Take the Sky

by BM Vagaybond (MintSharpie)

Summary

On the run from the Alliance, trust fund kiddie and hacker Gavin stows away on the Firefly-class vessel Hunter. Things do not go smooth.

Notes

Updates monthly on the 15th (unless my degree program drains my brain straight out my ears)!

As is done in Firefly, I've sprinkled some Chinese phrases into the dialog. Many of them are from http://firefly.wikia.com/wiki/Dictionary, but I've used Google Translate for the rest. All of it is probably divergent from actual Chinese. If you notice something wrong, by all means please let me know and I'll fix it.

Extra special shoutouts to my wonderful friends and beta-readers, Freckles and Astra. You're amazing.

Also, I made a playlist. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6EsfIIn5NazjliRWKrmTqvwsPfFNlxN7
P.S. Please do not leave a comment just to request a ship of some sort. Not only is that rude and gross, this work is already fully plotted. I will not be adding Burnie/Ellie or any other couple simply because someone asked, and any such comments will be deleted without reply. If there's a relationship in this story it's because I planned for it to be. kthxbai
Chapter 1

Persephone’s great Xiqan open-air market and spaceport, in a less fashionable corner of the Eastern continent, was not somewhere Gavin had ever really intended to go. And maybe he was being paranoid, but it seemed like everyone and their dog knew he didn’t belong. Three days in the cargo hold of a Weishun Industries freighter hadn’t been quite enough to hide that Core-planet look.

Gavin self-consciously wandered between stalls, loafers scuffing in the dust. Merchants hawked their wares from every side: bright cloth and fragrant spices, scrap metal and cheap jewelry, suspicious meat grilled on sticks. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been utterly fascinated; there was no place as lively as this back on his home planet of Ariel. At the moment, however, he was far too distraught to appreciate the local flavor.

His family had disowned him. The Alliance was after him. He had the clothes on his back and a handful of credits to his name. Even at twenty-five he had never been this far from home, never had to survive without his dedicated Sourcebox and all the luxuries the central planets had to offer. His shadier friends, folk who might have some idea of what he should do, were back on Ariel and utterly out of reach. What he wouldn’t give to be in his workroom, cruising the darknet, sipping shimmerwine straight from the bottle…

Absorbed in his thoughts, he didn’t notice the two Alliance peacekeepers stationed at the end of the thoroughfare. They stood at ease, sonic rifles cradled across their black-and-purple armor. The great tide of humanity that swirled through the market gave them a wide berth – except for Gavin. Shouldering his way automatically through the throng, he nearly fell into the sudden empty space in front of him. Stumbling slightly, he looked up right into the visored face of an officer, who glanced at him contemptuously. He gulped.

“Ah… ‘scuze me, gents, beg your pardon, terribly sorry…” he babbled, backing away towards the safety of the crowd.

The man who’d looked at him still held his eyes, gaze becoming suspicious as his helmet’s HUD fed him data from the Cortex. Facial recognition had triggered something. He elbowed his companion and nodded in Gavin’s direction, then began to step forward.

“Sir, we’d like to ask you a few – hey! Stop!”

The young fugitive had taken to his heels, weaving blindly between people, no aim but escape in his mind. Ahead to the left was a pile of shipping containers; he dove for a gap between them, scrambling through with less than an inch of clearance. At the end of the narrow way was a maze of corrugated metal. He chose a direction at random and kept running, breath coming hard in the dry air. Another corner, more alleys, the high wall of a warehouse; he couldn’t hear the officer’s shouts anymore, but still didn’t stop. He followed the wall at a near-sprint until the path ran out, and he burst into the bright sunshine.

He was near the spaceport now, skyline dominated by the huge hulks of ships lined up at the docks. If there were any Alliance patrols nearby, they were lost among the hordes of travelers. Terminals stood in ranks along the boulevard, displaying the names and destinations of the vessels moored beyond. Some were attended by members of their crews, overseeing the movement of cargo or advertising for passengers. In the distance, the roar of engines and screech of shifting metal announced departures and arrivals in a near-constant flow.

Gavin knew he could stay no longer on Persephone. In desperation he scanned the departure board
and picked the ship that was scheduled to leave next: a boat named *Hunter*, in berth 27. According to the clock, he had five minutes to get there before liftoff. He sprinted away without bothering to see where it was bound.

He made it to the dock with barely a minute to spare. *Hunter* was a relatively small ship, Firefly class, branded with a bright green star. In front of it, a young woman with dark red hair was finishing an inspection of the port extender. Gavin jogged up to her, slightly breathless.

“Pardon me, love, got room for one more?”

The woman turned to him with a smile that faded slightly at his strange appearance. But she quickly refreshed it, and spoke in a pleasant tone.

“Actually, sir, we’re not taking passengers –”

He shoved a crumpled handful of money at her with what he imagined to be a roguish wink.

“Brilliant. Let’s be off then, yeah?”

“Uh… yes… Wait, sir, I –”

“Of course, where are my manners? Name’s Gavin. Gavin Free.” He stopped halfway up the ramp and turned to offer his hand.

“Um. Lindsay. Nice to meet you,” she replied, shoving the cash into a pocket of her coveralls so she could accept his handshake. “But we’re cargo only. I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

Gavin glanced back the way he’d come. There was more activity around the departure boards now, and he could see sunlight glinting off dark helmets. Lots of them.

“Listen,” he murmured, leaning close to Lindsay’s ear. “I will pay you a hundred thousand credits if you get me off this rock in the next two minutes. I’ll stay in a crate the whole trip if you want, just let me come with you. *Please.*”

Lindsay skeptically looked him up and down. This guy was disheveled and dusty, but the pretty clothes fit, and his hands were soft and well-manicured. Everything about him spoke of money. If she’d run into him at a bar, she’d have fleeced him for all he was worth. But he was offering more than she’d get at a hundred bars, and looked like he could deliver. That kind of cash spoke louder than the trouble he so clearly would bring.

“All right, fine,” she muttered. “Get inside. We’re dusting off soon.”

“Thank you, thank you, you’re top, absolute toppy tippers,” Gavin whispered. He let himself be hustled into the cargo bay and stood to the side, limp with relief, as Lindsay hit a button on a console by the door. The ramp began to rise with a mechanical whine.

“Everything’s stowed, captain,” she said into the comm microphone. “We are go for departure.”

“Great,” a distorted voice replied. “Jack, get us in the air. I want to be on Boros in five days.”

“Roger that, sir,” another voice said. The dull roar of engines became audible through the hull, and an unsettling tug signaled the activation of inertial dampeners. Gavin barely had time to adjust before Lindsay was pulling him along to the side of the cargo bay.

“You’ll have to stay in here for a little while,” she said, removing a piece of siding to reveal a narrow compartment. “Can’t have you spookin’ the crew before I’ve told ‘em about this. But if
you’re good for that many credits, I’m sure they’ll have no problem droppin' you off at Boros.”

“Uh. All right,” Gavin replied, tense once again. He hesitated. “I’m going to need some equipment, and access to the Cortex, before I can pay you. I, uh, left most of my stuff behind.”

“I figured as much,” Lindsay said, accepting this statement with surprising ease. “We’ll see what we can do. Now get down. I’ll come back for you soon.”

Gavin nodded mutely, lay on his belly, and scooched backwards until he was fully inside the small space. Lindsay smiled at him and replaced the grille, leaving him in near-total darkness.

Out of the frying pan, he thought glumly, resting his head on his arms. He was in a right bugger’s muddle and no mistake. At least he had five days to plan his next move, and hopefully Boros would have some semblance of civilization. Maybe he could find somewhere, far outside the Alliance’s reach, to settle down, live an honest life…

He snorted. That would never do. What he needed was a way to get the feds off his tail, so he could return to the central planets and get back to having fun. Although maybe not the same kind of fun, given how his last escapade had turned out. Maybe he’d take up sailing, or cinematography. Something less risky than hacking.

Realization hit him in a flash. Of course! Hacking had gotten him into trouble, and hacking would get him out: all he needed was a computer and a Cortex link, and he could wipe his data from the Alliance criminal database. Compared to the military server, it would be easy, and he could catch the first ship bound back for Ariel. Then he could return to his apartment, make up with his family, and get on with his life.

Content and certain of his path for the first time in days, he closed his eyes and drifted into a restful sleep.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Lindsay made her way to the bridge, thinking. That Gavin was a fugitive she had no doubt – she’d noticed the approaching Alliance forces too, and the crew had made enough hasty exits of their own that she knew what it looked like to be chased. But there were many ways to turn the situation to their advantage. All she had to do was convince the captain of it.

Geoff sat in the copilot’s seat, feet up on the console, watching the surface of Persephone drop away. He noticed Lindsay enter and twitched his mustache in greeting.

“How’s the extender?”

“It’ll hold long enough,” she answered. “We need a replacement linkage assembly soon, though.”

Geoff sighed. “If we have enough left over after this drop, we’ll see. Those things ain’t cheap.”

Lindsay fidgeted with a lock of ruby-red hair. “Well, sir… I might have a way around that.”

Geoff looked up sharply, and spun the chair around to face her. “What did you do?”

The mechanic grimaced. “Okay, don’t be mad, but… I picked up a passenger right before we left. No, no, listen,” she added hastily as Geoff’s face clouded angrily. “I think we can make a killing off him. He looks like a rich kid, but on the lam. He offered me a hundred thousand credits to take him on board. I figure, we let him pay us, then turn him over to the nearest Alliance cruiser and get the reward money. Double payout, easy peasy.”

Jack, in the pilot’s seat, glanced over to her. “A hundred thousand?” she asked sardonically. “You really think some Persephone dock-rat has that kind of cash?”

“You should take a look at him,” Lindsay said earnestly. “Silk shirt, fancy leather shoes, never worked a day in his life. Even if he can’t pay out, there’s the Alliance reward. Go on, captain, look him up on the bulletin. He said his name was Gavin Free.”

Geoff held her eyes for a long moment, mouth twisted sideways in suspicion. But eventually he turned away, and flipped on the console that would connect to the Cortex. He typed for a few seconds, paused, and typed again.

“This guy?”

Lindsay leaned around him to look at the screen. Gavin’s holographic hazel eyes blinked at her over his long nose.

“Yes, that’s him,” she confirmed, scanning the article briefly. “Public intoxication… Resistin’ arrest… Unlawful passage… Pretty solid rap sheet.”


Jack, setting the helm for auto-pilot, whistled. “Impressive. Could almost be one of us. Stupid, though, to give you his real name. What’s the reward?”
Lindsay peered at the screen again, then gaped openly. “It says... Wuh de ma, it says fifteen million credits.”

“What? That can’t be right,” Geoff said, reading and re-reading the bulletin. “Even Burns ain’t worth half that much!”

“What does it matter?” Jack asked, releasing the throttle and leaning back. “Linday’s plan is good. If that price isn’t a typo, we’ll be set for the next fifty years.”

The two women looked instinctively at Geoff, awaiting his decision. He thought for a full minute, frowning deeply and stroking his mustache.

“There’s somethin’ mighty sketchy about this,” he said slowly. “I don’t think this report is tellin’ the whole story here. And where is this kid? He better not be runnin’ loose around my ship.”

“Nah, I stashed him in the secret compartment. I don’t think he’s interested in messin’ with us, since we’re helpin’ him escape.”

“All right. Leave him there until you tell the others what’s up.” He paused and closed his eyes for a moment, brow furrowed. “Your idea’s solid. We’ll wring him for all he’s got, then throw him to the feds.”

“Aye aye, cap’n.” Lindsay saluted lazily, and left the bridge.

After a moment, Jack spoke.

“Sir? You’ve got that look again.”

“I don’t like this, Jack,” Geoff sighed. “Somethin’ smells like Alliance bullshit. This Gavin kid must’ve pissed ‘em off somethin’ fierce for ‘em to offer so much. He might be more trouble than he’s worth.”

“He’s worth an awful lot.”

“If they pay. Reward that big feels like a trap.”

“We could just drop him off somewhere. A hundred grand isn’t nothing. Let someone else deal with the hassle.”

“Nah. If we’re careful, we’ll end up rich as dicks. I just gotta figure out the best way to do this.”

Jack stood, stretched, and rubbed her face tiredly. “Your call, sir. I’m going to bed.”

“You do that.”

Geoff stayed on the bridge, staring at the stars, for a long time.

“I’m telling you, he’s sitting on the fuckin' card!”
“Fei hua, Michael, I haven’t got anything, see?”

“Now it’s up your sleeve!”

“Nah.”

Lindsay draped herself on the back of her fuming husband’s chair and propped her chin in his coppery curls. Ray, looking tired across the table, nodded at her.

“Sup.”

“Oh, some stuff,” she replied airily, watching Ryan empty his pockets with an entirely too innocent expression. “Y’all got a minute or are you too busy gamblin’ away your life savings?”

The pile of small change between the men jumped as Michael kicked the table leg in frustration.

“No, we’re fine... This cheatin’ niang is gonna catch it later, though.” He glared at Ryan, then leaned back to smile at Lindsay. “Whatcha got, babe?”

“Well,” she said, and moved to lean conspiratorially against the table. Something about her expression prompted the others to sit up and pay attention.

There was silence when she finished her rundown of the situation. Ryan leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful look on his face. Ray blinked, digesting the news.

“Huh.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Ryan agreed, running a hand through his hair. “And you trust this guy?”

“Not so far as you could throw the ship, but the pickin’s too good to pass up.”

“We got a plan for how to pull it off?” Michael asked dubiously. “We’re not exactly the kind of people the Alliance wanna deal with.”

“Cap’s thinkin’ on it as we speak. We got five whole days, he’ll come up with somethin’.”

Ray rubbed his scruffy chin. “You said he wants a computer? Is there even one on board that he can use?”

“There’s the comm up on the bridge, but I don’t think that’s what he’s after,” Michael said.

“I’ve got something that might work,” Ryan said slowly. “A little project of mine. Been tinkering with it a while. I could probably have it operational in a day or two, but between ports the Cortex connection is gonna be spotty at best.”

“We’re berthin’ at Boros for a spell. Can easily keep him on board long enough to do his thing,” Lindsay suggested.

“What do we do with him until then?” Michael asked. “He can’t stay in the hold the whole time.”

“Guest quarters,” Ray said with a shrug. “Lock him in there so he can’t cause trouble.”

“I guess so. Cap said I could let him out once y’all were up to speed. Wanna come with?”
they followed Lindsay out of the room, their cards forgotten on the table.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
wuh de ma: Mother of God
fei hua: Nonsense
niang: motherfucker
“Hey, I’m back.” Lindsay’s voice came through the grille, which shifted, allowing light to pour into the cramped space. Gavin stirred and blinked sleepily.

“Lovely. Can I come out now?”

“Yeah, come say hi to some of the crew!”

Gavin pulled himself forward out of the compartment and stretched like a cat before looking up. The sight before him nearly made him crawl back into the hole.

Three hard-bitten men loomed over him, looking down contemptuously, each holding a wickedly effective-looking gun. One of them wore a black mask fashioned like a skull, grinning at him like it knew when he was going to die.

“Erk,” Gavin squeaked.

“Gavin, meet Ryan, Michael, and Ray.” Lindsay pointed out each man in turn. “Guys, this is Gavin.”

Michael cocked his pistol, aiming it significantly at Gavin’s head. “You’re gonna stay in line here, dohn-ma?”

“Any shenanigans get you a one-way trip out the airlock,” added Ray.

“If the captain doesn’t have me gut you first,” the skull said quietly.

Lindsay gently pushed down the muzzle of Michael’s gun. “Y’all might wanna ease up a bit, he looks like he’s gonna pass out.”

“Aw, it’s not like it’s loaded,” her husband said with a hint of a whine.

The skull shrugged. “Mine is.”

Ray slung his rifle across his back and offered his hand to Gavin. “Don’t piss yourself, kid. We’re just fucking with you.”

“You guys spoil all the fun,” the third man complained, but he still holstered his weapon and pulled off his mask.

Gavin tentatively let himself be raised to his feet. Now that they weren’t trying to scare him to death, the three men seemed much more amiable.


“Uh. Yeah. That’s… that’s fine.”

“It really is unloaded,” Michael reassured him, pulling back the slide and ejecting the magazine to prove it. “You’re no good to us dead.”
“That’s somehow not comforting at all.”

“Speaking of which,” said Ryan, “The way I see it, you’re not much good to us alive either. Leastways until we get paid. So you’ll be staying in your bunk and out of trouble until I’ve got the computer working for you.”

His intense blue gaze was instantly hypnotizing. “Y… yessir,” Gavin stammered, suddenly off-balance.

“Come on. I’ll take you there,” Ray said, motioning for Gavin to follow.

The other three stood aside as their passenger trailed shakily after Ray. Up a set of metal stairs, through what looked like a mess hall, and down a hallway lay several cabins faced with papery yellow walls. Ray led Gavin to one of them and drew back the sliding door.

“This’ll be your room. Storage on this wall, toilet and sink fold out here. Don’t waste water. Make sure all the drawers are securely closed when you’re done with them. If you need something, use the comm panel. This button’ll connect to the engine room and this one is Lindsay’s room. Bother her, she seems to like you. Do not use the PA system.”

“What about food? A chap’s got to eat.”

“One of us will bring you something, or if the captain’s feeling generous maybe he’ll let you up to the mess.”

“All right. Got some books or anything?”

Ray thought for a moment. “Jack might have a reader you could borrow. I’ll ask.”

“Thanks,” Gavin said, wondering how many others were on board. “Will I get to meet the rest of the crew?”

“I dunno.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Ray left, and Gavin heard the click of a lock and the clang of footsteps walking away across the metal deck. He sighed and threw himself down on his cot. Something in his pocket shifted and poked at his leg.

“Oh yeah,” he muttered, digging it out. A small, translucent blue data chip rested in his palm. He sighed again, reached for a drawer, and locked it away. He could learn what was on it later.

“But did you see his kelian face!” Michael attempted to imitate Gavin’s wide-eyed terror, and burst out laughing again.

“Ohhh, man, that was fantastic,” Ryan said, wiping a tear of laughter out of the corner of his eye. “Worth his passage for entertainment alone, I’d say.”
“You guys are ridiculous,” Lindsay sighed with a shake of her head.

“Come on, you gotta admit it was fuckin’ funny,” Michael said, slinging an arm around her shoulders. She rolled her eyes.

“All right, it was at that,” she said, smiling. “You two put those guns away. I’m gonna check the engine and hit the sack.”

“Okay. Be there soon,” said Michael, kissing Lindsay on the cheek. She leaned into him for a moment before leaving to tend Hunter’s beating heart. The two men went in the opposite direction, up a flight of stairs towards the nose of the ship.

“So what are you gonna do, Ry? It’s kinda early for you.”

Ryan rolled his broad shoulders a little, stretching. “I’ll go tell Geoff we’ve, uh, ‘greeted’ our passenger. Maybe work on the computer for a while.”

“Kay. G’night, then.”

“Night.”

They split up, Michael to the crew quarters and Ryan to the bridge. He found Geoff bent over a notebook, scribbling ideas like he always did before a not-so-legal job.

“We’ve got the kid in one of the passenger cabins. You wanna talk to him?”

“Yeah, yeah,” muttered Geoff distractedly. “I’ll bring him a protein bar in a minute.”

“Working the details of Lindsay’s plan?” Ryan asked, leaning over the captain’s shoulder to peer at his notes.

“Tryin’ to figure out how to make the exchange without gettin’ our butts arrested,” Geoff said, leaning back in his chair. “The feds have a nasty habit of roundin’ up folks tryin’ to turn over fugitives. Some mi tian gohn about ‘harboring’ and ‘aiding and abetting.’ Double-crossin’ snakes.”

“Tie him up somewhere, show them a video, and tell them where he is once they’ve given us the money. We can do all of that remotely, even have them make a digital credit transfer.”

“I thought of that. It’s probably the safest option. But we need a fallback plan in case they don’t agree to it. With that much money on the line they might want to see him in the flesh before payin’, but then there’s the risk they’d just take him and run. Or, if we try to keep ‘em from doin’ that, they’ll snag whichever of us is with him.”

“That’s their M.O., all right. At least it was in my day.” Ryan rubbed the back of his neck. “Well… If the choice is between losing the reward and getting locked up, I’d just as soon throw him to the wolves and burn atmo. It’s tze sah ju yi, carrying him around with a bulletin out. He’ll bring us all down.”

Geoff sighed. “I dunno. I’m gonna talk to him, maybe see what he really did to get the Alliance so fuckin’ riled up. Could give us a better idea of what we’re walkin’ into.”

“All right. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Ryan retreated to his quarters thoughtfully. He’d been on the other side of several hostage
negotiations, and Geoff’s fears about the authorities’ behavior were spot on. The Alliance didn’t like losing. But that was a problem for another day. Tonight – insofar as “night” had any meaning out in the black – he had work to do.

As he began the painstaking task of soldering miniscule wires into place, he thought about Gavin. During their brief encounter he had been a complete mess, which was the typical reaction from someone with a gun to their head. It was usually deeply satisfying, but somehow not so this time. Funny, yes; but he actually felt a little bad about it, though he wasn’t at all sure why.

“F’n zse!” he swore, burning his finger on the soldering iron. Doing such delicate work while distracted was counterproductive. He shook his head sharply and put Gavin from his mind, bending once more over his task. If he kept his full attention on it, he could have this part done in a couple of hours. The rest could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
dohn-ma: understand?
kelian: pathetic
mi tian gohn: excrement, bullshit
tze sah ju yi: suicidal idea
f’n zse: shit, pool of shit
Chapter 4

Gavin grew bored extremely quickly. With nothing to entertain him, the sparse cabin rapidly began to feel like the prison it was. Still being on Persephone time, he wasn’t particularly tired, either, and after his nap he could not make himself sleep. He’d resorted to writing code in his head when he heard footsteps approaching.

Someone fiddled with the lock and pulled open the door. Gavin sat up to see a tallish man with an impressive mustache, dressed in a black suit that had clearly seen better days. Slung incongruously over it was a worn leather duster and a bandolier that carried several small pistols.

“Howdy, I’m Geoff and I run this boat. Want somethin' to eat?”

He offered what looked like a small brown brick. Gavin took it, bewildered.

“This is food?”

“Only the best-quality protein, with all the nutrients you need mixed in. That much should be more’n enough to last you ‘til we hit Boros.”

“You’re joking,” Gavin said flatly. The bar fit comfortably on his palm with plenty of room to spare.

“Nope. It’s all we eat most of the time, with flavorings and such. It’ll grow on you.” He sat down with a thump on the bed next to Gavin and leaned back on his arms. “So, what brings you to my humble ship? I hear you had to de-ass Persephone in a hurry.”

Gavin shifted uncomfortably. “Uh. Yeah. I did.”

“Don’t worry, kid, you can tell me what happened. You might’ve noticed, my crew ain’t the most savory characters. We don’t judge. But since I’m takin’ you on, I gotta know what kind of a pain in the neck you’ll be.”

Gavin tensed for a moment, as if to flee. But with nowhere to go, he slowly sagged with a look of hopeless resignation. When he spoke, it was in the voice of a child who’d been caught cheating at school.

“Well, I have this hobby, see. Getting into computer systems, finding vulnerabilities, bypassing security. Sometimes I’m curious about what people want to keep hidden. A lot of the time I’ll do it just to see if I can. But this time I guess went too far.” He ran a hand through his hair, which stood up in all directions. “I hacked a military server. For laughs, you know, to prove I could.”

“Well, that don’t sound like the best idea.”

Gavin shook his head. “I did it, but I wasn’t careful enough. They traced me, tracked me down. Showed up at my place, middle of the night, bloody guns blazing. None of that sonic shite – real lead. I scarpered. Left everything I had behind.” He rubbed his face, downcast. “And that’s the full Monty. It’s not like I’ve killed anyone.”

“So was it worth it? What’d you see?”
“The data? N… nothing really. Just bollocks’d up my life for no reason.” Gavin studiously avoided the captain’s eyes.

Geoff stared at him piercingly for a moment, then shook his head and rose from the mattress.

“Tough break, buddy.”

“You’re leaving already? Couldn’t I ask you a few questions too?”

“Heh. We might've left the world ‘round noon local time, but we got there at the end of our day. For us it's about one A.M.”

“Oh. Lovely. I'll just... stay here then.”

The captain smiled slightly and reached into a pocket of his coat. “That you will. These might help pass the time.”

Gavin caught the deck of cards with a nod of thanks. “See you in the morning, maybe?”

“Ah, who knows. Out here it’s a miracle if any of us see morning.”

And with that disconcerting statement, he was gone. Gavin remained where he was, shaken.

Despite his fears the hours passed uneventfully, and Hunter’s internal clock ticked slowly through the night cycle. Recessed LEDs all along the walls and ceilings shifted their colors from shades of dull blue to pale yellow and delicate, rosy pink. The crew began to wake with the ship, stirring in the artificial dawn. One by one they trailed to the mess in various stages of drowsiness, lured by the tantalizing aroma of the automatic coffee pot. Ray, shirtless over soft green pants and bare feet, assembled some protein and packets of flavor into a passable imitation of scrambled eggs.

Geoff was last to arrive, stepping into the room as the others were sitting down with their shares of breakfast. His hooded eyes drooped even more than usual, a testament to how little rest he’d gotten that night. He plopped into his chair at the head of the table and accepted the cup of coffee Lindsay brought over to him.

“Thanks. Okay, listen up, everybody. I’ve got a plan.”

“When do you not?” asked Ryan.

“Yeah, yeah, bi jweh. I think I have a safe way to trade off our… ‘extra cargo’. Look.”

He pushed his notebook forward. On the page was a rough sketch of the Georgia system, with Boros and its satellites labeled in black. An inset showed an area of one of its moons, with cities and military installations marked. Close to a small town was a red X, and near to that, a blue one.

“We’re runnin’ a little hot on this trip, so the fuel cells’re gonna be close to dead by the time we reach Boros. We don’t wanna keep Dequan waitin’ for his shipment, either, so that leaves us no choice but to hit South Ridge first. I’ll close the sale, and once we’ve got cash in hand we’ll resupply. Jack and Lindsay, you’re on fuel and parts. See if you can find a linkage assembly on
sale. Ray and Michael, food detail. There oughta be enough to get some real goddamn rice for once. I’ll stay with Hunter and contact the feds to negotiate a half-now half-later credit transfer. Ryan, you’re with Gavin. Make sure he comes through on his end of the deal. Once that’s done, things get tricky.”

“You’re not making the switch in port, are you? Boros is crawling with Alliance.”

“Of course not, Michael, give me some credit.” Geoff pointed at the red spot on his map. “This is Casper Hill, on Ares. It’s a walkable distance from Rokkik’s Town and has good visibility in all directions. We’ve gotta bring Gavin there without spookin’ him.”

Jack yawned. “How about we say it’s too dangerous for him on Boros? That he’s less likely to get pinched on Ares?”

“Exactly. He seems harmless enough, so I’m gonna let him out of his cage today, and I want you all get friendly with him. By the time we’re ready to hand him over he should trust us enough to go along with this.”

“What? That’s kuh wu!” Lindsay said forcefully. Geoff glanced at her with exasperation.

“And turnin’ him in for a reward ain’t?”

“But why fuck with his head first? That don’t seem necessary.”

The look turned into a glare. “So we don’t have to use force later and risk damagin’ the goods. When the hell did you grow a conscience, anyhow?”

“Wei, captain, just finish the plan,” Michael told him, putting a comforting hand on his wife’s shoulder. She shrugged it off darkly.

Geoff frowned again and returned to his notes. “As I was sayin’, he’ll trust us to take him somewhere safe. We land Hunter in the valley here –” he pointed at the blue X “– and take little Gavvy by shuttle to the drop point. The way I’ll set it up, we oughta get there long before the feds. But just in case, I’ll take Michael and Ryan with me. Once we’re there we tie him up and haul ass. Alliance arrives an hour later, picks up the package, and we get the rest of our money. Even if they hump us on the second payment, we’ll already have enough from the first to live the high life for a good long while.”

The crew generally nodded, some more enthusiastically than others. Lindsay still looked rebellious, and Geoff focused his attention on her like a laser.

“You better not tip him off, Jones. This is too big to fuck up. I will make you regret it if you turn on me.”

They locked eyes for a long moment, will against will. But Lindsay could no more resist the captain than grow wings. She dropped her gaze to stare resignedly at her plate.

“Shi’a, cap’n. I’m in.”

“Good,” Geoff announced briskly, tucking his notebook away. “Any of those eggs left?”

Breakfast passed quietly. Lindsay was first to leave, muttering about injectors and how sustaining Hunter’s current speed wasn’t good for them. Jack went to take the helm. The four men lingered over second cups of coffee. Eventually Ryan drained his mug and stretched, thin blue shirt straining over his torso.
“I better get back to work on the computer. Still a lot to be done.”

“Actually, Ryan, hang on a sec,” said Geoff as the other man made to stand up. “You two, scram. Go pump iron or somethin’.”

Michael looked at Ray, who sighed and began to clear his plate. “I’ll be there in a minute. I gotta ask Jack something.”

When they’d left, Geoff beckoned Ryan closer.

“What’s up, sir?”

“I talked to Gavin last night,” Geoff said in a low voice. “The kid’s an open book. Most of what he told me about why he’s here was true: he nosed around an Alliance cluster and they didn’t take it too kindly.”

“But they must get millions of attacks every day, and shrug it off,” Ryan said, confused. “Why crack down on this guy?”

“Because he didn’t just attack, he got in,” Geoff said with a trace of admiration. “When I asked him what he saw, he claimed it was nothin’. But he’s shit at lyin’. I want you to find out what he’s got. Could be it’s useful to us.”

Ryan sighed. “Why me? I’m busy.”

“You’ve got a way of gettin’ inside people’s heads,” Geoff told him quietly. “Make ‘em tell you things they don’t wanna say. Do things they don’t wanna do. You sidle up to ‘em and wrap ‘em round your finger. Nobody else on this boat got that skill.”

“I’m flattered,” Ryan said dryly. “All right, I’ll do it. He’s a hacker, you said? Maybe he can help with my project.”

“Shie shie, guay toh guay nown.”

“Oh, can it,” Ryan said, standing. Geoff raised an eyebrow at him. He snorted quietly. “Can it, sir.”

“That’s better.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
bi jweh: shut up
kuh wu: despicable
wei: hey
shi’a: yes, affirmative
shie shie: thank you, thanks
guay toh guay nown: conniving or scheming person (literally, "ghost head and ghost brain")
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gavin followed Geoff like a puppy, staring at everything with intense fascination as the captain gave him the tour. They ended on the bridge and Gavin nearly fell over in awe at the sight of empty space before him – there had been no windows in the hold of the freighter that took him off Ariel. He approached the wide expanse of perma-glass reverently, and touched it with trembling fingertips. The surface felt somehow warm, but awfully, terrifyingly fragile. The notion of such a thin barrier between him and the infinite black gave him a horrified thrill.

“I don’t think you’ve met Jack yet,” Geoff said, watching his charge with amusement. The statement broke Gavin’s thrall.

“Uh. No. Who’s he?” he asked, turning away from the stomach-dropping sight. Geoff began to laugh.

“She is the pilot,” Jack said with annoyance, crossing her arms over her colorful shirt and turning her seat to face him. Gavin’s mouth hung open for a second before he scrambled unsuccessfully to recover from his faux pas.

“I’m terribly sorry, s– ma’am, I shouldn’t have assumed… Lovely name, awfully unique – I mean – bloody hell, I’m such a donut. Pleasure to meet you.”

“I guess you’d have plenty of authority to comment on unique names, Gavin,” she responded tetchily. Geoff looked at her reproachfully over the younger man’s shoulder, and she reluctantly pasted a smile on her face. “Sorry, I hear that a lot. It gets old fast. Ray mentioned you wanted something to read?”

Gavin, face still bright red, struggled to regain some composure. “Um. Yes. But I can probably manage now that I’m not stuck in my room.”

Jack shrugged. “Well, I have an extra tablet. I’ll leave it in your bunk if you want. Our sleep schedules are out of sync and it’ll probably take you a while to adjust to the time difference.”

“I’m used to odd hours. I can match up soon. But thanks.”

Now that he looked less of a fool, he could take in a little more of the cockpit. Some of the buttons and switches seemed to be on the ragged side, jury-rigged and held together with electro-tape. The dashboards around the copilot’s seat had been scavenged for parts, probably to replace broken ones on the other side. None of the computer equipment was very advanced and didn’t look like anything he would find useful; the exception was a pair of video comm panels, one for each pilot.

“Mind if I give this a quick look?” Gavin asked, moving to the one on the left.

“No at all,” Geoff answered. “It’s just for short-range communication, but it’s the only Cortex link we’ve got. We’ll have to hook Ryan’s rig up to it later.”

Gavin bent over the controls and flipped on the screen. It showed nothing but static.

“Nothin’ to connect to out here,” Geoff commented, fiddling with a dial. “You can look at yourself though, if you want.”
The image changed to a fuzzy picture of Gavin, staring intently at his own face. He didn’t notice the captain surreptitiously pressing “record.”

“This is the menu,” Geoff explained, leaning over to touch a small icon on the screen. He managed to put himself in the shot while doing so. “In port, you can link to the broader network or choose a local signal. You’ve also got playback and broadcast.”

“Neato,” said Gavin. He turned away, satisfied, and again did not see Geoff saving the video he’d made. “So where’d you learn to fly, Jack? This all looks complicated as knobs.”

“Freighters, mostly,” she answered. “I worked for Blue Sun for a while, then flew fighters in the war.”

“The Unification War?”

“What other is there?” Jack said, getting miffed again. Her steely expression discouraged Gavin from asking more questions. “Sir, if you don’t mind, we’re almost at the asteroid belt. I’m going to need to focus.”

“Say no more,” Geoff replied, drawing Gavin away. “Try not to make a Reaver snack out of us.”

“Roger that.”

As they trotted back down the hall Gavin peppered Geoff with questions: Which side did Jack fight for? Was anyone else on board a veteran? Why had he described them as a dodgy bunch? What kind of work did they do that made them no friends to the Alliance? What were Reavers?

The captain deflected most of this, claiming it wasn’t his place to share other people’s business and that the less Gavin knew about their operation, the better. But when the younger man brought up Reavers, Geoff halted in his tracks.

“Wait, you… you never heard of Reavers?”

Gavin shook his head, innocent curiosity on his face. “Nope. No idea.”

Geoff motioned for him to sit on the small common room couch, and began to pace up and down in front of him.

“Ugh, damn inner-ring rich kids, they don’t teach you anything… If you’re gonna fly with us for any distance, you need to know this. Even a milk run to the Georgia system is more dangerous than it used to be…” He sighed, smoothed his mustache, and spoke in a haunted voice. “A Reaver is a monster more horrible than you could imagine. They might’ve been people, once, but somethin’ fucked ‘em up so bad they ain’t nothin’ but evil now. They’ll desecrate any flesh they get their claws on, even their own, with any kinda weapon they can think up. They’ll kill you – eventually – but not before tearin’ your skin off, gnawin’ the meat off your livin’ bones, and fuckin’ the holes they’ll punch through your gut. If you’re on a ship that gets boarded, or in a town that gets raided, take my advice: shoot yourself.”

Gavin’s usually tan face was stark white by then, enormous hazel eyes staring blankly and mouth open in shock. It seemed like he couldn’t really process what he’d been told.

“Y… you’re having a laugh,” he accused.

“I swear on every star in the ‘Verse, it’s true.” Geoff’s voice was that of a man who’d gone through hell, and only partly come out the other side. “Now it ain’t likely we’ll run into
those cheong bao ho tze monsters on this trip, but you deserve to know the risk.”

“D- did you ever see them?”

The captain’s eyes clouded, reliving memories that were always too close to the surface. “Yes,” he whispered, a hand moving subconsciously to his pistols. “A few years back. We were makin’ a stop on Whitefall when a Reaver ship landed on the town. We managed to get out in time, even took a few poor bastards with us… but it was close. We could hear the screamin’. Saw on the bulletin later that there were no survivors.”

“Bloody hell,” Gavin breathed.

“That’s exactly what it was. And I pray I never have to see it again.” Geoff stared into space for a few moments more, then shook his head sharply and cleared his throat. “Enough. I hope you’re satisfied, kid, ‘cuz I’ve got work to do. Why don’t you go see Ryan? He said he could use your help.”

“Uhhh,” Gavin said hesitantly, abject terror giving way to a different kind of fear. “Isn’t he the… the scary one?”

“Yes,” Geoff confirmed, almost happily. “I think he’s in his quarters. Back up towards the bridge, second hatch on the right. Knock first or he’s liable to shoot you. Have fun!”

Gavin watched him nonchalantly walk away. He gulped and decided to talk to the rest of the crew first.

For the most part they seemed friendly, but all grew slightly awkward after a few minutes. Ray wanted to get back to his portable game player, a toy that Gavin noted he had not offered to share. Lindsay had to finish rerouting some hydraulics. Michael was wiring up grenades and refused to talk at all. Gavin was left with the sense that the crew was not accustomed to much social interaction and probably needed a day or two to get used to him.

And that left just one other person: Ryan, the man in the mask.

Filled with trepidation, Gavin walked to Ryan’s quarters as if to a gallows. There was a small speaker by the hatch with a button on it. He pressed the button gingerly and winced when a voice crackled out of it.

“Yeah?”

“Um. It’s Gavin. The captain said you needed me for something?”

“Jing tsai. Come on in.”

It took him a moment to work out how to open the “door.” It seemed to push in and form a ladder that led down into the room, which was much larger than his own tiny cabin. Once he was inside the portal closed by itself.

“Hey. C’mere, I think you’ll like this,” Ryan beckoned. He was much less intimidating in a blue shirt, faded jeans, and a smile than when looking down the barrel of a gun. Gavin found himself drawn to a sturdy wooden table, bolted to the floor, upon which was strewn a host of wires, resistors, transistors, and every other kind of -istor that went into the construction of circuitry. He could tell at a glance that this was thoroughly obsolete stuff, nowhere near as advanced as his setup at home, but as a result was much easier to work with.
“I got this old Archon 26 CPU a while back and started building the system around it. Motherboard’s done, I got some RAM and a case, but the GPU and power supply still need work.”

Ryan’s voice, so deep and bone-chilling yesterday, was warm and excited now. Clearly, he was passionate about his project. It put Gavin much more at ease.

“You made this from parts?” he asked incredulously, peering at the motherboard. “The soldering’s excellent.”

“Aww, thanks, Gavin,” Ryan said, flattered. “I’ve been making shit for a while, toys mostly. Want to see?”

“Sure!”

Ryan opened a drawer and pulled out several small devices. Some had wheels, some had wings, and one looked like a tiny catapult. He delighted in showing Gavin how each one worked, even opening up the casings to display the delicate mechanisms inside.

“I used as much clockwork as I could for this one. Figuring out how to articulate the wing joints on it took… what, about a month?” Ryan grinned. “I made it only fly in circles and set it loose in the cargo hold. Lindsay died laughing, but Jack nearly went insane.”

“No,” Gavin feigned disbelief. “How long did it fly for?”

“Oh, only a day or so,” Ryan said cheekily. “Nobody will let me take it out of my room, now. I mean, maybe it can be kinda annoying. A little. I guess.”

Gavin smiled mischievously, wound the toy up, and tossed it into the air. A second later he remembered who he was dealing with; his eyes went wide and he squeaked, scrambling backwards.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t help it please don’t kill me!”

Gavin cringed until he realized that the low rumble coming from Ryan’s chest wasn’t an angry growl – it was laughter. It burst from his lips in a rich chuckle, wide grin flashing. Through his fear, Gavin was hit by a bizarre urge to poke the man’s cheek.

Ryan shook his head. “Joke’s on you, I changed the mechanism to last ten minutes instead. Nice try, though.”

Gavin blinked, the highlight reel of his life fading from his vision. “Oh. You’re not mad?”

“Nah, man, that was funny! Also, I can do this.” Ryan reached up as the device buzzed by and snatched it right out of the air. It struggled in his hand until a push of the reset button made it fall silent. “How about one we can control?”

They played with his widgets for over an hour, making the little RC drones fly around and do battle with the miniature tanks. Suddenly Gavin realized how easy it was to talk to the older man; he was funny, charming, and in some ways not unlike a child – the same ways, it seemed, as Gavin. He even caught himself considering the word “adorable” a couple of times, watching Ryan’s face beaming up at one of his creations. For the first time in nearly a week – and possibly much longer than that, if he really thought about it – Gavin was having fun.

Eventually they were all played out. They sat back with identical satisfied sighs, glanced at each other, and laughed.
“All right,” Ryan said, gathering up the toys and putting them away. “Wanna tackle the PSU?”

“Yeah!” Gavin answered, jumping to his feet.

“Shiny. You do that, and I’ll work on the graphics card. I think I have something you can sit on…”

A moment later he was perched on a good-sized box next to Ryan, who had a stool. The table was just big enough for them to fit side-by-side, but there wasn’t much elbow room. Carefully they sorted out which parts each of them needed, and Ryan showed Gavin where all the tools were in his meticulously organized chest. He flicked on a bright light to see by, and they began their work.

“So where are you from, again?” Ryan asked after a few minutes.

“Echo City, on Ariel,” Gavin said, twisting a pair of wires together. “It’s a lovely place. Tallest skyscrapers on the planet.”

“You know, I think I’ve been there,” Ryan commented. Gavin looked up.

“Really? When? Why?”

“Oh, it was a while ago. Ten, maybe twelve years? Before the war started, at least. I took my tactical exam there.”

“Tactical exam?”

Ryan smirked. “I was a cop. After the Academy I applied for special training. Hostage rescue, dangerous arrests, that kind of crap. We took one of the graduation tests in Echo City.”

“Woah,” said Gavin. “How’d you end up here, then?”

Ryan sighed, put his tools down significantly, and ran a hand through his hair. It settled into a perfect swoop across his forehead. “It was on Perth. My team was after this woman… I don’t even remember her name, but she’d murdered some folks and was considered armed and dangerous. We had her surrounded, and my C.O. went in to make the arrest…”

He trailed off. Gavin nudged him gently.

“What happened?”

“Something wasn’t right,” Ryan continued soberly. “He’d gone radio silent, so I followed him into the house. And… he was… she…”

He paused again. Gavin could see his hands shaking, and the shadow in his eyes as he looked down… was that fear?

“The qing wa cao de liu mang had her by the throat, clothes all torn up, trying to… to force himself on her. I didn’t even think. I shot him stone dead.”

Once more Gavin found himself speechless. It gave Ryan a moment to collect himself.

“The court martial cleared me of criminal charges after they saw the footage from my helmet cam. But I was still… uh, decommissioned. Without honors. So I moved out to Persephone, learned to work with tech, and signed on with this crew when I got tired of the nine-to-five.”

He smiled sadly and took up the soldering iron. Gavin had a strange urge to give him a hug, but settled for a comforting squeeze of his shoulder. Ryan looked up at the touch and smiled for real, a
hint of thanks glinting in eyes reddened by unshed tears. Gavin found himself hypnotized again, not from terror this time, but rather an odd sense of connection. Then Ryan blinked, and the moment was lost.

They attended once more to their work, but Gavin dwelled on the feeling well past when the ambient lights faded to dusk. It was 2:30 A.M. by the ship’s clock before they grew tired and parted ways for the night. Even after, as he lay on his cot in the dark, those deep blue eyes were all that Gavin could see.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
cheong bao ho tze: monkey-raping
jing tsai: brilliant
qing wa cao de liu mang: frog-humping son of a bitch
He woke at eight the next morning, groggy and desperate for a shower. The best he could do was turn his shirt inside-out and splash a little water on his face. When he stumbled out of his cabin he saw that the rest of the crew was already up, and apparently had been for quite a while. Michael was the only one in the mess when he entered, sitting at the table with a sketchbook and pencils.

“Tea,” Gavin croaked, dragging himself to the kitchen area. “Have you got any tea in here?”

“We got coffee mostly,” Michael said. “But I reckon there might be some Longjing or Baimei in the third drawer.”

“Green?” the drowsy Gavin whined. “No good strong black?”

“Not unless you want a cuppa joe, sorry,” Michael told him. Gavin sighed mightily and snagged a mug.

“Milk and sugar?”

“Over by the stove. You gotta rehydrate the milk.”

Gavin spooned a bit of white powder into his cup from each jar and added a little water. The mound at the bottom took on a creamy consistency. He poured the dregs from the coffee pot in, stirred the whole, and took a sip.

“Ugh, ’s cold!” he exclaimed, nearly spitting the mouthful out. Michael looked over to him pityingly.

“Microwave’s to your right. Thirty seconds oughta do it. I hope you know to take the spoon out.”

Gavin did so, and in half a minute was seated next to Michael with a mug of steaming coffee.

“What’cha drawing?” he asked, taking a drink. He pulled a face, but didn’t complain any more.

“Specs for a mine,” Michael said, turning his paper so the other could look. “Proximity triggered, see? But remotely disarmed so I can pick ’em up without blowing myself to shit.”

Gavin studied the detailed design. “I can see why that’d be important. How come you need mines?”

“Oh, job like ours, you never know. I got rockets, bombs, grenades – sorry for being such an asshole yesterday, by the way. It’s touchy work, building those things.”

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“No worries, I understand,” Gavin said, somewhat gratified. “What exactly is your job, though? Bloody captain wouldn’t tell me.”

Michael sighed. “If Geoff doesn’t want you to know, I probably shouldn’t say anything…” He glanced at the pleading look on Gavin’s face, and relented. “Ah, whatever. We got a lotta jobs. Mostly shippin’ luh suh from one place to another without transport tax, if you get me. It can be dangerous, dealin’ with the people we do. But sometimes we get hired to get rid of bandits and the like. That’s when we need me.”
“Wow. You must have some right brill stories, yeah?”

“Fuckin’ right I do. Like the time on Santo when a nasty bunch of slavers turned up…”

He regaled Gavin with tales of derring-do, which Gavin lapped up eagerly as he finished his coffee. Nothing this exciting ever happened at home – until his attempted arrest, that is. Michael turned out to be hot-tempered in a highly entertaining way, recounting battles with fierce enthusiasm and many, many curses. Gavin loved it, encouraging him and reacting appreciatively in all the right places.

“…and I sent their fuckin’ shuttle into the goddamn stratosphere, you shoulda seen the fireball! It was like, fwooosh, boom! And Ryan slit their leader’s fuckin’ throat in front of the rest, cold as ice, as an example. They ran screamin’ and never came back! And the town Elder, he was so fuckin’ grateful, he paid us our wage and enough real food to last us two whole weeks. Those were good strawberries. I can still taste ‘em.”

Gavin whistled in admiration as Michael looked wistful, but inside he was slightly shaken by the bit about Ryan.

“Does Ryan do a lot of throat-slitting?” he asked casually, trying to hide his nervousness. Michael got excited again.

“Hell yeah he does! That motherfucker’s hard as they come. This one time a deal went south, right, and the other guy’s goons had us cornered. I dunno how the fuck he did it, but Ryan got that hundan by the balls so fast I didn’t even see him move. We backed outta there with him as a hostage. His fuckin’ gang followed but we got to the shuttle, got in… and right before we took off, this absolute psycho looks those bitches in the eyes and says, ‘This is what happens when you fuck with our crew. Tell your friends.’ And he cut the bastard’s fuckin’ neck wide open and threw his body out! The fuckin’ assholes were too stunned to shoot us down, so we got away. I think Geoff gave him a raise after that.”

“Holy shite,” Gavin breathed. He was visibly trembling. Michael smirked at him, tipped his chair back, and put his feet up on the table.

“Don’t freak out, Gav. He’s so fuckin’ loyal you could use him as a shield, and I’m pretty sure he likes you.”

“R… really?”

“Well, you spent the whole day in his room and came out alive, so, yeah.”

“I guess,” Gavin said doubtfully. The prospect of being friends with such a killing machine was a daunting one.

Michael stretched a little and ended up flailing to keep from toppling backwards. Gavin laughed.

“Oh, shut up,” Michael groused, stabilizing. “Wanna come work out with Ray and me? If you’re gonna spend any time on the border planets you oughta bulk up some.” He pinched Gavin’s slender arm teasingly.

“Ow!” Gavin whined, more for effect than anything. Michael gave him a Look. “Ugh, fine. But do you have anything else I could wear? I don’t think a dress shirt is quite appropriate.”

They found Ray playing a video game in the common room. His wiry frame was more similar to Gavin’s than Michael’s solid one, so he agreed to lend the newcomer some clothes more suited to
their rough-and-tumble life. The aged purple t-shirt and fraying cargo pants felt odd, but they were wonderfully, blessedly clean. For the moment.

Once he was changed he followed them to the back of the cargo bay, where a single padded bench stood next to a rack of dumbbells and heavy plates. A pair of handles hung from chains attached to the steel-grate walkway above, and a few ragged towels were tossed in a pile to the side.

“All right, let’s see what you’ve got,” Ray said, sliding some plates onto the bar that rested on hooks welded above the head of the bench. Michael moved behind it, ready to spot.

Gavin lay down with great trepidation and reached up to take hold of the cool, textured metal. He braced himself and pushed, straining.

The others struggled to muffle snorts of laughter as Gavin failed entirely to raise the bar. He couldn’t even get it out of its cradle.

“Let’s try a little less,” Ray choked with amusement. He removed the plates and replaced them with much smaller ones.

Again Gavin pushed, and this time the bar rose – but as soon as he tried to lower it for a press, his arms gave out. Michael caught the weight before it crushed Gavin’s windpipe.

“Okay, maybe just the bar.”

Off came the plates. Gavin managed three reps before clanging the bar back to rest.

“That’s bloody difficult,” he panted.

“Eh.” Michael shrugged. “You’re just startin’ out. Here, let me show you a deadlift.”

Ray did pull-ups while Michael demonstrated the correct form for the new exercise. Gavin mimicked him a few times with no weight, until his instructor was satisfied that he wouldn’t wrench his back. Using his whole body to lift the bar was much easier than the press, and Gavin completed a full set of ten. He was sweating by the time he finished.

“Good,” Michael praised. “Take a minute, then do it again.”


“Nope. Not if you wanna get any stronger.”

“Maybe I don’t,” Gavin muttered, but complied anyway.

He was halfway through his third set, struggling mightily, when Ryan came clanging down the stairs. He looked at the weightlifters and smirked.

“Hey guys. Mind if I borrow Gav for a while?”

“God, yes, take me away from these maniacs,” Gavin gasped, forgetting his concerns about the man in his desire to stop the torture. Ray and Michael both laughed.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then. Same time, right here.”

“Don’t think you can get out of it,” Ray added. “This ship’s only so big. We’ll find you.”

Gavin whimpered quietly and scurried to Ryan, trying to hide behind his broad frame. The older
man chuckled and led him away, up to the crew quarters and his own room.

“Got some new duds, I see,” he commented. “Purple suits you.”

“Oh, thanks. Ray let me borrow them.”

“You can get better clothes on Boros. Well, one of us can get ‘em for you. Depends on if there’s many feds around that day.” Ryan began to set out the computer guts they needed to finish building. Gavin gulped.

“Feds? Are there a lot?”

Ryan thoughtfully tapped his chin with a screwdriver. “Yeah, actually. Now I think about it, it’s probably not the best place for you to go.”

“What should I do, then?” Gavin asked in a small voice. Ryan appeared to ponder for a moment, then smiled.

“There’s a moon, Ares, that the Alliance don’t bother with much. They got a couple outposts but nothing major. The towns are pretty decent in general. Prosperous enough for trade, small enough to be cozy. You’d be as safe there as anywhere.”

“Huh. So why go to Boros first? Can’t you just… drop me off on the way or something?”

“At this point in its orbit, it’s on the other side of the planet from us. Plus, we have a delivery to make. Just stay on the ship while we’re in port and you’ll be fine.”

“All right,” Gavin said reluctantly, sliding onto his box at the table.

“What’d you do, anyway?” Ryan asked after a few minutes of quiet tinkering.

“What?” Gavin said, suddenly nervous.

“To be on the run. You don’t have to say if it’s too personal, I’m just wondering why you’re here.”

Gavin told his story once more, and it came easier this time than it had with Geoff. Ryan was a good listener. He was doing that hypnotizing thing again, too. The words came pouring out like blood from a wound.

“…So I legged it for the Hunter, and, well, here I am.”

“You must’ve touched on some sensitive information, to have ‘em so hard on your tail,” Ryan commented, still meeting Gavin’s eyes. The younger man could no more hold back than bench press the ship.

“I didn’t read anything at the time but I did download some,” he babbled, strangely eager to please Ryan. “No idea what but I still have the data chip and with the right input port I could find out.”

“Any idea what kind of jack you need?” Ryan asked, a secret smile dancing at the corner of his mouth. “It probably wouldn’t be too hard to wire it up to this rig.”

“Mini Trans-X 4.0,” Gavin said promptly. “Have you got one?”

“Oh.” Ryan’s eyes clouded slightly. “That’s a brand new type of serial input, isn’t it? I don’t think we’ve got anything compatible.”
“Aw, sausages.”

Ryan laughed at that, and a subtle change in his demeanor somehow broke the spell that had held Gavin in thrall. The young hacker blinked as if confronted with daylight for the first time.

“Well, if you’ve got that kind of technology, your setup back home must be quite something,” Ryan said casually, beginning to fiddle with the GPU again. “What processor do you use?”

Gavin answered, a little disoriented. He felt like he’d done something incredibly stupid – not a new sensation by a long shot – and regretted spilling the beans about his data chip. But Ryan… He was so interested, and knowledgeable, and seemed to want to help for curiosity’s sake alone. Despite his reservations about the man, Gavin wanted to trust him.

They paused work at lunchtime. Having had nothing but a cup of questionable coffee all day, Gavin was starving. Ray, finished with his workout, had done something with the protein stuff to make it taste like lo mein. Without any texture, though, it was a very odd meal. Nobody else seemed to have a problem with it.

“So, Gavin, how’s it going? Is this brute treatin’ you all right?” Lindsay asked, elbowing Ryan in the ribs.

“Hey now, I haven’t done anything to him,” Ryan protested. “Look, he’s still got all his limbs and everything.”

Jack snorted into her glass of water. “I wonder how long that’ll last.”

“Fang xin, he’s too useful to chop up.”

“That’s reassuring,” Gavin muttered, poking at his food.

“How’s the engine, Lindsay?” Geoff changed the subject. The mechanic swallowed a mouthful and shook her head.

“She’s fine for now, but it’d be better to slow down a spell. We’re gonna blow an injector at this rate.”

“Will she hold ‘til Boros?”

“Probably?”

“Then keep her together and we’ll deal with it there. We can’t be late.”

“Shi, captain.”

“Ryan, how’s the computer?”

“Great, actually. Gavin’s a big help. We should be done by dinner.”

“Fantastic. How long will it take to hook it up to the Cortex?”

“Eh, maybe a couple hours.”

Geoff nodded sharply and returned to his meal.

Strange taste or not, Gavin was hungry enough to eat all his share. Most of the crew soon dispersed to their various activities, leaving him, Geoff, and Ryan at the table. The two techies moved to get
up as well.

“Stay a minute, Ryan,” Geoff ordered. Gavin looked at him, wondering if he should remain, too, but the captain waved him away.

“You can go ahead and keep working. I’ll meet you there,” Ryan told him. Gavin nodded and left.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
Longjing, Baimei: varieties of green tea
luh suh: garbage, crap
hundan: bastard
fang xin: don't worry
shi: yes
True to his word, Ryan was back about ten minutes later. He found Gavin sitting criss-cross on the floor, one of the toys they’d played with yesterday in his hands. The younger man looked up with a blush mantling his cheeks.

“Um. Hi.”

“Hi,” Ryan said with a smirk. “Whatcha got there?”

“Nothing, just faffing about,” Gavin said somewhat guiltily. Ryan raised an eyebrow and crouched down to look.

Gavin had opened up a drone and made a complete mess of the workings inside. He remained stoic as his face turned a deeper shade of red.

“I was thinking I could improve the maneuverability,” he stammered. “The wing joints, here, they can have a wider range of motion. Made a dog’s dinner of it, though.”

Ryan was stock-still for a moment, and Gavin glumly started to consider which of his limbs he’d rather do without. But Ryan just laughed and shook his head.

“You’re incorrigible,” he said, standing back up. “Let’s finish what we started, okay? We can play with these again later. Maybe Lindsay would be interested, too.”

“All right,” Gavin said with relief, and unfolded his long legs. He startled himself by accepting Ryan’s offered hand.

The second and a half it took him to find his feet seemed to last for hours. Ryan’s palm was broad, warm, and callused, with interesting ridges and whorls that felt like scars. His fingers were gentle, knuckles a little dry from the recycled air in the ship. Gavin’s whole attention was focused on the contact, eyes dancing from bluntly trimmed nails to attractively tapered wrist in the space of a quickened heartbeat. He held on a fraction of a second longer than necessary, sweeping the pad of his thumb across the soft skin underneath it. When he finally let go his blush was back, and he felt breathless.

Ryan didn’t seem to notice.

Gavin fumbled with his tools at first, too stuck in that moment to focus on the proper placement of inductors. When he nearly opened an artery with wire cutters he gave up, slammed them on the table, and rubbed his eyes vigorously.

“Something wrong?” Ryan asked, glancing up in concern.

“No, ‘m fine,” Gavin mumbled, cheeks still hot. “Bit knackered. Stupid Michael and his stupid exercise…”

“Well, don’t hurt yourself. Blood and electronics aren’t a fun mix.”

Gavin snorted. “This’ll be quick. Not much left to do, if I don’t lose a finger.”
That drew another short chuckle from Ryan. “See that you don’t. It’d be a shame, talented hands like yours.”

And there went Gavin’s ability to do anything useful at all. He shoved himself away from the table, trying to hide his bright red face.

“You know what, let’s not take the chance. I’m gonna have a kip. See you at dinner!” He nearly tripped over himself scrambling out of the room.

Ryan watched him go, and waited for the hatch to clang shut before returning to his work. This manipulation thing was far easier than he could have hoped for; Geoff was already thrilled with his progress.

So why did he feel guilty about it?

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Gavin didn’t show for dinner. He remained sequestered in his quarters and gnawed on the protein bar Geoff had given him. Jack had kindly left her spare reader on the bed, too, which served as enough of a distraction to calm him down somewhat. It had an eclectic mix of books loaded on it: everything from war stories to technical manuals to several lurid romances whose titles made him blush. He was well into a rousing novel about a battle on Hera when someone knocked at his door.

“Hey Gav?” It was Lindsay. “Can I come in?”

He put the book down, drew aside the screen, and invited her to sit with him. She smiled and arranged herself on the bed.

“You were lookin’ a mite peaky at lunch, and we missed you at dinner. Everything okay?”


“That’d do it. And you’re sure Ryan ain’t botherin’ you none? I’ll knock some manners into him if you want.”

The image of short, soft Lindsay knocking anything into Ryan made Gavin giggle. “No, no, he’s spiffing. Still not sure what to make of him, with the stories Michael tells, but he’s… he’s great.”

Lindsay gave him a sly look, but didn’t press the subject.

“Stories, huh? About what?”

“Fighting, mostly,” he said. “Some stuff about leaving his home on Zephyr with you guys.”

“That was an interesting day,” Lindsay said with a smirk.

“I bet. When’d you two get hitched?”

“About a month later,” she answered, sticking her tongue out cheekily. “Sometimes you just know, y’know?”
“I really… don’t…” Gavin said, trailing off as an image of Ryan came unbidden to his mind. He shook his head vigorously. “Where’re you from, anyway? How’d you end up on the Hunter?”

“I was born on Persephone,” Lindsay said, frowning a little. “Never knew my parents. Earliest I remember is growin’ up on the streets. Geoff had a gang of kids like me, stealin’ and takin’ odd jobs to scrape by. He was a good da gher da, always lookin’ out for us. It was rough, but we did well enough under him to just about live like real people. Then he got older and left.”

“What’d you all do?”

“I took over the gang for a spell. Worked the docks, learned about ships and how to fix ’em. We did okay for a few years – some kids grew up, new ones joined. Then one day outta the blue comes Geoff, straight to our den. The yo chr thought we were gettin’ pinched, but he was lookin’ for me. Said he’d bought a ship and needed a crew. So I went with him.”

“How long’ve you been flying together?”

“Oh, must be six years or so. The war’d just ended, ‘cuz Jack came with us too and she was one hell of a yao nu back then.”

“You mean she isn’t now?” Gavin asked incredulously. Lindsay laughed.

“Y’all just got off on the wrong foot. She’ll come around.”

“I guess she did lend me the reader. Jolly nice of her.”

“Yeah, she’s got a soft side. Just takes a while to find it.” Lindsay tried to rub some grease off her hand, but only succeeded in smearing it around. “So how ‘bout you? You from Dyton colony?”

Gavin smiled. “Did the accent give it away?” he asked wryly. Lindsay snorted. “That’s where my family’s from originally, but I grew up on Ariel. Echo City.”

“Nice,” the mechanic said appreciatively. “Is it true people there are cyborgs?”

“Ha! Not bloody likely,” Gavin answered. “There’s a lot of hype about augmentations – advanced prosthetics, superhuman reflexes, that kind of crap – but if the docs at St. Lucy’s can’t figure it out, it’s all bollocks.”

“Oh,” said Lindsay, disappointed. “What about the lake that glows at night? Is that real?”

“Xingguang Lake? Yeah,” said Gavin. “It’s a couple hours shuttle ride from Capital City. We used to go there on holiday. It’s like swimming in the stars.”

“Wou duh tian ah,” Lindsay breathed, eyes alight. “I’d love to see that someday.”

“If I ever get home you can come visit,” Gavin offered, amused at her awe. But that awe faded rapidly at his words.

“That’s… mighty kind of you.” She bowed her head a little, bangs hiding her eyes, and abruptly stood. “I should check the air circulator. Humidification feels off. G’night.”

“What was that about?” Gavin muttered to himself when she’d left.

A little while later he was engrossed in his reading once again. He noticed someone knocking on their third attempt.
“Hello?” he asked, opening the door. Ryan stood there, looking slightly sheepish. Gavin’s eyes went wide.

“Hey. Lindsay said you were awake,” the older man said. “Did you want to fiddle with the drones some more? It’s not that late.”

“Um. I dunno, I’ll prob’ly make a mess of it again.”

“Nah. Even if you do, it’s no big deal,” Ryan said easily; but the hacker squirmed with discomfort, and he took a rueful step away. “I’m sorry. Just thought I’d ask. Have a good night.”

“’Night,” Gavin whispered to his retreating back. Was it his imagination, or were those muscled shoulders slumped with disappointment?

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

da gher da: gang or faction leader
yo chr: young ones
yao nu: demon woman
xingguang: starlight
wou duh tian ah: Oh my god
On the fourth day he joined the crew for a quiet breakfast at 7 A.M. ship time. Fresh coffee tasted much better than the stale stuff from the day before, though it still didn’t hold a candle to a decent cup of tea. The bacon-flavored protein was certainly passable. Geoff had been right – it did grow on you.

“Hey, Jack,” he said cautiously after a few minutes. “Thanks a ton for the books. I’m really enjoying them.”

The pilot looked up from her plate and gave him a slight nod, short auburn hair swinging by her chin. “Mei wen ti. What’re you reading?”

“I think it’s called Voices from Serenity Valley or something. It’s intense.”

Jack twisted her mouth sideways and said no more.

“You done with your machine, Ryan?” Geoff asked a little while later. The other man swallowed a mouthful of food.

“Almost,” he answered. “Took a little longer than I thought, but I can link it to the Cortex this afternoon.”

Near the end of the meal Gavin noticed Michael and Ray surreptitiously glancing at him and snickering to each other. He glared at them and excused himself from the table, retreating to his cabin a little too fast. Annoyingly, the lock was gone from his door. He grabbed Jack’s tablet, snuck to the cargo bay, and secreted himself back into the compartment Lindsay had stored him in before. But his efforts were in vain, because at 9 A.M. sharp the terrible twosome dragged him kicking and squawking from his hiding place.

“Come on, Gav, we told you,” Ray said, iron grip latched around Gavin’s wrist.

“Oh, sod off, you can’t be serious!”

“Deadly,” said Michael with a wicked grin. “You’ve got a long way to go.”

“But I don’t wanna go anywhere!”

“Too bad.”

Ryan waited in their workout corner, watching the proceedings with great amusement. He held a 50-pound dumbbell easily in one hand, and wore khaki pants with an olive-green shirt already damp with sweat.

“Let’s go, Gavin. You don’t want to be pushed around forever, do you?” he said, in that dark voice he’d used the first day. It sent shivers down Gavin’s spine.

“Traitor,” he moaned, giving up. He was nowhere near capable of fighting back.

They paired off, Michael with Gavin and Ray with Ryan. All three crew members teased the outsider mercilessly, putting him through his paces like a show dog. Already sore from yesterday’s
adventure, Gavin groaned his way miserably through the trial until they put the weights down at last.

“**Hao gongzuo**, kid,” Ryan praised, slapping him on his sopping wet back. “We’ll make a spacer outta you yet.”

“Please, please tell me we’re done,” Gavin begged, gasping.

“Nope,” said Ray, tossing him a towel. “Now it’s time for sparring.”

“What.”

They switched partners. Michael and Ryan demonstrated some simple brawling moves: the hook, the jab, right and left blocks, how to take a fall. Gavin fumbled through the practice, Ray deflecting every weakly swung fist with ease. Kicks were the same; he was so tired that before he knew it Ray had swept his legs out from under him. He toppled over, only at the last second remembering the correct way to hit the deck.

“Nnngh,” he moaned brokenly, spread-eagled on the blessedly cool metal. “Uncle.”

Michael crouched down and poked him in the ribs. He didn’t so much as twitch.

“I think we killed him,” Ray commented dryly.


He hauled the younger man to his feet. Gavin, despite the thick haze of exhaustion, felt a vague thrill.

Standing on his own was nearly impossible. He clung to Ryan’s arm with a death grip, trying to convince his aching body not to collapse. It was a close thing.

“You’ve got a little while before lunch,” Michael said, stripping off his sweat-darkened shirt. “Stretch out, clean up, relax.”

“You gonna be okay?” Ray asked, eyebrow raised. Gavin glared at him.

“If I do, it’s no thanks to you bastards. Bloody tyrants.”

“Come on. Let’s get you washed up,” Ryan said warmly, allowing Gavin to use him as support as he tottered away. Ray and Michael exchanged a knowing look behind their backs.

“I’d give my knob for a real shower right now,” Gavin said longingly. Ryan chuckled.

“Sorry, there isn’t that much water on the ship. It’s heavy and the tank is only so big.”

“We are going to *stink*.”

“Nah. I’ll show you how we do it out here.”

The method turned out to be quite simple. A large packet of cool gel functioned as a waterless soap, which hardened in the air and flaked off, taking dirt and oil with it. The residue could be swept up and disposed of. Ryan demonstrated on his hands and left Gavin to it, retreating to his bunk for ablutions of his own.

The gel bath left Gavin feeling remarkably refreshed, though still bone-weary. He flopped naked
onto the bed, fully intending to sleep like a stone until they broke atmo. Alas, his rest was
interrupted almost immediately.

“Hey, Gavin. Lunchtime.” Lindsay’s voice crackled over the comm. “You comin’?”

He dragged himself upright and over to the panel. “Yeah, gimme a minute,” he groaned tiredly into
the speaker.

The outfit he’d borrowed from Ray was a sodden wreck, so he laboriously pulled on his old clothes
and staggered up to the mess. Something smelled good.

“I found the last can of chicken broth,” Ray explained proudly as everyone hummed their
appreciation. “A little garlic powder, rosemary, and thyme, and bam. Instant stew.”

The “stew” was still mostly protein slush, but it tasted fantastic. Gavin could practically feel the
nutrients rush through his body to rebuild his shredded muscles.

“Any updates?” asked Geoff when the crew was sated. They all shook their heads. “All right.
Remember we’re landing tomorrow afternoon. We’ll match local time at about four. Lindsay, can
you get the mule ready?”

“Dangran.”

“Good. Now everybody kwai jio kai.”

There was a great scraping of chairs and clattering of plates as everyone cleared their dishes. Gavin
found himself next to Ryan at the disposal port.

“Want to set up the computer with me? It’s almost ready to link to the Cortex.”

“I’d love to, Ry, but I am absolutely mullered,” he responded, using the nickname without
thinking. “You lot beat the piss out of me. I’m having a lie-down.”

Ryan glanced at him sidelong in a way that made his heart skip a beat. “All right. Let me know if
you change your mind later.”

“Uh. Yeah. Yeah, I will,” Gavin stammered.

Once he was back in his room he stripped down again, tired of the itchy fabric on his nice clean
skin. He collapsed on the bed with relief and did not move for hours.

“There we go,” Ryan declared, scooching out from under the dashboard. “Should be all set.”

The homebrew computer was bolted down under the copilot’s console. A neat bundle of wires
connected the back of the rig to the guts of the comm panel, next to which rested an ancient LCD-
style monitor, decrepit keyboard, and weathered mouse. Ryan experimentally pushed the power
button, and it whirred to life. The screen popped up with the logo of a software company that had
gone out of business decades ago.
“Gohn shi, buddy, you might’ve just made us stupid rich.”

“We’ll see. I haven’t tested the connection yet. That’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow.”

“Can you show me how it works?”

Ryan opened a list of system options and selected the one labeled “Networking.” An empty window appeared.

“See, if we were in range, there’d be a list of…” He stopped. “Huh.”

An icon had popped up on the menu. The name next to it was AC-72006-WALDEMAR.

“Aw, dicks,” Geoff said. “Jack, gimme a scan. Range about thirty.”

“Yessir,” she said, and fiddled with some controls. “Jao gao. There’s an Alliance cruiser twenty-six AUs from us. If they don’t change course we’ll pass awful close to ‘em in about a minute.”

“Xiong mao niao,” the captain cursed. “They’ll already have spotted us. Steady as she goes, Pattillo. If we run we’ll look suspicious.”

“Aye aye. Holding course.”

“Shut that thing down, Haywood,” Geoff ordered. “Bring Gavin to the engine room and stow him in the portside air duct. We don’t need to take any risks.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jones, Narvaez,” he snapped into the PA. “Hide the off-market cargo, now, and stack the legal stuff nice and pretty. We got Alliance on course for intercept. Lindsay, get to the engine room and open the ventilation access door. Stay calm, people, they got no cause to stop us.”

Ryan sprinted aft to Gavin’s quarters and barged in without knocking.

“Get up, you gotta hide – oops.” He stopped dead in his tracks.

“Jesus Christ, Ryan!” Gavin shrieked, scrambling to cover himself with the blanket. “What the smeg?!”

Ryan filed the sight away to consider later and snapped back into action, striding in and grabbing his charge by the arm.

“Bring the damn sheet. Alliance is coming and we gotta stow you ma shong.”

“Shite,” Gavin breathed, embarrassment on hold. He let himself be dragged a few feet before remembering something very important. “Wait, wait – the chip!”

“Fuck. Grab it and let’s go.”

He snatched the data chip from his drawer and followed Ryan at a run, bare feet slapping painfully on the steel. They got to the engine room where Lindsay was waiting just as an unfamiliar voice came over the PA.

“Firefly transport Hunter, this is Alliance cruiser Waldemar. Release control of your helm and prepare for docking.”
“Beans, bacon, sausage, cock,” Gavin chanted.

“Sorry about this,” Ryan said, and scooped him up in his arms.

Gavin was too shocked to notice himself being shoved up into a small metal space, nor the cover clanging shut behind him. He curled up in his thin sheet, heart racing with far more than fear.

Lindsay screwed the panel back on, giving Ryan a gleefully knowing look. He realized his face was burning.

“Bi jweh,” he grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Did I say anything?” she asked innocently.

“We’ve got bigger problems right now,” Ryan muttered. In a louder voice he said, “Gavin. Whatever you do, don’t make a sound. We’ll be back for you.”

He took the silence as agreement.

“Everyone down to the cargo bay,” Geoff announced. “We should meet our guests. No guns. Let me do the talkin’.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

The crew assembled in front of the loading ramp. There was a hiss of pressurizing airlocks, and moments later the passenger door swung open.

In marched a tall, blond-haired man wearing the grey uniform of an Alliance officer. The stripes on his shoulder declared his rank to be First Lieutenant. Behind him were four common soldiers in black-and-purple armor. They carried sonic rifles and looked around suspiciously.

“Welcome aboard Hunter, Lieutenant. I’m Captain Geoff Ramsey. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The man stood ramrod-straight and clasped his hands behind his back. “Routine patrol, captain. There’ve been reports of smugglers in this sector. I’ll need to see your ship’s registration and some paperwork on this cargo.”

“Of course,” Geoff said smoothly, drawing a sheaf of paper from inside his coat. “I think you’ll find everything’s in order.”

The officer shuffled through the documents, peering carefully at the various seals and signatures that marked them as legal. “Bound for Boros, eh? Big market for drops, I hear.”

“Is that so?” the captain asked lightly. “Nasty stuff. Never saw the appeal, myself.”

“Hmm.” The lieutenant finished with his inspection and handed the papers back. “And is this your whole crew?”

“That it is.”

There was a tense moment of silence as the officer walked slowly around the stack of crates, examining the labels. Though he appeared to be satisfied with the cargo, he gestured sharply to his soldiers. They moved forward and started poking around.

“Apologies, captain, but I’m sure you understand,” he said loudly, cutting off Geoff’s protests.
“Just a cursory search. Can’t be too careful these days.”

Geoff grit his teeth and waved down his crew as they shifted angrily. “Of course. Any help you need, just let me know.”

The minutes ticked by agonizingly slow. Consummate professionals that they were, nobody even glanced at the secret compartment where their illicit goods were stowed. The Alliance grunts, not overly familiar with all the nooks and crannies of a Firefly, missed it. But as they advanced through the ship, the anxiety mounted.

Gavin, huddled in the dark and the wind within the air duct, heard two of the soldiers coming. He held his breath as they tossed the room – it sounded like they were prying open every tool box and control panel. He trembled like a leaf as they got closer and closer, and he could have sworn they could hear the cold sweat breaking out on his palms and the frantic pounding of his heart.

At last the men retreated, satisfied that no contraband was stashed in the engine room. Gavin didn’t breathe out until their footsteps faded into the distance.

The four soldiers returned to the cargo bay and shook their heads at their C.O., who squared his shoulders and waved them back to the cruiser.

“Sorry to bother you, Captain Ramsey. Safe trip.”

“Thank you kindly, sir. Good luck catching those drug runners.”

The lieutenant gave a thin smile and left, thoughtfully closing the door behind him.

The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“That could’ve been a lot worse,” Ray said. There was general agreement.

“Shouldn’t’ve happened at all,” Geoff said darkly. “Let’s get movin’.”

Ryan and Lindsay returned to Gavin’s hiding place. “All clear,” the mechanic called. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, look at this mess!”

It took a little searching to find her socket wrench, but once she did she clambered back up to the access panel and began to take it off.

“You can come out now,” Ryan said, extending a hand to help the fugitive down. Gavin refused it.

“Don’t you look,” he admonished, poking his head out to glare at them. “I’m completely starkers!”

Lindsay stifled laughter and turned her back, elbowing Ryan hard in the ribs until he did too. It took more resolve than it should have not to peek as Gavin slithered out of the vent with a thump.

“All right, I’m decent,” he muttered once the bedsheets was firm around his waist. “If you’ll excuse me…”

He marched down the hall back to his room, pointedly not looking at either of them as he went.

“So,” Lindsay said significantly, giving Ryan a sly smile. He glowered at her.

“Don’t you start. The captain wanted to get him to trust us, so that’s what I did.”

“Cai bu shi, Haywood. You’re in deep, you just don’t wanna see it. Now get outta here, I gotta
clean up.” She pushed him out of the engine room.

He went back to his quarters with a scowl on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
mei wen ti: no problem
hao gonzuo: good job
dangran: of course
kwai jio kai: get lost (go away)
gohn shi: congratulations
jao gao: crud, drat
xiong mao niao: panda piss
ma shong: right now, immediately
bi jweh: shut up
cai bu shi: yeah right (sarcasm)
The air was blue with muttered curses as everyone put to rights what the Alliance soldiers had torn apart. The exception was Gavin, who'd holed up in embarrassment again.

He was noticeably absent from dinner once more, which was just as well. The atmosphere was glum and tense around the table. Geoff left first without a word. The rest of the crew finished their meal in silence until Lindsay spoke.

“So. Tomorrow we’ll be wealthy.”

“You don’t sound too happy about it,” Jack said, not enthusiastic either. “Having second thoughts? This was your plan.”

“I know, but…”

“I think we all got an uncomfortableness about it,” Michael said. “That is, if he’s growing on the rest of you like he is on me.” He gave Ryan the side-eye.

“He’s fun,” Ray said. “I kinda like him.”

“You’re just saying that ‘cuz you can’t take Ryan or me in a fight,” Michael quipped. “He’s good for your ego.”

“That is absolutely true.”

“What about you, Haywood?” Jack asked, crossing her arms. “You going soft on me too?”

“Like a zhan dou ke yi kuai rou,” Michael snickered. “Ow!” he yelped as Ryan punched him in the shoulder, hard.

“We do the job,” the older man growled. “He may be fun but he’s like carrying poison. Anyone says otherwise got a death wish.”

That put the kibosh on their budding mutiny, but they each spent the night profoundly conflicted.
relieved some of the aches and pains. Ryan arrived and Gavin watched them all spar for a while afterwards, envious of the surety and swiftness of their movements. It was almost a dance where the three participants were all following different steps. Michael was like a ferocious bear, prioritizing offense over defense. Ray was lithe and nimble, sidestepping attacks and striking like a snake. And Ryan… Ryan moved with the graceful confidence of a professional, and it was clear he was pulling his punches. They still connected solidly and knocked the smaller men back each time. Gavin grew tired just watching him, and eventually meandered off to his cabin to read.

He was so enthralled by the book that he completely missed lunch. It took the pilot’s voice over the PA to startle him out of it.

“Attention passengers, we are entering orbit in ten minutes and landing in twenty. Keep your hands and feet inside the spaceship at all times and prepare for docking.”

Gavin snorted, realized he was hungry, and gnawed some more of his protein bar. If he kept reading he could finish the story by the time they touched ground.

Up on the bridge, Jack turned off the speaker. She glanced at Geoff, who nodded. It was time.

He lowered himself into the copilot’s chair and switched on the comm. They were in range of the Boros network now. He opened a menu of options, more advanced than what he’d shown Gavin, and routed their signal through a central hub. It would hide the origin of the call and make it harder for anyone to trace it back to the ship.

He took a steadying breath, and dialed up the Alliance.

A heavyset Chinese man in grey answered. “Ni hao.”

“There’s a warrant out on the Cortex for a man named Gavin Free. I’ve caught him.”

“Have you, now?”

“Yes, and I’d like to turn him over for the reward.”

“I’ll need some proof, lao di.”

“Of course. Sending video now.” He played back the tape of Gavin peering into the screen. The officer typed on his console for a moment.

“Facial recognition’s a match. Gohn shi, da yeh. You’ve apprehended a very valuable target. Deliver him to the nearest federal station at once.”

“Well, see, there’s a kinda hitch,” Geoff said. “I’ve had some bad experiences with you folks before. So you’ll forgive me when I say, I don’t trust you too much.”

The officer frowned deeply. “What is it you want?”

“Ah, see, I knew you had a mighty hankerin’ for this guy,” the captain said smugly. “Here’s the deal. You transfer half the reward money to my account, I’ll leave the package in a nice safe place
for you. Then you give me the rest and I’ll be on my way.”

“Absolutely not,” barked the other man. “We don’t deal with people like you.”

“You will this time, if you wanna get your hands on him. It’s not like I’m gonna double-cross you, with that many credits on the line.”

“Hrmph. Standby.”

The Alliance insignia popped up on the screen. Geoff sat back heavily, and Jack glanced over to him.

“Sir?”

“He’s talkin’ to his C.O.,” the captain said. “In a minute he’ll be back and take the deal. They want him too bad to let us slip away.”

Sure enough, the comm crackled to life once more. A different man, with ebony skin and stars on his shoulders, came into view.

“I hear you have something we want. I’m afraid we cannot agree to your terms as stated, but we’d be willing to offer fifty thousand as a down payment instead.”

“Fifty?” Geoff exclaimed indignantly. The officer shook his head with a condescending smile.

“You’re calling from the South Ridge network on Boros. Judging by the equipment behind you, you’re sitting in the cockpit of a Series 3 Firefly. Not many of those in port, captain. You’ll take fifty thousand credits, or fifty years in the brig for harboring a known fugitive.”

Geoff glowered. “A hundred thou’ at least, or I burn atmo this second.”

The man seemed to consider it, one elegant brow arched. Then he nodded sharply.

“Done. Name your time and place.”

“Casper Hill on Ares, noon tomorrow local time. You’ll find your package there.”

Geoff uploaded coordinates and information for one of his bank accounts. The officer confirmed the transfer.

“Very well, captain. You’re going to be a very rich man.”

The line went dead.


“Mm,” Jack agreed vaguely, focused on making a safe re-entry.

Geoff turned on Ryan’s makeshift computer and connected to the Cortex. He could monitor his finances - the legal ones, anyway - from there. As soon as the credits appeared he transferred them to a different bank, and closed the original account. There was no way for the Alliance to go back on the deal.

“Right. Now it’s Gavin’s turn.”

*Hunter* landed smoothly a little while later. Ray and Michael loaded the mule with smuggled
cargo, and drove off with Geoff to their rendezvous. Lindsay and Jack took inventory of what they’d need to purchase: fuel; a linkage assembly for the extender; a new socket for the injector that had burned out. Ryan went to Gavin’s quarters, and made sure to knock this time.

“Hey, Gav? You dressed?”

“Yeah, one sec. Almost done…” He reached the end of the final page, put the reader down, and opened the door. “What’s up?”

“Time to make good on that fare you promised,” Ryan said, one brow raised. “We didn’t build that rig for nothing.”

“Oh. Right.” Gavin couldn’t look him in the face.

Up to the bridge they went, and Gavin plunked himself in front of the monitor. “This could take a while,” he warned.

“You’ve got time.”

Gavin closed his eyes and cleared his mind, finding the space of focus within himself. Then he placed his fingers on the keys, and began to work.

His personal assets were frozen, of course, and he couldn’t bring himself to steal from his parents. In any case, that would be too obvious. So he had to get the money from somewhere else. That, he decided, would be Blue Sun Corporation. They wouldn’t notice a paltry hundred thousand credits mysteriously disappearing from their coffers, especially if he made it look like someone on the inside was embezzling.

He made absolutely sure to cover his tracks before so much as pinging their servers. He encrypted his signal with the strongest algorithms he knew, and routed it through seven planets’ worth of proxies. There was an awful lot of lag, but it was well worth the annoyance.

His fingers flew across the keyboard as he compiled a worm that would get him into the company’s digital stronghold. At one point he stopped to ask where he should send the money to; Ryan gave him the information for another burner account, and he continued writing.

An hour passed, then two. Ryan hardly noticed the time, as engrossed with watching Gavin as Gavin was with his work. The sun was sinking to an angle that struck the hacker just right, turning his sandy hair gold and hazel eyes bright green. The week-old scruff on his cheeks seemed to sparkle, and his slender hands were a blur as he typed. Ryan drank it all in, thankful that the hacker was too intent on the screen to notice his secret admirer.

“There. It’s done.” Gavin twisted in his chair, spine crackling. “One hundred thousand credits, just like I said. You can look.”

He pointed at a window that showed the promised amount sitting pretty in the crew’s ledger. Ryan leaned over his shoulder and hit a few keys, hiding the money the same way Geoff had done earlier.

“Thank you for flying Haywood Airlines,” he joked, lingering slightly before straightening back up. “We’ll drop you off on Ares soon.”

“Oh. Right,” Gavin said, a little sadly. Ryan felt more than a twinge of regret.

“You’ll be fine,” he lied.
Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
zhan dou ke yi kuai rou: dangly piece of flesh (probably implies "limp dick")
ni hao: hello
lao di: pal
gohn shi: congratulations
da yeh: sir
Chapter 10

Geoff and the boys returned triumphant from their illicit escapade, having successfully traded eight liters of redeye drops to the local drug lord for quite a tidy sum. The four crew members present gathered around in the cargo bay, clamoring to split the cash.

“First things first,” the captain decreed. “We got four hundred platinum for this job; that’s a clean hundred and sixty credits. Our buyer for the above-board stuff is offering ten credits per crate if we can get ’em there before dusk. I’m gonna go deal with that. The rest of you take thirty credits each for supplies. We’ll divvy up everything proper when you get back. Don’t take too long, we gotta dust off in three hours and there’s repairs to make ‘fore then.”

The crew still looked up at him expectantly and didn’t move. Geoff rolled his eyes.

“No, I don’t know if we’ve got Gavin’s fare yet. We can find out later. Y’all got jobs to do, go do ‘em!”

The crisp digi-cloth bills were doled out and the crates of perfectly legal crop supplements strapped to the back of the mule. Geoff revved it up and drove off again, not needing extra muscle this time. The others checked their radios and paired up for a trip to the marketplace. Lindsay hit the comm as she left.

“Ryan, we’re out. I’m lockin’ her up.”

“Roger.”

The ramp closed with a solid crunch of metal on metal and suddenly the ship was very, very quiet.

Gavin flexed his overworked hands. “Man, I feel a right mess,” he sighed, wincing. “Any chance for some painkillers?”

“What we’ve got might be a little stronger than you need,” Ryan answered, amused. “Morphine, mostly. But we can check. C’mon.”

The medbay was brightly lit, but sparse. Gavin looked with squeamish interest at the surgical chair dominating the center of the room. Ryan scanned neatly labeled bins arrayed along the wall by the sink.

“Disinfectant… allergy… nausea… local anesthesia… general anesthesia… Here we go, anti-inflammatory. Unless you’d rather sleep ‘til next week?”

Gavin shook his head, amused. Ryan handed him two small tablets and a paper cup of water, which he accepted with a grateful smile.

“Cheers,” he said, and gulped them down.

“You oughta feel better in a few minutes,” Ryan said, putting the medicine bottle away. “It’s fast-acting stuff.”

There was an awkward silence, in which both men became acutely aware of their own heartbeats.
“Uhm.” Gavin cleared his throat. “I’m just gonna… go use the computer some more. Got one last thing I want to do.”

“Okay,” Ryan said a little too fast, cursing internally.

Lindsay was right, damn her.

“Hey,” he said. Gavin turned to give him a curious look. “I’m gonna take care of something real quick. Don’t fuck anything up in there.”

“I won’t,” Gavin replied.

Ryan went to his quarters, locked the door, and slowly and deliberately banged his head against the wall.

“Fifteen. Million. Credits,” he muttered with each impact. “Tai kong suo you di xing qui dou sai jin wo de pi gu, this is ridiculous.”

He reached for his radio and switched it on.

“Captain, you there?”

A burst of static. “Yeah, but make it quick.”

“Did you, uh… are we a go for the Alliance exchange?”

“Yes. Why, is there a problem?”

Boy, was there ever.

“…No, sir.”

“Good. Did the kid pay out?”

“Yeah. Money’s safe.”

“Fantastic. See you back at the ship. Takeoff’s at nine.”

“Yessir.”

Ryan turned off the radio, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

He was the captain’s right-hand man. He’d killed for him, taken bullets for him, been through thick and thin at his side; he owed Geoff his life. He would not — could not — waver now.

Back on the bridge he found Gavin in another trance-like state, staring at the computer screen as his fingers danced across the keys. Ryan installed himself in the pilot’s seat, and waited.

An hour passed.

“Oh, for – bollocks!” Gavin slammed a hand against the dashboard, then threw himself back in his chair. “Mungy drippy tosspot pleb and giant bloody knobs…”

Ryan raised an eyebrow at his muttered pseudo-curses. “Something wrong, Gav?”

“Yes there bloody well is,” the hacker growled angrily. “Stupid smegging Alliance! I should’ve goddamn known.”
“Known what?”

Gavin turned to Ryan with a pained expression. Once more he found himself confiding in him things that were better kept private.

“The criminal database. Most of it’s a bloody candy shop, but my file… There’s high-level military security on it. I could crack it, but not here, not with this shite.” He kicked the computer in frustration. Ryan glared at him.

“Hey, hey, careful! We worked hard on that.”

“Sorry,” Gavin murmured, simmering down. “It’s just… I need to clear my name to get home, but I need to get home to clear my name. Or somewhere else with a four-tier crypto-wall and a hundred quantum processors, which means central planets, which means I am utterly shagged.” He raised his eyes, desperation lining his face. “What am I gonna do, Ry?”

Ryan looked at him with deep sympathy and a vast ocean of guilt. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “Just keep moving forward. You’ll find a way.”

The space between them felt like light-years.

“Ahoy Hunter!” Geoff’s voice crackled over the comm, shattering the silence. Gavin and Ryan instantly broke eye contact like their conversation hadn’t happened. “I’m back, open up!”

Ryan pushed the ramp control button and stood. “If you’re done, better clear the deck. Captain won’t want you here alone.”

“Right,” Gavin said, sliding out of the copilot’s chair. “I guess I’ll be in my bunk.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ryan, hating himself. “It’s gonna be okay.”

In the cargo bay, Geoff had parked the mule and was recalling the rest of the crew by radio. Ryan pasted a satisfied smirk on his face and sauntered down the stairs.

“So, are we rolling in it yet?”

“Not exactly,” Geoff sighed. “Alliance wouldn’t agree to half. We only got a hundred large up front.”

“Zhen dao mei. Think they’ll come through later?”

“Probably not. But with Gavin’s share, it’s still more than enough to keep flyin’. I’m thinkin’ a month’s shore leave on Bellerophon, how’s that sound?”

“Real shiny, captain.”

“I hear they got resorts with live-in Companions,” Geoff said, a gleam in his eye. “And all the shimmerwine you can drink!”

“I can’t wait.”

Geoff squinted at him suspiciously. “You okay? You look tense as dicks.”

Ryan shifted uncomfortably. “Don’t wanna count our chickens just yet, sir. Not ‘til the job’s done.”
“Hmph. Fair enough.” Geoff caught sight of the others approaching, and waved. “Huanying jui jia! How’d it go, boys?”

“Great,” said Ray, carefully setting down a large box full of food. “We found some real bargains. Stuff’s a little bruised but we’ll eat like kings tonight.”

Michael unceremoniously dropped an enormous burlap sack. “And rice was two silver a pound. We got fifty.”

“Awesome. How about you, ladies?”

“Well, I got the inductor socket, but the only linkage assembly we could find was a hundred credits. Sorry,” Lindsay said glumly.

Jack shrugged. “Port service is charging our cells now. At these prices we should get ‘em about eighty percent full.”

“Good enough,” Geoff said briskly. “I’ve got some great news for y’all, too. As of right now, this crew has two hundred thousand credits in the bank just waitin’ to get spent.”

Everyone but Ryan reacted with joyful exclamations, and Michael kissed Lindsay full on the mouth. The captain quieted them all with a wry smile.

“But. There’s still the whole turning-in-Gavin thing. Once that’s done we can celebrate like pigs in the mud. For now, we gotta make good on our side of the deal. Lindsay, get the engine back to spec. Jack, get ready for hard burn. Everyone else, arm up. No reason not to be careful.”

The crew sobered immediately and went about their tasks.

Forty minutes later they were leaving Boros, rear thrusters glowing the bright yellow that gave the Firefly its name. Jack expertly launched them out of orbit on a trajectory that would get them to Ares in one hour. By her calculations they’d reach the rendezvous at ten A.M. local time, early enough to drop Gavin and turn tail long before the Alliance arrived.

The atmosphere on the ship nearly vibrated with constrained energy. Everyone but Geoff and Jack ended up pacing the halls, preparing themselves to do what both common sense and greed dictated must be done.

The third time Ryan found himself outside Gavin’s room he gritted his teeth in self-loathing and forced himself to return to his quarters. Once inside he took a deep breath, reminded himself yet again of his devotion to the captain, and changed into the clothes that shadowy folk throughout the ‘Verse had long ago learned to fear: ragged blue jeans, combat boots that could crush bones, and his signature black leather jacket with the blue and white accents. They were his armor, his shield; they allowed Ryan Haywood to become Vagabond, merciless killer and scourge of the underworld. They steadied his nerves and steeled his resolve.

Finally he reached for his greasepaint, ringed his eyes in black, and donned the skull mask that struck terror into the hearts of all who saw it.

There was no uncertainty in him now.

“Landing in five,” Jack’s voice came over the PA.

Geoff retrieved Gavin from the guest quarters and led him to the shuttle where Michael and Vagabond waited, armed to the teeth. He did a double take.
“Christ, Ryan, is that really necessary?”

“Can never be too careful.”

Gavin suddenly got the feeling that something was very, very wrong.

They bundled into the shuttle and Geoff took the helm.

“Shuttle one ready for launch,” he said over the comm. “Take care of the ship, y’all.”

“Clear to detach, sir,” said Jack.

“Joo how rin, guys,” said Ray.

“Bye, Gavin,” said Lindsay, sadly.

The shuttle soared away, scrubland of Ares flashing past below. In the distance they could see Casper Hill, rising proudly out of a thick pine-barren forest. As it grew ever closer, Gavin’s nerves tightened to the breaking point.

They landed gently. Geoff cut the throttle and Michael opened the door, sauntering onto the hard-packed dirt.

“C’mon, Gav.”

Gavin stepped outside, heart racing, squinting in the bright sunshine. Geoff followed.

“You can see Rokkik’s Town that way,” he said, pointing to the eastern horizon. Vagabond used the distraction to softly creep up behind Gavin, a tranquilizer injection in his hand. “No place to land between here and there, so you’ll have to hoof it, but there’s a pretty easy path.”

“Thanks for everything, guys,” Gavin said gratefully, beginning to turn around – and then he saw the laser light, dancing between Geoff’s eyes.

For a moment time seemed to stop. He felt sluggish, limbs dragging like he was swimming through molasses. In excruciating slow motion he lunged, arms outstretched, and managed to bowl all three men over just as a high-caliber round whizzed through the air where the captain's head had been seconds before.

The tranquilizer smashed on the ground.

Ten Alliance soldiers rose from seemingly nowhere, dust coursing off their desert camouflage. Geoff, Michael, and Vagabond reacted immediately, squirming out from under Gavin with weapons at the ready. A hail of bullets flew at them and they gave as good as they got, with pistols and fully-automatics alike. Michael howled with rage as he sprayed lead in all directions. Geoff laid into them with a gun in each hand. Vagabond silently nailed his targets with perfect headshots every time.

Gavin lay on the ground with his arms over his head, terrified, until he spotted an as-yet-unnoticed assailant creeping up on their far left. The soldier had a nasty-looking rifle, aimed directly at Vagabond’s skull.

“Ryan!” Gavin screamed, and threw himself into the path of the bullet.

Everything went dark.
When he came to they were in the shuttle, and his shoulder was burning with the worst pain he’d ever felt in his life. Faces swam in his vision, one strangely blurred with some black substance that made it hard to focus.

“R… Ryan… watch out…” The words tore from his throat in a whimper. He struggled, trying to rise. He had to move, had to protect him…

“Quit squirming, asshole, you’re gonna lose more blood,” Michael scolded, trying to hold him down. Despite his words, his voice wasn’t angry at all.

“But Ryan…”

“Shh, it’s okay, they’re gone, we’re safe,” said Ryan, gripping Gavin’s uninjured hand tightly. “I’m here.”

“Oh,” he whispered, relaxing. His head felt very heavy. “That’s all right, then.”

He did not wake again for two days.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
- tai kong suo you di xing qui dou sai jin wo de pi gu: Stuff all the planets in the universe up my ass
- zhen dao mei: just our luck
- huaning jui jia: welcome home
- joo how rin: good luck
THREE HOURS LATER: ALLIANCE NAVY HEADQUARTERS, LONDINIUM

“The strike team hasn’t reported back, sir.”

“They’re forty minutes late. Have you tried raising them?”

“Affirmative. No response.”

“The Admirals will have our heads for this… Contact Commander Mburu. I want as much information as possible on the man who tried to collect the bounty. Put out an APB for that ship – what was it, a Firefly?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Good. List the crew as wanted for eleven counts of murder, assault with a deadly weapon, attacking an officer of the peace, and harboring fugitives.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted.”

“There are twelve thousand eight hundred and fifty-three Firefly-class vessels currently registered in the database, and probably hundreds more that aren’t. We don’t know what any of the crew look like, and they’ve got enough money now to effectively drop off the radar. This seems like an awfully long shot.”

“Then we shoot long. The more we screw around, the worse this breach gets. I want that data retrieved, and everyone who’s come in contact with it locked up or dead yesterday. Are we clear?”

“Crystal, sir.”

“When did Jack say we’d hit Greenleaf?”

“Not too long. A day or so.”

“Good. I need some fuckin’ downtime.”

“Tell me about – wait, look, I think he’s comin' around. Ryan! Get in here!”

Gavin heard a tremendous clatter from the upper deck and the sound of someone heavy running very, very fast. With extreme force of will he cracked open his eyes to see Ryan nearly falling into the medbay, still clutching a spoon, which he promptly dropped on the floor.

“Gavin?” His voice broke with concern. “Hey, kiddo, you awake?”
Gavin opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Lindsay and Michael scrabbled by the sink, each trying to be first to bring him a cup of water. Ryan stole it from them and held up Gavin’s head to help him drink.

“What happened?” Gavin rasped when he’d managed a few swallows.

“You ate lead, buhn dahn,” Michael said. “Lost a lotta blood. You’re damn lucky it didn’t hit a few inches to the right, or you’d be six feet under by now.”

“Oh,” Gavin whispered, and chanced a look around.

He was lying on the medbay’s surgical table. An IV was taped in the crook of his right arm and his left shoulder was swathed in gauze. He couldn’t feel anything past his collarbone, and an experimental effort to twitch his fingers produced no movement at all. Lindsay and Michael stood a few feet away, but Ryan was close by his side, face wracked by worry and relief. Gavin realized that their right hands were tightly intertwined.

“How’re you doing?” Ryan asked, smoothing hair out of Gavin’s eyes. “Any pain?”

“Not much,” Gavin answered, smiling up at him. “How long was I out?”

“Two days,” the older man answered quietly. Neither of them noticed the Joneses edging surreptitiously out of the room. “You had me scared, kid.”

“I’m sorry,” Gavin began, but was cut off abruptly as Ryan sealed his lips with a gentle, desperate kiss.

The entire universe ground to a halt.

“You saved my life,” he whispered hoarsely as Gavin lay stunned. “I’m the one who should be sorry, bao bei. We should never have put you in danger.”

Gavin blinked, feeling like he was going to pass out again. “What’re you on about, Ry?” he murmured. “It’s not your fault.”

The agony in Ryan’s eyes was too much for him to bear. He let go of Ryan’s hand and reached up to cradle the back of his neck instead, burying his fingers in the dark, shaggy hair. He brought their faces together again, softly, and this time fully appreciated the feeling of Ryan’s lips pressing against his own; the warmth of his body; the scent of him. It was like the sun rising in his chest, washing away all the pain and fear and replacing it with joyful serenity. The whole world consisted only of the two of them; no crew, no ship, just this one perfect kiss.

They separated a moment – or maybe years – later, breathless. The room was so quiet they could hear the IV pump running.

“Aw, dicks. Not another one.”

They jumped apart like startled rabbits at the sound of Geoff’s voice, making Gavin yelp in pain. The captain was slouching casually in the doorway, tattooed arms crossed, a mildly irritated look on his face. Ryan swallowed guiltily.

“Um. Another… what, sir?”

“Goddamn shipboard romance. I’m runnin’ a criminal enterprise here, not a fuckin’ dating site. Ray never gives me these problems…” He straightened up and went to check Gavin’s bandages.
“Anyway, Gav. What you did back on Ares? That was one of the stupidest, bravest things I’ve ever seen. We’d be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

Gavin winced. “If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t’ve got shot at in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, shit happens and you move on. Besides, Ryan told me all about how you swiped that cash right out from under Blue Sun’s yu bun duh nose. Seems to me, on the balance, you could be a real asset to us here.”

“I… what?” Gavin asked, confused. “Are you saying you want me to stay?”

“That I am. If you’re interested.” Geoff raised a suggestive eyebrow. “Which I’m fair certain is the case, given what just I walked in on.”

Gavin blushed scarlet and wished he could melt into the floor.

“We’re on our way to Greenleaf now,” Geoff continued briskly. “It’s safe enough and they got decent hospitals there. We did the best we could for you, but…”

His tone sent fear coursing like ice water down Gavin’s spine. “Is… can my arm… am I paralyzed?”

Geoff looked surprised, then laughed. “Hell no, kid, we gave you somethin’ to make sure you wouldn’t rip your stitches when you woke up. It’ll wear off eventually. Nah, you’ll just heal a sight quicker if a real doc takes a look at you. Without those fancy toys of theirs it’d take three months, at least.”

Satisfied that Gavin’s wound wasn’t bleeding through, Geoff stepped back and removed his own shirt. He had a large bandage taped neatly to the side of his ribs.

“Oh no, you’re hurt too!” Gavin exclaimed guiltily. The captain began to change his dressing.

“This? Just a graze. I’ve gotten worse in bar fights.”

“What about you, Ryan? I didn’t even ask. And Michael? Is he okay?”

“We’re fine,” Ryan said soothingly. “A few scratches, some dented armor. Michael’s got a pretty impressive bruise. Bet he’d show you if you asked nicely.”

Gavin snorted. “I think I’ll pass.”

“You should thank him, by the way,” said Geoff. “If he hadn’t got pressure on you so fast, you’d’ve bled out in the shuttle.”

“I will,” Gavin said. “Can I go see him?”

“If you get up you’ll just pass out again,” said Ryan with concern. Gavin shook his head stubbornly.

“I’m cramped, I’m restless, and I could eat a bloody elephant,” he declared, and lifted his right arm. “Get this damn thing out of me, will you? I promise I’ll be careful.”

Ryan raised a skeptical eyebrow, but conceded. He prepared a small bit of gauze and turned off the IV pump. With one swift, synchronized motion, he withdrew the needle and applied the bandage. On the other side, Geoff carefully arranged Gavin’s numb arm in a sling.
“Okay, if you’re really sure…” Ryan said. Gavin looked petulant.

Slowly, slowly, Ryan helped him sit up, turn, and slide off the chair. For a moment Gavin stood on his own two feet, though he still clutched the larger man for support. He smiled triumphantly – but suddenly his legs forgot they were legs, and buckled right out from under him.

“Whoops,” Ryan said, sweeping him up in his arms. “I told you so.”

“Sod it all,” Gavin muttered into his chest. He felt very dizzy. “Can I at least get something to eat?”

“Of course,” Ryan said warmly, depositing him onto the chair again. He went to the comm panel, looking back frequently as though afraid Gavin would disappear in his absence.

“Hey, Michael, can you bring some food down here, please? The real stuff. Oh, and a spare radio.”

“Sure, gimme a minute,” came the reply.

Geoff fiddled with his mustache. “We should probably put the line back in,” he said apologetically. “You need a lot of liquid to replace all that blood.”

“Uuugh, fine,” Gavin groaned, dropping his head forcefully against the pillow. “This all went a bit tits up, didn’t it?”

“Way less than it could’ve,” Ryan said, replacing the IV. Once it was running again he returned to his place at Gavin's side, taking his hand once more. Geoff shook his head and pulled his shirt back on.

“You crazy kids have fun. I’ve got work to do.”

He passed Michael on his way out. The younger man bore a tray with a plate, glass, and little black radio on it.

“Here you go, Gav. Steak, rice and beans, garlic bok choy. Ray really went nuts tonight.”

“That smells bloody amazing,” Gavin said earnestly, mouth watering. Ryan changed the angle of the surgical chair to let him sit up. “Geoff says you stopped the bleeding the other day. I just wanted to say thanks... You saved my life.”

“Yeah, well, you saved ours, so we’re even,” Michael muttered. He managed a halfhearted glare. “Just try not to get fuckin’ shot again, dumbass. I still haven’t got the bloodstains outta my jacket.”

Gavin chuckled weakly. “I’ll do my best.”

Michael couldn’t keep up his irritable façade. He smiled a little, deposited the tray in Gavin’s lap, and ruffled his sandy hair.

“Good to see you doing better, boi.”

“Ooh, the b-word! He likes you,” Ryan quipped. Michael punched him in the shoulder and left.

Gavin’s food proved to be somewhat problematic, as he could not operate both knife and fork at the same time. He had too much pride to let Ryan cut up his steak for him, and so resorted to tearing chunks out of the whole with his teeth. After nothing but protein paste for so long, the taste and texture of genuine beef was pure bliss. His plate was empty in the space of ten minutes.
“Oof. That was *top,*” Gavin sighed, and put down his fork. Now that his stomach was full he felt very, very tired. He yawned mightily.

“I’ll tell Ray you said so.” Ryan picked up the tray, leaving the radio by Gavin’s hand. “Get some rest. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Gavin’s eyes were slowly drifting shut. “…Hey, Ry?”

“Yeah, Gav?”

“Thank you.”

Ryan leaned down and laid a gentle kiss on Gavin’s forehead.

“See you in the morning,” he whispered.

Gavin had already fallen asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
buhn dahn: idiot
bao bei: sweetheart/precious/darling
yu bun duh: stupid
Ryan returned to the kitchen, glowing. Even the chaotic mess he’d made earlier couldn’t dampen the contented hum of his nerves, and he began tidying up quite happily.

“You’re grinning like a fucking idiot,” said Ray, coming in for a midnight snack. “I thought you hated doing dishes.”

“Nah. Not today.”

Ray gave him a weary look. “So you actually did it, huh?”

“And it went well.”

“Sure did.”

“I don’t get it, man, but whatever.” Ray shook his head. “Try not to break him.”

“Of course not!” Ryan said with mock offense. “Oh yeah, he said your cooking was ‘top.’ I think that means he really liked it.”

Ray gave a gratified smirk. “Shiny.”

He collected a few pieces of assorted fruit and went back to his room. Ryan finished putting the mess hall to rights, and did likewise.

That night he lay awake. At first he was still giddy, and every time he closed his eyes he saw Gavin’s drowsy smile. But after a few hours of this, when his butterflies finally faded, the guilt began to creep back in.

Just like he had done for the last two days, he told himself he’d only been following orders. He remembered how they’d thought the whole crew could escape the edge of poverty in one fell swoop. He even tried to reason that he hadn’t betrayed Gavin – Vagabond had done it.

As always, none of these mental gymnastics helped one bit.

Ryan tossed and turned, unable to suppress or let it go. He couldn't even meditate; his mind was fixated on the regret that was carving a hole through his stomach, and the hand that had held the tranquilizing gun so close to Gavin’s neck felt like it was burning. His heart started pounding heavily, unsettlingly so, as if to punish him. He was seized by the mad thought that since he’d acted so heartless, maybe he didn’t deserve to have a heart at all.
“Maybe not,” he whispered hotly, and got out of bed.

Lindsay called Ryan’s room twice in the morning, but got no response. When she went to his quarters to physically wake him up she found Vagabond sprawled face down on the floor, motionless, skull mask flattened and askew.

“Wou de tian ah, Ryan!” she cried, and rolled him over with a mighty heave. His leather jacket was warm in her hands, the mask a little slippery as she pulled it off his head. She held an ear to his black-smeared face and sighed with relief that he was still breathing.

“Wake up, Ryan, we’ve landed and we need you.” She shook him by the shoulders until his eyes began to open. “What the hell were you doin’ last night? What’s with the war paint?”

“Nngh,” he groaned, sitting up. “Helps me sleep.”

“What kind of feng le sense does that make?”

Ryan shook his head. “The kind that stops me from hating myself for what we did to him,” he said quietly.

Lindsay put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “I know you’ve been a little rough these last few days, but this? Goin’ all stone-cold-killer just to get some shut-eye?”

“Don’t tell the others?” he asked in a pleading tone. “I don’t… I’ve got a reputation to keep up.”

“Yeah, yeah, big strong ja hwo who don’t owe nobody nothin’. Fang xin.” She planted a sisterly kiss on his forehead, then made a face. “Ugh. Greasy.”

“I thought you loved grease,” Ryan said with a wry smile, shrugging out of his armor. Lindsay snorted.

“Not in my mouth, asshole,” she said, scrubbing a sleeve across her black-stained lips. “Now get that shit off your face. We’re at Greenleaf, but nobody can get Gavin out of the medbay.”

“We’ve got a stretcher, don’t we?” Ryan asked, undoing all the buckles and zippers on his boots. “Michael and Ray can carry him.”

“He won’t go without you.”

Ryan paused in the middle of yanking off a shoe, cheeks turning rosy under the paint.

“…Oh. Okay, I’ll be right there.”

Once in civilian attire he walked to the medbay faster than he normally would, and entered to find Lindsay, Michael, and Ray all crowded inside. The space was made even more cramped by the stretcher that Gavin adamantly refused to be transferred to.

“Morning, Gav. Are you being a pain in the ass?”

“I’ll be a pain in your arse, Rye-bread,” Gavin said, giggling. His face was deeply flushed.

“Sorta, but’s not his fault,” Ray said with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure he’s got a fever.”

Ryan moved to Gavin’s side. A hand to his forehead confirmed Ray’s diagnosis – he was burning up.
“Did you check the site?” he asked with authority.

“Yeah, it looks kinda red and gross,” Michael said, pulling back the bandage to show flesh swollen painfully around the sutures. There was pus, too. Ryan grimaced and started giving orders.

“Lindsay, get me the peroxide, a dose of polymycin, and a lancet. Ray, pass the Novocain cream and prep a fresh dressing. Michael, gimme the scissors, then get some paper towels and hold ‘em ready.”

While his nurses snapped to, Ryan pulled on a pair of surgical gloves. First he cut off Gavin’s bandage, applied numbing ointment to the inflamed wound, and let it soak in. Then he accepted a long, wickedly pointed metal tool from Lindsay and a wad of paper towels from Michael. Mouth twisted in concentration and distaste, he lanced the infections, drawing out the thick, pale ooze that was making Gavin so feverish. When he’d disposed of as much as possible he switched to a new pair of gloves, washed the area with disinfectant, and wrapped it up with the clean gauze provided by Ray. Finally, he got rid of the gloves altogether and made Gavin swallow a huge pill of antibiotic.

“That’s all I can do here. Thanks for the help, guys. Okay, Gav, ready to see a real doctor?”

“What if… What time is it underwater? Does a fish have a schedule?”

In spite of the situation, Michael and Lindsay snorted with laughter. Ryan’s brow creased with worry.

“He’s delirious,” he said. “I hope this fever goes down soon. Michael, let’s get some ice packs on the stretcher. Ray, Lindsay, can you move Gavin onto it?”

They negotiated the transfer and bore their patient to a shuttle, where Geoff waited. He stood aside to let them in.

“I called ahead. Mercy Hospital’s waitin’ for us,” he said, closing the door behind them. “It’s amazin’ what a little cash in the right hands can do.”

“Better tell ‘em we got a possible case of… whatchamacallit… septicemia?” Ryan said, dredging up the term with difficulty. “His wound got infected overnight. I guess we didn’t clean it enough.”

“Is that bad?” asked Geoff, going through the ignition sequence.

“Very.”

“Then let’s get movin’. Jack, this is shuttle one. We’re out.”

“Clear, sir. We’ll meet you later.”

They detached from Hunter and sped off towards the medical complex that dominated the city skyline. Geoff radioed the hospital and gave them an update, conspicuously using the name “Charlie Patton” to refer to their injured passenger. Michael and Ryan took note of the alias as they crouched on either side of their injured outlaw, experiencing a very strong sense of déjà vu as they tried to hold him still.

The hospital had several landing pads. A small contingent of nurses waited at one, gurney at the ready. When the shuttle touched down they swarmed forwards, almost snatching the stretcher from Ryan and Michael’s hands.
“What treatment have you already given the patient?” asked a senior-looking nurse with a digital notepad. Her ID card said “Jacqueline Li.” She beckoned for the three men to follow and walked off at a brisk pace.

“Got the bullet out, did some rough stitches,” answered Ryan, trotting after her. “He’s been on nutrient-saline drip for two days and ate a high-protein meal last night. The infection only developed this morning. I cleaned it out as best I could and gave him two-fifty mgs of polymycin, but his fever’s running at least a hundred and it’s affecting his cognition.”

Nurse Li gave him an odd look. “Are you an EMT?”

“Ex-special forces. Field triage and such. We tended to get shot a lot.”

Michael and Geoff trailed behind, feeling left out as Ryan was peppered with technical questions. They looked with interest at the wide white halls and bright signs with words like “neonatal,” “radiotherapy,” and every type of -ology under the suns. Nurse Li led them to a wing labeled Critical Care, where there was a large, airy room filled with chairs and stacks of old-style paper magazines. Distraught-looking people sat reading, or paced around with worried expressions.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait here until he’s stabilized,” she said. “May I have your names?”

The men gave her their information and found three empty chairs together. They sat quietly for a while, listening to the blathering of the TV across from them and the calm announcements that occasionally echoed through the building.

“Doctor Gonzales to ER, Doctor Gonzales to ER. Code Blue. Yisheng Gonzales lai dao jizhen shi, Yisheng Gonzales lai dao jizhen shi. Lan ma.”

“Ooh, somebody’s havin’ a bad day,” Geoff murmured, not looking up from his month-old copy of Laser Digest.

Michael got antsy and joined those treading holes in the carpet. Ryan continued to stew, head bowed and elbows propped on his knees.

Eventually the others arrived, led by a young orderly who immediately scurried off again. Jack picked up a copy of Engine Report; Ray, Guns&Ammo Illustrated. Lindsay joined Michael and spoke to him in hushed tones. His clouded visage noticeably softened.

A couple of hours passed in silence. Every so often a person in a white coat would come in and call someone’s name, then lead them away into the maze of hospital corridors. More infrequently, new members joined the ranks of the waiting.

They were starting to get hungry when a nurse entered, yellow scrubs bright against her intensely black skin. Her name tag said “Adaoma Orizu.” She consulted her tablet.

“Ramsey, Jones, and Haywood?” she called. The entire crew jumped to their feet.

“What’s the news?” Ryan asked anxiously. The nurse looked slightly taken aback as everyone swarmed around her.

“There are more of you than listed,” she muttered to herself, then gave them a gentle smile. “Your friend has been moved to recovery room thirty-three-oh-four, but he’ll be disoriented when the sedative wears off and I can’t let six people in at once. Family takes priority. Are any of you family?”
“I am,” Ryan declared, earning him bewildered stares from everyone else.

“And what is your relation to the patient?” Nurse Orizu asked, stylus poised to make a note.

“I’m… the husband.”

She scribbled on her screen and completely missed the crew’s suddenly red faces contorting with suppressed laughter.

“Right this way, sir.”

As they reached the end of the hall, Ryan heard a tremendous roar of absolute hysterics burst from the waiting room. His cheeks turned brightly pink, but he couldn’t hide his smile.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
wou de tian ah: oh my god
feng le: crazy
ja hwo: guy or fellow; can also mean "weapon"
fang xin: don't worry
yisheng: doctor
lai dao jizhen shi: please come to the emergency room
lan ma: code blue
Gavin reclined in a comfortable-looking hospital bed, IV in one arm and crisp bandages on the other. As Ryan rushed to him he could see that the feverish flush was gone, and those long-lashed hazel eyes were clear.


“Looks like he's woken up. I’ll give you some time alone with your husband, Mr. Patton,” she said, and closed the door behind her. Gavin looked confused for a moment, then positively scandalized.

“Patton? ...Husband?!”

“Shhh, keep it down. It was the only way they’d let me in,” Ryan explained, embarrassed. “And we gave them a fake name for you. Just roll with it.”

“That’s a laugh,” Gavin said. “Glad you could come, though. This place is dull as knobs.”

“Well, you won’t be here for long.” Ryan soothingly touched Gavin’s cheek. “Your nurse told me they got rid of the infection and bonded the tissue back together. They’re giving it one more day to flush your system, and you’ll be good to go.”

Gavin briefly nuzzled Ryan’s palm as it lay close by his face. “Did anyone else come with you?”

“Y… yes, but they’re not allowed to visit,” Ryan said, distracted by the touch. He gently ran the pad of his thumb down Gavin’s nose to his lips. They were pink and soft and… fuck, they were perfect.

He cupped Gavin’s cheek and kissed him, eyes shut to focus on the sensation. Gavin’s free hand tangled in his hair as he kissed back, nipping gently at Ryan’s bottom lip. The older man couldn’t stop a weak moan from escaping him, and he had to brace himself against the bed to keep his legs from giving out.

Gavin reacted with a quiet hum of pleasure. He parted his lips slightly and allowed his tongue to sweep faintly into their kiss. Ryan let out a muffled groan, responding in kind until they were practically melting together, mouths full of the taste of each other and a heat no fever could match.

They were in danger of getting hot-and-heavy when the doctor knocked. Unlike the last time, they pulled away slowly, lingering on the moment. They continued gazing into each other’s eyes as Ryan called, “Come in.”

“Hello! Mister… Haywood, is it?” A businesslike woman with chestnut hair and a white lab coat strode into the room. She extended her hand and Ryan shook it briefly, reluctant to stop touching or looking at Gavin for any length of time.

“That’s me.”

“Pleasure. I’m Doctor Gonzales. Your partner here is doing much better – I believe Nurse Orizu gave you the rundown?”
“More or less.”

“Well, I’d like to fill you in on a few details.” She consulted her data pad. “The sepsis was only in early stages. We caught it before his vital organs were damaged, but he needed dialysis and about a liter of fresh blood. We’re keeping him on antibiotic drip for another day as a precaution, and he’ll have to take a fifty milligram dose of Zycatopham twice a day for a week. The tissue of his shoulder responded well to bonding, so he can use the arm again, but he should take it easy for a few days. No heavy lifting, no gymnastics, no typing or writing for extended periods of time.”

“I think we can manage that,” Ryan said, smiling at the pout that had formed on Gavin’s face at the mention of ‘no typing.’

Doctor Gonzales retrieved a small pad of paper from her coat and began to scribble on it. “Here’s the prescription for the antibiotic. Take it to the pharmacy on the ground floor and they’ll fill it for you.” She tore off the top sheet and handed it to Ryan.

“Thank you, doctor,” he said, shoving it in his pocket. “Anything else we should know?”

“I’d like to remind Mr. Patton that intramuscular administration of lead is generally frowned upon, and should be avoided in future.” She raised one perfectly arched brow, the twinkle in her deep brown eyes betraying a wry sense of humor.

“Yes, ma’am,” Gavin said sheepishly, returning her grin.

The doctor briskly checked his vitals. Finding everything in order, she draped her stethoscope around her neck and made a note on the patient record.

“Visiting hours end in about ten minutes. You remember how to get back to the waiting room?”

“Left out of here, elevator at the end of the hall, down two floors, turn right,” Ryan recited.

“Yep. All right, Mr. Haywood, his discharge is scheduled for three P.M. tomorrow. You’ll be able to pick him up from the outpatient lounge. See you soon, Mr. Patton.”

Ryan thanked her once more and she left, closing the door behind her.

In the space of a breath their mouths were crushed desperately together again, arms wrapped as tightly around each other as they could get without ripping out the IV. It was a blessing that the hospital walls were made to be soundproof; they rapidly lost the ability to keep their needy sounds quiet. Gavin used his newly reconstructed arm to caress Ryan’s broad, muscled back as Ryan slid his hand under Gavin’s blankets to stroke his torso.

For once, the looseness of the hospital gown was a godsend. Ryan ghosted over Gavin’s skin with a feather-light touch, not quite believing that what was happening was real. He trailed his fingers through the thick hair on Gavin’s chest, then across his stomach; and hesitantly, hyperaware of any discomfort on Gavin’s part, down just a little bit farther.

Gavin moaned into Ryan’s mouth, hips involuntarily twitching upwards. Callused fingertips drew lazy patterns on the skin right where his leg met the rest of his body, tickling in a way that sent delicious shivers flashing through him. Ryan rested his hand there and broke their kiss; Gavin tried to follow, then gasped and fell back as Ryan began to gently bite his neck just above his collarbone.

“Nngh… Ryan, the nurses – ah! They’ll see…”

“I won’t leave a mark,” Ryan murmured against his skin. He nibbled and sucked his way up the
side of Gavin’s neck until his nose rested against the younger man’s scruffy jaw. He breathed in deeply, relishing his scent for a moment before returning his attention to those perfect lips. They were already parted as Gavin breathed raggedly, overwhelmed by sensation.

“General visitation hours are now over,” said a cool voice over the hospital’s PA. “Visitors please return to your waiting areas.”

“We’ll have to finish this later, bao bei,” Ryan whispered in between more kisses as the message was repeated in Chinese. Gavin grabbed his face as he tried to pull away, and rested their foreheads together.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Gavin let him go reluctantly, and lay back on his pillows with a sigh. Ryan took one last look at him from the doorway, and began the long walk back to the lounge where the others waited.

“Oh, goushi,” he cursed, stopping short. Meeting up with them was going to be… interesting. He decided to stop at the pharmacy first, but it didn’t put off the humiliation for long. When he got to the waiting room, all five of his crewmates looked like they were ready to explode.

“First to say anything is the next one in for surgery,” he growled. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.”

They just barely held it together long enough to make it outside, but once they were there all hell broke loose. Jack and Lindsay doubled over in hysterics; Michael and Ray had to lean on each other for support. Geoff lost it completely and dropped to all fours, pounding a fist on the sidewalk. Their gleeful howling echoed and rebounded between the buildings, mocking Ryan from all sides. He stood there with an exasperated look on his face, fingers drumming in aggravation on his crossed arms.

It took five whole minutes for them to get it out of their systems – five minutes in which hordes of passers-by had slowed down to gawk. By the time they were able to catch their breaths, Ryan had managed to lighten up a little.

“I’m never gonna hear the end of this, am I?” he asked with a wry smile.

“Nope!” chorused the crew, all wearing identical shit-eating grins.

“Well, it worked, didn’t it? I got the scoop on his treatment. We can come get him tomorrow afternoon.”

“Dude,” said Ray, wiping tears from his eyes. “We know.”

“That nurse came back and told us,” said Michael, suppressing another attack of the giggles. “You didn’t have to pretend at all!”

Ryan felt himself going crimson, and turned away to hide his shame.

“Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving,” he declared, a bit too loudly. It spurred another round of cackling.

Eventually they sorted themselves out, and concluded that it was past time for a little shore leave. They got some money from an ATM – their own money, which was new – and went to find some lunch.
Afterwards they spent a few hours leisurely strolling the city, stopping at this store and that one at a whim. Ryan, to the mischievous delight of everyone else, used some of his share to buy Gavin new, more practical clothes and boots.

“You’re takin’ this husband thing a little serious, ain’tcha?” Lindsay teased as he checked out. She ran away laughing as Ryan chased her back into the street.

When the sun began to set, they decided to really go wild and stay at a hotel for the night. There was a decent place near the hospital, precisely for the convenience of patients’ friends and family. The crew reserved five first-class rooms, which turned out to be the entire top floor. After dinner in the hotel restaurant, every single one of them retired to take the first honest-to-god shower they’d had in months.

Ryan, still high from Gavin’s kisses, slept soundly.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
bao bei: sweetheart
goushi: dog crap
Since they had almost all day to wait before they could retrieve Gavin, the crew squandered away the next morning in truly luxuriant fashion. Ryan stayed in the huge, soft bed far past the time he would usually wake, sprawled out in a way that Hunter’s narrow cots would never allow. Room service delivered a decadent breakfast of waffles, fruit, eggs, and a huge pile of bacon; he lingered over it, then took another shower just because he could. He stood there idle at first, not bothering to wash, letting the hot water pour over him. It glazed his skin and channeled along his many scars, cascading to the tiles and swirling languidly down the drain.

He took his time drying off, and stood in nothing but a towel while he pondered the outfits he’d bought for himself yesterday. Eventually he chose the pair of jeans that hugged his butt the best, and a soft cotton shirt in a deep blue that complemented his eyes. It also showed off his forearms quite nicely when he rolled the sleeves up, and looked good against his black leather belt. His lack of holster, though, still left him feeling naked.

He was critically regarding himself in the mirror when a knock came at his door. He answered it to find Lindsay at the threshold, looking distraught and smelling faintly of lavender lotion. Ryan immediately stood aside to let her in.

“Mei mei, what’s wrong? What happened?”

She sank onto his bed, fidgeting. “Michael and I were watchin’ TV, and the news came on… Ryan, they’re lookin’ for him. Him and Geoff, both.”

“Wait, Geoff? Why?” He dropped onto the bed next to her, the beginnings of dread tingling at the back of his neck.

“Murder,” Lindsay said, meeting his eyes. “And harboring Gavin, and some other stuff. I don’t know how they pegged it on the captain, but I think we’re in trouble.”

“Da mafan,” Ryan agreed. “Did you tell him?”

“Michael went over. I thought I’d best tell you too, since…”

She trailed off as Ryan squeezed her shoulder gratefully.

“Anything about the rest of us?”

“Not by name, but anybody with ‘em is wanted on the same charges.”

“Did they say where we were last spotted?”

“Ares.”

“Well, at least they don’t know everything,” Ryan said with a little relief. “If we keep a low profile we’ll be okay for a little while.”

“Won’t the hospital report him?”

“Nah. We used a fake name, and then there’s doctor-patient privilege. Besides, we killed all the
guys who attacked us. Nobody knows Gavin was even hurt, why would they look for him at a hospital?"

Lindsay considered this for a moment and appeared to be slightly mollified. She leaned her head against Ryan’s shoulder.

“This sucks.”

“Sure does.”

They sat like that for a few minutes, taking some comfort in being upset together. Eventually another knock sounded; it was Michael this time.

“Geoff says meeting in his room, ma shong.”

“I bet,” Ryan muttered. He and Lindsay followed Michael to the captain’s quarters. Jack and Ray stood there already, looking somber and drowsy respectively. Lindsay raised an eyebrow.

“Where’s..?”

“In here,” Geoff called miserably from the bathroom. The door was open, and he was in the process of shaving his face with no small amount of distress. It took a moment for Ryan to realize that he was shaving all of his face, including the upper lip that until recently had borne his much-prized mustache.

“Shun sheng duh gao wahn, captain, what did you do?” Lindsay exclaimed, emerald eyes wide with shock.

“He had to,” Ryan said with a sympathetic grimace. “It was too distinctive.”

“They’ve got my picture,” Geoff said thickly, splashing his cheeks with water. “This won’t fool facial recognition, but Joe Jackass on the street is less likely to spot me.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Jack quietly. Ray rubbed his eyes and yawned – he’d probably still been asleep less than fifteen minutes ago.

“This is gonna take some getting used to,” he mumbled as Geoff emerged from the bathroom. The captain looked heartbroken.

“You’re tellin’ me,” he said, touching his lip the way a recent amputee would try to use a missing limb. “Anyway, this forces our hand a little. We need to grab Gavin and get off this rock before it gets too hot around here.”

Lindsay and Michael both looked a little uncomfortable. “Well…” they said in sync, and glanced affectionately at each other. Lindsay gestured for Michael to continue.

“It’s really only you and Gav who’s gotta lay low, cap. We booked this place for two nights, and I’m sure we all wanna take advantage of it a little longer.”

The others shifted slightly, agreeing but reluctant to voice it. Geoff looked exasperated.

“Never say I don’t do anything for my crew,” he grumbled. “One more night, dohn-ma? And we’re outta here first thing in the morning.”

“Shie shie, captain!” Lindsay cried joyfully, giving him a bear hug. His dark expression lightened somewhat.
“All right, all right, enough of that,” he grumbled with gruff affection.

Jack looked thoughtful. “You know, sir,” she began, tapping her chin with one slim finger. “I can probably make you up some so you’re less likely to get found. It’s amazing what a little contouring can do. I can even hide your tattoos. You wouldn’t have to stay inside, so long as you don’t touch your face too much.”

Geoff looked a bit startled. “More’n six years flyin’ with you, and I didn’t even know you wear makeup.”

“That’s because I do it well, sir.”

He considered her offer for a moment, then nodded. “That’d be nice, Jack. Lord knows I don’t wanna stay cooped up in here while y’all’re out havin’ fun.”

Jack graced him with one of her rare smiles. “I’ll have to go get some things, but you’ll be unrecognizable in no time.”

“What about Gavin?” Ray asked with another yawn. “You gonna do him up too, or will he have to stay inside?”

“We don’t have a room for him,” Michael said. “There isn’t another on this floor, and he probably shouldn’t be runnin’ around unsupervised.”

“That’s no problem,” Ryan said quietly. “He can stay with me.”

Everyone looked at him with sly, knowing smiles.

“I guess that solves that issue, dear,” Geoff snarked. The others stifled laughter. “All right, everybody go enjoy yourselves, but let’s meet at that dim sum place on Summer Street at noon to touch base. Ryan, I’m assumin’ you’ll be the one pickin’ up your husband?”

Michael nearly choked.

“Yes,” Ryan muttered, cheeks turning red again.

They split up for the rest of the morning. Jack found the nearest beauty supply store; Michael and Lindsay wandered into a place that advertised couple’s massages. Ray inevitably ended up in an arcade. Ryan, intensely restless, couldn’t settle on any one activity. He stalked around the city, subconsciously avoiding security cameras, hand continually drifting to where his holster should have been. For the sake of the crew he quashed the desperate urge to start a fight, and instead worked out his nervous energy by walking around and around a small park near downtown.

As he paced he couldn’t stop chasing questions around in his head. What if the news bulletin was successful, and somebody found them? If they got off the planet in time, where would they go? Was there any way to shake the feds off, make them lose interest?

Ryan paused mid-stride. Maybe there was a way.

He brought it up at lunch, the clamor of the restaurant providing adequate protection against eavesdroppers.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said between shrimp dumplings. The tone of his voice made the crew pause eating; Ray slurped up one last noodle.
“About what?” asked Geoff. Jack’s makeover had worked wonders: his cheekbones seemed sharper, and his eyes brighter. She’d also cut his hair. Combined with the missing mustache, he hardly looked like the same person.

Ryan leaned forward, arms braced on the table. “A couple days ago, when Gavin paid us, he tried something else, too,” he said, making sure not to speak too loudly. “He got into the Alliance criminal database, said something about clearing his name. But his own file was too strongly protected, and the rig we hacked together wasn’t powerful enough to do the job.”

“What’re you gettin’ at?” asked Michael.

“He could get us out of this mess,” Ryan explained. “We've got the cash now to give Hunter some serious upgrades—” Lindsay’s eyes lit up. “— so why not install a real workstation for him? If we want to use his skills for evil, he’ll need it anyway.”

Geoff looked skeptical. “You really think he could do it? Get us off the radar?”

“Absolutely. I watched him work, he’s zhen de shi tian cai.”

“Sure you’re not just sayin’ that cuz you’re in love with him?” sniped Ray drily. Ryan managed to control the flush in his cheeks this time.

“Shut the actual fuck up, Narvaez.”

“Settle down, you two,” Geoff said lazily as Michael, Lindsay, and Jack snickered into their food. “Sounds like a plan, Ryan. Plus, we can finally find out what’s on that chip of his.”

“Shuh muh?” asked Lindsay, chopsticks halfway to her mouth.

Ryan filled them in on the pertinent things, pausing whenever a waiter stopped by their table with more dishes.


“Could be,” Geoff said. “I’m itchin’ to know, myself.”

“No wonder they want him so bad,” Lindsay said, then got a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Almost as much as the soon-to-be Mister Free over here.”

“Will you knock it the hell off already?” Ryan snapped, not bothering to keep his voice down anymore. “You got married in a month, I don’t think you’re one to talk!”

“You might beat our record at this rate,” Michael said, laughing, then backing down as Ryan trained a ferocious glare on him. “Wei, bro, we’re just teasing.”

“Honestly, Ryan, we’re happy for you,” Ray said, not sarcastic for once.

“You’re just so kuh ai when you’re flustered,” added Jack, unsuccessfully hiding the somewhat romantic expression on her face.

Ryan returned to his meal, fuming.
Chinese translations
mei mei: little sister (affectionate)
da mafan: big trouble
ma shong: right now, immediately
shun sheng duh gao wan: holy testicle Tuesday!
dohn-ma: understand?/got it?
shie shie: thank you
zhen de shi tian cai: really a genius
shuh muh: what?
wei: hey
kuh ai: cute
The last two hours were excruciating. He got to the hospital’s discharge area forty minutes early, hoping that just being there would calm him down. It didn’t.

There were televisions placed at intervals around the room, all tuned to different channels. Most were sports or soap operas, and Ryan could only manage to watch a few minutes of each before needing to move on. One screen, however, played the news. He forced himself to sit down and pay attention to it, not-so-patiently enduring stories about droughts on Triumph and the ongoing efforts to rebuild Shadow. The only relevant thing he saw was in the scrolling bar along the bottom, silently announcing “Search continues for fugitives Ramsey and Free, last seen on Ares” before transitioning to stock market values.

When it got close to three o’clock he started jumping every time the big double doors opened to let someone out. He snapped his head around to look so much that he eventually just changed seats, allowing him to keep watch without breaking his neck. As the minutes ticked by he grew more and more antsy, afraid that something had happened, that the infection had come back, that the hospital staff had figured it out…

He had worked himself to the edge of panic when at long last the doors opened again and Gavin walked through, entirely on his own and apparently bandage-free. Ryan sprang to his feet with a relieved cry and ran to him, remembering at the last moment not to crush his shoulder when they hugged.

“Hey, Ry! Wow, you look great,” said Gavin, beaming. His smile was so captivating that at first Ryan didn’t notice he was wearing a blue scrub shirt over his old, stained pants.

“What’s this?” he asked, plucking at the loose sleeve. Gavin looked a bit sheepish.

“Well, I didn’t have a shirt when I came in, so…”

Ryan smiled warmly. “We can fix that. Come on, I’ve got a surprise for you.”

They were walking to the exit hand-in-hand when he heard it: the news channel, cutting through the noise like a siren.

“…And our main story at the top of the hour today, dangerous fugitives Gavin Free and Geoff Ramsey are still at large…”

Ryan’s breath hitched in his chest. He turned his head to look and saw his two crewmates staring out from the wide screen, larger than life.

“…Please report any information regarding their current whereabouts to your nearest federal station…”
“Gavin, keep your head down and walk faster,” he hissed. The younger man heard the desperate undertones and complied immediately.

“Look a bit to the right.”

They passed through the sliding glass doors, Ryan’s orders keeping the security camera from getting a clear shot of Gavin’s face.

“Ryan, what – ”

“Tell you later,” Ryan muttered, scanning the area with a professional eye. “Keep looking at your shoes and follow me exactly.”

He led them on a careful path, avoiding cameras when it was possible and placing himself in the way when it wasn’t. They took an indirect route to the hotel to avoid surveillance and people, and went up the back stairs when they got there.

Finally they reached the top floor. Ryan opened the door to his room with a heavy sigh of relief, urged Gavin inside, and put the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the handle. Gavin turned to look at him.

“What was *that* about, Ry?”

Ryan swept him up in hug that lifted him off the ground. “They’ve gone public,” he said into Gavin’s neck. “Your face is all over the news. Had to keep you from being seen.”

Gavin squirmed, the breath tickling his sensitive skin. Ryan noticed, and started to kiss there instead.

“R- Ryan,” Gavin gasped, hands balling into fists. “Shouldn’t… shouldn’t we clear off? Where’s the ship?”

“She’s in port,” Ryan murmured, carrying Gavin to the bed. “We’re safe for now. Nobody here but you and me.”

He laid him down gently on the freshly made sheets. Gavin scooched backwards as Ryan crawled up after him, until they were face-to-face.

“Ryan, really,” Gavin said, putting a restraining hand to the older man’s cheek. “This probably isn’t the best time, yeah? With the whole damn Alliance out for my blood?”

Ryan looked down at him, deep blue eyes filled with fire and longing. “You might’ve noticed, in our line of work, there’s never really a ‘best time.’ When you get a chance, you take it, ‘cuz it might never come again.”

Gavin touched his injured shoulder. He thought of how suddenly they’d been ambushed, how he’d taken that bullet without a moment’s hesitation. He remembered the day they’d been searched, and how close those soldiers had been to discovering him. Even back on Persephone, those frantic minutes as he ran away, not knowing if it was the last time he’d see sky…

Slowly, timidly, he raised his hands to Ryan’s back, then slid one into his hair. It was amazingly soft and thick; the dark strands were like threads he could twirl around his fingers. He tugged down gently until their faces met, noses just barely touching.

“We were in the middle of something yesterday, weren’t we?”
Ryan grinned. “Y’know, I think we were.”

He kissed Gavin’s nose, then his cheek, then tilted up his chin to softly connect their lips. The world seemed to melt once more; Gavin hummed happily and closed his eyes, a warm pink mist tinting the edges of his vision. Ryan’s shoulders were firm under his hands, and his mouth was like silk as their tongues teased at one another. Gavin let his lips part a little more and moaned quietly as Ryan accepted the invitation, slowly pressing a little deeper, sweeping in lazy arcs that had Gavin’s heart pounding.

Ryan shifted his weight onto his left arm, freeing the other to roam Gavin’s body. He ran his hand along the younger man’s side, first down over his shirt and then up underneath. His calluses and scars briefly caught on Gavin’s hair as they skimmed across it, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Gavin whined a little and arched; Ryan started to explore his back, tracing the curve of his spine and angles of his shoulderblades.

“Nnh… Ryan…” Gavin breathed, pressing himself upward as best he could. His threadbare slacks did nothing to conceal or restrain the warmth beginning to swell there. Ryan’s jeans were getting tight, too – they were already form-fitting, and now the zipper was straining. Gavin trailed a hand down Ryan’s back to his hip, then under to caress the sensitive area.

“Ta ma de, Gavin,” Ryan rasped, shuddering.

“Let’s shuck this crap,” Gavin whispered, tugging at Ryan’s belt. The older man planted one last kiss to his throat, and sat back on his knees.

“Are you totally sure?” he asked hoarsely, concern plain on his face. Gavin smiled at him with hooded eyes.

“Take the chances you get, yeah?”

All the concern evaporated. “Yeah.”

Gavin fumbled a little with the thick leather, but managed to release the belt and toss it aside. He had much less trouble with the jeans, undoing the button and slowly tugging the zipper down while meeting Ryan’s eyes.

Ryan groaned at the sight and the relief. In turn he pulled Gavin’s loose top up over his head, then bore him back down to lavish attention on his now bare torso. He avoided the fresh scar, but left no other place untouched; he mouthed gently at his collarbone, chest, and sides, making the younger man writhe and gasp. In a few places he even used his teeth, nipping and sucking small marks into the tanned skin. Where his mouth wasn’t busy, his hands were, fingers lightly massaging from hips to heartbeat and back.

Gavin clutched at Ryan’s hair and shoulders, trembling. He’d never been treated with so much care and attention before, never been… worshiped like this. Ryan worked him over like they had all the time in the world, his bull’s strength tamed for the moment and channeled entirely into pleasuring his partner. Gavin managed to grip one muscled forearm just as a particularly enthusiastic bite sent shivers down his spine. He thrust upwards involuntarily, whimpering when he couldn’t get any traction.

“Oh, god… Ryan, please…”

Ryan rubbed against him once more, then sat up to remove his own shirt. Gavin took the chance to wriggle out of his slacks and boxers, then tugged Ryan’s jeans down past his hips.
The temptation was too much. Before Ryan had time to pin him down again, Gavin opened his mouth and licked a long streak from the base of his cock all the way to the head.

“Shit!” Ryan exclaimed, legs going weak. “Fuck, Gavin, warn a guy… oohhhh, god…”

He trailed off into a moan as Gavin began to suck, softly, and reached around to grab Ryan’s ass. He swirled his tongue expertly, drawing gasps, but teasingly didn’t take in much length. At the same time, he kneaded the muscles of Ryan’s butt and thighs, making them quiver.

“Does that feel good, Ry?” he asked cheekily, pulling away for a moment. Ryan chuckled and pushed him back to the mattress.

“You know damn well it does, you little…” He cut himself off with a rough bite to Gavin’s neck that would definitely be a bruise in the morning. Gavin laughed even as he shuddered, dragging his nails down Ryan’s side and leaving red scratches in his wake.

Ryan worked his way across Gavin’s chest again, but didn’t stop at his waist this time. Instead he returned the tease, holding Gavin down easily with one hand and ghosting a breath over the tip of his cock.

“You know damn well it does, you little…” He cut himself off with a rough bite to Gavin’s neck that would definitely be a bruise in the morning. Gavin laughed even as he shuddered, dragging his nails down Ryan’s side and leaving red scratches in his wake.

“Want me to touch you, Gav?” Ryan asked, in the deep, dark voice he usually reserved for more deadly situations.

Gavin began to crack. “God, Ryan, yes,” he groaned, shivering. A shiny bead of precome started to leak from his slit.

“Mm, want to get sucked off? Or should I go a little… farther?” Ryan trailed a finger of his free hand down, past Gavin’s balls to the tight ring of muscle below.

“Aahhh, anything, just do something!”

Ryan chuckled, and got off the bed. “Don’t move. And don’t touch yourself, either.”

Gavin whined. Ryan swooped back down and kissed him passionately, tasting a hint of himself on his partner’s lips.

“It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

Gavin gulped and nodded.

Ryan yanked the rest of his clothes all the way off and strode quickly to the bathroom, wincing at the cold tile on his bare feet. There, by the sink, was what he wanted: a bottle of lavender-scented lotion. He grabbed it and hurried back to see Gavin, who was spread out on the bed with his hands bunched desperately in the sheets.

“You’re so patient for me,” Ryan praised, returning to lie next to him. “Are you ready?”

“More’n ready, Ry, I… mmph!” Ryan swallowed his words with a deep kiss, then pulled away.

“Good,” he breathed, taking in every detail of Gavin’s face: the sandy hair spiked across his forehead; his hazel eyes hooded with desire; the deep blush mantling his cheeks; his beautiful, spit-slick lips, swollen with kisses.

Ryan appreciated the sight as he opened the bottle of lotion. He squeezed a generous amount onto his fingers, rubbed warmth into it, and let his hand drift slowly downwards. He paused for a
moment, then gently slipped a finger inside, easing the process with more kisses.

Gavin moaned, tensing at first but relaxing quickly. Ryan continued to lavish him with his mouth as he added another finger and then a third, carefully moving back and forth, scissoring and curling to loosen the tightness.

“M- mmm!” Gavin’s eyes flew open and he cried into Ryan’s mouth. The older man stilled his hand and raised his head.

“Hit a sweet spot, did I?” Ryan asked mischievously while Gavin panted. “So you like it when I do… this?” He repeated the motion, curling his fingers to press directly into Gavin’s prostate.

“Oh GOD!” Gavin’s voice broke. “God, yes, do it again…”

He nearly sobbed when Ryan withdrew his hand.

“I’ll do it as much as you want, bao bei,” Ryan whispered. He moved to place himself between Gavin’s shaking legs, lifting them to rest over his shoulders. He slathered himself with another large palmful of lotion, then leaned forward and gently pressed into Gavin’s eager body.

He went slowly, a half-inch at a time, letting Gavin get used to the feeling before adding any more. All the while he planted kisses along his calves, whispering encouragement as Gavin took him in. The hot, tight space felt incredible and it was all he could do to hold back, but his concern for Gavin’s comfort kept him in check. He shifted a little, experimentally, and stifled a groan at the sudden wave of pleasure that washed through him with the movement.

At last he bottomed out, entirely sheathed in Gavin, panting with the effort of holding still but waiting for a signal before moving a single hair. His partner was flushed from head to toe, biting his lip and wriggling slightly as he stretched to accommodate Ryan’s girth.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” Gavin breathed, complete trust shining in his eyes.

Ryan began to draw back, breathing heavily at the friction, then rolled his hips to set up a slow, sweet rhythm. Gavin gasped and threw back his head, quietly moaning, hands grabbing at nothing. He used what leverage he had to push against Ryan in time, making the strokes longer, the thrusts harder.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “More, Ryan, I need more of you…”

“Hang on tight,” Ryan said, and picked up his pace. He canted his hips a little, aiming for the spot that had made Gavin cry out.

“A- aah!”

There it was.

Gavin was truly writhing now, whole body shaking like a leaf. Ryan would have been worried had the younger man not been spewing a constant stream of “yes!” and “fuck” and “right there, shit shit shit…” He was in too much ecstasy to push back anymore; he twitched uncontrollably as the precome dribbled from his cock and made his foreskin shine.

“Ohh, you’re so good,” Ryan purred, torn between closing his eyes and watching Gavin come utterly undone. “Is this what you wanted, Gavin? Is this what you like?”
He couldn’t even answer, just babble incoherently as Ryan continued to work into him. The sounds he was making, the feel of his body so needy and responsive, drove Ryan right to the brink. The heat built under his stomach and suffused every inch of him, begging to be released; his own hands were starting to shake, given over to the pleasure he shared with his partner. He reached down, taking a firm grip on Gavin’s straining dick and stroking it slowly.

“F- Ry- gonna- I can’t…”

“Come for me,” Ryan whispered.

“Haa- Aaah!” Gavin cried, arching, nearly ripping the sheets as he came all over his stomach and chest. His whole body tensed, toes curling and muscles clenching down on Ryan’s still-moving cock.

“Oh, fuck, Gavin…” Ryan groaned long and loud as the pressure burst through him, releasing hard and hot with his last few ragged thrusts. There were stars behind his eyes and jelly in his legs in the wake of his orgasm, leaving him completely spent and utterly blissful.

They clung to each other until they came down to earth, relaxing and letting themselves go limp. Ryan pulled out reluctantly, and crawled around to lie next to Gavin as their breathing returned to normal.

“So,” Ryan murmured, nuzzling Gavin’s ear. “Glad we took that chance?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely,” Gavin answered, turning his head to kiss Ryan on the nose. “We should probably clean up, though.”

“Ah,” Ryan said, smiling. “You’re gonna love this.”

He helped Gavin off the bed and led him to the bathroom. Gavin’s jaw dropped.

“A shower! A real shower!”

“Big enough for two, even,” Ryan said, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

Gavin’s face could outshine the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
- ta ma de: fuck (exclamation)
- bao bei: sweetheart
Six o’clock arrived to find them clean, dry, and sleepily twined around each other between the sheets. Ryan had used the lotion for its intended purpose to combat the effects of three showers in rapid succession; it enveloped Gavin in the warm scent of lavender.

He traced his finger smoothly along Ryan’s chest, following the lines of the scars that littered his body. Some were thin and pale, relics of his time in service to the Alliance. Others were more recent, shining marks of his warrior’s life. There were even a few fresh bruises and scratches that must have come from the fight on Ares. Gavin touched these as lightly as a feather.

“You’ll collect more of your own if you stay with us,” Ryan murmured, brushing the still-fragile skin on Gavin’s left shoulder. “You okay with that?”

Gavin raised his eyes to meet Ryan’s.

“If” nothing. Of course I’m bloody well coming with you,” he said, with absolute certainty. “And not just because I’ve got nowhere else to go, either. I’m… starting to like it here. In spite of everything.”

Ryan’s expression was somewhere between joy and pain. There were things he wanted to say – oh, so many of them – but the words wouldn’t form on his tongue. Instead he hugged Gavin closer, burying his face in the younger man’s fluffy hair.

They stayed like that, comfortably drifting in and out of consciousness, until a sudden burst of noise from the hall announced the return of the rest of their crew. Ryan stirred sleepily, yawned, and caught the aroma of something delicious.

A gentle knock sounded at his door. He carefully detangled himself from Gavin, found his pants, and answered. It was Ray, holding two large paper bags. A small smirk crept into the sniper’s customary deadpan expression.

“We got takeout,” he said. “Thought it was maybe worth disturbing you for.”

Ryan blinked, surprised. “Oh. Thanks.”

“We’re all eating in Geoff’s room, if you wanna come.”

“Oh, sure,” he answered with a glance back at Gavin. “Give us a minute?”

“Take your time.”

Ryan closed the door and went back to the bed.

“Hey, Gav,” he whispered, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Xing lai. There’s dinner.”

Gavin made a small noise and curled up a little more.

“Come on,” Ryan said, a little louder. “I never showed you that surprise.”

“Thought it was the shower,” Gavin muttered, beginning to stir. Ryan smiled.
“Nah. There’s more.”

Gavin rolled over reluctantly and stretched with a guttural sound. “I dunno if I can take any more surprises, Ry.”

“You’ve liked ‘em all so far, haven’t you?” Ryan asked mischievously. Gavin smiled through another yawn.

“All right. Show me.”

Ryan gave him a hand off the bed and led him to the pile of shopping bags in the corner. “I figured you could use something else to wear,” he said as Gavin’s eyes went wide.

“Wait, you… You didn’t.”

“I sure did.”

Gavin tackled him in a big hug, entirely awake now.

“You’re too bloody good to me, Ry.” He began picking through the bags with pleased exclamations.

Ryan had to look away in shame as an acid surge of guilt put the lie to Gavin’s words. He hadn’t even begun to atone for his betrayal; a cruelly familiar voice taunted that he might never be able to. He inhaled sharply and shook his head to dislodge the thought, shoving it as far away as he could. It curled up in a corner and stubbornly remained, a seething spot of darkness marring the carefully tended landscape of his mind.

Gavin decided on a bright green t-shirt, black hooded jacket, and a sturdy pair of cargo pants. Once he was dressed they went to Geoff’s room, where a partially eaten feast of Chinese-American food awaited them. The others, sitting in a circle on the floor, budged up to make space.

“Bloody hell, this is deluxe,” Gavin said, plunking down on the carpet with an imperceptible wince. He grabbed a paper plate and began heaping it with orange chicken.

“Figured since you can’t go outside, this’d be nice,” Lindsay said, picking up a dumpling.

“Aw, thanks, Lindsay,” Gavin said through a mouthful of food.

“Actually, it was Jack’s idea.” Michael nodded to her. The pilot gave him a reproachful look as if to say, “Why did you tell him that?”

Gavin was slightly startled. “Well, cheers, Jack. Really thoughtful of you.”

“Buyao danxin,” she muttered, embarrassed.

He hadn’t realized how hungry he was until halfway through his second plate. He put down his chopsticks and looked up with a gratified sigh, taking a break before diving in again. It was then that he noticed Geoff’s transformation.

“Christ, Geoff, what happened to you?” he exclaimed. The captain made a face.

“Disguise is what happened, and I’ll thank you not to remind me.”

Gavin saw the looks from the rest of the crew, and shut up.
Everyone else finished while he was still eating, leaning back with appreciative groans and satisfied expressions. Jack began to clean up.

“So what are y’all’s plans tonight?” Lindsay asked, playing with her napkin.

“I’m turning in early,” Jack said, putting a container of leftovers in the mini-fridge. “We have to be up at zero-dark-thirty tomorrow.”

“Ugh,” Michael grumbled. “I guess hittin’ the bar’s not such a great idea, then.”

“Well, I won’t be missing anything,” Ray quipped with a smirk.

“I’ve gotta stay here,” Ryan said, but did not sound at all displeased. A few eyebrows were raised, but thankfully nobody took the opportunity to tease him again.

“I’ll stay in, too,” Geoff sighed. “I’ve taken enough risks for one day.”

“So we’re all being lazy, huh?” Ray asked. There was general consensus. “Anyone wanna watch a movie?”

A heated debate ensued to decide who would get to sit on the bed. Geoff won with the compelling argument that he was the captain and it was his fuckin’ bed, dammit, but it was a king-size so there was room for two more. Jack and Ray were all right with letting one of the couples have it, and since Ryan could easily drag Michael and Lindsay off, he claimed the space for himself and Gavin.

Then there was the trouble of choosing what to watch. There were twelve different movie channels and everyone had a different opinion. Eventually they settled on a thriller that featured a plucky band of heroes trying to save a town from a Reaver invasion. The crew watched with amusement, making quips about inaccuracies and arguing over what other films the various actors had starred in. Gavin enjoyed the first half, but when the Reavers themselves came on screen he sat bolt upright in terror. The creatures were horrific, gore dripping from wounds they gave each other, wearing clothes that seemed to be made of human skin...

“Come on, that’s so fake,” Ray complained, gesturing to the screen. “Real ones are way worse. Look, they don’t even have any of those piercing things.”

“Yeah, and their fuckin’ ships don’t look like that either,” Michael agreed, getting angry just for the fun of it. “Don’t these assholes know what a fuckin’ pulse harpoon is?”

“It should be smokin’ more, too,” added Lindsay. “Those ching soh don’t care about core containment…”

“They can’t show what Reavers are really like,” Geoff said quietly. “It’d be too graphic. Even for the paid channels.”

Gavin shrank back, instinctively reaching for Ryan’s hand as everyone soberly considered the captain’s point. If the real thing was that much worse than the already atrocious movie version, he never wanted to go back to space again.

An hour later the heroes saved the day, and the credits began to roll. Jack glanced at the time, and rose from the floor with a small wince.

“All right, kids, I’m hitting the sack.” she said, twisting the kinks from her spine. “See you in the morning.”
“Yeah, we should go, too,” Lindsay said, hauling her husband off the ground with both hands. They ended up mere inches apart, smiling, and gave each other small kisses before separating. Ray made a disgusted face at them.

“Okay, kwai jio kai,” Geoff said, getting up to shoo out Ray, Ryan, and Gavin as well. “G’night, everybody.”

The crew dispersed to their own rooms, yawning.

“Hey Ryan,” Gavin began timidly as the two of them got ready for bed. “Were those things everyone said about Reavers true?”

“Yeah. The movie was way off. Why?”

“N- no reason.”

Ryan put away his toothbrush and gave Gavin a long, sympathetic look. “It’s okay to be scared,” he said gently. “In fact, it’s healthy. I’d be more worried if you weren’t scared.”

Gavin swallowed nervously and studied the floor. “It’s just… Geoff told me about them before, how you guys ran into them once. Flying around so far from the central planets, where the Reavers are… It’s all a bit mental, innit?”

“Maybe, but we’re good at what we do,” Ryan said quietly. He lifted Gavin’s chin with one gentle hand until he could look him solemnly in the eyes. “Gavin, I will never, ever let them take you. I’ll die before I let that happen.”

Gavin gave him a watery smile. “You mean you’d kill me first.”

Ryan opened his mouth to issue a rebuttal, but stopped with an agonized expression. He hung his head, shoulders slumping.

“If it comes to that, yes,” he murmured, then looked up again. “But if we were boarded, and I only had one bullet left, I’d give it to you. I… You probably don’t understand what that means.”

Gavin studied his face for a moment, and smiled. “I think… I think I understand enough.”

He leaned in on tiptoe, and kissed Ryan slow and sweet. Ryan wrapped his arms around him as though the world would end at sunrise, kissing back with all the passion he couldn’t put into words.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
xing lai: wake up
buyao danxin: don't worry about it
ching soh: ruthless or savage beast of a person
kwai jio kai: get lost
ALLIANCE NAVY HEADQUARTERS, LONDINIUM

“Sir. We’ve got a tip. A civilian on Greenleaf reports seeing a man matching Ramsey’s description outside Mercy Hospital in Verdant City.”

“Excellent. The Hildebrand is in that sector. Send a team.”

“Should I have them lock down the port, sir?”

“Do it.”

Neither of them slept particularly well that night. Despite Ryan’s assurances that evening, Gavin tossed and turned, whimpering with nightmares of Reavers tearing him apart.

Ryan himself lay still, unable to close his eyes. He’d meant what he’d said, entirely and with no reservations, but it felt like a horrible deceit. How could he pledge such devotion to Gavin, when a scant week ago he’d tried to sell him off like chattel? How could they be together, with that treason weighing him down? The guilt hung over him, gnawed at him, grew stronger the more intimate their relationship became.

He wished he had his armor to bring him some peace.

Exhausted or not, they were rousted before dawn by an insistent knocking.

“Ryan, Gavin, it’s time to go,” Jack called. The men groaned like teenagers on Monday morning.

“Coming,” Ryan responded sleepily. He got up and shuffled to the bathroom. Gavin rebelliously pulled the covers over his head.

They managed to sort themselves out in a few minutes and joined the rest of the crew, gathered in the hall in varying degrees of grogginess. The exception was an annoyingly chipper Jack, who collected their key cards and addressed the group briskly.

“I’ve brought one shuttle to the hotel’s loading area, but the other is still in the lot. Michael, Lindsay, Ray, you come with me and pick it up. I’ll check us out of here on the way. Ryan, Gavin, go with the captain to take the one that’s here, and load it up with all our stuff. We’ll meet back at the ship.”

“Can I stick with them?” Ray yawned, jerking his thumb at Geoff. “I’m too tired to walk that far.”

“Suck it up, you fuckin’ hwen dan,” Michael grouched. “You don’t see us complaining.”

“Yeah, fresh air’s good for you,” added Lindsay.
“No, it’s not. Sun gives you cancer,” Ray countered.

“Then it’s a good thing it’s not up yet,” Geoff snapped, a bit cranky this early in the morning. “Let’s just fuck off before the feds get wise.”

Their shuttle soared away in the pre-dawn darkness, leaving the glittering city behind for the duller lights of the spaceport. Geoff remotely activated the ship’s docking protocol and reattached smoothly; metal whined as Hunter welcomed them home. The others arrived soon after, and from the sound of it, Ray was still complaining. Lindsay banished him to the mess with orders to make breakfast and a pot of coffee. Geoff beckoned Jack before she headed up to the bridge.

“Set a course for Haven. We’ve gotta regroup.”

“Yessir.”

“How long, you reckon?”

“I’ll have to check the charts, but given current orbital patterns I’d say three or four days at regular speed.”

“We got the fuel to make it a little faster?”

“No, sir. Not after burning hard to get here.”

“All right. Do what you gotta do.”

They were just starting to caffeinate themselves when Jack’s voice came over the PA.

“Sir. We have a problem. Port control’s locked us down. I can’t take off.”

“Da shiong la se la ch’wohn tian,” Geoff swore, leaping from his seat.

Sure enough, the dashboard display was red with the word “Locked.” Geoff hit a few keys, trying to override it. Nothing worked.

“They know we’re here. We’re fucked.”

“Um, I could maybe help.”

Gavin was standing by the door, looking nervous. Geoff and Jack both trained intense stares on him.

“Talk fast, kid. What can you do?”

“Well, it’s just a signal, right? It’s not like the engines are physically cocked up. I can try interrupting it at the source.” He gestured to the computer on the copilot’s side. “It’ll take me a little while, but…”

“Do it,” Geoff ordered harshly.

Gavin dropped into his chair immediately, bouncing with impatience as the machine booted up. As soon as he could, he began to type, taking shortcuts he normally wouldn’t in order to save time. It was sloppy code, but in half an hour he looked up from the screen.

“This’ll only work for about two minutes, until the system refreshes,” he said.
“I just need to get her in the air,” Jack responded, voice tight. “Once we’re off they can’t bring us down.”

Gavin nodded, finger hovering over the key that would start the program. “Ready?”

“Go.”

He pressed it, and a fraction of a second later the red light vanished from Jack’s console. She rapidly ran through the ignition sequence, and Hunter responded eagerly. Engines began to roar; the crew staggered with the ship’s movement until the inertial dampeners kicked in a few moments late. Jack sighed with relief as they lifted off the ground.

“There’ll be a cruiser nearby,” Geoff said, not relaxing yet. “Scan for it and take us out of the world as far away as possible. The other side of the planet, if you can.”

“Yessir.”

“Great job, Gavin,” the captain said, turning to the hacker. “I knew I hired you for somethin’.”

Gavin started, looking at Geoff incredulously.

“W- what?” he stammered. “Hired?”

“You don’t think we’d’ve detoured all the way to Greenleaf for just anyone, do you?” Geoff said, raising an eyebrow. “When I said you could stay, I meant it permanent-like. You’re on my crew.”

Gavin sat speechless.


“I… thanks,” the hacker said weakly. The shock of acceptance, the knowledge that the captain had put the whole ship in real danger just to get him medical treatment, was almost incomprehensible. Nobody had ever given two shits about him before, but these people, these criminals, had taken him in like family. And Ryan – terrifying, deadly Ryan – had become even more than that. In that moment Gavin truly realized he could never go back to Ariel – but he honestly didn’t care. Hunter was his home now.

Suddenly he noticed that the captain had been talking to him.

“Sorry, what?” he said, shaking his head to clear it. “I got distracted.”

Geoff gave him an amused look. “I said, why don’t you go finish your coffee. We’ll be out of the woods soon.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Gavin stood, stretched, and laughed a little. “’s prob’ly cold by now.”

“You can fix that. We have the technology,” Jack said with dry humor.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gavin muttered, moving to the door. He paused at the threshold, and looked back. “But really. Thank you… captain.”

Geoff nodded, smiling.

Hunter soared on, the ghost of sunrise glinting off her wings.
Ryan had begun to put away his new clothes when his door intercom sounded. He put down a folded shirt and went to answer it.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, Gav. Ching jin.”

Gavin clambered down the ladder and awkwardly stood a few steps inside, unsure of how to phrase what he wanted to say. Ryan raised an eyebrow at him.

“Something wrong?”

“What? No, no, not at all… It’s fantastic, actually. Geoff says I’m really one of you now. One of the crew.”

“Well, yeah,” Ryan said with a grin. “You have been since Ares. You got the landlock off us, I’m guessing?”

“Yep,” Gavin answered, a little proudly. “It wasn’t all that hard.”

“Then why are you so surprised?”

“I dunno, I just thought I was a passenger. Maybe I’d hack a little for you. But I’m wanted, still, and I’ve caused so much trouble…”

The sick feeling crept into Ryan’s throat again.

“That’s not your fault. We’re the bad guys, remember? This shit was coming sooner or later. We brought it on ourselves.”

Gavin laughed, if only because he had no idea exactly how true it was.

“Rubbish. You’re not as bad as all that,” he said, moving forward to butt his head fondly against the older man’s shoulder.

“Yes, we are,” Ryan murmured, suddenly unable to look Gavin in the eye. The hacker noticed and stepped back, uneasy.

“Now you look a mess. Did I do something wrong?”

“What? No, Gav, of course not.”

“Then what’s got your knickers in a twist?”

Ryan rubbed his face and sat down, patting the bed beside him. Gavin joined him, plainly worried now, and tried to take his hand. The other man pulled it away.

“You’re going to hate me for this,” Ryan began, gaze focused somewhere by his shoe. “Especially after yesterday… tzao gao, I just have to say it.”

“Say what, Ry?”
Ryan closed his eyes, brow furrowed, and took a deep breath.

“We… we sold you out, Gavin. Taking you on, making nice, bringing you to Ares, it was all for the reward money. That’s why we were ambushed. That’s why the Alliance is after us.”

Gavin reacted just as badly as he’d been afraid of. The hacker stood, backing away with a devastated look on his face.

“All of this… All this time, you’ve been playing me?”

“No,” Ryan said hotly, rising from the bed. Gavin took a few more steps away. “Not since… maybe the second day. We like you, Gavin, and I…”

“So you liked me and still ratted me out! Must be some new definition of ‘like’ I’ve never heard of!”

“I was doing my job!” Ryan blurted out, knowing it was no excuse. “You think I haven’t been beating myself up over this? It was wrong, I know it, but you don’t understand the position we were in – ”

“Oh, I understand plenty!” Gavin spat, making for the door. “You made me trust you just so you could get rich! I get it. This whole thing was a sham!”

“Well maybe at first, but… Gavin, wait!”

“Why should I?” Gavin asked from halfway up the ladder, almost choking on the words. Ryan balled his hands into fists, desperation making them shake.

“Because everything since Ares was real. Because I am so, so sorry for what I did to you. Because I meant every damn thing I said last night. Because… because I love you.”

The look Gavin gave him was one of agony and disbelief, as if astounded that Ryan would even dare to say such a thing. He climbed out the hatch without another word. Ryan watched, heart breaking, until the door clanged shut.

“Fuck. Fucking fuck!” He slammed his hands on his workbench, vision starting to blur. “Haywood, you ben tian sheng de yi dui rou, bei bi shiou ren, ta ma de hun dan…”

He cursed himself in both English and Chinese until he ran out of words, then started tearing his room apart, looking for his battle gear. He couldn’t deal with the pain coursing through him, needed to run away from it and become like a stone.

Jacket. Boots. Paint. Mask. He put them all on. And somehow, for the first time, they didn’t help one bit.

Vagabond sat on his bed, and cried.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
hwen dan: bastard, jerk
da shiong la se la ch’wohn tian: explosive diarrhea of an elephant
ching jin: come in
tzao gao: oh, crap
nen tian sheng de yi dui rou: stupid inbred stack of meat
bei bi shiou ren: pathetic wretch
ta ma de hun dan: motherfucking son of a bitch
Chapter 18

Jack, laying in their course, heard the commotion and the faint slam of Gavin’s sliding door. From the sound of it, he’d been arguing with Ryan, though she hadn’t been able to make out the words. Concerned, she set the helm for autopilot, went to Ryan’s quarters, and buzzed for him.

“Haywood, you okay in there?”

There was no answer, but she thought she could hear a low, miserable noise coming from the room. She rang again.

“Haywood?”

Still nothing. She tried the hatch. It was locked from the inside.

“Ryan, seriously. What’s going on?”

The speaker remained silent. Becoming truly worried now, she followed Gavin to his room. The sounds coming from behind his door were, if anything, even more wretched than Ryan’s.

“Gavin?” she asked, knocking. There was a soft thump against the wall, as though a pillow had been thrown.

“Sod off.”

Well, at least it was a response.

“Gavin, what the hell happened?”

“I said sod off, you mingey smegging arsewipe!”

“Woah, hey, I just want to help.”

“Should’ve bloody done before you tried to bloody sell me, you shite!”

“Oh, goushi,” Jack muttered, closing her eyes. She rested her forehead against the wall. “Gavin, that was a mistake, and we all regret it. But it’s done. You’re on our crew now.”

“Oh, and that’s supposed to make everything magically better, is it? Am I supposed to just forget?”

“I… no, but… Look, can I come in?”

“Go away, Jack.”

The pilot stood wearily in the hall, half-intending to just open the door and comfort him whether he wanted it or not. But he had a right to his privacy, she supposed, until or unless he did something that threatened the safety of the ship. She went to the engine room instead.

Lindsay was lying in her hammock, recovering from their early morning start.

“Hey, Jones,” Jack said quietly. “You awake?”
“Mm. Yeah,” Lindsay replied drowsily, turning over. She poked her head over the side. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got a problem,” Jack said grimly. The mechanic was instantly alert.

“What, is there another cruiser? Did the helm malfunction?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s… I think Ryan told Gavin we tried to trade him off. Now they’re both total wrecks.”

“Rung tse fwo tzoo bao yo wuo muhn,” Lindsay groaned, flopping back down. Her hammock rocked dangerously. “What’d he go and do that for?”

“Search me,” Jack said, shrugging. “I was hoping you could knock some sense into Ryan. He won’t even talk to me.”

“I’d better, ‘fore he does somethin’ idiotic.” The mechanic swung herself down, landing lightly. “What’re you gonna do about Gavin?”

“He’s most likely pissed at all of us. I thought Ryan might be able help, once he’s pulled himself together.”

“Yeah, ‘s prob’ly the only way to go. D’you still have those leftovers from last night?”

Jack blinked at the sudden change in topic. “They’re in the fridge. Why?”

“Bait.”

Lunchtime came and went with no sign of the troublesome couple. Jack told everyone what had happened, and Lindsay kept them from attempting any mediation themselves until she’d tried her own way first. They grudgingly agreed.

“Fuckin’ idiot,” Geoff muttered. “This is exactly why I hate onboard relationships. Ryan didn’t have to say a goddamn thing, we coulda sailed right on by without the kid ever knowin’. But noooo, he just had to be fuckin’ honest with his fuckin’ boyfriend…”

“I agree completely, Geoff.”

“Thank you, Ray. At least somebody on this boat has some sense.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Jack said, raising an eyebrow. “You’ll notice that I keep my entanglements firmly planetside.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever, but you still got ‘em.”

Lindsay waited another couple of hours before putting her plan into action. When she was sure that her recalcitrant crewmate had gotten hungry, she retrieved the leftover takeout and microwaved it to maximum deliciousness. Careful not to burn herself, she carried it to the crew quarters and laid the plate down just far enough away from Ryan’s room that he would have to come completely into the hall to get it. Then she hid inside her own hatch, and settled in for a stakeout.

Several minutes passed in silence. She was beginning to fear that the food would go cold again when she heard her target stirring. From her vantage point she saw the door of Ryan’s room open – just a fraction, as though he was peeking out to check if the area was clear. Lindsay prepared to pounce.
Vagabond emerged like something from a nightmare, dressed to kill, motions furtive and almost animalistic. It was so off-putting that Lindsay nearly missed her moment. He had grabbed the plate and was returning to his lair when she finally sprang her trap.

“Ryan!” she said commandingly, striding to him like an angry parent. The skull whipped furiously around to face her, but she could see that the eyes beneath were scared.

Lindsay herded him down the ladder, noting that despite his condition he still managed to hang on to the food. She followed closely, but stopped in shock when she saw the state of his room.

His tools and computer parts were scattered all over the table and across the floor, along with several dismantled guns. There were more than a few knives, too, a couple of which were standing proudly from the wall as if they had been thrown there. What space wasn’t littered with weapons was covered by heaps of clothes, both old and new. Strewn amongst the mess were his precious homemade toys, delicate silver and gold casings broken open like rotten fruit. Vagabond himself had retreated to the farthest corner of his bed, watching the intruder warily. He did not remove his mask or make any move to start eating.

“Jesus Christ, Ryan,” Lindsay said, running a hand through her hair. “Overreacting much?”

Vagabond didn’t reply.

The mechanic sighed and sat on the bed. She winced, rose slightly to remove a screwdriver from the sheets, and sat down again.

“Look, I know you’re upset, but this…” she waved at the shambles all around. “This ain’t helpful. Gavin’s maybe got a right to a temper tantrum, but you? Honestly, bro, come on.”

Lindsay scooched a little closer, and when Vagabond made no move to resist, she reached out to gently pull off his mask. She gasped softly.

“Oh, no, xiaodi, you’re really hurtin’,” she murmured, touching his cheek. There were tracks down his face where tears had run through the greasepaint, and his eyes were dull, red, and swollen from crying. He looked utterly broken.

“I told him everything,” Ryan rasped. “What we did, how I felt… and he looked at me like I was some kind of monster.”

“Welllll…” Lindsay said teasingly, pretending to be unsure. It didn’t cheer him up as she’d intended; if anything, he became even more upset. She quickly backpedaled. “I’m sorry, Ry. What can I do?”

He shrugged helplessly. “Rewind time and make me not say what I said?”

“Heh. I can fix a lotta things, Haywood, but this ain’t one of ‘em. You’re the only one can do that.”

Ryan looked at her almost sullenly. “How the hell am I going to un-fuck this?”

“We can start with your joo fuen chse here,” she said, gesturing broadly at the chaos surrounding them. “Get it all shipshape. Easier to think when it’s clean.”

She took his hand and coaxed him off the bed. Together they reassembled his guns, put away his clothes, and picked tiny screws up off the floor. The knives went back in their sheaths and the tools into their special case. The work seemed to calm Ryan down considerably.
When the room had regained some semblance of order his eyes were much clearer. He was even recovered enough to wash the greasy, salty paint off his face. Lindsay watched with her hands propped on her hips.

“Good. Now take off that jacket and come eat.”

Ryan meekly did as he was told, folding his armor away and placing his mask on top of it. The food Lindsay had brought was only tepid by then, but he was very hungry. It rapidly vanished.

“Feelin’ any better?” the mechanic asked.

“Yes,” Ryan said, in a much firmer voice than before.

“Then let’s talk this out. Why’d you do it, Ryan? Things were goin’ so well.”

He sighed. “I don’t know… We were getting so close, but everything felt like it was built on a lie. I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Fair,” Lindsay conceded. “Human trafficking ain’t exactly the best foundation for a relationship.”

“I was hoping he’d see we’d all changed our minds about him, that he was ours now. That I was his. But I guess I didn’t make that clear.”

“No, given the way y’all been actin’ ‘round each other these last couple days, I think he gets it.”

“Then I said it wrong, or at the wrong time, or something.”

“What’s that phrase of yours? ‘There’s never a right time.’ More true for this than most other things, I reckon.”

“Great,” Ryan said, dropping his head into his hands. “Now I feel worse.”

“Now hang on, I didn’t say it wasn’t the right thing to do. You needed to put it out there so that’s what you did, but now you gotta face up to the consequences.”

“Ugh. Usually I am the consequence.”

Lindsay gave him a stern look. “This ain’t a job gone wrong, Haywood, and Gavin ain’t some backwater drug lord. Nothin’ here to be solved by killin’.”

“I know.”

“Then stand up and deal with it. You’re a tough motherfucker, Ry, but right now you’re actin’ like a little bitch. And what do we say about those?”

“Bitches ain’t shit,” Ryan chorused with her, a smirk finding its way to his lips.

“Right on. Now get your ass in gear, bring Gavin somethin’ to eat, and suss it all out together. Oh, and you might wanna start thinkin’ on how to apologize to the captain, too. You know he don’t appreciate drama.”

Ryan groaned and fell back on his pillow. “Fuck. I really put my foot in it.”

Lindsay smiled wryly. “Hey, shit happens. Remember when Michael first showed up? I was totally useless for three whole weeks.”
Ryan snorted. “You tried to reset the ship’s internal clock and shorted out the entire lower deck.”

“Yep. Those were the days.” Lindsay allowed herself a moment of nostalgia. “Point is, I untied my fangzong fenguang de jie, and now it’s your turn. If I could make it work, so can you.”

She looked at him kindly until he finally sat up and met her eyes. He gave a short, firm nod.

“Thanks, mei mei. I’m sorry I made you come get me.”

She whapped him lightly on the ear. “You didn’t make me do anything, dummy. I came ‘cuz I give half a hump about you and don’t wanna see you upset.”

Ryan smiled thankfully at her, and leaned over to wrap her in a warm hug.

“Okay, okay, go hwong tong,” Lindsay said, a little embarrassed. “Get out there and kick some ass. We’re all cheerin’ for you.”

He let her go with one last ruffle of her hair. Then he stood, squared his shoulders, and strode to the ladder. But there he stopped, and looked back.

“You sure I can’t wear my -”

“No.”

“But it makes things so much easier!”

“Ryan,” Lindsay said waringly, giving him a half-glare.

“Fine, fine…” he sighed, and climbed out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

goushi: dog crap
run tse fwo tzoo bao yo wuo muhn: merciful Buddha protect us
xiaodi: little brother
joo fuen chse: pig’s sty
fangzong fenguang de jie: knot of self-indulgent lunacy
mei mei: little sister
go hwong tong: enough of this nonsense
Chapter 19

Ryan planned out what he would say while assembling a meal to tempt Gavin out of his shell. The last of the rice, pork, and spinach wasn’t nearly as good as Ray’s cooking, but at least the chocolate chip cookies Jack had baked were guaranteed to be delicious. If they couldn’t cheer Gavin up, nothing would.

Despite the conversation he’d carefully constructed in his head, he forgot every word the instant he actually stood in front of Gavin’s door. Balancing the tray on one hand, he took a deep breath, and knocked.

“For Christ’s sake, Jack, I told you to leave me alone!”

“It’s me, Gav,” Ryan said hesitantly. “I made you some dinner.”

There was silence from inside the room.

“Look, I just want to talk. Please.”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Gavin growled, but there was an edge of pain to it. “I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“Too goddamn bad, kid, ‘cuz we’re gonna work this out if it kills us.”

“That is a distinct possibility.”

Ryan sighed. “Gavin, I’m coming in whether you like it or not, but I’d really prefer it if you don’t make me open the door myself.”

There was a lengthy pause. Ryan was just about to pull the screen aside when he heard a soft sound like the shifting of blankets. Then there were dragging footsteps, and the door opened.

Gavin looked, as he would say, a right mess. His hair stood up every which way. His eyes were bloodshot and tear-tracks trailed down his cheeks. He’d even changed back into his old, shredded, bloodstained clothes. On top of all of this, his face was filled with something close to hatred.

Ryan felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

“Thank you,” he said, and stepped inside.

Gavin’s room wasn’t nearly as much of a disaster as Ryan’s had been. His new outfits had been dumped furiously into a corner, but for the most part it looked like the hacker simply hadn’t left his bed for hours. Ryan smoothed out the sheets one-handed and put his tray down.

“Say your thing and get out,” Gavin said, crossing his arms aggressively. Ryan squeezed his eyes painfully shut, trying to keep the misery at bay.

“I just need to explain,” he said. “I never meant to hurt you, Gavin. I wanted to be honest before we got too involved with each other.”

“Too bloody involved?” Gavin exclaimed, tightness in his throat making it come out as a squawk.
“Ryan, I got shot for you. You pretended we were married. We had sex!”

“I know,” Ryan whispered. “I shouldn’t have let it get that far so fast, but… I dunno, when the deal went south, something just… clicked. I had a second chance, and I didn’t want to waste it.”

Gavin snorted derisively. “Oh, lovely. So you fancied me before, and still sold me out.”

“Rung tse song di ching dai wuo tzo. I hate myself, but yes,” Ryan said, voice cracking with regret. “Even before Ares, I didn’t want to go through with the trade. But Geoff’s my captain, y’know, he’s done a lot for me, and I could never turn on him. And the crew… We’ve been struggling, Gav. Sometimes it seemed like we were flying on nothing but hope. Your bounty would’ve kept us in the air for the rest of our lives.”

“I feel for you,” Gavin said with deadly sarcasm. Ryan winced.

“Look, we all had our priorities wrong. I think at this point there’s not one of us who wouldn’t do it different if we could. But we can’t undo what we did, and lying about it’s been killing me. I thought it’d be better to start from a place of honesty than to keep going without ever addressing it.”

Gavin shifted uncomfortably. “I get that, Ry, but could you have picked a worse bloody time? Just when I started feeling like I belong here? If you’d waited a few months we could all have a laugh about it, like, ‘remember the time we tried to sell you to the Alliance? Wacky fun, yeah?’ Or right after I took a bullet for you, you could’ve taken some bloody responsibility…”

“Zhen mei nai xin de fo zu, Gavin, I’m trying to do that right now!” Ryan growled through clenched teeth. “I fucked up, okay. I bie woo lohng big time, and now I gotta deal with the fallout. And you know what, I deserve it. But I can take every damn thing the ‘Verse can throw at me, except for losing you!”

The sudden outburst stunned Gavin into silence. Even his furious expression slipped for a moment, revealing exactly how vulnerable he really felt. Ryan breathed hard until he could speak evenly.

“Gavin, I’ll say it again, I love you. I understand if you can’t deal with that right now, but I need you to believe me.”

“You’re right,” Gavin murmured. “I can’t deal with it. I need time.”

“Then take it,” Ryan said quietly. “It’s three days to Haven. If you decide you want to leave when we get there, I won’t stop you.”

“Thanks.” Gavin’s voice was barely a whisper.

The older man couldn’t help reaching out, but Gavin shied away. For a moment Ryan stood with his hand outstretched, then slowly let it fall to his side.

He left the room fighting back tears.

The next two days were the most awkward the crew had ever endured. Gavin lived a sideways schedule, eating at odd hours and completely avoiding everyone. Ryan followed his usual routine of meals, working out, and tinkering, but couldn’t sit still for meditation and barely spoke to anybody else. His reticence was contagious; conversations died quickly, and sparring was
somehow off-tempo. Ryan punched a lot harder than normal, too, eventually prompting Michael to call a time-out.

“Okay, Ryan, what the fuck,” he panted, clutching his chest. There was a red, fist-shaped mark blooming just under his heart, the pale line of his top-surgery scar cutting it cleanly in half. “This ain’t a real fight, asshole!”

“Sorry,” Ryan muttered ruefully.

“You two have **got** to make up, dude,” Ray said, working a kink out of his shoulder. “The ship’s too small for this crap.”

“Believe me, nobody wants that more than I do, but it’s up to him,” Ryan said with a helpless shrug. “I was hoping he’d come around by now.”

“Maybe I could talk to him,” Michael suggested, straightening up with a wince. “We were startin’ to get on all right.”

“Be careful,” Ray said. “He might bite your head off.”

“Come on, man, arguing’s like a sport to me. It takes an awful lot to get under my skin.” Ray and Ryan both gave him long-suffering looks. He rolled his eyes. “For real, I mean. If I was always as angry as I act I’d have a heart attack.”

“That’s fair,” Ray conceded.

“Let’s call it for today, then,” Ryan said, collecting his shirt and towel. “Let me know how it goes?”

**“Shi’a, Ry.”**

They split up to wash. Michael lingered at his mirror for a moment, trying to judge how bad the bruise from Ryan’s punch would be. There was still a fading expanse of yellow and purple on the other side of his ribs, a souvenir of the gunfight on Ares. He sighed, wishing just once for skin that didn’t hurt when he touched it.

Freshly clean and clothed, he made himself a protein shake and went to Gavin’s quarters.

“Gavin?” he called, knocking. “Hey, boi, can I come in?”

He held his breath for a moment, listening. At first there was no sound from inside, but soon he heard footsteps approaching.

Gavin warily opened the door a crack. “What do you want?”

“Just sayin’ hi,” Michael answered carefully, afraid to spook him. “How’re you feelin’?”

“’M all right. Reading a new book.”

“Oh yeah? What’s it about?”

“Early history of the Alliance.”

“Before they got all shitty, huh?”

Gavin actually smiled a little. “According to this, they were always pretty shite.”
“Color me shocked,” Michael said wryly, taking a gulp of his drink. “I ever tell you what they did to my hometown?”

“You told me some about the bandits,” Gavin said, opening the door a little farther. “Was the Alliance part of it?”

“Well, kinda.” Michael got a faraway look in his eyes, remembering. “So Zephyr’s on the Outer Rim, right? We got an Alliance flyby maybe once every three years. They’d run some tests on the terraforming shit and sometimes we could pay to go get medical treatment up on the cruiser. I went when I was thirteen, for my surgery. It was kinda weird. Creepy. Too clean.”

“If you think a ship’s too clean, you’d lose it on a core planet,” Gavin said. “In my neighborhood we’d got robots that picked up rubbish and polished all the glass.”


“It was quite nice, actually.”

“If you say so. Anyway, I was sixteen when the bandits started gettin’ really bad. Stealin’ horses, interrupting harvests, ambushin’ caravans, the whole fuckin’ deal. The cruiser came ‘round and Elder Caedon begged ‘em for help, but they said it was a local problem. They all but told her to go fuck herself, and then they fucked off. The next year was when Killian and his ung jeong jia ching jien soh came and took us – all us guys who’d come of age. They said if we joined them they’d leave Millsborough alone.”

“Did they?” Gavin asked, pulling the screen aside even more. In a few more inches it would be fully open.

Michael’s face clouded with true anger. “No. They played us against each other. If we didn’t go raiding with ‘em, they’d kill our families. If our families fought back, they’d kill us. Fuckin’ cheong bao ho tze pieces of shit.”

“That’s terrible.”

“You’re tellin’ me. So that bullshit went on for a couple of years, until Elder Caedon and the town council decided to hire mercenaries – that was Hunter. When they came, all us Millsborough kids joined in and fought back. After it was over, we found out that the Alliance hadn’t just refused to help – they stopped patrolling our sector entirely. No more mobile hospital. No more supply drops or terraform checks. No protection against the rest of the ‘Verse.”

“Those bastards,” Gavin sympathized.

Michael glowered. “You know the rest. But I’m fuckin’ convinced that the goddamn Alliance fucked us. If they’d sent some feds in the first place, all that shit would never have happened.”

“But then you wouldn’t have met Lindsay.”

“Heh. Yeah.” Michael got a dreamy smile. “You know she’s wicked with a laser pistol? She must’ve taken out, like, ten of those assholes that day.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Everybody on this ship could kill you six ways from fuckin’ Sunday. Ryan, probably twenty.”

Gavin flinched as though he’d been struck.
“Aw, shit,” Michael muttered, immediately regretting the mention of Ryan. He drank some more of his protein shake to cover up the awkward. “Um. Anyway. Just wanted to see how you’re doin’, and, uh. Yeah. I’ll… see you later.”

He shifted to walk away, but Gavin suddenly reached out to grab his arm. Michael looked at him, surprised.

“Could you… stay a while?” Gavin asked timidly. It took a moment for Michael to process the request, but when he did, he smiled.

“Yeah, boi. Whatever you want.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
rung tse song di ching dai wuo tzo: merciful god please take me away
zhen mei nai xin de fo zu: extraordinarily impatient Buddha
bie woo lohng: commit a blunder of great magnitude
shi’a: yes, affirmative
ung jeong jia ching jien soh: filthy fornicators of livestock
cheong bao ho tze: monkey raping
As much of a blessing as the books on Jack’s reader were, listening to Michael tell stories was exponentially better. Gavin got caught up in them, the intensity with which they were told taking him out of himself in a swirl of imagery. He could see the action in his mind’s eye, imagining worlds he’d never been to, suns whose warmth he’d never felt.

Michael, on his part, gradually steered the topic from battles and criminal hijinks to more intimate, personal moments that the crew had shared. His sharp tongue softened as he described the miniature rosebush Ray grew in his quarters, and the time Jack followed the sunset halfway around a planet just because it was beautiful. He choked up a little recounting his and Lindsay’s wedding, officiated by Geoff on the lush moon of an uninhabited Border world. Cautiously, he even told of Ryan’s softer side: feeding stray dogs on Persephone; acting as medic when someone was hurt; playing pranks with Lindsay. He tried to convey how tightly they all were bound together, how close they’d become over years of hardship and fleeting glory. The implication that Gavin could become a part of it all hung like a ripe apple just within his reach.

Michael talked for so long that he completely lost track of time. His glass was empty and his throat dry as dust when he finished his last tale.

“…and we all woke up piled on the bridge, in deep space with no fuckin’ idea how we got there. Geoff swore off Lindsay’s moonshine after that.”

Gavin laughed, a true laugh with no trace of the gloom that had plagued him for days. Michael smiled.

“All right, I gotta get somethin’ to drink. You feelin’ any better?”

“Yeah, actually,” Gavin said with mild surprise. “A lot better. Thanks.”

Michael stood up, stretched, and ruffled the hacker’s hair. “You should come hang out again. We miss you.”

Gavin blinked, looking thoughtful. “Maybe. It’s lonely as knobs in here.”

“Any time you’re up for it. Jack said we hit Haven tomorrow night, so…”

“I’ll think about it.”

Michael nodded understandingly and left him to his reflections.

He’d missed lunch by quite a while, and could feel his stomach complaining. After wolfing down the leftovers the others had thoughtfully saved for him, he went to Ryan’s quarters and pressed the intercom.

“Hey, bro. Got a minute?”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Ryan responded eagerly. Michael climbed down into the room.

“So I talked to Gavin,” he began.
"You were in there a long time," Ryan interrupted anxiously. "Is he okay? What were you talking about?"

"Chill," Michael said, not surprised by the other man’s intensity. "He wanted me to tell stories, is all. I reckon he’s feelin’ like he could maybe stay with us. He said he’d think about it, anyway."

Ryan relaxed a little. "Good. That’s good," he murmured. "Did he… say anything about me?"

"No," Michael answered. "But I told him all about the great shit you’ve done – not the fuckin’ asshole in the mask, but you, the real you. And he listened. Even got a little misty-eyed, to be honest."

Some of the weight seemed to lift from Ryan’s shoulders. "Shie shie, Michael. You’re the best."

"I know." The younger man stuck his tongue out cheekily. "You owe me and Lindsay big time for runnin’ all this interference. A round of drinks, at least."

"If Gavin forgives me, I’ll buy you a whole bar."

Michael laughed. "We’re gonna hold you to that, Ry."

"I’d be insulted if you didn’t."

They shook on it.

The atmosphere on the ship lightened considerably that afternoon. Ryan joined in Michael, Ray, and Lindsay’s card game with a much brighter attitude, cracking jokes and pretending to cheat just to wind Michael up. He even apologized to Geoff, which went about as well as he’d expected.

"You’re twelve kinds of goddamn idiot, you know that?"

"Yes, sir."

"We could lose our ticket to the big time because of you. I should throw you off the fuckin’ ship for causin’ all this trouble."

"I’d really prefer if you didn’t, sir."

"I’d expect Ryan 'Murder' Haywood, of all people, to know when to keep his fuckin’ mouth shut. Just… ugh." Geoff massaged his temples in exasperation. "Two weeks on septic vac, and don’t you fuckin’ dare pull shit like this again."

Ryan winced, but accepted his punishment without a word of complaint. He knew full well what the captain was capable of – in perspective, he’d quite literally dodged a bullet.

Despite the improvement in the crew’s collective mood, Gavin remained elusive. There was a sighting when he grabbed some food from the mess, and at one point Jack found him on the bridge looking out at the stars, but he still avoided most social contact and didn’t talk to anyone. They were three hours away from Haven when he timidly revealed himself at dinner, a little sheepish and dressed once more in the clothes Ryan had bought him. The rest of the crew looked up, startled.

"Hey, Gav," Lindsay said cautiously. "How’re you doin’?"

"All right," Gavin answered. He stood by the door as if afraid to come any closer. "Got enough for one more?"
“Totally,” said Ray.

The crew buded up to make space at the table, subtly arranging things so that the empty chair just happened to be next to Ryan. To the concealed excitement of everyone else, Gavin took the seat with no hesitation. A thrill of hope ran through Ryan’s body.

“So Jack,” Geoff began, slowly resuming their conversation. “You said you’re gonna visit Sarah and Jehlani when we get there?”

“Yes, I’m staying the night at their place and we’re going to the beach tomorrow. I think Ray said he might come over later.”

“Absolutely. Sarah challenged me to a Deathblade 4 rematch.”

“Didn’t she kick your ass last time?” Michael said teasingly. Ray threw a napkin at him.

“How about you, Geoff?” asked Ryan. “Gonna pick us up some work?”

“Hopefully. I got a Wave from Burns, says he’s got a dirty job for us. Should be right up your alley, actually.”

“Jing tsai,” Ryan said with a dark grin.

Lindsay shuddered at the look in his eye. “No murder faces at the table, bro. It makes me nauseous.”

“Well, what’re your plans, Lindsay?” Ray asked.

“Gonna figure out what kinda upgrades Hunter wants. Hit the bars, do a little shoppin’, maybe get some real alone time…” She nudged Michael, who gave her a glance so suggestive it crept over the line into explicit. Geoff rolled his eyes.

“Speakin’ of what not to do at the table…”

The meal and banter continued. Gavin listened intently, but didn’t say much. During a lull in the conversation he quietly asked what Haven was like, and who all the people the crew had mentioned were. Geoff smiled.

“Haven’s a moon on the Rim the Alliance don’t pay attention to. There’s a lotta shady folks livin’ there ‘cuz it’s safe from the law. Hence the name.”

“It’s mostly desert, but the coasts are pretty green and there’s some good-sized cities and towns,” added Ryan. “Big mining industry. Greatest beaches in the ‘Verse, too, except maybe for Liann Juin.”

Geoff picked it up again. “We have contacts in Sanctus – that’s a city on the northern continent. Burns is one of ‘em. Dangerous guy. He’s a big sher toh so he’s always got work for a crew like us.”

“What about Sarah and Jeh… Jehlani?” Gavin asked, stumbling over the name.

“Yeah, you pronounced that right,” Jack said with a hint of a smile. “They’re my partners, but I don’t get to see them much. They like to keep both feet on the ground.”

“Sarah’s great,” Lindsay said happily. “Just wait ‘til you meet her. And Jehlani’s such a sweetheart.”
There’s also Jacob and Carla,” said Michael. “They own a place downtown, with rooms they let us crash in. Dan and Nuan run a firing range. I’ll spend at least an afternoon there. You should come with.”

“Yeah, we never taught you how to shoot,” Ray agreed. “You really oughta learn.”

“Sounds fun,” said Gavin. He seemed considerably perked up. “How long are we staying?”

Ryan’s heart leapt at the use of “we.”

“At least a few days. Probably a week,” answered Geoff. “No danger there, and unless Burns is feelin’ impatient we don’t have to hustle for a while.”

The whole crew looked very pleased with that.

“I’ve set up our arrival so we’ll only be a few hours offset,” Jack said. “It’ll be about seven local time when we get there, and ten by the ship.”

“Sounds good.” Geoff stood to clear his plate. “See y’all in the world.”

Gavin lingered after cleanup, shooting furtive glances at Ryan that had the older man on tenterhooks. Everyone else noticed, too, and cleared the deck with uncharacteristic efficiency. They didn’t go far, though; Lindsay and Michael hid close by in one hallway, and Ray in the other. Jack finagled the comm system to pick up audio from the mess hall and route it to her headset on the bridge. Only Geoff actually left them alone.

Ryan finished cleaning his dishes and leaned as casually as possible against the fridge. Inside, his heart was pounding, but he kept his gaze level and breath steady while he waited for Gavin to speak.

Gavin fidgeted, trying to find the right words. Eventually he appeared to get frustrated with himself, and scrubbed at his face with his hands.

“Sod it all,” he muttered, then took a deep breath and addressed Ryan in a louder voice. “You’ve prob’ly figured it out already, but I’m staying,” he declared, looking defiant. “You lot look after your own and I believe you’ll do the same for me, now. What you did hurt, but… I understand your reasons, and you’ve been bloody amazing to me since Ares, and I know how hard it must’ve been to come clean and deal with my being such a tosser about it…”

He was babbling, he knew, but he couldn’t seem to stop – until Ryan closed the distance between them in two long strides, and swept him up in a hug that enveloped his whole world.

“Ol’ you have no idea what this means to me,” Ryan whispered, closing his eyes to better appreciate having Gavin in his arms again. “Welcome home, bao bei.”

Gavin inhaled Ryan’s warm scent like he’d suffocate without it, and returned the hug with desperate intensity. They embraced in silence for a long time, parting only slightly for a heated kiss.

Ryan restrained himself from just carrying Gavin away. Instead he broke the kiss, resting their foreheads together gently.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, a little hoarse with emotion.

Gavin laughed quietly. “Plenty, but not here.” He moved to tug Ryan in the direction of the crew
quarters.

An electric surge shot through Ryan’s stomach and tightened excitingly underneath, but he stayed where he was for the moment.

“I’ve got one last thing to take care of. You go ahead, my door’s unlocked.”

Gavin cocked an eyebrow, but went to Ryan’s room by himself. When the hatch closed behind him Ryan waited a full count of five, then cleared his throat.

“I know you were listening, assholes,” he called quietly. “You can come out now.”

There was a great swell of giggling and the three eavesdroppers emerged. Ray whistled sarcastically, Lindsay applauded, and Michael looked smug.

“You owe me a bar.”

“Start comin’ up with a name, buddy,” Ryan said with a grin. “Now if you’ll actually fuck off for a while, I’ve got some stuff to do before we land.”

“‘Stuff.’ Sure,” drawled Ray. “If that’s what you kids are callin’ it these days.”

“I’m older than you, jackass.”

“Whatsoever.”

His mischievous crewmates went below deck, snickering the whole way. Jack turned off her comm and sat back in the pilot’s chair, all but purring with gladness. Ryan, beaming, returned to his quarters and Gavin’s waiting arms.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
shie shie: thank you
jing tsai: brilliant
sher toh: leader of a criminal organization (literally "snakehead")
bao bei: sweetheart
Despite its name, the Blue Sun hung golden in Haven’s sky. At this time of day the star cast an intense, brassy light that left no shadow on any west-facing surface. The city was cast into sharp relief, bright glare reflecting off windows drenched in honeyed fire. Trees and plains beyond the outskirts glowed an impossible emerald in stark contrast to the bare dust of the spaceport.

Deadwood loomed in the northern sky, vast brown continents readily distinguishable from its cobalt oceans as it slowly rotated about its own axis. The planet was so close it looked ready to drop out of the heavens, crushing everything beneath it like so much brittle ice.

Gavin, halted at the mouth of the cargo bay, gaped in wonder. Not even convergence of the three moons of Ariel could compare; Michael’s stories, vivid as they were, had only scratched the surface.

“It’s beautiful,” he whispered, and pulled in a deep breath of the hot, dry, metal-scented air. It tasted like freedom and new beginnings, the unburdened promise of this shining sanctuary world.

“If you think this is cool, wait’ll you see Newhall,” Ray said as he walked by, seemingly unimpressed by the glorious landscape before them. Geoff hardly spared a glance before going to talk to the dockmaster. The rest of the crew briefly appreciated the sight, Jack even going so far as to sigh contentedly. Ryan paid more attention to Gavin’s awestruck face than anything else, and gently took his hand.

Gavin allowed himself to be led down the ramp, finally noticing activity in the foreground. A pair of vehicles – old-style solar cars, by the look of them – waited beside the entrance to a broad dirt road. Jack was making a beeline for the minivan, where two women waited hand in hand. As Gavin watched, she picked up speed, crossing the distance at a run until she flung herself into the others’ waiting arms. They all embraced, a huddle of laughter and kisses and happiness that meant these ladies must be Jack’s partners, Sarah and Jehlani.

The others gave them some space, greeting another person next to a big olive-green SUV. Ryan and Gavin joined them.

“Hey, Carla, how joh bu jian,” Ryan said, reaching for a handshake. The tiny silver-haired woman ignored it and went straight for a hug instead. It was like a child hugging a mountain: her head only came midway up his chest.

“Haywood, you sonofabitch, it’s been too long!” Her voice was shockingly deep for such a small person, and gravelly to boot. Gavin smothered a giggle.

“How come I don’t get a hug?” Geoff cried indignantly as he joined them, propping his hands on his hips. Carla released a slightly amused Ryan and turned on the captain, mimicking his gesture of irritation.

“How come you never paid your tab, Ramsey? Stayin’ for free don’t mean drinkin’ for free, dohn-ma?”

Michael, Lindsay, and Ray all snickered while a tongue-tied Geoff opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish.
“That’s… I never…”

“Maybe you just don’t remember after goin’ through half my stock, boy, but you owe me a helluvalot of credits.”

“Actually, we can do somethin’ about that,” Lindsay said, grinning. “The ‘Verse dropped a little luck on us for once.”

“Is that so?” Carla turned to Gavin, looked him up and down, and developed a lascivious smile. “Wouldn’t have anythin’ to do with this fine fella, would it? Never seen you before.”

Gavin’s eyes went wide in embarrassment. The attention was not unlike the last time his grandmother had pinched his cheeks and commented on how tall he’d gotten.

“Uh, no, I’m new,” he stammered while everyone else laughed. “Name’s Gavin. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.” Carla shook his hand. “Carla Roberts, resident barkeep and criminal babysitter. You stayin’ with these less-than-fine folks?”

“Sure is,” Ryan answered, settling a possessive arm around Gavin’s shoulders. “He’s our hacker.”

“Ooh, well ain’t we gettin’ all fancible,” Carla said with good-natured mockery. “Y’all movin’ to the big leagues now?”

“That’s the plan,” Ray said with a wry smile.

“The cash he’s already got us ain’t nothin’ to sneeze at,” Michael added. “Geoff can pay you back now and not even feel it, I bet.”

“Huh,” Carla said, raising a sly eyebrow at the captain. “Must be one helluva windfall, then.”

“It’s a long story,” Lindsay said as the crew laughed and Geoff glared. “Let’s get back to your place and sit down ‘fore we get too far into it, yeah?”

Ray glanced over to the other car, where the three lovers were still circled together but past the more exuberant part of their reunion. “Noses for who has to ride with them,” he declared, promptly laying a finger on his own. Nobody else followed suit.

“You’re such a little snot, Ray,” Lindsay said, rolling her eyes. “We’ll go. Geoff?”

“Anything to get away from this yao nu,” he said, narrowing his eyes at Carla. She laughed and punched him affectionately in the arm.

“Missed you too, you old bum.”

The crew split up, four in the van and three in the SUV. Their drivers turned onto the dirt road and began cruising towards the city. The sun set a few more degrees, morphing golden light into a dusky ruby. Gavin looked back at Hunter, whose ramp was still down as dock workers swarmed around her.

“Shouldn’t we have locked her up? Isn’t this place full of… well, people like us?” he asked, worried. Ryan and Ray both seemed unconcerned.

“Haven’s special, kid.” Carla said. “It’s a safe zone. Bein’ here comes with rules – not many, but the ones we got are more bindin’ than any Alliance laws.” She pronounced ‘Alliance’ as though
the word itself carried some horrible disease. “It don’t matter what you did ‘fore comin’ here, but
this place is sacred ground. Our price for safety is to never fuck with anybody else. No stealin’ or
murderin’ or rapin’ or callin’ the feds. If you do, you’ll eat a bullet faster’n you can spit. Same
goes for false accusations.”

“This moon may be full of killers and thieves, but the crime rate’s lower than any core planet,”
Ryan added. “I should know.”

“There’s a few exceptions, like bar fights,” Ray commented. “If you can kill somebody with just
your fists, everyone pretty much figures you’re entitled to it.”

“Of course, ‘cuz of that, there ain’t many scraps anyways,” said Carla. A hint of steel entered her
voice as she continued, “And none at all at my place. House rules.”

“Never would’ve guessed,” Gavin said wryly. The old woman chuckled. It sounded like crushed
ice and cheap bourbon.

Gavin leaned against Ryan for the rest of the trip, looking out the window and contentedly
listening to the other three catch up. Carla laughed a lot, and her dry wit drew even the usually
quiet Ray out of his shell. They talked about everything from steel prices to the latest in auto-scope
technology, new arrivals in Sanctus to how smaller desert towns were faring this season.
Apparently there had been problems with the irrigation system at the nearest outpost, which Sarah
had been working to fix. The offshore fishing was great, though.

The sun was a purple smudge on the horizon when they crossed the city limits. Somewhere along
the way the dirt road had developed pavement, and now the streets branched out in a near-perfect
grid. Gavin peered with interest at the innocuous-seeming businesses, houses, and traffic that they
passed. Even the people hardly looked like he’d imagined. They were uncommonly well-armed,
maybe, and there were more folks sleeping on the sidewalk than one would expect, but on the
whole it was very… normal.

“If there’s no laws or authority here, how’d all this-” Gavin waved a hand at the window. “-happen? Who organized it all?”

“You’d be surprised how folks’ll pull together when they ain’t got nothin’ but each other,” Carla
said, turning a corner. “The minin’s great around here, we got smugglers aplenty to bring what-all
we need from offworld, and it just kinda grew.”

Gavin whistled, impressed. “How long has the city been here?”

“Oh, ‘bout twelve years, I reckon. There were a few settlements earlier on, but nothin’ special til
just before the war. Us on the Rim and Border weren’t too keen on the Alliance pushin’ their xiong
mao niao out here, so we found the most godforsaken moon we could and got to carvin’ out our
own scrap of nowhere. Got a lotta Browncoats comin’ in after they lost, too, so everythin’ really
picked up ‘round then.”

“I can’t believe you made all this so quick,” Gavin said, craning his neck to see the top of a
building that was trying its hardest to be a skyscraper. Carla chuckled again.

“Smugglers, kid. Burns and his crew lifted five or six auto-constructors from… where was it…
Salyut, I think. Or maybe Albion? Either way, that kinda hardware makes things a helluva lot
easier.”

“I’ll bet,” Gavin muttered. The more he heard about this Burns character, the more curious he was
to meet him. He began to suspect that he might have an unhealthy fascination with danger – first the hacking, then Ryan, and now the biggest crime lord this side of… well, anywhere he knew about. The concept was slightly worrying and very exciting. Glancing sidelong at Ryan, he resolved to test his theory. Later. In private.

Soon they pulled into a parking space behind a large building, the entire first floor of which was clearly a bar. The van followed, but continued running as Michael, Lindsay, and Geoff hopped out. Jack remained inside the vehicle, rolled down her window, and leaned over to talk.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, guys. You’ve got the house number, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll call you,” Ray said, then wrinkled his nose. “Or maybe you should call us? We don’t wanna interrupt anything.”

Jack laughed. “Sure. Have a good night!”

“You too,” Lindsay said with a bawdy wink. Jack smirked at her, and Jehlani drove away.

Carla opened the back door and led the rest of the crew into a bustling industrial kitchen. The counters were gleaming brushed steel, and the sizzling of fryers made it difficult to hear each other. Four people worked feverishly to prepare food for the evening rush, while another two cleaned dishes with expert efficiency. One of the cooks, a man with short grey hair and a grubby apron, turned from the grill with a wide smile on his face.

“Hey, everybody! How’s it goin’?”

Carla gave the man a big kiss and beckoned Gavin forward. “Mighty fine, hon. Check it out, Ramsey’s got another stray. This is Gavin. Gav, my husband Jacob.”

Jacob looked him over, and offered the hand not currently gripping a spatula. “Nice to meetcha. I got any reason to be jealous over my lady here?”

“Hardly,” Gavin said, grinning. The man seemed just as amiable as his wife, and he certainly had the same wry sense of humor.

“Can I getcha anything? Burgers, stir fry…?”

“We’ve eaten already, but drinks would be nice,” Ryan said, glancing at the others to confirm. There was general enthusiasm for the idea.

Carla took them out to the tavern floor. It was as clean as it was possible to be with a fair-sized crowd of dusty diners inside. Wait staff in dark green shirts scurried around with full and empty plates; two people poured whiskey and drew beer behind the bar. There was a large, empty table in the back corner, and the crew settled around it while Carla herself went to get the drinks. In short order everyone had a libation of one kind or another: hard liquor for Geoff, Michael, and Lindsay; dark ale for Gavin and their host; and some sort of fizzy soft drink for Ray and Ryan. They all raised their glasses.

“To rich times and smooth sailin’,” Geoff said.

“To friends, old and new,” added Carla.

Ryan smiled, and squeezed Gavin’s hand under the table.

“To freedom.”
Chinese translations
how joh bu jian: long time no see
dohn-ma: understand?/get it?
yao nu: demon woman
xiong mao niao: panda piss
ALLIANCE NAVY HEADQUARTERS, LONDINIUM

“Why is this taking so long? I want results.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but they’re completely off the radar. There hasn’t been a trace of them since Verdant City. We’re doing the best we can, but…”

“Do more. Increase patrols and searches of private ships. Send agents to every backwater moon and spaceport. Find Ramsey’s contacts and turn up the heat.”

“Yessir.”

“Oh, and monitor all communications to every member of Parliament. Spiderweb protocol.”

“Sir?”

“Someone’s bound to use that information sooner or later. When they do, we’ll know.”

Dawn broke bright and clear over Sanctus, air already warm with the promise of a hot day to come. Four of Hunter’s crew remained abed for several hours with headaches of varying intensity, souvenirs of a long evening drinking and spinning tales with Carla and Jacob. Ray and Ryan just liked the fancy beds.

The Roberts’ own apartment consisted of the floor above the bar, complete with kitchen and dining area. Gavin and Lindsay, the toughest drinkers, were first to wake and stumble downstairs to scrounge up breakfast. The fridge and cabinets were thoroughly stocked in preparation for hungry guests, so Lindsay set about creating an enormous quantity of protein-rich scrambled eggs. Gavin, who could light a pot of water on fire, helped by grating cheese and brewing coffee. To his resigned dismay, there was the same distressing lack of tea here as on the ship.

Ryan arrived next in no particular discomfort, sleepy rather than hungover. He swiped a piece of bacon from Lindsay’s plate and gave Gavin a good-morning kiss. Michael did the exact same thing a few minutes later, smooching his wife on the cheek while she made a disgruntled face.

“Leave some bacon for me, you fuckin’ animals,” she grumbled, opening another package.

The food was wavering on the edge of room temperature by the time Geoff showed up. He squinted at the light, dropped into a chair, and buried his face in his arms.

“Fuck my life,” he groaned.

“Better pull it together, cap,” Lindsay said, sliding a plate in front of him. “Ain’tcha seein’ Burns today?”

“Yeah,” Geoff said miserably. “In the afternoon, though. I’ve got time.”
“What’s one of these meetings like?” Gavin asked, trying to hide the extent of his interest. “I’ve never seen a shady deal go down.”

Michael took a sip of coffee. “It ain’t too complicated. Ryan and me’re the muscle, Ray’s overwatch. Geoff does the talkin’ and we get the job.”

“Typically we’ll get paid half at the start, and half when we deliver,” said Ryan. “There’s a lot of bluffing and posturing, a little price negotiation. Everyone already understands how it works, so all the macho shit’s for show.”

“Can I come with?” asked Gavin, trying to be casual. The room instantly became tense as the whole crew looked to their captain, who raised his head with terrible menace.

“Hell. No.” Geoff said coldly. “You’re not a player or a killer. You’d be a liability, and in a lot of danger.”

“But didn’t Carla say there’s no killing allowed here?”

“You’re new to this business, so I’ll explain this once,” Geoff told him in a voice like stone. “These deals’re all about appearances, and you ain’t exactly the hardest motherfucker in the ‘Verse. Takin’ you along’ll make me seem weak. And this moon might be a safe zone, but noplace else is. Burns’ people are everywhere, and he knows I protect my crew. If he gets hold of you, he’ll have leverage enough to make us his bitch. I ain’t riskin’ that. Or you.”

Gavin felt a peculiar mix of annoyance and warmth. “Maybe when I’ve got more experience?” he asked. “I could learn to handle myself.”

“You stay away from this,” the captain said quietly, steely undertones promising a world of hurt if he was not obeyed. “That’s an order.”

Gavin had just enough sense to back down. He nodded slightly.

“Yes, sir.”

Geoff held his eyes for a moment longer before his aura of power faded, replaced by hung-over regret. He dropped his head back to the table.

“Somebody get me some coffee.”

Afternoon crept up while they weren’t looking. Carla and Jacob, on the schedule required by their night-shift jobs, joined the crew for breakfast at about the time a normal person would be cleaning up from lunch. Ray showed up late too, but without a valid excuse. Jack called soon after to let them know that she and her girlfriends were leaving for the beach, and that the others were welcome to join them whenever. Lindsay accepted the invitation, arranging to meet the ladies once Geoff’s deal had been struck.

When two o’clock came around, the men prepared for their rendezvous with Burns. They’d brought bags of supplies with them from the ship: radios, weapons, and in Ryan’s case, his armor. Gavin looked on with interest as they cleaned and assembled their guns, smiling at the discreet pink accents on Ray’s sniper rifle and the engraving that read “Mogar” on Michael’s fully-automatic. Ryan got quieter and quieter as he worked, a hint of cold sadism developing in his eyes. Gavin glanced at his face, and shivered.

Finally Ray slung his rifle over his back. Michael slipped an extra magazine into his pocket. Vagabond adjusted his mask. Geoff checked his bandolier of pistols one last time.
“All right, boys. Let’s go.”

“Joo how rin, y’all!” called Carla, waving as they walked out the door.

Gavin watched them leave, the gleam of guns and leather stirring an odd hunger in him. He swallowed hard and made a mental note, then shook his head and went to help Lindsay with dishes.

Geoff led his entourage through the streets to an area just south of what passed for downtown. A few blocks from their destination, Geoff motioned to a flat-roofed three-story building. Ray slipped off to assume his position on top, taking cover behind the boxy fans and air ducts there. The other three kept walking, eventually coming to a stop outside a small, respectable-looking restaurant. A faint scent of garlic and cooking meat wafted through the air.

There were two large, unpleasantly muscled men with red armbands and big guns waiting by a side door. Geoff approached them with total confidence.

“Tell ‘em Ramsey’s here.”

One of the mooks grunted acknowledgement and entered the building while the other eyed the three visitors suspiciously. Michael and Vagabond stood on either side of Geoff and slightly behind him, casually fingering their trigger guards and impassively returning the other man’s stare.

A few tense, silent minutes later the door opened again, and the first sentry motioned for Hunter’s crew to follow him. They did so, walking through the restaurant’s empty back rooms to a small beer garden behind the building. It was surrounded by ivy-draped trellises, and a water feature burbled quietly in a corner. There were no diners, chairs, or tables - save one, which was occupied by the kingpin and his queen.

Burns lounged next to the blonde and beautiful Ashley “Ashes” Jenkins, his lover and joint commander of their empire. More red-branded guards attended them. Michael and Vagabond rapidly assessed the tactical situation; even counting Ray’s sniper cover, they found it unfavorable. Their nerves stretched a little tauter.

“Hey, buddy, thanks for coming,” Burns said jovially. He did not rise. “Word is you’ve got under the Alliance’s skin lately. How’s the fugitive life treating you?”

“Not bad,” Geoff replied, equally casual. “Hear you got a little somethin’ for us?”

“You bet. I think you’ll like this one. Ash?”

Her smile was both alluring and cruel. “A couple of our business partners don’t remember what a binding contract is. We want you to send a message.”

“Where’s the mark?”

“Rubicon,” Ashley said. “VerseLink Technologies is based there, in Archway. Their chief of operations and the head of procurement are ours – but recently they seem to have forgotten that.”

“You’re gonna let ‘em know they can’t walk away from us,” Burns continued. “Don’t kill ‘em. Just impress upon ‘em how unpleasant disloyalty is. I seem to recall you being pretty good at that kinda thing.” He nodded respectfully at Vagabond.

“Rubicon’s a Core world,” Geoff pointed out with a frown. “That ain’t exactly child’s play.”
“Your fee reflects that,” Ashley said. “Twenty thousand plus expenses. My agents got you some intel, too. Should make things go a little smoother.” She slid a folder full of holo-paper across the table.

The captain reached for it, paused for permission, and began to peruse the data. His brow furrowed.

“They both have top-of-the-line security,” he said. “And families. We don’t do kids, if that’s what you’re askin’ for.”

“It’s up to you how the message is delivered,” Burns said with a smirk. He ran a hand through his short, curly hair. “As far as security… If you don’t think you’re up to it…”

“We can do it,” Geoff said harshly, closing the folder. “Twenty-five plus expenses.”

Ashley raised one eyebrow. “Our offer is already generous, Ramsey.”

“Yeah, but you want this done right. You’d have called in Baofei or the Adder Sisters if you wanted it cheap, but the best has a price. Twenty-five.”

The crime lords glanced at each other, lips pursed in amusingly similar expressions.

“Twenty-two,” Burns said. “Last offer. Take it or leave it, but if you push…”

“You’ll be Baofei’s next job,” Ashley finished.

Michael and Vagabond nearly vibrated with adrenaline while Geoff made a show of considering the compromise. After what he judged to be an appropriately long pause, he nodded sharply.

“Done. Got a timeframe on this?”

“Not particularly,” Burns said, counting out a wad of cash and tossing it on the table. “We understand it’ll take a while to set up. Just keep us in the loop.”

“Can do,” the captain said as his bodyguards relaxed slightly. He took the money and documents, tucking them away inside his coat, then turned to leave.

“Have fun, Ryan,” Ashley said with a wink.

Under his mask, Vagabond smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
joo how rin: good luck
“How’d it go?” Lindsay asked eagerly when the team returned. Gavin looked up from his hand of cards so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash.

“Great,” Geoff said, slapping the folder triumphantly down on the table. “Twenty-two thousand, but it ain’t gonna be easy. It’s a Core job.”

“Shit,” Lindsay said, both impressed and apprehensive. “What’s the low-down?”

“I’ll go over it when we’re all together,” the captain said. “Where’re we meetin’ Jack?”

“Anxian Bay.”

Ray groaned. “Do we have to?”

“You can be a little bitch if you want, but the rest of us’re going,” Michael snapped, still somewhat tense from the meeting.

Vagabond finally pulled off his mask, and Ryan wiped sweat off his forehead. “You know, Ray, out of all of us, you’re the least likely to get sunburned,” he said wryly. Lindsay snorted.

Gavin barely heard the ensuing squabble, in which Ray was press-ganged into having fun. He was too fascinated by the way Ryan’s long, dark hair glistened, matching the black paint ringing his eyes. His body, not yet relaxed from its menacing stance, was reminiscent of a wildcat ready to pounce. It was genuinely disappointing when Ryan shed both his leather jacket and aura of imminent violence to become his more familiar, nonthreatening self. He reached up to re-tie the short ponytail that didn’t quite catch a few locks in front; he tucked these behind his ear, and they settled into their customary gentle swoop. Gavin tugged at the collar of his shirt, which at some point had become uncomfortably warm despite the cool air of the apartment.

A sudden elbow in his ribs made him jump. “You might wanna ease up on the starin’,” Lindsay whispered. “Or at least be a little less obvious.”

Gavin blushed scarlet and darted his eyes to the side, but Ryan had already noticed. The older man’s lips twitched mischievously and he made a show of stretching, which caused his shirt to ride up and reveal a sliver of skin.

“I think I’ll stay and look over this file,” he said, picking it up. “Keep it on the back burner, maybe
get some ideas."

“Fine,” said Geoff, shucking his coat. “Catch us up later.”

“Oh, so he gets out of it, but I don’t?” Ray exclaimed, still aggravated at the prospect of an outing in the sun. Lindsay cleared her throat and gave him a heavily suggestive look. When the sniper cottoned on, he closed his eyes in resignation.

“I hate my life.”

Gavin weaseled out of the trip by claiming an upset stomach. Lindsay facilitated the ruse, pondering aloud that he did look a little green around the gills. Nobody was really fooled, but the excuse allowed all parties to maintain a little dignity. Gavin gratefully slunk upstairs, letting the four beachgoers sort themselves out. They left their heavy artillery in their rooms and changed into lighter clothing; Jacob let them borrow his car, and in short order they were en route to the bay. Both innkeepers took Carla’s SUV to run some errands, and all at once the building felt very, very empty.

Gavin dug out the lube and condoms he’d swiped from Ryan’s quarters, sat on the bed, and waited.

Ryan slipped into their room a few minutes later, carrying his battle gear and the job information he was supposed to be studying. He tossed the folder aside and closed the door, then turned on Gavin with hooded eyes and a hungry smile.

The hacker grinned back. “Keep ‘em, love,” he purred as Ryan started to drop his jacket and mask. “There’s a little experiment I want to run.”

Ryan tilted his head slightly, intrigued. “What kind of experiment?”

Gavin shifted onto his belly and propped himself up with his elbows. “You’re an interesting person, Ry,” he began. “Sometimes you’re you, and sometimes you’re… different. Dangerous.”

Some of Ryan’s eagerness faded, and he began to look uncomfortable. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Well, it’s exciting, innit?” Gavin’s tongue darted out to moisten his lips, leaving them pink and shining. “Last time I saw you like that, things went all tits-up. Now I want a taste up close.”

Ryan blinked. Whatever he’d been expecting, it certainly wasn’t that. Tendrils of black heat began to curl below his stomach.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘taste?’” he asked hesitantly, as though he didn’t know the answer.

“Just put the bloody jacket on and get over here.”

Ryan reluctantly complied, feeling incredibly peculiar as Vagabond began to stir along with his desire. As soon as the zipper closed Gavin grabbed him by the collar and pulled him onto the bed.

“Show me your dark side,” he breathed.

Vagabond heeded the call, surging against Ryan’s control and drawing a low growl out between their teeth. Gavin shuddered with anticipation, lust tinged and heightened by the slightest hint of fear. Ryan leaned over to bring his face close, already breathing hard.

“You know this’ll be rough, right?” he asked, voice strained.

“That’s kinda the point, Ry,” Gavin cooed, twisting his body invitingly. The motion shamelessly
showed off the bulge in his pants. “Just don’t forget the lube, yeah?”

“I’d better take care of that now,” Ryan muttered, a small win for rationality.

Despite his near-heroic fight to be gentle, he still prepped Gavin with an aggressiveness that would be unthinkable in his normal state. The hacker’s breath hitched as his clothes were torn from his body, and he stifled a cry when two slick fingers were shoved unceremoniously inside of him. He tried to relax while they scissored and twisted, stretching his hole as the muscle burned with resistance. Ryan added a third a fraction of a second too early, causing Gavin to arch his back and grimace.

“Nnngh, shite,” he whined through clenched teeth. A flicker of concern crossed Ryan’s otherwise ruthless face, and he paused.

“Are you…?”

“Keep bloody going,” Gavin growled. “Don’t stop, just give it to me.”

Ryan clung desperately to the merciful side of him barely long enough to unzip his jeans, unroll a condom, and slather his rigid cock in lube. As soon as that was done, he slipped further into darkness – but not entirely. One final safeguard stood in the way.

Gavin bit his lip as Ryan bent over him, blue eyes steely and black paint smeared all down his face. The effect was terrifying; Gavin’s heart, already pounding like a war drum, skipped a beat. Then Ryan dove for his neck, and he had to close his eyes as surprisingly sharp teeth sank into his flesh.

The pain went straight to Gavin’s head, making him whimper. His dick felt it too, getting harder by the second. Precome leaked from the tip and he reached down to give himself some friction – but Ryan moved like lightning, grabbing his arm so viciously that he could feel the pressure on his bones.

“No,” Ryan hissed cruelly. He didn’t glare, but his eyes were like those of a viper: hypnotizing, threatening, impossible to disobey. “You wait.”

Gavin licked his lips again, stomach fluttering at the thrill of being dominated like this. “Make me,” he whispered, resisting Ryan’s control with a taunting smile.

His captor positively snarled. Ryan brought more of his superior strength to bear, pulling Gavin’s wrists together and pinning them down above his head. Gavin cried out for real as his left shoulder twisted badly, and the sharp edge to the sound brought Ryan back to himself for a moment. He instantly released his hold and backed off.

“Shit, Gav, are you okay?”

“Quit bloody worrying, Ry,” Gavin said, panting a little. “What’ve I gotta do to get you going?”

Ryan automatically glanced to the side, where his mask lay discarded on the bed. Gavin followed his eyes, and grinned.
“Let’s really kick it off, love,” he purred, picking up the latex skull.

The tiniest spark of fear flickered in Ryan’s eyes before Gavin pulled the mask down over his head. It was the trigger that pushed him over the edge, suppressed the man and let the monster surface.

Gavin could feel the change as Vagabond took over completely, and saw the subtle shift in bearing that marked him as a brutal killer. He grinned in anticipation as his heart began to race with both excitement and more than a little terror.

“Oh your knees,” Vagabond growled, giving his own cock a few rough strokes.

“What if I don’t want to?” Gavin responded cheekily, loving the image of the ruthless murderer looming so hard and wet above him. He was not prepared for what happened next.

Before he could blink there was a pistol pointed right between his eyes. Vagabond fingered the trigger much more lovingly than he’d done to Gavin.

“Oh. Your. Knees,” he whispered, voice like silk over cold steel.

Gavin swallowed hard, spine suddenly turning to ice. To his astonishment, though, the proximity of the gun only increased his arousal. Its deadly potential heightened every sense and made him keen softly with raw want. He obediently turned himself over until he was on his hands and knees.

“That’s more like it,” Vagabond murmured. He jammed his gun against the back of Gavin’s shoulders, forcing his head down to the mattress and ass higher up in the air. The cold weight of the weapon gave the younger man a terrible thrill, and his cock pulsed with need. He moaned brokenly.

Vagabond knelt behind him and pushed his legs farther apart. Gavin squeezed his eyes shut, unable to handle the suspense as he waited to be claimed. It felt like Vagabond was drawing out the tension just to torture him, slowly sliding his dick over Gavin’s hole without entering it.

“Ryan, please…” Gavin whimpered. The wounds on his skin were throbbing hotly and he was so turned on he felt he might burst, but he was too afraid to move with the pistol so close to his head. He could only endure, helpless and shivering with desire.

When Vagabond finally pushed forward, it was without buildup or mercy. Gavin screamed, the fullness he’d been longing for coming too suddenly and too hard for him to bear. He buried his face in the pillow to muffle his cries as Vagabond fucked into him, roughly and without regard for his comfort. Gavin took his cock like he’d die without it, screams fading to lusty moans as the pain subsided and pleasure took hold.

“Oh, god, Ryan, yeah…” he choked, each word punctuated by a gasp and the dull smack of denim against his skin. Vagabond thrust with his whole length each time, dragging out only to ram back in as far as he could go. Gavin got lost in it, feeling each impact through his entire body; his dick was flushed red and dripping precome on the sheets, already begging for release. He longed for the friction to attain it, but could only claw uselessly at the blankets as Vagabond slammed into him again and again.

Vagabond shifted his unarmed hand from Gavin’s hip to his hair, yanking his head back while his chest remained pinned against the mattress. The pull set Gavin’s scalp on fire, and the way Vagabond leaned forward changed his angle slightly. His cock now struck Gavin’s prostate more often than not, causing white heat to surge through the younger man’s body. The tingling warmth
built up with each burst like the waves of an incoming tide, rising higher and higher, reducing him to an incoherent wreck. His legs shook, filthy noises spilled from his gaping mouth, the pressure grew inside and he knew he couldn’t last much longer…

“Ry… I’m… I can’t…”

He heard the sound of the pistol cocking behind his head; Vagabond buried himself to the hilt and went still.

“You don’t come until I tell you to,” he hissed, jamming the muzzle of his gun into the base of Gavin’s skull. “Clear?”

Gavin swallowed, mouth dry, struggling to hold himself together. “Y-yes,” he said, voice breaking.

Vagabond started to move again, even harder and faster than before. He filled Gavin up over and over, thrusting in deep, pulling almost all the way out before pounding back in with savage force. Gavin bit his lip so hard he could taste his own coppery blood, focusing on the pain to keep his orgasm at bay. He spasmed uncontrollably, loaded gun forgotten, drowning in an inferno of sensation that consumed him from the inside out. He could barely see with his eyes wide open, white stars bursting in his vision with every unforgiving snap of Vagabond’s hips. Tears began to leak down his cheeks with the effort of holding himself back, the pleasure so strong as to be agonizing, mind going blank as he flirted with passing out.

“Fuck,” Vagabond breathed, grip tightening as his movements became erratic. “Now.”

Gavin howled, convulsing, as his climax burned him alive. His cum shot thick across the sheets; he couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think through the flames in his throat and fireworks behind his eyes. Time stopped until there was nothing left of him but ashes, slumped on the bed and utterly unable to move.

Vagabond cursed as Gavin clenched down around him, the tightness sending him over the edge too. He gave a last two ragged thrusts and came, spilling his heat into Gavin's aching body. He rode it out, panting harshly, slowly relaxing as the adrenaline drained from his system.

His mask was suddenly stifling. He yanked it off, holstered his gun, and unzipped his jacket, relief flooding him as the killer faded along with the oppressive warmth. Ryan took a deep breath and pawed the sweat from his eyes; he saw Gavin scarred and spent beneath him, and rapidly got himself together.

“Oh, god… Gavin? Are you okay?” he asked urgently, pulling himself out with a wince. With that last support gone, Gavin’s legs gave up completely, and he collapsed limply on top of his own mess.

“Dwzfnff,” he said into the pillow.

“Shuh muh?” Ryan moved beside him and gently rolled him onto his side.

“That was amazing,” Gavin rasped, a dreamy grin plastered on his face.

“But…” Ryan touched his damp cheek with trembling fingertips, leaving a smear of greasepaint behind. “It looks like I hurt you.”

“Yeah, it was awesome,” Gavin giggled, a little high.

“Gavin,” Ryan pressed anxiously.
The younger man opened his eyes, taking a moment to focus vaguely on Ryan’s worried face. “Honestly, Ry, it’s exactly what I was after,” he said as seriously as he could manage. “We should absolutely do that again.”

Ryan still frowned, tracing out the wounds he’d left on Gavin’s neck and chest. “Maybe. But not with my gear on. What it does to me… it’s too dangerous.”

“That’s what makes it fun,” Gavin said. “Ryan, you worry too much. Sometimes it’s good to just let go.”

Ryan still looked at him like he expected the younger man to shatter any moment. Gavin pulled himself closer and gave him a long, tender kiss.

“Let’s get clean,” he murmured against Ryan’s lips. “I still want to go to the beach.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
shuh muh: what?
In the time it took Lindsay to come pick them up, Gavin did his best to hide the more obvious bites and abrasions that littered his body, but there wasn’t much he could do without Jack’s makeup. He ended up simply examining himself in the small bathroom mirror, gently running the pads of his fingers across gradually darkening bruises and quickly clotting scratches, shivering slightly as he mentally replayed how he’d gotten them. His little hypothesis had turned out to be solid fact: danger got him hotter than the center of White Sun. It was probably a good thing, given the new life he’d chosen, but combined with his reckless tendencies… He didn’t want to even think about the sort of unpleasantness that was possible out here on the fringes of the ‘Verse.

Ryan stared numbly at the files he was supposed to study. It had been terrifying, watching helplessly from a tiny corner of his mind while Vagabond treated Gavin so viciously. The fact that the hacker apparently liked it did little to ease Ryan’s fears. What about the next time? How could he keep Gavin safe if he was stuck on the sidelines, unable to rein himself in? As far as he could see, there were two options: refuse to participate in that kind of kink-play again, thereby denying Gavin something he wanted; or get so in touch with his demon that he could still be present, still be in control, even when the mask came down.

He honestly didn’t know which was worse.

After reading the same sentence four times without understanding it, he sighed and dropped the folder on the bedside table. Suddenly he couldn’t wait for Lindsay to arrive and whisk them away into fresh air and sun.

By the time she got there, both men were nearly bouncing with impatience. Gavin was wearing a long-sleeved jacket despite the blistering weather; she smiled knowingly, and he grinned back with only the faintest tinge of embarrassment. Ryan still had his pistol, of course, but had discarded his heavy boots in favor of a lightweight pair and traded his black shirt for a white one. He still looked slightly troubled, but the mechanic didn’t pry.

“Let’s go, you’re makin’ me miss the tide,” she chided. They didn’t need further encouragement.

Gavin hung out the window like a puppy on the way to the beach, looking eagerly at everything with his hair whipping frantically around his head. Ryan lightened up just watching him, and when they arrived at last he qualified as positively cheerful. Lindsay had barely turned the car off before Gavin leaped out, tripping over himself in his haste to get to the shore. The other two followed at a more sedate pace, pausing to take their shoes off before stepping onto the sand.

Lindsay waved off to the left, where a few indistinct people were lazing around a small cluster of towels and a big umbrella. Someone replied with an answering wave and a distant shout. Ryan looked around for his wayward boyfriend, who’d somehow managed to hare off in precisely the wrong direction.

“Hey, Gavin!” he called. “Over here!”

The hacker looked up from a handful of interesting rocks, dropped them, and jogged lightly across the sand, dodging other beachgoers as he went.
Of Hunter’s crew, only Jack was manning their little outpost, but she was accompanied by her partners. Finally seeing them up close, Gavin had to admire how beautiful they both were; Sarah’s bushy brown hair, strong nose, and olive complexion reminded him of the ancient warrior women he’d learned about in Earth-That-Was history class, while Jehlani’s twisted locks and flawless skin were so intensely dark that the fine yellow sand around her seemed stark white. Both smiled broadly as the introductions were made, and Jack happily dragged over a towel to offer Gavin a seat. He accepted, fascinated by the changes these women had wrought on the usually reserved pilot. Although, he thought with a smirk, if he were into ladies, he’d probably have the same reaction.

“It’s great to meet you, Gavin,” Jehlani said. Her voice was as smooth and round as the rest of her, and lightly melodic. It was the sort of voice he could listen to all day.

“Jack’s been telling us all kinds of stuff about you,” added Sarah. Her grey eyes sparkled with excitement; the hacker instantly felt he would get along with her. “You really cracked an Alliance server?”

Gavin preened at her admiration. “Well, yeah, it wasn’t that hard,” he said, casually inspecting his nails. “I mean, it’s just a matter of tricking the system, innit?”

Ryan left him and Sarah chattering away about computers, and turned instead to Lindsay.

“Where’s the sunscreen?” he asked, unstrapping his holster and pulling his shirt over his head. She gave him a funny look.

“Here,” she replied, tossing him a bottle from a large sack. “You’re not goin’ in the water, are you? You ain’t got a suit.”

“Ah, who cares?” he said, popping the cap. “We’re gonna do a lot of laundry this trip, right?”

“You’ll get the car all wet,” she said uncertainly, slipping out of her sundress to reveal a cute bikini underneath. Ryan laughed as he slathered white lotion on his chest.

“That’s what towels are for. Can you do my back?”

Jack and Jehlani stayed reading under the umbrella while Ryan and Lindsay chased each other to the shore. Geoff and Michael were already several meters out, having a splash battle; Ray, despite his earlier reluctance, was right there with them. The newcomers dove in, too, teaming up against the others in watery combat.

“Fuckin’ traitor!” Michael crowed, sweeping a big wave over his wife. She sputtered and laughed, turning to flutter-kick a huge plume of spray right into his face. Ryan, meanwhile, dove to catch at Ray and Geoff’s feet, hauling them briefly underwater. They squirmed free and broke the surface pissed as wet cats, pouncing on the larger man in revenge. A couple of folks swimming nearby turned to watch their antics, amused.

Gavin hardly noticed the time passing, too caught up in talking to Sarah to spare half a thought for anything else. She was intensely interested in his computer work, though her main expertise was in hydraulic engineering. He asked about the irrigation system Carla had mentioned the day before, and was instantly swamped by a deluge of information about dew collectors and variable pressure valves. It seemed that, like any object following the laws of physics, once she got going she was difficult to stop.

“You’ll lose your voice at this rate,” Jehlani commented in the space where Sarah had to breathe.
Jack snorted.

“Maybe then she’ll stop talking,” she said with a wry smile. Sarah shot her an affectionate glare.

When the engineer calmed down at last and Gavin had absorbed all the science he could handle, he flopped back onto the sand with a dull thud. The shadow of the umbrella didn’t cover his face in that position, and the bright sun burned his eyes. He turned to look at Jehlani instead.

“How about you?” he asked, blinking the spots from his vision. “What’s your story?”

“Not as exciting as hers, I’m afraid,” she said, marking her place in her book. “I’m just a musician.”

“Just?” Jack looked over her sunglasses sardonically. “Tell him about the time that Companion asked you to be her singing coach. Or when you got a standing ovation at Shueng Wan concert hall. Or -”

“Ni gongwei wo,” Jehlani murmured, ducking her head shyly. “That was a long time ago.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Sarah said, nudging Gavin’s arm. “She could sing the birds out of the sky. Her electric violin’s amazing, too.”

“Wait, isn’t Shueng Wan on Osiris?” Gavin asked. “How’d you end up here?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” she answered. “I disagreed with the Alliance one too many times. Their resettlement policies were bad for some of my friends and family, and during the war… Well. We all packed up and moved to Haven after the first U-Day, when it was obvious how horrible the Alliance is.”

“Yeah, I’ve been learning a lot about that recently,” the hacker empathized, propping himself up on his elbows. “It’s amazing what they don’t teach you in school.”

“Of course not. All you get in the Core is propaganda,” Jack said, a little coldly. “The Education Minister’s just another Blue Sun errand-boy. Gun ta jwo lu.”

Jehlani looked at her reprovingly. Sarah exhaled the ghost of a laugh and shifted to lean back against the musician’s thick thigh.

“You really oughta be used to her salt by now,” she said, smiling. “Besides, it’s the Alliance! We’ve all got a right to cuss ‘em out.”

Gavin caught the looks the three women exchanged, a series of warm and loving glances that had Jack cheerful again and Jehlani leaning in for a kiss. The hacker promptly felt like he was intruding, and turned to watch the rest of the crew instead. As they frolicked he realized what a poor choice it had been to wear long sleeves to the beach; it only took seconds for him to decide that modesty was for tossers. He bounced to his feet and stripped down to his boxers, leaving the clothes in a heap on the sand.

“See ya later, bi- uh, ladies!” he quickly corrected himself for Jehlani’s sake, and bounded away to plunge headfirst into the waves. Sarah watched him go with an appraising look.

“So that’s what Haywood’s into, huh?”

“Head over heels,” Jack confirmed with a sigh. “It’s been a wild ride, let me tell you.”
“Oh, I believe it,” Jehlani said, amusement giving a lilt to her voice. She stroked Sarah’s hair where it spilled into her lap. “He reminds me a lot of you, honestly.”

The engineer stuck her tongue out and crawled back to a warm place in the sun.

The long Haven afternoon wore on. The group cycled between land and sea, periodically drying out and recovering energy only to plunge into the crystal-clear water again. Jehlani proved to be an excellent swimmer, freestyling all the way out to a small island and back without getting tired at all. Ray eventually had enough exercise for one day and retreated under the umbrella to play on his portable console; Sarah joined him and drove from the back seat. Gavin put together a large collection of smooth stones plucked from the sea floor, and practiced skipping them with Michael. Nobody commented on his battered appearance, and though the mildly salt water did sting in places, Gavin was having the time of his life.

They started getting hungry when the sun teetered on the brink of the city skyline. Ryan put the finishing touches on the sand castle he and Gavin had built, and stood with a quiet grunt of effort. Everybody else had been out of the water for a while, and he could see them starting to get dressed and pack up their things.

“I think it’s time to head home, Gav,” he said, offering a hand. The hacker, a few shades browner than he’d been that morning, clasped it and levered himself to his feet.

“This was top,” he said, brushing damp sand from his legs. “I haven’t mucked about like that in… God, in years.”

“So a good day overall?” Ryan asked with a grin as they walked back to the others. Gavin returned the smile, emerald eyes sparkling in the fading sunlight.

“The best.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
ni gongwei wo: you flatter me
gun ta jwo lu: screw them (singular) running
Ryan wasn’t the only one who had to sit on a towel during the trip to Sarah and Jehlani’s house. They piled out of the cars still smelling of sun and salt, dampness clinging to their skin and clothes like summer perfume. Dusk had fallen and the porch light cast a warm glow over the front of the house, illuminating a neat little rock garden with an abstract metal sculpture standing prominently by the door.

“This is cool,” Gavin said, bending to inspect the twisted sheets of steel. The welds shone in rainbow-tempered colors, the edges were carved like fractals, and the surfaces swirled with minute etching. “You an artist, Sarah?”

“We all made that together,” the engineer answered, unlocking the door. “It’s supposed to be symbolic and stuff. I figured it was an excuse to play with acids and acetylene.”

“The yard smelled like burnt toenails for a week afterwards,” Jack said dryly.

“But it was fun,” Sarah countered with a huge grin.

As they trooped into the foyer, Jehlani immediately rounded on them. “No sand in the house,” she said firmly. “Shoes off, dry out, and then you can come in.”

They cleaned up as best they could. Most of them had had the foresight to bring fresh clothes, and changed in the bathroom; Gavin merely took his boxers off and put his pants back on commando. Ryan, wrapped sheepishly in a towel, had to wait until their laundry was done before he could reclaim his jeans. Gavin, fighting an awkward boner, tried not to look at him.

He hung out in the living room instead. The place was neat and clean, but comfortable, and a mix of eclectic objects lined the shelves. A pile of notebooks and several complex mechanical devices marked a desk against the wall as Sarah’s. Jehlani’s violin case occupied the corner next to an amplifier and effects pedal. A good-sized holoscreen dominated one wall, hooked up to a gaming console almost as nice as the one Gavin had back home. Sarah and Ray were already booting something up and casually trash-talking each other. A delicious smell wafted over it all, a rich lemony aroma that had everyone’s mouths watering.

The sun-drunk crew sprawled around the room, watching the enthusiastic and very loud Deathblade 4 match being fought in front of them. The score was tied at one round each when Jehlani emerged from the kitchen.

“Dinner is ready,” she called, lifting a sky-blue apron off her neck.

The meal rivaled, if not exceeded, the quality of Ray’s cooking. At first the only conversation consisted of earnest praise of the food, and even that quickly died off into “mmm”s and the sound of chewing. When everyone was happily full of creamy lemon chicken and spicy vegetable dumplings, they sat back with contented sighs.

“That was amazing,” Geoff groaned, loosening his belt a notch. “You oughta open a restaurant, seriously.”

“I’ve been telling her that for ages,” Sarah said, giving Jehlani an “I-told-you-so” look.
“Making a job out of it would ruin the fun,” the chef said lightly. “Besides, if I cook something, I want to eat it.”

“Fair enough,” Michael laughed.

Lindsay stood and began clearing plates. Ryan and Jack also rose to help, followed a little less eagerly by Sarah and the rest of the crew. The founder of the feast was exempt from cleaning duty. With eight pairs of hands the work went quickly, and soon everybody was collapsed in the living room again with a pile of cookies for dessert. Jehlani admonished that there were to be no crumbs whatsoever, then went upstairs to get ready for her night at work.

“All right, let’s finish this,” Ray said, cracking his knuckles and picking up the controller he’d abandoned before dinner. Sarah grinned and dropped to the floor beside him.

“Your ass is humped, lao sheong.”

“Bring it, niang.”

They were well matched. Each time one combatant officially triumphed, the other would demand a higher best-of number: first five, then seven, then nine. The rest of the crew, letting their food settle, watched sleepily.

The sound of someone descending the stairs made them look up. Jehlani returned to the living room, stunning in a pale robin’s-egg-blue dress accented with glittering rhinestones. Her heavy locks of hair were held back with a silver cord, and flawless, elegant makeup highlighted her eyes and lips. Jack rose from the couch, visibly breathless.

“You outshine the stars, airen.” She approached reverently, but stopped just short of touching Jehlani’s face, afraid to sully the musician’s radiant image. Instead she leaned forward and murmured something that sent a blush flitting across her partner’s cheeks.

“When I get back, xiao niao,” Jehlani replied, ducking her head coyly.

Geoff, watching the proceedings with a sly smile, blinked at that and cleared his throat. “Actually, ladies, Jack’s comin’ with us tonight. We got business to attend to.”

The pilot’s lovestruck gaze became fixed for an instant, then faded to a professional expression that still displayed a touch of disappointment. “Oh.”

“Y’all can get it on tomorrow,” Lindsay teased. Michael and Gavin choked back laughter, glanced at each other, and began giggling like children. Jack snapped into a more military posture, staring at them coldly until they shut up.

“I think it’s time to head out, gang,” Ryan said. He elbowed Gavin in the ribs and stood to stretch broadly. “The sooner we get this job done, the sooner we get paid.”

“Couldn’t’ve said it better myself,” Geoff said, kicking Ray’s leg to get his attention. The sniper jerked, avatar dying horribly in the split second he lost concentration.

“Hey!” he yelled indignantly while Sarah crowed her victory. “I was winning!”

“Then you can win again later. Come on.”

“Yeah, walk away, loser!” taunted Sarah. “You’re lookin’ at a two-time champion, right here!”
“This isn’t over,” Ray growled as Geoff pulled him from the game. “That was a tie and you know it, sha gwa.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Jehlani shook her head tolerantly, gave Jack a soft kiss on the cheek, and went to ruffle Sarah’s hair. “Behave, you,” she scolded with a fond smile. “It was great to see everyone! Will you come around again before leaving port?”

“Yeah, I reckon so,” Geoff replied. “And if you keep feedin’ us like that, you can count on it!”

Ryan, Lindsay, and Michael helped bring Jehlani’s sound equipment out to her car. As she drove away, negotiation began to decide how all seven crew members would fit into Jacob’s five-seat SUV. A few rounds of rock-paper-scissors determined that Lindsay and Ray would ride in the cargo space behind Michael, Gavin, and Ryan, who were squished in the back seat. The trip back to the inn was blessedly quick, but they arrived to a large weekend crowd and all the noise that came with it. Even up in the proprietors’ apartment they could hear the muffled sounds of revelry coming from below.

“Okay, everybody,” began Geoff when the crew was gathered around the kitchen table. “This job’s gonna be tricky. As most of you know, it’s on a core planet, which is bad enough even without two of us wanted as dicks. Bottom line, it’s your basic kneecapping. Burns wants some associates scared to death, ensure loyalty, blah blah blah.”

Lindsay pursed her lips in thought. “So are we supposed to literally bust their kneecaps, or…?”

“It’s an option. There’s also the classic horse-in-the-bed tactic, just to let ’em know we can get to ’em at home. They’ve both got families, though, and we gotta take that into account. I’d rather leave the kids outta this. Without trauma, if possible.”

“Wuyi,” Michael agreed with a faint shudder.

“But we still need to hit ’em where it hurts,” Geoff said. “Burns wants ’em to remember this.”


“Well,” Ryan said slowly. “I did have one idea. This is a Burns job, right? So why not burn it into them? Brand ’em like cattle, so they know they’re part of his herd.”

The crew looked at him silently for a minute, something like fear tingling their faces.

“You are one sick bastard,” Michael said flatly. Ryan smirked, spread his arms, and bowed mockingly.

“Ryan Haywood. Nice to meetcha.”

Gavin eyed him sidelong and licked his lips.

Geoff cleared his throat noisily. “It works. We’ll go with that until we come up with somethin’ better. But before that, we gotta get to ’em.” He opened the folder of information, pulling out a blueprint. A quick touch of a symbol on the corner called up a 3D holo-projection of the building. Ray whistled.

“Nice crib.”
“This is one of the houses we gotta infiltrate. On top of CCTV all over the street, the place has a comprehensive security system. Two recessed cameras coverin’ each outer door and window, laser sensors in case the cameras fail. Coded locks on fuckin’ everything, no roof or basement access. Each bedroom’s got a panic room that can’t be opened from the outside. The other house is pretty much the same.”

Another silence ensued, this time thoughtful.

“Could we get in during the day, and hide until they get home?” Lindsay suggested.

“Maybe,” Jack said, absently drumming her fingers on the table. “It’d be a lot harder to go unseen, though.”

“Could we use some kind of reflective – wait, no, lasers. Never mind,” Ray said, trailing off with annoyance.

Gavin wrestled with the problem. Breaking and entering wasn’t exactly his area of expertise, he was better with… oh.

“I got it,” he declared happily. “Cameras gotta record, yeah? And lasers have to send their signal to someplace. So they all must be hooked up to some kind of computer system!”

“And you can fuck with computers,” Michael said, a slow grin spreading across his face.

“Jing tsai!” Ryan clapped an approving hand on Gavin’s shoulder. “Why bother sneaking past the camera when you can just turn it off?”

“Well, not off, exactly, ‘cuz that would probably trip the alarm,” the hacker clarified. “They’re not supposed to stop filming ever. But I could feed it some empty footage, and definitely shut down the locks and lasers.”

“Where’ve you been all my life?” Geoff shook his head. “So many jobs coulda been so much easier.”


“The hit we did for Mary-Anne woulda gone smoother,” Ray added.

“Yeah,” sighed Ryan. “I nearly got fucked on that one.”

“Aaaaanyway,” Jack interrupted, calling them back from nostalgia. “Details. What’s our excuse for being on Rubicon in the first place? What does it take to disable security? When do we make our move, and how?”

“Right,” Geoff said firmly. “The excuse is easy enough, we’re a cargo ship makin’ a delivery. I’ll have Trevor rustle us up some papers. As far as security... Gavin, what do you need?”

Gavin shrugged. “Depends on the kind of software and networking they’ve got. If they’re really stupid, it’ll be linked to the broader Cortex. If it’s a closed intranet, I’ll need a hard-wired connection to get anything done.”

“That comes back to the original problem,” Michael pointed out. “Plus, you’ll have fuckin’ cops on you faster than a cangying xia che shangbian fen.”

Gavin was already shaking his head. “I don’t have to be there. I’d just need someone to wire a
cheeky little transmitter into the system. And I’ve got a plan for that.” His smugness grew with every word, hazel eyes narrowing conspiratorially. “Pretend to be from the security company. Make an appointment to do an update, to patch a vulnerability or something. You can faff about with the computer just long enough to be believable, plant the bug, and stroll on out of there cool as a bloody cucumber.”

Approving eyebrows were raised all around the table. “That’s… a really good idea,” Lindsay said, impressed. “Who should do it?”

“You, probably.” Ray waved vaguely at her. “You’ve got the most experience with engineering shit, and it’s easier to trust a pretty face.”

She glanced coyly at him. “Shucks, Ray, you’re spoilin’ me here.”

“Okay.” Jack said, a bit forcefully. “We’d need uniforms, two of those transmitter things, and some background info… Might have that already in the file. Anything else?”

Gavin rubbed his scruffy chin. “Well, I’d need some specialized software that I don’t think our little rig can handle, so that new computer we talked about would be top.”

“Done and done,” Geoff declared.

Michael looked a little worried. “Wouldn’t the camera pick up Lindsay’s face when she goes in? Isn’t that evidence?”

“I can fix that,” Gavin said. “Just takes a bit more editing.”

“Shiny,” the captain said. “Okay, so once that’s set up, Ryan’ll go in. We’ll figure out the best time with the dirt Burns got us. Next hurdle: gettin' the mark alone without wakin’ up the family.”

“Anesthetic,” volunteered Ryan. “The military uses knockout patches that you can program to keep a patient under for however long you want. They're insanely restricted, but could Trevor get us some?”

Geoff shook his head. "I'll ask, but if it's stupid hard to get at then my money's on it takin' a while."

Lindsay shrugged. "There's always the usual."

"No," Ryan said firmly. "Not this time. Those Northup twins are too young. The injection would kill them."

The room was quiet for a moment as everyone racked their brains. They seemed to have reached an impasse when Ray, looking uncomfortable, piped up.

“I could maybe help with the patches,” he offered reluctantly. “My doc back home might be able to order ‘em for us. He's chill. I trust him.”

Michael gave him a skeptical look. "You don't sound too sure."

"I'm sure."

“Fine,” Geoff said briskly. "Make sure to get some that are safe for kids."

Ray acknowledged this with a resigned nod.

Ryan fiddled with his loose lock of hair. It was tacky with dried seawater. “So I waltz in, drug the
family, haul the target someplace quiet, put the fear of Burns into ‘em… What should I do with ‘em after that?”

“Knock them out too, and put ‘em back to bed,” said Lindsay. “They’ll wake up terrified, knowin’ you got in and out so easy.”

“Sounds good.”

“How about getting to and from the scene?” Jack asked. “Vehicles, routes…?”

“Maybe we can talk about that tomorrow,” Michael yawned. “I’m tired and I wanna take a shower.”

Ryan smiled wryly. “Yeah, we’re still pretty salty.”

“I’m awfully knackered, too,” Gavin agreed, stretching.

Jack pursed her lips in annoyance. “So you dragged me away from my girls for a ten-minute meeting? Nice.”

“You and I can stay up and talk extraction, Jack,” Geoff said. “Nobody else cares anyway.”

The others left, laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
lao sheong: pal
niang: motherfucker
airen: beloved
xiao niao: little bird
sha gwa: fool
wuyi: definitely
jing tsai: brilliant
cangying xia che shangbian fen: fly lands on shit
Jack and Lindsay took the next day to go over Hunter with a fine-toothed comb, making note of all the things that needed repair or upgrades. Gavin tagged along with them on a trip to the ironically named Dump, a neighborhood where everything from scrap metal to high-end tech was sold. Most of it was wildly overpriced, but the hacker soon learned that the vendors were expecting to haggle. The ladies of Hunter made a formidable team, and came away from their expedition with nearly everything on their list for much less than advertised. They arranged for the larger items to be delivered straight to the docks, while the rest got loaded into Carla’s SUV. After they dropped Gavin back at the inn, they disappeared to the ship and didn’t come back until late at night.

For his part, the hacker managed to piece together about eighty percent of his new workstation. Unfortunately, despite buying up every quantum processor he could find, he was still short by twenty-three nodes and another few petabytes of memory. He told Geoff as much that night; the captain didn’t seem concerned.

“I know a guy,” he said through a mouthful of sticky bun. “Tell me exactly what you need, and I’ll pick it up for you tomorrow.”

“Is this another one of those deals where I can’t come?” Gavin asked plaintively. Geoff smirked.

“You catch on quick. It ain’t as touchy as last time, but yeah, havin’ you along ain’t the best idea. Why don’t you head down to the range instead?”

Gavin sighed in annoyance, and took another swig of his beer.

In the morning the captain set out on his mission, bringing Ryan along for backup. Michael and Ray, their skills unnecessary on this particular shopping trip, headed to the firing range with a nervously excited Gavin in tow.

The place consisted of a small building and a very large expanse of dirt. Inside was a cozy lounge, a display case, and a counter with a till. A short, stocky man with raven hair and heavy-lidded eyes finished dealing with a customer, and came to greet the three newcomers.

“Hey, boys, welcome back!” he said with a thick Chinese accent. Michael and Ray grinned, offering a high-five and a fist bump respectively.

“What’s up, Nuan?” Michael asked. “How’s business?”

“Eh, a little slow, but I can’t complain,” the proprietor answered. “Brought a friend, I see?”

“Gavin. Nice to meet you,” the hacker said, extending a hand. Nuan shook it heartily, and Gavin could feel calluses from long firearm use rub against his own delicate skin.

“Dyton, eh?” Nuan gave a lopsided smile. “You should meet Dan.”

“Well, I…” Gavin began to explain, then gave up. “Yeah.”

“Actually, I was gonna ask – has he got time for a private lesson? Gav’s never been shootin’ before.” Michael nudged the hacker with affectionate condescension. Nuan’s eyes lit up.
“Oh, you’re in for a treat,” he said confidently. “Yeah, Dan’s free as a bird. That guy who just left was our only client so far today.”


“It comes and goes. Let’s get you guys started.”

He opened a door labeled “Armory.” Inside was rank upon rank of lockers, each containing a different type of lead, laser, or sonic weapon. Particularly large ones were mounted in glass cases on the wall: sniper rifles, mostly, but there were a couple of what looked like grenade launchers and chain guns, too. The rest of the space was occupied by boxes of ammunition, crates of batteries, and a large, rough-hewn table. On opposite sides of the room were signs pointing to the indoor and outdoor ranges.

Gavin’s eyes went wide. “Flippin’ heck,” he said. “You could build an army with all this.”

“Funny thing about that,” Nuan commented, retrieving a standard revolver and semi-automatic pistol from one of the lockers. “A lot of our stock is leftovers from the war. This one right here -”

He gestured to a weatherbeaten assault rifle on the wall. “ - came from Shadow. ‘Uninhabitable,’ they said, but that didn’t stop the carrion crows. We picked up a lot of merchandise from those battlefields. Wholesale. Lianjia.”

He put the handguns on the table and opened the outdoor range for Michael and Ray, who nodded their thanks.

“Come on outside when you’re done,” the sniper told Gavin. “We’ll send Dan in for you.”

They left, and Nuan turned grim. “All right, before you touch anything, let’s go over the rules,” he said. “First and most importantly: never point your gun at anything you’re not willing to destroy.”

He ran through the basics of firearm safety, making sure that his student was listening closely by periodically springing questions on him. By the time the lesson was over, a new person was leaning easily against the wall by one of the doors. When Gavin could spare the attention, he saw that the man was tall and brawny, with dark hair and a short, scruffy beard. His face was broad and friendly, with a serene expression that looked odd on top of his serious military fatigues.

“And here’s Dan!” Nuan said. “He’ll be teaching you the rest.”

“Cheers,” Gavin murmured, still reviewing what he’d learned so far as the proprietor left to tend the register again. The firearms instructor approached, smiling gently.

“So you’re the newbie, eh?” he asked, looking Gavin up and down. The hacker blinked, then grinned.

“Never touched a gun in my life,” he answered, almost proudly. Dan raised his strong brows with a chuckle.

“Let’s kick it off, then.”

The next two hours contained more information than Gavin could remember from all his years of school. His teacher showed him how each handgun worked, how to strip down and reassemble them, correct firing technique, and how to reload. They went to the indoor lanes so that Gavin could take a few shots; the recoil hurt his healing shoulder until he mastered the proper stance. Dan noticed his discomfort, and shook his head in sympathy.
“Looks like you won’t get to play with the big boy toys this time,” he said. Gavin was crestfallen.

“Aww, but…” he whined, ready to argue.

“Trust me. You’ve seen Michael in a fight, yeah? Assault rifles kick like a mule. In your state it would bollocks you right up.”

“Sausages,” the hacker muttered, scuffing his toe on the floor. He could think of another reason why a more powerful weapon wouldn’t be a good fit for him, too: the little pistol he’d been using was far heavier than it looked, and he could only imagine how much more a bigger gun would weigh. He probably wouldn’t even be able to carry it around for very long, let alone use it in a fight.

Suddenly all those workout sessions looked much more appealing.

“We could try something else instead,” Dan said thoughtfully. “Unload those and come with me.”

Gavin did so, bringing the handguns back to the armory. Dan gave them a quick once-over and put them away, then turned to a different locker that was full of sleeker, more modern-looking weapons.

“This might be more your speed,” he said, offering a brushed-aluminum gun that was far too small to be intimidating. “The Armistice Spark-12 laser pistol.”

When Gavin took it, he grinned hugely – it was feather-light, and fit in his hand like a dream. They went through another round of instruction before loading the battery pack and giving it a spin, firing in a special lead-backed lane designed specifically for high-energy rounds. Gavin took to it like a fish to water.

“This is brilliant!” he declared after his eighth tight cluster of hits. Dan laughed as he retrieved the eviscerated plastic target.

“Want to give some of the others a shot?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely!”

They went through half a dozen makes and models before Gavin fell in love. The gleaming silver Q-Beam Vector 3, styled after a standard revolver, was about a foot long from muzzle to butt and handled like it was made just for him. He insisted on learning it inside-out, taking extra time to examine all the circuitry that was accessible without specialized tools. He was so focused that his instructor gave up trying to talk to him until the gun’s titanium-alloy body was completely reassembled.

“So… you like it, then?” Dan asked with dry humor. “I think we have a few more in stock, if you want one of your own.”

“Yes,” Gavin said, jumping to his feet. “Oh, question… does it come in gold?”

The closest factory-made color was a much more tasteful bronze. Gavin bought it on the spot, as well as three battery packs, a charger, and a chestnut-brown leather holster. When the transaction was complete, Dan led him outside to the real range, where the others were perfecting their art. Michael practiced rapid reloading between shots; Ray lay on his belly in a sniper nest that overlooked rolling hills, peering through the scope of his rifle at something only he could see. Dan pressed a button set into the wall by the door, which activated red lights and brief alarms at each firing station. The two gunmen noticed, flicked on their safeties, and turned to greet their
“Look!” Gavin crowed, gleefully showing off his new toy. “It’s got six separate beams that shoot nanosecond pulses and make a plasma slug that can burn –”

“Bie jinzhang, boi,” Michael said, amused at the hacker’s excitement. “You should talk to Lindsay, she’s the expert on that shit. We like it low-tech.”

“You’re all mental for sticking with those old lead things,” Gavin scoffed. “This is way better.”

Ray shook his head. “It depends. If you fire that piece on the ship, it’ll breach the hull. Most ballistic guns won’t.”

“Plus, lasers cauterize the wounds they make,” Michael added. “Which is good for puttin’ some bastard through fuckin’ hell – I think Ryan’s got one for that – but you gotta hit square in the heart or head to take anyone down. Real bullets cause a lot more damage.”

The information dampened Gavin’s enthusiasm. “But… it’s a laser,” he countered weakly. The other men laughed.

“We’re not saying it’s useless,” Ray assured him. “Ours just aren’t obsolete.”

The hacker’s slight resentment faded through their lunch break, and vanished completely as soon as he got back to practicing. The outdoor high-energy lanes were much longer than the indoor ones, but similarly separated from the rest by tall lead-lined barriers. Gavin tried his hand at moving and distant targets, finding them much more difficult than the close, stationary ones he’d used earlier. However, despite missing the critical points more often than not, all of his shots did hit somewhere on the target. By the time the sun began to set, he was thoroughly pleased with the progress he’d made.

“Wanna come eat with us?” Michael asked Dan and Nuan as the range closed up for the night. “There’s a place down on Zei Street we haven’t been to yet.”

Dan nodded as he locked the last of the guns away. “Orbit? Yeah, it’s pretty good. We’re not open tomorrow, so count me in.”


“Absolutely,” Ray said. “What’re you doing this time?”

“Going to the park to catch lightning bugs. She’s been looking forward to it all week.”

“Cute,” Michael said as they left the building. “Say hi to her and Lianne for us.”

“Shi’a. Have a good night!”

“Bye!” the younger men chorused, waving.

“All right, let’s go,” Dan said once his boss was gone. “Drinks are on me.”

“Really?” Gavin asked, grinning. “Cheers, Dan.”

“Cheers. But in exchange you’ve got to tell me how it’s going on the home front.”

Ray smirked. “Yeah, good luck with that.”
Gavin fidgeted with his new gun. “It’s kind of a long story,” he said sheepishly. “Let’s get bevved up first.”

“Fine by me,” Dan said with a shrug, and turned to the others instead. “How about you lot? Still flying?”

Michael laughed, shaking his head slightly in amusement. “You could say that…”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
lianjia: cheap
bie jinzhang: take it easy
wo buneng: I can't
shi’a: yes, affirmative
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Grad school is a thiiinnngggg~~

Content warning for drug stuff (marijuana, nothing harder)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…and I told him, I said, if we don’t sweep it first, we won’t even make it to the front,” Dan said, carelessly waving around his half-empty drink. “And wouldn’t you know it, Sarge takes five steps into that field, and suddenly – you ever seen a red mist? Nothing left. Absolutely multered, he was. The rest of the squad just looked at me and I’m like, ‘I told him so.’ Why have me along if you won’t let me do my job, eh?”

Gavin nodded sagely, trying to look serious despite the liquor in his veins. “Sodding idiot, that one. Deserved it.”

“No, you know who really deserved it? The gou cao de purple-bellies who put ‘em there. It was just outside town, B! There were kids who could’ve…” He choked on the words and cleared his throat with a deep gulp of beer.

“Bastards,” Gavin agreed. It seemed like the soldier had finished, but he was merely refueling.

“And!” he declared, slamming his empty mug on the table. “And they have the bloody balls to call us the war criminals! How d’you figure that one, eh? We didn’t bomb the entire bloody planet into smithers, did we? I wish we’d had that kind of firepower… lingwai, qing?” he asked the waiter, who scurried off to procure a refill.

Ray and Michael watched the conversation with amusement over their own drinks. They’d barely gotten a word in edgeways once the alcohol began to flow. Though Dan was an exceptionally tough drinker, Orbit’s specialty cocktail was nothing to sneeze at, and he’d had three. Ray got the feeling he’d have to peel his friends off the sidewalk later.

“I never knew any of this crap,” Gavin said, and burped. “I was a spoiled brat. Hardly knew there was a war on.”

“You know better now, eh? Seen the Alliance’s true colors?”

“Damn right, B. Bunch of sadistic bloody tossers.” He took another sip, looking thoughtful. “I might owe ‘em a thank-you, though. If they hadn’t run me off Ariel I’d never’ve met any of you.”

“You freakin’ sap,” Ray muttered sarcastically into his soda. “Gonna send ‘em a fruit basket?”

“Yeah, with a bomb in it,” Michael added, elbowing Dan in the ribs. “We oughta try that.”

“Oh, no,” the soldier said, shaking his head emphatically. “I’m not going anywhere near your bloody toys anymore. Not after last time.”

“Ooh, what happened last time?” Gavin asked excitedly as Ray started to laugh. Michael looked
scornful.

“It did exactly what it was supposed to, it blew up!”

“In my face, you wanker!” Dan rose from his chair and pulled up the hem of his shirt to display a jagged scar on his side. It looked fairly recent. “You never do it right! In a goddamn spaceship, no blast shield, no sound buffer…”

“Well excuse me, mister professional, I’ll just go buy my own portable bomb range…”

“Bloody miracle that heap’s still flying…”

“Woah, woah, reel it in,” Ray interrupted as Michael’s ears and neck turned bright red.

“Don’t you dare call Hunter a heap,” Michael hissed. Through his intoxication Gavin noticed the difference between mock fury and the real thing: Michael burned hot when he was playing, but this side of him was like ice.

Even drunk, Dan knew he’d crossed the line. He sank back into his seat, looking sheepish. “I’m sorry, mate. Next round’s on me.”

“It’s already on you,” Ray reminded him, relieved that Michael appeared to be simmering down. Dan blinked, thinking hard.

“Then, uh… I got a couple of Griswolds back at the range, you want ‘em?”

“’S okay,” Michael muttered. “Just… y’know.”

“I know.”

The waiter returned with Dan’s fresh beer. Ray used the interruption to haul the conversation out of an awkward silence.

“So Dan, has Chloe dumped you yet, or is she still blind?”

“Okay, first of all, she’s not blind,” Dan corrected with exasperation. “She’s got a lazy eye, and no, she didn’t dump me. It was a mutual thing.”

“Sure it was,” Michael said sarcastically, still slightly peeved. Gavin jumped in.

“My ex, now,” answered Dan with a sigh. “We disagreed on one too many things. Stupid stuff. What to have for dinner, what shows to watch, how hot we like the shower…”

“That’s what you get for moving in together,” Ray said with a heavily judgmental look. “You’re not still roommates, are you?”

“God, no,” the soldier scoffed. “Give me some credit.”

“What’d you do, then?” Michael asked, returning to his drink.

“Eh, crashing at a buddy’s place, but I’ve got an eye on an apartment…”

Two more beers and three shots later he was barely able to stand. Michael and Gavin were in only slightly better shape, despite only having drunk a quarter as much. Gavin watched Ray heave Dan's
wavering form upright and laboriously shuffle the pair of them towards the door. He was perfectly content to stay sat and let the world happen around him, so it was with annoyance that he felt Michael pulling on his arm.

“C’mon, idiot, we oughta go home too. Hey,” he called to the waiter, who’d promptly returned upon seeing the group leave without paying. “Put it all on Dan for us, wouldja?”

“Oh. Sure,” the young man replied with a shrug. “He’s gonna have more than one kind of headache in the morning, though.”

“Not our problem.”

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Geoff had made good on his promise. Though the man himself was nowhere to be found, he’d left a note on the kitchen table saying that the computer parts Gavin wanted would be delivered to the ship tomorrow night. Lindsay and Ryan were tinkering and plotting, respectively. Neither looked up right away, and when they did, they didn’t seem surprised by the drunken state of the others. Only Dan’s presence was unexpected.

“Your turn to drag someone in off the street tonight, huh?” Lindsay teased, putting her project down. Ryan set the job folder aside, smirked, and took over holding Dan up. Ray sagged with relief and fell gratefully into a chair.

“Dumbass can’t remember where he lives.”

“Bollocks, mate, y’just wouldn’t follow me,” Dan mumbled.

“Because you can’t walk, either.”

“…Hehe, yeah.”

Lindsay snorted at Dan’s vapid grin; Gavin and Michael started laughing so hard that they had to lean on each other for support. Ryan sighed, and tossed Dan over his shoulder to haul him to bed.

“Why is it that every time I see you, you’re a wreck?”

“’Cuz he’s always a wreck,” Michael gasped through his giggles. Dan, facing backwards, raised two fingers in a rude gesture. Then Ryan turned a corner, and they were gone.

“Y’all ain’t lookin’ too sharp either, hon,” Lindsay said. She propped one fist on her hip. “Bedtime for both of you, I think.”

“Naw, Lindsay, I’m fine,” Michael said. He took his weight off Gavin to prove it, and merely swayed right into his wife’s arms without ever finding his balance.

“She’s right, boi. Go have a kip.”

“Both of you, idiot,” Ray groaned. “You’re gonna pass out on the floor, and I’m not pickin’ you up.”

“As if your weak ass could,” Lindsay retorted. She pulled Michael’s arm over her shoulder. “Come on, hubby. Bed.”

The pair cautiously navigated across the kitchen and up the stairs, passing Ryan on his way back.
through the hall.

“I put Dan in Jack's room. There's no way she's sleeping anywhere but Jehlani's house tonight.”

Ray shook his head with mild disgust. “You better do something with this asshole, too,” he sighed, watching Gavin wobble. “I'm out for a bit. There's a new head shop I wanna peruse.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Of course there is. Just don't make me have to go looking for you.”

“Course not. *Some* of us are adults.” He made a pointed expression at Gavin, who didn't notice.

“Have fun, then. C'mon, Gav, let's hit the sack.”

“Okay, Ry,” Gavin said dreamily, and followed his partner to bed.

Ray stretched mightily, grumbling at the aches from Dan’s weight and the afternoon's extended shooting session. He used the doorframe for leverage until his shoulders stopped complaining, then slipped out the back door of the inn.

It was nice to be on his own for once, easier to pay attention to his surroundings without his boisterous crewmates crowded around. He fell into an easy gait, boots soft on the dusty pavement, practicing awareness of everything and nothing in particular. There were plenty of people out and about; many denizens of Haven were distinctly nocturnal. Vendors and food carts that would be shuttered for the night on a core planet stood open and inviting here, bathed in whatever lights each proprietor had on hand. They created patchworks of harsh blue-white and soft flickering yellow. Ray kept to the shadows in between.

He traced his way to where a huge, glowing sign down a side street depicted a five-pointed green leaf wreathed in silver. The light fell on small groups of people who stood, sat, and lay in pungent clouds of smoke and laughter. Music, a synthesized interweaving of driving beat and aimless melody, played from speakers over the door. Ray’s professional bearing relaxed as he approached, and he smiled to return the greetings of revelers he’d never met.

A gust of smoke followed him inside, making the air scrubbers whine to keep up. The shopkeeper waved over the shoulder of her current customer and called for him to take a look around. While she completed her sale, Ray examined the buds, oils, and chocolates, the artfully crafted pipes, and the newest in vapor technology. Vivid pink light from a hydroponics display reflected off the glass cases and made the place feel alien. The menu on the wall added to the otherworldly impression; the varieties of weed had bizarre names like “Sasquatch Sundae” and “Over the Looking Glass,” and were accompanied by descriptions that were hard to understand even while sober. One paragraph in Chinese seemed to have been written by a narcoleptic octopus.

Ray deciphered the information with a sniper’s patience as a steady stream of patrons came and went. At last he purchased samples of three strains he’d never heard of, a bar of infused chocolate, and a new grow light for his roses. He admired the accessories behind the counter while the cashier rang him up, particularly interested in a magnificent piece that it would be an insult to call a bong. The glass was a whorl of blues and greens, and formed in such a way that he couldn’t tell where the inside ended and the outside began. It seemed to be rolling back in on itself… or maybe it was in the process of exploding… Ray tilted his head back and forth, unable to figure out how it was done, until he was startled by the hand that waved in front of his eyes.

“Hey-o, mate, you with me? That’ll be forty platinum.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”
“No worries,” she said amiably while he reached for his cash. “Happens more often than it don’t.”

Ray paused. “Actually, could I see that bong up there real quick?”

“Oh, good eye.” She brought it to him. “Made it myself. One of my favorites.”

“How much?”

“One hundred.”

Two weeks ago that would have been an enormous sum, a goal to scrimp and save for. Today, he had five times as much sitting in his pocket.

“I’ll take it,” he declared with a grin.

“Shiny! Then it’s one-forty all together.”

Ray handed over the money and watched her ring him up. As she packed the delicate glassware into a box, another thought struck.

“Hey, uh… any chance you do gift wrap?”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

gou cao de: dog-fucking
lingwai, qing?: another, please?
Ray woke up at about the same time that Gavin began to recover from his hangover. They had the kitchen to themselves – Lindsay and Michael were already out, Ryan was working with Geoff on plans for the job, Jack was still with her girlfriends, and Dan was in the bathroom with regrets. Tepid coffee and a half-eaten burger sat in front of Gavin; he shoved them across the table as Ray took the seat opposite him.

“It’s top. Jacob made it. I just can’t even think about food anymore.”

“Thanks.”

Ray happily polished off the meal as Gavin gazed blearily out the window. He wasn’t used to a sky half-full of planet yet. It made him feel unpleasantly upside-down.

“Got plans today?” Ray asked when his plate was empty.

“Nah. You?”

“Yeah, I had a couple ideas,” he said slowly. “In fact… c’mere, I got somethin’ for you.”

“Do?”

Gavin trailed after Ray to his room, which looked like he'd unpacked by setting off one of Michael’s grenades in his luggage. A few objects had been placed with distinct care, however: a pair of glasses; two different gaming consoles; a tiny potted rosebush; a small pink lamp; and a large box wrapped in green paper. Ray picked up the box and unceremoniously shoved it into Gavin’s hands.

“Open it. No, seriously,” he urged as the hacker looked at him, befuddled.

Gavin pulled off the paper and flipped open the lid of the box. Inside, a sculpture rested in a nest of insulation. He carefully lifted the delicate glass and held it to the light, eyes going wide.

“It’s… it’s beautiful, Ray. What brought this on?”

“Eh, y’know. Felt like it.”
“Cheers, lad. Dunno where it’ll go in the ship, but I think I’ll put it in the window for now. It’s kinda glowy underwater art.”

Ray tilted his head inquisitively. “Wait. You never smoked, Gav?”

Gavin wrinkled his nose. “My dad and granddad smoked cigars all the time. I can’t stand the bloody stuff. What’s that got to do with aught?”


“Oh. No, can’t say I have done.”

Ray regarded him critically for a moment. “Eh, guess I shouldn't be too surprised. You look more like a Special K guy.”

“A what?”

“Nothin’. Anyway. That’s not just a knickknack, it’s a bong, and I got some sick dope last night. Was hoping you might wanna blaze it up with me?”

Gavin blinked. “I thought you didn't drink or anything?”

“Wo bu hejiu, but I love a hit when I get the chance. Lindsay busts my balls if I get smoke in the air filters so I just don't do it on the ship.”

“I respect that.” The hacker glanced out the window, then back to Ray. “What's it like?”

The skunky odor of marijuana distracted Ryan and Geoff from their strategizing. The captain shook his head and looked to the sky for patience. Ryan took the opportunity to call a break.

“We've been at this for a while,” he noted, rolling the kinks from his neck. “Guai, you were up all night. Maybe we should take a page from Ray's book and relax.”

“If you wanna join him, be my guest. I'm still workin’.”

“Not even a cup of coffee?”

“Sure. Go fetch.”

“Fetch it yourself, sir,” Ryan retorted casually, earning himself a baleful glare.

He followed the scent from Geoff's room to Ray's. A giggle and an overly enthusiastic “Come in!” greeted his knock, followed by a wave of reeking air when he opened the door.

The two younger men were sprawled on Ray's floor, propping themselves up on the mattress that they'd dragged off the bedframe. An old documentary played on the similarly relocated holoscreen, and the bong rested between them, within easy reach. Ray's eyes were a little red, but Gavin's were swollen nearly shut; he grinned hugely and made grabby hands in Ryan's direction, beckoning him over. The older man shook his head wryly.

“Having fun, are you?”
“I’m a spaceship,” Gavin agreed. “See better with m’ eyes closed.”

“Gav’s a little more sensitive than me,” Ray commented. “A couple rips and suddenly woosh! Right outta the ‘Verse.”

“Please don't break him,” Ryan chided through a smile. “I wanted to go see Jehlani’s show tonight.”

“It'll wear off soon. We didn't do edibles or anything. Figured we could try that some other time.”


“Zhe zhen kexiao!” Ray fell back onto the mattress, laughing too hard to breathe. Ryan lost it, too, and Gavin followed suit just because the others were doing it. But when his crewmates trailed off into chuckles, he didn’t; he rolled on his side, still giggling uncontrollably, one hand clutching the blankets and the other buried in his own hair.

“Christ, Gav, chill,” Ray snorted.

“I can’t!” the hacker gasped, trying to open his eyes. He dragged his arm into a new position, straining to get upright, until like the flick of a switch he was back in control of himself. “Oh, brill, a snack!” he exclaimed, pulling something from under a sheet.

“Oh no,” Ray said, grabbing it from him. He looked in despair at the half-eaten bar of chocolate. “Welp, I was wrong. Goushi, no wonder he’s so fucked up.”

Ryan blinked. “Is that…?”

“Yeah,” the sniper sighed. “Can’t believe I didn’t notice. That was… Jesus, enough for three sessions. Goddammit.”

“Yikes! Is he gonna be okay?”

“In, like, six hours.”

They looked down at Gavin, who had already forgotten the theft of his prize and was giggling again.

“Wanna stay for a bit?” Ray asked. “This oughta be better than the concert.”

“Eh, sure, why not. Lemme grab some coffee, I’ll be right back.”

“Get some soda while you’re at it.”

“And food! Need a nosh.” added Gavin from the floor.

“Okay, Gav. We’ll get you some munchies,” Ray said placatingly. “But I think you’re done with this now.”

He took one last hit from the bong and put it on top of the dresser to clean later.

Ryan came back with what seemed like half the kitchen. He put everything on the floor and sat down on the mattress behind Gavin. “How’re you feeling, babe?” he asked, beginning to gently knead his partner’s shoulders. The hacker made a noise that he probably thought was a purr.
“I’m top, Rye-bread. ‘S top fun, this is… wait, what?”

“Seriously, Gavin? Did you just confuse yourself?” Ray asked condescendingly.

The purr gave way to more giggles. “I don’t know.”

“Oh boy,” Ryan said. “Can you tell us what you’re thinking about?”

“Uh, nuthin’. Bodies. Is it, is it weird, that our organs move? Cuz… cuz you could tell me my heart was a dude that was moving, and I would believe it.”

“Jesus Christ!” Ray started cackling.

“I’m not sure where to start with that,” Ryan mused. “Maybe think of it this way: our organs move every time we do, don’t they? So it’s never weird.”

“No, like, relative to us. Inside us.”

“But they are us.”

“What are?”

“Lao tien fu,” Ray moaned. “Ryan, you’re not even high. The fuck’re you doing.”

“Being incredibly entertained.”

“Eh, can’t argue with that.”

The seconds needed for their brief exchange were enough for Gavin to get distracted by the movie they’d been watching. Ray had chosen it specifically because it was an exposé of criminal life on the Rim – the life of Hunter’s crew. Currently there was a gunfight playing out on screen; an Alliance sheriff had busted an illicit sale of livestock.

“Oh noooo! Priest guy!” Gavin cried as a character got shot. Ryan felt the muscles under his hands tense up.

“Shh, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” he said soothingly. “Ray, you wanna put something else on?”

“Noooo,” Gavin whined again.

“Just do it, he won’t notice.”

“I notice everything, Ray.”

“Yeah, sure you do.”

Ryan had already changed the channel to the finals of the Intersystem Ancient Combat Arena video game tournament. The brightly flashing colors captured Gavin’s attention immediately.

“Hey, I used to play this!” He sat up. “Was pretty spiffing at it. I was the tits.”

“So what’s going on here?” Ryan asked. “Explain it to me.”

Gavin squinted at the screen, mouth hanging slightly open. “Well the goal is… You’ve got two teams and… and I…” He broke into a vapid grin. “I forget.”

The ensuing hysterics finally drew Geoff out of his office to find the source of the racket. He came
stamping grumpily into the doorway and glared tiredly at them.

“Can a guy get some fuckin’ quiet in here?”

“Sorry, Geoff.” Ray said. “Wo de cuo.”

“Then fix it,” the captain groused. “You're makin' it hard to think.”

“Okay. Here, Gav, you wanted this food, eat it.”

“You totally positive you won't join us, sir?” Ryan wheedled. “I've even got coffee. It could be lack of sleep that's making it hard to think.”

“Positive, you loud-ass fucks. Gimme that.”

He confiscated the coffee and retreated. Gavin was already gleefully prying open a carton of leftovers.

“What'cha got there, Gavin?” his partner asked.

“Scallion pancakes.”

“Hmm,” Ryan said teasingly, sensing another opportunity for mischief. “What are they made of?”

“Well it’s a scallion pancake, innit? Scallions.”

“Okay, and what else?”

“D'you not know what a scallion is, Ry? It's a tiny smidgey leek thing, yeah?”

“Yeah, so, that is not only scallions,” Ryan pushed a little further.

“Are you off your bloody skull? 'Course not!”

“So what's the other ninety percent made of?”

“Pancake!”

The two more sober men began to laugh again, hard. From down the hall, Geoff’s voice roared out: “Shut the fuck up, assholes!”

Which, of course, only made it worse.

Their raucous amusement finally tempted Dan out of his ball of fading misery. He was recovered enough to share their meal, and even partook of some of Ray's stash after his turn admiring the artfully worked glass.

“Wow, look at that! This is deluxe, Ray, good eye.”

“I know,” the sniper said smugly.

Ryan grimaced as a fresh billow of smoke filled the room. “Bleh. You'd think they'd find a way to make this stuff smell nice.” He rose to open the window and stuck his head outside for some fresh air.

“Dude, this is great,” Ray said, having another rip of his own before putting the bong away again. “It's like, like pineapple. And hey, you come back covered in xiekuai half the time, so you ain't
exactly one to talk.”

Ryan turned back to face him. “Your nose can't possibly work right. It's like a skunk shit out a pine tree in here.”

“Let's ask Gavin, then, he's got the most nose out of all of us,” Dan quipped.

“Ohhh, shit! Shots fired!” yelled Ray, looking expectantly to Gavin for a reaction. The hacker looked a little hurt.

“That’s not nice, B,” he pouted.

Dan’s smile faded while the others’ grew. “Sorry, B. Too far?”

“From what?”

“Wou de tian ah,” Ryan sighed, shaking his head with a smirk on his face. His three high companions were giggling helplessly yet again. “It’s gonna be a long day, isn’t it?”

“Not for him,” said Ray when he caught his breath. “It’ll be a fuckin’ miracle if he remembers much of anything.”

“Oh boy.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

wo bu hejiu: I don't drink
guai: hell
zhe zhen kexiao: this is hilarious
goushi: shit
lao tien fu: oh, god
wo de cuo: my fault
xiekuai: gore, blood and guts
wou de tian ah: oh my god

P.S. Yes, the "documentary" is Firefly. I have no shame.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Content warning for... I dunno, coping with mental illness in general? For the record, this chapter was inspired by my own experiences with depression and lovingkindness meditation. I don't want to be insensitive to anyone with multiple personality disorder so if something comes across as shitty, PLEASE let me know.

Also, hooray for informed consent!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Michael and Lindsay returned that evening, laden with shopping, to find the crew’s floor quiet. Only Ryan was up, examining and cleaning the guns he’d neatly dismantled on the kitchen table. When he noticed them enter, he quickly tried to make some space for them.

“Don’t bother, bro, we’re good.” Lindsay dropped her bags on the floor and began to unpack groceries. “Where is everybody?”

Ryan smirked, still rearranging his weapons. He filled them in on the afternoon’s activities, from Ray’s mistake to Gavin’s eventual slumber.

“…just talking absolute nonsense, and he kept trying to get frisky, I mean literally couldn’t keep his hands still. I told him, ‘you can barely move, let’s talk when you’re sober.’ He was all ‘But Ry-yan!’ for about two minutes and then passed right the hell out. He’s asleep in our room, but I didn’t want to leave him alone, so. Here I am.”

“Classic Ray, corruptin’ the youth.” Michael prominently placed a small silver canister next to the coffee machine. “What about everyone else?”

“I haven’t seen Jack all day. Ray and Dan went for food about twenty minutes ago, but Geoff hasn’t come out of his lair yet. Hopefully he’s seen sense and taken a nap by now.”

“Sense? Geoff? Heaven forbid,” said Lindsay.

Ryan shrugged. “I have a feeling we’re gonna be shipping out before too long. Something’s got under his skin.” He snapped a few pieces of metal back into the shape of a pistol.

“Ain’t you lookin’ forward to this one, too?” Michael asked with his head in the fridge.

“Well…” Ryan paused his work. His voice became deep and hushed, and his easy grip on a rifle stock turned into a caress. “Maybe.”

“That means he can’t fuckin’ wait,” Lindsay drawled. “You’re a beautiful, sadistic motherfucker, Haywood.”

The odd glint in her crewmate’s eyes didn’t fade as he continued tending to his arsenal, and he didn’t speak any more, either. The atmosphere made both Joneses quiet as they prepared their dinner, communicating in murmurs and small touches. Despite the space Ryan had cleared on the table for them, they retreated to their own room to eat, leaving him alone once more. He snorted
when soft moans began to filter through the wall a little while later, and tuned them out by imagining his part of the upcoming job in excruciatingly gory detail. His hands continued on autopilot.

A closer, less happy moan snapped him out of his distinctly murderous trance. Gavin came staggering in, eyes still swollen, and made a beeline for the sink. He stuck his mouth directly under the faucet and began to gulp water as fast as he could. More spilled down his front than down his throat.

“All right there, Gav?”

“Frsy,” Gavin burbled.

“I can tell.” Ryan smiled and leaned back in his chair. “You know there’s a sink in our bathroom, right?”

“Lk’n f’you.”

“Well, you found me. I’m impressed you’re on your feet, honestly. How about we go back to bed, hmm? I’ll bring a glass of water so you can stay horizontal.”

Gavin straightened up from the sink. “Okay,” he gasped, chest heaving as he recovered from his self-inflicted drowning. He pawed at his wet shirt, suddenly agitated. “Gotta get this off. Feels weird. Scratchy.” He awkwardly pulled it over his head, but got stuck halfway. Ryan chuckled and filled a glass for him.

“Let’s go, dear. Time to sleep.”

When Gavin fell onto the mattress he writhed around until he was free of his clothes and lay, damp and naked, in a tangle of sheets. Ryan cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You good?”

“C’mere, Rye-bread. Got something for you,” Gavin wheedled, trying to arrange himself in an alluring manner. He managed it for only a few seconds before he giggled, utterly ruining any attempt at seduction. “’s my penis.”

“O qin’ai de,” Ryan sighed, amused in spite of himself. “Gavin, I told you, we’ll talk in the morning.”

“But – ”

“No buts,” he said firmly. “And you’re not getting any ass, either. Now stay right there while I put my guns away. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You’re meeean.”

“Yes, and you’re high, so hush,” Ryan called quietly over his shoulder on his way out the door. He swiftly reassembled all his weapons, with a mental note to finish cleaning the ones he hadn’t gotten to, and hauled it all into their room to deal with later.

Gavin had already passed out again. Ryan dug his reader out of his luggage and lay down on the other side of the bed, intending to make some progress on the epic fantasy novel he was in the middle of. Instead he found himself gazing soberly at his boyfriend, the fading evening light just enough to see all the bruises and abrasions he’d left two days before. He reached out and touched
one of them, so softly that Gavin didn’t stir.

“You’re gonna make me do it again, aren’t you?” Ryan murmured. “You’re insane. I’m insane. We’re both out of our goddamn minds.”

There was, of course, no answer, and the silence sank deeply into the air. Ryan frowned as his heartbeat grew unpleasantly hard, like hammer blows trying to break out of his ribcage, and a sick tingle started to gather in his throat. He shook his head and grabbed his tablet again, but he was too late – the words were nothing but pixels. He ground his teeth and sat up to glare at his armor, lying not-so-innocently on a chair in the corner. The mask, resting atop the neatly folded jacket, grinned back at him.

It knew.

“Wei ta ma de yuangu,” Ryan growled. “Get back where you belong.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing it away, but when he opened them, the skull was still there. He nearly wailed in desperation, silencing himself just in time for Gavin’s sake. He dropped his head into his hands and clenched at his face. This had to stop.

Only one recourse, other than killing or torturing somebody to satisfy the beast, was left to him. Cursing himself, Ryan slipped out of bed and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the mocking mask. He breathed deeply a few times, bringing all his attention to the air flowing in and out of his lungs, and gently closed his eyes.

He’d somehow managed not to do this for entirely too long – a week, at least. The barrier that separated Ryan from Vagabond was already cracked and frayed; tendrils of darkness had begun eroding the control Ryan had spent so long building up but was never quite able to finish.

Carefully, deliberately, he took a mental step back, to observe rather than experience the battle inside of him. Slowly he called up feelings and images – memories – of the time Before, when he’d been happily alone in his head. It took enormous effort to see the faces of the people he’d called friends; the animal shelter he’d volunteered at; the backyard of his childhood home. He gathered them up and nurtured them until they became crystal clear, lucid dreams complete with sound and smell. He held them in his mind for a while, cherished them, until it was no longer difficult and he felt he was ready to move on.

He steeled himself and wound the clock forward, to After, skipping past the hellish years and out the other side to the good times with Hunter’s crew: sparring playfully with each other; the look on Lindsay’s face at her wedding; coasting through the glittering sky after a job well done. Just a little further had him approaching the present, but he firmly halted at the last time they’d been on Persephone. Nothing since then was safe.

After what he sensed was an hour, Ryan let it all go. He counted ten long, slow breaths, blessedly undisturbed by any shadows, and hesitantly opened his eyes. His mask still rested in front of his face, but the malice had faded for now. He smiled, stretched, and got himself a snack.

Dark had properly fallen over the city. Faint street noise and the smell of allspice drifted through the slightly open kitchen window as Ryan munched on one of the apples Lindsay had bought. With every bite he relished the internal quiet he’d cultivated, allowing himself to really appreciate the crisp sound of the fruit’s breaking skin and the sharp sweetness of its juice on his tongue. Each sensation was pure, clean, and vivid, a connection to the physical world outside the border of his skull. He ate slowly, wanting to make the moment last.
It was with resignation that he finally threw away the core, because it meant it he had to begin the second part of his task.

This time, he wore his armor.

With each piece he put on – boots, jeans, jacket, face paint – Vagabond grew a little bit stronger. At last he sat down on the floor again, took a shaky breath, and pulled the mask onto his head.

At once the emptiness rushed in. Instead of allowing it to completely wash him away as it was determined to do, Ryan fought for every neuron he could hold, a beachhead to fortify himself against the demon with whom he shared the same sack of meat. Vagabond was useful, yes, and “normal” Ryan was still fucked up enough that sometimes he was even fun, but only when he could be directed. It had taken a lot of work and a small miracle to make him obey Geoff. If Ryan himself couldn’t do it…

He never wanted to be like that again.

Vagabond was restless. The upcoming job had him excited, thirsty for blood, hungry for other people’s pain. But he knew it wasn’t yet time, and the familiar ritual of meditation soothed him despite the significant gap in his practice. He settled in, a coiled snake patiently waiting for his prey to get close.

Once Ryan had weathered the initial storm, he started his exercise over from the beginning. Despite having refreshed the memories beforehand, it was harder to bring them back now than it had been the first time around. Vagabond resisted; he wanted either icy calm or vicious glee, nothing else. Ryan did the best he could to push back against the cold monolith, desperately trying to visualize the things that made him feel human. He worked hard enough that by the time Vagabond decided they were done, Ryan had given their body a headache.

They took off the mask exactly an hour after putting it on. Ryan grimaced and rubbed at his throbbing temples, getting greasepaint all over his fingers in the process. This session had sucked, but at least Vagabond had followed the schedule. If he ever decided not to let go, there would be far more to worry about than a migraine.

Exhaustion fell like a sledgehammer when Ryan tried to stand up, and he staggered slightly as he got into the shower. The water only served to tire him out further, and it took the last dregs of his willpower not to curl up to sleep on the wet tiles. He hardly bothered to dry off before collapsing into bed. Gavin jerked in surprise.

“Sorry,” Ryan muttered, half-into his pillow. “Go back to sleep.”

“Ryan?”

“Shh.” He turned to drape his arm over Gavin, who wriggled until they were face-to-face. Their noses bumped gently against one another.

“Ryan, you’re my favorite.”

Ryan smiled, a little sadly, and closed his eyes. “I love you too, yuanjia.”

Chapter End Notes
Chinese translations
o qin’ai de: oh dear
wei ta ma de yuangu: for fuck's sake
yuanjia: sweetheart, enemy, foe, one's destined love (Google Translate gives all these definitions; I intentionally used this word because of its apparent duality. If I screwed it up, which I probably did, leave a comment and I'll switch to "bao bei," the regular word for darling or sweetheart.)
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A piece of paper lay on the kitchen table when the Joneses awoke that morning. Michael scanned the note, then passed it to his wife.

“Well, Ryan was right. Geoff’s really fired up. Look, he even made his own coffee!”

“For fuck’s sake, he knows these upgrades’ll take more’n a day,” Lindsay groaned. “I best get goin’.”

“At least eat something first, babe.”

“Only if I can do it on the road. Toss me one of the protein shakes?”

Michael did so, and threw some snacks in a bag for her as well. “Don’t wear yourself out,” he cautioned. “The captain can *qu tiao hu* if he wants you to rebuild the whole fuckin’ boat by tonight.”

“*Fang xin,*” Lindsay reassured him. “I’ll call Jack real quick before I go. And we got those new radios yesterday, remember? I’ll check in with you later.”

“You better,” Michael grumbled. Lindsay gave him a kiss goodbye and went to borrow Jacob’s car.

Michael’s clumsy attempt to make fried bread lured both Ryan and Ray out to join him, and he waved their attention to Geoff’s note while he finished plating his breakfast.

“Son of a bitch,” Ray sighed. “I’m not awake enough for this.”

“Are you ever awake enough for anything?” Michael asked grumpily. Ryan looked up in mild surprise.

“Don’t put too much salt on that toast,” he chided. “*Mei mei* took off already?”

“Yeah.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. When I’m done with my shit I’m gonna see if I can get over there and help her out.” He grabbed some syrup from a cabinet and took his three slices of bread to the table, hunching over the plate possessively.

“No fair,” accused Ray. “You didn’t make enough for everybody.”

“I never said I’d feed your scrawny ass, Ray, you just showed up.”

“All right, kids, *lengjing,*” Ryan ordered before the sniper could cook up a retort. “I’ll do some more. What’s so bad about sending a few Waves, Ray?”

Ray gave him a long-suffering look. “Have you called home lately?”

Ryan cringed. “Touché.”
After breakfast he left the dishes for Ray to clean up and went back to his room. Gavin still lay abed, snoring lightly. Ryan gently shook him by his good shoulder.

“Wake up, Gav. We’ve got work to do.”

Gavin grudgingly rolled over, groaning and squinting into the light. “Ugh, my head…” he rasped. “Whuss goin’ on? What? How much did I drink last night?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re missing the entire day.” Ryan sat down on the mattress beside him and handed him a glass of water. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Gavin scrunched up his face, and rinsed out his cottony mouth so he could speak. “We got bevs with Dan, yeah? No… Ray gave me a present. Didn’t he?”

Ryan snorted and shook his head in resignation. “He sure did.”

“But… but that was morning, wunnit? …Good lord, I need to piss.”

He dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom, swaying slightly. Soon the sound of the shower came filtering through the closed door.

Ryan took the opportunity to finish cleaning his guns before starting to pack. He’d gotten most of his things stowed and had begun to polish his boots when he realized that Gavin hadn’t come out yet, and the water was still running.

“Hey, Gav, are you okay in there?” He knocked a couple of times, and upon receiving no answer, opened the door. A billow of warm steam smacked him in the face.

Gavin was sitting on the floor of the shower, hugging his knees, letting the water beat on him. He looked up at Ryan’s approach and attempted a smile.

“Sorry. I’ve got a wicked headache.”

“I’m not surprised, but we gotta get moving.” Ryan twisted the knob to cut the flow, forcing the hacker to either get up or freeze. “Geoff wants to dust off as soon as possible, tonight if we can. We gotta finish the upgrades to Hunter first.”

“That’s bollocks,” Gavin whined, and reached for a towel. “It feels like we just got here!”

“Yeah, I bet it does,” Ryan commented dryly. “Don’t worry, we’ll be back. Probably. If this job goes smooth.”

Gavin paused drying off, suddenly apprehensive. “Don’t even say that, Ryan.”

“What? It’s true.”

“Maybe, but I don’t wanna think about it.”

“Then think about this.”

Ryan pulled him in for a gentle kiss that made all of Gavin’s nervousness melt away. Though chaste, it was sweet, melding their lips into a warm and comfortable connection. The towel nearly dropped into a puddle.

“Now get dressed,” Ryan said when they separated. “We’re building your new workstation today.”
That woke Gavin up more effectively than the shower had, and cleared the dreamy mist from his eyes. He still moved like a man with a hangover, but actually started to pack up rather than wallow in it.

“You really don’t remember anything about yesterday?” Ryan asked, watching as Gavin pulled on a shirt. The younger man shrugged.

“So what? I must’ve got blackout drunk. Used to do it all the damn time.”

“Try stoned. Like really, really stoned. We’re talking tian fan di fu, here.”

Gavin stared incredulously at him. “How’d I manage that?”

“By having too much of Ray’s special chocolate.” Ryan smirked. “You might owe him a few credits for that.”

“Aw, tits,” Gavin groaned. “Either way, I didn’t do anything bloody idiotic, did I?”

The smirk turned into a huge grin. “Well, it was really fun listening to you spout absolute gibberish. The more intelligible parts were that you were desperate for grapes and ‘on a roller coaster through time.’ You asked if rocks float on lava. Oh, and hao shen did you get horny. Like, yikes. I haven’t seen anyone that worked up since the Academy.”

“So no change, then?” Gavin replied cheekily. “Shame I don’t remember the sex.”

“Well, that’s because it didn’t happen,” Ryan said, turning serious. “I’m not gonna take advantage of you in that state – high or drunk – without laying down some ground rules while you’re sober.”

“Oh. Uh… thanks.” Gavin toyed with the shoe in his hands, simultaneously grateful and weirdly disappointed. He looked up with a mischievous expression. “The answer’s yes, though. Anytime, anyplace. Unless I’m proper unconscious, I guess,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

“Duly noted, but let’s check in before you get wasted next time,” Ryan warned. He suddenly shivered. “And don’t try to get me in my armor, when you’re like that. Just… just don’t.”

Again, an odd shot of disappointment, but the look on Ryan’s face left no room for argument. It was even more implacable than the captain at his most serious.

“I promise, Ry,” Gavin said solemnly. The mood didn’t last long, though, and he grinned slyly. “What about now? I bet a good shag’ll clear this headache up right quick.”

Ryan was thrown off-balance by the proposition, but smiled as he shook his head. “I told you already, we have to get to work. Maybe after we’re done with everything.”

“Aw, fine,” his incorrigible partner muttered. “Damn good motivation, though.”

“Yeah. Sure. Now go eat while I finish packing.”

Michael glanced up from his sketchbook when Gavin wandered into the kitchen to find breakfast. “Feelin’ okay there, boi?”

“Been better. What’re you doing?”

Michael held up his work for inspection. Stylized flames, letters in different fonts, and various symbols of loyalty covered the page.
“Geoff says we’re goin’ with the cattle-brand idea,” he explained. “I’m workin’ on the design.”

Gavin peered at them. “I like this one,” he declared, pointing at a blocky capital B made to look like it was on fire. Michael turned the notebook around to evaluate it.

“Huh. You think so?”


“Good enough for me.” Michael stuffed his pencils back into their bag and pushed away from the table. “I gotta hit the Dump. Have some tea, you look like shit.”

Gavin’s eyes went wide. “Tea?!”

“Picked it up yesterday,” Michael said, and tossed him the canister on his way out the door. “Go nuts.”

He left before Gavin had the chance to thank him. Instead the hacker reverently opened the tin, lifted it to his nose, and inhaled deeply. The bright, fruit-like aroma of loose Dyton Black brought tears of homesick joy to his eyes.

Ryan found him nursing a steaming mug. “Have you eaten yet?” he asked.

“No.”

“Come on, Gav. It’s gonna be a long day.”


“If you insist, but make it quick. I’m packing it up to take with us.”

Gavin sighed, grabbed a pastry from the counter, and immediately returned to his beverage. Ryan finished loading the rest of their groceries into bags just as Jack arrived in Jehlani’s van. They rosted Ray from his brooding, filled the car with their luggage, and swung past the Dump to grab Michael on their way back to the ship.

Lindsay had already been working for some time when they got there. Boxes lay stacked just outside the cargo bay; Gavin eagerly seized the one labeled with his name and tore it open. It was full of smaller boxes in bright colors.

“Perfect!” he exclaimed. “I think I’ve got everything now. C’mon, Ryan!”

He bounded up the ramp, forgetting in his haste that the rest of his computer parts were still in the car. There was nothing in the pile for Ryan, so he gathered up the components that Gavin had left behind and followed him into the ship.

The excitable hacker had set up a construction zone on the floor of Ryan’s quarters. He looked up eagerly at the sound of his partner’s footsteps.

“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he gushed. “Come on, don’t faff about, let’s get this compy compson online!”

Assembly required a whole different set of tools than those they’d used to piece together the first rig. This stuff had likely never even been in the same room as a soldering iron, instead joining together at the delicate touch of a magnetic needle. Everything was tiny, and Ryan was impressed at the patience Gavin displayed while they worked. All the hyperactivity had vanished; his hands
moved with deliberate precision, and his gaze was steady through the lens of a magnifying visor.

While each individual component was minuscule, altogether the arrays of processors and memory modules filled a chassis the size of a small tray of brownies. At last Gavin placed the side panel and ghosted a finger over the power sensor.

“Suck it, bitch!” he crowed as the display snapped to life.

Ryan grinned in satisfaction. “Nice.”

“Course, now I gotta configure it…” Gavin sighed. “Where’d we put those software chips?” He began to dig around in the pile of boxes that surrounded him.

“I think it’s break time,” Ryan said, stretching. “We’ve been here for a few hours already.”

“What?” Gavin glanced at the clock and stared: it was past 2 P.M. “When did that happen?”

“One second ago, and then a second before that…” Gavin threw a packing peanut at him. “Come on, let’s get some lunch and then you can finish this up.”

Metallic echoes filtered through the hall outside Ryan’s quarters, coming from both directions at once. Gavin paid no attention, and merely grabbed a protein shake before retreating to begin the solo portion of his project. Ryan didn’t linger, either, but took his meal up to the bridge instead. Here too were piles of full and empty boxes, but they had been stacked with military efficiency rather than tossed wherever was convenient. Jack stood on the copilot’s seat, unscrewing a ceiling panel.

“What’s up, Jack? Need a hand?”

“Hold on.” She gently lowered the panel and stepped off the chair, placing everything out of the way. “There we go. Sure, if you’re done with the computer, I’d appreciate it if you could get that nav set installed. Lindsay and I want to get everything done that we can’t do in the air, ASAP.”

“Roger. Manual?”

“In the box.”

“Got it.”

He memorized the instructions over lunch. When his stomach was full he opened his own hole in the wall and began to replace Hunter’s old navigation assembly.

The crew and the dock workers crawled over the ship for the remainder of the afternoon. Lindsay in particular ran around like a headless chicken, frantically modifying the engines with Michael and Ray helping where they could. Geoff radioed in to check their progress and got snapped at for his trouble.

Several hours later, Hunter was spaceworthy again. Though Geoff was antsy, he was browbeaten into letting the crew say a proper goodbye to Carla, Jacob, and the showers at the inn. Jack finagled a trip to Jehlani’s house for one last meal, a late dinner of roast lamb and vegetable medley that the captain admitted was well worth the time. A final round of hugs was exchanged, and as the clock struck ten the crew piled into a shuttle and took off back to the port.

“Crosscheck,” Geoff called over the PA once everyone had settled in. “Fuel cells?”
“At max, sir,” replied Jack.

“Water tanks?”

“Full up,” answered Michael.

“Oxygen?”

“Breathin’ fine, cap,” confirmed Lindsay.

“Shiny. Next stop, Three Hills. Punch it, Jack.”

**Hunter** came alive, her VTOL engines purring, her helm responding smooth as a fighter jet. A slow grin spread across Jack’s face as she stroked the throttle.

“Hang on tight, kids. Mama’s burning hard.”

The atmosphere shuddered in their wake.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

qu tiao hu: go jump in a lake
fang xin: don't worry
mei mei: little sister
lengjing: calm down
tian fan di fu: complete disarray/pandemonium, literally "sky tumbles while earth turns over"
hao shen: good god
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS
harm to children
sexual assault (not the child)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took some convincing to get Jack off the bridge for an all-hands meeting. She was so enamored of her new and improved cockpit that, had the captain not given a direct order, she’d have happily flown on manual control all the way to their destination.

“All right, all right… yes, sir,” she grumbled, setting the auto-pilot. “Can we at least do a slingshot around Cortex Relay Seven on the way? Please?”

“Never thought I’d hear you whinin’, Jack,” Geoff said, amused. “Fine, but only if it don’t slow us down, dohn-ma?”

“No sir, it won’t sir, thank you sir!” She bounced from her seat, grinning, and gave the dashboard a loving pat before heading to the common area.

Other than Jack and Gavin, who were ecstatic over their new toys, the crew was exhausted. They sprawled on the couch and floor, looking dully at Geoff as he stood in front of them all.

“I’ll make this quick. First thing: what with all we spent on Hunter, we’ve pretty much run our credits dry. We got forty-seven of our own left for general funds, and that’s only cuz Burns is footin’ our bill for business expenses. Anything you got in your pockets right now, that’s all you got til we get paid next.” His audience murmured nervously. “Now speakin’ of business. We’re pickin’ up the uniforms on Three Hills and then hoppin’ to Newhall for the knockout drugs. Your guys said they’ll have ‘em ready, right, Ray?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. From there, it’s go time. We got fake papers and registration for a berth on Rubicon. Ryan, you get to be captain for this gig.”

Everyone snapped back to attention, startled.

“Excuse me, sir?” Ryan asked.

“You heard me. I’m a wanted man, and the rest of y’all’re gonna be busy. We can go over all the details when you’ve had some shut-eye. Anyhow, while we’re in the air, I want the rest of this ship made just as badass as you can get her before we hit Reaver space. Gavin, you take your computer for a test drive and see what our new systems can handle. Let me know when it’s all checked out. Any questions? No? All right, go the fuck to sleep.” He strode out of the room before anyone had time to raise a hand.

“Jeez, what’s his problem?” Michael asked grumpily.
“Does it matter?” Lindsay countered, even more grumpily. “I’m goin’ to bed.”

“Same,” said Ray. “See you in the morning.”

As the crew dispersed, Ryan looked askance at Gavin, who’d gone white at the mention of Reavers. “Did you hear what the captain told you, Gav?”

“Yes,” the hacker said defensively, then looked down. “…No.”

“It’ll be fine,” Ryan soothed. “Do you know how disgustingly huge space is? The chance that we’ll run into a Reaver ship is basically nil.”

“Maybe, but what’s that old saying? Yeh… Uh, yeh lu jwo duo luh jwohn whet jian guay,” Gavin recited in broken Chinese. “What if this is the one time?”

“Your accent is shit,” Ryan teased. “Don’t worry, it won’t be. You’ll see when you test it out, our new navigation system can spot a dust mote a million miles away. We’ll be gone before they ever know we were in the sector.”

“If you say so.”

“Trust me.” Ryan took his arm and began to draw him towards their quarters. “C’mon, how about we hit the sack?”

Gavin shook his head. “Not right now. Gonna do some more with the computer.”

“Gavin, please. We've been working all day.”

“Just not tired,” Gavin muttered. “Go on, I’ll catch you up when I’m done.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I’m a tech guy too, dear. I know what that ‘done’ means.”

That scored a laugh. “Then you also know I won’t be able to sleep until I get there.”

“…Fine,” Ryan said, mouth twisted sideways with dissatisfaction. “I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

He left, and Gavin went to the guest room that he was in the middle of turning into a work space. He perched on the unopened box containing his new chair, donned his headset, and gently woke the machine he’d christened Phantom. It responded silently, accepted his password and fingerprint, and bathed him in harsh blue light from five monitors at once. That was the first thing to fix, he decided: a script that would adjust the screen’s brightness according to the time of day.

Gavin grew more and more restless as he tweaked this setting and that one, getting the interface the way he liked it before diving into any real work. The patience he never displayed anywhere else finally kicked in when it came time to write his custom security protocols; he recreated them from memory, then spent the night reworking and patching the weaknesses the Alliance had exploited to find him back on Ariel.

The ship’s clock read three in the morning when Gavin was satisfied with his digital defenses. He smugly checked one last configuration file, pleased by the speed with which he’d finished, and straightened from his hunch with a small noise of discomfort. Only when he began stretching the kinks out of his spine did he realize how hungry he was, and he finally wolfed down the now stone-cold fried rice he hadn’t noticed Ryan leave next to the keyboard for him.

Gavin continued to stare at the screen as he ate, its attenuated glow reflecting in his eyes.
Phantom’s power was now entirely at his disposal, awaiting only a Cortex link before the ’Verse was his playground once more. The Sourcebox was already configured; Gavin put his empty bowl on the floor, and made the connection.

“Yes,” he breathed as the icon turned green. His hands shook as he ran the first tests, reaching out through subspace to touch the vast tapestry of information upon which society was built. He could see everything, from the enormous relays that carried signals between stars to the tiny networks on Border planets where any computer was a rare and valuable asset. His fingers itched to pull up a dozen news feeds, forums, and games, to dive into his old life and never come up for air again. But he resisted, because there was one thing he wanted to do before anything else.

The criminal database beckoned.

Breaking in was like flying. The military security that had stymied him when using Ryan’s antiquated project was nothing more than an interesting puzzle now, and he was able to gain administrator access to his files in little more than an hour. He deleted them all, including the network backups, then found Geoff’s entry and did the same. Then he got rid of all active APBs on Firefly-class ships, for good measure.

By five-thirty he was giggling, high on his own success and the thrill of the risks he’d taken. Not a single flag had been raised in the system. Gavin licked his lips as he wondered what to do next, fingertips hovering over the keys. Suddenly a thought struck him, and his heart began to race. He searched for “Ryan Haywood.”

Ryan’s entry was nothing more than a record of dropped charges, but that was all Gavin needed. He memorized the reference number and dove into the main Alliance military network to dredge up the full case file. He scrolled through reams of court transcripts that he was too impatient to read, until he found what he was really after.

In the “Evidence” directory was a video labeled 2509-03-15_jrhaywood-helm. Gavin held his breath, and played it.

Through Ryan’s eyes, he watched as the strike team surrounded a house. He could hear Ryan’s calm, slow breathing, and the terse chatter of his helmet’s radio. Every so often he’d check in himself, with efficient phrases like “Roger” and “Haywood in position.” He pressed his back against the outside wall beside the door and watched his CO slip inside. All was silent for several minutes, until one of the eleven names along the left side of his visor went from green to yellow. Suddenly the voices started up again, this time laced with a sharp urgency.

“Sergeant, what’s your status?”

“Did anyone hear gunfire?”

A series of “Negative” replies.

“Sergeant, do you copy?”

“What’s going on?”

“Rangers, quiet!” Ryan snapped. The radio instantly fell silent. “I’m going in. Ghazi, you’re with me. Chan, Beeler, cover the front door. Go!”

A soldier appeared from seemingly nowhere to pair with Ryan. Quickly but stealthily they followed their sergeant into the house, checking doors and corners as they went. The sound of a
struggle in a locked room reached them as they climbed the stairs.

“Cover me,” Ryan whispered, and trusting Ghazi to do so, kicked down the door.

The scene inside made Gavin gasp. Ryan’s CO had a woman pinned to the ground with his hand over her mouth; her skirt was around her waist, and she desperately scrabbled for the pistol just out of reach as the man lined up to rape her. A child, no older than four, did his best to attack the assailant even though his hands were bound. His feeble efforts were utterly useless.

“Contact!” Ryan yelled as the vital stat readout on his HUD indicated a massive spike in heart rate. He’d started shooting almost before he spoke, a fully automatic barrage that struck just as the sergeant turned to look. His head snapped back as his helmet’s visor shattered in a spray of gore, and he collapsed on top of his intended victim. The yellow name on the screen turned red.

But the soldier wasn’t the only one to collapse. Ryan had fired in blind rage – or panic – and not all of his bullets were on target. Both the woman and the child also lay still, a pathetic pile of bodies in a spreading pool of blood.

“Target down, I repeat, target down!” he yelled. “Three… three casualties…”

Gavin could hear Ryan hyperventilating even over the chaos of chatter that poured from the radio. He approached the corpses seemingly on autopilot, taking out a trauma kit as his squadmates stormed the house.

“Clear!” they called as they advanced through each room. Ryan paid no mind as he dropped to his knees and began tending to the child’s wounds.

“He’s dead, sir,” said Ghazi, appearing next to him. “Look at his spine.”

Ryan ignored her. “We need a medivac,” he said in the flat voice of shock. “Get a medivac in here, now.”

“They’re already en route, you know that.”

“Get a fucking medivac!”

“Shit, I think you’re the one who needs it.”

“Shut up, ranger!” Ryan was beginning to sound hysterical. “This wasn’t supposed to happen! Meant to disable… not the kid… I’ve never…!”

Gavin hit pause, feeling sick, and suddenly he heard Ryan’s voice in real space.

“I wish you hadn’t done that.”

He whipped off his headset and looked up. It was seven in the morning and Ryan stood at his side with a mug of tea, eyes on the screen, face tormented.

“Uh. Hi,” Gavin said weakly, minimizing the window. “I just…”

“I know,” Ryan put the tea down and turned away. “Satisfied?”

“I… Ryan, wait,” Gavin called as Ryan moved to the door. He paused, but didn’t look back.

“What.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gavin stood and put a hand on his partner’s shoulder. “When we were building the first computer, why did you lie?”

Ryan laughed mirthlessly. “I was trying to get you to trust me, remember? A child-killer isn’t exactly a sympathetic character. And I didn’t lie, I just… left stuff out. Why did you have to go digging it back up?”


“Why this?”

Gavin shifted to take his hand. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “Can we talk?”

“What’s there to talk about? You saw everything.”

“I don’t think so.” Gavin drew him to the bed and sat down. “I think you ‘left something out’ about how you got from there to here.”

Ryan’s expression hardened. “You really want to know? Fine.” He pulled his hand away and stood back up, crossing his arms defiantly. “You ever killed a kid, Gavin? You should try it some time. How about the first time, the first life you take. Kill the child you were sent to rescue and see what that does to you. Where do you think my… my other self came from, huh?” He began to pace, voice rising. “And then, then try not being able to control it. Try having to run away from your friends, your family, try turning into a fucking serial killer and finding out that you like it. Do you know how long it took to separate it from me? For two years I jumped from planet to planet, making a living by day and taking lives at night. They call me the Vagabond because of it, did you know that? And finally, finally I started to get a grip, got my armor, started only killing criminals instead of random schmucks off the street. But that’s more dangerous, right, that’s yu mogui tiaowu, and one night I got in too deep. They were gonna kill me. When suddenly comes Geoff, and shei zhidaow wisheme, he saved my life and fucking hired me. Hired ‘the Vagabond.’ And fuck me if that guaiwu didn’t obey. He followed orders! But I’ve been fighting to keep it that way ever since. I’m still a fucked-up, sadistic wei shian dohn wu, and I still like it, but you’ve seen him. He’s on a whole other level. So here I am, Geoff’s attack dog, just trying to pretend I’m human.”

His voice broke and he stopped pacing, breathing hard. He stood with his hands pressed to his face and swallowed tightly a few times, fighting both tears and the urge to kill.

“Happy now?”

Gavin’s mouth hung open slightly, but his eyes were full of pity. He got off the bed and gently pulled Ryan’s hands down, leaning to give him a tender kiss. It was not reciprocated.

“You’re plenty human to me,” he said. “A monster wouldn’t’ve brought me tea, would it? Or looked after me when I was off my head?”

“Put my mask on and I won’t.”

“That’s not… Ryan, look, if you weren’t human you wouldn’t be trying so hard. You’d be out there with no mask still doing in whoever, but you’re here, with us! We’re criminals, but we’re not monsters. Hey.” He raised Ryan’s chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. “I don’t fall in love with monsters, all right?”

Ryan was dumbstruck. But as Gavin smiled at him, he came to life, and moved in for a sudden and passionate kiss as a few tears leaked down his cheeks. They embraced desperately, clutching at each other’s clothing; Gavin let go only to reach blindly for the door and slide it shut. Then he put a
hand on Ryan’s chest and pushed until they fell backwards onto the bed.

“Gav… we have work to do,” Ryan panted, halfheartedly trying to pull away.

“Bah. Hunter can wait.” Gavin began to snake his hand up Ryan’s shirt, laying kisses down his neck as he did so. “My job right now is taking care of you.”

Their not-so-quiet sounds filtered through the thin paper walls. When Lindsay came to get them after breakfast she paused to listen, smiled, and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

dohn-ma?: understand?
yeh lu jwo duo luh jwohn whei jian guay: do enough nighttime travels and one will eventually see a ghost
yu mogui tiaowu: dancing with the devil
shei zhidaow wisheme: who knows why?
guaiwu: monster, freak
wei shian dohn wu: dangerous person or animal
ALLIANCE NAVY HEADQUARTERS, LONDINIUM

“Sir. One of Lieutenant Hemmer’s sources says that the target will be on Three Hills within the week. They’re bound for the textiles manufacturing plant.”

“Finally! Send a cruiser, I want a whole division on this. Multiple strike teams, whoever Colonel Ghazi’s got available in the area. But take them alive, understand? We need them to talk.”

“Yessir. The Sanlinberg is nearb- Wait! Digisec reports inconsistencies in the criminal database! …Sir, it’s Free. He’s gone.”

“What?”

“Today’s cross-check showed his entry’s been deleted. Him, and Ramsey, and their ship.”

“The little… Why didn’t they stop this? What do we pay them for?”

“Well, the local records are intact. That’s why we keep them. Shall I have Digisec restore the public database from backup?”

“…No. Wait.”

“Sir?”

“They think they’re safe. They’ll get sloppy. Leave the records offline, but update the Operatives and brief the Sanlinberg.”

“Aye, sir.”

Michael paused his welding project at the sound of their arrival in the cargo bay. “There you are,” he said, removing his protective visor to look them over with a knowing smirk. “Christ, I wish I had your stamina.”

Ray, who had been holding the pieces of metal in place, rolled his eyes. “Just go to the mess hall. You’re lucky Lindsay kept Geoff from barging in and dragging you out.”

“I owe her one, then,” said Gavin. “C’mon, Ry, let’s go.”

He towed a pink-cheeked Ryan away to find the captain, who was taking inventory of their foodstuffs. He looked up at them with a distinct scowl.

“Fuckin’ about time, you fucks. Haywood, get movin’ on the damn medbay upgrades. Gavin, is your box done?”

“Yep!” he chirped as Ryan went about his task. “Works like a bloody dream.”
“You got it jacked into Hunter’s guts yet?”

Gavin shook his head. “I hard-wired it to her old conduits, but only the Cortex link is active. I thought I should talk to Jack before connecting any vital systems.”

“And what’ll that take?”

“Just a cheeky little pressy-doo.”

Geoff squinted at him. “That wasn’t English. Are you sayin’ it’s easy?”

“What’re you on about? Of course it’s English,” Gavin replied, mildly offended. “And yes, it’s easy.”

“Then say it simple, stupid. C’mon.”

Geoff set a brisk pace to the bridge. Jack looked up from the helm as they approached, saw Gavin, and leaped to her feet.

“Gan kwai, what do I have to do? How do I get it working?”

“Okay, okay, calm down,” Gavin laughed, taking a step backwards. “Tell me how you want the – ”

A flashing light and loud buzz from the communications panel startled all three of them. Jack and Geoff immediately went to look at it.

“It’s a Wave from Trevor.” Jack tilted her head slightly, confused. “But we’re out of range of any networks…”

“Not anymore,” Gavin said smugly. “Dedicated Sourcebox. We can make our own connections wherever we damn well feel like.”

Jack looked suitably impressed as the captain picked up the call. The monitor sprang to life, showing a young man with a long face, pale skin, and black hair that had been bleached yellow. His expression was grim.

“Geoff. We got ourselves a snitch.”

“What?! Hold on… Pattillo, get him out of here…”

Jack hustled an instantly curious Gavin away to talk bridge configurations. The captain turned back to the screen.

“Tell it.”

“I’m sorry to say we found one of my employees calling the Alliance this morning. He was even using a work computer, the idiot. That’s what we keep logs for…”

Geoff cleared his throat. “So what’d he tell ‘em? Did you catch him?”

“You bet your ass we caught him, and he’s good and dead as of ten minutes ago. We don’t fuck around on Haven. But, he sang like a bird first. One of Burns’ people is almost as good at interrogation as Ryan. You should’ve seen it.”

“That’s great, but what did he say?”
“He told them you were bound for the garment district on Three Hills and were due to arrive in four days. Also ratted out a few other spies in our midst. We’re gonna have a busy week.”

“That was it about us? Just where we were headed?”

“Yeah, but isn’t that enough? I’d stake my reputation on your welcome being a little too warm.”

“How shi sung chung,” Geoff said bitterly, and sighed. “Well, thanks for the heads-up, buddy. I appreciate it.”

Trevor smiled. “It’s the least I can do for my favorite clients. Yi lu shwen fohn and let me know if you’re still alive at the end of the week.”

“Will do.”

He hung up, clenched his fists on the edge of the dashboard, and swore for a minute. Jack poked her head back in when she sensed he’d cooled off.

“What’s the plan, sir?”

“For fuck’s sake, let me think,” the captain groaned, and collapsed into the copilot’s seat. His expression immediately lifted, and he wiggled around a little. “Wow. These are fuckin’ comfy.”

“Yes, sir, they are.” Jack took her own place and hit the internal comm. “Gavin, did you do it? Is it ready?”

His voice crackled through the radio. “You gotta hit ‘accept’ first. It should be a big green button on the nav screen.”

She pressed the icon with a finger that shook from excitement. The interface flashed black for an instant, and when it resumed it looked completely different – more complicated, yet sleek and elegant. Jack made a high-pitched noise and started going over everything in excruciating detail.

“…Did it work?” asked Gavin hesitantly.

Geoff was the one to reply. “Yeah, it worked,” he said. “I think Jack jizzed her pants. She’s gonna be useless for a bit. Do I gotta do anythin’ else up here?”

“Anywhere it says ‘accept,’ press it.”

The captain confirmed the updates on the rest of the bridge, and a similar transformation took place on each screen. “Okay, I did it.”

“Did anything go mental?”

“Uh… What’s mental look like?”

“Turning red or yellow, lots of flashes, exclamation points, warnings, explosions…”

“Then no.”

“Shiny. What next?”

Geoff rubbed his face tiredly. “Hang on, I’ll be right there.” He switched off the comm and flicked Jack’s ear to get her attention. “Start up that scanner and keep it on. Tell me the second you find any Alliance bullshit, and when you do, go dark.”
“Yes, sir,” she answered distractedly, too happy with her toys to be miffed at him.

He wandered down to the guest quarters to find Gavin perched on his box, eyes flicking between screens like he was watching a flock of starlings. There were copies of the bridge interfaces there, not just navigation but also readouts and monitors of nearly every aspect of the ship.

“Hey, Geoff. What’s up?” he asked without looking away.

“How’s it all doin’?”

Gavin shrugged. “I dunno dick about spaceships, but nothing’s obviously gone ‘round the twist. I’ll ask Lindsay when she’s got a minute.”

“All right,” Geoff said. “Then your next job is clearin’ our names.”

“Oh, from the Alliance database? Did that last night.”

The captain blinked, taken aback by the casual comment. “You did? Show me.”

Gavin pulled up a Cortex window and connected to the public bulletin. “Here, you can search it yourself. I scrubbed us and the ship from everywhere I could reach.”

Geoff paused. “You could reach?”

“Well yeah, they’re not complete plebs. They’ll have offline backups. Deleting those remotely is literally impossible.”

“Then what was the point?”

Gavin developed a shit-eating grin. “I left ‘em a present. They gotta connect the backups to the live servers to restore our files, yeah? When they do, they’ll trigger a worm that’ll corrupt the local copy. Any media they plug in will lose the sectors containing our data. Suck on that, impossible!”

Geoff rounded on him with a glare. “Goddammit, bhn dan, what’d I tell you about speakin’ English?”

The hacker sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. “Me real smart, Alliance no can fix warrant.”

“All right, you little shit,” Geoff growled, but with no real malice. “Keep that up and your first turn on the duty roster’ll be septic vac.”

He finished searching the database, giving a small grunt of satisfaction at each “no results” page. When he stood back up, his temper had vanished, and he even went so far as to ruffle Gavin’s hair.

“Good job,” he said gruffly.

Gavin preened. “Anything else?”

Geoff turned grim – not angry, but as serious as Gavin had ever seen him. “I reckon it’s long past time we find out what’s on that chip of yours.”

“Really?! Fizzing brill!” Gavin crowed excitedly, and jumped up to open a drawer next to his workstation. He grabbed the small blue chip in an eager rush, but froze for a moment to stare at it resting innocently in his palm. “All of this… because of you,” he whispered, then suddenly shivered and turned to Geoff. “I have to set up some security first. Give me a minute?”
“Yeah, just don’t take forever.”

All it needed was the flick of a switch, and Phantom’s secondary hardware woke up. The specially isolated machine shared the same chassis, but nothing else. It didn’t even have a Cortex link.

“There,” Gavin said. “Now, if there’s something malicious on this, it won’t infect the ship.”

He gently ran a finger down the back of the case until he found the Mini Trans-X 4.0 port. When the chip slid in, a new window popped up on one of the screens to show its contents: a single heavily encrypted folder.

“All right. Hold onto your knob.”

Gavin unlocked it with bated breath. It was full of hundreds of plain text documents, each titled with a person’s name. He idly scrolled down the alphabetized list, looking for anything different, until he saw someone he recognized.

“Samantha Alexis O’Neill,” he murmured, hovering the cursor over it. “That’s our local MP back home. Her campaign ads were everywhere last year.”

“Roger Chen O’Mallory. He’s eighth precinct on Xing Yun,” Geoff said quietly, pointing. “Adam Lerch Oakheart, New Melbourne. Quentin Manuel Obtetra, Albion. This is… Wou de tian ah, this is the whole Parliament. Oh, Gavin, what did you do?”

Instead of answering, Gavin opened one of the files. Under the heading “Oakland, Beverly Schorow” was the story of her entire life, both public and extremely private: from her birth certificate and voting record to her prescription medications and what color she dyed her hair in tenth grade. It even included her bra size and the fact that she’d stopped eating walnuts two months ago.


They stared transfixed as Gavin opened document after document. Every single one was a thorough and intimate profile of a politician, and went into such detail that a few notes made even the world-wise captain blush.

“Wait!” he ordered suddenly, jabbing a finger at the words on the screen. “Look. Right there, halfway down. Right fuckin’ there, is that… I can’t… No. Jesus fuckin’ Christ!” He began to pace furiously around the room. “Cheong bao ho tze xie e ta ma de hun dan, if I ever get my hands on him…”

“There’s no way he did that. No way,” Gavin said, trembling. “I… I refuse.”

“What did we get into?” Geoff wailed, voice cracking. “What are we gonna do?”

The sounds of his distress brought Ryan from the medbay next door. “What’s going on?” he asked urgently, body set to fight. Geoff shook his head violently and tried to be professional again. He only briefly succeeded.

“Stand down, Haywood. We’re okay… but Gavin found… fuckin’ hell, just look.”

Ryan, concern only increasing, went to the computer and put an arm around Gavin’s shoulders. His eyes went wide as he scanned the screen, then filled with pure, total, ice-cold rage.

“What the…”
“All of ‘em, Ry,” Gavin said in a near-whimper. “There’s one for every MP.”

“They all…?!?”

“No, not this. For God’s sake, I hope not this.” Gavin finally looked away from the monitor, turning to bury his face against Ryan’s side.

Geoff finally pulled himself together and spoke with deliberate care. “This is everything about everyone. Everything. Favorite color, corporate donors, how long their dicks are… Fuck, we could probably find out how many nose-hairs they’ve got.”

“Wou de tian ah.”

“See, that’s what I said!” The captain rubbed at his temples to ease his growing headache. “Haywood, I need your psycho ass. Gimme ideas. Shenme.”

“This is a lot to take in,” Ryan muttered.

“I swear, I didn’t know,” Gavin said indistinctly into Ryan’s shirt. “I’d’ve done something. Reported it. I swear on every star in the ‘Verse, right? Right?!?” He began to hyperventilate.

Ryan shifted to hold him properly. “Shh, bao bei, it’s okay. We know you didn’t.” He planted a gentle kiss on Gavin’s head, then looked up to Geoff and sighed. “Sir, the obvious course of action is blackmail. If shit like this hit the press there’d be a lynch mob, so whoever has proof can turn these motherfuckers into finger puppets.”

“Okay, and what if I don’t feel like trying to grab the entire fucking government by the balls right now?”

“We were already in too deep the second Gavin came aboard. Absolutely nothing is gonna keep whoever’s using this info from hunting us down, and even I can't go up against an Operative. They’re… enhanced. And they’ll never stop.” Ryan absently began petting Gavin’s hair as he thought, but the tenderness of his hands was nowhere near his eyes. “We have to find who’s behind this, and turn the tables. There is no alternative.”

“Fuck my life,” Geoff groaned. “You absolutely sure? We can’t just… shoot ‘em?”

“They gotta be alive to call off the hounds first. Then yes, hypothetically, we could shoot them, but we’d open the biggest can of worms in the ‘Verse. Who knows what these sick snakes would do without somebody keeping ‘em in line?”

Geoff started pacing again. “I hate it when you make sense,” he growled, and followed up with a few choice phrases in Chinese.

Ryan smirked at his cursing. “There’s a couple things we can do in the meantime, at least. We’ve got the motherlode of insider information here. Maybe Trevor could do some tactical investing for us, or we could sell it directly. There’s gotta be a shadow broker or two on Haven.”

“Yeah,” the captain said dryly. “Trevor.”

“Huh. Guy wears a lot of hats.”

“Worked together five years, and I'm pretty sure I still don’t know all of ‘em.” Geoff glanced at the bed, intending to throw himself down onto it, but stopped with a brief expression of distaste. “Ugh. Gavin, I’m gonna need to use your devil machine for a spell. How do I not break it?”
The hacker extracted himself from Ryan’s embrace and managed a weak smile. “Just don’t turn it off or kick anything across the room.”

“Shiny. All right, put this damn chair together already and then go help Michael. Ryan, back to work.”

“Yessir,” said Ryan, and left with threat in his stride.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

gan kwai: hurry up

how shi sung chung: a good show's about to start (sarcasm, i.e. "this'll be good")

yi lu shwen fohn: happy journey, bon voyage

buhn dan: idiot, moron

wou de tian ah: oh my god

cheong bao ho tze xie e ta ma de hun dan: monkey-raping evil motherfucking son of a bitch

shenme: anything

bao bei: sweetheart
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

CW for a bit more drug stuff, and also a minor breakdown. Happy new year!

Gavin went through the rest of the day in a haze of exhaustion and shock. He helped the lads finish constructing Michael’s new miniature forge, but didn’t answer any of their worried questions. After lunch he replaced the PA speakers, but the now-crystal-clear sounds were lost on him. By dinner he was swaying on his feet - he’d gone longer without sleep, but always with a case of energy drinks and a particularly engrossing project. He was ready to pass out on his plate by the time Geoff stood at the head of the table and called for attention.

“Today’s been a hell of a day,” the captain began solemnly. “Turns out the feds know where we’re headed, so our plans veez-ah-vee Three Hills might be changin’ on short notice. Changin’ to what, I ain’t figured out yet. We’ll burn that bridge when we get there. But we got another problem, too. A bigger one.”

He paused, inhaling deeply. The mess hall was dead silent.

“The shit Gavin stole from the military? It’s information. I know which MPs’ve been unfaithful, how many times, and with who. I know whose votes are bought and sold, who’s been diddlin’ kids, and… and worse.” He shuddered. “There are Reavers walkin’ the halls of Parliament, my friends.”

He looked at his crew, at each slack and horrified face around the table, and met their eyes with an iron expression that left absolutely no room for dispute. Authority radiated from him like heat as he spoke.

“Until further notice the mission of this crew is to find the bastards chasin’ us, the ones who own all this info, and make ‘em wish they’d never been born. From now on y’all’re gonna keep your lips tighter’n a worm’s anus, dohn-ma? Trust nobody – I mean nobody, Jack – with this. Don’t let slip where we’re goin’ or where we’ve been. This is more serious than every fuckin’ thing we’ve ever done and ever will do.” He shook his head ruefully. “I want every soul on board with me like heat as he spoke.

“Of course we’re with you, cap’n!” Lindsay exclaimed indignantly, and it set off a torrent of agreement. Only Ray hadn’t spoken when Geoff raised a hand for quiet.

“Sleep on it. Dismissed.”

He left for his quarters, but the crew remained at the table, profoundly shaken.

“Looks like he dismissed himself,” Ray joked without enthusiasm. Nobody smiled, but instead turned to Ryan as the next most senior officer.

“What the fuck,” Michael said flatly.
Ryan tore his gaze away from Geoff’s retreat. His shoulders went back, his chin rose, and his eyes went hard as gunmetal as he regarded each of his crewmates.

“What we have is blackmail, plain and simple,” he began. His voice was clear, quiet, and commanding. “Odds are good that someone high on the Alliance food chain is using it to control nearly every member of Parliament. That someone is in a panic, knowing that there was a breach and all their secrets are running loose out here in the black. They’ll hunt us, and everybody we’ve had contact with, until we’re all captured or dead. The captain agrees that the only way to stop this is to find the one in charge, and blackmail them for keeping certain… atrocities… hidden.”

There was a thoughtful silence.

“And then we’re the ones hushing it all up,” Jack said doubtfully. “If they’ve done such taotian things, shouldn’t we expose them?”

Ryan’s expression changed again. His bearing shifted from first mate to murderer, and his eyes from steady to sadistic. Everyone edged a little farther back in their seats.

“Maybe,” he whispered. “But what happens to them isn’t up to you.”

He stared into space – hungry, merciless, manic. The air filled with fear, but all he did was grin. Horribly. Like the mask he didn’t need.

“Ryan!” Gavin suddenly hissed in his ear. “Save it for the bedroom, love.”

That, and the hand trailing suggestively up his thigh, snapped Ryan out of it. He blinked, shook himself out, and smiled ruefully at the crew.


“Jesus Christ, Ryan,” Jack said weakly, still poised to flee.

Lindsay relaxed a bit, but not entirely. “Damn, Haywood. Go pull yourself together. We got the dishes.”

His regret was clear as he rose from the table, but he hid his trembling well. “Thanks, mei mei. No, Gavin, you stay,” he ordered as his partner stood to follow. “I… I need to sit for a while. Alone.”

“Aww, fine,” Gavin pouted, then gave him a sly wink. “I’ve got my radio if you change your mind.”

The crew warily watched Ryan leave. When the door to his room clicked shut, they turned as one to Gavin.

“The hell did you say to him?” Ray asked incredulously.

“Yeah, man, even I can’t talk him down so quick,” Lindsay added. “C’mon. Spill.”

Heat rushed to Gavin’s cheeks. “Something, uh… private,” he stammered. “It… It wouldn’t work for any of you. Trust me.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Ray grumbled. “Fine, y’know what, I don’t even wanna know. Let’s go spar, Michael. I gotta hit something.”

Jack snorted. “Same. Mind if I come with?”
“Me too,” added Lindsay. “Gavin?”

“Thanks, but I’m about to keel over,” he said, and yawned as if to prove it. “Didn’t sleep last night. Maybe tomorrow.” He wandered off to the cot in his workroom, leaving the others to bus the plates.

Jack convinced Geoff to take the helm, and after a quick change of clothes the four combatants squared off in the cargo bay. They started with set forms, working out the tension still lacing their muscles, and gradually picked up speed until everyone was making mistakes. After a water break they switched to a round-robin of freeform matches; Michael and Lindsay’s brawl, however, rapidly became a tickle fight. Ray and Jack paused at the sound of their hysterical laughter and gave them stares as dry as their foreheads weren’t.

“Get a room,” panted Ray. He took the opportunity to scrub the sweat off his face with his towel.

“C’mon, kids,” Jack scolded between heavy breaths, hands on her hips. “No sex on the battlefield.”

“Or anywhere near me!” Ray added firmly.

The Joneses, still giggling sporadically, found their feet.

“We’ll see you in the morning!” Michael called as Lindsay dragged him away.

They disappeared, and Jack sighed wistfully. “I miss my girls.”

Ray looked disgusted. “Don’t start. Are we throwing down or what?”

“Oh, right. Yes. First to three?”

“Body shots only.”

“Sure.”

They fought until Ray emerged victorious. Gasping for breath, they bowed to each other, then staggered to the mess hall and chugged water until they felt sick.

“Oof. I needed that,” Jack said, leaning back in her chair.

Ray smiled. “You should come off the bridge more often.”

“Or you should come visit me. I bet you’d have fun, all the new equipment makes it like a game.”

“Huh. Y’know what, sure.” He stood up with a groan. “Let’s get less disgusting and I’ll meet you there.”

Geoff was all too happy to surrender control of the helm. He returned to his quarters, fatigue lining every inch of him. Ray took the copilot’s seat and regarded the console with interest.

“Definitely looks different.”

Jack, checking their position, laughed. “Do you want me to go into the details?”

“Oh God no,” Ray said with feeling. “My ears would fall off. Just gimme the basics.”

Despite his words, he listened attentively as Jack happily explained what each chart, table, and graph meant. He even asked for a few of the finer points after all. When they came to the end of the
lesson, he nodded sagely.

“One last question. Where can I put my feet?”

Jack stared at him. “Please don’t.”

“Here’s good, right?” Ray leaned back in the chair and put his feet up on the corner of the dashboard where only plain metal showed. In this position he could lounge comfortably as he stared out into the abyss.

“What did I sa – Oh, fine.” Jack settled into her own seat with meticulously correct posture. “Don’t break anything, or I will break you.”

“We just proved you can’t,” Ray said with a smirk. Jack glowered at him.

“Only because I followed the rules. Remember which one of us was a soldier.”

“All right, all right, lengjing. You know I’ll be careful.” He turned back to the stars.

They flew in a silence that easily grew companionable. After a while Ray stretched, put his feet back on the floor, and stuck a hand in his pocket.

“You want some?” he asked, offering a half-eaten bar of chocolate. “It’s good. You can’t taste the weed at all.”

“Thanks, but I’m driving at the moment,” Jack said wryly. “Maybe some other time.”

“You sure? It’s not like she can’t fly herself.”

She considered his point, looked down at the charts, and then back to him. “Okay, but only a little. Ryan told me what this stuff did to Gavin.”

“Hah,” Ray scoffed, breaking off a tiny piece for her. “That idiot had three times as much as he was supposed to. This’ll just give you a nice buzz for a couple hours.”

“Ganbei, then.” Jack raised her share in a mocking toast, and popped it in her mouth. “Huh. That actually tastes good.”

“Right? I’m gonna get more next time we’re on Haven.” He took his own, larger bite, and settled down again.

The effects hit about half an hour later. Jack felt the fuzzy warmth building and set the helm for auto-pilot; in a few minutes she was reclining, feet up on the dashboard, gazing at the sparkling sky while her sore body comfortably melted. Ray glanced at the dreamy smile on her face, and giggled.

“So you like it, huh?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“How d’you feel?”

“Um… peaceful. Like… like I’m flying, but the ship’s not here. Or I am the ship. Just floating. It’s nice.”

“Wow,” said Ray, without a trace of sarcasm.
“What about you?”

“Empty, but a good empty. Kinda Zen, y’know? Everything and nothing. All of space.” He blissfully closed his eyes. “I’ve got the stars in me.”

They dozed on and off, unable to tell how much time was passing and not quite managing to care. At some point Jack spoke.

“This was a great idea.”

Ray smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks. …Wait, we did that backwards.”

“S’okay.”

“Okay.”

“…Hey Jack.”

“Hmm?”

“We oughta get Ryan to try this. Dude needs to chill.”

The suggestion woke Jack up considerably. “What? No.”

“Why not?”

“Did he ever tell you why he doesn’t drink?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well… then you should ask him. I don’t have the right to say.”

“But you know,” Ray said, tone daring her to spill the beans anyway. She didn’t bite.

“Yes. More or less. Kinda.” She furrowed her brow in thought. “Actually, he was pretty vague about it.”

“So… you don’t know.”

“Um. Probably not then. But he’s fanatical about it. No drinks, no drugs, no nothing.”

“All right. That’s a shame. It might get rid of that stick he’s got up his ass these days.”

Jack giggled, relaxing again. “I don’t think it’s a stick.”

“Gross,” Ray whined. “Can we not?”

“Oh. Sorry. But seriously, something changed right around when Gavin showed up. Ryan was more like this when we first met. Not even his usual scary motherfucker schtick, either. More… more _feral._”

Ray grimaced. “That sounds awful.”

“Or I guess it could just be all the stress going on right now. I haven’t seen the captain like this since around then, either.”
“The war?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Man, this ship must’ve been a fun place to be.”

“It was a rough start, yeah.” Jack smiled up at the sky. “Wouldn’t trade it for anything, though.”

They lapsed into silence again. Ray tried to recapture his earlier feeling, but there was a melancholy now that was hard to shake, especially with the soothing effect of the drug beginning to wear off. The day’s exertions were catching up with him, too; he found himself yawning one too many times, and gradually stretched out each part of his body in turn.

“I think I’m gonna peace,” he said as he pulled himself out of the chair. “Let’s do this again sometime.”

There was no response. He looked over to Jack and found her curled up in her plush seat, utterly asleep. Ray gently shook her shoulder until she woke up enough to look at him.

“Trust me, you wanna be in bed,” he cautioned with a wry smile. “Drink a lot of water and hit the sack. You need a hand?”

“Mmmf,” Jack complained, and reached out so he could help lever her to her feet. “Thanks. ’S was nice.”

“Wo de ronxing,” Ray yawned. “See you later.”

As Jack burrowed under her covers, she thought she could hear vague, unhappy sounds coming from the other side of the wall she shared with Ryan. But she was probably just imagining it, she told herself drowsily as she drifted off for real. She wouldn’t remember by morning.

It was Ryan’s turn to stay up half the night. Meditation was an agonizing trial, repeatedly devolving into a frantic internal shouting match that left him on the verge of tears. He had to keep starting over, taking a few minutes in between attempts to walk circles around his room. But when his memory exercise failed for the eighth time, he couldn’t even make himself stand up. Instead he buried his face in his pillow, and screamed.

He poured his panic and frustration into a raw and primal cry, and if it hadn’t been muffled it would have instantly woken the entire crew. It shattered the dam inside and suddenly he couldn’t stop; he screamed until he couldn’t breathe, gulped a fresh lungful of air, and screamed again. Tears like shrapnel dragged the worst of the pain out of him until he lay in bed, sobbing, as limp and fragile as wet tissue paper.

But an odd peace crept over him as he slowly wilted. Ryan suddenly had enough mental room to ease out of the agonized knot he’d tied himself up in; it was as though Vagabond had realized he’d crossed some sort of line, and was retreating almost sheepishly back to his side of their head. Amazed, Ryan sat up and wiped his face, moving cautiously in case he broke this unprecedented ceasefire. When nothing happened, he closed his eyes again - but instead of starting his routine, he built an entirely new picture.

He stood in Hunter’s cargo bay, center lit from nowhere, edges dissolving into shadow. With all his usual care and thoroughness, he constructed an image of Vagabond standing in front of him.
The creature materialized exactly as he looked in the mirror, right down to the scuffs on his boots and blood-dulled patches on his jacket. He carried no weapon, however, and felt hollow until Ryan completed the very last detail. Then the vessel awoke like a golem and Vagabond was there, a demon given its own form, yet willingly docile. The two of them stared at each other in silence.

“What the hell?” Ryan eventually said, in a wounded and disbelieving voice. “Could you always do that?”

“No.” There was no visible sign to indicate that Vagabond had spoken, but there was no doubt that it was him. “Not for a long time.”

“Then… what happened?”

Vagabond tilted his head – skull – in mild confusion. “Gavin did,” he answered, as if it was obvious.


“Of course you do. I look for cracks in people, Ryan. He shook you up, and you were starting to break. Tonight, you almost did.”

“…It was the MP, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Figures. I want to hurt him so bad, I wouldn’t even need you to do it.”

“But you would. That’s why I was there. You called me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Of course it does. I’m still you, Ryan. You only pretend I’m not.”

Ryan started to lose it again, and needed a moment to keep the visualization from collapsing. When it stabilized, he shook his head firmly. “No. You might be in here -” He gestured at his own body. “- but you’re not me. You’re a tool. I choose to use you. That’s all.”

“I didn’t come from nowhere. You needed to hide from what you are, so you made me. Every time I show up, it’s because you invited me. You think you fight me, but you want me. We are one, Ryan, and we should not be separated. You’re only hurting yourself when you try.”

Ryan lifted his chin defiantly. “No. You’re lying.”

Vagabond might have smiled under the mask. “If I were what you tell yourself I am, I’d be a Reaver. I’d lay this place to waste. So why do I do what Geoff tells me? Because he saved our life, and he has your respect. Why don’t I slaughter your friends at the first opportunity? Because they save our life on every job, and you like them. Why are we so in love with Gavin? Because he saved our life, and you just so happened to have a crush on him. If I wasn’t part of you, I wouldn’t give a shit what you felt. But loyalty is in your bones, Corporal Haywood, so it’s in mine too.”

“No,” Ryan said, but there was uncertainty in the word now. “No, all of that is because I control you. I’ve trained you, I force you to obey me.”

“You’re still not getting it.” Vagabond took a step forward, and then another. Ryan was frozen,
terrified, as the grinning skull came right up to his face. “I’d do what you want me to anyway, Ryan. That’s all I ever do. I Am. You.”

He moved forward one more time, and in a surge of ice merged entirely into Ryan’s body.

Ryan’s eyes flew open. He was sitting bolt upright in bed, panting, drenched in a cold sweat with blankets tangled around him.

“Bullshit,” he muttered. “Fucking bullshit.”

He got up and stripped down to wash, but the gel made him shiver in a way it usually didn’t, and his fresh pajama pants felt weirdly unfamiliar. He looked back at his cot and promptly decided that he didn’t feel like changing the sheets, so instead he climbed out of his quarters and padded through the silent ship to Gavin’s workroom.

The hacker had dumped his clothes on the floor and was curled up in bed, dead to the world. Ryan stood looking at him for a moment, wondering now just how much of his feelings were actually his. Then Gavin made a small noise and twitched in his sleep, and the wave of affection Ryan felt assuaged his fears for the time being. With a tiny smile he lay down beside his lover, and didn’t dream at all for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
dohn-ma?: Understand?
taotian: heinous
mei mei: little sister
lengjing: calm down
ganbei: cheers
wo de ronxing: my pleasure

P.S. I know it's spelled vis-a-vis, but this is Geoff talking. =P
Everyone was tense and tired the next day. The automatic coffee machine burbled quietly to itself for a while before anybody showed up to the mess, and then it took four pots to get the crew moving. There were only finishing touches left for the in-flight upgrades, but the caffeine was still only barely enough for them to do it right. Geoff wisely put off the detailed mission briefing again, and assigned only the new roster of regular chores over lunch. These were done more sluggishly than usual; it didn’t help that Gavin was the only one comfortable being in the same room as Ryan.

By late afternoon they had finally woken up, and were now simply on edge. Most of them tried to take their nerves out on the weights, but ended up calling the session early to avoid the stifling heat of Michael’s forge. Lindsay, on the other hand, was perfectly happy there, watching her shirtless husband work and sharing her iced lychee juice with him.

Gavin lingered as the others dispersed. “What is all this?” he asked, squinting curiously at the steel bar Michael was drawing out of the furnace. The end glowed a painful orange-white.

“That’s for the brand,” Lindsay said. “He’s gettin’ it the right temperature to start shapin’ it.”

“How’s he do that?”

She taught him most of the process, providing commentary as Michael performed the live demonstration. He’d just begun to anneal the piece when Jack came through the PA in glorious high-fidelity.

“Listen up, kids!” She sounded gleeful, but there was an oddly brittle edge to her voice. “In twenty minutes we will be approaching Cortex Relay Seven. Batten down your hatches because things might get a little… sideways.”

Ryan, who was just thinking of breaking out something to tinker with, immediately hit the comm panel in his room. “Jack, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m shaving some time off our trip by slingshotting around the relay. I’m just not entirely sure if the inertial dampeners are up to it.”

“Jack…” he said threateningly.

Geoff picked up. “It’s fine. I ran the numbers. We’re savin’ ten hours and it ain’t like Hunter’s gonna break apart. We might get shook a bit, is all.”

“And you couldn’t’ve said anything earlier?” Ray chimed in, annoyed. “Some of us have fragile shit in here!”

“Must’ve slipped my mind,” Jack replied casually.

Michael put his tongs aside to grab his radio. “I’m gonna fuckin’ murder you,” he growled. “You better hope all this hot metal doesn’t go flyin’ around, or I’m gonna shove it straight up your ass.”

“Fangsong, everybody, it’s not that bad.” Jack sounded put out. “I guess I’m not allowed to have fun.”
“So are we going on a roller coaster or not?” asked Ray.

“Oh, no, we are.”

“Fuck you,” Michael groaned.

“Eighteen minutes!”

The crew scrambled to protect their valuables. Lindsay helped Michael secure his project and make the forge as safe as possible. Ray used his special plant-training wire to lash down his roses, and rushed to transfer everything in his room from floor to drawers. Ryan double-checked that his weapons and tools were properly stowed, then did the same for the sharp objects in the medbay. Gavin ran to his workroom, grabbed his sculpture off the desk, and sat cradling it in one arm while stabilizing Phantom with the other. As he tucked the keyboard, mouse, and headset into the corner behind him he made a firm mental note to bolt down everything he could as soon as he had the chance.

“Anybody want to come up to the bridge? This’ll look pretty damn cool,” called Jack. Everyone was too busy saying their prayers to reply. “All right, kids, it’s T-minus one minute. I’ll try to be gentle.”

She turned off the PA, looked over at Geoff in the co-pilot’s seat, and grinned. He was smiling in a dangerous, mischievous way, as if he had a very painful surprise for someone and was really looking forward to giving it.

“Just like old times, eh, Pattillo?”

“Yes, sir!” she answered enthusiastically, champing at the bit as she watched the timer go down. “Ten, nine, eight…”

Geoff joined in, and they counted the final seconds together.

“Three, two, one… OORAH!”

Jack hauled on the throttle with their battle cry on her lips, and Hunter roared along with them. The enormous relay suddenly filled the viewscreen, a breathtaking spectacle of glittering lights and shining metal the size of a small moon. Jack executed a broad roll just for kicks as she skimmed the outside of the station’s electromagnetic halo, making sparks crackle along the fuselage and a haze of static flicker across the helm controls. She whooped gleefully as the ship accelerated, and with Geoff cheering beside her, slammed back out of orbit onto a new trajectory. Hunter groaned with inertia, enough that even with the dampeners the crew pulled close to 3gs.

It was over in a few exhilarating seconds. As soon as she stabilized, Hunter’s main engine flared, and she resumed her silent cruise through the stars.

Inside, however, was far from silent. From the raucous joy on the bridge to the vibrant cursing astern, Hunter rang with the crew’s voices. Their precautions had been a good idea, but while nearly everything important had stayed in place, most chairs had fallen over and a few loose odds and ends were piled against the starboard wall of each room. Many were broken.

As soon as they made everything shipshape again Ryan called an all-hands meeting. He and the crew stood menacingly before the couch, on which their captain and pilot sat like misbehaving children. Nobody was happy.

“I know y’all gotta blow off steam,” Lindsay lectured, “but wouldja kindly not break my baby to
do it? Fuck’s sake, Jack, we *just* fixed up those thrusters! *Hunter* ain’t no fighter jet!”

“Phantom would’ve kicked it if I wasn’t there,” added Gavin with his hands on his hips. “He’s the brain of the damn ship now, Geoff! I told you he shouldn’t go bloody smacking across the shitting room!”

“And what about us?” Michael’s voice was cold poison. “You ever stop to think that maybe somebody coulda got hurt?”

“I nearly got shanked by a flying scalpel,” grumbled Ryan.

Jack actually looked ashamed.

“Sorry, everyone,” she murmured, downcast. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“No, Pattillo, you’re fine,” Geoff assured her. He stood and faced the rest of the crew solemnly. “As captain, I’m responsible. Y’all’re right. It was stupid and I apologize.”

His matter-of-fact answer took the wind out of their sails. They shifted awkwardly, righteous anger suddenly without a target.

“Then… Apology accepted, I guess,” muttered Michael. “So long as you mean it, dickhead.”

Gavin wrinkled his nose with dissatisfaction. “You sure, boi?”

Michael nodded. Beside him, Lindsay shrugged. Her furious expression faded to a rueful smirk.

“Could never stay mad at you, Geoff.”

The others seemed to agree, if their deflated postures were any indication. Gavin sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck; Ray began inspecting the floor.


“*Ahem,*” Geoff said significantly.

“Dismissed, *sir.*”

“That’s better.”

He nudged Jack and beckoned. They grabbed some food from the mess and ate it on the bridge, watching the stars and listening as the crew prepared their own dinners and retired one by one. Finally the ship was utterly still, and it felt like the two of them were the only people in the universe.

Geoff closed the door as quietly as he could and sat down again. They turned to look at each other – and burst into helpless laughter.

“‘Oh, look at me, I’m the captain!’” Jack pitched her voice comically low and wiggled with mock self-importance. “‘I’m soooo responsible!’ *Baichi.*”

“Totally worth it,” he gasped, wiping an arm across his watering eyes. “You still got it, G-monster. Fuck, I miss flyin’ like that.”

“Hah! Now, there’s a name I haven’t heard in years.” Jack shook her head and smiled as the two of them settled down. “I don’t think my poor old body could take that much anymore.”
“God willin’ you’ll never need to. Not like at Sturges.” Geoff leaned back and closed his eyes. “But you’ll shred sky again, when we’re wealthy. I’ll see to it.”

Jack sighed wistfully. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m serious. When we’re outta this mess we’re gonna get rich as fuck and I’m gonna buy a moon. And everyone on it. And a whole fleet of jets to dick around in.” He smiled dreamily as his imagination ran wild. “Hmm, and some Companions to dick around in, too. Yeah.”

“For Christ’s sake,” Jack groaned. “You can keep some things to yourself, you know.”

“As if you ain’t told me worse,” retorted the captain. He was quiet for a moment, then released a breath heavy with the weight of command. “I’d rather think about that than what we’re sailin’ into,” he murmured.

Jack smiled softly. “You’ll get us through it. You always do.” She pressed one last button on the console and stood. Her bangs veiled her eyes. “Good night, sir.”

“Hey.” Geoff got up, too, and touched her shoulder so she would look at him. “One of these days you’re gonna realize you’re puttin’ put too much faith in me.”

“I don’t think so, sir.” Jack gently removed his hand so she could pull up her right sleeve. On the inside of her forearm was a weathered tattoo of their squadron’s insignia. A date was inscribed along its top edge: July 31, 2508.

The captain looked down. “I know, but…”

“Geoff.” She lifted his chin with a finger. “You earned it.”

The worry lines carved into his face became just a little deeper as he saw the unshakeable trust in her eyes. He turned away.

“Dismissed, Jack.”

She threw a salute he didn’t see, and left the bridge.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
    fangsong: relax
    baichi: moron, dork
The crew used the next morning to nail down or stow everything they possibly could. “We’ve been sloppy,” Ryan remarked as he helped Gavin gravity-proof the workroom. “You’d never get away with all this loose crap on a sailboat. Inertial dampeners spoiled us.”

“Sucks,” said Gavin as he carefully packed Ray’s gift into a drawer. “I like looking at this.”

“The inside of a battleship isn’t exactly what you’d call aesthetically pleasing.”

Gavin raised his eyebrows. “Is that what we are now?”

“If I know Geoff, we’re headed that way.” Ryan finished bolting Phantom to the floor and got to his feet. “Hell, the Independents used Fireflies early on in the war. Stick a rail gun on top and these things were a serious pain in the ass for the Alliance frigates. What do you think’s in that last big box in the cargo bay? We just haven’t had time to install it yet.”

“Huh.” Gavin ran a hand through his hair, which immediately became a mess. “That’s exciting.”

“Cross your fingers we don’t ever have to use it.”

“Aw, Ryan, you’ve jinxed it.”

“I’ll jinx you.”

A gleam appeared in Gavin’s eyes, and in one smooth motion he stripped his shirt off over his head. “All right, let’s go.”

Ryan paused, surprised – but not unpleasantly so – at such an eager reaction to offhand banter. “Feeling the magic, huh?”

“I’m serious.” Gavin arranged his pout to be as suggestive as possible, and insinuated himself across the room until he could slide his arms around Ryan’s neck. “Unless you don’t think you can handle this…”

Ryan smirked and settled his hands on Gavin’s waist. “Cai bu shi. I could handle you in my sleep.”

Gavin grinned. “Oh, really?”

He straightened up assertively, shoulders going back, chin rising. He pushed them towards the bed and guided them down to the mattress, straddling Ryan’s hips and bringing a possessive hand to his cheek.

“How d’you feel about a little switcheroo, love?”

Ryan’s breath hitched. “What did you have in mind?”
“Well, turnabout’s fair play, innit?” Gavin purred in his ear and followed up with a sharp nip of teeth. “It’s my turn to make you squirm. D’you want that, Ry? Want to be mine for a day?”

His low, intimate, somehow almost threatening voice struck a deep chord. Ryan shuddered as his body grew warm without him.

“I… I can’t not be in control, Gavin,” he rasped, pulling away. “You saw. It’s too much of a risk.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me,” Gavin said, but more gently. “Not for real. I’d bet my life on it.”

“It could actually be your life,” Ryan murmured, conflicted. His insistently growing erection was awfully distracting. “Maybe… maybe if we’re careful? Nothing, y’know, violent. Just going slow. If you can promise me that…”

“I promise, Ryan.” Gavin’s response was instant, and his air of eager dominance vanished. “Cross my heart and, uh… and rang fotuo shale wo. So there.”

“You’re not just saying that ‘cuz you’re horny, are you?”

“No.” Gavin sat back, raising his hands in a gesture of peace. “I know I can be an impulsive idiot, but if it would hurt you…” He stopped, surprised. He hadn’t expected to feel pain at the mere thought of inflicting the same on Ryan.

The air was thick as Ryan bit his lip, teetering on the edge. The terror of giving someone else the reins was strong.

But it was Gavin.

“Okay,” he said hesitantly. “But the safeword is ‘Reavers.’ If I say that, hard stop. No arguments.”

Gavin shivered, disgust flickering briefly across his face. “No worries on that. What a mood-killer.”

“Exactly,” Ryan confirmed with a small smile. He reached out to lace their fingers together. “But until then…”

Gavin shook himself internally, banishing unpleasant thoughts, and picked up where he’d left off.

“Are you absolutely sure?” he asked, leaning back down until his lips were a bare inch from meeting Ryan’s.

“Yes.”

Gavin grinned and closed the gap, pulling him in for a deep, possessive kiss. Without breaking it he caressed Ryan’s side under his shirt, gently tracing the lines of muscle with his fingertips. He ghosted over the scarred skin, humming appreciatively, until suddenly Ryan jumped with a squeak.

“Oh, dear,” Gavin said mischievously, laying his hand on the spot. “Ticklish, are we?”

“No,” Ryan began defensively, then yelped when Gavin dug in. “No no no, aah!” he giggled, flailing. He dislodged the smaller man easily, and flipped them over to pin Gavin’s arms to the mattress.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work,” he panted. “Want to try again?”

He released his hold and lay back down to let Gavin straddle him once more.
“You’re no fun,” Gavin pouted, pulling Ryan’s shirt off instead. “Next time I’ll have to use a cheeky little prop or sommat. Don’t tell me you haven’t got a pair of handcuffs somewhere.”

“Oh, I do. Several,” Ryan said, allowing himself to be disrobed. “Good fucking luck getting ‘em on me, though.”

“Give it time. I’ll wear you down. Maybe not today, but I will.”

Gavin preempted any response with a kiss, aggressively taking advantage of his partner’s already open mouth. He held himself up with one hand and gripped Ryan’s hair with the other, forcing him into a better position; he surged hungrily, repeatedly, tongue sweeping in, then retreating to taste Ryan’s lips.

“How’re you doing so far?” he asked quietly, pausing for breath. “Feeling all right?”

“Y- yeah,” Ryan stuttered as Gavin turned his attention to his neck. “Maybe a lit- aah! a little less?”

The bites became kisses, subtle tugs on his skin that made the nerves below tingle happily. Ryan moaned faintly and raised his hands to Gavin’s waist, wanting to touch as much of him as he could. He pulled gently, trying to bring their bodies closer together, and made a frustrated noise when Gavin sat back instead.

“Relax,” Gavin cooed. He took hold of Ryan’s wrists and moved them back to the mattress, then began to undo both of their pants.

“What’re you planning?” Ryan asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

“I said relax.” Gavin sighed. “First I can’t get you going, and now you won’t bloody calm down. Work with me, here.”

Ryan winced at the rebuke. “Sorry, sorry… I’ll be good.”

He breathed deeply, still in a turmoil of lust and nerves and the profound need to take over the situation. The reflex was so strong he wasn’t even sure he remembered how to let go; he was tensed in a fight-or-flight cringe that wouldn’t go away.

Gavin noticed the strain in his body as the last of their clothes tumbled to the floor. He slowed down some more and unhurriedly kissed across Ryan’s abs and chest, giving special attention to every single scar, running his tongue around each nipple in turn and making him shiver. Finally he brought their lips together again, and at the same time lowered his body to create another, more sensitive point of contact.

“Mmmh!” Ryan groaned into their kiss as their naked cocks rubbed against each other. He wrapped his arms around Gavin, snaking one hand into his hair and one down to his ass. Gavin didn’t scold this time; he merely rolled his hips again and kept going, the friction growing hot and slick with precome.

His lazy pace wasn’t enough for Ryan, who found leverage and began to move with a faster rhythm. Gavin gave him a sharp nip as a warning, stilling him with a firm hand on his hipbone.

“Let me.”

He continued for a few moments more, relishing the way Ryan trembled. As he did so he planted his weight on one arm, and with his other hand fumbled at the wall to open a bedside drawer.
Among the essentials he’d stocked there were a bottle of lube and some condoms.

Ryan heard the foil crinkle and broke their kiss with a laugh. “Of course you did.”

“Duh. I know what I’m about. Still good?”

“I think so, but it’s been a while.”

“Call it if you need to,” Gavin said as he sat back to prepare. He let one slick fingertip circle Ryan’s asshole, eliciting a sharp intake of breath, and applied gradually increasing pressure until he began to sink inside.

Ryan struggled to relax, unused to the feeling after so many years without it. But Gavin’s slim hands were wonderfully gentle, and he knew exactly what he was doing. He kissed along Ryan’s thigh to the tender place it met his hips, then mouthed around the area without touching his still-hard cock. Ryan bit his lip and tangled a hand in Gavin’s hair.

“Oh, fuck… Gavin…”

“Mmm, it’s so hot when you say my name like that,” he purred, and as a reward hooked his fingers slightly. Ryan cried out and arched off the bed, then tried to sit up.

“C’mere, you.”

“Naughty, naughty,” Gavin chided, pressing a little harder. Ryan collapsed with a moan. “Ooh, you can’t fight back now, can you?”

“Ta ma de ni… aah!”

“No, fuck you.”

Gavin took the opportunity to tear open the condom, and after another application of lube brought the tip of his dick to Ryan’s ass.

“Yeah… just tease it…” he whispered to himself, exercising immense self-control to only push in a tiny bit at a time, working back and forth in increments that made his partner groan. “How’s that feel, love?” he asked, a little louder.

“Nice,” Ryan answered. “R- really nice…” He reached for Gavin’s arm to draw him forward until his face was close enough to kiss. It also pulled his cock deeper inside, and he moaned into Gavin’s mouth.

Gavin shuddered and began a series of shallow thrusts, not wanting to leave Ryan’s tight heat even partway. They rocked in the sheets, so close together as to be one body, rubbing chest to chest with each gentle drive. The fullness made Ryan ache with need, and he moved his hands to Gavin’s hips to try and force a better kind of movement.

“You want something, Ry?” the hacker murmured into their kiss, voice shaking with effort as he resisted the pressure.

Ryan growled and bit Gavin’s lower lip instead of answering. As maddeningly good as this felt, he needed more, and he was determined to get it. He mustered his strength, and using the power of his arms alone, forced his smaller partner’s hips into a faster rhythm. Gavin seemed to realize that he wasn’t going to win, and finally began to give Ryan the stimulation both of them craved. Their lovemaking turned into fucking as Gavin’s cock pounded in and out; their breaths became panting
laced with deep groans.

“Fuck!” Ryan yelped as a slight change of angle hit just the right spot. Gavin grinned mischievously and started aiming for it, eliciting a series of desperate noises that Ryan valiantly tried to stifle by biting his own arm.

“Never thought you’d be so loud, Ry,” Gavin commented breathlessly. “So much for the strong silent type, eh?”

Ryan whined - half embarrassment, half agreement, all pleasure. He could hardly remember the last time he’d done this, but no Academy fling had ever given him a rush so strong, nor made his entire body pulse with the sweet pain of adrenaline. Gavin filled him perfectly, repeatedly, intensely; but not enough, never enough, he needed more, as much as possible and then some, please…

Without words, he could tell himself it wasn’t begging, but every sound that tore from his throat was sheer desperation. The caress of Gavin’s fingers, the friction of his cock inside, the lightning that struck with every impact – it only made Ryan hungrier, made him yearn to lose himself in the sensation of the moment, to truly let Gavin in. The rhythm shook him up, sex and breath and heartbeat throbbing in body and mind, taunting and tantalizing with the promise of a tidal wave. Shuddering pleasure multiplied through his bones and under his skin until he couldn’t possibly hold any more, and then kept rising; he trembled desperately on the edge, overwhelmed but unable to fall, until Gavin wrapped a hand around his dick. Then all at once the pressure burst, and with his last cogent thought Ryan locked their lips together so he could pour his final scream into their kiss.

Gavin kept going, not slowing down or breaking rhythm until Ryan had spilled everything he had and was quivering with overstimulation. Then he pulled out, stripping away the condom in the same motion, and began to feverishly jack himself off. At last his movements stuttered and with a faint moan he came, adding his own contribution to the spray of pearl already painted across Ryan’s chest and stomach.

“Christ alive,” he gasped, drinking in the sight of his lover exhausted and spent beneath him. “You’re… That was… Goddamn.”

Ryan couldn’t answer yet. He had his eyes squeezed shut and his body was flushed crimson as the endorphins slowly faded from his blood. He lay there with a blissful expression, just breathing, until a paper towel landed on his face.

“Gah,” he spluttered, sitting up. “Why.”

“We made a mess.” Gavin smirked. “I wish I had a camera.”

“You like messes, huh? Good to know.” Ryan started to wipe off his torso and sighed. “I’m gonna need a couple more of these.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

cai bu shi: yeah, right (sarcasm)
rang fotuo shale wo: let Buddha strike me down
ta ma de ni: fuck you
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Here's the plan: from now on, Take the Sky will update once a month on the 15th. If I post a PWP chapter I will also post a plot chapter as well, because I'm hella impatient to get on with the story and y'all smut-averse folks shouldn't have to wait twice as long for something new. I even have a buffer so I can keep up with this schedule for once. Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they joined the crew for lunch they received several long-suffering stares. Ray was still wearing a pair of chunky white headphones, and ignored them completely. Ryan, pink-cheeked, avoided everyone’s eyes. Gavin carried on as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

His blasé behavior eventually defused some of the annoyance around the table, and normal conversation had almost resumed when the lights, the engines, and everything else shut down. By the sickly glow of the emergency strips, everyone but Gavin immediately evacuated the table: Geoff and Jack to the bridge, Lindsay to the engine room, and the others to arm up and cover the cargo bay door. Gavin jumped to his feet too, but with no assigned post, he followed the captain, figuring it would give him the best chance to find out what was going on.

The two senior crew members were bent over the scanner, whose new backup power source was shielded from outside detection.

“...startin’ a goddamn war?” Geoff was asking incredulously. “That’s insane!”

“I’m impressed, sir,” Jack muttered. “To spot those gunships from… what is this, 1500 AU’s? That’s as far as the cruiser itself can see. I think we went dark in time, but if we don’t change course our momentum will take us straight into them.”

“Yeah, fuck this.” Geoff threw himself into the co-pilot’s seat, already snapping orders into his radio. “Everybody, brace. We’re burnin’ hard as we fuckin’ can in thirty seconds. Lindsay, gimme an Ivan.”

“Shi’a,” she replied tersely.

“Patillo, Newhall. Go. Now.”

“Yessir,” Jack affirmed, hands already flying over her console.

Gavin wedged himself in the doorframe just in time. The lights came back on at the same instant Hunter executed a maneuver just as violent as the slingshot, swinging a full 180 so fast that the hull whined. There was a tremendous clatter and the wet smash of breaking glass. A few seconds later the extreme acceleration stopped, making Gavin jerk in the opposite direction and stumble onto the bridge.

“Out of range, sir,” Jack said as Geoff looked around for the source of the noise. He saw their uninvited guest and loosed his safety straps with a glower.
“Keep watchin’ that scanner, Pattillo. Who said you could be up here, asshole?” he growled at Gavin, who shrugged innocently.

“Nobody said I couldn’t. What’s going on?”

“I… you… gaaah!” The captain dragged his hands down his face in consternation. “Okay, I’m sayin’ it now: when unexpected bullshit happens, your job is to get to your computer and wait for orders. Dohn-ma?”

“And that’s an order too, right?”

“Of course it’s an order, moron! Get off my bridge!”

Gavin laughed and threw a mocking salute. “Yessir, mister captain sir!”

He meandered back to the mess hall and found that it truly was a mess: lunch had gone flying off the table, painting food and drink all over the walls and floor. He stared with dismay at the wreckage, and nearly missed the captain’s update over the P.A.

“Stand down, people. Our intel about the Alliance was good, so we’re skippin’ Three Hills and are en route to Newhall now. I’ll figure out the uniforms when we get to Rubicon. Gavin, give us a Cortex link. Everyone else, clean up.”

It was another four days to their next destination, and Geoff decreed that someone should be at the helm round-the-clock in case of any more close encounters with the Alliance. He, Jack, and Lindsay each took a shift, and Ray volunteered for the dog watch to avoid the tempers that were starting to run high. The Joneses’ frequent arguments inevitably ended with passionate make-up sessions loud enough to be heard from the bridge; Jack broke the punching bag in her room, and her cursing began to rival Michael’s. The lines on the captain’s face were a permanent fixture.

Ryan spent a lot of time alone in his quarters, meditating. It was a crapshoot whether he managed anything productive or not; half the time he found himself facing Vagabond again. At first he refused to play ball, and simply took a break to work on repairing his drones. After two days of this he grudgingly began to cooperate, hoping he just needed to get it out of his system. Their conversations, however, invariably got nowhere, and left him in a worse mood than when he’d started. It worried Gavin, who tried everything he could to cheer him up. Nothing worked for long, although the sex was delightfully rough even without Ryan’s armor.

The frustration bled into everything. Although the entire crew spent more time than usual working out, Gavin treated the weights as though they had done him a personal insult, and put just as much effort into the simple sparring exercises Michael assigned him. Jack, Geoff, and Lindsay were well into their turn on the equipment before Ray convinced him to stop, and even then he only took a short breather before he was back at it.

“What’s got into you, xiao bai lian?” asked Lindsay. “I thought you hated this.”

“Nothin’,” Gavin panted, executing a front kick for the umpteenth time.

“You’re losing your form,” Jack remarked. “You should stop before you train your body the wrong way.”

“She’s right,” Geoff cut in. “If you’ve still got energy, go do your chores or somethin’.”

“You can take mine too,” Michael commented dryly from his workbench. “Scrubbin’ the coolant lines. Tell me when you’re done.”
“Okay.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’ll do it.” Gavin finally stopped kicking and found a towel. “Can someone show me how?”

As their journey wore on, his uncontrollable nervous energy started to drive everyone nuts – although the ship had never been cleaner. In contrast, Ray became even quieter than usual, and spent nearly every waking moment stoned. When his chocolate was gone he risked Lindsay’s ire and smoked in his room, covering the vents with dirty clothes in an attempt to keep the air filters from clogging. It didn’t work, but Gavin dealt with the mess before the mechanic ever noticed.

By the time they landed on Newhall Ray had sobered up, but it was painfully obvious he didn’t want to be there. He joined Geoff, Michael, and Ryan by the shuttle with a set expression, as if he were getting stitches without anesthetic. The captain frowned.

“You okay, Narvaez?”

“Wo hen hao.”

“Really fine, or fine like not actually fine at all?”

“Can we just get this over with?”

“So the second one, then,” quipped Michael. “C’mon, you said the dude was chill.”

“Shut the fuck up and leave me alone,” Ray snapped.

Ryan cleared his throat loudly. “Any last orders, sir, or are we a go for departure?”

Geoff shook his head. “Nothin’ special. The shit’s already paid for so don’t let ‘em fleece you. No guns, don’t cause trouble, and get back by sunset. We’re dustin’ off as soon as Lindsay says we can.”

“And you’re sure I can’t come?” Gavin asked plaintively from farther down the catwalk. “Not even a peek outside?”

“Quit whinin’,” Geoff growled. “You ain’t the only one wishin’ they could see sky.”

“Sorry, boi. We’ll take pictures,” Michael called as he got in the shuttle.

“See you later, Gavin,” added Ryan. “Love you.”

Ray was too preoccupied to even make a face.

The small city had been built on a steep hillside, with tightly packed buildings spilling down to the shore in a riot of brightly colored stucco. The walk from shuttle lot to medical center took them through a neighborhood of quaint little shops and respectable-looking houses, between which was a byzantine network of streets. Everything seemed slightly worn around the edges: a bit of rust on a fence here; a chip out of a sign there; some paint peeling off a windowsill. Wheeled solar vehicles comprised most of the traffic, though the occasional hovercar cruised by once in a while. Over it all, a gloriously ringed planet and three moons of various sizes shared the sky with the glaring sun. Ryan and Michael looked up frequently and wished there weren’t so many roofs blocking the view.

The small veterans’ hospital was not crowded, and had the same aged look as the rest of town.
Ryan approached the welcome desk when it became apparent that Ray wasn’t going to.
“Hi,” he said with a smile. “We have a ten o’clock appointment with Doctor Garcia?”
“Last name?” asked the bored-looking receptionist.
“Narvaez.”
The man typed on a computer that was hidden behind the desk, then nodded.
“Okay, you’re checked in. Room 208.”
“Thanks. C’mon, guys.”

The doctor was not the only one waiting for them behind the glass door of the office. He was accompanied by a man and a woman in vibrant clothing, the sight of whom made Ray stop dead in his tracks.
“Oh, no,” he moaned fearfully. “I’m not going in there. Ryan, you do it…”

But it was too late. The couple had spotted him, and the looks on their faces told his companions exactly who they were. Ray barely had time to cringe before an ecstatic hurricane burst through the door and crashed over him.

“Ray!” his mother cried, draping herself over him. His father enveloped both in an enormous hug that lifted them off the ground.
“You’re back,” he choked through tears of joy. “Thank god, thank god, you’re alive…!”

Ray stood immobile as his parents wept over him, not even trying to return the affection. He stared out from behind his mother’s shoulder, expression betrayed and pleading and very, very scared.

“Let’s give them some time alone, eh?” Dr. Garcia murmured – somewhat guiltily – to the others. “I believe I have a prescription for you.”

Ray watched his friends abandon him, and shut his eyes in misery.
“Yeah, dad,” he finally managed to say. “It’s me. I’m alive. Mom, you’re choking me.”

He was subjected to kisses on every square inch of his face. He tried to smile when they held his cheeks and said “just let me look at you!” He even put up with their prayers. But when they declared “I’m so glad you’re home!” he shook his head firmly and yanked out of their embrace.

“No. This isn’t home. I’m not coming back just for you to take over my life again.”

They stopped and gazed at him with agony in their eyes.
“We know,” his father said. “And we won’t. Never again. I swear.”
“We’re so, so sorry, cariño.” His mother began to cry again. “We should have listened. We should’ve…” She covered her face with her hands, shoulders shaking.

“Yeah. But you didn’t.” Ray swallowed hard at the unexpectedly painful sight. “I don’t know what you expected.”

“That you’d… god, that you’d ‘respect your elders.’” His father’s voice was full of self-hatred as
he quoted the phrase, and he reached out a hand as his son recoiled. “No, wait, I’m saying we were stupid to think that. We were foolish and we disrespected you. We… we hurt you…”

His tears began again and he couldn’t speak, only mouth the words “I’m sorry” through the grimace of his anguish. He pulled two handkerchiefs out of a pocket, handed one to his wife, and buried his face in the other.

“We thought you’d never come back,” his mother sobbed. “We thought you were dead! And then a single Wave, after four years… And you didn’t even want us to know!”

Ray shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah. And I’m pissed he told you. But do you get it now?”

“Well,” she sniffed, and blew her nose. “The way you said you feel about love? Not really. But what matters is, it’s important to you, so it’s important to us.”

“The engagement was nullified, obviously,” his father said as he got a hold of himself. “Her family worked something out with the Gutierrez clan. When we heard you were coming, Doña Rosa wanted to draw up a new contract, even though you’re older now. But we said no. We told her she’d drive you away again.”

“Papa threatened to stop doing business with her grandson,” Ray’s mother said proudly. “He was magnificent.”

“She’s not happy with us. I think we’ve been disinvited from the next twelve Christmases. But if you come home, we don’t care. Just come back… please?”

Ray looked awkwardly at his shoes as the waterworks recommenced, waiting for his parents to calm down again and thinking as hard as he’d ever done. He still hadn’t figured out what to say when Michael, Ryan, and Dr. Garcia emerged from the office. The relief was like air to a drowning man.

“I have to go,” he muttered, edging away. “I’m sorry. We’re busy… I gotta…”

He scurried out the door to the sound of heartbroken wailing, and glared daggers at Dr. Garcia on his way past. Ryan and Michael offered awkward thanks before following their crewmate, bewildered.

“The fuck was that about?” Michael asked when they got outside. “Were those –”

“My parents. Yeah. Leave it.” Ray stared into space, finally appreciating the celestial display and squinting in the glare of the sun. “Let’s get the rest of the cargo. I’ll meet you at the shuttle.”

Before they could say anything, he’d taken off running. He left the ground, jumping familiar fences and scaling old walls until he was racing across the tightly-packed rooftops. He dove from building to building, rolling across tiles and plaster, until he had to cross a major street. Then it was down via awnings and garden sheds, an intricate serpentine through pedestrians on the sidewalk, and several death-defying vaults over traffic, only to scramble back up three stories at the first opportunity. He got quite a few stares, a lot of honking, and twice he thought he heard someone call his name. He ignored it all, body singing with the sheer joy of movement after so long cooped up on board Hunter. Gavin had his hacking and Jack had her ship, but this was what let Ray fly.

When his breath finally ran out he found himself leaning against the steeple of a church a few blocks from the lot. Wearily he made the last few jumps to the ground, trying not to be seen, and completed his journey at a walk. The others were waiting for him when he arrived.
“Go neong yung de, Narvaez,” growled Michael. “Did you lose your goddamn radio?”

Ray shook out his limbs one by one. “Sorry. Didn’t hear it. Didja get the dope?”

“Sure did.” Ryan said as they piled into the shuttle. “I like your doctor. He really is a chill dude.”

“I’ve had some good times with him,” Ray said, flopping exhaustedly onto his back. “Pretty annoyed he tipped off my parents. I thought he was a better bro than that.”

“Good times with your doc? That’s a new one.” Michael shuddered. “I hated ours. Although, to be fair, he also hated me.”

“You’re from the ass end of nowhere, man. Of course he wasn’t gonna be on board with you.”

“Ray, if literally everyone else in Millsborough figured it out, that ain’t an excuse,” Michael hissed. “Fuck, even Killian knew what was up. Doctor McFuckstick was just a kewu, juni, yuchun piece of Reaver shit and I should’ve shot him when I had the chance. Maybe keep him from hurtin’ some other kid like me.”

“I’m glad you came with us, though,” Ryan said softly. “For a lot of reasons.”

“Noplace in the ‘Verse I’d rather be.”

Ray quietly started stretching again.

They picked up their legal cargo of gourmet produce and headed back to the ship. While they’d been gone, Lindsay and Jack had cajoled port control into letting them borrow the cargo crane. Ryan and Michael secured their refrigerated crates and went to help hoist the turret into position by the upper hatch; Ray stopped by the medbay first to clean up the scrapes on his hands. Through the burn of antiseptic he felt someone in the doorway, and turned around to see Geoff slouching there.

“What’s up, sir?” he asked warily.

“I could ask you the same thing. Actually, that’s exactly what I’m gonna do.” The captain shut the door behind him and leaned against it with a perfectly neutral expression. “What’s been eatin’ you lately?”

“FUHN PI, Narvaez. What’s on your mind?”

Ray bit his lip and started painting medical sealant over his raw skin, just as lost for words as he’d been with his parents. Geoff didn’t push, but he didn’t leave either, instead pulling an old book from a pocket of his coat and beginning to read. A pregnant silence filled the room.

Gavin, walking by, noticed the closed door and could practically smell the drama saturating the air. He peeked through the window, saw his crewmates soberly standing there, and could no more leave them alone than beat Michael in a fight. He assessed the situation and concluded that his best chance to eavesdrop was to get on his computer and futz with the P.A. system. It was all hooked up to Phantom anyway; Gavin merely had to change the right setting, and every sound in the medbay was routed straight to his headset. He booted a game to play in the meantime, and waited.

When Ray finally spoke, his voice was dull, and he still hadn’t looked up from his hands.

“It’s being here. Newhall. I never told you why I left, did I?”
Geoff marked his page with a finger and closed the book. “Never had cause to ask.”

“It’s a boring reason. I just had to get away from my family. They’re very… traditional.” He shivered. “Kids obey their parents, parents obey the matriarchs. No questions. They designed my life since before I was born. You were my way out.”

“Don’t see how that’s borin’ at all,” the captain said. “Scale it up and you got us Independents.”


Geoff raised an eyebrow. “You’re the one brought us here.”

“Yeah, I know. I thought I could deal. I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ray. We all got shit that bites us in the ass now and again. Truth be told, I respect the way you’ve been handlin’ this. We got a better shot at pullin’ off a big job ‘cuz you sucked up your *fudan* for us.”

“Then it’s worth it, but I feel like I’m gonna be low for a few days. Sorry.”

“So long’s you’re good to go when it’s time to work, you be as low as you want.” Geoff straightened from his slouch with a fatherly nod. “Good talk, buddy. Keep me posted.”

“*Shi’ā*. Thanks.”

The captain left to read, and Ray eventually pulled himself together to help the others install *Hunter*’s new gun. The medbay fell silent.

Gavin disconnected from the P.A., quit his game, and leaned back in his chair. Melancholy was apparently contagious, because he caught himself daydreaming of Echo City. He smiled wistfully at memories of mirrored buildings piercing the clouds, and the last time he’d been to his favorite nightclub. There’d been that really hot guy, and they’d gotten drunk, and fucked behind the speakers to the pounding of the bass…

But it was all hollow, a monotonous chain of days spent chasing the next thrill with nothing to fuel him but boredom. Shallow friends, family that cared more about appearances than each other… An empty life of empty people.

He wondered what it was like to miss home.

Chapter End Notes

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**Chinese translations**

*shi’a*: yes, affirmative
*dohn-ma?:* clear? do you get it?
*xiao bai lian*: literally "little white face"; implies ignorance/innocence/prettty-boy-ism
*wo hen hao*: I'm fine
*go neong yung de*: son of a bitch
*kewu*: hateful
juni: bigoted
yuchun: asinine
fuhn pi: bullshit (literally "fart")
fundan: burden

Spanish translations

cariño: affectionate masculine diminutive, e.g. darling or honey
doña: feminine honorific, e.g. Lady or Dame
When she took off that night, *Hunter* carried a mounted rail gun and seven hundred pounds of tungsten slugs ready to defend herself and her crew.

“We drill on it every day from now on,” Geoff decreed. “I want all you assholes able to fire that thing at short notice.”

Training began the next morning, and would continue until each of them could suit up, get out the topside airlock, and charge the cannon in under five minutes. Michael, Gavin, and Lindsay also began designing a computerized weapons system to install as soon as they had the money.

On the second day Jack navigated them through the Halo, the Reaver-infested asteroid belt separating the core planets from the rest of the ‘Verse. The only ships she spotted were other transports, which she ignored, and one Alliance cruiser, which she avoided. When *Hunter* was clear of the danger she borrowed Gavin from the Joneses, and together they programmed the helm to instantly lay in an evasive course when the scanner identified an enemy ship.

The projects, and complete absence of Reaver attacks, calmed Gavin down significantly. He was the only one, however; Geoff’s nerves in particular screwed up even tighter now that they were well into Alliance territory, and he increased emergency drills to four times a day. Combined with regular chores and workouts, they left the crew too tired to be grouchy.

After one such session the captain called a meeting in the mess hall. The others arrived to find the table covered with papers: painstakingly handwritten maps, flowcharts, and lists, with each person’s name heading at least one page.

“We’ve put this off too fuckin’ long,” Geoff announced. “Grab your instructions and look ‘em over.”

They went through the plan, and three different contingencies, twice. Gavin studied his information so intently that the captain had to tug on his ear at the end of the briefing.

“Aah! What?”

“A codename,” Geoff repeated with annoyance. “You ain’t got one yet. Ideas?”

“Oh. How about Phantom, like my computer?” Gavin suggested. “Does that work?”


Gavin looked apprehensive. “Is this really all we’ve got on the security systems? No copies of the software I could play with in advance?”

“Sorry, kid.” Geoff shrugged. “If you want more, steal it. You can, can’t you?”

“Course I can, you minge-pot,” Gavin countered defensively. “It just takes time.”

“So get movin’. I want this over and done with as soon as fuckin’ possible.”
“Fine, then I’m off,” the hacker declared, looking rebellious. “I will knock the piss out of anyone who comes into my office without an offering of food.”

Lindsay grinned slyly. “Except Ryan, right?”

Gavin glared at her and left without another word.

Ryan, not blushing for once, fiddled with his loose lock of hair. “So I’m captain now, huh?”

“Read the goddamn instructions, dipshit,” sighed Geoff. “Any time we gotta talk to Alliance or port control, you’re Captain James fuckin’ Dixon. Don’t let it go to your… It’s already gone to your head, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Captain Dixon replied with a smirk.

“Well, we’re fucked.”

Ryan did not abuse his power much. While he did indeed barge in on Gavin a few times, he handled port control with casual competence and dealt easily with delivery of their legal cargo. Their berth was reserved for five days; if they were on the ground any longer, Geoff said, it was because they’d been arrested.

They did not waste the time they had. Jack stole the car she’d be driving for the job, anonymized it, and brought Michael along to memorize the entire neighborhood between the targets and the place Hunter would be. Ray did the same thing, but on foot, and at night. He made note of cameras, alarm systems, guard dogs, and which homeowners stayed up late, as well as the best places for a lookout to hide. Lindsay got into character as a security tech, studying schematics and practicing a Core accent. Although the others still made time for chores and sparring, Gavin remained sequestered in his workroom, glassy eyes glued to his screens. Empty cans of energy drink accumulated on the floor beside him.

One of Ryan’s tasks, in addition to making sure Gavin ate and slept, was to pick up the security company’s van and uniforms from Geoff’s contact. The dead drop, however, also contained something not on the shopping list.

“A real book? Like with paper and glue and shit?” Michael asked. “The fuck is that doin’ on this rich-ass hunk of rock?”

“It’s a message, idiot,” said Geoff, grabbing it from him. “Gimme.”

On the table in his quarters he pored over the pages, searching for tiny pinpricks above the first line on each. When he found one, he wrote down the letter it marked. Three hours later he reached the end of the slim volume, straightened up with a wince, and looked at the result of his work: gibberish. He rolled his eyes and decoded the simple cipher.

“Alliance thinks they bought me. Watch your back.”

He groaned tiredly, then went to find Ryan.

“Ain’t like it’s unexpected, but it’s annoying as dicks,” Geoff sighed. “I wonder who else they’ve sleazed up on.”

“Everyone,” Ryan said. “Or if they haven’t, they will soon. You’ll get more of these.”

“Of what?”
“Warnings.” He handed the note back. “Already heard from Trevor. Steffie the Snake, Ruby, Bob, Dunn-n-Done… They’ll be getting in touch when they can.”

Geoff squinted at him. “The fuck’re you talkin’ about, Haywood? I’ve known the Cheesemaster for twenty years and Trevor’s too big a player to fuck with. Nobody else got a reason not to turn snitch.”

Ryan met his eyes with a somber, level gaze. “I don’t think you understand how loyal your friends are to you, Geoff.”

“No, I don’t!” He glared, but the red in his cheeks was not fury. “The fuck is with you people and thinkin’ I’m worth a shit?”

“Let’s count how many lives you’ve saved, for a start,” Ryan said, beginning to tally names on his fingers. “Everybody I just mentioned. The J-Gold crew. Carla and Jacob. All of us on this ship, at some point or other…”

“Stop!” Geoff yelled. “That’s an order!”

“…Yes, sir.”

“This business don’t take kindly to sentimental shit like that! It’s stupid! We’re on the raggedy edge out here and I don’t begrudge anyone their god-given right to cover their own ass…”

The intercom buzzed. It was Jack. “Uh, sir? Trevor’s forwarded a Wave from Kerry. It’s labeled urgent.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Told you so.”

“Gaaaah!”

The recording contained the same basic message as the book. Geoff ground his teeth and called Trevor back.

“Oh good, you’re alive.”

“You wanna explain how come Kerry sent this shit to you and not me?”

The broker tilted his head. “You wanted new registration. That includes your IFF signal and the serial number the ship uses to connect to the Cortex. In layman’s terms, you have a new phone number.”

“And you were gonna tell me when?”

Trevor shrugged. “Thought you knew. It’s part of the package.”

Geoff growled in frustration and began a harsh reply, but deflated instead. “Sorry. I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“I bet. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Nothin’ at the moment. Just stay on your toes. Alliance disease is spreadin’.”

“So I’ve heard,” Trevor sighed. “Well, I’ll keep forwarding any messages. You can update whoever else you want your own self.”
“Thanks, buddy. See you when I see you.”

“Joo how rin.”

Three more warnings came through in the next two days. Each one made Ryan smile, which was a rare occurrence at that point. The only other things to manage it were Michael’s completion of the electric brand, and the successful execution of Ray and Lindsay’s preparatory mission.

“You good, Phantom?” she murmured to her throat mic as she dug around in the wiring of the first house.

“Perfect, Grease Cat,” Gavin replied. The transmitter she’d planted was active, and the connection was strong. “Just do the same thing for the next one.”

They were back by midmorning, and Gavin spent the next thirty-six hours becoming the middleman between cameras and computer. He routed the security feed to himself, and recorded a night’s worth of blank footage to give to the system during the job. Changing Lindsay’s face on the existing file was simple with the tools he’d bought on Haven, and he even altered the copies stored in the company’s network. As a final touch he wrote a self-destruct for his code: ninety minutes after Ryan disconnected the transmitters, there would be no trace of tampering. Gavin would have been there and gone – like a phantom.

“I’m done. Wake me up before go time and you die,” he moaned over the P.A., and passed out.

With that time only a few hours away, Ryan retreated too. He sat on the floor of his quarters, arranged his armor in front of him, and closed his eyes.

Vagabond looked as he always did, but there was a distinct energy in the air now. Ryan imagined he could see sparks in the skull’s empty sockets, a sullen cobalt glow that promised a world of pain. He shivered with anticipation.

“I’m ready,” he began, in a voice firmer than he felt. “I want to work together tonight. I want you to prove we can.”

“ Took you long enough,” Vagabond answered. “But you’ll see. It’ll be so much fun!”

“Wait, wait, that’s not what I meant.” Ryan shook his head. “I mean we trade off. You do yours, and I’ll do mine, and we won’t fuck with each other. Just to see if you can behave yourself.”

“Oh, come on. You know you want to get your hands bloody. Don’t just watch, Ryan. Feel it with me!”

“No! That’s the deal. Otherwise the leash goes back on and I tell you what to do.”

Vagabond’s grin grew blacker. “You really think you still can?”

“You bastard!”

Suddenly they were on the floor, and Ryan’s hands were around Vagabond’s throat – but when he squeezed, he was the one who choked. Stars burst in his vision and he tried to let go. He couldn’t.

“All right, Ryan. I’ll play your little game.” Vagabond’s voice hadn’t changed. “But give it time. I’ll wear you down. Maybe not today, but I will.”
Ryan woke, gasping, to Lindsay’s panicked face.

“Again with this!” she cried. “Xiaodi, you’re scarin’ me!”

“What?” he croaked. It hurt.

“You were tryin’ to strangle yourself, Ryan! If you’re zisha —”

“I’m fine,” Ryan said harshly, and refused her hand as he got to his feet. “Took a nap, had a bad dream. Drop it.”

She watched him splash water on his face. “Are you even up to this? ‘Cuz Ray…”

“I’m. Fine.” He pushed the sink back into the wall a little too hard, winced at the slam, and turned around. His eyes were haunted. “I’m sorry. It’s time?”

“Near-abouts. Damn good thing I checked on you early.”

“Sure is,” he murmured, then swept her up in a hug. “Thanks, mei mei. I love you.”

“Oh, shut up,” she grumbled, blushing. “Just come back in one piece.”

“Yes’m.”

She punched him in the arm as soon as he put her down. “And go get your boyfriend. Tea oughta be ready by now.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know.”

They were in the air on the way to their jump-off point, a golf course in the suburbs outside the city. When Hunter touched down their final preparations were complete, and an eerie calm descended on the ship. Geoff gathered them in the cargo bay one last time and paced in front of them like a drill sergeant.

“I want this quick and clean, people,” he growled. “Smooth as a baby’s butthole, dohn-ma? You’re the best fuckin’ crew this side of anywhere. I know it, Burns knows it, and I swear to God y’all better fuckin’ act like it. We keep cool, stick to the plan, and we’ll all come out of this just fine. So. Is everybody ready?”

“Yes, sir!”

“I said are you ready, motherfuckers?!”

“Yes, sir!”

He stopped, and turned to look each of them in the eye. His face softened, and his next words were a prayer.

“Good hunting, my friends.”

Chapter End Notes
Chinese translations

joo how rin: good luck
xiaodi: little brother
zisha: suicidal
mei mei: little sister
dohn-ma?: understand? Do you get it?
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

3, 2, 1, HEIST!

Content warning for a brief, not very graphic torture scene.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The poor night guard never stood a chance. Enraptured by the portable video game in his hands, unworried by the blank security feed, he didn’t notice the needle in the back of his neck until he was fast asleep.

Ryan stood by the rear gate, which was only identifiable as such because of the security booth and the driveway leading up to it. Otherwise, the entire wall looked smooth and unbroken.

“First hurdle,” he whispered into his mic.

“Got it,” Gavin replied, and a section of stone slid away.

The path through the estate was uncomfortably exposed. If they hadn’t circumvented the cameras, Ryan would have showed up on at least four of them. He broke physical line of sight with the house by moving from tree to tree, bush to bush, keeping low. Gradually he crept his way up to the staff entrance.

“Second hurdle.”

“There you go, love,” Gavin purred in his ear as the red light by the doorknob turned off. “All clear. Killed the lasers and pressure pads, too.”

“Keep your eyes open, Vagabond,” said Geoff. “Remember, we’ve only got cameras on the doors and the elevator. You gotta do a sweep inside.”

“Understood.”

Ryan pulled soft covers over his boots so he wouldn’t leave prints, then slipped through the door into the foyer where deliveries were received. It led to the kitchen, and past that lay the opulent formal dining room. There was also a den, a parlor, a sitting room… As he checked each for occupants, Ryan sneered at these people who needed so many places to be lazy in.

“Ground floor is clear;” he said as he circled around to the back staircase, used by the staff to move about unseen. “Advancing to the basement.”

He tiptoed downstairs, every nerve calmly hyperaware. The cellar contained only storage, machinery, and a rather impressive collection of vintage wines that would be worth a fortune on the right market. He returned to the stairs and began to climb, but paused at the second-floor landing. The door was made of wood, and looked old enough to have come all the way from Earth-That-Was. He reached into his jacket for a container of oil no bigger than his thumb and lubricated the
hinges, then quickly picked the lock. The door opened soundlessly; he made sure it shut behind
him that way, too, and started down the hall.

Like a wraith he peeked through every door that was open and placed an ear against those that
weren’t, searching for the slightest hint of movement. These immaculate offices, lounges, and
bedrooms were intended for guests, and he couldn’t risk leaving some night owl awake at a
computer. Fortunately, the Northups were not hosting this evening. All was silent as the grave.

When he’d verified that the place was empty, Ryan continued upwards. He slid quickly around the
switchback in a way that let him see both up- and downstairs at once, passed the third floor for the
moment, then proceeded to the penthouse to confirm there was nobody above him. Satisfied, he
descended one flight and entered the Northup’s living quarters.

He’d just begun to ghost forward when Gavin yelped in his ear.

“Hide! You've got company!”

The command hadn't finished hissing through the radio before Ryan had his back in a corner, taser
in hand, ready to fight.

“Status?” he asked, so quietly that the word didn't make it past his mask. The next voice he heard
was the captain’s.

“Little guy on the patio. Only saw him for a second. Don't get caught, and don't make a mess.”

“Roger.”

Ryan remained motionless, listening. Nothing happened until Gavin and Geoff cried out at the
same time.

“What the smeg?!”

“We've lost visual! Vagabond, we're blind – Phantom, fix it...”

There was mild chaos on the other side of the radio. Ryan tuned it out, called up his mental map of
the house, and advanced to the third floor landing where the main staircase terminated in a T-
shaped intersection of halls. The threshold of the family’s private gym made a tactical hiding place
with lines of sight on both possible points of entry.

Nothing continued to happen for several minutes, but Ryan waited patiently until a figure came
into view up the stairs. It was short, stocky, and moved like a dancer. Its dark clothing was nearly
skintight, silhouette broken by the lump of a backpack. Poised to flee, it looked around, then glided
down the hall – directly towards Ryan’s hiding place.

The interloper was experienced, and checked inside each doorway before crossing in front.
Suddenly the two home invaders were face-to-face; brown eyes went huge in the gap of a ski mask
the instant before Ryan’s fist made contact.

“Got him out cold, sir,” he murmured, holstering his weapon. “Just a thief. Probably cut the
cameras for himself. Orders?”

Geoff sighed curses, and Ryan could almost see him rub at his face.

“Just our fuckin’ kepa de yunqi,” the captain muttered. “Make sure he doesn’t get in the way, and
get the job done. This was supposed to be clean...”
Ryan knelt and regarded his victim. A few tools and a stun gun were clipped to the straps of the bag, which itself contained an impressive collection of knicknacks from various parlors and a wad of cold, hard cash that could only have come from the safe in the first floor library.

The burglar's shirt had sleeves just barely loose enough to push up past the elbow. Ryan peeled the backing off a spare tranquilizer patch and applied it to the inside of one heavily muscled forearm. As he settled in to wait for the five minutes needed for it to take effect, he noticed the hiss of an earpiece coming from under the thief's mask.

This was not a solo operation.

“Sir. He's got a wire. His partner knows something's wrong.”

More muttered curses. “Okay, uh... okay. All right, tell whoever's on the other end that we've got their guy but we don't want any trouble. Tell 'em... shit. How bad did you fuck him up, Vagabond?”

“I used a tranq patch.”

“Gaaahhh,” Geoff moaned in frustration. “Fuck it, tell the partner we'll haul this guy out when we're done. Keep the mic and we'll arrange a pickup later. Goddammit.”

“Sir?”

“Just get moving!”

“Yessir.”

Ryan dragged the thief's ski mask off to reveal a bald head and bearded face with dark blue paint smeared around the eyes. His earpiece was a cutting-edge model, fitting for a guy good enough to crack this joint. Ryan removed it.

“...Talk to me!” came a high-pitched cry from the speaker. He felt a shock – that voice sounded awfully familiar. “For fuck's sake, Tim...”

“Do not call for help,” Vagabond growled. “Your man interrupted some business and is taking a little nap right now. I will contact you again when you can come pick him up. Do not make any more noise over this line or I will strangle you both with your own intestines.”

He took the silence as agreement and tucked the device into his pocket, making sure it would not pick up the sounds of his own work.

“Damn, Ryan,” Gavin said quietly.

“You shut up too,” Geoff snapped. “Mission critical talking only. And use the fuckin' codenames or I’ll change yours to ‘Moron.’”

Ryan tossed the luckless fellow behind a treadmill and resumed his own task, prowling down the hall to the oldest daughter's bedroom. No lock on this antique door; he crept inside to see the girl sprawled gracelessly amid a cyclone of sheets and blankets. With infinite care he laid the tranquilizer on her arm, waited five minutes, then stole away and repeated the process with the twins in the next room over. Their patches were so small he had to place them with a fingertip.

That left the master bedroom where the target slumbered peacefully next to his wife, who didn't. She seemed unconscious, but she tossed and turned, muttering. With every scrap of stealth he possessed, Ryan sidled up to her and stood poised to apply the sedative as soon as her arm came
into reach. He held his breath, fearing that even a feather-light touch might wake her. After a few seconds she rolled over, burrowed into the sheets, and finally lay still – without her arms exposed at all. Only her face and a sliver of her neck poked above the blankets.

It would have to do. Ryan delicately nudged her frayed ponytail aside with one gloved hand and placed the drug below her ear as gently as he could. The woman made an indistinct noise and curled up a little tighter, but that was all. It took less than two minutes before she was entirely limp. He waited the full five anyway before moving so much as a step.

“T'm in position,” Ryan breathed, looking down at VerseLink's head of procurement. “Confirm status?”

“You are a go.”

“Roger.”

Vagabond pressed the hidden switch that opened the panic room and immediately hauled his victim inside. The door was closed and locked behind them before the man even had the chance to wake up. When he did, he found himself propped up against the wall, greeted by a too-friendly voice and the scent of hot metal.

“Hello, Tomás. Or can I call you Tom?”

Cue the usual blubbering, confusion, et cetera.

“I don't like it when people whine, Tom. Actually, that's a lie. I love it. But I'm busy tonight, so let's keep this quick, okay?” Vagabond leaned close, head tilted at a perfectly unsettling angle. “You work for Burns, Tom, and I think you know he isn't satisfied with your performance this quarter.” He held up his empty hand as the man opened his mouth to protest. “Don't bother arguing with me, Tom. I'm only delivering the review. Don't worry, you're not fired. Just consider yourself... written up.”

His other hand jabbed forward. The searing brand's hiss was drowned under the victim's shrieks as the flaming sigil burned itself into the flesh just above his hip. Vagabond smiled under his mask, letting the soundproof walls absorb the screaming.

“I know, I know, it's hard to take criticism, isn't it?” he purred. The odor of cooking meat filled the small space. “But it's all part of the growth process, Tom. Burns is confident that your numbers will improve. And they will. If not, we might have to convene a meeting of the board, and you don't want that, Tom, do you?”

“No... no, no no no... pl- eeeaaagghhh!” he cried out again as Vagabond pushed a little harder, then withdrew. “Fami... family...”

“Oh, nothing's happened to them yet,” was the placating reply. “Let's just focus on the short-term goals for now. We can check in again in a couple of months, how about that? And you won't tell anyone in the meantime, or I'll be a lot less friendly.”

Tomás gaped at him, mouth opening and closing, only whimper's and a string of drool escaping from it.

“Let me hear you say 'yes, sir,' Tom.”

“Y... y...”
“What was that?”

“Yes, sir,” the broken man choked out. He was soaked with sweat, tears, and his own urine. The air purifiers finally kicked on.

“Good. Now say ‘thank you, sir.’”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Very good.” Vagabond turned off the brand and took a tiny syringe from his pocket. “I’m glad we had this little chat, Tom. Now go back to sleep.”

The injection, unlike the patches, worked instantly.

“Objective complete, Captain. Pulling out.”

“Roger,” Geoff replied, then made an exasperated noise. “For fuck’s sake, Phantom, calm down…” His voice became indistinct, as if covering his mic with his hand.

Vagabond rapidly tidied up. His nitrile gloves meant that he hadn't left fingerprints anywhere. A soft medical wipe got rid of the blood and char around his victim's new tattoo, though there wasn't much to be done about the soiled pajama pants, nor the carpet. He used a towel to protect himself from the mess while putting the man back to bed, then switched to a clean pair of gloves, closed the panic room door, and reversed the steps he took to get in. The tranquilizer patches on the four women were much easier to remove than they had been to apply, as the sleepers would remain under for at least an hour afterwards. Finally Ryan stood over the mysterious thief, but did not peel off the sedative just yet.

“What should I do with the other intruder, sir? He can't walk out of here.”

“Put back anything he took and see if you can fix whatever he did to the cameras, then hit the kitchen and splash some booze on you both. Just a touch, though, we’re talkin’ like aftershave here. Mogar, the story is you met friends at a bar and they're fuckin’ drunk as skunks. Mama Bird, see if you can get any closer to pick ‘em up.”

“Yessir.”

Ryan lifted his hostage with care – he was heavier than he looked – and hauled the man outside to where Michael waited for them. The mask, leather jacket, and Gavin’s recovered transmitters went into the bag, along with the thief’s own camera jammers and all the tools of violence. They covered their prisoner’s jumpsuit with the clothes Ryan had planned to change into and lifted him up, each slinging one of his arms over their shoulders. Together they staggered to the street, trying to remain unseen and unrecorded for as long as possible. Once in the open, it wasn't hard to act inebriated; the trick was to avoid drawing too much attention. Ray maintained his overwatch the whole way back, flitting from one hiding place to another, then appearing at their extraction point like a ghost.

Jack, waiting for them behind the wheel, wrinkled her nose.

“You better not stink up this car, it's a rental.”

“Hilarious,” Michael snapped. “Just get us home.”

“Fuck off, I’m going.”
The trip was tense. Jack, driving two under the speed limit and religiously using her blinkers, stuck to the predetermined route until they were well out of the city. Only when the surveillance zone was behind them did she floor it and make a beeline for their landing site.

Upon their return, Ryan and Michael dragged their captured thief into the medbay. They tied him to the surgical chair as Lindsay, Ray, Jack, and Gavin watched from the door. Geoff strode in a minute later.

“Haywood, debrief.”

Ryan straightened up at the tone of the captain’s voice and rattled off his report as the crew wedged themselves into various corners to watch. At the end of the story Geoff was quiet, but Ryan maintained his pseudo-military stance.

“Permission to ask a question, sir?”

“Granted.”

“Why did we take him with us?”

Geoff tiredly dragged his hands down his face. “You shoulda been the only one in that house tonight. You want this asshole to make it look like you stole shit while you were there? We can’t let him go until Burns knows his message was sent and that we acted like fuckin’ professionals.”

“Understood. Another question?”

“Yeah, yeah… at-goddamn-ease, Haywood, you're makin’ me nervous.”

Ryan relaxed with a sheepish grin. “Sorry, sir. How should we deal with his crew? I told them we’d make contact.”

“Then we make contact.” Geoff regarded their prisoner appraisingly. “I wanna run ‘em on the Cortex, too. If they ain’t another bunch of red-hot fugitives, I’m thinkin’ we see if they maybe wanna work with us. A sneak this good could be worth somethin’.”

Up went everyone’s eyebrows. “Isn’t it getting awful crowded in here, sir?” Ryan asked.

“I didn’t say *adopt*, stupid. Just kinda collaborate-like. When we’re outta the woods.” He shook his head wearily. “Anydicks. Finish this job. Then we’ll handle it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

kepa de yunqi: terrible luck
Chapter 39

The second hit went perfectly, and as soon as the team was back on board, Geoff summoned his warriors to the medbay. With Vagabond at his side he peeled the tranquilizer off their prisoner’s arm, then administered the injection that would counteract the lingering sedation. A moment later the man stirred; his eyes sprang open, and he began to buck wildly against his restraints.

“Christ, what the hell?! Ow, ow ow ow I’m on fire! What the fuck is happening?!”

Vagabond grabbed his shoulders to hold him down. “Stop thrashing around or you’ll hurt yourself. Stop screaming or I’ll hurt you.”

The thief went perfectly still. His swollen jaw dropped and his bloodshot eyes, pupils contracted from the drug, nearly bugged out of his head.

“Holy shit. Are you… You’re the Vagabond.”

“Yes.”

“You’re the one who knocked me out?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god…” Everyone in the room stared at him as he broke into an ecstatic grin. “This is the best day of my life! Could I get your autograph? Who’s got a pen? Where’s my shit? How much did I get? Where am I?”

Even Vagabond was flummoxed. Silently he looked at his captain, who was working very hard to keep a straight face and had already lost track of how he wanted this interrogation to go.

“I think you mighta given him a little too much,” said Michael. Geoff ignored him and addressed their captive instead.

“Calm your dick, dumbass. Who the hell are you and what the fuck were you doin’ in my house?”

“Your house?” The thief stared incredulously at him. “No fucking way you live there. I know for a fact that’s the Northups’. Who are you? Why am I tied down?”

“You first, or your hero’ll autograph you with a knife.”

The man looked back to Vagabond, who gazed steadily at him. “Honestly? That’d be kind of cool. Could you give me a scar, like, across my tricep? Ladies love a scar.” He attempted to indicate the location with his chin and found the muzzle of a laser pistol jammed into his gut instead.

“Tell the captain who you are unless you want scars where no one can see them.”


Geoff brought up his radio. “Phantom, run the name Rimmy Tim for me.”
“Roger,” Gavin replied, then called back few moments later. “Description matches. Person of interest in four burglaries and a B-and-E, but no bounty. Alias of one Jeremy Dooley.” He snorted with amusement. “Dooley? What kind of a name is that?”

“Hey!” The thief – Jeremy – glared indignantly at the radio.

“Phantom, you and me are gonna have a nice long talk about professionalism later,” Geoff growled. Behind him, Michael and Ray stifled giggles.

“Got something else too, Captain,” Gavin continued, unruffled. “Profile on the local underground network. Lists way more jobs than the Alliance bulletin… Huh, there’s some big heists here. Museum of Fine Art, Weishun Industries secure distribution facility… All on Rubicon.”

Jeremy looked smug.

“Who’s your partner?” Vagabond asked, in a voice that could have been mistaken for friendly.

“Partner?” Jeremy asked innocently, then yelped as the pistol dug deeper into something tender.

“Partner,” Vagabond repeated. “Woman, highish voice, called you Tim.”

“Oh, her.” Jeremy squirmed. “I wouldn’t call her a partner exactly. We just teamed up this once.”

“Name.”

“She told me it was Lady Jewel. Can you untie me now? My nose itches.”

Geoff called on Gavin again. The name Lady Jewel had no hits whatsoever on the governmental database, and only one on the underground forum. It was nothing more than a deleted post.

“What’s she look like?” Geoff asked.

“Never met her. I saw a help-wanted on the Cortex, we chatted, she left me some gear. She was gonna tell me where to drop her shit when I was out. Seriously, could I get a tissue or something?”

The captain sighed, released one of Jeremy’s hands, and shoved a paper towel into it. “There. What were you stealin’ for her?”

“Necklace,” Jeremy said after he’d blown his nose. “Byzantine platinum chain, hundred-and-five-carat marquise red diamond centerpiece, mother-of-pearl inlay on the setting. Matching earrings, too. Mrs. Northup had them on loan from VerseLink’s special collection.”

“Well, your Lady’s gonna have to deal without her jewels,” Geoff said. “But I sure would like to know how y’all waltzed in there while we were busy. She planned it?”

“Gave me step-by-step instructions. Do you have the loot, though? Where’s all my stuff? Who are you – except for you, of course I know you,” Jeremy amended, gesturing respectfully to Vagabond. “– and why’d you fuck up my job? I have a reputation to protect, y’know.”

Geoff raised an eyebrow. “Kid, you’re the one nearly fucked up a job here. Can’t have some sticky-fingered qiezzi makin’ my crew look bad. You ain’t got shit.”

“Aww, come on!” Jeremy whined. “All that work and I don’t even get paid?”

“Not unless you want my Vagabond comin’ after you – and not in some sick fantasy way, either!” Geoff snapped as Jeremy looked thoughtful. “If you touch that house, it’ll be the last thing you
Jeremy met Vagabond’s eyes and promptly determined that he’d much rather stay in the man’s good books. He swallowed nervously.

“Fine, yep, no problemo. Northup who? What’s a necklace?”

“He’ll behave,” Vagabond said to Geoff, but he still held Jeremy’s gaze. “He’ll do whatever I say, won’t you?”

Jeremy was unable to look away, despite his cheeks turning a humiliated crimson. “Look, I’m not making any promises…”

Geoff nodded with satisfaction. “Yeah, he’s good. Keep an eye on him for a minute, will you?”

He found some privacy in one of the guest quarters, and put on Jeremy’s earpiece.

“Hey, Lady Jewel. You there?”

“Where’s my partner?” came the instant reply. “What have you done with him?”

“Little Timmy’s safe. You can even have him back, but I’m afraid you ain’t gonna get your mitts on that flash you wanted. See, you two managed to interrupt some business – Burns business – and I can’t let you f*ck around in the Northup house any more.”

“Says who?”

Geoff smirked. “All you gotta know is I got some twisted assholes on my crew and your guy’s in our brig. Don’t bear thinkin’ about, what might happen to Rimjob over here.”

There were several seconds of silence from the other end of the line. “What I think is that you’re full of sh*t.”

“You can hear it straight from the horse’s mouth if you want.”

“Let me talk to him.”

Geoff covered the microphone and returned to the medbay.

“Tell her you’re bein’ held hostage by a bunch of murderers,” he commanded. “Say anythin’ else and you’ll be dead before you finish the fuckin’ sentence.”

Jeremy enthusiastically confirmed the story, babbling kept in check by Vagabond’s hypnotizing stare. Geoff stuck the earpiece back in and went outside again.

“See?” he said smugly. “Now, I’m itchin’ to know who else got the gang qiu to hit that crib, ‘cuz I reckon your crew and mine could stir up some powerful mischief if we ever got to workin’ together. I say, let’s meet. Right now. You can have your boyttoy back, and per-maybe-haps you and me could touch base, do a little networkin’. Hell, I’ll even let you name the place.”

There was a longer pause before a sigh hissed through the speaker. “The Heartbreaker nightclub in Konoford. Go to the delivery entrance of Lily’s 24/7 and ask for a tongue twister. Bring whoever you want, but don’t try anything stupid. They don’t play nice here.”

“Twenty minutes.” He stuck the earpiece back into its muffling wrap, then hit the comm panel. “Phantom, get me some intel on a club called Heartbreaker. Grease Cat, prep shuttle one. Ninja,
scrub the cars and dump ‘em in those trees nearby while we’re gone. Mama Bird, keep the engine running.”

Gavin’s information about the place was vaguely encouraging. It had a reputation as a hotspot for vice and criminal activity, kept more or less neutral ground by the drug cartel that ran it. Don’t cross the Megas, don’t make a mess, and they didn’t give a shit what else you did in their space. Unfortunately, it was out of range of their headsets, and there were no safe landing zones close enough to park the ship.

“All right, we’ll manage,” Geoff said. “Mogar, Vagabond, let’s go.”

The supermarket in the quiet suburb of Archway boasted quite a large parking lot, full of luxury hovercars and even a few sporty shuttles, but Lindsay touched snugly down right against the delivery dock. Vagabond took a look out the window.

“Sir, you should stay close to me so I can hide you from the cameras.”

“Okay. You ready?”

Vagabond returned Jeremy’s backpack and took hold of his shoulder. “Ready.”

“Good. Grease Cat, you’re with us. Might need a pretty face. Mogar, keep in touch with Mama Bird and be ready to haul ass if we come out hot.”

“Shi’a.”

Geoff followed in Vagabond’s shadow and Lindsay walked to the side, protecting the captain from the security cameras covering the dock. When they reached the door marked “Receiving” they rearranged themselves so that Geoff could speak to one of the two heavily muscled women behind it.

“Y’all got any tongue twisters?”

The taller bouncer took a walkie-talkie out of a pocket. “They’re here,” she muttered in a low voice. “One cute chick, one old dude, and one creepy fuck in a Halloween mask. They’ve got Tim, he looks fine.”

Geoff ground his teeth at the jibe, half insulted and half worried. Something felt distinctly wrong.

The bouncer handed them off to her partner, who led them along a bleak hallway and through a swinging door that said “Staff Only.” Down two flights of stairs was a much stronger door with a faded pink heart painted on it. Their guide scanned her fingerprint and retina, opened the heavy lock, and turned the handle.

A cacophony of music and chatter immediately assaulted them. The place looked like any other nightclub, though with Core-planet glamour absent from most places Hunter found herself. Only upon closer inspection did they notice the menus on the wall – which listed narcotics and sexual services alongside the specialty cocktails – and the weapons openly carried by the clientele. The laser pistols and intricately engraved knives were as fashionable as they were deadly.

Strangest of all, nobody seemed to care much about the crew’s presence. It wasn’t that they weren’t noticed, but the glances weren’t the shock and fear that the sight of Vagabond prowling across the dance floor should have elicited. Instead, there were a lot of seductively raised eyebrows and gently bitten lips. One scantily clad fellow even winked at him. It was disconcerting.
They were brought to a quiet corner far in the back of the club, where yet another bouncer barred
Jeremy from passing.

“Not you. You stay here.”

“What? Why?”

“She doesn’t need you yet.”

“But I haven’t got paid!”

“Not my problem.”

“You suck.” Jeremy scrunched up his face in profound annoyance and turned to the crew. “When
you’re done, can I come with you? On the ship, I mean. I’d literally kill for a chance to work with
the Vagabond.”

Geoff blinked at him, bemused. “We’re pretty much full up, buddy, but we’ll call you if we ever
need a thief.”

“Aww, please? I won’t be any trouble!”

“The captain said no,” Vagabond growled, but there was no malice in it. If anything, he sounded
slightly flattered.

Jeremy looked devastated, and his whole body wilted with disappointment. “Okay. Well, it was an
honor. Good luck.”

The crew, truly nervous now, was left in the custody of a small black woman with a big black gun
and a purple streak in her hair. She took them down a hallway and through a lounge, which was
full of heavily armed and impeccably dressed guards. Finally they stopped in front of a plain black
door; their handler opened it, ushered them inside, and pulled back a curtain to reveal a stunning
redhead luxuriating at a table with jewels around her neck and a drink in her hand.

Ryan stopped dead.

“Well now, this is a pleasant surprise,” the woman purred. “The infamous Vagabond! How
exciting.”

The captain narrowed his eyes. “You ain’t no ‘Lady Jewel.’”

She laughed. “Hell no. I’m the Doll. And you’re Geoff Lazer Ramsey, aren’t you? The man who
tamed the monster.” She turned to Lindsay next. “Which means this delightful vision must be
Lindsay Jones. Never seen you before… more’s the pity.”

Lindsay flushed bright red in glorious contrast to the way Geoff had gone pale.

“Obviously you know my allegiance is worth somethin’, then,” he said, quite smoothly given the
circumstances.

“We’ll see.” The Doll gestured to the empty seats around her table. “Sit, have a drink. Let’s talk.”

“We’d rather stand, but thank you kindly all the same.”

Steel glinted in her eyes. “I’m sorry, did I give the impression I was asking?”
The guard who’d let them in sauntered to her boss, grinned, and pointedly stroked her rifle. Metallic noises from the doorway told Geoff that there were also guns behind them. He cursed under his breath, and sat.

“Come now, your crew too! We’re all friends, aren’t we? But Vagabond, darling, do take off that mask. It’s hideous.”

Vagabond looked ready to kill, but Geoff just sighed wearily.

“Lemme guess. You’re gonna shoot us if he doesn’t?”

Even the Doll’s derisive snort was attractive. “I could, but we can’t deal if you’re dead.” She smirked. “I still want a look at you, though. Big strong guy, a couple scars… grade-A eye candy, am I right?”

Under the mask and the paint, Vagabond was mortified.

Geoff shrugged at him. “Up to you, buddy.”

“My face stays,” he snarled.


Her bodyguard raised her gun, and the ones by the door followed her lead. Lindsay froze and Vagabond’s pistol leapt into his hand, but Geoff maintained his composure. If anything, he relaxed.

“At ease, Vagabond. Listen, Doll, you don’t wanna do this,” he said, leaning forward with a kindly expression. “He’ll heed me to a point, but he’s got this whole thing about the mask. Forcin’ him to take it off is literal suicide. He won’t care if he dies killin’ you, and I won’t be able to stop him.”

“He would, too,” Lindsay added earnestly, picking up on her captain’s bluff. “Honest to god. Don’t matter how much lead’s in him, he’ll kill you ‘fore he goes.”

“You… Or your girlfriend,” Vagabond said softly, grinning at Mica. She didn’t flinch.

“I dunno, babe, I reeeeeeally wanna shoot him. Two to the head’ll drop anybody.”

The moment teetered on the edge of violence as a dozen fingers creaked on a dozen triggers. Ryan, desperate to defuse the situation, launched a ferocious attack on Vagabond, but their gun didn’t waver until Geoff’s quiet voice cut in.

“Vagabond, take off the mask.”

That was it, then. His captain had given an order.

Vagabond took off the mask.

The Doll stood up so fast her glass smashed on the ground. “James Ryan Haywood?!” she yelled, eyes flashing with rage. Three confident strides on six-inch heels brought her close enough to lever back her arm and deck him solidly on the jaw. He let the blow land, and his head snapped sideways at the impact. He made no move to retaliate.

“It has been eight years, you piece of shit!” The tiny woman, in her fury, seemed to loom over Ryan as he cringed. “You wanna explain yourself?”

“Not really,” he muttered. “I’m sorry. I had to.”
“Oh, you had to. Well, I can’t fucking argue with that!” It was at this point he noticed the knife in her hand, because it was pricking at his throat. “You have ten seconds before I’m gonna need a clean dress.”

“Hold your fuckin’ horses!” Geoff broke in. “Can this at least wait until we’re done with our business here?”

“No,” she hissed. “Five…”

“Haywood, spill. That’s an order.”

“Okay, okay!” Ryan cried, raising empty hands in submission. The mask fell to the floor. “I lost it, all right? I lost my goddamn mind, Meg, I had to run because otherwise I’d have killed you!”

She still glared, but the pressure of her blade lessened. “Go on.”

“Fuck,” he groaned, closing his eyes with shame. “Don’t you remember? The discharge, the therapy, the way I treated you? Look at me, I’m the Vagabond! If I hadn’t left, you’d’ve been my first kill. I had to save you.”

There was a dreadful silence as she considered this. Slowly, thoughtfully, she stepped away from him and returned her knife to a pocket in her corset. She crossed her arms and looked him up and down, evaluating.

“Well. At least you made something of yourself.”

Geoff noisily cleared his throat.

“Anyone wanna tell me what the fuck is goin’ on?”

Ryan tiredly rubbed his face, getting greasepaint all over it. The black smears conveniently hid his bright red cheeks. “Captain, this is Meg. Meg Haywood.”

Lindsay whistled. “You left a goddess like her? You really did lose your mind.”

The tension instantly snapped as both of them looked at her, horrified.

“What?! No! God, no!”

“Hell no, he’s my brother! …Also, it’s Turney now.”

Neither Lindsay nor Geoff could stop their jaws from dropping. They stared, dumbstruck, as the siblings sized each other up like a pair of rival tomcats.

“Turney, huh? Where’d that come from?”

“Street name, and it stuck. How’d you end up with Ramsey?”

Geoff relocated his senses and interrupted firmly. “I hired him. For business. Which is why we’re here. Save your family reunion for when we ain’t Rubicon’s most wanted.”

“All right, fine. You want business? Let’s talk about how much you owe me.” Meg took her seat again, and authority settled like a cloak around her shoulders. The transition was as clean and complete as putting on a costume. “You’ve robbed me of a very pretty little toy tonight, so tell me why I shouldn’t have that sneak-thief go right back in to get it for me. Oh, and don’t bother with that Burns shit. I’m not scared of him, and I’m not scared of you. Especially not you.” She glanced
pointedly at Ryan. “It might’ve been a while, but I still remember you wet the bed until you were thirteen.”

A freight train of humiliation crashed into him and his mind went blank. Vagabond rushed in to fill the vacuum; sister or not, he was strongly tempted to shoot her.

“I should rip out your lying tongue for that,” he snarled, and Meg’s persona slipped as she recoiled like a kicked puppy. “Be grateful I let you live the first time, because I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Knock it off, Haywood!” snapped Geoff. “Put your damn fengkuang away. Christ.”

“Yes, sir,” Vagabond said, and retreated. As soon as Ryan took the wheel he shrank into himself and put his hands over his mouth, distorting his horrified words.

“Oh my god, mei mei, I am so sorry.”

Much to her credit, she recovered quickly, and instead became thoughtful. “Interesting. I see what you mean now.”

Ryan quietly moaned in shame and hid his eyes as well. Behind them, he was furious.

“Fuck’s sake, I didn’t mean turn into shi mianbao!” Geoff, exasperated, stood and addressed Meg. “You’ll get two thousand credits to stay away from the Northup crib. Lindsay, quit eyein’ up the nice ladies and come on. Haywood, I swear to god I’m gonna sic you on yourself.” He seized them each by a sleeve and began to drag them away – right into the bouncers still blocking the door. He glared archly at them.

“Excuse us.”

“I don’t think so,” a stern voice declared behind him. Geoff cast a look over his shoulder, where he saw Mica shaking her head.

“Mica wants you to stay, you stay,” said a man wearing black leather pants and little else. Geoff caught himself ogling the prominent bulge and closed his eyes before anyone noticed.

“I wish I didn’t know exactly what I did to deserve this,” he muttered, turning back around. Meg was looking murderous again.

“I’m not done with you. Sit!”

Geoff rolled his eyes to the sky and obeyed. This time, the others followed, and Meg smiled brightly.

“That’s better, isn’t it? Let’s start over. What’ll you have to drink?”

All three immediately shook their heads.

“We’re on a job,” explained Geoff. “No fun ‘til it’s done.”

“Suit yourself. How about you, babe?” she asked Mica.

“The usual, thanks.”

“You got it. Now,” Meg said, placing her order on a holographic interface built into their table. “Your ruining my fun has been a massive pain in the ass, Ramsey, and I’m very tempted to make
you my bitch. I get the feeling you’d do a lot for me in exchange for the Northups’ safety. Running my drugs, for instance. I can always use another smuggler.”

Geoff reclined confidently and crossed his arms. “You’re gonna have to take a rain check on that, unless you want the whole fuckin’ Navy comin’ after your shipments. You mighta heard, we’re kinda hot right now.”

“Hah! No, your saving grace is that it’d be weird extorting Ry-Ry for anything more than doing my homework. We can just work out how much you’ll compensate me for the loss of my jewelry.”

“I reckon two k is pretty reasonable, considering how big a pain you are in my ass.”

“Oh please, that’s not even a reasonable start.” She leaned forward; Geoff and Lindsay both began to sweat. “You should factor in how lucky you are that I like you, Ramsey. Not many people have the balls to walk out on me, and certainly nobody who does keeps them for long.”

Continuing to meet her eyes strained the captain’s willpower to the limit. “Somethin’ tells me you don’t wanna get on your bro’s bad side, either.”

Meg smiled wryly and sat back; Geoff and Lindsay could breathe again. “Well, no point in denying that. Actually, Ryan, I’m proud of you. If you had to go nuclear, at least you kicked ass doing it.”

“Uh… Thanks? I guess?” He resisted the urge to squirm in his seat. “But that begs the question, how the hell did you end up here?”

She sighed, switching gears completely as if Geoff had vanished. “I’ll admit, I was a wreck when you disappeared. I failed out of Sihnon in my last semester – before I got my Guild membership – so I couldn’t work for Guild rates, and you know how tight things were. I had to go unlicensed just to make ends meet. There a whole lot of drama at home, certain words were said… So I left. One thing led to another, I met some people, and I got my shit together. I’ve had this place for five years now, hit the big time in the last two. And here we are.”

“What exactly is big time on a Core planet?” asked Lindsay. “Where I’m from it means the glasses are clean.”

“Look around, gorgeous. I got a club like this on every world in the Core. Hotshot needs his dope? Boom. Rich geezer got twisted tastes? I’ll hook him up. Just looking for the hottest party in the ‘Verse? We never stop. My clients are Blue Sun execs, MPs, Navy admirals… Nothing happens inside the Halo that doesn’t go through me. Even Ashes hits me up now and then.”

Her brother swelled with pride. “That’s my girl.”

She grinned impishly, and for a moment the underworld monarch really did look like Ryan’s kid sister. “Shame we spent so long on the boring side of the law. We should be running the galaxy by now.”

Geoff had closed his eyes and steepled his fingers, breathing deeply to keep from losing the end of his rope while Meg ignored him. Now he cleared his throat, just loud enough to get his crew’s attention, and spoke in an overly casual tone.

“Haywood, you wanna stay with her?”

Ryan snapped to attention so fast a loose lock of hair fell into his face. “No, sir!”
"That’s what I thought." The captain directed a cool glance at Meg, feigning boredom. "So, Doll, are we square at two thousand?"

"My goodness, we’re impatient." Meg tossed her hair imperiously and accepted her fresh cocktail from a waiter. "Try multiplying by ten, honey, and that’s still nowhere near what that set of diamonds is worth. Not only would certain people pay more than two million for them, they would look amazing on me."

"Anything looks amazing on you," Mica said cheekily, and sipped her own drink. Meg gave her a sidelong glance heavy with desire.

"That is flattery, sweetheart," she purred.

"Can’t be flattery if it’s true," Mica replied with a wink.

At this point Geoff was sick of being toyed with, and he was ready to agree to nearly anything if it would get him safely offworld. He bit the inside of his lip and willed himself – and his dick, if he was honest – to calm down. Only an amateur would name a higher price now.

"Seriously, I can come back later if y’all got somethin’ else to do," he offered casually. "Or someone. Y’know, whatever."

Vagabond once again took advantage of Ryan’s flusterment to seize control, but this time he simply kept their body poised and silent while Lindsay made a slight choking sound. At long last, Geoff’s refusal to break paid off.

"All right, all right. I’ll be in touch," Meg decreed without bothering to look at him. Her hand was already inching up Mica’s skirt. “You can go.”

"The rest of you, too," Mica added, waving the guards away. “And lock the door.”

Vagabond put his mask back on with considerable relief, and the crew left rather faster than they’d arrived. Their escort had to hustle to keep up with them across the dance floor, and they didn’t even acknowledge the bouncers on the surface. It was half a miracle that they remembered to shield Geoff from the cameras on the way out.

"They’re back, Mama Bird," Michael called over the shuttle’s comm as he took off. “Straight home, cap?”

“I wanna be off this rock yesterday.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Michael knew from long experience not to ask questions when the captain spoke like that. Instead he traded off with Lindsay in midair and held on tight as she flew low and fast over the slowly waking town. Hunter was ready to go as soon as they reattached, and her VTOL jets scorched the grass as Jack left Rubicon behind.

Upon their return to the ship Lindsay noticed Ryan slink away before the captain could scold him. She rebuffed Michael’s advances for the moment and sought out Gavin, pulling him aside with the excuse of discussing Hunter’s engine monitor.

“I need a favor,” she said when they were safe in the workroom. Gavin’s fingers stilled on the keyboard and he looked at her, surprised.
“What kind of favor?”

She glanced nervously at the door, then leaned forward over the back of his chair to mutter secretively into his ear.

“I’m worried about Ryan. Could you keep an eye on him for me?”

He snorted. “More of an eye than I’ve already got?”

“You don’t know what to look for, is all.”

“And what’s that, then?”

“Stress.”

“Well, that’s not hard,” Gavin pointed out. “He was tetchy all the way to Newhall. Hell, everybody’s been weird. Jack’s all gingered up, Ray’s hiding, you and Michael can’t keep your hands off each other…”

“This ain’t like that.” She shook her head. “You’ve already seen Ryan’s regular tetch, gettin’ grouchy and pissed at shit. The kind I’m talkin’ about is more starin’ into space, keepin’ a hand on his pistol when he don’t need to, and this one expression… Y’know how he sometimes gets sorta serene-like, but a creepy kinda focus at the same time?”

“Yes,” Gavin murmured nervously. “I thought it was normal. Hot, even.”

Lindsay exhaled a quick laugh. “You ain’t known him as long as me. Trust me, that shit’s a bad sign.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“He listens to you. If he gets like… like that, distract him. You know the kinda stuff he likes.” She sighed. “Also, try to be around when he’s meditatin’. He says he wants to be alone, but I ain’t so sure that’s safe anymore.”

Gavin frowned. “What?”

“I’m just scared he might do somethin’ stupid. He ain’t been himself, and when he ain’t himself, he’s dangerous.”

The way she said it discouraged Gavin from mentioning that he found “dangerous” quite sexy. Instead he folded his arms on his desk and propped his chin on top. The graph of coolant flow was now at eye level; its steady march through time was soothing.

“Okay. I’ll be careful.”

Lindsay fidgeted. “ Actually, could, uh… Wouldja mind pokin’ your head into your room now-ish? This last run got him all worked up.”

The anxious waver in her voice was such that Gavin didn’t hesitate. “Yeah,” he said, and stood up with a groan. “Oof. Should probably think about conking out anyway.”

“If nothin’s wrong, you go right on ahead.” Lindsay gratefully squeezed his shoulder. “I just got a bad feelin’ about this.”
Chinese translations

qiezei: burglar
gang qiu: balls of steel
shi’a: yes, affirmative
fengkuang: insanity
mei mei: little sister
shi mianbao: wet bread

Never fear, this is not the last we'll see of Rimmy Tim...
“I knew you’d be back.”

“What the fuck was that?” Ryan yelled. “Not the job, that went fine, well done. I mean back there with Meg. Threatening my goddamn long-lost sister wasn’t part of the deal!”

Vagabond looked at him with pity. “You were a dumbstruck embarrassment. Someone had to take initiative. You should be thanking me.”

“I’d rather look like a twit than have you taking over whenever you feel like it.”

“You’re lying.”

“You were out of line.”

“We’ve been over this, Ryan. I only did what you wanted to do.”

“Sometimes you can’t just do whatever you want! That’s why you’re there, so I can be around actual humans without leaving them gut-shot and screaming, or slicing them open and watching them bleed…” His hands began to shake.

“Finally, you admit it,” Vagabond purred. “Take me back, Ryan. We can work this out.”

“No!” He closed his eyes, covered his ears, and fell to his knees. “No, no, no. I have a life! You’ll ruin everything!”

“I don’t want to lose what we have, either.” Vagabond’s sorrowful whisper was inside Ryan’s skull. “I just want us to enjoy the parts you hate to love. Is that so much to ask?”

The words were a siren song, and it drove Ryan to the edge of tears. “I can’t,” he sobbed. “I can’t. Please stop.”

Suddenly he was standing without having gotten to his feet, and Vagabond was right in his face.

“I can’t stop, Ryan. You’re doing this. This is all you.” He took hold of Ryan’s shoulders in a cold, earnest grip. “It’s only going to get worse. There’s only one way this can en-”

He cut off his own pleading and took a step back.

“He’s here.”

Ryan was too dizzy to ask who, and before he could pull himself together, his vision had vanished. He opened his eyes.

“-d? Talk to me, love, please!”

“…Gavin?”

“Yes,” Gavin said with huge relief, and smoothed Ryan’s hair away from his face. A few strands stuck on his wet cheeks. “Are you all right?”
“I… don’t know,” Ryan mumbled, and passed out.

Gavin became slightly frantic. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do now other than check for a pulse, which was strong and maybe a little too fast. Lindsay wasn’t picking up her radio and it didn’t seem right to call anyone else, so after forcing a moment’s rational thought Gavin set to work getting Ryan out of his battle gear. The paint and boots were easy; the jacket, less so. After fighting with the thick leather for a while he was forced to give up on it, and since he wasn’t nearly strong enough to shift that much dead weight into bed, he appropriated the pillow and covers and tucked Ryan in where he lay.

Worried but at a loss for what to do next, Gavin found his reader and installed himself on the bare cot. Nothing appealed, not even the guide to Firefly maintenance he’d been studying. It didn’t help that every few seconds he’d glance up to reassure himself that Ryan was still breathing. Eventually he just relocated, curling up close enough to feel the rise and fall of Ryan’s chest, and the warmth radiating from his body. It was so comforting that, hard floor or not, Gavin found himself getting drowsy. Then all at once the last few days caught up to him, and he was asleep before the tablet fell from his hand.

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Hunger woke Ryan around noon. Disorientation had him reaching for his pistol before his head was off the pillow; only when his fingers touched his empty hip was he able to get his bearings. Guilt flooded him as soon as he remembered where he was, and he scrambled to strip off the jacket that felt like it was burning.

Gavin stirred when he did. The hacker sat up with a wince, and grimaced as he rubbed his eyes.

“Morning, Ry. Get any sleep?”

“I think so,” Ryan answered. He plucked at the blankets. “Thanks for this. Sorry I scared you.”

“Never mind about me.” Gavin gently touched Ryan’s back. “Are you all right? What happened?”

Reflex had a denial on his tongue before his heart caught up and strangled it. “I’m fi-” He swallowed hard and looked down.

“I mean, if it’s normal then whatever, I’ve got no bloody clue what you usually get up to alone,” Gavin stammered. “I’m just worried, y’know, I’ve never been with anyone like you – not that there is anyone like you… um… Yeah. What should I do?”

His awkward concern got a fleeting smile out of Ryan, whose throat had closed up in fear. He coughed slightly and spoke to his knees.

“I’m losing control, bao bei. What you should probably do is run.”

Affronted stubbornness immediately set up camp on Gavin’s face. “Hell with that. You’re stuck with me. And don’t you dare think about legging it on us, got it?”

Ryan’s voice was bitter. “I could, you know. I could just disappear when we land on Haven. None of you would ever be able find me.”

“First of all, you won’t leave. You can’t.” It was a statement of fact, not a beg. “Second, you’re underestimating me. It might take me a while, but I’d catch up. And third, this isn’t even you talking. This is bollocks. This is feeling sorry for yourself.”
“You don’t understand,” Ryan muttered, cheeks hot.

“You don’t understand,” Ryan muttered, cheeks hot.

“Then explain it to me. Please. Maybe I could help.”

Ryan ignored the beseeching tug on his shoulder and stood up instead. “I’m hungry,” he declared, and began to change into fresh clothes. Gavin looked petulant, but held his tongue.

The crew was on more or less the same internal schedule. Everyone trailed into the mess over the course of half an hour, save for Ray, who was keeping an eye on the helm. Nobody had the energy to cook, however, so the meal consisted of unadorned protein and whatever leftovers happened to strike their fancy. Ryan was too preoccupied to notice the looks he was getting: worry from Lindsay and Gavin, righteous glowering from the captain. If he’d seen the expression on Geoff’s face he’d have jumped into space before he was thrown there.

“Hey guys! What’s for lunch?”

The unfamiliar voice triggered the crew’s fighting instincts, and before they knew what was happening they’d all jumped to their feet and drawn their weapons on the stranger strolling nonchalantly into the room.

“Mm, stuff. Where’s the plates?”

Jeremy meandered to the cabinets and began poking around. Everyone else helplessly turned to Geoff, who looked ready to pitch the entire ship out the airlock.

“You sneaky piece of shit!” he yelled. “How the fuck did you get in here?!"

“Funny thing, nobody ever locks the outer access hatch to the water recycler,” the thief commented, beginning to dig around in the refrigerator. “Or maybe you do and it’s just a pathetic lock. Yeah, probably that one. Ooh, cantaloupe.”

“Shall I set a course for the nearest black hole, sir?” Jack asked tightly.

Geoff lowered his gun with a stream of curses, breathed deeply, and shook his head.

“Can’t lose the time. Jones, Haywood, throw this ji shengwu in a guest room and lock him in. And give him a protein bar. He’s gonna be in there a while.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Uh, hello? Cat burglar? A hundred credits says you can’t keep me locked up anywhere.”

“Oh yeah?” The captain’s glare could kill a small horse. “Cargo bay airlock, no food, no radio. Take turns on guard. Ma shong, you fucks!”

“Wait wait wait, airlock?!” Jeremy’s arrogance vanished as Ryan and Michael each grabbed an arm and dragged him away. “I take it back! I’ll stay in the passenger dorm, I promise! Hey!”

“I wonder if we really can get a hundred credits out of him,” Jack pondered, resuming her seat.

“At least,” Lindsay scoffed. “He wanted to join the crew, y’know. Bet he’d swear his first-born to us if Ryan told him to.”

“The fuck?” Jack paused with a slice of melon halfway to her mouth. “He’s not right in the head.”

“Not even a little bit,” Geoff grumbled, and resumed his breakfast. A moment later he snorted with a smirk. “Y’know what, though? I kinda like him. He’s a damn good thief and he doesn’t seem to
give a flyin’ fuck about much of anythin’.”

“He sure pissed you off, though,” Jack pointed out. The captain raised an incredulous eyebrow at her.

“You fuckin’ kiddin’ me? Y’all got no right to be throwin’ stones on that score. Not a goddamn one of you.”

Lindsay was about to prove him right when Ryan returned and plonked grumpily into his chair.

“Michael can guard that kid. He figured out who I am and keeps staring at me. Reverently,”

Gavin nearly spit out his tea with laughter. “You have a fanboy?!"

“Which tops the list of things I don’t need right now!” Ryan snapped. “What I do need is blood sugar and a nap. Captain, permission to – ”

“Denied. Leastways until you and me have a little chat.”

“Goushi,” Ryan groaned. “Fine, let’s get it over with.”

Geoff jerked his head at the door. “You three, out. And no eavesdroppin’!”

Jack, Lindsay, and Gavin exchanged apprehensive glances. The women picked up their plates and left to finish eating elsewhere; Gavin did the same after giving Ryan a shy peck on the cheek. He closed the door behind him.

“I know what you’re going to say, sir,” Ryan began wearily. “Unprofessional, what the hell’s wrong with me, you didn’t hire me to fuck everything up, yadda yadda. I’m sorry, and I’m working on it. Can I go?”

“Oh, you ain’t gettin’ off that easy, Haywood.” Geoff leaned forward on his arms. “You’re gonna tell me what exactly it is you’re workin’ on and if I can expect any more of this xiong mao niao outta you. We got a hellstorm comin’ down the pike and I can’t have my goddamn first officer losin’ his shit when we oughta be kickin’ ass and takin’ names.”

“Sir, I…” He focused very hard on his day-old dumplings. “Please don’t make me explain. It really wouldn’t be pretty.”

“Ryan.”

The captain’s quiet, firm voice brought Ryan to attention whether he wanted it or not. Their eyes locked, blue on blue, dark as an ocean and just as deep.

“That’s an order.”

The tension that swelled between them was too thick to cut with a knife. Ryan suppressed the sudden need to vomit, and pulled in a breath that shook as badly as his hands.

“Well, sir, you… you know how I always wear the mask and stuff when we’re working?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s… it’s not just theatrics.” Ryan stared through the table, through the ship, into space. “That’s someone else. Me, sitting here, I’m not him. I couldn’t do what he does. Fighting, sure, but the up close and personal shit? That crazy, twisted show last night? That’s what he’s like all the time. I
keep him in a box so I can have a normal life, more or less. The problem now is that he’s starting to get out.”

Geoff’s expression hadn’t changed from its stern neutrality. Ryan felt like an insect pinned to a board.

“Remember when I signed on, sir? I hadn’t gotten my shit together yet. You helped, I found my place with you, but… goddammit, I’m falling apart again! The lines are blurring and he’s showing up when he’s not supposed to. He doesn’t wait his turn anymore. He’s just there, pushing, and any time I crack he tries to take me over.” Cracks were proliferating as he spoke, each one a stutter in his voice. “I’m trying so hard. So hard, Geoff! But if this keeps up, I have to leave. I have to. If I stay he’ll kill us.”

“No.”

Ryan finally glanced up again. The captain’s face was like stone.

“Sir?”

“I said no. You’re not leavin’.”

“But sir –”

“Cut the crap, Ryan. You know good and all where I’m comin’ from here. What’s it gonna do to my reputation to lose hold of somethin’ like you? I let you go like this, who takes the blame when you turn around and start killin’ folk? No, either you straighten up and fly right, or I put you down.” At last, a trace of emotion: pain pinching the corners of his eyes. “And I’d sure hate to do that to a friend.”

The air was saturated with unshed tears. Ryan fought to keep them that way, closing his eyes and breathing deep. He tried to visualize something, anything, that would anchor him; in the end it was simple fear that held the line.

The moments of silence felt like eons. An eternity later he reached blindly for his glass and gulped down a mouthful of water, then scrubbed a hand across his mouth and smiled weakly.

“You’re freakishly calm about this.”

“I’m not just a pretty face, y’know,” Geoff said wryly. “It ain’t like I can’t work some shit out after six years.”

“That’s not what I…”

“I know. But seriously, I figured it’d be along those lines. Too much of a one-eighty not to be some kinda screw loose.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Got no reason, ‘til now.”

“Oh.” Ryan looked down, ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

Geoff sighed. “Look. You know where I stand. Anythin’ you need to get through this, or fix it, I’ll make it happen. I really would hate to have to shoot you.”

Ryan chuckled faintly. “And I’d hate to be shot.”
“Then we’re on the same page.” The captain’s implacable aura faded to a weary sadness. “Get some rest, Haywood. I’ll deal with Dooley.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Ryan collected his food and made his way back to his quarters. He’d just sat at his desk and begun eating when Gavin arrived, looking somber.

“Hey, Ry.”

“Hey.”

The hacker stood by the ladder, fidgeting. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Ryan glanced up sharply. “Didn’t know what?”

“How bad it was. I’ve been making it worse, haven’t I?”

He glared sullenly. “Do you ever listen to what Geoff says? What part of ‘no eavesdropping’ was unclear?”

“C’mon, that’s a bloody invitation.”

“But the door was closed, how…?” Ryan trailed off as Gavin pointed to the comm panel, then tapped his ear.

“It all goes through Phantom. Can’t stop me without shutting down the ship.”

“You’re a menace.”

“You’re a goddamn idiot. Y’know what’ll make me happy? You not going utterly mental and ending up dead. That’d be ideal, yeah?”

“I’m trying, Gavin!” He shoved the plate away and dropped his head into his hands. “I’ve been trying! I just don’t know what to do anymore!”

“Thought I could handle it,” Ryan mumbled around a dumpling that tasted like ash. “And it made you happy.”

“What?! That’s the most...” Gavin choked on the words and had to clear his throat. “You’re a goddamn idiot. Y’know what’ll make me happy? You not going utterly mental and ending up dead. That’d be ideal, yeah?”

“I’m trying, Gavin!” He shoved the plate away and dropped his head into his hands. “I’ve been trying! I just don’t know what to do anymore!”

“How about talking to me?” Gavin gently tugged Ryan off the stool and over to the bed, then sat close and put an arm around him. “At the very least tell me how I can keep it from getting worse.”

“I don’t know,” Ryan moaned. “I used to have this thing that worked, but it doesn’t anymore…”

Gavin let the words fill him the way a challenging section of code would, shoving all else aside, subject to every possible neuron of brain power. He carefully followed each recreation of conversations with Vagabond, and put surprise on hold when he learned about Meg. The fragmented story compiled into a portrait of James Ryan Haywood, one more complete than anyone else had ever been allowed to see – and from his overclocked mind came a possible answer.
He kept quiet until Ryan was done, head in Gavin’s lap, shoulders shaking.

“Here.” Gavin offered another tissue. “You’re okay, love. I’ve got you.”

“Thanks,” Ryan sniffed miserably. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I wanted to know.”

“Really? You’re nuts.”

“I mean, we’re dating, aren’t we?”

“Something like that.” Ryan forced himself to sit up and accept the glass of water Gavin handed him. “Well, there it is. For all the good it does. I understand if you want to leave.”

Gavin gave a start. “What the flip makes you think I’d do that?”

Ryan looked dully at him. “If you don’t feel like running, you’re just as crazy as I am.”

“Then I’m crazy. Not the first time someone’s said so, won’t be the last.” Gavin turned to lie on his back and patted the mattress next to him. “C’mere. I have an idea, if you want to hear it.”

“Oh, this’ll be good,” Ryan muttered, but he still got comfortable with Gavin’s arm around him. “Shoot.”

“All right,” the hacker began. “I think you’ve been going at this all wrong. What if – bear with me here – what if he’s right? No, no, seriously, listen!” He pulled Ryan back down. “Listen. You’re trying to control him by keeping separate, and it’s not working. You’re wasting energy on something impossible, but I think you’re strong enough to keep a lid on that part of you if you weren’t so obsessed with getting rid of it entirely. So what if you owned him? What if, instead of being two different people fighting each other, you accept him and then control yourself? Imagine like… like you’re on a diet. You can have cheat days, when we’re on jobs and you can go full beans, and the rest of the time you know you’re not allowed to eat the whole damn cake. Or whatever.”

Instant rejection of Gavin’s mad hypothesis clashed with something inside: not Vagabond, but a tiny fragment of Ryan that grabbed onto the idea and held on for dear life. What if...

“You are out of your goddamn mind,” he growled – but didn’t leave the bed. A perverse spark of hope glued him down. “You don’t understand how… how fundamental this is. I can’t just suddenly make nice with this fucked-up guaiwu in my head! He’s not me, that’s the whole point!”

“Doesn’t have to be sudden. Can’t be. But it’s worth a try, innit? If you’ll end up mullered anyway, what’ve we got to lose?”

“…We?”

“Yeah. We.” Gavin shifted so he could look Ryan stubbornly in the eyes. “I told you, you’re stuck with me until it kills us.”

“I’m running out of ways to tell you you’re batshit insane,” Ryan murmured, but his heart wasn’t in it. It was busy beating very, very hard in the moments before their lips met.

Chapter End Notes
Chinese translations

bao bei: sweetheart
ji shengwu: parasite
ma shong: right now, immediately
goushi: dog crap
xiong mao niao: panda piss
guaiwu: monster, freak
Geoff powered through the rest of his meal without tasting it. Contingencies chased each other around his brain, possible plans and courses of action, ways to balance the bullshit that just kept coming. When Lindsay returned with her empty plate he looked up and smiled at her.

“Hey, Lindsay. Got a minute?”

“Depends. Business or pleasure?”

“Just sit down, wouldja?”

“Aye aye, cap’n, just a sec.”

She finished putting away her dishes and took the chair next to him. “What’s up?”

“When we’re back on Haven I gotta go see Burns and get the rest of our pay. I want you along.”

Lindsay blinked in confusion. “Shuh muh? Why?”

“You got muscle for days and a damn scary hand with a laser. Could use you with me.”

“D’you think somethin’s gonna happen?” she asked quietly. “Did Trevor tip you off?”

“Nah. Just got a feelin’ I might need you, is all.”

She frowned and scooched her chair close enough to lower her voice to a whisper. “You ain’t bringin’ Ryan, are you.”

Geoff smiled wryly. “Heh. Shoulda figured you’d know.”

“I’ve been worried,” she confided. “How can I help?”

“Just the usual entourage crap for the payoff. Arm up, look dangerous, be on your toes. And…”

Geoff leaned on his elbows and rubbed his forehead. “I hate askin’, but… Remember way back when that kid Logan was robbin’ marks alone and keepin’ shit for himself?”

Lindsay began to look uncomfortable. “Yeah.”

“And how I had you watch him, and let me know what he was doin’ so we could catch him at it?”

“You want me to spy on Ryan.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it spyin’ exactly. Just keep me posted, y’know, if he starts driftin’ a little too far off course.”

“Shi’a,” she said dubiously. “Anythin’ else?”

He sighed. “I dunno. Just… We gotta get away for a while. After all this. Truth be told, I kinda miss Persephone.”

“The old stompin’ grounds?”
“Yeah. I wonder if the gang’s still around.”

“Maybe. If they are I might leave ‘em a little somethin’ to smooth it along a bit.”

Geoff snorted. “Like toilet paper.”

Lindsay laughed. “I was thinkin’ more like water filtration, but that ain’t a bad idea.” She butted her head affectionately against his arm and made a small noise when he ruffled her hair. “You gonna handle the stowaway ‘fore he needs toilet paper?”

“Soon. Gonna let him stew a bit longer. Maybe ‘til after dinner.”

“Okay.”

There was a pause while Geoff drummed his fingers on the table. “How’re you feelin’? In general?”

Lindsay sat back and fixed her mussed-up ponytail. “I dunno. I oughta be happy about this job, but I’m plain worried. About Ryan, about Jack, about you. And this whole shit circus with the Alliance, it’s scary. Somethin’ ain’t right.”

“I’m sorry, kiddo. A lotta things ain’t right. I know you said you’re with me, but...”

“Geoff, don’t even,” she warned. “Ain’t none of this your fault. It’s mine. I’m the one brought Gavin on board in the first place.”

“Lindsay, I’m captain.” His voice was tired and heavy. “Whatever happens to this boat, it’s on me.”

“Fei hua. The whole ‘Verse ain’t your responsibility, dummy. I know you won’t believe me, but it’s the truth.”

He was silent for a moment. Lindsay covered his hand with her own and gave a gentle squeeze.

“Honest.”

Geoff exhaled the shadow of a laugh and withdrew. “Fuck’s sake, fireball, I wanted to make sure you’re okay. Why’d you gotta turn it around on me?”

“That’s what family does, cap.” She smiled. “I’m fine. Can’t say the same for the motherfucker at the end of this bu daode daolu, but this bitch is in it for the long haul.”

Affection and concern warred on his face as he shook his head. “I’m mighty grateful for that. Truly, I am.”

“Fang xin, baba. We’ll never be even.” She kissed him on the cheek and walked to the door, but there she stopped, pursing her lips in thought.

“Hey, Geoff?”

“Yeah?”

“You shot Logan.”

He met her eyes somberly. “That I did.”
She looked down, and left without another word.

Geoff watched her go with an ache in his heart. They’d come a long way since Persephone, but you didn’t save a near-dead toddler from the streets without feeling responsible for the rest of her life. If he hadn’t been busy raising her, he’d have de-assed that planet a hell of a lot sooner.

He sighed and pushed himself away from the table. All things considered, he reckoned, she’d turned out all right.

Dinner was even less formal than lunch had been. Michael brought some food back to the cargo bay where he and Ray were playing cards; Gavin collected several meals’ worth so Ryan could remain in his self-imposed quarantine for a while. Geoff took a plate to Lindsay, whose turn it was on the helm, and returned to the mess hall to enjoy a quiet supper with Jack. She allowed him to decide when to break the silence, which he did not do until he was entirely done eating. Then he let his chopsticks clatter significantly into his empty bowl.

“Trevor says Burns wants to know why we didn’t keep him updated.”

Jack paused with a piece of tofu halfway to her mouth. “The marks made contact?”

“Yeah. He’s happy about everythin’ except radio silence.”

“What’ll you tell him?”

Geoff shrugged. “Nothin’. Next he hears of us, we’ll be right up his ass askin’ for our pay.”

She frowned. “Forget pay, this seems like asking for trouble.”

“It’s riskier to let anyone know what we’re up to. Better to keep off the radar ‘til we got no other choice.”

Despite his firm statement, his face was troubled. Jack resumed her meal to let him think; before long he shook his head and sat back tiredly.

“Gimme a sitrep, Jack. How’re you feelin’ about all this?”

She swallowed and dabbed a bit of sauce from her lips. “Like life’s been fucking unreal for the last few weeks. Still not quite convinced I’m not just sleeping off Lindsay’s moonshine.”

Geoff smirked. “Can’t fault you for that.”

Jack folded and unfolded the napkin in her hands as she decided what more to say. Her eyes took on a steely cast, and though she started in a near-whisper, her voice rose with every syllable. “Honestly, though? I’m angry. I’m pissed we’re being hunted, I’m pissed at that qiezei for stowing away, and at us for not noticing, and at the Alliance for chasing us, and oh yeah, I’m fucking furious at that shitstain of an MP. It’s worse than what we saw in the war, for fuck’s sake! How a living, breathing human could…!” She shivered in rage and horror, and brought herself back down to a normal volume. “Sorry. It’s too much. I just can’t believe it, sir.”

Geoff looked at the floor with agony on his face. “I can’.”
Her brow furrowed. “Sir?”

“Some of my kids came from that kind of place, back in the day. Not the same, exactly, but the stories they’d tell? Might as well’ve escaped from Reavers.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “It ain’t so unbelievable that a guaiwu like Moorland could exist, after hearin’ what my yo chr had been through.”

Jack had turned slightly green as he spoke. “Did Lindsay…?”

“Not so’s I know, and it ain’t like she’d remember. Don’t bear thinkin’ about.”

Jack pushed the last of her food away, too queasy to even look at it. “Well, now I understand where Ryan gets it from. He’ll have to fight me for the right to cut that fucker’s dick off.”

Geoff snorted. “I’m pullin’ rank on that one. Y’all can bust his kneecaps or whatever, but if anybody’s doin’ the castratin’ it’s gonna be me.”

“Hmph,” she groused. “We’ll divvy him up when we catch him.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “You sound awful sure that’s what we’re gonna do.”

“As if you’d let him live an instant longer than he has to.”

The captain’s laugh was barely detectable. “You know me too well, Pattillo.”

She was distracted from her anger by the tone of his voice, and took a moment to study his face. “Are you okay, Geoff?”

He looked up sharply, saw her concern, and groaned. “Oh, guoshi. Not you, too! Did Lindsay put you up to this?”

“Up to what?” Jack asked, mildly confused.

“Goin’ all armchair psychologist on me.”

“No. I just see what you’re doing to yourself. Again.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked wearily. “And what’s that?”

“Putting the whole world on your shoulders.” She touched his arm. “Everybody knows you didn’t ask for any of this. The ‘Verse just fucked us, but you always take it so personally.”

Geoff glared balefully at her. “What else am I supposed to do? I got us into this mess, I gotta get us out.”

“That’s what I’m saying, you didn’t ‘get us into’ anything. Shit’s just happening.” She smiled kindly. “None of it’s your fault, and you’re doing a damn good job of keeping us afloat. Cut yourself some slack.”

“Feh. I’ll relax when we’re wealthy.”

She rolled her eyes. “All right, whatever. You be as zhiniu as you want, but it doesn’t change the facts.” She stood and bounced on the balls of her feet. “I’m antsy. Up for sparring, sir?”

The captain blinked at the brisk change of subject, then smiled wryly. “Sure. I gotta deal with that Dooley asshole first, though. Maybe after.”
“Ugh, fine,” Jack grumbled. “I’ll be in my bunk.” She began putting her leftovers away.

Geoff got some things from his quarters and walked to the hold where Michael and Ray lazily guarded their prisoner. They abandoned their game when the captain approached and stood to give their report.

“He finally shut up, sir,” Ray said. “I think he might’ve gone to sleep.”

“You sure he didn’t mosey off while you two were playin’ five-card fuck-’em over here?”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Positive. Only reason he can even breathe is ‘cuz we’ve been cycling it every hour. Probably due for another one.”

“Nah. I’m lettin’ him out. You two scram for a spell.” He turned a stern glare on the younger men as their interest piqued. “No foolin’, dickheads. I need a one-on-one here.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied, disappointed. They collected their cards and went to start a new game in the common room.

Geoff shook his head and opened the inner airlock door. To his mild relief, Jeremy was still there, curled up asleep as Ray had predicted. The captain nudged him with a toe.

“Hey, moron. Rise and shine.”

The thief woke groggily, reactions slowed from lack of oxygen. His complexion improved as the fresh air reached him, and a second later he jumped to his feet with a salute.

“Christ, finally! Requesting permission to use the head, sir!”

Geoff snorted with amusement. “Granted.”

He led Jeremy to an empty guest bunk and showed him where the toilet was, but only gave him the minimum of privacy, not wanting to let the escape artist entirely out of sight. A minute and one hugely relieved sigh later the captain sat him on the bed and stood facing him, arms crossed menacingly.

“All right. What the fuck are you doin’ here?”

Jeremy looked at him imploringly. “I told you, I want to join your crew. Get off Rubicon, rob new places, have adventures. I could be an asset, you said so yourself!”

“Hold the fuck up.” Geoff raised a hand. “Are you tellin’ me you’ve never been off-world before?”

“Never,” the thief confirmed. “I didn’t want to go alone, but shipping out with the Vagabond? No fucking way I was missing that chance.”

“Wei ta ma de yuangu,” Geoff groaned. “So let me get this straight. You just up and left everything and everyone on the only planet you’ve ever been, to stow away with a gang of strangers on a ship goin’ fuck knows where, all because you wanna be buddies with an infamous serial killer whose way of sayin’ hello was to near break your jaw. Have I got that right?”

Jeremy at least had the decency to turn slightly pink. “Uhh, yep. Yeah, that’s what I did.”

Geoff couldn’t bring himself to scold, and merely shook his head in disbelief. “Well, you’re our kinda stupid, that’s for damn sure.” He sighed. “Listen. We’re on our way to the outer-est Rim there is. The Alliance is searchin’ hell and creation for us, and even when they ain’t, we still can’t
always tell if there’s gonna be enough to eat tomorrow. You are *not* stayin’ on board.”

“I could help!” Jeremy protested. “I’ll pay my way. You can have everything, most of it’s digital and I can tell you where my stashes are.”

The offer of cash grabbed the captain’s full attention. “Oh yeah? How much are we talkin’ here?”

“Eighty thousand in the bank, twenty in paper, another twenty in platinum, and I haven’t sold some of the stuff from the time I hit governor’s mansion. Could get maybe thirty grand for it if I find the right buyers. And I guess I gotta sell my condo.”

Geoff kept his face impassive while the numbers danced behind his eyes. “I’ll believe it when I see it, but I reckon you might’ve just bought yourself some consideration. You got a few days to prove you’re worth keepin’, otherwise you’re outta here the second we break atmo.”

Jeremy clenched a victorious fist. “Yes,” he said under his breath. “I won’t let you down, captain. In fact I can do the transfers right now, if you have a Cortex link.”

“That we do.” Geoff smirked and reached for his radio. “Gavin, I need you at the computer.”

There was a pause before Gavin picked up, and he sounded breathless. “Now?”

“Yes now, moron.”

“Ugh. Okay… gimme just a mo’.”

Jeremy narrowed his eyes at the radio. “Who’s that asshole?”

“Let’s go meet him,” Geoff said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

A disheveled Gavin arrived at the workroom a minute later. He gave them both a disgruntled look as he gingerly sat down at his desk.

“What’s so damn important, Geoff?”

“That’s *sir* to you, dickwad,” the captain grouched. “You’re gonna help Jeremy here pay us airfare for so kindly takin’ him off-world.”

“That absolutely could’ve bloody waited,” Gavin whined. “What’m I supposed to do, anyway? He can log into his own mingey bank account…”

His grumbles did nothing to endear him to Jeremy, who had not forgotten the jibe at his name. The thief had his arms crossed as he evaluated Gavin and found him wanting.

“Where should I send the money?” he asked Geoff gruffly.

“Actually, Gavin’s gonna do it. He’s gotta learn how we hide it anyway.”

The hacker cast a baleful look over his shoulder. “You’re lucky if I don’t lock you out of the ship next time we land.”

Instantly the air went cold. Geoff spun the chair around and seized Gavin by the front of his shirt, yanking him into a half-stand that put them nose to nose.

“No, you listen up good, *hwen dan*,” he hissed. “Just because you’re on my crew doesn’t mean I’ll tolerate you turnin’ on the rest of us. Threaten my ship one more time and I’ll kill you slow as I
know how. No, y’know what? I’ll make Ryan do it.” He grinned nastily at the petrified look on Gavin’s face. “Yeah, that’s right. He already betrayed you once on my order. Don’t think he wouldn’t again.”

He released the trembling hacker, letting him collapse into his seat like a stringless puppet. Geoff turned to Jeremy – who now wore an expression of equal parts respect, excitement, and satisfaction – and tilted his head at the door.

“We’ll deal with this later. C’mon, let’s meet Ray and Michael proper-like.”

Gavin stared after them, speechless. He sat there stunned for what felt like forever, but it was scarcely a minute before his radio went off.

“Hey Gav, are you coming back soon?” Ryan asked. “’Cuz if not I’m gonna finish myself off.”

“Oh. Yeah, you go ahead,” Gavin stammered, trying and failing to sound casual. “Bloody captain’s got me doing a stupid project.”

There was a pause before Ryan replied. “Okay. Sorry about that. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Cheers. Have fun.”

He was shaken enough that the idea of listening in didn’t cross his mind. Instead he convinced his stomach to unknot itself and went to find Lindsay. She was on the bridge, reading one of Geoff’s books and humming absently.

“Lindsay?” Gavin began tentatively. “Could I ask you something?”

She carefully inserted a bookmark before spinning her seat around to talk. “Yeah. Somethin’ happen with Ryan?”

Gavin fidgeted. “No. Geoff.”

He recounted the scene for her. The expression on her face was not encouraging.

“You pushed a button, Gav,” she told him gravely. “The biggest. Ain’t nothin’ he hates more than one of our own turnin’ on us.”

“But I was joking!” he protested. “It was a joke, I was just minging!”

“There’s some shit you don’t joke about,” Lindsay said in a voice like a sword. “Mutiny’s top of the list.”

A flush painted Gavin’s cheeks. “He still didn’t have to pull the Ryan card on me,” he grumbled before a chilling thought struck him. “But Ry wouldn’t… not really.” His next words came out as a faint squeak. “Would he?”

Lindsay looked away, unable to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry the captain scared you,” she replied. “He ain’t been that harsh in years. Him, Ryan, even Jack, they’re all gettin’ like they were at the start, right after the war. Shit, I don’t remember Geoff bein’ so wuqing since we were street rats.” She smiled bitterly. “Truth be told, I ain’t so keen on it now as I was then.”

“But you were here early on, too,” the hacker pointed out, curiosity getting the better of him. “How come you’re still normal, and that?”

“Oh, I ain’t normal.” She sat up a little straighter; the gleam in her eye and the threat in her voice
were echoes of Ryan. “I’m just savin’ my savage up for later.”

“Oh,” Gavin said weakly, feet backing up by themselves. “Well, uh, I’ll keep it in mind. G’night!”

He fled to his workroom, shut the door, and calmed himself down with a game of vandalizing Cortex sites. When he’d grown bored of changing Alliance webpages to a humorous video of things one should not do to one’s testicles, he decided to earn some goodwill back from Geoff by doing something productive. He stretched, opened an energy drink, and began to track down who might be blackmailing Parliament.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
shuh muh?: what?
shì'a: yes, affirmative
fei hua: nonsense
bu daode daolu: corrupt/immoral/evil road
fang xin: don't worry
baba: father (slang/affectionate)
qiezei: thieving rat
guaiwu: monster
yo chr: young ones
guoshi: dog crap
zhiniu: pigheaded, stubborn
wei ta ma de yuangu: for fuck's sake
hwen dan: bastard
wuqing: ruthless
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Content warning for a drug mention and a very brief, not at all graphic sex scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Geoff began Jeremy’s tour in the aft common room where Ray and Michael had set up shop. They were much friendlier now, and the captain indulgently let the three chat for a bit. It quickly became an interrogation as to how the thief had managed to get on board.

“Where’d you ditch the shuttle?” Ray asked. “I didn’t see one when I hid our cars.”

“Oh, I put it on autopilot,” Jeremy answered breezily. “It parked itself right back outside the store. Shame I couldn’t keep it, though. It was a nice one.”

“When we land, you’re gonna show me how you busted into the recycler,” Geoff said darkly. “I ain’t havin’ that kinda security hole on my ship.”

“I’d be amazed if anyone but me could get in that way, sir,” Jeremy scoffed. Michael raised an eyebrow.

“Cocky sonofabitch, ain’t’cha?”

“Yup!”

When they eventually made it to the bridge, Jeremy’s attitude vanished. Lindsay had to conceal a smile at the look on the newcomer’s face: that first sight of the infinite black could strike awe into even the toughest landlubber, and watching it never got old. Lindsay found herself answering a barrage of questions about spaceflight, and couldn’t resist showing off her knowledge a bit. Jeremy ate it up, leaving her feeling quite smug when the men moved on.

Jack and Ryan remained in their respective quarters, so Geoff led Jeremy back to the passenger dorm. He sat the thief down again and leaned against the doorframe.

“Last thing. You ever heard of Reavers?”

Jeremy shrugged casually. “Ghost stories. My dad used to say if I didn’t behave, the Reavers would get me. I didn’t and they haven’t, so...”


He elaborated in gruesome detail, but didn’t seem to be getting through. The kid was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid, and given his behavior so far, the captain decided it was a pretty even split. When he was done he peered suspiciously at Jeremy’s perfectly unruffled face.

“You understand any of what I been tellin’ you?”

“I mean, yeah,” the thief said. “I’m just not scared.”
“Then I reckon you ain’t been gettin’ it.”

“Horrible monsters, eat your guts, fuck your skull,” Jeremy ticked off on his fingers. “But they’re rare, and they die when you kill them. Seems just about as bad as, like, a pack of wolves or something.”

Geoff stared at him for a few moments, unable to comprehend how the idiot was completely unfazed by the concept of Reavers. He shook his head with amazement.

“Our kinda stupid,” he muttered to himself, then addressed Jeremy. “Well, that’s about it. Pray we don’t run into ’em. If we make it to Haven alive, and we ain’t sick of you yet, I’ll consider maybe takin’ you on board. Elseways, you’re stayin’ planetside.”

“All right.” The thief stretched. “Got anything to eat?”

“Yeah, but you stay here,” Geoff said firmly. “You can come out tomorrow, dohn-ma? My crew needs to settle down before you start pokin’ your nose into their shit. Else it’s back in the airlock for you.”

“Yes, sir.” Only now did Jeremy sound anything other than cocky. “What can I do in here besides sleep?”

The captain reached into his coat and retrieved both a protein bar, which he had to explain, and the very same deck of cards he’d once provided for Gavin. He left Jeremy gnawing on dinner, wearily ran his fingers through the growing scruff on his cheeks, and resigned himself to go collect bruises from Jack. On the way he paused at Ryan’s door and pressed the intercom.

“Haywood?”

At first there was silence, and he was about to move on when he finally received a somewhat groggy reply.

“What’s up, sir?”

“Just checkin’ in. You okay? Did I wake you up?”

“Eh,” Ryan said noncommittally. “I’m fine, though. Thank you, sir.”

“All right. As you were.”

Ryan returned to bed, where he continued to lie awake. Not only was it early, but he hadn’t been as active as usual today, and he still had enough energy that his body refused to sleep. Something told him Gavin wouldn’t be back tonight unless he interrupted Geoff’s assignment, so he had to deal with it on his own. The thought simply made him more anxious.

He ran through a list of things he might be able to do by himself. They’d been working on the drones for so long that his eyes hurt, which eliminated reading as a possibility. He’d already jacked off. The room was clean, as were his weapons. Yet more pushups and crunches did not appeal. Without leaving his quarters, he had very little to distract him.

Another two hours of misery later, his resolve began to weaken. Gavin’s idea had been niggling at him, and exhaustion was eroding his ability to ignore it. He rolled onto his back and wedged an arm behind his head to stare resentfully at the ceiling, poking at the thought like a loose tooth. After a while he gave up, got off the bed to sit cross-legged on the floor, and closed his eyes.
“Okay,” he began. “Let’s assume, hypothetically, that Gavin’s right. What then?”

Vagabond somehow looked smug. “We’ll be together again. Whole. The way it’s supposed to be.”

Ryan threw up his hands in frustration. “You keep saying that, but what does it even mean? How would I change? Would I lose control? Would I…” He paused to breathe and compose himself. “Would I cease to exist?”

“None of those things would happen, Ryan. You won’t change: I am already who you are. You won’t lose control: you’ll be in control for the first time. You won’t disappear: you’ll become more yourself than you’ve ever been.”

“That still doesn’t make sense!”

“Then explain the question better.”

“If you’re me, wouldn’t you already know?” Ryan countered scathingly. Vagabond’s self-satisfaction increased.

“I do know. But since you don’t believe me, you need to work it out for yourself.”

“You’re a piece of shit,” Ryan growled.

“Yes, we are.”

Ryan had to rein himself in, hard, before he tried to kill Vagabond again. He pressed his hands to his face, counting breaths, fighting through fear and anger to stay in the dream despite every fiber of his being wanting to get out. He could feel Vagabond laughing at him.

“I’m not like you,” he said, focusing on every word. “Yeah, I like to fight. I like power, and blood, and killing. But it’s my job, not my life. I’ve got other stuff to do, people I care about. I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to be a Reaver.”

“We won’t,” Vagabond purred. “You’re so close, Ryan. So close to the truth. Think!”

Ryan suppressed a fresh urge to kill and forced himself to think, to pull his hands away from his eyes and look, really look, at Vagabond. He tentatively approached until he could see every crease of his jacket and nick in the latex of his mask, which were exactly the same as when Ryan had constructed them. Vagabond’s eyes, though, were different. For starters, he had them now – real ones. That deep blue was more than disembodied sparks, and Ryan recoiled when he saw himself there.


“Always so stubborn,” Vagabond sighed. “And here I thought we were making progress.”

“Listen,” Ryan nearly whined. “Can we please stick to the plan? When the mask’s on, you do what Geoff wants, and don’t push it. The rest of the time, just leave me alone.”

Now Vagabond stepped forward, returning Ryan’s uncomfortably thorough examination. “I’ll tone it down for Geoff so he doesn’t kill us. Everything else depends on accepting, whether you believe it or not, that you’re still calling to me. You’re trying so hard to bring us together. I can’t – and I won’t – leave you alone.” He leaned in until their faces were less than an inch apart. “This is what you want, Ryan. Trust me. Trust yourself.”
The dream vanished, and Ryan’s eyes snapped open in fury. He glanced at the clock: it was one-thirty in the morning.

“Cao wo de pigu,” he snarled, and pulled open his equipment drawer to glare at the mask. Its grin scared him like a creep who wouldn’t take no for an answer. But just as he began to slam the drawer shut on it, Ryan’s eyes fell on the other items sharing the space with his armor. Among them was his stash of tranquilizer.

In the eight years since Perth he hadn’t taken so much as a shot of morphine. Now here he was, desperate for a dreamless sleep, reaching for the bag of spare knockout patches. On their own his hands opened it, took one out, and picked up the controller that would tune the dose for him. Two hundred pounds… four hours…

“No!”

He dropped them like hot coals, aghast and ashamed of himself, then angry. A moment later he was up the ladder and out the door.

Gavin was, as expected, still awake. He hardly had time to react before Ryan had him up against the wall.

“Ryan, wha-” The rest of his question was abruptly cut off, as his mouth was suddenly full of Ryan’s tongue.

“Anytime, anyplace,” Ryan said mockingly as he pulled back for a moment. He did not release the grip that held Gavin pinned. “I think now’s good, don’t you?”

He didn’t leave time for an answer before lunging in again, jamming a hip between Gavin’s legs and kissing him hard. He was met with an eager sound and the kind of resistance that meant his partner was ready to play.

Ryan fucked Gavin viciously, denying him any opportunity to be assertive. While he did not use a gun, his grip was painful, and his movements brutal. He had to clamp a hand over Gavin’s mouth to stifle his sounds of pleasure before they woke the neighbors; Gavin didn’t last long after that, but Ryan kept going, energy and frustration and fear burning out until he simply couldn’t move. He panted harshly, trembling, and finally retreated to throw away the condom.

Gavin, bruised but happy, made room for him to collapse on the bed. “Why’d you stop?” he asked. “I can keep going ‘til you’re done, too.”

“Don’t think I can finish right now,” Ryan rasped, already getting drowsy. Gavin frowned.

“I’ll ride you if you want, or suck you off,” he offered. “You don’t have to do all the work.”

“Thanks, but nah. I’m good. C’mere.”

Gavin dodged his attempted embrace. “Let me close this connection,” he said, and limped across the room to log out of the government servers. He broke the Cortex link, then turned off the screens, plunging the room into darkness. Only the faint blue glow of Phantom’s chassis remained.

“You all right, Ry?” Gavin asked. He wiped his torso off with his shirt and found a comfortable spot on the mattress.

“Nnh. Sleep.”
“Okay.”

It felt like a mere second later that Ryan opened his eyes to morning. Though the lights were out in the workroom, the ambient glow from the hallway had a distinctly daytime hue, and when he turned the computer screen back on he saw that the clock read 8:47. No wonder Gavin was gone; the crew was probably done with breakfast by now.

The hunch was confirmed when he stumbled outside and nearly ran into Lindsay, strolling past on her way to the engine room.

“Mornin’, lazy-ass. We saved you some pancakes.”

“Shie shie, mei mei,” Ryan slurred, mouth unpleasantly tacky. “Coffee?”

“Plenty, but put some pants on first.”

He looked down to discover that he was still naked. Lindsay’s laughter followed him as he scurried back to find his pajamas, which had somehow ended up tangled in the computer chair. When he’d stopped blushing he resumed his trek to the mess hall, where he found Jack and Michael doing the dishes.

“Look who decided to show up,” Michael said dryly. “We thought you’d fuckin’ died.”

Ryan did not dignify that with a response. The coffeepot was already on its second brewing of the day, and it was tempting to pick up the carafe and drink from it directly. He compromised by immediately chugging one mug and taking a second to the table.

“There’s leftovers in the fridge,” Jack commented. “Eat, you look like you need it.”

He agreed with a vague mumble, but didn’t rise from the seat he’d filled. The pilot rolled her eyes and left him to his stupor.

Breakfast succeeding in waking him enough to realize he ought to get dressed. He threw on some workout clothes, but didn’t go to the cargo bay just yet. Instead he cautiously approached his equipment drawer, opened it, and began a staring contest with his mask.

Vagabond waited there in his mind, no longer confined to an edge or corner, but lurking close beneath the surface like the canvas of a painting. Ryan let his eyes defocus and turned his awareness inwards to acknowledge him, facing the reality that he existed and had to be dealt with. A sour-milk smugness made the pancakes attempt escape, but Ryan clamped down and forced himself to endure for another few moments. This way he could at least disengage with some dignity, on his own terms. He wasn’t running away.

“This is my life,” he growled. “Whatever we do, we do it my way. Not yours.”

Of course, Vagabond whispered inside.

It startled Ryan enough to make him blink. He resisted the urge to slam the drawer in anger, closing it slowly and deliberately instead.

“Stay,” he ordered under his breath, and left to meet his crewmates in the hold.

Despite his best efforts, he went through the motions on autopilot, continually distracted from the routine by the thoughts that had not stayed put in his room. Michael, Ray, and Gavin kept trying to joke with him, but gave up when they switched to sparring. They kept it to low-key, scripted fights,
and still had to remind Ryan not to hit too hard. After the fifth time they simply decided to stop; Ryan went to clean up, but the younger men joined Lindsay and Geoff in watching Jeremy lift weights. All five crew members fought to keep their jaws off the ground as their vertically challenged guest easily bench-pressed more than any of them could, and used the pull-up handles for tricks only Ray would even think of attempting.

“What?” Jeremy asked between gulps of water. “Never seen a gymnast work out before?”

“Nope,” Michael promptly announced.

Ray shrugged. “I can do muscle-ups and rolls and shit, but not going horizontal like that. You should try free running.”

“Not a chance,” he laughed. “Strength, I got. Speed, not so much.”

“I feel left out,” grumbled Lindsay, retrieving her dumbbells.

“You keep up with Ryan in deadlifts, hon,” Michael said. “That’s more than me. And besides, you got the brains. No way any of us could keep this ship in the air.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Geoff demanded.

“Then why’d you hire her, if you could do it by yourself?” Ray teased. The captain scowled at him.

“Hmm, I could go for some liver and onions,” mused Jeremy. “You got any?”

He had to settle for stir-fried rice with pork and vegetables for lunch. It was still plenty satisfying; before retreating to the helm, Jack pronounced it the best meal they’d had since Haven, making Ray quite pleased with himself.

They were just finishing cleanup when Hunter’s engines unexpectedly roared. She changed direction abruptly, and the shift was hard enough to make the crew stagger.

“What was that?” Geoff demanded loudly, already halfway to the bridge.

“Automatic evasive maneuvers,” Jack said as he entered. “Hunter spotted an unidentified ship.”

“So much for stealth,” the captain grumbled. “We clear?”

Jack studied her map, blinked, and opened a few menus. With each page of information a little more color drained from her face, until she was staring blankly at the screen with her breath quick and shallow.

“Jao gao,” she whispered. Her eyes were huge, cheeks stark white under her makeup. “Oh god, oh god, oh god…”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

Dohn-ma?: understand?/got it?
Cao wo de pigu: fuck my ass
Shie shie: thank you
mei mei: little sister
Jao gao: crud/drat/oh no

(sorrynotsorry)
“Pattillo, report!” Geoff barked sternly while his gut dropped through the floor. As he’d hoped, the order triggered Jack’s military training; though she was petrified, she found her tongue and spoke coherently.

“One Longbow-class ship fourteen hundred AUs astern, sir, but there’s no IFF signal and the radiation signature indicates lack of core containment. Likely Reavers.”

“How fast?”

“Fifty a minute, but we’re already at full burn. That model ship is faster than we are.”

“And we’re runnin’,’” Geoff whispered. “We ran from Reavers…” He dredged some moisture into his mouth as his fingernails dug into his palms. “Where’s the nearest human ship?”

“None in range, sir. Unlikely we’d find someone able to help before they catch up.”

The captain stared without seeing, face blank, mind racing. The worried beep of the scanner highlighted the fact that neither he nor Jack was breathing. He reached for the P.A. as if in a dream.

“Attention all hands.” The words were heavy and cold as cast iron, and his enunciation robotic. “There is a Reaver ship on course for intercept and we can’t outrun them. Arm yourselves and say your prayers. I repeat, all hands to battle stations. This is not a drill. Gavin, start up a broad-spectrum SOS. Narvaez, you’re topside.” He let go of the comm. “Pattillo, bring us around. Half burn.”

“Aye, sir.”

Her terror was submerged beneath steely eyes and a confident grip on the throttle. The barest hint of a manic grin tugged the corner of her mouth, just enough for a single vicious canine tooth to catch the light. Geoff saw it, and a fire kindled in his chest.

“Let’s take out some trash,” he growled. “Keep on ‘em, G-monster.”

“Right up their fuckin’ ass, sir.”

“Perfect.” Geoff stood. “Which guns you want?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”
He went to his quarters, then Jack’s, and returned to the bridge staggering under the weight of their weapons. Jack set the autopilot for only as long as it took to buckle on an extra holster, pull the strap of her assault rifle over her head, and fill her pockets with spare magazines. Geoff looked odd with a matching rifle crossing his chest one way and his bandolier of pistols the other; he’d also hung a revolver and two combat knives off his belt, and had a shotgun slung across his back. Finally he shoved a hand-axe and a box of ammunition into a safe place by Jack’s feet, straightened up, and saluted.

“Wo hui zai diyu jian ni, Jack.”

She returned the salute emphatically. “Fuck ‘em up, sir.”

Geoff recorded a message to Trevor and had Gavin set up a script to send it only if all was lost. It was the work of a moment, but he remained at the white-faced hacker’s side once it was done.

“Keep an eye on the comms from here and let me know if anyone answers our hail. I’ll call you if we need you.”

The only answer was a strangled whimper. The captain hesitated briefly before putting a hand on Gavin’s shoulder.

“Stay with me, kid. You got your gun?”

“Yeah,” Gavin managed, and waved vaguely at the bed where ammo and a few firearms were neatly laid out. “Ry gave me some stuff.”

“Good.” Geoff swallowed hard and gave a comforting squeeze. “Gavin, I’ll do every fuckin’ thing I can to keep us alive. Worse comes to worst, we go down fightin’, and I’ll be proud to die with you.”

He strode off before the moment got uncomfortably sappy.

Ryan and Michael were not alone in the cargo bay. Jeremy was there too, cradling a small submachine gun with surprising ease for a nonviolent offender. Geoff joined them, a sardonic twist on his lips.

“Still wanna be on my crew, Dooley?”

The thief grinned. “You’ll be begging to hire me.”

Michael, who carried enough ordnance to take down a cruiser, snorted. “Got no idea how to give a fuck, do you?”

“Hell no,” Jeremy scoffed. “Fucks are overrated.”

“You ever killed somebody?” asked Ryan. He wore his jacket, but not his mask, and his face was pale. Even so, there was something unsettling about his eyes.

“Eh, not yet. And Reavers don’t count anyway.”

“Not yet, he says!” Michael laughed. “I fuckin’ like this guy.”

Geoff shook his head, amused despite the situation. “If you ain’t da chung wu dahn, kid, you might just have a job after this.”

Nobody pointed out that there was unlikely to be an “after.” The captain pulled out his radio to
cover the doomed atmosphere.

“Pattillo, what’s our status?”

“Six hundred AUs and closing. Estimated intercept two minutes forty-one seconds.”

“Keep me posted. Narvaez, you in position?”

“Yes sir,” Ray answered, echoing faintly in his suit’s helmet. “Cannon’s charged and loaded.”

“Good. If you see a shot, you take it. Don’t wait for orders.”

“Yessir.”

“Lindsay, how’s the engine room?”

“Ready, cap’n.”

“Gavin, any replies to the SOS yet?”

There was silence.

“Gavin? Check in.”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah, I’m here. Nothing on the comms.”

Geoff closed his eyes and reminded himself to be patient. “In a combat situation you say ‘yes, sir’ or ‘no, sir,’ dohm-ma?”

“Oh. Sorry. Yes, sir.”

“Good. Standby.”

“Yessir.”

Jeremy snorted. “Idiot. Even I know that much.”

“Which is incredible, since you’re missing half your brain,” Ryan growled.

“Bi jweh,” Geoff snapped before an argument could develop. “Just cross your fingers we won’t have to throw lead in the first place.”

Jeremy stuck out his tongue when Geoff looked away.

“Pattillo, time?”

“One minute,” she answered tensely. “Brace for combat maneuvers.”

Everyone on board hunkered down with bated breath. The longest sixty seconds in history passed, Jack’s countdown from ten the only sound.

“Three… two… one… Visual contact established,” she announced. A moment later a very slight vibration resonated through the hull.

“Fuck!” Ray yelled indignantly. “How’d that miss!!”

“Automated point-defense guns,” Jack said with a mix of fear and annoyance. “This is gonna be
“tough…”

The ship began to swoop, roll, and swerve as she tried to get Ray a firing vector the Reavers couldn’t block with flak. The men in the cargo bay rattled around like popcorn in hot oil, clinging for dear life to railings and cargo webbing.

“Shit!” screamed Ray. “Harpoon! Fuckin’ pulse harpoon!”

“Hang on tight!” Jack cried. *Hunter* screeched as the entire ship shook with the impact of the debilitating weapon.

“Lost engines, captain!” Lindsay called.

“They’re reeling us in!” Jack said.

“Narvaez?!” yelled Geoff.

“Shit…” Another faint shudder as he fired again. “Hah! Got their main thruster… *goushi*, we’re too close now. I don’t have an angle.”

“Then get inside!”

“Yessir!”

“Pattillo, what can you do?”

“Nothing, sir, not without engine power.”

Geoff held his radio to his lips, eyes closed as if in prayer. A moment later he spoke again.

“Leave her. Jones, what’s it take to turn our gravity sideways?”

Lindsay’s stunned silence lasted all of a second. “Gravity generators are manual control only. Panel’s in the compartment under the cargo bay. But I don’t know if-”

“Perfect. Do it.” Geoff hit the button that would open the hatch. Large panels in the middle of the deck began to slide apart, revealing the area below. “Gavin, arm up and get over here.”

“Y… yes, sir,” Gavin replied faintly.

“Can he even fight?” Michael asked. Ryan nodded.

“He’s got his laser, and I gave him an SMG too. He’s strong enough.”

“It ain’t his guns I’m worried about,” Michael said. “He got his head in the right place?”

“He’s strong enough,” Ryan repeated softly.

“He better be,” muttered the captain as the other crew members arrived. Ray was emotionless. Jack and Lindsay wore identical expressions of mania, the walking damned ready to take as many with them as possible. Gavin looked as shaky as his voice. Geoff tried to project confidence as he gave more orders.

“Jones, get to work. When they try to board us, rotate so the umbilical is ‘down.’ Everyone else, faces to the wall.”
He demonstrated by plastering himself to the aft side of a supply crate, such that when gravity shifted he’d be lying on it facedown. The others scrambled to imitate him; Ray, Jack, and Jeremy found crates as far astern as possible, while Ryan and Michael took positions closer to the door the invaders would have to enter from. Lindsay had the hole in the floor to shelter in, though it certainly wouldn’t be comfortable. She worked as though in a trance, hands oddly graceful as she rewired this and adjusted that.

Gavin cast about wildly until his eyes lit on the secret compartment. He scurried to it, shoved the grille far into the back, and squirmed inside. With his head poking out, he could just about get an angle on the door. He tucked the Uzi under his arm, spare ammo close to hand.

“Hey, Ryan,” he called quietly.

Ryan had to re-adjust three different firearms and a sword so he could look, and saw the pleading in Gavin’s eyes. He smiled sadly, and without speaking raised two fingers to his temple like a gun.

The gesture made Gavin’s heart hurt and stomach drop. He drew the pistol that Ryan had given him – “As a last resort,” he’d said – and checked the magazine.

It was empty. A single bullet rested in the chamber.

A moment later, a dreadful thud made the ship quiver. There were some metallic noises as the Reavers’ umbilical bridge locked in, and all at once the crew could hear the howling.

“Lindsay…” Geoff said, warning and terror putting an edge to his voice.

“Hang on, just a… c’mon baby, come the fuck on you piece of shit… Got it! I got it!” she cried, and threw herself into position just as the Reavers started hammering at the airlock. “Now!”

The crew experienced a split second of freefall in the time it took for the gravity generator and inertial dampeners to reset, and the sensation was the opposite of pleasant. Gavin and Jeremy groaned and gagged, but managed not to vomit. The more experienced spacefarers merely winced and took up combat stances, balancing on the crates that they desperately hoped they’d locked down properly. The steep slant of what used to be the floor was vertigo-inducing.

“All right, you beautiful bastards, listen up.” Geoff’s command sliced through sound and fear alike. “We’re gonna take out every last one of those sons-of-bitches one way or another, got it? Now, I want it rainin’ bullets as soon as I open the airlock. Switch up who’s shootin’ so the fire don’t stop when we gotta reload. Jones, if there’s a breach down there, throw every grenade you got and I’ll close the door ma shong. Then I want normal gravity, and everyone but Gavin suit up to shuck the harpoon. Narvaez, back to the gun. Blast that bird full of holes the second I say so. We clear?”

“Yes, sir!” was the unanimous reply. Geoff grinned viciously.

“Let’s get killin’.”

He slammed the airlock control button. The first of the Reavers tried to charge into the ship, and Gavin’s scream was drowned out by gunfire. The creature didn’t even reach the gravity shift – it spasmed wildly as it was peppered with bullets, and it fell back into the arms of the Reaver behind it. A traffic jam developed in the hallway, but the invaders didn’t stop. They shoved their dead allies aside and tried to climb up the threshold, swarming and falling and pushing and rising like a backed-up sewer drain. Battle raged, and a deafening chaos echoed through the ship.

At first it was shooting fish in a barrel, and the Reavers had no chance to use their true strength in hand-to-hand combat when they were unable to get through the door. However, there seemed to be
no end to them, and soon they wised up enough to use each other’s corpses as shields. Hunter’s crew had to aim more carefully, trying to conserve ammo that was being depleted at a horrifying rate.

Gavin, paralyzed with terror, could barely aim in the first place. He kept his gun on semiautomatic, taking single shots at a time, trying not to think about the ravenous demons that would tear him open and eat him alive and- Oh, for god’s sake. With a massive act of will he hauled his mind out of the worst-case scenario to refocus on the task at hand, but his concentration didn’t last long, and he found himself zoning out over and over again.

Suddenly he realized that he’d been staring at Ryan, who was closest to the Reavers that were ever-so-gradually forcing their way into the ship. Empty shells and magazines littered the floor beneath him; Gavin could see the beginnings of worry under Ryan’s otherwise stony face. It sparked a protective determination in Gavin’s heart that bolstered his resolve, and he redoubled his efforts to provide cover fire. He was still stymied by fear until inspiration struck: a game, that was it! This was the hottest new VR game. He was shooting an army of pixels, mere targets, nothing real. Kill the monsters, protect the squadmates, get the high score. Easy. He clung to the idea as he peered down his sights, and fought.

Despite the combined firepower of eight desperate humans, the sheer number of Reavers meant that they were beginning to spread into the room. Ryan snarled as his shotgun ran dry, and hit the quick release to drop it from its strap. With both assault rifles already on the floor, all he had left was his sword, a Chinese saber he’d confiscated from a double-crossing arms dealer. It was an antique – but they didn’t make ‘em like they used to.

With a roar that rivaled those of his enemy, he leaped. He fell upon the closest Reaver and took its head clean off, then used his momentum to continue the slash across the chest of another. In and out of the fray he darted, whirling steel and heavy boots holding back the tide of monsters on one side of the door while his crewmates continued to rain lead down on the other. The Reavers were graceless, without finesse or tactics, and could not lay a hand on Ryan’s expert battle dance. They died like flies; their blood rolled down the sleeves of his jacket and slowly soaked into his jeans.

It was with surprise that he ran out of targets. He stood among the foul corpses, chest heaving, genuinely confused at the lack of opponents when he could still hear the shrieks of the Reavers echoing up through the floor. The reason became apparent when an ominous hiss swelled between the staccato bursts of shooting.

“Cease fire! Cease fire!” he cried, and dropped his weapon to clear away the mutilated bodies clogging the door. “Umbilical’s breached, they’re pulling vac!”

“Jones, now!” yelled Geoff, poised to close the airlock.

“Fire in the hole!” Michael crowed. He abandoned his perch to stand at the threshold and began hurling grenades straight down, which translated into powerful pitches along the hallway. He dumped everything he could before the heavy steel slammed into place, and at his trigger a massive column of flame and viscera barreled back down the path of least resistance to crash against the hull. The umbilical that connected the ships cracked wide open, and in an instant the blaze was sucked into the soundless vacuum of space.
Chinese translations
wo hui zai diyu jian ni: I'll meet you/see you again in hell
da chung wo dahn: big gun no bullet (i.e., talking a big game but unable to follow through)
dohn-ma: understand?
bi jweh: shut up
goushi: dog crap
ma shong: right now, immediately
Though the harpoon still held *Hunter* immobile, she was safe from boarders for the moment. That didn’t mean anyone relaxed one bit.

“Gravity! Get your feet on the floor!” Geoff commanded. Lindsay was already working on the control panel.

“Three! Two! One!”

An avalanche of rancid meat slid disgustingly to the deck when she flipped the switch, and this time neither Jeremy nor Gavin could keep from throwing up. By the time they were done, Ray was already gone to get on the turret. Jack, Lindsay, and Michael were scrambling to pull on space suits; Ryan had to shed most of his gore-drenched clothes before doing the same. Geoff made sure each of them had a laser, as ballistic guns wouldn’t fire in a vacuum, and cycled them through the airlock with one hand while holding his radio in the other.

“Gavin, get to your computer. Keep an ear out for rescue and holler if nav spots another ship. Narvaez, be ready to shoot the shit outta that slag-heap on my order. Everyone else, cut it loose. Exterminate any Reavers with extreme prejudice. Stay in radio contact. I’m here to let you back in.”

There was a series of affirmatives from everybody except for Gavin, who wandered off looking shellshocked, and Jeremy, who still stood behind a crate with a lost expression.

“What do I do?”

Geoff was only startled for a moment. He shrugged and gestured to the carnage around them. “Let’s get this yi da wbei bun chou roh outta here.”

The order had an immediate effect on the thief, who saluted despite the green cast to his face. “Yes, sir!” he barked, and started to dump shredded bodies into the airlock for disposal.

Outside, the radiation sensors on the crew’s suits gradually began turning an uncomfortable orange.

“Fuckin’ Reavers and their fuckin’ core containment...” Lindsay muttered as she cut the shredded umbilical off with a plasma torch. One by one, the four crew members edged around the ragged remnants to grip holds on the skin of the ship, then swung in graceful arcs to land boots-down on the ramp. Quick taps of buttons on their ankles activated magnets in the soles, allowing them to let go with their hands and stand upright. Their pistols were out as soon as they did so.

“Harpoon’s anchored on her belly, cap’n,” Lindsay reported. “I’m gonna check it out for booby traps ‘fore messin’ with it.”

“Roger,” said Geoff. “Ryan, stay a minute and help us clean up this mess.”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan replied, and began jettisoning the Reaver corpses that Geoff and Jeremy pushed out through the airlock. They drifted gruesomely into the black.
The other three paced toward the back of the ship, feet sticking with each step and giving them an awkward, irregular gait. The harpoon’s vicious clamp loomed as they approached, dwarfing Lindsay as she began to poke around. It had four arms, each twice as big as she was and tipped in a claw that had latched into *Hunter’s* outer plating. The “pulse” part of the device had fried an aft power conduit, triggering the engine’s emergency shutdown. The mechanic swore when she saw the damage.

“This’ll take more’n a couple walks to fix, cap’n.”

“Worry about fixin’ it later. Just get that *ji shengwu* off us.”

“Aye aye.”

Her inspection revealed that the articulated head of the clamp could be decoupled from the immense tether. However, it did indeed have a trap on it: a peculiar dead-man’s-switch that would explode if the two parts were ever separated. A fresh wave of curses spewed from the comm.

“Use your fuckin’ words,” snapped Michael.

Everyone else swore when she finished her explanation.

“Told you so,” she grumbled.

“Shut up and let me think,” Geoff ordered. He went silent for a few moments; then the crew heard him snap his fingers. “How’s it look on the other side? Can you cut it loose from the Reaver ship instead?”

“Maybe?” Lindsay tried to rub her forehead, and growled when her hand thunked against the visor of her helmet. “I can’t tell from here.”

“So get climbin’.”

“If you’re gonna cross that thing, why bother dicking around? Blow it apart. It’ll make some space, too, ’cuz of momentum. Then maybe Ray could get a shot in.”

Jack made an approving noise. “Shit, that’s not a bad idea.”

“That’d be shiny, if you do it right,” said Ray. “I still don’t have an angle here.”

Geoff made the decision. “Jones, what do you need?”

“C-4. A lot of it.”

“Where’s that at?”

“Green crate, starboard side of the bay, says ‘C-4’ on it.”

“And how much is a lot?”

“As much as you can get through the airlock.”
“Standby.”

The enormously heavy box required a brief reduction of the ship’s gravity to move, and just barely fit through the door. Once outside, the four astronauts cautiously navigated it to a spot where Michael could clip it via anchor line to the belt of his suit. Together the Joneses began to cross the immense braided-steel cable strung between the ships, the bloodstained crate bobbing along behind them like a child’s balloon.

“This is definitely one of the weirder things I’ve ever seen,” Jack muttered as she and Ryan followed them.

“What’s it look like out there?” The wait had not dulled Geoff’s nerves.

“Got a ways to go, sir, but it’s not too hard a walk,” Lindsay replied. “Should take maybe ten minutes.”

“Can you go any faster?”

“Not without killin’ the mag-boots.”

Geoff ground his teeth. “Yeah, no. Don’t do that.”

“Wasn’t plannin' on it.”

The utter silence from the Reaver ship was almost as bad as the unholy screaming that was probably echoing inside it. It hung dreadfully in space, covered with vile decorations scrawled over a hull too new to be battle-scarred yet.

“This is a military model, not civilian,” Jack commented. “How the fuck did Reavers get their filthy fuckin’ hands on one of these?”

“Somebody was really stupid,” Ray said with an audible shrug.

“I don’t wanna think about what else they got, if the Alliance can’t keep their paws on a Longbow,” muttered Geoff.

“Then don’t,” Ryan snapped, so coldly that the others were startled. Jack piped up before the tension could escalate.

“We’re almost there. Michael, how are you gonna do this?”

“Stick it perpendicular to the join. Best chance to break it, and we don’t want shrapnel hittin’ Hunter.”

“Wayi,” Lindsay agreed. “Maybe closer to a forty-five, though. We still gotta push it away from us.”

“How close, d’you think?”

The Joneses began a quiet conversation about angles and thrust, which would have bored the others to tears if so much hadn’t been riding on precise execution of this operation. At last they came within striking distance of the Reavers’ ship, and Lindsay could find the optimal place for their bomb.

“Here,” she said confidently, pointing at a section of crude welding right where the launch mechanism had been stuck to the hull. “It’d be better to mold the stuff around it, like a collar,
“Help me split this shit up,” Michael ordered. “We can put chunks all the way around, a little more on this side.”

He reeled the crate in and pried it open to reveal a small box of wires and five hundred pounds of plastic explosive. He lamented the fact that he couldn’t shape the charges properly under the circumstances; it meant that a significant portion of the energy would be wasted.

“Somewhere, Dan is shitting his pants and doesn’t know why,” quipped Ray. 

“It doesn’t have to be pretty,” Jack reminded them. “Let’s just get it done. How can I help?”

Soon the individual units of C-4 were unwrapped and ready to be topped with detonators. Michael took custody of a hundred and forty pounds of it; the other three divided the rest between them and smushed the malleable bricks into single lumps that could be carried more easily. Michael distributed blasting caps with a stern warning not to apply them until the explosives were firmly in place.

“Let’s get inside,” he said when the others returned a tense few minutes later. “Shrapnel’s no fuckin’ joke.”

The trip back to Hunter’s airlock went quicker than the outbound journey. Geoff cycled them in; a waxy mixture of anxiety, exhaustion, and lingering terror carved deep lines on his face.

“Do it,” he ordered.

Michael muttered a prayer and hit the switch.

There was silence.

“...Did it work?” asked Jeremy timidly.

“I’ll check,” Michael offered. He went back outside, and the crew was treated to a gleeful whoop. “Fuck yes! The cable’s loose! And the ship’s drifting away!”

“Narvaez, you got a shot yet?” Geoff snapped into the radio.

“Almost...”

“Don’t hit the engine. At this range it’ll blow us the fuck up.”

“Yessir.”

They let Michael back in and the ship vibrated faintly a few times, each pulse accompanied by Ray’s quiet murmurs of “nailed it” through the radio.

“That ship is Swiss fuckin’ cheese, captain,” he announced as the crew began to remove their helmets. “No way anything’s left alive in there.”

“Roger that. Stand down.”

Everybody wilted with relief, looking at their captain with a tinge of awe – except Jack, whose face shone with vindicated faith. Geoff didn’t have the energy to glower at her, and merely shook his head with eyes that drooped tiredly.
“Take an hour, y’all, and then we’ll swab the deck. After-action report can be at dinner or somethin’.”

The Joneses didn’t have to be told twice, and it was unclear who was dragging whom back to their quarters. Ryan gathered his clothes and vanished nearly as fast. Jack and Jeremy, however, lingered.

“You first,” the pilot prompted. Jeremy shifted nervously from foot to foot.

“Well… Captain, I was wondering...”

“Shut the fuck up, Dooley. You’re hired.”

Jeremy’s entire body lit up. “Really?! For serious? Holy shit, this is the best day ever!”

Geoff sighed heavily, though not without a bit of wry amusement. “If you say so. Start scrubbin’ and leave us alone.”

The newest crew member threw an enthusiastic salute. “Yessir! Where’s...”

The captain wordlessly pointed to the boxes containing the cleaning supplies and began making his way towards the bridge. Jack followed close at his heels.

“Sir,” she began, shutting the door behind her to block the exuberantly explicit sounds coming from the Joneses’ quarters. Geoff dropped into the copilot’s seat and began fiddling with the unresponsive controls.

“I really don’t wanna hear it right now, Pattillo.”

“With all due respect, sir, too fucking bad.” She remained at his elbow, torn between standing at-ease and propping her hands on her hips. “That right there? That’s exactly why I- why people follow you. Who else would think of using gravity to our advantage? We’d’ve been overwhelmed in a second without that trick. I wish you could see you deserve loyalty, and why.”

A muscle twitched along Geoff’s jaw as he ground his teeth. “Who got us into this mess, dumbass? I’m captain. I’m responsible for puttin’ this crew in danger and it’s a fuckin’ miracle we’re still alive.”

“Quit pretending like you’re not worth trusting,” Jack growled. “And quit telling yourself it’s your fault when the ‘Verse drops eyun on us. You’re the one who gets us out of shit, goddammit! I’m getting real sick of watching you worry yourself to death. Sir,” she tacked on as an afterthought.

Geoff gradually turned a shameful red during her outburst, and couldn’t meet her eyes. “The fuck you want from me, Jack?”

“Just… just fucking believe me.” Her frustration took on an edge of pleading. “You think I’d still be here if I didn’t think you’re worth it?”

He finally managed a glare. “This is gettin’ awful close to sentimental, Pattillo.”

“Well golly gee, what was your first clue?” Jack responded scathingly. “This is exactly what I mean. You pull off something amazing, then somehow tell yourself that you didn’t, and that it’s your fault we were in that situation in the first place. Look, I could be safe on Haven with the loves of my goddamn life right now. But no, I’m out in the black fighting off Reavers, and why? Because you’re the best leader I’ve ever known. We do crazy, awesome, fucked-up shit every day I’d never
get to do anywhere else. We’re on track to take the kind of revenge on the Alliance we’ve been
dreaming of since we enlisted. Hell, maybe someday we’ll even strike it rich. And I know that at
the end of it all we’ll still be flying, because of you.”

“Or we’ll all die ‘cuz I make a fuckin’ stupid call.”

She snorted. “Fine, pretend you do. Then if we die, it’ll be like goddamn legends, which is more
than most people can say.”

“Still be dead.”

“For fuck’s sake…” Jack sighed and pressed a hand against her temple. “Geoff, will you please
acknowledge that your strategy saved us from being slaughtered by Reavers? Can you accept
that?”

He sullenly looked away. “Meh.”

“Now you’re just sulking,” she snapped, and took her radio off her hip. “Ray, you there?”

He picked up after a brief delay, and an odd thickness clogged his voice. “What?”

“You wanna spar or something?”


“Let’s use the common room. Oh, and no holds barred this time,” Jack demanded as she left the
bridge.

The door closed behind her, and Geoff winced. “Oof. Poor bastard.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations

Yi da dwei bun chou roh: big stupid pile of stinking meat
Ji shengwu: parasite
Wuyi: definitely
Eyun: bad luck
Ryan’s control faded like an out-of-range comm signal as he scurried back to his quarters, clad in nothing but boxers and blood. His battle high lingered even after the spacewalk: the sheer power of his body; the feel of slicing flesh; the exultation of being the last one standing. He loved it – always loved it – but this time it burned so hotly he feared he might melt, might lose himself to the bloodlust the way Vagabond wanted him to…

He dropped abruptly into the room without using his filthy hands on the ladder, which gave Gavin a dreadful scare. Ryan hardly noticed, and abandoned his gory clothes to yank open the drawer that held his mask. He locked eyes with it, panting. A drop of scarlet sweat fell from his hair and splashed viscously onto the latex.

Gavin lowered his pistol with shaking hands, but was unable to let it go. He couldn’t speak, either, overwhelmed by the fight that kept replaying in vivid fragments: screaming, bullets, Ryan’s worried face. It was all tinted by blood… so much blood. The reek was burned into his brain, and his skin seemed stained with it, though in reality he hadn’t touched a drop. He stared at his fingers, still clutching the textured black plastic of the gun, and wanted to scour them clean down to the bone.

“You feel it, don’t you, Gavin?” Vagabond placed a hand flat on Gavin’s chest; it soaked a crimson print into his shirt. “Mmm, there it is,” he purred in silky delight. “I knew you had it in you.”

“What?” Vagabond caressed Gavin’s cheek, drawing a trail of blood across his skin. “Your heart’s beating far too hard. There’s butterflies in your stomach. I can taste it on your breath.” He leaned in close, much too close, until their eyes were locked and lips a whisper apart. “Don’t hold back your truth, Gavin. There’s no law here, nobody to judge you. Just me, and it makes me so happy…”

“S-stop,” Gavin squeaked faintly.
Ryan recoiled as though electrified. He staggered backwards, clutching his head, and half-fell against the drawer to slam it shut. Whispered curses and moans of “I’m sorry” poured from him as he slid down the wall until he was curled up in the corner, shivering.

Gavin finally lost his grip on the pistol, which clattered to the floor. He tentatively shuffled forward and knelt, reaching out to touch Ryan’s shoulder with a trembling hand.

“That… that was him, wasn’t it?”

Ryan nodded mutely.

“It was the fight, yeah? The fight brought him out?”

Another silent nod.

“It’s all right. We’re okay,” Gavin lied firmly. “Let’s clean you up. There’s too much… Too much kepa de xuexing in here, innit? Can’t think straight.”

At first Ryan didn’t respond, but after a few shuddering breaths he nodded once more and began to find his feet.

Cleaning the ship took five miserable hours. Everyone assembled in the mess hall later that evening, still lightly perfumed with the scents of viscera and bleach despite their best efforts to scrub them out. A mix of fatigue, relief, and helplessness made the air clammy as they sat at the table.

“Y’all pulled off a fuckin’ miracle today,” Geoff began softly. “I’m damn proud to call you my crew. All of you.” He pointedly met Jeremy’s eyes, and the others nodded in subtle respect. “We might be shook and hurtin’, but we’re gonna get through this, as a family. Any of you need to talk, I’m here. Anything needs takin’ care of, we’ll take care of it. All I ask is a little hustle on fixin’ the engines, ‘cuz without ‘em, we’re on the drift. Help out Lindsay any way she says.”

“Shie shie, cap.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’ll be pushin’ on this.” He looked sadly at each person in turn. “Once we’re back on course for Haven I suggest workin’ out whatever issues might be naggin’ at your brainpan. What I said before still stands: if you ain’t comfortable with a long and dangerous hunt, I ain’t gonna resent it if you wanna stay planetside.”

Nobody spoke up, although a certain firming of jaws and hardening of eyes clearly indicated who’d already made up their minds. Geoff let a faint smile tug at the corner of his mouth.

“Eat. Sleep. We got work to do in the mornin’.”

He distributed protein bars from a cabinet and retreated to the bridge.

Even Jeremy was quiet as they forced themselves to eat, battling vague nausea to gnaw on their flavorless food. Ryan was first to stand, abruptly and without looking at anyone; Gavin followed him to their quarters as if leashed. When they got there it seemed as if Ryan was about to jump him, but the aggression didn’t go beyond a sudden, desperate, and slightly-too-tight hug. Gavin reciprocated blankly, not noticing that his ribs were being crushed. It was difficult to notice much of anything when he couldn’t un-see all the things that had happened today.

“I don’t think I can sleep tonight,” Ryan muttered into Gavin’s shoulder.
“Me neither.”

“Dunno what to do instead, though.”

“Nope.”

“Hm.”

The pressure of the hug lessened, and they simply stood leaning into one another’s arms for a while. Eventually the faint sounds of the crew giving up on dinner began to drift into their awareness.

“Let’s get everyone and watch a movie,” Gavin declared. “Or a show. Or stupid videos. I can download anything we want.”

“Sure.”

“Got any ideas?”

“Not really.”

“Helpful, that.”

They emerged from their quarters to find the others listlessly putting away their unused dishes. Jeremy perked up a bit at the sight of them.

“You okay? I mean, y’know. Relatively speaking,” he asked hesitantly. Ryan dodged the question with one of his own.

“Anybody want to watch a movie?”

There was a general lack of enthusiasm, but no outright rejections either.

“Where?” Ray asked.

“On Phantom,” replied Gavin. “It’ll be a bit cramped, but I could use some distraction.”

A collective shrug made its way around the room.

“Sure,” said Lindsay. “What were you thinkin’ of?”

“I’m taking suggestions.”

They all agreed that something dumb and lighthearted would be good, but nothing more specific than that. Gavin ended up turning to the Cortex for answers, and chose the first promising-looking result that came up in a search of his favorite pirating site. Soon the crew, carrying pillows and blankets and decked out in pajamas, arranged themselves as comfortably as possible in the computer room. This required extremely close contact between all involved, but not even Ray complained about it.

“Ready?” Gavin asked.

“Oh, wait, hang on,” Jack said. “Can someone pass me a radio?”

“I got it.” Michael, the closest to the comm panel, reached up to call the bridge. “Hey Geoff, come watch this fuckin’ stupid game show with us.”
“Can’t. Gotta keep an eye out for company,” the captain demurred.

“Aw, c’mon,” Lindsay wheedled. “Even if somethin’ shows up, it ain’t like we can go anywhere.”

“I’ll set an alarm,” offered Gavin, already opening a configuration file to do just that. “We can even keep the nav screen open on a second monitor.”

“Oh, all right, twist my arm.” Geoff’s voice carried a smile. “Gimme a minute.”

“Put on something comfy,” Jack advised. “It’s a little tight in here.”

Geoff’s arrival necessitated another round of adjustment. At last he had a spot on the floor beside Jack, who had an arm around him and Ray’s head resting on her thigh. Lindsay claimed the captain’s other side, leaning back against Michael’s legs while he sat on the bed next to Gavin. Gavin in turn was half-in Ryan’s lap, and Jeremy was content to squeeze into the corner between Ryan and the wall. Blankets and pillows filled the few gaps that were left; the chair had been banished to the next room long ago.

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“Okay,” Gavin said. “Uh… who can reach the play button?”

“Me,” answered Ray, then groaned dramatically as he lifted himself off the floor.

“Fuck off, I didn’t hit you _that_ hard,” groused Jack.

“Tell that to my bruises,” he muttered, and pressed the space bar.

Bright colors and bad English voiceovers flooded the air as the video started to play. Halfway through the second episode the crew was beginning to smile; halfway through the second season, they were asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chinese translations
Kepa de xuexing: awful gore
Shie shie: thank you

...so I've gone through all my buffer and have no more chapters in the can. I'll try to keep up but I'm also trying to FINALLY graduate this spring and it is... stressful. Please forgive me, I hate not having time/brain to write this but like *gestures at Ph.D. program and tries not to cry* Huge love to everyone still with me, I swear I'll finish someday <3

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