining on them again. He minimized that to a small box in the bottom left corner of the view screen.

"Can we get anything else out of the engines?"

Las turned in her seat and cocked an eye at him.

"I'll take that as a no. Dammit."

On the screen the planet loomed closer in hues of desert red with splashes of blue and green. The approaching blip was almost on top of them however. Jack's right knee began tapping up and down as he fought the urge to release his harness and pace the small bridge.

"They're gaining too quickly. Las, steepen up our angle and let's shoot between the planet and its moon. Skim the atmosphere if you need too."

She nodded again before speaking for the first time since the engagement began. "I'm picking up a signal."

He sat up a little straighter. "Is it another ship that we can call for help?"

"Negative. It seems to be an automated buoy. It keeps repeating itself. It says that this planet is a class III hostile world and is to be avoided. I don't know what that means though."

"It's Consortium Fleet code for do not land, hostile non sentient life. It's a good thing we're just doing a flyby."

The planet grew even larger in the view screen. The small ship began to rumble as it skipped across the planet's atmosphere. The ship shuddered even harder.

"Weapons fire Captain. They've caught us" Thran said.

More blasts bombarded their shields.

“Shields are failing” Thran yelled over the sounds of stressed hull plating.

Jack balled his hands into fists and started shouting orders. “Las, reverse course. If we’re going out I want to go out swinging. Straight down their throats. Thran, channel whatever shields we have left to the front projector. Narrow it down to the smallest point possible. And give em both barrels.”

“Are you nuts” Thran asked.

Jack turned to him. “Yes.”

He spun back as the maneuvers began slinging them around. The artificial gravity was losing cohesion and the inertia was beginning to bleed through. On the screen the Toltryn ship grew larger. They must have realized what he had in mind because the flair of thrusters lit the night as they tried to lose speed. They were too late however.

Pulse cannons poured fire into their bow as they closed. The Toltryn launched their own hellfire into Jack’s ship. And then they collided. Even more systems overloaded. Sparks spewed everywhere before the bridge grew dim. The ship began to spin causing Jack’s stomach to rise into his throat.

“We’re in freefall” Las said casually.

Jack thumbed the communicator button on his console. “Mayday, mayday, this is the civilian freighter Alert. We are going down; I repeat we are going down. If anyone can hear we need immediate assistance.”

He set the message to automatically repeat and then leaned back into his seat. Ahead of him he could see Las calmly working her controls. His vision began to swim and grow darker as the pressure grew. Eventually it went black.

## Two Weeks Earlier

“What in the world is that” Al asked. His eyes were wide and his mouth fell open. He looked like a kid hopping from foot to foot.

“It’s an old Beacon class cutter” Jack replied before Gral could answer. The little Senurian fidgeted rubbing his hands together. They had reached the end of the row of space worthy vessels and had made a point to not seem interested in any of them. Until now that is. In front of them was a long narrow vessel. With its engines jutting out the rear in resembled a sparrow with its wings tucked.

“Cutters were designed to do medium to long term patrols in system or form parts of larger task forces. That ship must be pushing a hundred years old. Trust me; you don’t want to go into space trusting your life to that.”

“Come on big brother” Al replied. “Let’s at least take a look inside. How can you resist those classic lines?”

“It’s a fine ship” Gral interjected. “With plenty of life left in her. She would serve you admirably I assure you. I could also cut you a very nice deal on her.”

“Fine” Jack said with a mental sigh. He extended his arm indicating for Gral to lead on. The inside of the ship was cleaner and better kept than he had expected. It was dark though as it was mostly powered down. Gral lead them on a tour of the ship starting in crew quarters, moving on through engineering and finishing on the bridge. Al’s eyes lit up when he saw the engines and he immediately began opening panels looking at circuits and connections. Gral’s hand wringing returned.

“Relax; my baby brother won’t damage anything. He used to be an engineer at the Consortium Shipyard. He’s more likely to leave it in better shape better than when he found it.”

Grals nervous tick slowed but didn’t stop altogether.

“How about you show me the bridge while he looks around here?”

“Yes. Of course. Right this way.”

“They sure packed em in tight” Jack thought as they moved to the upper deck towards the bridge. It was a small, utilitarian affair. There was a captain’s chair in the center surrounded closely by navigation, tactical, engineering and communications. The controls were old style knobs and switches. Nothing like the touch screen panels he was used to on newer ships.

“Like I said” interjected Gral “It’s a fine ship. What do you say?”

“I say your definition of a fine ship and mine are very different.”

At that the hand wringing came back full force. Before he could say anything else Al came bouncing into the bridge, his long legs as always taking large strides.

“What do you think Jack? Isn’t this ship great?”

“I don’t know Al. I think we should take another look at that Motarian yacht.”

Al’s face fell a little. He had always been one to wear his heart on his sleeve. Jack sat down in the captain’s chair and took another look around the bridge. He did have to admit that the chair felt right. This was also the closest he was ever getting to being on the bridge of a Consortium starship again. He spun the chair to face Al and then looked to the rear of the bridge where the dedication plaque was hung. A ship like this was so unimportant that they hadn’t even struck it before decommissioning. C.S.S. Alert.

“I’ll tell you what Gral, you throw in the food and drive systems from that damaged Hu scout ship and we might be able to make a deal.”

Al’s eyes lit up when he heard this. Gral was not so happy.

“What!? That’s simply outrageous! You are taking advantage of me!”

“Save the act Gral. We both know that scout is only good for spare parts. And this fine ship” he waved his hand around at the bridge, “is long past its glory days”.

Gral growled, which made Al giggle, and began wringing his hands again.

“Fine, but no refunds on equipment! Everything is sold as is!”

“I expected no less. Al, why don’t you start powering up this tub while Gral and I square up?”

He rose from the chair and motioned for Gral to lead the way. The short Senurian’s legs moved him along in quick stiff movements. When they reached his office he immediately began roaring at his assistant.

“Tal! Get in here!”

A tall Huvashi walked into the room looking even more nervous than Gral. His skin darkened from indigo to a darker purple. He darted his eyes over Jack while he chewing on his bottom lip. In his arms were a stack of electronic pads.

Gral made a point of fluffing the seat behind his desk as he sat. Jack resisted, barely, the urge to roll his eyes as he sat opposite him. Poor Tal had nowhere to sit and was forced to stand to the side after passing out his pads.

When everything was signed Jack accessed his account and transferred the funds. Gral watched the money transfer intently on his screen. His lobes lifted when it went through. Standing he juted out his hand for Jack to shake.

“It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

Jack stood and shook his hand.

“Likewise. I hope to have the honor again someday.”

With that done Tal passed him a final pad. He looked up to Gral who waved him away.

“These are the command codes” Gral said. “I hope you have a safe journey. But remember, no refunds.”

Jack tipped him a flippant salute and headed back to his new ship.

“What the hell have I done” he mumbled to himself.

It was hard to stay concerned when he climbed back aboard. Al was nearly running as he did his inspection.

“Jack” he exclaimed when he saw his brother. “This ship is amazing! I love this classic 23rd century tech.”

Jack couldn't help but smile at his energy. “But will it fly?”

“Of course! It just needs some tender loving care. Where could we put into port for a week or so while I work?”

“The captain of Station 12 is an old friend. I was thinking about putting in there.”

Al let out a low whistle. “That's a hike Jack. Clear over to The Free Trade Worlds.”

“I know, but we just spent all our money on this old tub. We need work fast and that's where my contacts are.”

Al started rubbing the bulkhead. “Shhh, its ok girl, he didn't mean anything by it. You aren't just an old tub.”

Jack rolled his eyes and headed towards the exit. He called over his shoulder “we take off as soon as I get back with our gear. If “your girl” is ready.”

## Present

Jack groaned and opened his eyes.

“I think he's finally waking up” a voice said.

“Uhhhhh” he groaned again while he tried to sit up. Suddenly there were hands under his shoulders helping him move. He turned his head and saw two of Al that finally coalesced into one.

“Thanks baby brother.” He winced and held his head before looking around again. Surrounding him seemed to be endless dunes of red sand. “Where's Alert?”

“Just over that dune. She's fine; we just pulled you out while we put out the fires.”

Jack sat up straighter causing a fresh bolt of pain to shoot through his head. “Fires? Is the ship ok?”

“She's fine. Well, as fine as she can be. You got my baby all kinds of shot up.”

“Yeah yeah yeah. Like that was my fault.”

He stretched out his hand. “Help me up will ya?”

Al grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. Al slid a shoulder under Jack's arm and the two of them staggered across the sand. Jack could feel sweat rolling down his sides and back under his flight suit. As they were cresting the dune Marath topped it coming in their direction. The diaphanous veils that she wore were blowing in the wind. They barely covered her dusky skin.

Al whistled softly.

“Easy there tiger. We have more important things to be doing at the moment.”

“Hey, I can't help it big brother. And really, do you blame me?”

Jack shook his head and grinned. “Not in the slightest.”

“Oh dear, let me help you” the tall Ruruan woman said. She slipped under Jack's other arm. She was taller than he was and it made him slightly uncomfortable but the passing look of jealousy on Al's face made it worth it.

On the other side of the dune Alert laid half buried in the sand. Jack whistled softly when he saw it. He then promptly slipped and fell pulling the other two down with him. They rolled to the bottom of the hill and lay giggling.

“Damn it Jack” Al said.

“Sorry baby brother, still a little wobbly.”

He climbed back to his feet and dusted himself off before helping the other two up.

“Come on, I want to see how bad it is inside.”

The three of them walked up the ramp into the cargo hold. Inside was blessedly cool compared to outside.

“Let’s start with the engine room.”

The engine room looked like the after effect of a tornado. Wires and parts were scattered across the bay. Scorch marks covered the walls.

Jack just stopped in the doorway with his hands on his hips. “Damn. They did a number on us.”

Al stood beside him. “We got our asses kicked.”

“You can say that again.”

“We got our asses kicked.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “How long?”

Al shook his head. “At least a day.”

Jack nodded. “I’ll try to help you as much as I can. Where are Thran and Las?”

“Las is probably on the bridge. Thran has been working on the pulse cannons.”

“Ok, bridge first and then I’ll check on Thran. You and Marath see what you can get done in here.”

Jack walked back out into the corridor and stopped with one hand leaned against the wall. He shook his head and staggered towards the bridge.

“Hey Las, how are the navigation systems?”

“Not working.”

“Wow. I got two words. This is a big day.” He fell into his seat. “Good job getting us on the ground in one piece.”

Las shrugged her shoulders.

“I see we’re back to non-verbal communication. Hurray.”

She turned her chair around to face him. “I’m pretty sure I saw the Toltryn vessel come down with us. I don’t know where they landed or if they made it. I just know it was somewhere east of us.”

Jack looked off into space. “We’ll have to go check. I don’t want to be taken by surprise. Have we gotten any more details from the automated beacon?”

“No but I haven’t gotten communications back up yet. I did spot something you might want to see before you go traipsing across the desert.”

She tapped on the controls and the main viewer came alive showing an aerial view of collapsed stone structures. They were pitted and partially covered in constantly moving sand.

“I guess there were people here once upon a time.”

“Looks like. Those structures are also east of us for whatever that’s worth.”

“Ok keep working. I’m going to go round up Thran and get moving.”

He walked down the corridor until he found an open hatch in the ceiling. Hauling himself up the ladder he poked his head through to see the upper crawlspace.

“Hey Thran you in here?”

He heard a clang followed by a Motarian swear word.

“What’s up Cap” Thran asked. He was out of sight around a corner but his voice boomed through the crawlspace.

“Do you feel up to taking a hike across burning sands filled with unknown dangers in the possible hope of finding a downed enemy craft? Said craft being full of murderous interstellar mobsters who would gladly murder us slowly just for pure pleasure.”

“Well, when you put it that way how could I resist?”

“And here I thought I was the only crazy one on this ship. How are our cannons looking?”

Thran crawled around the corner back into view. He struck his head on a low hanging sensor. Clapping one hand to his forehead he lapsed into a Motarian diatribe.

"Soooo, does that mean they work or not?"

Thran glared at him. "I've got them working but without the engines online we have no way to power them."

Jack waved off his concerns. "Don't worry about that. AI is a wizard with ships engines. Five credits says he has them purring like a kitten by the time we get back."

"When do we go?"

"Just as soon as we can grab some kits and raid the arms locker."

Jack slid back down the ladder to make way for Thran to clamber down after him.

"I'll check out the plasma rifles while you grab the gear" Thran suggested.

"Sounds like a plan. Meet me in the hanger bay in 20."

Sand crunched under Jack's feet and sweat had stained his jumpsuit darker shades of blue. He waved for Thran to stop a moment while he pulled out his canteen. Tugging his scarf from around his face he took a swig.

"How much longer till those ruins that Las spotted" he asked Thran.

The tall Motarian pulled out a small locator and checked their position. "Maybe another hour at this rate."

"Hopefully we'll find some shade when we get there."

He adjusted his pack on his shoulders and set out again.

"What do you think is here that caused them to set up the warning beacons" Thran asked.

"No idea. I wouldn't think anything could survive here to be a danger."

Thran looked around them. "I would think that anything that could survive here would be very dangerous indeed."

"What, like giant sand scorpions or something."

"One never knows."

The two of them slogged forward through the sand. Finally Jack looked up from his feet and stopped. He pointed straight ahead of them.

"I think that's our ruins there."

Ahead of them stood a small forest of weathered stone pillars. Several had fallen over and been covered with sand drift.

"I don't think we are going to find much shade there Captain."

"Still, we need a break and that's our best bet."

The ground rumbled softly.

"Uhm, what was that" Jack asked.

"When one anticipates danger wisdom tells him to flee."

"That sounds like a good plan. Let's make for those ruins. At least that's some cover."

Taking off at a jog, weapons slung crossways in front of them, sand dragging at their feet, they moved towards the leaning circle of columns. Gasping for air they didn't speak as rumbling grew heavier. They were almost there when sand exploded in a geyser in front of them. Jack lost his feet and slid forward when he tried to stop. Thran was more nimble and landed in a crouch with his rifle to his shoulder.

A shrill buzzing split the air. A giant thing crawled out of the sand in front of them. Later Jack would describe it as part lobster, part cicada and part centipede. Jumping to his feet he raised his own rifle.

"I guess we see why there's a keep out sign on this planet" Thran said.

"Don't just stand there, shoot the bastard" Jack yelled.

Crackling sounds and burnt ozone oozed from their rifles as they fired and moved around the creature's side. More shrill buzzing sounded. With it came a sound that was almost too high

to be heard that drilled into their ears. Flinching they moved and fired moved and fired. The creature lumbered after them. It shook its head in pain and confusion while snapping its claws at the blasts coming its way. Parts of its carapace began to turn black but the blasts didn't seem to be penetrating its shell. Finally it screamed again and dove into the sand.

"That cannot be good" Thran intoned.

"Nope. I think it's time to run again" Jack gasped out.

Chests heaving they sprinted for the columns again. They were fifty feet away when the sand fountained up again. The creature was close enough that the two of them were sent sprawling. Jack's rifle flew from his grasp. Thran rolled to his knees and began firing again but if two rifles couldn't slow the thing down then one was barely noticed.

It pulled itself farther out of the hole and moved forward on a hundred legs. It held its pincers up snapping at them. Jack was scrambling to find his rifle but it had buried in the sand. His hand closed on the weapon and as he staggered back to his feet a sharp explosion sounded. The front leg of the creature where it joined the body disintegrated. Lurching forward it stumbled onto its shoulder.

Another crack came catching the next leg. Screaming shrilly it rolled towards that side. Thran shifted his aim to the third leg in line. Jack joined him and they severed the next two. Yelling came from behind them. It was followed by repeated sharp pops.

Jack looked at Thran. "Is that a freaking machine gun?"

"Cap, I don't know and I don't care. More shooting is probably the best plan."

"Good point."

The two of them poured fire into the creature. Two figures came up beside them firing their own rifles in short bursts. Between the four of them they cleared more legs. Finally with another scream the creature slid back into its hole and was gone.

Jack took a deep breath trying to slow his thundering heart. "It's about time. My rifle charge was almost empty."

He turned to look at the two men beside him. Looking them up and down he was surprised to see two humans. One was taller with blonde hair. The other was a little stockier with black skin. They were dressed in tan colored uniforms with pixelated patterns of darker colors. They each held black rifles slung around their necks.

"Um, hey" said Jack. "Thank you for your help. How did you two get here?"

The two of them looked at each other before the shorter one answered. "I'm Captain Nathan Walsh of the United States marine corps. I was hoping that you could tell me the answer to that question."

### One Week Ago

Jack dropped them out of light speed on the edge of the system. The stars went from blurs of light to tiny pinpricks as the sub light engines kicked in. On his viewer he could see station 12 in orbit around its dying star.

He thumbed the intercom "AI, get up here for final approach."

A minute later AI came bouncing through the hatch. "Wow. That is a pretty site" he said indicating the star.

"It's pretty. At least for another thousand years or so. It's near burned out."

AI fell into the seat at navigation. Jack programmed in their final approach.

"Who is this Motarian we're meeting with again" AI asked.

"Thran" Jack replied. "Former Motarian Guard. Worked with me in the Trade Unions after he quit."

"What are we hiring him for?"

“Security. Some places we’re going it doesn’t hurt to have a little muscle. Although hopefully this first job my contact has lined up will be pretty routine. Take the wheel a second.”

He moved across to the communications board and hailed the station.

“Station 12 this is Alert on final approach, requesting permission to dock.”

“This is Station 12” came a melodious voice.

“Judith, is that you?”

“Jack! How’s my favorite ne’er do well” came the excited reply.

“Lighter on credits” Jack said with a chuckle. “Listen sweetie, we need somewhere to set down for a bit to do an overhaul on our new baby. Think you might have some shuttle bay space?”

“For you love, we’ll find some space.”

They could hear speaking in the background. Judith was laughing when she spoke again. “Capt. Kirby wants to know if you brought his bottle of Hei’Berg ale.”

“Tell Charlie I brought him a whole damn case.”

Judith chuckled again. “The Captain says that you can stay however bloody long you like. You are cleared for docking bay 6.”

“Will you be there to greet me?”

“No, some of us have to work for a living. But I get off at 0800. I’ll meet you there and we can go to dinner.”

“It’s a date” Jack replied.

“You’re damn skippy it’s a date. You’re buying. Station 12 out.”

Judith might not have been able to meet them but Capt. Kirby was standing in the bay as Jack landed the Alert. He was a tall, lanky man with a shock of blonde hair. When the hatch opened his face lit up into a grin. He rushed Jack and grabbed him in a bear hug. Jack would have sworn he heard ribs pop.

“Jack! How ya been pardner” he asked while setting him down.

“I’ve been better” he wheezed out. “Bob, this is my baby brother Al.”

Kirby stepped forward and shook Al’s hand.

“Oh, of course HE gets the gentle hand shake. I get broken ribs.”

Kirby simply smiled while Al was busy trying to wring life back into his hand.

“What brings you two boys out this way?”

“Freelancing” Jack replied. “We finally saved up enough to get our own ship.”

Kirby cocked an eye up at the Alert. “She’s a pretty lady but how does she fly?”

Jack walked over and put a hand on the hull. “This ole gal just needs a few upgrades is all. We have most of the parts we need to overhaul her. Just needed space to park her and get to work. That and a few relays and such. Al, do you have that list?”

Al handed Kirby a padd who frowned as he read over it. “This is a little more than a few relays pardner.”

“What’s a few odds and ends between friends” Jack said with a grin.

“A lot if I get caught giving out my inventory to someone with your history.”

Jack’s grin faded away. “Look Charlie, we need help. Everything is tied up in this ship. We either fly or we fall on this one. Please.”

“Alright alright” he said holding up his hands. “I won’t leave you stranded. But don’t expect my chief engineer to help much after I empty his storerooms.”

“Believe me” Jack responded, “Al is worth three chief engineers. Isn’t that right baby brother?”

Al blushed at his remarks. “You just get out from under foot and let me work. Go find that Motarian friend of yours.”

Jack threw him a mock salute before walking towards the door.

“Uh, Jack” called out Kirby. “Forgetting something?”

Jack laughed and jerked his head back towards the ship. “Come on, I’ll give you the tour while we get you your booze.”

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The promenade was bustling with people of dozens of races when Jack stepped off of the lift. He weaved his way through the crowd to a bar named The Triangle Patch. Seated at a table across the room he spotted a tall Motarian speaking with a short haired woman. As he got closer the short stature and upswept ears showed that she was Iné. The Motarian spotted him and leapt to his feet.

“Jack” he cried and scooped him up in a bear hug. “Not again” was all that he could think as the air was squeezed from him. He coughed as he was set down.

“Hey Thran” he said breathlessly. “Who’s your friend here?”

“Captain, let me introduce Edran Las.”

The Iné woman stood and offered out her hand. Jack took it saying “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“It’s been a long time Thran” Jack said as the three sat.

“That it has sir. It is good to see you my old friend. I have to ask, do we have need of a pilot?”

“Possibly.” He looked back to Edran Las. “Is Ms. Las who you have in mind?”

“She is. She is a fine pilot. I’ve seen her fly several times since I’ve been here.”

“Well Ms. Las, tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to say. I’m a shuttle pilot. Wouldn’t mind flying for you if the pay is right.”

“Fly anything bigger than a shuttle?”

“Flown some courier ships from time to time through the old Raustreen/Consortium DMZ.”

“Ah. Resistance I take it?”

Las didn’t answer him. Instead she gave him a blank stare until he threw his hands up.

“Forget I asked. Well, let’s go then.”

Las sat up and glanced between Thran and Jack.

“If you’re going to fly for me then I need to see you fly. Let’s go find a shuttle.”

He stood up and walked away. After a moment Thran and Las looked at each other and shrugged. Standing the pair followed him out.

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The shuttle came to a landing so gently that Jack didn’t even register it. He looked over at Las in the pilot’s seat. She met his gaze and stared back at him impassively.

“Ok, I’ll admit it. I’m impressed. But being part of a crew is more than just flight skills. How about you come by in the morning to take a look at the ship and meet my brother AI? If you mesh well with everyone then we can talk about a job.”

Las simply shrugged her shoulders, unstrapped her harness and walked out.

“Doesn’t say much does she” Jack said to Thran who promptly shrugged his shoulders, unbuckled his harness and walked out. Jack threw his hands up. “What a crew I’ve got here.”

He was exiting the shuttle when the communicator sewn into the collar of his flight suit beeped.

“This is Captain Baker.”

“Captain, I like the sound of that” Judith said giggling. “Bit lofty though isn’t it?”

“Well hello beautiful. I passed my commercial Captain’s exam. Don’t doubt that for a minute.”

“Darling, I’ve never doubted you. We still on for dinner, drinks and dancing?”

“You know it ‘darlin’.”

Judith giggled again. “Well, in that case I’ll relay a message for you. A Mr. Sark just sent us a communique. He has cargo that he would like you to deliver to Djinkath Prime.”

Jack tensed up. “Did you say Sark?”

“Yes, why?”

“Just making sure I had the name clear. Would you be a doll and transfer the information to my ship?”

“You love saying that don’t you?”

He smiled but the tension in his shoulders never relaxed. “You know I do. I’ll see you at oh eight hundred. Wear your dancing shoes.”

“I can’t wait darling.”

Jack began to pace beside the shuttle scratching behind his ear and running his hand through his hair. He paced for close to twenty minutes before another shuttle crew entered the hanger. They gave him funny looks until he left.

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Jack stumbled onto the bridge around oh nine hundred in the morning. Al met him at the door with a cup of coffee. Jack took it and sipped it hissing at the scalding heat.

“Thanks baby brother.”

“You look like you need it. Dance a little too much last night?”

Jack winked at him. “That Judith really likes to dance. Not to mention drink. I think my head might explode.”

He looked up and saw a short haired woman at the pilot’s station. “Las” he asked.

She didn’t look back at him when she replied. “I’ve already stowed my belongings in my quarters. Plotting in a course now for Djinkath Prime.”

Jack looked back at Al and raised an eyebrow. Al just shrugged which caused Jack to roll his eyes. “What’s with everyone communicating with their shoulders all of a sudden?”

Las looked back at Al and the two of them shrugged at each other. Jack threw up his hands again. “I’m going to find something for my headache. Do we have Sark’s cargo onboard?”

“Thran is having it loaded as we speak” Al replied.

“Any idea what it is?”

“Not a clue. Does it matter?”

“Not really” Jack called over his shoulder as he walked off the bridge.

### One Day Ago

“Djinkath Base, this Alert asking for clearance to land, over” Jack spoke into the communicator. On the view screen in front of him Djinkath grew into a giant orange and green ball. In orbit was a giant space station that looked like it had been cobbled together over several decades. A response was not immediately forthcoming. He reached for the button again when an answer finally came.

“This is Djinkath Base. Why are you here?”

“Friendly aren’t they” Thran muttered from his station.

Jack frowned as he hit the button again. “This is Jack Baker Captain of the Alert. I have a delivery for Mr. Sark that he has been expecting. I wouldn’t keep him waiting if I were you.”

It was another minute before the next message. He assumed that whoever was manning communications was checking out his story. "Very well. Come into docking bay 6. I'll send you the coordinates now."

"Man I love working with the Toltryn. They're so warm and inviting aren't they?"

"You did well" Thran replied even though he hadn't been speaking to anyone in particular. "People like this only respond to strength. You were firm but not so aggressive as to offend them."

"I hope you are right. Last thing we need is a blood feud because I insulted someone's favorite nephew. Las, do you have the coordinates for the landing site yet?"

She didn't respond except to nod and bank the ship starboard. Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Hurray for a gregarious shipmate he thought to himself.

Las set Alert down in the cargo bay. The barest of tremors vibrated through the ship. Jack stood up and patted her on the shoulder before jerking his head for the rest of the crew to follow him.

"Ok, here is the plan" he said while they walked. "We need to unload this cargo ASAP and get gone as soon as we can without seeming rude. I know this Sark. He is a not nice guy who works for a not nice outfit. Keep your heads down while we're here. Stay together and do not get drunk whatever you do. Sailors in this port get shanghaied all the time."

When he walked out of the main cargo hatch Jack was met by a Toltryn. The tall alien had the brightest green skin that he had ever seen on a Toltryn. His face looked crackled like most of his race.

"Are you Baker" he asked.

Jack looked him up and down. "I am. And who are you?"

The alien puffed his chest out. "I am Lof, first Lieutenant to Sark. He wishes to see you."

"Well then Lof, I suppose you had better take us to see him."

He grunted and jerked his head towards the corridor. Al raised an eyebrow in Jack's direction. Jack shrugged and started after Lof.

The lime green lieutenant led them deep into the station. Finally they came to a hatch with two guards standing on in front of it. They moved aside at Lof's approach and he led them inside. The interior was filled with intricate tapestries and bright rugs. The two of them barely noticed that though. What caught their attention was a woman, a woman with jet black hair and dusky skin. She smiled at them and Al was captivated by her dark purple eyes. The fact that her diaphanous robes were basically see through didn't hurt in keeping his attention.

"Do you like her" a voice asked behind them.

Jack spun around to see another Toltryn behind them. This one had darker green skin than Lof.

"Sark! How have you been?"

Sark embraced Jack briefly. He stepped back holding Jack by the shoulders. "I am well my friend. It is a pleasure to see you. And to see you Captain of your own ship finally."

"Thank you. This little job of yours will help me stay Captain of that little ship."

Sark's face narrowed and his grip on Jack tightened. "You did not examine the cargo did you?"

Jack shook his head. "Of course not; we value our client's privacy."

Sark nodded and let go of him. "That is good. You have not answered my question though. Do you like my newest slave girl? She is a Ruruan that I purchased from my cousin Torrin."

Al gulped beside him and said "she's beautiful."

"I'm glad you agree. I like to surround myself with beautiful and expensive things."

Al glanced at Jack who shook his head slightly.

“Come, come” said Sark as he waved them into a side room. “While you are here I’d like to show you what I have recently acquired.”

The two brothers followed him into the room to see a large table covered in green felt. Al’s mouth fell open.

“Is that an actual poker table?”

“It is indeed. My supplier assures me that it is an original 21st century earth piece. Please, sit, I would love to play a few hands.”

“We really should be getting back” Jack said.

“I insist” Sark snapped.

Jack put his hands up. He and Al sat at the table on either side of Sark. He finished shuffling the deck and began dealing. As soon as the first card hit the table the slave girl glided up to Sark. She leaned over between Sark and Al to whisper in her master’s ear. He grimaced briefly but then was all smiles. As she straightened up she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled at Al.

“Very well, send him in” Sark said dismissively to her.

“It seems that we have a new player joining us. A captain in the Consortium Fleet.”

“Hurray” Al said under his breath. Apparently he didn’t say it quietly enough as Sark’s head whipped towards him. Al looked down at the table top.

Jack sighed. Suddenly the chair next to him screeched as it was pulled back from the table. A tall man with salt and pepper hair sat down. He was dressed in the black and silver uniform of the Consortium Fleet. It took Jack a second to recognize him. He grimaced when he did.

“Elliot. What brings you here?”

The man smoothed the front of his uniform. “It’s Captain Wales if you please.”

Jack leaned forward onto the table. “They made you a captain? Of what tug?”

It was Wales turn to grimace. “You’re looking at the new captain of the Lionheart.”

Al’s mouth fell open. “They gave you one of the new Armor Class cruisers?”

Wales smirked at them. “That’s what they do for war heroes.”

Jack clenched his teeth. “You still haven’t answered my question. What brings you here?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified. But when I heard my ole buddy Jack was here with his new, ship, I just had to say hello.”

Sark looked between the two of them with narrowed eyes. “You two know each other?”

Elliot smiled at him. “Of course we do. Would you like to tell him Jack?”

Jack worked his jaw side to side. “Elliot was the Executive Officer aboard the Arleigh Burke. I served under him.”

Captain Wales laughed. “Come now, there was more to it than that. Deal those cards Mr. Sark and we can tell you all about it.”

Sark’s scowl lifted at the mention of cards. He reshuffled the deck and began dealing again. For a moment everyone was quiet.

“I believe that poker is the best thing that the human race has given to the galaxy” Sark said.

“Kicking the Raustreen Empire back to their side of the quadrant doesn’t count” Al asked.

Jack shot Al a look seconds before Sark slammed his hand on the table. “No! For what those animals did to my people they should have been exterminated! But your damned Consortium didn’t have the stomach for such things.”

Al jerked as Sark’s hand crashed down in front of him. Even Capt. Wales sat back away from the table.

Jack casually picked up his cards and examined them. Without looking up he said “you know as well as I that we didn’t have the ships to do that. Especially after Grainger.”

"I don't care about Grainger! I don't care that your space force was too weak to do what needed to be done. I care that they razed our colony on Epicus 3. I care that my family died there and I have yet to get my revenge."

Jack threw a card down starting a discard pile. "I can't give you revenge. I can give you a chance to win some of your money back though. Will that suffice for now?"

Sark stared at him for a moment scowling before he burst into laughter. "That will suffice indeed!"

Al wiped a hand across his forehead and looked at his own cards. He shuffled them in his hand but a second later he rearranged them. His hand shook slightly as he flipped two cards onto the pile.

"Captain Wales" Sark began. "I'd love to hear more about Captain Baker's career in the Fleet. He is so reticent to speak about that time of his life."

"I would be too if I were him."

Al clenched his hand on the edge of the table.

"Jack here had a nice career ahead of him until Grainger. He had served three years as third officer aboard the good ole Arleigh Burke."

"What happened after Grainger" asked Sark. "Besides a complete loss by the Consortium Fleet that is?"

"Jack hasn't mentioned his court martial?"

"Considering the charges were all false I don't see why it's worth mentioning" Al nearly shouted out.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen" Sark said soothingly. "Perhaps we should simply play cards."

Jack lined up his cards as they played. Occasionally he would flip a credit chip on the pile in the middle. Finally Sark called and laid out his cards with a grin. Al threw his cards down and flopped back in his seat. Jack glanced at his own hand and back at his opponent's. Sighing he laid his face down on the table.

"Too much for me. I guess you win."

Sark rubbed his hands together before scooping his winnings towards him.

"I'm going to go turn these into credit slips. Why don't you gentlemen have a drink on me?"

He snapped his fingers at the slave girl before slipping off. Al looked at Jack and shook his head.

"Did he really beat you?"

"It doesn't matter. As testy as he is winning would have been a greater loss" Jack replied.

Al wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "You're telling me. Sheesh."

The dusky slave sidled up to their table. "What would you gentlemen like?"

Al moved his mouth but no words came out. Jack rolled his eyes at him.

"We'd like two supernovas please."

"Nothing for me my dear" Captain Wales said.

The slave girl smiled at him before glancing back to Al. She trailed a hand across his shoulder as she walked away.

"I think she likes you Al."

"You think?"

"I think that a woman like that couldn't have any interest in a failure like you" Wales said.

Al shifted in his seat. Jack gave him an almost imperceptible head shake and he sat back. His posture was ramrod straight though.

Wales around at the curved architecture. "I wonder if Epicus 3 looked like this before the bombing."

"I wouldn't know" Jack replied.

Wales leaned close to him. "Come on, you didn't get a good look as you flew by in that captured Raustreen raider?"

Al's eyes widened. "Jack, what is he talking about?"

Jack didn't take his eyes off of Wales' face. "Things best left unsaid."

"You're just full of secrets aren't you Jack?"

Jack leaned forward. "You've got a few of your own if I remember correctly."

"Maybe" Wales said with a smile. "It's a good thing I'm better at burying mine."

A door slammed open causing Al and Jack to jump. Shouting came from the corridor.

Wales smiled. "Uh oh. Looks like the room was bugged. Damn. Who would have thought?"

Jack leapt to his feet. "You son of a bitch! You came all the way out here to set us up? Again?"

"Nah, you were just a bonus." He tapped a spot along his jaw. "Lionheart. One to teleport."

He wagged his fingers as he flashed out of existence. Jack swore but not for long.

Footsteps were pounding their way. Straining he flipped the steel table over and pulled Al behind it just as energy blasts began to come their way. Pulling out his own pistol he fired around the side. Al had his hands over his head.

"Al, a little help here!"

Al jerked his head up. "Right. I'm sorry."

He pulled out his pistol and added his own fire to Jack's.

"So, anything you wanna tell me big brother?"

"Yes, we need to get a teleporter installed for occasions like this."

"That's not what I meant." He fired another shot. "Even if you are correct. So, anything at all you wanna talk about? Any little stories to share."

"Nope, nothing to tell." He fired again. "At least nothing very interesting."

"Define interesting" Al yelled.

"Oh, you know, women. Spaceships. War stories. Little things like that."

The firing stopped suddenly and they heard Sark's voice call out. "Baker, give up and come out now. If you do we'll let your brother live."

Jack looked Al.

"Hey, don't look at me. I'm ok with this plan."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Smartass!"

"What's this about Sark?"

"You know what it's about!"

"I think he heard" Al stage whispered.

"What's it gonna take to get outta here Sark?"

"Nothing is getting you out of here Jack."

"Well, I was afraid you were going to say that."

Jack hopped up and fired wildly. A man cried out. He dropped back behind the table as Sark's men fired back.

"So much for diplomacy" Al said as he shot around the table.

Suddenly the lights went out. Sark and his men stopped shooting. Jack and Al could hear them calling out in confusion. Electric sparks and miniature bolts of lightning flew around the room. Screams punctuated the air. Just as quickly the storm ended and the lights returned.

The two of them stood up slowly staring around at the pile of bodies. Al's mouth hung almost to his chest.

"Do you think that they're dead?"

"I see Sark twitching. That means he's alive and likely to be unhappy when he wakes up."

Al rubbed his chin. "I guess we could kill him."

"Don't tempt me" Jack replied.

The hatch opened. Both of them dropped into a crouch with their guns raised. Standing in the doorway was the slave girl. She posed in the doorway with the light silhouetted behind her.

"Well, are you boys going to just stand there or should we make a break for it?"

Jack smiled at Al. "I like your new girlfriend."

Al blushed and slugged him in the shoulder.

"Come on lover boy. We need to go now."

They stepped over the twitching bodies of Sark's men.

"Are they alive" Al asked.

Jack knelt down and checked Sark's pulse. "Yeah. At least this one is."

"Boys, now isn't the time to be chit chatting" the slave girl said.

"Ma'am, we appreciate the help" Jack said. He grabbed Al's arm and started to drag him away. "Come on baby brother, let's go."

The slave girl stepped in their way. "Hold on. I saved you. You can't leave me here."

Jack stopped and stared at her. Before he could nod his head Al chimed in "Come on Jack. We can't leave her here."

Jack scratched his head. "I guess not. Ok darlin, your with us. What's your name?"

She sighed and her shoulders relaxed. "Marath. Thank you. You don't know what it's been like."

Al patted her on the shoulder. "It's ok Marath. You're safe now with us. We'll take care of you."

"Ok, let's get to know each other on the ship" Jack said.

The three of them ran towards the hangar bay. As they moved Jack tapped his communicator. "Thran, never mind coming to get us, we're clear and headed your way. Make sure Las has the engines up and be ready for company."

"What the hell happened?"

"Just a little misunderstanding."

Thran grunted. "Little misunderstandings can lead to much suffering."

"Now is not the time for philosophy Thran. Now is the time to be ready to shoot people."

"I am always prepared to shoot people" he rumbled back.

The hatch to the hangar bay slid open just as the alarm sounded. The three of them started to run when they heard shouts behind them followed by blaster fire. They dove behind a stack of crates and drew their weapons.

"You ready" Jack asked Al.

Al nodded wide eyed at him.

"Ok, on the count of three. One, two, ....."

Alert's engines whined to life and she jolted from the floor. Spinning to where the aft faced the entrance the cargo hatch dropped down and there was Thran pouring fire from his rifle into the crowd of attackers.

"Come on" Jack said and sprinted for the ship. Footsteps slapped the floor behind him. He boosted first Marath and then Al into the ship. As Al was clearing the top a shot caught him in the calf. Crying out he fell to the floor in pain.

"Al" Jack yelled.

"I've got him" Marath called out as she knelt beside him.

Leaping up Jack pulled himself to the deck. As soon as he was in he rolled to a knee and started shooting alongside Thran. With Marath's help Al limped to the controls and the hatch started to close.

"Ok boys, I think it's time to bail."

"I agree" Jack replied.

"Did we at least get paid before they started shooting" Thran asked.

Jack held up his money pouch and jingled it.

"That's all well then."

"Where is the med center" Marath asked.

"It's down the hall. We'll take him."

Marath held up a hand. "I was in my last year of med school when they captured me. I think that I can handle this."

Jack nodded before he hit his communicator. "Las, is the main airlock answering our commands to cycle open?"

"No."

He grimaced. "She's just so chatty. Ok, well, I guess make a hole and let's scat."

"Ok."

There was a loud tearing noise followed by an explosion. He could feel the deck vibrate under his feet.

"Damn, she doesn't waste time."

He and Thran ran to the bridge.

"Any sign of pursuit" he asked as he fell into his seat.

Las started to shake her head but stopped. "One ship just launched. Looks like a Toltryn interceptor."

"Oh fun. The type men like Sark like to use to raid ships and take slaves. Any hails?"

The ship rocked with cannon fire. "Ok, I guess that's it. Set a course to anywhere and let's go to light speed."

"From where we are our only options lead towards the edge of the arm."

Jack gulped. "That's still better than getting shot to pieces. Hit it."

The vibrations of Alert's deck smoothed out as they slid into hyperspace. He glanced at his display. Sark's ship entered hyperspace moments behind them. He pulled up the schematics of an interceptor and frowned.

Tapping the communicator he called engineering.

"Al, I have one of those questions engineers hate."

"I hate it already" Al replied.

"Can we go any faster?"

"What do I seem like, some kind of miracle worker? Of course not. This engine is already wound so tight it just might pop."

"Well, if we don't go any faster Sark will be catching up to us in exactly three hours and forty minutes."

He heard a gulp. "Ok. Marath is almost done wrapping up my leg. I'll live, thanks for asking by the way. Let me get down to the engine room and see what I can do."

## Present

Jack stared at the man in front of him. "Did you say United States Marines?"

Captain Walsh narrowed his eyes at him. "I did. Would you mind telling me where we are please?"

Jack shook his head. "Captain, I don't know what's going on, but there hasn't been a United States for over three hundred years." He looked around them. "You're on a god forsaken desert planet a stone's throw from the great abyss."

He pointed at Thran. "See, an honest to goodness alien."

The two marines took a good look at the tall Moltaran. Their jaws dropped. For his part Thran scowled at Jack.

"It is never prudent to antagonize your friends."

"Which one of your philosophers said that? Never mind, don't answer that."

Thran had opened his mouth to answer but snapped it shut.

"Look Captain Walsh and?"

The young black man stepped forward. "Lieutenant Jeremy Bell."

"Captain Walsh, Lt. Bell, I don't have answers for you, but I'll gladly give you a ride off this planet."

The two marines glanced at each other for a moment before Walsh answered. "We'll gladly take you up on the offer of a ride. If I see one more of those giant lobster insects I'll lose it."

"How long have you two been here?"

"Four days. We were on patrol. I remember this weird light storm and then nothing else until we woke up here. We were almost out of water and food."

Jack and Thran both pulled out canteens and passed them over. Walsh and Bell both said thanks as they took them and drank thirstily.

"What year was it" Jack asked.

"2014" Walsh replied as he lowered the canteen.

Jack whistled. "TI is going to love this."

Both marines looked at him quizzically.

"Temporal Investigations. They usually handle things like this" Jack explained.

Bell's eyes went wide. "Stuff like this happens so much that you have people just to deal with it?"

Jack nodded slowly. "It doesn't happen often, it's just that when it does it's a big deal. Although usually it's someone trying to go back in time. Not the other way around."

Walsh kicked sand. "Can you tell us what we've missed?"

Jack shook his head. "A lot of those records got lost in the wars of the 22nd century. I'm sorry. Look, we'd love to chat, but we were actually out here scouting for someone."

"We understand. What's the situation?"

"Well, the situation is that we were forced down on this planet by pissed off pirates. While our engineer fixes us up we're the advance party to head off any unwelcome surprises."

Both of the marines looked at each other a moment before checking the magazines of their rifles.

"Lead on" Walsh said.

As soon as he spoke the sand between them erupted. The four of them scattered as energy pulses rained around them. Rolling through the sand Jack looked up the sand dune to see Sark and two of his men firing down at them.

Depressing the trigger he sent rapid pulses of plasma energy up the dune in response. The chatter of automatic rifle fire sounded from his left. Thran joined in adding his own fire forcing the pirates to duck for cover.

Jack pushed himself to his feet. "Head for the ruins!"

He turned to run in that direction when something hit between the shoulder blades throwing him to the ground. He was unconscious before his face hit the sand.

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Jack blinked his eyes slowly. It was dark wherever he was and his head throbbed. He tried to touch his forehead but he found that his hand wouldn't move. He tried his other hand and then his legs. All four were restrained.

"Ah, I am glad that you are awake."

Jack rolled his head over causing it to throb again and his vision blur. When it cleared he saw Sark leaning over him.

"Welcome back Captain Baker."

"Thanks" Jack said dryly. "Now that I'm awake and feeling so much better, I don't suppose that you'd be inclined to let me go home?"

Sark threw his head back and laughed out loud for a minute. Suddenly he snapped forward and was yelling in Jack's face.

"The only release that you will get will be when I finally kill you."

Spit flew from his lips to land on Jack's cheek.

"All you had to say was no" Jack replied. "Where is my crew?"

Sark laughed again. "Your crew won't be bothering us. Be brave while you can human. Lof! Bring me my knife."

The lime green Lieutenant came into view carrying a long serrated blade.

"Ooh, what a sharp looking knife you have there margarita boy."

Lof glared at him as he handed the blade over to Sark who held it to Jack's cheek.

"Tell me everything about Epicus 3."

"You know everything that I know. The Raustreen sent a raiding party to intimidate the Toltryn Families into not siding with the Consortium."

"You lie!"

The knife sliced into Jack's face causing him to grunt in pain. Blood flowed down his cheek onto the table he was strapped too. Sark put the knife against his other cheek.

"We both know that that wasn't what happened. I've always wondered why the Raustreen would try intimidation when it would have so much simpler to purchase our ships. Now, tell me who gave you the orders to fire on our colony."

"I never fired on Epicus 3."

The knife sliced his other cheek. Jack bit his tongue to keep from screaming. Sark waved the knife in front of his face before resting it on his shoulder.

"Tell me."

"There is nothing to tell. We didn't have anything to do with it."

Sark sliced again before switching shoulders.

"We can keep this up all day. Tell me what I want to know."

"I have nothing to say. I was not responsible for Epicus 3."

Blood erupted from his other shoulder. Small agonies blazed all over his body. The knife came to rest on his rib cage.

"I'll ask you again" Sark hissed.

"You can ask but my answer will not change."

The next cut was deeper. Jack felt it scrape his ribs. He moaned in pain despite himself. Sark smiled and licked his blood from the knife blade.

"Now we are getting somewhere. I shall ask you again and again until you tell me what I want to know."

Jack lifted his head off the table. "You can cut me all that you like but I will never have anything to say to you 'old friend'."

Sark glowered at him. "We shall see."

He placed the knife across Jack's chest.

An explosion rocked the ship causing him to stumble forward across Jack. Jack didn't waste any time. When Sark's face came close to his he bit his ear and wrenched his head to the side tearing it free. Green blood poured over his face as Sark lurched backwards screaming.

"You bastard" he yelled while clapping a hand to the side of his head. "You will pay for that."

Jack spat out his ear. "I doubt it. That sounds an awful lot like my crew causing a bother."

Sounds of blaster fire intermixed with M16 fire reached them. They heard screaming from out in the corridor. Sark crouched against the wall. He straightened back up and reversed his grip on his knife.

"I still have time to finish our business before they get here."

He stepped forward and brought the knife up. Suddenly the hatch slid open and Thran, Las and the two marines filled the room.

"Drop the knife" Walsh yelled.

Thran shot him in the chest.

"You didn't even give him a chance" Walsh said.

Thran shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh not the shoulder thing again" Jack said.

"Sorry boss" Thran said.

Jack sighed. "How about you make it up to me by cutting me loose."

As Thran freed him Sark groaned but didn't sit up.

"What do you want us to do about him" Bell asked.

"Just leave him. Where's the rest of his crew?"

Las and Bell glanced at each other. "Some of them might still be alive" Bell said with a shrug.

Jack groaned as he rolled off of the table. Walsh supported him down the corridor. He threw a hand up to block the setting sun as they stepped out onto the sand.

Jack whistled as he saw Sark's ship. "They look even worse than we do."

"Eh, the hell with them" Bell said. "They seemed like douchebags anyway."

"I do not feel like walking back to the ship" Jack said.

"I wouldn't worry about that" Las replied. She pointed to the horizon just above the dunes. Jack squinted until Alert came into focus slowly.

He slumped in relief as it settled in front of them and the aft ramp lowered. Shuffling through the sand he made his way into the hold. Marath and Al were there to meet them. Al was pushing a folding wheelchair. Marath had traded her robes for a jumpsuit. It looked two sizes too big but Al still kept sneaking glances.

"Where the hell did that come from?"

"Found it in a storage closet in the med bay" Al replied. "Now sit."

Jack sat. "Las, how about you set a course for Station 12" he asked as Al started pushing him towards the med bay.

She nodded and headed forward towards the bridge. Thran was close on her heels. Walsh and Bell stood looking around until Jack jerked his head motioning them to follow.

"You know a lot of what we made on this run will get spent on repairs" Al said.

Jack sighed. "I know. Plus we need to introduce these two to TI."

Al rolled his eyes. "Great. Those guys are so much fun."

When they got to the med bay they eased Jack onto a bed where Marath started cleaning his wounds. As they did they felt a gentle shake as Alert lifted off.

"Someone wanna tell me what happened" Jack asked.

Walsh cleared his throat. He looked around at the walls wide eyed.

"Don't worry Captain, Las is a great pilot and this is a good ship. Nothing to worry about."

Walsh nodded. "After you got knocked out we were forced to retreat. Thran led us back to Alert for reinforcements."

"I wasn't too sure about that short woman, Las" Bell interjected. "But damn that girl can shoot. She slaughtered those green skinned bastards."

"If you knew the history of that woman's planet you wouldn't be surprised" Jack said.

Marath pulled out a tissue regenerator and started playing it over his wounds causing him to hiss in pain.

"Oh hush you baby" she snapped.

"Yes ma'am. What happened next?"

“Nothing much to tell really. We tracked them back to their ship, busted in, shot the place up and rescued you. Now we’re here. What do you plan to do with us?”

Marath put away the regenerator and raised the head of Jack’s bed up.

“Thank you ma’am” he said to her.

“We’re headed to Station 12. It’s the nearest Consortium base in the area. We’ll contact TI from there and help you through the process of becoming citizens as best we can.”

Walsh’s shoulders slumped. “No chance at all of going home huh?”

Jack shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Even if we could they frown on that. Don’t worry though. At least you arrived after the war. Things were pretty interesting a few years ago.”

“They seem pretty interesting now” Bell mumbled.

Before Jack could reply the world stretched out around them before snapping back to normal.

“What was that” Walsh demanded.

AI smiled at him. “Relax, you just experienced light speed for the first time. How about you gentlemen follow me? I’ll answer all your questions and we can let my brother here rest.”

Everyone followed AI out. As they did Marath turned down the lights and gave Jack a smile. He waved as she closed the hatch behind them. Soon he drifted off to sleep.

## Epilogue

Sand crunched under foot as the two men moved under the hot sun. Cresting a dune they looked down on the circle of stone pillars.

“Are you certain that they were here” asked one. He was shorter than his companion but broader through the shoulders.

“I’m certain. That’s what the beacon said anyway.”

“They aren’t here now. Any sign of the other ship?”

The tall one checked a device in his hand before shaking his head. “Negative. It looks like the Toltryn ship managed an escape as well.”

The short one grunted. “Almost a shame. They’re little better than animals. Still, I suppose we should go before the local fauna wakes up.”

The tall one nodded. “I wonder if they had any idea of where they were.”

His companion sneered at him. “You know as well as I do that they didn’t. And it’s our job to keep it that way. Now come on.”