Corpse Flower

by Helen1969

Summary

Twelve years after the events of "Frozen Harvest", Harlock(Yama) is searching for Tadashi Daiba - who vanished the night his mother was brutally murdered four years ago. The trail has finally led him to the planet Hakidame - where a youth convicted of the brutal murders/disappearances of several beautiful women on a dozen worlds has always claimed in his defence that they were not human, but some strange, alien plant-lifeform... one which may be the basis for all the ancient Earth myths of deadly, sensual women who prey on men and lure them to their doom...

NB: Specific tags have been avoided to remove what would otherwise be major plot spoilers, but I've placed this in "mature" for a reason - although a lot of this has its basis in myth and legend, taking some of these themes to their logical real-life conclusion does enter into dark territory!


Prologue

Man has conquered Space before, and out of that conquest faint, faint echoes run still through a world that has forgotten the very fact of a civilization which must have been as mighty as our own. There have been too many myths and legends for us to doubt it. The myth of the Medusa, for instance, can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth. That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon whose gaze turned the gazer to stone never originated about any creature that Earth nourished. And those ancient Greeks who told the story must have remembered, dimly and half believing, a tale of antiquity about some strange being from one of the outlying planets their remotest ancestors once trod.

CL Moore - Shambleau

Corpse Flower

Prologue:

...reports from the planet Hakidame that the infamous pirate ship 'Arcadia' has been sighted in the system turned out to be just a hoax caused by a malicious hacking of the local warp feed. The ship, captained by the notorious space pirate Harlock, has not been seen in Alliance Space since the end of the machine wars over eight years ago...

The bartender reached over and changed the channel to a sports broadcast. Only one man in the bar looked up; a tall man in pale grey spacer leathers, well worn and scuffed, with the sleeves rolled up to the middle of his lower arms. Scars ran along both arms; another ran across his left cheek and over the bridge of his nose, ending just under his right eye in a spattering of tiny burn marks. It did little to detract from an attractive face that had gotten him propositioned several times tonight by both sexes, politely refused. High cheekbones, a firm set to his jaw, and hazel eyes that looked out with a shrewd amusement from under a lock of brown hair. He had the look of a man somewhere in that indeterminate age between thirty something and forty-five; still youthful, no longer boyish, but not yet thickening in middle age. A closer look revealed that those nondescript leathers covered a lean but well muscled frame. A well worn holster rode low on his right hip, the grip of an antique pistol visible. Gloved hands curled loosely around a tumbler of some indeterminate amber liquid.

'Heh, ghost stories to scare kids at night,' the bartender laughed. 'Harlock's a myth. A fairy tale the Space Patrol spread to justify their pay cheques.' This got a laugh from some of the older barflies propping up the counter.

'No-one's seen him in years. Shit, the guy must be dead by now, I mean, he's supposed to be over a hundred years old, right?'

'The machinners worlds still have a bounty out on his head and those of his crew though. Lot of energy capsules for ghosts.'

'Dial-heads,' one of the old timers spat. 'Practically pissed themselves at the mention of his name during the war.'

'Yeah?' Another asked.'So how does that work then? They piss oil or some'at?' More laughter, and the conversation moved on.

A woman entered the bar, casually checking out the room from the doorway before entering fully. Tall, with long blonde hair falling to her waist, she was slender with a quiet, mature beauty that
turned several heads. Dressed in a simple red roll-necked sweater over black trousers tucked into knee length boots which had vacuum seals on the ankles, suggesting a spacer. A long red coat swished heavily as she walked, occasionally revealing a glimpse of a wicked looking blast pistol. She had that confidence and timeless beauty of a woman who would age gracefully, and any guess of her age would probably have been ten years lower than it actually was. Smiling her refusal of a handful of propositions, she made her way over to the man at the bar.

'Is this seat taken?'

'It is now.' He smiled at her. 'You're late, I was getting worried.'

'Traffic was a bitch. But I got what we needed, and we're set.' She grimaced as he knocked back the remnants of his drink. 'Seriously, your tastes have gone downhill lately,' she scolded. 'I don't know why you bother. You haven't been able to get totally blind, stinking drunk in over a decade..'

'I live in hope.' He replied looking into her eyes and smiling.

The bartender grinned as he polished a glass. Could still spot a couple a mile off, he thought to himself. No wonder he'd not been interested in anything else on offer; the woman was a serious hottie. Probably henpecked the guy though, he thought as he watched them leave, the man with a slight limp, favouring his right leg. Also had a few too many, he thought as the guy almost walked into the right hand doorpost. Then someone called for a drink and he thought no more of it.

Outside the bar, a hovercar waited, a large fat man in his fifties wearing thick glasses at the wheel.

'Are we on? He asked. 'Captain?'

The tall man reached inside a pocket and pulled out an eyepatch which he tied in place over his right eye. 'Kei's got the location and you've snuck our ringer into the system, so I guess we are.' He grinned at the fat man. 'Nice work on that hack by the way. Seems they bought it.'

'Never in doubt, captain,' he grinned back. 'Now where is it we're going?'

'Out of town about five miles. An institution for the criminally insane.' The woman - Kei, said quietly. At the fat man's puzzled look she grinned at him and slapped him on the back. 'Relax, Yattaran. We're about to break out a serial killer...

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Hakidame was an industrial planet, if somewhat off the main space lanes in the past few years. Like most such marginal worlds, in the years since the end of the Machine Wars, it had a mixed population, skewed mostly to naturals, with machinners a minority. There was a run down, seedy aura about the place. Once prosperous industries had no markets left in the aftermath, and factories lay idle, or were over run by local gangs looking for places to fight over.

On the outskirts of the old town, a large single storey building clad in grey plascrete lay inside a barbed wire compound, the old electrical fence now rusting because the power to keep it going was an expense the municipal board of the town couldn't justify any longer. Far cheaper to keep the occupants inside and docile with old fashioned locks, chains, guards and in the most violent cases, drugs.

The grounds of this eyesore were long gone to ruin. Local weeds thrived in the thin soil, and choked everything else into submission. Even the building, grey plascrete flaking off in large slabs, was smothered in some alien vine that dug its tendrils into the cracks in the wall. Small chittering insect-like creatures lurked in the shadows, though the few guards who wandered the area for a quick nicotine or other fix to break up the monotony knew to keep well clear of them; their bites
and stings had a nasty effect on humans.

One pair of guards sauntered back towards the side door they'd slipped out of earlier, the taller and younger of the two shoving a vapourette back into an inside pocket. He was dark haired, freckled, and new to the job. The older, fatter man opened the door with a wave of his id over the card reader.

'There's talk they plan to move that kid out in a few days. The one in your area? Any truth to that?' asked the younger man. His expansive hand gestures covered the quick dexterity he used to slip a sliver of plastic between the door locks as they passed through.

The fat man smirked. 'That piece of shit turns eighteen at the end of the week. Word came down from on high they'll put him in the MaxSec wing of the Panopticon. Psychiatric evaluation be damned. Word around the precinct is the police chief pulled some strings, on account of his little girl being one of the victims in that mall spree they took him down for. Little shit won't know what's hit him, once some of those guys get a hold of him. Bad place for a pretty boy. He'll be handed round like a piece of candy.'

He smirked 'Still. There's not much left. After he bit that orderly's dick off, they've kept him so far under I doubt he can remember his own name by now. Wanna take a look, before they move him? Been a queue all day of folks wanting a souvenir before he goes. Six months in this place and only now do they all want a memento. Can slip you in if you like?'

'Why not? Get a picture to show the folks back home... I remember all the fuss when they were looking for him. Ten systems he went through before they caught him, wasn't it? Biggest manhunt since that pirate vanished. Then all the big hooah over the fact that the guy responsible for the murder or disappearance of over a hundred women was a damn kid. What was he - fourteen, fifteen when he started?'

They wandered amiably through the empty corridors, passing only the occasional orderly on his rounds. The rooms in this wing were always locked, soundproofed and padded. Few sounds disturbed the air. The place smelled of mould; damp, musty, humid.

'Fourteen. Bit of a whizzkid before he went off the rails. Honours student, university fastrack, and one hell of a junior fly half. Official line from the bleeding hearts is he had a psychotic break after his mother was killed in front of him in a burglary gone wrong. Me, I think some kids are just wired wrong, know what I mean? This one just went off the grid, dealing, stealing, pimping himself out on street corners giving blowjobs or takin'it up the ass in dark alleys for the cash. What normal kid does that?' He stopped in front of a once-white door, with a dirty window in it at eye level.'Here ya go. I'll open it up. They keep him in restraints, so you'll be safe.'

'Long as I don't stick my cock in his mouth, right?' They both laughed. The fat guard keyed in his security number, and stood aside as the door slid open.

Inside, the padded walls of the cell were as damp and mouldy as the rest of the building, with a sickening stench of urine and shit added to the musty odour. The only thing in the small cell was a figure huddled against the far wall, arms strapped firmly into a dirty straightjacket. Dirty brown hair, stringy and unwashed, hung in rats tails around his face. He didn't even look up as the two men walked in.

'See what I mean?' The older guard said. 'Some lady killer now, eh?' He kicked the youth's outstretched legs. 'Hey, pretty boy, look up when you're spoken to!'
No reaction. He might as well have kicked a log. 'Can't get a picture if you don't show that pretty face, can we?'

The young guard knelt down and pulled the youth's hair to get him to raise his head. Blank brown eyes stared through him, and the harsh light of the overhead light lit up a sharp, lean face, almost starvation thin. High cheekbones, a slack mouth which might have once had a slightly pouting cupid's bow top lip over a full bottom lip. Stick thin arms could be felt through the straightjacket's tough material. A trickle of drool through those lips ran unheeded down a chiselled jaw. When the guard let go of his hair, his head fell back down to his face like a puppet who's strings had been cut. 'Man, kid's totally wasted.'

'Doesn't even fight back when you fuck him either. Not that anyone wants to in this state.' The fat guard kicked the youth in the ribs, not even getting a grunt of pain. 'Used to be good money passing him round at first, looker like that. Plus, ya know, some guys just love gettin' some payback on women killers. I told ya, kid even took out the police chief's daughter, Nana. Cute girl. Sixteen. Gunned down in the middle of a shopping mall.' He kicked the youth again. 'Sick fuck kept screaming about how he was killing aliens, if you can believe that? Alien plants that look like women! Says the reason they never found the bodies is that they burn up like paper when they die. That's why they put him on a psych ward instead of straight into Panopticon. Of course, if he'd been of age, he'd have gone straight to death row.' He turned to the new guard. 'So, fancy some alone time with him?' He sniggered again, snorting like a pig.

The younger guard smiled amiably. 'Actually, I thought I'd take him with me.' His hand lashed out and the supposed vapourette was jammed into the fat guard's neck. With a gurgle the man dropped to the floor with a thud. 'Finally, a way to shut you up, you sadistic slob.' He thumbed a commlink hidden under his collar. 'Any time you feel like joining the party, captain. I might need some help getting him out of here. Kid's a mess. Not sure I can get him out on my own.'

A movement behind him caused him to whip round, a small pistol leaping into his hand. The youth was on his feet, swaying slightly, and glaring out at the world from under that tangle of filthy hair like a feral cat. 'I can walk. Just get me out of this,' he snarled. He took two steps forward, and fell to his knees, fielded by the young guard.

'Damn, Tadashi, you're a mess,' the guard muttered. He started pulling at the straightjacket's straps. 'The drool was a nice touch though. Palming your meds?'

'Who are you, how do you know me?' The youth's voice was cracked and harsh.

'Last time we met you were ten or twelve, I think. Name's Zack.' He managed to get the last buckle undone and helped the youth out of the jacket. As he peeled it away he couldn't contain a gasp of horror at the sight revealed. The young man's body was covered in sores, bruises, cuts and scars. 'Ah, shit. The captain's going to go completely nuts.'

'About what?' A deeper voice from the doorway. The prisoner looked up, to see a tall man in grey standing in the shadowed corridor. 'Zack, the next patrol's due round. We need to go.' He walked into the room and took in a hissed breath at the sight in front of him. His single visible eye - the left, as the right was covered by a leather patch - glittered with a fierce anger. Two strides took him to the prisoner's side. 'Tadashi?'

His outstretched hand was slapped back with more anger than force. 'Don't fucking touch me!' The youth snarled.

The man Zack had addressed as 'captain' didn't flinch. 'I don't have time for this, scamp.' He nodded to the younger man. 'Zack, watch the corridor. Kei's outside with a hovercar, but our
window is only a couple of minutes before the alarms go back on.'

He knelt beside the prisoner. 'I've spent four years trying to track you down, scamp. You're a little too good at flying below radar for your own good. Now get to your bloody feet and come with me. Unless you have a better plan?' He held out his hand again. 'You can walk, or I can chuck you over my shoulder and carry you. Which won't be easy, as you're a damn sight bigger than the last time I did it.'

No response.

The older man sighed. 'Nevermind. Up you get.' This time when he took the youth by the arm, there was no resistance. Stumbling to his feet, he leaned heavily on the other man, but could only reach the door before he faltered. With no warning he leaned over and threw up all over the man's boots.

Zack winced, 'Oh, kid... you're gonna want that back!' His captain just sighed.

'I can't...' the youth gasped. Harlock shifted his grip to move the youth's arm to around his shoulder. 'Not far,' he murmured kindly. 'Zack?'

'All clear, captain.' He fell into place behind his captain, and the three made their way towards the side door without incident. 'Yattaran's managed to seal off the rest of the wing, but if we don't hurry..'

'Don't rush, Zack. Too much haste gets you into trouble. Door.' Zack leaned round to push the outer door open on the command. Once outside they both half guided, half dragged the exhausted youth to a waiting hovercar. The side door popped as they approached. In the doorway stood a tall young woman with long dark hair that fell down to her thighs, a silken sheath which floated around her as she moved towards them, her hips swaying with an ancient, seductive grace. Her hair drifted around firm, high breasts as she moved, revealing and concealing in a random dance. Her face might have inspired artists and poets alike, if not for the eyes, which were the inky darkness of the abyss.

'Wow...' Zack stopped in his tracks. 'Is she naked?'

'Cold night,' his captain remarked blandly. He unholstered the antique pistol from his gunbelt. 'Not your type, Zack.'

The woman swayed towards them, her hands outstretched, imploring. The youth gasped, pulling away from his helpers. 'Don't let her touch you!' His efforts pulled the older man offbalance, and they both staggered sideways, knocking into Zack just as sharp thorns shot from the woman's hands and missed them by inches. With a practiced move the one eyed man fired off a single shot, hitting the woman in the middle of her forehead. She fell backwards, a ear splitting shriek causing all three to wince. The second she hit the ground her form was wreathed in pale blue flames. Within seconds her form was reduced to ashes, holding its shape for a moment, a carbonised effigy that was dispersed by the breeze until nothing remained.

Harlock re holstered his pistol with elegant ease. 'High time we were out of here. Kei, where are you?'

'Moved out of sight round the corner. You might want to get a move on, I'm getting some weird readings from the grounds.' A woman's voice over the commlink, tinny but assertive. Zack looked round warily.
'I don't see anything...'

Harlock pulled the youth closer, supporting him firmly with an arm around his waist. 'Look down. ..' he said softly. Zack followed instructions, peering at the ground in the gloom. 'I can't. .. oh holy crap... something just moved past my foot!'

'Don't panic. Get your pistol. Set for a wide area burst. It's the vines, they're growing. Get in front, sweep it in front of us.'

The arcing flame of the blaster lit up the crepuscular gloom, as Zack scorched the ground in front, causing the twisting vines to blister and curl as they charred. The youth leaning on Harlock coughed hard.

'There should be at least another,' he croaked out. 'Controlling the vines. You need to run... now!'

'Zack... '

'I can't see anyone. Captain, they're getting thicker, I... oh shit. Crap. Get it off me, get it off!' He shot wildly at his feet, and then struggled to get his feet clear of the clinging vines, which began to swarm up his legs.

'Stand still, Zack, and stop screaming like a girl.' Harlock told him calmly. He aimed his own pistol at Zack's feet. 'Just a little..'

Another ear splitting shriek pierced the night, and the vines loosened their grip. The faint glow of blue flames illuminated a tall blonde woman standing near the fence with a large, baroque styled bolt pistol. She holstered it in a smooth motion. 'Hurry!' She shouted. 'I think they heard that one!'

As if on cue, the alarm from the building went off, and spotlights began to come on in the compound. With Zack's help, they ran towards the woman, half dragging the boy between them. She moved aside to allow them entry to a waiting hovercar.

'What kept you? .. oh shit. Tadashi?' The blonde woman gasped as she saw the figure suspended between the two men. 'Is he...? She sniffed. 'And what is that smell?'

'He puked all over the captain's boots,' Zack said gleefully, helping the older man grab the youth. Kei gave them a hand, drawing a sheet over the youth's abused body. With a gentle hand she reached out and brushed one tangled mass of elf locks out of his face. He was shivering now, his eyes unfocussed.

'He looks like death warmed over. What the hell did they have him on?'

'Too much.' Harlock told her grimly.

'He might have been trying to come off them himself,' Zack offered helpfully. 'I think he'd been faking it for a bit. '

Anything else he might have added was forgotten as a blaster bolt shot past him and scorched the surface of the hovercar. 'Damn it, now who's shooting?' He tried to pull the barely responsive youth down into some kind of safety, but let go as another blast sizzled past his ear.

'Security.' Kei swore as she returned fire. 'Ali, backup needed! Get your arse down here!'

'Five of them,' Harlock noted calmly. 'Zack, can you get Tadashi into the vehicle?'
'I'm trying. He's a little bigger than he used to be,' the young crewman grunted. 'I-' he crumpled to the ground as a sharp elbow caught him in the gut. 'Oh, shit. Captain, he's rabbiting!' He managed to get to his feet, but his attempts to take off after the younger boy ended before it began, as another hail of blaster fire kept him pinned behind the hovercar. All he could do was look on helplessly as the half naked youth stumbled off into the night.

He didn't really know why he ran. It just seemed to be what he'd been doing forever. Stumbling away from the gunfire, desperately searching for somewhere quiet. Somewhere else to be. Whatever the reasons these people had for rescuing him, well, thanks for nothing. He didn't plan on waiting around to get shot.

It started to rain after a few minutes. Within a short time he was wading ankle deep in runoff, drenched to the bone. The institution's lightweight pyjama bottoms were plastered to his skin, and he'd long since lost the sheet the blonde woman had tried to wrap around him. Pain lanced through his feet at every step, the filthy water stinging dozens of cuts. His hair, already stringy from neglect, clung to his neck and face. He didn't bother to push it out of his eyes. What was the point? Couldn't see shit through the downpour.

But in the end, his already weakened body couldn't go any further. He sank wearily against a wall in a dark alley, ignoring the scrape of brick on wet skin. No more. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep going. Well, better here, of his own choice, than locked up again at someone else's convenience. It was, after all, better than he deserved.

The rain kept coming, and he started to laugh. Maybe it would wash him away, bit by bit, down into the drains with the rest of the garbage. If it did, it wouldn't wash away his sins. Nothing could that. He knew. He'd tried. But at least the cold made his head feel clearer.

Harlock... had he dreamed that? Standing in the doorway, single eye blazing? His chin fell forward onto his chest. That would be too cruel. And too late.

You never came, Yama... four years trying to track you down, scamp. Had he dreamt that bit? You promised... .

'Tadashi?' She stood in front of him, a vision in red and black. How the hell had she gotten so close so quickly? He was never that careless. 'Hi scamp. We've been looking for you.' She knelt down, a few paces in front of him, seemingly not bothered that she was getting those nice clean boots filthy. And the familiarity was starting to annoy.

The rain had stopped.

And her scent... lemon and roses... where did he know that from?

Kei. Kei? Warmth, memories of warmth, and laughter, and arms holding him safe...

But not when I needed you... childish laughter. Not his? Memories he hadn't been able to afford in years.

Screw 'em.

'You don't trust me, lady?' He croaked. He stared at her with a wary anger from under rattailed locks.

What did you expect, a little kid running into your open arms?
She shook her head. 'The guys wouldn't appreciate that you might need your space for a while. Harlock's first instinct is to cuddle you half to death. Me, I've been where you are. I know something of what you're going through.'

'I doubt it,' he snapped hoarsely. He watched as she took a steadying breath, the beginnings of tears in those vivid cobalt blue eyes. 'Ah, for fucks sake lady, I don't want your pity!' The hurt he saw then made him flinch a little inside, but there was something satisfying about watching her back off as though he'd physically hit her. *Yeah, that's what it feels like...*

'I'd be a little more careful with that mouth of yours, Tadashi. Seems to have become a nasty weapon since we last met.' This voice came from the end of the alley. If he turned his head a little he could just see the man standing in it. Tall, brown hair, hazel eyes - well, the left one. The right was covered by a black leather patch. Definitely a head-turner even with that scar across his left cheek. A face he'd seen in dreams and nightmares for years. The man from his cell? So, not a dream...? *Priceless.*

Yeah. Try this out then: where the fuck were you when I needed you, cousin? It sure as hell wasn't where you promised you would be, was it? *Oh yeah. That felt better. Here's a thing no one else could do, right? Make the great, badass Captain Harlock flinch as though you'd smacked him in the face.* 'I don't remember seeing you when mum died, having the life choked out of her by some freak with vines for arms. But hey, guess what - I managed just fine without you. Four fucking years and fifteen planets and not a sign of good old cousin Yama and his scary phantom ship. The great hero was off saving the universe I guess. Too busy for family? Well, you weren't needed then, and you're not needed now, you purblind turd.'

Kei made as though to reach out to him, or hit him, he wasn't sure which, and he flinched, seeing the hurt warring with fury on her face. But she stopped short, and turned away. Shivering, he lifted a hand, but it was either ignored or not seen. He let it drop into his sodden lap, and his head drooped. *Pointless, at the end. All the times he'd played a scene out like this it hadn't been like this. He'd been on his feet, triumphant, not shivering in a corner, bone tired, fuzzy headed and bleeding. Maybe if he made him mad enough he'd end it. Please, Yama. Harlock. Whatever you want to call yourself. Just fucking shoot me already.*

*I killed them. I deserve it.*

*Nana...*

He felt, not saw, the arm that lifted him up. Placed a jacket round him. Looked up into that hazel eye, that wasn't angry, or condemning. Just affection, and a compassion he didn't deserve.

'I fucking hate you,' he screamed hoarsely, his voice almost giving out.

'It's a start.' And his cousin's hand was ruffling his hair gently in the way he'd done so often when he'd been small, and done something he shouldn't.

And this, *this* was what he'd run from. But he couldn't run any further, could only hold onto a damp sweater, clutching the fabric with trembling fingers, and let the tears fall, letting strong arms hold him, feeling safe for the first time in years.

He thought the rain had started again, at first. But this time the rain was warm, running down his chest. And there were blue flames in the alley, and Kei calling, screaming into the night for someone.

You're in an alley, silly...
A heavy weight against his chest, and he was buried under damp leather and warm, red rain... so much rain.

His own body heavy, darkness closing in. A scarred face pulling Harlock's limp weight off him, and Kei's hands frantically pressing against his own chest.

Then nothing.
Admiral Hoshino turned a disdainful gaze onto the slovenly chief who'd driven him out to the psychiatric facility. 'And you say your men - over dozen armed men - failed to deal with a youth, a one-eyed man and a woman?' he sneered.

The police chief blustered. 'It was Captain Harlock, Admiral, and the woman was his executive officer, Kei. How do you stop a hundred year old monster and the bitch-demon he keeps by his side?'

'I'm well aware who it was you failed to apprehend, captain. A renegade junior officer from the former Gaia Fleet. Not some immortal phantom. And the woman is human, if rather enthusiastic about making a point of flattening anyone who so much as looks at her beloved captain sideways. The Alliance is not happy that your forces failed to identify that the Arcadia was in system. You were warned weeks ago that he would come for the boy, yet you had nothing in place to take him. And now you have let Harlock and his crew escape, taking a notorious murderer with them.'

He stared at the run-down building and clenched one gloved fist tightly. The anonymously sent file containing details of the conditions at this place had proved to be all too accurate. With an imperious gesture he called over his chief of security. 'Irita. Have your people finished?'

The spare framed, grey haired young man saluted. 'Yes sir. We've transferred the inmates to holding cells on board. Panopticon has been advised and will be awaiting our arrival.'

Hoshino turned to the chief of police. 'A severe dereliction of duty, captain. The state of this facility is a disgrace. No matter the offence, systematic torture and rape of inmates is neither sanctioned nor tolerated. Your charges here will be transferred to Panopticon for evaluation, after which they will be moved to the appropriate facility.'

'You have no jurisdiction here, Admiral, this is a civilian matter...' the police captain blustered. Hoshino cut him off sharply.

'The prisoner who escaped had committed offences on fifteen planets, captain. That makes him an Alliance prisoner, not a local one. He should have been handed over to your nearest base, not tried and held on a backwater colony world. Furthermore the sadistic torture of that prisoner and the others in the care of this facility is contrary to the articles your planet signed up to as a condition of membership in the New Alliance.' He gave the man a pitying look. 'Whilst I sympathise with your loss at his hands, the fact remains that you were obligated to either turn him over to the proper authorities, or to have him humanely executed for his crimes. There are no mitigating circumstances for your actions, captain. Irita, place him under arrest and put him in holding. He goes back with us.'

Irita nodded curtly. 'As you command. By the way, we've identified the guard who was on duty last night.' He waved over one of his subordinates, who unceremoniously hauled over a fat male in the grey uniform of the facility security. 'I'm not sure we can convict on the testimony you received, however, given its probable provenance. ..' he added doubtfully.

Hoshino smiled grimly. 'As it happens, the security footage captured his confession to that young pirate masquerading as a guard. That's more than enough to get a warrant for the rest of the footage. Place this piece of human refuse in solitary. I don't want to see it again.' He paused. 'Irita... I understand this cluster fuck is partly down to your actions...' It was somewhat gratifying to watch the younger man squirm.
'Admiral, it seemed a reasonable risk to take to apprehend Harlock. His file...'

Hoshino cut him off with a raised hand. 'And that was your first mistake, Irita. A twelve year old file is not the man. Nothing we have on record about this Harlock will help you understand what motivates him. You thought he would be vulnerable, because he has people out there he cares about? That you were dealing with a naive idealist who'd stick his head into a noose without checking for a trapdoor? That man didn't survive the Machine Wars, commander. You're just bloody lucky your name doesn't appear on any of this. Or I can guarantee a short, sharp lesson would be forthcoming. At the very least it appears you failed to ascertain the conditions in this facility. Failure being preferable to ignored...'

'I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

'No. It won't. Or the short sharp lesson will come from me, not from him. There is however a more egregious error you made regarding Harlock.'

'Admiral?'

Hoshino shook his head wearily. 'You made the mistake of thinking you were dealing with one man. You couldn't be more wrong. This Harlock is surrounded by people who would walk through fire for him. Most of them experts in their own fields as well as in bloody vicious in a scrap. His 'wife' is probably a better natural leader than he is. His fat slob of a first mate I suspect is responsible for the systems intrusions that compromised your plan. That blond slab of muscle who acts as his attack dog is not not be underestimated either. And then there's the Nibelung woman... it's not just his charisma that wins them over; he's not that persuasive or even more than averagely charming. But he has an integrity that people respect; he'd lay his own life on the line for the people around him, and they know it. I swear the man thinks he's some kind of knight-protector from pre-industrial days. Treats this area of space as his own private fiefdom, and gets away with it. Next time, Irita, do your damn homework.'

He turned his back on his subordinates, and stared up into the overcast sky. 'And pick your battleground carefully. A lot of planets out here still remember the Arcadia's race to end the Deathshadow Plague five years ago. That's a lot of grateful people.'

Irita pushed his wireframed glasses up his long thin nose. 'Your own wife and son survived because of that. How come you still despise him...'

'Because he's a wanted outlaw who refuses to play by civilised rules. The Alliance with the Machinners was founded on the back of a treaty he openly and repeatedly criticises. Men have to know their place in the new order, Irita. He and his crew were offered an amnesty in return for services rendered. Every man woman and child on board told us where to stick it. Both times. As a husband and father, I'm grateful. As an officer of the lawful government, it is my duty to bring him and his crew in to account for their crimes. There's no place for men like that in our world. He's a dangerous anachronism. Where would we be if everyone followed his damn example?'

The Mephisto awaited in orbit, and there would be no point waiting here for the painfully slow wheels of colonial policing to grind into action. His quarry would be long gone. Irita's allowing word to get out onto the 'net about the whereabouts of young Daiba had been a calculated risk. If not held back unavoidably by orders from Alliance Fleet HQ that no-one seemed to remember giving, they might have been waiting to spring the trap his security officer had been planning for weeks after locating the boy. And now they were detained further from pursuing that phantom abomination by the need to clear up the shit these hicks had dropped in his lap thanks to the Arcadia's tendency to leave disaster in its wake.
'Whatever went down in that alley, Harlock, I hope it bloody hurt.' Scant hope it would have killed the cocky little shit. The Teflon coated bastard had more lives than a cat, and a tendency to land on his feet. *Run headfirst into a situation and leave some other poor sucker to clear up the mess. As usual.*

Next time, he promised himself. Next time, you won't be so bloody lucky...

Kei leaned her head wearily against the glass of the infirmary observation window, watching Doc Sado at work. The woman had pressganged Meg into acting as her nurse and gofer, she noticed absently. But her attention was on the bared bloodied torso of the man on the operating table. Her gloved hands pressed on the glass and she vaguely noted the bloody smears she was leaving on it only because they obscured her view if she moved her head.

A strong arm went around her shoulders, and she was tugged into a bear hug against a broad chest with her nose pressed into a dark green sweater. 'Ah, kid, you know, if it's not one of you pressed up against this window, it's the other. Whaddya do - agree to take turns?' Large hands pulled her hands out in front of her, and began pulling her gloves off, dropping them one by one onto the floor. 'And Doc hates it when you get blood all over her windows.'

'Ali...' she leaned against his shoulder, and he patted her awkwardly on the back. 'I never even saw that third one. She - it - just came out of nowhere.'

'Some kind of camo, from where I was standing. It was like she came out of the wall. Didn't know they could move so bloody fast,' he told her.

Taking a deep, steadying breath she looked up at her comforter. The big blond chief gunner and comms officer for the Arcadia grinned down at her. 'He'll be fine. Doc just needs to stabilise 'im a bit and let the ship do the rest. You know the cap'n; tough as old boots. He's too damn stubborn to die on us.'

She attempted a smile, but failed miserably. 'Thanks, Ali. I felt the ship go into IN-SKIP. How long before we reach Tabito?'

'Couple of days max. Look, you go get yourself cleaned up. Yattaran and I will take the command posts. Get some sleep, and wait for Doc to give you a shout. I'll send Anita over with something warm. Now scoot!' He made little shooing gestures with his hands, and it raised a small, brief smile.

'How's Tadashi?' She asked. *The boy's blood on her hands, mixed with Harlock's...*

Ali's amiable grin stiffened into a lip curling sneer of distaste that reminded her of his grumpier attitude back in the old days. 'Stitched up, sedated and in one of the isolation rooms. Got one of the lads cleaning him up and getting some fluids into him. If it were up to me I'd shove the ungrateful little prick out the nearest airlock.'

'Ali!' He shrugged, unrepentant. 'Harlock still had his commlink open, Kei. We all heard what the kid said to him. After all you two have been through these past few years, I'd have bloody well left him there for saying what he did. It's not the first time he's gotten one of you badly hurt either; what's he trying for? A trifecta?' He gave her a searching look. 'I know you both think of him as family, but it's been years since you last saw him, and he's not that little tyke anymore. He's a dangerous young man with some serious issues. Might be safer all round just to patch him up and set him
'Proving he's as daft as ever when it comes to family and friends,' Ali replied gruffly. 'Whatya gettin' at?'

'I think we should get Yattaran to make a few course changes along the way."

He nodded slowly. 'You think those things are after the kid?'

'We assumed he was tracking them from planet to planet... what if we were wrong?' She tapped her long fingers on the glass, deep in thought. 'I'll take responsibility for the change in course. But better safe than sorry."

Ali nodded, and with a wan smile she left him, heading for the quarters she shared with Harlock. Halfway there, however, she stopped at a junction in the corridor and stared thoughtfully down the side corridor that led to the secure isolation rooms. With a soft huff and a shake of her head, she turned and headed in that direction. Some things, she reflected, you just didn't leave to the guys.

He drifted for what felt like forever. Sometimes there were voices when he woke, talking softly, just out of reach of coherency. He thought he heard his name once or twice. But drifting was easier, wrapped in the comfort of clean, fresh, warm sheets and a cocoon of painless, mild euphoria he knew had to be artificial, but hell, after the last few months, it was a welcome relief.

But eventually the peaceful cocoon was unwound, and drifting became harder. This time when he felt a warm hand against his face, he did wake up fully, and found himself staring into a pair of vivid blue eyes he'd thought he'd never see again.

And had never, ever, wanted to see him like this. He pulled away, turned his head and tried to bury his head in the pillow. Which was damp.

Ah, hell, as if to rub in how pathetic he'd let himself get, he'd cried into the damn thing? 'Just fuck off already.' He mumbled into the padding.

'Harlock's right, you do have a mouth on you these days.' Her voice was soft, warm, gentle, and part of him wanted to do nothing more than turn round and bury himself in that warmth she represented. Offered. 'Tadashi, please at least look at me?' He felt her hand come to rest on the bed next to him. Close but not touching. 'You are safe here. I promise.'

He expected her to move that hand, to try touching. They all seemed to think it was fine, but it had taken every bit of willpower he had not to strike out at the guy who'd tried to clean him up earlier. Even through the fog generated by whatever they'd given him. That he'd barely had the strength to so much as snarl at them was by the by. And then there was that quiet heartbeat, just on the edge of his hearing, as though he was leaning against his mother's breast, safe and sound. He wanted to fight it, because how could anywhere be safe, ever again? It was just a lie.

But Kei... Kei was here, not moving, not saying anything. Kei who'd almost gotten killed saving him as a kid, right? Who'd taught him a few moves he could use at school on Mistral against the boys
who thought an average size skinny kid was a soft target. Those same moves had saved his life more than once...

He turned over, and found himself staring into blue eyes brimming with unshed tears. *Crap. He'd made her cry. I'm sorry,* he managed to croak. He didn't dare move, the effort of turning over had made him feel sick again, and he remembered throwing up several times since he'd seen a familiar figure in the doorway of his cell. He still had the acidic sour aftertaste in his mouth and his throat felt as though it had been sandpapered, *Shit. How long had it been? How long had he been out? The telltale hum around him told him he was on a ship. The heartbeat...*

Arcadia. Well, duh. *Where else?*

'I told Cai to leave the door ajar for you. Figured you might feel a bit better if you knew you could get out. Should be able to move you to a proper room in a day or so, but Doc needs to keep an eye on you for a bit longer.'

*I understand what you're going through...* hadn't she said that? In the alley, before...

*Before... 'Harlock!' He remembered blood, and a heavy weight...*

'Sshhh. He's going to be okay. Getting shot is something of an occupational hazard.' She reached out with her hand as though to touch him, but hesitated when he flinched. 'Sorry. Instinct. I won't if you don't want me to.'

Touching had meant pain and degradation for so long, he'd almost forgotten what it was like to be held for no reason but comfort. And he didn't know how to tell her it was okay. He stared into her eyes and tried to nod. With a sad smile, she sat beside him, and brushed his forehead gently, as though pushing his hair out of his eyes... except... his head felt cool, and lighter than it had in months, and his hair wasn't falling into his eyes. He tried to reach up, felt only stubble.

'Sorry about that. Your hair was kind of beyond saving; we had to put it out of its misery. It will grow back fairly quickly. Unless you decide you like the look?' Her hand briefly ran over the stubble, and he felt her stiffen as her fingers found one of the scars that his hair usually hid. The one he'd gotten that first night, trying to pull one of the plant creatures off his mother...

His body stiffened as she dropped her hand to his shoulder, resisting the slight pressure than would pull him closer. She moved her arm immediately, not far, just enough to let him know she wasn't pressuring him.

How did she know? He wondered. But the movement left him feeling bereft, and it was almost automatic to move back into the shelter she offered. To lay his aching head in her lap and be held, very gently, hardly putting any pressure on his skin at all.

'I was where you are myself, when I was a little younger than you,' she said quietly. 'Used, drugged, terrified to let anyone get close. The world's an unpleasant place for beautiful children. Some people can't see something decent and pure without wanting to corrupt it, destroy it or use it up. I can't tell you the pain and the humiliation will ever go away completely. But I can tell you it's not all darkness, no matter how bad it seems right now.'

He wanted to say something in reply. He really did. But the drifting sensation was back, pulling him down into darkness again. Only this time at least, it wasn't the abyss that usually awaited him. He shivered, suddenly cold again, and felt her pull the sheets back up around him. For the first time in years he didn't fight sleep as it took him. Safe... she'd said. Well, nowhere was truly safe. He knew he had to tell her that. *Later. Later.*
Kei kept her arm very still around his thin shoulders, watching him drift into a much needed sleep. She wasn't sure if she wanted to burst into tears or punch the living daylights out of someone, as her gaze took in the scars, bruises and cuts on his thin body. With his head in her lap she could see his face clearly. He'd been a beautiful little boy, she remembered. Tawny haired, brown eyed the last time she'd seen him. His hair had lightened a little as he'd hit eleven or twelve. At eighteen, he looked far younger as she looked down at him. The shaved hair made his too-thin face look far more boyish than it probably would after a few good meals. Long dark lashes, high cheekbones and that stubborn chin that seemed to run in the family, as well as the wide, full mouth with that perfect cupid's bow top lip and the slightly fuller bottom one. He was, she guessed, a little shorter than Harlock's six one by a couple of inches, but they'd be a similar build when the youth was back to full fitness. But even in sleep there was a sharp wary cast to his features that his cousin didn't have. In sleep, Harlock lost the reserve he'd put into place over the years, and some nights she couldn't get enough of watching him, hair tousled around his face, relaxed and almost shyly innocent. With Tadashi, the reverse seemed to be the case, as though he had more to fear asleep than awake.

The thick scar revealed by the close cropped hair drew her attention. It snaked from close to his left temple back across the skull almost down to the neck. A blade of some kind, she guessed. Another ran down his left arm, along with a series of puncture wounds at one inch spacings spiralling around the arm in a way that was too precise to have been caused independently. So, one of the creatures had thorns on a vine of some kind? There were knife and blaster scars on his chest, defensive wounds on his arms, and more troubling, a series of regular, shallow scars on the underside of both wrists running across and up almost gridlike. Made over a number of years, at a guess. She recognised those all too well. She'd had a matching set of her own, though they'd faded years ago, and only a close look would reveal them now. Pressure sores and scars from healed sores where the straightjacket had dug into his thin flesh. Bruises on his throat and arms, and across his shoulders. Some more recent than others, fingermarks from being restrained, or worse. At least one was almost certainly from a fist.

A noise from the doorway broke her reverie. Anita, the somewhat amply proportioned quartermaster and cook, and for her sins, Zack's mother.

'You look as though you need a break, my girl. Why don't you let me take over?'

'I didn't want to wake him,' she whispered back. Anita walked remarkably quietly to her side given her bulk, and looked down at the sleeping youth.

'Bless you, child. He ain't waking up anytime soon. I'll stay by for a bit in case he wakes up. But you need to get something down you and get some sleep. With the captain out for the count, you're needed.'

She helped Kei extricate herself from the boy's weight, and took her place beside him. 'Reminds me of Zack at that age. All tough on the outside, desperate to prove they can take on the world, but deep down they still need their mommas.'

'True of most of this lot,' Kei added with a smile. She gave the older woman a peck on the cheek. 'I owe you one.'

'Tish. Off you get. If I know our captain, he won't be staying in the infirmary a second longer than it takes him to stagger to the door.'

Kei sighed. 'Don't I know it. It wouldn't be quite so bad if when the boot was on the other foot, he didn't practically sit on me to make me stay put. Which is terribly sweet, but there are times I could
thump him one. He hovers, Anita... ever since...'

She trailed off awkwardly, and the older woman patted her hand. 'Oh my dear, of course he does. He almost lost you. And since he's male, instead of rolling his sleeves up and getting on with things the way we do, he has to flap around like a carp on the chopping block. It's what they do.'

Kei returned Anita's warm smile with her own. 'You know, with that image in mind...' The older woman shooed her away with a grin, and she finally made her way to her own quarters, for that long overdue shower.

The artificial candles in the room were always left on. If there was one thing either of its owners would have agreed on, it was that when you're already one eye from night, waking up in the dark is unnerving. Kei didn't mind the ever present glow. It was soothing, much like the ship's tendency to imitate the creaking groans of the ancient sailing vessels the sterncastle - and the captain's quarters - resembled. Though the ship's guiding mind tended to sleep when not needed, it - he - did like to make sure he wasn't forgotten. New recruits to the ship thought it was haunted. Older, wiser hands didn't bother to disabuse them of the notion. Most of them enjoyed winding up the rookies.

Tonight the creaking sighs held a questioning note Kei recognised. She patted the wall of the cabin above the bed. 'It's fine, Tochiro. He just managed to get himself shot. Again.'

'The sympathy I hear there is overwhelming..' the sarcastic drawl might have been more convincing if he didn't sound so tired, and not slurring his words a little. Kei sat upright in bed, letting the sheet fall to her waist.

'You are supposed to be in bed,' she scolded as he limped wearily towards her, and sat heavily on the side of the bed next to her. A large gauze pad was taped to his right side, covering half his chest and extending down to the bottom of his ribs. The thin pair of pyjama bottoms from the infirmary he discarded, not without some difficulty, before he fell in next to her. His bare feet were like blocks of ice.

'Which is where I am..' he said faintly. It wasn't a fight she ever won, so she snuggled up next to him, careful to avoid this latest injury, and felt his heartfelt sigh of relief.

'I meant in the infirmary.' She ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the feel of the soft, fine strands. He reached up to pull her wandering hand down to his temple. With a little smile she took the hint and began to gently massage the spot, as he sighed gratefully.

'If it's a choice between lying on a mattress thinner than my finger staring up at the ceiling, or lying in my own bed staring at you, it's a no-brainer.' He murmured sleepily. 'It's not like Doc doesn't know where to find me if she absolutely has to take my pulse every bloody hour. I tried telling her that if I was breathing, it had to be obvious that my circulatory system was working, but somehow she didn't buy it. Thankfully she has more than one patient to worry about.' He let out a relaxed sigh. 'The only problem is that I can't actually look at you since I have to lie on this side. Slight flaw in my plan.'

'You should be sleeping anyway,' she chided gently. 'I take it the meds she gave you are lasting about as long as a bottle of scotch?' She felt him shift awkwardly, a sure sign of a question he didn't want to answer. 'There are times this dark matter totally sucks.'

'It's just pain. It goes. Eventually.' he murmured. 'How's Tadashi?'

'Exhausted, coming down from being stuffed full of a cocktail of nasty shit that Doc will be
swearing about for a month, and in a lot of pain, physically and emotionally. I'd really like a few hours alone with the people responsible.'

He shifted carefully so that he was lying on his back, his head in her lap, staring up at her. 'If it helps, I managed to tell Yattaran to send the files on that place, and Tadashi's case, over to the Mephisto. Hoshino may be a dick, but threaten to put something like this out on the warp net and he will close it down. Hell, he's an arse, but show him a breach of the rules, and he won't let it go unpunished. Short of flattening the place from orbit, that's as good as it gets.'

'He let Tadashi rot in there for weeks, just to draw you out,' she pointed out.

'That new security chief of his did,' he corrected. He yawned. 'Probably thinks we don't know about that bit. Can't wait to rub his nose in that down the line. But if that twit hadn't tried to do an end run around me, we'd never have found him. An ill wind, as they say...'

'No good deed goes unpunished?' She corrected him. He smiled sleepily. 'Nor a bad one either. Thanks to me getting shot, we finally have a sample to analyse...'

She shifted a little to be able to look at him. 'I really wouldn't try to sell getting yourself shot again to me as a positive... but I knew I hadn't seen a gun... what was it?'

'She shot some kind of needle-like thorns. Razor sharp edges as well as points. Right out of her arms, I think. Went straight through me which is why Tadashi wasn't hurt as badly. Since they're probably part of her...'

'It.' Kei felt it had to be said. 'Aren't you the one who keeps trying to remind the guys they aren't shooting naked women?' 'Cold night' my arse...

He pulled a face. 'Fine. It. But it's still the first chance I've had to get a piece of one. That tendency they have to blow up or burst into flames is hell on any opportunity to take a look at what they are. Given the lengths they've gone to getting rid of any experts in any field that could identify them, it was almost worth it.'

She shuffled down a little until she was snuggled close, her arm resting over him but carefully avoiding his injury. 'I think there are a lot of people who'd agree with me when I say that losing you is not an option,' she said softly. Her only response was a light snore, and she lay back against the pillow and sighed. 'Impossible, infuriating man...' she whispered, holding back a sad smile. There were times she thought he'd burn himself up trying to protect those he loved. It was up to those who loved him to protect him from that. But damn, he made it so hard sometimes to keep up.

The Arcadia creaked and groaned. 'I guess it's up to us, eh, Tochiro?' She whispered. A soft wind ruffled her long hair. Either the air con was playing up, or the central computer was agreeing with her.-
Chapter 3

It would have been so easy to just drift, and not bother waking up. But then, he'd never been someone to take the easy option. If he was honest, after what felt like days of hanging around actually able to think clearly for the first time in months and with no-one trying to kill him, he was bored stiff and itching for a fight. Or something to take the edge off. Neither of which would likely be forthcoming...

'Feel up to getting out of bed or were you planning on burying your head under the pillow again?'

The voice came from the doorway, and he looked up to see a man standing next to it, one leg bent and his foot braced against the wall, arms folded across his chest. Bleary eyed he peered cautiously at the intruder. Collar length dark hair. Eyepatch. Oh joy... couldn't have another couple of days to put this off, could he? 'Harlock.'

'You might want to work on the delivery. The disdainful sneer lacked conviction. It needs a little more emphasis on the first syllable...' When he didn't respond, Harlock sighed. 'You're pissed at me. I get it. But lying on your arse all day won't solve anything. Doc tells me you're fit enough to move to crew quarters, so I thought I'd give you a hand.'

'I'm not the only one needs to work on his presentation,' he retorted. 'Casually leaning on the wall, one foot on it, trying to indicate relaxed and harmless; I'm not going to be able to move fast...' which is bollocks because you can push off from that foot like a sprinter from a starting block if you do it right. But the arms are folded, defensively, so you're unsure of the situation. Head lowered, slightly, but your good eye's on me and doesn't move. So, watchfulness, you don't take chances. Back to the wall, door's open but you're close enough to make a run for it. How am I doing?' he snapped.

Harlock's wry smile was answer enough. 'Ouch. I had that coming. But the offer still stands. If you want to take my head off, at least get fit enough to give yourself a fighting chance.'

Tadashi laughed harshly. 'Yeah, like you'd let me,' he snorted.

'I said you should give yourself a chance. I never said I'd go down easy.' Harlock pushed himself off the wall, and strolled casually over to the side of the bed. 'Clothes and boots on the side,' he nodded his head to a side table. He took a seat in the chair next to the bed, crossing his ankles and stretching out, casually pushing the sabre rifle on his left hip out of the way. 'Kei tells me you need time to heal. Normally I'd agree.'

He looked curiously at the older man, wondering where that had come from. 'The whole therapy thing? Fix poor little Tadashi?' he sneered.

'We don't really have that luxury, do we?' Harlock's voice was quiet, and for a moment he thought he heard a wistful note in it. 'Here's the deal, Tadashi,'

'Daiba.' He growled out. 'Just Daiba.' He caught a fleeting look of what might have been sympathy in his cousin's eye. He held that gaze, daring the other man to challenge him. Strangely when he didn't take the bait it didn't feel like a win.

'Daiba. We can put you off the ship, if that's what you want. Anywhere you please, with a new identity and even some place you can get the healing you need. Or not, that's your call. Or I can be a total shit and ask you to stay on board, and work this out with me. And make no mistake, that
really is a bad deal. These things that you're hunting... or are hunting you... they have been moving against humanity for a long time.’ He sighed. 'Listen, scamp. If I offer you my hand right now you'd snap at it. You're hurt, and you want to lash out, and you sure as hell aren't going to trust anyone around you for a long time. But you had the strength to try to take some control over your life back in that hellhole. You had the strength to make a run for it even if it was a monumentally stupid decision. And you have the strength to look at me and tell me to go fuck myself. If you can hate, you haven't given up. So I'm not going to pat you on the head and tell you everything will be all right. It won't be.'

He reached out and grabbed one of the sweaters lying on the table, and handed it to Daiba, who stared at him warily, and didn't take it. 'You're angry, and hurt, and if you admit it, scared. But you're not a quitter. So if you want a second chance, you're going to have to reach for it. I won't push you out of the mess you're in, that wouldn't help you. If you don't get up on your own now, you never will. But if you still have the brains you were born with, I will be here when you decide to reach out and take my hand instead of biting it.'

Slowly, Daiba reached out for the sweater, and took it from the outstretched hand. 'You suck at motivational speeches, you know that?' Muscles protested as he dragged the sweater on over his head, but it was surprisingly soft on his torn and bruised skin, and possibly the warmest thing he'd worn in years. 'Why couldn't you just go with the usual bullshit about making stuff better? I had a whole speech ready to shove your face in if you'd tried that,' he muttered. 'I'll just bet you did. I wish I could take away the last four years. You have no idea how much. But I can't. Your physical injuries should heal quite quickly on this ship. The scars inside... well, most of us on the Arcadia have those.’ He stood up. 'Get yourself dressed, I'll be outside when you're ready.'

Daiba shook his head slowly, confused. 'That's it? You just walk out and leave me to fend for myself?' Inwardly he winced. *Whiny, much?* But he'd expected... what, exactly? Welcomed with open arms. Yeah... he had an all too clear memory of where he'd told his cousin to stick *that*. 'You're a grown man. Act it. I'll be outside.' Harlock closed the door behind him, but left a thin gap.

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Left alone in the small room, Daiba sat on the bed, the sheets still wrapped around his legs. He reached listlessly for the leather trousers on the table. A light tan, not new. Same with the jacket, with the vacuum attachments on the rear and seals for hardsuits along the shoulders. A faded skull and crossbones marked the left breast of the jacket. Calf length boots with folded tops, and seals on the ankles. A gunbelt -holster noticeably empty- completed the ensemble with a similar emblem for a buckle. How long he stared at them without moving he didn't know, but eventually he made the effort to get rid of the thin infirmary bottoms and pull on the trousers. No underwear. Well, hey. Pirates go commando, huh? Who knew. But there were socks. Go figure. He pulled them on.

Even that effort exhausted him, and he paused before reaching for the boots. Six months of enforced inactivity and poor food had taken its toll. Even this much exercise was a struggle. But be damned to it if he'd quit. He grabbed the left boot and tried to pull it on, and cursed as he lost his grip on the cuff before it was even half way on, and toppled into a heap on the floor.

Within seconds, there was a strong arm helping him back to the bed, and Harlock - bloody Captain Harlock of all people, was helping him pull the damn boots on. He didn't have the strength left to put up a fight, but when the other man handed him the jacket, he gave him an accusing stare. 'What happened to making me get to my feet on my own?'

'You had to make the effort for yourself. I never said I wouldn't be there if you needed me.'
Harlock said softly. 'But if you want to throw it in my face, fine. You wouldn't be the first family member to do it.' A soft snort. 'Kei's right I guess. I never learn.'

The tone was flippant. The look on his face before he turned slightly... There was something in his face that spoke of an old hurt, never healed. It was an unlooked for opening, a chink in the armour of a man most people feared or hated, and he debated using it. It would after all be so easy to hit a soft spot with the right spiteful remark.

An old memory...

'Can't you just keep that little brat out of here?'

*He huddled against the corridor wall, flinching at the raised voice inside the room.*

'He's four, Isora. He just wanted to be friendly. You didn't have to scare him.' Yama's voice was quieter, but he sounded upset. Tadashi held onto his football a little tighter. 'Let me just clear...

There was a smashing noise, a sickening slap, and he flinched. He really hadn't meant to knock into the desk, and really, nothing had broken. He peered through the door to see Yama backing away, raising a hand to wipe the blood away that dripped from his split lip, and Isora, in his chair, angrily sweeping the papers his brother had tried to give him out of his hands. The vase that had tumbled earlier, without breaking, was now in pieces on the carpet.

'Just get out, Yama. Take the brat with you. If you must volunteer as a babysitter, do it elsewhere. If the Academy hasn't managed to thrash that softness out of you, at least indulge it where I don't have to look at it.'

*He huddled against the wall as his cousin stumbled out, but Yama knelt down next to him and held his arms out. 'S'okay, scamp. We'll find somewhere else to go until your parents finish up, shall we?''*

*He reached out a chubby hand as Yama picked him up. Touched the bleeding lip, and cuddled into his shoulder. 'He shouldn't hurt you. Why don't you hit back? .'*

'Some people lash out when they're hurt. Doesn't mean I have to.'

'Daiba?' Yama - no, Harlock's voice dragged him back to the present day. He looked up into that single hazel eye, and flinched as he remembered his screams in the alleyway... *I fucking hate you...*

And yeah. There it was. The same look he'd seen fourteen years ago, any time the two brothers had been together.

Yama's hair had been shaved close as well, he remembered. Military regs.. .

'What is it?' Harlock asked. Daiba shook his head to clear it. Why the fuck should he feel ashamed of whaling in on the guy? *Four fucking years fending for himself, without some sanctimonious arse riding in on a battleship to the rescue...*

'Nothing.' He clutched the heavy leather jacket in one hand, and pushed himself off the bed with the other. Although wobbly, his legs did at least hold him up, and his feet, despite having being so badly cut up, didn't seem too much the worse for wear when he put his weight through one foot tentatively. 'Let's go.'

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Bravado only got you so far, he reflected a couple of minutes later, glaring at Harlock's leather clad
ass. He leaned against the corridor wall, out of breath and trembling with both fatigue and pain. Thankfully the dimly lit corridors of the ship were not heavily used, as they'd only passed two crewmen so far, who'd just nodded a cheery greeting to their captain, and barely spared him a look. Harlock had stopped to let him catch his breath, but didn't, mercifully, walk back go help him.

Or maybe he really was a complete jerk and enjoyed watching him struggle... he ditched that thought, but couldn't do anything about the embarrassed flush that accompanied it. What the fuck was so wrong with him that he had to see even the guy who'd been like a big brother to him as a kid as another chew toy to lash out at, as though his mouth and his heart had a disconnect he couldn't control? Clawing at every hand that came near him like a feral cat. He'd done the same to Nana, at first, until...

... he took aim at the blue skinned creature holding Nana. It was a clear shot, but he still froze, unable to tear his eyes away from the thin trickle of blood that ran down her throat from where the thing's talons were digging into her.

'Daiba, please!'

He heard her voice even over the cacophony around them. It gave him the resolve he needed, and looking into her green eyes, so confident and trusting, he fired.

He missed. His shot hit the creature in the arm and she screeched, an unearthly howl that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

...and there was blood. So much of it, even reaching his face and he was standing twenty feet away, surely? And Nana was falling, to the side, the blue talons continuing the tear they'd made in her pale throat.

He screamed then, firing almost blindly, not even noticing when the blue skinned woman fell to the floor in flames. Didn't even notice when he was pushed to the floor, arms wrenched behind his back and...

'Daiba?' Harlock's hand was on his shoulder, and without thinking he placed his own hand on a leather clad arm, as he tried desperately not to throw up on an empty stomach. Especially since he had a vague memory of decorating these boots once already... With an effort, he straightened up. Belatedly, it occurred to him that they were almost the same height now. Almost. 'Willing to accept a hand this time, and let me ditch the macho posturing?'

It was in his power, he knew, to twist the knife. And so help him, there was a part of him that really wanted to. To see the hurt in that face that only he could put there now, if he wanted to let it loose. There was enough there already, though, he realised, staring into his cousin's face. Despite being twice his age, the guy still looked young, but there was a sadness that hadn't been there the last time they'd met. Lines of strain, and when that easy-going mask slipped, as it had in the psych cell, something akin to a deep, unflinching, quiet fury in that single eye that made him suddenly grateful he wasn't on the receiving end of it.

'Fuck it,' he growled out harshly. His voice it seemed would probably not recover anytime soon. 'I'm not Isora. But try fucking cuddling me and I will deck you.'

'You can try...' the amusement was forced, they both knew it. But he did allow the older man to support him as he made his way unsteadily down the corridor.

'Did no-one pay the electric bill on this ship?' Every corridor they took seemed permanently
wreathed in shadows.

'You get used to it. There's more than enough light, actually. But too much interferes with the dark matter, or so I'm told. We could keep the levels most ships use, but after all this time, it doesn't really bother anyone, and I'd rather keep the saturation levels inside the ship up. Besides, Mimay's people don't handle it as well as we do. Light, that is. Their sun was somewhat dimmer than ours, and light bothers her.'

'Is it true that it heals the crew?' He felt Harlock's hand stiffen slightly on his arm. 'Mum and dad used to discuss it. Especially on Niflheim. What the effects on humans would be, over a long period of time. She worried about you. I mean, you don't look old...'

That earned another snort. 'Great skin runs in the family; there's nothing I can do about it. And less of the old, scamp. I'm not past it yet.' He sucked in a deep breath before continuing, more seriously. 'Dark matter can be capricious. I find it best not to rely on it. You might find it heals you faster, but not all the way. It might leave scars, it might not. Bleed out too fast and it can't keep up. Lose a limb it won't grow back. Die and you stay dead. There are good reasons we keep Doc around.'

'And there I was thinking it was for her cheerful bedside manner,' Daiba muttered. It earned a genuine laugh, and for a moment, he felt like smiling in return. A brief flicker of something he'd started to think was dead inside. Something that should stay dead, he thought sourly, treading down hard on the feeling. It was hard, though. Even though he didn't say much as they walked, there was something about the other man's demeanour that invited companionship. Not conversation... but just a sense of calm acceptance that was hard to ignore. Even harder to resist the temptation to just throw himself at the man and sob on his shoulder.

Which was just freakin' wrong... *He's your bloody cousin for fucks sake*... even if he wasn't the memetic badass all others aspired to in the underworlds of several planets... and shit, there had been days he'd wanted to just scream to the world that he was *related to Captain fuckin' Harlock and why don't you bastards run off and piss yourselves*...? Except that in real life, heroes don't just jump out of alleyways and start beating on the bastard trying to kill you...

*Except he had, hadn't he?*

Four years too bloody late.

Harlock finally stopped at a closed door, and keyed it open. 'You can change the code, but the Central computer has an override for emergencies anyway, just so you know. Even the officers quarters are a bit spartan, but I figured you'd prefer it to sharing. There's a private shower and head, but the water in quarters is rationed, so don't linger. The console will give you information on demand, but if you go wandering and get lost, just get to a comms port and shout up. If it helps it took me weeks to find my way around...'

A small ginger streak shot towards them as the door opened, and Daiba flinched, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. Flushing, he tried to regain some dignity as a small ginger cat meowed at them both in a strident tone, and twined itself around Harlock's legs. He reached down to pick it up. 'So that's where you've been hiding, you daft cat. Kei's been looking for you!'

The cat purred contentedly in its captain's arms. 'Meet 'Trouble'. One of several annoyances on this ship I'd be lynched if I tried to remove... this one adopted us, and his mother resides with Doc. To date no-one's figured out how the hell he manages to get locked into the places we keep finding him, but personally I think the ship just enjoys messing with me. Oh, and if that damn bird shows up, don't feed it... you'll never get rid of it if you do. It's an opportunist.' He turned to leave, still holding the cat. 'I'll get Anita to send dinner over. I don't think you're quite ready for the
A little bemused, Daiba stood in the open doorway, and shook his head. 'Hey-are the animals the only annoyances?' He called out as Harlock began to wander off.

Harlock turned back and grimaced. 'Sadly not, but only because I'm not allowed to shove Meg out of the nearest airlock...'

The seemingly off the cuff remark was explained almost immediately by a screech of 'I heard that...!'. From the next door over. A blonde head poked out of the doorway. 'Oh. It's you.' It sniffs, realising that the speaker was the captain.

'I think that should be 'I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realise it was you..' Harlock drawled. It earned another dismissive sniff.

The speaker was a girl, about fifteen or sixteen, at a guess, Daiba thought, as she stood in the corridor, hands on hips. Thin, small breasted (and he'd bet that rankled, since it wasn't helped by the skin tight flightsuit.) Shoulder length blonde hair was held back off her face by a pink bandanna, and her flightsuit was a similar shade of... 'pastel pink?' He exclaimed before he thought to put a brake on his mouth.

'You got a problem, shrimp?' she bristled.

He shrugged. Scrappy girls he could handle. 'Dunno. Just didn't expect to see a pirate in pink.. it's kind of... sweet?' He gave her his best shit-eating grin.

The only reason she didn't send him flying was that Harlock caught her flightsuit as she barged past him and had hold of her by the collar. The cat decided to make a run for it and headed back into Daiba's new quarters.

'Kei wears pink,' she growled at him, 'so what?'

'Dark magenta. With black. Which she totally rocks. Not...' he gestured at the pale ensemble with white gloves and white-topped calf boots. 'It's cute. Really,' he gushed.

'Tadashi...' the warning note in Harlock's voice was unmistakable, even over the excessive decibels reached by the furious screech of his captive.

'Just five minutes with him...' she begged. He leered at her.

'Puh-lease... you couldn't afford me...' he drawled. She stuck her tongue out at him.

'You, no fighting,' Harlock snapped at her. 'You,' he gave Daiba a look of bemused exasperation. 'Stop trolling. She's got the next room to you and she will make your life hell.' He looked down at the girl, who probably barely reached much over five foot. 'Meg, calm it, or you will be cleaning out the coolant sluices for a week. Again.' Rather sullenly, she nodded and he let her go. With a backward glance over her shoulder at Daiba that promised retribution, she disappeared back into her room. He guessed only the sliding door stopped a dramatic slam, and grinned. Catching Harlock's stern gaze however, he wiped it off again.

Harlock shook his head and sighed. 'Teenagers. Why do I never learn?' he muttered. But he flashed Daiba a rueful grin, that invited a similar response.

'Who is she?'
'Friend of Emeraldas. Wants to be Em's first officer eventually. In the meantime, I'm stuck with her.' There was no heat in his voice, however.

Daiba grinned. 'Bit of a 'tude?'

'Like Emeraldas, but shorter and scrappier. And as efficient as Kei, but without the charm.' But the look he directed at the door softened. 'As I said though. You're not the only one on board with scars. Just try not to get under each others skin. Or at the very least, if you must try and kill each other, do it quietly...'

Difficult to know, with one eye covered if the guy winked at him or just blinked. But as Harlock raised a hand in farewell as he walked away, Daiba had the distinct impression he'd just been played... stick the wounded kid next to a bratty scrapper who presumably would get his back up? Yeah. Totally the sort of stunt you'd pull to try and get someone's head out of their arse, he reasoned. What the hell. It was that or sit staring at four walls and hope for the next batch of meds to take the world away... he stuffed one hand into a trouser pocket and sauntered into the room, closing the door behind him. He dropped the jacket onto a chair, and flopped down onto the bed with a sigh, clasping his hands behind his head.

The ginger cat meowed at him and jumped onto his chest, settling down with a vibrating purr to wash.

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The nemeton was deserted during the night hours. Most of the meliai were of necessity creatures of daylight, and their guardians tended to keep the same hours as a result, even though they had no real biological need to do so. So the vaulted hallways rustled and whispered in the soft wind that blew through the leaves of the great ash trees which formed its massive arches.

Cleome sighed quietly as she stepped briskly along the avenue. A wind blew her long black hair over her face and she pushed it out of her eyes automatically. Most days she preferred to take her time, and linger with her sisters as they tended the trees which gave them their name. But not tonight. When the queen called, you answered.

The queen's chamber lay at the heart of the sanctuary, where the trees grew so closely together they formed a domed room, the branches interwoven over millennia to provide a suitable enclosure for the one who ruled them. For perish the thought she should be seen by unworthy eyes...

Suppressing that thought before it got out into the open, Cleome entered the chamber, the branches parting for her and closing up again as she stepped through. She shivered involuntarily as they did so. Like most of her people, she hated enclosed spaces. Even the inner sanctum of the nemeton.

How much worse was it for the chosen one, who could never leave it once installed?

The figure of the queen reclined regally on the massive curve of a root, on a deep cushion of the finest downy leaves. Black haired, white skinned, imperious. A goblet was placed in one long fingered hand by a handmaid - an apple cheeked epimeliad, small and dainty, her red hair falling to her ankles in her chosen form.

'You sent for me, majesty?' Cleome bowed as she reached the position her rank allowed her to take from the queen. Ten paces. No closer. She sank into a deep curtsy, careful of her himation, which as usual had a tendency to fall off her shoulder no matter how carefully she pinned it to her chiton. Traditon, she often reflected, was over rated... but as tradition dictated, she kept her head bowed until the queen deigned to acknowledge her presence.

'Cleome. You have received news of the agents sent to apprehend that human boy?'
'Yes, Queen Raflessia. It appears the *ampeloi* sent to kill him were unsuccessful. They were all killed by a third party.'

'The *melia* responsible?'

Cleome hated these reports. Another sister would pay the price for failure... 'Hysterias, my queen. She reports however that they were thwarted by a man. Tall, young, with a scar across his face and one-eyed. Majesty, if the oracles spoke truly...' She raised her head, careful not to make eye contact. 'My queen, the legends...'

'Of the *fury*? The one-eyed warrior whose arrival heralds destruction of all things?' The queen laughed harshly. 'Child, that man vanished thirteen years ago. In addition we obliterated all of that detested lineage wherever they were found.'

'My queen... the man who rescued the boy was Captain Harlock...' she bowed her head again and waited for the response.

'The imposter? The young fleet rebel who took command of the Arcadia after the battle for Earth...?' The queen's tone was imperiously dismissive. 'A posturing gnat.'

'Our agent with the new Alliance fleet reports that blood samples found at the scene are a familial match for Harlock. Both of them. One belonged to the boy, the other to that imposter...'

'It was risky, to contradict the queen, but as she held her breath, braced for any reprisal, she felt she had to add the rest. 'This new Harlock was the youngest son of the botanist who was eliminated twenty years ago on Mars. You may remember we had to destroy the facility later? Regardless of his provenance, he did fight with courage during the recent wars with the mechanised men, and has proved a consistent thorn in the plans of our Nibelung allies...''

'You wish to investigate him further?'

Cleome nodded. 'Yes, Majesty. If both he and the boy are scions of the harbinger's line, perhaps the Destroyer of Worlds was *not* the prophesied one...'

'We have advance agents in that sector of space, yes?'

'We do.'

'Then see to it, commander. Humanity stands on the edge of its own destruction at last. Nothing and no-one can be permitted to interfere. Find out what kind of man he is, and if he is likely to stand in our way. I assume you also intend to finally remove the Daiba boy at the same time?'

'He will be found and dealt with, Majesty. Many of our sisters lost their lives to this child. He will not escape us again.'

The queen merely nodded, and turned away. Dismissed, Cleome backed out of the chamber, holding back a sigh of relief until she was well clear of the room. Her second, Zinnia, waited patiently at the end of the long vaulted avenue.

'Did you tell her about the new prophecy?' Zinnia asked as they walked. Once free of the *nemeton*, Cleome allowed herself to relax. She glanced sideways at her assistant, whose preferred form was a tall, golden haired human woman. Only her black eyes gave her away as *Meliai*.

'I didn't dare,' she replied softly. 'All of our lives we were told the Fury would be our destruction. Now this new oracle...'
'She is not Mazone,' Zinnia pointed out. 'Perhaps her words are not for us?'

'Then why did she contact us? This Shura... she is neither Nibelung nor human, either.' Cleome sighed. 'For now, we say nothing. Our agents will be instructed to investigate both Harlock and this planetary dirigent who knows too much about us. Perhaps a solution to both will present itself.'

'And Hysterias?'

Cleome shook her head sadly. 'Hysterias will pay the price for failure. Something we would both do well to keep in mind.' She didn't miss the thin lipped glare from her second as they walked, quickly masked though it was. The meliai chafe at their leash, she thought sadly. And the hamadryads they tend are expended seemingly on a whim... can they therefore be blamed? We are so few, who were once many...

...and over them both, the carrion flowers. Whose secrets no-one should know outside of their number...

...so how did this Shura know?

...and could she be trusted to stay silent? If not...

...If not, then we face an even greater danger than the one we flee. If we turn on each other, we are lost.

She stopped, turned and placed a hand on the window in front of her. No stars were visible in the void. They were still too far from the shores of their destination. Only darkness on all sides.

'Beware the one-eyed warrior. Death is his mark and he leads the damned. His is the darkness. He is the untameable fury who cuts the thread of fate. Holding all oaths he would sever all bonds...'

In spite of the warmth, she shivered.
In the end there was only so much time he could spend in indignant isolation, exchanging monosyllabic grunts with whoever drew the short straw to bring him his meals and take away the remains - not that there were any besides the plates and noticeably plastic cutlery. Plastic? Seriously? Cutting his damn arteries was never a plan.

Someone else's though...

He fingered the empty holster on the gun belt. Mixed feelings on that. Annoyance that he wasn't trusted with a weapon. Thankful that he didn't have to handle one of the damn things and pretend like he was cool with it. After the mall. After Nana... He didn't think he'd be cool with it ever again.

And yet... the satisfaction of blowing those creepy-eyed, murdering bitches into ash...?

Okay. Yeah. Maybe he could get behind a gun again. Payback was long overdue.

Trouble meowed at him and scratched at the door. With a sigh he levered himself off the bed and walked the half dozen steps to let the damn cat out again. Where do you keep a litter tray on a spaceship? One of the mysteries of life on the Arcadia he guessed.

The cat shot out before the door was fully open, and had to dodge the figure standing in the doorway. Dark hair. Freckles enough for a star map, and a goofy grin he remembered all too well from younger days. 'Zack?'

'The one and only. Captain sent me over. We're in orbit. Want to take the first shuttle down?'

'Down?' He flinched inwardly at how dumb he must have sounded. He really was going to have to work on those verbal skills...

Zack grinned even wider. 'Tabito. We're making a stop to pick up the rest of the crew and sort some stuff out. It's kind of our second home. Well, one of 'em. Harlock and Kei are going on ahead. Personal stuff. Thought you'd want to join them. S'only for a few days, but it's a chance to go ground side and stretch your legs. Hey- you still play? I mean... shit. Of course not. And you're still sick...'

Aaand... there's the awkward silence, Daiba thought, as Zack's cheery rambling stuttered to a halt as his brain caught up with his good intentions...

'I'll get my jacket,' he replied, taking pity on the older guy. Zack had taught him how to tackle, and to kick for goal, he remembered. Even on Niflheim, the older boy had always found time to teach him the finer points of the game, even if it was just the two of them and an old rugby ball with loose stitching. He grabbed the heavy jacket from the chair where he'd dropped it, and strolled as nonchalantly as he could back to the door. 'So, who's still living there?'

He remembered a few names and faces, though he'd been - what - six? Seven? Selen, of course; Emeraldas' lovely auburn haired aunt. Her husband, Rei, dark haired, always wearing sunglasses even indoors... They'd dropped by a couple of times, with supplies, and long talks with his parents. Less so after his father died, though they had sent their ship to relocate them to Mistral, where his mother... Distracted, he'd missed some of Zack's conversation as he followed him through the ship's corridors largely on autopilot.

'... hit the place hard, around the time we lost track of you. But Selen's still got the raman shop.
Mom helps her out when we go back.'

Not wanting to admit he'd not been paying attention, he just mumbled something noncommittal. Thankfully he was spared a pop quiz by arriving at the hangar deck, where one of the chunky shuttle craft was being prepped for take off. Bullets... he seemed to recall them being called. Nice. Not just a transport either: they sported a couple of very functional looking cannon on the nose. Optical cannon, wasn't it?

'Well remembered.'

Harlock's lean form - now dressed far more smartly than he remembered, in a mid-length dark blue jacket with a white scarf peeking out of the collar at his throat. Though he still had his sleeves rolled back to below his elbows, and brown gloves -which wouldn't co-ordinate even if they hadn't been well worn and faded. His hair looked as though he might have brushed it several hours ago, but had been idly messing with it ever since. The combination of laid back cool and absent minded scruff made him bite back a grin.

'I didn't realise I'd spoken. Not forgetting these babies in a hurry. Fighters are okay, I guess, but I kinda liked this one better. Always wanted to learn to fly one. They can do more. Fighters... they only have one use. Like a sword.'

'Slicing and shooting?' Harlock patted the hilt of his sabre rifle, emphasising the poor choice of analogy.

'Well, most people have swords that - you know - just cut people with. Not drill them full of holes from a distance...'

'Range isn't that great on them, not if you want to be accurate. They take more holding for a start. Here.' He drew the blade and handed it to Daiba, who took it carefully. Yeah. He felt straight away what Harlock meant. You shot this thing almost from the hip, without any stabilsation, and although not heavy as such, it was not balanced for holding at arms length for minutes on end; it was a bloody sword when all said and done. He didn't fire up the gravity edge though. He handed it back.

'It's flashy. Meant to look way cooler than it is. Officers weapon, which explains a lot,' Harlock said dryly, resheathing it. 'This one isn't the original though. The old Harlock's blade was sized for a guy way bigger than me, and I just kept tripping over the damn thing. Maji knocked out a couple of replacements. Emeraldas has one of the others.' He placed a hand on Daiba's shoulder. 'Shall we?' He gestured to the open hatch in the belly of the craft. 'Incidentally, you're looking better already. How are you feeling?'

He held back to let Harlock go ahead. 'Tired. But stronger. Not so fuzzy without that shit in my system they kept shoving down my throat, and being able to sleep in a bed without restraints helps. If there's some kind of gym...'

'We've training areas. Shouldn't be a problem, but humour me - I'd like Doc to look you over first and give you a program. Even if you haven't signed on with us, you are still my responsibility.' He turned round when he didn't get a response and raised an eyebrow. 'No argument? Who are you and what have you done with my cousin?'

Daiba flipped him the finger. 'I'm pissed at the universe, not dumb.' He swerved to avoid a walking brick wall with a permascowl. 'Hi Ali!'

The Arcadia's gunnery officer just growled at him, as Daiba dropped his head to hide a smirk.
'Not wise,' Harlock murmured. 'You could end up under him if you sign on. And he's not big on insubordination that doesn't come from him...'

'I heard that, rookie!' came a shout from the rear of the craft. Harlock smirked. 'Besides, it's like shooting fish in a barrel. Not sporting.'

'And that, runt.' Ali strode back towards them and stared down his captain. 'Anyone would think you'd forgotten I can still kick your arse on the practice mat, rookie. Seems someone's cruisin' for a bruisin'...'

Despite Ali's extra inches and muscle, Harlock didn't back down, but his smirking grin got bigger. 'The bigger they are, Ali... he reached up and patted his crewman's cheek. 'And if you do flatten me, I'll just just sic Kei onto you again...'

'Hah. Hiding behind your girl's skirts?'

'When she can twist both of us into a pretzel? Let me think. Yes.'

Daiba stood looking on, bemused. He remembered the big blond guy's acerbic style well, but the outright lack of respect to his captain... Oh. He caught the shared grins the two men shared, before Ali threw his head back and laughed, and Harlock just let out a little huff and shook his head, still smiling. The teasing... he hadn't expected that, though what he had expected... he shook his own head, bemused, but somehow also amused by the exchange. Ali slapped his captain on the back hard enough to almost send him flying, and walked off, still chuckling.

'You let your crew talk to you like that?'

'Heh? Oh. The ones who've earned it, yes. Ali's one of the handful left from when I first came on board. We both know where the line is. We've had our differences, but we've also had each other's backs for over a decade now. I'd trust him with my life. Besides, this isn't a military crew, even if it is a battleship. The men and women who fight beside me do so because they choose to. Which isn't to say there are no rules, but I don't order people around on a whim. If I give an order, it doesn't have to be obeyed, but you'd better have a damn good reason for disobeying it. Get someone else hurt or killed, or fuck up, and the consequences will be severe.' He ducked into the cockpit, leaving Daiba standing in the middle of the passenger area- at least, until Kei came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'What he doesn't tell you is that if it does get to his desk, that means it got past mine, you've fucked up big time, and he will be really pissed. And trust me, although it takes a lot to make him lose his temper... the results are generally not pretty.' She jerked a head towards the cockpit. 'Want to take my seat? If so, don't keep him waiting.' She sauntered off to take a seat behind the pilot's chair, ruffling her captain's already unruly hair as she sat down and batting off his irritated hand with a grin. Daiba sighed and shook his head, but he did saunter causally up to the cockpit and drop into the co-pilot's chair as nonchalantly as he could.

'The effort was apparently lost on his audience of one, who simply grinned at him, and began showing him the take off sequence as if he did this sort of thing every day. Despite his intention to just sit there with his arms folded and glower, he found himself paying attention and leaning closer to he controls before he had time to realise he was being played by a master.

Strangely, he didn't mind. When Harlock asked him to repeat the procedure and he nailed it with only a couple of corrections, the silent nod of approval somehow left him feeling... content. Almost happy, he realised, as they took off smoothly from the hangar deck and headed out of the open hatch, towards the greenish/brown planet below.
The seats behind them were filled with chatter, from Meg's screechy soprano, Kei's quiet contralto... Ali, bitching about whatever. Zack, teasing Meg and laughing. The other two he didn't know. Cai - a quiet Chinese guy in his late twenties or early thirties, and another about Harlock's age - dark haired, one armed. Rick, he gathered from eavesdropping on the chatter, and realising belatedly that he did know the man... from Mistral. *So what the hell was he doing on board the Arcadia...? the guy had had a pretty wife, he remembered... and a couple of kids.*

Harlock brought them neatly down in a barren field on the outskirts of what looked like a small town. A couple of other ships - small, in-system jobs, by the looks of them, nestled close by. Dominating the field though was a small battleship whose tubby, orca-like form he recognised immediately. 'Isn't that the *Futatsuboshi*? ' he asked.

'In the flesh, so to speak.' Harlock shucked off his seatbelt and stood up ducking out of the cramped cockpit. Their passengers, Kei included, were already out the door. 'The ship that just doesn't grow up. Cute, isn't she?'

Daiba snorted. 'You still teasing Rei about that thing? I'm amazed he hasn't planted one on you yet for disssing his ride.' Busy with the unfamiliar fastening of his belt, he didn't immediately notice that there had not been a reply. Harlock was waiting for him in the passenger compartment.

'Zero's dead, Daiba. Four years ago, in the last weeks of the plague.'

No humour now. Just a quiet sorrow. He felt a heel for even asking. 'I'm sorry.' *For dragging it up. For joking. For not knowing. Because I liked the guy...*

He just got that little huff and that sideways shake of the head in reply. 'You weren't to know. Come on, there are plenty of people who you will want to meet. If, that is, you feel ready?'

He followed behind the older man, down the short ramp and onto firm ground. Not a field, he realised. Just a naturally landscaped standing for a spaceport. Several people were coming over to greet the crew; a girl of about eleven or twelve to be fielded by a smiling Rick; A tall fair haired girl in her late teens, who greeted the normally surly Meg with a hug and then twined herself around a blushing Zack. And a guy probably only a couple of years older than himself, shorter, dark haired and wiry, who practically tackled Harlock and quickly had the captain in a bear hug, much to Daiba's surprise, quickly following it up with Kei. 'You're early! I haven't had chance to sort anything out...!'

Daiba felt a surge of jealousy towards the guy... *who the hell was this, to be so familiar with his family like this?* He folded his arms and kicked at the grass, scuffing one boot in the turf.

'What can I say. The traffic was lighter than I expected,' Harlock deadpanned. The younger man laughed.

'Huh. You just love making an entrance...' he accused jokingly. Ali, off to one side, sniggered. 'He's got you dead to rights, captain!'

Harlock turned to face Daiba. 'I should make the introductions, I suppose. Tadashi - meet Tadashi.'

The stranger turned and grinned at him, sticking out his hand, which Daiba studiously ignored. 'So they found, you, huh? Nice to meet you at last. I've heard a lot about you over the years.' He pulled back his hand when it was obvious it wasn't going to be taken, and looked up at Harlock questioningly. Harlock just shook his head slightly, and the guy just shrugged. 'Oh well. Selen's waiting for you all.'
'Some of our flock aren't waiting,' Kei said with a laugh. 'Brace yourselves! Incoming enemy action at three o'clock!' Kei tugged at Harlock's sleeve and pointed to where three small figures were running towards them. The one in the lead cannoned straight into Harlock's legs, almost taking him out with a knee high tackle, only to be swept upwards into the air, giggling.

'Papa!' A dark haired boy about eight or so, or a little older.

Daiba choked. The two slower figures arrived, to be fielded by Kei and Ali. One so alike to the boy now sitting on Harlock's shoulders, though paler and thinner. Brothers... twins? The one Ali was swinging onto his shoulders was a changeling. Short, bespectacled, with a wide grin, bouncing happily on the usually surly officer's shoulders.

'What the hell did I tell you three about running onto the landing field? Who's idea was it this time? Wattaru?'

The boy on Harlock's shoulders didn't seem particularly worried by the mild rebuke. 'We wanted to greet you.'

Kei sighed. 'Give it up. You know where he gets it from...' She had the other boy's hand in hers, and drew him close. Compared to the chattering livewire on Harlock's shoulders, his brother was silent, just looking at both with a quiet smile. 'Daiba, you might not remember...'

'I haven't forgotten,' he replied. 'Wattaru... and Mamoru?' He hadn't seen them in years, but his parents had often spoken of the additions. He looked at Ali's burden. 'But...'

'Shotaro.' Harlock answered. He leaned over and ruffled the boy's hair. 'Another of what Kei calls our waifs and strays, though as far as we're concerned we're all family. Right boys?' He got nods all round for that.

'Taro's our brother, the quieter twin, Mamoru piped up. He gave Daiba a belligerent glare as if challenging him to make something of it. Probably used to defending the kid from youngsters less tolerant of his weird looks, he thought. He'd scrapped enough on his own account for being small and pretty as a kid.

'Then I guess that makes him my family as well,' he said softly, giving the boy a smile. Kids he didn't have a problem with. He offered his hand to Mamoru. 'Want a piggy back? You look a bit big for your mom to be your ride.'

The hand was accepted and he swung the kid up carefully onto his shoulders. Kei flashed him a grateful grin, and he wandered off after the rest of the group. Harlock, he noticed, had taken a surreptitious look back over his shoulder, but said nothing as he caught up, and the three boys giggled above their heads, pointing out the sights they could see from their vantage points.

The 'other' Tadashi wandered over to his side as they walked. 'You look a little shell-shocked. Want me to take Little Harlock here?'

His first instinct was to protest that he could manage, thank-you-very-much, but he still had some common sense left, and if he was honest, he was beginning to flag. He let Tadashi lift the boy from his shoulders without comment.

'Guess I wouldn't put the words 'Captain Harlock' and 'father' in the same sentence, ' he offered eventually. 'All the talk out there has him as a kind of godlike badass. Not some guy who gets called 'papa' and gives piggy backs.' Even if that's exactly what he had been to his small cousin... but back then - well, it had taken a while for the reputation to adhere to the Arcadia's new captain.
'You don't think that's a condition needed to raise kids?' The shorter guy snorted. 'He says having them is easy. Protecting them... that's the hard part. Also, he adds that after trying to make sure you didn't get yourself killed, his own are a walk in the park...'

'Yeah, bang up job he did protecting me.' The words were out of his mouth before his brain could put the brakes on, and in the resulting silence you could have heard a blade of grass hit the ground. The exclusion zone around him grew by several feet, as Tadashi walked off to talk to Ali, and even Zack gave him a what-the-fuck look and turned to whisper something to the girl he was arm in arm with.

Kei looked as if she was about to walk over and say something, but a quiet word from Harlock stopped her. She did, however, give him a look that promised a reckoning later. Daiba put his head down and shoved his hands into his pockets, following the little group at a distance. He did catch Ali's comment about an '...ungrateful little prick', which, from the over shoulder glower that accompanied it, he was meant to hear.

Whatever.

Harlock however placed his son on the ground and murmured something to Kei, before striding over to him. The rest of them carried on into the town, without a backward glance.

Daiba flinched as Harlock reached him, but all the man did was give him a soft push in another direction, heading for a nearby hill that he didn't recognise from his childhood here. 'Look, I'm...'

'Shit up and walk.'

There was absolutely no threat in that quiet voice at all. He kept his mouth shut, but couldn't seem to break the habit of scuffing along as he walked, occasionally kicking a harmless tuft of grass into the middle of next week. Every time he looked up his eyes would be drawn to that broad shouldered back just ahead. The slight slope exacerbated the slight limp he had, but it didn't slow him down too much. Daiba was several months out if shape and feeling every one of them by the time they reached the hilltop.

Slightly breathless as he reached the top, he stood next to his cousin, who was staring out over the long mound they currently stood on. Not a hill, more like one of the ancient burial barrows his father had talked about on old Earth. Even down to the rough hewn stone marker that they stood next to. It held no names, just a year, and a simple inscription.

He took a closer look. The words memento mori were inscribed beneath the year 2985. The same year his life had rapidly headed down the toilet.

'The plague?' Daiba asked. He'd heard stories on the streets on several of the worlds he'd passed through. Planets left almost depopulated by the war, already struggling to survive, left empty by the disease that swept through the galaxy leaving devastation in its wake. He struggled to remember the old phrase... one of the dead languages his father had loved.

'Remember you too can die.'

Harlock's voice, sounding a little harsher than usual. He even had to clear his throat before he continued: 'The worst thing about the plague was the disposal of the dead.' Harlock's voice was now soft and sorrowful. 'The town doesn't have a crematorium, so we had to do it the old fashioned way. Too many to bury individually, and to protect the living, it had to be done fast. So they had to fill mass graves.' He knelt down in the long grass, and laid an un-gloved hand on the low mound.
'Over six hundred of our friends and fellow townspeople. My best friend, Selen's husband. Their two youngest boys. Thirty of Selen's crew. Fifteen of mine including men who'd known me since I first came aboard; Carlos. Bob. Dan. My old family friend, Levary. Young Mattias, who I recruited not far from here. My oldest daughter, and my unborn son, who never even drew a breath.' He looked up into Daiba's eyes. 'Kei nearly died and Mamoru still isn't fully recovered.' His eye flashed with fury. 'I stood there holding Kei for thirteen hours whilst she laboured to give birth to a dead little boy. Watched her almost fall apart as they carried away the body of our daughter. We could only sit and watch Zero lose the fight for his life. We were almost killed stopping the Deathshadow One, and he still drove himself hard to get the cure to as many worlds as possible.' He stood up, and Daiba took a step backwards in anticipation of a confrontation that didn't come. Harlock simply laid a hand upon his shoulder. 'Everybody here is still hurting. None of us got out of the last few years without more scars. You probably knew some of these people.'

Daiba looked down at the grassy mound, remembering. His family had spent a couple of years on this planet before heading out for Niflheim. He'd played and gone to school with the kids in the town. Now he found himself wondering how many of them were down there under the grass. 'Why no names?' The only thing he could think of to say.

'It didn't seem right for some to be remembered but not others. We had a transient population after the war. A lot of folks with no family at all. In the end, those of us who lost loved ones just keep those memories in our hearts.'

Harlock's tone was matter of fact, but Daiba didn't buy it for a moment. And the scale... Tabito wasn't a highly populated planet, and for the town to lose so many... if the death rate had been so high here, how had other worlds fared whilst he peddled himself in backalleys and tracked down murderous alien bitches?

'Badly,' Harlock told him when he asked. 'The newsfeeds won't talk about it, the Alliance want to sweep it under the rug, as it mostly affected frontier worlds, though they had their hands full at the time evacuating Mars after the AI debacle that left the planet interdicted. But if we face another threat in the next thirty years, humanity is screwed. Our populations were borderline after the homecoming war, and never recovered. Then the Machine War hit, then the plague... hell, even without the Deathshadow plague, the damage done during the war would have left - did leave, far too many worlds teetering on the brink.' He lifted his hand away, and placed it on the hilt of the sabre. 'If you feel you really need to take a piece of me...' He unholstered his pistol and tossed it lightly to Daiba, who caught it awkwardly with both hands. 'It's your choice.'

Daiba hefted the pistol and examined it. Then with a harsh laugh he threw it back. 'It's not even loaded. When did you palm the energy cap?'

'On the way up here.' He'd caught the pistol one handed and reloaded the energy capsule before reholstering it in one smooth, practiced move. 'What? Do I look like a manic depressive dipsomaniac with a death wish? I have regrets and losses enough for two lifetimes, but I refuse to be that selfish.' He smiled reflectively. 'Besides, if you did shoot me, Kei would tear your arms off and beat you to death with them.' He laid a hand on the monument. 'A lot of those regrets are buried here. But I learned a hard lesson from the previous captain. And several better ones from his best friend.' He let out a soft huff. Shook his head. 'The last time I saw you, you were only thirteen and barely up to my chest. I knew the child... and I'm at a loss to get to grips with the man. But if you want to be treated like a man, start acting like one. Lashing out in spite isn't going to help. It was Isora's way, and you don't have that in you. Anger, yes. But not spite. If you feel you need to make a point, I'll meet you on the practice mats. But the childish tantrums are beneath you.'

Daiba couldn't meet that clear hazel eye at first. He took a deep breath, the fresh, untainted air a
welcome change from the polluted smog of the worlds he'd spent the last few years on. Only then did he look up. 'It would be so much easier to hate you, you know that?'

That earned a smirk. 'I'm told I have that effect on a lot of people.'

'Huh. You must piss a lot of them off with that attitude.'

If anything that shit eating grin just got bigger. 'Oh, I count on it. There's no better way to force someone into making a stupid move than being a smart-arse. I've stayed several steps ahead of the Alliance fleet for years because their Admiral is a tight arsed prig who can't take a joke. Seriously, he almost blew an artery the last time we crossed paths.'

Daiba gave the older man a sharp look. 'You're a bloody troll, aren't you?'

'Guilty as charged. If it gets my people out of harms way,'

'But you captain the most powerful battleship in history... why not just blast the bastards?'

'It's not just about the firepower. A ship like the Arcadia is as much a burden as a blessing. A blunt instrument isn't always the best tool for the job. Sure, if I wanted to destroy whole planets or the entire fleet, it's perfect. But if I do that, I'm no better than the murdering bastard they try to paint me as. The Alliance needs that fleet. Far better they just learn to stay out of my way. Anyone who can't learn that lesson... well. Let's just say there are far more entertaining ways of disposing of garbage than just blowing it to shit. But don't let Ali or Yattaran hear you repeat that. They tend to prefer the more direct approach. Most of my guys don't do 'subtle'.'

'That's because half of them can't even spell it,' Kei's voice called out. She was strolling up the hill with a small girl in tow about five or six years old, with long brown hair, and her mother's cobalt blue eyes. 'You were taking your time. I thought I might need our secret weapon...' She smiled and knelt down at her daughter's side. 'Nami, why don't you go and say hello to your cousin? You were too little to remember meeting him last time!'

Daiba had to field a sudden onslaught from a tiny whirlwind intent on hugging his knees. He sent a bewildered look to the couple who stood watching him with undisguised amusement. 'Is this how you two felt when under attack from me at this age?' He asked plaintively. He knelt beside the little girl, who without any hesitation threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'Nami, eh? You've grown. I think you were just walking last time we met. I'm Daiba.' Thankfully his dislike of being touched didn't extend to children. The little girl's uninhibited acceptance brought a lump to his throat as he stood up slowly with her still clinging to him like a limpet, her soft cheek against his.

'Trust me, you were a one-child wrecking ball,' Harlock told him dryly.

'You're nice. Why did uncle Ali call you a prick?'

All three adults choked on that one, Harlock muttering something under his breath that made Kei clap her hands over her daughter's ears. Daiba had to bite his lip to stop from laughing. 'That's not a very nice word for little girls to use,' he chided her gently.

'Mamoru uses it.'

'Mamoru spends far too much time hanging out with certain members of my crew who are in dire need of a reminder of how to mind their manners around small children,' Harlock ground out. 'On which point, 'uncle Ali' is going to get his arse handed to him on the practice mats tomorrow...'
'Harlock!' Kei's feigned indignation at her partner's own lapse almost caused Daiba to giggle. Kei winked at him, and he lost it at that point.

It brought back memories of happier times. The ones he'd tried desperately to forget since the night of his mother's murder.

They made him feel vulnerable, and that usually made him angrier. The laughter ended abruptly in a choke.

'Don't be sad.' Nami's voice in his ear was as gentle as the little peck the girl gave him on the cheek. 'Papa will make everything better. That's what he does best.'

He looked across at Harlock over the dark head of the little girl, and saw the expression on the face of the man most people considered to be the most dangerous outlaw in known space flicker into something that looked, for a moment, oddly helpless.
Irita sighed, lowered his face into his hands, and took a deep breath. The file on his monitor sat there, half finished, accusing.

No matter how he juggled the facts, they refused to make sense. The analysis from the scene of crimes division on Hakidame was bunched in his left hand, and he smoothed it out with a whispered curse.

No matter how often he read it, the results didn't change.

A massive residue of carbon, in the shape of a human shadow. No. Make that three. Traces of chlorophyll, as well as human DNA, in cell samples that had survived the heat from a serious concentration of plant volatiles combusting in a manner that had left most of the surrounding area untouched. Which had to be impossible, given the temperatures needed to reduce human or even plant material to ash.

The same results from six different planets so far, buried so deep in the local files it had taken all of his not inconsiderable skills to ferret them out. Against orders.

*The boy hadn't been crazy.*

Emphasis on the past tense. How much his four year flight and incarceration in a mental institute had changed that were anyone's guess.

He tugged at his pince-nez glasses to remove them, and rubbed the bridge of his nose, where a sharp pulse suggested a nasty stress headache was heading his way.

But there was a pattern. He just had to find it.

Looking again at the files, he traced a finger over the events he'd connected, going back over thirty years. The death of Admiral Isora's mother in an 'accident'. The destruction less than two years later of her experimental greenhouse. The deliberate destruction of the rebuilt facility only weeks after it had been dedicated to the Admiral's late wife. The death of Hiroko Daiba - an environmental scientist - in a supposed burglary gone wrong. The death of Hiroko Daiba - an environmental scientist - in a supposed burglary gone wrong.

And sixty-seven other cases of environmental, botanical and biological scientists across several systems to be taken into consideration.

Not, he thought sourly, a healthy profession.

Hoshino, he knew, would have preferred most of this to be laid off onto the pirate, but unless he'd started at the age of six, that wasn't going to fly. In fact, if his theory was correct, Admiral Isora's younger brother had probably been a victim of the same perpetrators. The official account suggested the youth had been lucky to be relatively unhurt in the explosion. Though that did not excuse Harlock's many crimes over the past twelve years. The man had freely chosen a life of piracy. No-one had twisted his arm up his back after all. If he'd done the sensible thing and followed orders...

He flicked his open files to show the publicity pictures of the launch of the Deathshadow Fleet over a century ago. One cannibalised to create a ticking time bomb aimed at a distant nebula, but prior to that had been used to channel the life force of thousands for some still unknown purpose. One plague ship which had decimated entire systems. One still unaccounted for.
And the Arcadia. Possibly the only ship capable of putting an end to the horrors her sisters had perpetrated or could still unleash...

Much though it pained him, he had to admit the man seemed to have his uses. *Break glass in times of catastrophe*... Better a disposable outlaw than fleet officers and men. So maybe the survival of the Arcadia under her new captain hadn't been a total disaster.

He pushed his glasses back onto his nose, and flicked his screen back to the un-redacted version of the report from Mars. For some reason he kept rereading it, as if some hitherto unseen snippet would suddenly jump out and make some clarity out of the fog of data he'd been wading through.

Just as he sighed again and reached for the save icon on the touchscreen, a name caught his eye. The person responsible for the redacted file had their user name all over the reports he'd been pulling. Swearing under his breath he checked over the rest of the files just to be sure.

All of them had passed through the office of the Holy Father. More specifically, the desk of his personal aide.

Namino Shizuka.

Irita smiled coldly, a shark finally scenting blood in the water. He reached for his commlink.

'Kirika? Irita. Pull any files we have on the office of the Holy Father. I want to know the current whereabouts of his former aide, a Shizuka Namino.'

The call came through when she was in the shower, and with a muttered 'son of a bitch...' Shizuka was forced to traipse naked and dripping across her room to pick up the commlink, towel in hand.

Number and visual withheld. But she knew better than to ignore it. Especially when the code displayed was RX2.

'Namino.' She pushed her red hair back from her face as she answered, disentangling the long strands with her fingers while she awaited the reply.

'This is agent P5-Z09. You requested notification in the event that the Martian files were accessed?' The voice, as expected, was feminine.

'I'll deal with it. Who requested the access?' She tipped her head on one side as the agent gave her the name and location, and cut the connection without a word.

Internal Security... she thought that those avenues had been cut when the Gaia Council had been disbanded and replaced by the new Alliance. A new broom. Someone was a little overzealous, but she could deal with one overly diligent lieutenant.

She towel dried her long hair and grabbed a robe from the bed, tying the belt tight with a savage tug. After a moment to gather her thoughts she told the apartment AI to lift the blind on her window. The view wasn't spectacular: her seventeenth floor flat in the temporary government facility on Enceladus looked out over the flat ice plains. If she cared to enhance the magnification, she could have made out one of the ice plumes that periodically vented from one of the nearest cryovolcanoes.

For one of her kind, it was bleak and terrifying. But she had been born and raised on now-interdicted Mars. The green pastures and thick forests of legendary Earth had been long gone by the time her crèche-mothers had raised her.
But if their queen was to be believed, one day, that would change. The strange broadcast made from the pirate ship a few years ago had revealed a hope they had all thought lost forever.

*Earth would bloom again...*

She logged into her console and pulled the personnel file of the young lieutenant. Yukihiro Irita. Age twenty-five. The face that graced the file was a sharp featured young man wearing pince-nez glasses; cold-eyed, close cropped hair prematurely grey. His father had been an astronomer in charge of the Pluto Observatory, killed in the Machinners War during Promethium’s attack on the solar system when the advance attack had taken out the early warning outposts. Irita had been fourteen, and living on Mars with his mother at the time. Given the opprobrium the government had heaped on the outposts for 'failing' to notice the attacks, it was a wonder he'd bothered going into service at all. As it was, at twenty five he was still just a lowly lieutenant, and in security at that.

Not going far very fast, she mused. Too much an outsider to be fast tracked, and lacked the connections for advancement. He had a brain and wasn't afraid to use it. Not something regular service encouraged.

Well, there were ways to deal with problems that didn't involve killing them... She smiled to herself. It took her only a few minutes to arrange a flight out to the new naval base on Titan, first class.

There were perks to being the Head of Security to the new President of the Alliance after all.

Kei had to go looking for Harlock after dinner. He'd barely cleaned his plate before slinking out of the room, hardly even pausing to make his apologies to Selen for not waiting for dessert. Since he'd walked back down from the burial mound at her side, only vaguely responding to Nami's excited chatter, she'd expected a reaction.

At times like this, she had a pretty good idea where she'd find him, and nailed it on the second of three possible locations.

He'd stripped off his jacket, which was now hanging precariously from the side of a chromed chair. Bent over the viewscreen for the scanning electron microscope, and scribbling furiously with a stylus on his tablet. He looked up as she entered, forcing a smile at her from under a tangled shock of hair which looked as though he'd been twisting it around his fingers for hours.

'It's late,' she said softly, drifting over to his side. She perched on the chair next to his. 'I thought you couldn't find much in those samples from Hakidame?' She peered over his elbow to look at the screen.

'Not much. Daiba was partly right when he calls them plants. However Nature isn't as tidy as most of us would like, and there were lifeforms that didn't fall neatly into the traditional categories even on Earth, so I'd hesitate to assign them to that family definitively. Look: The cells are eukaryotic, and have a large vacuole, and what look like chloroplasts, but beyond that...' he sighed. 'The samples were badly degraded; it's difficult to be sure, but the cells appear oddly plastic. Undifferentiated. If they were plants I'd expect a cell wall, but they resemble animal cells in that regard. They have a tiny nucleus, but masses of mitochondria. And look - ' he pointed with the stylus to one area of the screen. 'Animal cells have gap junctions allowing communication, but this resembles plasmodesmata found in plant cells.' He sounded frustrated, and she laid a hand on his shoulder.
'So. Alien?' She asked. He huffed.

'Alien? Maybe. You'd think so, yet the partial nuclear DNA sequence Doc ran was terrestrial. The mitochondrial on the other hand resembled nothing in our databases. Ditto the RNA.' For a moment she thought he was going to throw the stylus at the screen, but he laid it down carefully, and switched off the device. 'What we need is a larger sample and preferably a live subject to examine. And perhaps a proper expert on these matters instead of a dropout who never completed his studies in the field and is just winging it.'

She wrapped her arms loosely around his neck and rested her head on top of his. 'You sell yourself short, as usual. Run it through the Central Computer tomorrow when you've had a decent night's sleep. It's late.' She kissed the top of his head, and smiled gently as he leaned into her embrace.

'The boys and Nami?'

'Restless. They'd really like to spend some time with you, tomorrow. They miss you when you're away. I miss you.'

He turned in his seat to look at her. 'I know it's hard. Having you back on the bridge this time out made me realise how much I miss you when you're not there. It's just not the same staring at Ali's fat ass all day..'

She laughed with him, and he buried his face in her neck. 'As Ali would say, that's the price we pay for not keeping our hands off each other...'

He snorted. 'You've been spending far too long away from the Arcadia if you think he'd be that polite. Last time out he was begging Tochiro and Mimay to redline the dark matter drive to get home because he reckoned I was 'cranky' because I hadn't gotten my leg over in a couple of weeks. Please. I can go at least fifteen days before I'm climbing the walls.'

She forced a smile at his levity, but it didn't lift her concern. He was pale even for someone who spent a substantial amount of time in space, and there were lines of care around his eye that hadn't been there a year or two back. 'I suspect he was pithier than that.' She brushed an errant lock of hair out of his eye. 'You look tired. You can't keep burning the candle at both ends forever. You're not immortal, and you still aren't fully healed from this last injury. This can wait a few hours.' She tugged him to his feet. 'I want my Harlock tonight, not the pirate or the botanist...'

'Yes ma'am!'

She started to tug him towards the door but stopped as she noticed a file flash onto the screen as it started to shut down. A picture of a small, four legged creature that resembled a leafy plant. 'Was that one of those little critters from Tokarga?'

'Mmmm. It occurred to me that when looking for a lifeform's origins, it might help to look at similar creatures. We have seen mobile plants before showing some signs of reactive intelligence. I thought it might be worth a trip back - If only for all the grief everyone will give Ali, taking the piss out of the eminent geologist who couldn't tell the difference between a rock and a titanic space worm...'

They grinned at each other, though for both the memory wasn't untinged with sorrow.

'We're back up to full strength, I suppose. Who do you intend to take my post?'

'I rather thought you might want to come. Selen's happy enough to look after our brood as well as her own. Tadashi's on vacation from his medical studies, and Rick wants some time with Clare and
Guy, so I was planning on letting him take this one off anyway. Security therefore isn't the issue. They'd be protected.'

'You want some help with Daiba.' she accused. He didn't deny it. 'I suppose a couple of weeks can't hurt. You, however, can explain to the boys why they can't come... you know they really want a trip with us.'

'I'd be happier if none of them ever wanted to set foot on the Arcadia,' he muttered. 'We're still not too sure of the effects of dark matter. I'm not comfortable having our children so close to it. Mimay's idea of 'safe' isn't always mine.'

Kei linked her arm in his as they left the lab, taking the short cut through the greenhouse it was attached to. A replica of the facility on Mars the Gaia Council had flattened to make way for the mechanisation plant, which had itself been destroyed in the odd events that had led to the planet being evacuated only a year after the war. With the help of his sister-in-law's research, and a dispossessed crew of botanists and environmental technicians who'd been desperate for a chance to continue their work, he'd managed to create a thriving research centre. A year or so ago the main work had transferred to Destiny, having outgrown its humble beginnings on Tabito, but the facility wasn't idle. Rick, for example, was here to co-ordinate the ongoing attempts to repair the damage to his home world, Mistral.

They almost bumped into Daiba as they wandered along the central path. The youth was staring at the various beds, standing in front of a display of simple, white petaled flowers. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and scuffed at the gravel path with one toe, trying desperately to look uninterested. His hair was still shaved close enough to see his scalp, making his thin face seem even more vulnerable. Despite the thick leather jacket, he looked far too thin still, Kei thought sadly. But at least he looked Harlock in the eye when greeted.

'Couldn't sleep,' he offered, without being asked. 'Selen suggested I take a look around. Said you wouldn't mind?'

Kei snorted. 'Don't show any interest, kiddo; he'll drag you round and give you a detailed history of every blade of grass given even the slightest encouragement.'

'Well, I did need some help to get to sleep...' Daiba quipped, a slight smile softening his features briefly.

'Cheeky brat.'

Kei decided to take a back seat, and watch the tentative attempt the lad made to engage. Smart enough to know he had to try, at least... that was a good sign. Though inwardly she sighed. The nonchalant pose was just that: a careful approximation of normality. There were tight lines around his eyes, which didn't hold eye contact for long, constantly on guard. Sticking his hands in his pockets hid the tendency to wrap them around himself protectively.

Oh yes. She knew all the tricks. The need to harden yourself off, like a crab shedding its shell. She'd had almost a decade of practice before Yama - Harlock - had started peeling her out of it.

At least, she thought with a small smile, he wouldn't have to use the same charm on this youth - half his age - as he had with her. She could testify that he was fairly open minded, but other men? No, not his type even when he didn't think of them as a younger brother. Not that she didn't know a few young women who would be having inappropriate thoughts about the frail, insecure youth and his handsome protector. And Meg could keep her smutty little mind off her husband, thank-you-very-much if she knew what was good for her...
She leaned back against the wall, arms folded, watching the pair.

'So why keep this?'

'Partly for Nami. She would have loved this, and it was built on her work. And there's still the problem of the terraforming failure. If I'm honest, looking for the answer has become a bit of a bete noir. I have the help of a certified genius who has a pretty awesome amount of computing power at his beck and call, and even he's stumped.' Harlock stared past the youth, his uncovered eye focused on something Daiba had a feeling was much further away than the glass walls.

'Mom thought there might not be a biological reason, did you know that? Before she was killed, she was really worried about something she'd found in some old datafiles. She said she was sending it to you... did...?'

'No. The first we knew about her death was when Rick called us. Her lab had been trashed, and you were already on the run. But he did crate up what was left. Maybe it's worth a look.' He frowned. 'Actually, it's definitely worth us both going over it. It's possible your mother's murder was one of dozens of deaths by unnatural causes of people in her line of work. Even my own mother, and the explosion that injured Isora and Nami were linked, according to some files Nami passed on to me.' Harlock turned and fixed the younger man with an intense stare. 'Weighing up the pros and cons of bringing him into this so soon...'

He came to a decision. 'Ever heard of an exotic flower called 'Raflessia'?' He asked, not expecting an affirmative reply, but Daiba stared back at him, looking shocked.

'Not a flower,' he whispered. 'A name. The night I found mom, when I got home from rugby practice. There were two women - at least, back then that's what I thought they were - in the room. Their faces were masked, but when I screamed at them to ask what had happened, the one who tried to shoot me...' Here he broke off, and his fingers ran the length of the jagged scar on his scalp, rubbing it absently. 'She called out something about 'the glory of queen Raflessia' .'

Harlock began to walk back to where Kei waited for them, leaning casually against the doorway of the airlock entry. 'They used to call it a corpse flower, because it stank of rotting flesh. It's a parasite, or was. Like most of the flora and fauna of Earth, it's lost forever thanks to my predecessor's temper tantrum. I suspected a name, but had no context.' Reaching Kei's side he placed an arm around her waist. 'After practice, tomorrow, we'll take a look.'

Daiba acknowledged this with a slight nod. But he had a question. 'Practice?'

It was Kei who answered, with a grin. 'Lots of testosterone addled males getting sweaty in the
attempt to prove their masculinity by pummeling, kicking, wrestling and otherwise trying to beat each other to a pulp. Occasionally getting their arses handed to them by the graceful, elegant females they are trying to impress... fancy coming along for the fun?"

The gentle funning made him smile. 'I don't know... do shirts come off?'

She winked, playing into his sly humour. 'Why else do you think we watch?' she deadpanned, as Harlock just rolled his eye heavenwards mouthing something that was probably 'give me strength...'

He was woken up by two overly enthusiastic eight year olds bouncing onto his bed and yelling a hearty good morning into his ears in stereo. The twins didn't seem to have a volume control.

Or a speed dial.

Wattaru seemed to think that life was something to be approached at light speed, regardless of obstacles - as a result he tended to bounce off anything in his path that he didn't just trip over. Mamoru, necessarily a little slower than his brother, operated on an over-under-or-through policy: less likely to fall over things, more likely to treat them with absolute contempt for daring to get in his way. And as he trailed along in their wake, Daiba came to the conclusion that Harlock and Kei were probably having a great laugh giving him a dose of his own medicine.

He handed off his escorts with a mock frown. 'Thanks guys, I get it, I was an absolute horror at the same age, right?'

Harlock picked Wattaru up from where he'd tripped at his father's booted feet, attempting to decelerate without dumping delta-v first. 'I couldn't possibly comment,' he said with total innocence. Daiba snorted.

'For this, I miss breakfast?' The twins ran off to join a group of children to the side of the field they were in, and he followed Harlock to the side, where a group of - what he assumed were the crew of the Arcadia- were limbering up. Ali and Cai he recognised. Zack was off to one side wrestling with his sweater and trying to avoid his mother's well intentioned but unwelcome help. Meg and Kei were already down to vest tops, along with Selen. Others he didn't recognise, but Harlock quickly introduced him to Franz, Van Rynn and Kane, all strapping guys in their early thirties.

Eye candy, however, they were not. More like a trio of aging tomcats, with the battle scars to prove it. They took the heckling from assorted onlookers in good humour, however, even as they crashed one by one out of the improvised ring, barely causing resident bruiser Ali to break a sweat. Cai, whipcord lean and stripping off his shirt to reveal an enviable six pack, fared a little better, but flawless technique still hit the mat when faced with a tenacious bruiser who didn't know the meaning of a fair fight. Ali helped the slim crewman to his feet, chuckling, amid wolf whistles from the female audience.

'If you like what you see, ladies, feel free to try your own luck!' The big blond crewman smirked. He flexed his pecs suggestively and winked. 'Don't be shy now...'

Anita, the cook/quartermaster shouldered her way to the front of the crowd, and grinned at Ali. 'I might just take you up on that, sweetheart.' Wearing a vest top and loose combats tucked into her boots, Daiba was surprised to see most of the large woman's bulk was muscle. She wasn't far short of his own height, and although a little soft in places, it soon became apparent she had the measure of the cocky loudmouth.

Also that the two of them sparred regularly, because they pretty much had each others measure,
although Anita was better trained, even to his inexpert eye. But Ali's greater speed and strength carried the day, although she gave him a better run for his money than the men had. She picked herself up and took a hearty slap on the back before rejoining the crowd, to appreciative applause from the other women.

Ali was handed a towel by the still grinning Cai, and had just draped it around his neck when Harlock stepped forward. 'Getting too cocky there, old man?' He asked. He unfastened his jacket and handed it to Kei, following it with his sweater. Daiba let his eyes wander over the older man's physique whilst he patiently disentangled the strap of his eyepatch from the sweater, before handing both to Kei with a rueful laugh.

On the face of it the two men were a total mismatch. Ali was well over six two or three, broad chested with slabs of muscle, even if building a slight stomach. Scars ran over his back, and one side actually had a slight dent in it under a particularly bad scar near his ribs. He took a deep shuddering breath as Daiba watched, leaning on a nearby fence as though tired, his face between his arms, breathing heavily.

Good showmanship, but having watched him for the past half hour, he didn't buy it for a moment, and neither, from his eye-rolling sigh, did his captain.

Harlock had the advantage of at least ten years less on the clock than his crewman, but was at least a couple of inches shorter, and considerably slimmer. Under his dark jacket he tended to look a little skinny, but this, Daiba realised, was deceptive. Although not whip-ripped lean and sculptured like Cai, or packing the muscular bulk of Ali, he was surprisingly well built. Lean, but broad shouldered. Larger in the chest than his posture would indicate. Still slim hipped and long legged, without a trace of middle aged roll yet.

Fast on his feet, Daiba thought, watching him move to engage with Ali, both men grinning. And probably more stamina, although the barely healed scar near his shoulder looked sore - the wound he'd taken on Hakidame protecting him overlapped with old electrowhip scars that marred that strong back. Other scars covered his lean torso; faint, long healed burns on his back and side; one snaking, wide slash across his chest from shoulder to navel. Defensive cuts on his lower arms from a knife fight. A blaster burn curled around his stomach and down over the point of one hip where his pants dipped low.

A gasping grunt from Ali brought his attention back to the fight. A lightning fast strike from Harlock's fist had slammed into the crewman's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He recovered quickly, with a blistering curse, but too late to avoid a well-timed knee in the joy department, that put the man on the floor curled around his own pain and struggling to breathe.

Getting his breath back with an obvious effort, Ali held out a hand to his captain. 'Fuck, you didn't have to geld me, you bastard!' He gasped out.

Harlock ignored the outstretched hand. 'Get up, you drama queen. I didn't hit you that hard, and I'm sure as hell not falling for that trick again.' He backed out of range of any retaliation before he turned his back and collected a towel from a laughing Kei amid hoots and whistles from the crew.

Daiba thought the captain's response a little harsh, until he saw Ali roll effortlessly to his feet grinning, not even slightly winded. As Ali accepted a rub down from a smiling Anita, Daiba strolled as casually as he could towards Harlock, who turned to look at him with his good eye as he drew close. 'Fancy a bout?' He asked.

Daiba waved a hand negligently at the practice area, then at himself. 'I'm hardly back to full str...'

'Anyone can fight when they're fit and healthy. It's how you fight when you're on the ropes that
shows what you're made of.' Harlock cut short his excuse and handed Kei the towel. 'In the ring, scamp, front and centre.' He strolled back to the makeshift ring, and turned to face Daiba, arms folded.

Not seeing an easy - or face saving - way out of this, Daiba reluctantly pulled off his sweater, trying to ignore Meg's sharp intake of shock when his skinny, still scarred and bruised torso was revealed to the onlookers. He was blushing furiously by the time he reached the ring, trying to resist the temptation to cover up. No honourable battle scars for him, were there? Bruises from resisting being raped or beaten by a sadistic orderly: On a bad day the night-stick double-shifted. Pressure sores from a thin bed and tight restraints...

Embarrassment gave way quickly to anger. By the time he'd walked the few strides to face Harlock, the resentment was back like a comforting blanket. Something he could pull over his head and give a well-earned 'fuck-you' to the world. His hands were clenched by his side, fingers digging into the palms as he resisted the urge to wrap his arms around what was left of himself, to hide from prying, judging eyes.

His opponent simply waited, relaxed. Arrogant bastard... but if he thought he could just stand there and wait...

He attacked, soundless, as he'd learned early on to do, knowing no-one would come if you screamed, and noise only made the beatings worse. He tried to aim for Harlock's blind side, faking the punch, going instead for the sweep...

The man simply wasn't there. No fuss, no hurry. Just side-stepped and straight-armed him below the throat. He dropped instantly, landing hard as he couldn't check his speed.

'Lesson one. Don't let anger, pride or fear get control of you. It's an invitation to a bruising. You cannot afford mistakes. Up you get!'

No helping hand was offered. He had to roll onto his knees and push himself off the ground, panting slightly. Even this had left his legs feeling like jelly, but he'd ever been anything, it was stubborn. He tried again, this time trying to hold onto his temper and keep a clear head. But once again Harlock wasn't where he'd been when he started his attack. Again and again, he failed to connect even a glancing blow, as the older man simply glided out from in front of him. Daiba was winded, and Harlock hadn't even broken a sweat. Frustrated, he lashed out, aiming for the right cheek, only this time to have his fist caught in a vice-like grip. And Harlock's free hand landed a solid blow on his solar plexus, dropping him gasping again to the ground. He had to shake some life back into his fingers; damn... He'd forgotten the guy was a champion free-climber. His grip was incredible... and he'd pulled that last punch for sure.

He struggled back to his feet, swaying slightly. The trees seemed to be dancing, off in the middle distance. He saw Harlock shake his head slightly. Asking him to back down? He shook his own in negation. If he wanted to make a point, he'd have to do it the hard way.

'There's another lesson,' Kei's voice, very quietly, near his ear. He hadn't even seen her get close. 'If you can't deal with a strong opponent by yourself...'

'I stopped looking for help years ago,' he ground out savagely, hoarsely. He felt her hand rest on his bare arm. Warm. Soft, but a strength in her fingers as they closed - oh so briefly - around his wasted limb.

'But can you relearn?' she asked. He looked at her, meeting those cobalt blue eyes. Caught sight of the crew of the Arcadia, just waiting. Watching. For what?
'Kei? It was just a question. It was... not asking for help. But she gave his arm a squeeze, and then gave him a little shove to one side.

'When I call, go high and left,' she whispered. Then she pulled away and lazily strolled towards her partner. 'You need a reminder of what it's like to get your arse handed to you, darling. Ali there's getting too soft on you in his old age!' She called out. The crowd laughed with her and Ali flipped her the finger from the sidelines, one arm draped around Anita's shoulders. 'Daiba!'

He did as he'd been told, but decided on a last minute change of tactics, throwing everything into a shoulder charge that would usually have flattened his opponent, only to run into a brick wall, as Harlock barely staggered, although he did hear a soft hiss of pain. He tried to capitalise on this by aiming at that still sore looking scar, only, to be blocked by a fast fist that knocked him sideways. So damned fast... then the pirate landed with a heavy thud on the ground next to him, rubbing his knee ruefully as Kei looked down on them both, smiling.

'Lesson two,' Harlock said softly. 'We fight together. Not one of us ever has to face anything alone. Back to back, side by side..' he took Kei's offered hand and instead of helping himself to his feet, gave her a hard tug so she landed next to them, to the merriment of the onlookers, though Daiba suspected she'd let him do it. 'You're stubborn, you don't give up, and that's good. But don't let it make you inflexible, and never be afraid to ask for help. Or to offer it.' He got to his feet, pulled Kei to hers and then offered his hand to Daiba. 'Though if you get backed into a corner, coming out fighting might be your only option.'

He took the outstretched hand, and was surprised as Harlock clapped a hand on his shoulder before releasing him. 'Get fit. Next time you'll have a better shot.' Daiba nodded slowly, and his cousin turned and walked away, taking his towel off one of his sons, and ruffling the boy's hair. Mamoru, he thought, though unless you saw them side by side the differences between the two were not obvious. The exasperated sigh seemed more typical of Mamoru than the more easy going Wattaru. Sure enough when the other brother ran over, it was Wattaru who skidded to a halt. Slightly more robust and tanned than Mamoru, and perhaps a little fuller in the face.

Both boys ran off to join a group of children of a similar age. Daiba recognised Selen's daughter Kanna - a fair haired beauty the same age as the twins, who hung adoringly on to Wattaru's every word. Taro, who despite his short stature was a little older than the twins, seemed inseparable from Mamoru. Those two wandered off by themselves as Daiba watched.

He remembered his own days here with more than a little pain. Apart from Zack, he recognised no-one among the young adults who mingled with the crowd who might have been one of his childhood friends. It was a harshly sobering thought.

Daiba hid his grimace behind his sweater as he pulled it on, schooling his face back into neutral before facing the world again. He thought briefly about trying to make amends with Zack, but the older youth had the blonde girl from last night wrapped around him possessively. Niobe, he thought her name was. The touchy girl - Meg - had wandered off with some of the younger children, Nami amongst them. There seemed to be some unspoken accord that someone always kept an eye on the small fry.

'Daiba.'

Harlock's soft voice. Daiba shoved his hand into his pockets and faced him. 'Yeah?'

'Shower, breakfast, then we'll be taking the bullet up to Arcadia. You and I have some files to review.'
He nodded, and was rewarded with a fleeting, one-sided smile as Harlock turned back to talk to Kei and Selen. Before he could make a move, Ali slapped him on the shoulder hard enough to stagger him, and he had to take a couple of steps to stay upright.

'Don't worry, kid. After the filing, you might even get to do some typing...' he sauntered off, smirking at his joke.

It was a stupid move, he knew the moment he opened his mouth. 'So if we need some notes taking, how's your shorthand?' he called out after the big pirate. He flinched a little as the guy turned round again, but instead of the expected fist in the face, the man just chuckled, and winked at him.

'Now you're gettin' it, kiddo. One hour. Be back on the landing field, or be prepared to jump real high...' he wandered off whistling, and Daiba - nothing better to do... headed back to town.

Mom's files... he had to take a steadying breath and lean against a brick wall, blinking back tears he refused to let fall. Not after all this time. The files that might have gotten her killed. He took another deep breath. Exhaled. And again. He could do this, he could.

It wasn't what he wanted. If he was honest that was a fight he wasn't yet ready for. But maybe it was a start. Maybe somewhere in the details he could once again pick up a trail to those responsible. This time, he would be the hunter.

He pushed himself off the wall and walked back into town, his head held higher than it had been in a long time.
Chapter 6

Lieutenant Irita looked up as the midshipman knocked and stood in the doorway of his small office, peering at the young woman over the rim of his glasses. 'Yes?'

'Sir. You have an unscheduled visitor from the President's office.' She stood back to allow someone to push past her, and closed the door behind her, leaving this unexpected intruder waiting patiently in front of him.

He didn't look up immediately. In his experience unannounced visitors expected to have his undivided attention on a whim, and he made it a matter of policy to refuse to give it to them. He continued working, pushing his glasses firmly into place, waiting for the first throat-clearing to announce that his unwanted guest was getting annoyed.

It didn't come. Nor did they take the seat in front of his desk unasked. Interesting.

He quietly, un-ostentatiously, closed down the report he'd been reading, and looked up.

At which point he found himself wishing he'd done so several minutes earlier. The figure in front of him, standing patiently to attention, was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever laid eyes on. Tall - easily five ten. Slender, but also nicely curved in all the right places. Her hair fell down to her waist, unfettered, a shining fall of red curls that no bottle had ever replicated. Despite the necessary confines of all solar system outposts these days she also sported a healthy tan, indicating either wealth or a very well placed government job. Her eyes were captivating - a vivid green he found hard not to stare into like some lovesick teenager.

He pulled himself together with an effort, hoping like hell he hadn't started drooling. As it was, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. On a closer inspection, he took in that she wore no artificial scent that he could discern. No make-up, no jewellery beyond a small silver chain that disappeared into a surprisingly demure neckline, and as if to complete the insult to millions of women who laboured at great length and cost to look generate a fraction of the allure of the siren in front of him, her clothes were a plain black a-line skirt suit suit, with a prim, high necked shirt and sensible shoes.

'I'm not in the habit of receiving visitors without an appointment, miss...' his voice was a little harsher than usual, in his determination to prove to both of them she had no effect on him.

The woman smiled at him, and if he'd thought her lovely before, he had to revise his evaluation upwards by a significant margin. 'Namino. Shizuka Namino. Head of Presidential Security."

He covered his embarrassment by gesturing to her to take the chair, which she did with elegant, fluid movements that would have made her the darling of the warp-vids. 'My apologies, Miss Namino. What can I do for IntSec?'

Presidential Security. Something of a euphemism, as this was the organisation responsible for covert intelligence, in addition to guarding the President. Probably the consolation prize for putting up with the insipid little booby, he'd always thought. Though she looked young for the role... her file had suggested she'd been around for at least twenty years, yet she looked barely older than his own age.

Almost as though she could read his thoughts, she smiled again at him. 'I'm thirty six, lieutenant. I know you've been pulling files I processed for the old council. I was a junior secretary in the office.
of IntSec and worked my way up the hard way, in case it matters. So now we have that out of the way, why don't I explain why I hopped a first class transport from Enceladus to Titan to see you? I'm sure you're a busy man, after all.' she smiled winsomely. 'Not however too busy to dig in old files that were redacted by the Old Regime for a reason.'

He peered at her over the top of his glasses, a move he knew usually made people nervous. His pale grey eyes had a way of unnerving others. A defect as a child which he'd turned around to work for him very well as an adult. 'Creepy', his classmates had called it. These days it was filed under 'disturbing'. But not, it seemed, to this vibrant slip of a girl... no - woman - who sat in front of him, her green eyes flashing with amusement.

'I'd be interested in knowing that reason, Miss Namino. Assuming it isn't still classified.'

'And if it is?'

'Then I'm even more interested. Records prior to the Homecoming War were lost during Harlock's attack. The dark matter chain reaction destroyed most of the planet's surface, never mind the government facilities. We were lucky the military HQ had already moved to Mars in the twenty-third century, or we'd have lost even more. It seems a strange coincidence that your name appears on all of these files. Why did they even cross His Holiness' office to start with? Had someone already made a connection between these incidents?'

She laughed. 'Really, lieutenant? You happen across a few dozen records of out thousands that crossed my desk, that obviously have my signature on them, and somehow arrive at a conspiracy?'

He leaned back in his chair and glared coldly at her. 'Miss Namino...'

'It's quite all right, lieutenant. After all, if there were a conspiracy, it would mean that those involved had been in place for decades, working in the highest levels of government, unnoticed, carefully making sure that any persons or organisations that stood any chance of unearthing them were quietly done away with.. all under the nose of the strictest security in the galaxy...'

It did sound absurd. He laughed. 'So you suggest that if I cast my net wider, these records are just a statistical blip, easily explainable by dint of the fact that you were just so busy?'

'I might have thought the same, until I checked the files for myself,' she said quietly, a change of course so unexpected he actually found his jaw dropping slightly. She smiled again, a move he was sure she practiced in order to obtain the most devastating effect. 'The most recent examples really are rather compelling. One family with so many losses in the last twenty years.'

'You make it sound as though this only just came to your attention,' he snapped. 'Yet you quite clearly redacted the files on the Martian incidents at great length. On orders? If so, whose?'

She sighed, and leaned towards him as though taking him into her confidence. 'Lieutenant, the Holy Office has been disbanded for over five years. Very few of those involved kept any influence in the new order. Certainly none of those close to His Holiness. As you can see, I moved on to better things, but I cannot say truthfully some of the things I heard and saw back then didn't make me uncomfortable. I had put it behind me, but when your name crossed my desk in connection with these files, and I saw them gathered together for the first time... well..

She sat back in her chair and crossed her legs, a move that had she worn clothing that accentuated her legs would have been provocative. Another deliberate ploy, he suspected. Look at me, I'm sexual, but I do not use it as a weapon... Oh, she was good. Very good.
Too good? His instincts were telling him one thing very clearly: do not trust her...

'Well?' He prompted.

She tilted her head slightly, another whimsical move he was now sure was as much a front as everything else about her.

After all, a woman like this did not get to her position without being utterly ruthless, regardless of her assets.

'You seem to be onto something, lieutenant. I think there is a connection, and this pirate the fleet is so keen on stopping appears to be involved somehow. Whether as a victim or something else remains to be seen. But it seems unlikely your superiors will grant you the opportunity to follow this through. Admiral Hoshino is an admirable attack dog, but following this to wherever it may lead... to bring those responsible to account, no matter what it takes or how long they might have got away with murder... that requires a different touch.' She reached into her pocket and handed him an official flimsy sealed with the insignia of the Alliance Presidency. 'I think you'll find you're out of uniform, Captain Irita.' She stood up gracefully, and smoothed down the wrinkles in her skirt. 'You have a week to put affairs here in order, captain, and then I will expect you in my office. We'll discuss this at greater length then.'

She didn't wait to be shown out, and was already out of the door before he remembered his manners enough to stand.

He waited for the door to hiss shut before opening his orders. As she had said, promotion to captain, effective immediately, and attached to the Office of Internal Security. He placed it on the desk in front of him and placed his glasses on top of it with a sigh. He had a headache forming right between his eyes, and unless he missed his guess, it was directly linked to the itching between his shoulder blades.

A beautiful knife could still kill you. What he ought to do was respectfully decline, and walk away.

He knew he wouldn't. The first step of avoiding a trap, after all, was to know it existed. But what the trap was however... that he couldn't see.

It was there. He could feel it. But like mist, it wouldn't allow him to grasp it in his hands. That she knew enough about him to dangle this in front of him was a worry, but one he could live with if it lead to answers, and a problem solved and filed away neatly.

If he was being played... well. Two could play at that game.

He'd never realised how over forty years of a life could be reduced to something so tiny. One small chip held his mother's notes and publications for her entire career. Another his father's.

Daiba sat holding one in each hand, turning the hexagonal golden disks over in his fingers. Meanwhile Harlock leaned nonchalantly against the wall behind him, not saying a word, his arms folded across the skull and crossbones emblem on the front of his jacket.

'You don't have to ride herd on me you know. I'm fine. Really.' The man had been in and out of the little cubbyhole he'd given Daiba several times over the past couple of days, offering advice and help. Not without merit, but losing himself in the details was one of the few ways he'd found to deal with everything roiling around in his head. That, and getting the stuffing kicked out of him by Meg or Zack, who'd been tasked with improving his combat skills.
'You're not, but that isn't why I'm here. I said we'd do this together, and I meant it.' Harlock pushed himself off the wall and instead perched on the edge of the desk, facing the monitor.

'I thought you'd have - know know - pirate stuff to do?'

*For fuck's sake, he wanted to shout... have you really got nothing better to do?*

'Making miscreants walk the plank? Keelhaul evil doers? Rob a few fleet supply convoys? Hate to break it to you, but these days we're pretty self sufficient supply wise, and fleet usually stay out of this area of space as it actually falls under the SDF, not the Alliance. And *they* don't have a warrant out for our arrest.'

*So that would be a 'no' then... 'And the plank and keelhauling?* Daiba asked with a resigned sigh.

'So last week. Though I do have a bird that likes perching on my shoulder, when I can't avoid the waddling idiot. I swear it's getting fatter.'

Daiba slipped the disk containing his mother's work into the reader in front of him, hiding a small smile. So the guy hadn't lost all of his sense of humour over the past few years... even if it felt a little forced at times. He keyed up the index, and scrolled through the holographic display looking for the date stamps. 'You've never been what I expected, you know? Even when you came back to Mars and took us away. It was fun, at first, finding out you were Harlock, but I kind of thought you'd turn out to be some kind of battle hardened badass - all cold eyed killer or something, the way the news tells it. But you're still just... you know: you.' He tailed off with a vague handwave, wondering perhaps if he'd gone too far.

Harlock just shrugged. 'People see what they want to see. My crew, my friends... my family. They see the side of me that can afford to let the walls down. Hell, they'd tear me to pieces if I pulled that stoic macho bullshit on them that the last guy did. Kei tells me I'm *reflective* - that I tend to show people what they expect to see. Which makes it sound horribly manipulative, as if it's something I do on purpose. I don't. But anyone who comes at me or mine looking for trouble tends to find it, and I learned the hard way that sometimes you have to put one guy down to discourage the rest. It doesn't take as much as you think to build a reputation. You just have to be ready to do two things.'

Daiba tilted his head on one side and waiting for the punchline. 'Well?' He asked, when the answer wasn't forthcoming.

Harlock sighed. 'It's not that insightful. You just have to be able to hold your ground - and never pull a weapon unless you plan on using it. And if you do, don't hesitate.'

'That's three...' he pointed out. Harlock shrugged.

'What can I say? I wanted to be a botanist, not a mathematician.' He pointed to an item on the holographic display. 'Go back a little. There.' Daiba scrolled back up and called up the file.

'I'd love to know how she got hold of these statistics,' Harlock muttered. Periodically he tapped away at the screen, overlaying one set over another, discarding, starting over. Eventually Daiba sat back and let him drive. Once pointed in the right direction, the man just steamrolled ahead rather like his twin sons. *No prizes for guessing where they got it from...*

They both looked at the correlation when finished. Harlock spoke first.

'If you overlay the CO2 levels, look what happens. Your mother was right. There's a spike in the vegetation profile, as expected, but no reduction in the raised carbon dioxide levels afterwards. It's
masked by the more obvious listed causes of failure, but it's consistent...'

'The dates and population levels don't show any correlation,' Daiba pointed out, quite reasonably he thought.

Harlock shook his head. This isn't about population growth, or even a timetable. The results are what you'd expect to see if - say - a certain critical mass of plant material was reached, but the terraforming machines failed to compensate by changing the CO2 output. In fact, in each case where other factors didn't intervene, the levels continue to climb, in direct violation of the natural order. No way is that natural.'

'Sabotage...'

'Every single world, except for the industrialised planets. Most of those had domes, if I recall correctly. I find it hard to believe that no-one joined the dots.'

Daiba pointed to the obvious date in the sequence. 'I think they had bigger things to worry about by then. Have you got the dates for the first stages of the Homeward movement?'

In answer Harlock placed his hand on the wall. 'Wake up, lazybones. I need to pick your brains.'

Daiba gave the man his best what-the-fuck look, but it just earned a fleeting, secretive smile. The holographic display flickered, and the image of a smiling, round faced man in his early thirties appeared, peering through bottle-lensed glasses at them. 'I heard you. Wondered when you'd get around to asking for my help.'

'Just a quick question. Most records pre-war were lost, but does your database hold any information on the progress of the movement to return to Earth?'

The ghostly face frowned. 'It kind of just snowballed, if I remember correctly. Have to say, we were busy elsewhere for a lot of the early years. The Yukikaze was a survey ship, and Harlock and I spent a lot of time out near the galactic rim, near the Greater Magellenic Cloud. Later the Deathshadow 1 - the ship we named the class after - was assigned nearer the core, which is when we met the remains of Mimay's people. My files don't really carry much information on that time - as a military vessel, the Arcadia was not exactly tasked with monitoring intelligence feeds. That was mostly carried out on Enceladus. If you could get access to that data, you might find out more from the pre-war period. All communications relating to the insurrection were routed through there, and the Outer Planets and their moons escaped the damage that the inner worlds took.'

'Can you hack the database?' Daiba asked. The hologram shook his head.

'Nah. Not unless we had a hardline into it. Even then, it would set off every alarm in the system. Don't know about you but I don't fancy being responsible for wrecking what's left of the fleet.'

Harlock snorted. 'A little late for that. They will insist on getting in our faces. However, there are easier ways.' He nodded to the hologram. 'We'll be down later, my friend.' The hologram returned to the previous display. He leaned over and tapped the comms channel open. 'Yattaran?' He paused, waiting out the obligatory grumbling. 'Yeah. Whatever. I need you to put your brain into gear for a change, you lazy bastard. Can you get messages though our back door channels to Admiral Oki - strictly off the record, I don't want to risk this being picked up.'

'You woke me for that?' The Arcadia's first mate grumped.

Harlock just sighed. 'I'd do it myself, but I also thought you could maybe leak the same questions through the nearest warp relay. Fleet Intelligence will be jumping through hoops to find out why
we'd want particular info. I figure we could let them earn their pay for once and do our leg work for us...'

'Do I have to?' The fat pirate sounded put out. 'Every time you ask me to drop the ball like that, my reputation plummets...'

Harlock grinned nastily. 'It's the fastest way to get the information we want, sorry. Easier to hack the fleet comms relay than dig through a hundred years of crap looking for what I'm after.'

'Which would be what, exactly?' The big man sighed. 'You know, the last time you had a great idea it didn't work out too well...'

'Bite me. I'll send Daiba over to you. Between you you should be able to cobble together a convincing scenario.' He cut the connection. 'Talk with Yattaran, we should be able to get what we want to look at within the week. In the meantime, I was planning a sidetrip in a day or two. Up to you if you want to come with us or wait it out here...' he trailed off at the indignant stare he was on the receiving end of. 'Yeah. Teenagers. What was I thinking?' He sighed theatrically. 'All I need now is for my gang of hellions to tag along...'

As he began to walk away Daiba halted him with a hand on his arm. 'Where are we going?'

'Tokarga. Eighth planet in the Gohrum system. Had a run in with a weird plant lifeform there back when I was still new on board and the old captain in charge. Thought they might be worth a second look, given what we've seen.' He smiled a little sadly. 'Get Yattaran to tell you about it. He loves telling that one!'
partner in crime, Taro. 'I think it's clear!' He called out.

'Are you sure this is the right way?' Taro sounded doubtful. 'I think we're lost...'

'A pirate is never lost on his own ship!' Mamoru declared proudly. 'Dad's room is around here somewhere... find that, and..'

'But I'm tired... we've been walking for ages. And what if we get caught?'

'Now you're starting to sound like Wattaru. Buck up! It can't be far, if the blueprints you hacked are right. The Central Computer hasn't tipped dad off, so it must be okay...'

Daiba bit back a laugh at that point. *Oh man... if he'd caused the younger Harlock to freak out over his escapades as a kid, his own two were going to leave him grey before he was forty... he wasn't sure which one was the more likely to put their father in an early grave... the caution-to-the-wind Wattaru, or the it's-okay-if-we-don't-get-caught slightly more thoughtful Mamoru. It hadn't taken him long to work out the differences in the effect the twins had was measured in milliseconds. The outcomes would be the same, but Mamoru usually thought something through before doing it anyway. Probably the reason he tended to sport fewer bruises than his brother."

Idly, he wondered which was the eldest.

'I think we go this way...' Mamoru muttered, turning the corner just as Daiba stepped away from the wall, and colliding with his knees with an 'ooff'. '

'Oh, Uncle Tadashi!'

Daiba fielded the boy neatly, almost losing his own balance in the process. 'I think you two might need to come with me before your parents start worrying,' he muttered. Ah well. Who needed lunch? 'Either of you know where we're going or are you as lost as I am?'

Mamoru's eye rolling response almost rivaled his father's. 'We're not lost, we're exploring.'

'Yeah. Right. And neither of you are actually supposed to be on board, are you?' He drawled. 'Where's your brother?'

In the last couple of days the twins had rarely been too far away from each other, and their capacity for mischief meant that surely you wouldn't find one without the other. He watched the faces of Mamoru and his adopted brother, and grinned when they shared a guilty look.

'He's fine. Only mom caught him and was chewing him a new one when we last saw him.'

'Left him to take the heat whilst you two slipped off to explore?'

Another guilty look, albeit even briefer than the first. Taro shrugged. 'He'll be fine. No-one ever thinks he's up to anything sneaky.'

'Whereas you two have already got a reputation for being behind most of the mischief caused by your peers...' Daiba laughed. 'Your father is going to have so much trouble with you two when you get older.' *And oh to be a fly on the wall for those years...*

'Older? It started as soon as they could walk..' drawled a voice from behind the boys. Harlock emerged round the corner, grabbing a collar in each hand, though gently, Daiba noticed. 'Is there a reason I shouldn't ground the three of you until you're thirty, just to be on the safe side?"
'We weren't in any trouble, we just wanted to see Yattaran, and you haven't let him off the ship since you got back!' Mamoru explained.

'He was making a model for us. He said it was ready, we just wanted to see...' Taro added helpfully.

'And Wattaru? Somehow I don't see him fitting in with one of the schemes you two cook up. Unless it's an unwitting patsy to get the grown-ups off your backs?'

No reply to this, just a shared guilty-as-charged look. Harlock sighed. 'I wish I could say I don't know where you get it from, but sadly both sides of the family tree seem to just keep throwing up rebels.' He gave Daiba an arch look at this, and the younger man stuck his hands in his pockets, tried to look innocent and winked at the boys, who giggled at him. 'Make that all the bloody branches... I really should have known better.'

Mamoru hit his father with an impressive lip wobble and a wide eyed kicked puppy look that almost had Daiba holding the wall to avoid falling over laughing. 'Does that mean you don't love us?'

Daiba felt he should step in at this point, as the frazzled expression on Harlock's face, whilst priceless, was probably a reaction too far. 'Ease up on him, you little sod. First off, that was just mean. Second - Take it from someone who still remembers all the tricks, that little catch in the voice, whilst impressive, was over-egging it. Less is more.' He gave his cousin a shrug. 'Don't let this one play you, he's got a career in politics if he keeps this up...'

Mamoru gave him an indignant glare, which he studiously ignored.

Harlock sighed. 'Ali keeps asking me if I'm sure they're not some adult changelings masquerading as small boys. Some days I'm not too sure.' He turned Mamoru to face him. 'You, save the theatrics for serious moments. Use it on your enemies, not on friends and family.' When Mamoru opened his mouth Harlock raised a gloved finger. 'I'm pretty sure the next words out of your mouth will be 'I'm sorry...'. But if you don't mean it, I don't want to hear it.'

Mamoru looked thoughtful, then: 'I'm sorry I tried to play you, father.'

'Rather more sorry it doesn't work..' Daiba heard him murmur as he hugged his son hard, and extended the same to Taro. At least at that both boys looked genuinely sheepish. Daiba had a feeling however that they'd be comparing notes for a revised strategy later on.

'Is the universe going to be ready for your offspring?' He asked slyly. He tipped a wink to the boys who both giggled. Yeah... he could offer a few tips that might go down well... nothing like several years experience brought to bear... Mamoru slipped a hand into his as Harlock led them through the ship.

'I'm not sure it's ever ready for a Harlock,' he replied quietly. 'As my friend delights in telling me, I'm also going to be responsible for setting loose a Harlock and an Oyama on the galaxy together for the first time in a century. From what I've been able to piece together of our families' tangled histories, that can get messy...' As the boys forged ahead towards Yattaran's open door, he added quietly 'Mimay often talks about "destiny" as though everything we do is fixed... infinitely repeatable, albeit with variations. An eternal ring of time; the ouroboros constantly eating its own tail. I hope she's wrong, because some things... should never be repeated.'

'Like you and Isora?' Daiba asked. Harlock paused and stared out of a porthole, through which Tabito was just visible.
'Partly. Though for all Mamoru's manipulative tendencies he would never put Wattaru - or Taro - in any danger. Those three can fight like a couple of cats in a sack with each other, but they rain down hell on anyone stupid enough to pick on one or the other. Not something I can ever say about Isora and me. But as a family, we do tend to attract trouble, and one horrific exception aside, we tend to die young, not in our beds surrounded by adoring grandchildren.' He turned to face Daiba, a little frown forming between his eyes. 'Harlock was about my age when he turned himself and the Arcadia into some harbinger of destruction. One of his grandsons - a man I'd come to think of as the brother I wish I'd had- wasn't much older when he apparently went crazy and fired on his own fleet before vanishing with his ship a couple of years ago. My own father didn't reach forty, and my older brother as you well know gave in to hatred and anger and despair, and was only twenty-seven when he died. So if you wonder if I worry, the answer is an unqualified yes. But I won't go blindly or without a fight, and if I can protect my family from any such 'destiny' I'll gladly sacrifice anything to do it.' He paused. 'Almost anything... ' A wry smile, a little self mocking. 'Kei hates it when I make rash promises that I'll feel honour bound to keep. And there are some lines I would never cross.'

There was something so raw about that admission, Daiba found it hard to meet the man's single eye. 'Mum always said you seemed to be trying so hard to be normal, despite everything..' he waved a hand to indicate the Arcadia. 'All of this. Being Harlock... trying to save the world, even from itself.' He hesitated, then offered: 'Even if you don't always succeed...' It was as close as he could come to offering the olive branch on that score. For now.

Any comment Harlock might have made on the subject was pushed to one side as the boys ran back, chattering excitedly and waving a large model spaceship under their father's nose, Yattaran in slow pursuit, keeping a wary eye on his handiwork, at a guess.

'Look! Isn't it great?' Mamoru bubbled. Harlock had to kneel down to get a better look as the boys refused to let go of their prize.

'Impressive, but what is it?'

'Our ship!' Taro added proudly. 'We told Yattaran what we wanted, and he built it for us to scale. See, it's got cannon just like the Arcadia... and your rooms at the back!'

'It's going to be our Arcadia when we grow up.' Mamoru said quietly, his eyes fixed on his father's face, watching for parental approval. 'We'll be able to travel everywhere in her and see the universe!'

Daiba hung back a little, watching the boys gleefully pointing out the various parts of their dream ship. The design was actually quite streamlined by comparison to the weirdly organic Arcadia. Her overarching dark matter array was gone, the length shortened to make her look a little better balanced, less front end beyond a natural centre of gravity. The spinal column and skull were gone, replaced by wooden effect decking and an elegant, more point bow with a simple skull and crossbones painted onto the blue surface. Yattaran had also added so delicate scrollworked decals to the sides and top. Mamoru giggled as a push of a button operated a switchblade from the bow.

'Nice job,' Daiba opined to Yattaran quietly, finding himself standing next to the big pirate.

Yattaran pushed his bandana back from his forehead and rubbed his balding scalp. 'Eh. They'd come up with most of it on their own. Not sure the captain'll thank me for aiding and abetting though. But if he thinks he can steer those kids into safe life choices, he's in for a nasty shock. Blood will tell. It always does.'

'He'd never stop them from pursuing their own dreams.'
This soft statement came from Mimay, who'd glided up behind them unnoticed. She gave Daiba a smile and a nod of recognition. 'There are no safe choices when you are born with a target on your back. He knows this.'

'Doesn't mean he can't try.' Yattaran muttered. 'Walking away and letting your kids be raised by strangers didn't exactly work for the last captain, did it?'

Mimay bowed her head sadly, but made no reply.

Daiba watched quietly as Harlock gently guided his excitable brood back towards his quarters, and allowed Yattaran to point him in the direction of the commissary. Watching the impromptu family moment reminded him sharply of his own father. Too old to really take an active role with him, he had tried his best. Both his parents had, and their loss came hammering at him by the time he sat down with a plate full of Anita's cooking, costing him most of his appetite. He picked at his food, poking it with a fork and just pushing it around on his plate. Yattaran had grabbed a takeout box and vanished, and he could hear Anita busy clattering dishes in the kitchen.

A ship full of people, and here he was just sitting on his own. He realised with his newfound clarity he envied the brothers and their little sister. For all the dangers and losses in their lives, they still had their parents, each other. Friends abounded. He'd been the one with the supposedly safe life, parents not running from the authorities, in what should have been safe careers. No wonder Harlock freaked out over protecting his kids and others in his care. If the one who should have been safe had gone through hell, what did that say about his kids' chances?

Yet he and Kei had left them behind, if not unprotected, to go after him. They'd never given up...

Crap. He'd never be able to explain to the guy how damn sorry he was he'd acted like a total twat in return... but he could at least make it count for something.

Despite the fact his lunch had cooled to a barely edible tepid mass, he shoveled it down manfully. Just great... another reason to want to blast a few vegetables into blue-flaming flambe.

Maybe he'd finally get the chance for some decent payback in a few days.
Chapter 7

The insistent alarm echoed in his already pounding head, accompanied by Ali's bellowing 'all hands to battlestations. Repeat: unknown battleship approaching. All hands to battlestations. That means five minutes ago you lazy turds, not when you bloody well feel like it.'

Daiba stared bleary eyed at the timer on his bedside table, and rapidly wished he hadn't. The ship kept Earth standard time by long tradition, and by that, it was four in the fornicating morning. He let himself flop back onto the bed with a groan, wondering if he actually counted as 'all hands' yet, or was still the captain's annoying bratty relative.

The answer came as someone banged on the door with no regard for his delicate condition, and Meg's strident shriek told him in no uncertain tone to get his lazy, hungover arse out of bed.

He rolled over and pulled the pillow over his head.

It was unceremoniously pulled away by the same hands that tried to push him out of bed.

Bad move for the perpetrator, as four years of living on streets and sleeping lightly to react to unwanted attempts at robbery, rape, murder or all three had made him a dangerous person to shake awake. He had his hands wrapped around a small throat, straddling a body much smaller than his on the floor before he had time to think it through.

Larger hands grabbed him and yanked him away from a choking Meg. Also a mistake because he turned into a clawing, wriggling dervish, desperate to get free from his captor. At least until the guy got an arm around his throat and choked him into submission.

'Ease up, kid. This isn't the streets.'

Belatedly, he recognised Rick's voice, and forced himself to calm down. He was still trying to get his breath back after the man had released him. Meg had scuttled for the doorway, looking as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

'You really are a grade A whack-job!' She accused. He didn't look up, wishing he still had his hair to cover his expression.

'Lighten up, Meg,' Rick snapped at her. 'You should know better than to wake most people up on this ship like that, let alone someone who's been through the wringer recently. Even Kei would take your damn fool head off. Now get to your position, and leave me to clean up your mess.'

The girl flounced off in a huff, not bothering with an apology. A little less shaky, Daiba finally looked Rick in the eye. The one-armed former pilot just gave him a hand up. 'She can be a pain, but she isn't malicious as much as just a bit unthinking. Sorry about the chokehold, but you'd have regretted throttling the little cow one day.'

'No. I get it. Thanks. Maybe I should have put a 'do not disturb' sign up as a warning?'

Rick laughed and handed him a sweater. 'Nah. There's a few jokers on board who'd still try it on just to get a reaction. Most of the crew are okay in a fight, but one or two lack people skills. For real, that is, not like Ali's bullshit turn as thick goon. You're the new kid, you might as well resign yourself to some hazing. They'll want to know you can be relied on in a fight.'

The alarm was still ringing, then abruptly cut off. 'About that... was I supposed to join you guys?'
'That would be the captain's call, and he hasn't said anything yet. Play it safe though - get your skinny arse up to the bridge regardless.' He headed for the door and paused in the opening. 'Especially when you're nursing a hangover. Sheesh, you look almost as bad as Zack does - what the hell were you two celebrating last night?'

'My birthday,' he muttered, straightening his sweater then yanking his boots on. 'He and the OT found out and decided it was worth some recognition.' He grinned nastily as he remembered the state the Other Tadashi had been in when they'd staggered back to Selen's place to drop him off. On the other hand Zack hadn't looked much better...

He arrived on the bridge a step or two behind Rick, to find everyone at their posts apart from the captain, noticeably not behind the wheel. Meg was manning Kei's usual station, and Zack, looking a little flustered, was behind Yattaran's, with the big guy lurking behind him.

A large battleship loomed in front of them, almost filling the window. Niobe, at one of the comms stations was chewing her lip and looking nervous. Most of the crew however just looked a little put out.

'Okay... who was on watch and called this?' Ali asked. 'Come on ladies, fess up! I don't like looking like a total prat calling this one...'

Zack raised a hand slowly. The crew broke out into whoops and jeers, and he blushed red. Daiba smirked at him. 'Really, Freckles? You yanked the fire alarm?'

'I didn't recognise the ship. It's new...'

'Or you had a bit too much last night and are almost as hungover as Daiba here,' Yattaran sniggered.

He had to make a reply to that slur. 'Not hungover so much as bugger all sleep due to the two people in the next room - and I should point out the walls between cabins are bloody thin - shagging very noisily from about midnight to two in the bloody morning.' He made sure to give Zack the meaningful stare as he spoke, gratified to see him turn even brighter, his blushes only slightly eclipsed by Niobe's. 'Though I did practically piss myself laughing when they fell out of bed...'

'Twice...' Ali added. 'I was on the other side.'

'You bastards!' Zack sounded aggrieved and embarrassed. 'And keep it down, it's not as if the capt... he stopped, taking in all the grinning faces around him. He gulped. Hard. 'He's behind me, isn't he?'

As if to punctuate this, Harlock's gloved hand wafted past the back of his head, not to slap, but it did ruffle his hair. 'With my ward, Zachariah?'

'Erm... I... we were going to... that is...'

Harlock left him stuttering and strode past him to take the helm in a firm grip. 'As long as the pair of you keep doing your jobs, I'll just let your mother deal with you. I'm sure there's a lecture in responsibility and precautions I'd rather not have to deliver for at least another ten years... But would you care to tell me why you caused a full blown panic about an incoming warship that's actually a friendly?'

'But I didn't know that!' Zack was on the defensive now. Daiba had the feeling Zack would rather
face being chewed out by Harlock than get *The Talk* from his mother... Judging from the equally stressed look Niobe was giving the deliberately oblivious Harlock, she felt the same way.

Harlock raised his hand to forestall any further excuses. 'The Arcadia wasn't reacting, that should have been your first clue. The second was that they've been broadcasting since they came out of IN-SKIP, and no-one thought to check? According to the central computer, you hadn't even run a sweep before calling the alarm. Ali, Yattaran. Both of you will drill the crew on this watch until they learn to take a little more care before getting us all out of bed. Especially when they're fogged from a night on the damn tiles, which the two of you should have damn well realised and arranged alternates for. For fuck's sake, get it together. I shouldn't need to be giving this lecture. You're getting sloppy without Kei riding you. Pick up the damn slack!'

He turned to Meg. 'Open a channel to Admiral Oki.'

The hologram projector buzzed into life, showing a tall man in his thirties, in SDF blues. A perfect complement to his collar length hair.

'Blue?' Daiba's mouth was open and off before he thought to rein it in. The woman behind the admiral even had green hair... he shot a puzzled look at Harlock, intercepted by Ali.

'Aquatics,' the pirate muttered sotto voce. 'Don't stare, it's rude.'

'Really. *You're* calling *me* out on *my* manners?'

Ali shushed him with a glare.

'Harlock, it's been a while.' There was a strange reverb in the guy's voice. Through water?

'Not long enough you soggy, sorry excuse. What's with the new ship? Mid-life crisis?'

'Sayeth the man standing behind the wheel of the ultimate in compensatory cock-rockets,' the officer shot back, with a grin. 'We got your message. I thought I'd deliver in person.'

'Not like you to play errand boy now you've moved up in the ranks, Rokuro. I take it there's more you want to discuss?'

'Not on an open channel, Harlock. Willing to let me dock?'

'Run a line over, Yattaran will guide you to an airlock. I'll meet you there.'

With a nod, the admiral cut the connection. Harlock sighed. 'I knew I should have talked Kei into coming. She gets on better with these guys.'

'Anchor tube locked, he's coming over. Want an escort?' Yattaran asked. Harlock shook his head, then seemed to think better of it.

'Ali, you might as well, this might interest you... and Daiba.'

Daiba looked up startled. 'Me? But...'

'Time to get your feet wet,' Harlock grinned and slapped him on the shoulder. 'In more ways than one. But keep quiet, and watch for now. Rokuro's one of the good guys, but... well. Things can change. Oh, and before I forget, happy birthday.' He tugged something out from inside his jacket and handed it over. A gunbelt wrapped around the same style of gun he carried, only a little less ornate.
'Thanks. I...'

'Later, I'd better teach you how to shoot the damn thing properly. Assuming you don't mind taking lessons from someone with bugger all depth perception?'

Daiba shook his head.

'Good. Now keep up.'

Despite Harlock's warning, Rokuro Oki turned out to be a likeable guy, all things considered. From the banter between him, Ali and Harlock, these men obviously went back a long way. Sitting off to one side and trying not to be too irritated by some of the digressions from what he considered to be the important issues, he listened in.

'Word is Doppler has them. One of the SPG agents reported seeing the remains of both the Prometheus and the Pandora, being cannibalised for parts. But he has hundreds of people in those damn masks. Pilots, engineers, scientists and experts he's kidnapped. A lot of guys Hank or Dan's build. Impossible to know for sure. Even if we did find them and bring them back...'

'They'd be crucified in the press even if they weren't court-martialed...' Harlock finished for him. 'As it is, Professor Oedo had to take Takuma Ichimonji and Lisa Douglas off to Jasdam, after those cadets half-killed Takuma. A lot of bad blood over the Prometheus Incident, and a lot of young men and women who had parents or relatives serving on those ships'

'It's a fucking crock, is what it is,' Ali growled. 'That pointy-eared bastard had to be behind the slaughter. No way in hell Danny boy or Hank would have committed an atrocity like that. We all know that rat Hechi has been playing around with mind control for decades.'

'Proving it's not easy though,' Oki pointed out. 'Dr. Jones, I remember you yourself have said more than once they're Teflon coated. Nothing sticks. To his people, Doppler's a hero. They love him, and he can do no wrong in their eyes.'

'One of these days, I'm gonna have to deal with that piece of shit once and for all...' Ali snarled, his hands curling into fists.

Harlock laid a hand on his shoulder. 'You know I'll support you if you decide to go, Ali. You've had this hanging over you for years.'

The pirate nodded his acknowledgement, and Harlock turned his attention back to Oki. 'The other matter we asked about... did your archivist have any luck?'

Oki nodded. 'You were right. We did stay out of the Homecoming War, for obvious reasons - our people left Earth centuries before the rest of you. There was nothing left for us to go back to - the Oceans had been poisoned by the late Twentieth Century, and were a fraction of their depth by the time of the Homeward Movement. We sat it out, and went mostly undetected, so yes, our records go back to before that time by a considerable margin.

Your instincts were right - the Movement followed on very quickly from the terraforming failures. We didn't tend to concern ourselves with air-dwellers' affairs back then, but we always watched. Did it seem a bit too well-organised for a spontaneous movement? Hard to say. Conspiracies are hard to prove when ignorance and stupidity can achieve much the same effect with far less effort.' He paused, a thoughtful frown on his face. 'What worries me is that the moment the archivist researching this for you began looking at records from before our diaspora, he was the victim of a freak accident. The dome he was working in collapsed, ostensibly due to a structural defect, and
given the age of the section, that's as plausible as anything else...'

Harlock stood up, walked to the massive window that dominated his quarters and folded his arms across his chest, staring out at the roiling, ink black cloud that flashed occasionally with lightning. 'I'm not a big believer in coincidence,' he muttered. 'Too many people have a distressing tendency to die when they start to dig into this.'

Oki shifted in his seat. 'You asked about old tales... stories that might feature women, or creatures that pass for such... There are legends - fairy tales told to children, that tell of strange, unearthly women who would wrap men up in long hair and drag them to drown in the depths of the sea. Land-dwellers used to tell of mermaids, and blame it on our people, but there were areas of Earth's oceans no one of us would go. Strange whirlpools and maelstroms; areas where strange forests of seaweeds would gather for miles, forming a no-go area for our vessels, or where men would venture to hunt, and never return.'

'We have similar stories,' Daiba spoke up, stepping forward. Harlock turned to stare at him and he shuffled awkwardly, until he noticed he was being nodded to to continue. 'My father was an anthropologist and archaeologist, and he was fascinated by old Earth legends and the way different cultures had so many similarities. He used to study the old works on comparative mythology, and one constant was a fear of strange, otherworldly, beautiful, deadly women who would lure men to their deaths. Rhinemaidens, sirens, enchantresses... shapechangers... tree and water nymphs... he said a lot of scholars started to attribute them to some kind of male fear of women, a psychological hangover from prehistory. But he believed they might have been relics of something more concrete, especially once he discovered that humans - surface dwellers - weren't the only race on Earth. It fascinated him.'

'Les belles dames sans merci...' Harlock murmured. He smiled at Daiba, albeit a little grimly. 'I paid attention to his stories as well, as a kid.

And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake...'

'And no birds sing...,' Daiba finished for him, with a shiver. 'Yeah. He had a lot of those. Said you could find as much truth in literature as in history, if you just looked at it in the right frame of mind.' He stared into Harlock's single hazel eye. 'I think he was right. And I believe he died for it, Yama.'

The use of his cousin's old name was a slip; he wasn't sure if it was why he got a sharp look, but Harlock said nothing about it, just turned his attention back to Oki.

'It might be better if you don't ask your people to dig any deeper, Rokuro. Something or someone doesn't seem to like anyone asking certain questions.'

The aquatic shook his head. 'If there is some kind of ancient menace from Earth out here, it doesn't seem to discriminate between our species. But I will ask them to be discreet. It seems a bit of a stretch though that folklore could transmit memories and tales of such things over millennia...'

Ali interrupted him. 'Or, you know, maybe we men really do have an inbuilt phobia about sticking our cocks into dark, warm, moist, slimy places and getting them bitten off...?'

Daiba and the other two just stared at him in disbelief. 'What?'
Harlock just shook his head and sighed, but Daiba saw him fighting to bite back a grin. 'Ali, I'm trying desperately to wonder how anyone could possibly make that sound worse, but I'm failing...'

'It's kinda grishly...' Daiba muttered. At the looks from Harlock and Ali he just shrugged. 'Not all the way through, despite what that orderly told you. And the bastard had it coming.'

Ali chuckled. 'Aaand we have a winner,' he said gleefully, as his captain winced.

Oki just sighed. 'Airdwellers...'

After Oki and the Poseidon had taken their leave, Ali left Daiba alone with Harlock in the captain's quarters. Daiba felt the distinctive shudder as the ship entered IN-SKIP, and the clouds that obscured the view from the captain's window flickered with red lightning as the dark matter increased around the ship. To one side the extra large bed was occupied by one small ginger tabby curled up next to a slightly larger tortiseshell and the captain's weird black bird. One snap of that long beak could have taken out either cat, but the three were curled around each other, the cats purring loudly.

Harlock spoke first. 'I didn't realise you had the same suspicion about your father's death.'

'I didn't, at first. It happened on Niflheim, and we thought he just had a heart attack. It was all so sudden, and we shipped out for Mistral quite soon after.' He perched on the edge of the enormous ornate desk, and watched Harlock prowl across the room, until he stood in front of him. 'It wasn't until the third burglary I started to dig into what he'd been working on that it started falling into place.' He stared over Harlock's shoulder. 'Mum thought it was just coincidence. That's why she never... she never...' he had to take a steadying breath. 'She wouldn't call you. I wanted her to. If I'd pushed, or gone behind her back, maybe...'

'You were fourteen, Tadashi. No-one expected you to shoulder a man's role.' Harlock told him softly.

'I did.' Daiba replied bluntly. 'What the hell has age got to do with it? I know some guys older than me I wouldn't trust to fasten their hardsuits without help, and let's face it, Isora wasn't much older when your parents died and he had to step up...'

'I would not,' Harlock interrupted, still in that quiet tone, 'ever use my brother as an example for why you should be allowed or expected to do anything.' He reached for a bottle on the desk and poured a measure, knocking it back in a smooth motion. Probably a useless gesture, Daiba realised, given that he'd had it on good authority he couldn't actually get drunk.

As if reading his thought, Harlock grinned ruefully. 'Yeah. It sucks. Especially when it also means most pharmaceuticals don't work for long either. Doc usually has to drink for both of us if I ever need patching up...'

Shuddering inwardly at the thought of being operated on without anaesthetic. .. yeah. Daiba could see why Doc might hit the bottle to take a knife to a patient... With an effort he pushed the conversation back on track. 'Dad had been looking into some of the old archives and artifacts on Niflheim. Especially regarding their legends. But I was only eleven at the time. He didn't discuss his work much, even with Mum - and she was more interested in their ecology, and how it bounced back after the dark matter incident...' He stared out of the window, wondering if there were patterns in the lightning... 'I've got no idea what he found. His records aren't as well organised as mum's... he tended to flit between stuff as he found links, no real order to it. Not one for writing it down either...'
'I remember. Always said he liked to keep it in his head until he was ready,' Harlock said sadly. 'Which doesn't help us much now.' He sat down in the high backed chair behind the desk, and leaned back in it casually. 'Keep digging. If anyone can make sense of what he was working on, it's you. You know how he worked, and might remember more when prompted.'

'Is that to be my job around here? Desk jockey?' Daiba tried not to sound bitter.

'You still need to get well. I would not send you into a scrap the state you're in right now. Nor are you fit enough to fly solo. I know you want revenge, but right now you're more a danger to yourself than to your enemies. If it's a change if scenery you want, come with me down to the surface of Tokarga. Caustic winds, active volcanoes, lava plumes, giant space worms...'

In spite of everything, Daiba had to smile. 'You'd have made a lousy salesman, you know?'

'Really? Because I'm pretty sure you'll be on board when I fly down...'

'A little less throttle, kid,' Ali told him as the little craft bucked on entering the atmosphere. 'Keep er level. I haven't seen the captain this close to tossing his cookies since Kei was teaching him to fly the Space Wolf...'

Daiba looked behind to see how true this was, but Harlock looked relaxed enough to his eyes. His visible eye was shut, and he lounged in his flightseat with his long legs stretched out, pristine white leathers tucked into his battered boots. 'He looks fine to me.'

Ali wafted the back of his head. 'Eyes on the road, rookie!' He barked. Flushing, Daiba concentrated again on flying the bullet, and following Ali's instructions, as they headed for the coordinates agreed earlier. A flat area at the foot of a shallow canyon, half a world away from the point where more than twelve years ago, Harlock's career had almost ended in a fiery grave. Saved by the same man he'd been sent to kill. The stories he heard from Ali and Yattaran about those times made his head swim. It was hard to picture his then mild-mannered cousin as an assassin... but then again, that was probably the whole point.

'Where do you want me to set her down?' He asked.

'Anywhere that isn't a mudaud,' Harlock muttered from behind his left ear.

'Blow it out yer ear, cap'n. If I hear one more crack about that fucking space worm...' Ali snarled. 'Two klicks north east should do it. The sensors detect a fair concentration of those walking cabbages over there. This area's not too active tectonically, but the atmosphere's still corrosive. We snag and bag and get the hell out.'

Daiba set the bullet down with only a slight bump, and ran an interested eye over the instrument panel. 'Why the hell did anyone think this planet could be colonised?' He asked, as Harlock handed him a full face respirator. 'It's highly volcanic, tectonically unstable, and the atmosphere is a toxic soup.'

'Colony is a bit of a stretch,' Ali told him. 'It was a research outpost. The conditions are supposed to be close to Earth in its formative era. They figured they could just speed up the process, maybe get some insight into how atmospheric and geological changes can synergise..'

'They screwed up,' Harlock continued, as they prepped for leaving the craft. He double checked Daiba's suit seals and mask. 'Someone didn't realise the planet's orbit periodically fluctuates to bring it closer to its nearest neighbour, which increases the stresses in the continental plates. It entered a period of intense tectonic activity and associated vulcanism. At least according to my
'You can still see the remnants of the domes here and there. Probably the only stuff that doesn't just melt.'

'If the atmosphere's that caustic, why don't those plants melt?' Daiba asked as they entered the airlock.

'Bloody good question, and one I'd like the answer to myself.' Harlock clicked his rebreather into place. Ready?'

With a clear blue sky above, it was hard to remember the planet's atmosphere was toxic. Daiba wandered behind Harlock and Ali staring at the scenery with mild interest, unlike the two older men who both seemed to find plenty to interest them - Ali busy taking soil and rock samples, and Harlock peering at anything even remotely green, occasionally snipping something into a sample bag.

The green sward under their feet drew his attention. Patches of a spongy green moss shot through with red littered the canyon floor. He knelt down to take a closer look, fascinated by the waving cilia which uncurled into the air, as if questing for something.

Given how barren the rest of the area looked, he wondered what they fed on. Harlock and Ali had wandered several hundred yards by now, and he didn't feel like calling them back to ask what was probably a pointless question.

A tiny chittering noise just on the edge of his hearing distracted him, and he searched for the source, finally spotting a tiny four limbed creature bouncing on oddly articulated joints on a nearby rock.

Small blue-green leaves sprouted from what looked vaguely like a head and neck - a deep turquoise shading to pale tips. The 'tail' was a small reddish thornlike structure. If anything, he mused that the critter looked a little like a tiny centaur. As he watched its acrobatics, it was joined by several more, and he looked on in fascination as they bounced along, climbing the rocks by taking tiny toeholds and sinking tendrils into narrow cracks. One approached closer and he held his hand out, wondering if it could sense him. To his surprise, it moved towards him, still chittering. Before it could placed one outstretched leg onto his hand, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, startling him and in turn causing the tiny centaur plants to bolt for cover.

He managed to avoid striking out at Harlock, whose hand it had been. 'Damn it, don't sneak up on me like that!'

'You shouldn't touch anything unless you know it's safe. We've still no idea what those things are or what they eat. And I just found out the hard way that little thorny growth can pierce my leathers. Thankfully that's all it touched.'

'You think they're poisonous?'

'The word you're looking for would be venomous. Though I wouldn't recommend eating them either. Come on - the Arcadia shows a storm heading this way, and given the direction, it's probably carrying fallout from one of those corrosive plumes. I'd rather not risk the hull integrity of the bullet.'

Daiba looked in the direction Harlock was pointing, to see the sky already darkening. Harlock gave him a little shove towards the low slung craft, where Ali could be seen hovering nervously in the
'We need to get out of here pronto,' Ali told them once the airlock had finished cycling clean air and the inner doors opened. He and Harlock took off for the cockpit hastily, Daiba trotting along behind and this time taking the seat behind the co-pilot's. Ali's cropped blond head blocked his view through the screen, but it made no difference, as darkness had shrouded the craft completely. He could hear the hull being peppered by either gravel or hail - hard to tell which, but the staccato rattling caused him to flinch, wondering if the storm would compromise the hull or not before they could get airborne.

Under the constant tip-tapping, Daiba began to notice a rather different sound - a creaking, metallic stress. 'Erm...captain? Ali? You hear that?'

'Hear wh-' Ali began, only to shut up mid sentence as Harlock raised a hand.

'That's the hull...' he said quietly. Ali swore under his breath.

'I'll check it out,' he told Harlock. 'Don't like the sound of that.'

With no orders one way or the other, Daiba decided to follow him to the airlock. 'What could possibly put pressure on the hull? The wind isn't that strong, and that wasn't corrosive, was it?'

'Dunno kid, which is why since you so kindly volunteered your services, you get to stick your head out the airlock and look,' Ali told him with an evil grin. Daiba snatched the proffered helmet out if his hands and fixed it in place.

'I get hazard pay, right?'

Ali smacked him on the back of his shoulder. 'Course you do. Now take a look.'

The airlock slid open, and he cautiously stuck his head out, peering through the dust storm that battered his faceplate with debris. Visibility was poor, so he turned on the small torch he carried on his belt, and turned his attention to the hull, peering through the gloom.

The small ship was covered by green tendrils and vines, shit through with red streaks. They writhed in the light cast by his torch, and wriggled towards him like some time lapse footage of a vine growing in real time. With an unmanly shriek, he pulled his head back into the airlock and fumbled for the hatch control.

'What's with the girly screams, kid?' Ali asked over the intercom.

'That stuff outside - the moss? It's not moss and it's all over the hull!' He yelled, still fumbling with the controls. 'Shitshitshit... it won't close!' Several tendrils were already snaking their way into the airlock, and one twined itself around his ankle. Panicking, he abandoned his attempts to shut the door and fumbled for his new gun instead, drawing it awkwardly. He fired wildly at the vines writhing near his foot, narrowly missing his boot in the process, and the bolt ricocheted off the decking, fortunately in the direction of the open hatch.

'Calm the fuck down and stop shooting inside the bloody ship!' Ali yelled over the comms. 'Get that fucking hatch shut!'

'You fucking try it!' He yelled back. 'This stuff's all over me! He fired again, this time aiming out if the hatchway and onto the ground outside. The vine around his leg withdrew, accompanied by a horribly familiar screaming sound that was as much inside his head as his ears. With the breathing space granted by it backing off, he managed to finally get the hatch to close, and sank to the floor...
as the air recycled back into the airlock. He stumbled back into the hold without waiting for the inner door to open fully. 'Shooting the vines did fuck all, but I think if you use the vertical jets, that might scorch the mass they come from. The one holding me let go when I shot outside...' he gasped, yanking his helmet off.

'You get that?' Ali yelled towards the cockpit.

'On it. We'll use the maneuvering jets to burn the area around us for good measure. Ali - get your ass back up here and get us ready to fly the moment we're clear. Daiba, strap in, this could get bumpy...' Harlock called back.

Daiba followed instructions, but the ominous creaking from the hull still made him jumpy. 'What if the hull is already compromised?' He called out nervously.

'It's at ninety percent,' Harlock replied calmly. 'And the Arcadia is already heading down to meet us.'

'Oh.' So that's all right then... he thought more than a little sarcastically. Then the penny dropped. 'On the way? So you're planning on going in hot?'

'What's the matter kid, never made a rush landing inside a moving ship before?' Ali smirked.

'Not that I remember, no.' He snapped back. His hand gripped the arms of the acceleration chair tightly. The creaking noises seemed to get louder - or was that just an overactive imagination?

'Captain...' Ali's voice held a warning note now it hadn't had a few minutes earlier.

'I know, I know... I just gave it a full burn and we aren't moving!' The craft rocked awkwardly as he spoke, adding an unwelcome emphasis to his words. 'Shit. As soon as I get rid of one patch, another takes its place. Where the fuck is this stuff coming from?' Harlock stood up and left the cockpit, grabbing his sabre rifle from where it rested next to his seat as his made his way aft, past Daiba. 'Ali - take the controls. I need to take a closer look at this 'moss'. No plant should be strong enough to hold us like this...'

Ali looked as though he was about to step forward and object. In the end he held his ground. 'You can't just walk out into that storm, captain. You'll be cut to ribbons. You didn't bring a hardsuit...'

'No, but I did pack this.' Harlock held up a battered black leather cloak, lined in red. It had seen better days, showing marks from long use, torn and frayed at the foot, scuffed, scarred and charred in others. With a practiced ease he swung it onto his shoulders and fastened it in front, carefully adjusting the high collar - a vain gesture, Daiba first through, until he noticed that it neatly plugged some esoteric circuitry into the studs at the neck of his jacket.

'Kei will fucking kill me if she finds out about this, you do know that?' The big pirate said bluntly. Harlock just patted him on the shoulder.

'Only if I don't make it back.'

He grabbed his rebreather and headed for the airlock.

'Yeah... real comforting,' Ali didn't look at all happy, a man backed into a corner. He took the pilot's seat, muttering under his breath.

As the airlock cycled shut, Daiba took the seat next to him.
'You're not gonna stop him?'

Ali sighed. 'Kid - you got two choices when he decides to do something - do as you're told - and stay the hell out of his way. Coz one thing I've learned the hard way - stopping him ain't usually an option. So sit back and relax. Nothing we can do until he gets back. Or calls for us. Worries aside, he does usually knows what he's doing. Mostly. Sometimes.'

But his eyes stayed fixed on the monitors and the comms panel, occasionally flicking to the inner airlock door.

Outside the small craft, visibility was down virtually to the tip of his extended sabre. The landing lights on the bullet didn't extend that much further, and were lost in the violent sandstorm. Harlock took a couple of tentative strides away from the bullet, thankful for the gravity-warping cloak - on a low setting, it acted as a makeshift shield, providing just enough of a diversion to keep the contents of the heavy winds from sandblasting him.

Underfoot the ground felt spongy, as though sodden, even though it quite obviously supported the bullet's not inconsiderable weight. He ducked under the fuselage to take a closer look at the supporting landing gear, on a hunch, and cursed under his breath when he saw that all four were embedded half way to the body of the vehicle in the mossy ground. 'Seriously,' Harlock muttered to himself, 'what was I thinking coming back to this dump? Bloody planet must see me coming...'

He moved his head so that the helmet light shone onto the ground, in order to take a closer look. Almost immediately he had to scuttle backwards and try to avoid hitting his head on the underside of the vehicle, as a writhing swarm of tentacles wriggled their way out of the mass and headed straight for him. He looked up and over the bullet, to where more of these 'vines' had swarmed, and swore softly. They almost completely enveloped the craft now, and more spread over it as he watched. On a hunch, he aimed the sabre at a clump and fired. The vines - for lack of a better term - writhed away from the blast and shriveled, but more quickly took their place.

And if he wasn't mistaken, there was a high-pitched screaming sound, similar to the one he'd heard back on Hakidame...

A shaking in the ground alerted him to a new danger, and he tried to peer through the storm. Occasional glimpses of something heading for them... a herd, perhaps? Flashes in between gusts of something - things - very large and not stopping.

'Oh shit...' As quickly as he could, he headed back for the airlock, yelling on the comms for Ali. Even as the hatch shut behind him, he bellowed instructions, not waiting for the inner door to open. 'Tell Yattaran to get Mimay to aim the dark matter array at our co-ordinates. No, I'm not fucking joking. Shoot now, dammit, and be ready to haul ass out of here!'

He threw the rebreather into a corner as he exited the airlock, moving as fast as he could for the cockpit, heedlessly shoving his young cousin out of the way without an apology as the youth tried to move to let him past.

There wasn't even time to buckle in, as the ship bucked and heaved under thrust, and outside the cockpit window, dusty crepuscular gloom turned to an unnatural lightning-torn night.
Chapter 8

'Captain?' Ali gave Harlock a puzzled frown as he prepared for lift off. 'What the hell was out there? Not often you run in with your boxers in a bunch...'

Harlock was busy with the controls, trying to balance enough power to the engines to keep them ready to spring free the moment they had any give in whatever held them, and at the same time avoid putting too much stress on the ship. Whilst this this didn't appear to Daiba's inexpert eyes to involve much more than holding onto the throttle, sweat beaded his forehead. 'You know those little dancing plants? Think bigger.'

Daiba sneaked a look over his shoulder to where their samples were stashed. One little centaur was curled up in the back of a clear specimen case, looking dejected. Or wilted. 'How big is big?'

The bullet rocked as something smashed into it. 'About that big... and it wasn't alone... Yattaran, Mimay, in your own time... I wouldn't want to rush anyone!' Harlock yelled into the comms.

'You want me to blow the bullet, fine. You want to make it back here, quit yer bitchin' cap'n and let Lady Blue here do her job!' Yattaran's somewhat tetchy voice bellowed back. 'Hold onto yer underwear boys, firing in 5...4...3...2...1...'

'Tracking...' Ali called out. 'Harlock... dark matter incoming... 2..1...'

The take off was far from smooth. Even as the dust storm was blotted out by a cloud of darkness shot through with red lightening. The bullet sprang free from the choking hold of the vines like a racehorse from a starting gate, and even with the compensators at full, all three men were pressed back into their seats.

It must have been his imagination, but Daiba could have sworn he heard a scream of rage as the bullet lifted free of the planet, racing through the darkened skies towards a patch of darkness that made even space seem like a dim twilight. He flinched as they darted headlong into that pulsating cloud, as though expecting to collide with a physical barrier.

Then twin stars of red and orange appeared, lighting their way towards the open rear hangar of the Arcadia, and they came screaming in for a landing, Harlock somehow managing to dump velocity at the same time he brought the ship down to the decking. Despite external and internal dampeners, the sudden stop was not kind to the men on board. Daiba struggled to breath, his chest feeling as though someone was sitting on it. He panicked, trying to free himself from the safety webbing, gasping for breath.

A large hand lifted his ineffectual fingers from the buckle, and activated the quick release for him. He sank to his knees in front of the acceleration chair, whilst someone - Ali, he realised eventually, had a reassuring hand on his back.

'C'mon, kid, breathe...'

A pithy comeback to the peppy encouragement was on the tip of his tongue when he bent over again and threw up all over Ali's calf high boots.

'Awww man!' The burly pirate scuttled back trying desperately not to heave his own lunch up.'What is it with people's piloting...? The old captain, Kei, you...'

'Help him up, Ali, and quit bitching. Meg and Zack can testify to your skills in the vomit comet.'
And it's not like you didn't have your eyes closed when we landed, either, you big girl's blouse...' Harlock gave the woebegone Daiba a gentle slap on the back. 'Get yourself cleaned up, then get to the bridge. Both of you. Get someone to take the samples down to the labs for now.'

After Harlock had almost bounced out as though rubbing in the fact that it wasn't his stomach that was protesting at the violent landing, Daiba raised his head cautiously, anxious not to lose what was left of his stomach contents along with what little dignity he had remaining. Especially with the sour smell he'd already deposited on the floor. Ali helped him to his feet with a rough tug on his arm.

'Up 'n' at 'em, kiddo. The way yer lookin' right now, guess makin' you clear this and my boots up wouldn't do much good. Grab some poor sod from the deck, then get cleaned up,' he said roughly.

'But...'

'Ah, don't sweat it. Everyone gets a chance to blow chunks at some point. The old captain flew like a fuckin' maniac, and it was a rare flight I didn't scream for momma when I was in the co-pilot's seat with him. He taught Kei, and it took her a few flights to learn to hold her cookies. She taught Harlock, and man, you should have seen the mess he made the first time she took him out in one of the fighters... Hoo boy, he was holding onto the wall like it was his new best friend, in between heaving up everything he'd eaten for two days...'

'Ali,' Daiba said between clenched teeth as the pirate gave him a friendly shove in the direction of the landing bay, 'do you ever shut the ever-loving-fuck up?'

'Course not,' the pirate sniggered. 'Where would be the fun in that?'

Through the bridge window, the crew checked out the swathe cut by the dark matter emitter as the Arcadia made another pass over the landing site, the image magnified considerably on the screen.

'Warning,' Zack smirked, 'objects in our forward viewscreen may appear closer than they are...'

'Oi, we'll crack the jokes, Freckles!' Yattaran clipped the back of the young man's head. Zack ducked the friendly blow and laughed.

'Hey - who had Ali down to screw up the landing?' Cai called out mischievously. He ducked a friendly punch from Ali with a grin, dancing out of range gracefully.

'Everyone, I think!' This from a grinning Niobe over on one of the ECM consoles next to Ali's station.

'If you think I wouldn't hit a girl, Nibby, think again,' he growled at her. She smiled at him, dimpling prettily. Daiba had to admit, Zack had taste... she was attractive. A quiet girl, and an obvious favourite with the crew, most of whom treated her like a surrogate daughter - unlike the pricklier Meg, who brushed off any show of affection with a scowl that could rival Ali's at times.

'The good news is the new containment field Yattaran and Tochiro cooked up worked,' Ali called up from his post. 'Showing no major damage to the planet. The strike was spot on. Surface damage only, just as ordered.'

Daiba took a step closer to the screen, taking a closer look. Sure enough, you could even see the mostly protected spot where the bullet had rested, still showing signs of vegetation. 'Is it me, or is that stuff regenerating?' He turned to stare up to the command bridge, where Harlock stood at the front of the gantry directly over the skull decor, arms folded. In the gravity cloak, he looked
somehow larger, more menacing, his single visible eye staring intently at the screen.

'Daiba's right,' Meg called out. The small girl moved away from Kei’s console to stand beside her captain, a wispy figure in pink and white. Girl. Huh. Daiba had learned she was only six months or so younger than he was... but she acted so damn young... at least off-duty. The whole pink and white thing didn't help either, though personally he'd have put her in black and yellow.

Stripes.

'There is a real-time, measurable increase in the biomass. Whatever that stuff is, it recovers almost as fast as we do. The dark matter is already reduced by twenty percent since I took the first reading an hour ago.'

'Just like on Niflheim, right, Harlock?' Daiba asked. 'Mom's data...'

Harlock stared down at him. 'I remember. She had a theory that the vegetation on Niflheim was somehow responsible for cleansing the planet. And like here, the stuff was similar to lichens or mosses, but capable of forming much larger structures than terrestrial counterparts. But that stuff down there can't be the moss we saw on Niflheim.'

'No water.' Daiba finished for him. 'Mosses need water to reproduce.'

'They need a solvent,' Ali corrected him. 'Moss-like don't mean exactly like. Water works for most worlds, because it's common to most life. It ain't the only option. Hell, they could use the winds, sulphurous acid rain... as long as x meets y, life goes on.' He smirked again. 'Guess they like it slippery as well..' He ducked as a well worn brown leather glove, balled up, was thrown at his head. 'Missed me!' He called up to his captain.

'Not when I get you on the mat, you greying rockhound.'

'Awww... Harlock... I thought you'd never ask me out...'

Harlock just sighed, and flipped Ali the bird, to grins and laughter from the crew. 'Give me my bloody glove back, Ali, and meet me down in the lab. Get Doc to meet us there. Yattaran - set course for home.' With a practiced sweep to throw the heavy cloak out of his way, he turned and walked away.

Daiba grabbed the glove before Ali could reach it, and sprinted around the comms suite to meet Harlock at the foot of the upper bridge stairs. He handed it to him without a word, and fell into step at his side. 'What is it with you people? Don't you take anything seriously?'

'You'd rather serve on a military ship?' Harlock asked, without breaking stride. He pulled on his glove, folding it back at the cuff. 'You'd hate it, trust me. Like me you don't have the temperament.'

A rushing sound was the only warning Daiba had before something flew over his head and landed on Harlock's shoulder. The strange black bird dug its talons into the shoulder of the cloak, causing his perch to grunt slightly, then shove its head against its master's ear, as though begging for attention. Harlock obliged by reaching up to rub the beady-eyed head, tapping the long beak out of the way if it looked as though it was aiming to take a nibble of his ear. Satisfied, it settled down to preen, perfectly balanced on its mobile perch.

'What is it with that thing anyway? I don't think I've ever seen anything like it in books.'

'Tochiro picked it up on his travels. Apparently he always had a soft spot for waifs and strays. After he died it sort of adopted Harlock, and it decided I'd make an adequate replacement.'
'So it's what - over a hundred years old?'

'I find it's sometimes better not to ask too many questions about some things around here. I'd go mad if I let some of the freakiness get to me.'

Looking around at the dark corridors and occasional outcroppings of mysterious pulleys and devices that had no readily discernible purpose, Daiba had to agree. The ship, under all the odd trappings, a technological marvel. It just looked as though it had been thrown together by someone with a serious hard-on for really bad morbid poetry - what his father had jokingly called "the stuff filled with overgrown graveyards, ruined castles, pale, fainting maidens and pirates declaiming their existential wangst in alliterative alexandrines." With that surrounding them every day, it was understandable the crew found some release in the a light-hearted banter. The alternative was probably something better suited to the pre-diaspora outpourings of some over-dressed manic depressive.

'Bird get your tongue?' Harlock asked as they walked. Daiba grinned.

'Nah... was just remembering that stuff dad used to read... You remember those poets, pre-atomic age?'

'I'm trying desperately to forget them,' Harlock replied with a little laugh. 'He sent me a copy of one once - a beautifully preserved third printing of 'Manfred'; must have been twelve hundred years old. I think it was more at home in my predecessor's bookcase than mine. All about the crushing weight of immortality. In verse.' He gave a mock shudder. 'I'm not sure if it was intended as a joke or a warning. He was always concerned about the effect this ship would have on me. Ah. Here we go.'

He opened the door in front of them, to reveal a well-lit, bright room at odds with the usual sombre decor of the Arcadia. Several sample boxes from the bullet were now stacked neatly on a table, and the room was littered with various drab grey boxes whose mundane exteriors presumably held a multitude of expensive, sensitive machinery and electronics. In the top box, one of the little centaurs crouched miserably in a corner of its transparent cage, its leafy plumage drooping.

Harlock set him to work unpacking and preparing samples for scanning, and the familiar work kept him occupied for some time, joined later by Zack, Doc and Ali, the latter of whom concentrated on the non-organic samples, squirreling them away to his own area of the lab, where of all people, it was Meg who joined him as a lab assistant. Doc Sado - a tall, slim woman with greying dark hair and a no-nonsense manner, guided Daiba with some of the prep work when his knowledge faltered.

One last task saw the small group gathered around the final sample case - one holding the live specimen of the little four legged plants.

'Just what do we do with it?' Zack asked. 'I mean... it's still alive. If we put it through most of the scanners, it'll need to be restrained - or - you know...' he trailed off anxiously.

'Dead.' Meg stated, saying out loud what the freckled youth wouldn't. 'Sheesh, Freckles, you can be such a wimp!' 

'Yeah... but how do you kill it without damaging the cells?' Ali asked. He looked at Harlock, who stood looking at the case, now cloakless, arms folded. 'I guess there are some studies you can do without pulling it into pieces, but after that, it'll need a cell by cell analysis...'

'It's kinda cute...' Meg leaned towards the clear case and tapped the side. The creature inside just curled itself up into a little huddle. 'Poor thing.'
'Meg - it's a fucking vegetable. Just because it shows some rudimentary avoidance behaviours...'
Ali sighed, giving up. 'Reminds me a bit of a scared kitten,' he continued glumly. 'Captain?'

'You didn't see the size of the their cousins in that herd bearing down on the bullet,' Harlock drawled. 'If this is just a juvenile stage, you really don't want to keep it around.' But even he looked reluctant to harm it.

Daiba pulled the pistol Harlock had given him earlier and aimed it at the case. 'Seriously? Just open the case, I'll put the stupid thing out of its misery if the rest of you are too soft.' He glared at the thing. 'Ali's right, it's just a vegetable, and no-one here's going misty-eyed over the salad counter, right?'

Harlock reached over and laid a hand on his lower arm, pressing just enough to force him to lower the weapon. 'Apart from the fact that shooting in a confined space is bloody stupid, leave it for now. We've plenty to look at. Doc - take it back to the main lab and set up an environment container for it. It might be more useful for now to just examine it. Motile plants with this much response to external stimuli are not something I've seen anywhere else - I'm curious.'

'What if it's like them?' Daiba demanded, as hereholstered his pistol angrily. 'You really want that thing on the ship?'

'It's not running loose,' Harlock replied evenly. 'The lab has a stringent contamination protocol. I'm not too worried.' He gave Daiba's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. 'You don't have to kill everything straight away, Daiba. Sometimes studying your enemy can be more useful.' He gave the case a rueful look. 'Besides, it is sort of cute.' He confessed.

Daiba caught Ali's eye-rolling exasperated sigh and bit back a heartfelt one of his own. How could a ship full of bloody cut-throats be so damn soft? He turned on his heel and left the room, wondering not for the first time if staying with his cousin was such a good idea after all. Would he pull the trigger if a beautiful woman stood in front of him, naked and alluring, sorrowful, vulnerable and pushing every pre-programmed button in the male psyche to protect-it-with-a-view-to-screwing-its-arse-off? Did he even know what it was like to stand there enthralled, while something reached into your pants and fondled a painfully hard erection with one hand, whilst thin, terribly strong fingers elongated and encircled your neck at the same time, trying to throttle the life out of you even whilst those same fingers encircled your cock...

For the second time that day he was doubled over, one hand on the corridor wall, heaving what little was left in his stomach up onto the dark deck, desperately fighting for breath as his heaves tightened his diaphragm and throat, making it hard to breathe.

He didn't even have the strength to straighten up as he heard boots on the deck behind him. The dark nacreous wall was the only thing keeping him even partly upright, and he concentrated on not reacting as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Tadashi?' Harlock's voice, holding no censure, only concern.

He struggled to put his feelings into words, as well as even forming the damn things. The memory had crashed into him at full speed, even faster than the bullet's recent landing on the hangar deck. Memory, and sensation... the roiling sickness that clung to him with an oily tenacity. The feeling of being utterly powerless; complicit in his own ruin and death... even welcoming it; the shameful, self-loathing wave of desire...

His stomach heaved again, and he trembled with both anger and shame. Thankfully this time he missed the boots next to him.
Heedless of his mess, the sour smell of which was already turning his empty stomach, he felt Harlock kneel next to him, an arm around his shoulder, then a hand just brushing through the short buzz of his shorn hair, as though comforting a child.

He didn't care. He just leaned against that solid, safe haven and let his head drop onto Harlock's shoulder, too tired to cry.

'You don't know what they can do,' he whispered hoarsely, once he could get the words out. 'What they can do in your head. You know it's wrong. You know it's dangerous... but you can't stop yourself. Part of you wants it.' His hands lay on his thighs, clenched into fists so tightly he could feel his fingernails through the gloves. 'The worst of it is, it you even welcome the pain. There's this feeling... desire, passion... but something sticks to it, like a slick rot, a taint you feel will never wash off. And even if you get away, even if you kill one, they still come. And so do you. I've seen men on their hands and knees, screaming abuse at me for taking one of them away; trying to kill me for reminding them that they were once human, instead of some junkie searching out another fix. Even knowing... if they get close, you are drawn. If they touch you...' he shuddered and felt Harlock's arm tighten again. Not judging, just holding him silently whilst the tears fell down Daiba's face unchecked.

Niobe, tasked with monitoring the planet below one last time before they left orbit, kept a weather eye on the scanners as they passed over the uneven terrain. Sulphurous clouds could obscure vision, but their veil was easily pierced by the Arcadia's sensors. She cast a questioning look over at the first mate, but Yattaran was busy checking the ship's systems preparatory to take off.

At least, she thought, the planet was interesting. Several of the massive muldaud coiled in ancient lava tunnels, easy to spot once you knew what to look for, and she smothered a giggle. Poor Ali.

He was never going to live that down. The unstable planetary crust though was a textbook example of vulcanology and plate tectonics in action. Ali had suggested she use the opportunity to further her studies; since coming on board the Arcadia ten years ago, she'd shadowed the grumpy gunner, keen to learn - and once he'd realised she meant it, he'd been surprisingly keen to teach.

_I want to learn_, she'd told the former geologist. _I want to find a better way to mine for the metals and elements we need; the work they forced abandoned children to do. One that doesn't hurt people, or planets._

She rubbed her arm surreptitiously, looking around a little nervously to be sure no-one had noticed, but apart from the massive bulk of the first mate at the next console, and the hovering, ghostlike Mimay lounging elegantly behind the both with one leg draped over the arm as she leant back in the captain's chair, no-one was around to notice. It was a habit she tried to break, rubbing at the old acid scars, but as Kei kept telling her, it did get easier - especially when you had someone around who didn't mind them...

One of the panels beeped at her, and she dragged her attention to the display. Unsure of the results she saw, she re-ran the scan. 'Erm... first mate? I think I just found something...'

It seemed as though the entire crew had gathered around to look at the screen. Niobe stared around nervously. Despite serving on board for the past three years, speaking publicly still made her nervous. Usually she could rely on Kei for morale, but this trip her adopted mother was back on Tabito. There was Zack, but he was standing over by the new kid, who was looking the worse for wear again.

It was Zack's mother, the Arcadia's chef and quartermaster, who prompted her to speak up.
'Honey, they don't bite. Just tell them what you saw.' Anita patted her gently on the shoulder, and she welcomed the support, even though she still felt as though she had a mouth full of cotton. The captain took three steps to her side and flashed her his quiet smile, and she relaxed a little.

'The sensors picked it up when I did a sweep of the equator. At first I thought it was just a patch of vegetation, given the carbon content - though the density was weird. Then the sensors... well. See for yourselves.' Niobe brought up the image on the main viewer.

The viewer was taken up by the image of a roughly circular object, partly buried in the surrounding sedimentary rocks, and tilted slightly towards the left as they looked at it. The surface was uneven; ridges, whorls and striations that resembled gnarled bark on an ancient tree, even down to faded, ghostly circles that looked like lichen staining the surface. The object was buried so that only a hemispherical section stuck out of the ground - several protrusions looked like short branches, and one appeared to be some kind of central axis, making the object look like a child's spinning top, somewhat flattened and lying tipped over to one side.

'No fucking way!' This from Yattaran. Harlock took a step past Niobe and took a closer look.
'Magnify that,' he asked her quietly, pointing at once section. She obliged, and the image zoomed in on one section of her find.

'That's wood, right?' Meg, sounding as if she expected someone to spring the joke on her at any time. She pointed to Yattaran. 'What he said!'

Ali moved in to stand on one side of the captain, and stood at his side, both men with their arms folded across their chests. Niobe sneaked a peek sideways as someone else moved, and recognised the newbie - Daiba? The slim youth looked a little more raw than usual, and he kept reaching up to run his fingers along the curving scar on his scalp that his close cropped hair revealed.

'According to the scans, it's approximately seven hundred yards long, three hundred in diameter and fifty high - deep scans reveal another hundred and twenty yards buried in the sediment. Approximately sixty-five million years ago, give or take a few, looking at the depth of the deposit. Of course, this is based on the baseline of known terrestrial factors, adjusting for the erosion by sulphurous winds and the local conditions...'

'Ya do know you've been a bad influence on this girl, right?' Yattaran twitted Ali, who just grinned smugly at him.

'Couldn't be prouder, fatso. Yer just jealous coz no-one ever wants crash courses in plastic model building.'

'Quit bickering you two,' the captain said without heat. He smiled at Niobe. 'Go on, and ignore the peanut gallery.'

She smiled back. 'I re-scanned the data - the structure is composed mostly of lignites. The preservation is so good it has to have been buried for a long time, otherwise the winds would have scoured it. But here's the kicker - it hasn't been fossilised completely - possibly because the "wood" - for want of a better term - is actually fused to and infused with some seriously high-tech alloys. Specifically titanium and tectite, and something else the databanks have no record of.'

'I'm getting readings as well,' Cai called up. 'There's a power source in there, and it's still active!'

The ship seemed to shiver and tremble then, and Harlock reached out a gloved hand to rest lightly on the ship's wheel. 'Easy, my friend...
The trembling subsided, but Niobe could have sworn the ever-present, barely audible heartbeat grew a little louder.

'Cai, scan for any other signals. Any odd transmissions?' the captain asked. The slim crewman nodded and began searching the spectrum on his console, its various dials and displays changing almost too fast to see from Niobe's vantage point.

'One, a very faint signal on a wide band coming from the centre of the vessel. Captain - I'm also getting life signs!'

'Meg?' Harlock asked the younger girl who was manning Kei's usual station. Short blond curls bobbed down to review the readings.

'Centre mass, captain. Very faint life signs coming from the same location as the transmission.' She called out.

'Anything on the deep scans?' Harlock asked. He got cries of 'negative' all round from the crew.

'Must be something in the construction that's blocking it,' Maji, the usually quiet engineer and armourer said softly. Niobe had to strain to hear him. 'You have partially fossilised wood of a kind that isn't in our databases, reinforced by numerous alloys which look as though they were grown, not engineered, into the structure. Since this is just the outer hull we're looking at, there's no telling what's beneath the surface!'

Niobe watched as Daiba took a step closer to the screen, a look on his face like he'd just seen a live scorpion in front of his nose. 'You have to be kidding though... a wooden spaceship?' He turned an accusing glare onto Niobe as though she were personally responsible for the existence of such a thing.

'Any more ridiculous than a self-repairing spaceship made of dark matter that sings to itself in the middle of the night?' She shot back, annoyed with him enough to lose her good manners.

She heard Ali grumbling under his breath, and turned an inquisitive gaze upon her mentor. 'Professor?' She grinned as he glared at her use of the unwelcome nickname.

'Captain?' He asked in turn.

Harlock turned and strode over to the chair where he'd laid his sabre, and holstered it elegantly in one smooth movement. 'Turn it around, Yattaran. I guess we're going back for a look.' Settling his cloak back neatly over the holstered sabre he sighed deeply. 'This damn planet just has it in for me...'

A handful of the crew who'd been around since the beginning of the Machine War laughed nervously, but looking around, Niobe saw that Ali, Maji and Yattaran were not among them. Instead the three men shared a nervous look, before the three turned almost in unison to stare to a spot behind and to the side of the captain's chair, where Mimay, ghostlike, stared at the screen silently, her large eyes, so unreadable, flickering occasionally as her third eyelid fluttered across them. Her gauzy veils fluttered in a sudden chill draught that skittered randomly across the bridge, causing the captain's hair to ruffle softly as he headed for the stairs.
Chapter 9

Harlock stood in front of his black and red Space Wolf and ran a silver gauntleted hand over the red skull decal, coming to a rest with his fingers just brushing the characters 阎罗王 which someone - from the calligraphy probably Cai, albeit under instruction from some wag on the command crew - had tagged the plane with some years ago, just under and in front of the left wing. A reminder of his old life - or, given the legends, a comment on the role that often weighed as heavily on his shoulders as the gravity cloak currently thrown over the bed in his quarters.

'Yen lo wang?' Daiba's voice behind him was enough to make him move his hand but not to turn around.

'Yánluówáng,' he corrected the pronunciation. 'Or Enma, or Yeomna, and hence...'

'To "Yama",' the youth finished for him. 'An ancient god of the underworld who judges the dead. Dad found it rather amusing, given the links of your nomme de guerre to the leader of the legendary Wild Hunt, "a pseudonym of the one eyed psycho-pomp Odin, and part of the death-head imagery surrounding the ancient mannerbund of young men living outside of society..."' he quoted in his father's best lecturing voice. 'I think he penned a couple of monographs on the subject. Course, it all got a little surreal when he started translating those panels in the House of Records on Niflheim. Those prophecies really freaked him out...'

Harlock snorted. 'They gave me a few nasty turns as well. No-one wants to believe their fate is mapped out for them.' He turned and gave the youth a once over, taking in the form fitting Nibelung armour, brassy rather than his own silver. 'I see you found your other present...' he used the once over of the armour as an excuse to review the youth's overall state. Though he still looked washed out and a little wild-eyed, he was still calmer than earlier. Whether or not that was a healthy rebound or a serious case of repression remained to be seen.

Daiba grinned. 'I'd give you a twirl but there are four really butch pirates behind me and they might get the wrong idea.'

Harlock, looking over Daiba's shoulder, saw Anita leading Meg, Sabu and Yasu, all four in armour, but only Meg in the more streamline Valkyrie suit. He grinned. 'If they heard that, Sabu and Yasu might take issue...' he was rewarded with an answering smirk, and inwardly relaxed. Twitchy he might be, and there was still no telling what triggers could push the lad into a funk, but he pulled himself out of it well enough.

Runs in the family... he mused. Not always a good thing. We all tend to repress...

'I thought we were taking one of the bullets?' Daiba asked, nodding to indicate the fighter. 'Or were you just itching for a chance to show off?'

'Cheeky brat,' Harlock replied, without heat. 'As it happens we're taking one of the Cosmo Wings - they're a bit slower than the bullet, but carry a lot more firepower. That ship might be a fossil, but parts of it are still functional. No chances.' He took the few steps that took him to the younger man's side and rested a hand on his armoured shoulder. 'I would ask ask if you're certain you're up for this, but it's your call. For the record, you look like something Trouble dragged in.'

'Off the record, I feel like something the cat hacked up. I'm fine, captain.' He wasn't. They both knew it, but Harlock couldn't bring himself to order the lad to stand down. The ship was a fossil, they were not expecting trouble, and he had a feeling that Daiba would probably lash out if babied
too much.

Yeah. That ran in the family as well...

Daiba followed the captain's lead towards the vehicle that was parked a few stands down, after Kei's black-on-red Space Wolf, tagged with the characters 蛍隻, and a candy-floss pink and white number that just had to belong to Meg. He couldn't resist giving the prickly girl a raised eyebrow as they drew level, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

'Cute,' he gushed. 'What does it fire? Rainbows?'

Her gauntletted fist smacked him on the back, not quite hard enough to make him stumble. 'The captain lets us customise them, and I like pink. Since the alternative is shit green, you can kiss my ass, Daiba.'

'Not sure why you bother, it's not as though you can see it in space...' he drawled back.

'Are you planning on dissing the captain's paint job?' she shot back.

Harlock dropped back until he was walking between the two, effectively cutting off any further baiting. 'Don't drag me into this. I inherited mine anyway.'

'You could have changed it back...' Daiba replied with a cheeky grin.

Harlock heaved a mock sigh. 'What can I say? It really does look rather cool... and as Meg says - the alternative is a really vile shade of greenish grey that has military cheap skating written all over it. Those things were mothballed during my predecessor's time, but I couldn't help noticing he'd pimped his ride even if he didn't use it much.'

'It's a guy thing,' Anita said with a smile, patting him familiarly on the arm. In the heavy, chunky battle armour the Arcadia's crew favoured, she moved lightly, for all her bulk - which, even over fifteen years since she'd retired from the SPG, the former sergeant proved was still mostly muscle. Yasu, fat and bald with a permanently nervous smile, looked far less at ease in his and lumbered awkwardly. 'Like all these call signs for the planes. The captain is "Enma", Kei is "Firefly", Meg here is "Daisy" and they stuck my poor Zachary with "Freckles"!'

He shared a brief smile with the motherly quartermaster. Anita's no-nonsense approach suited his moods far better than Kei's obvious attempts not to just smother him, or even Harlock's equally obvious hands-off-worry-from-a-distance manner. In that, she reminded him of his own mother, and where the comparison would have once been painful (and if he was honest, he envied Zack at times, wanting to thump the older youth when he complained about still being under the thumb...), in the past few weeks it had become a comfort; something he could put on or take off as the mood suited. She bullied him kindly into eating and not just staring into his soup, and he could walk away if it all became too much to handle. The rest of the crew alternated between walking on eggshells or making obvious attempts to treat him "normally" - whatever the fuck normal was these days, and he was damned if he knew the answer to that conundrum...

Further navel-gazing had to wait, as they reached the more utilitarian side of the vehicle hangar.

Several ships and land vehicles were stowed here - from the grab-claw-like workboats, to the drills and all terrain vehicles used for either land travel or impromptu excavations. One such - a drill nosed tracked vehicle designed for tunneling, that could seat four, was already being loaded into the craft they came to a halt next to.
The Cosmo Wing was a larger craft than the bullet - approximately fifty six feet long, and built, to Daiba’s eyes at least, like a brick with aerofoils. Supposedly it could launch one of the bullets from the front-loading hangar, though he’d hate to be the one behind the controls - it would be a tight fit, and he guessed it was a one shot deal - trying to fly one back in would be like threading a very fine needle with a length of rope. Sure enough, the bullet rested several yards away, on a wheeled gurney designed to load her by hand.

Whilst Harlock headed for the cockpit, Daiba gave the ship the once-over. It wasn't lacking for armament at least, he noted with some satisfaction. The two front wings both sported small oscillator cannon, and several smaller plasma cannon were nestled under the gunner's turret on top, above the cockpit. If it had one big drawback, it was the lack of directional weaponry - nothing but forward facing cannon. At a guess - confirmed by Anita when he asked - it was intended mostly to fly in formation, and supported by the rest of the fighter wing.

'It's not as maneuverable as the bullet,' Harlock told him as he took his place in the co-pilot seat, much to Meg's annoyance. 'It's at its best against static targets, and it packs enough firepower to blast through most armour. But it does have its uses.'

'You want me to fly her?' Daiba asked. Harlock shook his head.

'Not this time. Just strap in. Yattaran - any movement down there?'

'Not so far, captain. Just the same signal. We'll stay in synchronous orbit though. Any trouble, just yell, we'll haul ass down there.'

'I'm hoping it won't come to that, first mate. Okay, we're set. Open hangar doors.'

Flights down to this planet, Harlock mused, were uneventful. It was the mad scrambles to get out of trouble that were the problem. If two could be more than coincidence. 'Third time's the charm,' he muttered as he set the craft down about a hundred yards from the wreck.

'I'm kinda countin' on it,' Ali sniggered over the comms. 'I've got fifty riding on you having to make a run for it with yer tail between yer legs again!'

Laughter from the crew filtered over the radio, and behind him, he heard Anita snort.

'Hate to break it to you but last time I checked I wasn't a cthonian, Ali. Unless you were mistaking something else for a tail...?' More laughter, and a heartfelt 'ewww' from Meg. 'Yasu will stay with the ship. Anita, Sabu - with me in the drill. Meg, Daiba - stay behind us and stay tight. If you get separated, head back to the Cosmo Wing post-haste - do not try to get creative. Am I clear?'

'Yes sir!' from Meg. A mumbled grunt from Daiba. Imperceptibly, Harlock shook his head as he bit back the impulse to demand a little more attention. Seriously though... when did I turn into my bloody father? The faint reflection in the cockpit viewscreen stared back at him as he steered the Cosmowing out of the hangar. In this ghostly image, he looked no different to the day he’d first come aboard the Arcadia - unless you counted the scar and the eyepatch, the two constant reminders of the dangers of complacency and haste - or as though someone had laid another face over his own, and if you stripped it away, there was the same impetuous idiot who'd arrived on board the Arcadia on his arse. The same youthful face stared back at him; the lines of care he saw in a real mirror were invisible. Makes it look as though I've never grown up... which Kei has accused me of so many times over the years. She has a point - here I am, running headlong into trouble. Again. With a silent sigh, he aimed the little craft at the planet below.
This time the landing site was a cracked plain of sedimentary rock - at least, according to the Arcadia's resident expert. Their target stuck out of the pale rock, a dark sepia against the light rose of the sandy stone. As Niobe had whimsically dubbed it, it did look like a child's spinning top tipped over onto its side, listing at an angle a little under forty-five degrees to the surface. As the group, having left the safety of the plane, approached, more damage became noticeable.

'Looks like it crumpled on impact,' Meg said over the comms. She pointed to the edge they could see sticking out of the rock. Sure enough the clean lines of other circular craft were here deformed and contorted, the surface pattern of the skin here distorted and twisted by the impact. Metallic spires jutted from the wreck, torn by an ancient explosion.

'Meteor strike?' Daiba hazarded, looking at the damage. The holes punched in the hull showed evidence of an inwardly directed force, as here the hull was forced into the interior of the vessel.

'Probably took a hit and crash landed,' Harlock replied. 'Meg, Daiba, get samples from the hull. Anita and Sabu, with me. There's a tunnel just inside, my scans show it leads inwards for several yards at least. We'll leave the drill and proceed on foot. If we hit a dead end, we'll go back and power through.' He moved to take point, only to be held back by Anita, whose large gauntletted hand jerked him back unceremoniously.

'Behind me, captain. I promised Kei I'd make sure you stayed out of trouble.'

'Kei's not here,' he pointed out, firmly lifting her hand from his shoulder.

'Which is why I'm the one telling you not to take point.'

Sabu laughed. 'Give up, cap'n. You know the orders Miss Kei leaves with us when she stays behind...'

Harlock gave him a sour look, somewhat lost behind the visor of his helmet. 'And some people need to remember who the bloody captain of this ship is, and who gives the orders!' He grumbled.

'Yes honey. We do. Now we're a good captain and let us do our jobs?' Anita patted his back in a friendly fashion, that almost sent him flying. 'By rights the captain should not be running around leading exploratory teams.' She raised an armoured arm to forestall his response. 'We all know you prefer to bring Ali along because he's just as likely to go off half-cocked and doesn't give you any grief over it. And don't give me the 'we're not a military vessel' baloney again. We had that out on Maicon.'

'I almost got my bloody head blown off on Maicon,' Harlock grumbled. 'As did you, so since my Exec isn't here to ride herd on you, this time we'll do it my way.' He brushed aside Anita's arm and took point, unholstered his pistol and stepped into the opening.

Daiba watched somewhat bemused as the three vanished, two rotund hardsuits trailing after their silvered leader into the darkness. 'Is it always like this?' He asked.

Meg, busy with something that scraped flakes of rock and metal from the ship's surface, just shrugged inside her suit. 'Beats me. Everyone always tries to protect him, and he always argues. The only person he doesn't blow off is Kei. Probably because apart from Selen, now that Colonel Ichimonji and Zero are gone, she's the only person who can actually knock some sense into him. Are you just going to stand there or will you make yourself useful?'

'Ichimonji... tall guy? Long 'tache? Had a kid my age... poor bugger, always jumpy when he heard someone yelling.'
'Takuma. He's with his grandfather now, I think. Harlock really got into it with Dan over him half killing the boy one time - I honestly thought the captain was going to flatten him. Took Zero and Hank to hold him down.'

He had a vague memory of watching Takuma being forced to make a seriously terrifying dive one time when the rest of them had been goofing around - there'd been a girl as well, hadn't there? Red haired, pretty, but a bit serious... Yeah. He could well imagine his cousin throwing a fit. Takuma had always been covered in bruises thanks to his father's rigid 'training', and Yama had always had a bee in his boxers over anyone bullying a kid. 'What happened to the Colonel anyway? I heard some muttering that he'd been killed or something?'

'Or something is right. Guess you didn't pay much attention to the news?'

He shook his head. Meg sighed.

'Two years back, what they call the Prometheus Incident. .. Ichimonji and Douglas were part of a new task force being set up to eventually form part of a new Explorer Corps. The Prometheus was one of four shops being retasked to provide support. During the inaugural presentation the Prometheus opened fire on her sister ships, then vanished with all hands. Ali thinks Chancellor Doppler was behind it. At any rate he was branded a traitor. Takuma and Lisa Douglas stayed with us for a bit.' She sounded wistful. 'I like Lisa. But once the fuss died down Professor Oedo took them home.' She helped him fasten up the specimen bags. 'Captain - we're done here?'

No reply.

'Captain?' Meg called again, tapping her commlink.

Daiba tried, and got only static. He tried the Arcadia, and got Yattaran's grumpy growl on the line. 'What is it, kid?'

'Can't raise the Captain's party from here. You might wanna try a stronger signal?'

There was a stream of expletives on the other end that made Daiba wince slightly, more at the volume than the content, though one or two sounded anatomically impossible.

'Nada. You two go into that thing and try from inside. Maybe something in the hull is blocking the signal.'

'Okay.' Daiba took a step towards the opening, then realised Meg wasn't following. 'Meg?' From the set of her shoulders, even in armour, she looked tense. 'Problem?'

She appeared to pull herself out of whatever bothered her, and brushed past him with her usual jaunty arrogance. 'No problem, keep up, greenhorn!'

Apart from their flashlights, no light entered the fossilised wreck once they left the torn hull behind. It made the corridors they moved through feel claustrophobic, despite the fact they were easily as open in places as the Arcadia's. Outside of the three beams of light, the ceilings and walls were invisible in the blackness, giving the sensation of moving through a much smaller space.

Harlock felt as though the blackness was only held at bay by the light; an odd sensation, as he never considered himself prone to claustrophobia usually. He had to resist the temptation to keep aiming his own light at the walls as he walked. Enshrouded by the metal and polymer armour, the sensation of isolation grew stronger as they walked, and it was an effort not to turn his head and check over his shoulder to make sure Anita and Sabu were still behind him. "Like one that on a
"lonesome road..."

Maybe I should have let Anita go in front... that's what being stubborn gets you... that, and missing Kei's presence at his side. Even in the silences, he could always count on her support. It was a tangible thing at times, something he didn't take for granted, but knew he could always reach for when needed. The lack was like missing a limb.

The tip of his toe failed to make contact with the ground, and that was all the warning he had that the corridor had come to an abrupt end. Woolgathering... he thought to himself as he came to a dead stop on the brink of an unexpected chasm. He turned to warn the others, and found himself alone. 'Anita? Sabu?' The headset returned only static. How the hell had he - or they - managed to take a wrong turn? He was damn sure he hadn't missed one, and surely there had only been his own light?

So where was the faint green glow ahead of him coming from? On impulse he switched off the light and had to fight down the momentary panic he always felt when the lights went out. Even over a decade after losing the sight in his right eye, the fear of total blindness wasn't something that ever went away. One eye from night... ran the old saying. There was a damn good reason he left the lights on in any room at night when in space. Less so planetside, where there was always ambient light, even if from stars or moons.

Oh, pull yourself together, you idiot, he told himself. He opened his left eye, hoping he'd allowed enough time to acclimatise.

With the powerful flashlight powered down, an entirely new world within the ancient wreck was revealed. The walls glistened with a moist, soft green phosphorescent lichen. This in turn highlighted structures and patterns the stark artificial light had hidden. The walls and floors of the corridor were composed of the same substance as the hull, and were revealed to be a multi-textured surface that resembled a tropical or hydroponic grown wood, as evidenced by the lack of growth rings. Structures resembling enormously magnified xylem and phloem ran across the structure, heading towards -and away from - the central axis. The ceiling arced over his head, like the inside of some ancient cathedral - the columns and arches resembled the ribbed, vaulted halls and walkways of the Martian capital he'd grown up in, soaring above his head to a point lost in the shadow once out of the range of the glow that surrounded him. It gave his silvered armour a purplish cast, he noted, looking down.

Staring at his feet was a really bad idea... only a couple of inches away the floor abruptly vanished into a wide void, from which a tree easily as tall as the ship emerged, the branches extending both upwards and outwards, providing a perilous walkway across the ravine that lay in his path.

It reminded him sharply of the Arcadia's central computer... if he were to stand partway up its massive trunk and stare down at the server arrays and the root-like cabling that covered the floor. Here the floor was invisible, lost in a subdued, hazy glow that offered no clear line of sight.

On impulse he pulled a stray piece of wreckage out from the nearest wall and dropped it into that cavernous depth.

It seemed to take forever to hit anything. A muffled clang was picked up by his armour's sensors. Well that settled one thing at least: don't fall off the walkways... He took the strides needed to reach one that appeared to head upwards and towards the centre, and tried not to look down. That dark abyss below was not something he wanted to get intimately acquainted with.

A few yards into the wreck they lost sight of the opening, the route twisting back on itself in a
labyrinthine coil.

'Did we pack any string?' Daiba asked Meg somewhat facetiously. As expected she didn't get the joke. 'What do they teach them these days?' He muttered under his breath in his best imitation of his father's world weary sigh.

'What?' Meg snapped at him.

'Old family joke. Sorry.'

'Ffftt.' But the response was half-hearted, and swinging his torch towards her, he noticed she was hyperventilating slightly.

'You okay?'

'I'm fine, rookie. Mind your own business,' she snapped back.

_Okaaay... don't try and be nice to the bad-tempered teenage girl._ Gotcha. But as the walked on, it became painfully obvious that despite her protestations, the girl was struggling. He recognised the signs all to easily, since he had a tendency to trip over his own triggers on a near daily basis.

Whatever Meg's was, was a biggie. He stopped walking and made his way back to where she'd pulled up, holding onto the wall and breathing way too hard. 'Meg, whatever it is, chill. You keep breathing that fast and you're going to have problems.' He laid a hand on her shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. Her helmet tilted back so she could look at him and her eyes were wide with panic. 'Meg?' He gave her a little shake.

'I... oh shit. I can't...' To his horror she began to fiddle with the fastenings of her helmet. 'I can't breathe... I have to...'

He caught her hands in his, and forced them back down to her lap. 'Meg, look at me. Please.' _Shit... was this how Yama - Harlock - felt trying to talk him down? _It took his servo augmented strength to hold her, being as they were both armoured, negating any advantage he might have had. 'Damn, I'm all at sea here, girl. If you won't get off your fat arse, how the fuck am I supposed to help you?'

'My ass is not fat!'

_Missing the point much? A note for next time, he told himself; turn the volume down first...'_Then get up and let me get you out of here, you shrieking banshee.' He gave her arm a tug, and met so little resistance he almost landed on his arse. He landed hard against the opposite wall with Meg's weight pinning him until he could force her back and get them both on their feet. Then without waiting, grabbed her hand and half dragged, half pushed her back towards the entrance. Once outside she landed in an undignified heap when he released her, but at least she stopped trying to yank her helmet off. 'Claustrophobia? You live on a bloody battleship...'

'Not claustrophobia, you dick. Just tunnels,' she snapped weakly. She slapped his hand away when he held it out to her. 'I can manage.'

'Fine,' he shrugged, though the effect was lost in armour. 'Yasu, anything from the captain's party?'

'Not so far,' the pirate sounded nervous.

'Didn't see the point, given that we were already at the exit,' Anita's voice was a welcome sound over the comms. Two heavyset suits of armour walked out from the wreckage, one of them breaking into a waddling run to Meg's side, and helped the girl to her feet despite her protests.
'Where's the captain?' Daiba asked, not seeing any sign of the tall figure in silver armour.

Sabu tried a shrug. 'We got separated, it's a maze in there. Had to turn back, Anita figured we should call for backup, go in mob handed.'

'Labyrinth,' Daiba corrected automatically. He drew his pistol. 'Get Meg back to the Cosmo Wing, I'll try to find him.'

Anita, one arm around Meg, shook her head. 'Wait for Ali and the others, lad. Captain won't be happy if anything happens to you.'

'I owe him.' Daiba said simply. 'Even if I didn't, he's family.' He paused. 'Besides, anyone want to be the one to tell Kei we left him in there...?' He didn't wait for an answer, and took off into the wreck at full tilt.

The walkways turned out to be far less user-friendly than Harlock first thought. The surfaces were far from flat for one thing - slightly convex, which made navigating them tricky. They also criss-crossed each other at odd heights and angles - which when he took into account the angle the ship had tilted, made sense - they headed inwards and slightly upwards, but their rigidity was a thing not natural. In life, these would have hung in graceful, swaying arcs. Time, and increasing lithification had frozen them into place, but not all at the same time... some were flattened, others made elegant arches over his head, or obstacles to be stepped over when they curled or coiled or draped in his path. And they were not a path per se - from time to time he had to hop or jump from one line to another, sometimes back tracking on his direction in order to head further in towards the pulsing green light that grew stronger as he got closer.

The footing was often slimy underfoot as well - water or some other liquid that offered a habitat to more of that peculiar phosphorescent lichen, treacherous under even armoured boots. He frequently had to make use of the armour's powered servos, and more than once of grapples. More than once he could have made use of a good old-fashioned pick or mattock.

Closer to the source of the light - and that central trunk - he began to notice that some of the debris and protruding obstacles resembled familiar objects... as though here and there a hand, a foot, a leg... part of a torso... were trying to pull themselves out of the surface. He knelt next to one - that looked like a slender, three fingered hand with odd, spatulate fingertips. The skin - if such it was, resembled peeling bark.

It triggered a memory... something long ago, back on Mars? Tsuyoshi Daiba, showing him pictures from the expedition he'd been on to Earth... or had it been Niflheim? Faces... bodies... frozen in the act of springing out of the dead trees of a dead world...

He slowed, checking every surface more carefully once sure of his footing.

Was it just his imagination playing tricks on him, or did some of the whorls and lines look like faces...? Did he see what was there, or only what he expected to see?

A vase or two faces... a beautiful woman or an old hag... a woman's torso, her hands behind her as though pushing her out of one of the arching ways, her mouth open in an eternal, silent scream...

Breathe slower, idiot, he told himself sternly. Then: why oh why didn't you just turn back and find the others? Still rushing headlong into trouble as though the downward slide to forty was a looming stop sign - a red flag screaming at him to get it all in now before it was too late...

The path underneath him crumbled, and only over twenty years of climbing experience saved him
from an untimely plunge into darkness. His fingers grasped the far side of the gap that had opened at his feet, and gripping tightly, he hauled himself onto the surface, panting for breath. The sudden rush of adrenaline kicked in and inside the helmet, he smiled grimly. Fucking idiot, he told himself. Never trust your damn footing. He'd been lured into complacency by the angle of ascent, and he should have known better - it wasn't the first time after all that he'd paid the price for getting cocky upon reaching what was a comparatively "safe" zone during a climb...

He tilted his head to aim the helmet light at the floor. Sure enough, there was a distinct change in composition where it had given way - from stone, to brittle wood. Whatever process had preserved parts of the ship from fossilisation had at some point stopped here for a time, for the surface ahead of him was again stone.

Paying a damn sight more attention to his footing, he continued inwards. Thankfully he only had about a dozen yards left to travel. He reached the central trunk, and approached the opening cautiously, drawing his pistol without thought.

Compared to the pale gloom outside, the interior was brightly lit. The tingling sensation as he passed through the entrance confirmed his suspicions regarding the uneven lithification of the vessel. Some kind of low intensity forcefield, probably failing - or being switched off - section by section over the ages the ship had been buried here. If Niobe's figures were correct, the dinosaurs had roamed the Earth when this ship had met its fate... Sobering thought.

And here we thought we were all alone in the Universe... apart from the Nibelung; various insect races, Metanoids, Cthonians, Aquatics...

Inside this room - a vaulted chamber over fifty feet in diameter - the only object he could see was an elongated pod of some kind, bathed in the green light. Here and there on the floor/walls he walked over were more limb and face-like protrusions, but the armoured thud of his passage turned them to dust before he could get a good look at them.

Hopefully the helmet cam was recording...

His passing kicked up more dust as he walked, his booted footsteps leaving their imprint in the ground behind him. The remnants of the crew?

A sudden sound from the rear, and he whirled round, pistol in hand, only to lower it again as he recognised the familiar shape of the Valkyrie armour. Daiba.

'Damn fool - never sneak up on someone who has a price on their head. I almost blew your damn fool face off!' He snapped, irritated more at himself than his cousin.

'I'd like to know how the fuck I'm supposed to sneak up on anyone in this thing,' the youth pointed out, not unreasonably. 'Anita and Sabu made it out - they got all turned around in the labyrinth. I thought someone ought to come after you. You're welcome, by the way...' he added as a cheeky afterthought.

'Huh. I don't suppose anyone mentioned the magic words "wait for back-up" before you took it upon yourself to launch a one-man rescue mission without orders?'

'Might have done in passing,' Daiba deadpanned. Harlock gave up. He hardly had the bloody high ground in these arguments, after all... Daiba brushed past him to look at the capsule. 'Fuck - I knew it!' He pulled his pistol out and aimed at the pod, before a heavy armoured hand grabbed his arm and hauled it down.
'First - what did I tell you about shooting in confined spaces? Second, don't be too quick. Anything in here hasn't moved in millennia.'

Harlock pushed the youth gently out of his way, and leaned over the pod - suspended in the room by several strands or branches that were thinner than the rest.

The contents were not wholly unexpected, he reflected, as he stared down at the form inside. What he hadn't expected was the breathtaking beauty of the creature.

In the greenish light, it was difficult to determine the true colouring of the woman who lay inside; her hair looked to be a lighter green than her skin, and was the only covering for a naked body which almost perfectly resembled that of a young human woman - full breasted, albeit those breasts were devoid on aureole or nipple. The rest of the body was hairless - below the smooth, navel-less stomach her anatomy resembled that of a child's doll - no public hair, nor even the deep cleft of genitalia. She was small waisted and narrow hipped; long legs extended through sinuous, knee-less joints to a similar turn at her ankles. The feet were dainty, and toe-less. Moving his gaze back up, he noticed the same sinuous grace in her arms - they approximated the human form, but that was all. If he guessed right, the creature was not formed over a skeletal frame.

Her skin was smooth, but over-run with a darker green tracery of veins. The face was symmetrical - uncannily so, when he looked closer - too precise in its dimensions - the mouth was a tiny rosebud, pink and full. The nose, like the breasts, functionless - there were no nostrils to be seen. Her almond-shaped eyes were closed, but he found it all too easy to imagine the same black pits that had held him briefly in thrall back on Hakidame... As a whole, beautiful, yes - but even more alien it its perfection than even Mimay.

He looked at the hands - like the ones he'd seen coming out of the walkways, these were three fingered, spatulate, and again oddly boneless. Longer than a human woman's, and he was reminded of Daiba's description of the way these creatures could manipulate a man... Despite the temperature regulation of the suit, a sharp chill ran down his spine at the thought. Especially when he spotted the nails - arising not from a flattened bed, but sprouting like long thorns from the tips of the fingers. Retractable, he noticed, as some were only partly extended. Or maybe she'd been a nailbiter... who could tell? But they seemed to be over an inch long, fully extended, wickedly sharp and curved.

'Maybe you shouldn't get too close,' Daiba warned, reminding him that he was not alone.

'Relax. It's been inert for a long time - look at the pod - it's got a layer of rock around it in places where dissolved minerals have been deposited - this wreck's been buried a long time. I guess the forcefield protected it for a long time, probably shrinking to save power as time went by. This must be the heart of the ship - maybe analogous to Tochiro in some way...'

Daiba leaned closer, but cautiously, peering past Harlock's shoulder. 'You sure it's dead?'

'Inert, yes. Dead... the readings are inconclusive, but plants - if this is related at all to anything we'd classify as such - can surprise you. My mother told me stories of plants on Earth grown from seeds found in ancient tombs, several thousand years old. And some of the oldest living organisms we ever recorded were trees - giants that were thousands of years old, big enough to drive a vehicle through...' he smiled at Daiba's lack of interest. 'Never mind. I wish We could take a sample, but opening it - well, there's no telling what could happen, and I have no desire to test my quarantine facility in person. We'll just have to see what the samples and scan results can tell us once we can get them to the main lab on Deathshadow Island.' He turned, clapping a hand on Daiba's shoulder as he did so. 'Come on. Back to the ship before Ali decides to send in the marines..'
He'd only taken two steps before he realised that Daiba wasn't moving. 'Daiba?'

Daiba's helmeted head turned to look at him, but through the faceplate his expression was unreadable. 'You said you were done?' He asked in a monotone. When Harlock nodded, he spun round, pistol in hand, and fired at the pod repeatedly, until it shattered into a thousand fragments. Harlock cursed fluently and threw himself at the youth, trying to shield him from the worst of the shrapnel. Multiple impacts on his own armour occasioned more creative swearing, before the sensors confirmed a few new dents but no immediately worrying penetration. He couldn't verify his young cousin's state, due to being momentarily blinded by a burst of blue light. When the after images faded from his eye he felt the wreck begin to shudder, and grabbed Daiba roughly, hauling him to his feet and shoving him ahead towards the exit.

'You hot-headed fucking idiot! Move! And watch your bloody footing.' He pushed Daiba towards the walkway he'd entered along, before remembering that it was already unstable. He jerked Daiba back to a halt. 'Nevermind. This way! Are you hurt? Is your suit compromised?'

'I...' Daiba faltered, until he managed to remember his basic training on the suit diagnostics. 'Okay, I think.'

'Good. With any luck you'll still be in once piece for me to tear you a new one when we get back to the Arcadia. You blithering idiot! What were you thinking? No, scratch that. You weren't thinking. Left! And do not run... even if the bloody roof lands on your head, you walk. Check your footing, stay aware. If I tell you to stop, you stop. Move, you move. Are we clear?' He didn't wait for confirmation. Either the kid followed orders from here on in, or he didn't. *I just hope you're far quicker at pulling your fool head out of your arse than I was at your age...* Harlock thought. He sighed inwardly. *Kei... I'm so sorry... now I know exactly how you felt when I used to pull stunts like this. And I owe you... I'm not too sure how you resisted the urge to strangle me in my sleep...*

With the terrain increasingly unstable, he had to concentrate fully on their path, and quickly tasked Daiba with scanning for falling hazards. Not, Harlock thought, the ideal partner to be roped to in a crisis. And he could not take short cuts by moving from one path to the other. Not with a rookie in tow.

Step by perilous step, he began to guide them to safety.
On board the Arcadia, the bridge crew were forced to hold on tightly to anything they could as the ship seemed to shiver from stem to stern. Ali, standing on the gantry watching the main screen, fielded Niobe as she almost toppled over. 'Oi, oi! Watch it, Tochiro old man!' He called out. At the helm, Yattaran struggled in vain with the wheel, before giving up and letting it settle into its own heading, rushing towards the lower atmosphere.

'Those power readings from below just dropped - the wreck's starting to collapse!' Cai called up from the lower bridge.

Ali headed for Kei's station, swearing under his breath as he shoved Niobe out of the way. 'This bloody planet... Yattaran - can you raise the Cosmo Wing yet?'

'Got Sabu on the line - he says they got separated from the Captain, and the kid went back in after him. They got back to the 'wing in the drill when all hell broke loose!'

'Crap... that thing's looking as though it's falling apart at the seams. Any signal at all from the captain? Ali frantically scanned the area of the wreck. 'I'm getting some really hinky readings from that thing - when those power levels dropped, something else spiked...' He stepped back from the station, looking more than a little wild-eyed. 'Mimay... swing your cute ass over this way love - I need a second opinion on this...'

The graceful alien floated over to his side, her diaphanous dress rippling in the light air currents on the bridge. She peered over his shoulder at the readings, then shrugged delicately. 'There are traces of dark matter in the energy signature, yes. But the readings are unfamiliar. If anything...' she paused, and looked at the burly pirate, her wide eyes flickering. 'The output is similar to that produced by living organisms, not a mechanical process.'

'Does that mean it's Nibelung?' Yattaran asked. She shook her head.

'No - but it is old. Terribly old. Perhaps...' she trailed off. On cue the ship creaked ominously, and Yattaran patted the wheel absently.

'EASY THERE, TIGER. WE'LL GET HIM. NEVER HEAR THE BLOODY LAST OF IT IF WE DON'T.'

'I ain't telling Kei, if this goes south,' Ali muttered. 'Still not sure she's forgiven me for that cluster fuck on Maicon...' He placed a muscular arm around Mimay's waist and gave her a friendly squeeze. 'Might be hiding behind you again, gorgeous.' He grinned as she sighed in exasperation at him and deftly escaped his grip.

'He's probably fine,' Yattaran scratched his left butt cheek and nervously folded and refolded his arms on top of his considerable girth. 'You know the captain... takes a lot to stop him in his tracks.'

Ali looked as though he was about to say something pithy in reply, but closed his mouth into a grim line. All they could do was head dirtside and hope for the best.

'Ten minutes.'

The statement came out of the blue whilst Harlock scanned the walkway in front of them looking for the safest way back to the exit. He finally located a reasonably robust pathway, but it required a six foot jump across the abyss. 'Pardon?' He turned his attention back to Daiba, the youth.
unreadable, his face hidden behind the split-masked plate of Nibelung styled armour as it was.

'You asked what I was thinking, when I fired. You were standing staring at that thing for ten minutes.'

Harlock thought back to the scene... they'd been speaking, Daiba had asked him a question about whether the woman - or whatever - was alive, then he'd fired. Recklessly. Repeatedly. 'That's not...'

'Seriously - would I make up a whopper like that to get out of trouble? Check your helmet footage when we get back. Ten minutes. You snapped out of it only when I hit it the third time - must have tripped a cut-off.'

If true... he shook his head to clear it. 'Save it for later - right now, one problem at a time. We need to slip across to that line over there - ' he pointed. 'It's only a five foot drop, but it's also a six foot jump. The footing isn't too great either, so I'll go first, and stand ready to catch you if you overshoot.' He could picture the doubtful look on the youth's face behind that dark mask. Especially when that bifurcated faceplate was turned back to face him after staring dubiously into the depths.

'Overshooting isn't what worries me,' Daiba replied. 'Missing completely or not making it however...'

'Keep your eyes on the farthest point you can see. Don't look at your feet, and whatever you do, don't look down.' He didn't wait for a response, just hurtled across the gap in a smooth jump, landed neatly and stood back up. 'In your own time!' he called out.

Daiba wasn't sure if he was being serious or sarcastic. 'Don't look down...' he repeated under his breath mockingly. 'Easier said than bloody done. Not all of us are ex Academy free climbing champion three years running...' he muttered.

'You do remember you're on speaker?' Harlock drawled. Yep. That was sarcasm... Daiba took a deep breath, exhaled, and ran for the edge.

He landed on the edge winded, clinging on for dear life as he slipped backwards towards the abyss. Almost... he thought. Sorry coz... His fingers lost the grip, and instead of propelling him to safety, his last minute attempt to wriggle to safety failed. He began to fall.

A strong hand encircled his wrist and held him, stopping his slide. Harlock was face down on the walkway, holding him tightly by one hand, the other was gripping a handy outcrop.

'Stop wriggling you idiot, you'll have us both over!' Harlock increased the power of his grip as much as he dared. From a prone position though he just didn't have an easy way to haul the lad back to safety. Kei made this look easy with me, he thought with a wry smile, remembering his unceremonious arrival on board the Arcadia over a decade ago. But she was standing at the time. Can't flip him up... can't drag... 'Try and grab my arm and haul yourself up.'

Daiba shifted his grip on the walkway, but when his fingers slipped and scrabbled for a hold, he panicked, slipped further and was hyperventilating, before he felt Harlock grab his other arm with his free hand.

'I've got nothing,' he managed to get out, struggling to follow his own advice to Meg earlier and get his breathing under control. 'What are you holding onto that isn't me?' The thought of him pulling the other man to their mutual deaths had him in a cold sweat. Could have aced this a year or two ago... sloppy and out of condition, he told himself angrily.
'Still on speaker, Tadashi... and I'm trying to find a way to get you up. Just try and keep still. I'm hooked onto an outcrop by my ankles and this stuff isn't too solid in places...'

'You might want to go with "too much information" at that point...' Daiba's voice had a slightly shrill note in it. 'Why's it suddenly crumbling like this?'

'My guess, when you shot the sleeping beauty back there, it began to shut down the force field. The interior is taking the strain now of the fossilised material above it. Now can I please leave the geology lesson and move to applied physics?'

'Snippy, snippy...' Daiba shot back at the slightly snarked tone in the other man's voice. 'I can't hang around here all day...'

There was an audible "Fffft" from the comms speaker. 'Let your captain do the jokes, hotshot. I'm going to wriggle backwards. When you can, try to grab the edge and pull yourself up. Just relax.'

'Do you say that to all the girls?' Daiba gasped the retort out. With the strain of dangling by both arms, his chest was starting to feel tight. Very slowly however, he felt Harlock move slowly, wriggling away from him. Inch by painful inch, his hands moved closer to the edge. He had his fingers closed on the lip of the walkway when he felt it tremble. I hope no-one's recording this... he thought sourly, listening to the girly squeak he emitted involuntarily.

'Oi, captain - planning on lying down on the job all day or do you need a hand there?'

'Yattaran?' Harlock felt the walkway tremble under the thud of his first mate's boots and turned his head slightly to see a large pointed armoured foot next to his head, the wicked claw like heel not far from his eye. The bulky armour leaned over, and a brassy arm reached out and grabbed Daiba's below the point where Harlock held him. One swift haul and a grunt, and he landed the young man like a flopping carp next to Harlock.

'Got word from the 'wing that you were late. When this nervous wreck started quivering figured someone should come down to get you. Might want to run though - not sure this thing will hold together much longer. What the fuck did you do? You were gone for hours!'

Hours? Harlock frowned mentally. Exaggerating much? But he filed the comment away for later. 'I think we managed to shut down the central computer analogue.' Harlock replied sheepishly as he helped a shaken Daiba to his feet and gave him a little push in the direction of the exit.

'Actually, I...' Daiba began.

'...saved my ass when I got distracted.' Harlock cut across the admission smoothly and quickly. The kid wasn't ready for the amount of hurt he'd be in if the Old Guard thought he'd put their friend and captain in danger. Behind the green tinted circles in the helmet, he couldn't read Yattaran's expression, but he had a pretty good idea that the word bullshit was probably written on it. 'Let it lie,' he murmured when he was reasonably sure Daiba couldn't overhear. 'It was partly my fault, and I'll deal with the rest.'

'Don't do to be too soft on these hotheads,' his first mate grumped back at him.

'Did I turn out too badly in the end?' Harlock asked, a trifle facetiously.

'You mean before or after you got a chronic decision making disorder outta yer system? Or helped start a four year war with an evil machine empire? Or blew up an entire planet...'

'Yattaran...' He could almost picture the smirk on his first mate's face. 'Do we have to keep
bringing up that last incident? Blow up one tiny uninhabited planet in the middle of nowhere and no-one ever lets you forget it...’ he grumbled.

‘The law of unintended consequences,’ Yattaran smirked. ‘Until lil Wattaru came along you were the poster boy, admit it...!’

Daiba staggered up to them and tapped the captain on the shoulder. ‘Thanks for the assist - but did you guys think you could hold off on the chatter until we get out of the weird spaceship that's about to collapse in on top of us? I prefer to study archaeology, not become it.’

The round helmet of Yattaran's armoured suit turned so that the expressionless glowing green 'eyes' - like those of some massive insect - turned to face him. ‘Mouthy little sod, ain't ya?’

‘Runs in the family, I'm told.’ Inside the relative anonymity of his own helmet, Daiba's shit eating grin grew wider. At least until a gauntlet whacked him upsides the head.

‘So does being a cocky little shit so do not think for one moment that I don't know the expression on your face right now, Tadashi.’

Harlock's dry delivery should have been warning enough, but he pushed his luck anyway, and as he followed the pirates down the unnervingly creaking corridor, he just couldn't resist sticking his tongue out at the back of Harlock's head.

‘And put your tongue back in.’

‘Eyes in the back of your head?’

‘No. Three sons and a daughter under the age of ten,’ came the pithy reply. ‘And several years fostering a red-headed force of nature with a personality that can send entire solar systems running for cover,’ he added dryly.

Yattaran just sniggered. ‘Bit quieter without ’er though.’ He added, in a softer tone. ‘Never thought I'd miss the snooty little cow.’

Since it took his mind off the knowledge that he might be responsible for several tonnes of rock landing on their heads at any moment, Daiba asked the obvious question as they strode briskly though the labyrinthine corridors of the ship. ‘Where is Emeraldas, anyway?’

‘Picked up a ship of her own a couple of years back, just after the Prometheus Incident. Said she had unfinished business to sort out. Selen said she heard from her a few months ago, causing havoc in the Andromeda Galaxy, so I guess she's still giving her mother some grief. Alliance stuck a price on her head almost as big as mine.’ His tone of voice was... odd, as though there was more to it, that he wasn't prepared to add.

‘Bigger,’ Yattaran grunted. ‘The price that is... head size is still up for debate. The bitch-machine-queen really wants her head on a plate.’

Daylight finally glimmered ahead of them, and all three put on a final spurt of effort, though Daiba noticed Yattaran was huffing more than a little. Behind them his audio sensors caught the sounds of crashing, thunderous collapse, as the ship finally began to cave in under its own weight. Just a little further... he told himself, stretching to keep up with Harlock, who's longer legs had taken him ahead slightly. He lengthened his stride almost on instinct, only to be hauled up by Harlock. The older man grunted as his extended arm pulled him up to a halt, gripping his shoulder.

‘Easy there, tiger. More lives are lost by rushing towards safety than simply taking time to be sure
of your surroundings. We tread carefully until we're out of the door.'

'Then we run like fuck,' Yattaran added gleefully with a wicked chuckle. 'I sent Anita's lot back up. Head for the workboat.'

'And if the rocks start falling on our heads?'

'Run like fuck!' Both pirates replied simultaneously. Despite the situation, Daiba grinned. The casual camaraderie made him feel included for the first time in years. As though part of a team again. Inside the anonymity of his helmet he smiled.

His sensors registered the tremors before he felt them. Red digits flashed across the heads-up display, distracting and disorientating. He was forced to stop and place a hand against the wall to brace himself, and clearly felt the shaking through the metal fingers of his gauntlet.

'Shit...' was Yattaran's pithy comment. 'Captain?' They all came to a stop.

'Fifty yards to the hole in the hull. I'm getting redline readings from the structure. We run, we risk our weight triggering a fall. The ceiling's hanging by a thread. Not sure about you two but I'm really not fond of being pinned under anything that isn't my wife...'

'Cap'n, we'd all prefer to be pinned under your wife...' Yattaran drawled. 'Softly softly then, eh?'

'There are cracks everywhere I look... if this were a rockface I'd be calling for my brown trousers about now...' Harlock took a deep breath, let it out slowly. 'This part is partly supported by the surrounding rock, but I really don't like the look of that roof. Tread as lightly as you can, both of you, but be prepared to run. Daiba - go between me and Yattaran. If I start running, just picture a rugby ball in my hands and see if you can find that speed your dad used to boast of!'

'If I remember rightly, you never exactly set the pitch alight,' Daiba replied a little cheekily. 'Bit of a bookworm according to mom...'

'Wise ass. Just keep up.'

Yattaran's glove clanged gently off his helmet. 'Oi - we get to cheek the cap'n, rookie. Ya need to earn it. Now move yer arse, hotshot. If this thing starts to fall I ain't planning on getting stuck behind it!'

Dust started to fall thickly from the roof as they moved, stepping as lightly in armour as they could, briskly, but - as Harlock called it - without haste. Several times Daiba could hear a rumble behind them, or saw a cascade of pebbles fall in front of them. Each clanging footstep went straight through him, and despite the settings on the environmental controls, he felt gooseflesh rise on his arms, and a cold sweat down his back. Yattaran's heavier tread especially began to make him nervous, and each heavy-footed clunk on the rock made him flinch.

Ten yards, and he could see the workboat through the ragged tear in the hull. Five.

And freedom. He drew in a ragged breath as his feet carried him out of the hole and onto more solid ground under an open sky. It was all he could do not to sprint for the workboat, resting on the ground about the length of a playing field away. Behind him he could hear Yattaran wheezing, and turned to see the large man bent double, hands on his knees.

The rent in the side of the ancient wreck vanished in a sudden dust cloud, and the ground shook under them as they stood watching. The entire thing collapsed in on itself, into a self-created pit, leaving only a pile of rubble and clouds of dust. Nearby, several of the little centaur-like motile
plants scuttled and squeaked their way to safety.

'Ah. That was closer than I like,' Yattaran commented as he stood up again. he was still puffing slightly. 'Right. Time to get you two back up to the ship.' He paused and looked back over his shoulder as neither Harlock nor Daiba immediately followed him. 'Oi - sometime today, unless you plan on sight-seeing? I thought we usually leave the pretty rocks to Ali?' He chuckled. 'Rocks aside... we might just want to saunter off casually... If anyone asks, we were two systems away and didn't touch nothin'!

'Ffht.' Harlock began to stride in the direction of the workboat. He paused before the airlock, glancing down at his suit, turning his hands over to check the surface. 'Yattaran - run a scanner over me and Daiba, would you? It might be the light but I think my armour's acquired a coating of something that isn't dust...'

Daiba looked down at his own suit, and sure enough, there was a light coating of something iridescent on it, that scintillated in the sunlight. 'It could just be powdered crystal? There was some quartz-like stuff in there.'

Yattaran scanned the pair and shook his heavy helmet. 'Sorry. It's organic. Readings look like some kind of spores. It's on me as well.'

Harlock sighed. 'Looks like we need to head for Hanger Four. Get Ali to seal it off and get Doc and a team down there for full decontamination.' He turned to Daiba. 'Hope you brought a book... we might be a while...'

Harlock's comment proved to be something of an understatement, Daiba reflected three hours later. Meg of all people eventually took pity on him and snook a tablet reader through quarantine for him, but he was still faced with a battery of tests and decontamination procedures, sitting half-naked on a cold plastic seat wearing only thin infirmary issued bottoms, and the only scenery being either bare grey walls, or the hairy-pimpled expanse of Yattaran's arse, exposed by the fundoshi he wore in lieu of the pants which didn't fit xxxl - a sight equaled only by the rotund first mate's belly, both of which had a horrible tendency to quiver alarmingly when scratched by their owner - which seemed to be a regular occurrence, as Yattaran seemed to resort to scratching or rubbing body parts when nervous or bored. No... wait... that led to a mental image he'd need to scrub...

He sighed heavily and surreptitiously looked over to the other occupant of the quarantine holding area. At least there the scenery was a little better to look at, given that Harlock - if you overlooked the scars - was at least worth staring at. Hell, even with the scars... Daiba had gotten a long look during practice sessions at the scars on his back, chest and arms, and his legs and ass hadn't fared much better. But the long straight surgical scar on his right thigh was now hidden, along with a puckered knife wound that some sadist had once obviously twisted in the muscle. The stab wounds he'd gotten on Hakidame was visible near his ribcage and shoulder; still sore-looking but healing fast. One long blaster scar trailed down his back and vanished under the loose pants, but he'd seen the snaking trail it had left, over one buttock and across the hip, perilously close to areas that could even ruffle a pirate's stoic aplomb, he guessed. The rest of him was a sobering testament to a life lived outside the civilised boundaries. Yet under all of the damage left by burns, stabbings, shootings, falls and a savage whipping, the pirate still had the whip-lean physique of a younger man than his thirty-six years would lead anyone to suspect, leaning nonchalantly against the plastic wall of their display case.

'Next time, do you think you could remember the tops?' Daiba had waspishly asked Meg - who'd "accidentally" mislaid said articles when passing them the bottoms earlier. 'I feel like I'm on display for anyone with a prurient interest in staring at my currently wasted abs...'
'Oh - like you weren't staring at the captain's ass earlier? She teased. Daiba caught Harlock's eye as he turned away, flushing, and bit back a smile at the exaggerated resigned sigh that accompanied an eye-roll. Guess he's used to it... Martian tended to be somewhat prudish regarding sex, especially the former Elites: low birth rates had led to a growing intolerance for same-sex relationships, at least publicly. Provided a citizen did their patriotic duty to keeping those rates up, blind eyes would be turned in private. But it did tend to make the Elite a hypocritical bunch at best - thankfully not something that seemed to have stuck with Harlock, and the crew as a whole were remarkably laid back compared to a lot of planetary populations he'd seen.

He pulled his attention back to the moment. 'Just think, if you'd gone any further into that wreck we'd all be eyeing your ass...' Daiba shot back, enjoying the flush that spread over the girl's face at the remark. Can't take it: don't dish it...

'I don't think it's you they want to stare at, kid,' Yattaran told him as Meg spluttered. 'Funny how many people aren't busy enough whenever the cap'n or Kei is workin' out... Either that or they all like to ogle a man with some meat on his bones...' he leered at Meg and deliberately laid his hands on his large stomach. She mimed sticking her fingers down her throat and skipped off. Behind her, Doc smirked. Harlock shifted against the wall and sighed, shaking his head slightly.

'Whilst I'll admit to liking a man with a bit of padding in the clinches, Yattaran, it wouldn't hurt you to lose a few pounds... you'll overtax the dark matter repair system trying to keep pace with your liver and heart... all that belly fat isn't good for you.' Her pithy putdown set Meg off giggling, but a slight frown from their captain seemed to be enough to settle them down again. He pushed his lean frame away from the wall with a fluid motion, and sauntered to the airlock of their small confinement.

'I hope you're here to tell me we can leave?'

Doc nodded, the motion loosening a lock of her dark hair from her pony tail, which she tucked primly back behind one ear absently. 'Well, you were right. Spores. Your suits were covered in them. Thankfully they don't seem to be viable, but we scrubbed everything regardless. I'd suggest one last shower though, before you get dressed.'

Daiba flinched. He still felt par boiled from the last three times - although admittedly only one had been water. His skin felt tight and papery from the decontamination chamber, and a finger drawn across the skin of his arm brought away a thin powdery coating that on reflection, he really felt the need to be rid of.

It seemed Harlock felt the same way, as the taller man strode ahead of them to the shower block in the quarantine bay, not waiting for either his first mate or his cousin to catch up. By the time Daiba reached the showers he was already stripped off and heading for the sealed low-g unit on the left, the door closing behind him. He shucked off his own pants and nipped into the second just as Yattaran waddled up, the door closing on the first mate's annoyed frown as he realised he'd have to wait. Small victories...

Meg of all people brought him some clean clothes to change into - not that he was vain by nature, but he had to admit she'd made a better selection than the last person who'd supplied his wardrobe - he suspected Harlock, never knowingly overdressed if he had to choose his own clothes, or so Kei told him. His cousin's choices ran strictly to utility and comfort. But in lieu of the faded tans and greys of his other gear, the jacket and pants of these leathers were a dark green with black trim, though the ubiquitous skull and crossbones adorned the right breast of the jacket in white. The boots were new as well - his old ones had been trashed by decontamination. He yanked everything on roughly, fumbling with the zip of the jacket, and eventually accepting help from Meg, who
shook her head at him in the same way his mother used to, and slapped his fingers away. A few feet away, Harlock was half dressed courtesy of the hovering help of Mimay, obviously struggling with his shoulder, as he eventually gave up on a jacket, and rolled his sweater sleeves up before pulling on a pair of scruffy brown gloves.

'Thanks,' he told the blonde girl gruffly. But unable to resist a dig added: 'Should I check for itching powder?' In reply she yanked the zip of his jacket up far harder than was strictly necessary, but then to his shock and surprise, placed a quick, light peck on his cheek before he could pull away.

'That's for earlier,' she said simply, before turning and walking away before he could say anything.

Harlock patted him on the shoulder. 'That goes double for me, but don't think I'm that grateful... I draw the line at kissing you. But you did well, talking Meg down safely. She was one of the kids Tadashi rescued from the Doppler Mining Corps about ten years ago. Tunnels still tend to freak her out.'

He remembered the story, vaguely. 'Wasn't Taro another?' He asked.

Harlock nodded. 'Barely two weeks old. His mother died in transit, before we raided the supply ship the container was on. After I hauled Ali's ass out of the mess he landed in trying to take down the operation, I came back to find Kei cuddling him as if she'd never let go, and she talked me into keeping him...'

A snort from Doc, standing in the doorway, interrupted him. 'My arse. You were cooing just as much, you big softy. I'd have had to go through you to drag him away from Kei - or our central computer, once he discovered our little foundling was one of his descendants, so don't try to act all tough.'

'Sayeth the woman who pretty much adopted Tadashi,' he shot back. He gave Daiba a fleeting, rueful grin. 'We do seem to have a habit of picking up strays, but thankfully most of the crew are pretty good with kids, considering. The worst part of the war was that there were always thousands we couldn't help for ever one we did. Even after that treaty was signed, the new Alliance did nothing about the abandoned worlds out here.' His voice was calm, but the icy look in his visible eye spoke volumes. 'Far too many were picked over by megacorps like Doppler's, seizing the opportunity to harvest cheap labour. Even today we still catch the occasional raid by Machinners ships, slipping round the borders to take what they can - the life capsule factories are still running at full strength, despite the propaganda with which the Alliance blankets the warp feed, and that's before we get into the skin traders... the brothel ships also prowl and prey on the abandoned and vulnerable.' He paused. 'We feared you might have been rolled up in one or the other when we lost your trail a couple of years back. Not that finding another threat to humanity helps matters. Between the Machinners, plague, our own greed and the threat posed by a missing Nibelung ship and the final Deathshadow-class vessel, this is one problem we didn't need.'

Daiba followed him as he headed back to the main spinal corridor of the ship, stretching his stride to keep pace before the other man noticed and slowed down. 'I'm still not sure what that threat is,' he mumbled. 'All the evidence from legends and the attacks on our family and other scientists over the years suggests something inside, trying to avoid detection. But if this ship belongs to the same species, then they were out here long before humans even evolved... so why now? Why are they so desperate to hunt me down? Why, if they've lived unseen for so long are they suddenly coming out of the shadows?'

'You assume that they are... try to divorce your own experience from what we actually know, Daiba. The trend in sabotage and removal of persons who could possibly identify them has been
un-noticed for a long time - certainly since before the Homecoming Wars. My own feelings are that they tried to keep our population low, after the diaspora. I'm hoping the records from the Aquatics will shed more light on this. They went after our families because we were involved in areas of concern - botany, biology, archaeology, anthropology... all of these could have posed a threat to a secretive race living and masquerading as human. But not all of the creatures we've seen have been human - the ones I saw on Hakidame were humanoid, but could no more pass as human than Mimay. Yet the women you were accused of killing did have documented lives - and at the very least I think we might be dealing with two very different species - one almost human in external appearance, one more obviously plant-like.

'Yet both burn up with that same blue flame when they die,' Daiba pointed out. 'Could it just be an illusion? I mean...' he stammered to a halt, and Harlock stopped walking and turned to face him. 'I always knew... to look at them. Something wasn't right. The way they move... the way they look at you. Even if trying to kill me in dark alleyways wasn't a dead giveaway... I mean... if I got it wrong... if they - if any of them - were really human... and I killed... I killed...'

He tried to meet Harlock's singular hazel gaze and failed, his head drooping downwards. It was all he could do not to cross his arms protectively across his chest, awaiting what in the past year or so had been a torrent of abuse and derisive dismissal of his claims. In the small hours of the morning he still found himself awake and tormented, wondering if he could trust a memory dulled and twisted by months of drugged recollection and reasoned, rational arguments by men in suits who usually ended up describing him as at best delusional, at worst murderously psychotic.

The hand that gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze restored enough equilibrium for him to look into the other man's eye, and a face that held only concern. 'I suspect we've both made decisions we regret. I can't honestly tell you that I've never killed an innocent bystander. Gaia knows, no battle is ever without unintended casualties, and the ones I know about still haunt me.

I've made decisions that have resulted in the deaths of hundreds if not thousands of people, and by one standard the Alliance has every right to want my head on a plate for my actions during the Machinners War, or the Battle for Earth. If I'm ever called to account for those who died because of me, there'll be a long line. It's healthy to doubt, to care... to do otherwise would truly make us monsters. But in the end you have to take responsibility for your actions, and stand by the consequences. Make amends where you can by all means, but you cannot let it overwhelm you to the point where you refuse to act whilst wallowing in guilt. That's just self-serving wangst and helps no-one. Ali often complained that I tended to sit on my hands and hesitate back in the early years, and he was right. That hesitation almost proved fatal on a couple of occasions, and I had to pull myself together. Better to act, to do something, than to let good people die by inaction.'

He let out a little huff and shook his head, a trademark tic when he didn't always agree with his own advice, Daiba had noticed. 'Well, it's one solution. But you don't have to take my word for it. Make your own path; as long as you don't decide to blow up the entire universe, I suspect you won't make too big a hash of things. If you did make any mistakes, they weren't made out of malice, and you still care enough that it hurts you. Like any pain it's there for a reason: to give you a warning that you need to ease up. Just don't let it overwhelm you.'

'How do you cope?' The question was impertinent, he thought, the moment it was out of his mouth. But Harlock regarded him quietly for a moment.

'Kei. My children. My friends. Being true to what I hold dear and what I believe. Those of us outside of society have to make our own rules, find our own path in life to what is worth fighting for, living for, or dying for. It's hard. We don't have that consensus that tells us that what we do is right. It takes a strength not many people have - it's not just war and plague that have caused
personnel shifts in my crew over the years. A lot just find the lack of formal structure hard to bear, and drift back to what normality they can find. Or lose heart and drift into an apathy that's hard to break. A community of rugged individualists isn't for everyone. "Pirate" as a label sounds Romantic, but the reality is a life lived without the safety net everyone else takes for granted. "Outlaw" means exactly that... outside all laws, all aid, except our own. We are the Galaxy's Most Unwanted. What bonds we do form can be undone in a heartbeat, when every man's hand can be set against us. What homes we do make can be taken away if those places we can call our own are claimed by the societies that we left behind. When those we love are hurt or sick, we only have the resources we've managed to take for ourselves, and it's too late then to complain that the choices we made have fatal consequences.' The look on his face was shuttered, impassive, but Daiba remembered the conversation they'd had back on Tabito about the death toll during the plague. Remembered a laughing little girl with light brown hair now buried in a mass grave...Yumi, his cousin's eldest child had been named, for his and Isora's mother...

Harlock continued: 'This new Galaxy Railway they plan, to link the inner and outer worlds, and eventually the Greater Magellanic Cloud and Andromeda... it's a truly amazing endeavour by humanity, but year by year the Free Space we roam will be brought back under the rule of law. Space may be infinite, but humanity's place in it is not. One day, there will be nowhere left to roam, even for the Arcadia, unless we strike out into the unknown.' He stared past Daiba, sadly serene.

'But surely not in our lifetime? I man, you're not immortal, like the other guy, are you?'

Harlock lowered his gaze and met Daiba's with a sad smile. 'Hopefully not. Immortality appears to be vastly over-rated, and the pursuit of it is a road littered with corpses. Our children are humanity's best future. And perhaps that's my biggest worry. We've taken steps to allow our children - all of them, not just mine and Kei's - to choose their path when old enough. Whether it will be enough...' he shrugged slightly. 'Maybe they'll have time enough to forge a path that won't be so lonely, without looking back over a shoulder with a price on their heads.' He paused again, and Daiba belatedly realised they'd reached a crossroads in the corridor, close to the Captain's quarters. 'Now look what you've made me do... Waxing lyrically morbid, and no Kei or Ali around to tell me to shut the hell up.' Daiba returned the wry smile Harlock gave him, as though the confidence shared was an unstated gift.

'Maybe you're just getting old,' he quipped. The observation earned him an easily ducked flick to the side of the head. 'See. Missed.'

'Brat,' Harlock called him, sounding amused. 'That earns you a session eating mat tomorrow.'

Daiba snorted. 'With that shoulder?' He pointed. 'You can't even pull a jacket on. Rotator cuff, I'm thinking?'

It earned him a sidelong stare. 'You do know I heal really fast, shrimp? And don't remind me... I might decide that the prat who couldn't nail a six foot jump needs a few sessions with me on the wall...'

It was an idle treat... the Arcadia's homebase apparently had an impressive climbing surface that just had to be a personal addition of her captain's. Ali had nicknamed it the Mordwand, after an ancient Earth rockface, or so he'd heard. A ridiculously insane climb from the inner to the outer levels via a core shaft on the hollowed out asteroid base the crew called Deathshadow Island. Harlock, Kei and Sabu were apparently the only crew who'd ever made it up in one piece, though climbing it was by invitation only, and the captain, despite being an unrepentant adreneline junkie, was - according to Zack at least - something of a stickler for safety... Daiba leaned against the wall,
arms folded, ankles crossed, and looked across at Harlock without comment. The only acknowledgement was a very slight twitch to the left corner of his mouth.

'Get some rest,' Harlock told him. 'I'm heading for my own bed, and you are not invited... we're breaking orbit shortly, and we'll be heading for Deathshadow Island. The facilities there are better equipped for analysing the data.'

Daiba grinned back at the dismissal. 'What do I do in the meantime?'

'Report to the range after breakfast for the duration of the trip. You missed that damn pod twice at short range and your tendency to fire wildly is something I fully intend to drill out of you as soon as possible. Ali, Kane and Roderigo will be more than happy to educate you in the finer points of gun safety.' This, he guessed, was The Captain back on the job, rather than family... 'After that, your arse is mine in the gym. Doc tells me you're more than well enough to start training in earnest, and if you truly want to be a part of this crew, it's past time you learned how to take care of yourself properly.'

He couldn't resist; he snapped a sharp salute and rapped out a 'yes sir!' to match. Harlock eyed him from under a lock of brown hair and sighed heavily. 'Wise ass...' he muttered. 'Go. Eat. Sleep, and take that damned cat with you...'

A plaintive meow announced Trouble twining his ginger tail around Daiba's ankles and purring loudly. Daiba picked the cat up and smiled into the soft fur, enjoying the scent and softness, and the way the little cat reached up a paw to tap him softly on the cheek. The little cat looked upwards and Daiba, forewarned, ducked as large black wings swooped low over his head and headed for Harlock, preceded by a smell that reminded him of week old fish.

Harlock deftly sidestepped the incoming bird with what looked suspiciously like long practice, and the long necked creature came to an ungainly stop in a heap on the floor, almost tripping over its feet trying to stay upright. 'Oh no you don't... what did we say about using me as a perch without leathers?' It ppprrked at him and settled to preening, much like a cat trying to maintain its affronted dignity.

'What is that smell?' Daiba asked. It really was noxious. Harlock sniffed and mimed gagging.

'If I had to guess, raiding the rubbish from the kitchens again. Anita tries to keep him out, but somehow he manages to get through every now and then. Not that I suspect the collusion of the central computer or anything... but last time he decided to nest in my wardrobe, and it took weeks to get the smell out...' A passing crewman was unlucky enough to be wandering nearby just then, and found himself unceremoniously placed in charge of the bird before he could make a quick exit. 'Damn thing,' he muttered, though from the small smile that followed that statement, it was half-hearted at worst. 'Bed, Daiba, or I'll send Anita to tuck you in.'

The door shut behind him with the heavy creak some wag had programmed into the controls long ago. Getting old... Harlock told himself as he dropped his jacket on the bed and unzipped his sweater. Too many miles on the clock, and the injuries, even with the fast healing granted by the dark matter, added up. Boots, trousers; both followed, missing the bed and hitting the floor and he left them where they lay. Sod it... I can pick them up later...

Once in the bathroom he lowered himself into the hot tub with a sigh of relief, punching the controls for maximum jet even as he felt the ship pull out of orbit, and the pressure the dark matter engine wrapped around his body.
A nagging thought refused to leave his head. *Something seen in the ship as he'd stood in that strange control room. Something familiar...* he sank a little deeper into the water, wishing he dared dunk his aching head long enough to wash away the pain chipping away at his left temple.

Slender, cool hands gently touched his temples, and began to move in slow circles, moving down to his neck and shoulders with practised expertise, knowing exactly how to release the tension in tired, strained muscles. He sighed and leaned shamelessly into Mimay's deft touch. 'As ever, you're a life-saver,' he told her softly.

A cool kiss briefly brushed his forehead as she leaned over him, unmindful of her dress trailing in the water. She handed him a towel as he stood, waiting until he climbed out of the tub before helping him dry off, despite his attempts to shoo her away.

'I'm a big boy now, mother... I don't need that much help,' he laughed, sprinkling her with water from his fingertips. She smiled back, but refused to be pushed away.

'You were hurt.' She handed him a clean shirt and some lighter pants, better suited for relaxing than the stiffer leathers. 'Zack brought your dinner, and I found a bottle of Sauternes in the stores.'

He laid a hand on her cheek. 'Thank you. As ever. But I suspect the latter is more to your tastes... have at it; it's not like I'd let that bunch of philistines loose on the old captain's stash...' they shared a conspiratorial smile, and he limped towards the table laid out with one of Anita's specials. 'Mimay - do you have that 3-d rendering of the Nodes of Time to hand?' He asked around a mouthful of steak.

Seated on her chaise-longue, goblet in hand, she peered at him around the bowl. 'Why do you ask?'

'Something's been bothering me since I got back... a pattern.' He pushed the plate away, still half full, and dragged up the footage from his helmet camera, quickly fast-forwarding the hologrammatic display until an image of the wall of the wreck's control room was visible. He zoomed in one area. 'Can you overlay the nodes onto this and pivot it around Earth as a point of origin?'

'The picture is only two dimensional,' she pointed out, as she rose gracefully and drifted over to his side. 'Tochiro?' She asked.

The picture twisted and reformed as the central computer obliged by converting the image. The spherical approximation of the nodes of time expanded to match the scale, then was rapidly re-orientated until the two overlayed each other.

'There'. Harlock pointed to an area. 'Tochiro - did you account for the expansion factor?'

There was an irritated huff from the desk speakers. 'Do I even need to dignify that with an answer, junior?'

'Sorry. But it was just too close a match, if this ship really is as old as Niobe calculated.'

'Ah. I did double check the calculations, but you were right to spot it. Five nodes, as far out as we got - all within two solar system-s which were so close they almost formed a binary solar system rather than a binary star and a singleton. None of them were on any of the planets though - took some careful placing to keep the oscillators in orbit around those three suns I can tell you...'

Mimay drifted closer and peered into the display. 'We placed these almost ninety years ago. No other nodes were so close.' She dropped elegantly into Harlock's lap, occasioning a sigh.
'I wish you wouldn't do that,' he teased. 'Boundaries?' She smiled back at him, but didn't move, just laid her head on his shoulder as she regarded the glittering hologram. He brushed her hair out of his face, and placed an arm around her thin shoulders. It unnerved some of the newer crew who couldn't get used to seeing her curl up against someone like an overgrown kitten, though she tended to gravitate to either Ali or Doc, both of whom were also perfectly happy to share a drink or three from the captain's private haul... he magnified the section of space in question. 'Tochiro - can you show me a real-time display of this area from the time-radar? We do have the navigation information, don't we?'

'Coming up. Getting a relay through the warp feed from Bolzar's telescope.' A pause.

'Tochiro?' Mimay's voice held a nervous note all of a sudden.

'Come on, my friend - it doesn't take you this long usually,' Harlock teased, but he felt goosebumps rise on his arms... his sense that something was very, very wrong was almost overwhelming.

'They're gone, Harlock.' Tochiro's voice was subdued, a rarity for the ebullient voice of the Arcadia. 'All five oscillators. And the two systems...'

The display changed, to show the same area of space - the surrounding parts of that area of a galaxy he couldn't put a name to off the top of his head were intact, but where a binary star and a white dwarf had been, orbited by over a dozen planets between them, there was only emptiness.
The laughter from the watching crew was not mocking, as once again the slight figure of the Arcadia's newest recruit hit the mat and rolled. He was back onto his feet before his opponent could capitalise on the throw, grinning smugly.

'Wipe that smirk off his face, captain!' Ali called out gleefully, cackling as the youth flipped him a middle finger before charging at his opponent - slightly taller, with a longer reach and years of experience behind him. Despite the younger man's energy and speed, the fight didn't last long, and Daiba slapped his free hand against the mat to signal his surrender after a feint left him exposed and quickly swept to the floor by a long leg, and then sat on with his other arm neatly twisted into what felt like a pretzel.

Laughing, Harlock let him loose and stood up, offering a helping hand which was eyed warily. 'You planning on pulling me over again?' Daiba asked, mindful of a trick. Fighting fair wasn't something the pirates were big on, but then, when you had the price of a year's worth of food or energy capsules on your head, fair was un-affordable... but he took the offered aid and got to his feet, breathing harder, he noticed, than the older man. Something that would have to change, he noted glumly to himself.

'You're improving. A week ago I'd have had you five moves ago.' Harlock grabbed a towel from a hovering crewman and wiped his face, pushing sweat dampened hair out of his good eye as he did. 'You still leave yourself open though. Too quick to rush in when you see what might be an opening. A skilled opponent would have you for breakfast in a real fight.'

'Maybe I should be fighting one then?' he quipped, grabbing a towel of his own from a pile on a nearby bench, and wiping down briskly. His sodden t-shirt lay on the floor and he picked it up, grimacing at the feel of cold sweat soaking the fabric.

'You really are a glutton for punishment,' Harlock told him, but the comment was friendly. 'Leave the shirt, Erik's on clean up. Kei's always on at me to leave the men something to do.' He picked up his eyepatch from the pile of his own clothing. 'That was a nasty little trick by the way, trying to blindside me. A word of caution though - any man who lives a long time after losing an eye won't fall for that easily. Always assume your enemy can see every feint coming and will have a counter. Every man I've ever fought who was in a similar position used their blind spot as a sucker. Yes, we're at a disadvantage, but we're also devious, sneaky bastards.'

'I gathered,' Daiba replied dryly as they headed for the showers. 'I thought you were trying to turn me into a eunuch at one point.' He still felt a little tender in the groin from a particularly nasty knee to the nuts... 'On which note, sorry about the hair pulling...'

'Keep telling him to cut his Earth-damned girly hair,' Ali sniggered as he strode up to them, a towel casually draped over muscular shoulders. 'His own stupid fault if you yanked a couple of handfuls out. Mind you, smacking his head into the mat like that was impressive...'

'Yes, thank you, Ali. The support of my faithful, hard working and ever loving crew is always appreciated,' Harlock drawled sarcastically.

'Any time, cap'n.' Ali waved a hand back over his shoulder at them as he sauntered past.

'Is it me, or does it just sail right over his head?' Daiba asked. He was rewarded with a brief smile. Since Tokarga they seemed to have begun to settle into a new orbit. As if Harlock had finally
stopped looking for the little boy he'd watched grow up, and was now accepting the young man he'd become. For his own part, he felt more at ease than he had in over four years. He wasn't whole... but he had found a firm place to stand, at least for now.

Harlock sighed. 'Oh, he does it deliberately. Sometimes I think he still sees that snot nosed little punk Kei dragged aboard like a wet kipper. I think he needs to; I don't think any of the original crew want a repeat performance of what happened with their old captain. It's their way of keeping me safe.'

'Huh. Keep telling yourself that!' Daiba ducked the business end of a wet towel aimed at his head as they entered the showers. He might have made a further quip, but was distracted by girlish laughter, and blushed to the roots of his regrowing hair as he realised the changing rooms were occupied by Meg, Niobe and Anita, all in the process of drying off. Whilst the ample curves of the Arcadia's cook and quartermaster were just disturbing in a motherly way, the two young women were far harder to ignore, and it made his eyeballs ache attempting to keep them focused anywhere but on two very pretty girls. Both of whom were obviously aware of his discomfort and took no great haste in dressing.

Harlock took pity on him. 'Put those back in the holsters, girls; what did Kei teach you about leaving weapons out if you don't intend to use them?'

'Sorry captain.' Niobe at least was quick enough to cover up, though her cheerful grin made it clear she was enjoying making Daiba sweat. Meg as ever was less obliging.

'It's just so cute how he blushes...' she gushed slyly. 'I just can't help it.'

'Try.' Was the laconic response from their guardian and captain. He gave Daiba a merciful shove through into the cubicles, but Daiba hung back slightly, just enough to hear Anita launching into a lecture. Under the circumstances, however, he ducked into a cubicle before stripping off. Nice. Now he needed a cold shower...

'Did you ever consider spanking as an option raising that one?' He asked as Harlock joined him in the next booth. The captain laughed.

'Tempting, but no. My own father was a little free with his fists, I didn't fancy continuing the trend. Kei usually does better at keeping the girls in line. Anita's as soft on them as I am - I think she wanted daughters herself. A battlefield injury pretty much put the option of any siblings for Zack out of the running, she told me once. Ignore them - it's harmless teasing' even if a little insensitive, and your reaction just makes them worse.'

'Harmless he says - you're not the one shivering his arse off under a cold shower...'

'I have children; trust me, I'm intimately acquainted with the lower temperature settings,' was the dry response.

Once dressed again, he passed Harlock his gunbelt as he waited on his captain to finish. 'How long until we get to this fortress of yours? It's been over a week, how far out is it?'

'About twelve hours.' Harlock took the belt and cinched it into place around his waist, over a dark grey jacket. He settled the pistol into place at his hip. 'The island has better analysis facilities for the data, which will lessen the load on Tochiro's systems. Most of the Arcadia's computational power is taken up with core systems. Which yes, does include Tochiro himself. I've also asked Kei to meet us there. Otherwise I risk breaking a promise, and I'd hate to do that.'
Daiba followed him out of the showers. 'Promise?'

Harlock smiled. 'One I wouldn't break for the world...'

Harlock headed for the central computer room after leaving Daiba to the tender mercies of his crew. He smiled to himself as he walked. At least the lad wouldn't be bored...he had a quick mind once he applied himself, and good reflexes. Whether he chose a combat or a technical post, he'd do well enough.

Ali, Yattaran and Mimay awaited him, along with the hologrammatic form of Tochiro - not strictly necessary, but his ghostly friend made a point of interacting with the crew more visibly as a courtesy.

He turned his attention to Ali first. 'Did you manage to get the data I asked for?'

Ali nodded, his frown even deeper than usual, if such a thing was possible. 'Had to call in a favour or three at the observatory, but yeah. I got it.' He grimaced. 'You ain't gonna like it.'

'Tochiro?'

The four - five if you counted the ghost- were enveloped in a 3-d representation of a star chart. Guided by Tochiro, it rotated around them until they were looking at a small galaxy.

'DDO 208 - "Draco" - a dwarf galaxy approximately .258 Million light-years distant from Earth, and as the name suggests, visible in the constellation of the same name. It's a satellite of the Milky Way, and according to the records quite high in Dark Matter. It's quite faint, mostly composed of old stars, mostly red giants.' Tochiro began quietly. 'This is a representation of the state of this galaxy from before the Homecoming War, from our own databanks.'

The display changed, showing a more detailed section of the galaxy; a binary system of a Red Giant with a smaller main sequence companion had six planets, mostly gas giants, but one Earth sized planet sat in what Harlock recognised as a sweet spot, and there were several habitable moons, looking at the data orbiting the visuals in the headache-inducing display. A nearby white dwarf appeared to have three small planets.

'From our records,' Mimay chimed in. 'Five nodes were clustered in this area - two in the binary system, one in the white dwarf and two here and here,' she pointed out the two areas, both in interstellar space but astronomically practically on top of each other.

'Still seems a bit close for comfort...' Ali commented dryly. 'Even allowing for imperfect expansion during the Big Bang, that has to be a bit of a coincidence... two would be astonishing, five is stretching probability...'

Yattaran snorted, the sound not unlike a pig in muck. 'Wise up, Rocky, shows you know nothing about maths - especially probability and random numbers. A cluster is as likely as a wide dispersion - more so in this star cluster, given the dark matter concentrations, which I'd guess slowed down the expansion rate. it's only humans who see patterns in random scatter.' He gave Mimay a wink. 'Unless your lot were as prone to write pretty pictures in the stars, kitten?'

She smiled at him and inclined her head gracefully, her long hair floating around her like another veil. Green fireflies drifted towards Tochiro's phantom image and twinkled through it. 'I suspect all sentient life seeks to make sense in the chaos around them, first mate. We too drew pictures in the night sky in our youth.'
'Whilst this is all very nice, could we move this along a little?' Harlock asked dryly from his perch on one of the rootlike appendages in front of the trunk of the central computer.

Tochiro sighed. 'You have no soul, sometimes, my friend,' the little man twitted him. Harlock smiled.

'For plants, yes. Not so much for large rocks and big flaming balls of gas. So can we please give the poor benighted botanist the Astronomy 101 version please? In case you forget, Kei handles the big scary numbers...'

Ali rolled his eyes at him. 'Remind me again why we let you be captain?'

'Because the rest of you were too damn lazy - or saw it as a poisoned chalice,' he shot back. Ali opened his mouth to object, but then shared a look with Yattaran and shrugged.

'Yeah, I guess he has us there...' he muttered with a grin.

'Anyway,' Tochiro continued smoothly; a non-existent hand pushed equally non-existent glassed back up his nose. 'If the peanut gallery will let me continue...' The display changed again, and now where three stars had been, there was only a void. 'No planets, no debris, no dust. Not even a radiation signature,' the voice of the Arcadia's soul told them. 'This was fifty years ago.'

'Is that possible?' Yattaran asked, prodding at the image as though it personally offended him.

'Wise up, fatso - shows you know nothing about the operation of Dimensional Oscillators,' Ali smirked. Yattaran flipped him the bird. 'Those things were built to remove hazards to astro-navigation, and there's a reason they had the word "dimension" in the description. The explosion is designed to tear a whole in space-time and drop the affected area - including all debris and energy - into another pocket dimension - at least, that's the theory - personally I hope to hell non of those other dimensions were occupied - we'd have some very pissed off aliens on our front door at some point if they were...'

'It's akin to a man-made singularity,' Tochiro added, with a nod to the burly geologist. 'There's nothing there to analyse, but my guess would be that one of the devices was triggered prematurely, and a chain-reaction set off the other four...'

'Dropping an entire section of space into another dimension...' Harlock finished for him. 'How come this went totally un-noticed by anyone?'

Yattaran dragged the toe of a boot along the floor, the resulting metallic screech setting everyone's nerves on edge.

'Please don't do that,' Tochiro asked him, a pained expression on his wide, pleasant face.

'Sorry. Eh. To be fair, it isn't as though any of us were on board at the time, apart from you two,' he motioned to the hologram and to Mimay. 'Captain never asked for any monitoring once the bombs were set, I figured he'd know if anything went tits up... I mean, if this blew up fifty years ago, then...' he trailed off, looking unhappy.

'...then even before we got to Earth, his plan was a bust. It was all for nothing.' Harlock's voice was soft, but bitter in tone, and he rose to his feet to stare at the void. 'His great plan never had a hope of succeeding, did it? All those deaths, all that pain, and it could have been - was - undone by a freak accident. How many more of those things have been set off before they could have been detonated?'
'Yeah... about that,' Ali ran a hand through his short hair, and scratched at one of his long sideburns. 'You remember we used one of 'em to knock out Loki's little project... these things don't go off by themselves as a rule. They are pretty tough to detonate without the codes. A chance strike by debris or malfunction that could set one off would be a million or more to one shot. Hell, it took three of us resident geniuses to jury-rig one to blow on command...' 

Harlock nodded. 'I remember... I also recall I had to make a suicidally stupid jump from the upper atmosphere of Lar Metal to rescue you and Kei afterwards... ' he grimaced. 'I still have nightmares about that little manoeuvre...' He walked over to a side terminal and keyed up the footage from his helmet camera. 'Leaving that aside, here's the real kicker from Tokarga.' 

The display showed the walls of the control room inside the wreck, each of which was covered in a frieze which showed creatures totally unfamiliar to them. Gracile, bipedal figures identical to the female form in the capsule danced across the walls, mingled with four and six limbed creatures with no known equivalent, though some bore a resemblance to the centaurs - as Daiba had dubbed them. 

On another wall, a projection of a planetary surface covered one entire panel; a single continent surrounded by ocean. 'Recognise this, people?' Harlock asked. 

'The break up of Pangaea,' Ali said quietly. 'Early Cenozoic era, and around the time the Tethys Ocean began to close up.' He pointed to the map. 'Here, you can see Laurasia already starting to split, and the continents are starting to take on the form from our history books...' 

'That's Earth?' Yattaran asked. He peered more closely. 'You sure? Don't look like any map I've ever seen...' 

'Yeah, I'm sure,' Ali replied firmly. 'The projection is centred on what became Antarctica, which is one reason it looks weird to us - usually our maps were orientated either around Europe or Asia, depending on prevailing politics, that is. But any geologist knows the Terran progression of continental drift and the history of their discipline.' He looked at his captain and grinned. 'Same goes for any biologist or botanist, I'm thinking?' 

Harlock nodded. 'I studied the progression of life on Earth, and its evolution. The effects of the super-continent breaking up on ecological systems...' he trailed off with an embarrassed cough and ran a hand through his hair. 'Oh, it's Earth all right. And that ship has been buried on this planet since the dinosaur killer hit sixty-five million years ago.' 

'Which suggests they - whoever "they" are - left Earth to avoid it. Perhaps.' Tochiro added. 'Presumably going here...' the display now showed another panel, this time a familiar star system. 'The Draco galaxy - and here -' another shot - 'The star system that's now history. Allowing for stellar drift...' 

Yattaran gave his captain a sharp look. 'How the hell did you spot that? Topographical distortion like that ain't usually your area...' 

His captain feigned a hurt look. 'I'm wounded, first mate... I'm not just a pretty face, you know.' He smiled ruefully. 'It was nagging at me... the solar systems are pretty unique in that cluster, and I've seen a couple of similar frescoes from Professor Daiba's files from Niflheim. We'd already determined that Mimay's people were aware of these plant-like aliens in the distant past. Not in the forms we've seen, however, but that's an oddity for another day.' 

'So did we - the captain - blow up their new home or something?' Ali asked. He sighed and shook his head. 'Oh man... those bloody oscillators keep coming back to haunt us, don't they?' He looked
over to Harlock, who leaned against the central computer core's trunk, arms folded. 'Ever wonder if you should have just persuaded Kei to make a run for it and lived out your days on some quiet little backwater?'

'All the bloody time,' Harlock replied quietly, but with feeling. 'But it seems I have a conscience.'

Mimay laid a hand on his arm, and smiled at him. 'You have never been the kind of man who runs from responsibility, even for problems that were not of your making.'

'No,' he replied softly, 'although I'd dearly like some quality time on the mats with my predecessor.' He sighed. 'We've a lot of work ahead when we reach Deathshadow Island. Hopefully Tokarga's biosphere will answer a few more questions.' With a nod to his friends, he left the computer room. Tochiro faded out quietly, leaving just the two men and their Nibelung companion.

Yattaran let out a low whistle. 'Gotta say, he's takin' it well, under the circumstances.'

Ali shook his head and shared a long hard glance with the ethereal alien at his side. 'No, he ain't. If Harlock - the old one - were in this room right now he'd be having his head stuffed through one of those servers about now.' He jerked his head in the direction their captain had gone. 'I'd be a lot happier if he'd just cut loose and take a swing at something. I get nervous when he goes all quiet-like. And he's right - he shouldn't be having to pick up the crap Harlock left behind him.'

'He didn't say that,' Yattaran pointed out.

Ali snorted. 'You weren't listenin', first mate.' He rubbed at the scar on his forehead. 'Ah, fuck... he ain't the only one who'd like a piece of the old cap'n. Bastard knew damn well Yama wouldn't run out on us, or run from the load he left on his shoulders, didn't he?' He turned a sour gaze on Mimay, who didn't meet his eyes. 'He's one of the few good'uns that family ever turned out, if you ask me.' With that he turned on his heel and stomped out, leaving a shuffling Yattaran to take his own leave awkwardly.

Mimay sighed sadly, green fireflies drifting around her in a fluttering cloud. 'As much as we loved him, they have the truth of it,' she said out loud. The central computer's swirling red lights flared in answer. She laid a pale hand on the trunk. 'So much of this we could have prevented. We knew his nature. Perhaps if we had loved him less and guarded him more from himself...'

The rumble from the core held a sorrowful note. In reply, Mimay laid her head against the cool surface of the central trunk, and closed her eyes.

Ali caught up with Harlock half way to the captain's quarters, and fell inside beside him without an invitation. 'You know, it ain't too late for me to just knock you on the head, kidnap Kei and the kids and drop the whole kit and kaboodle off on some nice quiet backwater where you can settle down to raise kids and corn, or whatever takes yer fancy...'

They reached the heavy double doors of the captain's room, and Harlock gestured Ali to enter in front of him. The burly pirate made his way over to the desk in front of the picture window, poured a large measure from the bottle on the desktop, and downed half of it in one swallow.

'Make yourself at home,' Harlock told him dryly. Ali grinned, grabbed the bottle and flopped down into the chaise longue usually occupied by Mimay, albeit with considerably less grace.

'Don't mind if I do...' he quipped.

Harlock dropped into the chair behind the desk with a heavy sigh, and unzipped his jacket. 'Too
late for that by a large margin,' he said eventually. He pulled off his gloves and dropped them to the desktop. 'Live out here long enough, and it gets under your skin. Live free long enough and you expand to the point where even if you wanted to, you can't stuff yourself back into the box marked "civilisation". Stare every day at a limitless horizon and you feel constricted by the way land meets sky almost in front of your nose.'

Ali snorted. 'Been practicing that speech much to explain to Kei why we're still sticking our necks on the block?'

Harlock leaned down to open a cupboard door, pulled out a bottle of some amber liquid with a faded label, and poured a generous measure. He raised the glass to his lip and swallowed slowly, savouring. 'Shows how little you know Kei. She's the one who told me that, four years ago.'

Ali gulped down the rest of his drink and poured another. Given the timing, he didn't need to ask what had occasioned that conversation. 'Lost a lot of good people that year. Old friends. Family... shit. The Homecoming War is still the gift that keeps on giving. Pity this one don't respond to a couple of antibiotic shots and a lecture on safe sex...'

The corner of Harlock's mouth twitched, before he allowed a genuine laugh to break loose. 'Trust you to find a way of describing a situation that leaves me not knowing whether to laugh or reach for a mental scrubbing brush. You're one of a kind...'

'I know,' Ali interrupted smugly. 'Charming, drop dead gorgeous, ace pilot, crack shot, and galaxy's greatest lover all wrapped up in one perfect package...'

'... and yet strangely no-one tells barroom tales about the legend of Space Pirate Captain Ali...'

Harlock replied smoothly, with a wicked smile.

Ali swung his boot legs over the arm of the chaise longue and raised his glass to his friend and captain. 'You just don't frequent the right bars, Harlock,' he said with a wink. He met Harlock's eye with his own gaze, rather more soberly. 'Every piece of shit that comes back to haunt us seems to originate there, doesn't it? Which ain't, I suppose, really your dear departed ancestor's fault either. The war, that is - not the dives I get hammered in.' Another gulp. 'If you're right about these things - plant women, whatever - trying to keep humanity in check, might well be they got hoist by their own petard on this one. In which case I ain't weeping too hard, and for once, we might just want to cut the man a little slack.'

Harlock ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back out of his good eye, which it permanently threatened to obscure. 'Maybe. But he was careless. And even at the end it was all about him. His pain, his redemption. Sometimes I'm not sure he learned a damn thing.'

Ali shrugged. 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions, they say. He was a good man once. I guess, like you, he just cared too much. Nothing worse for turning cynical than a disillusioned romantic. And after a while it's hard to give a shit if you think you can just reset to a save point like a kid's video game, innit? Just start over if you screw up, who cares? We all felt the same - didn't matter if we killed a few hundred Gaia Fleet soldiers, they were just faceless mooks, no harm, no foul.' He stared into his drink. 'Except there was a foul, and there's a conga line of people lined up waitin' to tell me what they think of Mama Jones' little boy once I finally reach the end of the game. Probably led by Ma, now I come to think of it, telling all and sundry what a horrible disappointment I've been.'

Harlock snorted and handed him a fresh bottle. 'Were you listening in on a conversation I had with Daiba a few days ago?' He tossed over the corkscrew. Whilst Ali set about pulling the cork, he reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a cumbersome device, easily gripped by one hand by a
much larger man - less so in Harlock's smaller one. Ali flinched.

'I really wish you could just chuck that in the nearest star...' he muttered. 'Though with - what is it now? Eight down? Maybe it wouldn't be so risky to destroy it...'

'I'd still prefer not to.' Harlock replaced the dimensional oscillator detonator and closed the drawer again, to the accompaniment of a relieved sigh from Ali. 'This recent revelation just makes it all the more important that we decommission the rest - or at least as many as we can.' He sighed. 'Shame we can't subcontract,' he added wistfully, raising a smile from the blond pirate.

Ali gave him a sideways stare. 'I'm so glad you're joking. I don't even want to think about those things in anyone else's hands.'

'You do remember they were originally the property of the government...' Harlock drawled.

Ali raised his glass. 'And you keep making my point for me...' they shared a wry smile.

The door opened to admit Mimay, closely followed by the rustling swoop of soft black wings. The bird perched on the end of the bed and settled down to preening its feathers, beak clacking as it nuzzled deep into the primaries. Mimay hesitated, seeing Ali lounging in her spot. Ali held out the bottle and swung his legs round to sit upright. 'Room for two, sweetheart,' he told her with a wink. Her tiny mouth curled into a sweet smile, and she click-clacked her way across the floor, and sat down, curling up against him. He caught a goblet tossed by Harlock and poured her a glass, draping an arm casually over her shoulder as she leaned back against him. Ali winked at Harlock. 'Aww... we need to get you a girlfriend!' He teased.

'I'm deliriously happy with the one I have, thank you,' he replied. 'And I'll be even happier in a couple of hours when we reach the Island.' He tugged off his patch and rubbed the useless eye. 'Were you planning on staying for dinner...?' He asked pointedly.

Ali's grin got even wider. 'Thought you'd never ask!'

Harlock sighed. 'That wasn't an invitation...' he grinned as Mimay elbowed Ali in the ribs for his effrontery and turned her innocent expression on the big pirate when he objected. 'Never mind, I guess I can use the company...'

Ali settled back with a shit-eating smile plastered over his face. 'See how easy that was?'

'Don't push your luck,' Harlock mock growled at him. He reached for the comms. 'I can still ask Anita to cook your steak all the way through...' he threatened, laughing at his companion's look of horror at the suggestion.

'Oi, rookie - wanna take a look?'

Daiba paused in the act of heading for the lower bridge station he'd been assigned, and looked up to the skull-fronted gantry, where Yattaran leaned over, waving at him. 'Get yer ass up here kid! First sight of this baby is always a jaw-dropper!' Daiba paused in the act of heading for the lower bridge station he'd been assigned, and looked up to the skull-fronted gantry, where Yattaran leaned over, waving at him. 'Get yer ass up here kid! First sight of this baby is always a jaw-dropper!'

Daiba looked over to Ali, nominally his boss on this watch, and the grumpy pirate waved him off. He strolled to the gantry stairs and bounded up them two at a time, arriving behind the Captain's throne with his hands stuffed casually into his pockets. 'So what am I looking at?' He asked the back of Harlock's head, as he stood at the wheel, hands apart on the balusters and legs braced. 'Gotta ask - how does that thing work on a spaceship anyway?'
Yattaran turned and glared at him through his thick glasses. 'You know, if I got a hundred credits for every smart-ass teenager who asks that question...' he growled. Daiba just turned his best shit eating grin on him.

'I know. Zack dared me to ask.'

Yattaran turned back to his station muttering. All Daiba caught was '...ing wise ass punk...'

'Daiba.' The quiet rebuke in Harlock's voice was unmistakable, and he sauntered over to his cousin's side.

'Is that it?' He asked, staring at the main screen. It was filled with a large, rather ordinary oval asteroid. Then his brain caught up with his eyes and he turned his attention back to Harlock. 'Oi - Ali - I think we have an imposter!' He ran an appraising eye over the older man's form as he stood braced behind the wheel. Burgundy pants tucked into smart black knee boots with the tops neatly turned down. A cream sweater, long sleeves for once not rolled up to his elbows, and gloves to match the pants. The cream fall of a cravat under the high collar finished off the ensemble. 'Is that cashmere? Who are you and what did you do with the captain?' He asked with a smirk.

It earned him a long-suffering look from a hazel eye, briefly turned in his direction before returning to concentrate on the screen. 'Everyone's a critic...' he muttered. 'There are more important things to worry about than my wardrobe,' he added a trifle acidly.

From the lower deck Daiba heard Ali snort. 'Yeah, but not quite so much damn fun...' he called up, to fond laughter from the crew. 'That's his lucky sweater... never fails to get Kei's paws running all over him; She usually fights a losing battle to get him to look the part of a dashing space pirate.' He sniggered. 'Not so much when he's looking to get his leg over!'

'I'm going to treat that contempt with the remark it deserves, once I can think of something suitably pithy,' Harlock drawled.

From the laughter, Daiba gathered the teasing was in good part on all sides, and shook his head. He caught the quirky smile on Harlock's face and returned it with a brief grin of his own. 'So, this is Deathshadow Island? Where do we park?'

'Watch and learn...' Harlock told him. 'Yattaran - send the gate code.'

On the screen, Daiba watched as the surface of the asteroid split open, revealing an irised gate which opened slowly to reveal a deep tunnel in the interior, well lit along all surfaces. Slowly, the Arcadia advanced towards this, nosing gently into the revealed dock.

'Holy... this thing can hold the Arcadia?' He knew the ship to be over a kilometre long, and most docks would need to be well over that to hold the ship. Factor in the depth needed so that an interior dock would be structurally sound...

'Five klicks in diameter,' Yattaran told him proudly. 'And she can hold another three capital ships in sub-docks.' Sure enough, he watched as they gently passed the comparatively tiny form of the Futatsuboshi. Deep bell-like clangs echoed through the bridge as the docking clamps grabbed the ship and locked into place. 'It's an old battle fortress for re-supply and repairs from before the Homecoming War. Several members of a consortium within the old Gaia Sanction High Council had commandeered it and had it converted into a luxury holiday home... the old habitat was converted into a little piece of paradise - artificial seaside resort, spa, restaurant, apartments... we liberated it before the Machine Wars, in a nice little fuck-you to a couple of Councillors who didn't deserve nice things. We've been putting it to much better use.'
'We had a lot of the interior space converted to hydroponics and other growing habitats,' Harlock said softly. He released the wheel and stepped back, grabbing his jacket from the captain's seat as he walked past. 'Several experimental agricultural projects have their home here as well. We've been trying to find ways to repair the damage done to planets like Mistral during the war, when they were laid waste by the Machinners.' He smiled sadly. 'It's not just a holiday resort for cut-throats, in case you were wondering.'

Daiba followed him down the stairs and towards the main airlock. 'I do have a higher opinion of you than that,' he replied. 'I guess this is part of what you meant when you said you were fairly independent supply-wise?'

A grunted acknowledgement.

'And a place where you can get a grip on some of the information we've gathered?'

Another non-committal barely verbal reply was his only acknowledgement as he trotted to keep up with Harlock's longer legs. 'So, about my allowance...'

This at least earned a world-weary sigh. 'Nice try, I am listening.'

'Just a little distracted, huh?'

That got him a backward glance over his left shoulder. 'I'm just realising that I have this to look forward to in ten years; in duplicate...'

Daiba clapped him on the shoulder. 'But in the meantime, they're still at the cute larval stage. You've got some grace before they turn into mouthy, cocky teenagers...'

The airlock was ahead, open, with a clear view over to where a gantry linked the Arcadia to the dockside, where a tall figure with long blonde hair stood surrounded by a small crowd of children. Daiba hung back as the small tidal wave of next generation pains in the ass ran onto the gantry, almost flattening their father. They were followed by Kei; walking slowly at first, but within a few steps she was running, fielded by Harlock with practiced ease as she practically leapt into reach of his arms, and he whirled her around gently, laughing.

Daiba jumped as Ali slapped him on the back hard enough to stagger him, but the irritated glare he turned on the other man went unremarked. 'Told ya,' Ali said smugly as the pair came up for air. 'Lucky sweater.' Sure enough, Kei's hands were roaming with abandon over her partner's back.

'I heard that,' Kei called out, laughing. 'Let go of him, Ali. He's family. Get Yattaran and Anita to organise the samples and then join the first rotation.'

Ali snapped her a salute. 'Yes sir ma'am sir!' He laughed as she stuck her tongue out at him from over Harlock's shoulder. He gave Daiba a little shove when the youth stood hesitantly. 'You heard her, git goin'!'

Daiba took an involuntary step forward, and had to brace himself as four pint-sized shapes launched themselves at him and swarmed en-masse, babbling away nineteen to the dozen and leading him off the ship and into the heart of the station, following their parents.

Ali leaned back against the airlock, arms folded, watching the little group with an indulgent smile, before pushing himself back upright with a sigh. 'Enjoy it while you can, kid... Things always end up going south around us faster than a pair of saggy coveralls.'
'Mister glass half empty, much?' Doc murmured next to him. He reached over and gave her ponytail a gentle tug.

'Just a feelin... got a nasty itch right between the shoulder blades.'

'For that, I have a powder...' Doc quipped. She linked her arm with his. 'Why don't we do what the nice bossy lady XO asked and get this shit out of my lab space and into the Island's facility, and then grab a drink or three, big guy?'

He grinned down at her. 'Sounds like a plan, Doc. Just one request?'

'Hmm?'

'Can you shut the damn cat out of your room this time? I still have the claw marks...'

She grinned back at him as the door slid shut behind them. 'Ali love... you still blaming the cat for those...?'
Chapter 12

Irita re-read the report for the second time, and placed it down on his desk with an irritated sigh. His pince-nez glasses were living up to their name and he tugged them off his nose, placed them neatly in front of him on the desk, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

'Corporal Kiruta, isn't it?' He looked over towards the small desk that took up the corner of his office nearer the door, occupied by a tiny scrap of femininity in an IntSec uniform.

'Sir? Yes. I mean, yes sir. Tami Kiruta.'

'I set you the task of examining the records to track other members of Harlock's family. Thus far, one five hundred word report which amounts to "no trace" is not ringing my bell.'

'I'm sorry sir, but I struggled with the Family Registration records office. Lieutenant Yama and Admiral Isora don't seem to have a family name, and the Martian records don't list one for their father either... Even Harlock himself - the one from the Homecoming War - is hard to trace. Before the age of about twenty-four it's as though he didn't exist.'

Irita resisted the urge to sigh again. 'Corporal - you're from one of the colony worlds, correct?'

'Yes sir. Luxor sir.'

Another world which had freely accepted the Alliance accords, if he recalled correctly. Most of the civilised - in the original sense of the word - planets had done so. But they remained colonies, in their outlook. He had to hide a sneer at her provincial ignorance.

'Martian Elite families gained their position by dint of documented descent from important Earth lines. Many of them dropped a family name by the twenty-fifth century; it became a mark of nobility - only the middle and working classes kept them. The exceptions are the Heads of Family, the oldest male heirs who traditionally took the family name as a given name and dropped their childhood name upon the death of the previous holder. Therefore if looking for Harlock around a hundred and twenty five years ago, I suggest you try the lists of commissioned officers aged twenty to twenty five the prior year who don't appear under that name later and who aren't listed as KIA. And whilst you're about it, run a comparison on the physical descriptions - there cannot be too many men of that age standing over six and a half feet tall with dark brown hair and brown eyes. You might also want to check records that list anyone stationed alongside a Toshiro "Tochiro" Ōyama, in the Engineering Corps. The two were supposedly inseparable.'

'Sorry sir.' His young - very young - aide blushed to the roots of her black hair. 'I guess I just didn't think to widen the parameters of the search. I though I could backtrack from the current data.'

He grunted. 'In Intelligence, Corporal, never assume. Especially never assume that you've been given all the information. Don't think of it as "thinking outside the box" or whatever dumb buzzword Personnel currently use - there is no box. Am I clear?'

'Yes sir. Thank you sir.'

This time the sigh refused to be contained. 'Corporal, at least in the office, dispense with the eternal sir-ing. You're not in boot camp. Captain will do just fine, and stop apologising for everything. It's annoying.'

'Yes s- captain.'
'Better.'

He was rewarded with a shy smile, that actually made her rather plain features look reasonably pleasant. She'd never be a pretty woman. For which he was largely thankful. He had enough problems dealing with his red-headed superior and her weaponised sexuality.

A subtle hint of a scent that should be banned under any civilised conventions for control of chemical warfare (sub clause: sex appeal) was his warning that his office was about to be invaded by a force of one. He looked over to the doorway in time to watch his superior sashay her way through the arch with a fluid hip-sway that would command a small fortune from one of the high-end escort agencies sufficient to fund most government departments for six months.

A sniff from his assistant suggested that the effect on the male of the species was duly noted and disapproved of. Or maybe she just found the perfume aggravated an allergy. From the carefully bland expression being cultivated by the corporal, his money was on the former.

'Thank you, corporal. Take a break and close the door.'

Once the door slid shut silently, he gestured to the chair in front of his desk. 'Director.'

She sat, making the simple change of posture a graceful exercise that reminded him of a leopard eying up its prey. Lesser men, he reasoned, would be on their knees in front of her before now. Thankfully the weaknesses of the flesh had never interested him. Observing her polished manipulation however was entertaining. Did she truly believe he could be rendered tractable by her display?

She leaned towards him, the gesture drawing attention to the way her breasts moved under the tight - but not overly so - demure sweater. Obviously yes, then...

'Captain. I hear your suggestion regarding the policing of the Colony Worlds was received with some enthusiasm by the Council,' she smiled at him. 'Though the Prime Minister was a little put out that you refused to entertain a tender for the transport vessel from one of the preferred suppliers...'

'Zone Industries might have re-branded in the wake of the revelations made by Harlock's crew some years ago, but Feydar Zone remains a bottom feeding parasite who cuts corners in the name of profit. The "Scaffold" project requires a framework carrier for six destroyer class patrol ships capable of transporting said ships via IN-SKIP and supporting its own point defence grid. Zone's designs were woefully inadequate on paper, and I would never risk any man or woman under my command on a ship built by that moron.'

She smiled. 'Oh yes... I read your report. Diplomacy was not one of your areas of study, I take it? You do know he's Triter's son-in-law?'

'One can only hope his prowess in the bedroom equals his engineering skills,' Irita replied dryly. He was rewarded by a light peal of bell-like laughter.

'Captain, I never suspected you of having a sense of humour.' She leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, allowing her short skirt to ride up to an artfully arbitrated line that - as with every move she made - always fell just on the acceptable side of revelation.

He was tempted to respond with the remark that he didn't have one, but decided to allow the illusion to stand. If that's what it was... quite often he was sure she was as aware of his lack of empathy as he was of her studied predation.
'I am intrigued to notice the attention you give towards tracing the family lineage of this errant space pirate,' she said artlessly. 'I can understand Admiral Hoshino's obsession with the man, but there are other criminals out there and closer to home requiring attention, surely?'

He replaced his spectacles on the bridge of his nose. 'Harlock is a beacon for malcontents and fanatics. He's a deserter, a traitor and a terrorist."

'Some would say he fights for freedom,' she pointed out.

'He's dangerous. Hoshino has the right of it. He draws like minded idealists and anarchists out from under the rocks where they crawl and tells them that they should only fight for themselves. No mention of loyalty to their government, or to the respect due to the institutions the rest of us live by. He makes people question the rule of law, and without that law, humans are little more than animals.'

'Then why aren't you concentrating on tracking him down? I see no requisitions for men or ships in your reports...' she leaned back in the chair, her arms resting lightly on the sides.

'I think the Admiral is diligent enough in that area for all of us. But I will. By going after his weakness.'

'He has one?'

Irita nodded. 'Family. On a personal level that is, not as an institution. I've been trying to track down any extant branches of the Harlock line - no easy task prior to the Homecoming War as many records were lost. We knew about Colonel Ichimonji - a grandson of Harlock's younger son. We have people in the Destiny Pilot Training Corps close to Ichimonji's son, Takuma.'

'In the hopes of him making contact?'

He smiled, knowing it didn't reach his pale grey eyes. 'Partly.' He passed over a flimsy of a slim file to her across the desk, and waited as she reached over, picked it up, and began to read. Very shortly after she placed it down and looked at him, appraisingly.

'Children...?'

'The boy - Daiba - spent time with Harlock as a child. I took the time to interrogate him when I arrived on Hakidame to set him up as bait. Strong willed little brat, but given the medications they were pumping into him, it wasn't too hard to drag some details out of him. I didn't get a planet name out of him, but I did drag out the information that at least until the Deathshadow Plague, Harlock and that XO had three small children - a daughter and twin boys. And one adopted boy a little older than the daughter. Assuming they survived, their own offspring would be close to ten and nine years old now.'

'I see. You suspect he hides them somewhere?'

'He must. I doubt he'd raise children aboard a battleship. That would be foolish, even on one that isn't contaminated by dark matter. The Daiba boy only knew that they'd used an old family name - one linked to a cadet branch of the family. He didn't, sadly, remember which one.' Hence his thus far futile search of the archives. .. He'd turned up only one other than the Daiba family so far, but "Maybach" was a distant branch with only one young man registered on Mars as missing in action during the AI war ten years ago.

'And what exactly do you intend to do with these children when you find them?' She leaned towards him, staring into his eyes with her piercing green gaze.
'Bait. What else? If he leaves them unguarded even for a short time, I'll have them, and then I'll have him exactly where I want him...'

'By dragging them into the remit of IntSec, you do know you'll be signing the death sentence for three small children, captain. Doesn't that bother you?'

'Should it?' he asked her bluntly. 'We root out traitors, terrorists and criminals, Director. If that means root and branch, that is the law: the families of traitors are always held equally accountable. It makes an effective deterrent - and makes the people police themselves. Wasn't that one reason we're having so much trouble finding this family? Harlock's wife was careful to ensure her sons changed their names after his rebellion. No-one ever found her or them when the initial fuss died down and they went looking... Yama - sorry - Harlock and his lover are both condemned in absentia to execution when caught. The children of such criminals need putting down. There is no place for such deviant individuals if we seek to bring order to space. Breeding, as they say, will tell.'

She stood up and smoothed down her skirt with a practiced elegant motion. 'You are a man of singular convictions, captain. I approve. Given the man's tendency to wander around the outer worlds at will, a less direct approach seems to have merit. It isn't as though Admiral Hoshino has had any luck these past twelve years.'

She paused outside the office after taking her leave, trying to resist the temptation to wipe her hands down the fabric of her skirt. Something about the spare, cold man made her skin crawl. A useful tool, but his rigid and uncompromising world view was unsettling. Idly, Shizuka wondered why he hadn't mechanised. His humanity was hardly at risk; the man simply didn't have any. Like a conifer he grew straight and tall, refusing to bend with the wind or shift with the seasons. She did wonder what it would take to shake that icy reserve... for all his studied restraint he certainly was aware of her sex... what, she wondered, would his reaction be if she dropped to her knees in front of him and took him into her mouth...? She smiled coldly. *He'd probably just take his glasses off, polish them and ask her to not leave a mess when she was done...*  

His clarity of purpose, however, she envied. He saw everything in binary: black/white, good/evil - with no deviation from the fixed path in front of him. Nothing clouded his loyalty or called it into question. In that, she thought with a wry smile, he was more like the original Harlock than he would ever know - or care to admit if he did.  

*How ironic...*  

Her own path, she had to admit, was less clear, and getting muddier by the day. So much of everything she had worked for all her life; so much of what her foremothers had worked for, was threatened both from within and without.

Eliminating even one of those disturbances would be a welcome relief... Harlock was the lesser of them by far, but a quick win would be appreciated by both of her masters - and a perennial thorn in her side would be gone at last.

*Destroyer of Worlds...* well, not so much this young man now bearing the name, but as Irita had pointed out, breeding would tell... and in another old saying 'the sins of the fathers would be visited upon the sons...' she smiled slightly. Families being held responsible for the activities of their members was no new concept, but...

She turned the corner and entered her own office. *Are we responsible for the sins of our foremothers?* She asked her inner self. Her window looked out over the frozen citadel, and she
stood in front of that sterile view, her fingers lightly resting on the tempered glass. My sisters... hidden on a hundred worlds, guarded by the chosen. Waiting... but for what? For the Return?

She shuddered, thinking of that. Damn Harlock and his ghost ship! Damn the insanity that had created the Homecoming War! One man's madness now placed them all in danger. Thanks to him, their queen was returning, burning with righteous, if somewhat hypocritical fury.

Shizuka shivered, and her arms wrapped around her torso as though to ward off the freezing chill that no building on Enceladus seemed capable of dispelling from its corridors. She was returning, and the galaxy would blaze with the fire of humanity's funeral pyre, once she was done with the pirate...

But what would be left, she wondered, in the wake of a pain that could set even frozen Enceladus alight?...

Yet it gave her an idea... if she could place Harlock directly in the path of the Return... might he not act as a firebreak? Perhaps their fury and pain, with a little encouragement, could be vented before too much else burned... A few sacrifices might be needed, but against the alternative...

She walked back to her desk and sat down. Once graceful gesture opened a communication channel. 'Yes, this is Director Namino. Would you arrange for Corporal Kiruta to see me before she goes off duty for the day?'

Cleome was late, and the look of disdain on the face of Commander Cassandra promised a reckoning later. The new favourite took any disturbance to her parades and platforms as a personal affront. She tiptoed as quietly as she could onto the gallery - the massive branch encircling the vaulted grove of the newly commissioned Kodama - and tried to look interested in the proceeding. Which from the increasingly hysterical rhetoric rising from the dais, was hopefully coming to a close...

As Cassandra ended her speech, one fist raised triumphantly into the air, a massed shout rose from the floor: 'We are the warriors of the Mazone... All glory to Raflessia, Eternal Queen!'

From her vantage point on the gallery that surrounded the glade, Cleome looked down upon the massed ranks of identical Meliae below and sighed. Her shoulders itched, but that might have been the fabric of the form fitting flightsuit she now wore. At least, she thought sourly, it didn't keep slipping off her shoulder. As the designated representative of the Queen, it was her duty to oversee such bombastic displays, as each ship in the fleet re-affirmed its loyalty, but the pretentious sabre-rattling got on her nerves.

'The military are getting far too fond of their own propaganda,' the woman at her side said quietly, looking to her left to ensure their other companion was not in hearing range. 'Cassandra oversteps her authority. How many dryad troops has she force-grown in the past few years? Their remit was to protect the civilian fleet, not to form an invasion force.'

'Tessius!' Cleome hissed at her. She too looked over to ensure Commander Cassandra wasn't paying any attention to them, but the sour-faced woman was staring with a mixture of pride and smug self satisfaction at the ranks below. 'You were part of the council that supported the queen's proposal. It's a little late to get cold feet.'

'I'm not sure it's ever too late to admit we might be wrong,' Tessius replied quietly. Her dark hair and nut-brown skin declared her to be of the Karya. She walked down the long gallery, to stare out of one of the windows in the side of the Nemeton, as though she could see the gathered ships in the
darkness. 'Force grown troops; force grown ships... both will be fragile in leaf and branch; vulnerable in battle. What purpose will it serve?'

'To revenge ourselves on the destroyer. To send a message to the despoilers that their time is done. To finally take these worlds they have abandoned and make them our own.' Cleome winced at the way her voice repeated the stock sentiments. As though Raflessia's pronouncements were scripture.

'We are guardians, Cleo. Not warriors. We protect. We serve. We do not wage war. That is the way of the Flesh. Not of the Green. It has always been thus, since the dawn. We adapt, we do not destroy.' Tessius' harsh voice held a note of almost infinite sorrow.

Cleome sighed. Times change. We it seems must change with them. We left the seas when the Flesh arose from the slime. When they followed us onto the land we defended as best we could - we adapted, we evolved... but it wasn't enough. Our passive defences, our poisons... even when our first sisters arose, we only ever resisted. Now they follow us into space, their rise built on the wanton destruction of our sacred dead, torn from the body of our homeworld, crushed and consumed until only ash remains of the Mother of Forests. They deserve to die! Was it not enough that they abandoned Earth having stripped it of anything green, but they spread their poisons and their casual disregard for life to new worlds? We tried to teach them a gentle lesson, but they refused to learn and so we tried to turn them upon each other. They should have died, Tessius - but still they cling, and now they have discovered new ways to spit in the face of nature; the abomination of machine life now spreads like a new plague...!

Her voice had raised to the level where Cassandra and her troops had started to notice. Cleo sent out a delicate scent: Peace, sister. We but discuss... the sour-apple scent that returned suggested Cassandra was not convinced. Ah well. She could come up with a suitable excuse later.

'The First Mothers left Earth to her fate when the comet hit,' Tessius said sadly. Her scent was of bitter almonds. 'In the days of the Giant Flesh, fearing the Change to come. Is not the fault partly ours? They abandoned the Mother Forest to its fate, but in place of destruction, new life sprang forth. They abandoned we new sisters who grew up in the meadows which replaced the Forest. In our turn we fled when the oceans began to rise and the humans cut and burned the new forests, put the plains to the plow and returned the once-nurturing soil to the oceans upon the winds; no longer content with desecrating our dead they raped the living in their greed and sowed the seed of Earth's slow demise a second time. Now one man in his pain has destroyed not only the Earth, but our second home. The queen, in lashing out at this one human for his inadvertent destruction surely risks falling into the same trap. I was just as angry when we watched our second home fall into the void so soon after the death-cry of our Great Mother caused so many to fall into despair and wither. I cursed humanity with my friend and queen, and vowed vengeance. But what I see us becoming is something that only saddens me, Cleo. We become what we hate.' She stared out into the darkness and laced her three fingered hand on the transparent pane. 'There are worlds we could settle, abandoned by those who would seek their sterile immortality. Many have our younger sisters on them. Perhaps...'

'You speak treason!' Cleo hissed at her, desperately checking to make sure no-one could have overheard. 'The queen...'

'The queen has lost her way, Cleome. Is it truly treason to question our course? Or have we become so like the humans that we must see rational discussion as discord?' She turned and walked to the gallery edge, and rested her hands on the warm rough surface of the branch that protected them from the long fall to the floor below. 'Look at them, sister. Look at those uniform, pale, forced cuttings with no will but that of their single progenitor. Is that really who we are? Is this what you would have us become?' She asked sadly.
Cleo couldn't find an answer that didn't violate every oath she had ever made. But Tessius took one of her jointed four fingered hands in her own flexible fingers and squeezed gently. 'Or are we all doomed to be little more than fodder for the Corpse Flowers? Would you really have our final adaptation be to become as human as you are?'

A sharp thorn pierced the smooth, unlined skin of her palm, and Cleo watched in shocked fascination as a rivulet of red blood trickled down her wrist, before the skin closed again with a faint wisp of blue flame.
'This is the third time in less than a month this bunch have attacked ships in our sector of space,' Ali said harshly as he walked next to Harlock. He had to drop back as the corridor narrowed to avoid both the sabre rifle at his captain's hip, and the bulk of his cloak. 'Ah, shit...' he looked away from a sideroom where several small bodies lay in a twisted heap. He slammed a fist into the wall as they walked, the gauntlet leaving a noticeable dent.

'Hunter's men,' Harlock replied softly. 'Kei tells me they have a handful of survivors from the boarding crew. In the meantime, get Doc to rope in Zack, Niobe, Meg and Daiba, and render what aid they can to the survivors. Kei's notified Oki, he'll be here in a couple of hours.'

'You know, if you want me to deal with em...'

Harlock shook his head. 'No. Hunter had his warning. I told him what would happen if I found his men raiding ships in our sector, under our flag. Time to make good on that.' He stopped at a crossroads in the corridor and looked at his crewmate. 'You finish up here and get the crew back in time to meet and greet the Poseidon. When Oki's finished here, he and I have other matters to discuss.'

Ali nodded his agreement, and watched his captain stride away down the corridor, the black cloak occasionally shifting to reveal the red lining. 'Fuck.' He muttered under his breath. 'Bloody pirates are getting too damn cocky of late. Hunter's Alliance based, what the battle-hardened fuck is he doing out this far?'

A hand clapped him on the shoulder. 'Talkin' to yourself, Chief?' Sabu asked with a grin. Ali grunted.

'Seems I'm the only person listening. Whaddya doin' loitering, ya dumb fuck?'

As usual the insults were water off the big pirate's back. 'Lookin' for you. Doc needs a few more hands and...'

Ali waved him off. 'Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. Round up the Brat Pack and send 'em her way.' He grinned as the bandanna wearing hulk lumbered off to comply. 'Never work when you can delegate... never thought you'd be useful for anything...' he smirked.

Daiba had ended up in Kei's squad during the mop-up, and now stared over the collar of his battlesuit down the sights of his pistol at the half-dozen pirates lined up in the hold with their hands above their heads. A sorrier lot of scum he'd not seen since leaving behind the streets of Alzar. Scarred, scruffy, filthy and stinking. Most were bloodied and bruised, but then the Arcadia's crew had no problem with beating the crap out of slavers and rapists. A seventh pirate was lying on the floor, his hands wrapped around what was left of his genitals, courtesy of Kei's bayonet, having been found with his pants down forcing himself onto a fourteen year old girl.

Kei herself looked grimmer than Daiba had ever seen her, pacing up and down waiting for Harlock to get to them. She rounded on him the moment he swept into the hold, looking every inch the legendary pirate - the black cloak swirled heavily around him as he walked, and he had one hand on the hilt of his sabre rifle. His single eye almost blazed with fury as he stared at the assembled captives.
'I could have just dealt with this,' Kei hissed at him. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

'This one's my responsibility, love. You know that.' He turned to the captives, most of whom looked as though they'd either just crapped their pants, or were about to. 'Sanchez - you heard my warning the last time you and your men stepped out of line in territory we protect. I told you and Hunter what the consequences would be.'

The man he addressed - swarthy, overweight, with long greasy hair and a straggling attempt at a goatee, spat on the floor. 'Word is you're not that tough, Harlock. Trading on another man's reputation. Without that what are you? Just some entitled pretty-boy playing pirate? Hiding behind some whore's skirts.' He glared at Kei and leered at her. 'Maybe me 'n' Hunter can show her a real good time once Hunter has your sack on his desk as a trophy, eh boys?'

Daiba winced as Kei took a step forward, to be halted by Harlock's raised hand. A nervous titter went through the prisoners, but those closest to him took a couple of steps away. He shifted his grip on the pistol and braced himself, eyeing up the closest with what he hoped was a suitably dangerous looking glare.

'You attacked an unarmed civilian transport, Sanchez. And not the first on this trip, judging by the misery we found in your holds. My men are already bringing over the survivors and copying your logs to hand over to the authorities when they arrive.'

'So what? You just hand us over to the SDF?' Sanchez sneered. 'First chance he gets Hunter will spring us from any prison transport. He won't leave his men behind!'

Harlock sighed. 'Sadly true, for all his other crimes. Which is why he won't get the chance. A pity you won't get to tell him in person that I am a man who keeps my promises, but he'll get the message.' He nodded to Yasu, Erik and Doscoi, the other three crewmen holding the prisoners at gunpoint. 'You know what to do with them.'

At Kei's side he stood patiently, watching as the men herded the captives towards the airlock, Doscoi dragging the whimpering rapist. Daiba took a tentative step forward to help when no order was specifically directed at him, but was brought up short by a hand on his shoulder.

'No. Not you. You don't have to be a part of this,' Harlock murmured quietly near his ear. Daiba shook the hand off and gave the man an incredulous look.

'I saw what they did to those women and boys - and to those kids. I don't need protecting, Harlock. They deserve far worse than fucking spacing.'

'There's a line you can never cross back over,' Harlock told him softly. 'Stand down this time, that's an order.'

Frustrated, Daiba slammed his pistol into its holster and stood glaring at the scene, arms folded. With the airlock shut, Doscoi casually slammed his hand against the release button and strode back towards them with the others, without even a backward glance. Harlock just nodded to them.

And that, it seemed, was that. Almost a let-down, he thought, remembering warp-vids from his childhood where the miscreants would be sucked into space screaming before exploding messily onto a camera lens... the reality was so quiet.

'Hunter's not this bold on his own,' he heard Kei declaim to Harlock. 'Someone put him up to this. Did you hear Sanchez' phrasing? We've heard variations on that rant before.'

'Of course Hoshino's behind it,' Harlock explained patiently. 'He's trying to have his cake and eat it.
By giving Hunter free rein and a list of soft targets outside of Alliance space, he's trying to draw us out and triangulate our homebase. All with plausible deniability, since Hunter's a pirate, not fleet. As a bonus he can try and put the blame on us for atrocities committed under our flag. The biggest flaw in his plan is that he has no idea of the Arcadia's true speed and range, so all he's doing is pissing off the SDF - who can't prove a damn thing, since Hunter probably doesn't even know he's being set up.'

'What if people do start blaming us for these attacks? It only takes one report...'

Harlock leaned towards her and planted a quick kiss on her forehead. 'We've been blamed for far worse, love. We do what we can. When word of this gets back to Hunter, he'll think twice before pulling this again.'

Daiba felt like raising his hand with a "please sir!". 'Erm... not to rain on your plan here, but how's he going to find out, since you just keelhauled the survivors...?'

'When I drag them along the long axis of the ship, I'll take that under advisement,' Harlock drawled.

'Picky. You know what I mean!'

Harlock beckoned to a crewman who dragged over a sorry looking specimen of humanity - pasty-faced, lank haired and weak-eyed. 'Take this one over to the Futatsuboshi and put it in the brig. Selen's people know where to drop shit like this where Hunter can find it.' He turned back to Daiba. 'Now can I get on with my job?' He took a deep, shuddering breath. 'You should join up with Doc. I already tasked Ali with putting you to work.'

Daiba ran his hand over his growing hair, long enough now at least to run his fingers through. 'I'd like to sit in on your meeting with Oki...' he said hopefully. 'If he's finally turned up something in those archives...'

'You'll be much more use helping out here,' Harlock told him softly. 'These people need help. Whatever Rokuro has to tell me, you'll be briefed, you have my word.'

Daiba glared at him stubbornly. 'These people are as scared of us as they are of the bastards who attacked them! I don't see why...'

'Because I told you to.' Harlock replied bluntly. 'They're scared, they lash out, and yes, they see us as little different to then who attacked this ship - a pirate is a pirate to them. But we are different, and that's why you'll help.' His tone softened a little: 'You also need to learn a little compassion and patience. And you can help these people - you know what it's like to be hunted, terrorised and abused. You've seen the world through their eyes - it won't kill you to spend a little time showing them that they can learn to see it through yours...'

He walked off leaving the youth standing there with his mouth open. Kei strode over to his side and tapped him under the chin. 'You'll catch flies...' she warned with a smile.

'On a spaceship?' He muttered. She was already sauntering away with a sway of her hips that had a way of reducing any red-blooded male within eyesight into a drooling wreck. She raised a hand to wave at him without looking back. 'Whatever...'

He wandered off to find Doc, resigned to spending the next few hours playing nursemaid to a bunch of suspicious, ungrateful civilians, whilst the grown-ups got to listen to the exciting stuff.
'Rokuro!' Kei greeted the blue-haired admiral enthusiastically, accepting the strong hug from their old friend. Rokuro Oki was about their age or a little younger - the same height as Harlock, but a little broader. He smiled at her as he released her and pushed the lock of hair that threatened to obscure his left eye out of his face.

'You look as lovely as ever, Kei. Parenthood still suiting you?'

She smiled at him. 'Always, though I sometimes miss the adventure. How are Miranda and your girls?'

'Well, and Miranda sends her love...' he broke off as Harlock cleared his throat. 'Harlock, good to see you. You look...' he pointedly eyed the pirate up and down, taking in the heavy gravity cloak and the sabre rifle. 'Well, it's a look, I guess...' he took Harlock's offered hand and clasped it firmly.

'Nice to see you too,' Harlock told him. 'Do try not to drip all over the floor... plays havoc with the wiring...'

Oki gave him a look from under his wilful hair. 'Really? That's the best line you could come up with?'

'Why mess with a classic?' Harlock deadpanned.

'Oh - maybe I expected better, after you fed us that stuff about wooden spaceships...' Oki replied as he followed their lead from the boarding tube that linked the transport ship to Poseidon. 'Except it seems you weren't pranking me...'

'Would we do a thing like that?' Kei asked him with a knowing little smile.

'You, no.'

Quickly briefed, Oki set his own XO to organising the rescue. 'Never fails to make me unsure whether to weep or to start shooting at something, seeing what we do to each other,' he said quietly as they walked. 'In the face of an external enemy, what chance do we have? We seem to prefer tearing ourselves apart.'

'Your people have a more peaceful history at least,' Harlock pointed out.

Oki sighed heavily.

'We are as human as you - our differences aren't so great. My family had land-dwellers in their ancestry - or so the story goes. And believe me, we've made mistakes of our own in the past. There just have never been enough of us to get to a point where we've turned on ourselves catastrophically.'

In the Captain's room on board the Arcadia, Oki unbuttoned his jacket and removed it, placing it next to him, neatly folded. He sat down in a comfortable armchair near the ornate leaded window, accepted a tall drink offered by Mimay and waited, sipping it appreciatively, whilst Harlock divested himself of cloak and sabre, and took his seat nearby. Kei and Mimay both took up residence on the chaise-longue. 'Have to say, that ship you found on Tokarga was quite an eye opener... I'd have several organisations chafing at the bit to excavate if we went public.'

'You'd sign their death warrant, if what we suspect is correct,' Harlock replied. A ruby-red liquid sloshed around in his glass as he toyed with it.
'Don't worry, I handed the lot over to Oedo for now. He knows how to keep a secret. Plus he's keen to investigate the remains of that drive... if your scans are correct...'

'They are,' Kei informed him firmly. 'I had Maji and Yattaran double check the readings. Those black globes were near-perfect energy absorbers across all scanned frequencies - and that was on the surface, in atmosphere. Nothing was reflected. Genuine black-body technology.'

'Biology,' Harlock corrected. 'Those carbon surfaces were organically produced, much like the structure of the ship itself. Maji almost blew up a reinforced lab on Deathshadow Island testing the yield of a tiny sample. In space, it radiates perfectly. An energy source almost as powerful as dark matter - in fact, it does absorb what dark matter it finds. A ship with an energy source that powerful...'

'I know. Oedo gave me the run-down. It could be the breakthrough he's been looking for for his pet project.' He took a long drink. 'A race who use plants the way humans use metals, plastics, ceramics, or we use polyps...'

'Just a theory for now,' Harlock took a sip from his glass. 'We're still trying to pull the pieces together. Hence my question about your archives - yours might be the only ones that reach back to before the Homecoming War.'

'Well there's the Cthonians... but they've not been on speaking terms with most of the other colonies for centuries. Apart from a few individuals who roam off world, they're an insular lot. Hardly bother to sign up for service.' Oki reached over for his discarded jacket and pulled a data chip from the breast pocket. He handed the hexagonal little device over to Harlock. 'Every fairy-tale, legend and mariner's tall tale we could find. We have a diverse mythology it seems - lots of superstitions and taboos about places in the oceans of Earth where we could not or would not go... like you air-breathers, we have our share of vegetation myths - and stories of women of unearthly beauty who would lure men to their deaths...'

Kei snorted. 'Interesting how it never happens the other way around... but then I guess stories of women being lured to their death by men usually have a more prosaic and rather more realistic outcome...'

'Sad but true,' Harlock replied. 'My uncle wrote a paper on that very subject. If any siren-like creatures were sexually dimorphic, then most stories of them would be lost as not being noticeably different from the everyday violence meted out to women in our history.'

'Which says an awful lot about human males, and none of it good whichever angle you examine it from,' Kei busied herself brushing Mimay's silky hair, to the quiet delight of the Nibelung woman leaning into her. 'Present company excluded.'

Oki suddenly seemed to be finding the refraction of light through his glass fascinating, until prompted by Harlock. 'Archives...?'

'Right... well, in addition to what's on the chip, there are records of a planet we tried to settle before Miraiseria. The colony lasted a couple of centuries but had to be abandoned due to infestations of a particularly pernicious seaweed that proved resistant to our efforts to control its spread. Massive blooms of the stuff grew up around our city there, and kept clogging up the systems. It got to the point where our vessels couldn't easily travel, they just kept running into drifts of it. Algal blooms began to cover the ocean surface, de-oxygenating the water and causing our stocks to die. Since we don't use chemical methods of control, it proved to be too much to deal with, and we left. Lots of breakdowns in the systems as well - eventually the official report was that something in the water just corroded the corals we use, and there was a catastrophic systems failure. But in light of the
terraforming data, I do wonder...'

'Sentient seaweed?' Harlock looked at Kei. 'That would be a first... The location's in here?' He asked, turning the chip over in his fingers. 'That might be worth a look - it's the first definitive lead we've had. An abandoned world where they haven't had to keep hidden...'

'It doesn't sound much like the creatures chasing Daiba,' Kei said doubtfully once they'd seen Oki to the boarding tube. Crew returning from the stricken transport were beginning to fill the corridor, mumbling their excuses as they hurried around their captain and XO's more leisurely pace.

'You're thinking in terms of our own species; humans - until fairly recently - believed they were the only members of their family tree to survive - though we now know differently. But the human race is just one twig left on a once far more diverse bush. Think how many different species of us there would be if more had survived - one thing we do know is that life expands to fill the available niches in an ecosystem - I read once of an island on Earth where most of the slots - predators and prey - were taken by a single animal, which had speciated and specialised. So try and imagine a world where maybe plants did the same - colonising the seas and the land... so-called carnivorous plants have evolved separately multiple times from different lineages - they are infinitely adaptable. Plants evolved numerous defenses against predators... is it too big a leap to think they evolved sentience, mobility, the ability to mould their environment with the tools around them?'

Kei stopped, forcing him to pull up and look at her. 'You know, you might want to just ease up on the enthusiasm here. I can almost feel the excited inner botanist champing at the bit inside the stoic pirate...'

She stood firm in face of the piercing look from his single eye. After a brief moment, he nodded. 'Sometimes, you're right. I never was much of a soldier. But never worry that I'll lose sight of the problem.' He tapped his eyepatch. 'One of the things you learn very quickly is that with one eye down, you have to stay focused on what you can see. At the same time, you have to pay more attention to what's in front of you.'

'So you're saying you have the advantage?' She shook her head and sighed.

He grinned. 'No, not really, it just sounded good...' she aimed a swat at his arm and he ducked neatly out of range. 'Trust me, Kei. They had to have damn good reasons for trying to remove anyone who might be capable of working out what they are, beyond simple secrecy... it risked drawing far too much attention, and it didn't start until our population fell after the war. It's easy to hide a leaf in a forest... until someone points a flamethrower at the forest...'

'Flamethrowers... now there's a thought for dealing with them.' She carried on walking, and he strode out to keep up with her. 'That, or you and Tochiro can come up with an effective weed-whacker...'

'Not that much of a joke,' he replied as they walked. 'you might want to chat with Tochiro about re-inventing Greek Fire, if we need something that will work underwater...'

From the bridge of the Arcadia, a blue and white pearl hung in space, a necklace of small satellites surrounding it. Daiba counted six small moons in total.

'It is beautiful... ' Kei breathed.

'Welcome to Tiamat. Most of the landmass is submerged into a world-wide shallow sea,' Ali called
up from the floor. 'A few island chains, mostly either coral or volcanic. Minimal polar ice coverage, so my guess is the planet is in the middle of a long interglacial period. Apart from that the remaining land is the tops of submerged mountain ranges - almost all the continental crust is below sea level - but as I said - shallow. A lot of the sea bed is at a depth which gets sunlight, which would explain some of the plant biomass blooms I'm seeing... Oki was right - the planet is choked with life. If we want to restock with fish, the oceans are teeming with shoals.'

'Anything you catch honey, you're gutting and descaling!' Anita called out to him as she folded her arms next to Kei and stared at the screen. 'But if we had the facilities...' she murmured.

Harlock leaned on the wheel. 'Grab a few idle hands, use hanger 3. Yattaran can knock up a short-term freezer storage with Maji's help. Just check the stuff is edible first - no nasty surprises...'

'It was stocked by the Aquatics, shouldn't be a problem,' Yattaran replied. 'Might even be worth grabbing some samples for stocking that little sea on Deathshadow Island...'

'After that debacle with the crabs? Please don't. I'll leave the resupply with you and Anita. Ali...' he looked around. 'And Sabu - you've got experience piloting underwater, right?'

'Grew up on Thetis,' the crewman replied confidently. 'Underwater drilling, so I can handle the Cosmo Wing or a bullet underwater.'

Harlock nodded. 'Then you're with me. Zack - with Doscoi and Ali. Daiba - with me. Kei - take command. Niobe, Meg - get your asses up here and run point.'

'Why do the boys get all the fun?' Meg grumped as she took the steps two at a time to take Kei's station as the leggy XO took the helm.

'Because only the Valkerie suits can take both vacuum and depth, and if we go, that would mean leaving the boys in charge...' Kei replied smoothly. 'Not sure about you, but I'd like a ship to come home to!'

There was a ripple of laughter from the crew, punctuated by a couple of exclamations from those who worked out they were being insulted.

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Daiba joined Harlock on the way to the suit storage. 'Are we really fitting in a fishing trip?' He asked.

'Why not? Keeps some of the crew busy, and you learn out here not to pass up a resupply. Beats the hell out of hydroponics and protein packs.' Reaching the armour racks he began to strip off down to his undersuit. 'Full armour, Daiba. We're taking Bullet one and Two, but in case of emergencies, the suits will hold at a depth of up to at least two hundred feet - or so I'm told.' He allowed Daiba to help him into the suit and returned the favour. 'Oki's people built a city in the equatorial waters, close to an island chain. That's where we're heading first. We'll check out what remains, if anything, then move out from there.'

Ali stuck his head round the door at the point, in armour but helmetless. 'Captain - really? Why do I get stuck with Doscoi?'

'Problem?' Harlock asked innocently, whilst he tightened Daiba's rebreather on his back.

'Yeah - he's a miserable, grumpy, bad-tempered windbag with a chip on his shoulder the size of Neptune... he finds fault with everything, and never bloody well stops complaining...'
Daiba caught sight of Zack hovering behind Ali and had to avoid meeting his eyes, or they'd both have lost it at that point. He bit his cheek and tried to concentrate on his gauntlets. A surreptitious look at Harlock's face though and it was almost game over when he caught the tiny twitch of the captain's mouth.

'I'm sure you'll cope, Ali.' Harlock deadpanned.

Zack lost it at that point and let out a whoop of laughter, hastily swallowed when Ali turned to glare at him. 'Problem, Freckles?'

Zack shook his head mutely, and with a grumbling snarl, Ali pushed him out of the way and marched off to the hangar.

Daiba grinned. 'Oh man, it really does go over his head, doesn't it?'

'Feel for me,' Zack replied with a hand to his forehead to mime a faint. 'I'm in the same bloody bullet with that pair of grumpy grandpas...'

After he'd wandered back out, Daiba turned to his smirking captain. 'You know, mom would say you used to be such a sweet young man...'

'Command this bunch of jokers for twelve years and we'll see how far being nice gets you,' Harlock replied. 'Anywhere from forty to sixty people all pulling in mostly - but not completely the same direction and most of them with a serious problem with authority. There are days I completely sympathise with the other guy's tendency to lock himself in his room and start in on the liquor cabinet,' he added with feeling. 'I still think most days that Kei and I are the only sane people on board...' he clapped Daiba on the shoulder. 'Ready?'

They dropped from the Arcadia in a low orbit, Sabu at the controls whilst Harlock took the co-pilot's seat.

'The bullet's been adapted to take on water as ballast when we reach the surface,' Harlock told Daiba as they skimmed the ocean surface. 'The oceans are more dilute than Earth's due to the polar melt, so the water is less buoyant. But we still need to sink. In an emergency we blow the ballast and head for the surface.'

'What about weapons?' Daiba asked, peering over Harlock's silvered shoulder.

'Forward array is an single oscillator cannon. It will fire underwater without refractive scatter, unlike the optical cannon. Two small torpedo tubes, one on each side customised to fire a discarding sabo chain-shot that will rip through anything unarmoured, or so Yattaran and Maji tell me. One depth-charge release on the underside, with six charges ready to load and one in the tube. No time for target practice, so if it comes to a fight, just spray and pray - we get to the surface and the Arcadia can wade in if necessary.' He tapped the comms. 'Kei - you got us both on the main feed?'

'Live and kicking boys. Camera feeds are clear, signals are strong across the board. Wish I was down there with you, Oki says their cities are a thing of beauty. Ali - watch your angle of descent, you'll splash down too hard belly-first at this rate.'

'Who's driving this thing, sweets?' Came the snappy reply over the speaker. But he did, Daiba noticed, adjust his flight path. Ali's bullet hit the water a couple of seconds after theirs did, from which point Daiba was staring in delight out of the cockpit window.
'Takes your breath away, doesn't it?' Harlock asked him with a friendly smile.

'Damn sight prettier than Thetis,' Sabu added. 'Driving through the crap churned up by the mining ops was a lesson in pant-filling terror. Flying only on instruments made it like space, only worse, as it was constantly clogged and you never knew what would float past. This sure is pretty...'

Daiba had to agree, as he stared at the clear blue waters. Shoals of brightly coloured fish darted in precise formations, whirling as one to get out of their path, only to close back in their wake. Strands of swollen kelp dangled in their path, suspended from their holdfasts on the sea floor like swaying, flexible stalagmites. Bright, translucent medusoids drifted in and out of the greenish brown fronds. On Harlock's quiet command, Sabu guided the ship around the sea-forest. From outside the fringes of the drifting fronds, it was easy to see why - a few meters in and it was a dense, impenetrable mass.

'Got a sonar contact about half a klick forward,' Sabu told them. 'Right where the Admiral said we'd find that city. Big enough too.'

'Take us in slowly, Sabu. No sense in rushing. Daiba - take point on the sonar. The practice will be good for you.'

Daiba swapped seats with Harlock, who then stood behind the co-pilot's seat, one hand resting on the back. 'You do know it feels as though you're watching every move I make?' He grumbled, feeling as though he was being leaned over.

'Relax. I'm watching the scenery. You keep your eyes and ears on the sensors.'

'Rank hath its privileges, kid,' Sabu told him with a grin.

'Nah... he's got the attention span of a gnat when someone dangles a weed in front of him, is all,' Ali snarked over the speaker. 'Ask Kei sometime why she doesn't try to jump his bones in the great outdoors on Tabito...'

'Ali, you're on speaker; shut the fuck up,' came Kei's voice over the comms. 'Or there are a couple of stories I could tell, including that time on New Barataria when a certain crewman on shore leave quite literally pulled an "ooh - shiny!" mid-coitus when he spotted a vein of something sparkly in the walls...'

'On which note, guys,' Daiba butted in before the too-much-information event horizon was breached. 'Check this out!' Through the viewscreen a wall of coral loomed in front of them. From the golden-white sandy seafloor to the topmost towers just below the surface, it must have stretched almost two hundred feet. Sabu guided the bullet along the structure as they looked for an opening.

'Reading a near perfect arc,' he called out. 'Did those blue-haired guys really grow this stuff?'

'They can grow and manipulated corals and other polyps and sea life the way we use metals and minerals,' Harlock told him. 'A reef that would take tens of thousands of years to grow naturally would take decades. And by adjusting the environment, they can tint the limestone they secrete, and use natural bio-luminescence to light their cities - look!' He leaned over and clicked off the exterior lights, allowing the natural glow from the walls to light their way, a scintillating rainbow of colour. The city wall took an an opalescent sheen that shimmered and changed with the flow of water over the jagged and pitted surface. Tiny fish scurried and danced in and out of nooks and crannies, and slower moving forms - star-like radials and slower moving cephalopods - grazed their
way over the wall.

'I see a gap!' Daiba called out. 'About twenty metres. Looks like a big window...'

'Sea-people buildings are inhabited from the top down,' Harlock told him. 'Go in for a closer look.'

The bullet edged closer to the opening, a large open archway more than big enough to let the bullet craft pass through. Beyond the arch, a short passage opened out onto a once-roofed plaza, the coral dome now crumbled and littering the limestone floor.

'Amazing,' Ali said over the comms, genuine awe in his voice. 'The coral skeletons are laced with a processed alloy of tectite and titanium - I've never seen anything like it - and they grew this damn stuff? They could make a fortune with this process!'

'One reason they keep quiet about it,' Harlock replied. 'They've had enough of being pushed around by us. On earth they had to relocate to the deep ocean trenches to avoid detection, afraid of what we'd do to them. After they left for a better home, they vowed never again to live in the shadow and the deeps. They love the light, shallow waters where they can grown their homes, not be stuffed into protective domes.'

The bullets edged through the wide streets of the underwater city, their crews marveling at the light, airy structures - graceful pink tinged spires; baroque, wandering labyrinths without a straight line in sight. Here and there some buildings still stood undamaged, their roots descending into the deeper waters. But most were overgrown; barnacled, kelp tangled and crumbling as the currents raised by the two small craft swirled around them, stirring long-deposited sediments and bringing fragile walls into further ruin.

'Shouldn't the tides have caused this to disintegrate long before now?' Zack asked.

'Protected by the sea wall we passed through, at a guess,' Ali replied. 'It was higher than these spires, and a tougher construction. The dome looks as though it collapsed recently - little build up of sediment on the piles of rubble. In other places you can see the stratification.'

'There's something over by that south wall,' Daiba called out. 'Where that current runs, something moved.'

'Just looks like a pile of more coral to me, kid,' Ali drawled. 'Takin' a look though.'

His bullet nosed ahead of his captain's, lights playing over the surface as it moved. Daiba watched the viewscreen as Ali delicately used one of the side jets to clear away the sediment from the pile. Several objects slid down a loosely piled ramp of whiteish fragments of limestone, some rounded, some long and thin, but all encrusted with a phosphorescent coating that lent them an eerie greenish glow which extended downwards for at least sixty feet or more. A spidery turquoise shelled crab with a thin body and limbs at least three feet long darted out from within the pile, causing more debris to collapse.

'Erm...I don't think these are coral,' Zack said, sounding as though he was trying not to throw up in his mouth.

'Human skeletons,' Harlock said softly, staring at the pile of bones. 'Hundreds of them. They must have washed up against this wall, carried by the current...' he leaned over the console. 'Daiba - sonar contact - check our six!'

Cursing inwardly at himself for taking his eye off the ball, Daiba quickly checked the sensors.
'Nothing... no, wait... Just for a moment I thought there was a contact, but it ghosted.'

A loud thud and a metallic scream from the hull made all three men in the bullet jump.

'What the f...' Sabu frantically checked the dash. 'Did something hit us?'

'Giant squid?' Daiba asked cheekily. A long tendril drifted purposefully across the viewscreen and he let out a decidedly unmanly squeak. 'I was joking...!'

'Looks like hair...' Sabu said, leaning across the instrument panel for a closer look. 'Green hair?'

'Ali - sit-rep?' Harlock rapped out the order.

'Not sure, captain. Bit of mud between us right now. Nothing on sensors apart from that weed.'

'Weed?' Daiba almost sprang out if his seat, only to be pushed back down by Harlock. 'It's them, isn't it?'

'Sit. Stay. Sabu?'

'Whatever it is, it's all over us. Like we're wrapped up like a nori roll...' the bulky pirate pulled the bandanna off his head and mopped his face with it, dropping it to the floor unheeded as he checked the jets. 'Holding us fast, whatever it is.'

'The walking slab of muscle's right, captain,' Ali said. 'Got eyeballs on you. You're covered in...' he hesitated. 'Hair?'

'Harlock!' Daiba screamed out the name as he pointed. 'Look!'

Holding their position about twenty feet from the bullet, five women swam in a lazy circle, their impossibly long hair drifting with malevolent purpose in the direction of the bullet, encasing it in flexible but iron-strong strands.
'What the hell are you guys smoking down there?' Kei stared at the holographic display showing the feed from the two bullets. 'All we're seeing is a large clump of giant seaweed!' On the viewscreen an undulating mass of vegetation had bullet one trussed up ready for dinner. She gripped the balusters of the Arcadia's wheel so hard her hand cramped.

'Well if it's an illusion, it's bloody convincing!' Ali snapped over the comms. 'Bullet one is covered in the stuff, and I'm lookin' at five naked chicks from the weird-ass space babe synchronised swim team!'

'Could it be something in the air?' Meg asked. 'Getting in through the filters?'

'Underwater?' Ali scoffed. 'Captain - brace yerselves, I'll try a shot, see if we can't shake you loose...'

A brief lull in the conversation was broken by some creative swearing from bullet one. 'Ali, did you bother to use the targeting computer? The enemy is twenty feet in front of us, not two feet to the side! Or did you flub basic optics and miss the day on the refractive index of water?!!'

Kei winced at the tone in Harlock's voice. 'Ouch... now he's pissed...' She called down to the lower bridge: 'Yasu - just check out that footage will you, tell me what you see?'

'Thinking maybe it's just a guy thing?' Meg smirked. Kei shrugged.

'Can't hurt to check...'

'Just weeds, Miss Kei,' the fat bald pirate she'd addressed called up.

'Bugger,' Meg sighed. 'Could have taken the piss for weeks if it was...'

'Not helping, Megan,' Kei chided. 'Harlock - can you break free?'

'We're trying, but we're held fast. Weed or hair, doesn't matter; it's holding tight, and squeezing. Can't take a shot as they have the cannon ports blocked...'

'We're on our way, just hold on!' Kei turned to Mimay, who nodded and ran her hands over the control globe for the engines, blue lightning flashing to follow her graceful hand movements. In response, the ship shifted, heading for the planet below, Kei's hands steady on the wheel.

'She might need to hurry it up,' Daiba told his captain, and pointed to the readings. 'The hull's under far too much strain. Can you hear it?'

The creaking scream of tortured metal was hard to miss, and Harlock gave Daiba a look that clearly said so. 'Integrity is down as well, not just from the strain. Something's corroding the metal.' He stood up, a look of firm resolve on his face. 'I'm going out to clear the torpedo tubes. We need to cut loose from this, and fast. The Arcadia will take too long...'

Daiba reached out to place a hand on his metal-covered arm. 'Let me. It's your crew's job, not yours.' He grinned. 'Save the 'I don't ask anyone to do a job I wouldn't' speech for next time.'

Harlock hesitated briefly, then nodded. 'Fine. But take this,' he handed Daiba his cosmo dragoon.
'It has a kick, even in armour, so be careful.' Daiba nodded his acknowledgement and picked up his helmet. 'Just the port side torpedo tube,' Harlock cautioned. 'Do not get creative.'

'Relax. I got this!' his chipper reply was rather more gung-ho than he actually felt. Suffering Harlock's fussing with his helmet connection, he weighed the pistol in his gauntletted hand. The grip was well-worn, and although large and heavy, as he lifted it he found it began to balance itself with hardly any effort. Checks complete, he turned to face the outer hatch and tried not to flinch as the airlock sealed behind him and began to fill with water.

He'd tried scuba diving years ago - another lifetime, when such skills had meant fun, rather than survival. Then, he'd had free movement in wetgear by comparison to the armour he now wore. It added an extra layer of claustrophobia to the experience that he found hard to get past. With an effort, he calmed his breathing down, hugging the side of the bullet and looking for the safest move. Hidden behind the wing he was covered for now, but to reach the forward tubes, he was going to have to leave his shelter. Every angle was visible to that group of gyrating sirens, whirling and spinning in their graceful, deadly dance, each move tightening their grip on the bullet.

'In yer own time, kiddo...' Ali called out over the comms.

'Fine. I'll just rush out into the open, scream like a dervish and start shooting wildly and in a indiscriminately, shall I?' He shot back. Ali laughed, and inside the darkness of his helmet, he smiled. Taking a steadying breath, he ducked under the wing and took a few steps towards the bow.

Even moving as carefully as he could, his feet kicked up the deep sediment on the city street. The water turned cloudy, blocking his vision, and, he suspected, giving away his position better than holding a neon sign over his head saying 'shoot me'.

'Fuck.' The heartfelt expletive just slipped out. *Nope. Didn't really think this through, did you?* he asked himself. But hoping that it would provide some obscurity to his exact movements, he moved forward into the murky water, using the heads-up display to navigate.

He had to feel his way along the hull, barely able to see a foot in front if his nose. As great ideas went, he thought sourly, this wasn't one of his better ones... Something squirmed under his hand, and he pulled it back with an almost girly scream.

'Daiba?' Harlock sounded concerned.

'Fine. Just fine. Put my hand on something...' He'd lifted his hand off the hull, but only by a few inches. Without warning that something lashed out and wound itself around his arm. Another flicked around his waist, curling like the lash of a whip, and pinned his other arm to his side. Looking down he could make out the long, prehensile locks of hair that stretched away to the continually whirling, dancing women, who's gyrations, he realised even through the murk, allowed them to control the hair that currently had him - and the bullet- wrapped up like a nori roll. He struggled in a furious silence, trying to get free, but the stuff holding him - despite trying to tell himself it wasn't hair, but a bloody weed, he couldn't shake the illusion - simply tightened even harder. He bit back a scream as his left arm inside his armour was crushed by the crumpling metal. Frantically feeling with his right for the cosmo dragoon in his holster, he fumbled with the grip, and the weapon dropped to the muddy sea floor.

Another strand of trailing weed encircled his neck, and began to squeeze. Slowly but surely, he felt the pressure as it forced the ring of his helmet attachment into his throat...
A bright flash sizzled past his head, quickly followed by four more. He could have sworn he heard a familiar, unearthly screaming through his helmet, as a bright blue flash burned in the murky water ahead of him. Suddenly released from his bonds, he sank towards the mud in a sagging heap.

His knee at least struck it lucky, as it landed on the Captain's cosmo dragoon, which he felt around for and picked up, cradling it in his good arm. The left hung at his side, feeling like a dead weight.

An arm wrapped itself around his waist and tugged him to his feet. For the second time in as many minutes he let out a high-pitched shriek.

'Easy there - it's just me.' Harlock leaned him up against the hull. 'Get your breath.'

'I'm fine, just need my bearings.'

His dangling arm gave testament to the lie, especially as the pain started to kick in... _broken, again... crap._ He couldn't see Harlock's face behind the faceplate, but had a feeling the word "bullshit" was writ large on it. 'Thought you gave me your weapon?' He looked down to see the gravity sabre in the silver-armoured hand that wasn't currently holding him up. 'Ah...'

'Surprisingly, long-range weapons are better than short range when you have limited depth perception. And unlike _some_ people I could mention, _I_ can remember to compensate for refraction...'

'If we weren't up against it here I'd give you grief for that crack,' Ali's voice crackled over the comms. 'But we've got a larger mass of that kelp heading right for us, _against_ the current...'

'Blow your tanks and get out, Ali. Bullet One is still caught - just need to clear the last couple holding us - they seem pissed...' he paused. 'Though how the hell that illusion hits my cortex when I know it's just a patch of sentient kelp is one of life's little mysteries... Daiba - feel up to clearing this crap off my vessel?'

He really didn't... not having his throat almost crushed and his arm starting to scream at him. But he nodded anyway, and took a firm grip on the pistol. 'Cover me?'

'You sure you can cope with one arm out?'

Daiba took a firm grip on the pistol, the weight negligible in the power-assisted armour. 'Only one way to find out...' He took aim at the thick strands suffocating the front of the bullet, and fired. Concentrating on the choking mass clogging the torpedo tube, he was peripherally aware of Harlock taking aim at the creatures holding the bullet fast. The severed strands whipped back towards their origin like a snapping hawser, rocking the swimming figures off balance. Another went up in flames as it made contact with the powerful energy beam from the sabre rifle.

'All clear!' He called out. Turning as fast as he could, he noticed Harlock stagger backwards awkwardly, losing his balance. Daiba grabbed the silver-armoured figure by one flailing arm. 'Captain?' They were both forced back against the hull as Sabu fired the now freed torpedo tube towards the remaining female forms holding them. The containing cylinder split in flight, releasing a long, coiled filament which lashed out and sliced through the figures, shredding them instantly.

'Whooo!' Ali called out. 'Leave it to the geek squad to invent a shiny new salad shredder!'

Blue flames exploded briefly in the water, and were gone. If they hadn't been already braced against the hull, Daiba guessed the shockwave might have been more than a little unpleasant. As it was, even protected by the suit he felt as though someone had dropped an anvil on his chest. Harlock was clutching at the nearby wing, half doubled over.
'Harlock?!' He gave the arm he still held a little shake.

'Last strand snapped back at a bad angle. I'm fine.' But he didn't make an attempt to free himself from Daiba's grip, and the two men made their way painfully slowly back to the airlock. Once inside with the hatch locked, both sank to their knees as the water emptied out. Daiba helped Harlock off with his helmet first, and bit back a gasp as he saw the blood flowing down from above his eyepatch.

'Just a scratch,' Harlock told him. 'Scalp wounds always bleed like crazy. Here - you'll need help with that attachment - looks as through one of them tried to unscrew your head... Sabu - why are we hanging around - punch it!' He'd helped Daiba over to the seating as he spoke, and held onto him as Bullet One headed for the surface. Once leveled out and not pinned into place, he carried on working the damaged helmet attachments patiently, ignoring the trickle of blood down his face which dripped onto the floor along with the sea water from their armour. The spreading red pool on the pale decking made the whole scene seem far worse than it actually was, Daiba mused - at least until his attention was diverted by his helmet finally being jerked over his head.

'Hey - try to leave my head attached to my neck!'

'Ffffht. Man up, scamp,' Harlock said familiarly. With the ease of long practice, Daiba ducked the attempt to ruffle his hair and glared at his captain, who seemed remarkably unfazed. Harlock passed him a towel from a nearby rack and grabbed one for himself, holding it his head as he made his way to the cockpit. 'Sabu - where's that clump of weed that was homing in on us?'

'Right below us, keeping pace, and it's bulging upwards, like something's underneath it trying to get out! 'Cept there's nothin' there!'

Two sharp explosions that sent a flaming spatter of a sticky, corrosive residue into the cockpit window gave a lie to that. 'They're spitting some kind of giant seed pod at us! Damn things just explode in mid-air!' Sabu shouted as he tried to bank the bullet out of harm's way.

'Well that's just rude... not to mention rather novel... Daiba - can you work the depth charge release? Let them have a couple of Yattaran's little presents in return...'

'It wasn't far to the mechanism, but one-handed, he couldn't operate the lever to move the charge into position. And the console told another tale of woe. 'I can't shift it, sorry - even if I could, the hatch is damaged! There's either something still stuck in it, or it was damaged when they had us in a squeeze...'"

'Fuck.'

Heartfelt and pithy, Daiba thought with a sight grim smile. And to the point.

'Kei - hate to ask for the assist, but I've got a hostile lifeform heading my way... be a darling and send it packing...' Harlock asked.

On the open commlink, Daiba heard her laugh. 'On our way - target locked, and you might want to grab hold of something - we'll be cutting it close!'

From his spot behind the cockpit, Daiba watched as the blue sky was suddenly blocked out by a roiling tempest of black cloud shot through with red lightning. The Bullet shook violently as it was caught in the wake of the Arcadia's dark matter cloud, even as Sabu pulled its nose up to pass the red-eyed skull and head vertically up the bow, curving back over the top of the massive battleship, before punching it towards the stern. Below them the flash of Arcadia's secondary battery lit up
even the black cloud, followed by the sonic boom of a massive explosion.

'Whooo!' He heard Ali call out. 'Didn't know seaweed cooked off like an ammo dump in a firefight...'

'Which bit of "explosive seed pods" did anyone over there miss?' Harlock's rather snippy question occasioned an embarrassed apology from Yattaran. 'A little less sharp on the trigger, first mate - I prefer some distance between my arse and the explosions...'

'Just make sure you got that on camera,' Kei drawled. 'You know he'll be pissed if he doesn't get to see the footage - and I'm not chasing down another forest of that stuff for an action replay!'

'You do know I'm listening...?' Harlock responded in a laconic drawl of his own.

'Why else would I bother?' Kei quipped. 'Now kindly get your lightly singed ass back on board so we can watch this from a safe orbit!'

'Bossy cow...'

'Hot-headed idiot...'

Daiba wearily made his way to one of the flight seats and flopped into it, only barely bothering to pay attention to the banter. Instead he busied himself picking strands of what minutes ago had looked like hair from his armour, and dropping the stinking, slimy strands of seaweed into the nearest specimen box.

'For the record, young man, I really do not enjoy the sight of any of the crew stripped to the waist in my sick bay, no matter how pleasing to the eye you may be, given that every time anyone displays his torso for me, I'm generally either stitching wounds, bandaging burns or - as in this case - fixing broken bones.' Doc finished placing a cast around Daiba's lower arm and helped him to place the injured limb in a sling. A bandage also wound around his shoulder, securing a torn shoulder ligament. 'Cast stays for a couple of weeks, but check in every two days - round here healing times can be a little weird.' She turned to Harlock, who was having his head wound cleaned by a conscientious Kei. 'And you - next time, I expect to hear that any crew member you send out to do a job knows how to use his equipment properly. I cannot believe you let that poor young man go out there in an environment he wasn't used to handling the armour in. He's lucky only the shoulder servo caused him any problems.' She stood in front of him, hands on her hips, her dark pony tail whipping over her shoulder like an angry cat's tail as she turned.

'Sorry Doc. Won't happen again,' Harlock replied quietly. He winced as Kei dabbed at his cut. 'What are you cleaning that with? Vinegar?' The hand he reached up to tug hers away from his bloody hair was summarily slapped back.

'I can just let this go septic,' she replied a little frostily.

'To be fair, he was saving my life at the time...' Daiba spoke up, hoping to get his cousin out of the dog house. Kei turned her icy blue gaze onto him and he swallowed hard.

'You,' she said firmly, waving the bloodstained antiseptic wipe at him, 'are a bad influence. Every time you get into trouble he goes hurtling into the fray to protect you. Do you have any idea how long it took me to break him of that habit of running headlong into danger?'

He toyed with the comeback of 'Never?' then decided discretion was a better tactic and fiddled with the sweater that lay in his lap.
'I'd keep my head down if I were you, kiddo.' Doc patted him on his uninjured shoulder, as Kei turned her attention back to Harlock. 'Never get in the middle of a domestic argument. Especially not those two... they tend to settle them on the practice mats, and they both play rough.' She helped him to his feet and steered him out of the infirmary past the bickering couple. Though as he passed them he noticed a half-smile on Harlock's face, as his fingers gently curled around hers, and for all her grumbling, Kei's ministrations were noticeably tender. He swallowed the sudden lump that rose in his throat.

'I want that... the realisation was painful, but he ached for what they had; the playful teasing and insults, the way they looked at each other as though no-one else existed in the room at that moment. Not for them the shameful, furtive fumblings down on their knees in back alleyways just to make enough credits for a meal or a place to sleep for the night... As a reminder of what the creatures hunting him had taken away, it hurt like hell. Yet at the same time... *I'd kill anyone who tried to take that away from them.*

Doc's hand on his shoulder dragged his attention away. 'I was...'

She hugged him. Unexpected, but not, to his surprise, something he felt the need to run from. 'I know, kiddo. We all feel like that.'

'Huh?'

Was he that transparent?

She smiled and patted his cheek. 'Think I haven't seen that look before? Those two - along with our friendly ghost and our ghostly Nibelung are the glue that holds this crew together. I gather this wasn't a happy ship in the old days, but those two... you won't find a man or woman aboard who wouldn't die to protect them - or what they have together. I've seen them in some dark times, that would break most people, but they find a strength in each other that the rest of us broken wretches unashamedly leech off... She gave him a gentle push.'Now scoot, and get some rest. And if I see you doing anything with that arm in the next two days, you'll regret it.' She vanished back into her room.

'So how the hell am I supposed to get my pants off?' He yelled after her without thinking, causing heads to turn in the corridor. Meg and Cai were closest, and whilst the fair haired vixen collapsed against the wall giggling, Cai just slapped him on his good shoulder and grinned at him, his mouth open to comment. Daiba, blushing furiously, groaned. 'Please don't... Just *don't*...' he pleaded.

'Never even crossed my mind,' the Chinese crewman replied cheerily.

Face on fire, Daiba fled the scene as fast as his shredded dignity would allow.

Kei brushed Harlock's bloodied hair back away from the wound she'd been cleaning with a heartfelt sigh. 'Is it possible for you to come back from a trip without any injuries? Some days I feel as though I have *four* small boys to keep my eyes on...' she reached for a first aid pack. 'That'll need a stitch...'

He caught her hand in his. 'Leave it, it'll heal, you know that.' He flashed her the slight smile he knew to be his most disarming. 'No sense on wasting our supplies on me.'

'You're never a waste...' she replied softly. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles lightly. When he released her and stood up, gathering up his jacket, she tapped his arm lightly. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'Hangar deck. I want to take a look at the damage to Bullet One. Then the lab, to take a look at the
She sighed again. 'Food, a shower and rest don't feature in that schedule, do they?'

He slung his jacket casually over one shoulder and stood in the doorway waiting. Kei folded her arms and stood her ground, the toe of one thigh length black patent boot tapping impatiently. Eventually he held out his free hand. 'Fine. Shower, food, then check the bullet.'

She took the outstretched hand and smiled winsomely at him. 'See - that wasn't too hard, was it?'

When he tried to turn a one-eyed glare onto her, she just laughed, leaned forwards, and gave him a peck on the cheek, ignoring his irritated sigh.

Later, in the hangar, Harlock stared glumly at Bullet One. 'Whatever they metabolise, it's pretty damn effective.' The hull was crushed and dented where the kelp strands had held it fast, and pitted and etched along the same dents. The viewscreen of the cockpit was melted and buckled, almost through the thick plexi-plate in places. 'Thankfully we rendezvoused in atmosphere, or I'm not too sure we'd have made it back.' He sighed and shook his head. 'Sorry Maji - you're up again. Pity the self-repair doesn't extend to the planes...'

The dapper engineer snorted and rubbed his neatly trimmed black beard with one hand. 'And do me out of a job?'

Kei patted him on the back. 'Don't worry, I'm sure the captain will always make sure you have plenty to do... how many vehicles have you trashed so far?' She asked innocently.

He ignored the jibe and turned away, heading for the exit. Kei rolled her eyes at Maji, eliciting a shy smile, and followed.

'The cellular and DNA analysis was pretty conclusive,' he told her as they walked. 'Same as the Tokargan critters, and the samples from other planets we found related to Tadashi's flight. Well, same lineage and origins, anyway...' He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'It isn't too great a leap to suggest we have a lifeform - or collection of such, which left Earth round about the time of the K-T impact - a high civilisation that can use plants the way we use metals, plastics, ceramics... they've probably sent multiple waves, actually - not unlike our own diaspora. And there are several highly speciated lines found in the samples to date. They're remarkable really - adaptable, resourceful - and secretive.'

'I don't think they all left,' Kei replied as she kept pace with his long stride. 'Think about it - for any kind of ancestral memory as a basis for the legends your uncle was so fond of they'd have to have had some presence on Earth down to historical times, surely. Then there's the different types... I've had time to do some work of my own during your recent trip. I went back over the police files from Tadashi's four year flight. The women listed as missing, or confirmed dead from eye-witness accounts weren't the humanoid plant-women we've seen for ourselves. They had fully documented histories and looked fully human.'

'It isn't unheard of for plants to mimic other lifeforms - mostly for reproductive reasons, but also for bait...'

Kei gave him a sharp look. 'I really wish I could unthink the implications of either of those scenarios...'

'They could be human,' Harlock pointed out. 'Maybe some kind of guardians - the old legends do
mention protectors of trees - nymphs, dryads... although whether those are the creatures themselves or human servitors is a good question.' He shook his head. 'But even the human women Daiba killed flamed and turned to ash...' He had one hand clutching his hair as he talked, tugging it occasionally as if the act would help him think. Gently, Kei reached over and tugged his hand down, sharing a smile with him.

'Your uncle's records might be the key,' Kei said softly. They were approaching the central computer room as she spoke, and the soft lighting from the central core was dimmer than usual. Un-needed, the soul of the Arcadia slept soundly, and the only other light came from the tiny trailing fireflies floating down on them from Mimay's habitual perch on one of the overhead branches. 'Those pictures he showed us back on Mars - do you remember?'

Harlock took his usual seat in front of the central trunk, and Kei sat beside him, leaning her head against his shoulder in a companionable silence whilst he thought. 'The carbonised trees that looked as though they were turning into women...' he replied softly. 'That little expedition that went down onto the planet's surface briefly after the Sanction's lies were exposed...'

'You were already planning on taking a look, weren't you?' she asked, knowing the answer.

He nodded. 'One last piece of the puzzle. If I'm right, it might also have another objective.'

'Bait.' Kei said bluntly. 'Whatever these things are they've gone to a lot of trouble over the years to keep their existence a secret. All of that expedition were murdered... You think they'll come out of the woodwork to stop us?'

He dropped a kiss onto the top of her golden head. 'Oh, I'm counting on it...' he replied grimly.
'He's grandstanding again...' 

Kei looked over to the direction Selen was pointing, to see Harlock poised on top of the artificial cliff, silhouetted against the equally fake blue sunny sky. She watched as he launched himself off the edge gracefully, somersaulting twice before entering the placid blue water with perfect form. On the beach, cheers and clapping accompanied his leisurely swim back to shore. 

'Not so much,' she replied with a smile. 'That one was tame... one or two of his more "creative" efforts to auto-Darwinate cut his time to get a vertical entry way too close for comfort... and since that's a thirty metre drop, that's saying something.'

Selen laughed. 'Give up, Kei. You'll never cure an adreneline junkie. Best you can hope for is that he'll ease up a little.'

'He has,' Kei replied with an indulgent smile. 'But every so often he just needs to backslide a little...' She watched him exit the water, smiling appreciatively at his lean form wearing only black trunks. 'I swear, if I could bottle him, I'd make a fortune...'

Selen laughed again. 'Who are you kidding, Kei? You'd never share!' 

Kei laughed in agreement, and embraced the woman who had been an older sister to her almost since their first meeting warmly. 'I know we've been nagging you to take a break, but you picked a hell of a time for a vacation!' 

Selen smiled as she held Kei at arms length, looking her over. 'So I hear. But what I've been hearing third-hand from Tadashi piqued my interest. I had to take a look. Besides, Kanna, Rei and Daisuke wanted to see the fortress, so it seemed a good time to come.' She linked her arm through Kei's and leaned closer so that she could whisper into her ear: 'Between the two of us, I think Kanna is more interested in being with Wattaru! She's missed him dreadfully.'

Kei looked over to the huddle of youngsters across the small strip of sand. Shotaro and Mamoru and Daisuke were talking with Rei - at twelve, Selen's third oldest was already showing the quiet dignity of both his parents, and shared their patience with the younger boys. His younger brother was the twins' age, and the four were animatedly examining one of Taro's latest inventions. Kanna - golden-haired rather than auburn, but otherwise already resembling her mother at eight, was huddled next to Wattaru; the two of them - one dark head, one fair, engrossed in a small pool the artificial tide had left behind. Nami had taken the opportunity afforded by her brothers' distractions to cuddle up to her father, and currently the most feared outlaw in known space was helpless in the grip of an almost-seven year old girl who had her arms wrapped around his neck and her soft cheek resting against his scar. 

'They grow up so fast, don't they?' Selen said softly. 'Another few years and he'll be scaring off her boyfriends...'

Kei smiled at the image. 'It'll be brave man who tries to get that far. She's her father's daughter all right, that one. Like Mamoru, she's nine-tenths below the surface.'

Selen laughed. 'They're all like that, Kei. And you cannot blame Harlock for their characters... if
anything I'd say Nami and Mamoru take after you... Wattaru reminds me more of how Harlock used to be, before...' she trailed off, and turned her gaze towards her two younger sons, both of whom resembled their father far more than they favoured their auburn haired mother. Both Rei and Dai were dark haired, and tall for their ages. Even at twelve and nine, they were their father in miniature. Wordlessly, for in truth, there were no words that could ease the pain of a loss so deep, Kei placed her arm around Selen's shoulders and held her close, offering what little comfort she could to the older woman. Watching the group at play, there were holes in the formation on her own side. Yumi... the golden-haired daughter who'd taken after her more than she had her father. And there should have have another little boy in that playful group, who would have been four...

She felt Selen's hand reach for hers and give it a tight squeeze. 'It never gets easier, does it?' Selen asked softly. 'There are nights I still wake up and reach for Rei. If not for those damned ships...'

Kei flinched slightly at the vehemence in Selen's normally quiet voice. But she couldn't deny that the other woman had a point. The legacy of the Homecoming War just kept on giving... 'It's not all bad.' She replied eventually. Unconsciously her gaze lit upon Mamoru, who was laughing at something Taro was showing the boys.

'There will be a cost, Kei.' Selen had followed Kei's gaze, and her own fell on the laughing little boy with sorrow. 'I can't say I wouldn't have tried the same in your place, but nothing good so far has come from humans meddling with dark matter... even the best of intentions can be twisted by it.' Meeting Kei's troubled eyes she sighed. 'But the Arcadia is the sum of her crew, her captain... it may be enough.'

'It has to be,' Kei said with feeling. 'There's still one more Deathshadow out there we have to find...'

He flapped off as she caught sight of Harlock staring at her quizzically, and forced a smile. From the shake of his head as he turned back to listen to Nami's chatter, he wasn't fooled. Still carrying his daughter he walked across the sand to them, and placed her gently down to run off laughing to join her brothers, before dropping gracefully to the blanket Kei sat on, his long bare legs stretched out in front of him as he leaned back against her, smiling from underneath his unruly hair, tangled and damp from the realistic sea breeze, and curling against his bare shoulders.

'Ali's right,' Kei told him as he leaned into a neck rub. 'You do need a haircut. '

'No. Just "no", love. We do not say "Ali's right", remember? We'd never hear the last of it!'

Kei glanced over to where the crewman in question was strolling out of the water having made the same clifftop dive, wearing a pair of skin-tight lime green swim trunks that left nothing to the imagination. 'Good point. But you do need a trim, you scruffy pirate!' He flicked sand at her, grinning when she squealed. Selen smiled at them and shook her head. 'I'll do it, Harlock. I've seen the mess she makes with her own hair...'

'Hey!' Kei scowled at her. 'Who's side are you on?'

'Mine, I think,' Harlock drawled. 'She's right... left to your own devices you just grab your hair when it starts to annoy you and hack it off with a knife.' He ran his fingers through the length of her golden hair as it fell down now to the bare spot below the cross-ties of her swimsuit above her waist. 'Though I like it long. It suits you.'

'Your's doesn't, you girly hippy,' Ali offered as he strutted past. 'Any longer and we'll be able to put plaits in it.'

Unruffled, Harlock laid his head in Kei's lap. 'Were you deliberately trying to scare the children in
those things?' he shot back, with a pointed look at Ali’s lime green crotch.

'The only thing that's scary is the colour,' Wattaru called out from the small group of children nearby. The rest sniggered.

Ali snorted. 'I'd expect that from your evil twin, small fry, not from you!' Wattaru smiled beatifically at him.

'Don't worry uncle Ali - when we hit puberty, we'll let you know what it's like...' Mamoru smirked.

'Comments like that, kid, will not make you any friends...' Ali told him with an injured sniff. Harlock laughed at him.

'Give up, Ali - you haven't come out on the winning side of an argument with the twins since -'

'They learned to talk?' Daiba, having strolled over to retrieve the volleyball the younger crewmembers were playing with, interrupted with a grin. He slapped Ali on the back with his good arm - the other was now out of the cast but fierce glares from Doc had stopped him from joining in the game, so he'd volunteered to umpire. 'Could be worse though, captain - have you seen the shirt Yattaran found?'

Harlock shuddered. 'Seen, and might need to get my good eye checked out... I'm not sure how many colours were on it, but given the number you'd think some of 'em wouldn't clash...'

'If all I'm gettin' round here is abuse, I'm off,' Ali grunted. As he walked away, his back was to the twins, one of whom - Mamoru, Harlock noticed idly, was giving the bird a little shove. It waddled awkwardly towards the blond crewman, who reached down to shove it gently away when it got underfoot, only to receive a well placed beak in an area all too visible under the tight fabric. His outraged bellow startled most of the crew on the beach momentarily.

'Son of a bitch! Which of you little terrors sicced that thing on me?' He growled at the boys who were all helpless with laughter. Mamoru looked over and winked at his father.

'Must have thought he saw a worm, Ali...' he replied innocently. Kei struggled to hide a grin, and Harlock had to bite back a laugh of his own. But enough was enough...

'Mamoru - enough. I don't think Wattaru wants to be a singleton...' He got to his feet and walked over to the group. 'I think I'd better take you three somewhere else before your "uncle" decides to keelhaul you...'

'I didn't do anything!' Taro pouted. He glared at the twins through his glasses. Harlock ruffled Taro's light brown hair fondly. 'No, but I was going to get dressed and get some lab time - figured you'd want in?' All three nodded enthusiastically.

'Will you take us flying, after?' Wattaru asked, wriggling like an excited puppy. His father smiled down at him. 'Depends...'

'If they promise to be good, run like hell' Daiba offered. He threw the ball he'd retrieved from next to them and ruffled the hair of each boy in turn. 'It only leads to tears. Everyone else's, that is, not theirs...'

'Feel like lending a hand, or were you planning on watching Ali and his gunners take on the brat squad?' Harlock asked him. Daiba grinned.

'Lab time sounds like a plan. I'm not sure I want to watch Zack's bunch get their asses kicked
again...' he fell in with Harlock as they headed to the hatch, the boys running on ahead. 'When are we heading out to Earth?' he asked as they walked. 'We've been back three days already..

'Patience. We have to resupply first, and I want to rotate a few of the crew for this one. Plus it's Nami's birthday in two days, and I promised her I'd be around for that.' He stopped off at the door to his on base quarters, the boys running in ahead. 'I need to change. Meet me in the main lab in thirty?' He had already turned away, taking the reply for granted.

Daiba found Doc in the lab, still going over the samples from Tiamat. 'Last time I saw you, you were heading for the mess hall,' she told him as he wandered in, hands stuffed firmly into his pockets.

That had been two hours ago, but he let it go. He shrugged. 'Given how after our recent trip the only thing on the menu is sodding herring, I thought I'd pass...' he took a seat at a terminal.

'Seriously, could the guys have picked a variety out? Would it have killed them to look around and scoop up something other than a couple of tons of fucking herring... it's not like the bloody planet wasn't seething with fish...'

She laughed at him. 'It was seething, true... that just happened to be what it was seething with. I think someone forgot an apex predator or three.. that or they had to leave before they tweaked the biosphere properly. You grab what you can, out here, kiddo. You should know that. But now we know about this planet, and know how to avoid those damned kelp fields, we can go back to restock and take our sweet time... Just think - it could have been a lot worse - I can remember one world a few years back where the seas had been totally over-run with jellyfish. Edible, but tastes like shoe leather...'

He glanced up from the terminal. 'Jellyfish. Huh. You guys raid a lot of worlds for food?'

'When we need to - there aren't many worlds that are fertile, and we never raid one that's inhabited to a level where we'd cause hardship to the inhabitants. But even before the Machine Wars, the Homecoming War left a lot of borderline planets depopulated - and without human interference, a lot of them have prospered - even if not always in a way humans could live with.' She placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her interlaced fingers. Her long dark ponytail dangled over her left shoulder, being toyed with by a lazy tortiseshell paw, as her little cat, Mii, reached up to play with it. 'The bit that sticks in my gullet is how many potentially agrarian worlds were snapped up by large corporations at the start of the diaspora and rapidly covered with cities and factories. We left Earth because we'd ruined her and exhausted once-fertile land, then we head for the stars and start over again... even planets like Mistral - a breadbasket for this sector before Promethium scorched it - were marginal at best for terraforming.' She shook her head, and had to rescue her ponytail from eager claws. 'We never learn...'

'Mistral is recovering.' Harlock strode into the room, flanked by three small figures who made a bee-line for Mii, and the little cat lapped up the attention, rolling onto her back for bellyrubs and purring her heart out. 'Luna... I thought we agreed the cats and my bird stay out of here?'

Doc reached for a bottle and poured a generous measure into a tumbler next to her. 'The cat's in my half, Captain... but if it's dangerous small critters that can cause absolute havoc that worry you...' she raised the tumbler and gestured to the three small boys.

Harlock gave a small huff, muttered something about "clogged filters" and shook his head. 'Those three didn't get into an experimental propagator and use the soil as a litter tray...'

'Only because they can't fit...' she shot back. Mii miaowed at her, and she scratched the little cat
behind the ears as she knocked back the contents of the tumbler. She smiled at her captain beatifically, and then went back to work, ignoring him. He sighed and took the seat next to Daiba.

'Did you find those files I asked for?'

Daiba keyed up the items in question, and a series of thumbnails filled the screen. 'Like you said... seems that some colleagues of mum's took it on themselves to head down the moment that the fleet returned to Mars after you broke it... they were dragged back within the week, but sent their work to Dad and Mum for safekeeping.' He scrolled through the small snapshots, periodically picking one out to view. 'They overflew the area - the seas were dried up apart from some small remnants in the old deep sea trenches, and the crust was so deformed you can't get a handle on the old continental structure at all - nor can you use the stars to navigate - the dark matter blast knocked the planet into a slightly different tilt, so finding a zero latitude/longitude that matches anything from before is difficult. But there are some landmarks that weren't totally distorted.' He pulled up a file that looked like a mosaic of overlapping pictures taken from the air, and dragged it to the holo projection suite, so that it hovered between him and the captain, enlarging so that more detail could be seen. 'Here - Ali thinks this is the remainder of the Himalayas... and the deep sea trenches in the pacific... and this - though it's been contorted to pass somewhere where the British Isles were - is the mid-Atlantic ridge. Here and here...' He pointed to two deep holes close together. 'This looks like the Gulf of Mexico - the two holes in the sea bed were supposed to have been made by the dinosaur killer... so this area to the left as we look at it was once the Americas. From the revised co-ordinates, the team landed somewhere in what was once the Yucatán.' He paused and looked over to check the reaction.

'Not bad, kid, not bad...'

Not Harlock's voice, but Ali's, the burly crewman looking over his shoulder to get a look at the map. Daiba froze slightly, the old panic coming back with someone standing behind him. Not helped by a glimpse of lime green out of the corner of his eye. Stupid... he told himself, taking a ragged breath. Not everyone is desperate for a piece of your ass... On the other hand there were places he could have made good money trading Ali's... he bit back the grin. No. That was not something you would ever mention out loud to a guy who could beat you into a pulp if he were so minded... but it did remove some of his tension.

Ali moved away suddenly, and Daiba caught the approving nod of the captain. Still looking out for me, huh? But distraction mercifully arrived in the form of another map, skilfully laid on top of his. Ali took up the narrative.

'Between Hiltz's team, you and Tochiro, you didn't do a bad job. The Arcadia made some scans whilst we were in orbit, which are incomplete - I'll need to get a full sequence when we get back. But even if the topography has changed, the geology that created it still remains. When you look at the composition of some of the surface - and by that I mean the entire depth of the crust - you can see the extent of the damage. Japan's now somewhere in Australia, along with Indonesia and New Zealand... the British Isles are sort of cuddling up to Iceland... but there are large swathes that escaped significant remodelling. Most of Austria for example. And Canada, though the rest of North America seems to have been treated like a pancake someone failed to flip properly... see? The cities in central Europe were flattened, but the landscape there wasn't tied into knots or forcibly relocated. The underlying geology is mostly intact. In other places though it's like someone read through a textbook on geological processes and just decided to try them all out in real time for shits and giggles. Ocean floors raised to the surface; mountain ranges slumped below sea level... how the hell He didn't just tear the whole planet apart is a mystery. By rights it should have been torn to pieces.'
Daiba noticed as the man spoke, and his enthusiasm increased, the usual slovenly and rough accent and language he affected began to slip. Taking a surreptitious glance to his left, he had a good look at Ali’s face, alive and intent with a fascination and intelligence he’d rarely seen the man show.

'Well, thanks for your input, Ali.' Harlock gave him a hearty slap on the back. 'We'll send you a postcard...'

'Like fuck you will... If you think I'd pass up the chance to...' he snapped his mouth shut, folded his arms and glared at his grinning captain. 'Oh. Very funny. Just couldn't stop yerself could you?' He whipped round to glare at Daiba. 'And you can wipe that smirk as well, junior.'

Daiba tried out his best innocent look, but from the growl that got, it didn't work, but the attempt did earn him a sympathetic eye-roll from the twins. With their adopted brother in tow, they strolled over. Size aside, all three often gave the impression they were older than their years... the twins especially, who'd only just turned nine. But then, when you're part of a community of outlaws and rebels, and live through a plague that wiped out a quarter of the people you know, you're bound to grow up fast... He moved over a little to let them get a better look, although Mamoru and Taro seemed more interested than Wattaru, who frequently displayed the attention span of a goldfish... and Taro was more interested in how the holo display actually worked.

'Can we go with you this time, dad?' Mamoru looked up at his father expectantly. 'We'd keep out of the way...'

Both Daiba and Ali snorted at that howler. Harlock looked down at the boy, smiling affectionately, but even Daiba could see the resolved "no" in his eye. So, it appeared, could Mamoru, because his face fell even before Harlock replied.

'You know it's not safe on a battleship, Mamoru. We'll be slipping past the Earth Fleet to get there, and we'll likely have to fight our way back out. And then there's the Martian problem...' he trailed off, realising belatedly he'd gone straight over the boy's head with that last item. Daiba's too, as it happened, and after hearing muttered, unexplained mentions of Mars' problems recently, he asked the question.

'Just what is the deal with Mars anyway?'

It was Ali who replied. 'Few years back, after the government retreated to Enceladus and Ganymede - well, during the war the Machinners toppled the beanstalk and the orbital dock, and bombed the capital into dust, so staying around wasn't an option unless you couldn't afford to leave... Anyways, all we know is that they lost contact with Mars, and some kind of interdiction was set up. Rumour is, an AI created by the military got out of hand and took over. There's an EM field that prevents most machines operating over most of the surface, and last time anyone took a flyby, three capital ships were shot down. There's now a permanent patrol making damn sure no-one gets on or off the planet, and no-one really wants to talk about it in Alliance circles.'

'Worse than that, get too close to Mars' orbit and ships have been known to shut down - anything computer controlled just dies.' Harlock added. 'Needess to say for obvious reasons I'm not so curious that I need to go take a look.' Daiba exchanged a look with Ali - Yeah. Right. He wanted to take a look, that's for sure. But then, it had been his home, once.

And mine... In another life... Daiba kept that thought to himself. Mars had made it clear it had no time for the Daibas. Fine. He didn't feel the need to go back.

But the memories conjured up did leave him with one pang of regret... after so long moving from place to place - first with his parents, then on the run - he had no place to call his own. Not truly.
The Arcadia... Tabito... Deathshadow Island. It was great. For now. Whilst he held to a purpose. But he wasn't a pirate, or an outlaw. Not where it mattered. He didn't long for open space and a lawless life... *I want a place of my own. Finish Dad's work, maybe.* No more running... Shit. He couldn't even picture that last, yet.

Mamoru climbed onto his lap and wrapped his arms around his neck. 'Don't be sad, Daiba.' He gave the youth a quick peck on the cheek, accepted a hug and then squirmed off again to take a look at his father's workstation, currently displaying some colourful results from the programme he'd had the central computer running ever since they'd left Tokarga. 'Dad?'

'I think you're a little young for DNA sequencing...' Harlock told him kindly. Mamoru shook his head with characteristic stubborness.

'I read a lot. And I like your work. Mum's only into maths and that's boring...'

'Heaven help me if you repeat *that* in her hearing,' Harlock muttered.

Ali sniggered. 'Rocks are far more interesting, kid. Take it from me.'

'You can't *eat* rocks,' Mamoru pointed out. 'And last time I looked they didn't keep trying to kill our family either...'

'He shoots, he scores!' Daiba had to duck a punch on the arm from Ali, and grinned. 'Oh come on, you sourpuss, you have to admit he has a point...'

'That's why I read his stuff as well,' Mamoru added. He smiled up at the grumpy pirate, who visibly softened under the family's devastating secret weapon. 'Wattaru wants to join the SDF when he grows up - but there's a pathfinder corps that goes out and explores new systems - me and Taro think that would be way more fun!'

'No-one wants to follow in the family footsteps and take up piracy, huh?' Daiba asked Harlock with a grin.

Ali couldn't have wiped his own smirk away if he'd tried. 'They always rebel against their parents, Captain... guess all yours can do is go straight!'

'At least they'll have the choice,' Harlock replied softly. He ruffled his son's dark hair. 'I honestly don't mind what choices they make, so long as they're made freely.'

'So... not too bothered that Wattararu over there might one day have to try and arrest you,' Ali pointed out dryly, all humour gone.

'I wouldn't, dad...' Wattaru ran over to his father, almost tripping over a trailing cable and face-planting in Ali's lap. 'I'd be one of the good guys, like Uncle Dan or Admiral Oki!'

'One of the good guys, huh?' Ali ruffled his hair fondly. 'Might be stretching it a bit after that stunt Danny boy pulled... but I'll hold ya to that in a few years, unless you decide you'd rather run a raman shop with little Kanna...'

Harlock smiled fondly, Mamoru giggled and punched his brother lightly on the arm, and poor Wattaru could only sit there wriggling and blushing. Daiba decided to help the kid out. 'So... what have you tied the computer up with for a week...? Can't be the DNA analysis, coz I know damn well those were finished in-flight...'

Harlock gently encouraged Mamoru off his lap, and called up a series of screens. 'It was the results
of the DNA analyses that were the problem, not the sequencing. Especially in light of the results from the cellular analysis. The samples were manifestly from different species - even phyla - but they did share some interesting characteristics, not least of which was the possibility that what we have here is a totally new kingdom - neither plant nor animal, but something totally unique, sharing aspects of both.'

'Yeah, yeah, skip the basics, Captain Exposition...' Ali grumbled. Harlock ignored him.

'I'll let the expert take over. Doc?'

The woman sighed and strolled over. 'You're perfectly capable of delivering the lecture, captain...' she muttered. But she continued: 'Short version: All organisms we know of use only twenty amino acids to synthesise proteins. Back on Earth, even pre-diaspora they knew of plants which could produce hundreds of proteins - and this species, family, whatever it is, is no different. But the kicker here is that their cells use them. They don't just tolerate them. What we've been trying to do is work out how... and we think we have it.'

'The suspense is killing me...' Ali drawled.

'We wish...' Daiba murmured, getting a thump on his arm for his troubles.

'It's a protean lifeform,' Doc continued. She gave her ponytail a tug. 'Best we can work out, some of these cells can change form - quite rapidly. Others can "grow" into required shapes. In some of the samples the ability seems dormant, as in that little centaur from Tokarga. But that kelp from Tiamat was extraordinarily responsive to its environment. Worse still, there's some chance these lifeforms can merge with animal or plant cells, living inside them like a symbiote. The cells are so plastic in structure and so responsive, they could theoretically have a limitless adaptive capability.' She shared a worried look with Harlock.

'That's just the physical properties,' he said quietly. 'They've also shown some pretty strong mental coercion and ability to manipulate our perceptions. Machinners aside, this is one of the most elegant, deadly lifeforms I've ever seen.'

'So why do we need to go to Earth?' Daiba asked. 'What can you gain by looking at some old, fossilised trees?'

'Trying to track them down out here - the active branch of this family tree, that is - will be next to impossible. There's just too much ground to cover - so to speak. One of the fundamental truths of space combat is that you can't close with an enemy unless they want you to. The distances involved are just too great...' he paused, and sighed softly. 'We do know however that they can and will come out of the shadows to protect their secrecy. Professor Hiltz and his team were murdered. Your mother. My mother's greenhouse... You...'

'You're setting yourself up as bait?' Daiba struggled to maintain his calm. 'Why? We could just drop me somewhere and wait...'

'Not happening, so get that out of your head,' Harlock replied bluntly. 'For one thing you're also wanted by the Alliance, and I do not need them sticking their noses into our business. Besides, I don't want the agents. I want whoever or whatever is behind them. So we go to the place it all started. If we find any trees, you can be damned sure I'll shake every last one of them until something drops out...'

'Speakin'of trees,' Ali leaned on his captain's shoulder, eliciting a grunt and an elbow to the stomach for his effrontery, the latter of which he dodged with the ease of long practice. 'If they still
build - grow - their spaceships out of 'em...

'If their cells are that easy to grow, could they be as self-repairing as Arcadia?' Mamoru interrupted and looked up at his father, a worried frown on his young face. 'Dad? That wouldn't be good, would it?'

'You sure he's not an eighteen year old midget?' Ali asked.

'Positive.' Harlock gave the blond crewman a shove. 'And stop using my shoulders as a place to rest your elbows.'

'Mamo got all the brains...' Taro offered, causing Wattaru to land a thump on his arm. 'Ow!' He glared through his glasses at his brother. 'Mum said no more hitting!'

'You two, break it up.' Harlock's quiet rebuke was enough to prompt a quick apology from Taro. Mamoru however still looked worried and he hastened to reassure him. 'Don't fret. The Arcadia can take anything anyone can throw at it. Taro's ancestor will see to that. We've got Tochiro, never forget that. And Mimay.'

'And a crew as daft as you are,' Ali added. 'Time was most of had more sense than to run right into trouble head on...'

'Yeah... remind me how well that worked out for you?' His captain snarked back with a grin. Ali narrowed his eyes and growled.

Mamoru sighed. 'Dad - are you two going to pretend you don't like each other and start fighting again? Coz mum said I was to fetch her, next time...'

'With or without baby oil?' Doc asked, all innocence, as Daiba choked back a laugh.

'Oh, yuck...' Wattaru pulled a face. 'I think I need Aunt Emeraldas' brain bleach...'

'That should have gone right over your head, kiddo,' Daiba whispered, noticing both men struggling to find something to say. Wattaru shrugged.

'Puh-lease... we get babysat by pirates and the Millennial Thieves - we've heard worse. Though mum says they only spend that much time talking about sex coz they never get any...'

'Midgets.' Ali pointed at the threesome. 'I don't care how much you protest, they're not eleven...'

Taro just smiled brightly. 'So if we're not kids, we can join the crew, right?'

'Wrong.' All three adults spoke in unison, whilst Daiba had to try desperately to keep a straight face. 'The four of you will be going back to Tabito once we ship out. I want you and your sister safe. Once we've dealt with this we'll see about that promised trip to Miraiseria.' Harlock hugged his sons in turn. 'Doc?'

At the unspoken request, Doc ushered them out. Once the room was cleared the captain sagged visibly in his seat. 'I swear, they put almost as many years on me as you do,' he told his cousin.

Daiba smiled at him. 'Sounds like you almost prefer murderous naked space-dryads flying self-regenerating wooden spaceships...' he quipped.

Ali gave him a sharp look. 'You know, when you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous...'
Harlock called up one of the simulations that showed the possible growth patterns of one of the creatures, based on their memories of the woman with the strangling, thorned vine from Hakidame. 'Except it isn't a laughing matter when myths and legends walk amongst us, and they're very, very real and extremely deadly. I want to keep this as far away from my family as possible.' He looked at Daiba. 'That would include you and Kei but I suspect you'd both tell me where to shove the sentiment...'

'Do I need to dignify that with an answer?' Daiba asked. 'And Kei would probably point out that both times you've fought them, you've been the one hurt, not her.'

'Which is why it's a good thing the Arcadia won't leave the dock unless I'm at the helm.' Harlock replied with feeling. 'Otherwise she'd try to have me sitting this one out on Tabito...'

Ali gave his captain a hurt look. 'Bloody marvellous. Why does no-one ever worry about me getting shot or killed on these things?'

Harlock heaved a heavy, exaggerated sigh. 'Ali, Ali, Ali... if you haven't worked it out by now... oof...' he didn't manage to avoid the elbow to the ribs. 'Asshole.'

'Yeah.. but cap'n, I'm your asshole...' Ali pointed out. His brain finally caught up with his mouth when he spotted identical twitches to the corners of two mouths. 'Wait... that came out wrong...'

'And here was me thinking we were never going to mention that cluster fuck on Metabloody ever again...' Harlock deadpanned. To Daiba's surprise, Ali blushed slightly.

'Dare I ask?' Harlock just raised his visible eyebrow and Ali glared at him. 'That'd be a "no" then...'

Daiba turned off the display. 'Leaving aside the levity, are we really going to stand a chance of getting through the Solar System Defences without being spotted?'

'Hell no,' Harlock replied quietly. 'We'll be spotted all right. But the question will be how much they'll throw at us. There's only a token fleet kept in the Solar System, and that's mostly to protect the High command on Enceladus.'

'But you can take that, right?' A quick, blink-and-miss-it look passed between the two pirates. 'Right?'

'No question. The real issue is how fast they can call in the rest of the fleet...' Harlock relayed drily. 'So getting in isn't going to be the problem. Getting out however...' He smiled grimly. 'That's where it could get a little tricky...'
Chapter 16

The Kuiper belt was the perfect point for a ship to exit IN-SKIP space. Beyond the orbit of Neptune, a vast black cloud lit by flashes of red lightning manifested close to Makemake, and established a close orbit to the planetoid. Despite being an area of space around the solar system easy to hide in from the deep space sensors on Ganymede and Pluto, the area still offered protection from detection, due to the large numbers of smaller, volatile objects that made up the majority of the belt.

Inside the cloud of dark matter, the Arcadia lurked patiently whilst its crew busied themselves checking their own sensor data before proceeding.

'Anyone else getting a feeling of deja-vu?' Kei asked. At the station to the left of the ship's wheel, Yattaran shivered. 'Last time we hid out here, you ended up shot on Mars.' He gave the youth standing next to him a stern stare. 'Chasing an annoying little brat as I recall...'

Daiba gave the tall collar of his green jacket a tug and rubbed his neck where the stiff material had chafed. 'Don't worry Yattaran, I'll make sure to keep tight hold of mummy's hand this time...' It earned him a snort from the big first mate, and a soft laugh from Kei.

'Getting readings from the region of Saturn,' Kei called back to the tall figure sitting in the shadows behind her. 'Five capital ships, no more than a dozen of the new Cassini class destroyers. The inner solar system is clear of patrols, just as you suspected. They've mined the asteroid belt though.'

Yattaran snorted again. 'Seriously... who do they have in charge? They do know that's only in the ecliptic plane, right? Even then we can just thread the needle...' He pushed his glasses into place. 'Two dimensional thinking...' he snorted.

'Not quite,' Kei replied. 'I'm reading IN-SKIP drive signatures - someone gave these things a mini warp drive - they can be deployed in seconds if they detect an incursion. Funny thing is though, their sensors appear to be pointing inwards...'

'Mini drives? Thought that was impossible?' Harlock stood, pushing himself out of the thronelike captain's chair and striding towards the helm.

'Ah. It was...' Yattaran scratched his backside. 'But the Alliance has been in bed with the Evil Machine Empire, and they grabbed a lot of tech from Mimay's baby brother.' He leaned over his console. 'Want me to crack the system again, since we're here?'

'Not yet. We go in quietly. I don't want a fight whilst we're investigating Earth.' He laid a hand on the wheel and smiled softly. 'Kei - lay in a course to avoid the belt, and jump to Earth orbit. Keep the Moon and Earth between us and any sweeps.'

'Aye aye, captain!'

'Mimay - dark matter engine ready?'

There was no response. 'Mimay?'

Harlock turned and walked to the rear of the bridge, to where the graceful alien woman stood in front of the control sphere for the massive dark matter engine that soared into the vaulted ceiling of the room, like a gigantic cathedral organ. Blue sparks fluttered inside the sphere, like agitated fireflies. Mimay's head was lowered, her soft pale hair falling over her face. 'Mimay...'
This time his voice was softer, gentle. He reached out a hand and touched her shoulder, eventually gently turning her to face him. Her wide, catlike eyes stared at him, the third eyelid flickering over the pale green pupil-less surface. His hand shifted to her chin, tilting her head until he was looking her straight in the eye, and then moved to stroke one cheek softly.

'I'm sorry, Harlock.' Her voice was a sorrowful whisper, almost lost in the background hum of the engines. 'This system... Earth. Every time we come here, something terrible happens. The Homecoming War... Earth's destruction... Harlock's loss... Kei almost died last time...'

'Shush... I'm sorry. I should have realised...' He drew her close and let her rest her head on his shoulder. 'Take your time.' The Arcadia's heartbeat thrummed as if in sympathy.

'On the plus side,' Ali said from his perch nearby, leaning against the stair rail, 'it seems to be getting less traumatic each time...' He caught the one-eyed glare from his captain and shrugged. 'What?'

'So not helping,' Kei told him coldly. She strode across the gantry, her boots clicking on the metal floor, to stand with Harlock and Mimay, and hugged the Nibelung woman tightly.

Daiba took a look around the top bridge, watching the reactions. Ali looked as though he was going to open his mouth to say something but changed his mind and slunk back down the stairs. Yattaran had his back to the scene and fiddled with his console, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder. On the lower deck, the crew were uncharacteristically subdued, with only minimal chatter reaching the upper gantry. He sidled over to the fat man. 'You okay?'

'Ah. Not quite as many memories,' Yattaran grunted back quietly. 'She's right though; only bad memories here. For those of us who were there... and then again, there's a whole load of people who were who ain't with us anymore...' He jumped slightly as Harlock walked up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Too many who aren't. I'll take the helm, first mate. Kei - ready on that course.' He took up his place behind the wheel, hands placed at ten and two, legs braced. 'Arcadia - go!'

The throbbing of the dark matter engine rose to a crescendo, and blue lightning arced between the wheel and the captain, touched briefly on Kei, Yattaran... lightly brushed Maji and Ali on the lower deck...

...and the universe outside the main screen went black.

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As the black cloud rolled back from Arcadia's bow, the crew assembled on the bridge took their first look at the world humanity had left behind so long ago. The ship was cruising in towards a high orbit from outside the moons orbit, and the grey, scarred surface of Earth's constant companion in adversity loomed large on the viewscreen.

'Who took a bite out of it?' Meg asked.

'Not us...' Harlock replied. 'We were being shot at, at the time...'

'The Gaia Sanction authorised the use of a mothballed planet-killer from the Homecoming War,' Kei added. 'A plasma accelerator using Jupiter's atmosphere for fuel. By that time they'd decided to cut their losses and take Earth out if it meant killing us.' She sent a sympathetic look Harlock's way. 'They'd have succeeded, if not for the old Captain, and Harlock's brother...'

'They can't just throw that at us again, can they?' Zack piped up, a worried note in his voice.
'Nah,' Ali replied. 'We took care of the hyperspace acceleration rings when we left. One final little "fuck you" to the Council. Since they landed straight in the middle of the Machinners' War right after, they never got round to rebuilding.'

'That, and the fact that no-one really gives a flyer about defending this system anymore,' Yattaran added. 'Too busy moving their worthless hides out to Grand Technologia.'

Harlock smiled sadly. 'It still doesn't sit too well, knowing that Earth's defenceless if an external threat does show up,' he said softly. 'Even if they did build it to turn on their own.'

'Too soft by far you are, sometimes,' Ali snorted. 'I'd prefer not to take hot plasma up the arse, thank-you-very-much.'

'.aaaand the really inappropriate imagery just never stops, does it?' Meg gave him a thump on the arm. But any further comments were stalled by the sight of Earth, rising into their field of view, until it filled the screen.

'I still can't bear to look at it,' Kei whispered sadly. She was standing close to Harlock, and leaned into his embrace as they stared at the screen, taking in the sight of the wasteland in front of them. 'I know it's trying to recover, but looking at this, I find it so hard to believe that it ever will...'

'Not in our lifetimes, no. And it's so frail, so fragile... but there is hope.'

The planet in front of them was a nightmare vision of hell, Daiba thought, staring at the screen. Something out of one of his father's texts... Pictures he'd seen over the warp feed of Earth's true face had not even come close to the reality. The once blue and green paradise was a maelstrom of red and black storms which roiled and tore at the surface. From orbit it looked as though clouds of lava raced across the face of the planet, and he almost expected to feel a searing heat as he stared at the screen.

'It's actually just dust refracting in the atmosphere,' Harlock said quietly, as though reading his mind. 'The temperature is surprisingly chilly. The surface winds are fierce, but nothing we can't handle. Anyone taking a plane down though will need to take care... the turbulence is violent.' He turned to Kei. 'Just a quick check - are we still getting a signal from the dimensional oscillator?'

She took the few steps back to her console to check, then looked up from her screen and nodded, biting her bottom lip hard.

'Didn't you leave some of the holoprojectors behind?' Meg asked. 'I can't see any...'

'You won't. Someone moved the remaining ones into close orbit around Mars a few years ago, where for some unknown reason, they point towards the surface,' Ali told her.

'Nor is it our problem,' Harlock reminded them. 'We have enough to worry about.'

That earned him sharp looks from his officers, Daiba noted, as Ali, Yattaran and Kei shot him "what-the-hell" looks, but none of them called him out on the obvious bullshit. The captain folded his arms and stood firm behind the wheel, staring at the screen. 'Kei and Yattaran will hold the fort. Daiba with me in bullet one. Ali, Zach, Doc and Niobe take the workboat - you're on sample gathering - might as well take a look at what's going on down there whilst we're here.'

'So where are we heading?' Daiba asked.

'Following in the footsteps of the Hiltz expedition, hopefully.' Harlock replied. 'Full environment flightsuits are mandatory, people - including respirators. The air is breathable, but that wind is
pretty fierce, and although there's not much chance of them blocking dark matter, some protection is better than none.'

'And with that attitude,' Ali drawled, 'We now know how Kei got knocked up so many times...'

'Don't make me come down there and hurt you,' Kei shot back. She moved over to take the wheel, offering a slight but worried smile to Harlock as he moved to let her take his place. 'It goes without saying, but be careful down there.' She turned her gaze to Daiba. 'Both of you. I want you both back in one piece, no holes.'

'You should know by now I never actively try to get into trouble,' Harlock replied. He laid one hand on her cheek, and gently brushed a strand of hair away, tucking it behind her ear.

'I shudder to think how much you'd get into if you did,' she muttered. 'Be safe,' she added quietly. He simply nodded, and turned on his heel.

'I have one stop to make,' Harlock told Daiba. 'Be on the hangar deck in forty.' Daiba nodded, and Harlock returned the gesture before clicking his way down the metal stairs.

The Central Computer Room was always a quiet, if not silent place. The constant background thrumming of the enormous servers and cooling rigs was a low-level undercurrent, but it could fade into the background. Likewise the dim lighting was only occasionally relieved by the circular, ever swirling red light in the centre of the trunk-like column of the main computer bank.

At first, new to the ship and its secrets, Harlock had thought this massive assemblage housed the - for want of a better word - "soul" of the Arcadia; her designer, Tochiro. The original Harlock's only friend. The truth was somewhat less clear cut, but by long agreement, this was where the two men had met, talked... well, from what little he'd seen, Harlock had talked... Tochiro mostly listened and made reassuring noises...

'Yes, I know that's not quite true, but to an outsider, it looked that way.' Harlock stepped between two of the outer ring of servers, and made his way to the bench-like extrusion in front of the swirling red light. He sat down with a sigh. 'How are you holding up, my friend?'

The light whirled a little faster and the background hum deepened to a minor key. 'I know it must be hard. I know you miss him. Can't be easy coming back here.' He tilted his head to one side, as if hearing something almost out of reach. 'No. Me neither. Even after everything that went down between us, he was still my brother.' His hand rubbed the length of the scar on his left cheek a little self-consciously. 'And here's you, still making do with the replacement goldfish...'

Negation and indignation in the background noise. 'Okay, fine... maybe I am feeling a little sorry for myself...but sometimes, looking at it... Seeing Earth, so fragile, so brutalised... all this power at my fingertips, and I have to sit back and do nothing...' He laughed softly, but without mirth.

Tiny green fireflies trailed across his face, and he looked up, then round, then up again. Mimay lay draped along one of the overhead conduits, her head resting on her folded arms, and staring down at him.

'I didn't hear you come in...' he said softly. She tilted her head to one side very slightly, cat-like.

'You constantly under-estimate your worth, Harlock. Even now. Our old friend chose well - there is no strength, no merit, in not being tempted. The true measure of a man is in how he responds to temptation. You are not now and never have been a man who gives in or gives up...'
He smiled ruefully. 'I think that's what Kei calls my "mulish stubborn streak..." Digging your heels in and refusing to move isn't always a virtue.'

'Unless you're already standing exactly where you need to be...' Tochiro's holographic image appeared next to him and 'sat' at his side. After more than thirteen years, it wasn't a gesture he needed to make as often as he had in the beginning. Over the years they'd learned to understand each other, their initial tentative alliance quickly deepening to a genuine friendship. But then, it was hard not to like Tochiro - an outgoing, affectionate man - the polar opposite in a lot of ways of the lifelong friend Harlock had at first been so wary of replacing. 'Don't worry too much about me and Mimay. We'll have plenty to worry about watching for the Alliance to make a move. Go, explore... and tell me all about it over a drink when you get back.'

Harlock returned the hologram's cheery grin with a soft sigh and a wry smile. 'I wish we could have that drink in person.'

'Ah. One day, maybe... if there's any kind of afterlife maybe one day all of us will sit down together for that drink - but hopefully not for a very long time.'

'It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles, And see the great Achilles, whom we knew...?'

Harlock quoted softly, questioningly.

Tochiro huffed at him and rolled his eyes. 'I think you're still far too young to wallow in that level of navel-gazing depression. That, and I should expunge all those pre-atomic age literary files from the servers. If you start quoting Swinburne, however, we're through!'

'If I start reading Swinburne, you have my permission to shoot me,' Harlock drawled. 'I'll be beyond saving at that point...' he stood, and the hologram mirrored the move, the image of Arcadia's creator only just reaching his shoulder. 'If you do need to talk, you only have to ask. I'll always be here for you.' He looked up at Mimay. 'Both of you...'

The bird swooped silently down from the vaulted rafters, to land on his shoulder as he left.

Daiba forced the issue of who called shotgun on piloting the bullet down by the simple means of beating the captain to the pilot's seat in the cockpit. As Harlock stood in the space between the seats he waited for the order to move.

It didn't come. 'What are you waiting for, Daiba?' Harlock dropped into the co-pilot's chair without missing a beat. 'Get this bird in the air before I die of old age...'

Lowering his head to hide a smile, Daiba began flicking the switches to start the engine. 'Yes sir!'

Harlock's description of the atmospheric conditions hadn't been an exaggeration. The craft bucked and fought him the moment it hit the troposphere, and Daiba found himself cursing under his breath as he fought for control.

A gloved hand reached out to lie gently on top of his, putting a slight pressure onto it as he struggled with the altitude lever.

'Gently, Daiba. It can only fight back if you fight it yourself. Don't force it, feel your way through. A lover's touch, not a fighter's!'

'But..'
'Relax. Loosen your fingers, take a deep breath, and guide her through. Let it ride out the turbulence. It's a tough machine, it can take it.' Harlock told him reassuringly.

'Yeah. It might... I'm not so sure about us!' Daiba replied a little more pithily than her intended to, but Harlock only smiled, and released his hand. Taking a deep breath, Daiba tried to relax and follow the captain's guidance. Sure enough, the little craft did level out, and he followed the quietly offered instructions down to the 10,000 feet mark, where without fuss, Harlock took over.

'It's going to be a bit hairy closer to ground level. Besides, you should take a good look before we land. It may be a dreadful sight, but it is something you'll never see anywhere else.'

Daiba stared out if the cockpit window at the blasted, desolate landscape - a hellish nightmare in black and red. 'Where are we?'

'Somewhere over what was the Great Lakes, I think, according to Ali's calculations.'

'Was it always several hundred metres straight down to America?' Daiba asked. 'There's the mother of all landslips below us - Canada's on the fourteenth floor!'

'Ali thinks Yellowstone's super volcano blew when the dark matter tore into the surface. Kind of ripped the stuffing out of North America and just dumped the crust back down again like a dropped pancake. Thera blew in the Med as well, but didn't have quite the same power behind it, having blown in historic times. That's one reason there's so much dust in the atmosphere - every faultline gave way at once. If the dark matter hadn't somehow contained the blasts, there planet would have torn herself apart.' He guided the bullet upwards again to avoid a mountain range - a massive escarpment of raw, jagged spines thrusting up into the sky where once there had been plains, according to the old map. 'Even when life returns here, nothing will ever be the same.'

'Parts of Niflheim looked look this,' Daiba said softly. 'Though dad said their dark matter damage came from underground, not an airburst.'

'Mimay told me that was a terrorist attack by Loki's faction. A runaway surge caused more damage than intended. Why she then thought Harlock had such a great idea I'll never know... maybe she thought it was safer trying to create the shield he asked for...' Harlock shook his head sadly. 'I just wish I could put it right...' he whispered so quietly Daiba had to strain to hear him.

'Could you?' He asked. 'I mean, if you were careful...'

'Dark matter isn't predictable. That's the lesson I've learned. It's capable of so much, but it's like sitting on a runaway horse sometimes.'

Daiba decided to change the subject. 'Does it get weird? Talking about the other guy, I mean? You took the name, but it had to be a bit freaky...'

'I got used to it. Yama's been gone for a long time, really. Kei sometimes still calls me that, but only when she's really worried. Technically Harlock's my name anyway, given that he was family. It's not as though I was some kind of imposter. As for talking about him? Yes, it can get a little weird. .. as though you're talking about yourself in third person, if talking to someone who isn't in on the joke. Why?'

'Just curious. And everyone seemed a bit freaked out by being back here, so I guess his name kept coming up... so to speak.'

'There aren't that many left of us from back then,' Harlock said softly as he banked the little craft again. They were approaching the co-ordinates found in the expedition notes. 'And they all - we all
- could have used some proper closure with the man, to be honest.'

'What did happen to him... I never...'

'Honestly, I'm really not sure. He just sort of vanished. Faded. Blue light, then poof - empty chair apart from his cloak and weapons... But if that means dead or some freaky dark matter jiggery pokery, your guess is as good as mine. There have been times I've wandered through the ship and felt something watching me - not Tochiro. Some of the new guys think it's haunted. And not by Tochiro...'

'And the old guys?'

Harlock gave a grim laugh. 'Tend to think I have an over active imagination and an inferiority complex... but he smiled sadly as he spoke. 'Actually, I would like to think he's watching out for us. But given what little I got to know of him, I wouldn't place a bet on it. The man I remember was tired of life and just wanted to die, I think, once he was free of the dark matter... Now, we should be close to that landing site, if I read the landmarks right...'

Daiba checked the co-ordinates. 'There was a cleared, flat area they used as a base camp. From there to the area they were checking out when those pictures were taken, it's a three mile hike, but the terrain's not suitable for a landing. We could just take a fly-by...'

'Wouldn't get any real detail from above. That's a petrified forest. Well, carbonised is closer. The vibration could also destroy what we want to look at. No. We'll put her down and walk.'

Daiba gave him a dubious once over. 'You sure that leg's up to it? You've given it so much abuse over the years...'

'Been talking to Doc? Don't worry, it can take most of what I throw at it. Hurts like hell afterwards though... You just worry about your own fitness.'

'I think I can keep up with a forty year old pirate with a leg held together by plates...' Daiba snarked at him. He ducked the inevitable waft of a hand to the back of his head.

'For that, kiddo, you can carry the packs... and that's thirty-six, you cheeky little shit.'

Harlock hadn't been joking, Daiba mused, as he trudged behind the taller man, carrying packs containing their equipment. On the other hand they were travelling light - the packs contained water, locators and a couple of cameras. 'I feel like a bloody tourist,' he muttered under his breath as he tripped over his twentieth rock.

'Next time, borrow one of Yattaran's shirts,' Harlock called back over his shoulder. 'By the way, watch your step - it's a little uneven underfoot...'

'No shit...' Understatement of the year, Daiba thought sourly, beginning to sweat in the flightsuit suit he was wearing. Whoever designed the damn things hadn't had jungle trekking in mind, even if that jungle was a barren landscape of tumbled rock mixed with the decayed or carbonised remains of dead trees. The ground underfoot was unconsolidated and prone to shifting without warning, and even in the thin, chilly atmosphere he was feeling an oppressive heat as they walked.

Then there was the silence. That, he thought after the first hour, was the worst of it. On most planets there was life of some kind. If not human, then there buzzing whine of insects, or rustling in the undergrowth... birds chirping... here the only sounds were their breathing, and the constant clamour of shifting rocks as they walked. He winced at the clatter of every pebble that disturbed
the eerie, unnatural silence. *Alone and palely loitering... and no birds sing...* He shivered.

There was no movement apart from their own either... winds whipped around them, channelled by jagged, unweathered canyons, and dust was a constant hazard in spite of the face masks, but the brittle charred remains of the rain forest didn't wave in that wind. As idle as stone, they might have been walking along corridors of black marble columns.

Unconsciously, he sped up to walk next to the captain. Rather more deliberately he unholstered his pistol and kept it in hand, noting as he did so that he wasn't alone in this.

'Expecting trouble?' He asked. 'I'd been feeling a little stupid pulling a gun on a deserted planet...'

Harlock's reply was a simple 'fffht' before he added: 'Truthfully, so did I... but I can't shake an itch between my shoulder blades, and I'm not sure I can put it all down to that over active imagination...'

He pointed with his free hand. 'These don't help either...'

Daiba couldn't see at first what he was pointing to. Just more of the charcoal-brittle tree trunks, some still vertical, still more littering the ground. He'd missed his step trying to lift a foot over one, a while back, and instead of tripping over the branch, his foot had gone straight through it, kicking up a cloud of black dust.

But as in the pictures taken by Professor Hiltz and his team, as he stared, lines and whorls in the blackened bark began to take form... long strands of hair, frozen in a long dead wind... here an eye, a nose, lips forever open in an echoless scream... faces desperate to escape being pulled into the grasping trees? Or frantically trying to free themselves by taking on a human form? And now that he saw faces, he filled in other body parts. The full, lush curve of a beast or buttock. The graceful lines of an arm or a long leg. Hands both three and five fingered, limbs oddly fluid...

'Is it me, or is this even creepier than that ship?' Daiba muttered. He glanced over at his companion. 'There are so many of them - how the hell did no-one ever notice back when Earth was occupied?'

'No, it isn't just you. As for going undetected... I have no idea, although I'm leaning to a combination of really good camouflage and paranoid secrecy...’ Harlock knelt down next to a group of fallen trunks, some showing signs of figures caught in the act of escape, others strangely smooth barked and devoid of features. Very gently, he reached out a gloved hand and brushed away surface debris and charcoal, to reveal two slim figures, one lying over the other in a futile gesture of protection. A few seconds later both forms collapsed into a pile of ashes, whirled away by a passing dust devil. 'They had enough time to see it coming, but they couldn't escape.' His voice cracked slightly. He stood up again and stared around at the devastation. 'Nothing justifies this... nothing...' he whispered. His next comment was spoken so softly Daiba wasn't even sure he heard correctly, but it sounded suspiciously like 'damn you, Harlock...'

'It doesn't excuse the fact that they've been killing to cover up their damn existence for years, if not centuries,' Daiba said harshly. 'Are you going soft on me? You've seen what we're facing.' He kicked out at one of the fallen trunks, causing an outstretched arm to crumble to ash.

'Don't do that,' Harlock ordered quietly but with a sharp note in his voice that had a distinct flavour of do-not-fuck-with-me in it. 'It's disrespectful. Soft, no. But I understand vengeance, even if I don't condone it, Daiba. Harlock's actions destroyed both their original home and a major colony if I'm right. I can't and won't excuse their actions, but I do at least understand them.' He laid his dusty hand on Daiba's shoulder, peering through the visor at the youth's unforgiving scowl. 'Two wrongs never make a right, Tadashi. Some eternal cycles shouldn't be repeated, and vengeance is one of them. Though don't ask me how. I'm flat out of answers to that one...' he paused. 'I thought...'}
His fingers curled tightly on Daiba's shoulder. A warning for silence? Then he tapped the side of the lightweight helmet. Daiba obediently switched to the short range comms channel.

'What is it?'

'Thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye... though it wouldn't be the first time I've been a little too twitchy. ..'

Daiba took a closer look at their surroundings. Black, blacker, blackest... not a shred of green to be seen. Just dead trees, rocks and dust, not necessarily in order of quantity... but just as he opened his mouth to say so, and make a crack about the guy getting his eyes checked (no... possibly in bad taste. . Put a lock on the mouth, he told himself sternly) something did move in a cloud of dust, moving out of the shattered forest, wreathed in black motes so at first only a shadow could be seen. Beside him, Harlock sucked in a deep breath, let it out slowly.

Through the obscuring cloud, a young woman with waist length red hair stepped into the clearing they stood in. In the faint, red-filtered light of the almost-dead world, her skin had a sickly, greenish pallor, and she was completely naked.
Irita was in the shower when the alarm sounded, and he swore under his breath as he fumbled blindly for the power switch, peering shortsightedly through a fog of steam. He groped for the towel hanging over the door and missed twice, before fumbling again and dropping it in the lukewarm water pooling in the bottom of the tray. Eventually he was able to wrap it around his waist, feel around for his glasses left on the side shelf of the bathroom, and push them firmly onto the bridge of his nose. They too were steamed up, but at least he could see where he was going. He made his way to his bedside table leaving a trail of water behind him, and cursed again as his big toe discovered one of the legs of the bed, followed by his shin, which, having not had the memo from his foot, found the bedpost all by itself.

He hit the communicator button on the desk next to his bed and barked a sharper 'what is it?' than he might otherwise had intended. Corporal Kiruta's earnest little face was almost lost in even in the small viewscreen she stared out of.

'Sorry to trouble you, sir. The warning system in the inner solar system detected a large mass entering Earth orbit. We had standing orders to inform yourself and the Director of IntSec.'

'Details?' He snapped brusquely, trying to sit down and keep his towel firmly in place at the same time.

'Approximately one kilometre in length, mass unknown. All other sensors are being absorbed by some kind of field around it - Captain, we haven't been able to confirm, but we think it might be...' 'Deathshadow Four - Arcadia...' Irita murmured. 'What could Harlock possibly want with Earth? The man's been lurking around the outer colonies for a decade.'

'Sorry sir, we don't know,' the corporal replied, looking as though not having the answer to a purely rhetorical question was some kind of personal failing.

Irita didn't bother disabusing her of the notion. 'How fast can we get a squadron in-system? And get the Director on the line for me. We'll need to move fast!'

'Sir - she's already en route to your apartment. Should be with you momentarily. The lead time for launching ships to intercept is approximately thirty-five minutes, but that excludes the time taken to get yourself or the Director on board, should you wish...'

Wish, yes. Irita wanted a piece of the pirate so badly he could almost taste it. But if that time was the difference between catching the bastard and letting him slip through his fingers again... 'Tell the Commander in charge to set sail on his own recognisance, Corporal. In the meantime, call up the nearest fleet to the Solar System and have them redline it to get here - if the Solar Patrol can delay Harlock long enough to bring a capital ship or two to bear, we might just be able to corner him.'

'Yes sir.' He cut her off before she finished, and stood up. No time for lying around... he had to get back to his office to monitor the situation.

The doorbell chimed, and he cursed. Namino, no doubt, determined to ride herd on his operation. He headed for the door and pulled it open before remembering that only a bath towel stood between modesty and embarrassment. And that pooled into a pile of soft grey fabric at his feet as he stood in the doorway glaring at his superior.
Director Namino smiled graciously, stepped around both Irita and his bath towel, and entered the room without waiting for an invitation.

Scarlet-faced he picked up the towel, slammed a hand on the door control, and re-wrapped his towel again. 'Do come in...' She ignored him, walked to the only chair in the apartment and sat down. 'Please, make yourself at home...'

If the sarcasm registered, she gave no sign of it, though her gaze did taken in his state of undress with a lingering appraisal that left him even more flustered. She leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, her black knee length skirt riding up with calculated precision to reveal a long length of creamy thigh. The tight cashmere sweater she wore should have been demure, given the roll neck, but somehow the scarlet fabric only called attention to her breasts and narrow waist, clinging as it did in soft, provocative menace, whispering its siren call to any red-blooded male who made the mistake of looking at her.

It was all he could do not to take hold of her arm and chuck the baggage out of his apartment.

'Captain Irita. My apologies for disturbing you at home, but under the circumstances...'

He waved her off. 'Director, I understand. However if you will permit me to make myself presentable?'

She smiled, like a cat staring at a small rodent. 'Of course, Captain. It wouldn't do for you to be... out of uniform.'

He strode into the bathroom, refusing to rise to the bait.

It took Irita at least seven minutes to dress - and into that Shizuka factored in at least a minute or so for the reptilian captain to regain some measure of self-control after she'd deliberately provoked him. Interestingly his reaction to her appraisal was usually fury, not lust. He seemed to take her femininity as a personal affront, rather than an invitation.

He strode back into the room, buttoned up into his uniform as though it were armour - boots, gloves, stiff brown trousers and jacket - the latter with a reinforced collar for a helmet dock, the effect of which was to force his chin up and the whole ensemble kept him ramrod straight.

The man used his uniform as his first line of defence, she realised. Interesting... and so very human. Naked and vulnerable, so much of that icy facade was revealed for the fraud that it was. Once imprisoned again within the stiff leathers of the military grade suit he wore, he was once again the iron-willed, iron-haired pillar of propriety he persuaded the rest of the world that they saw.

With his glasses pinching the bridge of his nose he also had a permanent frown. Not a man who wanted to let anyone close.

She smiled anyway, as though he'd been warm and welcoming. 'I understand the ships on standby are making ready?'

He glared at her. 'Since you were obviously informed several minutes before I was, Director, I'm surprised you didn't authorise the order yourself. We lost valuable time...'

She waved him off. 'Your corporal had her orders, captain. Do not blame the poor girl. I had my reasons, captain, and you know as well as I do that in-system, minutes are irrelevant. If he's interested in Earth, he won't be going anywhere, and he'll be fully aware of our response times. If
we're running a little late, he'll wonder why... and if a man is worrying about variations in procedure, he's distracted.'

'A man like Harlock might not be as distracted as you might think, Director. He's proven many times that he can be a canny opponent in battle. And I have to wonder what IntSec's angle on this is. Care to enlighten me?

Her smile widened. 'There's no secret, captain. I have my own people in place ready to take advantage of his arrival in-system. After all, it isn't always necessary to take a sledgehammer to crack a walnut...' and not a word of a lie in that statement.

Irita simply glared at her over his glasses. 'That answers "what" but not "why", Director.'

*To keep you off that task force...*

'Captain. I'm not obligated to supply you with those answers. You answer to me, not the other way around. Do your job - keep Harlock occupied until the main fleet can get here. If you manage to capture one or more of his crew for interrogation, so much the better - for my part I doubt the fleet will prevail, and so our best chance is to either distract him, or trap him. Either way, my people are in position to do just that. Whatever it takes.'

His glare didn't waver. 'You could have discussed this over the warp feed, Director. Why come all the way over here?

She sighed. 'Is it too hard for you to believe that maybe I was in the area and decided to simply save some time?'

'Do I need to dignify that with a response?'

'Hmmm.' She tilted her head slightly to one side, an amused smile on her face. 'Perhaps then I had plans of my own and wanted to ensure you were sufficiently distracted to not notice until it was too late?' She laughed at the way his head jerked, his expression one of a hound that had just caught wind of its prey. 'Oh captain... really. Can't I just be sociable? Now, my vehicle is parked downstairs, it's a good twenty minutes at this time of the day to Command, I suggest we make some haste, and we can await news and hope for a final resolution of this annoying pirate and his fantastical ghost ship.' She offered him her hand, silently expecting him to help her from her seat, and as an officer and a gentleman, he had to play his part. Though he did relinquish her hand as soon as he could without giving undue offence. Not for the first time she wondered at his history... the man was almost pathologically averse to human contact.

He held the door open for her as they exited his apartment, and she smiled to herself as he turned away to secure the door. Arranging his transfer had been a way of keeping his inquisitive nature under close control, but trying to find a chink in his armour? That was going to be a purely personal pleasure...

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'Aliiiiiii...!' Meg's voice had a habit of hitting unpleasantly high notes over the comms. The recipient winced and wished for a volume switch. Or just a way to reduce the treble and up the bass a bit to compensate...

'No need to screech in my ear, sweetheart. I'm right here.' Ali lugged a sample case into place in the workboat storage area, and gave the securing bands a hard pull to tighten them. He made his way to the ramp and looked down. 'What's got yer panties in a bunch?'

'Yattaran's on the line. He says they've lost contact with the captain and Daiba. All they're getting
'is static.'

'Shit. I knew it'd go pear shaped... shoulda gone with him...' Ali muttered. He tapped the side of his helmet. 'Kei - what gives?'

'Ali? How close are you to finishing up? Kei's voice had a slight edge in it that was all too familiar. She could fake calm - but when Harlock's safety was an issue, her voice tended to edge towards a slightly shrill note. Though you had to know her well to spot it.

He glanced around, spotting Doc and Zack heading back, a small trailer trundling between them loaded with sample cases and Luna's equipment boxes. 'The others are heading over. Want us to take a look?' He spared a wistful glance at the mountain range in the distance. So much to see... so little time. And sure as hell Harlock would be pissed at not taking a stroll up those beauties... Whoda guessed the Eiger would have escaped unscathed from the devastation?

'It might be nothing. That area's got some nasty folds in the landscape, they could just be in a dead spot. But I don't want to bring the Arcadia out of the shadows until we have to.'

'Eh. Don't sweat it, Kei. I'll find him for ya. He's probably just gotten distracted by a weed...' He cut the long range link and bellowed on the short range: 'Oi - you two laggards - get your arses back here on the double!'

'No need to shout,' Doc snapped at him. But she did give Zack a little shove and the two picked up the pace.

'What about the rest of the stuff?' Meg pointed to the pile of sample boxes they still had to stow, as Doc and Zack scurried up the ramp with their rover in tow.

Ali gave them a regretful look. 'Leave 'em. Captain's more important.'

'But if it's just a false alarm...?'

Ali gave the girl a shove up the ramp. 'Then we can come back for them. It's not as though there's anyone around to nick 'em!'

The pile of boxes exploded with dramatically ironic timing, causing them both to duck the shrapnel. Ali hissed as a sharp, red hot splinter cut into his leathers, slicing the skin on his arm. A second blast hit close to the second, and he dived for the hatchway, propelling Meg in front of him to shield the girl. 'Zack! Ramp up! Engines!' He rolled back to his feet and slammed a gloved hand on the ramp control, not bothering to wait for it to shut. He elbowed Doc out of the way and dropped into the co-pilot's chair. 'Get us airborne, Freckles!'

The ungainly little craft lifted into the air and wobbled as another blast streaked past.

'Kei - where the fuck did that come from?' Ali yelled into the communicator. He belted up and fumbled for his helmet release, dropping it behind the chair to be fielded by Meg.

'It came out of nowhere...' Kei sounded worried. 'Sorry Ali - we didn't get a reading until it fired on you. Still can't see anything except a heat bloom! Whatever it is, it isn't metal, polymer or ceramic!'

'Who was on the bloody sensors?' Ali snarled.

'That'd be me.' Sabu, sounding contrite.

'Fer pity's sake, you dim-witted slab of beef, you were on that last bloody planet - did you not think
'Ali.' Kei's tone was rather caustic. 'We're on the other side of the bloody planet...'

'Ah. Yeah. Fair point.'

'Got a visual!' Zack called out. 'Holy shit...'

Ali echoed the sentiment with a rather pithier expletive as he watched what looked like a wooden dragonfly hurtle past them and bank round for a return pass.

Harlock laid a restraining hand on Daiba's shoulder. 'Don't make any sudden moves, and do not fire unless I say so...' he said quietly.

The woman stood watching them, and he had time to evaluate the figure in front of him. Tall - easily five-ten. Slender, with a wasp waist, though her hips were boyishly slim and her breasts small and unadorned with nipples or auroleae. Her limbs were long and attenuated, rigid but oddly boneless. Her "hair" was actually long thin tendrils of red that squirmed in the uneven wind like live worms. Her face was doll-like - nostriless nose, black eyes, a small rosebud mouth. Yet for all its symmetrical perfection, there was something uncanny about the thing that made his skin crawl - its superficial likeness to a young woman was purely skin deep.

Just like the creatures on Hakidame and Tiamat... he mused. He studied the face a little more closely as those jet black eyes stared at him. No cheekbones, he realised eventually. That was the problem. The creature was assembled like a plastic doll, or a computer generated sprite - it approximated the structure of the human form, but it was not built upon the framework of a skeletal frame - no frame, no fat, no tissue differentiation... it was as expressionless as a human form machinner.

'Captain...' Daiba's voice held a note of both warning and slight panic. 'There are more of them...'

One by one more of the creatures stepped out of the dead forest, until they were surrounded. Yet they didn't approach.

Waiting... but for what?

His answer came in the form of another figure, striding out of the dust to stand next to the first. This one, however, was no simulacrum. She had dark hair, probably black although the dim light was deceptive. Her proportions were fully human, as was the face - or what he could see of it behind a fleet issue helmet. She also wore the uniform of an IntSec officer. A captain.

'You showed respect to the dead, on your way to this point,' she said clearly, her voice carrying over the gusting winds. 'For that, you may return to your ship and prepare for battle.' She turned to Daiba. 'You did not, and your deeds are known to us, Tadashi Daiba. You will meet our justice for the murder of our sisters and their charges.'

'Who are you?' Harlock asked, cutting off Daiba's indignant retort. He squeezed the youth's shoulder hard, silently begging him not to do or say anything stupid.

'Jorjibel. Captain, Internal Security, Sol System.'

'Correct as far as it goes I suppose. What are you really?' Harlock pressed.

'Mazone. A loyal servant of the Eternal Queen Rafflesia!' She answered proudly. 'Guardian of the
Green.' She took a step forward and Harlock released Daiba's shoulder and raised his pistol. 'Leave, Harlock. Leave the boy, and prepare to meet me in battle.'

'Not happening. We'll both be leaving. Daiba!' He backed away, motioning the youth to follow.

The circle of red haired plant-women - dryads?

_Mazone_...

...drew closer, closing in on them.

'No matter, then. I was ordered to give you a chance, at least.' She stepped back, dust whirling around to obscure her position. The circle continued to close, even as the two men backed towards the treeline.

'Captain?'

'Back to back, Daiba. But do not fire until I say so. Slowly, and keep them in sight. Move with me.'

Easier said than done, he thought to himself with a mental snort, when you're one eye from night. He tapped his communicator, but instead of the carrier signal heard only static. 'Shit...' he muttered under his breath. It was a two mile hike back to bullet one, over lousy terrain. And they had to get out of this glade...

At his back he could feel Daiba pressed hard against him, trembling slightly. 'Easy, Daiba. Courage.'

The younger man was breathing heavily. 'We're outnumbered...'

'And yet, they haven't committed yet. Just look for an opening.'

'How are we getting back to the ship? If there are more of them out there...'

'Working on it,' Harlock hissed at him. One of the creatures stepped ahead of her sisters, her left hand upraised.

'Death to the Destroyer of Worlds!' she screamed. A wild, wordless scream burst forth from the rest of the encircling creatures, and they charged towards to the two men.

Harlock felt Daiba tense, raise his right arm... 'Don't fire, you idiot!'

Too late. He heard the zssaap of Daiba's pistol, and turned in time to see the creature he hit fly backwards and fall to the ground, her arms raised to the sky as though in supplication. Blue flames burst from her slender form and her death scream split the air.

'Run!' Harlock yelled, suiting action to words, pushing Daiba in front of him and firing to clear a path as the remaining creatures rushed them, seemingly oblivious to the danger he'd spotted earlier.

Dessicated, long dead plant material, mixed with charcoal and stirred by fierce winds... the flames from the dead creature set fire to the debris underneath her, and it caught fire with ease. Within seconds, the clearing was an inferno, and the wildfire spread with terrifying speed. It caught the pursuing Mazone and they died screaming, twisting and curling and dancing in the flames. Their sisters blocking the pirates' path hesitated, and fell to Harlock's non-lethal shots, disabling their legs. He half pushed, half dragged Daiba along, trying to outpace the fire, which was already
leaping from one blackened tree to another as they ran.

'We won't make it!' Daiba screamed at him. He tripped over a rock and almost pulled Harlock over with him. Harlock yanked him back to his feet.

'Not if you don't pick your feet up. Run...!' He bellowed into Daiba's faceplate. He looked around, remembering... the route here, there had been a rock formation... He gave Daiba a push. 'Head for that outcrop and start climbing. I'll be right behind you!'

Daiba ran.

The outcrop wasn't far - a couple of hundred yards, but when he reached the base he stared up at it in dismay. It looked sheer and unclimbable, and there was no overhanging shelter to be the hell was he supposed to get up there? The top was probably twenty metres...

A crashing noise behind him advertised the arrival of his captain, who grabbed his arm to get his attention and pointed to a small indentation on the rockface. 'Fingers. Now follow me up, put your hands and feet where I do, hold tight and for fuck's sake don't get creative!'

Daiba followed as best he could, trying to keep a sharp eye on where Harlock got a hand or toe hold, but trying to follow Harlock's movements, and at the same time watching where his own grip was ending up, he slipped more than once and fell behind. A few weeks of practice on a safe, well designed training wall was no preparation for hauling yourself up by the fingertips trying to outrace a fire and murderous aliens, he thought. He fumbled for a toehold. Slipped, and was suddenly dangling in mid air, desperately clinging to the fingerhold he had on the rock, whilst his feet flailed to regain that precarious ledge.

'Stop wriggling, Daiba. Legs still, then bring your left leg up about six inches. The more you flounder about with your legs, the harder it gets to hold on. Easy does it. Slowly. Little bit more.'

His toe found the ledge again, and a strong hand wrapped around his wrist and hauled him up to a wider ledge. Once he got his breathing back under control, he realised Harlock had dropped back to pick him up. Sheepishly, he apologised.

'Take a breather. Not far to go. I scouted ahead - it's not a difficult climb, but the smoke's starting to reach us. Visibility will be pitiful in a few minutes. Can you carry on?'

Not trusting himself to speak, Daiba nodded.

'Good. Up you go.'

Daiba scrambled up the rest of the rock face and hauled himself over the edge, lying panting on the ground. He heard Harlock scrabbling for a handhold and forced himself up, to kneel on the cliff edge and lend the other man a hand, which was taken with a quiet thank you. Harlock was first to his feet and offered his hand to Daiba in turn. 'Static's clear up here. The Arcadia should spot us.'

'Spot you? You could have just sent a flare up, but noooo you had to set fire to the bloody place!'

Ali's less than dulcet tones over the airwaves were welcome to both men. 'Save the critique, Jones. Where are you?' Harlock asked.

'Over what's left of the Gulf of Mexico, but we've picked up a few stalkers. Say, Captain, you'll never guess what these things look like...!'
'Tell me later. Kei - need a ride, love!'

'On its way, Harlock. Tochiro has it in hand. Should be above you anytime...'

'About now...' Harlock looked up and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Daiba - get your arse on board the bullet and go help Ali. I think he's bringing company!'

'Where are you...' Daiba trailed off as he caught sight of the craft that was trailing Bullet One in to land. Red, black and mean all over. It wobbled a little as it came in to land. 'Who's piloting?'

'Someone who's a little out of practice!' Harlock called back as he ran for the Space Wolf which landed daintily next to the bullet. He grabbed the wing and swung up to the cockpit with a well practiced move.

*Hey! I heard that you ungrateful brat!*

Harlock smiled at the teasing reply that only he could hear, as he popped the canopy and reached for the flight helmet, before dropping into the seat. Canopy back down, he switched helmets quickly and strapped in. 'Thanks for the assist, my friend. What have I missed?'

*Kei's detected a small fleet - IntSec by the look of them - tiered class, no capital ships. Just a handful of glorified patrol cars. Popped out of IN-SKIP about ten minutes ago. They aren't the problem. We've got two ships - in our weight class - dropped in from the direction of Venus. Can't get a good lock on with the long range missiles. They dropped a couple of fighters and skipped away.*

Harlock began the launch sequence, flicking switches as fast as he could reach them. 'Ali - how are you holding up?'

'We had been heading to check on you and the brat, but seems our little pal has that in hand. Can't shake these pesky little things though. The short range lasers are fuck all use and it's a nightmare getting a lock-on.'

The workboat only had low powered cutting lasers... Harlock thought quickly. 'Try the grapple, Ali - if you can get a hook and line into one of them...'

'Dammit! Shoulda thought of that...'

'And that's why I'm captain,' Harlock deadpanned as he guided the fighter into the air. 'Five minutes, Ali, head for the Arcadia and I'll take out the trash.'

The bullet followed him from the top of the cliff. 'What do you want me to do?' Daiba asked.

'Stay on my right wing, and follow my orders this time!' He switched channels. 'Kei - give me Ali's heading. And tell Mimay to fire up the engines - all crew to battlestations, and prepare the hangars - we'll be coming in fast.'

'Way ahead of you - we're ready to go the moment you hit the deck.'

'Roger that. Daiba - stay close. Do not engage without my say so. Clear?'

He hit the afterburners and lit a trail towards the beleaguered workboat.

*Grapple... grapple... ah!' Ali fumbled for the controls. 'About a mile of microfilament cable... Freckles - let them get a little closer. If I can snag the first one, maybe we can give it a tug and*
'Let them get close? Like I have a choice! This thing flies like a brick...' Zack screeched at him.

'Those things are damn fast,' Meg said, leaning over Ali's shoulder as he worked. 'But I'm not sure I'd live it down if we got taken out by a bloody wooden fighter! Who though that idea up?'

'The de Havilland Aircraft company.' Yattaran's voice over the comms had a reverential tone. 'Well, a lot of early planes were wooden, but the DH98 Mosquito was a little marvel during the Second World War over a thousand years ago...'

'The Wooden Wonder...' Tochiro's tinny voice added, as reverential as the first mate's. 'That little darling could do almost anything...'

'Hate to break up the antique model-maker's love-in here,' Ali snapped, 'But I really don't give a flying fu-'

'Er - Ali - they're coming in fast!' Zack called out. He banked hard to avoid a series of blasts. 'Damn, they can shift! What's with the flapping wings though - shouldn't they tear off?'

'Ornithopter,' Ali replied shortly. He slapped the panel he'd been fiddling under back into place. 'Never seen one actually working though - and right now all I care about is putting 'em on the deck. Zack - drop back a little, and nose down, make it look like we're hit...' He snapped the targeting scope into place. 'Easy... easy...'

Outside the cockpit window, he could just make out the lead plane coming into view, the dragonfly-like wings flapping like crazy. At five hundred yards, he fired.

The grappling hook usually used to anchor the workboat flew from the side of the craft, and caught in the front left wing of the two pairs. As it completed one upswing, the trailing cable coiled behind the grapple entangled the fighter, and it began to plummet. With a quick snap of the release, Ali stopped the cable uncoiling, snapping back with the fighter attached. The workboat lurched as it took the strain, but had been built for difficult terrain and awkward landings. It wobbled, but held its course. The fighter on the other end of the line however snapped clean away from its wings, and headed to the ground. The wings whiplashed back and smashed into the trailing fighter, entangling it in turn, and wrapped around its body, the detached wings lodged between the fighter's on the down beat. With a cackle, Ali released the cable, and watched with unhidden delight as the fighter plummeted into the ground.

'Never gets old...' he commented.

'Don't get cocky, you still have two on your tail,' Harlock's voice over the speaker sounded a little exasperated. 'Daiba - take the one on your right. Ali - why is it of all my crew it's always you I end up rescuing like some damsel in distress?'

'Because I just love how cuddly you get afterwards?' Ali hazarded with a grin. 'Just get that flapping tree trunk outta my face, handsome!' He turned to Zack as the Space Wolf overtook them and pulled a rolling turn to flash back and take out its target - and then had to bank to avoid an own goal by Bullet One, and snap off a shot to take out Daiba's target. 'Sheeeut... he's going to have the brat's guts for garters for that one... Freckles - hit it!'

Obediently, Zack took the boat up and back to the waiting Arcadia.

Harlock brought the Space Wolf to a stop with a couple of feet to spare in front of the bulkhead.
He'd popped the canopy, bounced his way down the wing and to the deck just as Daiba was exiting the bullet. The youth was pulling his helmet off, revealing his mussed up hair underneath, now long enough to need a comb.

'Sorry,' he said, looking sheepish. Harlock slapped him on the back companionably.

'My fault - I forgot I hadn't trained you in atmosphere. It's a whole different ball game to vacuum. Get your backside over to a turret - we're about to have visitors.' Daiba nodded and took off, closely followed by Zack and Meg.

Harlock caught up with Ali. 'Anyone else getting a feeling of deja-vu?'

Ali rubbed the scar above his right eye as they walked briskly towards the bridge. 'Mimay's got the right of it, maybe. This planet is cursed... that, or we just drag that curse with us.'

'Now you're starting to sound like him...'

Ali shot his captain a searching look. 'Well it sure ain't much of a blessing, now is it? Him hanging this albatross around yer neck isn't something you plan on thanking him for, is it?'

'It's the least of the shit I've been clearing up, frankly. And it's not all bad...' The ship's ever present rumbling heartbeat briefly deepened.

Ali patted the wall. 'Okay, okay, short stuff. It ain't so bad having you around, I guess.' Before they entered the bridge corridor he tugged on Harlock's sleeve. 'You need to get that lad under control, Harlock. That "beacon" you sent up was down to him not following orders again, right? Family or not, if you don't give him a sharp lesson in how things work around here, someone else will.'

'I haven't gone soft on him...'

'You ain't exactly come down hard on him either. Time to cut the apron strings.'

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Ali made to head for his post. Harlock placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Fine. You want him, you got him.'

'Hey, I never said...!'

Harlock grinned at him. 'You trained the others. Hell, if you could get Emeraldas to back down and take orders, you can handle anything my family tree can throw at you. He's all yours, Ali.'

'Me and my big mouth...' the older pirate grumbled. But he didn't make any further denials.

Ali jogged over to his post, and Harlock took the steps to the upper gantry two at a time. He strolled towards the wheel, currently held firmly by Kei, who flashed him a dazzling smile as he reached around her to grasp one of the worn balusters. 'Take your post, XO,' he said quietly. 'Let's remind these idiots why they shouldn't get in our faces!' He stared at the screen. 'Six little destroyers? Really? Is that all they think we're worth these days?'

'They'll have called backup,' Yattaran called out. 'Nearest fleet's at Proxima - headed by the Achilles...'

'Then no dilly-dallying, people. Let's swat these gnats and get out of here...' Harlock paused. 'Because those two blips look a damn sight closer to our weight class, and they're coming in fast!'

Two of the Intsec ships exploded.
'Holy shit...' Ali took a frantic look at his console. 'Those blasts came out of nowhere! Need to recalibr... oh. Never mind! Tochio just found the frequency! They're firing again - and not on us!'

'Seems Intsec are determined to do half my job for me...' Harlock mused. 'Ali, Kei - make sure we're recording - might as well find out how these things fight and what damage they can take...'

The remaining IntSec ships regrouped and turned their attention on their attackers. Another blast rocked one of them, and it span out of control, taking out its neighbour. Tiny flashes a few moments later started to leave the area only to be shot at in turn.

'They're taking out the life pods!' Niobe called up, horrified. 'Captain!'

'Two minutes until we are within range,' Yattaran added. He shook his head sadly. 'We ain't gonna be much help...'

'Those ships are absorbing all the blasts aimed at them!' Kei added. 'Not even a scratch...'

'Black body drives,' Yattaran said smugly. 'Remember? Energy weapons won't do shit - the blasts are being absorbed before they get there. Poor bastards didn't stand a chance."

'Neither would we...' Harlock took a firmer grasp on the wheel. 'Stand down the turret crews, Ali. Prep the missile tubes for launch. Mimay - I'll need to pull a little more power, and Yattaran - tell everyone to batten down the hatches.' He laid one hand on the skull at the centre of the wheel 'And you, my friend - I think it's time to take this up close and personal...' He smiled as the background hum took on a satisfied, amused note.

'Oh crap...' Ali muttered. 'Not again... I still got whiplash from the last time...'

Outside, the black cloud surrounding the Arcadia began to coalesce underneath the red-eyed skull, forming a curved black blade shot through with red lightning.

On the bridge, Harlock span the wheel to turn the ship hard to starboard. 'Mimay - ramming speed!'
The ship looming large in the bridge viewscreen almost filled the full expanse. Kei kept a weather eye on the distance as they closed. Ramming was a risky manoeuvre, but this wasn't their first party... She glanced over quickly towards the helm, where Harlock stood, legs apart, hands gripping the wheel firmly. There was a feral grin playing around his mouth, and she turned back to her console to hide a smile. Honestly, he enjoyed this far too much...

'Missiles away!' Ali called out from below. 'Time on target, fifteen... twelve... ten... nine... eight... seven...'

That was her cue. 'Gravity anchor - fire!'

From outside the ship, two golden lines appeared to launch from the underside of the Arcadia. From her station however, Kei could only track the massive grapples. They hit the centre mass of the enemy vessel just as Ali called out 'zero!'

The explosions briefly lit up the darkness, and then the outline of the enemy vanished, as they closed with the damaged section now filling the screen. Braced for the shock Kei held onto her console, and kept her footing as the impact rocked the ship. Inertial dampeners held, though for a moment she felt as though her stomach was trying to make a bid for freedom as the artificial gravity compensated. The Arcadia tore through the ship as though it was made of paper, and debris flew past the viewscreen. A few pieces hit head on, and she flinched as one large piece bounced off.

A little more faith, please! The voice of the central computer sounded rather put out.

'Sorry Tochiro!' Kei replied. 'Instinct...'

Not you... Him!

She didn't dare look over at her captain. She heard Ali laughing and had to bite back a smile.

'What she said,' Harlock replied a little huffily. 'And if you ever only have one working eye left, you'll understand why ducking something heading your way isn't funny. Mimay - is there a problem? I seem to be losing speed...'

'The energy output is constant.'

Kei knew the alien woman well enough after twenty years to hear the unspoken 'but...'

'Erm... we have a problem!' Maji called up from the lower bridge. 'Yattaran - check the hull sensors!'

'First mate?' Harlock turned to Yattaran, stationed to his left. 'We still have one ship to take care of... what gives?'

Yattaran ran expert hands over his console, then swore under his breath and turned away. Faster than his bulk would lead anyone to believe, he took the stairs two at a time and headed for the hull camera display under the gantry.

'Captain - Maji's right. We have a problem!'

'And I'm still losing power, so tell me something I don't know!' Harlock's barely restrained snarl
made Kei flinch slightly. He rarely raised his voice.

'The hull - it's not repairing! The dark matter shield's being siphoned off!'

'Tochiro? How come I'm not hearing this from you...?'

There was no reply. 'Tochiro? Come on my friend, now's not the time for a nap... Harlock turned a worried face to Kei, who rapidly began checking the feed from the Central Computer.

'He's shut down, Harlock. The power drain... The hull's compromised in fifteen sections - Harlock, we're being drained of our output! If we can't re-integrate the hull and get the shield up we're a sitting duck!'

'Dammit... how?'

'The readings suggest it's those black body drives on the enemy ships. If we get any closer to that second vessel... Kei caught his eye, and he nodded grimly.

'No choice then. Mimay - all power to the engines - all hands - prepare for emergency IN-SKIP!'

He gripped the wheel firmly, and braced for the jump.

'Captain...' Yattaran bounded back up the stairs with thundering speed. 'If the hull doesn't hold...'

'If the hull doesn't hold we're dead the moment they get a clear shot once we clear this debris field! Punch it!'

The viewscreen was obscured by a billowing black cloud, and the ship shuddered from stem to stern as she forced her way out of normal space.

Less than a second later a hail of missiles tore through the empty space she'd left behind.

The planet known as "Shadow" had never known a summer. Its brief "spring" when it passed closest to its distant sun barely melted more than the top centimetre or two of the ice. Constant snowstorms thrashed the surface on a daily basis, dropping at least an inch of snow which quickly froze as ice. It made finding a firm landing site a problem, given that the sensors were affected by the shutdown of nonessential systems. But they finally located a flat outcrop scoured clear by the fierce winds.

As the Arcadia settled down without falling into a hidden crevasse or through a century or more of accumulated ice, Harlock let go of the wheel with an undisguised sigh of relief, echoed by most of the crew.

'Yattaran, Ali, Maji - grab a few idle hands, suit up and get out there - I want a full sweep of the hull. Mimay - what's our power status?'

The delicate alien sashayed over to him and shook her head slightly. Large pale eyes stared unblinking at him. 'The pull was almost as severe as the scrubbers used by the Gaia Fleet the last time we were in the Solar System. Possibly worse because this was immediate, not spread over several days. It will recover, but for the next day or two we will need to stay here - all non essential areas should be shut down to allow the hull to repair."

'Maybe next time you'll give my poor neck a thought and not pull that bloody stunt,' Ali grumbled from the foot of the gantry stairs, rubbing the offended article. 'The only reason we get away with shit like that is because we can self-repair so damn fast. Always said it was a fuckin' stupid
'No you didn't you whinging old woman.' Yattaran stomped down the stairs making enough noise to wake the dead. 'Quit yer bitchin' for once - I swear you ain't stopped in twenty-five bloody years... right, Maji?'

The taciturn engineer just looked over at Ali and gave a helpless shrug. Yattaran gave the fair haired gunner a shove in the small of the back and the three disappeared down the corridor to the sound of Ali's voice telling Yattaran what he could shove next.

Harlock glanced over at Kei and the two shared a smile in spite of the situation. 'Peace and quiet at last...' he muttered. Kei smirked. 'But he has a point. I got caught with my pants down back there - who the hell weaponises their drive like that?'

Mimay raised her hand with a sly smile playing around her lips.

'You're spending far too much time with Ali...' Harlock said tartly. 'Apart from us, then...' Mimay lowered her hand and moved closer until she was almost leaning into his shoulder. 'It might be just the way it operates - constantly feeding off all energy in the vicinity. Before we developed the dark matter drives, we used something very similar. These carbon-based absorbers might not be capable of being "switched off".'

'Begs the question of how they protect the crew... and how they stop it overloading...' Kei met her captain's worried singular gaze.

'The ship is alive. I suspect it protects the crew, and possibly feeds off the energy output. If it's not a wooden hull, but was a living tree,' Mimay replied softly, 'it would require enormous amounts of energy to function in the void, and possibly never stops growing.'

'Hmmm... We weren't affected,' Kei tapped her console idly. 'Life is energy... remember that terrifying solar prominence we had to shut down a few years back?'

'Took another dimensional oscillator to do it,' Harlock shuddered. 'It cost us seven good men getting free of that thing. Not likely to forget that hell in a hurry.' He sighed heavily. 'We got lucky... that Alliance ship chasing us - not so much. I can still see the faces of the crew when we boarded looking for survivors...'

'The dark matter surrounding Arcadia acts as a buffer,' Mimay said quietly. 'It will protect the crew against this black body drive, but only so long as it lasts. If they realise this and use their drive deliberately...'

Harlock sighed again and ran a gloved hand through his hair. 'Cuts down on our options for attack... can't get a good lock on at a distance; can't close with them... ramming's off the table - unless we can boost either our targeting or our shields. Right now I'm open to suggestions that don't include going Dutchman in armour carrying a big stick...'

'Tochiro will think of something,' Mimay murmured reassuringly. 'He and your other engineers are the best brains in their fields. Even Ali has the occasional flash of brilliance when it comes to weapons design and targeting...'

'Sweet Gaia, Mimay,' Kei muttered. 'Never say that where he can hear you - we'd never hear the last of it!'

'Hear what?' The burly crewman stomped up the last couple of stairs and over to the three gathered
at the wheel, stopping briefly to pat the bird on its long beak as he passed the captain's seat.

'Nothing important. You cannot possibly be finished already...' Harlock replied easily.

'Set the kiddies to work. But we might have a problem... There were some seriously gouged sections of the hull, and we've had to start cutting other sections out - some kind of vine was growing into the hull. I think their weapons might include biological components. To be on the safe side, Yattaran's got his crews cauterising the affected areas. But we'll be at least three days waiting on the auto-repair.'

'Why didn't the hull sensors spot anything?' Kei asked.

'They're all down,' Ali replied bluntly. 'Feedback's usually via the central computer and he ain't talking right now - That part of the system was compromised, and he's rebooting it. Took a massive overload before we bugged out.'

'Strategic withdrawal,' Harlock corrected him with a pained expression.

Ali snorted at him. 'With our pants down and our tail between our legs. Call it what you want, we scuttled for cover.'

'Well next time we'll just sit there and get torn to pieces, if it suits your macho image a little better,' Kei snapped, visibly rising to her captain's defence. Harlock, far more sanguine about the business, at least outwardly, laid a hand on her shoulder.

'I don't like it either, but given the damage we've taken, hanging around would have been foolish. My pride can just take its lumps. By the way, Ali, why did you need to report all this in person?'

'Glad someone finally thought to ask,' Ali replied primly. 'I didn't want to risk it over the comms in case they're compromised. Sabu found what looks like a barnacle on the lower hull under the port wing. I think we might have a boarding pod attached to us...'

'You might have opened with that,' Harlock told him acidly. 'Kei - pull up the port wing schematic on the holo viewer. Ali - show me where.'

Once the ghostly image of the Arcadia's cutaway floated in front of them, Ali pointed to an area tucked under the point where the port wing joined the main fuselage. With practiced ease, Kei expanded the image to show the corridor views of the interior.

'Several turret rooms accessible from that point. Since we've got everyone on duty at work, there's no-one to evacuate...' Kei checked over the schematic with her trademark efficiency.

Harlock pointed at the plans. 'Shut down the bulkheads to the port side, starting from the bridge. Why are no internal sensors tripping?'

'Tochiro usually monitors those, and he's been out for the count since before we landed,' Kei pointed out. She gave Harlock a worried look. 'If they've already made their way out of there...'

'Not likely,' Ali interjected. 'The bulkheads were closed for the ramming attack and didn't re-open until we made landfall. Then with all the turret crews scurrying around, there would have been very little opportunity to move around unseen.'

'For a species capable of projecting illusions?' Harlock folded his arms and leaned back against the wheel. Both Kei and Ali stared at him in horrified comprehension. 'Assume nothing. I want all crew accounted for. Get Doc up here with a scanner, and tell her to get someone down to the
hangar with another - in pairs, mind you. Pass the message on in person. Ali - you go under the microscope first. Then I want a security detail on each level. We'll start a corridor by corridor sweep, locking off the bulkheads behind us.'

Daiba shivered as an icy blast whistled past. Even hugging the massive bulk of the Arcadia, there was little to no shelter from the fierce winds laden with tiny shards of ice. Even wrapped in a heated suit, wearing a rebreather mask, the wind felt as though it cut straight through him.

'Your teeth are chattering,' Meg teased. She shivered and drew closer, as though he was much shelter from the arctic storm. 'This section's clear of that invasive vine. Hull's already healing.'

'Good. A few more metres and we're done with our section,' he grunted. His legs had sunk to mid calf in the hard, icy snow, and walking was an effort. Belatedly he noticed Meg struggling, and offered a helping hand, which for once was gratefully accepted. The slight girl stumbled into his arms as they ducked under the starboard wing, cursing inventively as he pushed her upright away from his chest.

'You okay?

She nodded. 'Tripped over a rock, I think.' She looked down at her feet, only lightly covered by snow at this point. 'Oh...'

Over the speaker in his helmet he heard her swallow hard. 'Meg?'

'I forgot... this is the planet the Captain first found out about the Machinners on...' She dropped to her knees and brushed aside the brittle snow, to reveal the body of a young woman, frozen solid and naked. The woman's eyes were open, forever fixed on nothing, and her slim body was exposed to her thighs, revealing a slightly rounded belly with a tracery of pale silvery stretch marks running across it... and an open transverse surgical wound below the mound of her stomach. Daiba shivered at the sight. 'My parents could be on a world like this...' she muttered.

Daiba knelt beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. Her shivers, he suspected, were no longer due purely to the temperature. Truth to tell there was an icy finger running down his own spine at the thought. 'But that might just be they're around somewhere in new bodies, right?'

'I'd rather they were dead,' she snarled. 'The thought that they abandoned me and my brothers just to live forever makes me feel sick.' She shook off his arm and stood up. 'But I'd like to find their corpses. Just to put a blaster bolt through their selfish faces.' He stood, and looked her in the eye, faceplate to faceplate. 'Does that make me a bad person, you think?' She asked

He shrugged. 'Given what you went through, I'd help you track 'em down. I got lucky, I guess - my parents adored me.'

'But those vegetable women murdered them...' She hugged him suddenly, taking him off guard. 'Don't worry, I'll happily shoot a few for you, Daiba.'

He returned the gesture a little awkwardly. 'Thanks...' I think... He turned slightly and pointed. 'Hatch is that way, let's just get outta here before we both freeze body parts we'd miss...'

Meg broke off the hug. 'No argument here... I want a nice mug of hot chocolate and a hot shower...'

'At the same time?' He asked cheekily. She laughed - a little strained, but it was something, he realised.
'Play your cards right I might even let you scrub my back,' she teased. She patted the faceplate. 'See - works every time - stay close, Daiba - your blushes will keep the chill away!'

'One day, someone will make you make good on your teasing, Meg.' Daiba muttered. 'Might even be me,' he threatened airily. She snorted and he bristled. 'What? You think I'm not interested?'

'Do you even like girls?' She asked. 'I mean.. I thought...'

He laughed harshly. 'As I've heard my cousin tell Ali numerous times, when you lose sight of daylight, quit digging... Yeah, sure, I've been known to earn a few credits by giving blowjobs in back alleys - or otherwise on my knees - but I like girls just fine, and for the record, women don't tend to go cruising for rough trade in the slums.' He paused. 'Well, not usually, and frankly those that do are a whole new level of scary...'

By this time they were in the airlock. Both waited for the greenlight and had their helmets off the moment the inner doors opened. Meg was blushing herself by this time, and looking uncomfortable. 'I'm sorry. I guess you don't like to talk...'

'No.'

She shut up, and walked next to him as they headed back towards their quarters.

'There was a girl...' he said wistfully, as they walked. Meg kept quiet, realising the confidence was a rarity. 'Nana. Found me one night after some thugs beat the crap out of me in a park. Made sure I got to a free clinic for some help, even found me a job hauling at the docks. I dunno - we just hit it off. For a few weeks it felt as though I could get my old life back. She didn't judge. Didn't push... then they came. They found me again. Chased us into a shopping mall, and one of them took her hostage. I tried...' he fell silent for a moment, without slowing. Meg waited.

'I tried to shoot the one holding her, but it threw her at me. Right at me, and I hit... I hit...'

Meg laid a hand on his arm, and halted him. He leaned against the wall, hyperventilating, and she waited quietly for him to get some control back. 'Poster boy for the law of unintended consequences. That's what dad used to call me. With a laugh. But it isn't funny when you get someone killed. When you kill someone you love because you didn't take the time to just think through what letting someone get close to you would mean when you have a target on your back. Not fucking funny at all.'

He looked down at her hand, then back up at her face, his eyes - slightly wild - meeting hers. 'You should keep your distance, Megan. I'm poison.'

She didn't move her hand. Didn't object when he finally lifted it off himself. 'You and most people on this ship, Daiba. You, me - we keep people at a distance. Niobe - she went through the same hell I did, but she just embraces life.'

'And Zack, at every opportunity,' he noted dryly. It earned him a fleeting smile. 'We all have our own way of coping, is that what you're trying to say? Come on. Linger in the corridor long enough someone will find more work for us, and I just want to change and warm up.'

'As long as it isn't Kei holding a clipboard, lingering isn't usually fatal...' Meg and Daiba shared a grin. If there was one thing you could rely on, it was Kei's unflagging one-woman campaign against laziness... not for the first time Daiba wondered how the hell that worked with Harlock - who could be annoyingly laid back at times - but then again, after over twelve years with Kei, perhaps it was just his quiet way of trolling her. At times his cousin's dry sense of humour could
grate a little... Another coping mechanism, he guessed.

They reached their corridor, and Meg had her hand over her doorlock when Sabu came lumbering up to them, puffing as he lurched to a stop. 'Oi! Captain's sending word round - we've got intruders. I'm to get you over to Doc, then it's all hands to internal battle stations. In pairs, sweeping bow to stern. Lock off where you've checked as you go. Captain wants ém flushed to the starboard hangar.'

'Can't I start by checking out my room?' Meg asked, a trifle wistfully. 'Maybe something might be lurking in my shower...'

Daiba had to bite back a smirk as the muscle-bound doofuss actually had to think about the facetious question.

'No, I don't think so,' he replied eventually, shaking his head. 'C'mon kids. Can't hang around all day!'

Meg sighed heavily and linked her arm with Daiba's as they walked. 'A nice hot shower... is it really too much to ask for?'

'Apparently...' He tapped Sabu on his broad back. 'Hey - Sabu - what does Doc want with us anyway?'

'These plant things can mess with yer head, right? Make you see people who aren't there. Or something. So we make sure you're you.'

'How do you know we're not the intruders?' Meg asked in her nicest tone. 'Maybe we took out the real Daiba and Meg, and took their place...'

'Or I'm not Sabu?' He asked, a little less stupid than he looked, that one, Daiba realised. He turned round and grinned at them. 'Guess we all have to have a little faith sometimes. Besides, if you're fakes, I was already screwed back there. And if I'm a fake, you're screwed right here. Since no-one's killing anyone, maybe we're okay...'

'And I'm sure that made sense in someone's head,' Daiba muttered. Meg was the only one who overheard him, and she sniggered and leaned into his arm a little more as they walked. Not an unpleasant sensation, Daiba thought, as they continued. She was short, but pretty enough - once you got through the prickles of her temper... However they reached the door of the infirmary and were being shoved into Doc's less than gentle hands before he could think it through.

'Have we anything resembling an internal security system on this ship that doesn't rely on Tochiro?' Harlock leaned on the wheel with his back against the ancient wood, arms folded, ankles crossed. Outwardly nonchalant, inwardly more than a little pissed off. Somedays, he reflected, their dependence on the central computer left a lot to be desired. Not many over the years, if he was honest, and getting pissy at Yattaran over it was a little unfair. They all owed their lives to the long-dead engineer haunting the Arcadia - but when that conduit was offline, his lack was keenly felt.

Like now, Harlock grumbled mentally. Faced with a room by room, corridor by corridor search for an unknown number of intruders on a ship over a kilometre long. Admittedly a lot of its actual interior was taken up by weapons, power supplies, engines and hangar space, but that still left an awful lot of ground to cover. And with a crew complement of under fifty, not that many bodies to do the job.

He stood up straight and uncrossed his ankles, pushing off the wheel. 'Kei - grab your pistols. Be
damn'd if I'm standing around here like a spare part. Get hold of Meg, Maji, Niobe, Cai and Daiba - they're the smallest of the crew.'

Kei picked her gunbelt up from the edge of her console. 'Something just wandered into your brain?'

He huffed at her. 'You make it sound like a rare occurrence...' he heard Yattaran snort behind him, but refused to rise to the bait. 'There are a few conduits running into secure areas - particularly the central computer room. We're dealing with a somewhat protean lifeform - I'd like to check them out.' He headed for the stairs without waiting for her, and she had to scurry to keep up.

'There are far too many to check - you know that.' She caught up with him and fell into step beside him, her long legs easily keeping pace with his long stride.

'Most of them have very few lengths where anything bigger than a mouse could get. Though I'm a little nervous that accurate schematics of this ship have proved a little hard to get...'

'Huh. On a self-rejuvenating ship with a sentient central brain which likes to "redecorate" every so often? Last time Tochiro decided to remodel we lost an entire hangar...'

Harlock grinned. 'But on the plus side, we did gain...' he stopped in the middle of the corridor and pulled his sabre from its long holster. Taking her cue from Harlock, Kei drew her pistols, hefting the ornate, baroque guns with an ease which seemed at odds with their size - though Harlock knew they were surprisingly light for their size, even with the underslung knives.

'What and where?' Kei whispered. Harlock pointed with his left hand.

'Starboard corridor. Just a glimpse, but it moved fast.'

'Sure it wasn't Trouble or Mii?' She quipped. She laughed softly at his glare. 'Fine. I'll take point...'

'She brushed past him, smiling to herself as his hand briefly rested on her back, her forward and slightly sideways motion causing it to run gently over her spine as she moved.

'Maybe you should let me go first...' he said quietly, his grip momentarily tightening on her waist as though to hold her back, though not enough to actually do so. She slipped free without effort.

'You're the captain...' she pointed out softly. 'How many times do we need to have this conversation?'

'You're my wife...' he replied, mocking her emphasis. Kei rolled her eyes, before remembering he was behind her and her exasperated expression went unnoticed. 'How long's a piece of string?' He quipped. 'Fine,' he continued. 'You go first, but don't stick your head in a noose on my account. The boys would kill me in my sleep if anything happened to you...'

'Mamoru might,' she replied as she slipped into the narrow corridor. Large enough to allow a small crewman - or a slim captain if he ducked - to reach the conduits it carried, it was purely an access route, not a thoroughfare. Kei slipped easily into the space, though she did need to lower her head at times to avoid the swooping loops of cabling and low-flying pipework containing the coolant fluids for the optical cannon batteries. Behind her she heard swearing as Harlock's head made contact with a low pipe. Smiling inwardly she shook her head and inched her way forward.

After about twenty feet the accessway opened out into a main corridor again, this time one of the back routes to the Central Computer Room. Kei peered out carefully before exiting, guns akimbo. Nothing. Except for Harlock walking into her back because she'd stopped a little too quickly for him.
'Sorry,' he muttered. She thumped his arm as she moved to her side. 'Anything?'

Kei shook her head. 'Not so far...' she ducked as the captain's pet bird swooped overhead, flying low to avoid the girders in the low ceiling. 'Dammit, you featherbrain!' She yelled after it - just as it dived beak first towards a section of wall not fifteen feet away, squawking angrily. Instead of knocking itself senseless against the wall, it battered its wings and stabbed repeatedly at the creature which had been concealed there - a pale skinned, woman-like figure in a form fitting flightsuit of an unfamiliar design, her face hidden by an ovoid helmet with a v shaped visor. A painfully high-pitched screech echoed in the corridor as the bird's long beak stabbed again and again at the joints of the creature.

'Oi - Tori!' Harlock shouted. At the sound of his voice, the bird cawed again and tried to fly free, only for the loose-limbed female form to grab hold of one wing with a three fingered hand and slam the bird into the bulkhead. Harlock fired - Kei's own blaster bolt launched at the same time. The two shots hit almost simultaneously, and the woman collapsed to the floor. Even as Harlock lowered his sabre and Kei let her own arm fall to her side, it burst into blue flames accompanied by a peculiar, ear splitting wail that set her teeth on edge.

Harlock dropped his sabre and ran for the stricken bird, which lay stunned on the floor, one wing flapping helplessly as it keened piteously. Heedless of the large beak, he knelt at its side and lifted the small head gently, supporting the thin neck with his other hand. 'Oh, you silly old bird. But brave. So brave.' He stroked it soothingly, and the trembling bird screeched shrilly near his ear, before sticking its head under his arm and crying like a small child.

Kei knelt at his side, and laid his sabre next to him. 'Is he okay? She reached out and stroked the bird's trembling feathers.

Harlock ran his free hand over the wing which currently stuck out stiffly from the large creature's side, held awkwardly. It screeched quietly when his hand touched the outer wing bones. 'Broken, I think. I'll take him to Doc.' He stood up, the bird cradled in his arms. 'Holster that for me, would you? And keep an eye on Tochiro for me. I'll send someone over to keep you company...'

Kei placed the sabre back in his holster and gave him a brief encouraging smile. 'I got this. Go.' She gave the bird one last gentle pat. 'Take care of our hero there...'

'Some hero...' Harlock looked down at the whimpering bird in his arms. 'Come on, tough guy. Man up! Soon have you back to waking me up at five in the morning shoving your cold beak in my face...'

Kei watched him carry the bird away like a small child, and smiled sadly. Damn thing usually got in the way more often than not, but everyone had a soft spot for the daft thing. She kicked the pile of ash the intruder - Mazone - had left behind. 'Bitch,' she hissed at it. Given it one more kick to scatter it for good measure, she knelt down as something glittered in the fluctuating light of the wall fittings. A small communicator of some kind? She pocketed the item and headed for the heart of the computer room.

She paused as she passed a spot on the wall near to one of the light fittings. A small shoot waved in the soft airflow of the ship, growing directly out of the wall. With a muttered oath, she hit her comm unit.

'What are you two still doing here?' Daiba jumped as Harlock's voice snapped from behind him. He turned to see the older man place his bird gently down on a gurney, the odd looking thing crying and holding one wing out to the side. 'Kei wanted you and Meg out patrolling for intruders twenty
There was a queue..' Daiba pointed out a little frostily. 'One Doc, nearly fifty people to check.' He pointed at the bird. 'What happened? Hit a wall again?' It squawked at him and stuck its head back under Harlock's arm.

'Doing your job for you. Injured in the line of duty pointing out one of the damn things camouflaged against a wall. Damn thing almost made it to the Central Computer Room.' Harlock stepped back to let Doc get close, the ponytailed medic moving in to fuss over it and check it over. 'Luna - can I take these two and leave Tori here with you?'

She glared at him over her glasses. 'One day, you can find yourself a damn vet... yes; fine. Go.' She waved at the door. 'Hopefully birdbrain here will be the only casualty today...'

Daiba couldn't resist. 'Doc! You really shouldn't talk about the captain like that!'

It earned a glare from Doc, a giggle - hastily changed to a cough - from Meg and a sigh from Harlock. 'Well you're obviously starting to get back to normal,' Harlock replied dryly. 'Move it, crewman... Meg, you too.' As they left the infirmary he placed one hand on each of his two crewmembers' shoulders. 'You two are going to investigate a few of the lesser travelled parts of the Arcadia for me - we've got more problems than just a damned intruder...'

Daiba shared a look with Meg. 'Oh joy...' they muttered in tandem.

An hour later, Daiba sat down on a convenient pipe. Meg joined him a heartbeat later, and reached over to try to rub a bit of muck from his face. Without any success, judging from her sigh. 'Leave it,' he muttered. 'Clean me up he'll only find another filthy hole to send us down...' He stared at the interior bulkhead gloomily. A thumb-thick, grey-green vine writhed over the surface, tendrils penetrating the surface, weaving in and out of the Arcadia. 'This stuff's everywhere - I thought Maji was clearing it?'

'Captain's talking to him. Damn, I never knew we had so many of these access corridors,' Meg sighed. 'Ugh. Do we have bugs on this ship? Coz I think something's crawling in my hair...'

'Looks fine to me. It just feels as though it's crawling. I keep thinking there's something in my flightsuit...' Daiba scratched at the elbow of his jacket. 'I itch... all over...'

'Get Doc to give you a cream.' Harlock wandered over wearily. 'It's the same story all over - According to Maji and Yattaran the stuff seems to be feeding off our Dark Matter - he just had to clear a length the thickness of a Space Wolf from the exhaust nozzles. We're covered in it, and it's just growing through the hull.' He ran a gloved hand through his collar length brown hair. 'Oh - and do not touch it with bare skin - causes a nasty reaction.'

'Can you clear it?' Daiba asked. 'What about blasting it?' He lifted the pistol in his hand and aimed at a nearby section of vine. Harlock placed his hand on the weapon and gently pushed down, forcing Daiba to lower it.

'Don't. It'll just give it a boost. Best guess is this stuff evolved to feed off any available energy source in space. It's probably what their ships are made of - and from the records on Niflheim left by your parents, we know similar plants there grew to gigantic sizes feeding off the dark matter contamination.'

'So you need to switch off the self-repair and the engine?' Meg asked.
Harlock shook his head and sat down next to Daiba. 'Sadly not. It would take days for the residual background levels to drop, and it'd probably just process the sunlight here anyway. No, there are other ways to kill plants that don't involve depriving them of nutrients…' He sighed. 'This is going to be a tough call.'

Daiba shot him a concerned look. 'You mean flood the ship with Dark Matter, right?' he asked. 'Overload them?' When Harlock didn't answer, he sighed. 'Fuck. Couldn't that wreck the planet?'

'We evacuate, and take the fighters and transports off. Tochiro - and Mimay will take off and flood the ship in a safe orbit. We couldn't stay aboard anyway in the condition the ship is in.'

'And if this blows the ship up?' Meg asked nervously. Harlock tried to give her a reassuring smile.

'Don't fret. We've alerted Selen. The Futatsuboshi's on its way just in case.'

'And if it just feeds the damn thing and the solar system gets clogged by the Giant Space Hogweed?' Daiba asked sarcastically.

'Ffft. In that case, we're utterly screwed.'

'So reassuring…' Daiba muttered. 'Gotta love those motivational skills you've got there, coz…'

'Brat,' Harlock replied, without heat. He stood up. 'You two can come with me. Maji's rounding up the rest. Apart from Ali, everyone had already checked in.' He tapped the communicator pin on the collar of his jacket, the little skull lighting up. 'Ali - you're late. What gives?'

Nothing. His normally calm features rearranging themselves into a frown, he tried again. 'Ali! Report!' With a muttered oath, he turned on his heel and began walking quickly back towards the crew quarters. With a quick glance at Meg, Daiba got to his feet and ran to catch up with the captain, Meg trailing in his wake.

'Captain? Problem?' he asked as he fell in beside him.

Harlock shook his head slightly. 'Maybe. He's a miserable bastard at times, but not given to lying down on the job. Did you two spot him on your sweep?'

Daiba shook his head. 'He took the portside weapons platforms with Franz and Doscoi. Heard Maji giving him some grief about a blocked turret he wanted Doscoi to check out whilst they were there.'

'I saw Franz and Doscoi passing by the Infirmary whilst I was waiting in line,' Meg added, puffing slightly from keeping up with the men's longer strides. 'But no Ali.'

Harlock nodded, and then tried again. 'Maji - Doscoi with you? Huh. Ask him if he knows where Ali is, would you? I'll wait.' A pause, then. 'When? I see. And he didn't check in? No. Thanks. I'll check it out. No, I've got Daiba and Meg with me, that should be enough if there's a problem.' He clicked off the comms. 'Pick up the pace a bit - Doscoi left him in the crew corridor heading for his quarters. It's not like Ali not to check in.'

Ali, like most of the senior crew on the ship - and the women - had quarters on the old officers' deck. His room was opposite Daiba's own spartan quarters - a dispensation less to Daiba's importance and more to his tendency to wake up screaming in the night, the youth thought a little bitterly as he passed his own door. It was a kindness, but one guaranteed to make life a little difficult below decks for him.
But they were outside Ali's closed door, and there were bigger concerns. Harlock knocked once, hard, even as Daiba made sure he had a firm grip on his pistol. Meg, on the other side, plastered herself to the wall next to the doorway, gun in her small but steady hand.

'Ali! If you're in there, open up!' Harlock called out. He banged again. 'Ali!'

'I'm busy right now!' Ali's gruff voice replied, muffled by the door.

'Too busy to call in when we need to leave in a hurry?' Harlock snapped.

'Ah. sorry. Got company, captain. Be right with you when I've got some pants on.'

'You buying this?' Daiba whispered. Harlock shook his head.

'Not for one minute, since the only person he's been banging is Luna, and she's busy and has been for hours.' He stepped back from the door, and quietly laid a hand on the wall. 'My friend? You awake yet?'

The distant, barely audible heartbeat that always filled the Arcadia deepened briefly. Harlock smiled a little grimly. 'I need Ali's door opening. In five. Daiba - get back, I don't want you in the line of fire!'

The door swished open softly, and Harlock peered round the opening. Ali stood facing him, a look of grim determination on his face. The scar next to his right eye twitched slightly when he saw his captain. 'It ain't what you think!' he called out. 'He said you wouldn't understand! Get back, Captain!'

Behind Ali, sitting on the edge of his bunk, a figure shifted. Harlock breathed in sharply when he saw dark brown hair framing a slender, delicate face, green eyes peering warily at him from behind the burly crewman. A cloying, sickly scent assaulted his nostrils - like a decaying jasmine which left a sharp, pungent, oily aftertaste on the back of the throat. His vision wavered slightly, then cleared, the face of the woman becoming clearer.

'Nami!' he breathed, almost a whisper.

'Harlock! Please!' Her voice pleaded with him as he raised his pistol to aim at her face. He hesitated. Next to him, he heard Daiba's murmured "Nana…" Grimly, he turned his attention back to the blond pirate.

'Ali… who is this?' he asked, softly.

'Captain… it's my brother. You can't…'

'Brother?' Daiba sounded confused. Harlock shook his head to try and clear it. The oily scent became even stronger.

'I told him you wouldn't understand… please, Harlock!' Nami's voice pleaded. Grimly, Harlock's finger tightened on the trigger.

'Captain! No!'

Ali stood firm in front of the figure on the bed, as though daring Harlock to challenge him. Beside him, Harlock sensed Daiba's hand lower slightly, and heard the shuddering breath as the boy tried to steady himself.
Or was it his own breathing he heard? The familiar, long lost face in front of him… that soft, gentle voice…

...calling a name she couldn't have known...

Muscles tightened, and he fought the sudden tiredness that made the cosmo dragoon feel as though it was made of solid lead in his hand. His finger trembled on the trigger, all strength gone, and he forced it to obey… but even as he fired, Ali launched himself at his captain, and the shot went wide as he fell, brought down by the weight of the heavier man. Fists like hammers smashed into his stomach and the side of his jaw on his blind side. Cursing, he brought the butt of his pistol down on the man's rock hard head, and another fist landed on his mouth, his teeth splitting his lip. Still fighting that peculiar lethargy, he brought his knee up sharply into the other man's groin and heard his pained cry. Two more shots rang out as he rolled clear from under the weight, and saw the nimble form of the girl he'd loved so long ago make a run for the door, where Meg stood firm, the muzzle of her pistol raised for another shot in a trembling hand. Her shot went wide.

The intruder made the mistake of turning to look, as she reached the doorway, a look of spiteful triumph on a face which in life had never known such a thing. He only had a moment, to see she grabbed Meg in her arms, using the small girl as a shield, the glint of a blade held against her throat, a trickle of blood running down Meg's pale neck.

From prone, it was a difficult shot, but he tried anyway.

A second shot from beside him hit the creature's torso as Daiba fired at the same time. Then "Nami's" head disintegrated, and Meg dropped to the floor with a cry, holding her throat. In the doorway, a suited, helmetless Mazone fell backwards into the corridor and burst into blue flames.

Harlock dropped back against the body of a groaning Ali, and let his pistol fall unheeded to his side. 'Meg?' he asked hoarsely.

Daiba scuttled to her side and moved her hand from the wound to get a look. 'Just a scratch.' He heaved a sigh of relief and helped the girl to her feet, and she clung to him. 'Captain?'

'I'm fine. Just need to get this prat into his bed.' Harlock got to his feet and hauled the barely conscious pirate onto his bunk. 'Get Meg to Doc - I'll get Ali to the hangar.' Daiba nodded, and helped a shaky Meg out of the room.

The door shut behind them, and Harlock turned his attention to Ali. Blood from the small scalp wound the butt of his pistol had caused trickled down the man's short hair behind his left ear. Probing his jaw carefully, Harlock winced as his fingers found a spot that would undoubtedly bruise, however briefly, and his split lip was still trickling down his chin.

He waited. Without looking at him, Ali sat up slowly, and buried his head in his hands. The smell that had filled the room was lessened, but still clouding Harlock's head. He reached out to Ali and placed the other man's arm over his shoulder. 'Up you go, Ali. Need to clear the air.'

'I'm sorry, Captain… but…'

'I meant that literally you idiot,' Harlock quipped softly. 'There's a really odd scent in here and I think it's part of the problem.' Ali looked at him and snorted wearily.

'Work on your material all night do you?' he grumbled. 'Fuck, what did you do to me? My balls ache like I got hit by a truck…'

Harlock helped him from the room, and leaned him against the wall in the corridor whilst he shut
the door behind them. 'My friend - get the air con working in there and flush it, would you?' He turned back to a slumped Ali. 'Your balls and my face both, you big bastard. Kei's going to flatten you for marking my pretty features…' He tried to help the crewman to his feet again, but his own strength failed him at that point, and both slumped down to a sitting position on the floor. 'Damn…'

Booted footsteps echoed in the corridor, and Sabu rounded the corner, followed by his usual partner in crime, Yasu. With muttered oaths both men lumbered over to their captain, and whilst Sabu helped Harlock to his feet, Yasu hauled an unresisting Ali to his. Too exhausted to protest, both men allowed themselves to be led to the waiting transports in the hangar.
Chapter 19

Enceladus - 2 days earlier

Pictures of the debris in the orbit between the damaged Moon and Earth flickered across Irita's viewscreen in a never ending loop.

Six ships.

Six ships had been dispatched from Saturn to deal with Harlock's unexpected return to Earth.

One had returned.

The captain - a tall young woman with red hair and green eyes, stood quietly to attention in front of his desk, waiting with infinitely more patience than the red-haired Director of Internal Security seated directly opposite him, legs crossed, arms resting on the arms of the chair, her fingers tapping on the armrest and her toe, in an elegant and expensive black shoe, keeping time.

'Captain Jorjibel.' Irita sat back in his chair and resisted the temptation to push his pince-nez glasses firmly onto the bridge of his nose. For some reason the more stressful the situation, the more they felt as though they were about to slip into his lap. 'You are quite sure this footage is all that your ship was able to record?'

'Yes sir.' The woman's voice was melodious, pleasant to the ear - but the expression on her beautiful, sharp featured face was cold and emotionless, and her green eyes held nothing but contempt.

Still, having an expression on your face that could sour lemonade wasn't an offence…

'Hmmm' Irita tapped a finger on his desk in minor irritation. There was something not right about the images on the screen… He'd seen footage of the Arcadia's battles before - and their aftermath. Despite the poor quality of the recording, this didn't look like the work of Arcadia's oscillator cannon, or of her insanely destructive ramming attack. No… the patterns were wrong. No matter how much he looked at it, there was something off about the picture he'd been handed by this young woman.

For one thing, although it was out of focus and dimly lit by reflected Earthlight, there appeared to be far too much debris than could be accounted for by the number of ships destroyed.

And why hadn't their own satellite observatories recorded anything? Dark Matter obscured the Arcadia, not everything in the bloody vicinity…

He gave his glasses a hard shove, and winced slightly as they pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Very well, captain. Leave us.'

'Sir!' The captain turned on her heel with a smart salute - aimed slightly at the Director, he noticed idly, more than him… then left the room at a measured march.

'You seem unconvinced,' Shizuka Namino said softly, once the door had hissed shut. 'Not to mention more than a little vexed, Irita.'

The recorded footage flickered at the edge of his peripheral vision, and he switched it off, sure it was at the root of the headache that was building in his left temple.
'It doesn't look right - or sound right. Harlock has never destroyed human crewed ships like this. Not military vessels anyway. Pirates, slavers… Machinners harvest escorts he'll make an example of, but in twelve years he has never left this kind of total destruction in his wake. It's not what he does. He prefers to leave a message, and he always offers quarter. Always.'

Shizuka leaned back in her chair, winced slightly, leaned forward and elegantly flicked her long hair out of the way before leaning back again. 'You yourself have described him as a terrorist and anarchist who needs to be hunted down and strung up… now you sound as though you admire than man.'

'Not admire, Director. I've studied him. He's a loose cannon, but he has lines he will not cross. It's why he has so much support in the Frontier worlds. They think he's tough, but fair and honourable…' He snorted. 'Honour… From a man who refuses to follow any rules but his own… This…' he sighed. 'It's out of character. If I saw this without your captain's commentary, I'd have speculated that this was a three way fight - there was at least another ship out there, Miss Namino, unless my reading of this is totally wrong.'

'So you're accusing Jorjibel of lying?'

'I'm saying her story - for whatever reason, leaves a lot to be desired,' he corrected. 'Maybe she only saw part of the scuffle. Maybe she was misled somehow. Or maybe she's following orders and only reporting what she's been told to… he thought. He kept the suspicion to himself. 'Sensors can lie, in space, it isn't unknown…'

'Do you hear yourself, Irita? Another ship? If so, why would Captain Jorjibel lie? She's Fleet, after all, and her ship engaged with the Arcadia - surely if she came under attack from a third party she'd have no reason to cover it up?' Shizuka leaned forwards, with her seductive smile on her face. 'Really. You're over thinking this. My people will go over the footage - if there's anything to find, we'll find it. You'll be the first to know.'

She stood up gracefully, and left his office. As the door closed he breathed a sigh of relief, half-tinged with annoyance. First to know? He doubted it. He'd get the story she wanted him to hear, and nothing more.

And nothing in that footage answered his larger questions… Why had Harlock risked so much to visit Earth? Why had he gone down to the surface?

Had he found something…?

He pulled out a small chip from his pocket, one he hadn't bothered to inform his superior of. Relayed camera footage from one of the few hologram generators left behind by the Martian incursion - partly because its decaying path had left it in low Earth orbit, and difficult to retrieve. He placed it into his personal, isolated tablet, and let it play.

Why hadn't Captain Jorjibel informed anyone that she'd taken a fighter down to the planet's surface herself?

And where had the unknown craft she'd met with on the surface come from…?

Shizuka found Jorjibel waiting for her in her office. Making sure the door was closed and the interference shield operational, she sat down and waited for her sister to report.

'Harlock knows. About the green sisters, I'm sure of it.' Jorjibel sat down without waiting to be asked. Technically as a warrior, she outranked the civilian Shizuka in their sisterhood, despite the
'But nothing of the fleet or their intentions?' Shizuka tapped her fingers on the edge of the desk. 'We know he has a name... his sister in law had uncovered that much. If that unstable idiot she married hadn't killed her she'd have had to die. Shame. She might even have persuaded to join us. There are after all some perks to our symbiosis...'

Jorjibel sneered. 'More scientists? It's strength we need, not more bleeding hearts. Tessius' heresies already spread through the civilian population.'

...and there we have the problem in a nutshell, Shizuka thought to herself. And thank you so much for being just the right blunt tool for the job. Outwardly, she smiled. 'Strength we shall have, once our people are united behind the Queen. Soon they will have reason to truly fear the Destroyer of Worlds, and that fear will bring them together. Tessius' pacifistic nonsense will fail once the fleet and Harlock clash.'

'How can you be so sure they will? Giving him the means to find the fleet is one thing, but how can you be so sure he'll take the bait?'

Shizuka's smile widened. 'Because he'll have a reason to hunt down Rafflesia and her fleet, and try to destroy them. Faced with their worst nightmare, the Mazone will find that strength they need to endure, and prevail.'

...and to see finally how the petty, narrow vision of a vengeful queen will bring them to ruin...

'And your little pet along the corridor?'

'Leave Irita to me. He serves a purpose. I'll set him to retrieving what we need to goad Harlock into action. His actions will also serve to stir up the frontier worlds against the Alliance - and given the location of our leverage, this should serve to incite the machine queen into questioning that Alliance... by the time the fleet arrives at the borders of this Solar System, there won't be a viable opponent to stand against us.'

Jorjibel, her tiny mind satisfied by the rhetoric, left, and Shizuka leaned back in her chair, swivelling to look out of her window at the icy clouds. The destruction of the distant homeworld had upset far too many long range plans for those who had remained behind in humanity's shadow. First Earth, then New Mazone and her colonies...

We like it here. Away from ancient, stagnant traditions. No bowing to a monarch none had seen in thousands of years... She sighed heavily. Damn Rafflesia for deciding to vent her anger on the rest of the universe! Humanity was sliding quietly into oblivion without help - so long as men like Harlock could be marginalised where the dangerous hope they offered for a resurgence of human endeavour could be kept firmly away from any real influence. Why risk it all just to make a point?

But played correctly, Rafflesia's insanity could pave the way to a new world order. Harlock, all unwittingly, would be the tool to usher in that new era...

And Queen Shizuka had a very nice ring to it...

Shadow - now

Despite the helping hands of the two burly pirates, neither Harlock nor Ali could stay on their feet, and quickly allowed Sabu and Yasu to let their charges slump to the floor. Ali looked far worse than his captain, barely conscious and pale - but then he'd thrown up twice on the way before
Harlock had ordered the crewmen to stop.

Daiba cradled Meg gently as he took a spot of floor a safe distance away from both men, out of vomiting distance. Truthfully, he felt terrible - his head was stuffed full of cotton wool, his mouth tasted like the aftermath of a bad night drinking, and his limbs felt oddly heavy. Even Meg's light weight was a struggle.

He looked over towards Harlock, who'd gone a sickly colour - even allowing for the Arcadia's dim lighting. 'You look like shit,' he offered.

'That good?' Harlock's voice was strained and he sounded as though it was an effort to breathe. 'I feel like someone cut the strings... heavy, exhausted. Like a bad dose of flu hitting all at once.'

'That smell... in the cabin - some kind of drug?' Daiba asked.

'More than likely. Ali seems to have gotten the worst of it. You were closest to the door and got off lightly. How's Meg?'

Daiba looked down at his charge, who stuck her tongue out at him, and winced as the slight movement tugged the wound on her throat. 'She won't die. Ow!' He glared down at the girl, who'd pinched his arm. In reply she just snuggled wearily into his shoulder.

Next to her, growing through the corridor floor, was the tip of a thin vine like shoot.

'Shouldn't we be getting a wiggle on?' he asked. He looked up to see Sabu crouched next to Ali's prone form. Yasu had vanished.

'Gone to fetch help,' Harlock told him without prompting. 'Ali won't make it to the hangar like this. But there's no rush to leave the ship so long as the hull doesn't deteriorate to the point we can't take off...'

A shimmering light appeared at his side, resolving itself into the faint ghostly form of Tochiro. Given the transparency either the power was still low, or the projectors in this part of the ship were less capable of rendering his image. Or both.

For once, the normally ebullient engineer was subdued. 'We already have a big problem, Harlock. I can't take the ship into orbit safely. Whatever needs doing, it'll have to be on the surface.'

'Harder...' Harlock opined. 'I was counting on opening the ship up to space to help kill that stuff...'

'It's the same stuff their ships are made of, my friend,' Tochiro told him. 'Won't make a difference.'

Harlock sighed. 'No help for it then but to flood the ship here? Damn... I didn't want to do this close to the planet, never mind on it...' He closed his visible eye wearily. 'Dark matter and planets don't mix.'

'On the plus side, this is a deserted world. Nothing down here but the dead. If anything goes wrong, it won't be the end of the world...' Tochiro said cheerily.

Daiba, Meg and Harlock all stared at the Arcadia's resident ghost, who shuffled his illusory feet and cleared his throat. 'Yeah. Anyway. Selen called, the Futatsuboshi's en route and should be here within three local days. You can hold out in the fliers for a week if you have to.'

'I'd rather not...' Wearily, and holding onto the wall, Harlock got to his feet. 'Grab me a passing warm body to help me back to the bridge whilst this stuff wears off.'
Tochiro's hologram nodded, and winked out. Harlock had barely time to wander unsteadily over to Sabu's side to take a look at Ali, when Anita appeared, took one look at her captain and started clucking at him.

'Sweet heavens, Captain! You look like the wrong side of a week long pass...' She stopped short when she saw the rest of them on the ground. Daiba waved weakly at her with a sickly grin. 'Oh, you poor boy - and what happened to you, Meggie? Looks like you all need Doc's ministrations...' She knelt at Ali's side, not waiting for anyone to reply, and Daiba noticed the corner of Harlock's mouth twitch. 'Oh, sugar... what the hell did you get yourself into this time, young man!'

Young? Daiba mouthed, catching Harlock's eye. Which was rolled theatrically without comment.

'Anita - a hand here? Sabu - get Ali to the hangar. Daiba - Meg - go with them.' With one arm draped over Anita's meaty shoulders, he made his unsteady way to the bridge.

Daiba accepted a helping hand from Meg and leaning on her slight form, tottered after the heavily laden Sabu.

Kei took one look at Harlock as he made his way carefully to the captain's chair, supported by Anita, whose attempts to let him down gently failed miserably as he slumped into the throne-like monstrosity with a deep sigh. 'Tochiro told me you got a dose of whatever those things were using to play with Ali's head... not to be delicate, but you look like shit.'

'So people keep telling me,' he muttered, with a sharp look at Anita, who smiled at him and thumped her way back down the stairs two at a time, bellowing for Zack. 'Damn, the SDF must miss her on the parade ground.' He winced and pressed a hand to his forehead. 'They tried messing with mine as well. That wasn't a shot I'd like to make again.'

Seeing the crinkle between his left eye and the inner edge of his patch, she dropped her flippancy. 'What did they make you see?'

'Not what. Who... These things like to play with their food. They made Ali see his brother, and I'm pretty sure Daiba saw that young girl from Hakidame when he shot at it. If I had time to worry about him...'

Kei leaned back against her console. 'And yet you avoid answering the question, I see.'

He pushed himself to his feet with an effort and made his way carefully but determinedly to the wheel. 'I just blew Nami's face off, and no, knowing it was an illusion wasn't much help. There are some sights you can't unsee.' He stood next to her and reached out for her hand, readily offered, and squeezed her fingers with a fraction of his usual strength. 'At least they didn't show me you...'

She squeezed his hand back, and change the subject. Time later for the play-by-play... 'Tochiro told me the plan. It's nuts, as ever, but he thinks it can work. Mimay's with him, going over a few things. The crew's off, apart from the group with Yattaran on the port wing. It looks as though that boarding pod is the source of the weed - we think it's how it latches on - only with us being saturated with dark matter, instead of just providing an anchor, it's spreading through the hull unchecked. We need to detach it, but might need to blow that section to do it... problem is, that will also take out the wing...'

He gave her a speculative look. 'How long to regrow it?'

'A week. It's a major structure, and the hull integrity issues mean it'll take longer than usual to
'Not if we're saturating the entire structure with dark matter anyway,' he pointed out. 'Blow the wing. Tell Yattaran to set the charges and get to safety.'

'He's just waiting for your call.'

He smiled at her. 'I should have known... I'm surprised you waited to ask permission.'

'Well, just for the detonation...'

They shared a knowing smile, before Kei turned her attention back to organising the necessary surgical explosion. 'This is pretty bad, even for us, isn't it?' she asked, nibbling her bottom lip.

Harlock let the wheel prop him upright. 'Possibly. It could mean we're the worst choice of ship to go up against this lifeform, if they are planning an attack. Right now, we have no real defence against their weapons - or it seems, anything of theirs. If one small pod can infiltrate the Arcadia like this, we're screwed in battle...'

Noticing his gaze drifting off into the distance, Kei gave him a nudge. 'Credit for your thoughts?'

'Fffht. Not worth that much. No. Just a vague idea... once we've got clear of this current mess, I want to talk it over with Tochiro, Yattaran and Mimay.' His attention was drawn to the small device - shaped a little like a yawara stick, only thumb sized, which she was toying with. 'What's that?'

'This? Picked it up outside the Central Computer room. I think that female dropped it. Why?'

'Because it looks like a Nibelung data chip...' he replied, plucking it deftly from her fingers.

On board Bullet Two, Daiba leaned wearily against the wall and slumped slowly into the nearest seat. The lassitude induced by the Mazone "drug" was wearing off, but it left a sour taste in his mouth and the back of his throat, as well as the start of a monster headache. Meg took the seat next to him, grabbed a nearby tablet and stylus, and began sketching on the screen. He leaned over to look, as under her deft strokes, a portrait of a loose-limbed, three fingered creature emerged. Pretty, in a strangely doll-like way, he thought. The mouth was rose-bud like, small, red. The face noseless, the eyes large and set wide on the heart-shaped face - the broad forehead with the tendrils of hair swept back from a deep widows peak and narrow pointed chin giving truth to the ancient and somewhat cliched description for once. The torso was thin, with small breasts...

Breasts? He shook his head. On a vegetable? Nope, never gonna get that one...

Meg noticed his interest as she took a break from her work, and tapped the tip of her stylus against her teeth. 'Not what you saw, I'm thinking?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'You didn't see anyone you knew?'

'Just this... bit like the ones on Tiamat.'

'Or Earth. They didn't bother trying to fool us then.'

'Kei said she didn't see naked chicks on Tiamat - just you guys reported that. And only you, Ali and The Captain said you saw people you knew. Maybe it doesn't work on women?'

Daiba shrugged. 'Sex linked secondary characteristics aimed at attracting pollinators or prey aren't
unheard of. And in Earth legends, you hear more stories of faery women abducting and either using or killing men than the other way around.’ He paused. ‘Mind you, Dad used to say that said more about male psychology than it did about comparative mythology...’ They shared a grin, briefly. To his surprise she laid her ungloved hand on top of his.

‘I know what you did for me back there, Tadashi. I can't even imagine what it took to make that shot, seeing that friend of yours. Thank you.’

It's nothing... he wanted to say. But it wasn't, not even close. Every time he closed his eyes the sight of her face disintegrating as Harlock's bolt hit less than a second after his own had lanced into her - its - side replayed overlapping with Nana's shocked scream as his shot missed the Mazone holding her and hit the centre of her chest and she fell...

‘I can't unsee it...' he told her quietly, as the crew bustled around them. Nearby, someone had dumped Harlock's bird on Ali's lap and the crewman - still looking a little shell-shocked, was feeding it crackers on demand absentely. 'Knowing it wasn't Nana and feeling it aren't the same...'

‘They mess with your head and twist everything around...’

Ali's gruff voice broke into the conversation and Daiba twisted in his seat to look at the man. Ashen faced, he fed another cracker to the waiting greedy beak pushing at his hand. 'You know you can't be seeing or hearing what's in front of you, but they get into your head, find what makes you vulnerable... your grief, your guilt... the worst of it is you know, deep down you're being played, but you can't stop yourself...' His face twisted into a self-hating snarl. 'Kid, if I ever gave you any grief over your reaction to those bitches, I'm sorry.'

Not trusting himself to speak through the sudden lump in his throat, Daiba merely nodded in reply. Ali grunted and turned back to his pushy companion. 'And you can quit begging, ya daft bird. I know damn well you know how to open a pack of crackers for yerself... quit playin' for sympathy...'

It squawked in his face softly and poked his ear so gently it was almost a nuzzle. 'Awww... stop that. Here.' Another cracker went into the over-open maw and down that impossibly thin throat. 'Quit feeding that thing, Ali.’ Harlock strode into view up the open ramp and into the body of the bullet. 'It's not your shoulder it bloody well perches on, and I'm already staggering under the weight...'

Ali just smirked nastily, picked up another packet, opened it and quite deliberately offered a cracker to the bird.

'Listen up,' Harlock's voice rang out in the enclosed space. Close to a dozen crewmen stopped chattering to look at him. 'This is the last transport to leave. Kei's taken bullet one. I'm leaving Maji to take this flyer out, and we'll retreat to the next valley over for safety. Mimay and the Central Computer will flood the ship with dark matter, infusing the hull and structure. The plan is that this will kill the Mazone vine that's infesting Arcadia. With any luck, we'll be back on board within twenty four hours.'

'And if this screws up and creates a two mile long fusion of corpsicles and dark matter ghost ship?' Ali asked cheerily.

'Over-thinking this, much, with an overactive imagination?' Harlock's reply was laconic but even Daiba recognised the do-not-push-me edge to his voice. Ali's response was to beam a beatific smile at his captain and deliberately offer another cracker to the injured bird. But the laughter from
the crew at the banter had a nervous undercurrent.

'Where will you be?' Daiba asked. 'You weren't planning on staying with the ship, were you?'

Harlock laid a gloved hand on his shoulder. 'Kei talked me out of it. The two of us will coordinate with Mimay and Tochiro from our Space Wolves. We'll also be keeping a weather eye on the horizon - we're a sitting duck down here, and this planet isn't too far from the main shipping lanes. The last thing we need right now is a patrol finding us whilst we're grounded. We'll operate a rolling patrol in-system with the Space Wolves until the Futatsuboshi arrives. Once the Arcadia's safe to enter there'll be a rotating shift on the guns until we can leave the gravity well.' His speech to the crowd over he said more softly, for Daiba's ears only: 'What about you? I heard the name you called out...'

Daiba gave him his best attempt at a reassuring smile, and hoped the description didn't resemble "grimace". 'So did I... So I guess "about as well as you are" is the best we get...' he offered quietly. The hand on his shoulder squeezed gently and Harlock nodded. Then pivoting on his heel he strode out of the small craft, the ramp lifting behind him to shut with a hissing thump.

From the cockpit of the Space Wolf the view of the exterior hull of the Arcadia was a sorry sight. It wasn't the first time Harlock had seen his ship with gaping holes in it, or even with bits dropping off - currently the main offender was the port wing, the lack of which made the ship look horribly lopsided from the top elevation as he overflew the vessel. Hell, the last months of the machine wars they'd been flayed almost down to the interior super-structure by a nasty weapon fielded by Leopard's ship thanks to the Machinners striking a deal with the ancient Nibelung scientist Loki... and that had taken some drastic measures to repair... But here the ship was also wreathed in the obscene, almost flesh-like vine that writhed and wove its way over and into the ship. Vines that rivalled the size of the great curving dark matter antennae that arced over the back of the ship smothered the top bank of oscillator cannon, and had a stranglehold on the ship.

From here, it looked like an ancient ruin, liana clad and derelict.

He didn't like the comparison.

'You know from out here that looks almost disturbingly phallic...' Kei's voice over the comms interrupted his musings.

And that comparison was even worse...

'There are times your brain is a scary place,' he replied tartly. She laughed.

'Prude. There's no denying the Mazone are no stranger to sexual imagery... and the way that thicker vine is penetra...'

'Just stop Kei, please, before you draw me a mental picture I can't erase... my poor Martian sensibilities can only handle so much,' he replied a little primly.

'Seconded,' added a deep, melodious voice. Tochiro's tone held a slightly mischievous edge. 'Given that I'm the one on the receiving end, and that, my friend, is not something anyone ever accused me of in life!' There was a slight pause before he continued: 'Mimay's ready whenever you are. Let's just get this shit out of my lovely hull, shall we? I'm actually starting to feel rather violated...'

'Would it kill anyone on this crew to have a conversation that didn't involve sex at this point?' Harlock asked acidly.
'Given this crew and the current circumstances, good luck with that...' Kei murmured.

Harlock sighed heavily, and bit back a pithy retort at the ghostly chuckle over the speakers from Tochiro. 'Bunch of bloody comedians... that's what I'm surrounded by,' he muttered under his breath.

'I heard that, and for the record - you'd prefer witless minions?' Tochiro asked, his recorded voice deceptively sweet. 'Ready when you are, oh Dark and Moody One.'

Ignoring Kei's giggle, he gave the order.

The curving arcs above the Arcadia twisted and uncurled, each splitting into an elegantly uncoiling structure that resembled a section of DNA. Dark matter billowed from the two antennae, and within seconds the dark cloud completely shrouded the ship, until not even the glowing red eyes of the skull on its bow could be seen. By the time the cloud had reached a diameter of close to two kilometres, nothing of the Arcadia could be seen.

Then the cloud began to shrink, folding in on itself and becoming so dense it seemed even the sunlight was unable to escape. Where the Arcadia had rested was a mile long shadow almost half as tall. And slowly, oh so slowly, the dark matter cloud was pulled in even tighter, until the outline of the ship reappeared, the ship's hull now a reflective, mirror-polished obsidian marked by a bone-white skull on the bow and an equally ivory coloured spinal column running down her top elevation towards the bridge. Faint red and green flashes of lightning flickered across this skin, until the mirrored finish slowly returned to its normal leathery lustre.

The clinging vines were gone. A sharp gust of wind blew a dust cloud from the surface of the Arcadia, and a fine grey ash covered the ground surrounding and underneath the ship.
Chapter 20

Enceladus

Whoever had designed the Enceladus base had a thing for pale, barely there pastels. Combined with the too-bright lighting in the ceiling strips, the effect was to render the colour scheme so anaemic they might as well have just gone with white and had done with it. Only where the occasional shadow pooled in corners or behind stanchions did the pale greens and blues come into their own, making a final forlorn stand against utilitarian sterility.

Irita preferred white. It had always signified readiness… a blank page upon which everything could be displayed or played out. It left nowhere to hide, unlike black, and refused to admit ambiguities, like grey. Everything had to be kept in order, in its place.

That was how the world should work.

Irita had deliberately picked a time when the docking bay was quiet, so he had only himself to blame, he acknowledged, when finding someone to release the little cargo runner he asked for took almost an hour.

'Sorry, Captain.' The desk clerk swung the tablet round for authorisation, and Irita removed his glasses and peered dutifully at the camera. 'This time of night, it's a little dead around here.'

'This far out from the sun, it's always night,' Irita pointed out as he pushed his glasses back into place on his nose. The clerk - a pimply-faced youth barely old enough to shave, laughed down his nose with a braying noise that set Irita's teeth on edge.

'I take it you weren't intending to be witty?'

Irita gave the young man at his side a sharp look over his wire frames, and the ensign straightened up and tried to hide a smile.

'No, Ensign Kodama. I wasn't.' Irita lengthened his stride as he headed for the little craft parked on the edge of the hangar. Sadly he'd picked one of the men on his staff his own height, and the man had no trouble keeping up. But then, finding someone at short notice to take the co-pilot seat on a not-entirely official trip to the inner solar system hadn't been easy.

Beggars can't be choosers… But at least Kodama had a reputation for being discreet and efficient, which was all he really wanted.

He could, however, do without the attempt at bonding. The ensign was fresh out of the OTC and hadn't had the touchy-feely crap they fed this new breed of officer on thrashed out of him. He still thought team-building exercises with the civilian departments were a good idea…

The earnest little fool was still chattering as he took the co-pilot seat and began the pre-flight checks. 'So where are we going exactly, sir? It's a little strange to be filing a flight plan this late…'

Irita strapped himself in and began firing up the orbital thrusters, as the track on the hangar deck began moving their ship to the docking bay doors ready for flight. 'The ships we lost last week, around Earth. There's something about the official report that's bothering me, Ensign.'

'But that was against Harlock, wasn't it, sir? Surely they didn't stand a chance against him and the Arcadia… What do you expect to find?'
'That's what I'm going there to find out.'

Kodama hesitated slightly before continuing. 'Should you be doing this without the oversight of Internal Security, sir? I mean, sneaking out like this…'

'I'm not "sneaking" ensign. My flight plan is legitimate, I'm not hiding where I'm going, or why. And I am IntSec - which is why I need to look at this independently of the Director's office.'

...all true, but filing the flight plan for a time equivalent to the early hours of the morning, Earth time, simply to avoid awkward questions from his superiors was stretching things a little...

The ship slipped neatly out of the lock and into Enceladus' low orbit. Clear of the docking ring, Irita boosted the little vessel out of the gravity well and into space. Once clear, he laid in the course he'd calculated and fired up the IN-SKIP drive.

To the observer on the top deck watching through the security screens relaying the orbital defence screen footage, the ship seemed to dissolve into a series of bright lines, as though its outline's movement had been photographed timelapsed, as it leapt forwards and vanished.

Shizuka smiled.

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_Mazone Mother ship_

The nemeton was a hive of activity when the queen gave an audience. Of late, she'd been keeping herself more and more outside of the day to day workings of the court. Her roots ran through the ship, entwined around every strut and stanchion. There was, in truth, no part of the lives of either flesh or green she did not touch, but she was their centre, and when she withdrew, the whole suffered.

My fate, one day, Cleome thought as she approached the inner grove. Or would have been, had their fates not been destroyed the day that a machine placed in the inner system of their home been touched by a stray solar flare and exploded, the resulting chain reaction in their binary system then spreading unchecked to four other suns in their close neighbourhood.

The oscillators had performed as they had been designed to… collapsing space-time in on itself; four dimensions unfolding into their related six and from there into the remaining sixteen at the Planck boundary.

An entire civilisation destroyed in the time it took the signal to propagate through IN space. Only the outlying colonies and a handful of ships had survived.

The ships which even now approached their final destinations.

Zinnia materialised at her side, her sea-green chiton a contrast to the black flightsuit Cleome currently wore, though both women wore their long hair unfettered.

'Cassandra's on a tear,' she whispered loudly, as they walked. 'Reports from the Terran system say that our ships engaged with the Destroyer of Worlds just outside of Earth orbit. He was actually on the planet, at one of the massacre sites…'

Cleome sighed. 'If he's seen the remains of our sisters, he still only knows of the past, not the present. What will that tell him? Nothing that can help him prevent what will happen once these devices are in place.'
'Still, with the disruption Tessius’ ideas are causing, there's a suggestion that uniting us behind an exterior threat…'

Cleo stopped and Zinnia almost walked into her back before halting. 'Cassandra doesn't want us uniting,' she hissed, checking to make sure no-one was close enough to overhear. 'She wants conflict. It gives her purpose. Without the unrest or the possibility of this pirate finding us and finishing the job his ancestor started, she cannot justify her expansion of the ship-growing programme - or her increasing numbers of ampeloi and hamadryads.' She fell back on the well-practiced rebuttal, but inside, she was less than convinced.

'We are not warriors… we strive in subtle ways, not this aggressive, militant posturing. That is a human trait.

As they approached the inner grove, a figure emerged from within, striding down the avenue with a step that always, to Cleo, looked as though the woman wanted to stamp the very earth she trod on into submission.

'Cassandra.' Cleo inclined her head very slightly to the other woman. Enough to be acceptably polite, but no more.

'Cleome.'

Was it just the lighting, or was the woman smirking?

'If you were expecting an audience, I wouldn't bother.'

Oh. Smirking…

'Why?'

Cassandra could look oddly predatory when she wanted to, Cleo thought. It wasn't a becoming look on her - but then, she - unusually for Mazone - wasn't a particularly attractive female to begin with. There was something flat and plain about her face, and her scent…

...sour, Cleo realised. Like rotting vegetation left out in the rain. Acidic and unpleasant, it clung to her like a miasma.

'Reports have come in from our kindred in the home system. That - male - the destroyer - has attacked and destroyed several of our ships, as well as murdering several sisters on the planet.'

Cleo struggled not to rise to the smug bitch's taunting tone. 'You'd prefer to start a war to justify your position, Cassandra.'

'And this is a problem?' Cassandra sneered. 'Better that, than Tessius’ plans to settle elsewhere. On which note, I have work to do. It seems several ships are starting to express similar sentiments, and I need to remind them of the proper order of things. A few examples should do the trick.'

She sauntered away, and Cleo exchanged a helpless look with Zinnia.

'She'd open fire on our own kind as readily as she would on the humans…' Zinnia sighed. 'We're being pulled apart, and the queen…'

'Hush. Not here, Zinnia. Too many ears. I'll continue alone - go and find Tessius, let her know there's trouble brewing. She might need to take her own precautions sooner rather than later.'
Zinnia nodded, turned slightly as though to leave, then turned back to look at Cleo. 'Why, Cleo? Why did this have to happen? All these years we've travelled and for what? To deliver our vengeance to the humans? What good will it do if we're gone? There are so many worlds we could have settled.' She whispered the heresy so softly, Cleo could only just hear it. She laid her hand gently on the other woman's bare arm.

'Because in thinking we had to protect ourselves from humans, we became just like them, she whispered back.

Steeling herself as Zinnia walked away, she headed for the audience chamber.

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**Earth Orbit**

The little runabout materialised out of IN-SKIP outside of the Moon's orbit. Irita deftly brought the craft around and held her steady, whilst he set Kodama scanning for the debris left behind by the battle. No sense in running straight into the battle zone - even with shields up, the risk of damage was too great. What he needed was some wreckage on the fringes of the area. Thankfully, the clean-up crew wasn't scheduled to clear up the mess for another two Earth-days.

**Hence the rush…**

'I have something,' Kodama reported. He pointed at the screen, which currently showed the view of the Moon's new geological feature - a massive gash across the surface, obliterating several mares and at least one mountain range, looking from this distance like someone had taken a bite out of a pie. 'Reading debris from our ships, as expected.'

'Nothing else?'

Kodama hesitated. 'There is an anomaly…'

'Show me.'

Kodama brought up the readings on the main viewer. 'See - here, and here?' he pointed with a silvery glove. 'It's not metallic, or ceramic.'

'Then what?' Irita snapped. Kodama hesitated before answering.

'Wood, sir. According to the trace analysis, it's wood…'

'Wood.' Irita's response was as flat as his subordinate's delivery.

'It's probably from one of the ships,' Kodama continued smoothly, not missing a beat. 'Some commanders have been known to bring artifacts on board despite the mass restrictions.'

Irita took a closer look at the readings. 'I put it to you, ensign, that a table that size would be larger than this flyer…' he drawled the statement out lest there be any doubt as to the level of sarcasm implied. Subtlety, he suspected, was wasted on this one. 'Send out a grapple. I want samples on board. Including from our own ships. Look for anything obviously caught in a blast, I want to analyse the energy signatures.'

'Yes sir.'

Inspecting the collection in the hold an hour or so later, Irita held back a sigh. He pulled off his glasses and pinched the throbbing ache on the bridge of his nose.
So much debris to choose from, and yet so little of any actual use? Statistically there should have been a chance that some pieces had been close enough to the point of impact from a weapon to absorb some of the energy from it. Even the impact from Arcadia’s ramming blade left a distinctive dark matter footprint.

Kodama… I was right. Subtle isn't a word you're familiar with…

But who do you work for? Namino?

'That's as much as we can take on board with our fuel levels,' Kodama called out. 'Sir - we really do need to be heading back. We've got about…'

'Another half hour. Kodama, bring the ship around and bring us alongside that largest wooden section. Use the point lasers to slice a piece off and bring it aboard for analysis.'

'But sir - that's a risky manoeuvre!'

'Then you'd better be sure to get it right, ensign. Think of it as a way to impress me.' He walked out of the hangar.

If Namino was playing her own game here, and Kodama was her man, then he'd placed himself in an intolerable situation. If Kodama's orders included getting him out of the way if he stuck his nose in where he shouldn't, then they were a long way from help, and who would question an accident when the officer in charge had clearly violated protocol to come out here…?

One thing he was betting on however, was that Namino wasn't that crude.

Harlock’s tactic… flushing the game by springing a trap. The irony just kept on coming…

Except he’d finally been able to access Admiral Isora's sealed file on his younger brother's activities: prior to going native, Yama - Harlock - had been an effective - if reluctant - agent specialising in getting his targets to over extend and trip themselves up. Even then he'd been a teflon coated, trolling little shit.

Still. If you can't beat them…

Which was, after all, why he'd been ordered to accept the damn job, in the first place. He sat back in the pilot's seat and tried to relax.

Enceladus, later

Shizuka waited patiently while Kodama finished his report, and nodded slowly in acknowledgement as he finished. One of their tame males, he never questioned his superiors, which made him an ideal agent - but useless as breeding stock, in her opinion, despite his blond good looks.

The queen's faction preferred them meek and biddable - which might go a long way to explaining some of the issues she was having with her somewhat lacklustre subordinates. Good hosts require a little fire in the belly…

But not too much… Irita had slipped his leash quite unexpectedly. His discoveries could be contained. The man himself…

'He'll need to be dealt with.' Jorjibel's tone dripped venom. Her scorn for humans was a fatal flaw,
in Shizuka's opinion, as well as being more than a little misguided. Why should you hate part of yourself, after all?

'Leave Irita to me, Jorjibel,' she snapped. 'You have your orders.'

'You're making a mistake.' Jorjibel stepped out of the shadows she'd been lurking in throughout Kodama's report. 'But one that can be easily rectified.' She stalked towards the door with her back ramrod stiff in disapproval and would have slammed it behind her if the mechanism allowed.

Shizuka leaned her chin on her steepled fingers, considering. She sniffed, catching a faint scent. Sniffed again.

Then she stood, reached into her desk drawer, pulled out a small, elaborately designed pistol, and headed for the door at a run.

'There will, of course, be a full investigation launched,' Irita told Hoshino. Over the warp feed the admiral's image was a little hazy. He waited out the minimal time lag on the reply, staring at the bearded face which filled the small screen.

'But you're sure of this?'

Irita nodded. 'I sent the fragments to a private firm on Ganymede for analysis, and I expect the results back within the week, but to the naked eye and a hand-held scanner, the evidence is clear enough. Whoever destroyed those ships, it wasn't the Arcadia. The energy signature was all wrong. I suspect they found something else when they reached the sanctified zone, and were destroyed to cover it up. If I'd waited for IntSec to send their team in, I doubt I'd have found anything.'

Hoshino frowned. 'I don't like this, Irita… Conspiracies in the highest levels of the new government?'

Irita pushed his glasses back up his nose before they landed in his lap. 'A holdover from the old, I suspect. And not the government as such - rather the supporting administration.'

'You're talking of decades here,' Hoshino mused. 'Especially if this does tie in to the information from Admiral Isora's old office about the Terraforming problem. Maybe I should pull you out?'

'I can handle this. I'm more worried about how this new ship ties into this. Organic technology on this level is unheard of - the preliminary scan I ran suggested this ship was grown, Admiral - it's a super-strong material but light enough, flexible enough and tough enough to withstand the rigours of space travel and vacuum. A civilisation this advanced…'

'You assume they're ahead of us, Irita?' Hoshino asked with a dark smile which failed to reach his cold eyes.

'What are you implying, sir?'

'Maybe nothing. But there have always been rumours, in the darker corners of the galaxy.'

And you'd know… Irita thought coldly. There had been stories floating around that the Admiral had a tendency to stick his nose into out of the way areas - starting as part of the hunt for the Young Harlock, but it had become something of a hobby lately. Be careful what rocks you turn over, admiral - you never know what might crawl out from under them.

He cut off the conversation after uploading the usual pleasantries and his full report, checking
again before cutting the signal that the line remained secure. With a heartfelt sigh he leaned forward in his chair, placed his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers.

Plants in IntSec's military arm? If Kodama was an example, the rot was setting in before they even graduated.

He pushed his chair back and stood up, feeling the sudden need for a shower. A very long, very hot one.

He'd reached the point when even the hot water had started to feel a little tepid, when he heard the door open and close to his bathroom. Through the steamed frosted pane of the shower cubicle, he saw a slender figure standing outside. He already had one hand on the pistol he kept close by, when the cubicle door slid open.

'You might want to think about getting out of there before the water gets any colder,' Shizuka Namino told him, a sly, knowing smile playing around her red lips.

She shed the thin, red sheath dress she was wearing and took a step forwards.

Ignoring both the woman and her slighting innuendo, he turned his back on her and switched off the water. As the drying field kicked in, he felt her hand on his back, running down the length of his spine, her nails scoring his skin slightly as she explored his skin.

'You weren't invited, Director,' he snapped through gritted teeth. 'Do you always take advantage of your staff like this?'

'Only if they prove somewhat… challenging…' she replied. He stiffened - unfortunate turn of phrase... - as he felt her move closer, until her nipples were grazing his skin. Her hands moved back up the sides of his torso and came to rest on his shoulders. 'Won't you turn around?'

Her voice was low, melodious, and seductive, and from somewhere he also noticed a fragrance… from her hair, as it brushed his shoulders and fell over them to sway almost with a life of its own against his chest.

Cloying… but...

'No.' He snarled the single syllable. Where they were braced against the wall of the cubicle, his hands curled into fists.

The red tendrils of her hair brushed against his straining cock as it kept pointing at the ceiling in defiance of his brain. Like her hair, the annoying thing had a life of its own, jerking involuntarily in response to the feather light touch.

'With all due respect, Director, I'd like you to leave. Now.'

'No you don't.' Her hands trailed over his chest, smooth and almost hairless apart from a scattering of wiry hairs winding a trail down to his navel. Her nails were long, painted and sharp, leaving thin red scratches in their wake that beaded tiny droplets of blood as he watched, a growing sense of disconnection beginning to make him feel almost a stranger to his body. The tendrils of her hair wound around his arms and legs now, the soft bonds holding him fast, digging into his flesh if he struggled.

She slid around until they were face to face, her body pressed against his, soft and yielding, his erection hard against her flat stomach.
It should have been alluring, a fantasy, yet despite the physical reaction, some part of his mind - shrinking deeper the more she stroked him - wanted only to run. If his muscles twitched, her hair wound even tighter around his limbs, only slackening again if he relaxed.

He pushed again as her hand stroked his length gently, running down his shaft to cradle his sack in her hand, then giving a gentle squeeze before moving back towards the tip. He ached, suddenly desperate to escape her expert touch.

The scent of decaying roses filled the small cubicle now, and he shook his head, trying to clear it of the fog that filled it. 'Just stop…' he tried to say, grinding the words out so harshly in contrast to the soft murmuring of her voice.

She laughed, and instead began to sink to her knees as she pressed soft kisses against his stomach, following the trail of dark hairs from his navel to the base of his disobedient erection.

Pleasure… almost unbearable… but tinged with a terrible feeling of disgust. Not only at his own rebellious body - the growing unease was bordering on full-blown panic as she lowered her mouth to him, taking him in with practised licks and curling her tongue around him, sucking gently at first, then taking him deeper and harder until his hips bucked, desperate to take more. The last coherent thought however was long gone, and all his universe contracted to the mouth fastened onto his cock, sucking and swallowing and tugging, writhing, sliding around him and into him, not just physically, but now black eyes stared into his and something old… warm and primal was sliding into his mind…

The creature eased back from him with a hiss as a crashing noise broke through his trance. Then there was pain.. excruciating pain as the thing wrapped around him was pulled roughly away, the vine like tendrils of her red hair slicing his skin like barbed wire dipped in acid. He screamed both at the pain, and the sudden loss as both the physical and the mental connection was broken..

...and collapsed onto the cold wet floor of the shower, sobbing in relief at the release, even as he reached for what had been torn so abruptly away.

He had a vague impression of red hair, and a flash from a blaster. Then something not even remotely human was writhing on the floor, wreathed in blue flames, and he couldn't tell whether the screams came from it, or from his own throat.

Then a blessed darkness descended.

Pain… in every part of his body. From the stabbing spike in his temple to a burning ache in his balls, down to his toes through legs that burned with lactic acid build up. As though his entire body had muscle cramps after a rough training session.

Like the really shitty aftermath of a three night bender and an assault course from hell all in one miserable package. Even his ears and eyeballs were in on the conspiracy. Both the voices around him and the light shining through his eyelids were too much to bear.

'I'll deal with this, Lieutenant. The assassination attempt on the captain was probably the work of anti-machinner separatists - just get your people rounding up a few of the usual suspects and shake something loose.'

Namino's voice… but hadn't he seen her die? After she'd…
The unreasoning panic set in again as he heard booted footsteps leave the room and the door shut. Eyes only open a fraction - and without his glasses, the view would be a blur - he fumbled for the edge of the bed, trying to sit up and swing his legs over the side.

He failed, falling face first onto the floor in an untidy heap. He tried to shout for help, but barely a whisper emerged, rising to a hoarse cry as he felt feminine hands on raw skin, forcing him back onto the bed.

His body refused to obey, and he lay there, helpless, as she dimmed the light to a bearable level, and pulled a sheet over him. He flinched at the contact, but soothing silk covered him, not the rough sheet he'd lain under a few moments ago.

'Right now every nerve you have will be on fire. Try not to move.'

Even if he wanted to, he couldn't. The helplessness was a weakness that had him almost weeping in frustration.

'You've been poisoned, Irita.' There was pressure on his neck, and the hissing sound of a pressure syringe. 'This will take the worst physical effects away. When that takes effect, we'll need to address… other… side-effects.'

Slowly, like being washed in cool water, some of the pain began to subside. 'You… you bitch - what did you do to me!?' he forced out.

'Me? You saw me? Well, Irita, I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted… I got here as fast as I could, but the Mazone was already well on her way to making you her puppet.'

He opened his eyes fully and saw only a red blur leaning over him. Her hair… that damned, prehensile, clutching, tormenting hair… a pale blur reached for his face and he flinched away, but all she did was place his glasses on his nose. Her face and form sprang into sharp relief, and the director pulled away, with a sigh. 'We'll talk in an hour or so, once the worst of the effects are out of your system. I'm afraid however that I can't send you to the infirmary - they couldn't deal with the toxins in your system, and even if they could, the existence of the creature which attacked you is not something the Alliance is ready for.'

He tried to reach for her, desperate to feel his hands close around that too-long, slender throat. But a deep lassitude followed in the wake of the cooling, blissful removal of the pain, and try as he might, his hands refuse to do anything but bunch the cool silk in his trembling fingers.

With it came clarity. Memory. The sick, diseased euphoria he'd felt as the woman had…

He started to choke as the bile rose in his throat, and he was helpless again as she reached for him, tsking under her breath, turning him onto his side so he could vomit into the bowl she held under his face. Heaving uncontrollably until cold and trembling, all he could do was lie there unresisting as she wiped his face and chest clean and placed a warm towel on his forehead.

His veins now carried ice where there had been fire, and now he shivered, covered in a cold, clammy sweat that smelt…

...that smelt of decaying roses...

The gorge rose in his throat again, but this time he was simply racked by painful, dry heaving that left his chest and abdomen feeling as though they'd been taken out and twisted. It hurt to breathe.

This time when she helped him lie back down, he felt her hand resting on his face, and he snarled,
and tried to twist away from the contact.

She sighed. 'I'm sorry, Irita. This… is going to be a lot worse than I first thought.' Her fingers pressed gently against his left temple. 'Sleep, captain. Sleep.'

He fought… tried to resist the compulsion, but his eyes closed even as she reached for his glasses.

He slept.
'Look on the bright side,' Kei slapped Harlock on the back. 'No-one died and we didn't get dark-matter zombies coming up out of the ground…' She frowned and took a closer look at the ice-covered graveyard they were standing on, looking at the bulk of the Arcadia looming overhead, her hull still patchy and gaping with holes deep enough to see the infrastructure through, black wisps of dark matter smoking off her as she healed. 'Yet…' she added, stepping away from an outstretched frozen arm with a shudder. Kei placed an arm around her captain, and rested her faceplate against his. 'It could have been a lot worse, and at least it is healing…' She smiled. 'But if Daddy ever gets to hear what you did to his ride, you're going be grounded for eternity and change…'

'Well I'd know who told, wouldn't I?' Harlock shot back. He did manage a tentative smirk though. 'Still, it'd put a stop to the bitching about the furniture…' He shared a secretive smile with her, before he laid a hand gently on the hull. Dark smoky tendrils coiled briefly around his wrist, before dissipating, borne on the cold, icy winds that blasted the plateau. He turned to look behind them, to where the Futatsuboshi lay on the pain below, looking even tinier than usual. 'Marin and Blaze made good time. At least we won't be stuffed into the bullets for a week…'

'I've got crews on clean-up,' Kei told him. 'Though I have to say, it's going to be a while. They're hitting a few snags. Since there's nothing we can do about it other than get underfoot, what say we grab a couple of bottles from your stash and go and make nice with Marin? In the warm…' She shivered as another icy blast caused the front edge of her jacket to ripple.

Harlock shook his head. 'Later, but I will raid the cabinet first. Ali's been horribly quiet since the Futatsuboshi got here and Doc let him out of the med bay. Seeing his brother… ' he trailed off and stared over Kei's shoulder to the wintry horizon. 'There's a lot of hurt there, and even more guilt. Figured I'd stop by and lend a shoulder, one baggage-carrier to another…'

They headed for the open ramp of the Arcadia's hangar deck, in a companionable silence until Kei, halfway up the steep ramp, asked: 'What about Daiba? He looked a little shell-shocked after what went down in that room as well. Seems you all got a dose of guilt-tripping mind-screw from that thing.' She almost snarled the last word.

'That's in hand. I gave someone else a little push in that direction.'

Kei shot him a searching look, sadly lost behind her visor. 'You sound way too smug… what are you up to?'

'Up to?' His voice dripped innocence off every word.

Kei huffed at him. 'Oh - no. You do not get to use that tone with me - I know exactly what you're capable of when you decide to interfere… you can be a manipulative little shit at times. This is a Yama moment, isn't it?'

'Less of the little - and why is it you bring up my old name when you think I'm up to something?'

'Oh… I don't know - maybe it's because somewhere under the tight leather pants and the piratical swagger, the devious little prick who first came on board still lurks?' she replied sweetly.

'Kei!' His indignant reproach would have worked better, she thought, if he could have refrained from laughing slightly as he spoke.

'I know you… remember? Come on, darling - spill.' She stood in his way, tapping her booted foot
on the metal floor, blocking his way, until he laughed out loud - then told her.

'Have you lost your mind?' she asked. He linked his arm with hers and led her towards their quarters. She shook her head and gave him a thump on the arm with her free hand. 'Honestly, if Ali finds out, he'll string Daiba up by his testicles if the kid does anything untoward - and he might just repeat the process with his captain - you know he's a little protective of those kids…'

'Not,' Harlock replied, 'after a couple of bottles of Andromedan bourbon…'

Kei sighed. 'No. But I might. They both need kid gloves.' She gave his arm a gentle squeeze. 'But you're avoiding - as usual. You just saw your childhood sweetheart get her face…'

'It wasn't her.' He interjected - rather more forcefully than necessary, Kei thought. As if realising he'd over-reacted he continued more quietly. 'It wasn't her. I know that. I'm fine.'

'Fine. Really? Seeing and knowing don't necessarily follow,' she sniffed.

'You worry too much.'

'That's impossible, where you're concerned. Would you rather I didn't care?' The smile he gave her was both affectionate and slightly bemused. 'Thought not,' she continued a little smugly.

'What I sometimes wonder is why the hell you do…' he teased. 'Given the whole "devious little prick" thing all those years ago…' He looked around at the battered interior of the ship as they walked, the floor lined with a fine coating of ash, and misty trails of dark matters oozing over the surfaces to repair the damage left by the invasive Mazone vine. '…plus the tendency to periodically trash our home…' he added.

'Just a fool for a pretty face and a great ass,' she replied with a laugh. She looked around at the mess and sighed. 'Though you do have a habit of being very, very good at leaving devastation in your wake. Days like this, I realise where the children get it from.'

'Not even Mamoru and Taro have wrecked a spaceship.' He paused. 'Yet.'

'It's the qualifier on the end that worries me,' Kei muttered. 'Give it time…' Reaching the heavy gothic doors to the captain's quarters, she gave the huge wooden doors a soft push and they opened silently. Once inside with the doors closed behind them they both stripped off the re-breather masks and the heavy outer jackets with sighs of relief.

Kei shook her hair out, running her fingers down through to the ends with a grimace. 'I need a shower.' Turning slightly she noticed a large lump in the middle of their bed - pale hair draped over a slender figure curled around the captain's black bird. She could just make out a small sooty smudge on the tip of the Nibelung woman's nose. 'But I think it might have to wait,' she continued quietly, with a fond smile.

Harlock looked over and smiled. 'She's exhausted. Hardly surprising since she and Tochiro had to do some tricky, delicate co-ordination with the dark matter and the self-repair mechanism to haul our collective nuts out of the fire.'

'Let her sleep,' Kei sighed. 'I'll pop over to the War room and take a look at that data drive we found. I'll set the computers to work on it and meet you over on the Futatsuboshi.' She gave him a peck on the cheek. 'I need to do something constructive…'

'Don't look at me,' he replied, putting on his best innocent face. 'I wasn't the one who hid your clipboard…'
There was ash everywhere. Hardly a space on the ship hadn't been touched by the invasive vine, and the attempt to destroy it had left charred debris everywhere. A fine, choking dust that was causing the air filters some difficulty in disposing of it, and every clean up crew was struggling to remove it, as every attempt to sweep, vacuum or otherwise remove it created clouds of fine dust which clogged the rebreather filters in no short order.

'Why don't you just turn the air on to blow, instead of suck?' Daiba had asked, after Cai had staggered past him, frantically trying to yank his mask off before he choked.

Maji and Yattaran just stared at him as though he'd grown two heads.

Patiently, he tried to explain 'It's just soot, right? I had a temporary job a couple of years back in a factory processing high quality carbon for several industrial uses - they stop it clogging the transport pipes by mixing it with air…'

'Air fluidisation… why didn't we think of that?' Yattaran muttered as he and the bearded engineer huddled over a console making some adjustments. 'All we have to do pressurise the interior and make sure each section then gets vented to space in turn…'

'...and not even a thank you,' he muttered, turning away with a sigh when it became obvious that he'd been forgotten. 'You're welcome.' Tired and worn out, he headed for his temporary quarters on the Futatsuboshi. It was, Harlock had informed them earlier, likely to be more than a week before the Arcadia was fit for human habitation again. Thankfully engineering, the bridge and the Central Computer room had been unaffected, and were ash free, but the living quarters - not so much. And the hull was healing very slowly, which was giving Harlock cause for concern.

The Futatsuboshi had a crew complement of around a hundred and fifty, at full strength. This time out she'd run on just under a hundred and twenty, leaving room for the Arcadia's crew, but her bunks were small and they were having to double up. Daiba arrived at his assigned cubbyhole to find it already occupied.

'Oh. Wrong room…' he started to back out, but Meg picked up a bottle of beer from the tiny table and waved it at him.

'No, it isn't. I just thought… the captain said you might like some company.' She held up a covered, sealed tray. 'And Anita took their kitchen staff in hand - we've got food. Not great, but a lot better than ready meals. Marin was muttering something about kidnapping her when I picked this up…'

He took the beer and got to work on one of the plates on the tray when it was offered. He sat on the edge of the narrow bottom bunk. 'Hasn't Selen been trying to persuade her to work full time in the ramen shop for years with no luck?' He peered at her before opening the bottle and taking a swig. 'How's the neck?'

She was just picking at her plate, and he gave her what he hoped was a pleading look. With some eye-rolling and a mock-sigh of "boys…", she handed it over and he shoved it in.

She touched the medical patch that covered the cut. 'I'm tired and sore… but like you said, I'll live. It wasn't deep enough to do any real damage.' She took a pull at her own bottle. 'You know… you saved my life back there, and that thing was pretending to be someone you cared about, so if you needed someone to talk to - or not, we could just…' She waved her free hand around airily, and he almost choked on his beer when that handwave appeared to take in the bed he was sitting on.
She immediately waved off the suggestion. 'Oh. No. Not that... I didn't mean I wanted to have sex with you...'

He spluttered the mouthful he'd taken all over his lap and reached for a towel to mop up the mess. Once he had his breath and composure back he stared at her. 'That was a bit emphatic - What am I - chopped liver?'

'Were you going to drink that or shower in it?' she replied sweetly. He stuck his tongue out at her, making her laugh. Prickly girl... but funny when she loosened up...

'No, I just meant I wasn't planning on jumping your bones - not that there's anything wrong with them... I mean, you are seriously cute now your hair's grown back, and I could seriously consider licking you from head to toe and back again, but you're - well - after everything you've been through I guess anyone hitting on you would be kind of something you'd want to avoid, and - are you even listening to me?'

Yes... but somehow he felt like being contrary. 'Sorry - you kind of lost me on the licking...' he deadpanned, without a word of a lie.

This time it was Meg who choked on her beer, and he couldn't resist: 'Were you going to drink that or shower with it?' he asked sweetly.

'What I want to do is throw it at your head,' she growled once she'd stopped coughing, her eyes watering, jabbing the bottle in his direction.

'See, that's the Meg we all know and love,' he smirked. The expression was quickly wiped away when he noticed she'd started to chew on her bottom lip. 'Well - you're kinda prickly, but I would like the company. If only to avoid the nightmares. Seeing Nana's face vanish into a spray of blood and... Yeah. Moving on. And it had been some slimy green stuff, not blood, since once the thing was dead, the illusion vanished in short order. Still. Messy.

'Look - I know I can be an ass, but I would like you to stay - even if it is because the captain said so...'

'Actually he just kind of suggested a bit vaguely...' she corrected, with a grin. 'But then I thought - what the hell?'

He rolled his eyes at her. 'Not helping, Meg - my ego might never recover...' He patted the bed beside him. 'Please? I can keep my hands to myself.'

He expected her to make her excuses and stay where she was. To his surprise however, she scuttled over and snuggled close.

Like a sister... Strangely, he didn't mind - in the bullet, he'd been holding her without thinking, after she'd been hurt. It had actually begun to feel comfortable. Natural... She didn't crowd him, and after so long without a caring hand, he found he liked the feeling.

'I know I can be difficult,' she began, speaking softly but still a little defensively. 'Doc says I have "abandonment issues" - I don't let people get too close. My parents left me and my brothers to die because they wanted to be immortal, and we were too young. And my brothers both died... then when Doppler's ships came and took us to the asteroid mines, it got so you never knew if you'd see people at the end of your shift who you'd woken up with. We'd huddle together in the dark for comfort, and sometimes the older ones would look after us. Sometimes they'd take our food, or the boys would take the older girls - and some of the little boys - away - for themselves or for the men,
and we'd hear them screaming in the dark…' her voice had dropped to a whisper. 'Tadashi tried to protect us… did they tell you? He got some of us into a cargo container, but then they started dying. In the end, only me, Niobe, Tadashi and little Taro were left when Ali opened the crate after the Arcadia raided the ship we were on…'

He placed his arm around her shoulders. 'I've heard Harlock and Kei both say that ancient alien plant-women have nothing on the damage humans can do to each other. They have a point - these things can fuck with your mind and body, but it was humans who stuck me in that asylum and pimped me out to anyone who wanted to either beat the crap out of me or have a piece... But to be surrounded by corpses day after day… abandoned by your parents, enslaved and used and abused for profit… that's a whole different flavour.'

_There were worse hells than his, and in a way, it seemed they weren't so different…_

'Guess not,' she murmured, and he belatedly realised he'd spoken this last out loud. 'About earlier. It took some guts to make that shot, and I can't even begin to think what that cost you, Daiba.' she mumbled into his sweater. She sounded sleepy, and when he noticed the bottle start to slip through her fingers, he caught it and placed it alongside his own on the floor. Gently, he drew her a little closer - she was so tiny - and felt her relax against his shoulder.

'You're welcome,' he whispered into her soft curls, and was rewarded with a sigh and her hand on his arm. Very carefully he leaned back in the bunk, carrying her with him until he could pull the cover over both of them without waking her.

Huddled together in the dark? Not such a bad idea.

_The licking however would have been a better one…_ Smiling to himself at the thought, he closed his eyes. Maybe having company _would_ help if the nightmares came…

_Just don't_, he sent up as a prayer to anything listening, _let me hurt her if they do…_

In the war room of the Arcadia, Kei waited until the door cycled shut and the air purifiers kicked in to remove any soot tracked in with her, then removed her rebreather with a sigh of relief. 'Please tell me the guys have almost finished clearing the ship?'

Tochiro's voice over the comms system laughed. 'Thanks to Daiba, they seem to have a handle on it at last. A couple of hours to get the worst out, then we go over section by section to clear any nooks and crannies. Kid's got a good head on his shoulders, once he calms down.'

'Why does that sound horribly familiar?' She pulled the small Mazone chip out of her waist pocket. 'Shall we?'

A small console rose up from the console. 'In here,' Tochiro told her. 'I've created an isolated server for you, just in case - though my systems are on a dedicated system, there are still remnants of the old computers on my network.' A laser scanner ran up and down the small dumbbell shaped device. 'This is Nibelung tech… and recently created too - whoever these vegetables are, they've had contact with Loki's group in the last hundred years.'

'Why does that not surprise me?' Kei muttered. 'That body-snatcher has been at the bottom of everything piece of crap we've had to clean up since Earth. Dig deeply enough, and something pale green and nasty wriggles out of the hole…' She paused in the act of slotting the chip into the port. 'You know… that does raise a question…'

'About the Homecoming War?' Tochiro asked quietly. 'Yeah. It has been preying on my mind.'
'We know someone was pushing the human colonies past the point of collapse to trigger the conflict - what if this was all part of Loki's plan? So far everything he's done has been to reduce humanity's population, and keep what's left safely under control - and conveniently occupied with other problems whilst this gate opens. Manipulating Promethium and co-opting her mechanisation programme… the Deathshadow Plague… Even the creation of the Deathshadow ships back in your day fits…'

'Ah. That's the part where I start thinking I screwed up,' he replied. 'I trusted the Nibelung team, but if one of them was compromised… I was able to configure the Dark Matter generators to interface with human tech, but I was still reliant on my friends to build the damn things. Harlock trusted me, Kei. If I didn't spot a double cross, then everything that happened after…'

She laid a hand on the wall, the closest she could get to comforting the long-dead little man. 'If you were played, there's nothing we can do now. And I can't cope with someone else around here wading hip-deep in guilt, Tochiro. We need your A-game.'

'Heh. As usual, you're right. So. Enough navel gazing. Let's take a look at this thing. Stuff it in there, Kei - let's see what we've got.'

Marin held out a glass to Harlock, and picked his own up from a small table next to a comfortable chair in his comfortable - but cramped - quarters. With two armchairs - one of which held Harlock with Kei on his lap, there wasn't much room left. The rest of the space was taken up by a simple fold away desk and chair, and a narrow bed, neatly made.

Their host was a tall, young man - seemingly in his mid twenties, but he was actually a little more than that - he wasn't more than a year or two younger than Harlock's thirty-six. Long black hair curled down to his collar, with a tendency to fall over his left eye, and this, and its mate, were his father's blue. His long nose was Zero's as well, although the cheekbones and his mouth and chin? Those were Selen's… Harlock mused. His brother Blaze - a year younger - shared the same features to the point most people assumed they were twins. Blaze was currently assisting with settling down the Arcadia's off-duty crew, which left Marin with the meet-and-greet.

'You made good time - I expected you to take at least a week…' Harlock told Marin quietly, with a knowing smile playing around his lips.

'We had business in the area,' Marin replied smoothly.

'Smuggling?'

'Please! Free traders, not smugglers!' Marin's mock affront raised a short laugh from his guest. 'Like you have any room to talk, you pirate…'

'Please! Political dissident…' Harlock raised the glass in a toast.

'To my father,' Marin said quietly, and drank his back in one smooth motion. Harlock followed suit, and placed the glass down. 'You still miss him?'

'Don't we all?' Harlock replied quietly. 'He was like a brother to me, for the few short years we knew each other. More than a friend. We lost a lot of good people to the plague, but some haunt us more than others.'

'My mother probably won't recover,' Marin said sadly. 'She tries to hide it…' He took a long swallow from his glass and placed it on the arm of his chair, idly twirling it by the stem. 'I'm glad we could help, however. It makes a change - usually the Arcadia is coming to our rescue…'
Harlock smiled ruefully. 'We got caught with our pants down this time. This lifeform seems to have a nasty affinity for dark matter which renders most of my usual tactics not just useless, but actively dangerous to ourselves. My people say the ship should be liveable in about twenty hours, but we won't be flight-worthy for another week at least. I haven't managed to get this badly mauled since the end of the machine wars.'

'As dad would have said, that makes you kind of overdue for a warning - it could have been a lot worse, and at least you have some breathing space to get your bearings. Flying around in a damn near invincible battleship must make you a little over-confident - it'll do you good to remember you're not immortal…'

Kei snorted. 'Now you sound just like Zero…' But she smiled at the dark-haired captain and was rewarded with his brief smile in reply. She felt Harlock's leg move under her bottom, and stood up to allow him to stand in his turn.

'Places to be,' he replied to her unspoken question, dropping a light kiss on the end of her nose. 'I still need to drop in on Ali…'

'Saw him heading for the crew quarters,' Marin offered. 'Looks like hell, for the record.' He gave the pair a shrewd look. 'Just what went down on the Arcadia during this total charlie-foxtrot? Yattaran was mumbling something about women who burn like paper…'

Kei gave Harlock her "I'll-take-care-of-this" look, and watched him wander out of the room with his best insouciant aplomb before settling down to give their friend the shorter version of recent events.

Irita awoke. Through the blur he could make out that he was in his own room, his own bed. He stank of stale sweat and vomit, and something else that made his aching stomach turn over, though thankfully this time he didn't heave. The sheets were cold and clammy, and he shivered and tried to find a warm, dry spot.

He failed. Hating the sensation of damp against his skin, he tried to stand up, and failed again. His legs refused to hold him up and he landed on his knees on the floor, hands clenched into tight fists, the knuckles white.

Hands lifted him up, gently, and placed him on the edge of the bed. He sat with his head almost between his knees, heedlessly naked, whilst he heard someone pulling the sheets from the bed behind him. He moved when prompted. Sat back down when prompted. Allowed himself to be covered and pushed back into a prone position.

A puppet, with tangled strings…

He reached for his glasses, and found them where he usually left them, down to the centimetre. With trembling hands he placed them on his nose, and saw his nurse clearly.

Shizuka. The bitch had her hair tied into a tight bun at the name of her long neck, and he had to swallow back the bile again at the memory of that hair…

...he wanted his hands around that slender throat so badly. Despite his weakness he launched himself at the woman, determined to finish her if it killed him.

He had so little strength left, she should have easily fought him off. Instead, his hands found her throat easily, and she went down to the floor under his weight without protest, not even struggling when he tried to tighten his fingers around her slender neck.
And strangely, the touch of his skin on hers was invigorating, providing him with the strength he'd lost. With an effort he heaved her upright then forced her back onto the bed, straddling her and still holding onto her neck, his fingers digging into the skin.

She stared at him calmly with those haunting, seductive green eyes, and lay there, limply under him, choking for breath but not struggling to free herself.

'Why won't you fight?' He loosened his grip enough to let her breath.

'Because you need this.' she breathed. 'You've been poisoned, Irita. Not just physically. The Ampeloi can get into your head, twist what you see and hear, until you can't tell reality from the hallucination. And they feed… on your emotions, on your strength, your seed…'

He shook his head to clear it, and when the spike made a reappearance in his temple, wished he hadn't. 'Gibberish,' he sneered. He shifted his grip so that he pinned her hands above her head with his, holding her in place with his weight, only then becoming aware that he was still naked, and his crotch was pressed against her bare thigh where the white dress she was wearing had ridden up. Oddly, his body wasn't reacting to the contact.

'They're plants, Irita… like all such, they need a - "pollinator" is one word, I suppose. They are very specialised, and very addictive. Even with most of the toxin out of your system, you still feel the pull, don't you?' She shifted slightly, her thigh rubbing against him, yet his body still didn't respond. 'And unless I get this out of your system you'll always be drawn to them, and susceptible…'

'Lies!' He pulled one hand away and slapped her cheek, hard enough to split her lip slightly. 'Stop messing with my head…'

'Oh, I'm not the one doing that… ' she paused, and her tip of her tongue flickered out and licked away the trickle of blood on her bottom lip whilst he stared, unable to look away, and remembering that mouth on him… 'Well, yes, but sadly it's the only way to show you to yourself. And that's what you want, isn't it? To take back control?'

Her voice was sensual, but aggravating. Except…

Control. Yes, that he could get behind. Holding her wrists in one hand, he fumbled at the side of the bed in the top drawer, finally pulling out a set of cuffs which he quickly used to secure her hands…

...those long fingered, talented, devilish, taloned claws…

...to the uprights of the headboard.

The thin material of her dress parted easily even under his shaken grip, and she was naked under it. 'How does it feel,' he growled, 'to be on the receiving end, Director? To be helpless and forced to watch with your body not under your control?' He reached out his left hand towards one firm, ripe, plump breast…

...and his hand halted about an inch away from her skin, the fingers trembling with the effort, before his arm fell to his side, as limp as his cock, which resolutely refused to rise to the occasion.

'I never lose control, Irita,' she said softly. With a soft click the handcuffs fell away from her wrists, and she sat up, rubbing them. Without a word she slid out from underneath him and reached for a replacement dress - one she must have brought with her and left out of sight, he realised through the fog, as she pulled it on. He sat in a heap on the bed, confusion warring with anger and
embarrassment.

'What did you do?' he asked dully.

She sat next to him, not touching. 'Nothing. That was all you - and it's not a side of yourself you're able to deal with, is it? All that cold control is just an illusion, and you had that stripped away yesterday. The truth is, you can't take control in a sexual situation - you just don't have the framework in place to cope with it. It means having to reach out and connect with someone, and that you just cannot do. Even if you think it's what you want, it isn't.' She picked up the cuffs from the pillow and dangled them in front of his nose. 'Look at you, all worked up and angry, but aroused? No. Not even close. Now - if I took these and chained you to the bed… we'd see a different response…' Her fingers opened slightly allowing the cuffs to fall into the drawer, which she then closed with a decisive push. 'Perhaps.'

'You know nothing…'

'I know enough, Irita. You've always been an outsider, you have no friends, no family, just your job. Hardly surprising in these times - humanity is after all spread so thinly, that normal has become the unusual for you. Family… relationships… sex - your demographics are so skewed it's a wonder any world not in the main five systems can still support a viable population. Birth rates are down not just because of lack of numbers or environmental issues, but because so many men are raised in isolation from their own kind - from women - that even if they get the chance to breed, many cannot. Is it any wonder so many younger men choose to become machines?' She looked him up and down. 'Frankly I'm constantly surprised you didn't choose that route.'

That assumption wasn't new, and it always irritated him. 'Because it's a crutch,' he replied coldly. 'You don't deal with a problem by running away from it. Those who voluntarily mechanise want an end to pain, to loneliness. They want to reduce the world to its simplest form, to take away the sharp edges and the fear. Feelings are messy, and inconvenient - but they are very human. We cannot fix the world by becoming what we are not, but by becoming better at what we are…' he broke off when he spotted the speculative look on her face. 'Get out,' he said, his voice suddenly loaded with weariness. 'Just go.'

He thought for one brief instant that she would refuse, but she stood up gracefully, re-arranged her dishevelled clothing, and left the room without a word, leaving his sitting slumped on the edge of a bed, his head in his hands, staring vacantly at the floor.

'Fuck off.'

Outside the door of one of the Futatsuboshi's crew quarters, Harlock leaned against the wall and hammered on the door again. 'Not happening, and where are your manners, Ali?'

'Fuck off. Sir.'

'Fine… I'm sure Yattaran and Maji would enjoy a genuine, Old-Earth vintage Laphroaig…' He stopped leaning and started to walk away, counting under his breath.

He got to three when the door opened. Ali stuck his head out, his short hair rumpled and sticking up at all angles, and sporting several days growth of stubble. 'You could have opened with that,' he muttered sourly. He held out his hand. 'Give.'

Harlock ignored the outstretched hand and sauntered past him, ducking under the outstretched arm blocking the doorway. 'I bought two glasses, Ali.'
'Yeah? I don't share.' He followed his captain into the room and glared at him through eyes that hadn't seen much sleep in the last few days. He eyed the bottle up covetously when Harlock set it down on the table and placed two small tumblers next to it. 'Am I supposed to just stare at it in awe or were you planning on pouring it…?' he asked testily. Once the tumblers had been blessed with the bottle's contents he lifted the one nearest him reverently to his lips. 'For this, you can stay,' he sighed. 'But no chatting.'

'Since when do I do chatty?' his captain drawled. Ali glared at him over the rim of the tumbler. 'Fine. Be like that. But if you want to talk about your brother…'

'Not about Phil.' Ali took a long swig of the amber liquid. He placed the half-empty glass back down and looked over at Harlock, until the younger man took the hint and topped it back up. 'But I'll tell you about that...that thing…' He shuddered. 'You know, they were creepy enough when they just changed form in front of us, but you have no idea what it felt like, having it crawl all over your brain…'

'It touched mine, briefly,' Harlock told him quietly. 'Something dark and old and unclean slithering over your mind in places no-one should ever go…'

'Exactly it.' Ali jabbed a finger at Harlock, then reached for his tumbler and took another swallow. 'I knew... I knew it wasn't Phil… that it couldn't be Phil… yet it played me like a bloody harp, Harlock. I knew it was wrong, that there was something not right, but I couldn't stop myself from responding, from taking it back to my cabin. It was like your brain just kept sliding away from the truth, like reality had been covered in some kind of rotting oily slime you didn't want to touch. And Gaia, Harlock… I wanted it to be Phil so bad…' He drained the rest of the glass and held it out silently again for a refill, which was duly obliged. 'You should have brought the Andromedan rot-gut…' he said with a harsh laugh. 'Wasting the good stuff on this…'

'Would you have let me in the room if I had?'

'Hell no!'

'My point exactly,' Harlock replied primly. He topped up his own glass, and swirled the liquid around gently, staring through the prismatic amber light thrown by the crystal facets. 'I'm at a loss, Ali,' he continued in his soft voice. 'We can't fight their ships, and to close with them physically risks being at the mercy of their mental tricks. How do we fight something like this? They're old… like the nibelung, they're a deadly relic of times long gone.'

'You could ignore them…'

At the sharp look from the younger man's hazel eye, Ali laughed harshly. 'Yeah. Never gonna happen, right? They made it personal for you when they killed the profs and tried to kill Daiba. They got me on board when that fuckin' weed got me spillin' my guts to the baby brother I… lost… decades ago. If they've been screwing with humans for millennia, then I say it's time for some payback.' He paused. 'They'll have a weakness, Harlock. Ya just have to find it - and that's what you do best - you prod, and poke and get in people's faces until they flip over and flash their soft white underbelly at ya.' He took a more appraising sip of his whiskey. 'I'm just scared I might have done the flippin', this time…' He looked away from his captain's shrewd singular gaze. 'It got me talkin'... for over an hour. Trouble is, I got no idea what my flappin' lips spouted.' He looked pale, drained, and a lot older all of a sudden, his usual bullish demeanor missing in action. 'None.'

'How bad could it have been, Ali? There's no proof it even had any way of transmitting anything it got from you - and what could you tell it? That we have a crew of less than fifty, and a Dark Matter powered battleship? Most of it is common knowledge.'
'Maybe… but I just got a real horrible sick feeling in my guts that tells me whatever it asked, it was your soft underbelly that I exposed.' He turned his harried gaze back to Harlock. 'A real sick feeling…' he whispered.

Harlock drained his glass to the dregs in silence.
'Wattaru fell in the lake again, mom, but don't worry - he's fine! But Rei and Keisuke had to wade in to pull him out, an' then Aunt Selen wasn't too happy because they got wet and muddy…'

'You didn't have to tell her that bit!' Wattaru pouted and thumped his twin on the arm, though not hard. 'It wasn't like I knew the branch was going to break when I went out on it after Nami…' he muttered.

'You didn't have to follow me,' their sister wailed.

Kei paused the video and placed her head in her hands. Then with a sigh she pressed play and watched the rest of the recorded video from her sons and daughter whilst trying very, very hard not to yield to the impulse to march straight to the bridge and demand the Arcadia took her straight back to Tabito. There was a mantra for times like this - usually involving counting to at least a hundred very slowly and telling herself that it was perfectly normal for the demonic Harlock-spawn she'd raised to get into trouble… a genetic predisposition that she could do absolutely sweet fuck all about and that she'd just have to live with as the price of falling for a disaster-prone danger-magnet with come-to-bed eyes, a great ass and the sweetest smile she'd ever laid eyes on.

That, and the fact that keeping watch over them twenty-six eight back on Tabito didn't work. They'd tried that.

'Any chance they'll grow out of it?' she asked out loud once the message had finished. The Arcadia's central guiding intelligence just sniggered over the intercom.

'The family records dated back to at least the fifteenth century, Harlock once told me,' Tochiro added with a noticeable smirk in his voice. 'If anything they get worse…'

'Joy…' Kei muttered under her breath. 'How the hell did the family survive over fifteen hundred years without wiping itself out before each generation reached puberty?

'Luck, and an unquenchable desire to travel…' Tochiro answered. 'Or so Harlock told me. Not being able to sit still too long in one place at least spread the line around far enough to ensure at least one branch always survived - and they do tend to marry back into the line periodically for some reason. Maya was Harlock's second cousin, for example, and you're descended from her, so technically you and your Harlock are distant cousins…'

'Never remind Ali of that one,' she said with a wry grin. 'We'd never hear the back of it. He's already convinced the boys are some kind of demonic hell-spawn without adding the "your parents were cousins" mantra…'

'Never remind Ali of what?' Harlock asked as he strolled into the war room and dropped a kiss on the top of her head before dropping into the seat beside her. 'Oh - is that from the boys and Nami? Blaze said they'd recorded a message…'

'Later. When you've got a brief cushion of a few drinks inside you before they wear off…' Kei muttered, switching the viewer off. Harlock winced. 'We've decoded the information on that drive - Tochiro - can you put it on the 3 D display for us?' she continued, quickly changing the subject.

The holoprojectors in the room came to life, quickly rendering a bubble of stars above the table which expanded to fill the room. Interspersed within the star map were five blinking green lights.
'Here's the Mazone homeworld, or rather, that area of space where we think they came from.' As Kei pointed, Tochiro obligingly zoomed in on the area of dark space, where no stars now shone. 'The device seems to be part of the navigational circuits of the ship the Mazone came from.'

'Doesn't explain what it was doing on board the Arcadia,' Harlock pointed out. He stood up and began circling the projection. 'Is it me, or was finding it just a little too convenient?'

'That rather depends on why it was dropped,' Kei replied tartly. 'But if you suspect "trap", you're not alone. Look at this…' she pointed to one of the blinking green lights and Tochiro again zoomed in. 'There's an embedded time radar trace in the data - all of these light represent a fleet which set out from that dead space - or nearby, rather - nearly fifty years ago. They've been travelling on a tight catenary to their destinations ever since - albeit with a couple of necessary deviations along the way.'

Harlock walked into the display and started adjusting the rotation and zoom to get a closer look. 'Each one has a different destination?' he frowned. 'Hmmm. But you said "necessary" deviation?'

'Tochiro - would you mind? Show him the main fleet trace.' The hologram expanded until only one green light and its trace path through space-time remained. The apparently smooth curve was now a series of smaller arcs.

'Every so often they drop out of IN-SKIP or whatever sub-space they use near to a main sequence star similar to Sol. We think it might be…'

'Because the ships are organic - photosynthesising - and periodically need to "recharge" their cells?' Harlock grinned at her. 'Hello - botanist …'

'Don't be so smug.' She stuck her tongue out at him. 'They're making mini-jumps, which might explain the time they're taking to reach the destination systems - fifty years is a long time, but it appears they can't make the large jumps we can without these stops.'

'It also suggests that it could be a weakness - if we do get into a fight, finding their next re-charging point might mean they'll come into it weaker, which might affect their ability to regenerate. And if the ships are so dependent upon sunlight…'

'Way ahead of you,' Tochiro interrupted smoothly. 'Mimay and I have already started to look at the idea of extending our dark matter cloud - if we can sap the solar power from the ships' cells and prevent them from receiving more sunlight, then we could weaken them enough to hurt them in battle. It's worth testing, if we can find a small group to engage.'

'Not one of these five?' Harlock stuck a finger through one of the green points as the display contracted again. 'At least two of them are due to make a pit stop, looking at these trajectories...' 

'Er… that might prove to be a bit of a problem even for us,' Tochiro replied. 'Have you seen the size of these flotillas?' The display zoomed in again, until a single green light was revealed to be a group of lights, tiny fireflies surrounding one large glowworm. 'There are hundreds of ships in that single group alone - though it's the largest of the five by a considerable margin.'

'Begs the question where are they going and why…'

Harlock turned to see Ali, Daiba and Yattaran all lurking in the doorway. There was a slight scuffle as the three jockeyed for position to get through the gap first, handily won by Daiba who slipped through as the two larger men were arguing over who'd elbowed who in the gut.

'So?' he asked, sauntering forwards, his hands in his pockets, waiting for an answer.
'Tochiro?' Harlock asked.

'Ah. Getting to that bit... Assuming the general trajectory is constant, then these five are headed to the systems of Destiny, Miraiseria, Blue Rose, Earth, and our old friend Heavy Meldar....' He let his voice trail off and waited. Ali and Yattaran shared a look.

'Didn't we stick oscillators somewhere in a couple of those systems?' Ali asked. 'The outer gas giant's rings in Destiny's system were a bitch...'

'Heavy Meldar's was on its moon,' Yattaran added thoughtfully. 'And we kind of dropped one on Earth...'

'Five systems seeded with a dimension shattering bomb...' Harlock muttered, staring at the display.

'And five oscillators exploded prematurely destroying the Mazone homeworlds,' Daiba finished. 'So that's their plan? An eye for an eye?'

'Then why the massive fleet?' Ali asked. The normally ebullient crewman still looked a little washed out and grim. 'Doesn't take several hundred ships to set those things off...'

Harlock frowned. 'Tochiro - can you work out the possible knock-on effects if those five were detonated simultaneously?'

There was a long pause, then a familiar graphic replaced the Mazone data: the model of the oscillator placements was a 3 dimensional representation of a four dimensional model of space-time, showing the location of the hundred "plugs" the previous captain had spent almost a hundred years locating. It rapidly expanded to fill the room in front of the assembled viewers. Harlock had to step back to see the full display, as he found himself standing inside it.

'The five targeted locations are marked in red,' Tochiro began. The display changed accordingly. 'In blue are the five destroyed in the Mazone systems, and the half dozen we know to have been either lost or used during the last twelve years. The remaining oscillators are in green.'

Daiba peered at the almost-but-not-quite spherical display, then gave Harlock a quizzical look. 'How come they're so close together? I mean, if space-time is infinite, and there are only a hundred places where you could blow the weak spots, then how come they're close enough to be reached in only a hundred years? Even at the speeds the Arcadia can reach...'

'Over to you, oh wise and sagacious first mate of the battleship "Exposition,"' Ali smirked, smiling smugly at Yattaran, who just ignored him and shoved his glasses back up his nose.

'First off,' Yattaran began, 'Get "speed" out of your vocab when talking about IN-SKIP travel - it's actually a way of cheating by dropping down into a folded dimension and popping back out at your destination, without violating the lightspeed constant - which you can't do, period. The limitations for it are power, not speed - the more power a ship has, the shorter the duration needed in Imaginary Number space, and the easier it is to drop in and out. But yer right, kid - it is impossible - if you're assuming two things - firstly that the weak spots are widely dispersed, and second that there were only a hundred of 'em to start with."

'There are thousands, potentially,' Tochiro added. 'But we only needed to blow a hundred of them to pull the plug and return the universe to its primal state for re-inflation. Because all you need to do is put a big enough hole in our space-time dimensions to create enough energy to allow the folded dimensions to re-unfold and - oh, never mind - you get the picture? Think of it not so much like a balloon, but a skin of water - make a few small holes all over it, hardly anything happens -
pinpricks might leak slowly, but at that rate, the universe has time to repair itself. Rip a large hole anywhere and…'

'It all pours out all at once?' Daiba finished.

Harlock nodded. 'Exactly. If Harlock - the other one - had gone ahead with his plan, the fracture he caused would have reverberated through the entire universe and ripped every weak point wide open.'

'Simultaneously?' Daiba sounded doubtful. 'What about lightspeed? I mean - wouldn't it take billions of years…?'

Ali patted him on the head and he ducked the gesture, swatting at the crewman's gloved hand with an irritated slap. 'Awww… it's cute when they try to think it through…'

Yattaran snorted. 'Didn't we take six weeks and half a dozen attempts at finding a metaphor you could get your brain cell round before you got it, you thick twat?'

Before it could escalate, Harlock stepped forward and cleared his throat, and they settled down, merely glaring at each other, both men with their arms folded on their chests. 'Behave, you two. And it was a sensible question. I asked it as well, and they were even ruder to me,' he told the youth, getting a wry grin in reply. 'Yes, it would - if the event took place in normal space, but it doesn't - once you bring the sub-dimensions into play, all bets are off - and you're unravelling not only in twenty-six dimensions, but also playing with non-localised phenomena - "here" and "there" are meaningless at these levels - all of space time becomes one, and…' Daiba rolled his eyes and pressed a hand to his forehead. Harlock grinned. 'Yeah. Pretty much my reaction. The easiest solution is just to go with it and stop thinking about it too closely.'

'It's all a bit simplistic anyway,' Tochiro added breezily. 'Our minds can't really grasp the concepts in a meaningful way - we just don't see the universe for what it really is.'

'Does anyone?' Daiba asked.

'Mimay,' five voices replied in unison.

'She calls it a song,' Kei added, sharing a smile with her friends. 'The Nibelung can… sense, see, feel, hear… whatever you call it… the "vibrations" of the strings of creation. What we call "super strings".'

'Moving along though,' Tochiro continued. The display began to revolve until the five target point were in plain view. 'If these five blow, then the simulation would run something like this…' All five points flared and blew out like a candle, and a rupture appeared as a fiery yellow-orange line snaking its way through the model. The faint white lights representing the stars began to wink out, and new points twinkled briefly into existence and flared in turn, until the rupture reached a glowing yellow spot on the farthest edge of the model. At which point a massive flare pulsed into existence and then the model imploded.

'Oh fuck…' Ali jabbed a finger at his captain. 'Was that what I thought it was?'

'The Gate of Yedar,' Harlock murmured. 'Tochiro? How accurate…?'

The Arcadia's guiding will was silent for a moment. 'About seventy percent. I have to say when I put the parameters in I didn't actually know for sure where it would end up - but if they blow those five points, they'll open the Gate fully.'
'Turning space inside out,' Yattaran breathed. 'The only "safe" spot would be the eye of the storm…'

'So that's why they're in convoy,' Ali added. 'They think they've got a way of surviving the explosion?'

'Or they've been told they have,' Kei muttered, glancing at Harlock. 'There's no way this is a coincidence, is it? Loki's been hard at work again.'

'He might even have triggered the original devices,' Harlock said quietly. 'We know he was working on Lar Metal's society around the same time… The timeline fits. Everything's in place for a perfect storm of catastrophes to open that damn gate - we thought we had at least another ten years to come up with something - now it's looking as though it's a matter of months.'

'Can't we remove the devices before then?' Daiba asked, looking from one pirate to another in turn. They all looked a little sick.

'I never actually said they were all oscillator locations,' Tochiro replied softly, filling the silence. 'That was you guys assuming. And therein lies the problem. They're not - but they are all weak spots.'

Harlock sat down heavily on the edge of the table, and Kei made her way to his side and laid a hand on his shoulder. 'The combined yield of their drive systems blowing simultaneously…' she whispered.

'If I could just nod sagely at this point, I would,' Tochiro continued quietly. 'Removing the two oscillators would do little to stop it - they've identified a weak point and if those ships reach those locations - or even a majority do - then we're screwed.'

'We don't actually know what will happen if the Gate is opened,' Harlock replied softly. 'All we've had since Loki sent that first signal is conjecture.' He turned his singular gaze to Daiba. 'We'd been hoping your father's research on Niflheim would shed some light on it.'

'It's all part of the same problem, isn't it?' Daiba asked. He ran a hand through his hair - now grown out to the point where this was possible - pushing it back from his face. 'You've got two ancient civilisations working to some end you don't know what…'

'Except that it probably involves destroying the universe we know and love,' Ali finished for him. 'Yeah. Bummer. Immediate problem - how the hell can we be in five places at once to stop those ships?'

'We can't,' Tochiro replied, 'Not even if we lift off right now, there's no time.'

'We can get word to people who can remove those damn oscillators though,' Harlock said grimly. 'I'll talk to Zero's boys - Selen's people can take care of them. That's two problems reduced in scale. Maybe.'

'Boys? They're your bloody age, not kids,' Ali snorted. 'Yer still a snot-nosed little runt yerself…'

'To someone of your advanced years, I'm sure it looks that way,' Harlock replied smoothly. Ali glared at him, more out of habit than genuine annoyance.

'Reduced?' Daiba asked, puzzled.

'Reduced,' Harlock stated again. 'Because whilst it removes the big bomb, there's still nothing to
stop them exploding those damn drives when they get there.' He stared again at the display. 'They need to synchronise the detonations at the five locations, however - so there might be an option…' he pointed to the largest fleet, headed for Earth. 'If someone can stop this one in its tracks for long enough, perhaps it would disrupt the chain reaction. If Layla Shura and her SDF can take out the ships heading for Destiny and Miraiseria, that's two more. However I doubt they can spare the ships to hold the line at Blue rose as well...' He frowned. 'Which still leaves Heavy Meldar - and there's our biggest problem…'

'It lies outside of the SDF's jurisdiction,' Ali explained, seeing Daiba's quizzical look. 'In fact, it's technically in Alliance space.'

'So's Earth,' Kei pointed out. 'If we stick our head back in that noose, we'll have the entire fleet down on us as fast as they can mobilise…'

'Not the entire fleet,' Harlock corrected. 'Just this galaxy's complement…' he trailed off under Kei's glare, then coughed. 'I'll call Hoshino - he'll probably just tell me where to shove my fairy-tales, but at least I'll have tried.'

When the rest of them had shuffled out again, Kei sat down on the edge of the table next to Harlock. 'That's a lot of ships - and possibly a lot of people - Mazone - do you really think they'll all be falling in line to sacrifice themselves for this? Assuming we're right about the destinations being chosen for that reason…'

'We don't know their social structure, true. But it wouldn't be the first time I've seen a crew fall in with a charismatic leader hell bent on whacking a cosmic wrecking ball through the universe…'

She punched him on the upper arm as hard as she could, and he pulled a face as he rubbed the offended limb. 'You had that coming;' she told him. 'Don't look for an apology…'

He sighed. 'I'd love to be wrong - but it's too precise. Right now I'm struggling for a way to realistically derail it - we're just one ship, and there are limits to our effectiveness, especially against these ships. Unless the alliance join in to stop these convoys in their tracks, I can't see a way to stop it. It won't need all of them to get through after all.'

'Maybe we'll get lucky - surely there must be someone in that fleet who sees through this and what it could mean? If there was an internal rebellion…'

'If we had a point of contact I suppose we could try telling them,' he replied with a wry grin. 'But it's not as though we could place someone on board one of those ships to cause trouble.' He stood up and straightened his jacket by means of giving the lower edge a hard tug. 'I need to get on the warp feed and lay this out to Hoshino. I suspect I'm about to get it thrown back in my face, but I can't just sit around on my hands and do nothing.'

Kei stood and moved to stand in front of him, so she could neaten his hair and retie his cravat, both of which, as usual, had a tendency to look a little rumpled around the edges. 'I doubt we'll do that, but the help would be useful.'

'I think,' he replied sardonically as he turned to leave, 'the word you're looking for is "essential"…'

'I'm not altogether sure why I don't just cut this feed without comment.' Admiral Hoshino's holographic image stood in front of Harlock in the imaging room underneath the bridge. 'Have you completely lost your mind? You expect me to believe that we're being invaded by fairy-women
I've taken the liberty of copying and sending you the data we've collected to date,' Harlock replied smoothly, hoping the sound of his teeth grinding didn't carry. 'And they're not "invading", Gozo - they're already here, and they never left. You've got five large fleets bearing down on the locations of five of the nodes of time, with intent to blow them.'

'Conjecture,' Hoshino sneered. Under his thick beard and moustache his mouth compressed into a thin line. 'Why would you think for one moment that I'd believe anything you'd send me?'

'I don't. I fully expected you to throw it back in my face. It doesn't change the facts, and I have to try. At least talk to Leopard - he was there when Loki tried to open the Gate of Yedar thirteen years ago. He's also seen first hand the fallout from one of the oscillators exploding near a node - the results are a matter of record.'

'You do know he wants your head on a platter as well? In fact, once you get outside your private little fiefdom and your cosy relationship with the SDF, it's hard to think of anyone you haven't pissed off. Calling in favours at this point…'

'I'm not asking for favours, Gozo - not for myself.' Harlock struggled not to let his exasperation show. They'd been at this for half an hour, and his patience was running thin.

'Even if this is true - why should we help you? Harlock created this mess by your own admission. Seems only fair the Arcadia should clear it up.'

'I've spent most of the last decade or more clearing up my predecessor's shit, Gozo, so don't try to imply I'm not pulling my weight. It should be blindingly obvious we're all going to be punching outside of our weight class here. And this isn't about me - it's all of humanity - possibly the universe itself - at stake. I'll fight to my dying breath to protect those I love - don't try to tell me you wouldn't do the same…'

'You really expect me to take this up the chain of command?' Hoshino snorted derisively. 'I tell you what - surrender yourself, your crew and your ship at the nearest outpost and maybe - just maybe - I'll think about it.' He smirked nastily.

'How's that trace coming?' Harlock replied smoothly. He had to hide a smirk of his own when the bearded admiral blinked. 'Yeah, good luck with locating us via the warp feed origin - I have a Yattaran, you don't. Fine - I'd love to be the one with egg on his face in six months if I'm wrong. Just take a look at the data. If nothing else, send someone out to the Earth-moon inner orbit to check out the wreckage in that area. Then start asking some serious questions of IntSec.' He cut the feed before the admiral could launch into another tirade, then leaned back against the rear console.

Ali stuck his head around the open side and grimaced at him. 'That went about as well as you might expect. How the hell did you keep your temper? I'd have torn the bugger a new one…'

'Practice…' Harlock sighed. 'Plus he has a point - it does sound a little bizarre, even for us…' He rubbed his temples, then knuckled his eye patch, before slipping it off and having a good scratch at the scars beneath his ruined eye.

Ali snorted. 'He's a twat. Maybe you should have gone straight to Leopard…'

'Not really a plan. He's not a fan, and for some reason I always feel guilty about disliking him…'

'He's not Zero, Captain - just his half brother. Even Zero said the silver-haired tosser had a stick up his ass the size of the Martian beanstalk…' he paused and grinned. 'Actually, didn't you say the
same about Admiral Tightarse there?' he nodded at the screen.

Harlock's laugh was a little strained. 'Two assholes, no waiting…' He pushed himself off the wall with a graceful motion. 'My quarters are clear now, I think I'll take a break.'

'Take a long one,' Ali advised, looking him up and down. 'You ain't stopped in two days.' He slapped his captain on the back. 'In fact, I'd say send for your darling lady and Anita's take-out, and lock the door for a couple of days of good food, hedonistic sex, hot-tubbing and back-rubs.'

Harlock paused in the act of re-tying his eyepatch to stare at him. 'You do know one of those involves far too much energy?'

'Yeah,' Ali said, looking contemplative. He patted Harlock on the back again. 'Maybe skip the hot-tub…' he added brightly.

Despite the circumstances, his captain's laugh was genuine.

Irita switched the comms off with a scowl. The databurst from Admiral Hoshino sat on his computer, the filename blinking at him like a puppy looking for attention. Harlock… Always Harlock.

He still wasn't sure how much to tell Hoshino - the admiral was a practical man, whose tolerance for what he couldn't see or touch or hear was minimal at best. Tales of strange, ancient plant-lifeforms that supposedly formed the basis for the myths of dozens of civilisations regarding dangerous female creatures - from the dryads of Greece to the Rhinemaidens of central Europe - were not something the man could process.

Truthfully, if not for his own recent brush with the thing that had assaulted him in his room, he'd have dismissed Harlock's story with the contempt it would have deserved.

Except… He'd already made that suggested trip, and the data… he pursed his lips and looked at the hard copy in front of him on his otherwise pristine desk. Wooden spaceships…

...women who burn like paper, who can manipulate your mind and body…

He reached for his keyboard and opened the downloaded file.
Chapter 23

Military personnel had their quarters in the lower levels of the Enceladus base, below the cloud level, but still well above the permanently icy - and unstable - surface.

Sometimes, Shizuka thought that only sheer bloody-mindedness kept the building up. But then, it, like a lot of the solar system's oldest habitations, had been built during the fabled Kamiyo exodus, by a people well versed in the art of surviving on the edge of disaster, given that they came from the Pacific subduction zone. It was one reason why despite the overwhelming prevalence of humans from the Eurasian and American continents, Japanese culture and Japanese language prevailed, even after a millennia.

Survival in the depths of a cold, inhospitable universe required a tenacity forged over generations of struggle against a hostile environment. The softer "western" ideal of chasing new frontiers had faltered and withered within decades. The east endured, as it always had.

Rather like her own people… she thought to herself, as she stepped out of the lift on the twenty-second residential floor. Her boot heels clicking on the metallic floor, she made her way purposefully down the white corridor. This far down there were no windows, and so the clinical walls were lit by bright ceiling lights, and broken every so often by large picture "windows" which shifted on a regular, regulated and regulation basis between vistas designed by the best psychologists to promote a healthy, relaxing and above all productive mindset.

The bright lighting, however utilitarian for its human inhabitants, was proving fatal to the greenery which punctuated the clinical equilibrium at mathematically precise intervals; sorry, flaccid, yellowing specimens sagged in minimally designed metal pots, thermometers, watering points and feeding points warring with their charges like plastic weeds poking through the overly friable compost they sat in. At some point in the recent past someone had obviously read an old text on brightening up interiors and had decided that the area required some greenery.

Shizuka stopped next to one pathetic specimen and leaned over it, smiling sadly as she noticed the oh-so-slight tropic quiver response to her presence - or her breath. She stroked the broad, waxy leaves gently, sensitive fingertips feeling the thinning surface and the depleted veins. Short on sunlight, potassium and water. 'You poor little thing,' she murmured. 'I know how you feel. None of us are where we should be…' She straightened up, making a mental note to see that the sad little things were rounded up and transported to the upper levels. There was a conservatory on the executive floor where they could be properly cared for.

Next time, the interior designers could make do with a few plastic replicas. People who couldn't take care of beautiful, sensitive life forms did not deserve them.

Her destination was a few doors down. Putting aside her irritated distraction, she continued her walk with a firm, purposeful tread. Twenty-five regular, rhythmic clicks of her heels on the floor took her to the door she was looking for, which opened silently before she could even pass her hand over the intercom sensor.

'I expected you three days ago,' Jorjibel told her smoothly as she entered. Despite her lower rank, the woman remained seated primly in her straight backed chair.

'I had things to attend to,' Shizuka replied equally smoothly, refusing to rise to the bait.
'Really? Or did it just take that long to disengage yourself from the Prime Minister's wandering hands? Or was it that little pissant president's cock you had your mouth around?' Jorjibel's sneer was a living breathing thing all of its own, radiating disdain. 

'Funnily enough it's about that tendency of your clade to fasten their mouths onto cocks that I wanted to see you,' Shizuka replied, answering the sneer with an elegant, minimal smile. 'I don't recall you being given any orders to attack my Chief of Security…'

'I wasn't given orders not to,' Jorjibel replied. 'He's becoming a liability. Sticking his nose in where it does not belong. Elsa was instructed to place him under her geas, and to see to it that we not only found out what he knows or suspects, but to ensure he remained firmly under someone's control - since clearly you hadn't seen fit to place him under yours…'

'You had no right to interfere, Jorjibel. You were scoring points here for the hell of it, and you know it. You exceeded your authority…'

'My authority? My authority comes directly from the Queen, in case you've forgotten! You and your kind have been away from the heart of the Mazone for far too long, intermingling with humans, scattered so thinly through dozens of systems it's amazing you still remember who - or what - you really are. Corpse Flower you may be, but only one at any time can truly express the will - and the last time I checked that was Rafflesia, not Shizuka!' Jorjibel stood up and began to pace the room in front of the silent, still Shizuka, who placed her hands on the black skirt covering her thighs and waited. 'You let your pet off the leash, and I tried to clear up your mess - and so help me, if I find out that you had anything to do with Elsa's death…'

'I killed her,' Shizuka said brightly, staring up at the ranting woman. 'It was politic to allow everyone to believe Irita dispatched the assassin sent to kill him, but he was almost catatonic when I arrived.' She stood up and smoothed the skirt down, never taking her eyes off the other woman, who was frozen in place, rigid with fury. 'I had this area under control, until you decided to escalate the situation. You made your first mistake by awakening the sister-ships and our Earth-bound sisters. Your second was in trying to eliminate my "pet" - and your last…'

She closed with the woman even as the captain reached for her gun-belt, which had been hanging from the arm of the chair. The holstered pistol skidded across the laminated flooring, out of reach, although Jorjibel made a valiant effort to regain it. Her human hands untwisted and blurred, the glamour fading, as she tried to send tendrils across the floor to retrieve her weapon. Searing heat flashed over one extended vine, and she screeched, turning her attention instead to Shizuka. The black-eyed, green skinned creature launched itself at Shizuka, who fumbled her weapon under the force of the attack. Strong, whiplike vines entwined around her arms, legs and throat, tightening with frightening speed. Choking for breath, she clenched her left hand, forcing the spring-loaded blade she kept in a sheath against her lower arm for just this reason into her hand. The gravity-blade sliced through the vines holding her wrist, and a second slash took care of the tendrils wrapped around the other arm.

Those around her throat tightened still further, and she struggled against the savage hold, feeling the vines cut into her skin. Blood trickled, warm and sticky, down her neck and between her breasts. From her other arm a small wad of a fine monofilament wire shot out, its protective sheath falling away to land unheeded on the floor. With a practiced flick of her wrist, Shizuka sent it towards her adversary, and it wound itself around Jorjibel. Shizuka tugged hard on the wires and the scalpel sharp filaments cut straight through the mazone's torso with minimal resistance. Jorjibel fell to the floor in three pieces, green ichor still pumping from severed xylem. Shizuka dropped heavily into a nearby chair, gasping for breath.
As she watched through a pale red mist, the pieces of Jorjibel began to emit a faint wispy blue smoke, followed quickly by a searing flame. One final high-pitched screeching wail accompanied the conflagration, and the flames died down as quickly as they had appeared, leaving nothing but a molten section of flooring and a small amount of ash.

Drawing deep, shuddering breaths, Shizuka pushed herself to her feet, and staggered for the door. With any luck the protocols she'd put into place could sort out this mess before anyone else was any the wiser.

A little more composed, she reached for the door control, only for it to open, revealing Irita standing in the open doorway.

When the report detailing the brief maintenance shut-down of the alarm system on one of the residential floors crossed his terminal, Irita's first thought was to simply accept it and go back the to ever-more worrying information overflowing from the databurst Hoshino had sent.

At least until he noticed this included the fire and smoke alarms for the officers' quarters. On a whim he pulled up the billeting assignments for that floor, and when one name in particular practically leapt off the screen, he swore softly, and scrolled down to the authorisation of the order.

Director Namino.

He pushed the intercom button and waited impatiently for Ensign Kiruta to reply.

'Sir?'

'Put me through to Director Namino's office,' he snapped, a little more curtly than he intended, but then, his nerves were not exactly what they had been, say, a week earlier.

A pause, then: 'I'm sorry sir, her assistant says she's out at the moment. Do you need me to leave…'

'No. No message.' He cut the connection and leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled under his chin. *What business could she have with Captain Jorjibel…?*

He quickly logged off the system, and took his pistol and gun belt out of his top drawer, buckling the belt on even as he stood up. Kiruta looked up in surprise as he left his office and strode past her desk purposefully, but said nothing.

The lift was slow in arriving and his fingers were already beating a staccato tempo on the down button, as though hitting it repeatedly would make it arrive any faster. Two uniformed officers stepped out and had to move out of his way as he forced his way past them into the mirrored box and pressed "22". He heard a muttered "how rude…" as the doors shut on the contemptuous captain who'd spoken out, but any further comment was quickly cut off.

Agitated fingers toyed with his glasses as he waited for the car to reach its destination. Each unplanned stop over thirty five floors brought an irritated frown to his face, as he made room for temporary travelling companions, but thankfully, when the doors opened on the twenty-second floor, he was alone, and the corridor was empty.

Once outside the door to Jorjibel's apartment, he reached for the keypad, not expecting the door to open at his touch; but open it did, revealing the director in an uncharacteristic state of disarray, her hair and clothing both dishevelled. A peculiar scent - like burning flowers - filled the air, and the knife she held unthinkingly in her left hand dripped a pale blue-green ichor onto the pristine laminate.
He pushed her unceremoniously back into the room and shut the door behind them.

'Captain...' she began, an irritated note of protest in her usually soft voice. He pushed her into the nearest chair and she sat down heavily and shut up, simply staring up at him with wide green eyes.

He took in the details with a well-practiced survey: the reddened band around her throat, already purpling. Ditto the skin on her wrists. Blood trickled from thin abrasions where the skin had been subjected to friction. Some of the redness could also have been a reaction to a toxic substance - a few tiny blisters marred her throat and lower arms. Her conservative black dress had certainly seen better days, sporting a rip in one seam along the length of her left thigh, and her usually neat, tamed red hair currently hung around her head like a thicket of tangled snarls.

The burnt-plastic stench of the scorched flooring caught his attention - a six foot section of the floor was twisted and melted, still giving off a foul, wispy smoke. Ash still drifted in the air, caught by the faint breeze from the air conditioning, and settled softly on the surfaces, already leaving a slick carbon residue on the broken table and the floor. Some of it even settled on Shizuka whilst he watched, and she flicked the larger particles away with a sharp twitch of her long fingers.

'I take it that greasy spot on the floor was once the captain?' he drawled. When she nodded wearily he took the seat opposite. 'So. You know a considerable amount about those creatures you told me about. Enough to know that you had at least one in this base - possibly more?'

'How did you find…'

He cut off the question with a sharp hand wave. 'You arranged to have the alarm system disabled - it rang warning bells when I saw the order, and lo and behold, here we are - at the scene of a murder no less - though we seem to be lacking a body…'

'Ah. In all honesty, I didn't expect you to make the connection,' she replied. Her voice, he noticed, had lost a lot of its charm, being hoarse and throaty. A combination he imagined of the acrid smoke and being almost throttled. 'And it was self defence, if you care. She attacked me.'

'And yet,' he replied smoothly, coldly, 'You arranged to have the alarms out of action before coming to see her.' He pushed his glasses back up his nose. 'Curious.'

'Jorjibel was the one who sent that creature after you,' Shizuka told him. 'She needed to know there were consequences for overstepping her authority.'

'Whose authority, though?' Irita asked. 'Certainly not that of the government…'

'No.'

A heavy silence lay between them like an ammonia raincloud. Or perhaps, Irita thought, it was like the cloying, rotting scent - the residue of the dead captain, which almost made him retch, with its resemblance to the stink of the creature which had attacked him over a week before.

'They're called "Mazone",' Shizuka said quietly, breaking the silence. 'At least, that's one name for them. They have their own names, of course, but they've interacted with humans for a very long time, and often adopted their terminology and names.'

'Plants,' he said bluntly. She nodded, then shook her head.

'It begins right at the start of life on Earth,' Shizuka continued. 'Long before life left the ocean. In the shallows, life emerged… algae, mostly. Later small proto-animals. And a form that had
elements of both, although that's a very simplistic way of looking at it. Neither plant nor animal, but more similar to plants - they mostly photosynthesised, for one. They thrived in the light. They grew, and evolved, and eventually spread to the land.

'They were the first sentient lifeform Earth produced. They evolved over the aeons to react to the changing world around them, finding ways to avoid, and then control, the emerging plant-eaters which made no distinction between them and the simple structures they resembled. They created a civilisation - a planet-wide cooperative which learned to communicate, and learn, and teach, and eventually made use of their resources much as humans have done - only with fewer mis-steps along the way. Their "technology" was organic - they could create hybrids of Flesh and Green, Green and Green, even of Green and metals or stone.' She paused, staring at him with wide green eyes, and he waited for her to continue. Taking a deep breath, she did so:

'When humans first began to burn coal, they encroached upon the vast cemeteries of our kind - the remnant of one of our first great expansions - the primal forests. It wasn't your first, or your last, atrocity committed against our kind.

'When Earth began to change irrevocably after the cometary impact you call the "dinosaur killer" hit, we needed to find another home. Our scientist had calculated that Earth would become an anathema to us. We had already begun to spread to other worlds in small numbers, exploring the void, much as later humanity would do. Our spaceships were made of a specially grown wood. We had long since harnessed a power source we used to maintain sunlight in space, and to power our ships, albeit at speeds far slower than your Imaginary Number drives. Our mastery of hyperspace came much later - but like plants, we were a long lived race, and time matters less to us. Generations might pass, but we would reach our destinations.'

'We?' He broke in, staring at her in surprise, his hand drifting to the butt of his pistol. She shrugged. 'It's complicated, and I'll get to that…' When he narrowed his eyes, but nodded, she took up the thread again.

'The majority left, leaving behind a few optimists who believed all was not lost for our homeworld. They stayed, and worked to preserve what they could. And where preservation was impossible, they adapted. Over the millennia there were successive waves that left to find our long-lost sisters. Some returned, for the longing for the planet of our birth never left us.

'Other sentient races emerged, rose, and fell. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. You are not special. We adapted to each in turn, as we had with the Saurians before - some, as always, became a part of the Mazone whole; guardians for the Green against their own kind.

'Humans arose, in time. And again, we adapted. But your kind were savage and cruel, and heedless of the consequences always, always, you take without giving back. We had to watch, helplessly, as you spread like a mould across the planet; raping, gouging, destroying everything you touched. The few we could adapt were not enough. From time to time we tried culling your numbers, but you always survived and spread again.

'Once again we fled to the stars. Once again, some optimistic fools remained, certain that there was always hope. For us, for Earth… even for Humanity. Then you followed us out into the void, in your metal tins. You once again spread and multiplied, and to our horror, you found the worlds we had colonised in the distant past.

'And you began again: taking, always taking, chasing only this mythical "profit". Never content to just live life to the full, you collect tokens and imagine yourselves the richer for it. You build monuments to your egos and your monstrous, rapacious gluttony for power and control. On a thousand worlds, Mazone wept. And we decided that once again, a cull was needed. We had tried
to keep your numbers in check by sabotaging the terraforming attempts - but you never gave up. So we formulated another plan. Instead of simply restricting your ability to colonise these worlds, we would make them uninhabitable. You would turn on each other, and this time, spread so thin, you would, perhaps, be manageable.

'It worked… but not in quite the way intended. Instead of taking your fight to the stars, you fled home, and your confrontation took place in the last place anyone wanted: Earth.'

She paused, and stood up, walking gracefully past him, to stare sadly out of the fake window, one elegant hand resting on the thick plexi-glass.

'We could never have foreseen what happened next.' She whispered. 'The Gaia movement we'd seeded to protect Earth managed to broker a truce - but even as they set foot on Earth to begin the process of establishing it as a protected, sacred preserve, one of their military commanders saw this as a betrayal, and turned on his masters. He opened fire on the drop ships from orbit, killing in one stroke the only men who would have likely agreed with him about protecting the planet - paving the way for the venal, self-serving power-hungry Gaia Sanction who followed.

'Then he attempted to create a protective barrier around the Earth, to prevent anyone from ever disturbing it again... and his pride, unleashed, instead of protecting Earth, tore her apart and created a blasted wasteland torn by black winds and weeping black tears from red skies.'

She was openly weeping now, silently, but he made no move to comfort her.

'You know most of the rest, from humanity's point of view. From ours, it was all about damage limitation. Earth - and our final civilisation there - was gone. Those of us who lived among you tried to ensure we protected our existence - with so few humans now, on many worlds we could no longer rely on your numbers to protect us - we'd done our job too well. So if anyone seemed close to examining odd plant life, or old legends, or looked too closely at ancient ruins on distant worlds, they were discouraged… or removed.

'There were those, in our distant, second homeland, who called for your total annihilation. But the more moderate voices prevailed. Until fifty years ago.'

She dropped her head, briefly, before lifting her face up to his again. 'Harlock - the Destroyer of Worlds… in his pain, he sought redemption. You know how - his plan to unlock the shackles of linear time, and to return the universe to a new beginning. A fresh start.

'It failed, but then, it would never have worked even if he hadn't had a change of heart on Earth. Because fifty years ago, a chance solar flare set off one of his carefully placed oscillators in the New Home System. That oscillator was closely linked to four others, comparatively speaking, on the astronomical scale. They all blew, taking with them the entirety of our colonies in that area of space. Should you look there now, you would find only empty space where they once were - the devices having performed exactly as planned - to remove any unwanted impediments to human expansion by dropping them into the compacted dimensions.

'Several million years of civilisation wiped out in an instant - the only survivors were those already in space, or on outlying worlds. And their leader decided that humanity had to pay. In kind.'

'She's going to destroy Earth?' he asked.

Shizuka shook her head. 'No. What would be the point? It's a dead world. Its recovery will take millennia.'
'Then an invasion? A war?'

Shizuka's laugh was far from humorous. 'Why invade? We're already amongst you. No. There is a fleet coming - or rather, five fleets. Each of them was tasked with finding one of the Nodes of Time. Five targets were chosen, for maximum impact. They've been travelling for fifty years, and very soon, each will reach their destination. A simultaneous detonation in five systems, designed to cause the maximum pain to humanity.' She paused. 'The irony here you'll love… most of those destinations are outside of Alliance Space. And so as far as your government is concerned, it's none of their business. They won't lift a finger to stop it. The SDF is stretched thin - they're little more than a glorified police force, and they've never recovered from the Machine Wars. They can't be in five places at once.'

'Then why do you care?' he asked. 'Either you're on the Mazone side, and you have no reason to care, or you're working for the Alliance and it's none of our business…'

'Because we have sisters on those worlds!' She shouted, hating the show of emotion even as the words left her lips. 'Because Rafflesia is as insane as Harlock was! This - is just revenge, pure and simple. Suicidal revenge at that - there's no way those ships can escape the wavefront from the devices in time once they detonate. Her little caravan is already falling apart at the seams, torn between the military and the civilian populations. Most of us just want a place to live. I thought by finding a way to drag this younger Harlock into the fight I could perhaps put him in her path long enough to find another solution, maybe even persuade some of our sisters to rebel - but so far all he's done is go looking for answers and now he's just sitting on his hands on some backwater. I need leverage to force his hand into a fight…'

His mind raced to process the tale she'd spun. In places, it certainly backed up Harlock's story… in others - well. Maybe Harlock's understanding of the problem was all wrong - or maybe Shizuka wasn't privy to the information Harlock had revealed. How could she know about this Gate of Yedar? The information wasn't even that well known outside of the Military - and no-one had taken Harlock and the rebel Ra Andromeda Selenium's warnings seriously thirteen years ago…

Shizuka was speaking again. 'Our agent - the one chosen to infiltrate the Arcadia - managed to send a brief transmission back before she was killed. She was able to interrogate one of the crew - there was other information, but we finally have the names and location of Harlock's children. They're on Tabito - in SDF controlled space. If I can take them, I can force him into action - he'll tear Rafflesia's fleet apart to get them back…' she began.

'Tabito…' Irita smiled coldly, and felt a warm thrill of triumph as he remembered a long-ago briefing, and frantically raced to put the information together with the data Harlock had given Hoshino… 'No.'

She looked into his grey eyes, so piercing through the lenses he looked at the world through. As if on cue, his hand reached up to push them further up his long nose. 'The Arcadia alone won't be enough. What you need is a way to bring the 

Alliance into the fight. And you're right about one thing, those children are the key.'

'How?' she asked. 'They're the children of a wanted terrorist and pirate - outlaws by association. No-one in the Alliance will run to their rescue…'

He smiled again. 'Wrong. Tabito was once home to a young girl and her adoptive parents - a small, ramshackle but popular ramen shop on the outskirts of a scruffy little mining town, if I recall correctly. In recent years the home of her older sister and her extended - and extensive - family.'

'So?'
'So, you attack the town - and make sure to include this rebel's home when you extract the Harlock brats. What do you think will happen when Ra Andromeda Promethium finds out that her one link to her past life has been attacked by aliens?.' His reptilian smile grew wider. 'Harlock will have more fire support than he dreams of. All you have to do is persuade your associates to take the children and hand them over to this fleet…'

Shizuka, still over by the window, shivered at the cold steel in his voice as he spoke. A cold satisfaction radiated from him, and despite her own ambitions, she felt a cold chill run down her spine as she stared at his implacable face.

'Namino - can your people clear up your mess?' he asked, getting to his feet. She nodded slowly, realising that at some point during the proceedings, she'd lost control of the situation. *A bad miscalculation.* 'Good. Straighten yourself up and come with me. I have a story of my own to tell you… and I think you might find it interesting…'
In hindsight, Tadashi realised that deciding to stop off at the ramen shop before dropping his bags off at home had not been his brightest idea. The queue already stretched out of the door, and he had to excuse-me his way through the crowded tables to get to the front, amidst dark mutterings about queue jumpers.

‘Ah, shut it,’ one gruff voice called out after one complainant had vocally expressed his displeasure. ‘He lives here!’

Tadashi gave the dusty miner a grateful grin over his shoulder as he squeezed through the last of the lunchtime crowd hugging the counter, and slipped under the counter-top, dragging his bags behind him. He dumped them in the corridor behind the kitchen with a heavy sigh, and popped his head back round the door, where Selen and one of her part-timers were busy emptying the large pots almost as fast as the cook could fill them.

‘Good timing!’ Selen called to him over the hubbub. ‘Can you grab those take-away boxes and get on the bike? We're snowed under because the power went over at the Grill on Main - everyone's headed here instead, and I've no-one to take the construction site order!’

‘I just got here,’ he grumbled. ‘And I'm hungry…’

‘Welcome home. If you want lunch, make yourself useful.’ She picked up two insulated boxes and thrust them into his arms, and slapped the receipt on top of them. This last he had to make a grab for with his teeth as it made a bid for freedom in the draught coming from the open back door. ‘Remember to get the money - and no excuses from Jeff this time - tell him I don't run a charity!’

Tadashi grinned around a mouthful of paper, and she winked at him. Selen's was well known in the town for being the best place to go for a meal at the back door after closing, for anyone struggling. Though woe betide anyone trying it on for a freebie…

As he turned awkwardly with his packages, she tapped him on the shoulder. ‘On your way back, round up the youngsters would you? They're probably either at the pond or up on Memorial Hill. I'll feed the lot of you when you get back!’

He nodded, and scuttled out as fast as he could, before she thought of any other errands to add. Leaving the noise and clatter of the shop behind, he stepped into the back yard and looked around for the shop's delivery vehicle, which he quickly located propped up against the side wall near the gate - a ramshackle bicycle which had seen better days, but at least had working brakes, a reasonably comfortable seat and good tyres.

Gears… not so much - only three out of the twelve on the derailleur worked, but thankfully the town was relatively flat and the run out to the new construction site to the east was fairly clear; a new road surface since he'd left for Destiny, he noticed, as the bike fairly flew along during a slight downhill section.

‘Hard hat!’

Tadashi slammed on the brakes and waited for Marco to catch up to him, puffing and panting as he handed him the aforementioned article. ‘Sorry - kind of on auto-pilot,’ he told the grey-bearded gate guard. The guy grinned at him.

‘Heard you were coming back - graduated at last, Selen said?’
He nodded. 'Doctor Monono now!' he couldn't hold back the grin or the pride that filled him. Marco slapped him on the back so hard he almost fell off the bike.

'Get you, kiddo - a doctor! I can still remember when you and the gals were nothing but knee-high little nibbles, all eyes and elbows the three of ya... nothing on ya at all...' The man's eyes teared up. 'Now the lasses are off with the Cap'n, and you got your medical degree. Makes a fella realise how much time's a passin...' He grinned a gap-toothed smile at Tadashi. 'Still plannin' on stayin' here to practice, or off to fancy planets and big paychecks?'

Tadashi shook his head. 'I promised I'd stay, and I meant it. Those fancy planets don't need me - you guys do. This is my home.'

Marco gave his hard hat a friendly bash, almost pushing it down over the youth's eyes, and Tadashi had to shove it back off his forehead, laughing. 'Good for you. I know the townsfolk'll welcome ya - and the Cap'n and Ali'll both be right proud!'

'Thanks, Marco - now I gotta go, or the lunches'll be cold.' He pointed to the box attached to his pannier rack nearest the older man. 'Third compartment, Marco - I'll rob you on the way out if you want?'

'Tell Selen I'll pop round after my shift,' Marco told him, reaching for the covered bowl and scrabbling around for the bamboo chopsticks. 'She knows my word's good - and let me know if any of 'em can't stump up on your way out - I'll pick up the tabs and they can owe me, no sense you takin' grief from 'er ladyship because of a few tight-fisted old navvies!'

Tadashi gave him a cheery wave as he cycled off, but the old man was already concentrating on his lunch. He grinned to himself as he got the pedals up to speed again. Marco, like a lot of the guys who'd made their home here, owed his life to Harlock - and to Selen. Tabito was home to many like him - those who'd escaped the culling of the colonies before and during the Machine Wars, destined for the life-force harvesting plants if they couldn't pay for machine bodies. *Waifs and strays, the lot of us*, he thought to himself with a slightly sad smile. But reflection had to wait, as it looked as though his arrival was going to be the only thing staving off a workers revolution...

With a wave and a cheery hello, he came to a stop in front of the assembled ravenous mob of workers, and was soon handing out the contents of his panniers as fast as he could move.

Selen hadn't said to wait for the dishes, but he hung around anyway. After being away for several months there was plenty to catch up on, gossip-wise. So it was over an hour later, and his own stomach was threatening to leap up his throat and throttle him, when he collected Marco's dish and stowed it neatly in a pannier, and after saying his goodbyes and handing in his hat, set off to round up a few more of the local strays - this time Selen's youngest trio, a handful of orphans - a rotating group there always seemed to be too many of - and Harlock and Kei's foursome.

He found them at the second location Selen had suggested - the pond had its usual crowd of children from four to sixteen playing in and around it, but the resident troublemakers - the twins - weren't amongst them nor were Selen's younger boys. Tadashi resigned himself to the long hard slog up the hillside to the memorial, and had to push the bike the last hundred yards when his legs and his breath both gave out.

'That's what you get for being stuck indoors on Destiny for months,' a dark haired boy of about twelve called out as he approached. Tadashi laid the bike against a nearby rock and stuck his tongue out at Rei, the speaker. Childish, he knew - the kid was half his age after all.
'I get plenty of exercise, brat,' he replied with a hurt sniff. 'It's this thing - the lower gears don't work...' Short and stocky, he was a little sensitive about his build. From the snort his comment occasioned he knew Rei didn't buy it, and if he was honest, the kid had a point. Without Harlock or Ali riding herd on him he did tend to amble around rather than charge...

He wandered over to the group, to be greeted enthusiastically by Taro and Mamoru. Nami clung to his legs begging to be picked up and he obliged, swinging the dark-haired little girl onto his shoulders. Wattaru, pinned in place by Kanna who was insisting on placing a daisy-chain crown on his head, just gave him a "help-me" look, which he just grinned in response to. Get used to it, kid... she's not letting go, that one...

'You've had a hair-cut,' a voice from above his head said, in the tree behind him. 'And that's a new jacket...'

'Bite me, Blaze,' he replied evenly, flipping the speaker the bird over his shoulder.

'Sooo... I'm thinking... new conquest?' He ducked the hand that tried to ruffle his hair as the older man jumped out of the tree to land behind him.

'Gerloff, Blaze - none of your business...'

'And blushing... so, I'm right, huh?' Blaze was a good six inches taller than Tadashi as well as ten years older than his own twenty-three years, but at times Selen's second eldest could be a childish little git, Tadashi thought grumpily as he moved out of the way. 'Boy or girl? Blonde or brunette?'

He resigned himself to giving up at least a little bit of news. One way or the other, Blaze would get it out of him eventually, and since the alternative was having to endure a tag-team from Meg and Zack on the issue later, it was a no-brainer: 'Girl, blonde, a couple of years behind me, in Pre-Med. She's nice. Her father's a retired commodore - ex-SDF.'

'Going respectable on us, Tadashi?'

'Worried your little smuggling routes are in danger?' Tadashi replied with a grin.

'Free traders, Taddy - free traders...' Blaze replied, pantomiming a hurt expression.

'You're safe - I said Commodore Bentselle was re...'

'Bentselle? As in the captain who took on that harvest fleet and its escort around Serumatake and saved six thousand people? That Bentselle?' Blaze leaned back against the tree, folded his arms and whistled through his teeth admiringly. 'If I remember rightly, the family was loaded - does she know you're a pirate-foundling...?'

'Yes, not any more - they lost everything in the war - and yes, I told Revi - she's fine with it.' He narrowed his eyes and glared at Blaze. 'Like every other female in the sector she has a copy of Harlock's wanted poster on her damn wall - I think she wants me to get it autographed... Anyway - what are you doing back? Last I heard you and Marin had taken the Futatsuboshi out to escort some of your smuggling -'

'Free traders.'

'- vessels. You weren't expected back for weeks.'

Blaze pushed himself back upright and called time on the assembled children. Whilst they obligingly picked up assorted lunch packs, he leaned closer to speak softly into Tadashi's still
slightly burning ear. 'Had an emergency call from the Arcadia - got themselves into a right pickle looking into these plant-women-things which were trying to kill your namesake. Don't worry!' He waved off the sudden look of panic Tadashi could feel on his face as the thought of anything happening to his friends and family caused a cold sweat. 'Everyone's fine - though Ali was looking a bit rougher around the edges than normal. But the ship took a pounding - some kind of alien vine got into the hull and they had to practically flay the ship from stem to stern to get rid. Seriously - she was only just about space-worthy when we left.'

'Even with the self-repair?' Tadashi picked up the bicycle and wheeled it back down the hill alongside the taller man.

'Umm. Should give you an idea how bad it was. Anyway - they're heading here for a brief stop-over - Marin dropped me off, and he's taken the ship off to gather a few allies. Harlock should be here in a day or two.'

'You got baby-sitting duty, huh?' Tadashi replied, looking over the small group. 'Selen didn't mention anyone was with them when she asked me to look in…'

Blaze just gave him a meaningful look. 'Tadashi - you should know by now, there's always someone watching…'

His own two younger brothers came running past him, yelling, even as he yelled back for them to slow down. He did manage to catch his baby sister and swung her up onto his shoulders, where she began an animated conversation with Nami, the two girls giggling together over the antics of the boys as they scrabbled downhill when the brakes failed.

A roaring, rumbling noise split the air and everyone stopped short, Wataru falling over his feet and sending Rei flying, both boys having to be fielded by brothers before they rolled to the foot of the hill - Mamoru catching Wataru with an almost idle gesture that spoke of resigned practice, and Keisuke grabbing Rei by the scruff as he slid past with a yell.

In the sky above them, the setting sun was being blotted out by a large dark cloud split by red lightning, streaming back along the dark hull of a massive battleship bristling with gun turrets, revealing the red-eyed skull fronting the familiar shape of the Arcadia.

'T'm going to have to say, this wasn't one of your better performances,' Kei said brightly as she removed the restraints from Harlock's wrists. He rubbed the reddened rings of skin where the metal had chafed with a rueful grimace.

'Bite me. How the hell did Maji get hold of these anyway? These experimental locks with the encrypted frequency modulator are supposed to be months away from distribution to law enforcement…' He stood up from the chair and stretched, tried to tug his jacket down, then massaged his abused thumbs with a wince.

'I didn't ask, he didn't tell, and I suspect it's better left at that,' Kei replied with a grin. She handed him the electronic key. 'You'll need to get him to work on adding the new algorithm to the picklock - he says he can do it. On the plus side, hopefully it'll be a while before you need to worry about being able to slip out of any new cuffs…' She dangled the restraints in front of him and smiled when he lifted them delicately from her fingers. 'Oh, and Ali says you owe him - apparently the two of you had a side bet on how long it would take you to get free of them?'

Harlock glared at her from under the lock of hair which fell over his face, almost obscuring his good eye as well as his eyepatch. 'Tell him he's a cheating bastard - I saw him talking to Maji, so
no, "you'll end up calling for Kei to get you out" doesn't count if you had advance knowledge that the damn things were uncrackable with Maji's Magic Lock Pick…' He pushed his hair back off his face. 'How close are we?'

'A couple of minutes out. And you know, next time you get bored, I can think of something much better to do with these restraints…' She reached for them playfully, and he held them out of her reach above his head.

'Oh no you don't… not after the time you fell asleep on me…' The ever-present engine note of the ship changed slightly. 'Did we just stop?'

Kei tapped her in-ear comms. 'Yattaran?'

'Ah. We pulled up a little short of the system - someone hailed us. Seems Marin and Blaze rounded up the usual suspects as requested. It was just the Poseidon making sure we were who we said we were.'

Harlock was already checking the display on his desk. 'Seems Rokuro brought along some friends - do we know them?' he shared a concerned look with Kei, not liking unknown battleships hanging out around Tabito.

'The Astoria and the Calypso,' Yattaran replied over the speaker. 'Both Explorer Corps ships. Professor Oedo's on board the Astoria - apparently he has some discoveries of his own to show us.'

'Independent corroboration can't hurt,' Harlock muttered. 'I didn't know Oedo had managed to get his new ships - he'll be dying to show them off. Send them down to the shop - we'll take the bullet down in a short while.' he cut the link and stepped back, staring out of the arched, leaded windows at the planet looming closer. 'Set Doscoi and Maji to checking over the systems and the hull, just to be sure,' he told Kei. 'Some of Tochiro's sensors are still offline on the starboard flank near the main cannon track. That's one of the last places we need any nasty surprises.'

She nodded. 'I'll meet you in the hangar. Who else do you want rounding up?'

'This shift? Daiba, Zack, Niobe, Meg…' he ticked off the names mentally. 'Ali, Anita and Doc. Yattaran can hold down the helm for now. The kids need a break and Anita's overdue for a change of scene…' he looked over at the bed with a fond smile, where Mimay was curled up with her long hair draped over her, exhausted from the effort of coaxing the ship's dark matter engines to keep the flow of dark matter contained and channelled into the self-repair systems. 'I'd make her go if I thought for one moment she'd leave the ship…' He sighed and brushed his hair back from his face. 'Never mind. Get Yattaran to sort out the usual rota for the rest - and round up anyone currently groundside - we'll rotate some of the crew with minor injuries off the ship.' He frowned. 'I'd suggest Ali take some real shore leave and stay for a few weeks, but he's a stubborn bastard. I'd have to tie him down to leave him behind…'

'So don't ask,' Kei told him, giving him a peck on the cheek as she reached around him for her tablet-stroke-clipboard. 'Make it an order - captain…'

He gave her a mock glare. 'So much attitude…' he smiled at her. 'I'd make the same suggestion to you - and don't stick that tongue out at me, I know damn well you're torn in two between staying with the boys and Nami, and keeping an eye on me…'

She paused in mid-flounce and his smile grew slightly as the movement caused her breasts to bounce very nicely in the supporting swell of her sweater. 'I'd keep all of you in one place if I could,' she said softly. 'I hate being away from any of you. At least the boys and Nami are safe with
Selen - between her manpower and ours, plus the planetary defences, they're as safe as we can make them - outside of Deathshadow Island or here.'

'Nowhere's safe…' he replied softly, all humour gone. She met his visible eye with her own troubled gaze. 'Not for any of us. Look at what happened to the Daibas… it's a cold, dangerous world. Between the danger we bring into their lives being who we are... the Machine Empire, the remnants of the old Gaia Fleet, Loki, the Mazone...' he turned away to stare out of the window. 'A thousand and one childhood illnesses or accidents… our own natures… Some days…'

Kei walked back over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder, saying nothing. Eventually she felt him relax slightly under her fingers. Giving his shoulder a slight squeeze, she left without a word.

After the door shut behind her he sighed again and walked over to the windows, to lay his hand on one of the upright stanchions as he looked out into the night. One of Tabito's moons loomed to the starboard side, quickly passing behind them.

'It wasn't your fault,' Tochiro said, his voice echoing slightly in the large room. 'We got through it, and no-one died…'

'I almost got you killed,' Harlock snapped, somewhat uncharacteristically. Tochiro, more than used to mood swings in his companions, took it in his stride as usual.

'Eh. Technically, no longer really alive, remember? So you got your arse kicked - it happens - remember that battle during the Machine Wars…?'

'Which one?' was the sardonic reply. 'Nothing was ever this close, my friend. The ship's still barely space-worthy, and if we get into a fight now, we're out the other side of screwed.'

'Are you going to wallow in maudlin self-pity and guilt for much longer?' Tochiro asked, a little waspishly. 'Because I've had a belly full of that 'tude over the last hundred years or so… if you plan on being a moody git, let me know and I'll power down for a while until you've got it out of your system…'

Despite himself, Harlock smiled. 'Next mood swing, thirty years…' he muttered. 'Sometimes your pep talks cut a bit close, my friend.'

'That's what friends are for,' Tochiro replied. 'Now pull your head out of your arse and put your game face on - best foot forward, pip-pip…'

'I'd quit right there if I were you,' Harlock growled, not entirely humorously. The ship's central guiding intelligence sniggered. 'Some days I think you, Kei, Mimay and Ali are in cahoots keeping me…'

'...from turning into a whining arse?' Tochiro finished brightly. 'Yattaran's on line,' he continued, not letting his captain get a word in. 'We're about to make orbit, and he wants to know if we're meeting these guys up here on down on the ground?'

'Ground.' Harlock reached for his gun belts and fastened them around his waist, shrugging the bulky holsters into place at each hip. Pistol and sabre in place, he picked up the heavy gravity cloak from its resting place on the bed, and settled it on his shoulders, quickly clipping the fittings to the built-in harness of his jacket collar.

'Any particular reason you feel the need to look the part?' Tochiro asked. 'Or just feeling the need to hide your insecurities behind the armour…?'
The black bird lumbered into flight from the bedstead it had been sitting on, and took its place on Harlock's shoulder as the captain strode out of his quarters without replying - although sensitive speakers did pick up an irritated, almost sub-vocal sigh.

'Thought so...' the Arcadia's central computer's voice muttered smugly, to the now empty room.

'Is that the best you've got?' Meg asked. She wriggled underneath Daiba, pinned with her arms above her head, as he knelt on top of her. He flushed as her hips ground tantalisingly against his. 'Because I'm not impressed…'

He let his weight fall onto her a little more, and grinned. 'Really? Coz I'm not sure you can get out of this unscathed…' He shifted his weight back a little as he felt her legs flex. 'Oh no you don't… not in the nuts again, you devious little cow!'

'Oi! Are you two going to take up the training mats all morning? Or do I have to listen to the foreplay whilst you decide if you're fighting or fucking?' Zack called out testily from the sidelines.

Daiba let go of Meg and sprang to his feet with well-practiced alacrity, to get out of the way of any potential retribution - the little minx had a tendency to fight dirty, and wasn't above trying to kick or knee his testicles up to join his tonsils. 'You have no room to talk, Freckles - you and Niobe tend to just end up rolling around on the mats giggling…'

'She's ticklish!' Zack protested. Daiba offered Meg a hand, and helped her to her feet.

'Doesn't explain the panting moans and screams,' Meg added with a sly grin at her adopted sister, who blushed brighter than Meg's flightsuit. 'Though I'm not sure anything does, Nibby - I mean - this is Freckles we're talking about - just how good can he be in the sack?'

'Hey!' Zack joined Niobe in heating the room with his face.

'Play nice, children!' Ali leaned in the doorway, arms folded across a black sweater. 'The captain's giving all of you some downtime on the planet, so get your arses into the showers and then over to the hangar deck - you've got forty minutes before I take the rover out.'

'You coming with us, Daddy?' Meg asked. She sauntered over to the big pirate and gave him a peck on the cheek, which he brushed off with a mock growl.

'Knock it off, Meggie - yer too old for that. Besides, it's kind of uncomfortable.'

'You didn't used to mind,' she replied with a twinkle.

'You didn't used to have tits,' Zack muttered darkly. Daiba sniggered and got a narrow-eyed glare from Ali for his pain.

'Yeah. Right. Forty minutes…' Daiba grabbed Meg's hand and tugged her along behind him, Zack wandering along behind with an arm draped around Niobe's shoulders. 'Seriously "daddy"?'

Meg shrugged and grinned. 'We always climbed all over him as kids. He kind of made himself our guardian when Arcadia was in town, even though there were hundreds of kids pulled out of the Doppler Corps mines over the years. I guess because we were the ones who made it to the Arcadia, he felt sort of responsible for us.'

'Meg shrugged and grinned. 'We always climbed all over him as kids. He kind of made himself our guardian when Arcadia was in town, even though there were hundreds of kids pulled out of the Doppler Corps mines over the years. I guess because we were the ones who made it to the Arcadia, he felt sort of responsible for us.'

'He's also our designated next of kin,' Niobe added. 'We had to have someone to register for school and such - the Captain and Kei wanted us to have normal lives, if we wanted them. They signed off
on Tadashi and formally adopted Taro, but we asked Ali. So he is our dad - sort of.' She giggled. 'Though he doesn't tend to like us sitting on his lap these days!'

'Tadashi should be back as well,' Zack added thoughtfully. 'He was due to graduate this month - wish we could have been there, but I guess there's a limit to how welcome the Arcadia would be on Destiny - it's not like we could show up in orbit and fly down to glomp him when he collects his degree!'

'I wouldn't have thought the captain would let that stop him,' Daiba replied.

'Nah - he wouldn't. But he never wanted Tadashi - or any of us - tainted by association. Not that any of us cared much. We like being on board. But he always makes it up to us for staying away from official events.'

'That's why we're back now,' Niobe added, just before she and Meg peeled away to the next door changing room. 'Zack's on a break after graduating, I'm here as a present for…'

'Zack?' Daiba added with mock sweetness. He ducked a wet towel Zack had picked up off the floor, left by a previous occupant, but caught the edge on his back with a cold wet clammy splat.

'Git. She's going to University on Destiny in a few months. Wants a degree in astro-geology,' Zack shot back as he stripped.

'Daddy's little darling…' Meg gushed, sticking her head - and far too much of her upper torso for Daiba's peace of mind, around the corner. It earned her a slap to the back of the head by Niobe's disembodied hand, and the boys sniggered.

'Meg?' Daiba called back before she could vanish.

'Me? Emeraldas promised me a position on her ship when she comes back. I want to join up with the Millennial Thieves.'

Daiba gave Zack a questioning look in the next stall. 'Seriously? What's wrong with the Arcadia?'

'Nothing - but Harlock's attention is on other matters, once we get this tangle sorted. Meggie wants to stick it to Promethium and Doppler - and that's kind of where Selen's boys and Emeraldas have directed their attention. Meg's only here to get some hands on experience first.' Zack smirked. 'Which she seems to be getting… if not quite in the areas the Captain imagined…'

'Knock it off, Freckles.' Daiba exited the cubicle, tucking his towel firmly around his waist. 'We're friends.'

'Yeah. Right… She's grabby, and don't think I hadn't noticed you noticing…'

Daiba reached for his trousers. 'She can hear you, you know, and she holds a grudge…'

'Not much point,' Meg called out. She stuck her head back round the doorway, fair hair plastered to her head, but already trying to curl. 'Tried beating some sense into him, but through that head, it's a lost cause…’ She eyed Daiba up and down and grinned. 'My… you are filling out nicely after a few months of square meals and work-outs…'

He grabbed a sweater and pulled it hurriedly over his head, hoping the gesture didn't look too defensive. 'Well at least I can't count my ribs anymore, which is a first in a long time…’ Beside him, Zack, still working on the trousers, sat down to avoid hopping around on one foot and grinned at him.
'We'll be beating 'em off with a stick at this rate, Daiba - and trust me, if you don't want anyone getting close, we'll do just that.'

The best he could manage in response to the unexpected show of support was a slightly neutral smile and a nod. Reaching for his boots he looked around at the walls of the shower room - still showing signs in places of the recent damage; patches of the wall still a little discoloured with a faint greenish stain as the self-repair laboured to finalise the fine details of the repairs.

*Maybe they'd never get the scars out,* he thought sadly. *Like the rest of us, the Arcadia has taken a battering, and sometimes… sometimes you have to live with the results. Even if they did get all the dents, holes and damaged areas repaired, you'd always know they'd been there, under the surface.*

*Sometimes the best you can do is patch yourself up and carry on…*

'Hey! No moping!' Meg bounced into the room, all curls again and linked her arm with his, sticking her tongue out at Zack when the older youth rolled his eyes. It took Daiba a moment to work out that there was something a little different, and he belated stared at the lemon coloured dress she was wearing which barely reached her knees.

'A dress?'

'So?' she asked, a little defensively.

'Nothing. It's… nice.' Spotting the early warning signs of an underachieving compliment in her narrowing gaze he tried again. 'You look pretty.' It wasn't a stretch - the girl was a pretty as a daisy, he thought. And without any artifice.

Zack spluttered, and received an elbow in the ribs for his pains from Daiba's free arm.

'Let's just leave the peanut gallery,' Meg said tartly. 'If you two ever finish beautifying yourselves, you'll just have to hoof it into town.'

'Hey - you can't just take off in the rover and leave us!' Zack called out plaintively.

Meg smirked. 'Then you'd better keep up and hold off on the smoochies…'

Daiba couldn't help grinning as they left Zack behind, swearing as he tried to pull his boots on in a hurry. *Sometimes... you can pick yourself up…* He patted the Arcadia's wall on the way past. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he heard an approving rumble just barely audible in the background hum of the ship's systems.
Chapter 25

It wasn't often the Arcadia set down on a planet - the ship, at slightly over a kilometer in length - was a bulky beast, and, as Daiba overheard Ali grousing, steered like a cow in atmosphere. But it seemed after the recent repairs her captain was taking no chances, and the ship landed with all the grace of a punch drunk albatross, on a barren plain a few miles north of Tabito's main township. Once the dark matter cloud had dissipated, two rovers exited from the rear ramp and headed south.

In the second vehicle, Daiba gritted his teeth as Ali seemed to take great delight in deliberately finding and driving into every pothole between the ship and the town.

'Could you turn back? I think you missed a couple of sinkholes back there…' he ground out in between bumps, after one lurching take-off left Meg in his lap and his stomach apparently suspended two feet over his head. He gave Meg a little push to get back up right, and watched as she sheepishly buckled her seat belt this time.

'You want to drive? Be my guest if you think you can do any better on this road…' Ali retorted.

'Driving? Is that what it is? I thought you were trying for orbit…' Daiba dead-panned. Behind him, he heard Zack snigger.

'There's a road?' Niobe asked innocently.

'Held together by pothoooooles…' Zack sang. He ducked the assorted slaps that headed his way without any effort, since to inflict any damage the rest of them would have had to release their safety belts, and no-one looked as though they fancied their chances.

'So… guys.. these other ships?' Daiba jabbed a finger upwards.

'Professor Oedo, of the SDF Exploration Corps,' Meg replied through slightly clenched teeth. 'Showing off some shiny new hardware by the sounds of it. They lost almost every ship and their major support base a few years back. Terrorist attack at their big launch party…' she trailed off sadly.

Ali's response was short, pithy and brutal, and not, Daiba thought, related to the crater he'd just bounced through. 'It was bullshit, is what it was. Two of the ships left formation and opened fire on the facility and the rest of the Explorer fleet. The press and the investigation both blamed the captains - Hank Douglas and his old buddy Dantetsu Ichimonji. Or is it Ichimonji Dantetsu…? Whatever. Anyway, those two guys were straight up and old friends of ours. Hell, Daiba - you might even remember 'em from back when we hauled you and yer mom and dad off Mars? Couldn't have taken down Promethium's first dastardly plan without 'em.'

'So why would they…'

'Because that bald-headed, pointy-eared prick from Shaitan and his hunchbacked hench-douchebag -'

'Chancellor Doppler and Deputy Chancellor Hechi,' Meg whispered in Daiba's ear, translating for him. Ali shot a quick scowl back at her prompting another "road!" squeak from an alarmed Zack.

'As I was sayin'... We think they got to Hank and Dan - Hechi's got some nasty tricks with find-fuckery, and both men openly despised Doppler and his goons. They have a hard-on for space exploration, but only on their terms and for their chosen few. That, and the lucrative supply and
refit contracts didn't go to their fancy-dressed little glove puppet Feydar Zone. You don't have to look too far for motive. The last couple of years they've tried to force the SDF into a contract, but thankfully Commander Todo ain't stupid enough to fall for it.'

'So not a Mazone plot then?' Daiba asked. He settled back down in his seat. Business and politics weren't his problem, thank goodness.

'Depends - won't hurt the Mazone now, will it? The SDF has had to put its new Galactic Railroad on hold whilst it builds the Survey fleet back up, and these vegetables probably won't lose sleep over that, if we ain't sticking our noses much out of our own space for a bit.' Ali brought the rover to a sliding stop. 'Even if it ain't part of the big vegetable conspiracy, I think you'll like the Prof. Enjoys wandering around out here almost as much as the Captain does - some days we think he missed his calling and shoulda been a pirate!'

Professor Oedo was a bear in a uniform, Daiba thought, as the hulking, bearded head of the SDF Explorer Corps shook his hand heartily. Not tall, mind you - he was slightly shorter than Daiba's five-ten - but broad. The man was a bearded, barrel-chested and rather loud man in his early fifties. Daiba just about managed to resist shaking his fingers to get some life back into them, and caught the shy smile of a small boy hiding behind the man-beast. He smiled back and the dark-haired boy popped back into hiding.

'It's all right, Takuma. This is one of your cousins. Tadashi Daiba - meet Takuma Ichimonji. Come on, come on lad, no need to be shy…' Oedo sighed heartily as the small boy kept sliding out of sight behind his legs. 'It's been tough on him, since his father…'

Harlock walked over and knelt down next to Daiba. 'I heard. What is it with people that they just turn on small children like that? You know me, Takuma. It's Harlock.' He held his arms out and the little boy shyly shuffled over, and then threw his arms around the pirate's neck and stuffed his face into the collar of his cloak, crying silently and clinging as though his life depended on it.

'Papa's not a traitor! He isn't!' The emphatic declaration right next to his ear caused a slight wince, Daiba noticed with a smirk. 'You believe that, don't you, Harlock?'

Harlock gave the boy - who looked about the same age as Wataru and Mamoru - a tight hug. 'I know he'd never have done anything like that of his own free will, Takuma. He was - he is - a good man at heart. But there are bad people out there who can make good people do bad things no matter how hard they fight back.'

*People… and nightmarish plant-women from before the age of the dinosaurs…* Daiba thought. He shot a sly glance over towards Ali, who looked more than a little discomfited.

'Doppler…' Oedo sad sadly. 'He's making quite a name for himself, since the Prometheus Incident. After he set himself up as Chancellor of Shaitan's system, he rapidly expanded into that part of the Galaxy, enslaving whatever populations were left behind once the Machinners had scoured a system.'

'He doesn't seem to like you much either,' Harlock added pithily. He put Takuma down and pointed him in Daiba's direction, encouraging the acquaintance. Taking the hint, Daiba knelt on the squeaky-clean floor of the ramen shop and offered a hand, which was shyly taken. 'Those broadcasts are getting more histrionic every time I make the mistake of tuning into them. Does he really want the Survey Programme shut down? What does he have to gain by it?'

'He's still spouting that crazy notion that space belongs to the elite - and by that he means the
genetically enhanced citizens of Shaitan and its territories. The people he decides are superior. The rest - as far as he's concerned they're either slave labour or fodder for the Soul Mills of the Machine Empire…' Oedo sighed heavily and placed his hands behind his back. 'There are still unexplored regions out there - areas where we might make a fresh start on worlds we haven't wrecked by poor terraforming or war… but he'd have them set aside for his "elite race".'

'I often wonder if he includes my people in his rejects…' Rokuro Oki strode into the shop with a grim smile for the two captains. 'Wonder if he plans on adding gills to go along with the pointy ears if his people find any water worlds out there?'

'Don't give him ideas…' Oedo replied darkly. He sat down on one of the chairs, which creaked in protest at the weight. 'In any event, we're years away from getting the long-range exploration programme back on track after the Prometheus Incident. Resources are stretched and the SDF is spread too thinly protecting the Frontier against Promethium's incursions from Andromeda, and Doppler's internal forays as he plunders any undefended system he can find for metals, rare earths and anything else that takes his fancy.'

Kei, Ali and Yattaran arrived, swiftly joined by Selen and her two eldest sons, making the room look suddenly crowded. During the various introductions Daiba noticed Mamoru and Taro peering round the door, and coaxed the reluctant little boy over to meet them. The Other Tadashi was riding herd on them, and gave him a cheery grin.

'Trying to get out of babysitting?' asked his namesake.

Daiba snorted quietly. 'I was planning on sitting in. Can you look after this one as well?'

'He can come with us. Anita's got some pancakes on…' Mamoru offered. 'C'mon, Takuma - you remember us, don't you?'

The shy nod was slow in coming, and it was obvious the little boy's first instinct was to keep well clear of others. Given the bits he'd overheard, Daiba wasn't at all surprised. Whatever destiny surrounds this family seems to insist on traumatising us all at an early age, he thought sourly. Though watching Taro and Mamoru get to work to encourage their little cousin was reassuring. He gave his namesake a conspiratorial grin and left Takuma in their charge and sauntered as casually and quietly as he could into the room, taking a chair near the wall where he could watch and listen and hopefully not get thrown out of the meeting.

'It's a startling concept,' Oedo mused, once Harlock and Oki had finished briefing him. 'Ancient vegetation-like lifeforms? And presumably the forms are - what some kind of illusion? A lure for victims? Loathly ladies of legend, enticing the unwary hero to his untimely demise…?'

Ali snorted. 'If anyone counters with "what a way to go" I'll personally thump 'em.' He shared a look with his captain. 'It was more like having your soul fondled by something that's had its fingers deep in shit…'

'Colourful as ever…' Oedo murmured, carefully keeping his face straight - though behind the thicket of his beard this was perhaps a pointless exercise.

'Some appear wholly human, others exhibit a plasticity that suggests a protean lifeform - one capable of changing shape almost at will. The creature we found on Tokarga was not a shape-changer, so motile ability seems to have evolved at least once, maybe even several times over their existence.' Harlock replied, with a frown aimed at Ali, in a desperate attempt to get the subject back on track. Daiba grinned to himself. When he started trotting out the science-speak instead of
'If you start quoting that line about sabre-toothed tigers and parallel evolution I'll start slapping,' Ali muttered. 'You'd think textbooks would find a new tune after all this time…'

'But sabre-toothed tigers are cool…' Daiba pointed out, not unreasonably to his mind. Ali growled at him.

'They've certainly taken as much to the oceans as the land,' Oki pointed out from where he was propping the wall up. His blue hair was held back from his face by a leathery braided band, and he was out of uniform, wearing a formfitting all-in-one suit that covered him from ankle to neck that glistened iridescently in the sunlight that trickled in through the shutters. Daiba tried hard not to stare but the play of muscle under the scintillating fabric was distracting. 'They're extremely adaptable, and probably live amongst us on some worlds. Mostly quite peacefully, would be my guess.'

'Except for the tendency to keep a lid on research which might uncover them, or keeping our populations down to a manageable level?' Harlock drawled.

Oki shuffled his large bare feet slightly. Daiba blinked when he noticed a little detail he hadn't expected. Webbed… huh. Figures… 'When you put it like that…'

'My people haven't recorded any obvious activity.' Oedo stroked his bushy beard thoughtfully. 'But once we knew what to look for, we did spot anomalies. The Attenborough came across a planet about two years ago that was listed in the records as a desert - but they found it covered in jungle growth.'

'We found something similar on Niflheim,' Ali added. 'Back when I accompanied the Daibas. The place was supposedly scourd by dark matter - but we found the ruins covered from top to bottom in lush growth - gigantic plants and lichens, most of it bloody disturbing and freaky. In the night you'd swear they moved…' he shuddered. The man still looked pale after his close encounter, Daiba thought. Twitchy… and that wasn't like Ali - the man was usually a solid, immoveable rock in a crisis.

Professor Oedo gave the pirate a searching look. 'I really wish I could persuade you to join my team, Doctor Jones. A man with your experience would be more than welcome - hell, if you were prepared to lead on an expedition to Niflheim, you could write your own cheque…'

'I left that behind years ago, Prof,' Ali replied gruffly. 'Ain't plannin' on putting myself back in harness anytime soon. Besides, there's the little matter of piracy…'

Oedo shrugged with a faked nonchalance that suggested the matter wasn't closed. 'The offer remains open, Ali. And whatever your reasons for joining Harlock, that was under a now defunct regime - and the Arcadia operates mostly in Alliance space - no crimes have been recorded in the space controlled by Destiny…'

Harlock, Kei and Selen all snorted at the same time and Daiba had to bite back a laugh at the looks which passed between the three.

'Mostly.' Harlock deadpanned. Oki sniggered and Oedo rolled his eyes and sighed.

'I didn't hear that…'

'Moving on…' Harlock strode forwards and all eyes were fixed on the tall pirate, who made a surprisingly imposing figure in the gravity cloak. Something about the way the heavy, leather-like
mantle swirled around him seemed to darken the light around him, making him seem taller, darker and a lot less accessible than Daiba usually saw his cousin. He shivered even though the room was warm.

'Whilst I'm happy not to lose one of my oldest friends to you, Professor, you do raise a valid point. We could use an expedition to Niflheim to check out the situation. There's a relationship between Niflheim and this species. Couldn't hurt to find out a bit more from that end - especially since they seem to be capable of neutralising our dark matter weapons and self-repair.'

'I can't spare a ship…' Oedo replied thoughtfully. 'Though I could let you have a few people,'

'I have ships,' Selen replied quietly, from her seat in a corner.

'I don't mind taking the 7th Star,' Blaze added. He smiled at Harlock. 'She's small but quick - it's not far from here to Niflheim, we could make a decent survey and still be back in a month.'

Harlock nodded gratefully. 'I wouldn't have put you on the spot…'

Blaze's smile widened. 'Hell - try to stop me - dad used to tell me so much about the things you two got up to. Be a nice change from trading…'

'Smuggling!' Three pirates, one SDF captain and the Professor and the speaker's elder brother and mother all chimed in. Blaze flipped them a finger.

'You'll need a technical team,' Oedo pointed out. 'I have…'

'I can act as archeologist,' Daiba piped up, surprising himself with the offer. All eyes turned to look at him. Flushing, he continued: 'I studied with my dad when we were there - and mom. Can't bring much to the Arcadia's battle, but maybe I can be more use there. I have all of my parents' records as well…' he offered as an added incentive.

Blaze and Harlock both gave him approving nods and inwardly he glowed.

'You'll need a geologist,' Ali growled. 'Fine. I'm in.'

'You don't have to…' Kei began, softly. Ali shook his head.

'Nah. Someone needs to keep an eye on the fry here. And you need someone who knows the place. Earth only knows what Oedo's clodhoppers will do trampling all over stuff.'

'No offence, I'm sure,' the bearded scientist murmured. 'Any other volunteers?'

Meg's hand shot up, closely followed by Niobe's and Zack's. 'We have specialities that can help,' Meg said. 'Besides, Captain - you offered us a bit of shore leave…' she added sweetly, looking at Harlock as she said it.

Harlock dipped his head to hide a smile. 'I meant rest, not more adventures…' His eye swept over the group of youngsters - though Zack, at twenty four, was the same age he'd been when he'd taken on the mantle of Harlock - then he nodded. 'I'll detail a couple of men to the team. At the very least you should take Maji - next to Yattaran he's the best equipped to make head or tails of any Nibelung tech.' He paused before Oedo could break in and raised a hand to forestall a question. 'And no, you can't have my Yattaran - he wouldn't go anyway. Not one for leaving the ship unless you force him off at gunpoint.'

'You'd know,' Ali snarked. Kei thumped him on the arm.
'What did we say about harping on about that incident?' she smiled sweetly at him. 'That was over twelve years ago!' 

'Incident, she says… I've still got a lump on my head where some overly enthusiastic trooper slammed a rifle butt into it on the way to the brig,' Ali muttered. He bent down to show her, ruffling his hair to part it behind his left ear. 'Look…' 

'I'll give you a matching one the other side if you don't shut up,' Harlock growled. Ali straightened up and flashed his captain a beatific smile. 

'Remind me - which tall, blonde, blue-eyed pirate is he married to…?' Oki asked in a stage whisper, addressing Selen. The lovely auburn haired former princess of Lar Metal just rolled her eyes and shook her head to hide a smile. 'This is why we don't like dealing with civilians…' Oki added, with a sly smile. 

Ali sniggered. 'Oh puh-lease - you love us really…' 

'In the meantime, what plans do the rest of us follow?' Oki asked with what was beginning to sound like frazzled determination to stay on topic. He pointed to the still holographic display of the Mazone fleets, under which some wag had added the caption "not to scale" scrolling down the display. 'Five destinations, and we're going to be spread thinly…' 

'Take the sectors closest to major planetary populations first,' Harlock replied, pointing. 'The further out we can stop them, the better. If they'll listen to reason, all the better - but I'd argue against engaging until you know the extent of their offensive capability.' 

'Take the straw out of the egg, grandma…' Oki drawled. 'Some of us are professionals…' 

'And yet here I am, well ahead of you,' Harlock drawled back. Kei kicked him on the ankle and he pointedly stepped out of reach. 'These are refugees - how much of a military power they have we don't know. I'm not happy on the idea of shooting down civilian ships, but if they will not - or cannot - listen to reason and fall back, all bets are off.' 

'Oh, the irony…' Ali muttered under his breath. 'Wasn't that long ago we were the bad guys trying to wreck the universe and everyone wanted to blow us out of the sky…' 

'Why do you think I'd rather head this confrontation off if we can? The Arcadia will take the main fleet - the one which we think carries their leadership.' Harlock folded his arms and leaned back against the wall. 

'Cut the head off the hydra?' Oedo asked bluntly. 

'Just so.' 

'Why are we so against just wiping them out?' Meg asked. 'Look what they've done to humanity! More personally, to the Captain, and Daiba… and Ali…' 

'I'm not against it,' Harlock replied gently. 'But realistically, we don't have the firepower. If we have to engage, we will - but there are at least two factions that we know of, and there are other ways than blowing the shit out of anything that gets in our way to resolve situations…' 

'Yeah?' Ali asked, his smirk still plastered over his face. 'Since when?' 

'Since we had our arses handed to us by one small fleet and a tiny one man boarding pod,' Kei replied grimly. 'Unless we can regain our advantage in a fight, we're screwed. And the SDF ships
have even less of a chance than we do. They don't even have Dark Matter - we saw what the
mazone ships did to those Alliance vessels near Earth. They didn't stand a chance.'

'Against wooden spaceships?' Oki smiled grimly. 'I'd have laughed a few months ago.'

'Not so funny when you see it in action.' Ali shook his head. 'Damn thing heals almost as fast as we
do. And the way that stuff they infested Arcadia with got through the hull - even with the Dark
Matter…'

'Could the Dark Matter have expedited the infestation?' Oedo asked. 'Would we fare better with our
more conventional ships?'

Harlock's broad, cloak draped shoulders lifted and dropped. 'Possibly. My lab was badly damaged
by that "vine" and by our somewhat scorched Earth response to clear the ship so I've not been able
to do any tests. We were able to fight it off because of the Dark Matter, which kept the hull intact
long enough to save us - but yes, it fed on the dark matter as it spread. A moot point though - I don't
fancy sending a ship into battle to find out the hard way…'

'I might have a solution,' Oedo mused. He stroked his full beard reflectively. 'We have some
experimental unmanned drones - might be worth a brief engagement.'

Harlock gave him a sharp look. 'Your craft are not battleships, Professor - I had hoped you'd just be
able to provide some much-needed intel from a distance…'

'We're better protected than you might think, Harlock. After Doppler's repeated attacks on the
dockyards, we've been able to persuade the bean-counters to upgrade the specs for the new class of
ship. Jasdam won't be out of dry dock for a few more years, but in the meantime, we've a few aces
in our hand.'

Daiba tuned out a little as the conversation drifted onto the distribution and deployment of their
available resources. Battleships and space travel, whilst exciting enough in small doses, were of
little interest. I'd rather get up close and personal… turning those manipulative bitches into
something that would fit into an ashtray was satisfying - stand-offs at astronomical (literally…)
distance shooting at targets only your sensors could see - not so much.

'World's first Pirate-Archeologist, huh?' He turned his head to look at Ali, who was now leaning on
the wall next to him. Daiba nodded.

'Harlock's got more combat ready crew than he needs. Better than me, anyway. I can do more good
looking into my dad's work.' But he still fingered the smooth butt of his pistol as he spoke. Ali's
gaze dropped to follow the motion, and the older man's mouth pulled into a thin-lipped line.

'Doesn't stop you wanting a piece of them, does it?' He stared over Daiba's head, looking at the
small gathering around the table, talking animatedly and jabbing fingers at the holo displays. 'If
there's a solution to this weaponised vegetation thing they have going, it'll be on Niflheim. Until
we have that, going up against them is gonna be painful. Captain has the right of that.'

'Is that why you volunteered?' Daiba asked. Ali shrugged.

'Captain's right. Without the edge we get from Dark Matter, we're just a big all-you-can-eat buffet
to their biological weapons. Our tactics have always been based around the fact we can take more
damage than the other guys, and dish it out. We found that out the hard way facing some of Loki's
nastier presents to the Machinners during the war - we're so used to punching outside our weight
class it's a bit of a shock when someone hits back and gives us a bloody nose… can't say I like the
idea of going off without the Arcadia wrapped around me, but…'

'But - a geologist?' Daiba hadn't meant it to come out quite so incredulous, but it seemed Ali, for once, wasn't in the mood to take offence.

'Kinda. Sorta. I can study the rock formations and find us some likely sites for one - for another, I know what to look for in the fossil record. Earth's a bust, after what the Arcadia did to it during the Homecoming War, but Niflheim didn't take anywhere near as much damage. Plus, I've been on a few digs - always work out here for a guy who can date what you're digging through and operate a laser digger without damaging what you're trying to get to…'

'He's not being entirely truthful,' Kei said out of the blue. She wandered over to stand next to Ali and leaned her elbow on his shoulder. 'Our resident bad-ass here actually began his degree in archaeology and ancient languages; he only switched to paleontology and geology for the cash...' she flicked the tip of his ear and got a growl for her troubles.

'Blasting the shit out of rocks pays better,' Ali muttered defensively, batting her hand away as he might an irritating fly. 'Try making a living on an assistant professor's wage in a dead discipline sometime… especially in a galaxy where the only civilisations we ever found - apart from the Nibelung - were only founded a few hundred years ago.'

'Do you even need me along?' Daiba asked, feeling suddenly like a fifth wheel. Kei gave him a reassuring smile.

'You know your father's research better than anyone. I don't think you'll be just tagging along, Tadashi. Oedo has some good people, but you, Ali and Maji will be looking for more specific data - finding us a weapon, or a way to negate that space-vine. By the way - can you read Nibelung?'

'I'm rusty, but I can brush up.'

'Meg and I can get you back to speed - thanks to Mimay we speak and read it pretty well,' Ali offered. At the youth's questioning eyebrow he grinned. 'Long dark nights in between planets and fuck all else to do - unless you fancy trying your hand at beating Yattaran at Shogi…'

'She likes speaking in her own language,' Meg said softly. 'I guess when you're the only one left around of your race it gets lonely.'

The older men and Selen had pretty much closed in around the table, voices animated and only occasionally raised. Kei noticed the direction of Daiba's gaze and smiled. 'Let them thrash out the details. It's what they do best. Ali - stay with them. Don't let him over-commit to anything - if the words "I promise" or any variant look as though they're coming out of his mouth, sit on him!'

They shared a knowing smile, and Ali nodded. Kei swept a glance over the youths in front of her. 'You four, however, need feeding. Anita's set up round back with the small ones and Tadashi, so I suggest you make a bee-line for the food before this lot realise they're missing out.'

Niobe and Zack took the opportunity to flee, but Daiba hung back, reluctant to miss out on what might be being discussed. Meg, he noticed, didn't look to be in any rush either, but the tiny girl did give his arm a tug when he hesitated.

'You'll find out later,' she whispered in his ear. 'C'mon.'

'Afraid you'll miss dinner?'
Meg smiled up at him. 'With the portions Anita serves up? Please. She always over-caters. Well. She would if some of the crew weren't born piggies…' He allowed himself to be led away, with a helpless glance back over one shoulder. His gaze caught Harlock's, that singular hazel eye watching him with what looked like approval. With an almost infinitesimal one sided smile, the pirate turned away, but Daiba held himself a little straighter. He'd been afraid his decision to latch onto the fact-finding mission might have somehow annoyed his captain… but then, he'd always talked about being true to yourself, so…

Distracted, he allowed a chattering Meg to lead him towards the back yard, and Anita's impromptu kitchen.
Chapter 26

Cleo watched unhappily as Cassandra held forth on the floor of the chamber. The commander flitted across the grass of the clearing, almost like a time-lapse recording of a bramble scrambling for the light on a forest floor; clinging, grasping, twitching its way over under or through anything in its path, and to hell with anything that got scratched in its wake.

Yes… that was it exactly… a common, thorn covered bramble. With sour fruit. Cleo tapped her fingers on the rough bark of the low branch she sat on, ignoring the puzzled frowns on the otherwise bland faces of the sisters next to her.

'Be still, Cleome…' Tessius' voice whispered in her left ear. 'You'll draw far too much attention…'

'She's shrill, and spiky, and far too fond of the sound of that screeching monotone she calls a voice,' Cleo hissed back. But she switched from tapping to playing with the folds of her chiton.

'There are still far too many incidents on the ships - insubordination and rebellion are running rampant,' Cassandra continued. 'The Queen will not stand for it any longer. Our goal is so close now that no dissension will be tolerated.'

'Just how do you plan on enforcing that?' Tessius asked, ignoring Cleo's frantic attempts to tug her chiton to make her sit down. 'Do you really have the numbers to force your will upon every ship in the fleet? We're spread so thinly even in this fleet - what of the others, flung even further afield? What news…'

'You are tolerated at these meetings because of your past friendship with the Queen, Tessius,' Cassandra snapped spitefully. 'Do not presume to question her will!'

'I have a place at these meetings because I represent a sizeable proportion of our population,' Tessius replied, her voice smooth and soft and melodic. 'The civilian population you and yours are charged with protecting, not oppressing.'

'The civilian population should be thankful they still have a place in this,' Cassandra sneered. 'What possible use do they have anymore, unless it is to be decorative? They cannot operate the ships, or fight… like the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin…'

Cleo couldn't resist. 'Did I just hear you quote a human poet?' she asked, innocently. 'And out of context…' Beside her, Tessius coughed back a laugh. Cassandra looked as though she was about to burst. 'Oh, don't get your roots in a tangle, commander.' Cleo waved a hand airily, knowing full well it would inflame the already bad-tempered woman.

'We exist to protect our sisters In the Green. If we forget that, we lose ourselves. And then what are we? Human women living in symbiosis with the Mazone? Drifting without purpose as well as without place in the universe.' Tessius added. 'You exist to protect that which you now say you see no purpose for - and day by day you sound like those you purport to despise so much - I have to ask, Cassandra - which part of yourself do you hate more - the Flesh or the Green?'

'What I hate is being bound by archaic traditions which serve no purpose,' Cassandra snapped back. 'The vapid apathy possessing the Melia and their kind is an affront to all of us - why do we waste our time and our ships protecting those who do nothing to deserve it?'

'It is not, and never has been, your place to question this,' Tessius snapped. She shrugged off Cleo's little tug on her sleeve. 'Once we reach our destinations, the Mazone will spread across these new
worlds and we will know a time of -'

'You pitiful idealist!' Cassandra strode forward until she stood in front of Tessius, sneering up at the taller woman. 'You'd have us return to some mythical golden age that never existed except inside your head? Peaceful co-existence? There can be no such thing whilst humans survive!'

'We are partly human,' Cleo interjected gently. Cassandra's sneer grew bigger.

'I don't need reminding of that fact - but our blood runs green, not red. We are so much more than they are…'

'Really?' Tessius shrugged, a gesture she knew full well would infuriate the commander. 'You're starting to sound just like them. Talking about control, and violence, and intolerance for any opinion but your own. Where will it stop, Cassandra? If you silence all the voices which cry out against you, what remains for you to protect? What will you be once you have become the very thing you say you hate the most?'

'You can find yourself amongst the first of those to be disciplined for insubordination, Tessius,' Cassandra snarled. Cleo took a step forwards to mediate between the two.

A flash of rainbow light caught the attention of all three, and they dropped to one knee with equal alacrity, facing the hologrammatic image which flickered into being in front of them. The tall, black-haired figure of Queen Rafflesia stared down at their bowed heads.

'Rise, daughters. And cease this bickering amongst yourselves. Tessius - '

'Majesty…'

'Keep the Ampeloi and their kin quiet. I know this journey has been hard on them, but it is only a matter of weeks before we reach our destination. Less than half an old Earth year before we can restore our race to glory. Cassandra enforces my will, old friend. I would not have you at each other's throats. Her image turned to Cassandra. 'You, commander - I have a mission for. Make your way to the four-dimensional projection chamber. We have much to discuss.' The rainbow haloed hologramme winked out, leaving the three mazone looking puzzled. The frown on Cassandra's brow now approached the proportions of a crevice, Cleo thought with an uncharitable irritation she considered chiding herself for mentally. Briefly.

The commander strode out of the chamber with a disdainful sniff and no attempt at politeness. Left alone, Tessius gave her friend a concerned look. 'A mission? And requiring the projection chamber? What can she have in mind that requires such a distance? Unless…'

'Unless it involves liaising ahead of the fleet?' Cleo replied. She tapped one long finger against her bare arm. 'Or with one of the other convoys?'

'There are agents imbedded amongst the human colonies,' Tessius mused. 'Has there been any contact?'

'Only from the one in the Alliance Government, but I've not been privy to the communiques. That would be Cassandra…' Cleo's eyes narrowed as she stared down the avenue Cassandra had taken. 'I'm not sure I like the idea of letting her off the leash.'

'Look on the bright side,' Tessius replied dryly. 'At least she won't be causing any headaches here for a while if the Queen sends her away…'

'Famous last words,' Cleo muttered darkly, earning her a startled look from her old friend, before
the two of them headed back towards their own bespoke glades within the Nemeton.

Had she realised at the time that it had been so quiet in the house when she walked into the hallway, closing the front door behind her? Or was that something her mind added later, fifteen years after the fact, trying to tell her that she must have noticed something - anything - out of the ordinary that day.

'Malo? Darling?' She placed her black bag down on the table and removed her top coat, placing it on the wall hook next to her husband's black duster. 'Lyra?'

No reply, from either her husband or their daughter. Puzzled, but unafraid...

Unafraid? Then why was she so cold… so very, very cold. It had been warm in the house, despite the cold outside.

... she walked towards the open door of the parlour, relieved as she stood in the doorway to see Malo in his chair, his back to her so that only his dark hair could be seen above the high-backed chair, and their ten year old daughter playing on the rug, only her legs visible from where she stood.

'Sorry I'm late...' she began. Malo's head began to turn, and suddenly the inner voice was screaming at her please don't… don't turn round… not this time… not this...

The blank oval that turned to face her was devoid of any human features, containing only a single circular gauge, like a huge cyclopean eye filling what should have been a face.

'Welcome home, darling,' said her husband's voice, issuing from a speaker somewhere in that nightmarish void. She stumbled back, clinging to the architraving. Nononono… How could you how could you?

'Lyra? Lyra? LYRA?' she screamed, not wanting to believe he could have done it, after all they discussed. But sure he wouldn't - couldn’t…?

Lyra stood up, her back to her mother, and she stared in relief at the long fall of her little girl’s black hair, now reaching her waist. Lyra turned to face her, and the relief became a sigh as she stared at her little girl's familiar face, her lovely smile, her sparkling dark eyes...

'Mummy!' Lyra ran towards her, her arms outstretched, and she sank down to one knee to catch her in her arms.

Just as Lyra reached her, in the second before she embraced her daughter, the laughing face slid off, revealing only the perfect, mechanical whirring of hundreds of clockwork complications.

She screamed.


Sobbing, Doc laid her head on Ali's bare shoulder, and let the burly pirate hold in her a bear hug, one hand awkwardly rubbing her sweat-dampened back. It was, as usual, a couple of minutes before she could compose herself enough to sit back up and reach for the bottle on the bedside table. She poured a large measure and gulped it down in one swig, ignoring the insistent meowing and headbutts from the tortoiseshell cat on her sheet-clad lap.
'Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you,' she said eventually. Ali just pushed the damp hair back from her face and shrugged.

'Wasn't sleeping.' He took the tumbler from her fingers and placed it on the table. 'You know, unless you're storing your memories in what's left of your liver, that stuff ain't going to help…'

'Fat lot you know,' she mumbled. 'Gods, why is it that it never plays out the way it did in real life…?'

'Coz dreams are shambolic,' he offered. She stared at him.

'Don't you mean symbolic?' she asked tartly.

Ali grinned. She smiled back wanly. 'Right. Ali-the-philosopher strikes again, huh?'

Mii's insistent demands for attention finally got through and Luna scratched the little cat behind the ears and under the chin, the little body vibrating with an ear-shattering purr. Little paws padded on her lap and she winced as tiny claws went straight through the thin sheet and into her thigh. Ali lifted the cat off her and placed Mii on the edge of the bed instead, where the cat gave him a disdainful look, then settled down to wash her tail.

'You know… I've got something better for what ails you…'

'The remains of that bottle of Laphroaig?' she asked hopefully.

He snorted. 'At the rate you guzzle? Hell no.' He trailed a finger over her far too prominent collarbone and down over one small breast, lingering with surprising delicacy as his thumb brushed the taut, proud nipple. 'A little bit of ol' Ali goes a long way…'

'Good job really,' she retorted tartly, with a pointed stare at his crotch.

'Awww… you know, I gotta say Lu, if you still think this is little you musta been real spoiled over the years…' he grinned at her and made the object of conversation bob up and down. 'Besides, it ain't always about what ya got…'

'After all these years, I still wonder how there's room in your quarters for you, me and your ego,' Luna laughed, falling easily into their usual pattern of banter. It was, as they both admitted, generally easier than - oh - actually facing what bothered you head on.

'And the cat,' Ali added, leaning forwards and scratching Mii under the chin. 'Can't forget the cat… Look - why not come with me this time? Bit of time off the ship won't hurt, and a change of scene would do you good…'

She shook her head. 'I'm a city girl at heart, Ali. You know this. All that jungle… wind, rain… I grew up in a city dome - I don't do weather. Or big scary trees you can't see through…' she shuddered. 'Even if I don't have the distraction of you…' she stopped and slapped at the hand trailing lazily up her inner thigh. 'Hey! Boundaries!'

He pantomimed a hurt look, staring at her with soulful blue eyes under thick lashes. 'Baby… after all this time I thought we didn't have any? Besides, Little Ali wants to get warm, and I know just the place…' His fingers ignored her censure and targeted one of her many ticklish spots, reducing her to frantic giggling contortions, before taking pity on her and pinning her to the bed (displacing one very annoyed cat) and showing her that he could, as always, provide a welcome distraction.
An hour or so later she sat on the edge of the bed pulling her silver-streaked dark hair into a ponytail and watched him as he lay back, arms behind his head and staring at the ceiling.

'Is it me who needs the company or you?' she asked softly. She reached over hand ran a hand down his chest, letting her fingers linger in the thick, wiry blond hairs that wound down in a trail from the patch between his nipples, past his belly button and down to the thicker thatch lower down. 'You've been tying yourself in knots since that Mazone did a number on you. It's not just about your brother, is it? Are you still worried about what you might have told it?'

A grunt was her only acknowledgement, and she sighed. 'What is it with you guys and the whole stoic grunting thing? Is there some macho code that you all sign when you join up?'

'I just can't grab hold of it, Lu. It's bugging me. It feels as though it was so bad I don't want to look at it, if you know what I mean? I don't wanna be responsible for hurting him, Lu. I'd follow Harlock into hell if he asked me - and that goes no bloody further…'

She yanked on a tuft of hair on his chest and smiled disarmingly at her when he yelped and glared at her. 'Heard it before, lover. Though you're usually drunker when you start getting this maudlin…'

'Yeah? Well if someone had left me anything to drink, I might well be deeper in my cups…' he retorted. She blew a raspberry at him, startling the cat, who jumped off the bed with an aggrieved hiss. 'Can't say I'm looking forward to revisiting that planet either. Last time was no picnic… There's something creepy about the place, and it ain't just the tree-high moss that makes you feel like an ant creeping through the undergrowth. Same kinda creepy the plant-things give me, when I think about it. Something old… too old, if you know what I mean? Like it just crept out of the primordial slime and don't like these multi-celled upstarts walkin' around.'

She stroked his arm lightly, feeling the goosebumps on his skin under the wiry gold hairs. 'Something long past its time?' she asked. She shuddered. 'I spent an hour there when we picked you up, sorting out Professor Daiba's team's little rashes and ailments. I needed a shower when I got back to the ship - like I'd gotten something squirming under my skin…'

Ali nodded. 'Couldn't shake that something just walked over my grave feeling the whole two months I was there. But for some reason the Profs and little Tadashi didn't seem to feel it. Maybe it's just me…?'

'Or maybe you've spent too long on this ship,' Luna said softly. 'There's a strange interaction between living things and the dark matter. Not just the physical component that makes so many of the longer serving crew resistant to injury and medication - something gets inside your head. Maybe you just have a deeper connection, given how the planet was so closely linked to the Nibelung? You are one of the longest serving crew after all, aren't you?'

Ali nodded. 'Umm. After Yattaran and Maji, but a few years before Kei. Franz started before Kei… so did Martinez, I think.' He stared past her shoulder absently.

'You could talk to Mimay…'

He shuddered. 'Hell no. She can creep me out faster than those vegetables. She might be more approachable these days, but there's still something damned inhuman lurking behind those lovely big eyes. And it ain't totally benign, no matter what she looks like. Harlock's got a tiger on a leash, not a kitty-cat. Thankfully the boy's got enough sense to know it - I'm not so sure The Captain did…'
'From what I've heard and seen, I suspect he just thought he could handle it,' Luna snorted. 'It's blinding obvious who Patient Zero for the rampant testosterone infection on this ship was…'

The comment raised a snigger from Ali. 'Never thought of it that way…'

She patted his cheek. 'Of course you didn't, lover - you're a man…'

The shrill ring of the alarm on his console interrupted any further reply. With a sigh Ali broke away and slid over to the side of the bed, swinging his legs reluctantly out from under the sheet and wincing as bare feet made contact with the cold floor. 'Shit. They're playing my tune. Gotta run, Doc.' He grabbed a towel and headed for his shower cubicle. 'Catch up before we ship out later?'

The water was running and the frosted door shut before she could answer.

Daiba shifted his duffle bag from his left shoulder to his right, then back again. A futile gesture, since it wasn't the damned bag that made him feel lopsided and off balance. He stared at the ramp of the Seventh Star, the edge touching his toes, but couldn't bring himself to step foot on the rubberised matting.

'It's okay, you know.' Harlock's quiet voice next to his left ear murmured. 'Doesn't mean you can't come back to Arcadia. It's just a few weeks.'

'That obvious?' he muttered in reply. He turned to look at his captain-stroke-cousin, who offered a reassuring lop-sided smile. 'Yeah, it does kind of feel as though I'm being ungrateful, just skipping out like this.'

A shrug, almost imperceptibly lifting the heavy black cloak that lay over the older man's shoulders and trailed almost to the ground. 'You stepped forward for a job that needs doing - I'm proud of you. You've come a long way in less than a year. There was a time I was afraid we might have lost you for good.'

And by "lost", Daiba realised he didn't mean physically. He smiled back at Harlock. 'You and me both. But the Arcadia feels like home now. Walking away… it's tougher than I thought.'

Harlock rested one gloved hand on his shoulder. 'It can start to feel like a refuge, after a while. Sometimes it's a good thing to walk away - a refuge can quickly become a crutch, or a shell - it becomes too easy to just rely on it, or to pull the metaphorical covers over your head and tell the world to go hang…'

'Huh. Hence Tabito and Deathshadow Island?' Daiba asked with sudden insight.

Harlock inclined his head slightly. 'Just so.' But he looked past the youth as he spoke, a wider smile spreading over his face. Daiba turned to look in the same direction, and saw the twins and Taro running towards them, waving and shouting.

'That refuge must look terrifyingly tempting at times,' he said quietly, so that only Harlock could hear. The sharp look from his visible eye that accompanied the almost inaudible huff in reply was all the confirmation he needed, as the three small boys charged up and demanded hugs.

'I'll be back,' he promised. Mamoru's arms had a death grip around his neck that he gently disengaged from, almost losing his balance as he tried to stand upright again from squatting down to the boys' height.

'Papa?' Wattaru stared expectantly at his father, and Harlock ruffled his hair gently.
'Blaze will be going with them, Wattaru. And Ali.'

'Yeah - your favourite chew toy will be just fine,' Daiba added with a wink. Wattaru looked baffled, but Taro and Mamoru sniggered at the comment, and he winked at them. All three ran off to say their goodbyes to Ali and Maji - arriving with three crewmen in tow - Cai, and two Daiba didn't recognise - a dark skinned man of middle height and years introduced as Greg, and a tall slim young man perhaps a year or two younger than Zack, whose golden hair topped a face which was a vivid blue.

'Don't stare,' Harlock muttered into his ear. 'He's from a planet in the Greater Magellanic Cloud - some kind of adaptation to the planet's conditions. Nice people - but the planet leaves a lot to be desired.' He raised a hand in greeting. 'Ben - I didn't think you were going to make it back in time!'

'Almost didn't, Captain - but thanks for the leave.' The man shyly approached them, and Daiba tried to remember his manners. But hell… blue…?

'Daiba - this is Ben. He's another archaeologist by trade, so you'll have someone to talk to - he's familiar with the Nibelung ruins and culture. Ben - Tadashi Daiba.'

Daiba took the offered blue hand and tried not to seem too concerned. The blue skin felt totally normal, palms dry and warm.

'Don't worry. Everyone freaks out,' the young pirate offered, with a smile. 'I'm used to it. I read all your father's papers by the way - the guy's a legend in the field! I'd love to compare notes if you…' he trailed off. 'Hell, Kei warned me not to be too effusive, and I'm off already…'

'It's fine. Really.' Daiba tried for a reassuring smile and hoped it didn't come out resembling a snarl. From the beaming smile he got in reply, he could only assume he succeeded.

'If he bothers you, just tell him to sit,' Ali offered as he strode past. 'We love our Benjy but he does kind of bounce a lot when he's excited…' Ben ducked the attempt to mess with his hair and mock growled at Ali, who laughed it off and marched up the ramp, narrowly missing Blaze coming the other way.

'Ali - who else are you taking off me?' Harlock shouted after him.

'Just Roderick - he's sorting out the vehicles,' Ali called back without looking round. 'And if you see him before I do, tell him I want my lucky red sweater back, the thieving bastard!'

Blaze shot Harlock a sympathetic look as the pirate placed a hand to his right temple. 'You want something for that headache?'

'Nothing works, usually,' Harlock replied. 'That's why we thought we'd try giving him to you for a few weeks…'

Blaze sniggered and Ali's voice floated back with an "I heard thaaaaat…" as he vanished into the ship. 'Why me?' he asked plaintively.

Harlock raised his visible eyebrow. 'You volunteered…'

'Yes - for Niflheim. Putting up with Ali for a month on the other hand…' he shook his head and sighed theatrically. 'What was I thinking?'

'You do know I want him back, right? And in one piece?'
Blaze rolled his eyes. 'Oh. Now you're just making it difficult…' but neither man could keep a
straight face and Daiba felt a smile creep over his own features as the two shared a laugh. Blaze
then turned his attention to Daiba. 'Ready? The ship's a little small…' A snort from Harlock who
then aimed for and missed an innocent look when Blaze glared at him. 'So you'll be sharing…'

'With me,' Meg said, appearing at their side like a pink-clad elf. She grinned up at Daiba. 'Rod and
Greg tend to tag-team, Benjy's straight but waay too talkative. Zack and Niobe tend to cling
together, Maji hardly ever speaks off duty and Ali's a grumpy bastard and a slob, so I figured I'd be
a better choice.' She slapped him on the back and sashayed up the ramp with what looked like a
brave attempt to mimic Kei's boner-inducing hip swaying grace. Torn between embarrassment and
amusement Daiba didn't dare look at the two older men, and thankfully they both took pity on him
and said nothing.

Amazing how silence could be deafening… He took his leave and followed Meg up the ramp with
as much dignity as he could muster. Most of which vanished quickly when he overheard a familiar
bellow from further inside the ship: 'You're sharing with who?!

He could have sworn his normally so reserved captain-stroke-cousin actually giggled.

Watching Daiba edge nervously past a growling Ali, Harlock bit back a grin. Still, the kid held his
ground and just shrugged when Ali waggled a finger under his nose and told him to keep his hands
- and other body parts - to himself.

He almost lost it when Daiba quite clearly and selling a put-upon demeanor for all it was worth
asked what Ali planned to do to protect him from Meg's wandering hands, leaving the older pirate
spluttering and Meg with a fit of the giggles.

'It's going to be a bloody circus on board,' Blaze muttered. 'How the hell do you cope with this on a
daily basis?'

'I don't. That's what I keep Kei and Yattaran around for,' Harlock replied smoothly. 'Kei used to say
she imagined it was like trying to keep forty-plus toddlers in line. Until she actually had toddlers.
Now she says she'd prefer forty toddlers - they're better behaved…'

'Ever considered reviewing that recruitment policy? Must be a bucketload of well-behaved, order-
following ex-fleet itching for a life of adventure…' Blaze suggested.

'Tried it. Funnily enough after they get their sea legs they all seem to suffer from the same
affliction as the rest,' Harlock replied dryly. Blaze didn't even bother to hide the snigger. He leaned
against the hydraulic lift for the ramp nonchalantly.

'So - Oedo's gone. Oki lifts off tomorrow - when were you planning on taking off?'

'Our window is approximately six days - assuming Kei and Yattaran did their sums right, that's
when the group we plan to look in on are scheduled to drop out of IN-SKIP, Otherwise it'll be like
hunting for a needle in a haystack. Too early and they might scan us - too late we'll never find
them.'

Blaze smiled as he watched Harlock's gaze turn to follow the boys playing happily nearby. 'Doesn't
hurt to have a bit of time with the family either, right?'

Harlock smiled. 'No. I'd leave Kei with them if I thought she'd stay, but she insists on making sure I
stay out of trouble. It tears her apart sometimes though - somedays I wish we could lead that
normal life…'
Blaze snorted. 'Seriously? You'd be bored in a week. Not with your kids, mind you - but the two of you have the Adventure Bug as dad used to call it. Him and mum were the same.'

Harlock turned back to face him and gave him an appraising stare. 'I never asked - but did it bother you - you and Marin, that is - growing up with your parents always off fighting?'

'Worried that your tykes might be upset? We missed them, sure - but like you and Kei, they were always careful to make time for us when it was safe, and make sure we knew they loved us. Sometimes, yeah, I envy our Baby Sibs having them around more than we did, but we didn't lack for anything and we didn't turn out so bad, did we?' He stared over Harlock's head, to a point before the horizon where a lone, man-made hill stood out against the skyline. 'I miss him now though,' he said softly. Harlock placed a hand on his friend's arm, but said nothing.

They parted with a handshake and a wave a few minutes later, and Harlock watched the little ship take off from a safe distance, the dust laden breeze caused by the engines whirling round him, causing both his cloak and his fine hair to flutter dramatically as the Seventh Star sprang from the ground and into the skies, quickly dwindling to a tiny dot and then to nothing.
Chapter 27

Niflheim

The *Seventh Star* came out of IN-SKIP outside the orbit of the ninth moon of the fourth planet. On the bridge, Ali watched from the back of the cramped space, leaning against the rear wall, arms folded over his broad chest. In front of him, a single chair behind a busy-looking console currently held the form of the ship's captain, only his dark hair visible above the high-backed chair. Less than a dozen yards in front of this were a long bank of seven stations underneath the main viewscreen which currently held a split-screen of four views - the planet ahead of them, wreathed in smoke and blue fire; the two suns that swung around each other in an eternal dance - Árvakr, a red giant, and Alsviðr, a dark star whose tidal effects pulled the planets orbiting the pair into elaborate ellipses.

The fourth image was a close-up of the surface as the unmanned probe they'd launched earlier just after starting shedding delta-v skimmed the lower atmosphere sending back readings as its orbit slowly decayed.

'Ladies and germs, for your viewing pleasure, we have an artist's impression of the system we are approaching. Please note this is *not* to scale…' Ali quipped.

'You know, you were cracking that one before I hit puberty,' Zack pointed out from his perch near the scanner console.

'Everyone's a critic…'

'Well I thought it was funny,' Blaze said quietly from the captain's chair.

Ali beamed and moved closer to the captain's chair, halting next to the young man occupying it. 'You know, I could grow to like you, Junior,' he replied brightly.

'Just when I was thinking I could tolerate you, Jones, you just have to spoil it, don't you?' Blaze rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the screen. 'Status?'

'Right on the nail, captain.' The young woman who spoke did so without turning round, her dark hair only just visible underneath a close-fitting cap. Like the rest of the crew she wore loose-fitting coveralls.

'Meg asked. She peered at the screen. 'Is that really a double-star?'

Blaze answered her. 'You're looking at binary star system KX-568TN1. Two close-orbiting stars with five planets in a circumbinary orbit, all in a single accretion plane. The outer two are giants with habitable moons. The Habitable Zone is occupied by the planet identified as Niflheim. The inner pair are dwarf planets.

'Skoll and Hati are the little 'uns. The giants are Fafnir and Fasolt,' Ali said under his breath. 'I wouldn't get too close to the big guys - there used to be a massive Dyson ring in orbit that broke up around seventy-five years ago. Bits of it still rain down on Niflheim every two years or so when it passes through the debris field.'

'How big are we talking?' Blaze asked, leaning towards the burly pirate. Ali shrugged.
'They cannibalised about eight of the larger rocky moons of the giants and an asteroid belt to make it - do the math...' He grinned. 'Yattaran and Maji were like a couple of schoolboys in a sweetshop over that baby… Apparently the Nibelung cracked the practical applications of acoustic force field construction in microgravity very early on - they built multiple habitats in-system. Called it Asgardr.' He grunted and turned to glare at the slim dark-haired pirate with a neat goatee who'd just punched him on the arm. 'Don't give me that, Maji - you and Lard-ass almost wrecked Bullet Two on a jaunt out to take a look at the wreckage. I'm still amazed the Captain didn't ground you for a week.'

'Didn't ground you when you took the drill out and got it stuck under a rockfall, did he?' Maji retorted mildly.

'Moving on…' Blaze interjected smoothly, with a "spare-me" intake of breath following. 'The probe shows plenty of plant growth down there, and a breathable atmosphere. I'm assuming since the Daiba Expedition lived there for several months at a time we won't need to worry too much about the environment?

Daiba stepped forwards at this, the youth strolling quietly over to stand beside Ali and Maji. 'Depends on what you mean by "safe". I wouldn't drink the water - a lot of that vegetation is toxic and that seeps into the water table. Likewise although the dark matter contamination is almost gone from the atmosphere, it has seeped into the bedrock and the vegetation sucks it up like a sponge. We can't eat or drink anything except what we take with us, but you only need basic environment suits - the air's breathable. Humid though - where we're heading the climate is tropical - sticky and hot.'

'Gravity's about 0.87 Earth normal,' Ali added. 'The core isn't as dense as Earth. Likewise the magnetic field is weaker. It's also tide-locked with one face on Árvakr. Or it was… readings we took last time suggest the "accident" shifted the orbit - over the past couple of hundred years it's shifted in its orbit, and seems to be getting unstable - Alsviðr's influence is getting stronger, and the planet is suffering from stresses causing massive crustal displacement, resulting in regular earthquakes…'


'Let's just stick to generic terminology kid. No need to get fancy - we all know what we mean.' He stabbed a gloved finger in the direction of the screen. 'With that and the regular fireworks display from the debris field, it can get a bit hairy down there. Hopefully we have a reasonable window - Maji calculated that we've got about three weeks before the fiery rainy season starts. Any longer than that and your shields will take a pounding.'

Blaze gave him a thoughtful nod. 'Hopefully we'll find something before then. Daiba - your father's notes suggest that the area we need to search in is still mostly above ground?'

Daiba nodded. 'The Scientific section of the citadel was located in one purpose-built facility, covering several square miles. Most areas tend to be multi-purpose, because they were social people - working, sleeping, mingling - they didn't draw the distinction we do for the most part, but for exceptional studies they did need bespoke accommodation.' He walked over to the sensor station and asked the young man seated there to roll back the recording of the probe's flyover. 'Here - this tower would be a good starting point - it marked the centre of the facility. A few miles to the west you can see that the vegetation is thinner, due to the contamination of the testing grounds and the remains of a spaceport. Dad thought this was where the weapons testing took place - and the data Mimay could supply supports this.'

'With a weak EM field communications will be difficult on the ground,' Blaze mused. 'We'll send
down a short-range warp radio.'

'Well it's either that or two cans on a string,' Ali quipped. 'I ended up having to set fire to a stretch of forest to get the attention of a search party one time…'

'That wasn't comms problems,' Maji added in his soft voice. 'That was because we just couldn't be arsed to look for you…' His neatly trimmed beard didn't even come close to hiding his sly smile and he ignored Ali's mock growl.

'It's also dim.' Daiba stepped in to stave off the posturing. 'Low light levels from the star mean it's almost always twilight even on the "daylight" side. That, plus the cover of the vegetation means most of the time you'll need lights to work.'

'Which side are we landing?' Blaze asked. He turned to face the youth. 'Harlock said you knew the expedition location?'

Daiba leaned over the drone technician and asked quietly for a view, which was displayed on the overhead screen. 'There,' he pointed. 'Just outside that lichen forest near the edge of the daylight line. The darkside was occupied at one time, but the main continent there was spotted with the remains of what Mimay told my father were seriously ancient habitations. Apparently they liked the night, but the continent had some freaky lifeforms and they eventually abandoned that hemisphere millennia ago rather than slaughter the creatures there.'

'Meaning it's going to be gloomy, soggy and there might still be things down there that could eat us?' Meg asked. 'Joy... remind me again why I thought volunteering would be fun?'

Daiba pulled a face. 'Erm… "eat" covers a bit of ground… apparently some of the native lifeforms feed not so much on flesh, but on more aethereal fare, as dad put it.'

'Or to put it in terms the rest of us would understand,' Ali broke in, 'They can suck your brain out with a straw.'

'Dean, that bit of "aethereal" did you miss?' Daiba shot back.

'Fine "mind", "soul"... take your pick. However I should add that in two visits I've yet to see anything living that I didn't arrive with - horrific though one or two of them can be when you share a tent with 'em on a dark night, and in my experience most nasty beasties don't last long faced with either a blaster or a nice big rock.'

'Relax,' Daiba told him. 'The only things going bump in the night dayside will probably be whoever's in the next tent - and then only if you're unfortunate enough to be bivvied next to Zack and Nibby…'

Even the Star's crew laughed at the red faces of the blushing couple, and Blaze shook his head slowly. 'Seriously - how does Harlock get anything done on that ship? All joking aside people, you know the drill. My crew will shift between ground and ship on a three day rotation. Harlock's people - you know what you're looking for, so just ask for whatever help you need. We'll land long enough to drop you and your gear, and after that we'll take up an orbit on overwatch.' He stood up and turned to Ali. 'Harlock tells me you're in charge on the ground, Jones - just let my people know where you want everything.'

'We're packed and ready to go, mate. Just open the door and we can roll out,' Ali replied with a grin. He rubbed his hands together in glee. 'Cap'n was right - a bit of extended shore leave should be just the thing. This oughta be fun!'
"Fun" he said…' Daiba glared at Ali across the domed "tent" they shared, the light from outside the translucent pod wavering and diffuse in Niflheim's crepuscular, moisture laden atmosphere. 'Three days of rain and I'm sure there are mushrooms growing in my dirty laundry…'

'Be thankful it's just your laundry basket,' Ali growled back at him. 'I'm starting to think I've got something growing in my boxers…' He scratched at his crotch almost absently, as though even the suggestion was enough to cause an itch.

'Firstly, that's way too much information and secondly, I'm sure Doc gave you a cream for it. She was rather vocal in reminding you about the fungal infections you and some of the crew came back with last time…' Meg muttered, huddled next to Daiba on the folding bed they both sat on, as she stared gloomily at the rain that pattered constantly on the flexi-poly surface of the tent they shared with the Arcadia's gunner and the currently out-on-business Blaze. 'I'd take a wander over to Zack and Niobe but that rain isn't just water, is it? I've never seen black rain before…'

The pale surface of the twenty-foot dome was streaked on the outside by continual runnels of the dark, semi-viscous fluid that Daiba had referred to as "rain". In places it had begun to stain the ivory surface a dingy grey, obscuring the view - such as it was. Even before the heavens had opened the translucent material had only offered a view of a flat, empty plain and three other domes like it, and the nearby lichen canopy that reared over two hundred feet above them, about half a mile away.

'It's full of spores from the fungal forests, according to Yama - sorry, the captain,' Daiba replied. 'The winds pick them up as the weather formations cross the forests, then when the air's saturated it causes these massive downpours because the humid air collects around the particulate matter.'

'End result, a week or so of misery whilst your underwear develops new and weird lifeforms and you go stir crazy wondering if your joy department is about to mutate and go for a walk on its own…' Ali said glumly. Leaning back on his own cot he reached for his tablet and flicked it on, selecting a text at random to read. 'Can't take the transports out coz we found out the hard way that stuff clogs up the engines - gets through the filters despite the best efforts of mice and Maji…' He glared at the pair over the top edge of his tablet. 'Meggie - if you break him, you've bought him…'

She stuck her tongue out at him and smiled prettily. However she didn't move her head from where it rested on Daiba's shoulder, her arm around his back. 'We have an arrangement - if he's uncomfortable, he tells me. It's called communication - maybe you should try it - might get you slapped in the face on shore leave a little less often…' Then she pouted. 'And how come it's you I'm ragging on, not him?'

'Because it's you that's invading his personal space not the other way round, to my everlasting astonishment. Since it seems obvious he swings your way, I can only assume the kid has manners - you, not so much.'

'I blame the parental substitutes,' Meg replied tartly, snuggling a little closer and closing her eyes. 'Appalling role models…' she sighed.

'It's fine, really,' Daiba added, coming to the girl's defence. 'She's cute when she's all kittenish…' From his position there was no way he could have seen Meg's visible eye open and narrow dangerously, but the wink he tipped Ali suggested he was well aware of the reaction.

'Touch my tits and you'll pull back a bloody stump,' Meg sleepily growled at Daiba. He just sniggered.

'Don't push it,' Ali warned him. 'I'd hate to get blood all over this nice new get-up…' He stroked the
form-fitting white crew-neck which tucked into gleaming new black leather trousers, the jacket to
the ensemble slung over a nearby chair, shiny black leather highlighting a vibrantly white skull and
crossbones on the left breast. 'Maji's done a nice job on these environment suits…' He looked over
at the pair who were similarly dressed, Daiba in a dark green, Meg, as ever, in pink. 'Gotta say we
look a lot snazzier than those Millennial Thieves… those baggy coveralls are sooo last century…'

'Only because you haven't been out doing enough work to take the shine off them yet.' Blaze's head
appeared in the doorway, the rest of him still in the airlock area. 'In case you hadn't noticed, the
rain's moving away. Looks like we have a chance to drive over to the ruins, and Maji wants to trial
a change he's made to the filters on the rover. Any of you up for the trip?'

'I'm sure we actually cut a trail through here last time…' Daiba stared through the windscreen of
the half-track as it pushed its way at what felt like a snail's pace through the undergrowth.

'We did,' Ali replied grimly. 'What you probably didn't notice was that it only stayed clear because
we were using it every day. This stuff grows faster than my co-

'Ali!' Meg's gloved hand slapped him upsides the back of the head, and he rolled with the tap,
laughing. 'Seriously, I do not need that image… daddy…'

'I could do without that image being tagged onto that word,' Blaze, seated between Daiba and Ali
on the front seats, muttered. 'Remind me again why I agreed to tag along with you lot?'

'Because we're going in first and you couldn't wait to take a look,' Ali replied tartly, giving the
dense undergrowth ahead of them a three second burn from the laser cannon on a wide sweep.
'According to the scanners we're only a few hundred yards from the edge of this but damn, it's
tough going. I'd forgotten what a slog this was.'

'Are we there yet?' Daiba asked brightly.

'I - being the dignified and magnanimous gentleman that I am, will ignore your facetious needling
and treat it with the contempt it deserves,' Ali replied.

'Couldn't think of a pithy come-back, could you?' Blaze asked in a stage whisper.

'Nope, but don't advertise the fact - I have a reputation to maint- aha! Thieves… pirates… small
pink females - get your first glance of the Nibelung citadel!'

The rover broke free of the forest, trailing several broken vines from its treads and clinging to the
surface. The view ahead was now clear of of the titanic vegetation, although under the half-track
the ride was soft and bouncy as they covered an meadow thick with giant mosses. Looming closer
were the broken spires of the citadel which had once covered the plain.

'Shouldn't this whole area be covered by now?' Meg leaned on Daiba's shoulders, peering over his
head. 'I mean - the planet was abandoned about a hundred and twenty years ago…'

'Dark matter,' Ali replied bluntly. 'They used it as an energy source and it built and powered their
buildings. 'The vegetation scours it from the atmosphere, but the shells of their buildings are like
the hull of the Arcadia - self-repairing. Though even twelve years ago the jungle was starting to
win…'

He halted the rover so they could get a look at the exterior of the citadel, and even Daiba, who had
seen it more recently, took a closer look. If he was honest, he'd not really paid that much attention
to it on previous visits.
The outer causeway of the citadel had fared badly - the nacreous surface was pitted and crumbling, and the curving walkways which had arced over the citadel had long collapsed onto the ground, to be covered by mosses the height of a man. Here and there the weak sunlight did glance off a protruding spire or outcrop, and these gleamed with a ruddy opalescent sheen where they had escaped the ravages of the jungle floor.

'According to Mimay it was a city of light,' Ali murmured. 'On a planet where at best it's always twilight, they used dark matter to create light. The walls shone from within, so they were never in darkness…'

'It's like pearls…' Meg whispered into Daiba's ear. 'All swirly and shining…'

'I'd hate to see the oyster that shat that out,' he muttered back. She clipped him around the head lightly.

'You just take all the romance out of it, you know that?'

'Romance?' He was genuinely puzzled. 'What's so romantic about the diseased secretions of a dying mollusc?' He pointed. 'Case in point - where this stuff's broken, it really does look like nacre - the gritty stuff, not the pretty pearls.'

'It was grown, you know,' Ali added, with a withering look at Daiba. 'Extruded. But not from giant oysters as far as I know.'

'Even in this state it's pretty amazing,' Blaze said quietly. He leaned between Ali and Daiba and pointed. 'Look at the way the light catches it - it must have been something to see when they still lived here.'

'Pretty ain't what we're here for though,' Ali replied as he gunned the engine back into life, the low-tech rover spluttering back on line. 'Though it's nice to see that we might be on the right track - if the city is still holding its own against this dark matter eating vegetation, then Harlock was right, and they could have something we might be able to weaponise. Worst case maybe just boost the self-healing system…'

'Any idea where you might find the records you need?' Blaze asked.

'There's a Hall of Records,' Daiba replied. 'But even when Dad was working on it, getting the machines online was a bit hit and miss. 'After another decade of abandonment, they might have decayed beyond help.'

'That's why we have a back-up,' Ali told him smugly. 'Blaze here has a couple of good guys to help Maji see if we can back-engineer anything from the materials themselves - I'll be helping out on that team with Niobe. You and Benjy are on the research team seeing what you can dig out of records, books… whatever they recorded stuff on. Meggie and Zack are covering the botanical side, with some more of Blaze's folks, seeing if they can tie this stuff back to the Mazone samples we've seen -'

'And checking to see if we can see what effects a couple of centuries of dark matter have had on cell tissue,' Meg added. 'The captain gave us some hints where to start, and we've both helped him out a few times in the lab.'

It took them three days to set up the labs in the ruins using the portable domes - mostly because there was no clear space near the citadel large enough to take the Seventh Star, and so most supplies had to be ferried in via the slow, fossil fuel powered half-tracks at first, later by lighter
quad bikes once the trails had been cut by the larger vehicles.

'Wish we had the bullets,' Daiba grunted as he hefted yet another packing crate into position. The blue skinned pirate - Ben - was on the other end and heaved a heavy sigh as he helped Daiba push it into position.

'You and me both,' he replied. His golden hair had fallen into his eyes, and he pushed the sweat-dampened elf locks out of his eyes, grabbed a loose tie from nearby and pulled it into a pony tail to keep it from repeating the unwarranted invasion. 'If nothing else we could have brought a loader down with us…'

'Wouldn't work, you lazy buggers,' Ali called out as he strolled past, a small crate on his shoulders. 'Anything electronic has to be boosted, and large loaders or landers - even the smarter workboats - would struggle in the low EM field and we didn't have time to do the customising. So it's shank's pony and flexing our amazing muscles for us for a couple of weeks. Won't do you two skinny buggers any harm - and just think of the admiring looks from the ladies…' he winked.

'Which consist of Zack's girlfriend, a curly-haired cactus in pink and that girl from the Star's bridge crew who seems to have the hots for her captain,' Ben pointed out. 'Not what you could call a target rich environment, and for you, two are totally off limits…'

'Whaddya you care, Benjy Blue? - you keep staring at Blaze's ass as well,' Ali pointed out with a grin, setting his load down next to their pile. 'Or was that Daiba's?'

'I'm an equal opportunities lech, and you know it, Ali. And stop wigging out the new recruit here - he hides behind Meggie if I so much as smile at him…'

'Do not!' Daiba retorted. He caught the sly smiles and pulled a face. 'Oh. Right. Wind up the poor, pitiful, emotionally distraught, sexually abused psycho time is it?' He added a little whine to his voice.

Ali looked over to Ben. 'Is it me, or did I catch just a hint of captainly sarcasm creeping in there?'

'Nope, I distinctly heard it as well. Remarkable performance… might have over egged the sniffle at the end there though…' Ben grinned.

'Assholes,' Daiba growled at them, without heat. Ali grinned at him, and gave him a push back towards the transport.

'Best ass on the Arcadia, and don't forget it,' he replied with a wink at Ben. 'Now you two get yer tushies movin' - I want all this kit installed and working by mid-afternoon latest.'

'How'd you tell on this planet?' Ben asked, leading the way back to the entrance where the faint outline of the half-track could be seen through the poly-carb. 'It's always bloody grim out…'

'Bloody is right,' Daiba added. 'Red sky at night… and morning, noon, tea-time…'

'Smart-arises,' Ali grumbled amiably. He ambled towards the trailer to grab another crate.

'You, see,' Ben said with a wink at Daiba - I told you he was checking us out…' Daiba had a muffle a snort of laughter at Ali's spluttering denial. 'And besides - he hasn't got the best ass on board. That'd be either the captain or Kei…'

'Yeah yeah… keep it coming wise-guy.' Ali hefted the crate down and pointed to it. 'One of you, get that, and pronto. There are six more to move and another half-track coming back in an hour.'
'And such a slave-driver,' Ben muttered with an aggrieved sigh, picking up the crate.

'Yeah, and pickin' on the token blue guy to boot, ain't I a rotter?' Ali replied, aiming a kick well clear of his shipmate's backside. 'Git! I have samples to analyse and Maji's a bloody grumpy bastard when he's waitin' on results.'

Daiba snorted at that, given that the mild-mannered engineer was about the least likely man on board to get his boxers in a twist about anything, and it was rare that even resident clown Ali could get a rise out of him, even when he really put some effort into it. Circus was about right, he thought, thinking back to Blaze's assessment of the Arcadia's crew. But despite the bickering, they did get their jobs done. He tried lifting the crate Ali dropped gently at his feet and failed. With much eye-rolling the big blond pirate huffed and puffed but took the other end and helped him to carry it indoors.

'Doin' okay back here?' Ali asked as he manoeuvred backwards, skillfully avoiding a trailing cable. 'Yer dad… you know.'

'Dad died doing what he loved,' Daiba replied evenly. For once he sensed the gruff pirate wasn't yanking his chain. 'Studying an alien civilisation - the only one we ever encountered - at least up to now - this was his dream.' Following Ali back to pick up another crate he stared at the remains of the ancient city that surrounded them.

'And your dream?' Ali asked as they lifted a larger crate down gently.

'Not sure yet.' He paused. 'I guess I haven't had chance to think about it for a while. Too busy trying to stay one step ahead of a bunch of murderous vegetables.' Ali didn't reply, and they walked back to the rover in silence. Outside, Daiba took a look around in the gloomy half-light. Supposedly it was mid-day, though you'd never really know it, in the dull reddish light.

He peered towards the edge of the jungle. 'Is it me, or does the treeline look closer?'

'What trees?' Ben asked, standing at his shoulder. 'I thought they were fungi or something?'

'Let's just stick with the generic terminology,' Daiba replied with a grin. He ducked, expected Ali's hand to the back of the head, but the pirate was staring at the edge of the clearing with a thoughtful look on his face, before loosening the blaster in his holster. Sensing the mood shift, Ben did likewise, and belatedly, Daiba followed suit. 'What is it?'

'Not sure, but you're right - something looks odd out there. Got a soup-can and some string handy?'

It was Ben who pulled out one of the radio sets Blaze had provided. 'Here.'

'Ta. Oi - Fireball - can your folks get a line on the jungle out here? Didn't we take some measurements around this camp a couple of days ago?' He waited, the reply inaudible to the two younger men. 'Yeah? Come round for another pass. I got a nasty feeling about this all of a sudden.' He clicked off the device but didn't hand it back.

'Problem?' Ben asked.

'Maybe. Maybe that itch in my shorts is just getting to me. Just to be on the safe side, I might order up a burn. Right now I really don't like the way the hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end.'

'We could take a look,' Daiba offered, hefting the pistol in his hand and taking a step towards the clearing. Ali's hand on his shoulder stopped him in his tracks.
'Oh no you don't… captain's relying on me to keep an eye on you, scamp. You stay put. I'll take a couple of guys and a flame thrower or two.'

'But - ' The attempt to complain landed on deaf ears, as Ali took off at a run for the main dome. Daiba was left to shove his pistol back in its holster and his hands in his pockets and stare gloomily after the pirate. 'Great - what the fuck am I supposed to do whilst he's having all the fun?'

Ben slapped him on the back. 'Our jobs, at a guess. Let Greg and Roddie finish up here - I got the power going to the records vault earlier - maybe they made note of moving forests or something?'

Daiba gave him a sour look. 'Is everyone on your planet this perky?'

Ben smiled, but it was a distracted, sad expression. 'Not really - it's a military dictatorship. Not a bad one, as such - the people genuinely adore the Chancellor, and he's a good man - but dreamers like me - not really many opportunities to stretch their wings, if you know what I mean?'

'That's why you joined the Arcadia?'

Ben's smile slipped. 'No - it's why I left home though. Harlock found me on an auction block on a planet where people buy and sell slaves - the more unusual, the better - including some truly oddball Machinners. You really wouldn't believe some of the kinks people will go for... The people I took passage with decided I was worth more as a curiosity, and put me up for auction.'

'Harlock rescued you?'

Ben shook his head. 'He bought me - it was that, or either start shooting, or leave me to my fate - and I kind of preferred him to the fat slug he was bidding against.' He shuddered. 'Do I need to tell you what it feels like having some obese creep fondle you all over intimately whilst licking their lips like someone handed them a gourmet buffet?'

Daiba shuddered in sympathy, and realised belatedly that Harlock's seemingly disingenuous arrangement of shipmates hadn't been entirely on the level. 'No. I get it. But you're not a slave, are you?'

'Hell no - Harlock told me I was free to go the moment we left - promised to drop me anywhere I wanted to go. I didn't know this area of space though, so I stayed on. Later we took out the traffickers who'd sold me out, and I figured it wasn't so bad on the Arcadia - I like the people, and Harlock's tough but fair.'

They'd reached the vaults by now. Daiba couldn't resist digging further: 'So - is that the only reason, or did you just fancy the arse off him?' he asked cheekily.

Ben grinned at him. 'Ooh - payback time is it? Let's just say if ever I got a chance to get horizontal between him and Kei, I'd take it.'

Daiba grinned back. 'You don't aim low, do you?' he asked. But any retort Ben was about to make was forestalled. Shoving the blue youth to one side, Daiba pulled his pistol for the second time in five minutes.

'Daiba?' Ben pulled his own gun without waiting. Daiba pointed to the opening, where a green moss covered the pale nacre of the doorway.

'Remind me - the interior of this building was clear of vegetation earlier, wasn't it?' he asked softly. Ben nodded.
'Where it wasn't, we scoured it to be on the safe side. I left this room only an hour ago and it was clean.'

Daiba peered around the door and swore under his breath. 'Well it isn't now,' he called back.

The equipment Ben had set up earlier was covered in a thick mat of moss, and long thin red tendrils curled out of the dense material, seeking out the lights. They'd already twined themselves around the stands of the spotlights they were using to light the place - a fluorescent substance which gave off a soft yellow glow.

'Crap,' Ben muttered. He reached for his belt, and swore again. 'I gave Ali the radio!' He grimaced. 'Maybe we should go get some help…'

'Look at the way it's heading for the equipment,' Daiba pointed out. 'How much longer before it trashes the lot?'

'Point… but have we got anything to clear it that won't take out the gear? Break this little lot and we'll never get into those records…'

Daiba knelt down and began to rummage through his pockets, trying not to think about the writhing fronds in the room, and how for a moment, it had looked as though they'd moved towards the door.

A trick of the light, that's all. Just your imagination. Like that itch in Ali's boxers… He pulled a couple of flares out of his breast pocket and stared at them thoughtfully. 'Did Ali give you a couple of these?' he asked.

Ben rummaged a moment and held out three slim sticks. 'Sure - all of us got them - just in case we got lost anywhere like he did back then. What did you have in mind?'

Daiba hefted the slender sticks in his gloved hands and stared at the moss covered room. 'I'm thinking that those tendrils seem to be trying to snap the light stands and break the globes - like that one over there - ' he pointed with a flare towards one lightstand which had been overturned and broken. There was a noticeable circle clear of moss around it, like bacteria avoiding mould in a petrie dish. 'Same stuff, yeah? And this stuff is pretty concentrated, right?' He looked around, found a large upturned dish - original purpose unknown, then frowned. 'Did I hear water dripping?'

Ben looked around, and pointed to a broken corner where a trickle of brackish water flowed slowly down the wall. 'Will that do? I think I see where you're going, but do we have enough?'

'The rate that stuff's expanding? I just want to free up the equipment long enough for one of us to run back for help.' He knelt to place the bowl under the drips and used the butt of his pistol to start tapping the end off one of the flares.

'So who goes for help and who tries to throw caustic fluids over alien plants without getting killed or splashed?' Ben asked with a sly smile.

Daiba grinned up at him. 'Dunno. How fast is your hundred?' he asked wolfishly.
A second lamp went out whilst Daiba worked feverishly to decant the contents of the flares into the bowl and waited impatiently for the trickling water to dilute the mixture, fingers tapping a fast beat on the sides. Was it just his imagination that he could hear a sussurating rasping coming from the archive? As though he could hear the stuff growing…

Whatever it was, it hated the light… This specific light, anyway.

Hadn't there been something in the briefing about the lighting they were using? He cudgeled his brain, trying to remember, because sure as hell he knew he'd not been paying attention to the lecture Maji had been giving..

'... low EM field means any electronics need to be amplified, and that in turn takes more power. So we've got a few tricks... ...the lighting relies on this stuff - it's from Miraiseria, and Marin's been trading with 'em to market it. Made originally from some kind of local jellyfish, but synthesised in the lab. Useful even in a vacuum, and as a bonus if you run even a tiny electric current through it, it glows like a tiny sun, so be careful…'

Daiba grinned to himself, and reached for his utility belt pocket. *Somewhere in there…* he pulled out an ordinary torch, and unscrewed the battery casing. As he worked he tried not to look at the watchched strapped over the cuff of his environment suit jacket. Ben had said he was fast, but he still had two floors of debris and two staircases to navigate, both ways, even after grabbing help. And the tentacled moss was growing exponentially.

*Work faster*, he told himself, stripping a thin wire from another item in his belt. *We need those records…*

*Why now though?* He wondered. Was it reacting to their presence? This moss grew just like the stuff which had crippled the Arcadia… were they related?

The bowl was full, and he moved it before it could overflow, careful not to spill any on himself. Equally carefully he stuck the improvised battery pack into his belt and stood up with the bowl in his hands. 'Well, here goes!' He walked towards the main bulk of the moss, and poured the liquid on the floor, trying to get as wide a spread as possible as it pooled on the uneven surface, cratered by time.

Well, it had to be enough… He took his little device out of the belt and lay it carefully in the shallow covering of shining fluid, and stepped back, steadily unspooling the wire, until he'd reached the limit of the spool. It wasn't far - barely to the doorway. Well… it had to be enough… he smiled wryly and touched the end to the battery terminal, remembering just in time to turn his back.

Even through closed eyelids with his back turned, he was blinking away afterimages from the blinding flash.

No boom… well, at least that was a good sign… Blinking back tears as his eyes watered in protest, he turned back to look at his handiwork in the soft, slowly fading afterglow.

The largest bulk of the moss was gone - shrivelled just like the stuff on board Arcadia after Harlock had ordered the dark matter released. The machinery was freed - but he sighed in despair as he saw the state of it - cracked and pitted and in some cases shattered, the inner workings forced into
unlikely positions by the invading plant life. Several hundred years of growth compressed into minutes would do that, he guessed.

'Bugger,' was his heartfelt response. The archive room was a bust, now. He sighed.

A small fall of rubble caught his attention - a soft whispering settling pitter-pattering slither, as though something had been disturbed and was moving. He pulled his pistol and walked warily over to where he thought the sound had originated.

Next to the remains of one of the Nibelung machines, a dark hole had opened up in the floor - less than a foot across, but from the depths below a faint pale green-blue glow illuminated the faceplate of his helmet. 'Huh.' He knelt down and leaned over to peer into the hole, but couldn't see anything useful.

Voices, and the sound of running boots distracted him, and he got to his feet. 'Oi - down here guys - I think I found…'

The floor disappeared under his feet and with a roaring rush of crumbling debris, he plunged down into the blue light, hitting bottom with an agonised scream as something rammed through his leg and his ankle twisted beneath him. There was an audible crack, and blackness.

He awoke to a cacophony of sound and sight. Groaning, he tried to move and screamed as a stabbing pain shot through his lower leg.

'Daiba?' Ali's voice, from a long way off, sounding concerned. 'Oi - Daiba - can you hear me?'

'Ali? Yeah!' he called back, his voice a croak in his ears. His visor was cracked and broken, but since it was only there as a precaution, he pushed it out of the way. The air was breathable, if dry and dusty down here. 'Not bothering to ask me if I'm okay - or even alive?'

'Heard the girly scream so didn't see the point since the answers were obviously "no" and "yes"' came the pithy retort.

Despite the situation, he grinned. Then winced as the pile of rubble he'd landed on shifted and sent another wave of pain through his leg. He sat up as slowly as he could, biting back another cry of pain, and swallowed an acidic mouthful of bile when he saw the nacreous shard sticking up through his calf, razor sharp edges slick red with his blood. Oh… Lower down, his ankle was at a funny angle.

'Oh… Lower down, his ankle was at a funny angle. Well, that explains the cracking sound…

'My ankle's broken and I've got a shard of this pearly stuff through my leg,' he called up. 'I think you need to send someone down for me.'

'Already on it,' came a voice back. Ben's this time. 'Ali's gone for some rope.'

Ben's blond head was highlighted in the opening above him, and Daiba assayed a little wave. 'Throw down a flare or two, would you? I'd like a look around, and the light down here's pretty dim…'

'Give me a minute!' Ben's head vanished, and Daiba leaned back against the rubble with a sigh, trying not to move his leg. The faint greenish glow seemed stronger to his right, and he turned his head to see if he could see anything.

'Was it just his imagination again, or was the light getting brighter? 'Just getting used to it is all,' he muttered under his breath. 'It's not as though there's anything still working down here.' The light
pulsed and flickered, then steadied. 'Nah…'

_Pulse._

He waited, holding his breath.

Nothing happened and he let it out with a large sigh.

_Pulse. Pulsepulse._

'Okay… not at all freaky. Is there anyone there?' On a whim, he repeated the words in his somewhat broken Nibelung.

_Pulse. Pulsepulsepulsepulse._

Ben's head reappeared. 'Ali's on the way. We'll have you out of there soon - in the meantime, I'm chucking down the flares.'

'Yeah - well try to miss my head!' Daiba called back. There was a soft chuckle.

'Shouldn't be a problem - it's not as though it's Ali down there!'

Two small lights fell towards him, and slight clattering sounds announced their arrival on the floor. The blue-green light was now competing with the deeper green glow from the flare sticks, and Daiba could now see the walls of the room he was in - although "room" was, he thought, being generous - the circular space couldn't have been more than ten feet round in total, and at one time it had been full of the same kind of pulleys and cables which adorned parts of the Arcadia's bridge - he'd miraculously avoided some of them on the way down. _A foot or two to either side and I'd have cracked my skull open like an egg…_

Then he looked up, and saw that Ben's head was probably a good thirty feet above him.

_So how the hell did I survive that fall?_ He shivered. He'd landed badly, sure, but nowhere near as badly as he should have done under the circumstances…

He very carefully - though not without another stabbing pain as his muscle flexed around the shard sticking out of his calf - shifted position to get a look through the arched doorway now visible through which the light had been coming.

_Pulse._

Through the small gap, he could make out a faintly glowing orb about four feet across, hovering - or on an unseen stand - in front of a series of organ-like pipes which quickly passed out of his line of sight, soaring with a graceful curve upwards.

'Oh crap…' he breathed. Taking a lungful of dusty air and trying not to cough he called up: 'Ben - tell Ali to fetch Maji - I think I've just found a working dark matter generator!'
decaying humus, this was sharp, and bright - a feather-light touch, pure and clear.

The light grew in the generator room, cool, but oddly inviting.

*Pulse.*

*Koma...* [[*Come...*]]

He was too weak to resist the call, but in truth, he didn't feel like putting up a struggle. The sensation was like dangling his fingers in a cold mountain stream - clear, fresh, inviting. There was a part of him that pulled back, wary and distrustful, but something that reminded him of childish laughter blew that away like leaves on a spring breeze.

Only dimly aware of Ben's warning, questioning cry, he crawled painfully towards the light, hauling himself across the threshold to collapse in an exhausted heap inside that cool glow.

Straight away much of the fatigue and cotton wool clouding his head cleared, and the pain of cuts and bruises sustained in the fall faded. He felt the bones in his ankle knitting together, and sighed in relief as the pain faded. But that still left the shard in his leg, and the light seemed to swirl around it, a flickering pattern - questioning? Forming around it, pulsing rapidly. It concentrated around the shard, and pulsed, a deeper green this time.

*Draga...* The Nibelung word slid into his brain past all of his defences. [[*Pull...*]]

'I can't... I'll bleed...' he muttered, the strangeness of talking to a light only barely registering.

*Lækna...* [[*heal...*]]

The word was accompanied by a soft compulsion, and only dimly aware of his actions, as though seen through a veil, he reached out, grasped the slippery shard, and yanked it free.

He screamed - the pain was excruciating, and the razor sharp edges sliced into his palm, through skin and tendon alike. Blood gushed from both wounds - leg and hand...

...then as he watch through the haze, the pain receded, the skin on his palm closed as though it had never been hurt, green flickering cold fire licking the place where the wound had been, and leaving no trace behind of any injury. Likewise, his leg was free of pain and when he flexed it, not even a residual stiffness or soreness remained. Tentatively, he stood up, using the doorway for support.

No broken bones. No pain, no bleeding. Although his trouser leg was still gashed and stained where the shard had pierced it both entering and exiting. With a nothing-ventured deep breath, he stepped fully into the generator room.

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The globe in front of the dark matter engine was both smaller than he'd thought from outside the room - perhaps only two, two and a half feet in diameter - yet massive by comparison to the one Mimay used on board the Arcadia. Which was strange, he thought, as he approached it cautiously and wandered back and forth across the front to the engine, staring at the alien construction. Because the Arcadia's dark matter engine dwarfed this one by a magnitude of at least 10...

The swirling light in the globe pulsed, and he peered more closely. The way the light shifted and twisted, for one brief moment he thought he saw...

'Oi - scamp - maybe you shouldn't be gettin' that close to things, eh?' Ali ducked through the low arch and joined him in the room. 'Phweee-oo' he whistled through his teeth. 'Maji's gonna love
this!' He squinted in the low light at Daiba. 'I thought you were hurt?'

Daiba shrugged. 'She healed me.' he replied, without thinking.

Ali's blue eyes narrowed. 'She?'

Daiba pointed at the machine. 'I think it came from here - a voice - in my head. Then when I was in the light, it healed me.'

Ali had his pistol out and pointed at the engine in a heartbeat. 'Kid - you might want to get behind me and go get Maji…'

Daiba pushed Ali's hand down and away from the machine. 'I don't think it's Mazone - it's Nibelung. And by the way, your accent's slipping again - professor…'

'It always does when he forgets to concentrate on sounding like a third-rate dock-rat,' Ben said as he ducked through the arch. In the flickering blue-green light, his skin took on a peculiar, almost translucent hue. Almost like an alabaster statue crowned with gold. 'Oh - someone just hit the motherlode…' he breathed, staring up at the engine which arched into the shadows of the high ceiling. 'Wow…'

'That should not be operational,' Ali growled. He gestured with his gun hand - still occupied - towards the engine. 'They require a living interface to keep them under control - that's why Mimay operates the one on the Arcadia. But she's almost the last of her kind, and there's supposed to be no-one living here.' He turned to glare at Daiba. 'What the hell were you talking about earlier? You said there was a woman here?'

Daiba shook his head. 'I said I heard someone. Or something.' He nodded towards the glowing orb. 'I think it was this,' he said softly, laying his bare hand - the glove so shredded he'd cast it off earlier - on the surface.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected; warm, cold… smooth… slick… if anything, there was both too much sensation and none at all. As though the surface of the sphere wasn't really there - except that he couldn't push his hand through it, and neither did it feel like a force-field.

'Maybe you shouldn't do that,' Ali said doubtfully. He reached a hand out to pull Daiba away but the youth shook his head.

'It's okay… I think.'

'Filling me so full of confidence there kiddo,' Ali told him. He settled for wary circling a feet feet away - or at least, a short arc backwards and forwards, since the main body of the engine was hard against the back wall.

'Well?'

Daiba took his hand away reluctantly. 'Not sure… feels weird, but nothing I can put my finger on, if you know what I mean?'

'Am I supposed to answer that level of vague analysis with anything resembling a "yes"?' Ali retorted.

'The light's changing again,' Ben said quietly. 'Is it me or is there something moving in there?'

The other two stared at the globe. Daiba remembering his own feelings earlier, tried to peer
through the swirling iridescent movement. For a moment, he thought he saw a humanoid shape inside, and backpedaled so fast he almost sent the blue pirate flying. He grunted a thanks at Ben.

'My pleasure,' the older youth purred in his ear.

'I can see something - but I thought I was imagining it the first time.'

*Pulse.*

'Should we be worried by that?' Ali asked, glaring around the room as though daring something to jump out at him.

'That's how it got my attention. I think it can hear us, and understand us.' Daiba peeled himself off Ben and moved closer for another look. 'I thought I saw a child - or something child-sized…'

'Daiba -' Ali took a step forward, his pistol aimed straight at the orb. 'Step back from there, right now, please.'

The unexpected politeness had more of an effect than the usual piratical profanity. Daiba stepped away from the orb, shooting a questioning glance at Ali, who held firm, a distinctly disturbing look of determination on his face.

'Ali?' Ben asked quietly.

'Just back away towards the door, lads. I don't think Daiba's seeing things. Back when Blaze's mom and dad got us involved in that little kerffuffle that turned into the Machine Wars, we saw something like this on a bigger scale. A nibelung called Loki had taken the controller of Deathshadow Two - Verdani - and shoved her into something to control a dark matter engine. I'm thinking he might have known something we don't…'

'Then there's someone in there?' Daiba would have made a beeline for the orb if Ben hadn't held him back. 'That's terrible! We have to -'

'We don't do anything, scamp. We've no idea what's in there - and if it is a nibelung, after all this time, it might not be too sane. Gullveig bloody well wasn't, when we caught up to Number Three…'

… *Hjálp… einmana… vinur…? [[Help… lonely… friend?]]

'She's asking for help!' Daiba struggled free of Ben's grip. 'Ali - whatever's in there helped me - saved me from the fall, and healed me. It might even be the reason this place was so clear of the vegetation for so long - we can't just leave -'

'Watch me, Daiba. I'm doing just that and so are you. We leave these devices to those who like tinkering with ancient tech that might blow up in their bearded little faces. You, me and Blue Boy here, we're leaving. Now!'

*Ekki láta mig vera einn!* [[Don't leave me alone!]]

The words exploded into his head, and Daiba dived for the orb, faster than either of his comrades could reach for him to stop him. Yanking his pistol out of its holster he hammered on the non-surface of the orb, frantically trying to break it, as though it were an eggshell. Futile, he quickly realised, because how do you break through something that isn't really *there*…?

*Undir…*
Ali was reaching for him even as he reached beneath the sphere, finding the spot where a single cable snaked out of it to vanish into the workings of the dark matter engine. Blue lightning flickered around his hand and up his arm as his fingers closed on it, just as Ali's hand closed on his arm and yanked him out from under...

...with the cable still in his hand. It pulled free, and the glow from the orb vanished, along with the light in the room. All that was left was the dim glow from the flares next door, and a small figure tumbled, still curled up tightly like an unborn child into Daiba's arms.

'For fuck's sake, Daiba - you've gone and bloody surpassed yourself this time,' Ali growled at him.

He ignored the complaints, and brushed pale, sea green hair out of an almost white, oval face. He sensed rather than felt Ben kneeling next to him, peeling off his jacket to wrap around the naked figure which shivered in his arms and stared up at him with oversized eyes, a third eyelid flickering over vertical slitted pupils. A tiny mouth attempted what might have been a smile, and then the eyes closed, small, thin arms wrapped around his neck and soft sighs whispered against his throat as she hugged him close, as though seeking comfort.

'Really, truly, gone and bloody done it this time,' Ali muttered, staring down at the tiny, elfin nibelung girl in the youth's arms.

'Was this even close to wise?' Blaze paced back and forth in the small dome, whilst Ali leaned against the wall, arms folded and a grim scowl on his face. Ignoring them, Daiba finished tucking the little nibelung girl into the bunk, and tried to extricate his hand from her small, cool grip. In the end he gave up when those large eyes stared up at him, and sat next to her, his fingers gently untangling damp elf-locks.

'Maybe not, but she begged me not to leave her alone in there - what else could I do?' Daiba replied, rather more shortly than he intended. The little girl gave a quiet mew of distress, and he stroked her her gently. 'It's all right, little one. I'm not mad at you...’ She shifted around until she could lay her head in his lap, and cuddled close, forcing him to rearrange the covers to cover her up again. 'Look at her - she's a child - how could they do this?'

'That "child" might have been the key to the way this place has been keeping the jungle at bay - did you stop to think about that?' Ali shot back. 'Now all we have to go on is whatever Maji can dig up from that terminal - or what's left of it.'

'Maybe she can tell us?' Blaze suggested. Though as he stared down at the tiny form, he looked doubtful. 'Can she talk?'

'Mentally,' Daiba replied, keeping his voice low. 'Just fragments earlier - feelings, projections. I'm not sure.'

Ali pushed himself off the wall with a heavy sigh. 'Bloody great. Blaze - I'll need your warp feed - try to get hold of the captain, assuming he's out of IN-SKIP. I know he didn't want any contact, but I think I need to touch base with Mimay. Maybe she can tell us what this is all about.' He stormed out of the dome, and Blaze, with a helpless shrug, followed him, narrowly missing Meg who was on her way in with a tray in one hand and some fabric in another.

'Yikes. Ali looked like a thunderstorm about to hit... what gives? Let's see what you found!' She knelt at the side of the bed. 'Oh... it's like a tiny Mimay! So sweet...’ Large eyes blinked, the third eyelid flickering frantically. As those small but strong fingers closed again on his hand, Daiba shushed her again.
'Not a what - she - though I haven't gotten a name from her. Not sure she knows what I mean, though she understands somethings.'

'I'll try not to scare her. But I brought over some stuff that might do to make some kind of toga for now to keep her warm. And there's food and drink - not sure what Nibelung eat though - never seen Mimay with anything but a glass of the captain's finest in her hand.'

'Maybe she lives on alcohol?' Daiba joked. Meg bit back a laugh.

'On that ship, what'd be one more?' She sat back on her heels and gave him a sideways look. 'Honestly - you really got them all in a flap - the citadel's self repair function seems to be grinding to a halt, and that jungle line is advancing at a rate that scare me witless - you can almost see it creeping over the ground.' She shivered. 'But I get why you couldn't just leave her in there.' She smiled down at the child, and reached out a hand to stroke her hair, which after a slight flinch, was accepted with a tiny smile. 'She's adorable!' She handed Daiba the tray. 'Now - eat - and tell me all about it!'

'They aren't children!' Mimay repeated emphatically, over both Harlock's and Kei's horrified reactions. 'They were grown to become the guiding intelligence of the engines - for most of our civilian uses. Outside of the spheres they had no life, no family. Just blank slates - clones, you might call them.'

On the other end of the warp connection, Ali frowned at the holo screen. 'Really? Coz from where I've been standing, Daiba's got a tiny, scared little girl clinging to him begging him not to leave her alone in the dark. And lady - right now, it's what I see that I believe.'

'They weren't supposed to be sentient in any meaningful way - no more than a dog or a cat - their conditioning was to ensure they could operate the dark matter fields and respond to any fluctuations - no machine has ever been able to manipulate dark matter effectively. It works best in conjunction with living creatures.' Mimay's wide eyes stared at him, third eyelid covering her catlike pupils so that her eyes looked like blank ovals in her face.

'I'd like to see Mii's reaction to being stuffed into a small ball for a century or more.' This from Doc, standing with her arms folded across her chest scowling at the pale alien woman. Mimay bowed her head, her silky hair falling forwards to hide her face.

'You think this power source she was guiding was somehow keeping the vegetation at bay?' Harlock interrupted.

Ali nodded. 'Maji's pretty sure - the readings were ever so slightly off the norm - assuming dark matter has a normal state - anyway, as soon as Daiba did his white knight shtick, the self-repair immediately began to fail. Since we didn't know how long the generator would stay on line without her in it, we pulled back. But Maji says that it seems to be failing safe - shutting down rather than running critical. To be on the safe side we're going back to the ship, and we'll run tests on the jungle from a distance.'

'And the child?' Kei asked. 'What do you want to do about her?'

Ali wasn't sure for a moment if she was speaking to him or to Harlock, until he saw the look the two exchanged.

'Unless she shows signs of being a danger, bring her back with you,' Harlock replied, speaking to Ali in answer. As Mimay opened her mouth to protest he lifted his hand to forestall the objection.
'Luna can check her over physically when we meet up on Tabito - and Mimay can try to communicate with her - if possible - we might be able to understand what she did to preserve the citadel for so long - and Ali's right - this might just be the break we were looking for.' With a nod of acknowledgement, he cut the connection.

Ali sat back in the comms officer's seat and whistled through his teeth. Behind him, Blaze placed his hands on the back of the chair.

'I'm not sure, but it looks as though this pooch-screw just turned into a possible silver lining…' he leaned his chin on his hands, and Ali batted ineffectively at the face that now rested close to his. 'You know, when Hoshino goes off on one about how Teflon-coated Harlock is, I usually laugh - but he really does seem to have the angels on his side…'

Ali grunted. 'Remains to be seen.' He heaved himself out of the chair, forcing Blaze to stand up straight to avoid getting the top of Ali's head in his face. 'Assuming the dark matter engine doesn't blow up, or the jungle start picking up its roots and running right for us, or the planet swerve into the debris field, or the tidal stresses set of a volcanic chain reaction, or that little "girl" go psycho whack job on us and slaughter us all in our beds…'

'Bloody hell, Jones, there's paranoid and then -'

'- there's experience,' Ali replied gloomily. 'Lots and lots of experience…'

'How the hell do you sleep nights?' Blaze asked facetiously as he took his seat. Ali paused just before he left the bridge.

'Badly.'
A fifth knife, held gently between finger and thumb of the thrower's right hand was released with a quick flick of the wrist.

The narrow, black-hilted blade joined its fellows clustered around the bull's-eye on the target at the far end of the room.

'Very nice. Now try it with one eye closed,' Kei said from her perch on a bench on the left side of the Arcadia's training area. Harlock walked slowly the length of the room to collect the blades from the target, sheathing them one by one on a black belt ornamented with a skull and crossbones buckle. Only then did he turn to look at her, and gave her a sly smile.

'Only if you wear something revealing and spangled and stand in front of the target,' he replied, his smile widening in response to her own twinkling grin. 'Or would you prefer blindfolded?'

'Now you're just showing off,' she told him. 'You know - it looks pretty cool, but at the end of the day, it's a little impractical to disarm yourself voluntarily during a fight.'

'Says the fierce little scrapper who taught me,' he replied, taking the seat next to her, deliberately close enough so she had to shift up to make room for him. 'I suggested it to you as a way for you to improve your hand-eye coordination after you lost your sight in that eye. I never thought you'd take it so seriously as an actual tactic.' She huffed at him, and in reply he leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

'It has come in handy over the years, so don't be such a snob.' He handed her the belt. 'Why not see if you still have what it takes? Unless you're out of practice…'

He grinned as she almost snatched the belt from his hand, her cobalt blue eyes narrowing as she eyed him up as though wondering what the hell he was up to.

'I take it there's still nothing on the long-range sensors?' he asked as she took her place behind the line on the floor that marked the thirty-foot distance to the target.

Two knives hit the board in quick succession, both in the black centre bull. 'Nada. Zip. Zilch. Though Ali broke radio silence again - just to say they were under siege at the site still. With Freya no longer controlling the dark matter the engine was shutting down and the growth of the jungle shot up exponentially - as he put it like a rat out of a trap. So she was holding it back somehow - now we just need to work out how…'

'Freya?'

In the red this time. 'Shit.'
... He smirked as she poised for another throw. So competitive...

'The little girl. That's what Daiba called her.' Thud. Another score in the black. 'There were some oddities about the materials used in the structure as well - mutations in the self-repaired sections, so the theory is sound - now we just have to see if we can replicate any of it.'

Thock.

Her last blade bounced off a hilt and fell harmlessly to the floor. 'Bugger.' She marched over to the target and picked up the errant item, then pulled the rest out with sharp jerks. 'I told Blaze to rendezvous at Deathshadow Island, just in case. We'll lose too much time if we send them back to Tabito.' She took back her position on the line. 'Oh - and you were right - that lichen-stroke-moss stuff? Similar genetic make-up to the stuff that infested the Arcadia.'

'Knew I'd seen something like it somewhere before,' he replied mildly, settling back to watch the view as a very firm, rounded, leather-clad arse wriggled enticingly as she lined up another throw. 'You're pulling your throws, Kei - too sharp, too fast. You always try too hard. Here.'

Pushing himself to his feet he walked over to stand behind her, ignoring her protests. With a grin he knew she wouldn't see, he inhaled the fresh, lemon and roses scent of her hair - so uniquely Kei, and placed his arms around her briefly, giving her lower body a little tug until she fitted snugly against him. His right hand he ran down her arm, gently encircled her wrist, his fingers encouraging her hand and lower arm to relax. 'You're using too much wrist,' he murmured into her neck, smiling at her soft intake of breath as his caressed her skin. Soft golden hair tickled his nose. 'You're getting too much spin and over-rotated that last throw. Here - you need to step into it like you mean it…'

'You're just using any old excuse to cop a feel,' she accused. 'And don't even think of trying to claim that's your holster - I can see both your gun-belts lying on the bench from here!'

'Just keep in mind that whatever you think is digging into your ass is doing so through two layers of reinforced leather,' he replied. 'And if it bothers you, for Earth's sake, stop wriggling quite so much…'

'Wriggling?' she asked, with a mischievous tone, matching deed to word. 'Like that?'

'Any more of that, and…' he plucked the knife from her fingers and dropped it point first into the floor mat, before divesting her of the rest in their sheaths and letting them fall to join it. By which time she'd twisted in his grip so that she was facing him, her face tilted up by the small amount needed to look him in the eye, a playful smile on her lips.

'And?' She let the tip of her tongue lick her bottom lip, then squealed as with one quick move he swept her feet out from under her, taking her down to the mat and pinning her to the floor. 'Ooof.'

'Was that "oof" or "oaf"?' he asked, before his mouth captured hers.

'I'm going with "oaf",' came a sardonic reply from the doorway. 'Do either of you ever keep your comms on?'

Harlock rolled off Kei with a regretful sigh and got to his feet, helping Kei to hers. Doc stood in the doorway tugging on her pony-tail with one hand. 'Ever heard of knocking?'

'Ever heard of putting a sock on the door?' She shook her head. 'Honestly… every time there's some downtime, I can guarantee I'll find the pair of you acting like a couple of teenagers.'
Harlock exchanged a look of mock indignation with Kei. 'I'm supposed to take this from the woman responsible for honey all over the controls of one of the gun turrets? I needed to bleach my brain after that image as well...' he shuddered. 'That was more of Ali - and you - than I ever needed to see...' He gathered up his gun belts and picked up the stray blade for Kei, who'd retrieved the others and who was trying and failing to keep a straight face.

'Not my fault,' Luna answered crossly. 'Would have been perfectly fine if someone hadn't decided to throw the ship around without properly engaging the inertial dampeners…'

'We were in orbit...Take it up with the Alliance - and next time, use a blanket.' He leaned against the wall and stared her down. 'Well - what couldn't wait but didn't require a call to battlestations?'

'Seems we've finally got company - Yattaran suggested I come and get you both.'

'That would usually be cause for an all-hands alert,' Kei pointed out. Luna shrugged.

'His call - but he says there's something rather odd about this group. Thinks you might need to take a look…'

'How many ships?' Kei breathed. She took a couple of steps towards the edge of the bridge gantry until she was standing at Harlock's side. On the main viewscreen, space was filled with the images of hundreds - if not thousands - of ships exiting IN-SKIP and moving across their field of view.

'They've been filing out of IN-SKIP for over a day. So far, no signs of stopping,' came Tochiro's reply over the internal speakers. 'Most of them are smaller than we are, but right in the middle -' the view zoomed into a bulge in the caravan than wandered across their screen. '- was this beauty.'

The ship filled the viewscreen, even with a reduced magnification. Except "ship" was not the first word that came to mind as they watched the object drift gracefully through space, surrounded by smaller vessels like a cluster of fireflies.

'That's a tree…' Sabu said wonderingly from his place at Kei's station. 'A Gaia-damned tree…'

'A tree that's about six miles long,' Harlock replied, staring at the screen. 'Weapons?'

'None that we can detect on the ship itself - looks as though it relies on the black body drive to power one hell of a shield, and those smaller ships around it for protection. That thing isn't a battleship.' Yattaran took his thick glasses off, polished them on the bottom of his sweater and pushed them back onto his nose. 'And that's the fourth I've seen go past, though the other three were smaller.'

'Quite a mix of ships as well,' Sabu called out. 'But most of them are showing no signs of anything resembling weapons.'

'Why are they taking their sweet time going back into IN-SKIP?' Martinez asked. A dark haired man a little older than his captain, his dark hair was pulled into a mohican and shaved in strips on both sides. One of the handful of survivors from the days of the last Captain, he currently stood at Ali's usual post on the lower bridge.

'Powering up, at a guess,' Kei replied. 'At least, that was what that data chip seemed to suggest. Seems we were right.'

'Have they noticed us?' Harlock didn't turn his attention from the viewscreen.
'Not so far. We've been in the shadow of these asteroids the other side of this solar system and we're powered down apart from the time radar - this lot have just kept filing past, like a damn parade.' Yattaran clumped across the gantry to stand beside his captain. 'You thinking of engaging? Because that's a bloody awful lot of ships…'

'Like you say - most of them look as though they're civilian…' Harlock folded his arms across his chest and frowned. 'Why drag civilian ships along if they're not refugees? They're heading for a handful of weak points in the fabric of spacetime…'

'...storing up energy in the black body drives as they go,'Mimay finished for him. She drifted across the gantry and stood between Harlock and Kei. 'There are very few habitable planets in that area, or even on the route they're taking.'

'Explains the slow progress - even allowing for the need to photosynthesise, they're taking a slow route to charge up those black bodies.' Yattaran added. 'By the way the life signs detectors are getting huge readings - even allowing for the ships being alive in some way, those vessels are stuffed to the rafters. Why bring along so many? If it's a…' he broke off. 'Erm - Captain?' He pointed to the screen.

Harlock followed the direction the rather grubby finger was pointing. Several of the larger ships had peeled away from the main body of the convoy, and were heading in their direction. Smaller ships - which had been orbiting their giant tree, broke off and followed, even as the tree and the bulk of the fleet vanished into imaginary number space.

'Have they spotted us?' Harlock asked. Kei took a look at her station.

'Doesn't look like it - the little ones are firing on the big ships…' She looked up at the screen. 'Oh, shit…'

One of the five ships broke up, splitting open like a rotten fruit. Several of the crew looked away, cursing as another suddenly vented from several points, before drifting into the path of another, which couldn't avoid its fellow. The remaining two ships were still hauling for what they obviously thought was the safety of the asteroid belt the Arcadia was using as cover.

Harlock's hand tightened on the wheel.

'Why aren't they fightin' back?' Sabu asked. 'They're bigger…'

'No weapons,' Harlock replied softly. Despite the tone, Kei and Yattaran exchanged a look behind his back. Both nodded. 'Those are transport ships. They're firing on their own kind…' He bowed his head briefly, then lifted his chin and stared straight ahead. He didn't get a chance to speak.

'Change of plan, people! All hands to battlestations! Seal internal bulkheads. Clear main arrays for firing!' Kei called out. She caught Harlock's eye and smiled. 'Well, you were going to give the order anyway…'

'Fffft. Yattaran -'

'I'm on it… easing us out of here, Captain. Orders?'

'Put us between those transports and the attackers. Position and activity in the main fleet?'

'Not reacting - most of them are already gone - looks as though they're in a bit of a hurry, though - some of those phase transitions are sloppy!' Kei called back.
'Hardly surprising,' Harlock said quietly. 'Someone's sending a message, and I suspect the rest of them got it loud and clear…' They pulled clear of the asteroid field, dark matter billowing around the ship as she powered up. 'Ahead full, first mate. Are we in range?'

'Not quite - though we can fire a warning across their bows…' Kei replied.

'Do it. Try to raise those transports - not sure if they speak our language, but if not, hopefully they'll get the message!'

'Franz- you're the linguist - see what you can do,' Kei shouted down the order. A dark-haired, mustachioed crewman ran for the communications suite under the gantry.

'A cunning linguist?' Yattaran asked with a smirk.

'Don't make me come over there and slap you,' Kei snapped back. 'Main battery - fire at will!'

The Arcadia's main array of oscillator cannon ratcheted into place around her circumference, triple-barrelled turrets pointing long her length, then each turret angled its guns as the crews locked onto a target. The three rows on her top elevation fired sequentially, twelve shafts of energy headed for the battleships bearing down upon the Mazone transports, tracked by Kei at her station, calling out the time on target.

One of the ships exploded, its energy signature blooming and then dying. The crew cheered.

'Who got the hit?' Harlock asked. 'I think someone just earned a raise!'

The crew laughed. Martinez looked up from the main gunnery console and called out: 'Hell - we get paid for this? News to me!'

More laughter.

'Esteban,' Kei told Harlock. 'Nice shooting!' she called out.

'Thanks Miss Kei - but I think she just turned into it!'

'Well, we have their attention now…' Harlock span the wheel to the left to avoid a speculative, though apparently spent shot from one of the ships. 'We've got a longer range than they have - unless they're faking. Pick your targets - and don't be shy about introducing yourselves!'

He turned to Yattaran. 'What's the reading on those ships? That one just burst like an over-ripe melon. Compared to that ship that gave us so much grief around Earth, that was ridiculous.'

'Eh. You got that right. Might be worth stopping to pick up some souvenirs before we leave - whatever it's made of, it's not even in the same class as that Earth ship. We've got a longer range than they have - unless they're faking. Pick your targets - and don't be shy about introducing yourselves!'

He turned to Yattaran. 'One cheap bottom feeding tender in every requisition,' Harlock quipped grimly. He grimaced. Zone Industries - notorious for undercutting bids and delivering ships that had a galaxy-wide reputation as flying death-traps. Despite this, there was always some venal flunky willing to take a back-hander and pocket the difference on the tender prices. Feydar Zone had eventually fled to Shaitan, after Harlock had publicly humiliated him and flattened his main dry-dock. Apparently Chancellor Doppler wasn't as picky about safety standards… 'Keep a weather eye out for reinforcements - I don't want any nasty surprises that aren't me.'
More laughter, as the gunnery crews got to work - not a straightforward task once the ships regrouped. Seventeen vessels that fell roughly into destroyer-class - roughly half the Arcadia's mass and length - formed up into three groups - one seemingly intent on doing an end run around the Arcadia, the remaining twelve ships attacking from multiple directions in groups of three. Harlock neatly slipped the Arcadia between two strafing attacks and span the ship up and around, the gunnery crews taking out all six in the space of seconds.

'They never learn,' he muttered.

'Hate to remind you, but this lot don't know who you are,' Yattaran pointed out. 'Oi Martinez - clean up that little shit to starboard - Doscoi - what the fuck are you playing at? The third ratchet system just took a hit! Self-repair's got the hull but it's jammed something inside the mechanism! For fuck's sake, whose idea was it to let Maji take a holiday?'

'Maji ain't the only decent engineer on this ship you fat bastard - just let me do my job!' came the pithy reply back over the comms.

Yattaran grinned evilly as he leaned over his console. 'Six down - no - seven - nice one Martinez! Looks like we caught these girls with their knickers down, eh? Now let's show 'em what we've got!'

Harlock rolled his visible eye. 'Really? - with Ali gone I'd rather hoped I'd be spared the inappropriate running commentary…' He cursed as a shot passed perilously close to the bridge window. 'Oh no you don't...' The wheel received a hard spin to port, and the ship flipped around on its axis in a well practised manoeuvre. 'Rear guns - give those gnats something to think about. Forward turrets - protect those two transports - someone out there seems to think I can't be in two places at the same time!'

'You can't,' Kei pointed out. He just smiled at her.

'No, but it's going to feel like it in a moment, because someone thinks they know our range now... Martinez - take out that ship that's hanging back will you? It's annoying me.'

'My pleasure, captain!'

'Heh heh...should we send out a warning that we have them surrounded?' Yattaran patted his stomach.

'Don't get cocky,' Harlock warned him. 'We're fast... but we're not that fast!'

'Captain!' Franz's voice called up from below. 'You might want to hurry this up a bit - I've made contact with one of the transports - they're asking for sanctuary!'

'All enemy ships accounted for, bar the one that slipped away,' Kei reported in their quarters, a couple of hours later. Harlock dropped into the chair behind the baroque wooden desk with a heartfelt sigh, and accepted a glass handed to him by Mimay. She placed her tablet down on the desk and perched on the edge, accepting a tall glass of her own from Mimay with a smile of thanks. The Nibelung woman drifted over to the chaise-longue nearby and draped herself over it gracefully, a glass of red wine in one long fingered hand, her wide eyes fixed on the captain.

'Are they Mazone?' he asked. Kei nodded. 'Well, we don't attack civilian non-combatants. As to what to do now…' he stared at the ruby depth of his glass. 'Damned if I know - it seemed like a good idea at the time…' He lifted the glass and drained it in one long swallow. 'Still, I wanted information - now might be a good time to see if I can get some.' He smiled at Kei. 'Fancy a side-trip?'
'You're planning on going over to one of those ships?'

'Well I'll be damned if I'm letting another of those creatures loose on mine,' he responded pithily. 'We're still cleaning up the mess from the last time.'

'That ship that got away…' Kei began.

'Done is done - besides, after what happened on Earth and afterwards, I have a feeling they won't be telling their high command anything they don't already know…' There was a half-full bottle of wine on the desk and he picked it up to refill his glass with casual nonchalance. 'Yattaran can hold down the fort. I've made arrangements for Franz to come along - and we'll wear the Valkyrie suits - there's a compatible atmosphere, but I'd prefer not to rely on that damned cloak for protection if plasma starts flying.'

'You and me both,' Kei replied, snagging the bottle off him and topping up her own glass. 'The only safe place for innocent bystanders in a firefight is under that thing, not next to you…'

Mimay hid a sad smile behind her glass. 'What?' Kei asked.

'It wasn't really a problem for Harlock,' she replied in her soft voice. 'He so very rarely fought beside anyone when wearing it…'

'One of these days, we need to work out a designation,' Kei told her captain. 'Old Harlock/Young Harlock? Great Harlock? First Harlock…'

'Anyone who starts appending "young" to my name will find out how funny I don't find it, at my age.' Harlock stood up and reached for his gunbelts, hanging from the back of the chair.

'Feeling that long slow slide to forty, as Ali would say?' Kei asked with a grin.

'Every damn day,' he replied with feeling. 'Let's go and see whether or not this was a good idea or not, shall we?'

Of the two surviving transports, the bullet was heading towards the one in better shape. The second ship was leaking its atmosphere and water to space, even as they watched.

'Should we send over another bullet to check on survivors?' Kei asked.

'I already did, but with that amount of damage?' Harlock replied sadly. 'Look at it - what's venting isn't under pressure - they already lost most of it hours ago. The black body drive is almost depleted, trying to keep that force-field up at a guess. If there are any survivors, they'll be few and far between.'

Kei bit her bottom lip between her teeth and said nothing.

'The drive on this ship's reading a bit shaky as well,' Franz added as they drew near. He peered at the console. 'She's not going anywhere under her own power, that's for sure.'

'This thing must be over three times our length,' Kei said softly, awed. 'Look at it! I've never seen anything like it… from this angle, it's almost left-shaped!'

'You have to hand it to them - the ship designs are pretty amazing.' Harlock made a slight adjustment to their course. 'So far, so good at least no nasty surprises, and I have their beacon. Decelerating and matching rotational vector. Franz - how's the suit?'
The pirate ran a hand under his collar and stretched his neck. 'Not too bad - though I wish I'd had more practice in these new suits. You sure we couldn't just use the old ones?'

'They aren't renowned for their manoeuvrability,' Harlock pointed out. 'And is it really the look you want when making a first impression on a race of alien women fabled in legend for their beauty?' he continued, a wicked glint in his eye. 'Look at me, the waddling weirdo with glowing green circles where my face should be and yes, my ass does look fat in this, thanks for noticing?'

Franz sniggered. 'Have anyone in particular mind when you came up with that one?' he asked, giving his long moustache a tug.

'I'll never tell,' Harlock told him smoothly. 'Okay - Yattaran? Hold your position, we're going in.'

'Yeah, yeah - just watch yer back, captain!'

'Don't worry - I'll keep one eye open.' Harlock closed the comms and guided the small ship towards what they assumed was a hangar. 'Well, if anyone has any questions about this mission, too late now…'

Behind him, in the body of the bullet, Anita and Luna made noises which he had to assume were negative. Right about now, he was wishing he'd not sent Niobe and Meg off to Niflheim. Since the "Mazone Effect" so far seemed to leave women unaffected, it was probably time to think about a change to the recruitment policy...

He guided the bullet into the darkness of the Mazone transport's interior.

The wait as the hangar doors closed behind them seemed to take Forever. Kei swapped places with Franz whilst they waited for the hangar to re-pressurise. She stared out of the window, but with the internal lighting in the bullet so much brighter than that outside, could see only their reflections - silvered and bronzed statues from the neck down, she thought briefly. The effect was lost when they both moved. Then the exterior lighting began to brighten, and the reflections faded to ghostly after-images.

'Pressure's almost back to tolerable levels,' she told Harlock, her eyes fixed on the readouts.

'Oxygen?'

'A little lower than ours, but still breathable. Other gases close to Earth normal at this pressurisation - although CO2 is a little high, but I guess that's expected, under the circumstances. Nothing harmful that I can detect at least. At worst it'll be like breathing at altitude - but you should be used to that…' she smiled at him as he stood up. 'Not that you've had time for any climbing recently.'

'Nor for a while yet,' he muttered. 'Any signs of movement yet?'

She pointed. 'I think the delegation just arrived.'

A small doorway had irised in the wall in front of them, and half a dozen figures were stepping out of it, to stand in a group before the bullet. One figure - looking to Harlock's eyes like a slender, freckled girl in her late teens with pale red hair falling down to her waist, stood slightly in front of the rest. Three were dressed in short draped garments that resembled a kind of toga - clasped at the shoulder and leaving one shoulder and arm bare. All were barefoot, and he couldn't see any obvious weapons.
Except, on Hakidame, the Mazone they'd faced had utilised the plants around them, and had some kind of inbuilt weaponry - sharp thorns tipped with a paralytic poison.

Except on Hakidame, he reminded himself, he hadn't been wearing armour. He gave his left gauntlet a sharp tug, and gestured towards the hatch. 'Well, we came this far, might as well go and say hello.'

'You know, you should have worn the cloak,' Kei told him as she fell in beside him. 'Far more imposing.'

'Did you get a good look at them?' he asked her softly as they approached the hatch. Franz was operating the door control, one hand on the hilt of his holstered pistol. Kei shook her head. 'I don't think authority is what these people need right now,' he continued. Standing in the hatchway, he waited for the rest of his crew to form up behind him, and then with Kei at his side, walked slowly down the short ramp towards the waiting delegation.

Unlike the boldness of the Mazone he'd met previously, these seemed nervous, trembling like leaves in the wind, although they held their ground. They had none on the aggressive arrogance he'd seen on Hakidame or Earth.

Closer inspection also revealed they were less human in appearance than others as well, although the girl in front appeared almost normal. Those surrounding her however were a mixed bag. The less human like ones were unclothed, although given they had no obvious sexual characteristics to hide, this wasn't too surprising.

One was stick-thin. Her fingers and toes were long and thin, the fingers longer than her palm by a considerable margin. These twitched as he stared, and he raised his eye to her face. Like the rest of her this was dark nutty brown and looked like the bark of a tree. A few steps closer, and he could see the bark was rough and flaking in places, and instead of the more flexible skin in her limbs, looked hard and brittle. Her hair - or what passed for it - was willow-like leafy twigs falling from the top of her head, and the leaves looked spotted and yellowed in places. Her face reminded him of a child's illustration of a dryad from his childhood - as though the features of a human face were only visible in the tree when you looked hard enough. Her eyes were an inky black, but in them, when he met that gaze, he felt a wave of sorrow wash over him.

Uncomfortable he swept his gaze over the rest. To the right of the girl, a green-skinned creature who otherwise looked like a loose-limbed human girl. She moved with a fluid grace when she shifted slightly, and he suspected a lack of an internal skeleton. She moved like a young tree in the wind. Behind her a woman who looked as though she was supposed to be a lot more rotund than she was - her sagging flesh was wrinkled and hung in folds from her limbs and rounded belly. But not old, he realised, looking at her face.

The remaining Mazone were more human, so similar in appearance to the freckled girl that there had to be a family resemblance. If anything, they looked even younger. Whether it was the lighting, or natural, they all looked pale.

He came to a halt several paces in front of them. 'I believe you wanted to discuss sanctuary?' he asked blandly as he could. The girl in front took a step closer, and went down onto one knee, the others following suit behind her. 'Ah… please, don't do that. Get up - I bow the knee to no-one, and I'd never ask anyone to do so to me.' He leaned down and gently lifted the girl to her feet, noting the confusion in her dark - though not black - eyes. 'Do you have a name?'

'Sainess,' she replied, in a melodic voice. 'This vessel and its people are under my protection.'
'Call me Harlock,' he replied. 'Most people do.'

All of the Mazone recoiled at the name, and he gave Kei a helpless what-did-I-say look. She shrugged.

'The Destroyer of Worlds!' one of the Mazone - one who looked human - wailed. Even the girl - Sainess - looked nervous.

'Well that's a new one,' he muttered to turned back to Sainess and her entourage and essayed what he hoped was a reassuring smile. 'Tell your people I mean them no harm. If they mean what I think they do, that was my predecessor.'

She concentrated for a moment, her eyes fixed on his, then nodded slowly. 'I see the truth of this,' she said eventually. 'Although… there is something about you…' She trailed off, looking even more like a puzzled young girl.

'You speak our language?' Kei asked, seizing the moment to change the subject. 'How -'

'We guardians were tasked with learning it in preparation for the exodus,' she replied. 'The rest of our peoples less so, although they can understand you if your thoughts are clear enough.'

'Mind-reading?' Franz sounded panicked. 'Ali said…'

'My people are not part of the faction who feel we must use force,' Sainess told him, addressing the crewman directly. 'Be at ease, we only see what is broadcast, we do not pry.'

'We've had dealings with your more militaristic factions,' Harlock added dryly. 'But on that score I suspect we have something in common? What happened here?'

'There are more comfortable areas further within.' She gestured, and the iris re-opened. 'Please.'

Seeing the crew's hesitation, Harlock stepped through with as much purpose as he could put into his stride, sensing, rather than seeing, Kei do the same on his right side. Muted booted footsteps behind him told him his crew had belated followed behind, and the iris closed behind them, cutting off the bright light of the hangar and leaving them in a softer, yellow light so diffuse as to leave no distinct shadows. With a deep breath, he allowed himself to be led into the heart of the Mazone craft.
Chapter 30

The narrow corridors soon opened out into a larger area. Harlock recognised the general architecture as similar to the fossilised vessel he'd wandered through on Tokarga - they passed the soaring arches and walkways he'd seen before, only this time they were vibrant and pulsing with life - verdant, moss covered walls and bark-like flooring; trailing vines, water running in rills along the corridors following the lines of the rough bark, or trickling in steady drips from the mossy walls. On a human ship, it would have been evidence of severe problems with life support. Here, it was integral to the environment.

Underneath the fresh scents of newly turned soil and the crisp scents of the vegetation, there was a sour undercurrent, almost unnoticeable, but still pervasive. The sour, sickly scent of rotting plant matter; cloying and acidic it left a bad taste in his mouth.

On a whim he pulled off a gauntlet and reached out to touch the wall. The bark was smooth and cool to the touch, in between patches of deep, velvety moss. But to his eye, and sensitive fingertips, there were imperfections in the surface - tiny microfractures. Once aware of them, he saw them everywhere - stress fractures, caused by the twisting and deformation of young wood. The Mazone girl noticed his attention and stopped to allow him to catch up.

'You have serious problems,' he said gravely.

'Not here,' she replied softly. 'I will tell you anything you wish to know, but I do not wish to spread panic - my people have too much already to fear from outside. I would not add to it.'

Harlock nodded his understanding, and followed her as she walked on. The Mazone they met in the corridors were few and far between - there were a handful of the stick-like beings - who seemed to prefer to move between the surfaces rather than walk, startling his crewmates when one formed out of the wall to their left with no warning, pulling free of the bark with a look on its wrinkled face that looked nearly as shocked as they did - but most were the green, long-haired and smooth-skinned females with the oval-shaped blank faces which made them seem even more uncanny than if they'd been completely alien in form. Almost all of them seemed far more frail than those he'd seen on Earth, or even the underwater menace on Tiamat. Their features were smooth, the dark eyes without white or pupil like wells opening onto the darkness of deep time. Even though most looked youthful in their smoothness, there was still an impression of great age in their curious gaze, as they turned to stare at the strangers.

And then there was the silence... They didn't chatter as they walked, even in groups. But there was an undercurrent that he could almost sense, a feeling that they were communicating - but outside of anything humans could understand. Inside the flightsuit he wore under his armour, he was sure he could feel the hairs standing up on his arms. He held himself straight, and met those oily back eyes with the resolute calm he'd learned to project over the years - though he suspected that his brother, long dead now, might have just categorised it as variant of dumb insolence. Whatever the origin, however, it seemed to work. All of those few who tried to meet his eye turned away quickly and quickened their steps.

They criss-crossed at least three of the arched walkways, and given the state of the walls Harlock hesitated to look too closely at the structures they walked on, especially when one of them arched over a deep drop down to what he supposed would be the black body drive several hundred feet below. Instead he looked around at the smaller side branches that grew away from the main branch they walked on, and noted several vaulted chambers at their terminal points, where the pod-shaped capsules holding a vaguely humanoid shape could be seen, with writhing cable-like vines trailing
into - or out - of them.

'It seems impossible,' Kei whispered as she caught up when they reached the comparative safety of a corridor again. 'I saw the footage from Tokarga, but this is incredible - is the whole ship organic?'

'The Trees of Life grow - grew - on our homeworlds,' the girl told them, overhearing. 'They are our homes, and we nurture them, in return for which they shelter, feed and protect us. Grown in space, they attain the sizes you see here, only here they are closed environments. The carbon drives are added before maturity, to provide additional support in the void for both ship and inhabitants, as well as the power for Śýndesi chórou…' Her hand grazed the mossy wall, trailing through the deep plus green surface. 'At least, that is how it should be,' she added softly.

'Sýndesi chórou?' Kei asked Harlock, leaning into him and whispering in his ear.

'Literally "bonded space" - or depending on the grammar maybe "the void which binds".' Franz supplied, with a grin at his captain and exec. 'Sorry - couldn't help overhearing - she doesn't do quiet…'

Kei glared at him, and he winked.

'I suspect it means what we call Imaginary Number Space.' Harlock pointed to patches where the vegetation seemed yellowed and sickly, or missing entirely. 'It seems your tree is sick,' he said quietly.

Sainess shook her head, tears in her eyes. 'No, it dies.'

The corridor opened out in front of them into an area resembling a woodland glade. Large tree roots snaked across the grassy floor, providing natural seating which reminded Harlock of the conduits in the central computer room of the Arcadia - his usual spot for talking to Tochiro. Small trees - no more than fifteen or twenty feet high, encircled the area, and arched over the roof, splintering the already diffuse lighting into fractured motes.

'Please - be seated.' Sainess gestured to the natural benches. Harlock took a seat with confident flair, and after a little hesitation, Kei took a seat next to him, the others arranging themselves close by - Anita remaining standing, her back to a wall, Franz at his captain's back watching the exits, and Luna taking another seat opposite where she could keep an eye on the way they'd come in.

'You asked for our help,' Harlock pressed gently, when Sainess, seated opposite, hesitated. Her apparent age, he was beginning to suspect, wasn't an illusion. She seemed almost as young as Meg. 'Looking around it seems you have bigger problems than a clingy government intent on keeping you in line.' He deliberately softened his tone as he spoke, allowing his mouth to curve into a slow, reassuring smile. *All that time spent cruising the Admiralty and Council ballrooms on Isora's behalf, charming his way through debutantes and cougars on his brother's orders hadn't been completely wasted, at least…* Though judging from the what-the-fuck look Kei was giving him, he'd hear about it later...

Sainess straightened almost visibly on her seat, her freckled cheeks flushing slightly under his regard. 'You have the right of it. Our trees die. Properly nurtured and raised in orbit, they grow strong, and fast, and sure. But when the homeworlds were destroyed…' She broke off, her fingers sinking into the mossy growth of her root-seat as though searching for comfort. 'When the exodus was announced, they needed vessels to carry us - all who survived. And to do so, they force-grew them in orbit around a yellow star not far from the edge of the destruction. Grown too fast, their skins are thin, their branches brittle. And I… I should have grown with my tree, maturing with him.
As I am little more than a child, so is my love - and we fail together. We will not survive another leap into *Sýndesi chórou*. The carbon drive has put too much strain on all systems. As the containment fails, it also leaches strength from within as well as without. You see the result -' she gestured, and Harlock took in the spoiled foliage - wrinkled, spotted, browning in places. White powdery mildew affected some of the branches. Areas of the mossy walls were withering even in the light.

'I see it.' he replied gently. 'Is there nothing we can do to help the ship - the tree? I have some skills in botany…' He kept his tone polite and earnest, leaning slightly towards her, his smile open and approachable.

_Harmless. Attentive…_

She shook her head. 'Not whilst we remain in the void. If we could have reached a planet - any planet, then… But when we asked to be allowed to rest, we were forbidden. When we then asked if we could take our vessels from the fleet and make a new home, we were refused. This is why we fled, a handful of ship-maidens. And you saw the queen's answer.' She lowered her head.

'I saw.' He leaned towards her. 'You said you'd tell me anything I wanted - now would be a good time to start. We've had some contact with your kind - none of it friendly - but then, I don't get that vibe from you or those I've seen here - but if I'm to help you, I need to understand _why_ I should.'

Sainess raised her head again to look Harlock in the eye. 'You just know… I expected to die… when the Flight attacked. I never expected any to come to our aid, let alone a human… And yet… The Destroyer of Worlds comes to our aid. It seems like a dream. We were taught to fear you - the One-Eyed Fury, and his death-ship, *Apollyon* - the Abomination.'

Kei flinched slightly and cast a sideways glance at Harlock, who simply reached up to untie the patch over his eye, tugging it free from his hair with a sharp pull. Both of his hazel eyes now stared at the Mazone girl, the right with its pupil fixed and dilated slightly less than its fellow, and underscored by a spattering of old burn scars.

'I lost the sight in this eye about thirteen years ago - but not the eye. The patch just helps prevent some nasty headaches - the optic nerve was damaged but does still have some function - even if that's just to give me splitting headache…'

Sainess stared at him, her mouth open in a surprised "o". She dropped her gaze in embarrassment. 'I'm sorry - I meant no offence…'

Harlock smiled. 'None taken - I hear worse. Often on a daily basis.'

'Yeah…' Franz muttered. 'Must be nice having Ali off ship…'

'My ship,' Harlock continued, resisting the urge to send Franz a warning look, 'Is called *Arcadia*, not *Apollyon*.'

'It is our name for the destroyer, in our legends. For us it is the ship that twice now has left nothing but death and destruction in its wake. *Arcadia* is a strange choice for something so fearsome,' Sainess offered. '*Arcadia* means paradise, in our old tongue. Yet your ship is the embodiment of corruption and death, shrouded in darkness.'

'A friend of mine tells me it's a symbol of hope sprung from the ashes of despair. But then he tends to wax a little poetical on occasion. Even in death, there is rebirth and new life. If we fight until only bones remain in the darkness, from the darkest night light can be reborn.' He replied softly,
Sainess raised her head and looked into his eyes. 'Yes. We would tell it differently, but we have a similar tradition.' She straightened, and although she didn't - as a human might - inhale deeply to give the impression of a decision made, still those present were left with that impression. 'We asked for your help, yet I see few options open to us. We cannot make another leap - my vessel would not survive - the structure has been damaged by both battle and by the rigours of our journey so far. Yet if we stay here, I fear the Flight will return, to finish what they began.'

'There is a planet, currently on the far side of this sun,' Harlock told her. 'It's barely in the habitable zone, but it has the building blocks of life on it. Water, carbon dioxide, nitrogen, oxygen. We scanned your ship before we came over - the hull is badly damaged and there are microfractures all through the superstructure. If you fired up your engines, it's likely it would fail long before you reached it. But we have a tractor array which could tow your ship into a slowly decaying orbit - from there you should be able to land.'

'It's not ideal,' Harlock continued as Sainess stared wide-eyed at him. 'It's a cold world, in the grip of an ice age. But if you brought your ship down in one piece, it would provide shelter. It's that, or be stuck in-system with the possibility your people will come back to finish the job. Which I suspect would be a genuine fear…'

She nodded slowly. 'I think we might not even be the first. There have been talks between shipmaidens… tales of ships which failed to exit Sýndesi chórōu - word from the nemeton has always been that these were scattered accidents - but myself and my comrades on the other ships who rebelled… we knew the state of our own vessels. We spoke amongst ourselves, and there were hundreds of ships in the same state - some barely surviving between leaps. Every leap, we lose more, and yet they tell us we must push onwards, ever onwards. Why? We pass through systems with worlds we could inhabit - many with no colonies of your kind on them! Yet always, always, they tell us the queen says we must continue - that at the end of our travails we will create a new, second homeworld!'

She stood up and paced the length of the chamber, her short, quick steps bringing her to the far wall. There she laid her hands on the rough bark, and placed her forehead against it. 'The queen will not speak with us,' she said listlessly. 'Her chorus surround her, and she will not even appear to us. There are those sympathetic to our plight, but they are few, and their voices are often silenced. Tessius… Tessius has cautioned against rebellion, but I fear even she loses hope of changing the queen's mind.'

'Your queen - Rafflesia?' Harlock asked.

Sainess raised her head and nodded. 'All glory to her name. Yes. The first of her line led the survivors away from the destruction.'

'And Tessius?' Kei asked.

'One of the leading voices in the chorus. She is Meliades, not Louloúdi ptómatos, though she stands high in our leadership.'

'Louloúdi ptómatos?' Harlock turned to Franz.

'Corpse flower,' Franz whispered in his ear. 'You want Meliades? That one I'm not too sure of, though it's similar to the name for something called an ash...?'

'I know that one,' Harlock replied. 'I knew all of the old greek legends regarding trees and flowers
thanks to my mother and my uncle… it was a name given once to the dryads of the ash tree, but can be applied to all tree-nymphs. Would that be right?"

A nod. 'We have stories, brought to us over the eons by our kind who remained on Mítra - the womb, I think you would say? The planet you call Earth. Yes. Meliae are those born from the great trees. They can take different forms at will, and very few ever show their true forms to outsiders.'

'You spoke of louloúdi ptómatos - corpse flowers. That's a name given to a plant called Rafflesia - a parasitic vine…'

'Yes. She is of that kind, but the name… it was once a pejorative, though she wears it now as a matter of pride. It refers to those who are part of your race, part of ours. The Green… it is in our blood. Their cells. It is not of them…' she trailed off. 'I am louloúdi ptómatos - but I do not know how to explain it. I am a shipmaiden, not Anazítóntas ti gnósi - a… "seeker of knowledge"?'

'Scientist,' Kei suggested.

Sainess smiled at her. 'Yes. I read the sense of your word. Yes. "scientist". We are many kinds… families. Ampeloi… those of the vines, who are wholly of the green. Dryades are the strength… as you would say - the military. The meliae, the dryades… they guide, protect. And we guide them in turn. And yet we also serve, all of us. It is what we do. Who we are. There are many more, but they would be strange to your minds - even we cannot truly comprehend the ancients - those who left Mítra in the first diaspora.'

'We found a ship.' Harlock held her gaze. 'Fossilised, on an abandoned world. My crew estimate it crash landed there almost sixty-five million years ago - during the period Earth was undergoing a mass extinction event. I'm not sure how that would fit with however you work out timescale…'

She nodded. 'We still take note of the orbital period of Mítra. That was a later diaspora - though not the last. There was a terrible conflict - many of us wanted to escape a coming disaster - a cometary body heading for us which was predicted to lay waste to the planet. Others felt the danger was not so severe, and that we should wait, and survive, as we had done so often before - our memories go back to the dawn times, through the Green - from the days before even the lowliest animal life on Mítra left the seas. Every catastrophe we thought would destroy all life always left a niche for life to return. Always, a large proportion of us left, yet some of those remaining always survived. As before, a contingent left, and one stayed. As before, we survived. The age of monsters ended, the age of your kind began.'

'You kept in touch with Earth all this time?' Kei asked, leaning forwards keenly.

Sainess nodded. 'We stay in contact with all our sisters. All are part of the whole. Those who remained on Earth eventually bonded with your kind - the tiny creatures from the forest floor who survived, and evolved. We even interacted with you down to your historical times, although you later dismissed us as a fantasy, as you crawled over Mítra and began to poison her land and waters and skies. We left again, merely a century before you took your own first steps into the void. From this final diaspora, my line was born.'

'Not all of you left,' Harlock added dryly. 'Did you? We have seen remnants of your kind on Earth - carbonised as they tried to escape, caught in the dark matter blast. And on the colony worlds - was it so necessary to cripple the terraforming?'

She hung her head. 'You followed us to the stars, and when you reached them, you had learned nothing. You saw worlds spread in front of you, but instead of embracing them, you tried to change them into worlds you wanted, rather than change yourselves to meet the requirements of these
'I hate to break it to you,' Luna broke in, a harsh note in her voice. 'But we don't adapt as easily - or quickly - to different conditions as plants do.'

'Maybe not - but does that excuse those who spread over verdant worlds and covered them with cities and fouled the skies and water?' Sainess raised her head and this time her eyes flashed with a passion. 'So many worlds teetered on the edge of flourishing with life, and humans came there and destroyed that balance in the name of making these worlds more like their home. We tried to protect them, but we failed. In the end we tried to drive you home, and watched you turn on each other. In my memories, this was a terrible time. And then… then the Destroyer came, and *Mitra* was turned into a scorched, desolate wasteland.'

'Your people caused the Homecoming War?' Anita's hands tightened on her armoured thighs. 'Do you have any idea -'

'Anita...'

At Harlock's quiet interjection, the big woman looked at him mulishly, but subsided.

'No. She is correct. We had no idea the consequences would be so severe - we sought only to cull your numbers to more manageable levels - no-one foresaw the terrible conflagration as the conflict escalated.'

'So what you're saying,' Kei added coldly, 'is that, like the old Harlock, you made a mistake?'

'Kei. I doubt these were even alive at the time.' Harlock waited for Sainess to respond.

'No - but we remember, all the same. There were Mazone on *Mitra*, and in orbit around the planet, watching. Their memories live on, passed from generation to generation. As do those from the Exodus, when we were exiled from our homeworlds.'

'We saw the empty space where your systems once were via our time radar,' Harlock told her gently. 'The oscillators my predecessor planted...'

Sainess lifted her head to stare at the canopy above her, her face pale in the diffuse light. 'About seventy years ago, one of the suns in that sector began to fluctuate wildly. As is our way, several vessels were sent away, containing the seeds of a future revival, in case the worst happened, and the planets and moons in that system rendered untenable. We didn't know about the devices until much later, when analysing the damage... But a stray solar flare, we think, set off one of the devices - and there were, we discovered, several more in very close proximity, relatively speaking. The chain reaction destroyed our entire civilisation - except for those few already in space. Within seconds the explosions tore through sub-space. Our worlds vanished in front of our eyes - no-one understood what they were seeing - afterwards, it was as though they had never existed...' She turned again to look at Harlock. 'Only the residual energy signature allowed us to identify the weapons, with the help of our sisters still living among you: the dimensional oscillators Harlock stole - designed to be used to "clear" space of dangers to shipping - a "tool" to some - but a weapon of terrifying potential in the wrong hands.'

Harlock snorted. 'There were a lot of those left lying around after the war, believe me - why anyone ever thought a device capable of ripping space-time apart at the planck interval and dropping its contents into one of the coiled sub-dimensions was a good substitute for a shovel is beyond me. You'd think they could just go *around* anything in their way...' Kei elbowed him in the ribs and he mouthed a "what?" at her.
'Soap-box.' She sub-vocalised the warning. To Sainess she said: 'So all of these ships - your fleets - they're the survivors? How did so many…'

'They didn't,' Sainess cut her off. 'Only fifty ships had been sent out - though a few hundred joined from other worlds once one of the shipmaidens - Rafflesia - sent out her call. The rest were grown in space, as needed. Our numbers grow quickly when needed - our forms are more flexible than yours at the lowest level of life - the twisted vine can assume many shapes, and we can reproduce using any method needed. I've heard you call us plants, but that would be too simplistic. We are Mazone - your divisions do not include us, although we can and do overlap with them, and even mimic their forms at need.'

'It's a lot to take in,' Luna told her captain. 'Captain - you and yours have taken a lot of damage at the hands of these Mazone - how far do you really want -'

He raised a hand to stop her. 'So far, we've just reacted. We've not really understood what we were facing. We've been attacked, and we've hit back. We've uncovered a threat, and we're trying to find a way to neutralise it. But one problem at a time, Doc - right now, we've got a civilian ship that's been targeted by their own military. There's hardly a man or woman on board the Arcadia who can't sympathise with that scenario.' He gave his attention back to Sainess, who waited with her wide green eyes focussed on him, her hands folded but agitated in her lap.

'We'll see you safe into orbit - that should give your people a chance at least. It isn't much, but -'

'It's all we wanted,' she broke in. 'Thank you.'

He nodded an acknowledgement and stood up. 'Can you keep your black body drive shielded enough to prevent it drawing upon the dark matter?'

She nodded. 'Only the dryades ships actively and aggressively make use of that functionality,' she added. 'You have my word your ship will be safe from any energy drain.'

'I'll send over an engineer or two to look over your ship before we lock on with the tractor beam. I wouldn't like any nasty surprises for either of us if your ship can't take the acceleration.'

'And it doesn't hurt to look it over,' Kei murmured on the way back to the bullet.

Harlock smiled at her. 'I could spend days on this thing looking at how the ecology holds together… but we don't have days, I suspect.'

She gave him a sharp glance,. But said nothing until they were seated in the cockpit, the crew already strapping themselves in back in the compartment. 'You think those battleships will be back.'

Harlock nodded. He leaned back in his seat, letting Kei pilot them free of the Mazone ship, and back into space, heading for the roiling dark cloud of the Arcadia's dark matter screen. The red eyes on the prow glinted through the tenebrous fog; demonic searchlights, cutting through the eternal night of space. 'If ships are failing and the civilian population getting restless, this Queen Rafflesia only really has two choices - give in to their demands, or tighten her fist and take a hard line on the dissent. I think we can guess which side she chose to come down on. Oh. They'll be back,' he continued grimly. 'Kei - I want a full holographic shield over us and the Mazone transport the moment we have it locked into the tractor array. And have Yattaran and Tochiro knock up a projection showing the transport lying dead in space near the rest of that debris field - hopefully the biomass and non-organic mass signatures for four ships won't be worth double-checking to
Harlock guided the ship towards the small icy world himself, braced behind the wheel, a tall, calm figure in dark grey. The bird perched on his right shoulder, periodically clacking its beak in annoyance if its perch moved too quickly.

'So far, so good.' Yattaran gripped the edge of his console and peered at the screens and gauges, the light from these giving his face a sickly green hue. 'Maybe this queen doesn't have the stomach for slaughter after all?' He lifted his head to peer at Harlock through his bottle-thick glasses.

'Getting a mass reading on the long range sensors!' Kei called out. 'Seriously, Yattaran - what have we said about opening your mouth too soon?'

'Oi - don't give me that, you do it as well… remember that -'

'Just the sitrep, you two,' Harlock broke in before they could start with the name calling and hair pulling. 'Numbers, range, course and speed?'

'Three ships, bearing down on the debris field. Coming in hard and fast.' Kei looked up from her console. 'Damn... they're big - and I don't like the readings - these three are a whole league above that last group! And they're going to go straight through our holo-net as though they didn't even see it…'

'That was always a possibility,' Harlock replied shortly. 'Get on the short-range to the Mazone transport - we're only an hour out from the planet at this speed. Give them a heads up - if they find us, tell them we'll cut them loose and run interference.'

Kei relayed the message, and looked over at Harlock, a worried frown on her face. 'If this lot mean business, any ideas how to counter their weapons and that energy-sucking effect yet?'

He shrugged, and got an earful from the bird for his pains. He shooed it off his shoulder unceremoniously. 'You - chair. Trust me, if anything comes to mind, you'll be the second to know.'

'Second?' she sounded affronted and Yattaran sniggered at her.

'Who's first?' he asked, smirking.

'Me,' Harlock retorted. 'Because right now, that's what our beloved ghost in the machine is bending all his not inconsiderable brain to solving…'

'It's a poser.' Tochiro's electronic voice held a petulant tone, as though the Mazone weaponry was a personal affront. I've been over the data from the scuffle we had in Earth orbit until I'm dizzy. These ships are in a similar class all right - so we can't close with 'em and they regenerate as fast as we do from a shot, even from a blast from the main battery.'

'If we can't ram them, then what about expelling the dark matter in a controlled stream?' Harlock asked. 'Mimay?'

'Whatever you're thinking, think faster!' Yattaran called out. He clung to the edge of his console, fingers digging into the surface as though he planned to force his way through it with his fingertips. 'Because they didn't buy the hologram - they're heading right for us!'
'Active scan detected!' Kei shouted. 'Damn… can't jam it… it was on such a low frequency I almost missed it.'

'It's a lifesigns detector,' Tochiro told her. 'Makes sense, seeing as their ships are organic…'

'Why didn't I think of that?" Kei muttered angrily. She glared at her console as though daring it to answer.

Harlock kept his attention on Mimay, who'd trip-trapped her way across the gantry to stand at his side. 'Can we use the dark matter array? Expel the stuff in a narrow beam?'

'I can generate enough dark matter,' she replied hesitantly. 'But that would just expand the cloud around us, and attenuate it. We can't…'

I can.

Tochiro's mental voice sounded in Harlock's head like a cool breeze on a hot summer day. Keep them at a distance, my friend - you might be onto something there - I just need a few minutes to re-route a couple of systems to the main battery. On which note, keep the gun crews off those arrays until I'm done - secondary battery and torpedoes only.

'Thanks - but how long's "a few minutes"?" Harlock asked waspishly, as the voice receded. He sighed, and looked around at the faces staring at him. 'Yes, your captain hears voices, remember? At last he does when someone's too bloody distracted by a shiny new idea to remember to use the comms… Yattaran - Kei - Martinez - shut down the main battery until I give the order. Secondary battery and torpedo fire only. Tochiro wants a little time to make some adjustments - let's make sure he gets it!'

'Aye aye, sir!' Yattaran grinned fiendishly. 'What do we do with our guests?'

'Extend the dark matter shield to cover them and stay on this heading. We've got a head start - we'll try to get the planet between us and those battleships, then cut them loose!'

'Too late! They just went IN-SKIP!' Kei called out.

'Heading?'

'Tracking… Captain - they're heading right for us!'

The ships exited IN-SKIP almost on top of the Arcadia, astronomically speaking. Harlock spat out a curse and hauled the ship around with a spin of the wheel, diving into a loop to try and come back around on top of the three Mazone ships. A barrage of shots sped harmlessly past the Arcadia. On Kei's command, the gunnery crew returned fire, but missed.

'Martinez…' Kei shouted warningly. 'Sorry Miss Kei - re-calibrating!' He took another look at his console. 'You were right - these aren't the same class as the last lot, Miss Kei - somehow I don't think these are going to fall apart at the first salvo…'

'Of all the luck…' Yattaran grumbled under his breath. 'Sheeeit… They scored a hit on the transport!' he shouted across. 'Erm… Captain - I think they're ignoring us! It's the transport they want!'

'The dark matter shield?' Harlock asked.

'The black body drive is pulling it thin once it gets close - it's not working!'
'Damn it. How close are we to the planet?' Harlock gave the wheel a huge spin to starboard, legs braced as the ship span around and headed for the small flotilla, guns blazing.

'Close enough, if they cut loose and coast in. The atmosphere might shield them…' Yattaran trailed off. 'Bloody risky though.'

'Call Sainess, let her know. We'll try to stay between her and these pests. Tell her to make a run for it!' A swing of the wheel again, this time to port, and the Arcadia curved over in an upside-down loop over their opponents, cutting between the three Mazone ships and their prey. 'Are you paying attention to me now, ladies?' he growled.

Kei shook her head and sighed as she glanced in his direction. He was braced at the wheel, legs apart, hands firm on the balusters and a grim expression on his normally calm face. 'You do take it kind of personally sometimes, you know, when you're ignored…'

'I've been spoiled by Hoshino's personal attention for so long,' he called back. 'More to the point, I really, really don't approve of people who take pot shots at unarmed ships…'

'I know. This is going to get messy, isn't it?' she asked.

'Only if they persist in trying to get round me… Tochiro - any ETA on those modifications yet?'

'Almost there… just a little longer…' came the reply, this time over the comms.

'Seconds? Minutes?' Yattaran asked sarcastically. He pulled his hand off his console with a yelp and shook it. 'Hey - no zapping! I only asked!'

'Message from the Mazone transport!' Sabu called up. 'They're almost in the upper atmosphere!'  

'Put it on speaker!' Harlock grunted as he swung the Arcadia out of the way of another barrage, dancing through the Mazone ships with practiced finesse. One shot connected with the port hull, a glancing blow. Their own barrage scored the side of one of the Mazone ships, briefly exposing its interior structure before it pulled back, its leaking atmosphere quickly dissipating as the breach sealed.

'Harlock. I just needed to thank you for your help - and your words. You kept your word to us, and so I'm sending over a databurst. What help it may be to you, I do not know. You were right… hope can spring from the ashes of despair. Your words… they show me that there is only one way this will end. They will not give up, and I would not risk your paradise to prevent our destruction. Know this, Harlock - even in death, there is rebirth and new life. From the darkest night light can be reborn. We will remember, in time.

Farewell.'

The message ended, Sainess' voice laden with sadness.

'What was that all about?' Yattaran asked with a frown on his wide face.

'Oh no… Kei - the transport - give me a visual!' Harlock's voice was harsh and strained. Kei shot him a sharp look, but said nothing, bringing the image of the transport - now deep in the upper atmosphere of the icy planet, into focus on a split screen on the main viewer.

'I'm getting a spike in the readings from that black body drive,' she said softly. 'Harlock…'
As they watched, the transport ship exploded - but not in a fireball. Its leaf-shape expanded and then dissolved, as though it simply lost cohesion and disintegrated. On Kei's console, the energy signature of the black body drive vanished, replaced by a diffuse cloud that spread over an entire hemisphere unseen, as her attention was fixed on the main screen. Harlock bowed his head briefly.

'Did they just…' Yattaran breathed. 'Fuck. We aren't done yet, why -'

'Because she was right, they'd never stop looking.' Harlock replied grimly. He lifted his head and stared at the planet, where a greenish glow lit up the upper clouds. 'They took the only path they hoped would make the Queen leave them be.'

'But suicide?' Kei almost yelped out the word. 'That's -'

'No. You heard her. Rebirth and new life. Maybe a thousand years from now, but they will bloom again on this world, if left alone.' He shifted his grip on the wheel. 'We just need to make sure they have that time. What are those ships doing?'

Kei bent her head to her console, her fair hair hiding her face. 'Still trying to cut past us - they're powering up their weaponry…'

'To try and burn the atmosphere before those seeds - spores - can reach the ground.' His right hand curled around the baluster. 'Tochiro?'

'Ready when you are!' the ship's guiding intelligence called out gaily.

'Kei.'

'Martinez - clear main battery for firing. All crews - target those ships!'

Harlock placed his left hand on the wheel. 'All ahead full! Arcadia - let's go!' The dark matter cloud around the Arcadia billowed and then was drawn inwards, towards the hull, then split into thick strands which wound themselves around the massive racked gun turrets of the main battery, and vanished. Then the Arcadia's might cannon let rip, each of three of the arrays targeting a different ship - the fourth array spreading its fire between them. Instead of the clean, brilliant plasma arcs of the oscillator cannon, the fire this time was a trail of darkness so deep, it seemed even blacker than the void of space, except where lit from within by flickering blue lightning.

The three Mazone vessels had no chance for escape. Each barrage hit within seconds of the other, and the last stray shots the ships had fired upon the Arcadia went wide, fading as they raced past the speeding battleship.

In an instant, there was only the silence of space, and the Arcadia flew through the area where the three ships had been, and not even a speck of debris from the battle remained to mar her dark hull.
Chapter 31

Nemeton - "Dorcas"

Cleo had to press herself against the outer wall of the nemeton as yet another group of dryades rushed past her, shoving everyone out of their way. Where the moisture in the mossy surface soaked through her chiton, her back felt cold and damp, and she bit back an irritated sign. *Another chiton ruined...* At her side, Tessius stiffened, her back ramrod straight and an expression of annoyed frustration on her face.

'Cassandra oversteps her bounds,' she snapped, as soon as the last in line was out of earshot. 'How is it we only hear of this "increased security" after she's already started moving dryades troops onto every vessel in the fleet? Where will this madness stop?'

'There were reports that almost twenty ships were lost at the last jump,' Cleo replied, not putting any real attempt at conviction into her voice. She peeled herself off the wall and followed Tessius down the corridor. A trailing vine brushed her face and she pushed it out of her way reflexively. 'Five of them transports...'

Tessius' derisive snort startled a melia tending a shallow rill at the side of the walkway, and the slight figure almost fell into the water in her attempts to stay out of the way of the exalted chorus members. 'Several fliers held back from the fleet when we jumped, and they didn't report in. The three that jumped back to "look" for them gave a garbled report before we lost contact… the gist of which, my dearest, is that Harlock's abomination was there, defending one last transport - not shooting at it. Harlock, of all people, defending us against our own! How much more obvious does this have to get, Cleome, before you pull your head out of the long grass and see what's happening?'

'Harlock!? But… his ship usually sails far from here!' Cleo stammered. 'How did he find us?'

'Personally, I suspect that red-haired little bitch hiding in the ranks of the old Gaia Alliance,' Tessius replied sniffily. 'Did you really think those left behind would welcome us with open arms? Our return heralds a renaissance for our race - a return to the old ways. They've grown lax, and integrated too well with those they were set to watch over - do you truly believe they will bend the knee and their heads to the queen, after all this time of merely paying lip service to their oaths of fealty?' She paced the confines of the small routeway with long, heavy strides. 'What could be more disruptive than setting the Fury in our path?'

Cleo grabbed hold of Tessius' arm and dragged her into a nearby ante-chamber. 'You can't go around saying things like that in public!' she hissed. 'And we've been losing ships for years when we jump - not all of them are strong enough - you've pointed this out yourself, many times.'

'We lose many to fatigue and poor growth, yes. Others to errors in containment of their carbon drives or if their navigation maidens fail - but Sainess' vessel was not so far gone, Cleo. And you should know - she and her fellow shipmaidens planned this - I told them the best time and place to slip away. Someone betrayed us to the dryades, Cleo. Cassandra targeted those ships the moment the fleet was jumping away, and she did so on the Queen's orders!'

'You don't know that!' Cleo's voice came out in a plaintive wail of denial.

Tessius was unmoved. 'Sainess contacted me, Cleome. Harlock tried to save the transports - they were all destroyed except for her. When one of the Flight sent to deal with them came back alone,
Cassandra's second sent back three main battleships - and none of them returned.'

Cleo tried to resist the urge to twist her own fingers into knots, but as that resulted in her clutching her chiton so tightly she risked tearing the delicate fabric, she forced herself to place her restless hands palms down on her thighs. It was that or start fiddling with her hair, and she suspected that she'd start yanking it out by the roots if she had to deal with Tessius' frustration for much longer. 'Maybe Harlock's interference is what we need?' she offered, without much conviction. The suggestion did stop Tessius in her tracks however, and the tall mazone loomed over her own slighter form. 'I mean, if Cassandra and her kind have someone other than our own people to worry about, perhaps they can be distracted enough to stop -'

'Stop their predation on our own kind?'

Cleo flinched. 'Please… don't say such things.'

'What would you call it then, Cleo? Culling? They'd have us "stronger" but they want to do this by destroying anything that holds us back in their eyes? We do not yank up the weak by their roots - we stand or fall on our own merits. The fall of the greatest tree in a forest is cause for celebration when new life springs up in the opening it offers - but - and this is where we differ from humans - we do not fell them!'

'There's no need to shout!' Cleo bit her lip as she realised she'd raised her own voice. She sighed heavily. 'What do you want to do?'

'Talk to Rafflesia. She has to see reason. We can allow the un-spaceworthy vessels to find alternate homes - as we should have done from the start.'

'But what about the queen's plan? If we reach the rendezvous points with only a part of the fleet…'

'Cleo - they won't reach those points anyway. I've seen the damage on our transport ships - those Rafflesia had us grow en route are riddled with structural damage - they were grown too fast. The hulls are too thin, and only the shields protect them from harm as they travel - one sharp impact and they split apart like rotten fruit. The carbon drives are not properly shielded, and they not only strain the ships physically, they are draining the vitality from both ships and from their precious cargoes.' Tessius' voice took on a softer, sadder tone as she spoke. She stared over her friend's head as she continued. 'Even this vessel struggles. Our vessels were never meant to take the strain they've been under for so long. Rafflesia tells us we need to travel slowly to charge the carbon drives - but in truth, we travel so slowly because to do otherwise is to risk utter ruin. Even the leaps we are making are too long! Every dive into the void-that-binds causes more damage. You need to see this for yourself!'

Cleo stared at her old friend, a heavy feeling in her chest. 'Cassandra would have you torn apart and fed into the composters if she heard you,' she murmured. 'But then, so, I suspect, will Rafflesia…'

'Come with me, Cleome,' Tessius begged. 'Please - see for yourself, and then judge what path to take. Let me show you the ships the Queen won't allow anyone to see. Those Cassandra's ships turn on the moment they show any weakness. See what we have become, away from the sheltered safety of this nemeton.'

Cleo stared at the outstretched hand, held palm upwards in invitation. Despite the warmth of the nemeton, she shivered, an atavistic response of her human self that long, long binding with the mazone cells in her system should have long ago weeded out of her line. To leave the nemeton? She'd been born here… served here. Served her queen.
She lifted her eyes to stare miserably into the inky black wells in her friend's face, as old as time itself - but then, Tessius' line reached back into deep time… when the shallow seas covered Mitra, and life only just began to stir. They were opposites… *meliades* and corpse flower… the eldest and the youngest. And so different in temperament. She'd often relied on the more outgoing Tessius to bolster her own shyness, and used her own nature to try and temper Tessius' more outrageous behaviour.

But to follow Tessius was to disobey Rafflesia. She lowered her head to hide the tears pricking the corners of her eyes. She heard Tessius sigh in response.

'So be it, for now, Cleome. But one day - and sooner than you think, you will need to decide which side you are on.'

Tessius strode from the small room, leaving Cleo alone with her increasingly turbulent thoughts as the only companion to her misery.

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*Enceladus*

Shizuka gave her jacket a short sharp tug, even though it needed no straightening. Reflected in the window of her office, the severe black trouser suit was barely visible below her long neck. With her red hair pinned up on top of her head in a neat, regulation chignon, she looked like the professional rising star in the Alliance Administration she purported to be.

Something the woman sitting in front of her desk, behind her, hadn't missed, judging from the disapproving sniffs which had Shizuka wondering if she should offer the mazone a tissue.

But then, Cassandra didn't do subtle. 'You look like one of *them,*' she said with characteristic brutal chill in her tone. 'You forget your roots, Shizuka.'

Shizuka resisted the temptation to snap back an equally frosty "Director Namino, to *you*...". The effort would have been wasted, since Cassandra - rank be damned - was in her estimation as thick as a hundred year-old taproot and about as flexible. *I haven't forgotten my roots, you misbegotten cabbage... I just don't bury them in shit and expect to come up smelling like a rose...*

Outwardly she smoothed her expression into carefully studied neutrality, and turned back to face her unwelcome visitor.

'It's my job to blend in, Commander,' she said smoothly. She took her seat behind the clean, aluminium shine of her desk and steepled her hands in front of her. 'This is how I retain my position, close enough to the seat of power to learn and to occasionally push, yet not so noticeable that anyone digs too deeply.' She leaned a little closer until her chin was over her clasped fingers. 'You made good time, considering how far away the main fleet is.'

Another sniff. 'The queen requires that the drives are fully charged before arrival. That necessitated a slow progress. Our ships would be perfectly capable of making the distance in the same time as those belonging to these parasites you "work" for, if she would only allow it.'

Shizuka's fingers twitched in the direction of a box of tissues lurking near her left elbow and once again prided herself on resisting temptation. 'Of course. However, I was expecting to be given the go-ahead to act - not to deal with an emissary of your exalted rank.' *I get sent one of the chorus, one close to the queen, instead of a lackey who could be persuaded to be a little less rigid in interpreting their orders...* She tried to ignore the beginnings of a spiking headache in her right
'Things change. Harlock is making a nuisance of himself, digging too deeply into things he shouldn't. The Queen wants him distracted, and your news was most welcome.' Cassandra's head had a tendency to strain upwards like a turkey trying to peer over a fence - a long-buried racial memory Shizuka could have done without… at least until she remembered the fate of such birds.

'I had planned to appropriate the children myself,' Shizuka replied. 'We have the location and the identities they are hiding under.'

'Your orders are to hand this information to me, Shizuka. And you're keeping me waiting.'

The leader of the dryades had a waspish temper, easily provoked. Her acidic tone indicated this was on a short leash. Shizuka sighed and pulled a flimsy out of a pouch on her desk. 'My agent was able to interrogate one of the Arcadia's crew before she was apprehended. They're on a planet called Tabito: Three boys - one adopted: Shotaro Ōyama, aged ten. Medical records on Tabito also confirm the birth of monozygotic twin boys - Mamoru and Wattaru Yūki, now aged nine, and a girl - Nami Yūki, nearly two years later - to a woman calling herself Kei Yūki. There was a mention of an older girl born two years before the twins, but nothing on file since the plague - I suspect she died. Very few worlds could keep up with the records given the scale and spread of the disease.' Instead of handing it to Cassandra she placed it on the desk in front of her. 'With all due respect to yourself and our Exalted Queen, extracting them will not be easy, and to enter that system unchallenged impossible. It's protected by an organisation called the Millennial Thieves - originally a rebel force who tried to overthrow the government of a planet called Lar Metal over fifty years ago. More recently they tend to operate as mercenaries and smugglers, on the edge of the law, though never enough to bring the SDF down on them.'

Another sniff. This time Shizuka's hand made it as far as the box of tissues before she stopped it. 'I'll send a ship in to acquire the children. We'll be gone before they know it, and if they attack - their ships are no match for -'

'No match? Maybe. But we want Harlock running after his brats, not half the colonial fleet!' Shizuka stared at the commander and tried very, very hard not to continue shouting. She lowered her voice, with some effort. 'Get caught and you'll have committed an act of aggression against citizens of the Outer Planets. Do you really believe that Layla Shura will sit back and let that go un-answered?'

'I don't care.'

The blunt assertion took Shizuka by surprise, and she started slightly, her eyes widening. She's willing to risk all out war over this…?

No… she wants it… of course she does - how else to hold onto her power, if not to ensure her dryades are indispensable, or worth more to the whole than those they purported to protect?

Suddenly, Shizuka felt uncomfortable. It was one thing to plot and plan to get her own faction into a place where they could dictate policy… maybe even supplant Rafflesia and her faction. But to see her carefully laid plans playing into the hands of a cold uncaring aggressor like Cassandra? Unthinkable. If Cassandra dragged the SDF into this, the resulting chaos could ruin everything.

Except it was too late now… she'd set the pieces on the board, she couldn't take them back.

But she could play another pawn. She smiled smoothly at Cassandra. 'Really? Perhaps you should care. We need to set these humans against each other, commander - wouldn't you prefer them
weakened and spread thin before you strike? They'd be easier to mop up, and with fewer losses to your ships and dryades…'

She let the idea percolate, hiding a triumphant smile where she saw the cogs finally slide into place. Too easy…

'You have a suggestion?' Cassandra snapped.

'I have a catspaw… a human who'd be more than happy to acquire Harlock's offspring - ostensibly for his own reasons. He wants to hold the pirate accountable for his crimes, and feels that with the right… incentive… he can bring Harlock to heel.'

'You want this man to do our work for us? I can see some merit, but how will this set human on human?'

Not that bright are you…? Shizuka sneered metally. Outwardly she let her smile widen. 'Because he's an Alliance officer - and if he abducts Colonial citizens, he commits an act Destiny will have to respond to. Since he'll be acting under orders issued directly from the Office of the President - via my office - then his actions could be construed as an act of war. If I then ensure the president only receives the worst possible news and some selective facts and missives from Destiny, this can be made to escalate nicely. They'll be at each other's throats in weeks.'

The crocodilian smile that spread over Cassandra's pinched, sharp-featured face was an image to treasure, Shizuka thought, as she leaned back in her chair, steepling her hands in front of her. Now… to sell this to Irita without him looking too closely at the details…

Arcadia

The red light on the front of the gigantic trunk of the central computer whirled slowly on its circular path, but was too dim to make too many inroads into the shadows that always filled the central computer room. Even in these less strained and happier times on board the Arcadia, this room was still shrouded in darkness, undisturbed for the most part by the everyday noises of the rest of the ship. Off the beaten path for the crew, even those who did have a reason to walk the corridors outside the massive array of computer banks usually felt compelled to do so silently. The only sounds which regularly disturbed the sombre peace and quiet were the trip-trap of Mimay's dainty boots, Harlock's clunkier tread, and the swish of dark wings as the bird spiralled up into the girders almost a hundred feet up into the dome that capped the room like that of an ancient gothic cathedral back on Old Earth.

And occasionally, like today, the sounds of Harlock's soft, resonant voice as he spoke, alternating with the computer's reassuring rumble.

'No. I'm not angry - the weapon worked perfectly. I'm just disturbed by its power.' Harlock was seated on the largest conduit which rose out of the flooring in front of the machine, creating a natural bench.

Rumble

Harlock shook his head slightly, a soft huff escaping his lips. 'No. I've not seen anything like it since we faced my brother and the Gaia Fleet. In truth, it reminded me too much of the Jovian Blaster… Yattaran scanned the area, there was nothing left, my friend. No debris - not even an energy trace. It was as though those ships never existed. Days like this… it just hammers home what a responsibility we have, in this ship. In the wrong hands…'
'Heh. Thanks for the vote of confidence. For the record, that was a pretty impressive improvisation of yours - but the devastation…' he shook his head wearily. 'It shocked all of us.'

'They were a threat. Why does this make you uncomfortable?'

Green fireflies drifted down and floated around his face before winking out, and he looked up to see Mimay draped along a bunch of the trailing cables overhead. Trouble, the little ginger tabby, was sitting on the small of her back washing his face with his left paw, and purring loudly.

'This ship's enough of a responsibility with just its conventional weaponry, Mimay. Adding something like this into the mix? It makes me all too aware of what I took on, all those years ago. The detonator for the dimensional oscillators wasn't the only terrible weapon your Harlock left me.'

'He trusts you to make better use of them than he did.' Her hair tumbled down like a pale blue-green waterfall, shimmering with a light all of her own in the shadows of the central computer core. The silken strands almost reached his face, and he reached up a gloved hand to let them flow over his fingers.

'Is that what we're calling it this week?' Harlock asked her in a dry voice with a wry half-smile to-go. She smiled down at him enigmatically but said nothing. 'I need to check on the readings from that planet before we pack up and leave - and I think we have a conference call coming in from Oedo and Rocky in about an hour.' He stood up to leave.

'Not Marin?' Mimay asked. Her fireflies fluttered agitatedly around her head before zipping off into the crepuscular gloom of the Arcadia's temple.

'No,' Harlock replied a little more shortly than he'd intended. 'He's not reported in, and Selen's getting worried - it's not like Mal to miss a warp-window. She's contacted Hannibal on Carmilla to see if he has any ships spare to investigate.'

'This worries you, as well,' Mimay said softly, tipping her head on one side.

'He's a friend - no - more - he's one of the brothers I chose… And if he's in trouble, it's because I put him there. So yes, I'm worried. If we have to, I'll redline the drive to where we last heard from him.'

A practiced, elegant twitch of the hilt of his sabre rifle flicked the blade out of the way as he strode out of the room. Mimay watched him vanish as he slipped between two banks of the giant servers which surrounded the central core. A soft, giggling susurration from the computer's sleepy guiding mind caused the ends of her small mouth to twitch upwards slightly.

'Yes, it would have made a more dramatic exit - but you know he's not worn that cloak onboard without reason since the time it got caught in a bulkhead whilst he was running for the bridge…' She smiled in response to something only she could hear, the tips of her long pointed ears flickering through her fine hair. 'No, I never thought that I would come to love him so much either, after…' she stared sadly past the slowly dimming whirling red light at the heart of the room. 'And yet I still yearn for what we lost,' she whispered softly.

The shadows deepened as the central computer sank into sleep, only Mimay's pale glow pushing at their edges as she laid her head on her arms and closed her eyes, cradled in the cabling as though in the loving arms of the Arcadia. Trouble settled down on her back and curled his tail over his nose.
Irita was poring over the latest intelligence reports from around the alliance when Director Namino strolled in. In the past few weeks it seemed every field officer and his dog had suddenly discovered the ability to write lengthy reports. That they all seemed to be linked to one particular long-haired, one-eyed, scar-faced, six-foot-one smug bastard was just the icing on the cake.

He reached for his insulated coffee mug as Shizuka took the chair in front of his desk, took a long swig and almost choked on the tepid liquid. Grimacing, he placed it back down as nonchalantly as he could. To his surprise she stood up again, smoothed her skirt down her slender thighs, and sauntered towards the side table where the filter machine stood. Quickly and efficiently she poured out two cups, and brought them back to the desk, placing one in front of him and putting the other to her lips as she settled back down in her seat.

'Do you really think I had the time - or the inclination - to poison it?' she asked playfully, when he hesitated to pick it up.

'The director making coffee for a mere adjutant?' he asked waspishly. But he drank the coffee. It had been standing for too long, and was too strong and bitter, but at least it was hot.

'I was the prime minister's secretary for years.' She shrugged, the gesture causing her breasts to strain against the thin fabric of her sweater.

'I'm surprised that you drink it… given what you are…'

She laughed. 'Really? What would that be? I'm human, Irita. Just… more.' She sipped delicately at the dark liquid, and her tongue peeked out from between her lips to lick away a stray drop.

Irita swallowed hard, and turned his attention back to the pile of reports on his desk. 'To what do I owe the pleasure, Director?' he looked up at her and pushed his glasses up his nose. 'If you hadn't noticed, it seems Harlock's been a little busy lately, and seems to be making it a group effort…'

'Pleasure, Irita?' She smiled warmly at him, and he tried not to shuffle in his seat as his body responded to the memory of those red lips…

...no, not hers… but the face… the eyes which had stared up at him in the shower when her doppelganger had taken him into her mouth… the likeness had been too perfect, and in his dreams it was her face that he caressed, her lips which sighed as he thrust into her…

...at least until the nightmares started. Writhing tendrils swarming over his skin - a wanton but unwelcome lover's touch, encircling his throat and squeezing the life from him even as he tried to struggle. All he could do was look down, at the rosebud red mouth around his cock which now was a rose in truth, but the petals surrounded a red, flesh maw which closed tightly around him and began to swallow… and the eyes… black, without iris or pupil - deep wells that opened onto a soulless primeval world that had never, ever been a place for men...

Yeah. That worked. Like a blast of cold water across the groin. He shuffled the flimsies and tapped the wad of reports into squared, regimented order in front of him, all edges neatly in line, in a neat pile which stood as a monument to order over chaos.

'I've had reports from several locations, flagging up activity from known associates of Harlock,' Irita told her. 'Admiral Oki took the Poseidon out along with the Thetis and Nereus. Our informant on Miraiseria reports they filed a flight plan to intercept a potential threat heading for their system - a large fleet of ships, origin unknown. Likewise Professor Oedo, of the Exploratory Corps has been
taking the *Astoria* on unscheduled manoeuvres… And those borderline legal ships operating out of Carmilla have been mobilising - apparently no-one's seen or heard from the *Futatsuboshi* in over a week.' He tapped the top flimsy with his right index finger. 'One of these days they'll cross that fine line…'

'That ship is currently captained by the eldest nephew of the Machinners' Queen,' Shizuka replied tartly. 'Though the two sides of that divided family have little love for each other, they do tend to form up when threatened from without. Don't get ideas about biting off more than you can chew.' She smiled at him. 'Harlock's being a busy little pest lately. Perhaps it's long past time to bring him to heel?'

He glared at her over the top of his pince-nez glasses. 'You have something?'

'Perhaps… It depends I suppose on your resolve.' She stood up and moved round to his side of the desk. Without waiting for permission she leaned over and began to type into his console. A draft document digitally watermarked "confidential" appeared on screen. 'Maybe this will help?'

He peered at the screen, then settled back in his chair with a satisfied, but slightly startled air. 'Article 53…'

Shizuka perched on the edge of the desk, her skirt riding up to bare most of her thighs. 'Just so. You did mention it, I believe?'

'It's useless without the aliases they registered the children under, and the planet…'

'I have both,' Shizuka replied smoothly, relishing his sharp intake of breath at the statement. 'The question is - are you prepared to follow through on this? They are, after all, only children.'

'Children of outlaws, vagrants and criminals,' he retorted harshly. 'From a long line of rebels. You know my views on this - if we want humanity to move forwards, such elements need to be removed. If they stand condemned by their parents' choices in life, that's just too bad. But the prime minister hasn't signed this…'

'He will,' she interrupted. She smiled again. 'By the time we reach the planet Tabito, this will be law - and taking Harlock's children into custody will be totally legal.'

'Tabito…' he keyed in the name. 'It's outside our jurisdiction,' he pointed out, his forehead crinkling into a worried frown.

'The Alliance has always reserved the right to pursue fugitives and wanted criminals into Colonial space,' Shizuka replied. 'Besides - it's a small world only patrolled by the Millennial Thieves, not by the SDF. A single ship could easily sneak in and out again before anyone can react.'

'But if Harlock's in orbit…' Even with that thought, he felt a frisson of excitement that rivalled even the effect of his superior's beauty on his cock… To finally bring the arrogant bastard to heel would be worth the risk - and to do so under his nose… His throat was dry and tight and he had to reach for the abandoned cup of coffee.

She shrugged. 'He isn't - I happen to know that heading your way is another report telling you that the Arcadia is currently half a galaxy away. He can't possibly make it back to Tabito before we can get there unless he pushes his drives - and why would he? He doesn't know we're coming…'

His pale grey eyes narrowed. 'You're coming along?' He wasn't sure if the prospect of being shut up on a small courier craft for a week or two with her would be good for his nerves. Even now her perfume was a heady, intoxicating brew that went straight to his loins, and her breasts - perfectly
covered as they may be - far too close for comfort. Her nipples were small, hard little bullets straining at the fine fabric. He had to work to pull his gaze back to her face, and his mouth was dry again.

Shizuka's smile softened into a seductive bow, her lips slightly parted as she brought them close enough to his cheek for him to feel the warmth of her breath against his skin. Hidden by the desk, his cock hardened, straining at the restriction of his uniform.

'Oh, Yukihito...I wouldn't miss this for anything,' she purred into his ear.

He dropped the cup and bit back a yelp as hot coffee spilled into his lap.

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**Niflheim**

'Have you thought about what you plan to do with her?'

Blaze stood next to Ali watching Freya playing a simple game of catch with Daiba, Zack and Ben. The little nibelung girl caught the soft ball the others threw to her unerringly, and giggled when one of them flubbed a catch - mostly be design, Blaze thought, noticing the way Daiba especially hammed it up, in a diving catch that sent him sprawling at Ben's feet. Ben's comment was inaudible but from the way Daiba flushed and sprang to his feet, probably salacious.

'Capitain says to bring her to Deathshadow Island.' Ali shrugged. 'Play it safe. We don't really know if she's safe to be around.'

'She reminds me of Kanna,' Blaze replied quietly, thinking of his baby sister. At eight, the two little girls were about the same height - although the nibelung girl was far too thin. 'I heard Mimay's reply on the subject - she seems to think we've unplugged a biological AI… just a cloned interface with no real identity…'

Ali's snort was answer enough as to his opinion of that. 'I'm sure that's what they told themselves - but look at her - only a week and she's running around, playing and starting to talk properly to people instead of just in their heads… she can't stop cuddling either - you gonna tell me that that's just a piece of meat with a pre-programmed brain? Seems to me Mimay's people liked to play god a lot - and didn't always care about takin' responsibility for their actions. Witness Exhibit One, Dark Matter engines…'

Freya missed a catch, and the pink ball - given the colour and the thick fabric Blaze had a strong suspicion Maji had found a use for some offcuts from Meg's environment suit - rolled past her to come to a stop at Ali's feet. Blaze watched as the pirate bent down to pick it up, only to find himself nose to nose with a pale, oval face almost completely dominated with large almond shaped blue eyes.

'Ya want this back, little'un?' Ali asked.

A nod. Her gossamer fine hair shimmered in the perpetual ruddy twilight with a blood-like hue, catching the faint light and reflecting it back with red and orange lights. Ali grinned and placed the hand with the ball in it behind his back. 'You gonna work on yer talking, Freya?'

She pouted, her little mouth puckering into a rosebud. She tried to reach behind him but Ali stood up and held the ball out of her reach. 'Ah-ah… Come on little'un… what do you say? And not in my head this time…'

'Please?' Her voice was a light as a feather on a spring breeze, almost a sigh. Blaze bit back a smile
as Ali handed her the ball and ruffled the top of her head as familiarly as he would one of the
children back home. 'Thank you!' She made the phrase ring like a tiny bell, and smiled up at the
usually grumpy pirate, before putting both arms around his legs and hugging him above the knees.
Then she let him loose and ran back to join the waiting youngsters.

'What?' Ali's growl when he turned back to look at Blaze made the younger man lower his head to
hide his smile.

'Nothing. It's just I watch you and the rest of the crew with her and for such badass murdering
thieves, knaves and all-round rascals, you're actually a rather soft bunch of desperadoes when faced
with small children…'

'Nothing wrong with kids,' Ali replied. 'Least not the good 'uns. Most of the time you know where
you are with 'em - and we've had a lot of practice with traumatised waifs and strays over the years,
thanks to your bloody aunt.'

Blaze winced. 'I don't need reminding, Ali. Trust me, I've no love for the woman, after what she
tried to do to my parents. Not now. But she wasn't always like that - there was a time she was a
hero, just like mum. Somewhere along the line she lost sight of that.'

Ali turned a disbelieving look on him. 'Hotshot - if you believe that, you're deluded. It ain't about
what these heroes lose sight of that's the problem - because they never do lose sight of what they
want - it's just if you stay at the game long enough, you start to realise that you're just pissin' in the
wind. Coz nothing really changes, no matter what you do. So you think you'll just try a little
harder, and a little more, and a little more, and before you know it, you wake up one day you've
become what you fight. You're the Bad Guy. You start to believe that the end justifies the means
and that maybe folks should be a little bit bloody grateful and fuck 'em if they don't recognise what
you want to do for 'em... But you don't change… deep down you're still who you always were -
hell, if you don't want to change the world - if you don't think the world - and yeah, even people
- need changing, you don't become a hero in the first place…'

Blaze stared into Ali's blue eyes, which held a lot more sympathy and intelligence than his
demeanour led people to believe. 'So what are you telling me?'

A shrug. 'Nothin' you don't already know - if you want to stay one of the good guys, you got two
choices - die, or walk away before it consumes you. Yer mum walked away, and good for her - she
still does her bit, but she does it by example, and runs her little shop in the middle of nowhere,
raising her own and other's kids, making the world a better place one person at a time, as it were.'

Blaze looked past him, over to the playing youngsters, a frown on his otherwise unwrinkled brow.
'And Harlock?'

'Which one?' Ali scuffed the dirt underfoot with the toe of a dusty boot. 'The last guy? He was
broken long before I met him, he just plastered over the bits and kept on going. At least in the end
he let it the fuck go and faded away into whatever afterlife he found.' He muttered something that
sounded like "when he ain't fucking with my head once a year..." under his breath.

'And our Harlock?'

'The Captain? Still young enough to think he can make a difference. Hell - to a lot of people, he
has. Maybe it's those who live forever - or have a really long lifeline - who outlive their dreams and
see them crumble to dust. Maybe he ain't there yet.' He took in a deep breath and let it out in a rush.
'Hell, I've been around too bloody long… thanks to the Arcadia. But then I was always a mean
bastard. I don't do heroics.'
It was Blaze's turn to snort at that bouncer, but he didn't feel like arguing the point. But his attention was caught by the sight of Freya running towards the leading edge of the jungle, where her ball had rolled. 'Erm… Ali?' He didn't wait for an answer, but started sprinting for the treeline, drawing his pistol as he ran, hearing Ali's hard footfalls just behind.

Freya reached down for her ball, even as Daiba and Ben both shouted a warning, but the youths were too far away. Blaze was close enough to see a thick tendril writhe out of the mould and mildew on the ground, and twine itself around the little girl's arm, visibly tightening its coils as he watched. He cursed under his breath as he slid to a stop just out of reach. The last week or so had seen them all learn the hard way how close you could go to the jungle without something stirring. But the source of the vine was too close to the little girl's feet to shoot, something that judging from the expletives blistering his left ear, was a conclusion Ali had reached as well.

Freya just looked at her would be rescuers quite calmly, then down at her arm with a frown. Another coiled tendril was already snaking towards her legs, but she gave no outward sign that this bothered her.

'I haven't got a shot,' Blaze muttered to Ali, who grunted and took a step past him. Sensing a rush from the brat pack, Blaze waved Ben off, and saw him quickly bring the other two boys to a stop out of range.

'Freya love… can you back away?' Ali asked gently, presumably hoping not to spook her. She turned to face him, her large eyes showing no sign of her third eyelid - a sign even Blaze had worked out meant Mimay was agitated. She shook her head.

'Viðbjóðslegur, ljótur planta,' she said firmly, the expression of distaste on her face more eloquent than any translation. She turned away again, the tip of her little tongue just peeking between her lips as she frowned down at the offending article.

Then she gave her head a little shake, and her entire body glowed a deep golden colour, momentarily blinding the two men. Blaze had to blink his watering eyes to clear the afterimage. He stared at her in awe as she returned to normal. A small trail of ash marred the bare skin of her arm, and she brushed it away with a little moue of distaste, before smiling up at the two men.

'Did we know they could do that?' Blaze asked Ali.

'Fuck me…' was the sotto voce response.

'I'll take that as a "no" then,' Blaze murmured under his breath. Freya picked up her ball and walked over to him, holding it up for him with a smile until he took it, and then danced back towards the waiting boys, in a clear invitation to throw it for her. His underarm throw was caught with a squealing giggle that once again reminded him of his little sister.

'I think we really, really need to get her back to the captain,' Ali said fervently. 'How soon can we finish packing?'

'Packing? Don't bother. I'll claim anything we leave behind on expenses,' Blaze told him, as he watched Freya playing again as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. 'I can have us ready to go in six hours.' He shot Ali a quizzical look. 'Assuming we think she's safe to travel with?'

Ali shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Search me - but I got a good feeling about her, if you know what I mean. I've met a couple of the nasty ones. Guess we just have to take the chance.'
'I didn't mean her intentions,' Blaze replied a little sharply. 'Is she safe in and of herself? We've no idea what being in the control sphere did to her… or what they did to her to put her in it. Dark matter…'

'Unless you plan on sticking her in an escape pod and towing her behind your ship, Blaze, I think we're just going to have to just suck it up.' He turned on his heel and began striding back to the camp, leaving Blaze to jog to catch up.

'Somehow, I should have known you'd say that,' he muttered.

'Why ask then?' Ali asked with a smirking grin thrown back over his shoulder without breaking stride. 'And I don't hear you calling for a pod…'

'If,' Blaze began through gritted teeth, 'I thought you were even remotely serious about stuffing her into one of those…'

Ali stopped abruptly, so suddenly that Blaze almost walked into his black-leather clad back. The blue eyes that regarded Blaze were utterly devoid of his usual mix of humour and cynicism. Cold and agate hard. 'Blaze - if it came down to a choice between her or us - if - and I do mean if - she turned on us - she'd go straight out the airlock. And you and the captain could rail, and scream, and boo-hoo at me all you wanted, wouldn't change my mind in the slightest.'

He strode off again leaving Blaze to pick his jaw up.

He turned back briefly to look at the little nibelung girl before he followed Ali. She wasn't playing - Zack's throw went straight past her as she stood staring straight at him and where Ali had been standing, her head tipped on one side slightly like a little bird.

Inside his flightsuit he shivered slightly. It felt as though a cold, moist trail was working its way down his spine. He ran a finger around the inside of his collar, expecting to find a clammy lining, but both skin and fabric were dry. 'Getting that feeling Ali complains of,' he muttered. 'Just sweat and condensation running down my damn back, is all…'

He looked back again, and Freya had picked up her ball and was running back towards the boys, laughing.
Chapter 32

In the war room of the Arcadia, the group gathered around the table was smaller than usual. With Ali and Maji away, that left Harlock, Kei, Yattaran Doc and Anita as the senior crew, with Mimay draped over a chair in the corner watching the goings-on with a glass of white wine in her hand, regarding the scene with her usual enigmatic poise.

The holo-suite currently projected the life size images of Professor Oedo and Admiral Oki, the latter looking slightly blurred, as the projector struggled to compensate for the image refraction of the water that filled the Poseidon. Both looked wild-eyed and strained.

'We had a smaller ship count, but the story's the same,' Rokuro Oki said. The commmlink produced a not unpleasant reverb when he spoke. 'But I had my orders from Commander Shura after we spoke on Tabito - to observe but not to engage. I have to tell you, sitting there on our hands and not wading in to protect those ships… my crew is not happy, Harlock. Not happy at all. But unless they request aid from Destiny, my hands are tied. If I open fire on those warships, even to protect civilians, I'll be out on my ear. All I could do was record it all and send it back to Destiny. Hopefully Commander Shura will make a decision.'

'You wouldn't have survived a confrontation,' Harlock reassured him gravely. 'If you had engaged, you might have held off the smaller, lighter battleships, but the heavyweights would have gutted your ships like carp on a chopping board. You saw what they did to the Arcadia around Earth - and we only took them out here with a technique that scared that shit out of me, never mind the enemy.'

'I had skid marks,' Yattaran offered helpfully. Kei gave him an exasperated look, Harlock studiously ignored him, and Anita stretched out a meaty arm and smacked him upsides the head without even turning to look at him, ignoring his aggrieved pout.

'Astoria isn't a combat ship - we went to Blue Rose knowing we were just observing… but Oki's right - sitting on our hands and doing nothing - even for an alien race that's probably not on friendly terms with us, was the hardest thing I've ever done. No people deserves to suffer for the decisions of its government.' Oedo's bearded face wore a heavy frown. 'I've not seen anything that callous since the Machinners' War. They came back for the limping ships, circling like sharks around chum. Since we were using the long-range drones it was all over before we could have fired up the engines.'

'Even the ship we saved self-destructed rather than risk further reprisal,' Kei said sadly. 'They seemed to be a rather peaceful people - apart from their militant arm. The one we spoke with sent over a file in our language that detailed much of their recent history - as part of the main force accompanying the queen's personal vessel, it appears they were closer to some of the worst excesses. She expressed the hope that we could pass this on to the other ships and to their contacts amongst our worlds - though how we do that…' she trailed off, with a sideways look at Harlock, who had a thoughtful look on his face. 'You have a plan?'

'It does happen,' he replied evenly. 'And we do have a pretty good warp-array. That part I'll think about. For now, I'm rather more worried about Mal and the Futatsuboshi - has there been any word?'

Both captains shook their heads. Oki spoke up first. 'We had a message from Marin about a week ago, but since then, nothing.'

'His mummy's worried,' Yattaran piped up. 'It's past his bedtime.' This time it was Luna who
clipped his ear for him.

'I can't spare a ship to look for him,' Oki said, a worried frown on his brow. 'I've got a fleet of refugees heading for Miraiseria from Nereus, all of which need to be checked over and vetted before we let them in-system, after that last attack by Doppler's followers. I can leave a drone watching the route of the convoy, but I still need to guard my system whilst I get my ass over to Destiny HQ to talk about this new problem. Marin's a friend, but I can't just drop everything to look for him.'

Given that the attack in question had resulted in a small transport ship deliberately changing course whilst coming in to land and only missing the outer domes of Miraiseria's surface colony by two miles, Harlock didn't blame him. Fifty people had died in the resulting tsunami damage to the sea walls, and the death toll would have been in the thousands if it had stayed on target. He nodded. 'I know - but that's why you have friends who aren't beholden to higher authorities, Rokuro. I was going to swing by Deathshadow Island to take my crew back off Blaze - but I've spoken to him, and he wants to join the hunt for his brother. He's going to drop a package off on Tabito with Selen, pick up a few more ships from the Millennial Thieves' fleet and meet me at Marin's last known location near Heavy Meldar. From there we'll spread out and see if we can find him on the time radar. Hell - it might not be anything sinister - accidents happen all the time, and without disrespecting her, the Futatsuboshi is an old ship…'

'She's forty years younger than we are,' Yattaran added grumpily, his arms folded on top of his overly ample stomach.

'Yes, but doesn't have our self-repair facility,' Harlock replied bluntly. 'And weren't you the one who told Selen after the plague that the ship needed to be retired? She took a lot of damage when she got caught in the crossfire between the Deathshadow and us…'

'Told her, but both her and Marin kinda wanted to keep her flying a bit longer. Selen and Zero had a lot of history with that ship - can't blame them.' Yattaran added.

Oki snorted. 'I can and will if sentiment got in the way of safety. Both of them should know better.'

'She'd have been fine, so long as Marin stuck to the mission parameters,' Harlock pointed out. 'She isn't supposed to go into close combat.'

'How likely was that?' Oki asked sharply. Harlock lifted his left shoulder in a slight shrug. 'Exactly my point. You can get away with the dumb stunts you pull, since the Arcadia's damn near invincible, but Mal idolises you and his father - but I've known both men since OTC: Blaze is a cautious one, but Marin takes risks, writing cheques he just can't cash. He's the eldest son of two legends, and he hobnobs with you, Kei and the crew of the Arcadia - as well as being surrounded by Selen's old crew, all of whom lived through some of the worst times in Lar Metal's history. He thinks he has something to prove.' A pause, and a sad shake of his head. 'No-one ever could persuade him otherwise…'

'What he thinks is that he needs to justify the sacrifices Selen and Zero made whilst he and Blaze were growing up,' Harlock replied quietly. He shared a look with Kei. 'But he's not an idiot. I've never known him in over ten years to put his crew at risk deliberately.' Then his lips twitched and he narrowed his visible eye to mock glare at Oki. 'And what dumb stunts would those be, pray? As I recall I didn't get my ship blasted out from under me going solo against the Queen Mother Urs II during that last scuffle with Promethium's fleet before she set off for M31 with her tail between her legs…'

'Oh - remind me - who recently had to flood his entire ship with raw dark matter to get rid of
a knotweed infestation?' Rokuro asked sweetly.

'Boys!' Oedo's voice rapped out the word with a weighty rebuke in the tone. Kei bit back a smile as both younger men backed down like a couple of schoolboys caught talking in class. 'Whilst I'm not in Rokuro's chain of command and Harlock never met an officer he felt like obeying, I'd take it as a personal favour if you two lads could settle down and stay on target.' When both turned away with amused huffs, the bulky head of the Explorer Corps snorted. 'Much better. Honestly, it's almost as bad as dealing with Dan or Hank.'

The reminder of the two long missing - and currently wanted for treason and terrorist offences - friends - sobered everyone up in short order. After finalising the finer details, Harlock sank back in his seat once the holo feed was cut.

'I'd hoped to get back to Tabito,' he muttered. Kei shifted from her chair to the table so that she could sit nearer to him, and he placed an arm around her waist and tugged her into his lap, ignoring Doc's long suffering sigh. And Yattaran's grunting laugh.

'The boys and Nami will be fine with Selen,' Kei said, but without much conviction. 'I just miss them.'

'You could just leave it to the lad's family to find him,' Yattaran offered. When everyone in the room turned to stare at him he huffed and pulled his glasses off to clean them, peering at his fellow crewmembers with a piggy-eyed squint. 'What? We're not his nursemaids - or anyone's for that matter.'

'No,' Harlock began patiently, 'But I asked him to help. And I could never look Selen in the eye again, let alone myself, if I abandoned him. We have each other's backs out here - that's just the way it is.'

After the rest had filed out of the room he perched on the edge of the desk, one leg swinging idly, arms folded on his chest, and waited for Kei to speak. She paced the length of the war room frowning. 'Out with it,' he said eventually.

She stopped pacing to look at him. 'We're in this well over our heads,' she replied, after a long pause. When he made no immediate response she continued: 'A small scale attack we could handle - it's straightforward. But this... It's a full scale migration through two separate areas of influence on five fronts. Even if we had the numbers - we don't play politics, Yama - we can't. You always limited our role in the Machinners War to trying to protect the outer worlds - stopping transports, protecting civilian targets. When you broke that rule and went all in on that last battle around Lar Metal, it all went to hell in a handbasket. The Arcadia is a force multiplier - if we get involved in a battle, it escalates. Our weaponry is planet-destroying... unleash it on ships and the collateral damage...'

She trailed off as he regarded her fondly from under the unruly lock of hair that constantly tried to obscure his good eye. 'Aren't you going to object?'

'No. You're right. We don't have a rag-tag group of refugees with a few rogue agents operating under the radar... In a very real sense, we've got a re-enactment of the bloody Homecoming War on the way... only with the aim of re-setting the universe. It's like Harlock all over again only with a whole civilisation... When we started we thought we were dealing with some ancient secretive cult - now we've got an entire civilisation heading our way. And right now, I've no idea what we do to stop them - because I don't want to start a war. If Sainess and her people are any indication, they're falling apart from the inside out, and that in my experience might make them even more
dangerous.' He ran a hand through his hair. 'My responsibilities don't usually go much further than the couple of hundred men, women and children either under my command, or dependent on me. I'm not a diplomat, or even a damn admiral - I'm just one man who happens to have a very powerful weapon at his beck and call. One I prefer to use to defend those I care about, not get into a shooting war if I can avoid it.'

His fingers caught the thong of his eye patch and snapped the thin leather when he tried to pull them free. With an irritated sigh he pulled it free of his hair and laid it on the table. His hand then drifted back to rub the scars under his damaged right eye.

Kei stepped closer to him and placed a bare hand on his cheek, running a finger over the length of his scar, from where it terminated in the middle of his left cheek, over his nose, coming to rest touching the spattering of scars under his eye. Her other hand picked up the patch, and she took her hand away from his face to deftly tie a knot in the thin leather strap, and then slip the patch back into place, leaning so close to him as she reached around his head to tie it into place that his nose almost ended up buried in a generous amount of cleavage.

'Hold that pose,' he murmured playfully. She straightened and gave him a little shove.

'You need to take a step back from this. Blaze is calling in about half an hour - see what he has to offer on the subject. Maybe there's something in the expedition findings that might help.'

He sighed. 'Blaze is like us - another lone wolf. Even Rokuro isn't much more than a group commander. What I - what we need - is someone like Dan, Kei. For a former display fighter pilot, the man was brilliant at seeing the big picture on a battlefield. One on one - or one against a small group, I can hold my own - but we need that expertise. Right now, we've got no-one who can fill that void... Doppler crippled the SDF when he took Dantetsu Ichimonji and Hank Douglas from us - they don't have anyone with that kind of experience left, and they're rapidly re-tasking themselves into more of a galaxy-wide police force, not a navy.'

'What about Ben's father?'

Harlock snorted. 'You know how we can cause a situation to get out of control if we get involved? Do you really want to bring that particular sledgehammer down on this galaxy?'

Kei pulled a face. 'Oh. Good point. He doesn't do subtle, does he?' They shared rueful smiles. 'So - do you just plan on sitting on your gorgeous derriere with a drink in your hand and hope it solves itself?'

'Why not? He asked dryly. 'Worked for the last captain... Ow!' this last was in response to her hitting his upper arm. 'I'm going to take your advice - and Tochiro's.'

'Which is?'

He smiled grimly. 'When faced with a situation you can't see a way out of, go get a drink, and wait for something to change in your favour. Until then, you aren't going anywhere, so why work up a sweat over it?' He pushed himself off the table and landed lightly on the floor, although she noticed he pulled a face as his right leg took his weight, despite his attempt to hide it. 'I'll take Blaze's call in the Central Computer Room. If you have no objections, I'd prefer you to get the ship ready for departure - we'll leave for Heavy Meldar as soon as we can.'

'That's Yattaran's job!' she called out after him as he left the room. He just raised a weary hand in reply over his head as he walked off, and she folded her arms over her breasts and huffed. 'Right. Why do I even bother? Lazy fat bastard's never around when there's work to be done. One of these
days I'm going to chuck the entire ship's stores of acrylic paint and cyanoacrylate out of the nearest airlock…' she muttered.

The lights on the wall flickered in sympathy as she grabbed her clipboard and stalked out.

Blaze stood in front of the hologrammatic image of his mother and tried very hard not to shuffle his feet under her firm gaze. Light years away she might be, and he'd been too old for almost twenty years to be given a verbal dressing down, but still…

'We'll be back within the week if we push the drive - Maji's got a few ideas that can increase our IN-SKIP immersion. If Marin's in trouble, we'll be there as fast as we can.'

'I know you will, my dear. Harlock's already on his way to Heavy Meldar, but even the Arcadia can't be everywhere at once. Please hurry - but don't take too many risks - I couldn't bear it if anything…' 

'It won't,' he broke in, wanting to reassure her. There was, he thought sadly, a brittle look in his mother's lovely eyes these days which he wished he could take away. Losing his baby brothers and their father to the plague had come close to breaking his legendarily calm and capable mother. If not for Kanna and the younger boys, he suspected that she might have simply faded away. As it was, he thought she looked tired and too thin.

'Let us deal with it, mum. We'll find him, and if he's put so much as a dent in the old girl you can ground him until he's forty.'

She smiled all too briefly at the suggestion, and nodded. With a heartfelt sigh, Blaze cut the connection. Nearby, leaning against a bulkhead, Ali regarded him openly, one finger rubbing the short, broad scar near his right eyebrow.

'What?' he asked, snapping more defensively at the loitering pirate than he'd intended. Ali simply shrugged it off.

'Nothing. Quite a woman, your ma… Not sure but she's probably the best woman in your damn family - she's certainly the sanest…'

Blaze ran his fingers through his hair. 'Casting aspersions on my saintly aunt again?' he asked with a forced grin.

'Your aunt's batshit insane, and your cousins ain't far behind - leastways Emeraldas is plain fuckin' scary and Maetel's… well. Jury's still out on little Mae, innit?' He pantomimed a shudder. 'She needs to be real careful, that one… trouble with deep cover is sometimes you become the bloody mask… I still ain't convinced I know what side she's on. And neither's the captain, if he's honest about it…' he paused. 'Actually, last time we saw her I wasn't sure if she knew what side she was on…'

Blaze huffed at him. 'Like we don't have enough to worry about? Thankfully Andromeda's two million light years away and we have enough crap out here on our own doorstep. Though it does leave the Thieves stretched a bit thin…'

Ali pushed himself off the bulkhead and stopped slouching. 'Huh. Kinda wondered when you guys might begin to regret letting Em take off with over a third of your fleet…'

'Round about the time she talked mum into letting her do it…' Blaze replied dryly. 'Dad might have talked her out of it, if he'd lived. Damnit - I do love my cousin, but the girl has ice in her veins and
she's a persuasive little bitch when she wants to be. And you really, really don't want to get in her way when it comes to her damned mother...' He tugged at his gloves. 'Since you're cluttering up my flightdeck, Jones, I take it everything's stowed?'

'Kit, kids, crew and one little bitty baby Mimay,' Ali replied brightly. 'Are we sure dropping her in your mom's lovely lap is a good idea? I mean, with all our kiddies around on Tabito…'

'Not my call - and mum agreed with Harlock. Besides, being around some semblance of normal might even help acclimate her to life outside her life-support. She might be two hundred-some years old, but she's still a little girl with no experience of the outside world. Given there's no Nibelung other than Loki's bunch to take her in…'

'Better she bonds with our lot, eh?'

Blaze shot him a searching look. 'I don't think anyone's being that cynical..' he began.

Ali snorted, and just stared over his nose at him. 'Seriously?'

Blaze shrugged. 'Well, not completely,' he revised. He took a long look around the bridge, as his crew filed in to take their places, pushing past Ali who nimbly hopped to one side to avoid a Mirai-class android, a tall female form resembling a nude, glowing, golden statue, long flowing energy fields rippling down her back over the shapely, but featureless curves of her backside rather like Mimay's hair as she strode to her post. 'Weren't you going to keep an eye on that young hot-head of Harlock's? He stormed out of here in a foul mood after he heard Harlock's story.'

'Maji had him rounded up to help with the loading - might give him time to simmer down a bit,' Ali replied breezily. 'Figured I'd give him time to stomp back to his quarters then try and knock some sense into him if he's going to cook off.' He grinned nastily. 'We've found giving him someone to be pissed off with works wonders.'

'Have you guys ever heard of therapy?' Blaze asked. 'You know - professional help?'

Ali turned a puzzled frown on him. 'Why would we do that when being a total bastard is so much more fun?'

Blaze sighed at the retreating black sweater as Ali walked out whistling, his hands in his pockets. 'Why do I even bother?' he muttered, prompting a "sir?" from his navigator as she took her seat on his left. 'Never mind,' he told her. 'Wheels up in ten, Sasha. Set course for Tabito.'

'Aye aye sir.'

Blaze took his seat with a heart heavier than he allowed anyone to see. Despite his optimistic banter, inwardly he kept gnawing at the lack of communication from his elder brother. Aniki... this had better be just a comms problem.

Be safe. Please…

If these aliens have hurt one of us, there will be hell to pay.

Daiba let the door of his quarters slide shut behind him, and slammed his fist into the wall as it did so, letting the pain in his bruised knuckles wash over him. A startled "eek" alerted him that he wasn't alone. Meg was standing next to her bunk, stripped to bra and panties, a white sweater in one hand.
'Sorry,' he muttered, shrugging out of his jacket and throwing it onto the foot of his own bunk before dropping heavily onto it, and lying back with his arms crossed behind his bed, staring up at the ceiling. 'Forgot I had company.'

'Obviously,' she replied tartly. 'What did that poor wall ever do to you?' When he didn't answer she walked the handful of steps closer to take a look at him. 'You idiot - what if you broke it?'

'The wall?' he asked, still lost in furious contemplation.

'No, silly - your hand. Though Blaze won't thank you if you break his ship…' She sat down on the bed next to him and pulled on the elbow nearest to her, and unresisting, he let her take a look at his bloodied knuckles. 'What's at the root of this new outpouring of testosterone fuelled wangst?'

'Hardly a laughing matter, Meg,' he replied waspishly.

'I'm not laughing, Daiba - but you just stormed in here like someone just kicked your puppy.' When he didn't answer she cradled his battered hand in her small ones. 'You know, lying there and stewing over whatever it is won't help, not really. Talk to me.'

He didn't pull his hand away from her grip, but he didn't turn to look at her for several minutes. Just lay there, his head still pillowed on his other arm, staring at the non-existent cracks on the ceiling. 'You might want to be somewhere else, tonight,' he muttered eventually. 'I'm not going to be good company.'

She snorted. 'When are you ever? You toss and turn all night even on a good day. You wake up screaming and thrashing - oh, and you also snore…' she added lightly.

He turned to look at her, and got an eyeful of small, high, very pert round breasts barely hidden by sheer pink fabric. 'Oh for pity's sake, Meg - put those away!' he groaned, turning to face the wall, in the process pulling his hand out of her grasp, and instantly regretting the loss of her warm touch.

'Seriously, Daiba? You've seen me naked…'

'In public,' he mumbled into the pillow. 'With people close by…'

Another snort. 'What's the difference?' She leaned over him and he felt the offending articles press into his arm through the fabric of his light sweater. 'Or do you just feel safer in public?' she whispered into his ear. The warmth of her breath on his neck and earlobe required another groan to be swallowed whole by his pillow, and the stiff leather of his pants was under more strain than he figured Maji would have built into them.

'Stop it, Meggie. Quit baiting me!' he snapped. When she flinched at his tone, he felt terrible. Yep, here I go again… lashing out like a total dick…' Sorry,' he muttered, but meaning it. He turned back to face her.

'Apology accepted. You can be a bit of a prick when you're pissed off.' She gave him a peck on the cheek. 'So - what got your boxers in a bunch?'

He sat up so that he could make eye contact. Staring at her breasts was pleasant, but getting uncomfortable. Though his eyes did run appreciatively over the skin on display - far too much of which still had hypertrophic burn scars from the acids used on the asteroid mine she'd been imprisoned on as a child slave. She noticed the direction of his gaze and stuck her nose in the air as though daring him to make something of it. He'd come to suspect that her seeming lack of concern over her state of undress was as much a front as some of his barriers - daring the onlooker to turn away, sneer, or look pityingly at her.
More fool them, he thought, meeting her eyes with his own and forcing a smile he didn't really feel. Scars didn't bother him - he had plenty of his own. Plus she's pretty, abrasive, prickly, and feisty… He pulled his head back into the conversation before she could work out where his mind was at. 'Harlock. Turns out we're now protecting Mazone, not killing them,' he ground out, still smarting at the betrayal. He outlined the most recent conversation he'd been privy to between Blaze, Ali and Harlock. Despite over an hour spent hauling the survey team's equipment back on board, he was still simmering.

'Marin's missing?'

He glared at her. 'Missing the point much? We're supposed to be talking about me...'

She stuck her tongue out. 'It's all you, you, you isn't it? But I could ask you the same question. You know the captain... Since when does he attack non-combatants deliberately? I heard Ali talking to Doc once about the War - one time, the Machinners placed a factory-ship right in the middle of a civilian convoy given military recognition codes on their transponders... the way Ali tells it he'd never seen him lose his temper like that before - or since, once he realised what he'd opened fire on. Locked himself in his cabin for hours and wouldn't even let Kei in. And if the Prometheus hadn't been there in support and backed up our story, the backlash against us would have been awful...'

'Look, I know I'm being fucking unreasonable, okay? Why do you have to get in the way of a good self-pitying wallow?' he snapped.

She patted him on the arm. 'Because it's childish and beneath you, and unfair on Harlock. You know he'd do anything for you - except go on a murder spree against...' she trailed off as she realised the direction her words were going. 'Oh. Shit.'

'Welcome to the foot-in-mouth club,' he told her. 'Yeah, yeah, I know... It's not Harlock I'm pissed off with really, is it? Not totally, anyway. It's me. Four years on the run. Four years being tracked down by those things, yeah, sure - but not all of them were coming after me when I killed them, were they? I didn't give a shit when I saw one whether they were going to kill me or not, so maybe the Alliance was right - I was just a dangerous psycho on a killing spree...'

She laid a finger on his lips to shush him. 'No. Well, yes, maybe - but you didn't know there could be different kinds, or that some were living amongst us just to keep their heads down...'

'Meg,' he sighed, and pushed her hand away gently. 'I didn't give a shit. Get that into your head - I really didn't care. Truthfully, I'd still happily send any I come across home in an ashtray. I hate them. They killed mum in front of me, and they were probably behind dad's death.'

She stared thoughtfully at him. Then shrugged. 'I get it. I do. I'd like to send Doppler home to whatever bitch spawned him in a baggie. Though I'd have a tough time getting past Ali. He really wants that guy's entrails garlanded across a few streets during a parade.' She pursed her lips slightly. 'But I think here it's just that you think Harlock's proving himself the better man than you are - and that stings, because you've idolised him your entire life. Am I wrong?'

He glowered sullenly at her and said nothing.

'You've always looked up to him - despite all that bile you threw in his face when you first came on board. What's worse, he's right, and you know it, somewhere deep down in that mess of teenage hormones.' She poked him in the chest with her index finger. 'But you're eighteen, and stubborn, and proud, and you just don't want to back down...' She patted his cheek, ignoring his attempt to snarl at her. 'Oh, stop being so damn miserable and man up.'
'Is it a girl thing to just totally undercut a guy when he's having a justifiable sulk?' he muttered at her grumpily.

In reply she leaned over and pressed her lips - soft, warm and dry - against his own. 'Grumpy bastard,' she teased, when she pulled away again.

'Prickly cow,' he countered with a grin, feeling better already, though he'd have had to have the admission torn out of him via a cable attached to a bullet craft.

'Dickhead.'

'Pixie.'

'Ooh - I like that one!' she replied brightly. She ran a finger over the sharp lines of his cheekbones. Comfortable by now with her touch, he only flinched slightly when her finger drifted too close to the corner of his mouth.

The commlink chimed with annoyingly bad timing. Daiba swore under his breath as Meg leaned away to answer it.

'What?' she snapped into the speaker.

'Meggie?' Ali's voice. Daiba rolled his eyes, making Meg stifle a giggle. He should have known. Always checking up on him, as though he was planning on jumping on the girl and tearing her limb from limb - or worse. 'Seen Daiba? He flounced off the bridge in a bit of a snit earlier.'

'Daiba? Erm…' She hesitated slightly, and Daiba's eyes narrowed in suspicion as he watched a series of expressions flit across her face. 'Oh… ahhhh… No, why, should I?' she added a little gasp at the end of the sentence, and winked at Daiba, who, realising her intent, choked slightly and tried to signal her to stop talking.

There was a pause on the other end of the commlink. Not missing a beat, Meg let out a low moan, ignoring Daiba when he thumped her on the arm. 'Meg - you okay in there?' Ali sounded suspicious.

'Ali? Oh, I'm fine… I just… oooohhhhh…. Don't! Don't stoooooppppp…' she drew out the words with a series of little pants added for good measure. Unsure if he'd locked the door behind him earlier, Daiba was torn between laughter at her antics - accompanied as they were by a pantomimed performance that was rapidly sweeping away his bad mood - and a very real fear that she was busy getting his death warrant signed by her over-protective guardian. Especially when Ali began hammering on the door.

'Tadashi Daiba! If you harm a hair on her head - on any other body part for that matter… I swear I'll yank the offending article out by the roots and choke you with it…!' came the bellow through the door.

'Oh, chill, Ali! I… oh… yes! Ooooohhh… oooohhhhhhh!' Meg cried out, her head flung back. Daiba lost it at that point, and appointment with death or not, had to bite a pillow to stop from laughing out loud. As it was a giggle escaped him. Meg hit the offswitch after a long drawn out "aaaaahhhhhhhhh" and collapsed giggling, her head on Daiba's heaving shoulders.

The banging abruptly stopped, with a snarled declaration of a duel to the death on the morrow.

'You're a very, very bad person,' Daiba told her primly, once he got his breath back. She smiled up at him beatifically.
'I just couldn't help it - he's been hovering over any guy I show an interest in since I hit puberty. Kei told me once he actually bugged her quarters to keep an eye on Harlock and her when Harlock was new as captain. Payback's a bitch…' she sniggered.

'Apart from the bit where he's going to tear my arms and legs off tomorrow on the practice mats?' Daiba drawled. At least she had the decency to look a little guilty.

'He didn't mention limbs,' she pointed out helpfully.

Daiba just *looked* at her.

'Okay… okay. Maybe you have a point.' Noticing that the intensity of his gaze had changed somewhat she added a "what?" tinged with sudden suspicion.

'Just wondering where you learned that repertoire,' he said innocently.

She tossed her head back, causing her curls to bounce prettily around her face and onto her bare shoulders. 'Oh. That. I bunk next door to Niobe, remember?' They both sniggered. She snuggled closer. 'Move up a bit, I'm getting cold.'

He glared at the top of her head. 'Then put some fucking clothes on, or get into your own bunk.'

He could almost think he could feel her grinning against his shoulder. 'Fffht. Did you kiss your mother with that mouth? Besides, I'd rather be here.' She tugged the thin sheet up over her. Perversely, he pulled it back out of her fingers.

'Not happening. Don't make me push you out of bed,' he said firmly, wondering if there was an afterlife his father had studied which rewarded selfless self-denial.

She grabbed the sheet back, pouting. 'You don't want to do that.'

'Want, no. Should, hell yes. Did you not hear Ali threatening to turn me into a boy soprano with his bare hands?'

'But,' she began, in her most totally-reasonable tone, 'he already thinks you've done the crime, so why worry now?'

'So I can stand there with a straight face and tell him without a word of a lie you were just yanking his chain?'

'I'd rather yank something else,' she replied teasingly. He gulped.

'Any more of this and I will start to think my poor cock oughta get a last request of the condemned,' he muttered. Meg spluttered, then recovered her composure enough to snigger.

'Oh chill… He's just being a dick. That, and he actually thinks you need to get laid to work off a bit of that aggression, and thinks you just need a bit of a push with what in his head passes for reverse psychology, I guess.'

He rolled over so he could eyeball her suspiciously. 'What is this - some conspiracy to get my head pulled out of my ass? Coz I'll remove it when I'm good and ready. And did they sign you up for this?'

She shook her head. 'Nope. They think I'm enough of a pain to keep you from losing yourself in all that misery just by being me. The rest is all my own idea.'
He snorted. 'Why bother? I mean - am I that great a catch? I've seen you eying Benji up…'

'Everyone eyes Ben up… he'd be drop dead gorgeous even without that blue tan. Maybe I just figure I'm in with a chance of a seriously hot guy with a bad-boy vibe and cheekbones and lashes I'd kill for myself, if I'm on hand when he finally decides he's ready to rejoin the human race again…'

'And by rejoining the human race, you mean "pin you to the bed and shag you senseless"? he drawled. She blushed and he grinned wickedly. 'Ohhh… not so wicked after all, are you?' Though she did, he had to admit, have a nice way of distracting him and diffusing his irritation. 'Pretty pink pixie pirate, playing with fire…' He ran one finger up the inner skin of her arm, following the line of one dark scar to her shoulder where it snuck under the thin bra strap that had fallen onto her upper arm, which he caught in the crook of his finger and pulled deftly back into place.

She pouted at him and sighed theatrically. 'You really haven't got the hang of this seduction lark, have you?'

Resisting the temptation to admit that it was far more fun to make her work for it, he gave her his best shit-eating grin, then patted her on top of her honey gold curls. 'Haven't I?' he asked innocently. 'What should I be doing then…?'

She flounced off his bunk and back over to her own. 'If you're going to carry like this, forget it, you just missed your chance…'

He lay back with his head pillowed on his arms. 'Awww...face it - it's why you fancy me…'

A snort greeted that. 'In your dreams… great cheekbones - and a great ass, maybe. But your personality sometimes leaves a lot to be desired.' When she leaned over to pick up her sweater he rolled onto his side and enjoyed the view of her barely covered backside.

'How about if I say sorry and we share the sheet?' he offered.

She sniffed. 'You had your chance, Cheekbones.' She turned round to face him whilst she pulled the sweater on, deliberately making sure it clung to all the right - however small - places as she smoothed it down. 'Regretting all that 'tude yet?' she asked, as she pulled on her trousers - far less seductively, since she was hopping around on one leg to do so, her tongue sticking out between her teeth as she concentrated.

'Sweating bullets,' he assured her with a straight face. 'Not to mention a cock-stand that's about to bust its way out of my-'

'Oh gods, will you just shut up already!' She chucked a balled up sock at his head, which he duly caught and threw back, hitting her on the left ear. 'Forget it, loverboy - I'm going to give them a hand on the bridge, because there's no way in hell I can keep up with your mood swings tonight…'

'You love me really!' he shouted at her retreating back, as she flounced out of the door with her boots in her hand, swearing at him. She stopped with a startled squeak, and he was about to twit her about changing her mind, when he saw what had stopped her in her tracks. Freya was standing in the open doorway, clutching her pink ball, and staring at them both with a puzzled little frown on her face, large eyes staring straight at Daiba. 'Oh, crap… how much of that did she overhear?' he groaned.

As if the day couldn't get any worse, Ben's blue face peeked over and around Meg, who'd knelt to cuddle the little Nibelung girl. 'All of it, I should think - since she was in my cabin and these walls
are even thinner than Arcadia's, children.' He winked at Daiba. 'But since it seems you won't have anything better to do for the rest of the evening, I guess you're on babysitting duty, Tadashi!' He smirked. 'Just remember your manners around the infants!'

'Fu- oh, just go, Ben.' Resigned to his fate he swung his legs off the bed and sat up, greeting the little pale green whirlwind who ran towards him with a fond smile he didn't have to fake. 'Hey, kitten. Want to work a bit on your talking?'

Slender little arms twined around his neck, and a cool cheek was pressed against his own as he lifted her onto the bed beside him and set her down. He didn't even notice the door close behind his crewmates.
Chapter 33

The Arcadia emerged from IN-SKIP in its roiling cloud of dark matter, about half a light year away from the Futatsuboshi's last known position. On the bridge, Harlock and Kei stood side by side, waiting for the black cloud to clear.

'Someone really needs to clean the windscreen,' Harlock murmured as an aside to Kei, who elbowed him in the side. 'Oof.'

'Stay focused, people - Sabu - get me some long range scans - Yasu - Time radar. Niobe - comms - scan all frequencies for a signal, even the ones we don't normally use. Remember, the Futatsuboshi is an old ship, she might be reduced to some short wave frequencies if she had radio problems,' she called out.

'Never mind the long range,' Yattaran interjected. 'I'm getting multiple pings on the short-range scanners - we've got one hell of a debris field up ahead!'

Harlock took a step forwards. 'A battle?'

Yattaran shook his head. 'Nah - none of the usual energy signatures. Mostly carbon residue, and photon emissions. Coming up on visual range now, processing for false colour display… aha!' The viewscreen cleared to reveal a cloud of debris - this far out from any sun, the ship's computers compensated for the lack of light by making the invisible visible for its human crew. Even at this distance, it was obvious the remains were of Mazone ships - the skeletal structures of the interior branches were unmistakable, as though a forest had exploded in empty space. Here and there, the ship's sensors highlighted bodies frozen in the vacuum. Saba, at Kei's station, looked away with a muttered curse.

'What the hell happened?' Harlock asked softly. He laid a hand on the ship's wheel as the Arcadia responded with a sighing moan. 'Easy, my friend.'

Kei took over from Sabu. 'From the energy spikes, it looks like a low intensity explosion from several sources in close proximity. Best guess, I think several of their ships came out of IN-SKIP too close, and the unstable drives failed - maybe one blew from the strain and set the others off?'

'Time radar confirms,' Yasu called up from the lower bridge - I've got a time trace from two weeks out - one ship blows, and the rest were just caught in the back blast. Like Miss Kei says, they were too darned close.' The ghostly echoes of the energy signatures appeared on the main viewscreen, an eerie replay of tragedy destined to play out against the cosmic background until the signal degraded.

Harlock bowed his head. 'Sainess was right… their ships just cannot take the strain of these multiple jumps. No matter what their quarrel with humanity, they don't deserve this…' He raised his head. 'Any trace of the Futatsuboshi?'

'Not yet,' Yattaran replied. 'Still looking for a trace. Given the power of the explosion of that chain reaction, space-time was warped in that sector for about thirty AU - we're on the edge, but if Marin came out somewhere inside that radius, there's no telling what might…'

'Don't sugar-coat it, Yattaran. We do know what can happen if a ship tries to exit the IN-Space in a singularity.' Harlock stared at the screen helplessly. 'Contact the other ships, warn them off this area, tell them to exit farther out and come in on sub-light. Whilst we're waiting, I want us to set up
warning buoys throughout this sector. Kei - you're in charge - plot a suitable radius and we'll use our speed to get them in place - this is a major shipping route between seven systems, so the faster they're in place the happier I'll be. Mimay - keep the engines hot, we might need them.'

Kei nodded. 'Where will you be?' she asked, as he turned to leave the bridge.

'With Tochiro - if anyone has any ideas about this kind of damage to space-time, he will. We might be looking for an anomaly in an anomaly. Franz- take Yattaran's post. First mate - with me. I'll need my geniuses on this.' He strode towards the left hand stairs, not waiting for the slower, lumbering Yattaran, who bumbled along behind on short legs muttering about "inconsiderate lanky bastards."

'At a conservative estimate based on the designs we've seen, I'd guess close to seventy ships were caught in that explosion.' Tochiro's hologram wavered then solidified. Harlock sat on one of the main root conduits between the central core and the server banks surrounding it. The black bird circled overhead then landed on an overhead power supply cable bunch to preen. Yattaran leaned against one of the server banks, arms folded on the vast expanse of his stomach. 'Those carbon drives are efficient black body devices - they can store an immense amount of energy - almost as much as our dark matter engine - so when they blow, they really blow. You can see from the damage here just how powerful a blast that was - as much, say as the oscillators we planted back in the day, just less focused. It wasn't, thankfully, enough to tear the kind of hole in space-time you'd need to blast into the smaller sub-dimensions, but it did cause a massive "wave" - kind of a space-time tsunami if you like - capable of disrupting warp radio and IN-SKIP travel in the area for a few years to come.'

'So we can't contact the Futatsuboshi,' Yattaran grunted. 'Can we find her?'

'Working on it. The disruption acted like ripples in a pond - distorting the signals, and sending the energy signatures way off course. But I can - being a genius - work on removing the noisy wavelengths from our sensor data, and apply a filter. It won't be perfect, and out here a miss is as good as a mile - but it's the best chance we have. Thankfully the Arcadia's sensors and comms are powerful enough to overcome a lot of this anyway, but the Millennial Thieves' ships…' Tochiro tailed off looking decidedly unhappy.

'...will be blind, deaf and dumb,' Harlock finished. 'Shit. We'll have to tell them to keep clear after all - we're the only ship which can enter this area, aren't we?'

Tochiro's ghostly form nodded. 'Fraid so. A lot of our tech works on very different frequencies, so a lot of the damage doesn't touch us - in one sense, the Arcadia only has a partial existence in this set of dimensions.'

Yattaran scowled at the screen behind the Arcadia's ghostly creator and scratched his arse idly with his left hand. 'Shouldn't that open us up to more damage?'

'If the blast had damaged deeper into sub-space - as, I think we can agree, the intention seems to be once they reach their final destinations - then yes. Right now, it's more like a small hernia. Irritating, but not life-threatening.'

Yattaran snorted. 'I can tell you ain't never had grapes hangin' outta yer."

'If we can stay on topic,' Harlock cut in, grimacing at the mental picture. 'I did not need that image. Just work on ensuring we can get some meaningful data out of our sensors, and if we have to enter that maelstrom, make sure you can get me back out again. I'll take the helm and send Kei down - it
sounds as though navigation will need some adjustments, and she's the one with the head for the maths.' He stood up and nodded to the pair. 'Find me that ship, my friends.'

After he'd left, his boots clanging down the corridor, Yattaran sighed heavily and glared at his ethereal counterpart. 'No pressure… just a hundred and twenty people we bloody know and one of the captain's best buds out there,' he muttered. He took a deep breath. 'So - since I'm yer damn paws again, shorty, where do we start?'

Kei nibbled on her lower lip as she stared at the readouts on her console for what felt like the hundredth time in an hour. In actuality it had been four hours, and despite Tochiro's tweaks of the sensor data, they seemed no closer to finding the signature of the Futatsuboshi.

She didn't turn as she heard Harlock's distinctive boots clatter on the metal grill of the upper bridge. Long experience meant she knew to the inch where he'd be standing, in front of - or behind, depending on your point of view - the ship's wheel.

'Funny - from here, you can't see there's anything wrong with the space out there,' he said quietly.

She did look up then, and smiled wanly. 'If you look closely, you can see the lensing effect caused by the distortion. We're outside the effect at the moment, just waiting for a signal to follow.'

'The buoys?' he asked.

'All in place and broadcasting. I contacted Selen's people - they don't like the idea of hanging back, but they appreciate the severity of the situation.'

'She always did have a talent for recruiting for common sense,' he murmured appreciatively.

'I did suggest we could use her expertise,' Kei replied a trifle facetiously. They shared a grin. The Arcadia wasn't renowned for recruiting personalities who were easy to get along with - the ship tended to function best with a crew most commanders would consider dysfunctional: most if not all came on board with a ton of emotional baggage and "damaged goods" was often the most charitable description Selen - and her late husband - had uttered in the Arcadia's captain's direction over the years. But that, Harlock often opined, was the point. Arcadia was a refuge, and those who earned their place aboard her would walk through fire for their captain and each other.

Outsiders might look in and see a group of military rejects, disavowed agents (Ali would point to their captain with pride)... misfits, petty criminals, malcontents, thrill-seeking former academics (Ali)... bone-idle, neuro-atypical loners (Yattaran), alcoholics (Doc), hormonal teenagers (Kei would mutter something about that being most of the crew and to hell with age…)... orphans (Niobe and Meg), insubordinate troublemakers (everyone would point to Ali) and intellects ranging from those charitably described as "slow" (at which Ali would point to Sabu and Yasu) to the near-genius of Yattaran, Kei and Maji (and, in his own field - or mind - Ali, again…). But it worked, and Harlock had developed a principle over the last decade and a bit of "if it isn't broken, don't fix it".

Even if from time to time, he did cast an envious eye over the smoothly run, clean, tidy, efficient, quiet ships of the Millennial Thieves fleet.

One of which was currently lost at sea, and the focus of their current efforts. For all their expertise and carefully selected crew, sometimes, you needed dysfunctional…

Harlock laid a gloved hand on the baluster that currently pointed to his second in command and wife. 'The longer they're in there,' he said softly. His fingers curled around the dark wood. 'The harder it will be to pull them out. We're so quick to hurl ourselves into these domains, we forget
there are very real dangers present. Hurtling out to the stars as fast as we can taking any shortcut we find, without really looking at our feet to see what we're treading in…'

Kei flicked a stray strand of her fair hair out of her face. 'Someone's waxing poetic this afternoon - did you grab a double espresso while I wasn't looking?'

'It's evening, Tabito time,' he corrected mildly. From the main bridge below, he could hear the unmistakable sounds of the mutters and clanking boots that heralded a shift-change. Laughter and complaints about consoles messed with rose up to the gantry in equal measure, and he exchanged a fond smile with Kei.

Dysfunctional… but our kind of dysfunctional, he thought to himself.

'Miss Kei!' Yasu's voice from below called up. 'We have a signal!'

Both Kei and Harlock strode to the front of the gantry to peer over the railing. From this position, Harlock could just see the top curve of the skull that fronted the comms array underneath if he looked straight down. The bald bruiser was grinning up at them and waving his hand in the air for attention.

'Pass me the details,' Kei called down. He nodded and scuttled back into the comms room, and Harlock followed Kei back to her station and waited with her for the data to come up.

'Faint,' he commented, as she worked to clean up the signal further.

'But it's there, and I think I can keep us on the right heading.' She looked up at him. 'There's a lot of noise and it's wobbly.'

'Get Tochiro on it - boost it as much as you can. We'll drop markers as we go - I want a sturdy ball of string between us and the outside of this area. We should be able to skim the surface of the dimensional rift, unless the Futatsuboshi has dropped too deeply already.'

'And if she has?' her wide blue eyes radiated concern, and she was nibbling her bottom lip again.

He reached out a gloved hand and gently laid a finger on the abused lip, pushing it away from her teeth with a smile. 'That's my job,' he murmured. In a normal volume he replied: 'Then we'll go in after her. Wrap the ship in dark matter and submerge. Yattaran -' he looked around. 'Isn't he back on post yet?'

'Still with Tochiro and Mimay - when I left them earlier they were figuring out some adjustments to the drive output,' Kei told him.

'Get the pair of them back up here.' She nodded and hit the internal comms relay. Harlock strode back to the front of the gantry again, and as one, the on-duty crew turned to look up at their captain.

Interesting - and gratifying… several men had stayed on the bridge even though they'd been relieved.

'Listen up - you know the situation. The Futatsuboshi got herself into a spot of trouble, and is somewhere inside this spatial anomaly. You all know the drill - we don't abandon our friends.'

A chorus of "hear, hear"s resounded, and he smiled grimly. 'We've got a faint signal, and the damage caused by the Mazone drives has screwed with our sensors. Even after recalibration, navigating inside the affected zone will not be easy. I'll need every eye on both the electronics and on the screen - you see something, you call it out. I won't yell at anyone for a false alarm…'
'No,' Kei called down without leaving her post. 'That's my job!' 

Laughter.

Harlock smiled fondly, 'Any of you on board when we last hit a rift like this will remember it's no picnic - and debris from the wrecked ships won't help. If we come under attack from anything still functional, be aware that what screws with your eyes will also screw with the targeting computers - the Central Computer can only compensate so much for the signal distortions.' He inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement and the crew chorused a series of "aye, aye, Captain"s back at him. He turned and strode back to the helm listening to the wave of banter and chatter that rose up as men headed for their posts and settled down to their jobs.

Yattaran and Mimay were already at their posts by the time he took a firm hold of the balusters of the wheel again. Glancing back over his shoulder he gave Mimay a sharp nod, and the graceful alien acknowledged it with a graceful dip of her head, her silky hair floating around her slender form as she moved. Yattaran, on his left, gave him a thumbs up.

With a deep breath he gave the wheel a ten degree turn to starboard. 'Mimay - dark matter engine engaged. Arcadia - let's go!'

A billowing cloud of dark matter enveloped the kilometre long vessel, and with stately, purposeful grace, the deadly ship moved into the distortion zone.

You could always, Kei thought gloomily as she kept a weather eye on her console, tell when the situation had gone totally tits-up. It meant even Yattaran being subdued, muttering something unrepeatable at his console instead of lying around in his room working on yet another of the models of various machinery he seemed to enjoy playing with. It meant quiet chatter from the lower bridge instead of incessant name-calling and complaints…

...no, scratch that one. She'd forgotten they were currently Ali-less.

And it meant Harlock's hands on the wheel, carefully steering the ship in response to the silent whispers from the central computer that only he could hear, or her own murmured corrections as she endeavoured to help him navigate based on the fluctuating signals from the Futatsuboshi.

Sure, they could let the computers handle it, but computers could only interpret so much.

The scenery outside the Arcadia made her brain hurt to watch for too long. There was nothing obviously wrong with the scene the hundreds of cameras and sensors outside the ship relayed to the bridge. To the casual viewer the usual blackness of space was relieved only by light - artificially added by the computers - glinting off a debris field which stretched even further than the one they'd extricated themselves from at the end of the Battle of Herise, towards the end of the machinners war - and that had seen over six thousand ships left in pieces.

Less debris… fewer ships… but a much more powerful explosion… Kei shivered as the ship moved slowly through the debris, a tangle of roots and branches with twisted bodies caught in their remains. Bodies recognisable by shape, since they were just carbonised, three-dimensional shadows silhouetted grey-on-black against the backdrop of space by the magic of modern (or was that ancient?) optical science.

*Shadows on the wall of eternity*…

But that wasn't what caused the eyes to lower, the head to turn away, and lead to a pressing desire to start rubbing her temples. That was reserved for the way that, after only a few minutes, you
started to realise that there was something very slightly off about the view. As though, whilst looking through a kaleidoscope at an image, someone started, very, very slowly, to turn it so that the image began to fracture. Tiny, tiny cracks in reality, distorting the picture in front of her. Colours began to bleed into one another, and to take on odd hues she had no memory of ever seeing before. Sounds began to distort - voices that were at once too loud and too quiet; simultaneously both a high pitched buzzing and a low, drawn out drone.

How odd… it sounded as though someone was throwing up.

There were strong arms wrapped around her, and a day's growth of soft stubble against her cheek. 'Hey. Not you as well…'

She tried shaking her head to clear it, and almost passed out as the world decided to turn itself upside down. She had to take a couple of gulping breaths to keep down the contents of her stomach, and all she could hear was the thumpthump of Harlock's heart against her ear.

Harlock guided Kei carefully over to the captain's chair and sat her down gently on the red leather. 'Easy there,' he said softly. With a gentle hand he brushed a sweat-dampened elf-lock out of her eyes. She smiled up at him wanly and promptly threw up, missing his boots by inches.

'Heh. That's six so far,' Yattaran called out with gloomy glee.

'Get a cleaning crew in - and get the second watch back up here on shift.' Yattaran gave his captain a curt nod and gave the orders, and Harlock turned his attention back to Kei, who clung to him as though he were her only lifeline, her face uncharacteristically pale and clammy. He perched on the arm of the chair and stroked her hair.

'That's not like me,' Kei croaked out eventually. She ran her tongue round the inside of her mouth. 'Ugh.'

'Anita's coming with some water. Just sit for now.'

'What happened?' She struggled to sit upright, ignoring his attempts to make her sit still. The bridge viewscreen, she noticed belatedly, had been shut down.

'Seems the spatial distortions have a nasty effect even through the screen. We've stopped for now whilst we swap shifts - might have to rotate the crew a bit faster than I'd like, but if that's what it takes.' He gave her a tired smile. 'We'll be flying purely on sensors from here. Shutting the screen down won't remove the entire problem - even through our dark matter cloud some distortions are taking hold - but it will make it a little less nauseating, I hope.'

'How come you're looking so chipper?' True enough, he looked pale, but nowhere near as green around the gills as she felt.

'Must have been that double espresso earlier,' he deadpanned. 'Cushions the system…' He took a glass of water from a hovering Anita and handed it to Kei. 'Drink - slowly.'

She sipped. 'If we're protected by our dark matter…' she said, once she'd recovered slightly. She held the glass tightly in both hands. Anita patted her on the shoulder and sauntered off to minister to the rest of the bridge crew.

'Yeah. According to Tochiro there are some weird-ass readings - we're ever-so-slightly into the sub-dimensional space, so the physics here isn't our physics. It's screwing around with all of our systems - and I don't just mean the electrics either - though, well, I do, because the human brain
sort of fires off…'

'Captain, be a darling - leave the explanations on biology to the experts…' Luna sidled up beside them holding a large tumbler in her right hand, still mostly full of an amber liquid. 'If we stay here too long, we risk some serious physical problems - remember that Prominence of Fire we had trouble shutting down some years back?'

'I'm trying to forget,' Harlock replied dryly. 'Took a dimensional oscillator to shut it down, and I lost five crewmen doing it.'

'Same thing,' Luna continued, gesturing wildly and almost sloshing the contents of her glass onto the floor. Harlock reached over and steadied her hand with his own. 'Ta. I'd hate to spill your hundred and fifty year old Lagavulin…'

'I should just give you the damn key to the drinks cabinet,' he muttered darkly. She just smiled at him and flicked her ponytail back over her shoulder with a toss of her head.

'Who needs a key?' she asked. 'I have an Ali… Anyway. Like the Prominence, this has a way of accelerating cellular respiration, so that basically, our bodies can't keep up with the demands on them. We're protected mostly by the dark matter that pervades the ship, and to a lesser extent our bodies - Harlock here was soaked in it a bit more that most of us because he's wandered around on a planet saturated with the stuff. The rest of the crew - anyone on board when the last captain unleashed the stuff through the superstructure has more of it in their cells than the rest of us. But hang around long enough, and we'll all start to feel the effects.'

'So the crew of the Futatsuboshi…' Kei mused.

'Toast, in a couple of hours, if we don't get to them.' Luna stared at her captain and his second. 'What? You prefer I sugar coat it?' She took a large gulp half emptying the tumbler. 'We're in your hands now, my pretty captain - so you'd better get doing what you do so well…'

'Which is?' he asked, raising one eyebrow.

'Save the day, handsome! Save the day!'

'That would be me,' Yattaran interjected, with a smirk. He grinned at the doctor. 'I got us a ship! Wanna tell me how handsome I am, Luna darlin'?

Luna shuddered. 'Yattaran - I'm not that drunk…'

'Focus, Luna.' Harlock twitched the half empty glass from her fingers and handed it to Yattaran for safekeeping. A stupid move, he realised three seconds later when his first mate downed the contents in one slurp. 'Heading and distance?'

'Two up, three down, four across… annnnnd - about half an AU…' Yattaran pointed to the smaller screen they used for a more tactical holographic display. 'One dinky little battleship, as ordered!'

'Right. I'll bring us closer. Mimay - stand by, we might need to extend the dark matter shield over them. Nibby - can you get a signal on comms?'

The blonde girl at Kei's station shook her head. 'Nothing - I can't cut through the noise - it's stronger here - more distortion…'

Kei stood up a little unsteadily, and gently brushed off Harlock's helping hand. 'Let me, Niobe.' She took over her station, but talked Niobe through the process of adjusting the communication
channels for the spatio-temporal distortion.

'I've got a very faint signal,' Kei told Harlock after a minute or so of tweaking. 'But it's only their SOS carrier beacon. I can't get a lock on probably because their reception equipment isn't up to our standard.'

'Yay for Nibelung tech, eh?' Yattaran added.

'Without it, we'd never have found them,' Kei replied. 'Darling - slow down a little - we're going to need to board them, not ram them…'

Harlock was about to reply with something about backseat drivers, when he noticed she was right - the distortions had tripped Tochiro's sensors up, and he was getting way too close to the Futatsuboshi's position, way too fast if he carried on following the central computer's instructions. Thankfully the Arcadia could dump delta-v faster than any ship he'd ever heard of, and at least in space, you didn't leave skid marks. So long as the inertial dampeners were working…

'Nice parking,' Kei told him with a wink.

'Was it ever in doubt?' He smiled at her. 'So - can we send over an anchor tube?'

Yattaran, peering into the display on his console, grunted noncommittally. He looked up and pulled a face. 'Maybe not… they're not actually all there, if you get my drift. I mean, they are, but…'

'Not quite in our reality?'

'I'll tell Mal you said that.' Kei laid a hand on Harlock's shoulder. 'From my readings, if we tried to latch on with anything, we might actually disintegrate the hull. As in, catastrophically.'

'What about an EVA?' Harlock turned back to Yattaran.

Yattaran scowled. 'To what end? How do we get the crew off?'

Harlock folded his arms across his chest. 'I'm open to suggestions…'

'Well someone needs to go over and assess the situation,' Kei said firmly. 'It might still be possible to get the ship out of the hole she's in…' she looked past Harlock to where Yattaran with a loud "hah" was now frantically jabbing with thick fingers at his console. 'You have an idea?'

'Holes… you might be onto something there, sweetie.'

'Sweetie me again and you'll have a new hole…' she growled at him. Harlock shushed her with a raised hand.

'Kei, stop rising to it, you know he does it just to bait you.'

'Yeah… he's a master…' she muttered. She turned back to her own console with what sounded like a muttered "and who's side are you on?"

'Yattaran?'

The first mate beamed at his captain. 'They're in a hole - technically a rip in the fabric of space-time bleeding into the sub-dimensions of Imaginary Number space, but a hole is a hole is a hole… so we need to work out a way of lifting them out.'
'We can't grab onto anything,' Harlock pointed out. 'Not if her hull integrity is that bad.'

'Not bad, as such… just not all the way out of IN-SKIP. But if we can make her an honorary part of the Arcadia, then "our" space-time bubble becomes theirs - and we can lift her out along with us. Kind of like giving her a tow… or a push. Either way, it's kind of like sticking sacks under yer tyres in the snow…'

'Dark Matter sacks?'

Yattaran grinned at him. 'Got it in one.'

'Not that hard,' Harlock muttered. 'It's generally all we have to throw at a problem…' but Yattaran was waddling over towards the Dark Matter engine, where Mimay stood in front of the glowing orb that controlled the soaring organ-like device.

'Mimay - we need the dark matter antennae deployed to manipulate the output. Can you talk to Tochiro? I need our shields to wrap around the Futatsuboshi, then we need to go in behind her if we can and shove as much of the stuff up her arse as we can…'

'I can hear you, Yattaran. Mimay - ignore the profanity - I think I know what he's after.' Tochiro's voice over the speakers held a slightly tetchy note. 'But we need to be quick - I'm having to be in a hundred places at once trying to hold us together in here. Harlock - this is going to take some really precise flying. I'm going to need the onboard systems to switch to manual whilst we do this, so every crewman needs to pick a system and stick with it. Yattaran - I'll need the old tractor beam array back online. We haven't used it since we dragged the Oceanos into Earth-orbit…'

'On it,' Yattaran grunted, his thick hands dancing over the controls. 'Kinda like old times, this - only we used to do this sort of shit to disable ships…'

'Someone, as Kei pointed out, still needs to go over there, however.' Harlock added in his most reasonable tone. Kei looked at him sharply.

'And by someone you mean you…?' She shook her head emphatically. 'Too dangerous.'

'Gravity cloak,' he shot back, pointing at the offending article, on its usual perch draped over the back of the captain's chair. The bird was currently using it as a perch, and cawed at him before stuffing its head back under its wing.

'Not exactly a universal cure-all,' she replied tartly. 'We're close enough to get a line over, but it'll be hands-on at the other end getting through an airlock. And with the disorientation…'

'I'll take Anita to handle the cutting gear - she's the best, next to Ali. And Karl and Garcia for back-up - they're also ex SPG - not much those two don't know about boarding in space.'

'Anita will need someone to handle the bubble around the airlock,' Kei pointed out. 'That's a specialist…'

'Who do we have?'

She thought for a moment. 'Franz - you up for a space walk?'

The pirate addressed yelled back: 'You asking for volunteers?' Everyone laughed.

'Very kind of you to offer,' Kei shouted back down.
Harlock walked to the front of the gantry and leaned over. 'Ignore her, Franz - you in or not?'

He grinned back up at his captain. 'What the hell, cap'n - could use a change of scenery!'

More laughter, and Harlock smiled slightly as he turned away. He caught Kei's eye and shrugged. 'You don't need to keep them hopping all the time,' he chided gently. Her tendency to try and organise the crew into a more orderly and efficient whole was frequently the source of merriment.

'You're too soft on them,' she grumbled back at him. 'I take it I'm not going with you?'

He shook his head. 'Take the helm - Yattaran will be busy. I need you here.' He reached out and gently brushed her cheek with the back of his hand, then abruptly strode towards the captain's chair to gather up the heavy black cloak. Long practice meant he could at least get it into place over his shoulders and attach it quickly to the fittings on his flightsuit without looking a complete idiot. 'Tell Anita and the others to meet me in hanger thirteen. Get us as close as you can once the dark matter is shrouding the ship. Looks like I'll be getting in some target practice with a harpoon…'

He made his way down the steps with a heavier heart than he showed to the crew. The Futatsuboshi had a crew of between a hundred to a hundred and fifty, depending on the operational requirements she was sailing under.

That's a lot of people we've fought beside, played beside or just rubbed shoulders with over the years… he thought as he made his way to the hangar where his armour was stored. A lot of friends counting on us…

...a lot of whom, realistically, might already be beyond help. Kei hadn't spoken out loud, but he'd seen the data she'd not discussed on her console. She hadn't wanted to alarm the crew, but the two of them had ways of communicating quietly when they had to.

The life signs detected from the ship could have just been affected by the sensory distortions.

If not, he had to be braced for the worst case scenario. Because Kei's readout had displayed only a handful of survivors.
Daiba waited at the head of the ramp, hands stuffed into the pockets of his trousers and scuffed the toe of his boot across the grilled flooring, getting filthy looks from a couple of the passers-by for the noise. A lock of his now unruly hair fell over his forehead, and he brushed it out of the way with a gloved hand.

'You're in need of a haircut, kid - maybe you should have stuck with the buzz-cut…'

He turned at the sound of Ali's gruff voice. 'I kind of prefer it this way.'

'Gets in yer eyes at the wrong moments - just ask the captain - not that he's lining up for a trim, the scruffy bugger. It's all Kei can do to keep him looking nice enough so he doesn't disgrace us. Left to his own devices he just picks something comfortable to wear and runs his fingers through his hair.'

Daiba grinned. 'Mom said he was always like that - kind of his way of rebelling against his father's expectations. I guess it hasn't worn off yet.'

'Not so's you'd notice. Not like the last guy - now he was a snappy dresser - so long as you liked black with lots of metal…' Ali strolled to a stop next to the youth and grinned wolfishly at him. 'Meg still not speaking to you, either?' he nodded in the direction of the pink-suited girl who looked round at the sound of her name, stuck her nose in the air with a sniff and went back to work.

Daiba grinned back. 'She hasn't forgiven me for "blabbing" about that little performance over the comms two nights back - though why she thinks I'd bend over and let anyone geld me without a fight I've no idea. When Ben backed me up, she threw a right tantrum - won't even speak to him now either!'

Ali shrugged. 'Women. Can't live with 'em… can't push 'em out the nearest airlock when they throw a wobbler - at least, not when the captain's watching...' He clapped Daiba on the shoulder. 'Where's our little sweetheart? Gotta drop her off with Selen and turn this bird around pee-dee-q…'

Daiba hid a smile, since Freya had won over the Arcadia's resident grump in short order, despite his initial reservations.

'We're here!' Ben called out, leading Freya by the hand as he entered the flight deck, Blaze bringing up the rear. 'Are you two going to stand there all day admiring the scenery, or can we get this rover started and roll out?'

Freya tugged her hand free of Ben's and ran over to the other two crewmen, fielded expertly by Ali, who picked her up and tossed her into the air, smiling at her giggles as he caught her. He settled her in his arms and she placed her arms around his neck. 'It's ready when you are, Blue. Blaze - you comin?' He made his way to the waiting vehicle, Daiba following in his wake.

'I've got to get us unloaded and then make ready to take off when you get back,' Blaze replied. 'Give my love to my mother, though.'

Ali snorted as he placed Freya in the back of the rover and fastened her seat belt. 'Coward. You're just avoiding the maternal fussing.'

'Guilty as charged,' Blaze replied unrepentantly. 'That, and my kid brothers will be all over me worrying about Mal…'
'And little Kanna will probably cry…' Ben added with a sly sideways glance at the Seventh Star's captain as he took his seat in the front. Blaze at least had the decency to look a little guilty at that.

Daiba took the driver's seat and gave Ali a triumphant smirk as the Arcadia's gunner realised he'd have to sit in the back. 'I can sympathise - one of us is going to have to explain to the twins, Taro and Nami why mummy and daddy aren't here with us…' he said archly.

Ali harrumphed. 'You two can work out which of you it'll be - I'm just along to help the pair of you load up on the supplies we're bringing back. On which note - why the ever-lovin' fuck couldn't they just send the truck out to meet us?'

Daiba guided the little vehicle down the ramp and onto the landing field. The river flooded - all the vehicles were the other side of the valley at the time loading up from the mine. Bad timing. The town's this side and the flood waters won't go down for at least a week, or so The Other Tadashi tells me.'

'Huh. One of these days we gotta sort this town out. Need to send Yattaran down with Doscoi - between 'em they should be able to figure out a few construction projects to make life round here a bit easier.' Ali struggled to hold onto the rollbar as the vehicle hit a stretch of potholes held together by scraps of road. 'Remind me again who was bitchin' about my drivin' last time we were here?'

'Tell the Brains Trust to start with the roads,' Daiba replied, concentrating on holding the wheel as he hit another row of holes. 'Be nice to actually have some…'

A shadow darkened the sky above them, and a slow rumbling followed it. Daiba slammed on the brakes, and all three men watched as the ship flew over head.

'That's not one of ours, is it?' Ben asked. Ali shook his head. 'Nah - Thieves' ships are a bit more rounded… that's... ' he broke off and reached for the radio. 'Blaze - oi! Blaze! Come in! We got company down here or what?'

The speaker gave out only static. Ali slammed the handset back onto its holder and swore. 'We're being jammed. Daiba -'

'On it. Weapons are in back, under the seats.' He tried to start up the engine again, and failed. 'Oh. Electrics…'

'Standard operating procedure of the bloody Alliance Fleet,' Ali said grimly. 'Knock out all the planetary comms and anything with an electrical circuit…'

'Which also knocks out any unhardened weaponry,' Ben added.

'Good job ours is hardened then - good ole Tochiro!' Ali replied, reaching under his seat and bringing out a large box. 'Huh. Three rifles and one grenade launcher. Well, it'll do. Daiba - sorry kid, you get to babysit - keep the little 'un here safe. Ben and I will leg it down to the town and see what we can do - hopefully Selen's people weren't caught totally with their pants 'round their ankles.' He handed one of the plasma rifles to Daiba, and another was tossed to Ben. Then the two pirates jumped from the rover and began running in a ground-eating lope towards the town, still at least two miles away.

'We're going over - but Blaze, I'm sorry - so far it doesn't look good.'

'Just keep me posted, Harlock. And thanks.'
Harlock nodded and the screen went dark. Blaze had to clench his fist to avoid slamming one of them into the console once the communication from Harlock cut off. Someone was going to have to prepare their mother for the worst, and that someone was going to have to be him. Sitting on the bridge and hoping he could put off the difficult conversation was no longer an option.

Sitting on his hands and letting Harlock search for his brother, however… It grated, even though it made sense to let the Arcadia take point - she was powerful enough and had the best personnel for the job, but he wanted to be there, not sat light-years away letting someone else do the work. But he could do one thing… 'Sasha - call up the task force we sent to find Mal - let them know the situation, and tell them to stay within easy call if the Arcadia needs them. It's even possible the Mazone fleet might come back to check for survivors - so have them stay on alert and watch Harlock's back.'

'Yes sir. You'll be…'

He pulled a face. 'Going to see my mother after all, it seems. She'll tie my entrails around my neck if I try to deliver this news over the comms…' With a heavy heart, he headed for the nearest hangar.

He hadn't even reached the first bulkhead when the ship rocked violently, throwing him into the wall. Ears ringing, he reached for his comm unit, but only static cackled from the small speaker. Looking around, the lights were flickering as the emergency generator struggled with the surge - a sure-fire sign they'd just been hit by a military grade jammer. 'Fuck.' He stumbled towards the bridge, only to find the bulkhead almost fully sealed. He stuck his head through the gap, careful of his ears, and bellowed for Sasha.

'Boss?'

'What just hit us?' he yelled back.

'No idea - the system defences didn't even spot the ship until it was on top of us in atmosphere - comms are down, sensors are blind, and weapons won't fire up because we didn't have the EM shields up…' she ran over to his position. 'Seems you're stuck in the corridor as well.'

'Tell me something I don't know. The backups are struggling - the surge must have overloaded the entire grid. I might have a clear run to Engineering. If so, I'll send someone back with a crowbar,' he snarled. Storming back the way he'd come, he muttered damning curses on whoever had attacked them. *How the hell did the sensors miss a bloody ship coming in this close?*

He didn't need to ask what they'd come for. There were, after all, only two things of value on Tabito - and unless the attackers were Machinners, they hadn't come for the older sister of the Machine Queen...

Selen heaved a sigh as the stove conked out, followed by the lights. Thankfully, the main rush for the lunchtime menu had died down, and there were only three people waiting to be served. She smiled apologetically at Marco, Todd and Simms, waiting in line for their lunch. 'I might just have enough left to cobble together enough for you boys - Tadashi - can you serve up whatever's still in the pots for them, and this one's on the house. I need to check the generator.'

'S'not the generator,' the stocky youth called out from the doorway to the back yard, where he'd been standing. 'Lights just went out on the comms tower…'

She lifted a hand in apology to the waiting workmen, and bustled over to the doorway to take a
look. Tadashi nipped adroitly out of her way, and frowned as he saw the pistol in her hand. 'Erm… Selen-san - are we expecting trouble?'

She pulled off her apron and bundled it up as she threw it onto the side table. 'Incoming hostile. Damn - the alarms weren't tripped - how the hell did they get insystem?' Tadashi looked up to see a small speck in the sky growing rapidly larger.

'Miss Selen?' Marco called from the front of shop. 'Problem?'

'Company coming,' she called back. 'I think we just got jammed!'

'We'll grab some hands.' He nodded to his friends and they all reached for concealed weapons, before heading out of the shop at a run.

'Tadashi - where are the children?' Selen asked.

'Down by the pond, I think. You want me to…'

She nodded, and he didn't wait. He dashed out into the yard, grabbed the bike from its resting place against the wall, and hopped on, peddling furiously as he headed out of town.

On board the small interceptor in orbit, Irita stared at the images coming back from the sensors. A few scattered mining towns, the main one with a small spaceport of sorts - little more than a reinforced clearing, currently occupied by one small ship, lightly armed and armoured, of a type he didn't recognise.

'It's just a small interstellar hopper,' his comms officer called out. 'We could take it out from here, but the jamming wave has taken care of weapons and comms - she's going nowhere, can't call for help and can't fire back.'

'Leave it.' He ordered. 'If we open fire from orbit we'll light up the sky like a supernova for any in-system defences we missed. She's contained - they're a good three to four miles from the town, and our agents have cut the place off from the other three sides by blowing the reservoir in the next valley. The town's isolated.'

'Sir.'

Irita turned to the red haired woman at his side. 'As you said - just a small town in the middle of nowhere - but I expected more resistance.'

'Comms chatter suggested they've had a problem - a small fleet took off several days ago on a rescue mission. It seems one of their ships is in trouble.' Shizuka paused, and frowned. 'Whatever it was, the Arcadia is apparently tied up as well. Quite honestly, we couldn't have planned this better if we'd tried.'

'I agree.' He turned to the screen. 'I'll lead a squad down to secure the targets. We'll try to avoid any confrontation - this is outside our jurisdiction, and the less collateral damage we cause the better. So saying, if anyone does try to engage, terminate quickly - do not allow anyone to raise the alarm.'

He strode off the bridge, leaving Shizuka to follow in his wake.

'You know, we could just go down secretly - avoid this show of force altogether,' she offered. He grunted. 'Or is it really so important to rub Harlock's nose in it?'
'Criminals and those who shelter them should not prosper or be seen to prosper,' he retorted. 'Nor should they have any hiding places. Harlock is a traitor, a pirate, a murderer, and he will be held accountable. And if Destiny or any other regime think they can shelter him, they're wrong.'

'You'd risk a war?' she asked.

'Layla Shura won't go to war over a pirate. Harlock's about to get a sharp lesson in the realities of politics that's long overdue.'

She gave him a sharp look but said nothing. Not the time really to point out that his targets would soon be in the hands of her Mazone, not sitting in an Alliance cell… Being safely escorted back to the main fleet, whilst the Alliance, Destiny and Harlock argued themselves into a standstill over who was to blame.

Tadashi found the children at the pond, as expected. The two Millennial Thieves on guard nodded to him as he dropped the bike to the ground, and one frowned at his haste. 'Problem, Tadashi?'

'Selen sent me.' he puffed. 'Something just took out comms and there's a ship - not one of ours!'

The two men wasted no time. Both quickly checked their weapons, and the second, younger man swore. 'Electronics are out!'

'I have a projectile back up,' the other pulled an antique out of his holster and smiled grimly. 'Not laughing now are you?' he told his companion. 'Go get the little ones - I'll keep my eyes peeled.'

Tadashi and the second man - Luco? Luca? - if he remembered right, headed at a run for the small group of children, the taller man in the lead. Tadashi pushed his shorter legs as hard as he could, and arrived only a few seconds behind.

Rei and Daisuke both looked up as he slid to a halt. 'Problem?' Rei asked. At twelve he was the oldest of the group. Mamoru and Taro were quick to join Selen's two. All four took in the unholstered guns and shared an anxious look.

'Wattie - time to go!' Mamoru called out to his twin, who had Kanna and their sister Nami in tow. About half a dozen small children between the ages of six and thirteen quickly gathered round.

'Back to the town?' Luca asked. Tadashi shook his head. 'If trouble's coming down, that's the first place anyone would hit. Selen said she saw a ship…'

'Worst case scenario,' said Derek Kane, the second Thief. 'I spotted a landing craft come down between us and the town. The pity of it is all we have is spotty cover.'

'Maybe if we just stay here?' Tadashi asked. 'They wouldn't be after the children, would they?'

'Who knows?' Luca replied. 'There are still raiders out there for the Machinners…'

'They know better than to start anything here though,' Rei broke in, his boyish treble wavering slightly. 'Mom might not be popular with our Aunt, but Promethium wouldn't attack here. Could be just pirates?'

'Pirates don't attack using military grade EM jammers,' Tadashi replied shortly. 'Well,' he added. 'Not unless it's us… Chances are it's about the kids… what else is there worth attacking us for?' He looked around. The pond was surrounded by a small grove of young trees that provided little cover. Beyond that, it was rough scrubland back to the town - which would be under attack by now at a
guess. To the east… He pointed. 'What about the old mine?'

The old mine workings were about half a mile away, in the side of a small hill. The children were banned from playing there, but Tadashi had grown up on Tabito when he hadn't been with Harlock, and… well… boys will be boys. He knew the workings well enough, and from the sly grins Rei, Dai and the twins shared, so did most of the boys.

'I don't like the dark,' Kanna said quietly. She was clinging onto Wattaru's hand for dear life, her eyes wide and fearful.

'I'll protect you,' Wattaru told her. He smiled at her and hugged her. 'I'll always protect you.' She smiled back at him, though she still looked a little worried. Tadashi caught sight of Mamoru rolling his eyes and shook his head. Cynical little bugger… Nami, he noticed, just stood near Taro and Mamoru, and waited patiently. Made of much sterner stuff…

'It's defensible,' Luca replied, looking thoughtful. 'Derek?'

His partner nodded. 'Only one entry point, since the back end collapsed twenty years ago. We should be able to hold out until reinforcements arrive - it won't take the outer-system ships long to realise we've been compromised - we just have to stay out of sight for a couple of hours, tops.'

'And send someone over to get Blaze - he landed not long ago,' Luca added. 'Not you - ' he shook his head at Tadashi, who closed his mouth with a snap on the offer he'd been about to make. 'That bike won't get across the flooding, and no offence - but you ain't built for speed, Tadashi.'

'I can go.' Rei looked from one adult to another, standing tall. 'I'm the fastest, and I can get the distance.'

'We're supposed to protect you little un's, not put you in more danger,' Derek replied flatly. 'Absolutely not.'

'I'm not little. And we're wasting time arguing. Who are they more likely to be after, anyway? Me? Or someone more important…?' He looked them in the eye one by one. 'I can make it. You guys should go, like five minutes ago.'

'I don't think that's…' Luca began. But Rei had already taken off.

Mamoru tugged Tadashi's sleeve to get his attention. 'He's right, you know - on both counts. Are you gonna just stand there or do I have to take point?'

The two thieves snorted in unison. 'Seriously - is Harlock sure he's not a midget?' Derek asked.

Mamoru sighed, and took his sister's hand. With Taro at his side he began walking. 'If I had a credit for everyone who asked that… Anyway - if I'm this good now, just imagine what I'll be when I'm grown up…'

Tadashi, rounding up the rest of the children with Dai's help, shuddered inwardly, and wondered if he needed to think about relocating to somewhere safer when the time came. Gamilas… Gamilas was a nice idea… another galaxy, a military force greater even the Alliance… Maybe Ben could put in a good word for him…

As fast as they could, the small group headed for the safety of the small mine.

Marco stood beside Selen outside the ramen shop, pistol in hand, and watched the small group of
armoured figures walk up the dusty main street, their metal boots kicking up a small cloud as they marched down the road.

'I could twenty,' he said quietly. Beside him, Selen nodded. 'We've only got about a dozen people armed, but we could make a fight of it. If they start shooting at us…'

'We can't risk a shooting match,' Selen replied evenly. 'Too many civilians and they know it. We care about collateral damage - I doubt they do, and they're counting on it.'

'The one in front isn't in armour,' Marco grunted back. 'I could drop him…'

'And they'd start levelling the place. No. They've gone to a lot of trouble to just isolate us. They want something - or someone. Otherwise they'd have struck from the air. No sense in getting our people killed without good reason. Let's hear him out.'

She took a step forwards when the leader - a tall, thin young man with prematurely grey hair and pince-nez glasses - halted his men and stepped forwards. 'An Alliance uniform? Captain - you're a long way out of your jurisdiction. What is the meaning of this?'

'You must be Ra Andromeda Selenium - formerly of Lar Metal?' His voice was deep and not unpleasant, but clipped and devoid of emotion. His grey eyes were also cold, she noted. Someone who wouldn't hesitate to kill to follow his orders. She recognised the type. He reminded her of Colonel Geran.

That changed how she would deal with him. 'I am. And you are?' Her tone was cold, clear and as clipped as only a childhood spent preparing to become a queen could have made it.

No… she could not deal with this man as Selen of the Millennial Thieves…

'Captain Irita, Internal Security, Earth Alliance. I have here a warrant for the apprehension of several fugitives believed to be sheltering here. Under Article fifty-three of the Alliance, the offspring of traitors and criminals are held equally responsible for the actions of their families. Therefore I require you to hand over Mamoru, Wattaru and Nami Yuuki, the registered offspring of the pirates Harlock and Kei, captain and executive officer respectively of the pirate battleship Arcadia. Failure to comply with this order will be considered to constitute harbouring and sympathising with rebels and traitors, and will be punished accordingly. Anyone sheltering these children or knowing of their whereabouts who hands them over or informs us of their location will be rewarded accordingly.'

He held out the tablet in his hand, but Selen ignored it. She stared into his cold, pale eyes until he looked away, flushing with impotent fury. 'No.'

When he opened his mouth to speak, she raised her hand. 'The answer is no, captain. Take it and leave - or start something you have absolutely no hope of surviving.'

He looked taken aback for a moment, but recovered quickly. 'Empty words, Selenium. You have a handful of filthy peasants protecting you at best - your ships are cut off and have no idea we're here. No help is coming.'

'Help will come,' she replied quietly. 'We take better care of our own than you think. But even if you succeed, you sign your own death warrant.'

He sneered. 'You think to threaten me with Harlock?' he snapped. 'I'm hoping to draw him out.'

'Then you're twice a fool,' she replied. She turned her back on him and walked away. 'Leave now, whilst you still can.'
'Uppity bitch,' she heard one of the armoured soldiers mutter.

Captain Irita let out a harsh laugh. 'Perhaps you need more persuasion, Princess?'

Without warning, a series of blaster bolts sped past her and over her, and the ramen shop splintered and disintegrated under the assault. Marco carried her to the ground, in an effort to protect her, but several sharp, red hot splinters tore through her exposed skin and through her thin tunic and trousers. Then someone hauled Marco off her, and other hands were grasping her roughly and dragging her to her feet. One gauntlet busied itself patting out the sparks in her hair, and she gagged slightly on the smell of burned hair. She was tugged and pushed to her feet, and turned defiantly to stare at the ruin of her home. The soldiers' weapons had made short work of the wooden building, and the houses on either side were also in flames, thankfully unoccupied. Her home - roofless, missing most of its front wall and one side, was busy burning to the ground as she watched, the heat almost scorching her as the soldiers holding her dragged her back to their commander.

Marco lay on the ground, the mark of a plasma bolt on his huge chest, his shirt scorched around the hole. His weapon lay next to his open hand and his eyes stared sightlessly at the bright blue sky. Those of her people who'd turned out armed lay either on the ground surrounded by the soldiers, or were being relieved of their weapons as she watched through watering eyes.

'There will be an answer to this,' she promised coldly. 'You just made the biggest mistake of your life…'

Irita smiled, the expression more like a snake's. 'For torching a scruffy little hovel?'

Selen smiled back, and watched dispassionately as the colour drained from his thin face. 'That "hovel", captain, was the place my sister grew up in. Her home as a child, raised by an elderly couple she thought of as her real parents until the day they died.' She looked back over her shoulder at the still blazing remains. 'She and I have our differences, but we both love this place - this quiet little world.'

He sniffed. 'I rather think Andromeda is a little far away to expect help from. Sargeant - take a squad and search door to door. You're looking for twin boys about eight or nine years old, and a little girl a year or so younger.'

Selen regarded him coldly as his men ran to carry out his order. 'You don't even have a description,' she pointed out.

'Then you'd better hope I find the right ones quickly', he replied with equal sang froid. 'Otherwise I'll just take them all and sort them out later. I'm sure very few people here have unsullied records. Rooting out the next generation of criminals and undesirables a little early doesn't trouble me.'

She stared at him, a cold sensation creeping into her stomach at his words, though as always she was careful to hide it. 'You really have no problem with killing small children for the deeds of their parents, do you?'

'The sins of the fathers,' he quoted loftily. 'I would see both Alliance and colonial space brought to order, madam. The days of outlaws, rebels and criminals flaunting authority are numbered. If that means removing an element with the predisposition to such activities, humanity will be the better for it…'

'I can only hope someone includes sociopaths in that list of yours,' she snapped back. 'Maybe you'll be a little less willing to pass sentence when it's your own neck on the block.'
He smiled mirthlessly. 'Except as a sociopath, I wouldn't actually care now, would I?' he murmured. He turned his back on her, leaving her held firmly by two armoured marines, and helpless to act.

Tadashi almost jumped out of his skin when something cold and wet landed on his neck. In the darkness he couldn't see Luca's face, but the deep heavy sigh from the older man at his muffled squeak suggested that eye-rolling was involved. 'Sorry,' he muttered. 'Must have stood under a drip…' Behind him, Mamoru sniggered.

'Can't we have any light?' Daisuke asked. Selen's youngest son was about the same age as the twins, although sturdier in build. He had his father's nose and dark hair, and his mother's eyes - little of it visible in the gloomy mine entrance. 'Once we're around the corner we'll lose the light from the entrance.'

'No,' Derek told him firmly. 'I know the little ones are scared…'

'Speak for yourself!' This from Taro, indignantly.

'... but even if we had any torches, they won't work until the EM field is down.'

'There are some glow-sticks,' Mamoru piped up. 'We put… I mean, we found a stash near the entrance…'

Tadashi snorted. 'Stashed them yourselves I'm guessing on one of the illicit forays you three make out here when you think no-one's looking?'

Silence.

'Thought so.' When there was no further action Tadashi poked his young charge in the ribs. 'Well don't just stand there, Mamo-chan - got get 'em! Before the girls start crying.'

'I'm not going to cry,' Nami told him firmly, as her brother pushed past her and began to rummage under a pile of old pallets near the wall. 'Kanna's the one who keeps sniffling.'

'She does not!' Wattaru's spirited defence of Selen's daughter earned him a grateful smile from the girl holding his hand in a death grip. In the pallid glow of the handheld flare Mamoru snapped, she looked pale, but held her head up high.

There were, however, faint trails running down her dusty face, which Wattaru attempted to rub away with his sleeve in a futile attempt at gallantry.

Mamoru handed over the rest of the flares - six in all - to Tadashi. 'If we save them, they'll last an hour or two.' He looked up at Tadashi, his eyes betraying more concern than his words. 'Blaze and the others will find us before then, won't they?'

'Count on it,' Tadashi assured him. 'But it shouldn't matter. Who'll even know to look for us here? Ship's sensors won't penetrate through rock.'

'I'd still feel better if you moved 'em a little further inside,' Derek said quietly. 'Luca and I can guard the entrance. Get them back into one of the side tunnels and wait.'

Tadashi nodded, and began to usher his small charges further into the mine. Mamoru moved up to join Taro again, Daisuke took Nami's hand and Wattaru followed them, Kanna so firmly attached to his side they might have been a four-legged, two headed creature out of legend.
Daiba lounged against the bonnet of the rover, ankles crossed, arms folded, and squinted up at the clear blue sky. Since the ship had passed over headed for the town, nothing else had disturbed the silence. Tabito was a quiet world - sparsely inhabited, sparsely vegetated - hell, was that even a word? And consequently short on birds and insects.

If he hadn't just spent weeks on Niflheim where he could have sworn he could hear the mushrooms growing on his boxers, it would have freaked him out.

Yama had had a lot to say on the subject. Mostly about how most planets were in the same state Earth had been in before the evolution of flowering plants… what had he called them? Something to do with sperm?

He sniggered. It always comes down to sex, right? His amusement vanished as though doused with cold water as he remembered how the Mazone distracted and entangled their prey. Okay. Not so funny…

A short sharp tug on the leg of his trousers got his attention. 'Freya?' He looked down and smiled at the little Nibelung girl who smiled back at him winningly. 'What's wrong?'

She raised a slender arm and pointed, and Daiba reflexively went for his gun before remembering it was currently useless. The figure running towards him however quickly resolved itself into the form of a young boy - twelve or thirteen years old at a guess, and as he drew closer, Daiba recognised him as the older of Blaze's younger brothers, the one named after their father. 'Rei?' he called out as the boy slammed on the brakes a little late, almost crashing into Daiba. Freya skipped out of the way of an unbalanced tangle of arms and legs, and then stood watching with luminous large pale eyes.

'Daiba?' Rei bent over, hands on his knees, getting his breath back. 'Where is everyone? I went for help…'

'Ali and Ben headed off into town.' Daiba placed a reassuring hand on the boy's heaving shoulders. 'What the hell's cracking off?'

'Tadashi… and the kids… over by the pond,' Rei managed to get out, in pieces. 'Had to hide when a bunch of troops went by - heading for town. But another group headed for the pond - six women, led by a redhead… I was hoping to reach the landing field…'

Daiba threw a look back over his shoulder. The Seventh Star was a good mile away. On a good day he could make it in under ten minutes at a steady jog, but the ground was uneven… 'The kids?'

'Luca, Derek and Tadashi are with them. There's an old tunnel nearby - it's defensible. Can't you radio for help?'

Daiba shook his head. 'EM. I tried a couple of times but got nothing. Dammit - the guys have gone off in the wrong direction.'

'Only if it's the children they're after - it might be the town.' Rei's voice held a hopeful note.

'One thing I realised very early on,' Daiba said softly. 'There's only one thing on this planet anyone could want.' He swore under his breath. 'Shit. We need Blaze. Rei - can you stay here with Freya?'

Rei shot him a puzzled look. 'You naming the rover, Daiba?' Then he looked down, following Daiba's pointed look. 'Oh. What the…' he stopped himself. 'I mean, who is this? She's like Mimay, only littler!'
'Freya. We found her on Niflheim. Long story. She doesn't talk much, but she loves cuddles. I'm going to take my chances going back for help - can you get her under cover and stay there?'

'Sure. I'm blown…'

He stopped as Freya walked up to the rover and scrambled nimbly onto the bonnet. Her long fair hair flowing behind her in the light breeze she stood up, to the detriment of Daiba's already overstretched nerves, and pointed. 'Eldur!' she called out in a firm treble.

'Huh?' Rei looked up at Daiba.

'Fire,' Daiba translated idly. He held out his arms and scooped up the little girl, who squirmed willingly into his embrace. 'I think backup's arriving after all…'

Sure enough, he soon saw what Freya had probably heard - a group of crewmen and women from the ship, with Blaze at their head, jogging towards them as though their lives depended on it.

Shizuka took a deep breath of fresh, un-recycled air for the first time in years, and breathed out reluctantly, wondering as she did so if anyone would notice if she just told the Alliance Prime Minister where to stick the job, and just vanished into the outback of a world like this.

*I belong outdoors, not stuck inside a multi-storey monstrosity breathing scrubbed air on a tectonically unstable ice cube in the arse-end of the solar system…* 

At her side, Cassandra stood to attention like a sapling strapped to a stick. The half-dozen sisters with them were rather more graceful in their parade posture, but still looked as uncomfortable as their commander, and Shizuka wanted to howl at the irony… She - the "hybrid" corpse flower - was far more at home in the open on a planetary surface than these hothouse flowers who took so much pride in being unadulterated mazone.

'Do you have the location of these creatures, or do you not?' Cassandra asked, her voice grating along Shizuka's nerves like nails down a bulkhead.

'The spotters located a small group of human young gathered near the water-source to the east,' Shizuka replied calmly, outwardly refusing to let the Illustrious Envoy of the Exalted Queen Rafflesia ruffle her feathers. *Irritating, oversized weed… 'Irita should be while terrorising some innocent and not so innocent bystanders in that town over there for a while. We have time to extract them.'*

'From where, precisely?' Cassandra looked around. 'I see nothing.'

*Of course you don't. You've spent your entire life on a spaceship you rust-ridden, mildewed pond-slime… 'There's an opening in that hill over there,' Shizuka pointed. 'Probably an old mine shaft - this planet was once a source of some rare earths before the Homecoming War.'*

'What's a hill?' one of the lower caste - what did they call them these days? Oh yes… Melia… asked.

'Where the land rises slightly,' Shizuka replied, swallowing a heartfelt sigh. *And this lot hoped one day to take root on these planets? Poor little hothouse flowers, forced and cloned for numbers rather than quality… Rafflesia was a full-blown idiot…* Out of the corner of her eye she caught Cassandra's satisfied smirk and realised their Illustrious Envoy had also been puzzled by her terminology. She almost laughed out loud at the revelation. 'They'll likely have guards at the entrance, so I'd recommend sending one of the more - flexible - members of your team in through
'I'll make the decisions,' Cassandra replied haughtily. 'You - and you.' She pointed at two of the green-skinned lovelies whose resemblance to humans ended at their basic shape and the long flowing tendrils on green vines on their heads. Large dark pools stared out from exquisitely blank faces. 'Seek out the largest heat source in there and grow towards it. Shizuka - I assume you have some idea how to distract the humans on guard?'

'I think I might manage that,' she murmured in reply, bowing her head ostensibly in respect, but using the gesture to hide her amused irritation. Entertaining though it was to pull leaves off the annoying bitch, having to kowtow to her was more than she could take after a week being cooped up with her.

She gestured to her own sisters - four corpse flowers from the IntSec team - and gave them their orders. They at least knew what they were doing, she thought, watching them use what cover they could to get close to the entrance to the old mine.

In the meantime she watched the mazone make their way towards the side of the small hill, almost invisible to anyone who didn't have the sight to spot them against the rest of the vegetation. They ran tendril'd fingers over the rough grass and then, like a time lapse film of a growing vine, began to grow their way into the ground and towards - she hoped - a group of humans who had no idea what was coming.

Tadashi cracked the second flare and let it fall to the floor, where the sickly green glow made everyone's face look decidedly space-sick. Kanna was still clinging to Wattaru, but her brother was sitting on her other side, one arm around his little sister. Nami - no longer quite so bold, was snuggling close to Taro and Mamoru, both of whom were making reassuring noises. There were five unrelated children in the group Tadashi didn't recognise - three boys and twin girls, all about ten years old, and they looked terrified. Tadashi left his post at the entrance to the small tunnel they were in and tried to offer up some reassuring big-brother talk. The boys relaxed a little, but the little girls still looked thoroughly miserable. In the end, Tadashi resorted to his weapon of last resort.

'Think you can lend me a hand?' he asked Mamoru, who gave him his father's wry smile in reply.

'You want a charm offensive on Marianne and Madeline?' he asked. He looked over at the pair - both golden haired and lovely - or they would be, if they weren't sniffing and red-eyed. 'Maddy's okay normally but Marianne's a wet hen.' He sighed. 'Dad says they're distant relatives as well… Rosenbachs…' Another heavy sigh.

'Theatrical little git,' Tadashi told him, with a grin. 'Make nice for once, Mamo - you are capable of it when you want to be.'

Mamoru scowled. 'Fine. But you owe me, Uncle Taddy.' He jumped to his feet. 'Girls. Honestly…' he muttered, plastering a grin over his face as he sauntered over to the pair, hands in his pockets.

'You say that now…' Tadashi murmured, watching him with a grin as he hunkered down next to them and started chattering. He retook his place at the side of the corridor, carefully checking the old tunnel to either side for activity. Nothing to be seen - although he could hear the slithering clatter of dirt pattering onto the hardened floor.

Great... that'd be all we need - a bloody roof-fall whilst we're in here…. He cracked another flare and used it to check out the roof of the tunnel they were in. He was busy peering at the cracks in
the wooden planks in the roof when the unmistakeable sound of gunfire reached his ears. Cursing, he ducked back into the side tunnel and grabbed his pistol, dropping the flare in the process.

'Tadashi?' Daisuke, Wattaru and Mamoru spoke together, the three natural leaders of the group. Taro gathered Nami up and held his adopted sister's hand.

'Fighting - at the entrance. Everyone back against the wall and hunker down. 'Mamoru - ' he looked at the three boys, and belatedly noticed each of them was holding a nice piece of wood with nails sticking out of it. 'Never mind. You three do what you have to if I go down.'

'Don't worry,' Wattaru replied, rather more grimly than was usual for the chirpier of the twins. 'We'll cold cock 'em if they get past you.' All three nodded, and ushered the younger children to the back of the short tunnel, where at some point someone - probably the boys, Tadashi thought with a grim smile - had built a small fortress out of loose planks and beams. The childish hideout was a well built little fortress, he realised approvingly. Guess that was Taro then… Gun in hand, he waited by the entrance, careful not to stick his head out too far.

So he didn't notice the vine snaking down from the roof between the chinks in the planking and encircling his neck until it began to tighten around his throat.
Chapter 35

Millennial Thieves Flagship: Futatsuboshi

The hardest part of any boarding action, Harlock always felt, was the moment when you launched yourself out of a perfectly serviceable spaceship, into the void with only a (high-tech, admittedly…) rope and harpoon between you and a long, drifting flight through nothing. Once outside of the gravity field generated by your ship, you floated free, using your momentum to carry you towards your target. The two ships could be only a few dozen meters away, but it always felt like a mile, no matter how many times he did it.

You didn't feel the tether between you and your own ship unless it tightened, and hopefully, unless things went wrong, you'd never have to use the reaction pistol stashed in the side of your armour. You floated without any idea of up, down, left, right, strange or charm, and hoped like hell you were heading in the right direction, that no-one was shooting at you, and that you wouldn't throw up in your helmet.

Not necessarily in that order...

At least this time they were using harpoons to anchor a line between the two ships, rather than the usual swing and jump. He'd have preferred to use an anchor tube, but the Futatsuboshi's fragile hull meant they didn't dare risk it.

He landed feet first on the hull with a clang as his magnetic boots kicked in. Anita had landed before him, and was busy making sure she - and her cutting lance - were secure. He felt, rather than heard, Franz land next to him. Without prompting, the crewman shifted his position so he could help Anita set up the force bubble which would provide an impromptu airlock once they'd cut a hole in the hull.

Karl and Garcia arrived next, two brawny crewmen who'd mustered out of the SPG but found civilian life just too boring after twenty years of action. In the Arcadia's old bathyscaphe armour, they waddled along the hull until they stood beside the sleeker form of their captain, the antique brass armour glowing orange in the glow from Anita's laser, against the rosy silver of their captain's much sleeker Nibelung armour. Where the Nibelung armour had a blank, black faceplate bifurcated and surrounded by arcing silver tracery, the spherical helmets of the crew glowed a sickly neon green from the light of the multiple heads-up displays that showed as a series of circles on the front.

Functional… but not exactly designed to strike fear into the hearts of your foes… Harlock pulled a face inside the anonymity of his helmet. Hysterical laughter, maybe… After all these years it was still a sore point. If Maji could lay his hands on greater quantities of the right alloys after this was over, they'd be stepping up production of the Valkyrie suits, or he'd know the reason why…

'We're in!' Anita's voice intruded over the comms. 'Franz, love - help me with this, would you?'

Harlock watched, staying out of the way, as the two bulky figures manoeuvred the small section of the hull they'd cut through out of the way, clamping it safely to the side of the ship to prevent it drifting into anyone.

'That's the problem with boarding a friendly,' Karl opined over the speakers. 'Gotta take a bit more care getting in!'
Harlock smiled to himself. 'Can't say I've ever had to do this before. Normally we just charge right at 'em, tear a hole in them and jump right in…' he replied.

'Can't say we hadn't noticed,' Garcia added dryly.

'Offending your professional sensibilities, gentlemen?' Harlock asked. 'You seemed to be enjoying yourselves when we took out that former fleet destroyer Hunter had somehow managed to salvage…'

'It's fun, cap'n - don't get us wrong - but sometimes, kinda good to do things the right way, if you know what we mean?' Karl replied. 'Speaking of which - Anita love - if you stow that monster outta the way, I think it's time for us to do our thing, lass.'

'Lass me again corporal and you'll be cleaning out my rice pans for a month,' Anita rumbled back at him. 'That's "sarge" to you!'

Harlock held back and let the banter flow over him as the former marines took point. Anita brought up the rear after stowing the laser safely, and left Franz watching their gear. The force bubble over the breach shrank to cover the hole once they entered the airlock, and it took a few moments for the pressure to equalise and allow them to enter the ship proper.

'Doesn't look too scary so far,' his quartermaster-come-cook said as she marched at his side. The only light came from the helmet displays and in the dim light the shadows crawled and twisted as they walked. Harlock reserved the right to thoroughly disagree with his brawny cook, and said so.

'Ah, captain honey - we've been in worse than this,' she replied. But it didn't escape his notice that she took a firmer grip on her large, bulky, heavy and decidedly do-not-fuck-with-me carbine.

'The emergency lighting is out in this section,' he pointed out. 'Any signals from life support at all?'

'Nothing,' Karl replied. 'There's air, but it's stale. Temperature is low as well - not far above freezing, so I hope everyone is wearing their thermal undies!'

The chuckles that accompanied this were more dutiful than genuine. Harlock shifted his weapon in his hand and shrugged his shoulders slightly to let the cloak settle around him. *Don't let this be the case throughout the ship…* he wasn't a religious man, but the plea was almost a prayer to anything listening.

They found the first bodies when they left the section of corridor they were in at the first bulkhead. Tabito Tadashi dropped his pistol in his struggle to get free. The vine around his throat tightened, trapping his fingers as he tried to pull it free enough to breathe, and whatever the stuff was, it was like flexible iron - no give in it at all. Gasping for breath, and getting progressively light-headed, he dropped to the floor and fumbled for the gun with his free hand.

'Tadashi!' As if from a distance he heard the voice of one of the twins. Pain lanced through his limbs and stomach, as though something had stabbed him in several places at once. He could hear something bubbling and croaking as he tried to breathe… lungs? Collapsing?

*Can't… breathe…*

He lost consciousness.
Mamoru stared in horror at the sight of Tadashi falling to the floor, wrapped in clinging, thorny vines which had come seemingly from nowhere to wrap around the youth’s neck and torso. 'Holy shit…' he breathed. Tadashi’s gasping, choking breath began to fail, and the boy dashed forwards to pick up the fallen pistol. *Dad would have a conniption if he saw him with the damn thing…* he thumbed off the safety and took aim - the vines were descending from a cluster breaking through the planks shoring up the roof. As carefully as he could he braced himself and took aim.

'Mamo - if you shoot that thing in here -' Taro's voice was concerned, and Mamoru didn't need him to finish the sentence.

'It's risk the ceiling, or we lose Tadashi,' he replied. Then he fired.

He'd aimed just below the ceiling, and there was an ear-splitting screech as the plasma arc hit the cluster of tangled vines. They withered and twisted as they blistered in the heat. Oddly, the smell resembled cooking meat… But the stranglehold on Tadashi's neck was released as the burning coils whipped back and withered in a blue flame. The terrible screeching died down, and blackened threads fell from the ceiling. Mamoru lowered the pistol with a sigh of relief, and tried to ignore the protesting muscles in his arm. Taro dived past him and tried to tug away the remaining tendrils that loosely flopped around their friend.

'He's bleeding,' he said curtly. 'Badly. We need help.'

Behind him, Mamoru heard Wattaru muttering sweet nothings to calm the rest of their group. One of the girls was sobbing hysterically to the point of hiccups. *Marianne*… he thought sourly. Did the girl even have a backbone? She was three years older than Nami for crying out loud… 'There's a first aid kit behind our barricade,' he called out to Dai, who was hovering near the back of the huddled group. 'Chuck it over, would you?'

Daisuke ducked behind the planks to rummage for the small box, and dutifully bowled it over, to be caught with ease by Mamoru, who passed it to Taro. 'Are you guys always this prepared?' he asked.

Wattaru grinned weakly up at him. 'Put it this way - it's better to clean up any scrapes before mom sees them… for some reason the sight of blood makes her go a bit huggy. And then she kind of talks… a lot…'

'And there's usually scolding,' Mamoru added. He helped Taro put some pressure on Tadashi's torso, where one wound was bleeding profusely. 'And she's going to totally freak over this…' He looked up. 'Dai - you're bigger - I think we need your big paws on this…'

'It's gonna need more than that,' Taro told him grimly. 'We need the grown-ups.'

Mamoru listened to the faint sounds of gunfire, coming fewer and farther between now. 'I think we're on our own,' he replied quietly. A fall of dirt distracted him and he looked around. 'I hope that's not another one of those plant-things…'

'Mazone,' Wattaru replied. He left Kanna's side and stood next to his twin. 'I heard them talking. They're Mazone. I don't know what they are or what they're doing but Mom and Dad were talking and it didn't sound good. They're the ones who hurt Daiba.'

'I guess they aren't going to do us much good then.' Mamoru looked at the sturdy piece of wood his brother held, a nice long rusty nail sticking out of it. 'Guess we'd better be ready with the weed-whackers…'
'Crack another flare first,' Taro asked. 'I need to see.' With Dai's help he was trying valiantly to bandage Tadashi's worst wounds. 'Total pisser that they managed to take out the medic…' he mumbled, once the light improved again.

'Worse that we've only got the one gun,' Mamoru muttered. He hefted the pistol in his hand and regarded the walls and ceiling warily.

'You shouldn't really be using that one,' Dai pointed out reasonably.

'It's not like there's anyone else,' Wattaru replied. He edged closer to his brother. 'The others are real scared, aniki. I don't think we should stay near the walls, but out in the open…'

The two boys shared worried frowns. 'I might not be able to aim that well, but if anyone comes at us down the tunnel I'll put the fear of Dad into 'em,' Mamoru assured his twin. 'Suppressing fire, I think they call it.'

'Can't hit shit more like,' Wattaru teased him. They grinned at each other.

'I'll cover you,' Mamoru told Wattaru quietly as his brother began to walk back to their huddled friends.

'I'll have your back,' Wattaru replied equally softly.

Neither of them thought it would be a good idea to mention out loud that the gunfire from the mouth of the tunnels had stopped.

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_Futatsuboshi_

Harlock knelt at the side of the young man lying in a crumpled heap on the corridor floor. He was slumped against the wall as if he'd fallen asleep where he stood and just slid downwards like a marionette with the strings in a tangle. He turned him over. 'Must be new. No-one we know.' The man looked even younger than he did, he thought. Mid-twenties at the outside. A rotten age to die. Assuming there were any good ones.

'There's not a mark on him,' he continued, taking a close look. 'No blood, no bruising - although there's post-mortem lividity. He's flexible, but since we don't know what the temperature has been doing, I'm not going to stick my neck out on a guess as to how long he's been here.' He straightened up. 'No obvious signs of a struggle - it's as though he just died in his sleep.' In the middle of a nightmare… he thought, looking at the youth's face. Whilst his eyes were closed, there were lines of strain around his eyes, and his jaw was clenched tight.

'Same over here!' Garcia called out. He was looking at a middle-aged woman and an older man. 'Ah, shit, it's Sela and Crane,' he added, naming the navigator and security chief respectively of the ship. Harlock swore under his breath and strode over to take a look.

'There's no cyanosis,' Garcia added. 'If the oxygen's thin now, it wasn't when they died. No signs of any kind of physical struggle, like you said - but it looks like they died of fright… look at their faces...' He yawned. 'Shit, I must be more tired than I thought…'

'Or we need to get out of here,' Harlock told him grimly. He looked at their faces, fixed in death. The woman stared at him with unseeing eyes, mouth open in a final, silent, permanent scream. 'Anita - can you get us through his bulkhead?'
She waddled and clanked her way to the door. 'Shouldn't be a problem. We've always had her overrides…' She got to work, and the bulkhead slid noiseless open. 'Crew quarters,' she said quietly when they were through, the door sealing again behind them.

'Check all the rooms,' Harlock told his crew. Inside his helmet, unseen, his normally generous hovering smile was replaced by a grim, compressed line. He increased his pace, lengthening his stride so much that Karl, in the lumbering armour, struggled to keep up as they headed for the bridge. Every so often he paused, distracted by something he could have sworn he saw moving in the shadows that pooled in between the faint light between himself and his crewman.

Or was it the shadows themselves which moved…?

'Is it me, Karl asked in a hoarse whisper, 'Or are the shadows kinda squirmy?'

'Is there an answer to that which won't send us both running for the airlock?' Harlock whispered back archly. He was rewarded with a slightly strangled chuckle.

'Yeah. I guess. Funny though - must be the light but for a moment it looked as though you had two shadows…' Karl replied.

Harlock looked, but saw only his own, singular, faint shadow stretching out in the diffuse light. He shrugged. We're all jumping at bloody shadows...

At one fork in the corridor he hesitated as he got his bearings - it had been a while since he'd been on the ship unescorted - then, satisfied, took the left fork towards the bridge.

'You worried about what we'll find?' Karl asked, his voice tinny and reedy over the comms.

'I don't see Mal as often as I do Blaze, but we're still good friends. Places like this can have terrible effects on the living - so yes, I'm worried.' He paused briefly to let Karl catch up. 'Don't you know one of the crew? Lianna?'

'Aye. Been stepping out a time or two when we meet up,' Karl replied, sounding slightly abashed. 'Turns out we're from the same planet - got rounded up in different transports by the dial-heads, and she got rescued by the Thieves, and I got picked up by you…' He hesitated when there was no reply. 'You ain't gonna tell me she'll be fine?'

'If I could, I would. Trust me, I'd love to be that certain.'

Karl nodded. 'Guess so. Ali always says you don't sugar-coat it.'

'I hate being made a liar by circumstance,' Harlock replied gently. The bridge doors were in front of them, and Harlock checked the control panel. 'There's still some power in this section at least. Get that last bulkhead closed for me - We don't want any accidents.'

He waited until the bulkhead sealed shut, then opened the doors.

His first impression was that the lights were off. The bridge was in total darkness, not even the emergency lighting working - the fluorescent strip lights that at least allowed you to find the nearest exit, even if you'd still trip over your feet getting to it. But the quality of the darkness was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Something about it made even the cold depths of the space between the galaxies seem welcoming.

And even in the temperature controlled hardsuit, he could feel the cold… Involuntarily, he took a
step backwards, away from the opening. ‘Tochiro - are you getting this, my friend?’ he whispered into the commlink.

‘Your telemetry is way off, Harlock,’ the Arcadia's guiding soul replied. ‘Some really weird readings…’

Harlock checked out his heads-up display. ‘Really? Because I've got a whole lot of nothing.’

‘My point exactly.’ Tochiro sounded worried. ‘Maybe you should sit this one out. I can get Kei to send a drone over…’

‘I think the instruments are unable to process what they're looking at,’ Harlock replied. ‘Remember that odd dimensional ship graveyard we found a few years back? We had to rely on our own senses.’

‘I never did like that pocket dimension,’ Tochiro said softly. ‘Something about it… best thing we ever did was seal it off. So, tell me what you see and feel.’

‘Darkness,’ Harlock replied. He peered into the empty blackness where the bridge should have been. ‘But it's not the absence of light… it's more the absence of anything, if that makes sense? And it's cold… so cold. Not like space - I wouldn't feel that in the suit. It's like something crawling into your bones and pulling the heat out... and it makes my skin crawl - like something clammy, moist… decayed… is trying to get inside me.’ He took a step forward. ‘I have to take a closer look…’

‘I wouldn't!’ Tochiro's reply was a sharp order. ‘Harlock - I know you care about these people - I do too - but maybe for once you should just quit the heroics and call this one. If it's getting through Nibelung armour, then whatever it is can't have been good for the crew.’

‘I came here to find Marin,’ Harlock chided him gently. ‘I won't let Selen down by abandoning him without making sure he's dead.’ He tugged at the heavy black cloak. ‘I've got more protection than most. And I'll just take a quick look. Because the little guy was right… there'd been only shadows and bodies in the corridors and crew rooms. But if there was hope - any hope at all, then he had to look…’

He stepped through the doorway.

Since losing the sight in his right eye, he'd been nervous of the dark - something Doc assured him was quite common with his injury. With only one eye left the fear of being completely blind was never far away. Mimay, taking pity on his attempts to bluff his way through the issue in the early months had told him that even the other Harlock had felt that same unease, though he'd hidden it better. It was why the captain's quarters blazed with the light of dozens of artificial candles.

He'd kept that tradition. Most people assumed he was just an incurable romantic.

I'm Captain Harlock… I don't panic. Stoic badass space pirates do not fucking panic when the lights go out…

He wouldn't have panicked…

But then, you're just the Replacement… Take off the eyepatch and the fancy cloak and what do you have? Just Yama, the unwilling assassin with a decision making disorder, who only keeps his position because he's shagging a woman who was happy to settle for second best…

You're nothing… just a disappointment… with nothing that is truly yours… Isora was right… you


can't save anyone... everyone you touch dies.


Harlock.

You couldn't save your daughter.

Dantetsu. Hank.

You couldn't save your son.


Zero...

You couldn't save your friend.

You can't save his son...

Cold... so cold...

No light. No sound. No sensation but the Cold. No up. No down. No left. No right.

Step.

You can't save yourself...

Step.

When the lights go out, in that darkest point of the night - even in space - when all the fears, uncertainties and doubts come crashing down and there's nothing to hold them at bay... Not even a rough, colonial red bourbon strong enough to clean out the turret coolant ducts...

Step.

Ten steps to the captain's chair. Straight ahead from the door.

Step.

The cold... no The Cold Dark. It needed capitalising. Italicising. It was conscious, and aware of him.

Ancient.

Not alive. Life and death were irrelevant to it. It had existed before life, before death. It simply was.

It feeds on life surrendered...

Now how do I know that?

Step. Step.

But I don't surrender. Not ever again. I hold, where others fall, because someone has to.

Step.
And I have a light.

Step.

Kei… my firefly… my beacon...

And what, the Darkness whispered in his bones, would you do without her… life is so easily snuffed out… How close have you come to that? To watching that light die… How many times?

Step.

Not life… fear…

This "voice" was different. Familiar. Unyielding. Calm. As if something in the back of his soul had stirred, uncoiling, rebelling against the vile touch that squirmed against it, into his head, his thoughts, everything that he was…

Except he was so, so much more…

Yama.

Arcadia.

Dark Matter.

And something else. Something that had reached out to him almost fourteen years ago, and touched a part of his soul. A necessary thing, because even the dark matter would not have been enough.

Someone else…

Harlock… I am Harlock. He straightened, aware for the first time that he'd been almost on his knees as though fighting a great weight.

Step.

I am Harlock...

He bumped into something rigid, unmoving. The high back of the Captain's chair, behind its console.

He reached out a hand, feeling for an occupant, touched an arm and felt something under his fingers: the double bars of a Thieves' captain's insignia. And a body, unresponsive, that fell sideways when he pushed...

You couldn't save your friend's son…

The grief was numbing, and behind the faceplate his closed his eyes. Marin. I'm so sorry.

Zero… Selen… forgive me.

Why should she? Your fault. Always your fault. Making the wrong decisions. Acting without thinking. And always someone else pays the price for your arrogance, your impatience, your pride…

And now he was on his knees, the weight of the gravity cloak dragging him down, one gauntleted
hand on the arm of the chair. Blue smoke writhed around him, trailing away as though being drawn out of him, towards...

towards everywhere and nowhere. There was no source for what tugged on his life-force, and the dark matter. It surrounded him. Was inside of him...

Get up.

His fingers tightened on the arm of the chair, to the point he was sure he felt the metal crumple.

For fuck's sake, brat, get the hell up. We don't give in to despair. This is not who we are. Get. The. Fuck. Up.

Why does my inner drill sergeant sound like The Captain?

He took a deep, shuddering breath.

And stood up on shaking legs. For a moment - very briefly - he thought the pale blue wisps of smoke trailing from his cloak formed the outline of a tall, slim figure in front of him. He shook his head to clear it, and it was gone. Another trick of the darkness? Or just wishful thinking...

"Don't give in"? Give me a break,' he muttered to his unseen heckler. 'You telling me to get off my arse is a bit rich…'

Was that a smirking laugh, just at the edge of hearing? 'Bastard. Go haunt someone else.'

Ten steps backwards. Just ten steps, and he'd be outside the door.

He started to move, and something that felt like a cold, dead hand reached into his chest and closed around his heart.

And something else moved in front of that primeval touch. Gave him just enough breathing room to gather his wits.

He pushed back. Stood straighter, and stepped backwards.


Tired… so tired.

Rest… why bother struggling?

Seven. Six. Five. 'Fuck you, whatever you are. I. Don't. Quit!' Snarling the words to the uncaring void left him drained.

Fingertips scrabbling for purchase on rough rock. The tiniest of ledges. His entire weight hanging from those small pads. Filthy fingernails, cracked and broken from clutching, catching on granite.


Teeth gritted. Four. Three. Two.

He fell backwards through the doorway to land in a heap in the corridor, green glowing circles peering at him from large, round brass faces.
'Captain? Captain!' 

'He was gone for half an hour!'

'...back to Arcadia. Kei's goin' frantic. Hull's practically falling apart...' The voice was male, uncharacteristically panicked.

He grabbed feebly at one brass arm, and caught hold of the wickedly curved blade that jutted out from the wrist like the claw of some ancient raptor. 'Tell Kei - get us out of here. Fast.' He fell back again, his head landing in a brassy lap with a clang.

A different kind of darkness claimed him then.

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Tabito

Daiba's first realisation that running headlong into trouble without any cover was when the zzssap of a plasma beam missed his head by inches. He dropped and rolled off the track, taking cover in the scanty shrubs which dotted the approach to the mine entrance. From the barely adequate cover of a prickly, red leaved gorse-like bush, he cautiously peeked out to take a look.

Huh... friendly fire probably... Nobody was looking in his direction. Two women were advancing on the mine entrance, weapons ready, whilst a third - a redhead, watched from the sidelines. A fourth lay unmoving on the ground, but didn't seem to be bursting into flames any time soon. All of them were wearing Alliance uniforms.

Mazone? Or just an all-girl squad? Huh... Stupid damn question - if you see a group of women together and they're after us, chances are some of them will be vegetables.

Movement on the hillside caught his eye, in time to see a pale blue flame rising up from behind some long grass. Two other figures were moving around there - one of them hunkering down and doing something that took her out of sight.

Coming in from behind? Could these things dig through soil and rock? He shifted awkwardly, trying to minimise his attempt to imitate a pincushion. No chance in hell of creeping up behind those two... but Red was following her pair inside the mine entrance and they weren't leaving anyone on guard...

His mind made up for him, he started to disentangle himself from the thorny shrub, but gave up in favour of just living with the rips in his jacket and pants. Keeping his head down and trying to move from shrub to shrub, he edged closer to the mine entrance.

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An earsplitting shriek made all of the boys jump.

'Something touched me!'

Mamoru risked taking his attention off the tunnels to take a look at who'd screamed.

'You big baby,' he heard Nami say. 'It's just a spider!' She reached out to take the offending creature off Marianne's shoulder. The older girl was shivering and crying, ignoring her twin's attempts to calm her down. Nami caught her brother's eye and rolled hers whilst mouthing "help me" at him. He had to turn away to hide his smirk. Still, it wasn't just the little girl who was snivelling - a couple of those younger boys were as well. He bit back a sigh. He tried to be charitable. He really did... but he much preferred the company of Selen's brood and his own siblings. And
Rick's two, Claire and Guy… No waterworks for one, and you always had someone to watch your back in a scrap...

*Yumi would have kept those other kids in line*, he thought wistfully. He had to swallow hard to get rid of the lump in his throat as he remembered his bossy big sister. Then there was no time for reminiscing, because he could hear footsteps coming towards them from the mine entrance.

'Company,' he hissed. He raised the pistol and tried to hold it steady, using both hands on the grip. Light footsteps… too light for Luca and Kane… One of the flares was near his foot, and he aimed a kick at it to send it into a corner of their little side-tunnel. The main tunnel plunged into darkness, but since there was only one approach to their hiding place, he figured he didn't need to be lit up like a Yule tree to see what was coming.

Another screech from behind him made him jump again. This time he rounded on the squealer. 'For fuck's sake you whiny little brat - do you even *have* a spine?' he hissed, in what he felt proudly was a pretty good imitation of Uncle Ali's pithier deliveries.

'But… but there's something round my leg!' Marianne wailed. She sniffled, tears running down her face, and all of a sudden he felt like a total prick.

There was another squeal, this time from the rather more resilient Maddy.

'Er… nii-san?' Nami called out. 'There's something coming down the walls!'

He risked looking away from the entrance again to see that the shadows were moving, writhing and coiling and uncoiling like tentacles, and slithering across the floor towards the small group. Maddy and her sobbing dishrag of a sister were trying to get away from vines sprawling over the floor towards them, and yes, one *was* trying to coil around Mari's leg, and was most of the way up her now rather grubby white sock.

'Everyone in the centre!' he called out. 'Wattaru - Dai - get whacking!'

'Waaay ahead of you!' his brother called out, suiting action to words and smacking away enthusiastically with his improvised shiv. The nails in the piece of wood he was using shredded the vines where they hit, and an ear-piercing shriek to rival Mari's squeals filled the tunnel. Dai joined him, the two of them whacking away with gusto, pieces of the fleshy plant flying everywhere, causing more squealing from the girl-twins and the younger children.

'Mamoru!' Nami called out, pointing at the entrance. A light was making its way towards them, the circular beam moving across the walls floor and ceiling. Mamoru raised the pistol, braced himself again and fired. The light wavered, and held fast, not moving, but it didn't sound as though he'd hit anything.

'We're armed, just in case you hadn't figured it out!' he called into the darkness.

'Little boy… trying to do a man's job?' a female voice replied, sharp, harsh and echoing oddly in the tunnels. 'Come out quietly. We mean you no harm…'

'Yeah, right,' Mamoru heard Taro mutter from his place next to a still unconscious Tadashi on the floor.

Mamoru fired again, aiming for the centre of the tunnel, and this time was rewarded with a screech. 'Dad always says anyone talking too much when you have a gun on 'em is lying to you,' he called out.
'Mamo - we got a problem here!' Wattaru called out. 'This stuff's getting thicker!'

'There is no escape.' A different voice, softer, more melodic. 'If you fight, more of you will die than necessary. Be sensible.'

Mamoru risked another look round, and saw his brother was right. The mass of vines was getting thicker, and larger, and starting to look as though the lumpy mass was trying to become something else… if he stared at it…

…it looked like a woman's body, trying to stand up from a crouch.

He didn't think twice. He fired, aiming for the centre of the mass, and flinched as the shot hit, splattering them with gooey, sticky sap and pieces of stem and some kind of leaves. Then the whole thing went up like a firework, cold blue flames lighting up their small redoubt.

The distraction however was fatal. Two women ran into their side-tunnel, and pointed guns at them. The tallest - her hair looked greenish-red in the odd light from the burning plant - smiled nastily at him, and pointed her pistol at Taro's head. 'I think at this range I'd take out your ugly little troll here, and your injured friend. Throw down your weapons, boys. Otherwise there will several dead bodies for your parents to cry over.'

Mamoru held onto the pistol, even though his hands were shaking, and gave her his best stubborn glare. Behind him, it sounded as though most of the kids had gone past sobs and into hiccups.

The second woman pointed her pistol at Nami. 'I'll start with this one.' She smiled, the red slash across her face like a gaping gash.

Mamoru dropped the pistol, and heard the thuds as his brother and Rei dropped their clubs. The red haired woman kept her weapon trained on Taro and Tadashi, as her friend rounded up the rest of the children and herded them into the centre of the tunnel, to stand with Mamoru. Nami slipped her hand into his, and he squeezed the cold little paw gently. Wattaru, standing at his shoulder, one arm around Kanna's shoulders, sighed heavily. 'If she'd pointed that at Marianne, would you have tried to make a fight of it…?' he whispered into his twin's ear.

Mamoru snorted. 'What do you take me for?' he whispered back. He would have added another less than complimentary comment, when another woman entered.

Taller than the one still keeping Taro and Tadashi under the gun, this one was wearing an unfamiliar uniform. Some kind of flightsuit, but not the familiar leathers he's seen on his father's crew, SDF, or the obvious Alliance uniforms of the other two women. She held herself the way he'd seen pictures of Selen's sister - the evil machine queen. The one he thought always looked like she'd gotten a whiff of something nasty up her nose. Her hair was dark, and fell almost to her knees.

She didn't walk properly, he noticed. Kind of bendy… like her joints were rubbery. He shivered, and felt his brother and Dai both do the same when her dark-eyed gazed passed over them.

'They killed three of us,' she snapped in a shrill, nasal voice. 'Which of them wielded the weapons?'

'Don't get creative, Cassandra,' the redhead snapped. 'The twins seem to have been the ones holding us off, and you have your orders.'

'I have no orders regarding the rest of these creatures,' the one addressed as Cassandra sniffed. Yep… definitely got the "smelt something nasty" thing going… Mamoru nodded to himself. He
stepped forwards. 'I did the shooting. Leave the rest of them alone!'

Cassandra approached him, and despite every instinct telling him to run, he held his ground, staring defiantly up at her when she leaned over him and took his chin in her clawed hand. Her skin was cool, and felt oddly smooth. 'So… this is one of Harlock's whelps?'

'Bite me,' he retorted, ignoring Wattaru's kick connecting with his right ankle.

'In good time, whelp.' The woman sneered and pushed him away from her, causing him to stumble. Wattaru caught him with a murmured warning about keeping his mouth shut for once. 'Shizuka - have you identified the targets?'

The redhead nodded, looking unhappy. 'The two male twins. This one on the floor wearing glasses. The dark-haired girl.'

'Females are not so easy to control,' the snippy one replied. 'We'll take the males. Kill the rest.'

'No!' It was Wattaru who darted forwards. He scooped up his club on the way and smacked the business end into the woman's legs, causing her to step backwards, a strange greenish ichor running from the wounds, which closed even as Mamoru watched. Mamoru took the opportunity to shove the other children towards the entrance as the other women tried to help their companion, who was screeching like a banshee - but not so distracted that she didn't somehow manage to reach out and knock Wattaru clean across the tunnel, to slam into the opposite wall and slump awkwardly to the floor.

But it left the entrance unguarded…

'Dai - run!' Mamoru called out. He grabbed Dai's fallen weapon and launched himself at the second of the strange women. She screamed as a nail stuck in her shoulder. Beside him, he felt Taro scramble for the fallen pistol, and saw the redhead raise her own pistol. 'Taro!'

Taro stopped, his hand only an inch or so away from the gun, and Mamoru's heart clenched as he saw the look on his adopted brother's face as he stared into the business end of the pistol. The other children had scrambled past their attackers and were running for the entrance, Daisuke yelling at them to get a move on.

The red head lowered her weapon, gave the pair on the floor a look of almost Dad-level contempt, and placed herself between the entrance and her injured comrades.

'Shizuka! Are you just going to stand there? I ordered you…' Cassandra almost spat the words out.

The one called Shizuka shrugged. 'It's an unnecessary complication,' she replied calmly. 'There's no need to leave bodies lying around.' She stepped over Tadashi's unconscious body and grabbed hold of Mamoru, quickly disarming him. 'Quick thinking pair, aren't you?' she murmured. 'I almost wish I'd be around to watch them try and cope with you…' She trussed him up neatly, hands behind his back, and knelt down to do the same to Taro. 'However a word of warning, little boy - my sisters are not indulgent of small boys. They will kill you if you cause too much trouble.' This was said in such a soft whisper Mamoru had to strain to hear it. He nodded, accepting the warning for what it was. He could wait. *Dad always says if you can just keep your head, there's always a way out of trouble…*

'Tie that one up!' Cassandra ordered the surviving sister as they both got to their feet, pointing to Wattaru, who was struggling to his feet groaning. She sneered. 'Tightly.' She turned to Shizuka. 'Get back to your pet human, Director. We'll take the hostages.'
Mamoru looked around and saw the back wall of the tunnel had collapsed at some point, and daylight crept through the small hole - just large enough for their captors to drag them through, he realised.

Something writhed at the edges of the hole as he watched, and he realised it was being held together by more of those weird-ass vines. But he had little opportunity to take a close look, as Cassandra and her flunky grabbed all three of them and started shoving them into the hole, jabbing them in the back with their guns when they balked.

'Tadashi!' Taro called out as he was bundled into the gap ahead of his brothers. But he was ignored, only getting a slap to the side of the head for his pains.

Then they were stumbling out into the daylight, and surrounded by almost a dozen of the weird, bendy-limbed women.

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Daiba hesitated at the entrance to the mine. The tunnel ahead was dark, but he could make out two bodies lying on the floor just inside. Men, in plain clothing not uniforms or flightsuits. Unmoving.

**Millennial Thieves... from the town?** The children's bodyguards... He swore under his breath. He was about to start down the tunnel when he heard voices - childish cries and running feet. He stepped back to avoid being bowled over as half a dozen small children came running out of the tunnel. Grabbing a small boy in the lead, he managed to bring the little herd to a halt. A quick head count revealed a few familiar faces - Nami and Kanna, looking terrified and grubby; identical twin girls with equally dirty faces, but rather more tear-streaked clean bits, a couple of boys he didn't know, and Selen's youngest, Daisuke bringing up the rear. Thankfully Dai seemed to recognise him, and as the girls clung to Daiba for dear life, the younger boy took a shuddering breath, then helped him herd the little group behind an outcrop, out of sight.

'Daiba?' Daisuke whispered. He looked down at Daiba's pistol. 'You might need more than that... there are three still in there with the twins. Rei...?'

'Rei's fine. I left him a couple of miles back that way.' He gestured vaguely back the way he'd come. 'Ali and Ben went ahead to the town - when Rei came running up I came as fast as I could.' He hesitated, torn between getting this lot to safety, and running into the mine to try and save the twins and Taro. If anything happened to the boys, his cousin would be devastated... but he couldn't just leave a group of crying small fry...

'I don't think they wanted us,' Daisuke whispered sadly. 'They were after Mamo and Wattie... But they were going to kill... the twins helped us get out,' he finished miserably.

'You did the right thing,' Daiba reassured him. He bit his lip, uncertain what the right thing for him to do right now would be.

Footsteps heading towards the entrance from inside the mine made his mind up for him. Too heavy for the boys... Pistol at the ready, he stepped out into the open.

'Hands up! Drop any weapons!' he ordered.

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Shizuka stepped out into the light, holding her hands above her head. She let the pistol in her right hand drop to the ground behind her and smiled. 'You must be Tadashi Daiba. I've read a lot about you - your file makes for interesting reading.'

The youth holding a gun on her was about her own height - a couple of inches shy of six feet, and
still at that skinny stage of youth - narrow hipped, long in the leg. Light brown hair threatened to flop into his eyes with every movement, but the gun trained on her never wavered, and the brown eyes staring at her glared with a hardness at odds with his age. Behind him, the older of the young boys peered from behind a rocky outcrop at the side of the mine entrance, and muffled sobs hinted at the rock hiding the rest of the small ones.

_Damn Cassandra… all they'd needed was Harlock's children. They could have just left the little ones in the mine…. still, she could spin something out of this and not have to deviate too far from the plan._

'Daisuke - any rope lying around?' The lad ignored her, and aside from motioning her away from her gun so he could kick it out of reach, made no moves to get closer.

The boy slipped past her into the tunnels and came out again with a length of rope. 'This do, Daiba?' the rope was old, and damp, but looked serviceable to Shizuka's eyes.

'Give it a tug or two,' Daiba told him. When the rope didn't pull apart he grunted. 'Dai - your mom teach you how to shoot yet?'

A sigh from the younger boy. 'Puh-lease, Daiba. I've been shooting since I was seven.' A pause. 'Dad promised to teach me, before…' The boy had handed the rope to Daiba and looked wistfully forlorn. Daiba handed him the pistol.

'It's got the safety off - if she moves, shoot her. And kiddo - yer dad was nice. You're not the only one who wishes he was still around.'

She let the youth tie her hands behind her back, none too gently. 'You don't have to tie them that tightly,' she chided. 'If I were one of the Melia, this wouldn't hold me anyway.' The rope was rough, and chafed as he drew the knot tight.

'Whatever you are, you're not going anywhere but back to the Seventh Star's brig,' he told her. 'Now - where are the twins and Taro?'

She shrugged, rather painfully with her hands behind her back and pulled tight, putting strain on her shoulders. 'By now, probably halfway to a Mazone ship parked a mile or so away. With an armed guard. You'd do better to worry about the boy they left behind back there. He didn't look well…'

He regarded her coldly, then pulled a knife from his belt and without warning, sliced at her arm, through the fabric of her jacket. Red blood trickled down her arm from the shallow cut. 'Huh. Human.' He glared at her. 'A collaborator?'

'Not exactly.' She heard the faint sounds of running feet getting closer. 'I think you have company - you might want to take back your weapon - they might be on my side.'

She watched patiently as a small group came running up the track towards them. A motley collection - another youth perhaps a couple of years older than Daiba. A girl about the same age as her captor, tiny and fair haired. A tall man in his early thirties or so, with black hair worn collar length - handsome, long nosed, with blue eyes, she noticed when he stared at her moments later. A couple of young men in their twenties, who she dismissed as subordinates to the dark haired man. Behind them trotted a boy of about twelve or thirteen, holding the hand of a strange little girl with pale, sea-green hair and large pale eyes - pale skinned, oddly attenuated limbs, and a way of seeing straight through her when she peered at Shizuka that made her shiver in the warm air.
'A nibelung child? The race had been virtually sterile for centuries…'

... she says Tadashi's in there - Dai said he was hurt, badly.' Daiba was speaking to the handsome man again.

'Kane's still breathing!' the little blonde girl called out. She and the older youth had found the bodies of the children's two protectors where they'd fallen defending the entrance. 'But Luca's dead.'

'Fine. We'll need to send back to the Seventh Star for reinforcements. Zack, Meg - go check on Tadashi. Hiroshi - see if you can help Kane. Simon - relieve Daiba of his prisoner and keep her under guard.'

'You might be better,' Shizuka spoke up, 'sending your people to the town. Before Irita gets a little carried away. He was just supposed to distract the Millennial Thieves forces whilst we extracted the twins, but he's somewhat overdue, and he does tend to have very precise rules when it comes to lawbreakers.'

'You're well out of your jurisdiction, if you're Alliance.' The dark haired man strode over to stand in front of her. He had a couple of inches in height on her, but not enough that she had to crane her neck to look him in the eye. 'Irita - that's the new IntSec commander, if I recall correctly. And you…' he looked her up and down with the appraising eye of a man evaluating a threat, not lingering over her curves or the way her jacket was unzipped to show her cleavage off to its best.

'Director Namino, you're a long way from Enceladus, way out of your jurisdiction, well out of your depth, your league, and in a shitload of trouble when Harlock and my mother get their hands on you. You and your friends just kidnapped my friend's children and threatened and terrified others under my family's protection - including my baby sister and two younger brothers - so before I drag you off to my brig for safekeeping, do you have anything at all to say?'

'Did you just threaten me with your mother?' He flushed slightly, his eyes narrowing. She smiled at him, heartened to see his pupils widen slightly and his nostrils flare in response. 'Certainly. But not to you, whoever you are. When Harlock arrives, I'll speak. Tell him I have plenty to say to him.'

She looked up as the sky above them momentarily darkened as the Mazone craft sped across the sky, followed a second later by a sonic boom. It quickly vanished into the upper atmosphere as she watched. Turning her attention back to her captors, she smiled again, this time she didn't give them her seductive best. 'And when you get the EM nullifier down, you might want to tell him to hurry. That ship will reach the main fleet faster than you might think.'

The man - she still hadn't heard anyone call him by name, glared down at her, a cold feral smile playing around his lips. 'Lady - if you sent those kids into the heart of the Mazone fleet, you just signed that fleet's death warrant.'

Daiba, who'd she'd forgotten was standing beside her, gave her bonds a short sharp tug. It's not Harlock she's gonna need to worry about, Blaze,' Daiba said with a decidedly unpleasant relish. 'Those boys also have a mother, remember?' The next tug on her bonds was savage enough to jerk her shoulder joints hard enough to make her cry out in pain. 'And lady - she spent eight years being trained by a man who was responsible for the deaths of billions, and thought nothing about tearing down an entire universe to remake it the way he thought it ought to be…' His mouth was close enough to her ear that she felt his breath as he whispered savagely. 'I can't wait to see what she does to you…'
Elsewhere…

The Cassiopeia was in orbit around Destiny, awaiting the return of the envoy to Layla Shura when the call came in. The thin-bodied machinner bore the markings indicating its rank and intake number - a corporal, with a recent replacement date, still getting used to the transition between human and machine. Its control of its spindly body with an egg-shaped head almost featureless but for its binocular sensors was unsteady.

Or perhaps that was the news it carried. It stood in front of the large desk, and waited for the silver haired man behind it to lift his head and acknowledge it. Despite his colouring his apparent age was close to his late thirties. In truth, he was Lar Metallian and closer to a hundred than he was to forty. His hair, however, had always been platinum.

'Speak.' he said eventually, not bothering to look up.

'Commander - we've had a signal from Tabito. It seems the transmitter under the Queen's old home stopped transmitting several hours ago.' the delivery, in a quiet monotone, held no emotion. 'The hidden orbital satellite went down first, after reporting an EM blanket hitting the town. There was also a heat bloom from the vicinity of the transmitter. A large one, before communication was cut off completely…'

Ra Frankenbach Leopard, Commander of the Machinners' Fleet, raised his eyes from the document he was studying. 'Is the ambassador back on board yet?' His own voice betrayed no emotion either, but that, as his deceased half-brother would have pointed out, was just Frank - who still, after fourteen years serving the Machine Empire, had yet to accept a machine body.

'No sir.'

'Pity. He'll have to make his own way home.'

Leopard stood up and sighed. 'Relay the information back to Andromeda - make sure they know to make sure the Queen hears it straight away. Then tell the engine room to make ready to sail. We leave immediately.'

'Sir - the heading?'

'Tabito.' Leopard stared past the machinner and smiled grimly. 'Maximum speed.'
Chapter 35

Harlock stood staring out of the leaded windows of the captain's room, a crystal goblet filled with a light amber wine in his left hand. Stripped to the waist and barefoot, he sipped at the glass absently as he watched the Arcadia's cannon fire at the drifting wreck of the Futatsuboshi floating off to starboard.

It only took two salvos from the main battery to completely destroy the little ship.

'The ship was too badly compromised to fly again,' Mimay said. She lay on the chaise longue in the centre of the room, draped languidly over the upholstery, a gold-chased goblet full of the same pale amber wine as his in one long-fingered hand. Reflected like a ghostly shadow in the windows, it was difficult to read her expression - but then her elfin features were always hard to read. 'Selen would not wish you to leave the ship for scavengers to find. It deserved better, after such long service.'

'And as a grave for her oldest son?' He drained the rest of the goblet in one go. 'I wish I'd been in time to save him. I wish to hell I'd never asked him to help…' He bowed his head.

'He was a fighter - like you, he wanted to do the right thing, to fight for what he cared for. Would you have taken that choice away from him?'

He had no answer to that. From its perch on the chair behind the desk, the black bird lifted its head from beneath its wing, stared beady-eyed at him, cawed softly and stuck its impossibly long beak back under its wing again.

'I remember Zero introducing us,' he said quietly. 'Blaze and Marin both, when Selen was recovering after what Geran did to her on Lar Metal. It seemed weird at first, him having sons my age - he never looked a day older than I am now until the day he died. The four of us went out and found a bar the brothers knew… The three of them were more like brothers than father and sons… or friends. Selen said later that was how things tended to work on Lar Metal - they'd played around with longevity, and the result was an odd society, which raised its children at a distance. They hadn't meant to be absent parents, but the rebellion…'

'Events can often get in the way of the best of intentions,' Mimay told him. 'Blaze and Marin were none the worse for it - they knew their parents loved them.' She raised her glass, a pale blur in her reflection. 'As do your own.'

'I'll settle for them forgiving me, one day,' Harlock replied sadly. 'And now, I have to tell Selen her son is dead, and Blaze, Rei, Dai and Kanna that I lost their brother… after we've already lost so many, will it ever end?'

'Not whilst life endures,' Mimay replied. She emptied her goblet, reached for the bottle and refilled it.

'That's… not really very uplifting…'

She smiled at him. 'Life… death… two sides of the same coin. As are sorrow, and joy. Laughter and tears. Without one, the other cannot exist. My race is long-lived, but far from immortal. We knew this long ago - to live without death is merely to exist. Without death, there is no change, there is stagnation. Without light and dark, there is only shadow. Without despair, what value does hope have?' She took another drink. 'What do you fight for, if not against the gathering darkness in
men's hearts? What courage would you have in a world with nothing to fear?"

'Adversity does not make everyone a better person,' Harlock observed wryly.

'And yet,' Mimay replied, the ghost of a teasing smile playing around her tiny mouth, 'Here you stand, so determined that the examples set by others will not define you… Not Harlock's despair, not your brother's spite. Yet without them, where would you have been, when the Machines came for humanity? Or when that creature who still walks and breathes wearing my brother's body tried to use the souls of thousands to let in the darkness from beyond time? Who would stand between this Queen Rafflesia - this corpse flower, if not for the pain and loss which you stand in front of and always, always say "no more"?'

He let out a soft huff. 'You credit me with far too much in the way of both courage and intent. What I felt on that ship… on the bridge… it unmanned me. For a moment, something of that darkness leached through to our world, and it crawled over me like a leech, trying to make me give in to despair, trying to find what I feared most. It could not take our lives - I think… I think we have to surrender them to it.' He shivered. 'If not for Harlock…'

'Harlock?' In the mirror of space, her saw her raise her head to stare at him with her large unblinking eyes.

'Probably… I think our resident ghost saved me back there… either that or my inner space pirate has his voice and attitude. Thus far our worst-kept secret haunting next to Tochiro has only ever manifested here, on the anniversary of our Battle for Earth…'

'If this breach indeed touches that dark dimension, then anything is possible,' Mimay replied, a speculative tone in her dulcet voice. 'And no man - nibelung or human - before or since has ever been touched so deeply by dark matter. Not even you.'

'For that,' he muttered, 'I'm eternally grateful.' He turned and placed his goblet on the edge of the desk, deliberately avoiding a slate coaster by the tiniest of margins. He continued his turn to smile at Mimay, who stared pointedly at his delinquency and sighed heavily, shaking her head and causing ripples in her silky fine hair like water falling down her back. 'I'd better get dressed and get to the bridge before Kei sends someone to lock me in for the night. She seems to think I need to rest.'

'You do,' Mimay called after him, as he headed for the bathroom, grabbing a sweater from the bed along the way, to the complaints of little Trouble, who hissed as his blanket was gently slid from under him. She sighed again as he shut the door behind him, and drained her glass again. 'And yet… we would not love you so much if you were the kind of man to lie down when the universe tries to bring you to your knees,' she whispered to the empty room.

Almost empty. The bird regarded her with one beady eye, the rest of its head and beak still buried under a black wing.

'You do know there's sod all cover if we stay on the road?' Ben said as he dropped down lightly from the tree he'd been using as a lookout post. Sweat glistened on blue skin, and he pushed damp hair back off his face as he sat back down next to Ali.

'There's fuck all if we try to get into it any other way,' the burly crewman grunted. 'Take yer pick.'

'The good news is there don't seem to be many patrols - they've got everyone in the main street that I can see - but that smoke's coming from the street where the shop is, which doesn't bode well.'
When Ali didn't reply immediately he prodded: 'Well?'

'I'm thinking,' Ali chewed his bottom lip as he stared down at the small town. He frowned, and rubbed the old scar next to his eyebrow. 'About two dozen men, well armed. They weren't expecting much in the way of trouble because they took out the electrics, and the town's cut off from three sides because of the flooding. Alliance uniforms - so these tossers are well outside their comfort zone. This isn't a legal op - someone's gotten creative, which means hopefully he'll be as twitchy as little Mii in a room full of rocking chairs…'

'They picked a time just after lunch - most people are out working - the town's pretty empty,' Ben added. 'That suggests they've had some advance intel. But what are they after?'

'Right now I don't care. It doesn't matter - I just need a plan to take them out - or at least distract them long enough to allow Selen to do something. You're from a military background - any suggestions, Blue Boy?'

Ben rolled his eyes. 'I left a military planet, remember? Free spirit and all that?' He grinned. 'I'm a lover, not a fighter…'

'Yeah, yeah… life and soul of the party, you are. But you grew up in a palace, yer dad's a major hardcase, and your bloody godfathers are apparently a selection of your homeworld's best generals - so don't try to sell me that crock that none of it stuck… the capn's the same breed - another sensitive little soul who hated the military, but he picked a shitload of stuff up by osmosis at the teat. Beat. 'Besides - I've seen you fight, you dirty lil scrapper. You ain't helpless.'

Ben stared down at the town, a crinkle forming on his normally unmarked forehead, right above the bridge of his nose. 'There's a store for the old mine workings this side of town just before you hit the main road, isn't there?'

Ali took the monocular from where it lay between them and peered through it. 'There's a shed off to the right as you go in - off on its ownsome a bit?'

'Well, you wouldn't want explosives lying around next to a row of houses, would you?' Ben added tartly. When Ali turned to stare at him, he smiled sweetly. An answering smirk began to spread over Ali's face in reply.

'I think I see what you might be getting at…'

Ben patted his thigh. 'See - always knew you weren't just a pretty face, Ali.'

Irita watched from the side of the road as his men rounded up the town's handful of inhabitants. At this time of the afternoon, very few people had been around, since most of the workforce had been busy trying to contain the flooding. Tabito was a marginal world, according to Alliance intelligence - a former mining colony that had never paid off its initial investment and had subsequently been depopulated by the Homecoming War, and then by the Machine Empire's first conversion wave. Repopulated more recently by outlaws, rebels and malcontents.

Including the proud, but oddly quiet woman in front of him.

He was still unsure what to make of this woman. She'd apparently led a rebellion against her own mother, for unknown reasons, sixty years ago, in favour of eventually putting her younger sister on the throne - only to then rebel against that sister in turn when the woman had begun her drive to mechanise humanity.
She had to be at least eighty, but looked no more than thirty five at most. Her auburn hair was cut to shoulder length, and had no trace of grey. Her stillness he almost envied - the emotionless facade he tried to project came so effortlessly to her. Even under fire and in restraints, she simply looked at him with a calm patience that made him start to sweat.

As though she was just waiting for him to make a mistake.

'Captain?'

He turned to look at the speaker - one of the young women Shizuka had insisted on bringing along - an IntSec operative from her staff. Since most of them looked alike, he couldn't bring a name to mind. They were all dark haired, slender and young. 'Yes?'

'Message from the director on the tight beam - they've acquired the targets.'

He nodded and smiled. 'Good. We'll soon be out of this flea pit.' He called Kiruta over, and the girl trotted up, clipboard in hand. 'Corporal - any success with the wanted lists?'

She nodded. 'Yes sir - seventeen men match the descriptions on file with regional Space Patrol offices as being fugitives for assorted offences - assault, theft, debt, tax evasion, embezzlement… deserters…'

'Is that all?' He tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice, but a snort from his prisoner suggested he hadn't succeeded. 'Something amuses you?'

'What did you expect? Murderers? Rapists? Pirates?'

'Since you consort with the latter, it's not an unreasonable assumption.' He pushed his glasses up his nose and strode over to stand in front of her. 'This planet is noted for harbouring a large criminal element.'

'Those who've made mistakes… who've had to run for their lives. Who want to make a fresh start.' She smiled, not warmly. 'Anyone who is a danger to others is not welcome. Any that slip through our checks, we deal with ourselves. We protect our own.' Her smile was cold now, her eyes icy as they bored into his. 'You, for example, are not welcome here.'

'And yet you seem powerless to deal with me,' he couldn't resist replying.

Her laugh felt like icicles running down his spine. 'Captain Irita - don't be so sure you've gotten away with this yet. If ever. I have a long reach…' she paused. 'Harlock's is almost as long, and we both have friends in high and low places. Something that in this area of space, I think you'll find you don't.'

'I've never needed friends.' He snapped it rather more sharply than he intended.

The look she gave in reply was pitying. 'Needed? Or had?'

His attempt to ignore her jibe was derailed as both of them were hurled to the ground by a massive explosion. Face down in the dusty road, all he could do was cough and blink as a series of smaller explosions rocked the area. Shouts and screams from his men and the assembled townsfolk added to the confusion. Gunshots rang out, but in the confusion - and from his position - who was shooting at what remained a mystery.

The cacophony began to die down, and he was helped to his feet, brushed off and handed his glasses as confusion still reigned all around. 'Thank you,' he told his helper automatically.
'Don't mention it,' Selen replied dryly.

He blinked through his glasses. She stood in front of him quite unconcerned, and dropped the restraints at his feet. 'Nice try,' she added. 'But my husband and I always made a point of making sure we could get out of anything.' She paused, a nostalgic smile playing around her lips. 'When we wanted to…' She strode away from him, calling out orders. His men were quickly rounded up, and heavy, calloused hands belonging to a slab of muscle twice his width pulled his arms behind his back and clicked his own restraints around his wrists.

'Sit tight,' a deep voice rumbled. 'Boss will want to have words with you.'

Selen breathed a heavy sigh as she watched her people mop up the Alliance soldiers. A few of the civilian townsfolk were looking shellshocked, but apart from Marco and a handful of injuries, the casualties weren't as bad as they could have been.

She stared around at the mess. The ramen shop and the houses along the same row were all gone, still smoking. Windows all along the main street had been blown out by the force of the first blast, and she could see fires raging on the outskirts of the town - one large sheet of flame still rising along with a column of black smoke from the explosives store.

'A good diversion, but someone's going to have to replace all of that,' she muttered.

'Anytime, Boss!'

She recognised the voice before she turned to look at the speaker. 'Ali!' She smiled a welcome at the Arcadia's chief troublemaker. 'I suppose I should have known…'

'Hey - it worked!' He grinned at her. 'Figured you guys could take care of the rest if we just gave those pissant little tits a distraction. Your people are better motivated for one thing.'

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Thank you. But there's another group, and I fear they went after the children. We have to…'

'Incoming!'

She wheeled round as Ben, his blue face now grey where it was covered by dust, called out and pointed. A small group was running down the main road towards them. Three of her men immediately took up the weapons they'd taken from the Alliance and pointed them at the runners, until she stepped in front of them and gestured for them to stand down. 'It's Blaze.'

Her son ran up and pulled up in front of her, breathing heavily. The two younger men behind him slithered to a halt and were rather more out of breath. Daiba… and Zack. She took in their haunted expressions and tried to calm her suddenly wildly beating heart. 'Blaze?' She took a step towards him. 'Rei? Kanna? Dai?'

'All safe,' he assured her. But the sadness in his eyes was almost tangible. 'But they got away, mother - I'm sorry.'

'They got the twins,' Daiba spoke up, breathless. 'They took Mamoru, Wattaru and Taro.' He was at that age, she thought, where he wanted to cry, but wouldn't, swallowing the tears before they fell.

'So much for your security,' Irita called out from the sidelines. He couldn't prevent a smirk from stealing over his face watching the horror dawning in their eyes.
'Shut the fuck up, you skinny four-eyed little shit.' Ali strode over and back-handed the Alliance captain, who was only prevented from hitting the ground again because the gorilla holding him kept a tight hold on his arms. 'This is your doing, I'm guessing? I thought you were a poisonous little shit when I saw what you did to Daiba back on Hakidame...'

'The Mazone took them,' Zack added. 'We have one of them.'

'Mazone, huh? What - one mouth round your deeply repressed virgin cock and suddenly you're giving it up and selling out humanity to a bunch of cabbages?' Ali sneered.

Irita straightened and looked the pirate in the eye. 'Jones, isn't it? I wouldn't be so quick to pass out the blame. If it hadn't been for a member of the Arcadia's crew "giving it up" we'd never have found the brats. Although apparently all it took was for an infiltrator to impersonate someone's younger brother... Tell me Jones - do you carry so much guilt around that something so pathetic could make you spill everything to a cabbage?' he sneering in turn.

Ali's backhanded crack across his face jerked him out of his captor's grasp and he landed on the floor in a heap, his glasses crooked on his nose and his lip smarting as blood trickled down his chin. A boot thudded into a kidney and he grunted in pain. 'Shut up. Just shut up! There's no way... no way in hell...'

Daiba watched, bile rising into his throat as Blaze and Ben both tried to pull Ali off the slim Alliance captain, both getting caught by flailing punches as their friend hit out indiscriminately, still screaming. 'Oh, fuck...' he muttered indistinctly, thinking back to a night just after their battle near Earth... the boarding pod... the Mazone vine that had compromised the ship...

...and the Mazone that had made him see Nana. When Ali had been getting in Harlock's face and screaming that it was his brother... not to shoot his brother...

...and he remembered this grey-haired man, in his cell on Hakidame, asking questions...

'Daiba?' Selen's gentle voice interrupted his reverie, and he stared up at her numbly.

'I think he might have told them something...' he replied miserably. 'But I think we both might have...'

Selen placed an arm around his narrow shoulders and held him close, not saying anything, as she watched Ben finally sit on Ali as her son pulled the Alliance captain out of the fray.

The mood on the bridge was still subdued when Harlock finally made his way up the stairs. As usual he walked past the skull-festooned captain's chair and made his way to the front of the gantry, taking his place behind the wheel. Sabu was at Yattaran's station, but Kei stood behind hers to his right, and gave him a weak but welcoming smile. Her eyes were red and a little puffy, but her voice was as firm and professional as ever as she ran down the list of business.

'Have we managed to make contact with Tabito?' he asked. Kei shook her head.

'Nothing. But even though we seem to be out of the worst of the warping caused by the explosions, we might have difficulty getting a signal out. I've tried Carmilla instead, since it's in a different direction. We should have Hannibal online anytime now.'

'Signal coming in now, Miss Kei!' Sabu called out from the opposite console. 'Putting it on.'

A hologramme filled the area in front of the wheel, obscuring the main screen from view. A tall,
dark figure, mantled and hooded, bowed slightly. 'Harlock'

'Hannibal.' Harlock inclined his head slightly and folded his arms. 'It's good to see you - I just wish it was under better circumstances.'

'It seems we almost always talk only when we have bad news.' Hannibal's voice was deep and gravelly, hoarse and somewhat forced. Harlock had never met the man in person, but his shrouded form and hints Selen and Zero had let slip over the years suggested his seclusion and tendency to keep his body and face hidden was not an affectation. The man had once been a famous hero on Lar Metal - though the circumstances surrounding his retirement were a mystery. 'I understand you found the Futatsuboshi?'

Harlock quickly detailed the situation, and waited for a reply. 'I'd prefer to tell Selen in person, before we get home, but we've been having trouble establishing communication with the system due to the current anomalies in this sector. We were going to try again once we're en route…'

'It might not be purely due to the damage to space-time in your area,' Hannibal broke in. 'Your call came just before I was going to try to contact you. We've had a report from one of the ships patrolling the outer system - several hours ago they lost contact with Tabito. At first they thought it was just a glitch - there has been heavy flooding near the town. But when the Seventh Star didn't report in after landing, and they couldn't raise her, they headed in-system. I'm hoping to hear back shortly.'

Harlock exchanged a worried look with Kei. 'We're at least a week out, even if we red-line the drive…'

Hannibal's hooded head bowed slightly. 'I'm sending my own people, and given orders to two of the other ships in-system to head for the planet. But Harlock - we're not the only people worried - I had word from Destiny that the Cassiopeia pulled out of orbit leaving the Machinners' ambassador stranded with no warning, shortly after a message was relayed from one of their nearby listening posts.'

'Leopard's ship?' Harlock's sudden grin was almost incandescent with a feral glee. Kei punched him on the shoulder.

'Down boy. We've had three run-ins with Promethium's pet attack dog and he's almost had you each time. Didn't Zero warn you about fighting outside your weight class?' she whispered.

'I'm lulling him into a false sense of security…' he murmured back.

She snorted at him. 'Selen's known for years Promethium had some kind of watch set over the old ramen shop,' Kei continued out loud. 'It was her home - one of the few places she had fond memories of. Her adopted parents are buried on the planet as well - no-one really minded - it meant it was one place Promethium would never attack, so long as we treated it with respect. If anything happened…'

Harlock stepped closer to her, and placed his hand on top of hers, where it rested, clenched into a fist on the brassy surface of her console. 'Don't start imagining the worst just yet,' he whispered. 'We need to keep focused.' He turned back to face Hannibal's shadowy image. 'We'll be underway immediately. Warn your people the Arcadia will be coming in hot, and close.'

Hannibal bowed again, and cut the connection. Harlock, his attention on Kei, quietly gave the orders. 'Sabu - send someone to get Yattaran out of bed. Kei - set course for Tabito. Niobe - give Mimay a call, tell her…' The tell-tale clicking of dainty heels at the back of the bridge, heading for
the dark matter engine, reached his ears. 'Never mind. Belay that. Mimay - prepare for IN-SKIP - maximum submersion. I want the fastest speed we can get without shaking ourselves to pieces.'

He left Kei's side, with a reassuring squeeze of her shoulder first, and took the wheel. 'My friend…' he whispered.

*I can do it in four days…* came the reply. *But we won't be going far afterwards for at least a week. It's your call…*

'What about five?'

*We'd be drained still, but we could fight and give chase if we had to. Not fast, but we could do it.*

'My children are there. And Daiba… Ali… Ben, Maji and the brats…'

Tochiro was silent.

Harlock gripped the wheel and bowed his head. 'All the speed in the universe does us no good if we're just a big target when we get there. Five days it is, my friend. I'm in your hands.'

'That's one hell of a tight course you want me to plot,' Kei murmured. She glanced back over her shoulder as Yattaran clumped heavily up the stairs yawning.

'I have faith,' Harlock told her quietly. He felt the tell-tale build up of power as the dark matter engine responded to Mimay's hands as they danced over the control globe. Faint wisps of blue energy - like St Elmo's fire - danced around the bridge, outlining the controls, the pipe-like soaring conduits for the engine, the pulley system in the walls, and even the crew - the blue fire strongest around Kei, Yattaran and himself, fainter around the newer members. Outside the bridge window, the view began to be obscured by the thickening dark cloud that surrounded the ship as it prepared to warp.

His hand glowed with it as his closed his gloved hand around the baluster of the wheel. 'Arcadia - let's go!'

Since the town gaol had been partially destroyed by the fires, and the Seventh Star didn't have a brig, Irita and his men had been moved to a makeshift facility in one of the abandoned mines. Blocked by a rock face on three sides and a quickly improvised - but effective - iron grill on the fourth, his fifteen surviving men and Director Namino now shared cramped quarters underground, lit by aging lamps powered by a generator which had seen better days, judging by the number of times the lights flickered or winked out for minutes at a time.

Rank having its privileges, he'd taken one of the cots provided, and currently lay back on a thin, lumpy mattress and tried to get comfortable.

He also hoped that the itching under his uniform was just psychosomatic, although he didn't put it quite outside the realms of possibility that the filthy, rough pad was already inhabited with a population greater than that of all of human space…

The architect of his current problems sat on the next cot, looking a little the worse for wear, her normally impeccable facade now dusty, torn in places, and looking a little bruised. Her captors hadn't been too gentle when handling her. Plus as time trickled by, she looked paler and more sickly every time he looked over. Almost as if she was wilting, he thought uncharitably, looking at her lank, tangled red hair.
His men had largely gathered in the opposite corners of their prison, ignoring their commanding officer.

'So tell me, director - was this according to plan?' he asked, unable to resist dripping sarcasm into his tone.

'If you'd done your part and subdued the town properly, we'd already be out of here,' she replied smoothly. 'You didn't even think to isolate that ship - you relied on the flooding to keep the town isolated, and under-estimated your opposition. And you totally failed to scout out the area before making your move - you should never have overlooked that explosives store - this was - and is - a mining planet. Selen caught you with your pants down when Harlock's men blew the explosives store. In short, not your finest moment.'

He gritted his teeth to hold back the immediate retort on his lips. 'Yet the children are now in the hands of the fleet, at least?'

She shrugged. 'They're on their way, yes.' She didn't elaborate as to which fleet they were being taken to. Assuming Cassandra delivered the boys alive and well to Rafflesia, her plan was still salvageable, even if the involvement of Mazone was no longer deniable.

She smiled secretively. It was a calculated risk, setting Irita (and by extension the Alliance) up as Mazone collaborators, but it served the same purpose as her original plan: distract Harlock, and set the rest of Human space against each other… Hopefully Harlock would deal with Cassandra - who could be relied upon at least to do one thing right…

… annoy the hell out of everyone involved to the point where she'd have no-one on her side.

Isolated and under fire, the military faction could be dealt with.

'Just what,' Irita snapped, 'Is so damned funny?' He'd lost his glasses in the scuffle with Harlock's men, and was peering myopically at her.

She allowed herself a little sigh of satisfaction, and settled back to wait developments.

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He always loved the way Kei moved with him when they made love. Her hips arched to meet him as she kissed him hungrily, her hands wandering over the scarred muscle of his back, lingering at his waist and the dimple at the base of his spine, before her fingers explored his buttocks and her hands pulled him closer, urging him to go deeper, faster, harder….

He raised his head from where he'd been giving one perfect, hard nipple his undivided attention, and smiled at her as he gazed into her eyes…

Was it true he could see himself reflected in those cobalt blue eyes? Collar length dark hair, almost black in the candlelight of the room. A wide, generous mouth, a patrician nose and a long scar curving down his left cheek down to his jawline…

...his jawline… ? Wait…

Kei smiled up at him. 'Oh, Captain...' she sighed.

He looked at her flushed face through another man's eye, and pulled away, scrambling off the bed and falling to the floor in a tangle of sheets…

'Harlock! Harlock!'
He sat bolt upright in bed, the covers falling to his waist, and struggled to get his bearings. Kei ran a hand through his hair to push it out of his face, and leaned her head against his shoulders, one arm around him. 'You've not had a nightmare for a while,' she said eventually. 'Ugh. You're all cold and clammy…'

'Fffhhht. You weren't complaining about me being all sweaty earlier,' he replied, deflecting on autopilot. He stared at his reflection in the window: collar length medium brown hair. A scar that reached to the middle of his cheek. Two eyes - even if only only of them still worked properly.

'Care to share?' she asked, ignoring his flippancy, as always. He loved her for it, but how to explain this one? "I was making love to you and turned into your old captain…”?

But she never gave up, which was another one of the hundred or so reasons he adored this woman. He tried the description on for size and tried not to wince when her eyes widened.

'Well… that's a new one,' she said eventually. She gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Not to mention slightly creepy…'

'For me or for you?' he replied with feeling.

She wriggled round so she was sitting in his lap. 'Both.' She twined her arms around his neck and settled into his lap, placing her cheek against his. 'When you first came round from whatever that darkness did to you on the Futatsuboshi, you said something about it making you feel your worst fears and insecurities… was that one of them?'

He didn't answer.

'Oh my love… I thought we had this out years ago. You're my Harlock…' She nibbled his earlobe and smiled when he responded. She shifted a little for the best spot to sit on and wriggled her hips just a little. His sharp intake of breath was gratifying.

'Kei…' he warned her softly.

'What? It could have been worse - I could have turned into him…'

'Oh Gaia - you just had to go there didn't you?' he pulled her closer. 'Not. My. Type. And certainly not what wakes me up at the equivalent of four in the morning…'

'You said that darkness - whatever it is - needed you to surrender, to give in before it could - what? Feed off you? Drain you?'

He nodded. 'The dark matter was drawn to it, but it wanted something else… something intrinsic to us… Fear was its way in, I think - well, fear and those little insecurities we all have. The magnified little dreads that creep into your head in the darkest hour just before dawn. You know the time when you lie awake and every tiny doubt suddenly seems like the most insurmountable problem in the universe…?'

'The one I used to get, wondering if I was just the rebound girl from Nami?' she asked softly.

He pulled her as close as he could and kissed her, gently at first, then demanding, until her tongue flicked over his and tangled with it. When he finally came up for air he stroked her hair gently, letting the silky strands run through his fingers. 'Never. You were never that.' He smiled at her. 'I thought we had this out years ago?' he continued, throwing her own words back at her.

She smiled. 'See. It works both ways, you dope. For the record, if he did show up whilst I had you
at my mercy, the only thing he'd get is a flea in his ear - or a right cross. No-one gets between me and my Harlock…'

Her mock ferocity on the subject always made him laugh. 'Is that why you "accidentally" pushed Mimay off the bed in the middle of the night last week?' He smiled fondly at her when she adamantly refused to answer that one. 'Strange… He was better looking than me… more sophisticated… had that whole archangel ruined thing going on…' he teased.

She huffed at him. 'Fine. Maybe I should leave the two of you alone next time he haunts us.'

He kissed her again. 'I already have enough arguments about who gets to top…' He felt her smile into his neck. 'You know… it's not just the heebie jeebies that that hour of the night is known for,' he mused. 'Wasn't it supposed to be the time most people die?'

'If it was, there might be some ancestral mythical-memory-thing going on,' Kei replied thoughtfully.

'Is that a technical term?'

She bit his earlobe gently. 'Talk to a psychiatrist - or Doc - I'm just your wife.' She snuggled again. 'Not sure if all those old biorhythms still apply in space though… But now that you're awake, maybe you could distract me?'

'Can't sleep?'

She nodded. 'It's just… four more days… every time I try to sleep I keep seeing the boys and Nami.'

He felt guilty at that. 'And here's me scaring myself witless with pointless identity issues…'

'The inside of your head is a scary place,' she assured him. 'But I'm happy to reassure you that you are who I want you to be… if you'll take my mind off what might be happening on Tabito.' She looked him in the eye. 'I'm terrified.'

She hated admitting weakness, even to him. He wrapped his arms around her as tightly as he could. 'I know. I'm trying not to think about it. If I did I'd never get anything done.' But Selen and her people were there, and the Seventh Star should have landed two days ago… and who even knew to look for the children? Their names were known to only a few…

The communicator pinged at that point, and he felt like growling at it as he put it on speaker. 'Yes?'

'Yasu, sir. We've got an incoming communication.'

'From Tabito?' he asked, suddenly hopeful.

'Yasu coughed and cleared his throat. 'No sir. It's not giving out a recognised IFF, but given that it's reaching us in IN-SKIP, it's powerful.'

'And it has our number…' Harlock muttered. 'I don't like people cold-calling. How the hell did they get our frequency? Keep the line open, we'll be right there.'

The woman whose hologramme stood at the front of the bridge was unknown to him. Tall, slender, with that willowy form that suggested a lack of a proper skeletal structure. Her black hair was long and swept back from a deep widow's peak. She wore - or perhaps it was just part of her - a pale teal
green form fitting one piece that covered her from her long neck to her feet.

Her eyes were without iris or white - just black pits that reminded him of looking into one of Arcadia's portals - although if there were star-like flickers in those inky depths, they were far colder than the stars.

Her face had human-like features, but the resembled those of a cheap plastic doll - the nose was just a protuberance running down the midline of her face towards the scarlet slash of a mouth that had never touched food. For all that artificiality, there was nothing fake about the aura of disdain she wore the way Mimay wore her gauzy veils.

*This one knows how to hate…* was his first thought.

'Am I addressing the one known as Captain Harlock?' she asked imperiously.

One hand toying idly with the wheel he shrugged minimally. 'I have had that distinction,' he drawled. Let her work for it… 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

'Cassandra. Supreme Commander of the forces of Her Majesty Queen Rafflesia's fleet, all Glory to her name!'

'Fond of the sound of her own voice, in't she?' Yattaran sniggered from his left.

'I've heard of you,' he replied. 'Your name features quite prominently in some very interesting communications passed onto us by a lovely young girl called Sainess… Quite the little opportunist, it seems - when firing on your own civilians.'

'The words of traitors have no meaning,' the Mazone snapped. 'And those of aggressors against our kind even less.'

Harlock heaved a theatrical sigh, and tried to ignore Kei's eye-rolling next to him. He leaned even more casually against the wheel, a study in jaded ennui. 'Aggressors - against a race who were responsible for my mother's death? For the destruction of her life's work? For crippling my brother and putting a girl I loved in a life-support capsule for the rest of her short life? For murdering my family and driving my cousin almost insane? He straightened, and stared straight at her image, all pretense of boredom gone. 'A race which has existed since the earliest days of life on Earth and always held a grudge against us? Who's prompting might well have led to the most sickening loss of life in human history?' He shook his head sadly. 'Tell me, Cassandra - who are the aggressors here?'

'You have fought and killed our kind!'

'In self defence or out of ignorance. Can you say the same?' he countered. She glared at him. 'You wanted to talk, Cassandra. Talk. Or perhaps I should bypass the flunky and go straight to the Queen - will she come to the camera and say hello? Or does she prefer to hide in the shadows ond only speak through puppets?'

Cassandra sneered. 'She does not lower herself to speak to vermin. The task of dealing with you was given to me. I have an ultimatum, Harlock - remove yourself from our path. What comes is no business of yours. Continue to get in our way, and you will pay a heavy price.'

'No business?' He stepped away from the wheel slightly. 'Protecting people is what I do, Cassandra. The Mazone threatened those I care about, and your queen's actions threaten *everything.*'
Cassandra smirked at the camera, her face flushed with triumph. 'Pull back, Harlock. Or what happens next will be entirely upon your head. What has humanity ever done to earn your loyalty? You're an outlaw. Exiled forever from your home and family, hunted for the pittance that would keep barely keep one Machinner alive for a year. You owe them nothing.'

'I don't do it for them,' he replied quietly. 'I have a home and a family. My loyalties are not to any government or people: they are to my friends, my family, my ship and my crew. I fight for them, and to ensure they have a future worth living in.'

Her cruel sneer grew. 'To your family, you say? How curious you should say that. How much would you sacrifice for them, I wonder? How far would you compromise your precious principles for their safety?'

Yattaran watched from the sidelines, a sick feeling growing in his stomach as the Mazone reached down out of the camera's range and hauled up two struggling figures. Another was wriggling in the arms of one of the ampeloi footsoldiers.

Wattaru, Mamoru and Taro.

'How far, Harlock?' Cassandra gloated. She handed the twins to her soldiers. 'I have your precious family, so what now? You can't find us to take them back by force… so what will you do?'

'You let them go, I might just let you live.'

The words were said quietly, but even from his vantage point Yattaran could see the grip the captain had on the baluster of the wheel he held in his left hand. The other was reaching out to lay a restraining hand on Kei's arm, as she gasped in horror and took a step forward.

'Bold words.' By now Cassandra was sneering as though it was going out of fashion. 'I think not. Back off, Harlock. Keep that abomination out of our way and we'll consider handing your sons back to you. If not… well… I'll start sending them back to you in pieces.'

'They'll never let them go,' Yattaran whispered, half to himself. At his side, Mimay sighed sadly.

'Do you really think I'm that stupid?' Harlock asked tightly. Under his hand the wooden baluster creaked ominously. A cold draft began to breeze through the bridge, ruffling his hair slightly. The ship's omnipresent heartbeat began to increase, and Yattaran felt goosebumps forming on his arms. He shivered.

'I think you might need some persuasion that I'm deadly serious,' Cassandra replied. She drew a knife from her belt. 'Hold one of them out.' She ordered coldly. Obediently the Mazone nearest to her held out the boy she carried. 'Which body part can they most do without, you stinking meatsack? A finger? A hand? An eye? Or should I perhaps geld him? I hear human males make good pets if castrated young enough. It makes them tractable.'

'You lay one hand on any of my sons and I promise you I will personally rip you apart and feed you into a composter!' Kei snarled at the screen and broke free of Harlock's grip. 'There's no place in the universe you'll be able to hide, you mildewed freak!'

Hearing his mother's voice the boy began to struggle harder, and the mazone holding him couldn't keep a grip on a determined nine year old. The boy fell into a heap, and Cassandra, furious, slashed down at him, only to be blind-sided by his brother, who wriggled free and leapt at her, trying to deflect the blade aimed at his twin. His gag slipped and he yelled as he jumped.

The result was utter confusion, and somehow in the mess, Cassandra's blade hit a mark, the camera
quickly partially obscured by the bright spray of blood. Yattaran caught a glimpse of one of the twins clutching his face and screaming. Taro was wriggling frantically, kicking and biting at his captor, and the second twin - Yattaran couldn't tell which - was trying to hold his brother, and being dragged away by one of the masked mazone. On instinct, he left his post, moving quietly for such a bulky man, and stationed himself on the other side of his captain.

The entire ship trembled from stem to stern, and the roar of rage from the Arcadia was deafening, but failed to mask the sound of Kei's wordless scream of anguish, anger and denial. She leapt towards the screen largely on instinct, and only Yattaran's quick thinking allowed him to catch her before she leapt the rail to what would have been a nasty fall to the lower bridge. She thrashed and screamed in his arms for him to let her go.

Mimay had taken a step towards the captain, uncertain. Harlock simply stood there, silent, unmoving. Unmoved?

No. There was an audible crack and the baluster he held broke off in his hand.

The screen went dark, and with it Kei's desperate rage turned to anguished sobs.

Next to Harlock, Mimay took a sharp intake of breath.

Harlock handed the baluster to Sabu, who'd gone as white as a sheet. 'Fix this.' He stepped over to Kei and took her from Yattaran, holding her tightly as she fought to get free, until she collapsed against him, her sobs shaking her entire body.

'Shush, Kei. We'll get them back.' Harlock held her as tightly as he could, looking, to Yattaran's eyes, oddly helpless. He hadn't seen his captain look this defeated in... well...

He hadn't seen this captain look so defeated. But he'd seen the look before, in another man's eye. Just before he pushed himself out of his chair and began a maudlin, self-pitying rant against his fate.

Yattaran waited. Either for the storm, or the rain.

His captain raised his head from where he'd rested it next to Kei's. His single visible hazel eye looked straight at Yattaran, and the first mate shivered.

'Storm it is then...

'Get us to Tabito, first mate. Now…'

'Tabito?' Yattaran scratched his head through his tatty bandanna. 'We ain't going after them?'

Harlock's face was grim. 'To go after them, we have to track them. Something they think we can't do.'

Yattaran opened his mouth to say that they bloody well couldn't, and closed it again as Mimay's long fingers closed around his arm. 'We need to pick up the trail, first mate,' she said in that soft, musical voice that had a way of plugging straight into his libido. 'So long as Mamoru's with them, we can find them, no matter where they go.'

'Mamoru?' he scratched his ass whilst he tried to process that one. 'But…'

'Dark matter,' Harlock said softly. 'We used the dark matter to save him when the plague…' in his arms, Kei gave a small cry, and he shushed her again. He picked her up in his arms and cradled her
tenderly. 'The Arcadia can find him. There's a link between them. Get me to Tabito, Yattaran. We'll pick up the rest of the crew…'

'And then?'

Harlock was already walking towards the stairs, Kei held surprisingly easily in his arms, given she wasn't exactly dainty. 'And then, the Mazone are about realise that when it comes to aggression, I haven't even started yet…'

Yattaran stared at his captain's back as he walked away, ramrod stiff. He turned to Mimay, but the Nibelung woman shook her lovely head sadly and busied herself with the dark matter engines.

The only other person on the bridge now was Sabu, who stood with a dull-eyed look on his stupid face as he stared at the broken baluster in his hand. Yattaran reached out and took it from him, reverently. 'Well, fuck,' he muttered, as he went back to his station to start shouting orders.

Unbidden, without anyone at the helm, the Arcadia thrummed with energy and he thought - despite it being physically impossible - that he could actually sense the ship speeding up. Untended, the wheel moved gently, but purposefully, as though guided by unseen hands.

It felt like hours, shut inside a small room - if he could call it that - running water down the walls and a carpet of moss made it more like some kind of soggy tree-house. They put him and Taro in there, despite their screams for Mamoru, and just left them.

Then they'd come for them both, tied them up and frog-marched them off the ship, across some kind of wobbly anchor tube that looked as though it was made of rolled-up leaves - sort of green, see through and he really didn't feel like sticking a foot or hand through what looked like tissue-paper thin walls… He guessed they must have swapped ships.

Wattaru kicked and fought all the way to the door of the room they carried him to. Beside him, in the arms of one of the other strange green women, Taro hung limply. They stopped outside a plain wooden door, and the boys were dropped unceremoniously into the room when it opened. Once the door shut behind them, Wattaru reached out to his older brother. 'Taro?'

Taro groaned, and slowly opened his eyes to peer short-sightedly at Wattaru. 'I'm okay. What did they do with Mamoru?'

'Here,' their sibling's voice called out weakly. Both boys looked around, to see a small shape lying on the middle of three beds. On shaky legs they both ran over.

Mamoru's face was a mess. The cut across his left cheek had been neatly stitched, and his face was still streaked with blood. The right side of his head, covering his right eye, was swathed in a white bandage. Even so he reached out to his brothers. 'Hey, you two, don't cry. Dad and Mom will be along. These bitches just made a huge mistake, right?'

Taro, always the optimistic one, grinned and nodded. Wattaru just looked miserable, not even calling his twin out on his language for once.

'Wattaru?' Mamoru reached out to his brother, who flung himself at the bed and clutched his twin, sobbing.

'I'm sorry, Mamoru... if I hadn't run into her like that she wouldn't have cut you.'

Mamoru shared a look with Taro over his twin's head. 'Hey, she was going to cut me or kill me one
way or the other. 'C'mon. We're Harlocks... we don't cry like girls, right?'

Wattaru looked into his brother's uncovered eye. 'But your face...' he wailed.

'I dunno,' Taro said chirpily. 'He looks like dad now!' He peered at his brother. 'Though mom's gonna totally freak when she sees it. How bad is it? Is it totally gross?'

'Taro!' Wattaru slapped the smaller boy's hand away from his twin's bandages. 'He's hurt!'

'S'okay. Hurts like hell but they gave me something. No-one will tell me how bad it is. Taro?'

Taro peered, his eyesight poor at more than three feet without his glasses, which had been lost somewhere along the way. 'Dunno. The cut's quite bad. Longer than dad's. Almost reaches your chin. Guess I'd better not mess with your eye. Might be okay under there?'

Mamoru shook his head carefully. 'Don't know. Didn't dare prod it. Mom always said to leave stuff alone. I think it's gone though. Feels kind of wrong.' He didn't add that the thought of that left him feeling cold and sick. The other two were going to need him to hold it together. Taro couldn't see shit without his specs, and although a scrapper usually got the snot kicked out of him in a fight. And Wattaru...

He sighed inwardly. Wattaru was wallowing in guilt so hard he sure wasn't going to be thinking straight. He always did whenever one of his well intentioned escapades went tits up and either he or Taro got hurt. Usually his response was to continue charging along headfirst and hope sheer momentum could get him out of trouble.

Months of enforced bedrest had given Mamoru far too much time to watch the people around him. There'd been little else to do other than read, and try to put on a good front to stop his parents from worrying. It had made him a lot more introspective than his impetuous twin.

Or as Uncle Ali had put it one night when he thought he couldn't be overheard: 'that one's a devious little bastard...'

Which when he looked it up, he rather liked.

'Listen. This lot are trying to use us to stop dad from blowing them to shit, right?'

Wattaru's eyes widened. 'You can't say...'

Mamoru cut him off. 'Can. Did. Get over it, you big crybaby.' Taro gave him his best what-the-fuck look, as Yattaran had called it, but Mamoru shook his head slightly at him, and tried to hide the wince at the pain in his eye... or where his eye had been. He needed to shake his twin out of his funk quickly, or the little dope would be angsting for days. 'Man up, Wattaru. Unless you've gotten soft with all that snuggling with Kanna...' he added slyly.

Wattaru blushed. 'That's none of your...'

Mamoru started chanting scornfully: 'Wattaru and Kanna, sittin' in a tree, k-i-s-s-i- ow!' He rubbed the spot on his arm where his brother had landed a pretty decent punch. He grinned at him. 'There you go! Found your inner Harlock!'

'Prick.' Wattaru snapped at him. Mamoru's grin got wider.

'See. Knew you had it in you. Now. Both of you listen up. We're trapped, but we can cause some trouble between us, right? I mean, it's every officer's duty to disrupt the enemy, in all those stories
Uncle Ali tells us... and we're the sons of the biggest badass in space!' He looked at his brothers. 'Taro's even got the Arcadia's builder as his great-something grandaddy, so we're all kinds of awesome...'

'We're just kids,' Wattaru pointed out, not unreasonably. 'We're not ten for another six months and Taro's only eleven. Even if...'

Mamoru waved him off. 'That's what everyone thinks, but they'll think we're stupid and too young, right? I mean, we can drive hardened pirates nuts with a bit of planning, and they know not to take their eyes off us... these skanky space hoes should be a walk over!'

Taro looked thoughtful. 'If I had some tools it would be better.'

'Would a knife be a start?' Wattaru asked innocently. The other two stared at him as though he'd suddenly grown two heads, and he gave them a mirror image of Mamoru's sly smirk. He pulled a slender knife out of his sleeve. 'I palmed it when they were fussing over you,' he told his twin, holding out the blade that had maimed him. He handed it to Taro. 'Will this help?'

Taro snatched it with an eager, conspiratorial grin. 'Oh yeah. That's a start...'

The three boys shared a triumphant smile that would have given their parents nightmares if they'd seen it.

More so if they'd heard the conversation a little later, when all three were cuddled up together. Wattaru whispered quietly; 'I just want dad and mom to come get us...' his voice trembled, and so did Mamoru's when he whispered back: 'so do I.' Taro nodded and Mamoru continued: 'But we have to be strong. It's okay to be scared, but we aren't gonna show it to them, are we?'

'I won't cry,' Taro whispered. He placed his hand over Mamoru's and Wattaru added his on top. The three nodded at each other silently, as if sealing a pact.

When Taro was snoring softly, Wattaru snuggled up to his restless twin. 'Are you really okay about this?' He whispered, placing his hand gently on the bandage that covered the injured eye.

'Hurts like fuck,' Mamoru said quietly, using a word that either parent would have had conniptions over hearing. 'I guess dad's scar isn't so cool after all.' He added.

Wattaru flinched slightly. 'Mom said our dead uncle did that to him. He hated dad coz of an accident and...'

_Oh. So that was what was bothering him?_ 'I love you, Wattaru. I'd never hate you. No matter what happens, we'll all be there for each other. Always.' He hugged his twin as hard as he could. 'We're part of each other. How can I ever stay mad at myself?' And then because this was getting way too touchy feely, he added: 'Even if I do want to thump you senseless sometimes...'

'Jerk.' Was Wattaru's muffled reply.

'Crybaby.'

They grinned at each other, but there was no humour in it. Mamoru gave his twin another hug. 'We're going to be okay. Dad and Mom will come - they'll find us. We just have to find a way to help them.'

'I'm scared,' Wattaru whispered.
'Me too,' Mamoru admitted after a pause. 'It's okay to be scared. We can do this.'

He didn't add: *we have to...* that was pretty much a given.
Chapter 36

*Arcadia*

The computer room was always dark and quiet, its soaring design always reminding Harlock of an ancient gothic cathedral. Depending on the mood of whoever entered it, it could seem welcoming or intimidating. There had been a time - half a lifetime ago, almost - when Harlock had been in the latter category. Then, he'd been lurking in the shadows behind the computer banks which encircled the tree-like central core whilst he watched a lonely, isolated figure sit on one of the massive roots of the central core, slumped as though weighed down by time and guilt and sorrow and loss, and the heavy gravity cloak he habitually wore.

Now, he reflected, he was the miserable asshole slumped in front of a friend he could neither touch nor truly understand, looking for guidance on the injustices of the world.

At least this time there wasn't some snot-nosed punk lurking in the shadows wondering if he dared risk shooting him in the back, he thought sourly. And he categorically refused to walk around his own ship wearing that damned cloak. Somedays it felt like a shroud.

The low-level rumbling of the Arcadia's background noise changed pitch for a moment. He shook his head slightly. 'Nothing. Just reminiscing.' He looked upwards briefly, but the dangling conduits Mimay usually draped herself over were conspicuously free of drifting fireflies. His only other company was the black bird, circling overhead before settling on one of the beams to preen. 'It's either that or start shooting something.'

The circular red light on the panel of the core facing him whirled a little faster. Harlock huffed slightly. 'Nothing. Just reminiscing.' He looked upwards briefly, but the dangling conduits Mimay usually draped herself over were conspicuously free of drifting fireflies. His only other company was the black bird, circling overhead before settling on one of the beams to preen. 'It's either that or start shooting something.'

The circular red light on the panel of the core facing him whirled a little faster. Harlock huffed slightly. 'No. Just remembering the first time I came in here. I had my target in my sights and I could have fired - done my job. I just couldn't do it.'

A rumble.

'No. Not because it would have gotten me killed - I'd expected that. Part of me back then would have welcomed it. It just... felt wrong. I had the drop on him in the workboat on Tokarga as well and still couldn't do it. Not in the back.'

Lights flickered. Harlock gave a hollow laugh. 'No. Not to his face either. I had him in my sights so many times and it just... wasn't me. If that makes any sense?'

Rumble.

'Too tied up to talk to me?' Again a little shake of the head, which if he'd seen himself, he'd have recognised as the same habit his predecessor had had. 'No - it's fine. I understand you pretty well by now.'

A more questioning hum.

'Something like that. Part of me wants to charge right in and rain down hell on the Mazone for this... but I can't blame all of them for the actions of a few. Someone wants me going off half-cocked - I just don't know why... But you know me - I don't like being manipulated.'

The hum deepened.

'You too huh? It had crossed my mind... if their information's that out of date... And you're right
he would have gone charging right in.'

Rumble.

'Heh. You think Mamoru resembles me and Wattaru The Captain?' A snort. 'Hardly. I've never seen Wattaru lose his temper - he just doesn't have any brakes. Mamoru on the other hand…' he paused. 'It pains me to say it but in a way I'm glad the three of them are together - Taro's got the brains but he can be vulnerable. Mamoru's often a little too clever and devious for his own good, but Wattaru can usually be relied on to rein the other two in with their plotting, and they can stop him charging around at full tilt. They're so damn young, but we didn't wrap them in cotton wool. They've got a better chance of getting out of this alive than most kids their age.' His head drooped slightly and he sighed. 'They hurt Mamoru… badly. I can't stop seeing it.' He lifted his head. 'Any ideas on how we do "subtle" when all we have to bring to the fight is the most powerful battleship in human space?'

The circling light dimmed in its endless circuit. 'Thought not. But I think we're going to need to think of something, my friend.' Heart still heavy, he stood up and back out of the encircling data banks before turning and striding away, wandering the currently empty corridors with a vague sense that he ought to be seen to be doing something.

The corridors weren't totally empty. Luna stalked out of the training room and glowered at Harlock from under her bangs when he came to a stop in front of her.

'Two days… Two damn days…' She jabbed a finger into his chest. 'If she won't sleep, try at least to get her to accept something to help - the damn woman's started punctuating her sentences again… never a good sign.'

*Thump. Thump.* Thwaaack.

Harlock winced as he heard the last of the noises coming from the room through the open door. 'You know she hates being drugged. For any reason. You also know why, Luna.'

'One of you won't take anything, the other metabolises them as soon as they're in his damn bloodstream…' his ship's doctor muttered. 'No wonder I drink…'

'You drank before you came on board!' he called out as she stormed away, white coat-tails flapping. She gave him the finger over her shoulder without looking back. With a sigh, Harlock pushed his hair out of his face and walked into the gym.

'Luna's right, you need to sleep…'

*Thump. T'ilm.* thudthwack 'fine' thump.

'And* thudthud I've* thump 'no' thud 'intention* thwackthwack 'of* thump 'taking' thud 'anything'. Thudthwa

That last combination of punches and kicks made even his eyes water, the force almost knocking the heavy bag off its hook. He stepped up and steadied it, before she could launch another barrage at the hapless equipment. 'Kei.'

She stared at him from under sweat-darkened hair. Through the sparring wraps he could see blood seeping through where she'd scraped her knuckles. Dark circles underscored her blue eyes, which glared at him with a barely restrained but helpless fury. With no-one to take her anger and fear out on, Kei didn't handle it too well. 'How can you be so calm?' she blurted eventually. 'I don't know how you can stand there so quietly. You don't shout, you don't…'
He reached out and drew her close. She trembled in his arms, and not, he know all too well, from fear or sobbing. 'You think this is calm?' he asked eventually. Gently, he disengaged and began to unwrap one of her hands, wincing when the wrapping came away bloody. 'This isn't calm. This is me doing my damndest to keep a lid on it, because if I let it out even for one moment, I'm not all that sure I can stop.' He sighed when he saw her swollen, bruised knuckles. 'You need a shower, a rub down and bed - in that order.'

'Right now, I'm not sure "stopping" is something I'm in favour of,' she snarled. 'Why should we stop? They took our sons, Yama - they hurt - maybe killed - Mamoru in front of us. They're hurt, scared and millions of miles away, and I can't do a damned thing about it. What makes you think I want you to stop?'

He started working on the other hand. 'I command the most powerful battleship ever constructed - one capable of ripping holes in the fabric of reality if I really, really decide to let rip and express myself with it. So whilst you get the luxury of beating some poor, helpless punch bag into submission, I have to keep a lid on my temper and try to find a way of getting our boys back which doesn't involve a body count in the millions.' He dropped a kiss on one abused knuckle. Then he looked up and stared into her eyes. 'I'd like nothing more right now than to just turn around, head straight for one of those damned convoys, and start shooting until there's nothing left but leaf litter…'

His voice was as calm as always, but the reined in fury in his visible eye made her shiver. He forced a wry smile when he realised. 'You're the one I usually rely on to bring me down to reality. I guess right now neither of us is fit for human company…'

'So point us at a fleet of vegetables and start shooting,' she snarled. 'I don't care anymore.'

He stared into her eyes for a moment, and then kissed her gently. 'Yes, you do. Or if not now, when you calm down, you will.'

'Don't take that bet,' she warned. She freed her hands and wrapped her arms around his waist. 'I can't stand feeling so helpless.'

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. 'Neither can I. But there will be an answer for this, I promise you. If nothing else that black-eyed bitch who hurt them is not long for this world.'

'She's mine.'

If anything the flat delivery of those two words mumbled into his sweater were more unnerving than her more emotional outbursts. 'If Mamoru and Wattaru don't get to her first,' he replied solemnly. Despite the fear and the worry, she smiled briefly.

'They do have a way with them, don't they,' she said in a soft, sad voice.

He hugged her a little more tightly. 'We didn't raise them to be soft, love. We couldn't afford to. Not with the prices on our heads. They're young, but they're smart, and resourceful, and the twins have Taro as well - if nothing else I trust in those three to take care of each other.'

'But they're still nine year old boys surrounded by a terrifying enemy, all alone,' she whispered. 'Speeding away to who knows where? How the hell can you be so certain we'll find them?'

He stroked her hair gently. 'Tochio's certain he can track Mamoru once we reach Tabito - dark matter leaves a trail, and he's always been able to find him, ever since…' he trailed off, the memories of the final weeks of the plague year still gave them both nightmares. The frantic search
for the cure, destroying Deathshadow One and the race to disseminate the vaccine had taken a toll on all of them, and had come too late for far too many.

It had almost been too late for Mamoru, who'd reacted badly to the retrovirus and almost died. If not for the quick thinking of Mimay, they'd have lost three children, not two. But using dark matter to save him had had a price - though one that now, Harlock was silently thanking his lucky stars for.

So long as the Mazone didn't split the boys up, they had a chance.

Kei, her face buried in his sweater, probably didn't hear, but to Harlock - captain of the ship for over thirteen years now - there was a slight strain creeping into the usual creaks, groans and murmurings of the ship when it travelled. The pressure - always present, however unwelcome - of dark matter was heavier than usual, and tiny flashes of blue lightning caught his eye, flickering along the walls and floor just at the edge of his vision.

"Speed" wasn't much of a concept in IN-SKIP - "Imaginary Number Space" was a conceit - the sub-dimension the Arcadia entered whilst immersed in the dark matter cloud was a coiled remnant of the universe from just after the Big Bang - when the universe had been a fraction of the Planck length in diameter. Tiny fractions of a microsecond later, it had collapsed into the familiar three spatial and one time dimension humanity lived in. But the multiple sub-dimensions survived, coiled tightly into tiny quantum states which touched the entirety of the Universe simultaneously.

Travel "time" depended on the depth of your immersion, and that was utterly dependent upon the power of your drive.

Arcadia was racing to Tabito to pick up the trace of Mamoru's passage into that sub-dimensional space, where dark matter shone like a beacon. And to do so her engines was putting out a level of power at the very limit of her design tolerances. Tochiro's entire concentration for the past two days had been - and still was - totally concerned with ensuring the self-repair function could keep up with the stresses the power drain was putting on her hull and structure.

If she didn't shake herself to pieces in the process, they would reach Tabito in a little over twenty-four hours.

And if he could have been sure they'd get there in one piece, Harlock would have poured the entire output of the Nibelung engine into the task if it shaved even a single hour off that estimate…

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Tabito

Blaze glared at the platinum-haired man sitting with casual abandon in a chair, one leg draped over the left arm. 'Nice to know my aunt has her priorities straight as usual - kicks up a storm because her childhood home gets trashed, but couldn't give a shit that my brother and his crew are all dead and we've got three missing children.'

Ra Frankenbach Leopard twiddled with the dark blue beret in his hands, and shrugged. 'She is what she is.'

'And you - uncle - can still sit there and wear that uniform in good conscience?' Blaze took a step forwards, his fists raised.

'Blaze, enough.'

At the sound of Selen's quiet voice, he stopped and dropped his hands to his side. 'Mother.'
'In good conscience, no,' Leopard replied. 'But unlike your parents I believe that you need to fight the system from the inside, with the rule of law.'

Blaze snorted. 'Seriously? You buy your own bullshit? You have a network of spies, informers and saboteurs larger than the Millennial Thieves working for you!' 

'Because your father handed over control of the Lar Metal faction to me,' Leopard added smoothly. 'And now who's getting sidetracked?'

Selen, at the head of the small table, placed her hands on it palms down and stood up, leaning towards the Machinners' commander. 'Frank - whatever her reasons, Yayoi - Promethium - sent you to us, and I can guess that you're just the vanguard. But what does she hope to achieve by declaring war on these people?'

Leopard ran a hand through his silvery hair. 'She's taking this assault rather personally. Up to now, I don't think she cared - we're mostly based in M31 now anyway - this spiral isn't of much interest - except for one thing: It was her home.'

'It was Captain Irita who flattened the shop,' Blaze pointed out.

'And he claims he was given the intel about this planet by the Director of IntSec - who turns out to be some weird plant-human hybrid.'

'Symbiote,' Selen correctly absently. 'She's human, but her cells contain organelles from some single-celled variant of the Mazone. Her body's riddled with it.'

'Whatever,' Leopard waved off the technical details. 'The fact remains that I've ensured she holds them responsible - for that and for Marin's death.' He bowed his head slightly. 'For what it's worth, I'm truly sorry.'

'Monitoring our communications, much?' Blaze snarled.

'Hannibal called me en route - take it up with him - if you dare. Marin was also my nephew, Blaze - my brother and I might have had our differences, but we reconciled years ago. The damage this fleet could do is unprecedented. I saw what Loki set in motion almost fifteen years ago on Lar Metal, and I swore then I'd never let him succeed.'

'And yet - you still allow Promethium free rein on harvesting humans for their lifeforce. How the fuck do you sleep at night?' Blaze leaned forward and had his face almost nose to nose with his uncle's as he shouted, and only backed down when Selen laid a hand on his shoulder. With poor grace, he allowed himself to be drawn away from the confrontation, whilst Leopard kept his seat and his composure and didn't answer.

Blaze gave his mother's hand a slight squeeze before he pulled away. 'Hoshino's in orbit, the Poseidon is in system and I'm guessing Harlock's heading here as fast as he can push the Arcadia. That's a lot of firepower - but what use is it? If we engage these convoys, we risk a repeat of the accident that caught the Futatsuboshi!' Blaze paced the length of the room. 'What good is a shooting war in retaliation?'

'Even assuming we aren't all at each other's throats,' Selen added. Blaze stopped pacing to look at his mother. Since Hannibal's call relaying Harlock's news, she'd been so calm, it made him nervous. Even when she'd told his siblings, she'd been quiet and collected, her grief only showing in the tight wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Those who didn't know her often thought her cold, but Blaze could see through the facade well enough. Even after five years she'd not gotten over his
father's death. This new loss was cutting her to pieces.

To his surprise even Leopard seemed sensitive to the mood. 'Selen - We have and always will have our differences. I'm here at your sister's bequest to send a message to this race - but the one thing she didn't do was tell me what the message had to be.' He stood up and walked to her side. 'This world is your home. I'll respect that. But I cannot hold back forever.'

'Not forever,' Selen replied. 'Wait for Harlock, that's all I ask.'

'He's a pirate and a rebel - what can he bring to this?'

'He's been investigating these creatures for months - years really, except we didn't know what we were dealing with until recently,' Blaze added. 'You want a way to handle the Mazone? Then wait for the man who knows the most about them - or had you forgotten that he's also got a brain as well as a big battleship? If anyone can find a way to stop them, it's Harlock.'

Leopard snorted. 'The galaxy's first combat botanist? We're doomed.'

Blaze smirked at him. 'See, I knew you'd understand.'

Leopard narrowed his eyes and looked down his nose at the younger man. 'You get more like your father every day,' he muttered, not unkindly. 'Hanging around with rebels and pirates is rubbing off on you.'

'Given the fact that so far the regular channels have been sadly lacking,' Blaze retorted tartly, 'That can only be a good thing.'

Leopard placed his beret on his silver hair and tugged it into place. 'It's a short term gain, Blaze. In the long term, these chaotic heroics never last. Only the order that comes with a civilised society can prevail in the long term.' He saluted Selen smartly, turned on his heel and left.

Blaze watched through the window as Leopard walked away. 'He ought to spend some time with that smarmy little shit we've got locked up in the mine. He spouts the same line of bullshit.'

Selen moved gracefully to his side and let out a deep breath. 'He's right about one thing: Heroes never last. They flourish when times are hard and the world needs changing - but once the world changes, what need does it have for them? All too often they become the very thing we fight against.'

'You didn't,' he pointed out, giving her a peck on the cheek. She smiled sadly.

'I had the sense to walk away.'

'And yet,' he said quietly, 'here we are.'

She stared out of the window at the dusty town, her fingers gripping the dusty sill tightly. 'As you say…'

'You know, I hate to admit it, but for once, my half-uncle has a point.'

'Frank is - and always has been - a blunt instrument,' Selen replied softly. 'We might need his fleet to fight the Mazone, but I'm not happy about it. Nor do I like their reasons for getting involved. Oki's on his way down and I know damn well Destiny won't want my sister involved in this. Yayoi has a tendency to overreact…'
'She's already overreacting,' Blaze broke in. 'Just sending Leopard in at high speed is proof enough of that.'

Selen sighed. 'She always did react rather than wait and consider.'

'Which is why, as I recall, we ended up on opposite sides,' he replied. He stood behind her, smiling sadly as he always did when her head rested under his chin when she held her. Some part of him always seemed to expect it to be the other way around - as though the little boy he had once been would always remain so. 'You're the sensible one, remember?'

She turned in his embrace and pulled away slightly so she could look into his eyes. His father's blue. She smiled sadly and flicked a stray lock of dark hair out of his eyes. 'That's what your father used to tell me…'

The catch in her voice was his only warning, and she turned and clung to him, crying silently into his jacket. He held her tightly for the longest time, not even noticing when his own silent tears joined hers.

'What is this?' Roderick growled as the third ship in an hour roared and rumbled overhead, momentarily blocking out the sun. 'Destiny Central?'

Ben slapped his crewmate on the shoulder and winced, shaking his hand to unnumb his fingers. 'Like hitting a brick wall,' he muttered. Roderick scowled through a scraggly black beard.

'And yet, you keep doing it…'

'I'm nothing if not an optimist,' Ben replied airily.

'You're a lot of things, Benjy-blue - most of 'em ain't repeatable in polite company.'

'That's the Poseidon,' Greg offered as he strolled past, one end of a large wooden beam on his shoulders. The other end was taken by a burly member of the Seventh Star's crew. 'The one before that was the Mephistopheles…'

'Uh-uh.' Ben corrected. 'The Mephisto - please note correct name - was this morning. Leopard's new ship was the last one before this. He's still in with Selen.'

'Are we friends with these guys now?' Rod snorted. He bent down to pick up more debris from the ground and swore as the carbonised wood broke apart when he tried to lift it. 'Bollocks. I need an industrial sized dustpan…'

'Friends, no… but Hoshino's had to haul ass over here to make excuses for his former underling, the Evil Empire are spitting feathers over Promethium's childhood home getting trashed, and the Alliance and the Evil Empire are both in shit with Destiny over this attack in Colonial Space and the death and kidnapping of colonial citizens - once the bottle stops spinning it'll be pointed right at these Mazone and they'll be falling over themselves to assure the Captain that they had nothing to do with it…' Ben's expression was grim.

'Pissing themselves as they do it, no doubt,' Rod sniggered. He looked up from his clearing of another pile of rubble and pointed. 'Oi - ain't that Leopard coming out now?'

Ben followed the direction the bigger pirate was pointing in and nodded. 'He needs to ditch the beret… it's so gay…'
He was twenty yards away, and over the sounds of heavy machinery and crashing rubble as the
townsperson and the crew of the Seventh Star worked on clearing the damaged housing, he shouldn't
have been able to hear the comment. But piercing blue eyes under a shock of prematurely white
hair glared straight at the blue-skinned pirate, before their owner turned on a militarily precise heel,
saluted Selen, and strode away.

'Captain's right... he really does have a tight ass...' Ben murmured, tilting his head on one side
appraisingly as he watched the officer walk away.

'The captain,' Zack said dryly from behind his left shoulder, 'doesn't mean it the way you do...'

The rest of the pirates laughed, and Ben shrugged off the observation with a grin. Zack looked
round at the assembled crew and frowned. 'Where's Ali? Blaze is looking for him.'

'Last time we looked, making inroads on his second bottle of Andromedan Red in as many days,'
Ben replied darkly. 'That stuff'll send you blind.'

'Funny - that's what my mum told me about some of the things you get up to,' Zack replied
cheekily. Ben aimed a swat at the younger man's head, which was skillfully ducked.

'Cheeky fucker. Since you've just come from the ship then, any news on Tadashi?'

Zack's mood instantly sobered. He shook his head. 'Still unconscious. But he's breathing on his
own now - that thing did a number on his neck. They think most of the plant toxins are out of his
system. But it's a close thing. Selen's been in touch with Hannibal - one of his ships will rush him
to Deathshadow Island. It's not like we've got great facilities here.'

'Any word from the captain?' Ben asked.

Zack shook his head. 'In flight, and we only got the relays back up this morning. It'll take them at
least three more days to get here - but it's worrying they haven't dropped out of IN-SKIP to get in
touch...'

'They don't know what happened though, only that we were out of touch.' Maji leaned against a
charred upright, his arms folded. 'I just hope none of this lot - he jerked his head upwards to
indicate the orbiting ships - get trigger happy when he arrives.'

Snorts all round. 'Like they could put a scratch on the Arcadia?' Greg voiced what the others were
thinking.

'Ain't about them scratching us,' Maji added gloomily. 'It's about starting a shooting war. We've got
Alliance, Machinner, Colonial, Thieves and us all lined up and twitchy coz of these Mazone - won't
take much to set it all off.'

'I rather think that's what they were trying to do,' Ben added thoughtfully. 'Not sure quite what that
uptight little tosser in the clink thought he was going to achieve by taking the kids - some high-
falutin' crap about luring the captain out seems to be as far as his narrow little mind gets - he's all
about law and order, that one. Ironic - given that he's responsible for an illegal raid outside his own
territory... but his leggy red-haired boss seems to think bigger - and according to Daisuke, she was
in cahoots with the Mazone. Seems to me it'd suit them just fine right now if we were at each
other's throats - they could sail right on through whilst we scrapped amongst ourselves.'

'Can't be that simple, though,' Zack said. When they all turned to stare expectantly at him and he
realised they were waiting for some profound insight, he flushed. 'Well, it never is, is it?'
Ben slapped him on the back, almost staggering him. 'Freckles - there might be cleverer ways of looking at this snafu, but I can't fault your assessment.'

Rod shook his head. 'So basically whatever they got planned, we're fucked?'

Ben grinned. 'Aaaaannnmmmddd the insights just keep on coming!' he beamed at them and Maji rolled his eyes. 'Truth is people, we're always fucked - we just have to bear in mind what we always do in times like these…'

'Which is?' Greg asked, looking at him squintwise.

'Fuck 'em right back!' Maji, Zack and Ben chorused. But the levity lasted for only an instant, before all of them exchanged worried glances, and tried to lose themselves in the hard manual labour of getting the town back on its feet.

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**Seventh Star**

Daiba found Meg sitting at Tadashi's bedside in the infirmary.

'Aria sent me,' he said quietly, holding out a sealed coffee mug and a take out box. 'You haven't eaten.' He stared guiltily at the still figure of his namesake, pale and bruised in equal measure. The marks around his throat were a spectacular mix of purple green and yellow. 'I know I joked about not liking sharing my name, but I never wished him any harm,' he whispered. 'He's a nice guy.' He held the coffee out again. 'C'mon Meg - at least drink something.'

She shook her head. 'Not thirsty. Or hungry.' She held Tadashi's hand in her small one, where it rested on the cover. 'They took him off the ventilator, but he won't wake up.' Her narrow shoulders started to shake. 'Why won't he wake up?'

Daiba placed his packages on the bedside cabinet and awkwardly put his arms around the tiny pirate. She burrowed into his shoulder and sobbed silently into his sweater as he patted her back gently, not sure what to say. 'They've got some nasty neurotoxins, according to Harlock - might just be that getting them out of his system takes time,' he settled on eventually. She sniffled and raised a tear stained face to look at him.

'Is that supposed to be a reassuring smile?' she asked after a brief pause. He assayed a slight shrug. 'You look like you just chewed on a stick of liquorice…' She sniffled again.

'I know. My bedside manner sucks.' He grabbed the takeout box and placed it in her hand. 'Hold this.' He grabbed the coffee, and started to tow her out of the room.

'Where… what…'

'Out of here, somewhere quiet, you're gonna eat something, and I'm going to stand by on snot duty.' He pointed the coffee mug at a damp spot on his chest. 'Since you seem hell-bent on using me as a hanky.' The Seventh Star had a small crew lounge and he dragged her - mostly unresisting - into it and shut the door. Most of the crew had gone to help with the clearance of the town or to guard the prisoners, so apart from the med staff, they had the ship to themselves. He got Meg seated on as sofa and plopped down next to her. 'Are you going to eat that?' he pointed to the take out tray. When she shook her head absently, staring glumly into her coffee, he opened it up and grabbed one half of the triple-decker sandwich inside. When she looked at it a little listlessly on its way from box to mouth, he sheepishly handed over the box. Whilst he gobbled up his purloined portion, she nibbled on hers, periodically picking at the lettuce that dropped into the box on her lap.
'Seen Ali?' she mumbled between bites.

'About an hour ago, down the pub. Where he's probably staying for the foreseeable future since that shit he's drinking tends to interfere with the motor and the higher functions…'

The door irised open and he looked up. A group of small children hovered in the doorway, until Freya ran into the room and crawled into his lap. The little nibelung girl - if, he thought, you could call her a child - in all honesty he wasn't sure what she was, although her blissful search for contact was certainly childlike - burrowing happily into his neck, her arms wrapped around him.

'Ladies' man,' Meg sniped, half-heartedly. He stuck his tongue out at her.

'You're jealous.'

As if she understood, Freya unwrapped herself from Daiba, and shimmied over into Meg's lap for a cuddle. Meg rolled her eyes but held the little girl close anyway. Daiba's lap now free, the little nibelung's companions swarmed onto the small sofa, and the pair found themselves buried underneath a pile which consisted of Selen's three youngest, and Nami. The boys were doing their best to bear up manfully, but Kanna was tearful and Nami wasn't far behind.

'Rei?' Daiba addressed the oldest of the group. Normally as stoic as his older brothers, Rei's reddened eyes and runny nose suggested he'd also been crying.

'Hannibal called. Mom just heard about Marin,' he sniffed. Meg shuffled closer - no easy task with a lap full of small alien - and handed him one of the napkins from the take-out box. Despite it being a bit greasy Rei took it and blew his nose noisily.

'Mazone?' Daiba asked, through gritted teeth. Rei shook his head.

'Not really - there was some kind of accident - Hannibal said that Harlock said that a whole load of ships had blown up - something to do with their drives. And it did something… Marin just warped into it, and the ship…' he hiccupped. 'The ship…'

Kanna started wailing again, and Daiba tried to juggle a sniffling Nami and her bawling friend, without much success. At least until Freya disentangled herself from Meg and laid a cool little hand on Kanna's cheek. To the surprise of both teenagers, her large almond-shaped eyes were shedding tears. But Kanna's wails subsided to a soft series of sniffles and she hugged Freya hard enough to elicit a little squeak from the alien.

Rei's offer of an already soggy, grease-stained napkin however was rejected. Her brother shrugged, and put his arm around Nami instead.

'Powerful explosions can seriously warp space-time over a large area,' Meg mused out loud. 'It's why battlefields in space are best avoided for years afterwards.'

'Dad told us about the battle near Lar Metal,' Rei offered sadly. 'I never believed him that energy weapons could miss because of the warping effect - thought he was just yanking my chain…'

'Tadashi told me about it as well,' Meg said quietly. 'A few years back the Arcadia got into it with some wreckers near a rift they'd been using to lure in passing ships - some kind of sub-dimensional junkyard. They had to close it later with one of the Oscillators the old Harlock had deployed.'

'Mom said something about that to Hannibal - I think it left a hole they've gotta close.' Rei nodded in agreement. 'But it wasn't just Mal and the crew… I think thousands of those plant-womens' ships blew up. It was bad… real bad.'
'I'm not sure that's what some of us are thinking,' Daiba ground out. Rei stared at him wide-eyed. 'They took the twins and Taro and almost killed Tadashi, remember?'

'Not all of them', Daisuke piped up in his boyish treble. 'I mean - we don't blame all grown-ups for stuff only some of them do, do we? That's what mom and dad always said, anyway.'

Meg kicked Daiba on the ankle as he opened his mouth to reply. Before he could complain that just because he'd been about to slander the entirety of the Mazone race because -hell- they were Mazone, she gave him a warning shake of his head, and he subsided. Instead he found himself staring straight into Freya's cat-like eyes, wide and sorrowful.

'Við vorum ekki allir góðir heldur …' she murmured.

He still had that strange connection which allowed him to understand her: We were not all good either…

Abandoned mine, outside of Tabito Town

Hoshino bristled at the escort, but Oki insisted on escorting him to see Irita. He didn't have much choice other than to accept the man's "offer", but the blue-haired admiral hadn't given him much choice.

'What do you expect me to do? Spring him?' he asked sarcastically. He aimed a glare at the aquatics who followed them at a discreet distance, power-tridents held with studied nonchalance.

Oki shrugged. His long blue hair was held back from his face by a silver circlet, which also revealed the faint lines of his gill-slits on the side of his neck, tightly closed against Tabito's dry, dusty air. 'I have my orders, Admiral. But you're a guest, even if an unwelcome one. It's my duty to escort you. Besides - it's not us you need to worry about. A lot of people here are seriously unhappy with your subordinate's actions. Think of us as your bodyguards…'

'It's a sorry state of affairs when pirates and rebels are more welcome in the colonies than the law-abiding representatives of a neighbouring government,' Hoshino snapped.

Oki's generous mouth compressed into a thin disapproving line. 'A government which supports the actions of a regime which had to be hounded out of this part of the galaxy for rounding up millions of people and either forcibly converting them to machinners, or slaughtering them to harvest their life-force - and in the process leaving thousands of small children abandoned on the planets they depopulated, either to die or to be rounded up in their turn as slaves for yet another unwelcome despot. Frankly, Hoshino, I'm amazed you have the nerve to complain.' Back ramrod straight, he strode ahead of his Alliance counterpart, forcing the other man to almost jog to keep up.

'Did you ever stop to ask yourself if the Queen's right?' Hoshino asked as he caught up. 'Her way at least puts an end to so much suffering. Humanity has no home anymore - you think living on these marginal worlds eking out a living is a good thing? Crime on the Machinners planets is minimal. They don't hunger, they don't rebel…'

'They don't think,' Oki shot back. 'They don't care about anything anymore. As for crime - of course it's reported as minimal - crimes against those who still have their own bodies isn't recorded. They treat the living as an underclass - there to be harvested for their essence - the substance which gives the high ranking machinners their vitality - without which they'd be as apathetic and compliant as their lower class counterparts. That's not living, Hoshino. It's an abomination. If you think it's such a great idea, why don't you sign up for a machine body yourself?'
In reply, Hoshino stopped and rolled up the sleeve of his right arm. Underneath the uniform, instead of flesh, his skin was jet black, shot through with what looked like tiny red stars. 'I did,' he replied quietly. 'After I saw what happened during the plague. I vowed I'd never risk my family again just to maintain some outdated idea of what it is to be human.'

Oki shook his head sadly. 'You fool. Don't you have a son under ten? What of him?'

Hoshino rolled down his sleeve and fastened his cuff again. 'I'd have waited, and taken him for conversion. But my wife ran, took him with her. I've not been able to find them, although I put on of our best hunters on it.'

Oki walked on. 'And that didn't tell you something?' he asked blandly.

'Yes. That she had help.'

Oki resisted the temptation to roll his eyes at that. 'Missing the point much? Nevermind, we're here. Take your time - I've had the rest of your people moved to your ship as requested. Are you sure you don't want these two?'

Hoshino's smile, under his thick beard, was thin and cruel. 'I might have my differences professionally with that pissant little traitor, but I still owe him for saving my family during the plague - and I know what it is to search for a child. He can have the pair with my blessing.'

Oki watched him stride into the dark mine entrance with an amused smile playing around the corners of his mouth. 'Generous of you,' he muttered. 'Good job you haven't figured out who your wife asked for help yet…'

He leaned against one of the supporting upright beams, folded his arms, and settled down to wait for his charge to return.

The sound of booted feet scuffing through gravel alerted Irita to their visitor. Since the guards had fed them only an hour ago (he'd been allowed to keep his watch, at least) he wondered if the Millennial Thieves had finally sent in the interrogators. But the figure he could make out fuzzily standing in front of his bars was the familiar bearded bulk of his former commanding officer.

'Admiral.' He snapped to attention as best he could under the circumstances, the effect ruined by short-sighted peering and his three day-worn uniform. In her corner, Shizuka looked up briefly and ignored them both.

'Captain.' Hoshino looked him up and down and snorted. 'You're a mess. Appropriate, since you've caused more trouble in the last few days than I've ever had to mop up after Harlock - which is quite an achievement.'

'I can explain-' he began.

Hoshino waved him into silence. 'Save it for your court-martial - assuming you live that long. I've had your surviving men taken into our custody. Can't exactly blame them for following the orders of a congenital idiot.'

Irita flushed angrily. 'Admiral - the orders I followed were countersigned by the President himself. If-'

Hoshino raised a hand to cut him off again. 'Irita - you had the makings of a good officer, despite your origins. But you screwed the pooch when you took a ship into Colonial space and orchestrated
the kidnapping of - ' he paused dramatically at this point. 'For fuck's sake, Irita - three small children? Did you even think this through? It's a public relations' disaster!' 

'Harlock's children,' Irita retorted. 'If I'd succeeded, he'd have come running to hand himself in!' 

Hoshino took a step towards the bars and despite himself, Irita took a step backwards. 'Article 53? *That* was your plan? You're a blithering idiot. Harlock would have torn into us all guns blazing without hesitating! And he'd have had half the SDF supporting him because you violated their space - *Colonial citizens*, Irita - it doesn't matter who their damn parents are, what you did amounts to an act of war. And before you open your prissy little mouth again to protest that you'd have handed me Harlock on a plate if your plan had worked, you would still have caused a damn war - since you lost control of the situation, blew up half a town and your men killed six locals.' 

'Harlock's men set the explosives-' Irita began. He was cut short again. 

'Harlock's men didn't set fire to the childhood home of Queen Promethium II, arrest her sister, and threaten to kill her nephews and niece,' Hoshino retorted. 'Or was I misinformed?'

Irita closed his mouth and said nothing. 

'Wise,' Hoshino told him. 'Because I not only have the SDF to pacify, but also the Queen - who'd like your head on a spike. But since she's in Andromeda, and Harlock's likely to explode into orbit in that skull-prowed abomination anytime in the next forty-eight hours, he gets you first. And Irita - if there's anything left of you by the time they've both finished with you, you can kiss your career in IntSec goodbye. I think there's an opening in the Space Sheriff's for a bright, ambitious officer who has just pissed away any chance of advancement in any other branch of the military goodbye.' 

Shizuka shifted then, and walked slowly over to the bars. After several days underground and without shower facilities, she looked dishevelled and pale, but nevertheless Irita noticed she still managed to exude an air of gamine frailty - playing the damsel in distress for all she was worth, the realised with a mental snort. 

*Good luck to you*, he wished her mentally. *He's not had the equipment to be tempted by that for two years...*

'Admiral. Captain Irita acted under my orders - and mine came from-' 

Hoshino's hand slammed against the bars with an audible clang that made both prisoners jump. 'I'm not sure *where* your orders came from, madam - but one thing I do know: they certainly didn't come from either the Prime Minister or the President. If Harlock doesn't tear you to pieces, you'll be going home to face charges of treason - in the diplomatic pouch.' 

Shizuka flinched. 'The Prime minister signed the order himself,' she replied haughtily, once she regained her composure. 

Hoshino's answering snort would have done credit to one of the draught horses Tabito had imported to help with the clearance work a year or two back. 'I'm sure he did. The question everyone seems to have is why he has no memory of doing so?'

'Convenient,' Irita answered dryly, sensing an opening. 

'Verified by one of the new memory scanners from Shaitan,' Hoshino replied smoothly, slamming the door on the escape route firmly. 'His memory of that meeting ends around the time Miss Namino placed some papers on his desk and only returns when she leaves the room. A neat trick, madam - but once we were alerted to the issue, rest assured, no stone was left unturned in
examining the scope of your actions. Which are not limited to the loss of a patrol ostensibly trying to intercept Harlock as he left Earth space a few weeks ago. Right now every single woman employed by the alliance is under review and having extensive testing.'

Shizuka turned away but too late to hide the very slight smirk on her face.

Hoshino smiled. 'Nice to know it's not limited to the fairer sex. Thank you - we had wondered if Harlock's data pointed at some shapeshifting ability.'

Irita couldn't resist. 'Seems you need to work on your pokerface, Director.' She ignored him, and went back to her cot.

A deep throbbing rumble reverberated through the tunnel as she sat down, causing the walls and roof to shake. Dirt and gravel trickled down onto the floor, and dusted the hair of all three. Hoshino flicked the tiny bits of rubble out of his dark hair and looked towards the entrance with a grim smile as the sound continued, drawing closer. 'It seems the Arcadia is gracing us with its presence a little earlier than expected,' he drawled. He was already walking away from the makeshift brig as Oki's men came to escort him.

Irita watched him leave with narrowed eyes - partly due to having to squint to see much. He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. 'It appears the moment of reckoning is upon us both,' he said quietly.

'Aren't you worried?' Shizuka asked. Peering at her he couldn't tell if she was pale and fraught due to her circumstances or because she was nervous of falling into the pirate's clutches.

'Of what? An outlaw? His reputation might cause trepidation in the troops, but when all's said and done, he's just a lucky upstart trading on the fear and awe of his predecessor. It's not as though anyone would be terrified of Space Pirate Captain Yama, is it?'

'Perhaps,' she drawled sarcastically, 'but that was before we arranged to kidnap his children.'

'Men don't frighten me, Director. Men can be dealt with,' he replied haughtily.

She laughed harshly. 'Men, perhaps, Irita - but what about legends?'

To that, he had no reply, and in the silence that fell over the tunnel like a thick blanket as the Arcadia's powerful engines powered down, you could hear every slither of dirt and gravel its passing had shaken loose, grain by grain.
Chapter 37

Daiba watched from the landing field as the Arcadia passed overhead in a cloud of dark matter. The massive ship looked lower in the sky than it really was, and didn't come in for a landing. As he watched, hand raised to shield his eyes against the low afternoon sun, small craft dropped out of the cloud and headed for the field.

'Grandstanding...' he muttered. But then he looked around at the hardened standing, where several shuttlecraft sat around the bulk of the Seventh Star. Machinners, Alliance, SDF... He sighed. Or perhaps he just felt there was no room to park.

'Needs to get those emissions checked,' Zack quipped next to his left ear. 'Instant fail on some planets, that...' But the jest was half-hearted and neither of them felt like laughing. Daiba took a firmer grip on Freya's slim hand as the black and red Space Wolf belonging to Harlock circled the field once, then came in for a vertical landing about two hundred yards away. 'Why did we draw the short straw and get the job of telling him?' Zack asked plaintively. He held Nami in his arms, as the little girl had been adamant she wanted to see her parents as soon as they landed. 'And do you really think we need the reinforcements?' he smiled at Nami and then rubbed noses with the sorrowful little girl, in an attempt to raise a smile. To her credit she did try to return the smile.

'Because the rest of them chickened out, or were just too plastered from wallowing in their own guilt to form a coherent sentence,' Daiba replied, a little more frostily than he'd intended. 'Even Ben found something terribly important to do that couldn't wait.'

Zack nudged him with a sharp elbow. 'Oh shit... it's gonna be bad...' he muttered. At Daiba's blank look he pointed. 'Black pants...'

The cockpit canopy had lifted, and a tall figure in a black flightsuit exited and began walking towards them, dark hair blowing in the early evening breeze. Before he'd gone even a quarter of the way, Nami had wriggled out of Zack's arms and was running towards the new arrival as fast as her legs could carry her.

'Papa!'

Daiba watched as Harlock sank down to one knee and held out his arms for his daughter. Even from this distance he could make out the hiccuping sobs, and he watched with a lump in his throat as Harlock stood up, the little girl in his arms, and began walking towards them again.

'That's torn it,' Zack said unsteadily.

'Then you should have kept a tighter hold on her,' Daiba whispered, as Harlock reached hearing distance. 'Captain!'

Harlock nodded in acknowledgement, still holding Nami in his arms. 'Daiba. Zack. I take it the rest of them didn't dare face me?'

His voice was calm and uninflected, and nothing except concern marred his features, and that only when he dealt with an exceptionally upset hiccup. Daiba flinched. 'No matter. Hush, Nami. I know. Mama will be here shortly. It's going to be all right. We'll bring them back.'

He turned his attention back to the two youths in front of him, and then looked down. 'And this must be Freya?' He knelt again, and placed Nami on his bent knee. 'I've heard a lot about you.'
Daiba felt her hand tug impatiently against his grip, and he let her go. She walked up to Harlock, quite unafraid, and smiled at him. Then she tipped her head on one side like a little bird, frowned slightly, and then reached out and laid a pale hand on his scarred cheek.

Harlock stared down into the wide, almond shaped pale eyes and smiled. A tiny rosebud smiled back at him, outwardly serene, but he felt the thin, long fingers on his cheek tremble slightly, and the cat-like pupils - so like Mimay's - were never as unreadable as their owners would like. He held out his free arm and smiled sadly as she almost sprang into his embrace, desperate for attention and acceptance. He rested his chin on her fine, soft, ash-pale hair, as silky as her full-grown counterpart's. 'Must have been lonely, I'm guessing, stuck in that bottle all these years?' he whispered. He received a little nod in reply. 'Not any more, little one. If you want a home, you can have one with us.' He looked down at his tearful daughter. 'Nami? How do you feel about having a new sister?'

Hazel eyes that matched his own stared into his and Nami nodded, and reached out a hand to Freya, which was taken. 'We've been playing. She's nice. She even made Kanna smile, and she's been crying ever since… ever since…'

The tears started again and Harlock held her close, helplessly wishing for a way to make things right.

'How did…' Daiba began, fishing desperately for a way to find out just how much his cousin knew about the situation. 'When we spoke to Hannibal and he said you were on your way, all he'd known at the time was that we'd been out of touch for too long…'

Harlock disentangled himself from two small girls and stood up, taking one hand in each of his. 'Someone calling herself Commander Cassandra hailed us. She had the boys, and was keen on making sure I understood how much danger they were in if I dared to get in their way. Then she threatened them on screen in front of me and Mamoru ended up getting hurt trying to save his twin. After that, I've been red-lining the safety margins to get here in time to pick up their trail.' His habitually easy-going demeanour vanished, and although the breeze wasn't cold, both youths shivered.

'Hurt?' Zack asked the question a fraction of a second ahead of Daiba. Both stared at their captain, concern written on both their faces.

'There was a scuffle - he got slashed across the face and that's the last we heard. But right now since there's nothing I can do about it, I intend to concentrate on what I can deal with, and that's finding them.' His tone was quiet, very matter of fact, and he offered nothing else.

Zack exchanged a questioning frown with Daiba, but the younger youth shook his head. *Don't press…* Zack grimaced, his mouth pressed into a thin line, but held his tongue.

Harlock began walking towards the town, but a tug on his hand by Freya stopped him in his tracks. 'What is it?' he asked. He looked back over his shoulder at Daiba. 'She does understand me, right?'

Daiba nodded. Freya tugged Harlock's hand again for attention, a little moue of frustration on her lips as he didn't immediately respond. When she had his attention she pointed, upwards and from their perspective, to the north. *'Pessa leið!'*

Harlock looked to Daiba for help. 'This way… that way… something like that, I think she means.' Freya nodded emphatically. *'Ég get fundið…'*
'That I think I can follow…' Harlock said softly. 'You can sense Mamoru? The dark matter?'

She nodded. 'Myrkur!'

'Murky?' Zack asked, puzzled.

'Dark, at a guess,' Harlock replied absently. Another nod. A torrent of her native language then gushed forth, more than Daiba had heard her speak in total up to now, until Harlock had to shush her with a finger to her tiny lips. 'Whoa! We don't follow you that well… I think I need you and Mimay to meet.' He looked up at Daiba. 'Blaze gave me a quick update before I came down. I managed to head Kei off at the pass and send her off with Doc to see to Tadashi, but that won't give me much time before all hell breaks loose. I gather that moron from IntSec and his puppet master are being held in the old mine?'

Daiba nodded. 'Blaze let Hoshino take the troops - though he held out for some serious compensation. They're making those guys help with the rebuilding. Selen's in two minds whether or not to take Promethium's offer to rebuild or not though.'

'She should take it. Winter's on its way - no sense in making everyone here suffer for the bad blood between those two.'

'Funny,' Daiba replied as they walked. 'That's what Blaze told her.' He paused, almost causing Zack to walk straight into him, and both youths stumbled. 'Captain - I'm sorry. That captain - he interrogated me, before you found me, on Hakidame. He was positively gloating about how I'd coughed up some family stuff to him, before Ali started re-arranging his internal organs. And at the mine… I was too late… maybe if…'

'Tadashi - no-one blames you,' Harlock replied softly. 'Certainly not for anything you might have said given the state you were in. I saw Doc's tox work-up for you - I'd have been singing like a canary under that load. And if you had reached the mine in time to clash with the Mazone, I might be looking down at two hospital beds later, not one. Or worse.' As though something had just occurred to him, he glanced around the open field with a frown. 'Not that it's a bad day for a walk, but are all the vehicles in use right now? It's a long walk for the girls…'

Zack grinned and slapped his captain on the shoulder. 'Yep - but we did manage to grab something - we just had to park out of sight of the landing field.' He pointed to a stand of stunted trees a couple of hundred yards away. 'I'm going back to the Seventh Star until you send down a bullet for our stuff and the samples, so you can take my ride back to town…'

Two large, grey, round backsides were visible sticking out of the small copse, tails swishing against the flies that buzzed around them, occasionally punctuated by an irritated stamp of a large hoof.

'You can ride, can't you?' Daiba asked. He used a convenient tree stump to scramble onto the back of one of the two sturdy horses the town used for odd jobs when wheeled vehicles just couldn't cope, and shifted backwards in the large saddle to let Zack hand Freya up to him.

Harlock eyed the other mount from under a lock of dark hair and sighed. 'Ride, yes… Amazing the skills you end up picking up over the years. I was just hoping for something a little more streamlined than Gog and Magog here: these two are built for hauling freight, not passengers, and their trots leave a lot to be desired when it comes to in-flight comfort.' But he vaulted onto Magog's back lightly and expertly, and took Nami off Zack when she was handed up to him. His daughter slapped his attempts to hold onto her away and sat confidently in front of him, her small hands gripping a handful of the gelding's long mane, her feet drumming enthusiastically but ineffectually
against his thick shoulders. Freya, in front of Daiba, looked less confident, and Daiba wrapped his left arm around her tiny waist before he nudged the grey into a slow walk. 'I didn't know you could handle a horse though,' Harlock told Daiba once they were moving.

Daiba shrugged. 'Picked it up when dad, mom and I were out in the wilds. Lot of worlds use them these days - easier to maintain than motor vehicles when your critical infrastructure's in tatters and most of your mechanics are long gone. We had to make use of camels on El Alamein - and if you think *these* guys are uncomfortable…'

'Isn't that planet off limits since the Machinners War?'

Daiba nodded, glad of the distraction. 'Yep. Someone had the bright idea of stuffing human minds into the weapons directly - as you might expect it went horribly wrong. That was after we left though - dad had been chasing down some old legends from the original colonists, who hailed from the old eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean back on Earth. They say that the weapons are still buried under the sands, waiting…' he shuddered. 'Bad enough being stuffed into a machine body forever - but turned into tanks and guns and then left to rust? I just don't get why anyone would agree to that.'

'Most of them probably didn't,' Harlock replied quietly, over his daughter's dark head. 'In the last few months of the war the Machinners were starting to lose. We had Promethium on the run and were so close to finishing the entire programme for good, when the former Gaia Council threw in the towel and signed a peace treaty and pulled their fleet out of the conflict. The SDF had no choice really but to follow suit, since the loose alliance of un-allied ships out here wasn't enough to hold the line against both the Machinners and the Earth Alliance.'

'Why? If they were winning…'

'Ask Hoshino when you meet him. He was part of that delegation.' His tone was bleak. 'The Gaia Fleet wouldn't have waded in at all on our side if we hadn't forced their hand at the start - in hindsight it's probably amazing they fought against Promethium for as long as they did.'

Daiba rode alongside Harlock, silent for a while. 'You don't really expect much from them in this fight, do you?' he asked eventually.

Harlock shook his head. 'Not really. I'm guessing Hoshino and Leopard are only here because Promethium's kicking up a stink about this attack. Whether either of them will bother going the distance is doubtful - and in all honesty after what I've seen in the past few weeks, a shooting war is the last thing we need - any major fleet engagement will risk the same outcome we're trying to stop - if those ships get to their destinations - or even close to them - and blow those drives, the results will be catastrophic.'

'Damned if we do and damned if we don't?' Daiba asked.

Harlock nodded. 'Welcome to the horns of the dilemma… a painful place to sit. I've got the most powerful battleship in human history at my fingertips, and right now it's about as much use as a chocolate coffee mug.'

'You have the *darkness*.'

Both men stared at the little nibelung sitting in front of Daiba. She stared right back at Harlock with wide, unblinking eyes.

'Freya?' Daiba tapped her shoulder to get her attention. 'You learn quickly…'
She gave him a frustrated little sigh and ignored him, keeping her gaze on Harlock, who nudged Magog closer to his brother. 'The Wild... maze... on Niflheim. They... evolved? to subsume the darkness, but it is... anathema to them. Sacrifice... barriers... constant power...' she muttered something in her own tongue and ended in a tiny squeal that sounded frustrated. 'Poison?' she offered eventually, staring into Harlock's single visible eye.

'Sometimes,' Daiba murmured, 'I forget you're not actually a little girl...' He met Harlock's questioning gaze. 'Back on Niflheim, the city she controlled the power source for had held back the plant life for decades or longer. I guess she must have found some way to use the dark matter to do it. And didn't you use something like it to cleanse Arcadia when we were infested?'

'Huh. The cure was almost as bad as the problem - kind of like using a controlled burn to stop a forest fire spreading,' Harlock answered. 'And it's a balancing act as we found out - too little dark matter and they just absorb it. Too much and we create the same sort of catastrophic side effects that destroyed Earth.' The deep sigh that followed was more frustration than despair. 'And it's academic if I don't get my sons out of there first - anyone who tries to start a fight whilst they're still on board one of those ships will have to go through me first, and the big picture be damned.'

'That's not going to sit too well with the military bods waiting for you to turn up,' Daiba pointed out.

'I didn't expect it would,' Harlock replied bleakly. 'But it wouldn't be the first time I've put the Arcadia between Hoshino's fleet and a civilian target. He's far too quick to write off "collateral damage" in the name of "the greater good". He paused. 'For someone who claims he learned so much from Isora, he tends to conveniently overlook the fact that my brother was prepared to sacrifice himself to save what most people thought was a dead planet.'

They rode on in silence for a few minutes before Daiba plucked up enough courage to risk another question. 'So what happened the last time?'

Harlock kept his gaze fixed on a point somewhere in between Magog's ear's as though using them as a sight. 'He did an end run around me and destroyed the planet anyway. Said he couldn't risk anyone breaking quarantine, even though we had the vaccine by then.' Then he added almost inaudibly. 'And then I had to race his damn fleet here to stop him doing the same to Tabito. Zero had to push the Futatsuboshi to the limit to hold the line with the Thieves fleet - as a result he and his crew died, because they couldn't get the vaccine prepared for themselves. Twice now I've had to board that ship looking for survivors, because I asked someone to do me a favour.' The bitterness in his voice was almost tangible, and Nami looked up at her father with worried eyes. Absently, he gave her a brief hug.

Daiba felt a tiny hand gently pat his face, and looked down. Freya stared into his eyes with her odd determination, and then looked over at Harlock, who rode on without looking over, a thoughtful frown on her normally smooth features.

Harlock stared around at the devastated main street. Inadvertently his hand tightened on his daughter's waist where he held her as she sat in front of the saddle, and Nami squeaked in protest. He loosened his grip. 'Sorry, Nami.'

'It's all right, papa - it's bad, isn't it?' Large hazel eyes stared up at him and she twisted herself almost into a pretzel to look at him. 'Rei said our house is gone.'

...along with most of the street. Harlock's mouth flattened into a hard line. The buildings had been old and of mostly timber construction. Since that had been more of a nostalgic conceit than a
necessary fact of life - Tabito wasn't a particularly tectonically active planet - from the look of the new foundations being cleared and laid, someone had decided to do the sensible thing and rebuild with stone from a nearby quarry. Waiting for wood to be ferried over from the unpopulated south and aged would have taken too long.

'I'm sure they'll have a new one up in no time,' he reassured her. 'I'm just thankful no-one was in it. Though I guess we'll have to find you some spare clothes from somewhere, huh?' She nodded solemnly, and he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. Looking over at Daiba he asked 'Well?'

'The pub's the only building with a large enough room to get everyone in. We've been having meetings over there.' He paused. 'Erm… we might need help getting Ali out though…'

'Leave him to me,' Harlock told him. He swung down off the broad-backed carthorse and held out his arms to help Nami scramble off, placing her gently on the dusty road. 'Selen?'

'Pub. When not being pestered by annoying admirals she's been setting up the kitchen there to feed everyone. The utilities are mostly down, but the pub had its own generator and water supply, so it's pretty much the only place right now anyone can get a hot meal. Most of the effort's gone into sorting out the power and water, and clearing the damaged buildings so they don't fall on anyone. There's a lot to co-ordinate.'

Harlock handed Daiba the reins. 'Put the horses away, then meet me in there. As for the co-ordination - they've got three bloody admirals in orbit, surely at least one of them could roll his sleeves up and pitch in to help sort this out?'

Daiba snorted. 'And get their lily-white fingers dirty? Perish the thought - although Oki's sent down some engineers to sort out the water supply, which was contaminated by the flooding as well as losing pipework in the fires and explosions - his people can't stay down long though - they need suits, or the dust…'

'I know. Clogs their Gill-slits. You'll have more help later - Yattaran's on it, and if someone makes sure Kei keeps a clipboard in her hands it might help redirect her energies a little.' He held out a hand to Freya, which was taken enthusiastically.

'Kei - and her clipboard?' Daiba muttered, watching his cousin and captain walk off with two little girls in tow. 'You're a fucking sadist… she'll run everyone ragged on a good day, let alone when she's in need of a serious displacement activity…'

Gog's reins were plucked out of his hand by a set of nimble, blue-skinned fingers. 'Which is why I figured they might need some help up by the dam,' Ben said brightly. 'This pair of hairy layabouts are needed urgently - Maji's co-opted the damn jeep over at the quarry, and we need to haul some tree trunks out of the way. Coming?'

Daiba looked longingly at the entrance to the local public house, through which Harlock and his charges were disappearing. But since the chances of him being allowed to sit in on whatever high-level discussions they'd be having were pretty slim, and it was far more likely he'd be press-ganged into working clear-up duty in the town if he hung around and didn't look busy enough. He sighed and eyed Magog's broad back glumly. 'It's a five mile ride out there, and these things have bugger all suspension…' he grumbled.

Ben grinned at him. 'See - I knew you'd be up for it! Fetch the haulage harness before anyone else tries to avoid the Wrath of Kei.'

After Daiba had disappeared in the direction of the stables on the outskirts, Greg sidled up to Ben
from where he'd been lurking behind one of the few remaining buildings this side of the street. 'Taking one for the team, Benjy - or just getting the pretty boy alone out in the wilds for a romantic ride?' he sniggered.

Ben flicked the reins at him, forcing his crewmate to dodge. 'Wash your brain out, Greg - kid's the captain's family. He's off limits, and besides - I don't do wounded birds. But if Kei can't get her hands on the people responsible for taking the boys, I'd prefer it if he's out of her reach for a bit. He thinks he's partly to blame for coughing up some intel under the influence of that tight-arse from IntSec.'

'She wouldn't...' Greg began. Then he shivered. 'Yeah. On second thoughts… So - why aren't you dragging Ali's rum-sodden arse along as well, if you're feelin' all altruistic like?'

'Because we've only got two horses,' Ben deadpanned. 'Make yourself useful, grab that harness off the kid and help fit it, then stick the saddles back on. I refuse to roll around like a ball-bearing on a joint of beef on top of these monsters.'

Greg did as he was told, but not without some mumbling complaints about who-the-hell-put-Ben-in-charge.

Ali did, the young crewman thought to himself, listening in with half an ear, the rest of his attention focused on the public house. When he decided to drown his bloody sorrows and wallow in booze-addled self-pity instead of manning up and getting on with the job. We've all got bloody skeletons in our closets, he thought sourly. We've all done things we regret. What we don't do - and what you're going to catch seven hells for from the captain - is let it get in the way of what needs to be done...

Selen was indeed in the kitchen, supervising several of the locals and some of the older children. From the rag-tag pile of stores being plundered, it looked as though they were working their way through whatever would spoil first.

'Send for Anita,' Harlock said from his vantage point in the doorway, safely out of the way of the activity. 'We've got plenty to spare.'

'That's not what I hear,' Selen replied, calling back over the clatter of pans and sputtering of hot oil in the large woks on the stove. She made her way over to his position, the bustling helpers moving out of her way as though she were parting the tide. 'Good grief, Harlock - how long has it been since you slept? You look like hell.' She hugged him tightly, and if he hadn't had his hands full of small girls, he'd have returned the favour tenfold.

'Is it insensitive to tell a woman the same thing?'

She smiled at him somewhat bleakly. 'Since Blaze feels no hesitation in doing so, feel free.' She looked down at his charges. 'If you can bear to let go of that death-grip on Nami, I can see she gets lunch and we can keep her here for you whilst you talk next door.' She smiled down at the girls. 'Freya too, if she wants?'

Nami tried to tug her hand free, and frowned up at her father when she failed to free her small paw. 'Papa?'

He smiled ruefully and reluctantly let her hand go. She instantly dragged Freya into the fray, joining Kanna, Rei and Daisuke who were "helping" - for some loosely defined version of the word - with some bread-making.
'I'd say she's safe here,' Selen said quietly, 'But under the circumstances…'

Harlock, his hands free, gave her a quick hug. 'I don't blame you, Selen. We gambled - we lost. Now I just have to pick the pieces of my own folly up and hope like hell I'm not too late.' He pushed her back to arm's length, his hands on her shoulders, and stared into her drawn, pale face. 'Damn it, Selen - I'm the one who should be apologising… Marin…'

She reached out to lay a hand on his cheek. 'I know. We got the news. It hurts, Harlock - it hurts like hell, but there's nothing more I can do for my son - and everything I can do for yours.' She peered over his shoulder. 'Did Kei come down with you?'

'Later,' he replied. 'I wanted to try and get a few details cleared up before she comes down, but I'm not too sure I can keep her occupied for long. She took it hard.' He took a deep breath. 'The one who took them - this Cassandra - she's a mean bitch. Taunted us over the warp feed, and Mamoru got cut up, looked pretty bad, before they cut the feed. Not a peep out them since.'

'Dammit. I should have put more men on them… we should have had more in-system…'

He placed a finger to her lips. 'Enough. We've all done enough what-ifs over the past few days between us I'm sure, to fill the Arcadia's databanks three times over. None of us ever thought the threat would come from Int-Sec, with co-ordinated, military back-up. This Irita crossed a line, and he'll pay for it from his superiors as well as from us, before everyone's through with him,' he said grimly.

Selen nodded. 'Oh. You have that right - I've had Alliance High command falling over themselves to apologise and a warp-feed from Destiny with Shura promising that this will not go unpunished politically - not that this gets us any closer to getting them back, I know, but you have a lot of friends in this sector, Harlock - now would be a good time to let some of them handle the bigger picture.'

'Whilst I go chasing myths and legends?'

She took a deep breath. 'Irita's actions might actually have a silver lining, though not on a personal level. It brought the Alliance and the Machinners into the arena. Go get your boys, Harlock - let me do what I do best - get these testosterone addled idiots round a table and try to come up with a plan. You know it's what you'd ask me to do anyway.'

He smiled sadly at her. 'You're a better friend than I deserve, do you know that? If I'd been more on the ball, I could have sav-'

She cut him short then, mirroring his own earlier gesture with a finger to his lips. 'I do not for a moment suspect that you could have done anything better, faster or more appropriate, my friend. My brother. Marin knew the risks he took - he was a grown man, and from what I heard, it was just a terrible accident. His crew likewise. No-one set out to hurt my son; space is vast, and full of terrors and dangers we sometimes just cannot fight. If not for the Arcadia's equally terrifying advantages, you'd have died out there years ago. We all would. And Rei… Rei died doing what he always did - helping others. We both gambled with our own lives for years, sooner or later one or both of us was bound to lose a throw of the dice. We all know they have no favourites,' she finished sadly.

He pulled her into another hug. 'I would still have willingly exchanged my life for either of them,' he told her fiercely.

'I know,' she whispered against his shoulder. 'And they - and I, and Blaze - would do the same for
you and Kei. I can't do much to help you in your coming quest - but I can have your back here. You and Kei - since we first met, you've stood by us in our fights. You became the brother I never had, and a sister I could be proud of. We're family.' She pulled out of his embrace and gave him a little shove. 'Now go, before one or both of us starts crying. I don't know about you, but I have a reputation to maintain!'

He looked over at the children, covered in flour and earnestly trying to show Freya how to knead dough, watched indulgently by three young women who all sported Holstered pistols underneath their white aprons. Nami saw him and waved, before Rei flicked water at her and she squealed. 'They're so much more resilient, aren't they?' he murmured. Kanna, he noticed though, held back from the rest and looked forlorn - even more so than his daughter. But then, she was two years older… and inordinately fond of Wattaru…

'Family in truth one day, maybe?'

Selen stood at his side, and watched with him. 'If that's what they want, when they're old enough, I'd like that.'

'So would I,' he said softly. 'Now I not only have to find my sons - I have to make sure they have that safe future I want for them. I wanted them to never know the horrors and the pain we had, Selen. Was that too much to ask?'

They both watched the children play alongside their new Nibelung playmate for a while, and neither could answer that question.

Having outgrown his welcome in the kitchen with lunchtime pending, Harlock found the main bar oddly empty when he walked in. But then, the locals and his crew were out trying to repair the damage, he reasoned. But the barstools were occupied by three smartly uniformed figures, and from the rear he was presented with the view of a dark head, silver hair, and blue. All of whom turned to face him as his metallic soles clunked their way across to the bar on the wooden floor.

'Vaughn.' He greeted the bartender with a smile. The dark-skinned man with tightly curled white hair slid a shot glass full of an amber liquid over to him with a grin.

'Cap'n. Just in time - I was about to call time on a certain bar-tab… I think I have something of yours over in the corner…'

Harlock looked in the direction of a sharp head-jerk, and sighed. He picked up his glass and downed the contents in one swallow. 'Cut him off, with my compliments. I'll settle up.'

'Eh. I know you're good for it. And it's not as though he's a noisy or mean drunk. But he's got a cloud of misery around him like the clouds the Arcadia always arrives in, and frankly it ain't good for custom.' But this was accompanied by a wink.

'Leave it with me. You still have that trough round the back?'

The barman nodded. 'Sure do. Need a hand?' He grinned wickedly, showing two rows of yellowed teeth.

'Oh. I think I can manage.' Harlock placed his glass down on the bar, and nodded to the other occupants. 'Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me for a few minutes, I have some personal business to attend to first?'

Hoshino's eyes narrowed, Leopard frowned, and Oki just shrugged. Taking those as a "yes",
Harlock sauntered over to his sorry looking excuse for a crewman. 'Up and at 'em, Ali. Time to stop shirking in here. In case you hadn't bloody noticed, there's a town in need of rebuilding.'

Bloodshot blue eyes stared up at him, and the face they belonged to just grunted and then went back to staring into the dregs of some unspecified liquid he was swirling idly in the bottom of a shot glass.

There was a time when Harlock had been the kind of man who'd hesitate before tackling one of his crew - especially one who outweighed him and was a noted brawler. But that had been a lifetime ago, when he'd borne a different name and a far less jaundiced view of human nature. He'd wised up very quickly when it became apparent that trying to reason with some of the thicker-skulled (and skinned) individuals under his command was a waste of time, breath and effort - as well as likely to see him shivved in the back one night and quietly shoved out of the nearest airlock, because a captain who was a soft touch earned no respect.

He reached over, grabbed Ali's collar, and heaved him to his unsteady feet. Not, he had to admit to himself, without effort - his resident pain-in-the-arse was solid muscle under the sweater he wore - which stank of stale booze and sweat. 'For fuck's sake, Ali, how long since you bothered to take a damn shower?'

'Piss off.'

In private, he might have let that go with a pithy retort. In public - and in front of three professional soldiers, two of whom had a vanishingly small appreciation of his management techniques, that wasn't something he could let slide. He jabbed a fist as lightly as he could into the big idiot's side, but aimed for a spot he knew would give the maximum return for his effort without causing too much damage.

The pained grunt he got as his fist connected with the old injury in Ali's side was gratifyingly gargled and caused his drunken crewmate to double over, gripping his captain's flightsuit sleeve as he hissed in pain. 'Got your attention now?' Harlock growled into Ali's ear as the man slumped against him. 'Move your feet - I'm not dragging you outside.'

'Allow me…' Oki had left his barstool and walked over, and deftly took Ali's other arm. 'No sense dragging this idiot all the way into the backyard by yourself - and besides, I think water was mentioned? That would be my element.'

Harlock grinned ruefully at his old friend. 'Rokuro - by rights, I should refuse…'

'Why?' Leopard smirked from under his decidedly camp headgear. 'We're not going to be impressed by the macho posturing involved in sobering up your sorry excuses for crew, Harlock.' He waved his hand as though granting his dispensation for the activity. 'By all means - go throw the gin sodden old rockhound into the horse trough. Far be it for us to get in the way of a good cliche…'

'Keep that up, and you'll be joining him,' Harlock promised. 'Right now I'm spoiling for a fight, and you'll do if nothing more butch shows up…'

'Try throwing Gozo in first,' Leopard replied airily, with feigned amusement. 'I'm curious to find out if he's waterproof…'

Harlock gave the enigmatic, bearded admiral so-named a sharp glance at that, but filed the comment away for later. Instead he ignored the all-too-full of himself Leopard, and allowed Rokuro to help him drag the reluctant Ali out the back. However despite the threats, the pair didn't
throw the Arcadia's crewman into the trough - tempting though it was, since it was full to the brim with icy cold water pumped from the inn's private underground holding tank. Instead a grinning Vaughn - well-used to the shenanigans involving the more colourful members of the Arcadia's crew, held a side door open for them and ushered them into one of the building's guest rooms, where he left Oki and Harlock to strip Ali of boots and sweater, and bundle him into the shower cubicle, where they propped him against the wall, turned on the cold setting, and shut the door behind them.

'Three… two…' Oki began counting. Before he reached one an enraged bellow announced the return of some semblance of sentience. A few seconds later steam began to mist up the frosted glass of the door.

'You pair of fucking bastards!' The door of the shower opened just enough for a pair of sodden pants to fly past their heads and land with an audible splat on the wooden floor.

'Towels are on the bed, Ali,' Harlock called out. 'And Zack sent your stuff over yesterday, just in case you surfaced long enough to realise the smell was driving the customers away!' He nodded at the door, indicating to Oki to follow him. 'When you feel more human, we'll talk. I'll send Vaughn over with some coffee.' He shut the door on a string of mumbled, muffled expletives and shrugged in reply to Oki's raised blue eyebrow. 'He'll be fine. Just needed to know I still love him.'

Oki spluttered. 'You guys… sometimes I wonder how you keep that ship functioning.'

'Practice,' Harlock muttered. 'And an XO who has a clipboard and isn't afraid to use it.' He loitered in the courtyard. 'We didn't get a chance to catch up, we came in so fast. I hope you didn't have anywhere near the same excitement we did.' His face lost the forced smile. 'Or the loss…'

Oki shook his head. 'Mostly we got that damn oscillator out of the way - by the way, we'll hand that over later, once Hoshino and Leopard are gone. Gozo's likely to start making noises about stolen fleet property, and Frank will just want one for himself - or to make sure you don't have it.'

'Hoshino can bite me - the statute of limitations for theft is only twenty years, if I recall correctly. And if Frank gets in my face I'll let Ben deal with him - for some reason Leopard tries to head for the hills when faced with our slumming princling.'

Oki's wry smile quickly faded as he began to speak again. 'Moving on…the group heading our way had similar problems to yours - we found the remains of three ships, all probably broke up exiting IN-SKIP. And two small transports that asked us for sanctuary. They'd been hiding in an asteroid field. No black body drives on them - and get this: not wooden like the ones you've been encountering. These were made of a nacre-like substance. Seems they'd been sold a story about taking over the water-worlds when they got there, but were starting to realise they'd been had.' He hesitated. 'Harlock - I know this is spectacularly bad timing under the circumstances, but we agreed to transport them to Tiamat. This bunch were water-dwellers, and in a pitiful condition. I know the Mazone have the twins and Taro, but I couldn't just turn my back on them.'

Harlock shook his head, remembering all too well the solidarity of the aquatics with others of their kind. 'Nor could I. The element responsible seem to be more militant - I'm not such a bastard as to blame a civilian population for the faults of its leaders and martial arm. Hell - we humans are just as bad.' He leaned against the wall and folded his arms. 'I remember when the Machinners War started - when we were faced with all those people who'd opted for immortality at the cost of their own children's lives, or their families'... there were no easy answers then, and I don't think we'll find any now either.'

Oki breathed a sigh of relief. 'Thanks. I'd hate to be at odds over this. Some of the things they told
us when we found a common language were pretty horrifying. I know it's no comfort, but by kidnapping your boys, their military has actually shot themselves in the foot - before, we couldn't intervene unless specifically requested - but taking colonial citizens at gunpoint is an act of war - I can stick my nose into this without censure now, if that's what it takes.

'I hope it won't come to that,' Harlock replied softly. 'But thank you.'

The door opened and Ali slunk into the courtyard, hands stuffed into the pockets of his trousers. His fair hair, usually either cut short or slicked back, currently curled damply almost to the collar of a blue shirt, open to reveal a dusting of light curls with his skull-and-crossbones pendant nestling in them. Belatedly realising he'd neglected to belt up his pants before stuffing his hands in his pockets, he sheepishly hauled his paws back out and tightened the skull and crossbone belt buckle as he walked. 'Captain…'

Oki lifted a hand and started for the bar. 'I'll see you in there,' he told them, and left Harlock staring at his damp crewman, who in turn seemed to be finding his booted toes fascinating.

'I thought we had this out on the Arcadia,' Harlock said in his softest tone.

'Yeah. But that was before I finally found out what the fuck that misbegotten cabbage got out of me,' Ali replied, finally meeting his captain's eye with his own bloodshot pair. 'I never thought for a moment it was the kids they were after, Harlock, if I had…'

'You'd do what? Fall on your sword? Grab a single shot flintlock? If anyone should be beating themselves up for getting caught with his pants around his ankles over this, it's me. I had them, they were my responsibility, and I let them down. I let Kei down, because I kept reassuring her they'd be safe. I assumed nobody would be bold enough or desperate enough to make a play for them. I was wrong. Right now, no matter how bad you're feeling, trust me, it's not even close to what's been going through my head for the past few days.' He balled up a fist, stepped forward and launched an uppercut that laid the older man flat on his back on the cold concrete. 'Good work on saving the town, but leaving Nami in the care of two teenagers and Zack? I don't care how competent those kids are - you dropped the ball on that one. Now pull your head out of your ass and get back in the game, Ali. Ben's been covering for you long enough. If you feel the need to stick your head in a bottle, the time for that is when we get the boys back and put a stop to this Mazone invasion. And I'll supply the bottles.' He stuck out a hand and hauled Ali back to his feet.

'I rely on you to keep your damn head and keep the rest in line when I, or Kei aren't around. I shouldn't have to have this conversation - not with you. We all got caught napping - I can't afford recriminations, Ali - I need everyone on their A game.'

Ali nodded, and rubbed his jaw. 'I did put in a few boots on that little weasel from IntSec for you,' he replied. 'I'm just sorry they pulled me off the twat before I could finish the job - but if you want…'

'Save your energy. Vaughn's getting coffee - get yourself sober and get back on the job - I can operate the Arcadia with forty men - we're currently travelling with sixty. Round everyone up - I need to ask for volunteers on this one.'

'That's Kei's job…' Ali trailed off at the sight of his captain's expression. 'Right. Gotcha.' He slapped Harlock's shoulder lightly. 'You look like shit, for the record. Never mind me - how long since you grabbed any sleep?'

'Four days, fifteen hours ship time,' Harlock replied bleakly. 'Apart from a couple of cat-naps. I have a couple of errands here, but I want to lift off in twelve hours max. Anita will handle the re-stocking - I won't deprive the colony of supplies, but Hannibal's en route with aid, so we can
appropriate enough, with a smaller crew.'

'Is it wise to take the minimum?' Ali asked. Vaughn walked out of the bar, a steaming mug in one hand, and he grabbed it out of the barkeep's hand with a friendly nod. When they were alone again he continued between sips. 'If we do get into a scrap…'

'I'm pretty sure we can persuade two-thirds between us,' Harlock replied. 'But I'm serious about it being voluntary. This one's personal.'

'That's what you think,' Ali muttered. 'Fine. I think you might be in for a nice surprise mind you, but fine. Where will you be?'

'Business to sort out - and that is personal… After I've had words with our new "friends" in there, I need to go see that cold-blooded little twat from Intsec and his puppetmaster.'

'You taking Kei along for that one?'

Harlock shook his head. 'She'd just shoot them soon as look at them.'

'They'd deserve it,' Ali pointed out grimly. 'What did you have in mind?'

Harlock's smile was equally grim. 'Something that stuck-up control freak won't see coming.'

'And that woman?'

Harlock's answering smile made his crewman's blood run cold. 'Her, I might make Kei a present of. Once we've interrogated her. Him I can't use - Director Namino on the other hand, could be a useful source of information. She's coming with us.'

'We're taking one of 'em with us?' Ali felt as though he'd sobered up instantly at the thought. 'Are you daft?'

'Maybe.' Harlock shrugged. 'But she's highly placed and I want answers. Now either I'll get the ones I ask for - or she can give up some more generic ones in the lab.'

Ali stared at him, and Harlock held his ground, as cool as if he'd just announced he was planning to go for a walk. 'You'd never vivisect someone - something?'

Harlock shrugged. 'Well - maybe. Maybe not. But she won't know that. And I do have a couple of live samples left from Tokarga to set the scene…' He shared a feral grin with his crewman, who threw his head back and laughed.

'Bad pirate - worse pirate routine is it?'

'I thought we could change it up a bit - if you fancy taking a turn as psycho-whack-job pirate again?'

Ali smirked. 'Don't mind if I do - but why am I always the psycho in these plans?'

'Because no-one else can do it without giggling,' Harlock replied with aplomb.

'Oh. Good. For a minute there I thought you were going to say I just had one of those faces,' Ali replied with a sarcastic drawl.

Harlock said nothing, but his raised eyebrow was far more eloquent as he turned on his heel and strode back into the bar, back ramrod straight and shoulders braced, leaving Ali alone with a
rapidly cooling cup of coffee and a thoughtful look on his face.
Chapter 38

Harlock strode back into the bar to find the three commanders still propping it up - although Hoshino was drinkless. Oki was downing one of the local beers with total disregard for the consequences and Leopard was fishing a paper umbrella out of his with a long-suffering sigh. Harlock held out a gloved hand for Vaughn to send a shot glass into, picked it up, downed it in one (the safest option, he'd discovered years ago…) and placed it back on the only slightly tacky surface without missing a beat. At the far end, his bird sat on a stool next to Oki, occasionally nudging the aquatic's elbow with his beak for attention.

'Shouldn't you at least check what you're drinking first?' Hoshino asked.

'I prefer not to give my taste buds any warning. Otherwise they might rebel,' he quipped, deliberately missing the point. Very few people outside of his crew knew that years of exposure to dark matter had made poisoning him somewhat of a challenge, and he preferred to keep it that way in case they decided to get a little more creative. He took possession of the stool next to Hoshino. 'Why so caring all of a sudden, Gozo? Did they finally install something resembling a heart when you downgraded?'

'Still a flippant little shit, I see,' Admiral Hoshino replied coldly. 'You never change, Yama. And once again your irresponsibility has put your family in danger - but then, that's hardly news either, is it?' He tried staring down his nose at Harlock, but it was Hoshino who looked away eventually, with an almost imperceptible shiver.

'Now, now, Harlock - you know the agreement - no sandbagging innocent bystanders with The Stare of Doom,' Oki quipped. He grabbed a handful of peanuts from the bowl next to him and held his hand out so the bird could pick them from his palm, one by one, with surprising delicacy for such a big beak.

'I don't see any innocents in here. And stop feeding my bird - it's my shoulder he sits on after you're done stuffing his beak for him.'

Oki just beamed at him and passed the bird another peanut. 'Ali said it was okay…'

Harlock snorted. 'If you believed that, I've got a used spaceship I can sell you. Only two careful owners…'

'Plus a hundred or so years on the clock,' Kei added as she walked in, holding Nami in her arms. Harlock smiled at her as she sashayed her way over to him. Oki and Leopard both stared admiringly as she walked past click-clicking across the floor in her thigh-highs, and he made a half-hearted mental note to arrange to give the pair a thrashing at some point on the mats once this current mess was over more out of habit than genuine annoyance. 'And one major make-over,' she added, as she grabbed a stool and perched next to Harlock, and allowed Nami to squirm until she was firmly ensconced on her father's lap. 'Have I missed anything?’ she asked.

He wrapped his left arm around his daughter, and draped his right arm around Kei as casually as he could, given the company, then thought to hell with it and gave her a little squeeze, smiling inwardly as she leaned ever so slightly into it. She looked pale, even in the dim light from the sconces on the walls, which had a flickering yellow glow, and the light didn't totally disguise her reddened eyes. Despite her attempts at her usual levity, he could still hear the strain in her voice, and her brow held the little furrow in it she'd had ever since the broadcast from the Mazone. Still, he knew he didn't look much better.
'Nothing so far,' Leopard drawled. 'Apart from Harlock and Gozo giving each other the stink-eye, and Oki here working on a long-term plan to slow your captain down a little by over-feeding that funny-looking monstrosity at the end of the counter.'

The bird looked up from peanut-grazing, and then quite deliberately waddled up the bar, stuck its beak in Leopard's half-finished beer, and pushed the glass off the counter and into his lap.

Even Kei couldn't not smile at the ensuing attempts to mop up the mess, accompanied by some surprisingly creative expletives. At least one of which was barely anatomically impossible even if you did have a foot long beak and a seemingly infinitely flexible neck about the same length as your body.

'Bad bird,' Harlock told it, not even attempting sincerity. It hopped down onto the floor and waddled over to him. 'You have wings, use them,' he told it, as he refused to pick it up and put it on his shoulder despite the pleading looks that would have embarrassed a dog. It settled down at his side to start preening. 'And you - moderate your language when there are children in the room.'

Leopard just glared down his long thin nose at him. 'She's baby-sat by pirates and you're calling me out?' he drawled as he brushed ineffectively at his wet lap. The barkeep offered a decently absorbent towel, and observed that it wasn't as if there was much harm done, given that the leather pants were pretty much water-proof. 'Why the hell are you letting a little girl sit in on this anyway?' he muttered under his breath. But looking at the way the dark-haired child clung to her parents every time one of them so much as shifted on their seat, he kept his musings to himself. That, and the way that singular glare capable of reducing even the newly-mechanised Hoshino to wistful staring at the whiskey bottle was so quickly replaced with a fierce but melancholy protective expression every time it was turned on either the child or her mother… He wisely decided to keep his mouth shut.

Selen and Blaze wandered in at that point, with such precise timing Harlock had to suspect one or both had been listening at the door. And with the bar now containing all the relevant parties - with the exception of Oedo, still trying to mop up his own small crisis - it seemed the time had finally come to put all their cards on the table.

Thankfully he'd had Yattaran and Tochiro condense the catastrophic events of the last year down to a manageable presentation - although he suspected he had Kei to blame for the bullet points.

'You've all been sent - or been privy to - the main problem. Even if some of you didn't bother to get off your arses until it landed in your own backyard.' The hologramme showed the Mazone homeworld and the simulation of the destruction, followed by the images of the diaspora Sainess had given them. 'If this was just a migration, it might have been manageable - there are plenty of planets out there all but abandoned, and I'm sure Destiny would even have welcomed help restoring some of them to livable standards. But from what we now know, it's not that straightforward.

'Their queen - Rafflesia - seems to have some half-baked notion that she can wrap her revenge and her solution in one big bow - using the black body drives she's aiming each of the transport fleets at a different soft point in space-time, presumably with the same intention that the old Harlock had - to reset time, and start over. Given what we've seen of these drives, I think it would work. However, the ships are either old, or built on the fly at short notice, and as a result -'

Harlock paused the holo footage and then advanced it slowly, as it replayed the destruction of the ships in Sainess' fleet, and then showed the readings and the footage from the spacial rift where they'd found the Futatsuboshi.
At that point, Blaze placed an arm around his mother and held her tight, although Selen remained outwardly dry-eyed and focused, unless you knew her well enough to spot the tension in her shoulders and the bleak look in her eyes.

'\textit{I also sent your people the readings from our scuffle with them near Earth - } Carefully removing any of the mention of how badly it had affected the Arcadia... 'And also the details of their weaponised plants. It highlights that engaging with them is something of a problem for two reasons.'

'Firstly,' Oki interjected, 'Any energy weapons you throw at them can be largely absorbed and just feed those black-body drives. It makes them almost as self-regenerating as Arcadia.'

'And secondly,' Harlock took back the thread of the conversation smoothly, 'You cripple enough of those ships in a small area - you need to remember that they're held together by spit and a prayer: they'll blow - and take anything in the vicinity with them - and if they don't rip a hole in the fabric of reality, they'll sure as hell render the area unnavigable for centuries. A standard battle engagement in an inhabited system is the worst case scenario.'

'Apart from the one where they reach their destinations and blow themselves to shit in an orgy of self-sacrifice?' Leopard drawled sarcastically.

Kei glared at him. "'Self" might be stretching it a bit. There might well be plenty of fanatics following Rafflesia blindly hoping she's leading them to some brave new world.'

'Well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?'

Harlock despite a lapful of small daughter, tensed, and would have made something of the sly dig if Kei hadn't given him a small warning jab in the ribs and then hung onto his gun belt until he got the message and relaxed.

'But there's trouble in paradise,' she continued, pointedly ignoring Leopard. 'At least one faction seem to want to just find somewhere to settle, and we think that might be a substantial part of their "civilian" population.'

'I've already relocated one small group,' Oki broke in. 'Once they realised we humans weren't all the bogey men we'd been made out to be, they were actually quite easy to deal with - frankly they were typical refugees - homeless, scared, stuffed into totally unsuitable ships and facing starvation and almost certain death on a daily basis.'

'We could simply engage and scatter them - break the convoys apart and it would make it easier to pick them off without causing a runaway chain reaction.'

'Scatter them?' Harlock rolled his eye. 'Did you bother to turn up to the day they covered astronavigation? How do you expect to find them again to pick them off? Those drives absorb most of their energy emissions - they're not too hard to spot if you're almost on top of them - say within a few AU\textsc{s} - but outside of solar system distances forget it.'

'Well I don't hear any better ideas from the peanut gallery,' Hoshino growled at him.

'Hearts and minds,' Harlock replied mildly.

'Two in the chest, one in the head?' Leopard drawled.

Kei just looked at Leopard as if she'd just spotted something small and wriggling on the sole of her boot. 'You're a simple creature, aren't you?' she sniffed. 'You can take the boy out of the SPG...'
Harlock laid a hand on her shoulder. 'Hoshino's halfway right - you need to scatter them - but my suggestion is that we do it by getting between the military vessels and the unarmed civilian transports. They're at breaking point - it shouldn't take much. Oki, Oedo and myself have already seen that given half a chance, the unarmed ships will run for cover from their own kind. They're turning on each other - we just have to pick one of the weaker convoys - the one we found might do - and break it up. I think once word spreads to the others, they'll start to fall apart.'

'That's a long shot.'

'It's better than a shooting war none of us can afford.' Oki nodded to Harlock, who inclined his head ever so slightly in reply. 'We don't have the ships for a head to head - even if it wasn't advisable.'

'The Queen wants a little more than some disruptive dancing around and holding hands with some limp salads,' Hoshino replied. He shared a look with Leopard. 'She's taking this attack a little personally…'

Selen folded her arms and glared at them. 'I think maybe I should be the one to remind Yayoi that it was my home that was blown up; my friends who died…'

'Like she'd care?' Leopard replied mildly. Blaze took a step towards him, only to stop when his mother shook her head slightly. 'Mummy's boy,' Leopard smirked.

'You're just determined to pick a fight, aren't you?' Blaze retorted.

'Ignore him,' Kei advised, her warning look to the pale-haired officer proving surprisingly more effective than anyone else's, given how he blanched when it was turned on him. 'Some people just enjoy kicking over an ants' nest - or, I suspect, have standing instructions to take control of the situation if we all prove to be such undesirable, uncontrollable elements who need to cool head to keep them in check.' She smiled sweetly at him when he glared at her through narrowed eyes. 'Oh, don't worry, Frankie.' She waved a hand vaguely in his direction. 'We haven't hacked your comms - it's just Zero had your number years ago, and he could be helpfully enlightening on the subject at times.'

'Pulling this back on track,' Oki interjected quickly. 'Just how can we engage these ships? Their very construction makes us vulnerable to having our own drives disabled by theirs, and energy weapons are useless for the same reason. Kinetic weapons can't do enough damage to them before they repair…'

Harlock reached into a pocket in his trousers and pulled out a data chip, which he threw to Oki. The blue-haired admiral caught it neatly and turned it over in his long webbed fingers, before turning a speculative gaze to Harlock. 'Specs for a few little gadgets my engineers cooked up,' Harlock answered the unspoken question. 'Monofilament wire, packed into a torpedo tube. Easy enough for any battleship's 3-D printer to extrude from raw materials. Just be careful not to drive into it yourselves once deployed, mind you. Most Alliance, SDF and Machinners vessels use small dark matter generators in those "printers" - they've been in use since before the Homecoming War - a little gift from Mimay's people. Maji and Yattaran figured out a way to boost them just enough to imbue the filament itself with dark matter - it won't stop the self-repair, but it will slow it down - maybe enough to get in a few good hits.' He paused. 'Incendiary devices would work as well, if you can deliver them into the internal structure, although that's not a weapon anyone in their right mind would want to use. But they are vulnerable to fire.' He looked troubled as he finished.

'Why Harlock - despite all they've done - do you actually care about these creatures?' Hoshino sneered.
'I fight monsters, Gozo,' Harlock replied quietly. 'I refuse to turn myself into one.' He handed Nami to Kei dropping a kiss onto his daughter's dark hair in the process. 'On which note, I have business elsewhere. Selen has graciously arranged to liaise with all of you, given that she knows you all.' With a nod to Selen and Blaze, he left them to the discussion on the finer points of Impossible Odds and How to Thwart Them.

Two pirates had come for Shizuka over an hour ago, and despite his opinion of her, the lack of any human contact bar the murmuring conversations of his guards had already set his nerves on edge by the time a figure strode out of the shadows cast by the dim lighting strung along the old workings and stood in front of his makeshift cell, arms folded across the skull and crossbones emblazoned on the front of a dark jacket. Dark, fine hair with a slight wave only partially obscured the black hole of the leather patch which covered one eye, and even in the dim underground light he could make out the jagged line of an old blaster scar running across his watcher's nose and half way down his left cheek. That visible eye looked slightly bloodshot and there were tension lines around the corner of both his eye and at the corners of his mouth, in blatant contradiction of his studiously casual posture. But scars and tension (and presumably lack of sleep) aside, the pirate looked a lot younger than his thirty-seven standard on file - if he hadn't known better, Irita would have placed him somewhere in his late twenties at most.

The details from that old file were memorised, he'd read them so often:

**Yama, Lieutenant, Gaia Fleet Special Counter Intelligence Unit, attached to the Office of the Admiral of the Solar System Fleet.**

*Born Mars, 2953, (Current age: 37) second son of a Fleet Admiral and the heiress to the Okita fortune. No family name (Martian Elites having dispensed with such seventy odd years ago...) Family: Mother - deceased, 2967, father 2968, brother 2977, foster-sister (later sister-in-law) died 2977.*

*Height: 6'1"*  
*Weight: approx. 70kg*  
*Hair: brown*  
*Eyes (eye): hazel.*

A loner in the Academy but had his name engraved on the class trophies for both free-climbing and base-jumping three years running - still something of a legend amongst the cadets who cared about such pursuits, Irita remembered vaguely. And possibly just as much of a legend in the Academy sick-bay, given the number of contusions, broken bones, cuts, ligament and tendon tears and (according to one sarcastic comment in his record from the surgeon concerned), a spectacular attempt to completely shatter what was left of his right femur... Plus he'd also taken the time to quietly sneak in credits for an online degree in botany, before his brother's demands on his free time curtailed *that.*

He ran the details through like a charm to ward off the oncoming storm, but under the quiet, unnaturally calm gaze of the man in front of him, it failed. And told him nothing useful.

**Captain Harlock**… Irita had learned much from serving under Admiral Hoshino. One of those lessons had been to pick up an ambivalently cynical attitude towards the current holder of that name. Hoshino had been a friend of Harlock's elder brother from their Academy days, and well-remembered the younger brother as a somewhat effeminate, overly bookish brat who took too
much after his mother, who most people - including both his father and brother - had never expected to amount to much. According to the admiral, he'd been Admiral Isora's errand boy even before he'd graduated from the Officer Training School firmly in the middle of his class.

Intsec's sealed files had told a slightly different story, when he'd got his hands on them, and one he hadn't credited until he took a long, hard look at the man who stood in front of him, watching him right back without a word. Errand boy? Maybe - but Isora had used his brother for every dirty little job he needed doing that had got him - despite his crippled body - into that Admiral's seat on the Okeanos. If his gamble sending his younger brother off to locate and assassinate Harlock had paid off, Isora could have written his own ticket onto the Council on the back of that before he was thirty...

Another reading of the whole mess was less charitable - suggesting that the Admiral had simply been trying to get his brother killed by sending him on harder and more dangerous missions, although not averse to taking the credit for his successes. The report from his last-but-one mission for his brother (heavily redacted on the details, to Irita's annoyance) had included a psych report appended to a long list of physical injuries which suggested that the young lieutenant had been close to burn-out - both physical and mental - before being sent straight back into the field to MX-201 where instead of the predicted three weeks, he'd waited for six months for the arrival of the Arcadia, with no resources, no backup and no way of contacting anyone if things went pear-shaped.

No-one in his right mind would have sent an operative in that state out into the field so poorly prepared. Unless they didn't give a rat's ass if they came back or not...

That damning report had been buried so deep in Isora's private directory, he'd needed a special access from Namino's office to open it. It - and a dozen other sealed mission reports which would have given him more than enough rope to hang the late Admiral Isora from the nearest convenient antenna. The youngest fleet admiral since the Homecoming War had gotten to his position on the basis of his brother's seemingly tireless efforts to the detriment of his own career. Not something he would have credited about the diffident, obstructive and downright obnoxiously anti-establishment rebel standing in front of him if he hadn't seen the reports with his own eyes...

Yet under that deceptively amiable regard, as a cold trickle of sweat began its journey from his neck down to the base of his spine, Irita floundered, as his carefully constructed picture of the man disintegrated. The files, in the end, had told him nothing. And that, he realised with an unnerving clarity, was the reason why this man was so dangerous: You could not predict how he would react. Knock him down, push him to the edge of emotional or physical endurance, take what he loved away from him - anything that would break a normal man - and he suspected he'd still be met by that calm gaze. There was no malice in that regard. No hatred, no anger even. Those he could have dealt with.

What he could neither understand or tolerate was the combination of disappointment and (of all things) pity towards him he thought he saw there.

Irita opened his mouth to speak, but Harlock beat him to it. 'You went to an awful lot of trouble to get my undivided attention, Captain Irita. Well - you have it now. What exactly did you plan to do with it once you had it?'

He'd expected the man's voice to be different, somehow. Colder, harder. But like that too-young-for-his-years face, it was not what he'd expected. A little deeper and huskier than earlier transmission reports on file. But there was a darkness in it that made him shiver slightly. And more strangely, a disappointment that cut through him in a way he'd never felt.
That darkness, once he was aware of it, was all around. As though the shadows were wrapping themselves around that still, quiet figure in the tunnel in front of his makeshift cage.

'What are you?' It wasn't the question he'd wanted to ask. Wasn't even close to what he wanted to say, and he blurted it out with totally uncharacteristic haste, almost stumbling over the words.

Harlock smiled, and it wasn't with amusement. 'A man who has very little patience with those who harm innocents to get what they want. A man whose children are even now in grave danger because of your actions.' He unfolded his arms and lay one hand on the hilt of an antique gravity sabre as he took the two steps that brought him up to the bars of Irita's prison. 'I came here expecting to find myself looking at a monster, and all I see is a young man whose ambition just outreached his ability. You don't think very highly of other people, I suspect… mostly because somewhere deep down inside you don't think that highly of yourself. Not that any of that excuses your actions.'

'You're an outlaw - you and anyone helping you or related to you are subject to the same sentence,' Irita began, piqued by the casual dismissal.

'Including three little boys who never harmed another soul in their short lives? Or a little girl who hasn't slept in four days through the night because she has nightmares about those creatures you and that red-head were in league with trying to kill her? The young man with his whole life ahead of him lying in my infirmary still in a coma? Or the townsfolk you killed and whose livelihoods and homes you destroyed?'

The amiable facade vanished in the space of a heartbeat, and Irita took an involuntary step back at the fury he now saw in that single hazel eye. 'I was doing my job,' he replied coldly. His hand reached up to his nose to push his glasses back up - a reflexive gesture that was utterly futile since those glasses had been crushed under the boot of the blond thug who'd attempted to reduce his face and ribcage to powder. Thankfully he only needed them for close work.

'Ah - that reminds me.' Harlock reached inside a pocket and brought out a familiar case, which he tossed through the bars to land on the rough arrangements of blankets that currently had the nerve to describe itself as a bed. 'I had one of my men get these from your ship.'

Irita stared down at the case containing his spare glasses, wondering how large a charge of explosives a former miner and explosives expert could pack into it if so minded.

'In case you're wondering, they're not booby-trapped.' Harlock let out a little "fffht" as he shook his head. 'You remind me a lot of my brother - similar mannerisms, and he hated to find himself without a pair.'

Irita bristled at the comparison, knowing what he now did about the admiral. 'Is this your way of giving me a sporting chance?'

Harlock shook his head. 'Why would I do that? I'm a pirate remember? An outlaw, rebel, traitor, deserter, terrorist… did I miss anything off the list?' He snapped his fingers as though remembering something. 'Oh - and a conscienceless sociopath with a deep seated disregard for authority and a fundamental disregard for human life.'

He leaned closer to the bars and smiled mirthlessly at Irita. 'And you thought it was a good idea to come dancing into territory where I have friends in both high and low places, and Piss. Me. Off?' he asked with studied amusement. He took a step back and that feral smile was back. 'You've either got balls bigger than your brain or a serious death-wish…'
Irita had to work his tongue away from the roof of his mouth, it had gone that dry. 'Then kill me and be done with it - or were you going to hand me back to that two-hundred pound gorilla in the red sweater for torture?' He tried to hold his back parade-ground straight, but under that faux-casual regard, his bowels were already beginning to turn to water. Which was odd, because at no point could he say what it was about the man in front of him that had that effect.

'Hmmm. Tricky. You'd prefer that, I think. If I pulled a gun on you or beat the snot out of you you'd feel so justified, wouldn't you? All your predications about me confirmed…And looking at you, it's clear that your record is actually pretty accurate in its assessment - you like an ordered world… everyone and everything in its place - throw you a few blankets and you refold them into a neat if not totally effective bed. You constantly tug at your jacket to make sure it's just so, flicking at the dust…'

Irita forced his hand away from his sleeve where it had been doing just that, and hated the accompanying flush. Harlock's smirking smile and casual shrug started to set his teeth on edge. 'Did you plan on just talking me to death?' he snapped.

Harlock's shit-eating smirk grew bigger, briefly, and Irita cursed under his breath at the slip. 'He has a way of getting under your skin…' Hoshino had told him, in a rare expression of almost grudging admiration. 'Don't let him. And don't let that boy-next-door look fool you. Although he's not even close to being as dangerous as his predecessor, he's a cocky little shit, and he does know how to play that innocent pretty-boy routine to perfection. If he spots a weakness he'll be after it like a shark scenting blood in the water.' Hoshino had taken a long swallow of some locally brewed swill at that point and pointed his empty glass at his subordinate. 'But Gaia help me… there've been a few times he's looked me in the eye and I've had a forcible reminder that he's truly Isora's brother…' He'd shivered, but not elaborated further.

Harlock's left hand drifted towards the hilt of his sabre-rifle, and Irita forced himself to hold his ground - and that one-eyed, mocking glare - without flinching. But Harlock's gloved hand instead reached into a pocket, and pulled out a small holo-projector, which he placed on the ground and stepped away from.

'What...' Irita began.

'A reminder. Of what your actions - your job - set in motion.' Harlock thumbed a tiny remote and the projector began to playback a recording. The commander of the ship that had brought them here - one of Shizuka's underlings, or so he'd thought. Watching and listening to her taunt Harlock, he recognised the same clipped arrogance of the creature that had impersonated the director in his room.

… and when she had three small boys dragged in front of the camera, he risked looking away from the recording to watch Harlock's face.

It's a weakness, he told himself. To care so much. He'd wanted to use that against the pirate, after all.

But he found it far easier to watch the recording playback than to look at the pirate. The twin boys - their resemblance to their father so close there was no mistaking their relationship - put up quite a fight. He had no idea where the third boy might have come from, homely by comparison to the twins, though no less of a fighter, judging by the way he tried to wriggle free of the green-skinned creature holding him.

He'd planned on holding these children himself, to use against their father. Had so blithely talked to Namino about Article 53. Executing the offspring of rebels like Harlock made perfect sense - such
bloodlines only led to continuing disorder, after all. It was regrettable, true, but rational, in the long run.

So why he flinched when the Mazone sliced the face of the boy who got between her and his brother, he had no idea.

That flinch saved his life, although he never knew it. Harlock bent down to retrieve the projector and pocketed it without a word. Then he turned on his heel and walked away, the shadows seeming to swallow him up as Irita watched in confusion. 'You're just leaving me here?'

Without turning, Harlock stopped. 'Hoshino's busting you down to the Space Sheriff's division, I understand - which for someone with your ambition is about as low as it gets - unless you do the decent thing and quit the service. Which I don't think you'll do. You don't have it in you to cope outside of the system.' If there was a quiet "yet" appended to the end of that, Irita didn't catch it.

Then - and only then, did he turn to face Irita, with such speed the business end of Harlock's Cosmo dragoon was in his face before he could blink. 'I could shoot you - and trust me, there's a part of me that would like nothing better than to pick somewhere not immediately fatal and watch you bleed out. But I'm not the monster you think I am, and I refuse to play by your rules. So here's the deal, Irita. You're a man who likes rules… consistency… predictability… order… in your life. So I figure the worst thing I can do to you is take that away from you.

'I'm getting my sons back, which might take a while. But rest assured I will not forget what you did here. One day - a month from now - a year from now - ten years from now - our paths will cross again, and there will be a reckoning. The only thing you are ever going to be sure of is that you will never know - every morning for the rest of your life - if that day will be the one when I come knocking.' With one smooth motion he reholstered the pistol, and Irita let out a breath he didn't remember holding. 'Of course, Kei just wants your head on a spike, but that's her call. I make no promises if you ever run into her. Or my crew.' He turned to leave again, and added. 'Or, if you're very unlucky, my sons,' without looking back. Before Irita could string together a retort about being unafraid of a couple of nine-year-olds, he'd already been swallowed up by the darkness, only the sound of his booted footsteps receding giving any clue that he even existed.

Irita walked unsteadily back to the blankets where his spare glasses case lay, and picked it up as he sat down heavily. And for a long time all he could do was turn it over and over in his hands, staring without focussing at the darkness where the pirate had been standing.

A second vehicle had pulled up next to his rover by the time Harlock left the mine, blinking in the sunlight. Another of the Arcadia's rovers, with Kei at the wheel, and Nami and the little Nibelung girl, Freya, bracketing Blaze in the wide passenger seats.

Rather more of a surprise was the sight of Hoshino stepping down from the back seat. The Alliance admiral moved with a fluid grace, and the well-trained eye quickly noticed something decidedly unhuman about the way he walked - it was just a little too precise.

When he stopped three feet in front of Harlock, the pirate found himself looking up slightly into dark eyes that whilst outwardly still appeared normal, upon closer inspection seemed to have an entire starfield lurking in their depths.

...yep. Definitely recently downgraded, Harlock thought uncharitably. Asshole… 'Took the opportunity to add a couple of inches, or are you just wearing lifts?’ he asked out loud.

Hoshino ignored the levity. 'Did you kill him?' he asked, the amused tone in his voice suggesting
that if his troublesome former subordinate had been on the receiving end of a blaster bolt, it
wouldn't be anything he'd cry over.

Harlock shrugged. 'And save you the job of busting his ass all the way down to the shittiest posting
you can find for him? Sorry Gozo - I'm not in the business of doing your dirty work. You want him
dead, you can shoot him.'

'I rather thought you'd be tearing his arms and legs off,' Hoshino replied dryly. 'Under the
circumstances…'

'Gozo, Gozo, Gozo…' Harlock sighed. 'If I slaughtered every asshole in the Alliance military who
gets up my nose, there wouldn't be much of it left for you to lord it over, would there? Besides,
killing this one would be far more merciful than he deserves.'

'Depends on how you do it,' Kei muttered, shooting him a dark look. 'If we don't get the boys back
in one piece I'm giving serious thought to leaving him on Earth just long enough for some dark
matter regenerative mojo to kick in, so I can experiment a bit…'

At that - or maybe the way she half-snarled the threat, Hoshino studied her face and shuddered
almost imperceptibly, and Blaze swallowed hard. Freya, sitting between Blaze and Kei, studied her
for a moment, then sighed heavily and laid a delicate hand on Kei's lap, staring into her eyes with a
peculiar intensity. Kei opened her mouth as though to say something, closed it again, and when
Freya followed up her scrutiny by scrambling into Kei's lap, laying her head on her shoulder and
putting her arms around her neck, relaxed as though strings holding her had been cut, and cuddled
the little girl with a sad smile.

Harlock added his own sad smile at that. 'I see you two were introduced,' he said quietly. He strode
past Hoshino without a word and stood beside the rover's driver's seat so he could look down at
wife and waif. 'From what I hear from Daiba, she does that a lot…' he said softly. Freya lifted her
head from Kei's shoulder and looked at him with a solemn expression on her face. She smiled
when he reached out a hand to run through her pale hair - as fine and silky as Mimay's, and in
Tabito's light it looked closer to a pale gold with a greenish tinge.

'I thought Mimay was the only survivor,' Hoshino said quietly, staring at the little scene from a
distance. Harlock shrugged and didn't bother to turn around. 'Apart from Loki's rebels - half of
whom aren't even wearing their own bodies, so did we. Although Gullveig and Deathshadow One
are still unaccounted for.'

'But a child-'

Harlock did turn at that. 'Don't even think it, Gozo - Leave Niflheim alone - it's outside your
jurisdiction and it is protected if you don't know how to get past the in-system defences. Humanity
doesn't need anymore of their damn "gifts". Their tech's caused enough problems already.'

'And yet you use it with impunity,' Hoshino replied tartly. 'Hypocrite,'

'I have two advantages the rest of you don't - and even I'm wary of their technology. As you should
be - dammit, Gozo - why did you do this to yourself? Are you so afraid of death?' He gestured at
the admiral's tall form, as yet not noticeably mechanised except in the starlit eyes, or the way his
clothing reflected the light oddly.

Hoshino met Harlock's gaze without flinching. 'After the plague, I realised that if we can conquer
death, then why not do so? Everything I was, I still am, and more. Your dark matter contamination
means you might look the same age at a hundred as you do now - you regenerate from injuries that
would kill a normal man - yet you decry mechanisation? What if this had been available to Isora -
or Nami?'

Harlock sighed. 'You think to shove that in my face again? You're not the first. The honest truth is I
don't know what they would have chosen - although I knew Nami well enough to know she'd have
had her concerns - we worked together for years when my mother was alive. Nami loved life - not -
' he waved a hand at Hoshino's tall form '-whatever this is.' He shook his head. 'You think you're
more or the same as you were? Every machinner I've ever seen lost something of themselves. After
all - how can you not?'

He didn't add, since Tochiro's existence was one secret only his crew and a handful of trusted
friends were privy to, that even his ship's guiding "soul" felt the same way about his own situation.
'But if you think dark matter is a boon, you've never felt it moving through your veins. You think
it's a blessing? Harlock was right about one thing - it's a curse.' He couldn't hide the little look that
passed between himself and Kei at that, the shared pain and guilt was never far away, after all.
'And an addictive one…' he added so quietly that only those in the rover heard him. Aloud he
continued: 'Get that idiot off this planet and out of my line of fire, Gozo - and feel free to do your
mistress' bidding if it means you'll help bring this armada to a screeching halt.'

Hoshino said nothing, but then he didn't have much of a chance, given that another rover chose that
moment to come bouncing over the hummocks. This one held Ali - who couldn't seem to keep a
smirk off his face - and two very soggy, mud-covered crewmen in the rear, holding onto the roll
bars for dear life, who upon closer inspection turned out to be Daiba and Ben - the latter almost
unrecognisable under a layer of black, slimy river mud.

'Where do you want these two, Cap'n?' Ali called out cheerfully.

Kei made a show of taking a closer look. 'Somewhere a long way from here and preferably dumped
in the pond first.' She sniffed the air, which had developed a certain… fragrance.

'I'm afraid to ask,' Blaze muttered conspiratorially at the two little girls. Nami smiled at him and
giggled shyly.

'You're not the only one,' Harlock muttered back. He left Hoshino and walked over. 'Do I really
want to know?' he asked, in a long suffering drawl. Ali guffawed - although that ended in a snigger.

'It was an accident,' Daiba began. He was slightly less muddy than his fellow crewman, although
that wasn't saying much. 'We'd taken the horses up to the dam to help with some clearance, and -
well, some moron in a Machinners' flyer buzzed the site and they bolted…'

Harlock looked the sorry pair up and down and resisted the temptation for the heartfelt sigh (™).
He didn't think his lungs would survive the inhalation of eau de dank river mud… 'That doesn't
explain why the pair of you look as though you've taken a bath in the crap left by the floodwaters
that's been steaming away gently for a couple of days,' he pointed out, perfectly reasonably, he
thought.

The pair exchanged looks that tended towards the guilty side of the spectrum. 'Well…' Ben began.

Ali chipped in at this point. 'The silly buggers were standing on the logs behind the horses -
pratting about trying to make a bit of a race of it. Which might have been okay if that plonker
hadn't done his flyby - but once Gog and Magog set off…' He lost it at that point and had to hold
onto the steering wheel for support as he tried to breathe and laugh at the same time.

Blaze bit back a smile at the image, and even Kei and Harlock, he noticed, shed their matching his-
n-hers brave faces briefly. Which, he decided, on seeing the sideways glance their crewmate gave them and the brief smug smirk of satisfaction that flashed over Ali's face, was exactly what their self-appointed omega had been hoping for.

However he had business of his own here. 'No need to hang around,' he told the Arcadia's people breezily. 'I've got some business to attend to here.'

Harlock's visible eye narrowed in suspicion as he watched him climb out of the vehicle. 'Blaze…'

'Nothing to see, move along,' he made shooing motions with his hands.

Kei took her hands off the wheel and leaned back in her seat. Ali switched off his engine, which had been idling. Harlock folded his arms and held his ground patiently waiting, and Ben nudged Daiba in the ribs and mouthed an "uh-oh" at him when he'd gotten the younger man's attention. The muddy pair leaned on the rollbar, as attentive as their captain.

Which Blaze had expected. And none of the watchers - except perhaps for Hoshino, who quickly found himself hustled out of the way by two burly Thieves - seemed at all surprised when another two Thieves dragged Irita out from his cell, blinking in the brighter light. 'Take his shirt off,' he told his men brusquely. 'Wouldn't want fibres in the wounds now would we?' He was already in the process of pulling his own zip-fronted sweater off, which he placed neatly on the seat of the rover next to Kei. 'Watch that for me?' he asked Freya, with a wink. He placed his gun belt on top of it, neatly coiled, and reached into the passenger glove box to pull out the gloves from his armour - lightweight, flexible, but nicely reinforced when you made a fist.

'Blaze…' Hoshino's voice held a note of warning.

'You can have him, Hoshino, when I'm done with him,' Blaze called out. 'Stay out of this.' He looked over to Harlock. 'Are you going to talk me out of this?'

Harlock shrugged. 'I told him what I'd do to him. I don't really care what anyone else has planned. He's all yours.'

Blaze nodded his thanks and walked over to where the now shirtless captain stood sweating in Tabito's sultry afternoon. His chest, back and arms were already covered in bruises, and he was developing a spectacular black eye around his left eye socket. Blaze walked around the younger man, sizing him up.

Irita was shorter than Blaze, who easily matched Harlock's six-one with change. Pince-nez glasses perched on his nose gave his thin face a permanent frown. He was also slimmer - whippet lean, but didn't look like a fighter. Just a desk jockey who didn't eat too well.

Too bad.

Blaze nodded once and the men holding Irita stepped back. He moved to within easy arm's reach, and plucked the glasses from his prey's nose. 'Wouldn't want those broken,' he quipped nastily. He held them out and they were taken by one of his men without a word.

'What the hell do you want with me?' Irita snapped at him, presumably having taken off his sense of self-preservation with his shirt. He looked over at Harlock, but the pirate simply stood there, looking quite relaxed, and ignored him.

'Payback.' Blaze stated bluntly.

'I don't even know who the hell you are!'
Blaze made a show of looking for a relatively undamaged spot, then launched a short, hard jab at the man’s left side, just below a spectacular display of greenish-purple-yellow that extended across from under his arm to his sternum. Irita staggered back with a pained grunt, to be fielded by one of Blaze’s men and kept on his feet. But his eyes - those pale grey eyes - now held anger as well as confusion.

“That one was for Derek.’ Blaze landed another blow in the same location, and this time felt something give. ‘That was for Kane. Two good men your Mazone lackeys gunned down in that mine while they were trying to defend a bunch of kids.’ His next punch was a right to the man’s nose, which gave way with a nasty little crunch. ‘That was for threatening my little brother Rei.’

A left jab, to the jaw, and blood flowed from Irita’s split lip to mingle with the stream from his nose. ‘And my little brother Daisuke.’

A balled up fist straight into the solar plexus that left the man on the ground gasping for air. ‘Pick him up,’ he told his men quietly. When they’d pulled Irita to his feet, now very wobbly, he said mildly, ‘For my baby sister Kanna, who’s still having nightmares about having a gun waved in her face and watching her favourite babysitter strangled by a sentient grapevine, and her best friends dragged away at gunpoint by your friends.’

He moved in again as his men moved back, and delivered a crippling kick to the left kneecap, which put Irita back on the ground. ‘For Tadashi, a great kid who put up with shit you can’t even dream about in your worst nightmares, and not only never once complained, but risked his life again and again for the people he cared about. That kid’s worth ten of a piece of shit like you, and now he might never wake up.’ He stared down at Irita and spat, the splatter landing in the dust next to the gasping officer. ‘You cunt. They were kids. What possible harm could they have done?’

‘I wasn’t the one who…' Irita gasped out.

Blaze leaned over him and stared into his eyes. ‘You gave the order. You brought them here. Here - to my home. My family. My friends. So next time you feel like sitting back after setting events in motion, man up and shoulder the responsibility. And the consequences.’ He moved back smoothly, and at a nod, Irita was again hauled to his feet. This time he swayed. ‘But at least you can take your licks like a man.’ His final punch landed under Irita’s jaw, and snapped his head back hard. The man flew backwards and landed hard on his back, gasping as he tried to roll over, managing to get to his knees. Blaze began to peel off his gloves, wincing a little as the abused flesh underneath protested. Despite the protection, his knuckles had taken some damage and he thought he might have sprained his wrist with that last one, having snapped the punch a little hard. ‘That was for my mother. You bloody well dared to stand in front of her and threaten her? You’re lucky I don’t just castrate you right here and now, poke your eyes out, stake you out and leave you for Harlock’s bird to pick over.’ He tucked his gloves into his waistband. ‘Once you’re off this planet, stay off it. In fact - stay the hell out of any space controlled by the Millennial Thieves. From this day on, anyone who catches sight of your mangy hide has my full permission to nail it to the wall of their cabin.’ He gestured to one of his men. ‘Hand this piece of shit over to Hoshino and make sure it gets off my home.’

He turned to walk away, and almost walked headfirst into Kei. He hadn't noticed her sneaking closer to watch. But she ignored him, her eyes fixed on the sorry-looking excuse for a human his men were hauling to its feet. Hoshino, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, wasn't making much of an effort to help his former subordinate.

‘Kei-’ Blaze began.

‘Nice work,’ she told him, and walked past until she was face to face with the wavering form held
up between his two guards. Blaze looked over to Harlock for guidance, but he hadn't moved, still standing implacably with his arms folded. Watching.

'Funny isn't it,' she said idly, toying with the thick bladed dagger at her hip. 'How eloquent the men are at times like this.'

With her back to him, Blaze couldn't see her face, but under its covering of blood, dust, and bruises, Irita looked as though the blood had drained right out of his face.

Then she grabbed Irita's shoulders with both hands, and rammed her right knee up into his crotch.

Blaze's men let him drop - either for shits and giggles, or because they really, really, didn't want to be next in line for a move that - from the silent, foetally curling figure on the floor's reaction - had come close to launching his bollocks past his tonsils.

Blaze himself had to struggle not to place a protective hand over delicate areas as she strode past him back to the rover, took her seat, switched on the engine and drove off without saying a word. Ali followed her, taking his charges with him.

Blaze made his own way to Harlock's side, and watched dispassionately as his people handed over their prisoner to Hoshino, leaving the machinner's admiral to call for a ride. 'Mind giving me a lift?' he asked. 'Mum asked me to supervise the transfer of supplies to the Arcadia for you. We can spare it, before you refuse - Hannibal's en route - he'll be here the day after tomorrow.' He paused. 'Oh - and I think your wife just drove off with my shirt…'

Hoshino watched them walk to the rover together - the two men were so similar in build and height and colouring, that from behind, or a distance, you could have mistaken them for brothers. They even moved with that same predatory grace that marked out men who knew how to handle themselves in both gravity and zero g in a fight. Something in the walk always gave away a spacer…

Idly, he wondered if they'd planned the scene he'd just witnessed. 'You might remember I did once warn you that if you took on Harlock, you wouldn't face just one man?' One of the Millennial Thieves had handed him Irita's glasses and he handed them over.

'Who the hell was that guy?' Irita asked once he'd shoved his glasses back onto his narrow nose and gotten his breath back. Hoshino looked down at him and if still human, he'd have winced. The man looked as though he'd been through a tenderiser.

'The nephew of Queen Promethium,' he replied absently as he watched the rover disappear into a cloud of dust. He didn't need to look at the young man at his side to know what was going through his head at the news. The ragged hyperventilating said it all.

Normally the bridge was not a place noted for silence - at least, not under the Arcadia;'s current captain, who as Ali had often been heard to opine, wasn't nearly so broody as her previous captain. To which Luna usually asked him what the hell laying eggs had to do with anything. Today however, despite a full crew complement on board, you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Apart from the clangs and clatter of boots shuffling on the deck, and a few murmured conversations which tended to peter out after a handful of sentences, the crew were uncharacteristically quiet. And even those small sounds faded as their captain walked to the front of the upper gantry, taking a position above the nose of the skull that faced the crew, behind which lay the comms suite. To Harlock's left, Kei and Ali. To his right, Yattaran and Mimay. The black
bird swooped down from the soaring array of brass-effect pipework of the dark matter engine to take up its position on his right shoulder. For once it didn't start preening, but stared belligerently out over the assembled crew with black, beady eyes.

'My friends. You all know why I've asked you here.' Harlock began. His gentle voice carried effortlessly through the bridge, and even those shuffling at the back - or rather, closer to the bridge control stations than to the helm's gantry - had no problem in hearing him. 'We've fought side by side for a long time, and there's no better crew I'd rather have at my side. But today I'm embarking on a personal mission - you all know what's at stake. We'll be following a faint trail, into the unknown, against an enemy who's already bested us, with no idea what waits for us at the end. It'll be dangerous, which is why I'm making this trip volunteers only. Anyone who doesn't-

All sixty men and women standing on the lower deck took a step forward. Harlock looked down at the faces turned up to look at him. Daiba. Ben. Meg. Zack. Anita. Niobe. Cai. Franz. Martinez. Maji. Luna (with Mii sitting on her shoulder). Rick - his sleeve pinned up, daring his captain to say something. That was just the front row. Behind them were others - Doscoi, Greg, Rod, Sabu, Yasu…

All of them waiting.

He bowed his head acknowledging their gesture, and remembered a day almost fifteen years ago, when a certain greenhorn had been the only idiot to stick his hand in the air when Kei had called for volunteers.

'Listen up, people!' Kei took a step forwards, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the crowd. 'I know you all want to come, and that means the world to both of us - but the long and the short of it is down to rations. The Arcadia is self-repairing, and has pretty much limitless fuel - sadly, the same isn't true of our supplies, despite Anita's best efforts. Since we have no real idea what we'll find out there, we've made the decision to operate at two-thirds capacity. For those of you about to take your boots and socks off, that means excluding the captain and Mimay, the operating crew will be forty people.' She moved to her console and picked up her electronic clipboard. 'Those of you remaining behind will be helping Selen with the rebuilding and organising the scattering of the Mazone convoys. If by some mischance we don't make it back, Selen and her people will take care of you.' She began calling off names. 'Rick - sorry, you have children, you're grounded.' The dark haired former pilot opened his mouth then thought better of it and nodded. 'Niobe, Zack - Tabito.'

Zack began to protest but a quiet word from his mother shut him up. Harlock watched, nowhere near as dispassionately as he felt.

'Daiba - your call,' Kei called out. Daiba looked straight up at the dark form of his cousin and nodded. Harlock gave him a small salute. 'Meg?'

'Don't even think about leaving me behind,' the small girl shouted back. Several pirates nearby laughed at her, and the pat on the back she had from Franz almost flattened her.

'Ben - Arcadia. Greg, Rod - Tabito. Doscoi - Tabito - we can't spare Maji and they need a civil engineer.'

The surly fair-haired engineer pulled a face, but nodded his acquiescence.

'Franz, Martinez, Cai - Arcadia. Kota, Sanada, Kidd - Tabito. Luna - Arcadia. Anita, Sabu, Yasu - Arcadia.'

She ran through the list with her customary efficiency, until there were two groups on the bridge,
the smaller of the two not looking as happy as perhaps they might. But the split - with a handful of exceptions, was a puzzle to Daiba, until he looked closely at those chosen to accompany their captain. Almost all of them were crew who'd been aboard the longest - not one crewmember who'd been aboard for the Battle for Earth had been selected to remain behind, and the few who weren't were senior members of the crew in critical positions such as Doc and Anita.

'Why you?' Daiba asked Meg as they watched the rest troop off the bridge, each greeted by their captain and Kei as they walked past the stairs to the gantry with a slap on the back and a quiet word.

'Girl power,' Meg whispered back. 'Their glamour-stroke-hypnosis thingy doesn't work so well on women, remember?'

He wished like hell he could forget. 'So why's Nibby staying behind?'

'Because she's non-combatant,' Meg told him. 'And Zack would fret without her, so the lovebirds get a bye…'

'And the older crew because…'

'Dark matter,' Ben suggested softly. 'That would be my guess. The captain's hedging his bets. They're the ones with the best chance of throwing off those pheromones… Not to mention mean old bastards to a man.'

'So why you?' Daiba asked cheekily. Ben grinned.

'Probably for the same reason Cai's staying - we stand a pretty good chance of resisting the siren's allure!' he declaimed dramatically.

'Cai's totally into blokes,' Daiba snorted, 'I get that, but word has it you'll shag anything with a pulse…'

Ben sighed and placed an arm around his crewmate's shoulders. 'So maybe I'm the secret weapon - sent into to infiltrate and seduce the enemy…' He murmured seductively next to Daiba's ear.

'Keep your tongue to yourself,' Daiba shot back, flicking away a wandering hand.

Meg snorted in her turn. 'Or more likely the captain's had complaints from the locals and figures it's just more diplomatic to keep you out of temptation's reach…' She placed an arm around the blue man's waist. 'So many goats… so little time…' she smirked.

'I'll have you know that the last time it was the mayor's daughter, his brother, the sheriff and a catering pack of chocolate sauce…' Ben retorted with an injured sniff. 'No animals were harmed…'

'No, but as I recall we had to cut the handcuffs off…'

Daiba let the banter flow around and over him as he waited, watching the goodbyes of the crew. Idly, he counted those mingling who were left on the bridge.

Then with a frown, he counted again.

'What is it?' Meg asked, noticing his concern.

'I only count thirty-seven - thirty-nine with the Captain and Mimay - so who are the others? Nami and Freya? That red-haired bitch?"
'Small fry and prisoners don't count,' Ben replied before Meg could. 'I think one might be Tadashi - Doc has him in the Med Bay - they're hoping the Arcadia's magic dark matter might wake him up.' He looked around. 'No idea who numbers forty-one and two are…'

Meg nudged - or rather jabbed, since he had a poor judgement of personal space - Daiba in the ribs. 'Number forty-one, I'm guessing…' She jerked her head in the direction of the port stairwell, where Harlock was greeting Blaze, who had placed a large duffle bag on the ground and was accepting a hard hug from Kei.

'Fuck me…' Ben breathed. 'Never thought I'd see the day… But I guess given what happened to Mal… I wonder…'

But what he had in mind went unsaid, as one of Selen's people in a white medical coat came running onto the bridge, and headed for Doc, to whisper in her ear.

'Doc?' Kei asked, noticing. She looked concerned, as did everyone who turned to look.

Luna however was grinning as she turned to look at her captain and XO. 'He's awake!'

Daiba only just got out of the way of the stampede as Niobe, Meg and Zack shoved their way through the still milling crew and headed off at a run. He couldn't even feel jealous as Harlock hardly hesitated in taking off after them so fast he dislodged the bird off his shoulder and caused it to take flight with an indignant squawk.
Chapter 39

Trying his best to look as though he was just vaguely going in the same direction, and not at all interested in the state of his namesake, Daiba trailed after the small group who headed for the infirmary at a dead run at a more sedate place. Consequently he arrived in time to see Doc trying in vain to usher the younger crew out of her sick bay. She gave up with a heavy sigh and threw her hands up. 'Fine! What do I know you? By all means, crowd round him, exhaust him and drive him into an early grave!'

'I'm fine, honestly Doc.' The throaty, hoarse whisper from the bed suggested otherwise.

'And you can shut up as well - what do you know about it?'

From his station leaning against the doorframe, Daiba could see his namesake lying in bed, head propped up on pillows, looking pale and opening his mouth as though to argue or apologise.

He didn't get the chance, because Luna elbowed Zack out of the way and began fussing round her patient. 'Goes away for a few years, takes a few courses and suddenly he knows better. Well you don't, young man, not in my sick bay.'

'Luna.' Harlock cut through the torrent with his softest voice. The assembled youngsters moved aside for him without prompting, and he made his way to the bedside. One arm went around the slim form of his doctor, the other was extended to the patient, squeezing one shoulder gently. As Luna rested her head on his shoulder, burying her head in his jacket to hide her face, Harlock smiled down at Tadashi. 'Dammit, kiddo - if you don't want to fetch me a coffee, you only have to say so!'

Tadashi's attempt to laugh ended in some gulping hiccups and a bout of nasty coughing that quickly got all visitors shoved out of the door unceremoniously. The sick bay's sliding door almost clipped Daiba's heels as he nipped out of the way to avoid it.

He had the distinct impression that in an ideal world, Doc would far rather have had a door that slammed. Maybe Tochiro could programme in a good hard slam for her…?

'What do you think you're doing?'

Doc's strident tones snapped him into the here and now. Belatedly he realised when he'd jumped, he'd done it the wrong way, and was now inside the sick bay. 'Erm… I… I just…' he gestured vaguely in the direction of the door, just as it re-opened to admit Harlock, one step ahead of three expectant faces who peered round him only to be cut off as the door slid shut again behind their captain.

'Jumped the wrong way, did you?' Harlock asked. He laid a hand on a spluttering Luna. 'I just want a moment. We'll be out of your hair in a minute.' He took a deep breath. 'Can he be moved?'

'No!' was the sharp reply, accompanied by a weak, hoarse "captain!' from the bed. Daiba stuck his hands in his pockets and left the adults to it, since Harlock was getting an earful of why her patient shouldn't be out of her sight. Ever again.

'Hey.' He perched on the edge of the bed. 'The others are hovering, I think. They've all been worried about you.'
Tadashi looked dreadful - pale faced and with a terrible red weal around his throat. But he gave his namesake a thumbs up.

'No talking!' Luna called out, without even looking at them. Daiba dropped Tadashi a wink and shrugged in a what-can-you-do way, which made the other youth start to laugh, which quickly turned into a rasping cough. At which point Daiba was unceremoniously turfed off the bed and Tadashi mimed "help me" as she started fussing over him again. 'In fact - don't do or say anything that might cause him to laugh, cry or speak.'

'How about a tablet?' Daiba asked, pointing to one on the side table. He caught sight of Tadashi's suddenly grateful glance, and nipped in to hand it to the unfortunate patient. 'Here ya go. Problem solved!'

Luna looked as though she was about to find fault with that as well, but Tadashi's rapid - if wobbly - scribbles quickly got her attention.

'No, you're not dead yet. Or dying. But you do need to rest. And I need to run some tests. You're not out of the woods yet,' Luna replied to the hastily penned scribbles. 'Blaze and Zack spoke to the Bentselles - don't worry, your girlfriend knows you're a hero.'

Tadashi grinned, at least until Harlock opened his mouth again. 'Malingering more like - do you know how hard it is to get a decent cup of coffee around here since you left?' He jerked a thumb back at Daiba. 'Not all Tadashi's are created equal it seems - ask for a cinnamon latte and this one would just tell me where to shove it.'

'Damn straight,' Daiba replied with a straight face, winking at the patient.

_Scribble._ He held up the tablet for them to read. 'Get your own damn coffee you lazy bastard. Sir.' Daiba read out. He sniggered. 'Oh, I dunno, captain… seems we might have something in common after all!' He exchanged a knowing grin with his namesake.

'Cheeky bastards the pair of you,' Harlock replied with a mock huff. He ruffled Tadashi's hair fondly and smiled down at the young man. 'I do miss you, short stuff. And the kids told me about what you did. Bravely done.'

_Scribble._

'If not for you they might have killed the rest before help arrived. Don't worry about the twins and Taro - that's my job. You've got nothing to apologise for. Now get some rest - we're taking off as soon as the provisions are loaded.'

_Scribble._

'Luna's sold me on not leaving you behind, squirt. But that's on condition you do what you're told. You were out for days, and we nearly lost you. Behave.' Harlock gave Tadashi's hand a squeeze where it lay on top of the covers, as pale as the rest of him. 'If you lie still and don't try to talk, Luna's going to let Zack and Nibby in - they're staying behind.'

'Only a minute or so though,' Luna told him gruffly. 'Then sleep.'

Harlock ushered Daiba out by dint of placing a hand on his shoulder and steering him towards the door, only narrowly avoiding the rush as Niobe and Zack headed for their friend, chattering loudly and over each other. Once outside he let go of his charge. 'I'm not totally convinced he should stay,' he said softly, looking through the infirmary window. 'But Luna's right about one thing - the Arcadia looks after its own, and although he's a tough little scrapper, he's not out of the woods yet.'
'But if we get into a fight?' Daiba asked. Meg, standing next to him, nodded, her blonde curls bouncing.

'The objective is track and rescue. I'm not looking for a fight,' Harlock said softly.

'You really think you can avoid one?' Daiba asked, more than a little doubtful about that sentiment.

Harlock sighed. 'I have to try - all I want right now is the boys back. Which means I'll go over under and through anything or anyone who gets in my way - but I don't want to put them at any greater risk than I have to.' He gathered himself and gave the pair a speculative look. 'Shouldn't you two find something useful to do?' he asked blandly. Hit by two soulfully innocent looks he shook his head. 'Well you'll only be in the way in the hangars - it's chaos down there. Why don't you find Kei and see what she can find for you? She'll probably need some help.'

'And you'll be doing what whilst the rest of us are hard at work?' Daiba asked cheekily. For once, his cousin didn't take the bait.

'Making a long overdue introduction,' he replied morosely. 'And attempting to nail a certain Nibelung to the floor long enough to get some answers about this damned tech of theirs and their regrettably overlooked ethically dubious control systems…'

Daiba looked down and caught Meg's eye once their captain had turned a corner in the corridor. 'Is it me,' he asked, 'Or if I were Mimay, would I be finding a nice deep hole to hide in about now?'

Meg wrapped her arm around his waist. 'You think he's really mad about it?'

Daiba stared down the shadowy corridor in the direction their captain had taken - towards the central computer room, unless he missed his guess. 'When he's that quiet about something? Oh yeah…'

The central computer tended to "sleep" when not needed. Currently in orbit around Tabito, the cathedral-like hall - too big to be considered a room - would normally be dimly lit by the wall sconces beyond the massive server bays, and the main light would be the softly glowing whirling red circle on the main trunk of the system which housed the soul of the Arcadia's creator. Today however that central, never slowing "eye" was pulsing green as it circled its never ending path; outwardly quiescent, Tochiro's dimensional tracking systems were following the trail left by the Mazone ship that had carried off the twins and his own descendent almost a week ago.

Keeping time with the pulsing light, Mimay's fireflies drifted through the air, rising, falling and dancing to a tune only she could hear.

Harlock stopped just inside the gap between two of the bays, and the cloud of fireflies sprang away from him rather as though they and he were identical poles of two magnets. 'We need to talk.' He looked up at the trailing conduits which draped in graceful arcs overhead. Mimay's long, diaphanous skirts trailed down in an equally graceful arc from where she reclined on top of them, her head pillowed on one arm.

'You should not have brought it on board.'

'She,'

Nibelung faces were not as mobile as those of humans - blank, huge-eyed stares were a default, although this could be augmented with a pursing of their tiny mouths, or in extremis, the flickering of a third eyelid. Harlock found himself treated to both: agitation, and a stubborn refusal to listen.
'Have you ever talked to one of them - outside their shells, that is? Did you ever question…'

Silence. Her fireflies now orbited her delicate, elongated head, or tried to hide in her long, almost translucent hair.

'You said they were "grown" - blank slates, designed to control the machines. Devoid of personality, of self-will. That's not something I've seen and heard so far. I've met and spoken to a lonely little girl who is at once far older than she looks, and wants to play with other children without a care in the world. Which makes me question what you told me, Mimay. And makes me wonder why you are going out of your way to avoid her.'

He'd learned to read her moods over the years - by necessity they'd spent a lot of time together as he'd fumbled his way into a role he'd fallen into by chance. Whilst he doubted he'd ever understand her the way the old captain had, he could usually muddle through. Right now, what he sensed was shame. He held up his hand, an invitation for her to return to ground level. 'Talk to me.' He asked it gently, but made sure she knew it was also an order.

Being captain was supposed to count for something, after all… He held his arms out as she shifted position, and lowered her gently to the floor once she'd slid into their arc. He let go of her slender waist with a smile, then took a seat on one of the computer's massive roots and patted the area next to him. 'Sit.'

She sat, and folded her hands in her lap, although her long fingers twitched a little, as though tempted to start clutching at the gauzy fabric that covered her sea-green flightsuit.

'It was a long time ago,' she began softly. She stared past him, into the whirling glow above their heads. 'We'd used in vitro reproduction for millennia, as our birth rates fell. When it became apparent that dark matter and inorganic intelligence could not interact safely, we knew we had to find another way of controlling the machines. In the wake of the metanoid rebellion…'

'Metanoids?' He had to take a deep breath and count to ten. Even after all this time, still the secrets kept coming… There were days he wondered if there would ever be an end to them.

She lowered her head. 'A mistake. Akin to your machinners problem. One that almost destroyed us as a race. A horror mercifully long gone…' She raised her head, and looked him in the eye. Recognising the plea, he nodded, and let her continue. 'Two of our greatest biologists - Sif and Sigyn - worked on growing our own kind to maturity in the clone vats, but with only limited success at first. Then there was a breakthrough - they found a way to create creatures based on our DNA which could control the dark matter instinctively - living computers, permanently bonded to the machines they maintained, and we flourished. Limitless energy at our fingertips… and we never questioned it. Not once.' She ended in a whisper.

'Mimay…' He laid one hand on top of hers, and squeezed her frail fingers lightly.

'There were rumours. Stories. Nothing we wanted to believe at first.' She was wringing he fingers now, twisting the surprisingly robust fabric of her veils between them.

Harlock waited for her to regain her composure. 'Freya's no faceless clone. What did your people do, Mimay?' he asked.

She lowered her head still further. 'Our dirtiest secret. Eventually, the clones had proved short-lived, and replacing them every ten years or so was prohibitive, given how many of our systems relied on the Dark Matter engines. So they secretly changed their remit. Instead of growing clones, they would occasionally - just when needed - take newborns from the reproductive centre. In the
last two or three hundred years before our fall, the hidden, shameful truth is that we took our own children - our most precious gift - and hid them in the darkness, cut off from all contact but the most basic communication, and forced them to control our machines.' Her hair fell over her face as she lowered her head.

Harlock reached out a hand and cupped her chin, and gently forced her to look at him. 'This is tied up in that dark matter disaster, isn't it?' he asked softly. She nodded.

'I - along with everyone else - was told that it was the clone-minds that turned against us, much like our metanoid creations once had. In hindsight…'

'Your slaves banded together and showed you where you could stick it?' he asked bluntly.

'Not all of us.'

Both Harlock and Mimay turned at the sound. Freya stood between the servers, her small hand in Kei's, and stared at them with her large, sad eyes. Her gaze flicked from Harlock to Mimay. Harlock's hand had moved from her chin to her shoulder, and he felt her tense under his fingers.

'Standard, now?' he asked the little Nibelung girl. She smiled at him and nodded. 'Well that will make things easier…'

Her attention however was fixed on Mimay, and she stood quietly, waiting.

Harlock felt Mimay's tension change to trembling, and slipped his arm to her waist. 'Mimay?' he said softly. The Nibelung woman did not move, and after a hesitation, Kei stepped forward, still holding Freya's slender hand.

'She's been stuffed in a tiny capsule in physical stasis for over two hundred years, devoid of any contact,' Kei said softly. 'Apart from a bunch of homicidal, body-stealing lunatics you two are possibly the last of your kind.' She released Freya's hand, and Harlock gave Mimay a short, sharp shove forwards at the same time, causing her to take a couple of tottering steps forwards to try and keep her balance. She failed, but in her instinctively graceful way, like a cat, she made dropping to her knees in front of the small child seem to be what she had intended to do all along.

Harlock let out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding, as her arms went around the little girl and she held Freya gently. Very quietly he stepped around them to reach Kei's side, and took her arm to pull her away from the scene.

'Let's just let this play out, shall we?' he murmured next to her ear. Neither of them spoke again until they'd rounded a corner in the long corridor.

'Do you think they'll be all right?' Kei nibbled on her bottom lip as she took a quick look back over her shoulder. Harlock gave her a little push in the direction of the bridge. 'You're pushy today…'

'I'm in a hurry. They'll be fine. But if Mimay staggers onto the bridge clutching a bloodied knife and covered from head to foot in the stuff you have my permission to say "I told you so".'

She huffed at him. 'Well, aren't you Mr. Positive today?' They walked back to the bridge in companionable silence for a minute or two before she spoke again. 'That woman…'

He didn't break stride, but flashed her a grim smile across his shoulder. 'Let her stew for a day or two, Kei. People always come up with far more worrying scenarios for what you intend to do with them than we could ever think of.'
'Speak for yourself,' she sniped. 'Personally, there's a lot I could think of to do to her.'

'Save it for that bitch who cut Mamoru - *that* one I have plans for.' His tone was deceptively mild, and didn't fool Kei for a moment. However she also knew him too well.

'If you could ever break yourself of being too damn merciful, I might buy that,' she sniffed.

His answering smile softened. 'You think I'm soft?'

She snorted. 'You're a good man - and I love you for it. But what you're not is a stone killer or a sadist. Whatever you have planned, it won't come nearly close enough to being what they deserve.'

He stopped so quickly she'd taken a step or two past him before she could pull up. She braked and pivoted on the ball of her foot so that they were facing each other in the middle of the corridor. Cai - moving at a fair clip on some task or other, had to squeeze past them, but neither of them acknowledged they crewman's concerned regard. 'I won't play with my prey, Kei. My rules have always been clear - if someone crosses a line, I remove them.'

'But this time I *want* them to suffer!' she blurted. He reached out his hand and gently traced the single tear that refused to obey her iron-clad resolve.

'You don't torture a rabid animal, love. You put it down,' he said softly. She took the step that closed the distance between them and laid her head on his shoulder, and he stroked her back gently, eventually letting his arm lie around her waist. 'We fly a black flag, not red.'

'Under the circumstances it's not helping to hold the moral high ground,' she mumbled into his shoulder. Sensing the crisis of conscience was averted for now, he pushed her away just far enough to drop a light kiss on her lips.

'Never make the move everyone expects of you, Kei. What can be predicted, can be avoided. Thanks to Harlock's "kill 'em all - I'll be rebooting history anyway" policy, I've rarely had to break a sweat to maintain that reputation of his. The game goes with the name - and everyone - except you - tends to overlook that under this damn eyepatch is *me* - not *him*. I was never regular military. I've spent almost fifteen years keeping our enemies wrong footed because they're so busy waiting for the other shoe to drop, so wrapped up in trying to work out what my angle is, they're doing all my work for me.' He smiled fondly at her. 'When I do get physical with anyone, they tend to leave themselves wide open as a result.'

She smiled at him. *You?* You were the worst bloody assassin in history!'

'Hopelessly burnt out and close to breaking point, and in hindsight taking on the job so soon after Marduk was a mistake,' he acknowledged. 'But you'll notice I *did* actually get the job done…'

'Really? How do you figure *that*?'

His answering grin was more than a little wolfish around the edges. 'Please notice, the Earth - and the universe - are still here.'

She shook her head. 'Honestly,' she huffed at him.

'You can't,' he replied primly, escorting her up the stairs to the upper gantry, 'Argue with results.' More solemnly, as they walked past the heavy, baroque monstrosity that was the captain's chair he added: 'Whatever it takes, Kei.'

'No quarter given, no mercy offered?' she asked quietly.
'If it comes to that.' He took up his position behind the wheel and waited patiently, arms folded, as she ran expert hands over her console. He didn't have to turn to know it was Yattaran's heavy boots stamping across the gantry to take up his station on his left. 'First mate - are we ready to leave orbit?'

'All stowed and all hands aboard,' cap'n,' Yattaran replied gruffly. 'As soon as Tochiro and our elfin ladybug are ready, we're good to go.'

Harlock nodded. 'My friend?' he asked reaching out to lay a hand on one of the balusters. There was a low, answering rumble from the ship.

_The trace is fainter… Little Freya says the ship carrying them is deep… very deep in sub-space. Wherever they're going, they're in one hell of a hurry, _said the voice only he could hear, unless its owner decreed otherwise.

'Just tell me you have a heading,' Harlock replied under his breath, not wanting Kei to overhear.

_Ah. The little 'un's got some connection I can't even begin to figure out - but she can follow Mamoru's trail. Says she can "see" the trail he leaves or something… Between us, we can track them at least. What we do when we get there…_

'We'll figure it out. One way or another.'

Kei shot him a sideways, narrow-eyed stare at that, which went totally un-noticed given that she was standing on his blind side.

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_Mazone transport: Fraxinus_

On a ship where the lights never went out, they soon lost track of the days. Not even the visits of their captors allowed for any reliable sense of the passage of time, since the rooms - and they had to use the term loosely for the hollowed-tree-like enclosure they found themselves in - were self contained and only rarely did one of the black-eyed, green skinned Mazone open the aperture to look in on them and check on Mamoru's injuries. Food and water were dispensed from a series of large nodules on the walls, wastes deposited in a small enclosed alcove from which they were mysteriously vanished. They shared one large "bed" - a wide, flat wooden extrusion from the floor with a surprisingly comfortable mossy covering. Their own clothing - blood and mud stained as it had been - had been whisked away by an officious red-head whose hair definitely clashed with her skin colour, and replaced by soft togas (to the twin's lasting amusement, and Taro's discomfort given his short legs).

They were comfortable, fed, clean and bored senseless. The last of which their parents - infinitely wiser in the ways of pre-pubescent scions of the ancient houses of Harlock and Oyama - could have told the Mazone was a recipe for disaster.

_Could_ have. More than likely _wouldn't_ have. Harlock in particular tended to enjoy making the punishment fit the crime, after all.

'It must've just got stuck…' Taro told the Mazone covered from head to toe in the contents of the food dispenser as she stood in the doorway, dripping the slimy protein onto the bark-like floor, and not even the black-eyed glares from the ampeloi mopping up the mess made when the blockage had caused a minor explosion in the corridor it backed onto could shake his innocent, wide-eyed helplessness. Although when he let a well-timed tear fall and stood there wring the hem of his toga
'You'll have to help me,' Mamoru whimpered when they came to move the boys into a new cell. He clung to the Mazone who reluctantly guided the "poor, blind child" and she never noticed when he lifted the contents of her tool belt with deft fingers in a move both parents would have gone ballistic over but street-smart former dip Uncle Franz would have praised. Taro was still trying to figure out the purpose of most of the strange wooden devices which were as strong as any metal.

'No idea,' Wattaru replied blithely when asked point blank how an item resembling a miniature trowel had gotten into the door mechanism and jammed it partly open. 'Perhaps you ought to be a bit more careful where you drop things?' he added helpfully. 'You should hear dad when someone gets careless with their tools on the Arcadia - I mean, it's all about discipline, isn't it, on a spaceship? The wrong item left unattended in the wrong place and if something causes a short… well…' As the mazone questioner turned on her dainty heel to stalk away in dudgeon, shoulders as rigid as ever any hapless babysitter had ever been he added 'Don't run a very tight ship, do you?'

'Damn…' Taro added, cocking his head on one side as he peered past Wattaru to watch their jailor disappear down the corridor. 'I think you scored with that one - if her ass was any tighter only dogs'd hear her when she farted!'

The three conspirators giggled.

Following up by breaking the waste-disposal system so badly that the entire deck - or whatever layout they had - was flooded however, resulted in the bad-tempered bitch who'd kidnapped them backhanding Mamoru on his still healing cheek so hard he was seeing stars when Wattaru and Taro helped him up to his feet. The cut had re-opened from her blow and despite the pain he stood his ground, wavering slightly and glowering sullenly with his good eye. She towered over the three boys, who all glared mulishly back at her.

One of the melia tugged at her superior's sleeve. 'Commander Cassandra - the Queen wants them alive,' she stage-whispered. With a snarl Cassandra turned sharply and stormed out of the room.

'Clean this up and move them. And in future, I want a watch on them!'

Boys and mazone heaved audible sighs of relief and visibly relaxed once she was out of sight. Their new guardian bundled them quickly from their cell and walked them a hundred yards or so through the labyrinthine corridors of the ship to a much airier room - the surfaces here festooned with greenery and filled with light.

'I'm Zeuxine,' the mazone told them brightly. She knelt down in front of the boys and lifted a hand towards Mamoru's face. Despite his best intentions, he flinched away.

'Be easy. I mean you no harm. I have tended our guardians when they have similar injuries - I can help.'

Reluctantly, he nodded, and allowed her to peel back the dressing. 'I don't think I've ever seen anyone get that one's roots in as much of a tangle as you three just did - unless it was Lady Cleome.' Her hand- three fingered with long, delicate, oddly boneless fingers, delicately removed the dressing and dropped it to the floor. 'We're not all like her, I promise.' Mamoru flinched away from her touch when she touched his rapidly-forming bruise. She touched her finger to a trickle of Mamoru's blood and touched the bloodied tip of her spatulate finger to her tongue.
Ew,' Wattaru muttered.

She smiled at him. 'I need to adjust for his body chemistry, little one. I can produce something to ease the pain and the infection, but your kind lack the symbiotic cells our Corpse Flowers have. To give you the sap we would provide for our guardians would not be wise.' She paused before lifting the gauzy patch that covered his right eye. 'Would your brothers prefer to be elsewhere? she asked gently.

'Wouldn't miss it,' Taro said with salacious curiosity emblazoned over his wide face. He leaned into Mamoru's personal space so close he almost had his nose in his adopted brother's good eye and he reached for the edge of the bandage. 'He won't let us see…

Mamoru smack his inquisitive hand away with uncharacteristic irritation. 'Pack it in, Taro - it's no fucking joke.'

Wattaru grabbed Taro by the scruff of his borrowed clothes. 'Back off, short stuff. Give him some space.' He hauled Taro away and gave him a series of small shoves to the small of the back to get him out of sight behind his twin. Wattaru nodded in reply to the heartfelt look of relief in his twin's eye. Sometimes, you just had to sit on the little bugger… He watched warily from the corner of the room as the slender alien peeled away the covering - another plant part? It looked like a pale, fluffy leaf… Waiting for any sign of danger - though what the hell you think you can do against a ship full of alien plant-women… he thought bitterly, his hand clenching into a fist at his side. You're not even ten yet, you're half their size, have no weapons, and no way home…

'Oi - loosen off a little, would ya?' Taro pulled his hand free of Wattaru's tense fingers and shook his own fingers to get some life back into them.

'Sorry,' Wattaru muttered.

'S'all right. I'm scared shitless too,' Taro whispered back.

Wattaru bristled. 'I'm not scared,' he forced out through gritted teeth. 'I'm worried.' He hesitated before continuing. 'Is she on the level, do you think?' he nodded in the direction of the mazone ministering to Mamoru. 'I mean, that nasty one and her friends were ready to just kill everyone back home, and she's got an itch to slap Mamo around.'

'Guess they're like people,' Taro replied slowly, thinking it over. 'I mean, Mom and Dad are good pirates, right? But then there's Hunter and his crew…'

'I s'ppose…' Wattaru chewed on his bottom lip. 'There's something missing from this one, if you know what I mean? She's nicer. That other - Cassandra - there's something not right about her. Kinda like when Promethium talks to Selen. Selen's all warm and quiet, but Promethium's sorta dark and cold.'

'Or it's the other way round - the nasty ones are the ones missing stuff?' Wattaru pondered the unexpected profundity and nodded his agreement. But Taro was already distracted by their surroundings. 'Hey - Wattie - lookit the walls! Are these stress fractures?'

The less-than technically inclined Wattaru dutifully looked at the section of wall his brother was gesticulating at, and shrugged.

'If you say so.' There was a strange, radiating crack in the surface. In fact, when he looked around, his sharper eyes potted a lot of them, on walls, floor and the low ceiling, curling and winding in and out of the mossy surfaces. 'They're everywhere.'
'Your brother has the right of it.' The graceful alien had finished ministering to Mamoru, who was re-bandaged and looking a lot less stressed. 'The ship is deep in the Void Between - deeper than it was intended to travel. Cassandra is in a great hurry.' She laid one of her odd, boneless hands on the wall and closed her eyes. 'We will not survive long once we reach our destination.'

All three boys exchanged a puzzled look. 'We?' Mamoru asked eventually.

Zeuxine nodded once, a slight incline of her long head that reminded them of Mimay in its alien grace. 'We who serve the vessels are a part of them. Normally our ship-trees take a long time to grow to full size. But our home was destroyed, and those of us who were born between worlds grew on young ships, grown quickly to hold those of us who survived.' As she spoke, Mamoru, closest to her, realised that although her alien form was difficult to read, she seemed younger than he'd thought.

'How old is this ship?' he asked thoughtfully.

'Barely fifteen cycles - but already one of the oldest in our fleet.' Before he could ask she added 'As we count time, orbits of our home planet as was - which to humans would be perhaps seven of Earth's orbits.'

'So if you're a part of the ship - are you the same age?' Mamoru asked.

Another graceful dip of her head.

'Holy shit,' Wattaru whispered. 'You're younger than we are? So how…?'

She smiled. 'We are budded from a parent. In this way, although we are ourselves, we begin with the memories and skills needed to serve the vessel.'

The boys exchanged looks. 'Clones?' Mamoru hazarded eventually. Zeuxine's flat, almost expressionless features crinkled slightly in an unexpectedly human frown. 'Cellular copies of the original,' he explained. 'Like taking cuttings and getting them to root…' when his brothers stared at him for the unexpected erudition, he shrugged. 'Well one of us had to pay some attention to dad when he's off and running and mum's eyes have started to glaze over…'

'We know of the procedure. Yes - very similar, but self-generated by the original organism.' Zeuxine's face returned to its untroubled placidity. There was something almost doll-like about the basic mazone form - small nippleless bumps for breasts, narrow waists, long necks with backswept heads and their long hair falling to cover the swell of their hips. Several of those walking around the ship wore next to nothing and their bodies lacked any kind of definition below the waist - no belly button, nothing more than an odd, shallow midline cleft to the rear - to Mamoru, they resembled one of his sister's playthings - one he'd disassembled in a moment of boyish curiosity, only to find under the clothing that it had been designed by someone with an eye for the vague shape of the human body, but with no inclination to pay much more than lip service to its functions.

Or as he'd put it at the time: no girl parts. He wondered idly if they had boys, and was promptly distracted by a chattering troupe of females so like to Zeuxine they had to be related. Upon seeing the boys they gathered round them in a twittering mob, chirping in their own language like a small flock of birds as they each tried to touch the strange creatures in their midst. In the end, after one three fingered hand too many tried to explore his face, Mamoru snapped. 'Just back off!' he snarled, slapping at the offending article. All of the black-eyed aliens drew away simultaneously and eyed him unblinking, swaying as though in thrall to an unseen, unknowable breeze. 'Get some boundaries, 'he muttered less confrontationally, turning away from the crowd.
'Zeuxine?' the speaker was a pale green with yellow-white hair her only covering. Not that the diaphanous veils most of the no-combatant Mazone they'd seen so far had left much to the imagination - and, as suspected, their doll-like anatomy was far from salacious.

'Lycaste,' Zeuxine replied gently. 'Enough. They are no more strange than the corpse flowers. And they are but saplings. Little ones not yet fallen from the branch.'

'I thought humans would be bigger,' a smaller version of Zeuxine said, flushing a darker green at the stares she received in her own turn from the boys. 'Calypso said they were the sons of the Fury himself!'

'Aerangis told me that, Eria,' was the almost snippy reply from the darker green red haired mazone so addressed. 'Yoania heard Cassandra say that he will not hurt us if we have them. Do you think that's true?'

'Lady - if you think holding us bought you a free pass, boy are you ever in shit,' Taro sniggered. 'Dad'll tear anyone apart who gets between us and him.' He glared at Wattaru who had elbowed him in the ribs for the profanity, but the mazone, oblivious to the social faux pas, engaged in a meaningful, silent conversation which screamed "worry" to the young bystanders, who exchanged their own silent concerns - although neither Wattaru nor Taro dared ask Mamoru if he was raising one eyebrow or just frowning, given that the other was hidden under a new bandage.

By means of a few strategically timed yawns and Taro's ability to turn on the waterworks at will, the boys managed to get the room to themselves eventually. Their new wardens left them with wooden bowls of the food they'd had to get used to over the past week, and departed. Mamoru stuck a finger in the creamy coloured pasted and stared glumly at the lump that stuck to his fingers like wallpaper paste. 'Either of you got any idea what we're eating?' he asked. 'I'm not even sure where they get it from…'

'You ask that now…?' Taro leered at his brothers. 'Maybe from their boobies like milk? Or other lady parts?'

The twins stared at him, stared down at their bowls, and put them down simultaneously with identical grimaces. Taro scooped the bowls up and tucked in. 'Too000 easy, you guys,' he mumbled with his mouth full. 'It's a protein and carb mix from some of those lumps on the walls. I asked whilst you two jokers were snoring a while back.'

'Yeah… but what's the protein?' Mamoru asked, a wicked smile paying around his mouth. He waited as the question percolated through Taro's brain and then lifted his bowl from suddenly limp fingers. 'Seriously, Taro-chan - if you can't take it, don't dish it out…'

'It still looks like snot though,' Wattaru added mournfully as he poked at the goo. 'I miss Anita's cooking. And Aunt Selen's.'

Mamoru jabbed a messy finger at his twin. 'You spend that much time in the kitchen in the shop I'm surprised Selen hasn't put you to work in it. Whaddya you gonna be when we grow up? A ramen cook?'

'Beats a job where he might have to arrest dad,' Taro interjected before Wattaru could do more than open his mouth to rebut the slur, and referencing Wattaru's oft-stated love of the SDF's proposed battle trains. Ever since the prototype engine had made a test run via Tabito, he'd been smitten - but then, Taro couldn't fault him there - the massive engine - 001, based on an ancient steam design - was rather cool…
At least the obligatory scap and argument that followed took the twins' minds off their captivity. Taro, a little older and a tiny bit wiser, figured that for now, that was about as much as he could do.

Once out of IN-SKIP we need to get a signal out, he thought, listening only vaguely to the twin's habitual carping over future career choices. Can't escape - not in space. But a big enough signal might just get someone's attention… None of the aliens had thought to search them, and he quietly, without fuss, ran a hand over the little compartment in the loose wraps they'd been given to wear that held the few "tools" he'd been able to hide, which included the small knife Wattaru had half-inched on their first day. It wasn't much, but it would have to be enough. You're an Oyama, he told himself firmly. You should be able to build a damn starship with some tinfoil and a butterknife… He looked over at the twins and sighed mentally. On the other hand - you love 'em both, but you've got Wattaru who trips over his own feet coz he rushes into everything full-tilt, and Mamoru who even allowing for the fact he tried to hide how tired he still got was a bit of a laid-back lazybones as your Harlocks… This time the sigh was audible. It never seemed like a problem when the spaceships were scratch-built out of whatever lumber was lying around…

Now that it was real however, he just wanted to curl up into a ball. But I can't... I'm the oldest, even if only by a bit. Dad'll be counting on me…

Feigning more tiredness than he actually felt in order to shut Wattaru up, Mamoru looked over at Taro, who had his furrowed little frown on his forehead. Over-thinking it as usual, Mamoru thought fondly. Small and short-sighted he might be, but he knew Taro would be desperately trying to think of a way to get them rescued faster. Or to protect the twins. That sawed off little bod most of the kids made fun of housed a fast, smart brain that left most of their peer group in the dust, to Mamoru's eternal delight. He relaxed a little at the thought. Leave it to Taro… he'll come up with something. He always does.

His gaze rested lightly on his twin, curled up next to him, pretending to be asleep but given away by the tension in his body. Never fooled anyone, but what the hell. Better if he rested. 'Nii-san?' Wattaru whispered, his hazel eyes now open and looking right at his brother.

'Get some sleep, Wattaru. It'll be okay,' Mamoru whispered back.

'You sure about that?' Wattaru pointed up at the ceiling of their room, and Mamoru looked up and shivered at the sight.

'What is it?' Taro asked, peering with myopic futility in the direction the twins were staring. Mamoru hesitated slightly, but eventually came down on the side of full disclosure.

'Those cracks? Like the ones in the walls? There's a massive one up there, and the self-repair isn't kicking in - the ceiling's twisting,' he replied, hating the slight tremor in his voice as he spoke. He watched the crack through his one good eye, and hardly even stirred except to put an arm around each brother as they huddled close. Wattaru, who could see it as well as Mamoru, opened his mouth to speak but Mamoru shushed him with a quelling look long since perfected. Sadly it never worked on Taro, who proceeded to tell them what none of them wanted to hear.

'There's too much strain on the ship,' Taro murmured. 'Ships like the Arcadia can go so fast because they go so deep into IN space - they can self-repair - constantly healing the damage within microseconds of it forming, it's a constant battle.' He paused, his head cocked on one side. 'Can't you hear it?'

The twins shook their heads in unison.
'The ship's tearing itself apart,' Taro said quietly. 'There's always some background noise, and if you listen real hard, you can make it out... it's like - oh - you know on those old warp vids when they show sailing ships and they creak all the time?'

The twins both cocked their heads to one side to listen.

'I dunno about this ship not lasting much after they get us where they're going,' Wattaru said eventually. 'Starts to look as though we'll be lucky to get there at all...'

Even as tired as they were, none of them dared close their eyes after that.

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*Mazone Mothership: Main fleet.*

The fleet had been drifting lazily through the system for several hours, basking in the light of the twin suns. Cleo stared out of one of the viewports of the *nemeton*, watching a real-time simulation of the photon streams as they floated past the yellow star of the pair. The stop was a necessary recharge for their fleet, but that necessity troubled her more than she dared to admit out loud. *The black-body drives do not need this much power for travel - we fight a constant battle against the entropy of the Deep Void, in an attempt to get to where? And why the hurry?* And the energy requirements are well in excess of our travel and self-repair.

She watched the dancing spirals of plasma as they writhed and coiled in their eternal ebb and flow against the backdrop of the long dark. Fractals waltzed in the cold emptiness: the promise of life - of *hope* - in the most hostile of environments.

*Or do we travel so deep not for speed, but to keep the levels from exceeding the safety protocols...?*

She laid one hand on the viewing pane, and her head she pressed against the cool surface. So many ships lost at the last interface... *We tear ourselves apart... literally.*

'Trying to warm yourself in the light, sister?' Tessius' rough drawl brought her back to the *nemeton's* shadowed hall with a bump. At this time of the daily cycle, it was a simulated twilight.

'I've no desire to burn, my friend,' Cleo said softly. She straightened, and ran a hand through her dark hair. She turned to look at her companion, but any conversation had to wait as a babbling congregation of *leshy* rushed past them, their twiggy limbs gangling and seemingly uncoordinated; legs and arms long, attenuated, and multi jointed waving like stick-figure puppets on the ends of tangled strings. They tumbled past in a tight little mob, and it was, as ever, almost impossible to tell quickly where one ended and another began. A tangled thicket on legs.

Cleo watched them scamper out of sight, wondering at the sudden prickling of her eyes at the sight.

'So innocent,' Tessius said gruffly, once they were alone again. 'They know nothing - need to know nothing - of our problems. One could envy them that naivitie.'

Cleo shot her friend a puzzled look. The sentiment echoed her own so closely she could almost believe Tessius could read her mind. But then again, she was, as she had often been told, something of an open book... 'At least they can enjoy their brief lives with no fear of what might come,' she replied, and startled herself at how bitter that sounded in her own ears.

'And so you too begin to fear?' Tessius asked.

Cleo couldn't answer. To admit it out loud...
'Walk with me, Cleome. We need to talk.' Tessius was already making her way down the outer circle of the nematon's heart, and Cleo, slightly shorter, had to scamper to keep up.

'Why are we heading for the docking bay?' she asked breathlessly, trotting along taking one and a half strides for every one of Tessius', so so it felt.

'Cassandra's here. The *Fraxinus* left the Deep not long ago - she'll be here with the hostages shortly.'

Cleo settled into an easier stride and waited for Tessius to continue. 'She's early,' she added eventually when no further comment was forthcoming.

'She's pushed the vessel to beyond its limits,' Tessius snarled. 'Three hundred melia, ampeloi, leshy and their guardians, all sacrificed to this insanity! What can she and the queen hope to achieve with this madness?'

'The Arcadia is conceivably the only ship that can stop us,' Cleo replied solemnly. 'We keep Harlock distracted, and…'

'And? And what, Cleome? Tell me what this gains us? To unleash this man on our people? This is no distraction - this man - he will come for us, and he will tear us apart to get to his children. So what is it she really wants? To give them someone to fear more than they fear the queen? More than they fear the danger they face every time we enter or leave the Deep Void?' She shook her head violently. 'Harlock *helped* our people, Cleo. Despite everything we've done to his race. How do you explain this?'

Cleo couldn't, but Tessius didn't wait for her to answer. 'We lose more ships every time we jump. The military under Cassandra are actively destroying any that cannot - or will not - follow. And they do it with the queen's blessing. How can this be right? That an outlaw hunted by even his own kind - a man capable of destroying the universe if he so wished - can have more compassion for another species than our own kind have for each other?'

Cleo dragged her into a side-chamber formed from the massive bole of an ancient ash. 'You *have* to stop airing these views where they can be overheard!' she whispered furiously, looking around wildly. 'Do you really think your position and friendship with Rafflesia will save you if anyone hears you?'

'Tessius dragged her arm away from Cleo's frantic sleeve-plucking. 'It's better than sitting on the sidelines and whimpering because you can't see a solution. No - I take that back: you see just fine - what you won't do is make a stand!'

'Because it'll just get us all killed!' Cleo wailed.

'Better that, than picked off piecemeal to further some vague agenda about turning back the wheel of time!' Tessius snapped. 'At the rate of attrition just in this convoy, there won't be enough drives *left* to trigger the nodes of time.' She paused, but not, Cleo noted, from any sense of caution. 'Cleo - it isn't too late to turn this around. If you were to bring your own influence to bear -'

'To do what, exactly? You can't run, Tessius - there isn't a planet on our route where you wouldn't be found. The queen has already shown that she will not permit anyone to leave. To do so is to encourage the rest of the fleet to do the same. So what's the alternative - a coup?'

Tessius stared at her, head held high, and held her gaze.

It was Cleo who looked away first.
Tessius laid a nut-brown hand on Cleo's pale shoulder. 'She'll drag Harlock into our midst as a rallying call for the waverers, Cleo. If she forces him to engage - and if Rafflesia doesn't, Cassandra will - you know what the result will be…'

Cleo, staring miserably at the floor, didn't answer. Anything she might have said in reply would have to wait, as the ship's hull shuddered like a tree in a storm, signalling the opening of one of the vacuoles to receive Cassandra's transport.

'They're here,' she said, choking slightly on the words. Without waiting for her friend she set off towards the transport's landing area.

'So I see,' Tessius replied coldly. Her voice came from a distance, and at the bleak note in her voice, Cleo stopped and turned to see what had provoked the reply.

Although she was several viewing windows down from her friend, the sight outside that had caught Tessius' attention was plain to see.

The Fraxinus had disintegrated, the residual heat signature from the destroyed carbon drive a faint, darker orange against the simulated sunlight.
The room they'd given her wasn't as bad as she'd expected, all things considered. Shizuka knew better than to ascribe the simple shower, sink and toilet facility as a luxury - it just meant they didn't have to waste time - or risk the crew falling for her "wiles" as one thug with a crew-cut had put it - taking her to and from the shower block in the brig. The Arcadia's crew's wariness of all things Mazone also extended, it appeared, to ensuring that those assigned to feed her and periodically check up on her were less likely to be affected by a pretty face and a decent amount of cleavage. At least three of her guards were obviously immune to her charms.

The little blonde girl with the permanent scowl had a tendency to slam her food tray down on the table and glare before marching back out - that, she could deal with, although she always had to resist the temptation to check for ground glass. The Chinese man was quiet and polite, and the only one who would speak to her, however briefly, but the complete lack of reaction to her sitting up in her cot one morning and letting her sheet fall to her waist made it perfectly clear he'd no interest in her gender. Likewise the stocky, bewhiskered older man called Tanuki who had to be at least seventy who'd gently informed her he had granddaughters her age and would she kindly put them away.

The fourth however… that one had potential. He was young - perhaps in his early twenties. Tall, blond, slim but well muscled, with an easy-going smile.

And blue.

She couldn't help staring, when she first saw him. She was Mazone - different skin colours were the norm amongst the elder species: silver, brown, green… opalescent… even a dark wine colour amongst one of the aquatic species. But humans, she'd long thought, tended to come in a more limited palette - shades of pink or brown - some darker, some lighter… less of the latter these days as so many of the poorer nations - including the African continent - had not been part of the diasporas that had begun a thousand years before, and what was left had been wiped out when Earth had been destroyed. Blue, however, was a new one.

'I'm from the Greater Magellanic Cloud,' he'd replied evenly when she'd asked, not expecting him to answer. 'We made some adaptations to the local conditions, and one of the genetic side-effects was this-' he gestured to indicate his muted sky-blue skin. 'Although one splinter group went with green… and some really disastrous facial hair…'

She'd eyed him up and down. 'You don't get that fixed mutation in such a short time with human biotech at the level it was before the Kamiyo Plan was enacted,' she'd pointed out.

He'd shrugged elegantly. 'Well… depends if you buy into the legends that we were transported there by the Nibelung long before the rest of humanity followed on their own.' His tone was as dismissive as his shrug.

*How could you not know your past...?* For the Mazone - who passed on from the dawn of time via their shared genetic heritage in each lineage, this was unthinkable. Even for the hybrids like herself - the "corpse flowers" - the miniscule organelles in her cells passed on via their RNA the memories of her "mazone" progenitors - those formerly free-floating single-celled organisms that had colonised an entire world.

She'd inadvertently asked the question out loud. He'd smiled at her as he placed her tray on the table. 'You'd be surprised. Archaeology and history are not encouraged on my homeworld.'
He'd left, after that. But every other day he had the evening shift for her meals, and on the next visit he'd brought her a stand-alone tablet to read, with a handful of academic papers on human migrations and settlement on it.

'So you're the token nice-guy who befriends the poor, helpless prisoner?' she'd asked.

He'd smiled, his teeth startlingly white against his unusual skin. 'Or the weak spot in your prison schedule - the sympathetic idiot who lets his guard down.'

Her mouth twitched, despite her best intentions.

'Or,' he'd added, as he left the room, 'I'm just Ben. And I'd be very disappointed if you decided to roll with the clichés...' He stopped at the door. 'Is there anything else you need?'

'Out of here?'

His smile was amused, but his eyes remained unmoved. 'Not happening, try again.'

'I had thought of taking up knitting… it's so boring in here…' She tried out her most winsome smile, and at that, he simply laughed in her face.

'Nice try, but I wasn't born yesterday.'

Looking into that youthful face she was suddenly struck by how… old… his eyes seemed. 'No…' she mused aloud as the door closed behind his leather-clad ass. 'And not as recently as most people around you believe, either…'

But even if there were no opportunities to get hold of anything sharp, there were other ways to create weapons. Although her room was monitored from a camera above the door (and possibly one she hadn't seen) the bathroom area might have a blind spot, depending on how squeamish they were here about bodily functions.

She fingered the bath towel she'd been given, and smiled. She'd been a model prisoner up to now. Time to start probing her prison in earnest, because for some reason, Harlock and the Arcadia were making much better time than she'd expected. And that wouldn't do. That just wouldn't do at all.

Frankly, if it had been up to her, Shizuka Namino would have been placed in a small cupboard about three feet square situated next to one of the access hatches of the turret coolant ducts for the oscillator cannon arrays. In fact, Kei had just the cramped, stinking, damp cubby-hole in mind… A few days curled up and having the sluice dripping on her head in the cold, dark, damp underbelly of the ship would be the perfect start to the things Kei would like to do to the woman responsible for kidnapping her sons. By comparison, the cramped, bare crew quarters they'd found for her on a mostly isolated lower deck were luxurious, and far better than the creature deserved.

The lock for the room had been disabled from the inside, and with cameras along the corridor there was no need really to assign a guard - although to be prudent, Harlock had assigned one anyway. Currently chairs at either end on the corridor were occupied by Martinez and Sandow, who were amusing themselves by means of throwing elaborate paper planes at each other in an attempt to see who could design the plane which would fly furthest. So far, it seemed from the collection strewn behind Sandow's seat that Martinez was winning - but then, he'd been friends with Yattaran for twenty years, and the association paid off…

She stepped delicately over and between the flimsy planes, careful not to damage their hard work. 'Not too bored, I hope?' she asked Martinez as she walked past.
He grinned up at her, not bothering to uncross his ankles. 'Don't worry - we've got our eyes on the prize, Miss Kei!' A long-winged glider brushed the top of her head, catching in her hair and she reached up for it and sent it flying back down the corridor in one graceful turn and throw.

'Sorry miss!' Sandow called out. The glider landed at his feet. 'Damn - best one yet as well!'

'All in the wrist, Sandow!'

'Yeah… that's what all the girls tell 'im,' Martinez sniggered.

'Asshole,' Sandow called back, more from habit than any genuine annoyance. Some exchanges were mandatory, after all. A guy thing… She stopped in front of the only closed door on the corridor, and stared at the featureless panel for a moment. Unbidden her left hand reached for the keypad to the side, and she didn't even notice that her right had dropped to the holster on her hip, to grip the butt of the pistol that rested at her side. Or even that she'd pulled it halfway out of the holster even as her black-gloved fingers hit the first three numbers on the keypad.

Even in the dim lighting of the Arcadia's interior, the shadows darkened around her for a fraction of a second. The sudden silence was almost deafening.

Without a word she turned on her heel, shoved the pistol deep into its holster, and strode on down the corridor without glancing around. By the time she'd walked past Sandow with a brief nod of acknowledgement, the shadows had receded - if indeed they'd been more than a trick of the light.

Around the corner, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed across his chest obscuring the skull and crossbones painted onto his dark grey flightsuit, and his ankles casually crossed, Harlock looked up as she drew level, but said nothing.

'Were you following me?' she asked.

'I'm ahead of you,' he pointed out in his most annoyingly reasonable tone. One hazel eye regarded her from under a shock of unruly brown hair. She huffed at him, and he smiled, albeit a little bleakly.

'Would you have stopped me?' She stood in front of him, one hand on her hip just above the point where her pistol butt cleared the top of the holster.

He shrugged. 'Truthfully - I'm not too sure.'

'But you're here…'

Another shrug. 'I was just passing through, as it happens.'

It was Kei's turn to smile with a little more warmth than she'd been feeling lately. 'This corridor doesn't go anywhere…'

'It doesn't?' He uncrossed his ankles and stood straighter, to look left and right with a practiced puzzled frown that ran from under the unruly fringe falling perpetually over the black leather lace of his eyepatch, to trail over his visible left eyebrow. 'Well…fancy that…' He unfolded his arms and held out a hand for her to take. 'Why don't we find somewhere a little less off the beaten track - I think I mislaid a small, dark-haired little girl and two cats along the way somewhere near the kitchen - we might need to rescue Anita…'

She linked her arm in his with a snort. 'Anita can handle herself. What is it you really have in mind?' She stared down his studiously practiced hurt gaze. 'Don't bother trying that one on me, I
'I will, but not here. Make a list of the best of the pilots - and bring me Ben. I've got an idea…'

The shadows followed them down the dimly lit corridor, and faintly, in their depths, the occasional flash of blue lightning dashed through the tenebrous pools where the light from the wall sconces refused to go.

Daiba took his tray and made his way through the lunch time rush towards the table in the far corner. Currently this was occupied by Ben, Meg, a tired, pale (but putting a brave face on things) Tadashi, and the unlikely new "recruit", Blaze. Meg elbowed Ben in the ribs to get him to shuffle up to let Daiba sit, and after sticking his tongue out at her, the blue-skinned crewman obliged.

'You're such a child!' Tadashi jabbed his fork in Ben's direction from across the table.

Ben smirked, winked and then went back to shovelling his lunch down at a rate that the rest could only stare at. 'What?' he mumbled through a mouthful of bacon and beans in Anita's patented spicy tomato sauce.

'Nothing,' Tadashi deadpanned. 'Unless the next time you're trying on some tight leather pants in a shop and ask "does my bum look big in this" you're expecting the answer to be "no".

'Higher metabolic rate, Tadpole. Remember? Besides - it's all muscle…'

'Is that why Harlock tasked you with one of the shifts watching over the prisoner?' Meg twitted him with a grin. 'Hoping she'll drop her guard for a smile and a six pack?'

'Hey - ' he waved his fork under her nose, 'I'll have you know it's a tried and trusted technique. Besides - who else could he ask to do it? The rest of you… no offense… are not in my league by a country mile.'

'Would anyone care if I smacked him over the head with my tray?' Daiba asked. A chorus of "nos"s and shaken heads were the unanimous reply.

'Finish your lunch first,' Blaze advised him sagely. 'Be a shame to waste it on that planet-sized ego…'

'Puh-lease. Ali thinks he's god's gift to women but frankly he's more the thinking woman's bit of rough. Daiba here's as pretty as a girl but too young. Tadashi has his good solid thing going but he's engaged… Cai's strictly driving stick and most of the rest of the crew…'

'Will so kick your arse if you finish that sentence,' Tadashi crowed, the effect somewhat ruined by the fact that his voice still cracked into a throaty croak.

'Blaze is drop-dead gorgeous,' Meg said, then blushed as she belatedly realised she'd said that out loud and in hearing of the subject. Said subject choked on a bean and had to be slapped on the back a few times helpfully by Tadashi. He reached for a glass of water and didn't dare meet Meg's eyes.

'Or the captain,' Daiba offered, in an effort to deflect attention from Meg's incandescent face. 'He rocks that boy-next-door aesthetic like it's going out of fashion, has an arse you could bounce a bullet off, and that smile could snap both knicker and boxer elastic at a hundred paces…' The sudden interest everyone at the table took in the remains of their lunches was his only warning. 'And he's standing behind, me, isn't he?'
The hands that came down on his shoulders were smaller than the captain's, but the grip was no less firm. 'Not exactly,' Kei's voice said quietly right next to his ear, and it was Daiba's turn to choke on his lunch. 'Something go down the wrong hole?' she asked innocently.

Meg sniggered. 'He wishes…' She ducked the half-hearted swipe Kei made at her head. 'Seriously - who wouldn't get ideas about those two, Kei?''

'Someone who wants to live to see her twenties,' Kei replied a trifle acidly. Meg decided to take a closer inspection of the last bean on her plate again. 'Ben - when you've a moment, Harlock wants you.'

Ben sighed theatrically as he pushed his plate away from him and stood up. 'In my dreams…'

'I just can't make my mind up,' Daiba said after Ben had followed Kei - leaving, he noticed, his tray for someone else to take back to the racks against the wall. 'Is he really that much of a camp slut or is it a front?'

'I think he's played the part for so long he's forgotten where it ends and he begins,' Tadashi said quietly. 'He was a lot… angrier… when he first came on board.'

'Kinda like you,' Meg added, waving her table knife at Daiba. 'But where you hold yourself back, he ran at it full tilt, if you know what I mean.'

'Everyone has their own way of coping,' Blaze stood up and took his and Ben's tray over to the racks and left the room with his long, easy stride.

Daiba pulled on one golden curl as Meg almost gave herself whiplash to watch him leave the room. 'He's twice your age,' he told her primly when she stuck her tongue out at him.

'So? I point you at your own comment re: bullets and backsides… plus he is rather lovely - that dark hair… those come-to-bed-eyes… that voice… plus I've never seen him really lose his temper. He's sweet.'

It was Tadashi's turn to snigger. 'Sweet? You didn't hear him talking to the Captain last night - he really, really wants a crack at those veggie-women. Marin and Blaze weren't twins, but they were very close in age and grew up relying on each other a lot because Selen and Zero were away fighting the Good Fight so much. He takes after his mum - doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve, but he's really spoiling for a fight.' He put down his fork neatly at the side of his plate. 'And he's not the only one.'

Meg reached out and placed her hand on top of his where it lay on the tabletop. 'I know, aniki. But it wasn't your fault. From what I hear you might have just saved the rest of them. Besides - you're getting better every day - I'm sure by the time we catch up to that ship, you'll be fit enough to fight - then we can all give 'em hell!'

'Seconded.' Daiba raised his glass of water in a toast and Meg and Tadashi both clinked glasses with him, although the muted clunk of plastic on plastic wasn't quite as effective as glass on glass. The gesture was accompanied by a tiny flash of blue, and Daiba peered at the glass he held somewhat warily. 'What was that? Static?'

Over the rim of his beaker he saw Meg and Tadashi shared a knowing look. 'What?''

'Oh shit…' Tadashi stared around the room, a small frown marring his broad forehead. 'I lost track - what day is it?'
'Close enough, I think,' Meg replied. She pointed to the walls. 'I thought there was something hinky with the lights earlier - put it down to the fact we're cruising so deep in IN space…'

Daiba followed her gaze, and felt a slight chill as he noticed that the shadows on the walls seemed to be deepening. 'Is that… Dark Matter? Inside the ship?'

Meg and Tadashi, he noticed, exchange Meaningful Looks. It was Tadashi who replied. 'Well - have you heard the talk about the ship's ghost?' he began.

Daiba placed his elbows on the table and leaned closer to listen.

'You want to do what?' Ben's normally pleasant baritone shot up the octaves to a point where Kei winced slightly. Even Harlock, she noticed, rubbed one ear pointedly. 'Captain - no offence - but have you completely lost your marbles? Do you have any idea just how insane this would be?'

In a corner of the room, where she'd been sitting on the floor playing with the cats, Nami looked up at the raised voices, then went back to dangling some string in front of Mii and her little ginger son.

'Not to put too fine a point on it, insane manoeuvres are kind of our stock in trade…' Harlock replied in his most reasonable tone.

Kei winced.

'Insane was probably the wrong word,' Ben replied pithily. 'How does "suicidal" sound?'

Ben - ignoring his captain's pointed glare - perched on the edge of the great oak desk that squatted in front of the leaded window of the captain's quarters - a fifteen hundred year old monstrosity allegedly brought aboard the ship when she'd been commissioned, from the first Captain's home, Schloss Greifenstein. At some point the extensive computerised system that linked with the ship's central computer had been installed in place of an ancient writing surface of some description. Whether by the whimsy of the installer or the owner, the old inkwell still remained intact, albeit now with one of Tori-san's feathers sticking out of it at a jaunty angle. Ben picked this up and tapped the desktop with the pointed end, until Kei snatched it from his fingers and placed it back in the pot with her best do-not-fuck-with-me glare.

Harlock leaned back in his chair and regarded his annoyed crewman through the fall of his fringe, his arms resting casually on the rests of his chair. 'Are you telling me that you're not up to it?'

Kei had to turn away, carefully finding an angle that hid her reflection in the window from Ben whilst allowing her to see his face reflected in the leaded lights. It wouldn't do for him to see her smirking, but she refused to pass up the opportunity to watch Harlock in action.

'You know damn well just how useless fighters are in a space battle - in-system, in orbit, they have their uses. And that's for normal battleships - the Arcadia can outfly any fighters with ease, including her own, and our ships won't be able to put a dent in the Mazone battleships. We'd leave our own people sitting targets - and for what? A diversion?'

'You didn't answer the question,' Harlock replied calmly. 'Oh - and since you won't take a hint, get your arse off my desk.'

Ben stood, but only to lean over the desk, his palms down, so that he could glare into his captain's increasingly smug face. 'Stop trying to push my buttons, captain - for once why don't you just spit it out instead of playing games?'
Kei spluttered and tried to pretend she was trying not to cough.

'Nasty cough,' Ben said blandly. 'Maybe you should take something for it?'

She turned back to Harlock's side and took up a stand beside his ornate chair, one hand leaning on the carved back. The bird, picking apart a titbit from his captain's plate in one claw with his long beak, clung to the other side with his spare claw and glared beadily at the young crewman.

'The Arcadia will be the diversion.' Kei took up the explanation without missing a beat. 'And the Space Wolves are being fitted out with variations on the new weaponry Yattaran and Maji came up with - monofilament torpedoes and a nasty upgrade to the plasma cannon. But our job isn't to engage unless we have to - the weapons are to help us escape after we've infiltrated the main mothership.' She called up a schematic of a giant tree, the 3-D image hovering next to one of the Arcadia for scale. It was easily three times the Arcadia's kilometer long length. 'Getting on board calls for some serious close-in flying, which means that it's the best pilots we'll be taking - you, me, Harlock and Ali.'

Ben stood up, taking his hands off the desk, and regarded the hologram with narrowed eyes. 'You want to conduct a boarding action during a firefight? On a moving ship?' He shook his head. 'It can't be done.'

'Not true - it takes some creatively insane flying, but it's doable,' Harlock said quietly. 'Zero and I pulled it off a few years back when we took out that prototype interstellar train…' he trailed off with a small cough when he felt Kei's hand land on his shoulder with a hard squeeze.

'You told me that you took that out by having an inside man,' she said with a decidedly chilly tone in her voice. 'Ali even backed you both up…'

That was Ben's cue to hide a smile, but he missed it by a mile. 'Damn, Captain - you are so busted…'

'You - keep out of this. Kei - can we talk about this later?' Once they'd both schooled their faces into neutral, Harlock shook his head slightly and continued, 'thank you. Now - Ali and Daiba can take the bullet in - it's fast and can take the boys back. The rest of you will be in the fighters. We should be able to fly into the superstructure and cut our way in.'

'How do you know they'll be on board?' Ben caught the tiniest of looks pass between Kei and Harlock at his interruption. 'Sure - we can follow the trail the Arcadia's on the scent of, whatever that is, but once we catch up, there are potentially thousands of ships to hide them on.'

'We don't,' Kei replied. 'But we do know who will be on board…' she let the sentence trail off as realisation spread across Ben's blue features.

'Hostage exchange?' Ben whistled. 'Ballsy. Risky though.'

'Something like that,' Harlock said softly. 'Either we get lucky and they will bring the boys to their queen, or we'll bring their armada to a screeching halt and they'll have to negotiate.'

Ben gave the pair a sharp look. 'Huh. I did wonder why you were putting me on the front line - and after all those assurances to my exalted father as well… it's not my chops in a plane you're after, is it?'

'Let's just say I think your expertise in other areas might be more useful. Everything I've seen and heard suggests that species aside, there are a lot of similarities between our societies - the Mazone queen is the centre of their society, and this one is something of an absolute monarch…'
Ben cocked his head on one side and grinned. 'Oh - I see… you want the princeling, not the pirate?'

Harlock snorted. 'You're about as much of a pirate as I am an admiral…'

'And as big a fraud,' Kei added, perching on the edge of the table, next to Harlock and smiled at the looks that earned her from both men. 'Between the two of you, you should be able to conjure up some plausible basis for negotiation…'

Ben jabbed a white-gloved finger at his captain. 'You've got a line in speechifying that's almost legendary - why do you need me?' He jabbed the digit again at Kei. 'And how come you don't get told to shift your arse off his precious desk?'

'First off her bottom is a lot prettier than yours,' Harlock drawled. 'Second, it's not me who whines about the disrespectful use of the furniture…' He jabbed his own finger at his crewman. 'And keep that digit under control if you want to keep it, you impudent imp. Now drag up a chair and pay attention - this one's personal and I'll need your A game…'

After Ben had gone Kei shimmied from her perch on the edge of the desk into Harlock's lap. With a heartfelt sigh she laid her head against his shoulder and snuggled closer as he wrapped an arm around her waist. 'It's so hard,' she mumbled into his neck. 'Keeping up appearances when all I want to do is start ripping heads off or screaming.' When he didn't reply she added; 'are you even sure this will work?'

He reached for a decanter with his free hand, and poured a substantial measure into the glass she held out for him. Decanter replaced, he took the proffered glass and downed the contents in one. 'We both know this can't turn into a shooting war. Ben was dealing with harem politics before he hit puberty - he's my best shot at making a diplomatic play.'

'Assuming that's even on the table…' Kei laid her cheek against his. 'Sometimes I still never know with you which is your actual play and which is the bluff…'

'And that's because you still think it's an either-or proposition,' he said gently. He turned so that he could drop a light kiss on her cheek. 'I need an opening, and whichever solution gives me that first is the one I'll take. Plus I can't get into negotiations myself - I need wriggle room which I won't get if I'm the one making the promises…'

She stared at him and frowned. 'You do know that promises to someone who plans to screw you over aren't binding, right?' At his raised eyebrow she sighed. 'Why do I bother? Just don't over-reach yourself on this one, we can't afford to screw this up. Can you really juggle three plans at the same time and not lose sight of one of them?'

'Kei - one thing you learn when you lose an eye - you pay really close attention to your surroundings with the one that's left. The stakes are a damn sight higher than just our personal cares here - trust me, I'm not planning on dropping the ball.'

'Plans have a tendency to go squirly on us,' she pointed out reasonably. 'Which reminds me - if you're coming on the boarding raid - who'll be at the helm? Yattaran? He's got the reflexes of a sloth…'

'Blaze.' The reply was flat and matter of fact. Kei's lips thinned in a thoughtful line. 'The ship's insanely fast, but then so are the Thieves' ships. He can handle it, and he knows my tactics - we fought alongside each other long enough, during the Machine War.'

'I don't like it - and not because of the thought of someone who isn't exactly one of us at the helm.
Perhaps you should let me lead the boarding party and stay on the Arcadia…'

'He's family, Kei. Hardly a stranger. Marin, Blaze and Zero - they were - are - the brothers I wished I'd had. And Selen's like a sister to both of us. I thought of the idea because Blaze can pretend to be me if needed - we're the same age, height and build, similar colouring and as Selen so often remarks we share the same hairdresser... I doubt the Mazone have more than a passing description to work with and "tall, dark, slim, handsome with messy hair and a scar and eyepatch". In the dim light of the bridge, if he has to take any calls, it might just cause enough confusion to work in my favour.'

'You don't want them to be sure of where you are?'

He nodded. 'Confusion to our enemies, I think the old saying goes. I told you - any advantage I can create, I'll take. A little make-up and a spare patch, and we're good to go.'

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. 'Have you actually asked him yet?'

He gave her a tiny push to get her to stand up, and dropped a kiss on her cheek once they were both standing. 'Actually, I was hoping you could do that part, before you round up the boarding party. You're so much more persuasive than I am - besides, you'll need a clipboard - so much to organise... no-one turns you down when you're holding your clipboard…'

'Hmmph. And where do you need to be that's so all-fire important at a time like this?' she grumbled.

'I have a ghost to talk to - or had you forgotten in all the excitement what day it is?' He handed her electronic tablet over which she clutched to her chest like a talisman. 'Unless you'd like to wait around for the Ghost of Arcadia Past?'

If anything she clutched the tablet even tighter. 'I've got most of the shift left - I'll catch up with Ben and then round up the pilots.'

As he watched her pick Nami up for a cuddle, then almost scuttle out of the room with uncharacteristic haste, a rueful smile played around his lips. 'Somehow, I thought you'd say that…' he murmured. 'But you'll have to face him one day, love…' He filled two glasses from the decanter, settled back in the high-backed chair and put his feet up on the desk, crossing them at the ankles. One of the crystal tumblers he held out to a deepening shadow that sucked up the light in the area next to the desk. 'You picked a hell of a time to show up this year, old man,' he said softly.

A shadow detached itself from the darkness between the candelabra, and blue light flickered briefly as it resolved itself into a tall, familiar form.

It was Ben who picked the short straw when Meg twisted her ankle trying to trip Daiba up on the practice mats. She took being helped by the youth off to sick bay ungraciously, leaning on him but complaining all the way.

'Can't. Maji and Yattaran need some help with the reconfiguring of the torpedo tubes on the fighters,' Tanuki told him.

'We've got five off sick on the bridge thanks to a leak into the water supply in the crew quarters on the starboard deck,' Cai told him. 'Captain wants the navigation stations fully manned, and Kei's busy with the planes.'

So it was Ben who had to double-shift to feed the manipulative whore they'd got stashed in steerage. Not his favourite job - the woman seemed to think she was a first-rate siren-cum-femme-
fatale. Ben begged leave to differ. His father's harem boasted several dozen of the loveliest - and deadliest - women - and a few men - to be found in any of the five colonised galaxies.

'You might want to clear those up before Kei comes back with her clipboard,' he said as he picked his way over and through the assorted unpowered flight failures littering the corridor. Sandow grinned at him.

'She launched one herself earlier. I don't know why the rest of you are so scared of her…'

Ben exchanged a grin with Martinez and both men burst out laughing. Ben was still smirking at the thought of the fun to be had later at Sandow's expense as he tapped in his keycode and stepped into the room.

The sleeping area was empty. The bed was neatly made up, the single chair still bolted to the deck (never leave anything harder than a pillow to be used as a weapon was Ben's motto) and the reading tablet rested in the wall niche for belongings.

Ben put the tray down on the bed and unholstered his pistol. There was only one place she could reasonably be, but he tipped his head back to look at the ceiling first anyway. Force of habit - after all, he'd once been caught out by a very limber assassin, and the Mazone had shown signs of some odd physical abilities.

No-one was clinging to the ceiling. He knelt down. No-one under the bed either. Which left the shower/toilet facilities, separated from the sleeping area by a thin, flexible partition for privacy - even though he'd argued against it. The captain, however, hadn't yet shed all of his gentlemanly upbringing.

There was no sound of water from the cubicle, so she wasn't showering. And since she'd had to have heard him enter, there was no way the woman wouldn't have called out if she'd been on the head. If there was one universal constant in the universe, Ben knew, it was that whilst men have no problem whipping out their plumbing in public, the female of the species tends to prefer to conduct her ablutions in private.

Well, tough shit. Prisoners should know that you don't get considerations if you're going to play silly buggers with the guards.

He tugged the curtain aside with a sharp pull designed to let him see as much of the cubicle as possible.

The chit was lying naked on the floor in a pool of water. The shower light was red, indicating the water supply had shut off automatically after the officially allowable two was curled onto her side, one leg drawn up, the other stretched out near his boots (and she did have dainty little feet, he noticed). Her red hair was plastered to her shoulder and covered her breasts from view, as well as partially obscuring her face. One hand was outstretched, clutching a sodden towel. He couldn't tell if she looked paler than normal - her natural colour was a pallor normal for dome-living humans - especially on worlds like Enceladus which were so far from sunlight.

Her breasts - covered in trailing tendrils of red hair - rose and fell shallowly as he watched, still wary of a trap.

He nudged her foot with his booted one. 'Oi!'

He might as well have kicked at a log for all the reaction he got. 'Hey! You. If this is a trick, you're bloody well going to regret it, lady.' He punctuated this with a harder boot to her middle, and this
did solicit a groan, and a rattling breath.

'Damn it,' he muttered under his breath. He re-holstered his pistol and knelt beside her - still keeping a safe distance. Stripping off a glove he laid his bared hand on her exposed back. She was cold, clammy to the touch, her limbs limp and almost rubbery when he lifted her arm to check and let it fall back to the floor. He swore under his breath. 'Shit.' Over his shoulder he called out 'Sandow - Marty - a little help in here!'

He realised his mistake as she twisted, sweeping her extended foot behind his knees to topple him from his squatting position onto the floor. He had a glimpse of her leaning over him as he struggled on the wet floor to find his feet. *Black eyes... like the darkest, starless depths between the galaxies...* and a wet, slapping swoosh as the sodden towel slammed into the side of his head and slammed it into the floor.

The blue-skinned pirate was groaning and stunned, but not out cold. Even so, it was simplicity itself to take his pistol, and the knife tucked into the top of his calf-length left boot. She had only seconds to react as the guards from the corridor rushed in, and her first shot took the younger of the pair - fair-haired and slim - right between the eyes. The dark-haired man dodged back into the corridor, quick on his feet, and she had to tuck herself behind the shower partition, to wait for his move. Blue was still groaning at her feet, and she quickly stripped him of his gun-belt, and fastened the bulky leather around her waist. The skull and crossbones buckle bumped against her stomach, cold and hard.

Sure enough, the guard was one of those who simply couldn't wait and call for backup. She heard the step of his boot on the metal deck as he made the time-honoured mistake of looking through the doorway. Her shot caught his arm - only a glancing burn, but enough to send him scurrying for cover as his pistol skittered across the floor.

She was already moving, through the room, out of the doorway and straight into the flailing arms of her guard, taking him by surprise as she cannoned into him. For a moment she was grasped tightly, her face pressed into a warm sweater covering a broad chest. The shock of finding himself grappling with a naked woman was probably responsible for the way his hand released her as though she was burning him, and from there her still wet body was slippery enough to help her evade his grip as he tried to hold onto her once the embarrassment wore off.

Too little too late, because he only had one useable hand, and she was stronger than she looked. She brought the knife in her other hand up and under, taking him in the side. He grunted once, and crumpled.

She didn't wait around to check if she'd killed him. Pausing only to pick up his discarded pistol and tuck this spare into her purloined holster, she snapped a shot off at the visible camera on the wall, and ran for the crossroads she could see about twenty feet away.

Ben picked himself off the floor with a groan. His head throbbing he leaned against the wall. Sandow's body lay on the floor sprawled in an undignified tangle of limbs, a blaster bolt hole seared right through his forehead, sightless eyes staring glassily straight at him. He bit back a vitriolic oath and staggered fully to his feet just as Martinez stumbled into the room, clutching his wrist.

'Ben?'

Ben waved him off with the hand which wasn't holding onto the wall. 'She got the jump on me.
Call it in.' Whilst Martinez hit the comms unit on his collar, Ben made his way unsteadily to the bed and sat down. His head was pounding and he was pretty sure Martinez shouldn't have an identical twin.

Something warm trickled down his neck and he reached up to trace it back to source with trembling fingers. A bad cut on the side of his head where he'd hit it on the tiles, and currently someone was trying to hammer their way inside with an ice pick.

'Help's on the way,' Martinez told him. He sat on the bed beside Ben, clutching his side. He waved off the concerned hand Ben reached out. 'Just nicked me, my jacket took most of it. I'm fine. Sorry, mate. I just couldn't keep hold of her - she's stronger than she looks, and with her all naked like that, I kinda panicked with my hands sliding all over her like that, then the bitch tried to stab me…'

'She'd shot you,' Ben pointed out. 'Don't sweat it. I underestimated her as well.' He paused then continued: 'Just don't let Ali here you say that!'

Martinez gave him a weak smile. 'Guess we're just too gentlemanly, huh?' He looked down at Sandow's body. 'Damn… he was so chuffed the captain picked him to come along, since he's only been with us a few months.' He looked back at Ben. 'What the hell does she think she's going to do though? I mean, we're in IN-SKIP - it's not as though she can escape and hitch a ride…'

Ben leaned back on the narrow bed until the wall was propping him up. He could hear Doc's strident tones preceding her down the corridor already. 'Thankfully, I don't think that's our problem for the next half-hour or so.'

She'd forgotten just how large a capital ship was. And Arcadia was one of the largest Earth had ever produced, at slightly over a kilometer in length. Her passageways made that even more of a trek to get anywhere, since she seemed to have been designed by someone with a serious fetish for impossible constructions - as though the ship was a klein bottle with mobius inspired corridors that not only back-tracked on themselves, but had little regard for the laws of three-dimensional geometry.

That, or someone was seriously messing with her head.

She'd been able to access one of the communications panels at a corridor intersection which had been very helpful with a schematic when asked, for all of two minutes before, she assumed, someone wised up and pulled the plug. But she had an almost eidetic memory, and had quickly spotted a handful of targets she could take out to slow this ship down. It was travelling far too fast for her liking. It would do no good for Harlock to simply show up and rescue his children before Rafflesia had had a chance to rally her people around her, after all. And a little reminder or two of Mazone duplicity wouldn't hurt. The worse his temper on arrival, the better.

If not for Rafflesia…

But getting anywhere was akin to finding herself in an ancient labyrinth. Bulkheads closed to prevent her going one way, yet when she turned back to take an alternate route, she found herself blocked by doors she hadn't even known were there. Lights flickered in strange patterns. Entire corridors were wreathed in a Stygian darkness that seemed to ebb and flow as she approached or retreated, sometimes trailing tendrils out into the better lit areas in which she stood, sometimes pooling in the corners, hugging the walls and crawling over the ceilings to trail like a thick, syrupy mist from the overhead girders. Sometimes she could have sworn that the shadows were alive, lit from within by tiny flashes of blue lightning. And the ship was never silent.
Not with the ordinary sounds of a spacecraft. Those she knew. This was different, almost below the level of her hearing: moans, and sighs, and the sound of wind beating against fabric, of water lapping against wood, and the creaking wail of timber under strain. And underneath it all, so soft that she wondered if she imagined it, the sound of a slowly beating heart.

She shivered, hugging the walls when she dared, tip-toeing between sconces, trying to move quickly between the dark pools where the lights didn't reach as though she was a small child again, hopping into bed at night to avoid the ankle-grabbing monster underneath it.

She was crying with relief once the door to the armoury slid shut behind her, and she almost didn't care that if anyone knew where she was, they might just leave her in here.

What the hell was this ship? Nothing in any of her reading about the Deathshadow Fleet had prepared her for this - nor the speculation regarding the terrible re-modelling the ship had undergone during her fiery fall into the tormented Earth. And why had none of the crew tried to stop her after her escape? She'd killed one, hurt two of them. Yet her tortuous path here had crossed no other's path. She did not believe for an instant that security was that lax. Had Harlock not sent out a team to stop her?

Did he really need to? whispered the darker corner of her mind. She slumped against a wall and slid down it to sit on the cold floor. The skull belt-buckle dub into her stomach slightly, reminding her that she was still stark naked. Not too much of an issue, as her symbiotes could handle her slightly lowered metabolism, and it was occasionally useful in fooling thermal sensors. But she did feel exposed and unprotected, her nerves raw after her less than purposeful flight through the labyrinthine corridors.

Looking around, she spotted several items stuffed into a corner - old flightsuits, a jacket, boots of varying sizes. She made her way over with an effort and quickly found some items that at least made her feel a little less vulnerable - a red sweater (far too large, obviously for a broad chested man) and some pants that although a little tight around the rear, did at least fasten with only a slight effort. She would, however, have to continue barefoot for now.

That problem taken care of, Shizuka turned her attention to the weapons racks. It didn't take her too long to equip herself with several shaped charges with timers inbuilt, and a small bag to put them in. The pistol she'd taken from the blue pirate she kept. She turned one of the explosives over in her hand delicately. Small, but heavy, and with a skull and crossbones etched into the casing. A small lighter patch stood out against the dark grey on one side that clung to the wall when she attached it. She found the quick release for what had to be a small electromagnet, but decided to leave it in place. More out of a sense of whimsy than any real strategic necessity, she left it in place after setting the time to thirty minutes. It would cause a serious problem that should keep the Arcadia's crew busy for some time.

The side facing her had a row of small neat lettering stencilled on it. Peering more closely she read "if you're close enough to read this, you're fucked". Checking out another as she tucked it into her bag she saw this one read "sayonara, sucker". Their armourer, it seemed, had a sense of humour. Well, the joke would be on him, she thought with a sly smirk as she exited the armoury onto the still deserted corridor.

Why the hell was Harlock not chasing her down with all hands? It just didn't make any sense… But like any good operative, she knew not to worry too much. Take the win for now, she told herself sternly as she padded along, her feel slapping softly on the floor. Worry about trouble when it arrives - he might well be playing her, but she'd been playing this game for a lot longer than Harlock had.
She just had to make sure she could do enough damage before she was caught. Or was killed.

Dying, however… she sighed as she walked, still feeling as though the ship itself was stalking her in the shadows. That hadn't been the plan. But she was only partly human - most of her memories would live on, in another host, eventually. She'd left a sample of her blood to be incubated by her people, and the tiny cells that made up the primal mazone within… that would live on. 'The unbroken line,' she whispered to herself. 'From the beginning… It's enough.'

She'd "died" before, after all. Too bad the host for her mazone symbiotes hadn't escaped the blast that had destroyed a greenhouse facility on Mars twenty years ago… 'I liked this life,' she muttered, feeling more than a little peeved as she scuttled along, the incessant murmurings of the ship following wherever she went.

She passed one closed bulkhead, only to see the corridor ahead of her disappear as another closed in front of her. She stopped, sweating in her purloined clothes, as the darkness deepened briefly.

Then the bulkhead she'd just passed opened silently, and light from beyond poured into the corridor she stood in, momentarily driving back the shadows. Suspicious, she ignored it, remembering a turning she'd ignored earlier, that lead in the direction of the port cannon arrays - the perfect spot to do some damage to the ship.

The bulkhead closed, sealing off the route she'd just walked. And now that sweat trickling down her back and between her breasts was icy cold.

I'm being herded…

The lights in the corridor now open to her were brighter than those around her, which began to flicker and dim even as she waited, wondering if she should take the bait. This route, if her memory - and the labyrinthine absurdities of this damned phantom were correct - would take her to the very last place she expected to find access to.

The Central Computer Room.

Why would the ship - no - more likely Harlock - want her there? Even if they captured her there or were waiting, there was still a chance she could do some serious damage before she died. It was surely too big a risk?

What game is he playing? She debated just sitting down on the cold floor and refusing to play - make the one-eyed joker come to her… But the shadows were somehow sucking the light from the piece of corridor she stood in, and although dim and gloomy, the road in front of her was far more inviting.

The sconce to her left went out. Then one behind her.

The darkness pooled at her feet, flickering blue where it licked at her bare toes. With a decidedly uncharacteristic squeal, she leapt forwards, into the light.

The bulkhead slammed shut behind her with such audible finality, she suddenly wished she'd stayed in her damn cell after all. Silent, seamless airtight bulkheads did not, generally, slam shut with hollow, metallic thuds that make your chest ache, after all. Shizuka swallowed hard and had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop a whimper escaping. This ship… this damned, ghostly, haunted ship…

The light on her right went dark. Losing the battle against the scream building up inside, she began to run.
The darkness more clearly resolved into the shadowy figure of a man, close to seven feet tall and dressed in black. 'Get your damn feet off my desk, brat.' A black gloved hand reached for the glass in Harlock's hand and blue sparks leapt between their hands. 'And then you can explain why the hell you're trying to tear my ship apart pushing through IN space at a depth so far outside her design specs that even I'm feeling nervous…'

'My ship, my desk - how many more times do I need to point this out? You're dead. Also - ergo: you don't get nervous.'

'That's a matter of opinion.'

Harlock smiled grimly. 'The dead part? Or the nerves?' The cats having gotten bored with their game had curled up for a mutual bath, and Nami scrambled over to climb into her father's lap, and he placed his free hand protectively around her and leaned down to bump noses with her, smiling indulgently as she giggled. She looked across at the shadowy figure and smiled at it, with a child's innocence.

'Hello grandpa Harlock!'

Her father choked slightly but the dark figure simply mirrored his own indulgent smile. 'Nami. You're growing up fast…' He turned his attention back to his replacement. 'What's amusing is you think it's either/or… Oh and it's "defiling" not "disrespecting" - if you're going to quote me, Yama, get it right…'

Harlock glared at the still, dark figure and downed his second glass with one swallow. 'Cute, Albrecht… How long were you lurking in the shadows this time?'

The shadowy figure shrugged. 'Long enough.' The Arcadia's ghostly former captain stepped out of the shadows and into the light cast by the artificial candelabra above the desk. 'Now - this deep in the void we have a little more time than usual, I think, but try to keep it short for once. What the hell is going on?'

The current incumbent opened his mouth to reply and was beaten to the punch by the wail of the alarm.

'Captain…'

Harlock slammed his hand onto the comms on switch 'Ali? Why are my ears bleeding?!' On his lap Nami stared up at her father, eyes wide as she nibbled on her bottom lip in a way that was so like her mother.

'Got a runaway on deck 3, Captain. That mazone bitch took out Ben when he looked in on her. She grabbed his gun and shot Sandow, and she's rabbited. Got her on camera heading for the main concourse, but she's been taking out the cams as she goes…'

Harlock swore under his breath. 'Get eyes on her from ahead of any potential route, and lock down the bulkheads behind her. Do not engage - I'll be there as soon as I can.' He ran his hands over the controls inset into the desk. 'I need a schematic of the living quarters on that deck - show me all corridors and conduits…' A 3-D rendition of the Arcadia's interior flashed into existence above the ancient oak. 'Remove anything too small for a woman Kei's build to get through.'

The cutaway became significantly less cluttered. 'Damn it - of all the times for her to pull something…' he muttered. 'With Tochiro offline…' He smiled apologetically at his daughter and encouraged her to climb down. 'Stay put, darling. I'll lock the door behind me, okay? Don't let
anyone in unless it's Anita - she'll be right along.'

A nod.

The older Harlock lifted a hand towards the little girl as she ran past him, but pulled it back, as though remembering belatedly that in his current state, interacting with the living was problematic even when he could materialise more physically. The younger captain found himself having to stifle a pang of pity at the aborted gesture, but now was definitely not the time.

His ghostly counterpart leaned over the schematic and pointed. 'Good job you've got someone who also knows this damned ship like the back of his hand then, isn't it? You need to rethink your holding strategy for prisoners, brat. She's got a free run to one of the subsidiary armouries from there. But your escapee has only got two real options if she wants to cause damage - the portside optical cannon power feed, and…'

'The central computer room,' Harlock finished for him.

'Is that…?' Ali asked, from the open commlink.

'I couldn't possibly comment. Ali - Yattaran - switch to my personal commlink. Keep feeding me the sitrep - I'm on my way.'

'Shouldn't that be on a secure channel?' his erstwhile predecessor asked archly.

Harlock simply raised his visible eyebrow and waited. He also took the opportunity to click the comms off.

'Ah.' A tiny smile twitched briefly at the corner of the older Harlock's mouth. 'You're going to outsmart yourself one of these days, you know that don't you?'

'So Kei keeps telling me,' Harlock replied shortly.

The inconsistently substantial form's smile widened slightly, faintly amused.

'What?' Harlock couldn't keep the suspicious tone from creeping into his voice.

'Nothing. Between the judgemental "you're a reckless fuck-up who doesn't clear up after his catastrophic decisions" routine and the overly convoluted plotting when a good blaster would do the job quicker, you remind me more and more of Mamoru every year... You have his colouring and eyes…'

'From everything Tochiro told me about your brother I'll take that as a compliment.' Harlock grabbed his gun belts and buckled them on. 'And how does that happen? I always thought I was descended from your side of the family escutcheon.'

'Long story.'

'Small gene pool…' Harlock sniped as the doors to his quarters opened and he exited at a fast walk. 'On which note - when this is over we're going to have a very long talk about this whole "sins of the fathers" schtick… This thing with the Mazone is another one of your messes I'm cleaning up after. And whilst it's one thing for these people to blame me for the crap you left behind, when it puts my children in danger, that's a whole new level of pissed-off you've uncorked.'

One of the crew gave him a strange look as he walked past, presumably wondering why his captain was talking to himself. Harlock took the opportunity to send the bemused lad off to get Anita 'No
comms. Just fetch her, tell her to sit with Nami in my quarters.' Harlock didn't stop to wait for acknowledgment, but carried on towards the lift, which at least had done him the courtesy of being ready for him.

Once the doors had closed, the older Harlock met the quiet eye of his junior. 'I have a feeling I won't like the answer - but where are your boys?'

'The Mazone have them. Some harebrained idea about distracting me from thwarting their plans. Which, to give you the short version, arise from the slight hiccup that destroyed their colony worlds fifty years ago. You might remember placing five of those damned oscillators in astronomically close proximity some time back?'

'There was a star cluster… I remember Tochiro remarking on it at the time. What happened?'

'They blew. A catastrophic domino effect when a nearby sun had a flare-up.'

You could, Harlock thought with little satisfaction, have dropped a pin in the lift and heard it fall. Well, almost. There was a slight swooshing noise when the lift was in motion...

'Fifty years ago?'

Harlock leaned against the wall and folded his arms. 'In hindsight, I'm amazed you didn't factor in that you might lose a few oscillators in the decades it took to place them all… and I'm including the brains of the outfit in that "you". It's not like Tochiro to drop the ball.' He weathered the one-eyed glare with his best shit-eating smirk.

'A century in the context of cosmological time is barely a blink of an eye. The chances…'

'Are, in hindsight, 1:1. It was a long shot of epic proportions, but sometimes shit happens. The trouble is, that shit has been heading our way ever since, and it's pissed off. I've got five convoys of refugees from an ancient civilisation heading for separate weak spots - only they're actually the biggest suicide bombers in history. Several thousand carbon-drives being charged to the max in transit, and the leader of these people plans on pulling your stunt.'

'Five won't do it,' the older Harlock replied quietly. 'If it would…'

'Things change,' Harlock interjected brusquely. 'We've already seen several weak points damaged by Loki and his rebels. Our projections on the size and direction of the blasts these ships can deliver suggests that they'll rip the universe apart and trigger something… What Tochiro and Mimay think is that this won't be the reboot Queen Rafflesia plans, but something far worse…'

'The Gate of Yedar.'

'The fractures will cause a massive fissure in space/time,' Harlock continued. The lift came to a stop and both men - the living and the to-be-determined stepped out into the longitudinal access corridor on the port side.

'Heading straight for the gate Loki partially opened fifteen years ago.' Blue sparks fluttered around the taller pirate's shadowy form. 'Doesn't sound accidental.'

'They have some Nibelung tech - they've had contact with the Nibelung over the years. Whether or not that includes Loki's group is good question. One I hope to get some answers to from our captive…' He stopped abruptly in his tracks as a large hand clamped onto his shoulder. Blue lightning ran down his arm from where the other Harlock's hand gripped his shoulder with a surprisingly effective grip. 'Would you mind? It's like sticking my fingers in a live socket…'
gloved hand released him.

'If they are, then there's no way that chain reaction was an accident,' the ghost mused.

'Don't think the three of you are off the hook,' Harlock told him. 'You might just have played right into his hands in a long game you didn't even know you were part of.' He carried on walking whilst he waited for a pithy reply but it wasn't forthcoming. In fact, for the first time since he'd known the man, the Captain looked oddly thoughtful. 'What?'

'It wouldn't be the first time,' Harlock (the elder) replied softly. 'I know your brother told you the official version of what happened after the Peace Treaty was signed, but there's no way he knew the truth. Only six people who knew what really went down survived that final battle, and three of us were on board Arcadia.'

'The others?'

'My brother… my wife - and a spectacularly unpleasant little shit called Hechi.'

'Him I know. He's still alive, by the way - as hard to get rid of as a nasty STD - or so Ali informs me.' They reached a crossroads. Harlock thumbed the commlink on his collar. 'Ali?'

'She's headed for the armoury - what do you want us to do? It's weird, though - the route she's taking is all over the place…'

Harlock, concentrating on the news, failed to notice the slight smirk that passed over his ghost's face briefly. Nor did he notice the shadows intensifying around them as they walked. 'Make sure the bulkheads are closed between her location and the turrets. I don't want any new holes in my ship - it's not that long since we had to wait for the entire hull to…' he broke off with a cough and a sideways glance at his companion.

'Are you trying to tell me you managed to find a way to compromise the integrity of my ship's entire hull?'

Harlock weathered the frosty, disapproving glare with his usual aplomb. 'No. I'm trying not to tell you…'

'I'm afraid to ask…'

Harlock's reply was a laconic: 'Then don't. Easier for both of us that way.' He carried on walking forcing his companion to keep up - and given his longer leg length, overtake and force him to walk faster. 'And why are you following me around my ship like a lost puppy, exactly?'

'Because - as someone pointed out in previous years - I only have a small window, and we have a big problem that we get very little time to discuss. And it's not your ship…'

They reached a bulkhead and Harlock tugged off a glove with his teeth and placed his hand on the palm reader. 'I'm not having this argument again,' he replied through a mouthful of leather. On the other side he tugged his glove back on.

'Good. You're learning. Finally.'

The older Harlock strode ahead of him, leaving the younger staring at a broad expanse of black leather disappearing into the gloom. 'I should have shot you on the bridge when I had the chance… no-one would have known… Hell, I could have blamed Isora… you were already bleeding out…' he muttered.
'You do know I can hear you? I'm dead, not deaf…' floated back the reply from fifteen feet ahead.

'Oh good. I'd hate to waste my best sarcastic repartee…'

'You've developed a real attitude problem over the years, has anyone ever told you that?'

Harlock caught up by means of the time honoured method of walking faster. 'I'm told I come by it honestly. From my father's side of the family,' he drawled.

'Oohh… burn!' came Ali's voice over the comms. 'I think you've got him with that one, cap'n.'

'Personally I blame the company he keeps,' the older Harlock replied pithily. He ignored the spluttering coming over the airwaves.

The two captains exchanged smirks. 'How did you put up with him?' Harlock asked.

'Not amazing what you can put up with when you plan on making the world and everyone in it eventually go away…'

'You're a pair of ungrateful bastards, you know that,' Ali told them over the comms, sounding aggrieved. 'I dunno… you give these guys the best years of your life…' There was a pause. 'She's still heading roughly in the direction of the armoury… I think. The thermal sensors can't pick her up, and the cameras are on the fritz for some reason. Whaddya want me to do?'

Harlock looked at his predecessor's still only vaguely-there figure. There was a slightly twisted, one-sided smile on the man's face that he just knew boded ill for someone. 'Hold on a moment.' He clicked off the communicator. 'You look like a ghost with a plan…'

'I might have one. Why don't you leave this to me?'

Harlock's visible eye narrowed. 'I'm not going to like this, am I?'

'My ship, my rules… and for once I don't mean that in the "I'm usurping your authority sense". The Arcadia and I have a connection. One I think I can work to your advantage. You want to question her, am I right?' If anything that twisted smirk was getting bigger and turning into a full-on shit-eating grin.

Harlock's mouth twitched slightly in answer. 'She's a cool customer, we've not had much luck yet. She just sits there and ignores us.'

'Then let me get to work - I think I should be able to scare the pants off her and have her nicely served up by the time you and your people get there…'

'Shouldn't be too hard,' Harlock muttered before he could stop himself. 'She's already naked…' He stared down - or rather up - the resulting annoyed glare. 'Wait - get where?'

'The Central Computer Room, of course,' the ghost said with a world-weary sigh. He promptly dissolved into the shadows in a shower of blue sparks.
Chapter 42

She'd had this nightmare. The one where she was running from an unseen foe, through a dark forest where shadows reached out from the darkness to clutch at her, spectral claws catching at her clothes and skin. In the dream however the darkness hadn't been lit by the flickering blue lightning that followed her. Nor had she had the sensation that a single, giant eye was watching her from the concealing darkness, radiating fury with a cold, bone-deep fire.

She was being herded. That much she quickly realised as she ran. Bulkheads would mysteriously open as she approached - or just as mysteriously close. Like a rat in a maze she was being guided to the centre of a dark labyrinth - towards what rough beast squatting at the Arcadia's heart, she didn't know. But it waited.

The eye watched. The hand guided. The heart beat. And two of those drew closer, ever closer, as she approached that dark heart.

She burst into an open area with a sobbing breath, and slammed straight into a wall. Knocked onto her backside she sat there in a heap, staring at the impediment in front of her. Not a wall. It was the exterior of a massive server bank, and it loomed over her, along with several of its kin - futuristic dolmen raised to the god of a new machine.

An altar lay inside this circle of standing stones - reminding her of the massive trees at the heart of Mazone ships - a giant trunk reaching into the vaulted ceiling that appeared at first glance to soar above her to a height of several hundred feet. A trompe l'oeil, she realised once she got her bearings. It was maybe no more than a hundred, but the effect was overwhelming.

Cables the size of small tree trunks trailed across the floor like massive roots, all leading to - or from - this edifice in the centre. A large circle of light glowed red on the side she faced, and this, along with several intermittent flashes of the blue lightning, was the only real illumination in the room. All else was darkness, and it pooled in the corners, in the shadows of the servers, and at the foot of the beating heart of the Arcadia's central computer. Her bare foot rested in one of those shadows, and she pulled it back towards her with a shudder. She had to resist the temptation to rub her skin to try and remove the taint. Her skin crawled as though something still touched it, and she longed for the light. Any light.

Except in a deep, ancient part of her brain something whispered that this was not the kind of darkness you can dispel by turning on the lights. This was the other kind... the kind not fooled by lightbulbs, or hiding your head under blankets.

And it had a face, and a form. The shadows formed into the shape of a man - impossibly tall, dark haired, with one solitary, blazing eye. This avatar of darkness took a step towards her.

Shizuka buried her head in her hands and screamed.

'Do you think you can shut her up? My ears are ringing.'

Harlock gave his older counterpart a look that was equal parts exasperation and what-the-fuck. On the ground between them the woman rocked backwards and forwards, still keening shrilly as her fingers clinched the red sweater she wore, although the volume was decreasing. 'You broke it, you fix it,' he drawled. He poked at the seated woman with the tip of his sabre rifle. 'You. Up.'
The woman lifted her head to look at him and let out another sobbing scream, although by now her voice was so strained it cracked and came out as a hoarse, shrill croak. Rocking backwards and forwards she began muttering under her breath. Eventually, Harlock could make it out. From the Fury defend us. From the Fury defend us. From the Fury defend us…

'Well that's new… normally they're throwing themselves at you.' Harlock turned slightly to his left as Daiba, Meg and Ali came slithering to a halt at his side. The speaker, Ali stared at the shivering, rocking figure. Then he did a double take as he saw the shadowy form standing nearby. 'Oh. Well that explains a lot… Hi, Captain.'

'Who are you talking to?' Daiba sent a puzzled look flying between Ali and the shadows he was facing. 'There's no-one there…'

'There's a darker shadow where the light flickers,' Meg whispered near his ear. 'If you look closely.'

Daiba followed her advice and squinted, but all he could see were shadows - although those did also seem to be gathering around his cousin. He shivered, because for a moment it looked as though another man stood next to him. One taller by almost a head, the hair longer and darker, the mouth wider and more sensual, and the whole pervaded with an abiding sorrow. Only for a moment and he put it down to a trick of the lack of light. Why's it so dark in here? he muttered. He gripped his pistol firmly and aimed it at the cowering Shizuka. 'And why hasn't anyone shot this thing yet?'

'Because I want some answers,' Harlock replied smoothly. 'Ali - Daiba - get her on her feet and disarm her, would you? She's carrying enough ordnance for a boarding party and even in here it makes me nervous.'

Daiba hesitated as Ali strode forwards and hauled the woman unceremoniously to her feet. The blond pirate shot him a disgusted look. 'Kid - are you planning on watching all day, or actually going to help me get this stuff off her?' He jabbed a finger at the munitions belt.

Daiba took a step forward and holstered his weapon with a sigh, but he was still a couple of feet away when she twisted in Ali's grip and pulled away, almost landing on her arse again - and would have done so, if she hadn't bounced off one of the servers. 'Stay back!' she waved the small detonator in her hand at them. 'I'll blow this damned ship's computers.'

'You can try,' Daiba heard Harlock murmur - and it sounded as though his voice was echoed by another, slightly deeper. Harlock took a step towards her. 'What makes you think that will work on board our own ship?' he asked, in a softer, comforting tone. 'Seriously - do you think we're that stupid?'

She stared at him wildly, and then pushed the button.

Click. Click. Click-click-click.

Ali reached over and lifted it from her suddenly limp fingers. 'You need to brush up on military procedures, lass. No armourer worth his keep would allow high-level ordnance to be made live on board unless the captain or XO authorised it.' But he whistled through his teeth as he carried the belt away from her.

'You are so full of shit,' Harlock whispered into Ali's ear as he walked past, careful not to leave the radius of the central computer's damping field until he'd made the detonator safe. Ali just tucked the detonator into his pants pocket and grinned.
Daiba moved in to secure Shizuka on Harlock's sharp nod, and made sure the restraints were zipped as tight as he could manage. But the fight seemed to have gone out of her. She ignored his jabs and pulls of her arms and kept staring at that patch of shadows near the captain from under sweat-damp red hair. 'And who said you could wear my sweater?' Ali added as he draped the explosives over his shoulder.

'Priorities, much?' Meg muttered at him. 'What's she staring at that's got her so frizzled?'

'Startling at shadows,' Harlock quipped with a grim smile. He stood in front of the prisoner, looming over her as she sagged in Daiba's grip. 'You picked the wrong day and the wrong ship in the wrong place in space/time to pull a stunt like this.' He reached out a gloved hand and gripped her chin, forcing her head up so he was staring into her face. 'And attacking and killing my crew was not a smart move. You must have known you'd sign your death warrant with that act?'

'I was dead the moment I was brought on board,' she replied listlessly.

Harlock let go of her chin, but she kept her head up, as though recovering some of her pride. 'I don't kill without need. Because of you, my sons are in grave danger and one at least is badly hurt. You deliberately placed them in that danger, and for that, yes, your life would be forfeit.'

'Then do it.' She lifted her head proudly and looked him straight in the eye. A tall woman, she was only a few inches shorter than he. 'By now Irita will have told the admiral everything, and I'll have no value to either the government or the Mazone. I have no value as a hostage, and there's little to nothing I can tell you that you don't already know.' Her eyes flickered to that shadow at his side. 'Better a clean death than the darkness that stands at your side… can you feel it? He wears those shadows like a shroud!'

Daiba could see the shadows roil and thicken in response, and this time the figure that appeared out of their depths was more solid, visible to all present judging from Meg's muttered "wow…"

'What you can feel is the dark energy from outside time itself,' the tall figure of the Arcadia's first captain told her in a low, hoarse voice. 'Here, outside of space and time, between moments, between worlds, there are still bridges to the last moments of a dying universe before it found a way to access a new world in the throes of being born. It is the darkness that spawned the Nibelung race. The few traces of it which survive in our time have been changed by billions of years of evolution and expansion. But this…' He towered over the now cowering woman. 'This is the cold shadow that is fear itself - the primal darkness from which light was born, and into which it will one day die. This is the darkness your Queen's actions will open a door to if she succeeds.' The shadows whirled and dissolved again as though caught in a dust devil. 'Your queen is a greater fool than I ever was…'

The lights, dimmed until now, flooded the computer room, and the deep hum of the central computer core was almost deafening after the eerie silence. The whirling light on the trunk now spun around with a vibrant green pulse. Daiba had to blink his watering eyes to get rid of the after-images.

Ali looked over at his captain, who just shrugged. The burly blond pirate sighed heavily. 'That had to be one of the longest speeches I've ever heard him give - and I'm still none the wiser…'

'Evil from the dawn of time,' Daiba said jauntily. 'Very bad. We're the good guys so we need to stop it. What's so hard to understand?' He looked from Ali to Harlock, the former who was looking at him as though he'd grown two heads, the latter just looking approvingly amused. 'What?'

Harlock's mouth crinkled at the corner in a half-smile. 'Nothing. It's usually my job to cut through
all the histrionic bullshit on this ship.' He stared at the figure slumped against Daiba's grip.

'Although it's not limited to this ship. You're an intelligent woman, Namino. What the hell were you thinking? Where would you escape to on a battleship in IN-SKIP?'

Shizuka stared up at him, her arms aching from being forced up behind her back by the youth holding her. Even the slightest twitch in an attempt to ease the strain was met by a cruel tug. 'I never thought I could escape. I would have settled for slowing you down. You do me no good if you engage with the queen's fleet too soon.'

'If you think I've any intention of working to someone else's timetable and agenda, you're on the wrong ship.' Harlock's reply was drawled, but the firm line of his mouth and the steely glare from his visible eye were anything but laid back. 'I fight my own battles.'

'And if those battles would be better served by a more considered plan?'

'Then you should have come to me in friendship, not used my children as a bargaining chip.' His voice wasn't raised, but she flinched from it as though he'd cracked a whip in her face. 'Don't try to persuade me that our interests coincide - all the evidence points to you trying to use me as a pawn in a damned power struggle. I neither know nor care about your petty power politics. Rafflesia's plan threatens all I hold dear - and you just sent my sons right into the middle of that. Using me would have been intolerable. Using my children puts you beyond any hope of redemption.' He stared coldly at the red-haired woman.

'Rafflesia would see all of the universe burn!' She struggled in the youth's grasp, to no avail. 'Cassandra - the one who took your children to the fleet - she tells the queen what she wants to hear - to use you as an enemy to bring the fleet into line and quell the rebellion, but in truth she would rather see Rafflesia fail, and turn the military ships against what's left of humanity's colonies and the Machine Empire.'

Harlock loomed over her. 'So you would set yourself up as their saviour? Knowing I'd not let either of them get their way?' he snorted. 'Your information is sadly out of date. I've spoken with some of the civilians in your fleet who you and the others use as pawns in your power struggles. They have a champion - without your interference it's likely the Mazone would be content to simply find a home - it's not like we're short of abandoned planets out here.'

Shizuka laughed in his face. 'Tessius? Is that who they pin their hopes on? She's not even one of us - she's dryades.'

'A true Mazone then?' Harlock asked, a provocative smile playing grimly around the corners of his mouth when she bristled. 'Your military is destroying any ships who can't keep up with the fleet. So far there isn't one of you I've any interest in dealing with - not you, and your stay-at-home sisters who don't want their comfortable secret lives exposed. Not Rafflesia's insanity, And certainly not Cassandra's ambitions. You all think only of yourselves, and nothing of those who should depend on you. You seem to think you're so superior to both humans and machinners - but from where I'm standing it looks very much as though plant-based lifeforms are prone to exactly the same follies you decry in other lifeforms.' He nodded once to Daiba. 'Take her away. This time take her to the brig. Oh - and turn the lights out when you leave.'

'No!' She struggled in Daiba's grip. 'You can't-

'Perhaps you should have thought of that before you decided to play games with me and mine,' Harlock replied coldly. 'But why so afraid? The only thing anyone on this ship has to fear in the darkness is what they bring with them.'
'Is that why the lights are always on in the captain's quarters?' she snapped back. 'One eye from night and you think to tell me there's nothing to fear in the dark? On this ship? Crewed by the dead, fused with the bodies of the dead - do you keep the lights so dim to stop anyone looking around and seeing the truth? The Arcadia is a rotting corpse feeding on fear and despair!' She came close to shrieking out that last, and when the lights in the computer room momentarily dimmed, she screamed. Her struggles caused the youth holding her to slacken his grip as he shifted his hands to get a tighter hold on her, and in that brief opportunity, she slammed her head back, slamming into his cheek instead of his nose, as he was standing at a slight angle to her. But it was still enough to force him to let her go.

The restraints tying her wrists she pulled apart, tearing the skin on her arms in the process, and she reached for the knife they hadn't found, strapped to her thigh. Sharp nails tore through the fabric of the trousers she wore and she pulled the blade free. 'I will not go into the night!' she screamed, and leaped at Harlock, the blade extended.

She never reached him. She fell to the floor, a skull-hilted knife buried in her hand, thrown from somewhere behind Harlock, who had remained impassive during the entire incident. The blade she'd held skittered off into a shadowy corner. Harlock turned to face Tadashi, who stood framed in the corridor behind him. 'Nice throw - but she telegraphed that leap so far in advance, I wasn't in any real danger,' he chided gently.

The stocky young man shrugged. 'I was aiming for her throat,' he replied bluntly. 'He glanced at Daiba. 'Get my knife back, would you?'

Daiba complied, wiping the blade on the woman's sweater before handing it back to his namesake with a conspiratorial grin as he walked his prisoner past him. The woman visibly shrank away as she passed the youth, who stared at her much as someone might at a cockroach just before they stamp on it.

'Lukas - go with him. No more surprises.' Harlock ordered a crewman about his own age standing nearby. 'And make sure she's guarded at all times - no-one goes in alone.'

Meg wandered over to stand next to Ali, who was leaning against one of the servers, arms folded and ankles crossed. 'I really hope the captain plans on spacing that bitch,' she snarled.

'Once he's got her in a state where she'll cough up some useful intel,' Ali replied calmly. 'We had wondered how to break her - seems we owe The Captain a big one.'

Meg looked up at him from under her curls. 'I kind of forgot in all the excitement - I guess it's too late now to leave out the little gifts?'

Ali grinned at her. 'Knowing our wandering phantom, he probably stopped off at his old liquor store first anyway. Though you might want to unstick yer eyeballs next time - you and Daiba both stared at him as though he was a lollipop you wanted to lick.'

Meg laughed. 'I think Daiba wouldn't mind being the lollipop… that mouth is just sinfully tempting… and the way he looks at you from under that hair… you never told me the guy was sex on a stick!'

' Probably,' Ali drawled, 'because I'm not interested in him being sex on my stick…'

Meg stuck her tongue out. 'Eww. That's an image I won't shake in a hurry.'

He glared down at her and unfolded his arms. He slapped her on the shoulder and gave her a little
push. 'And why, pray? You wouldn't be reaching for brain bleach if you were imagining him with Daiba I'm guessing. Or the captain…'

Meg sighed. The captain and other crew had long since departed. 'Maybe because - oh - they're young, and totally hot?'

He huffed and scowled. 'Cheeky bint. Are you trying to say I ain't hot?'

'Well you sure ain't young!' She ducked away from his half-hearted swing at the back of her head and danced away laughing as he snarled something unrepeatable.

'Cheeky cow,' Ali muttered at the girl's retreating back.

'That's girls for you.' Tochiro's voice was mellow and held an amused tone. 'Me and Liesl had two and they - and Harlock's nieces - could drive us all crazy at times. What did I miss? The chatter over the comms is buzzing.'

'Heh. Your old pal gave our prisoner a bit of a scare, and Tadashi almost impaled her hand to the deck. Frankly it's the least of her worries, mind - she killed Sandow and hurt Martinez and Ben, and she'll pay for that.' He ran a hand through his hair, which was in dire need of cutting, he mused. Or else he could maybe try growing it out for a change…

'Ah. I have her. Moved to the brig?'

'Shoulda been put there to start with,' Ali growled. 'One of these days he'll realise it's okay to open with being a total bastard…' He sighed, and rubbed at a bushy sideburn. 'He'll blame hisself for Sandow. But my money's on that idiot Ben… he knows damn well he should've called for backup.'

'You can't fix yesterday,' Tochiro told him gently.

'Yeah? Maybe not. But you can make damn sure that lessons are hammered home.' Ali balled his left hand into a fist. 'Though I'd love to start with that red-head.'

'She'll be getting a few lessons, leave it for now.'

Ali turned at the sound of his captain's voice, and nodded slowly at the look he saw on the younger man's face. 'I knew it. Yer already knockin' yourself out over Sandow.'

'It was my decision to leave her in crew quarters. The buck stops here. You know that.'

'Maybe. But Ben knew the procedure. We have rules. And all three men dropped the ball - that ain't on you, Harlock.' He held his captain's gaze steadily - one of the few men who wouldn't be intimidated by the quiet strength and resolute demeanour of this man. 'You feel the need for some punishment, meet me in the gym. It's been a while since I put you on yer ass.'

Harlock's smile was fleeting. 'It's been a while since you could, you mean.'

Ali huffed at him. 'In yer dreams. I have it on good authority all those full-fat lattes are adding up,'

'And Anita's cooking isn't?' Harlock jabbed a finger into Ali's midsection, eliciting a grunt from the older man, and earning a swipe at the offending digit which was easily avoided. 'You're getting soft, Ali. Hell - we all are. Maybe we needed this wake-up call. Ever since the Deathshadow plague we've been coasting: grieving and bumbling around in our comfort zone. I should have gone
after Loki and his people years ago, instead of disappearing up my own complacency.'

Ali took a long hard look at his captain. Never a bulky man, his flightsuit didn't fit so snugly as it usually did, and his belt had a visible notch in it in front of the buckle - he must have cinched it in by at least an inch over the past few weeks. His cheekbones were even more prominent than usual and his left eye was decidedly bloodshot.

_He looks tired…_ Ali thought sadly. _And I thought Kei looked bad. But he just hides it better. There were lines at the corner of that eye that hadn't been there five years ago, and a tightness around his mouth that no smile could completely banish. But then, that had been there ever since the last days of the plague… Then they'd gotten the news about the Daibas… Complacent? You? In a pig's eye, rookie. Your problem is you don't stop - for anything…_

But he kept silent. Instead he slapped Harlock lightly on the shoulder. 'Anita's cooking might be just what you need right now. Leave that bitch to us, cap'n, and go grab Kei and your little girl. We won't be out of IN-SKIP for a few more hours yet. Nothing more you can do tonight.'

Harlock nodded, only half listening, Ali knew. Inwardly, he sighed. 'Don't make me grab those two clowns from Heavy Meldar to frog-march you back to your quarters, cap'n.'

That at least did earn him a tiny twitch at the corner of the captain's mouth. 'Isn't that mutiny, Doctor Jones?'

Ali grinned at him. 'Only if I plan on taking your ship, you dumb cluck. An' if I wanted you off the ship I'd have done it years ago.'

Harlock shook his head with a wry smile. 'Would this change of heart have come after Shadow, Lar Metal, your run-in with Doppler Corps, or Grand Technologia?'

Ali's grin widened into a smirk. 'Puh-lease - you didn't steal my heart until Metabloody!' he declaimed, placing a hand over the organ in question.

Harlock snorted. 'Because I let you keep those bloody vases?' He sighed. 'I'd have thought at the very least saving your ass over the years would have counted for something…'

Ali gave him a pitying stare. 'Harlock, Harlock, Harlock… _anyone_ can save someone's life… but it's a rare man who'll stand by and let a full-blown idiot cart around two heavy stone vases when they're running for their lives…'

He was rewarded with a dry chuckle. For a moment they stood in companionable silence, because there was a lot that had happened on Metabloody that the two of them would rather forget… Little of it amusing. 'Prat.' The captain told him eventually.

Ali grinned warmly. 'Your prat,' he corrected. 'And why are you still standing here?'

'Funny,' Harlock drawled. 'I was about to ask you the same question.'

Ali stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled out of the room with a carefully practised insolence that came close to raising another wry smile from his captain.

'Why do I put up with you, Jones?' he called out after the crewman.

The reply floated back: 'Who the hell else do you plan on confiding the crap you don't want to lay on Kei or Tochiro to?'
'Another substandard vessel.' Cassandra's disdainful sniff matched her haughty demeanor. 'What are a few hundred non-combatants except a drag on our fleet and our resources?'

'She's lying!' One of the young boys - the handsome uninjured one - struggled in the arms of one of the *ampeloi*. 'She ordered her ship to open fire on them once we were clear!' He glared at Cassandra from under a mop of unruly dark hair. 'The ship was falling apart but you didn't even try to save them!'

'Shit that creature up before I do it permanently,' Cassandra snarled at the *ampeloi* holding him. Before the *ampeloi* could use her ability to extend her vines around the boy, Tessius, to Cleo's amazement, stepped forward.

'Enough, Cassandra. Cleo and I will take the children into our care. I'm sure you have a report to make to the queen.' She extended her hand and the *ampeloi* maiden, seeing no reason to refuse, released the child. The boy stood his ground, watching her warily. 'Your authority, for now, does not extend to this ship - which makes the prisoners our responsibility. I'm sure you and the queen - all glory to her name - will have plenty to discuss.'

Cassandra's hate-filled glare looked as though she wanted to skewer Tessius on the spot, but she demurred, and left, taking her guards with her. With a gesture Cleo dismissed the attending *melia* and *ampeloi*, and stared at the three small humans who now huddled together. The one who looked like the boy who'd spoken seemed sick, shivering even in the warmth of the nemeton. His head was swathed in a bandage of aloe leaves, finely beaten and softened into a paste which dried into a flexible fabric when treated properly. This covered part of his left cheek and his right eye. She walked over to them and knelt in front of them.

'I'm afraid you've had a poor welcome, and I can only apologise for your treatment at the hands of certain of our sisters.' She bowed her head, ignoring Tessius' slight cough. 'Not all of us are so…'

'Nasty?' This was from the smaller boy - an odd looking creature, stocky and bandy legged, with a head that looked a little too large for his body. He peered at her and squinted.

'Zeuxine and her sisters were nice.' This from the injured boy. 'They helped us. They didn't deserve what Cassandra did. She just didn't care. Worse - she enjoyed it. My dad wouldn't let her get away with something like that. It's wrong.' The other boys nodded in agreement. 'Are you going to do anything about it?'

Cleo shot a look at Tessius, who stared at the three boys with something akin to astonishment. 'I thought you didn't want to get involved?' Tessius asked, coldly amused.

'Can we let this go without incident?' Cleo asked. 'I know the testimony of human children will have no weight, but…'

'I need to get to the chamber of records before Cassandra can arrange for the footage to vanish,' Tessius replied abruptly. 'Maybe if our sensors caught her firing on the *Fraxinus*…'

Cleo shook her head sadly. 'You know as well as I it won't matter to the queen.'

'I wasn't planning on showing it to the queen', Tessius snapped back. She strode out, leaving Cleo staring at her ramrod straight back and chewing on her bottom lip.
Cleo however had little time to confront or reflect on her friend's reaction. The small odd-looking boy was tugging on her chiton, and stared up at her when she looked down. 'Miss? I think there's something really wrong with Mamoru…'

She glanced at the twins, in time to see the uninjured boy try and fail to catch his brother as he toppled to the floor.

Tessius stepped under the archway formed by two languid willows. White butterflies rose in a fluttering mass from the flowers within, and the air was laden with the scent of rosemary, sage and periwinkle. The custodians ignored her, and tended their charges with tender devotion, moving from plant to plant, snipping, trimming, training. Removing the dead and dying leaves with skill and dexterity, exposing new growth, encouraging it.

The butterflies settled down onto the tiny white flowers of the rosemary and the pale blue gentian. Their million wings added a soft susurration. The light was set to the early evening; a gentle, a pale yellow cast from the domed roof that was the inner bark of the vessel, far above the waving branches of the giant willows. Nearby, a necessarily artificial brook trickled over stones brought from the homeworld, tumbling delightfully down its mossy channel into the holding tanks, to be drawn by osmosis through the xylem of the living ship, upwards into another holding area, to begin its journey again.

She moved through the glade, careful to keep to the path of the of green, close cropped grass labyrinth that wound its way through the beds. From above, she knew, it would look like a sliced section of the animal brain - and in a way, it did share some function with that organ.

This was where the memories of the vessel were stored - specifically those of the sensors on the exterior bark, which recorded their surroundings. From here the delicate rills carried the scents and essential oils of the plants into the waters which would nourish the sisters who gave their lives in service to it as its guiding minds, forever bound in their service in the translucent pods which were their support. For which reason she stepped carefully over the tiny trailing stream in her path when it crossed the sward in front of her, careful not to let her chiton trail in the water, lest it be contaminated.

In vain, as it happened. She rounded a corner, her bare feet leaving no trace of her passing as the grass sprang back as she passed, and bit back a human-learned curse at the devastation in front of her. Where there should have been new life, bursting forth from the trailing mass of vinca and the upright, woody, varigated green and white bushes of rosemary, there was only shrivelled grey, rotting foliage.

Two guardians - hyleoroi - watchers of the woods - were already consumed by pale blue flames, their dust already dancing and carried away by the gentle scented breeze from the vessel's powerful pumps.

This at least would not be forgotten, as the dust settled on the surface of the nearest stream, and was swiftly carried away. The ship would remember.

Scant consolation.

A white clad hyleoroi glided to her side. 'We could not stop them, lady Tessius.'

'Cassandra's people?'

The guardian nodded, the green fronds and tendrils of her hair falling over her face in a universal
gesture of grief. 'These memories… they were important?'

Tessius nodded, then turned on her heel and left the room, heading purposefully towards the heart of the nemeton, and a long overdue talk to a woman who had once been a friend.

Within the encircling trees of the Queen's Grove at the heart of the Great Tree, there was a pool, lovingly sculpted to resemble the splash pool of a tall waterfall - although both pool and waterfall were artificial, the rocks made of a lightweight pumice, the water pumped back up the falls by an ingenious use of the vessel's circulatory system. Damp moss grew in the wet crevices, and willows dipped their graceful branches into the clear water, which was disturbed only by the ripples cast by the form that swam languidly across the twenty foot pool.

Tessius knelt at the side, her chiton immediately soaked where her knee pressed into the grassy edge of the water. 'Your majesty.'

'Please, Tessius - you did not used to be so formal.' Rafflesia drifted gracefully over to the shallows and stood up, the water cascading off her skin to fall like rain onto the surface of the pool. Her skin was the palest green, her hair jet black and falling down to her knees in a silky sheet, clinging to her curves.

Human… and yet not. Like the dryades or other true mazone, her eyes were an inky black. Unlike Cleo, Rafflesia's system was now almost completely suffused with the miniature mazone cells, replacing her original body over time, and still mimicking its form.

'That was a long time ago,' Tessius replied cautiously. She stood and moved aside to let her queen leave the water, and reach for a white chiton. 'We need to talk.'

'Then talk,' Rafflesia told her. She sat down on a fallen tree trunk. 'Sit beside me, as we used to do so long ago.'

Tessius continued to stand, and Rafflesia sighed. 'You are vexed perhaps because of Cassandra?'

'Vexed?' Tessius stared at her in astonishment. 'The situation has gone far beyond vexation, Rafflesia. When we agreed to embark on this journey, we agreed that we would be trying to restore a better time - a time without this human plague on the galaxy. A time where the Green could spread, and bloom, on a thousand worlds! A rebirth of our race, and our ultimate rejection of the creatures which caused the destruction of our homes. Now you sit by and let Cassandra and her militants destroy our own people without comment or censure?'

'I am Queen,' Rafflesia stated simply. 'You yourself helped make me so. My word is all you need to hear.'

'I hear nothing of Cassandra's actions in your words,' Tessius replied harshly.

Rafflesia looked at her much as one would regard a small child who just had a tantrum. 'Just so.'

Tessius paced backwards and forwards in front of her monarch. 'You approve of these attacks?'

Rafflesia shrugged and called for an attendant. In reply to an unspoken command, the epimeliad began to comb through the wealth of slowly drying black hair. 'They are necessary to cull the weak from our numbers. When we reach our destination, we must be strong - and united.' She stared into Tessius' eyes, black into black. 'We are united, Tessius, are we not...' It was a statement, not a question. Tessius lowered her head, and made no reply. Rafflesia reached out a hand and took one of Tessius' limp appendages in her fingers. 'My friend… we've come this far.
Have faith. We have no need to eke out a living on these dusty, dead worlds. All of eternity awaits!'  

*But will we live to see it…?* Tessius smiled wanly at her old friend and inclined her head slightly. And what use is Eternity if we sell our souls to achieve it? Rafflesia's cool hand released hers and she drew it back as politely as she could. 'As you say,' she replied quietly.  

As she turned to leave Rafflesia's voice hailed her: 'Tessius - if you should think to stand against me, our friendship will be no shield.'  

Tessius carried on walking and didn't look back.

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Cleo watched as one of the medics studied the little boy lying on a grassy bed. To prevent his brothers from crowding the mazon, she'd placed an arm around each pair of small shoulders to restrain them at first. Now they leaned into her slightly, unresisting.

'Hippolyta?'

The mazon - like Cleo, she was a corpse flower - finished her ministrations and turned to face her. 'The wounds are infected, but they shouldn't be,' she replied, sounding puzzled. 'The wounds had healed remarkably fast - although we couldn't save his eye. But there is something else at work here, sapping his strength at a cellular level. I'm getting some very strange readings - as though he was exposed to some exotic particles recently.' She took a step forwards. 'May I examine the twin?'

Cleo could feel the boy bristle, his shoulders tensing under her hand as it rested lightly on them. 'His name's Wattaru,' she corrected her subordinate. 'And you should perhaps ask him directly.'  

Both boys turned surprised expression to her, looking into her eyes with an astonishingly adult candour. Wattaru smiled at her, however sadly, and nodded. Hippolyta knelt beside him and lifted a hand, focussing her skills on his small frame.

'What's she doing?' Taro whispered. Cleo looked down at the little boy, and his too-serious, plain face. In a strange way he grew on you, once you spent time with him, she realised. There was something so unaffected about him, and his intelligence was evident in the way - even with his poor eyesight - he insisted on looking at everything around him, missing nothing.

'We have a high degree of what you would call extra sensory abilities,' she told him. 'Hippolyta can channel hers to look at the cells of the body.'

'This one isn't affected,' Hippolyta told her. 'No trace of the contamination in his brother's cells.' She smiled at Wattaru, who had the grace at least to return it. 'Interestingly you look like monozygotic twins, but you appear to be fraternal at the cellular level, albeit with very small differences genetically.'

Wattaru nodded. 'We're just really, really alike, mom says.' He looked over to his unconscious brother with his heart in his eyes. 'It's fun to mess with people's heads though, coz they think we're identicals,' he whispered.

'What is the contamination?' Cleo asked. She let Taro's small hand tug her over to where the other boy lay, sleeping only due to the soporific in his system. He'd been restless and sweating earlier.

'Dark matter.' This from Taro, in a confident voice that cracked on the second word. 'He got really sick, a few years ago. Mum too, and she lost a baby. Lots of people died,' he continued in a hoarse, tearful whisper. 'Dad… and Mimay - they took him to the Arcadia…'
Cleo shared a look with Hippolyta. 'Dark matter… but why would that make him so sick now…?'

Hippolyta made her way back to the boy's side. 'The carbon drives,' she replied. 'On the transport ship, with the vessel in flight, it probably wasn't noticeable - but here in the heart of the fleet and in the heart of this ship, the carbon drive leeches all the dark energy it can from the environment. He lacks our specialised cells, which can supply replacement energy to compensate. An unfortunate side-effect…' she trailed off. 'I'm sorry,' she finished, somewhat lamely Cleo thought. 'There's nothing I can do.' She busied herself making the boy comfortable.

Wattaru tugged on Cleo's himation. When he had her attention he piped up: 'It'll kill him to stay, won't it?'

Faced with those terribly young, frightened hazel eyes, there really wasn't much Cleo could say. *This was always going to be a mistake*, she thought sadly. *If he dies, no-one else will care - they still have two hostages, and they want Harlock to attack - how else to rally the fragmenting, terrified remnants of their race behind Rafflesia's insane plan? Or give weight to Cassandra's dire predictions of doom if the military were not granted the extra resources and power they craved?*

There was a rustle of soft fabric in the doorway, and she turned, to see Tessius looking at her speculatively.

'Ve need to talk,' they said simultaneously.
Daiba pulled the nose of the bullet up and shivered as the energy bolt only just missed the cockpit by a whisker. The space wolf on his starboard wing wasn't so lucky. 'I just lost Cai!' he screamed into the comms. 'Shitfuckwankcrapbollocksfuck.'

'Close the formation,' said Kei's calm voice in his ears. 'Daiba, quit waggling your arse like a catwalk model. You're as much a danger to your wingman as you are to the enemy. There's no need to be quite so hard on the controls. She'll respond to a light touch, you don't have to yank her around…'

'Like you're tugging your own cock,' Ali added helpfully.

Kei's heartfelt sigh must have echoed around the entire comms system. 'Jones - why are you on my wavelength?'

'Incoming!' Meg cried out. 'Daiba - get your arse back into formation - you're well off course.'

'I can get that bastard!' he called out as he chased down the fighter leading the attack. 'Just. A. Little. More…'

'Daiba! Formation!' Kei snapped. 'You've left Meg and Ben expos-

Two fireballs lit up his display. Now there was one ship in front of him, and three bearing down on him from the sides and behind.

He was cut off from his wing, and outnumbered…

The viewscreen lit up as multiple beams bore down on his small craft, and there was no dodging all of them. One blinding flash, and darkness.

He slunk out of the bullet's midsection, hoping no-one else would have left their simulators yet. To no avail. Kei, Ali, Meg, Cai and Franz all stood in the centre of the sim deck, applauding with a level of sarcasm he hadn't experienced since a disastrous semi-final in the under-fourteens when he'd managed score a try - over the wrong line.

'Congratulations,' Ali clapped him on the shoulder. 'I think that was an all time record.' He turned to Kei. 'Maybe we should get the Mazone to recruit him? He's more dangerous to his own side than he is to the enemy.'

'Ali!' Her admonition fell on deaf ears.

'I'm going to hit the showers. When you've pounded some sense into this idiot, we'll try again.' He walked off with his shoulders stiffer than Daiba could remember seeing. The rest of the team shuffled off behind him, shaking their heads. Even Meg just rolled her eyes as she strolled past.

That left him alone with Kei, and faced with the certainty of a much-deserved ticking off, he waited for the storm to hit, and examined the toes of his boots.

Instead, she walked over, and placed her hand under his chin, lifting his face up so she could look into his eyes. Miserably, he made a valiant attempt to meet that cobalt blue gaze.
'What were you thinking?'

'Apparently I wasn't,' he replied glumly.

She shook her head. 'You had a plan - what was it?'

Belatedly it occurred to him that she wasn't asking as a prelude to tearing a strip off him - although knowing Kei, that might still be on the cards. He swallowed hard. 'The formation was pivoting around that third ship - not the one in the lead. If I could have…'

'Well spotted. But you know what you did wrong?'

Well, that was easy. 'I screwed up. Broke formation. Didn't follow through.'

She tapped him with her middle finger hard, right between the eyes. 'You went off by yourself, without orders, without care for your team. Dammit, Tadashi - you're smarter than that. You went off half-cocked, and in a real fight, we'd all be dead.'

'The way that scenario was playing out we were dead anyway,' he pointed out - not unreasonably, he thought.

Jab.

'Ow!' He rubbed the spot at the top of his nose and glared at her.

'Focus,' she snapped. 'You've got a good brain, you can spot a pattern and you act fast - but you're not just one man out there. We watch each other's backs, and we never leave a wingman unprotected.'

'But the flight wing isn't equal!' He yelled in her face without thinking. 'The bullet is slower than the space wolves - they're holding back to protect me - instead they should be doing what they do best. You, Cai and Harlock - you should be first into the fray, harrying and nipping at them - you can scatter the formation - then me, Ali, Meg… we could mop up the strays as they split.'

He expected a small explosion. Instead she smiled at him, and patted him on the shoulder. 'Finally, you're getting it.' She started to walk in the direction of the door.

'What?'

'Back here in three hours, Daiba!' she called back over her shoulder. 'Next time, you take point.'

His mouth open, he watched her perfect, leather-clad backside sashay away with a wiggle that gave him ideas way above his station.

The heavy tread of boots on the deck alerted him to someone approaching, and she turned around. Harlock sauntered over, his helmet in his hand. 'I might join you for that one,' he said quietly.

'Was that a test?' Daiba asked. 'I mean - I know we're just training, but…'

'You screwed the pooch by going off on your own, but you saw what she wanted you to see. Now, you have to learn to act responsibly - and quickly - on that. Knowledge isn't everything. You have to be able to use it. And in the heat of battle, at these speeds - that's not easy.'

'But we might not even face fighters…'

Harlock shrugged. 'It's not the nature of the enemy - or the task - that's important. It's teamwork.
Understanding how your people fight, think and react. Knowing when to act, and when to follow orders. When to give them, and know that those around you will follow you because they trust you to make the right call.' He placed his hand on Daiba's shoulder. 'You won't pick that up in the time we have - but you're making a start. You know the strengths and weaknesses of your own vessel - if you want a tip, I'd suggest whilst you grab something to eat before she hauls you all back again, you might want to bone up on the specs - and the personnel records - of the rest of the team.' He wandered off again. 'Just a suggestion…'

He was gone before Daiba could thank him. 'Specs?' he muttered. He grinned and headed towards Kei's monitoring console. She hadn't logged off, and her recordings of the past week's worth of simulations was easy enough to find. 'Never mind reading - what I need to do is watch the play-by-play…' He settled down and started with their first training simulation.

An entire diurnal cycle passed before all hell broke loose. Cleo was sitting on the edge of a bed next to the sick boy - Mamoru - who slept fitfully, tossing and turning despite the light narcotic Hippolyta had dosed him with. The healer hovered nearby, awaiting orders.

'Is there any place in the vessel we can shield him from the effects of the drive?' Cleo asked.

'The further forward, and deeper in towards the centre mass the better,' Hippolyta replied. 'There are certain places where the hull is thick enough to shield the interior from the effect of the engines - but they are not generally used as living quarters.' She paused. 'Lady - why so much care over one human child? The queen will be content with the two remaining hostages…'

'I'm sure she will,' Cleo answered, a little more tartly than she'd intended. 'But do you really think that Harlock will?' She looked at the other two boys, cuddled up together on another bed nearby. 'Arrange it. We'll try to protect him for as long as possible.' She smiled down at the other two boys, curled up together sound asleep on the second bed. 'They are so resilient, are they not? I've seen humans on the planets we've passed on our journey who showed less fortitude in the face of far less danger.'

'You sound as though you admire them,' Hippolyta replied. Her voice however was gentle, without censure. 'I've never had contact with humans before. Perhaps, if they all showed such courage and consideration…'

Cleo brushed a stray lock of hair back from the boy's face. Even scarred, he would be a handsome youth when he grew to manhood. Hippolyta was right, she thought sadly. Even after all Cassandra had put them through, their stout defence of the Fraxinus' inhabitants and their condemnation of Cassandra's actions had struck a chord in those who'd overheard.

Not even our own will speak out… she thought wistfully, guiltily. They shame us…

The boy murmured something in his sleep, and she looked down again to see his undamaged hazel eye staring at her. 'You look sad,' he whispered.

'It's a sad world,' she replied. To her surprise he reached out patted her hand.

'Dad'll make things better,' he said confidently. His voice however was throaty and weak.

'Our prophecies say otherwise,' Cleo replied. 'To us, he is the destroyer of worlds, the Fury…'

Mamoru snorted weakly. 'That was the other guy. Our great-something-grandad. And even he just screwed up, according to Uncle Ali.'
She was unfamiliar with the idiom, but the sentiment was self-explanatory. 'The results of his actions were just as destructive even if inadvertent. We are here, now, because his actions led to the loss of all the worlds in five systems. All the suns, all the planets… and every living thing on them. Do you think him blameless because he didn't deliberately cause this catastrophe? Does it make our situation less dire or pitiful?' Cleo halted in her quiet tirade as she realised she was probably going totally over the head of a nine year old. But once again he surprised her, with a wry, knowing half-smile.

'No - but why would you want to punish everyone else for one guy's mistake? You're hurting people who didn't even know you existed. Doesn't seem fair. And dad would say it sure as hell doesn't make it right.' He looked up at her, tired, in pain and yet oddly sympathetic, that hazel eye wiser than his years. 'I mean - did you even ask for help? Before deciding to do what the old Harlock did, and blow up the universe to make the hurt go away?' When she didn't answer he shrugged. 'Didn't think so. But you're like us, aren't you? Me, Wattaru, Taro… mom, dad… this stuff was fifty years ago, right? None of us were even born then. You don't look that old. So why do we have to pay for other people's screw-ups? Couldn't we just - you know - sort stuff out?'

She stared down at him, so earnest, and so incredibly young, and felt something twist inside.

No, not twist… untwist. As though a very large knot had just untangled.

Any reply was forestalled by the sound of a tortured scream as a massive wave of blue flame engulfed the wall of the room. On instinct, she dropped to the floor, pulling the boy with her, ignoring his cry of pain as she landed on him.

'Wattaru! Taro!'

'Be still,' she called out next to his ear. The roar of the flames was worse than their heat, but still a danger. As quickly as she could she scrambled on her knees over to the other bed, thankfully further away from the damage. The other two were already crouched on the floor, a small knife in the hand of Mamoru's twin. 'Come,' she ordered gently. She held out a hand. 'I can't protect you here.'

They shared an unspoken question, then nodded and followed her to where Mamoru lay, trying in vain to lever himself up.

'Keep down!' She punctuated her order by tugging on the toga they'd given him. 'The flames will hurt you.'

'What is it?' Taro - the short, odd looking boy asked.

'Internal damage to the ship - like the meliae and others of our kind, when the cell walls are disrupted in death, the sap ignites. Now hide here and do not move - I need to know what is happening - and why no alarm has yet sounded.' She looked around frantically for Hippolyta, and found the medic cowing behind her station. The leaves and branches forming the link to the central core were already withered and brown. 'Hippolyta - guard these boys. I need to see what's happening.' Without waiting for a reply she dashed into the corridor, and looked around.

Ashes, ashes… dust blowing in the wind that had no place on a star-going vessel. The walls writhed and contorted; faces and bodies of mazone formed and deformed in the rough bark, as they tried to pull themselves from the walls, only to be trapped at the moment the section they were in died. Blue flames were everywhere, as was the terrifying wail of the dead and the dying.

One of Cassandra's people ran past and she grabbed the mazone by the arm. 'Sister - what happens?'
Unlike Cassandra, this one saw no reason to refuse her question. 'Lady Cleome? A rebellion. Tessius and the meliae are attempting to take over the ships. We're dropping out of the void. You should find a safe haven - I can have someone escort you to the nemeton…'

'Go,' she told the mazone. 'I'll find my own way.' Seeing no reason to refuse, the mazone nodded her acceptance, and left, taking the long route along the corridors as though she were a corpse flower. Although, Cleo realised, looking at the tortured murals, that was almost certainly a sensible move, since merging through the walls looked like a terrible idea.

It didn't even occur to her until she gathered up the boy - Mamoru - in preparation to moving them all to a safer location, that she hadn't once thought to ask about the safety of the Queen.

Harlock caught up to Kei in the corridor just outside their quarters. 'Only a three hour break?' he asked as they walked in through the massive doors.

'If you try to tell me you didn't see me, I'll be pointing you at Luna for an eye test,' their beefy cook told her with a smile. She patted Kei on the arm. 'As it is, I'm starting to think you need to see her before you fall over. I cleared away far too much from these quarters this past week.' She poked Harlock in the arm for good measure. 'And that goes for you too, captain. Neither of you is eating properly, and it ain't right. Ain't right at all.' She sighed. 'You do your boys - and little Nami - no good at all if you're not in fighting trim when we reach these vegetables.' Shaking her head with another sigh, she continued on her way.

'Like a stately freighter…' Harlock remarked with a grin. I'm so glad she's on our side - I'd have hated to come up against her in a scrap.' He turned his attention back to Kei. 'Sharp? You're running them ragged.'

'They need the practice,' she retorted.

'They also need sleep. Give them a shift off. We won't be catching up to the fleet for another three days.' He stepped in front of her and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'That goes double for you. Lunch. Sleep. In that order.'

She ducked away from his touch, not meeting his eyes. 'I'm not hungry.' She strode towards the bathroom, pulling her gloves off as she walked. 'I need a shower.'

Although the door operated on an automated slide, he had the distinct impression she'd much rather it slammed shut behind her.

'Problem?'

Harlock turned at the sound of Blaze's voice. Blaze stood in the doorway, Nami in his arms, and Mimay standing behind him holding onto Freya. Blaze took a step forward and almost tripped over the two cats, who were trying to tie themselves in a knot around his ankles. From its perch on his shoulder, the bird carked at his usual transport.

'Nothing I can't handle,' he replied. 'Can I leave you to sort out feeding everyone whilst I grab a quick shower?' He fielded Nami's run at his legs after she'd scrambled out of her honorary uncle's arms. 'Oof. You're getting a little big for that…'

'Papa? Is mama upset?' Nami stared up at him, her hazel eyes - so much like his own - stared up at him, wide and shining slightly. She'd inherited Kei's trick of nibbling on her bottom lip when she
was worried. He dropped down onto one knee and hugged her close. 'Nothing I can't fix,' he reassured her. He gave her a bear hug before standing up. 'You - don't drink the tantalus dry. Anita just refilled it…'

'As if!' Blaze retorted with a grin, one hand already on the brandy decanter.

'I wasn't talking to you,' Harlock replied, with a pointed glance at Mimay. 'Since when was ethanol a food group?'

'Since you turned a blind eye to the still Maji and Yattaran built with Anita's help last year,' Mimay answered with one of her sly smiles as she accepted a glass from Blaze.

Blaze grinned. 'Ask a silly question…' he quipped, saluting Harlock with his glass. The pirate just rolled his eye and disappeared into the en suite.

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Even over the gentle rushing noise of the shower she could hear him clattering around in the bathroom. The sounds she knew all too well after so many years. First the thump of his boots on the floor - always with a longer delay between the left and the right because he still found it awkward to flex that right leg - subjected to all manner of indignities over the years. Then the jacket, followed by the lighter thump of the sweater, and the occasional swear word as he pulled the leather pants off.

She smiled even as she turned her back to the shower door. Heaven forbid he'd call for help - although if they'd been alone in their quarters and they'd been closer to the bed, he'd not have refused her help. Although she could drive him to greater distraction by putting his clothes on…

There was only a momentary draught as the door to the pod opened and a warm, hard body pressed up against hers before the door slid shut again. She leaned back against his chest with a sigh and relaxed into his arms as he wrapped them around her waist. 'You know, you don't need to announce your presence quite so audibly,' Kei told him as he dropped a light kiss on the back of her neck. 'It's been at least ten years since I almost stabbed you for sneaking up on me.'

'And yet,' he murmured into her left ear, punctuating the reply with a tender lick of her earlobe, 'You still shower with a knife close to hand…'

She couldn't quite stop herself from giving the sheathed tanto on the shelf a guilty look. Old habits were hard to break. 'You never asked me not to…'

She could feel his faint smile at the base of her neck. 'I wouldn't do that.'

She leaned back again, loving the sensation of the water beating down on her skin, and even better, the feel of his body against hers. In almost fifteen years, she'd never tired of that. Although there had been changes to both of them in that time. Scars, yes - they both had more than they'd started with. She twisted in his light grip so that she could face him, and run her hands over a body she knew as well as her own. He'd filled out since she'd first slapped him down onto the deck like a landed carp. Martian born and waiting on a deserted world for six months before that, he'd been far too skinny - although she could testify to that wiry strength he'd honed over the years being there from the start. The boyish, slender youth had given way long ago to a lean, hard body that he kept beautifully toned. Broad shoulders tapering to a still narrow waist. His chest and stomach lean without being overly ripped, his hips still narrow and his legs long and clean. Not an ounce of fat on him. A scattering of dark hair now graced the expanse between dark nipples, hard and crinkled in the water (or perhaps indicative of some other part that was definitely hard and responsive…) and this ran in a trail down to his navel and then to the dark tangle… She had to raise her eyes back
up to his face at that point, or else it was going to get a lot more heated in the small cubicle.

His mouth twitched slightly as she made eye contact. 'You're doing it again,' he told her primly. 'Honestly, we've got two small children, two cats, a bird, an alien and Blaze in the next room. Stop giving me ideas...' He didn't have to stoop too far to capture her mouth with his own, and she had no intention of evading capture.

'All my fault, is it?' she teased when they both surfaced for air, letting her hands wander over his water-slicked skin. 'You joined me in here, remember? Not the other way around...'

'Mmmm.' His mouth was busy elsewhere, and she ran her fingers through his wet hair, stopping to untangle a small knot. 'Well since you seem to be hiding from your lunch in here in the hopes that Tadashi will clean it away without anyone being any the wiser...'

She flushed guiltily at that. Attuned as he always was to her moods, he shifted his attention back to her mouth. 'We both have coping mechanisms, love. I climb mountains without safety equipment-

And throw yourself into any and every potential danger zone you can find, she felt like adding. She glanced over briefly to the sheathed tanto, which hadn't always been there purely as self-defence. Her glance back took in the scars along the side of his torso, and she ran her fingers gently down the line of an old skin graft, and trailed them down still further to find and feel the ridge of the top of the long, straight, surgical scar down his thigh. The leg that still gave him trouble if he overdid things - although he rarely let it stop him. Three bad breaks before he was even twenty - a free climbing fall, a girder landing on it and a base jumping accident in the Academy. A less precise scar crossed it about a foot below his hip, in the fleshy part - where someone - the same someone responsible for the electro-whip scars on his back - had once stuck a dagger in and twisted it.

'I haven't felt this powerless since the plague,' she said eventually. He took her hand and moved it back to his chest, sheltered under his own. 'Or for so damn long...'

'You're not powerless.' He kissed her again, and moved closer, until the slick wall of the shower pod was against her back.

'Given that I'm totally at your mercy...' did he really think he could distract her?

Yes... Oh, Gaia... what he could do with those strong hands...

...and that wicked, wicked mouth...

'My mercy?' he nibbled on her earlobe at the same time his hands were doing interesting things elsewhere, and she would have been a puddle on the floor if he wasn't holding her up. 'You are the only person in the universe who can have the infamous space pirate Captain Harlock on his knees begging - if that's not being in control, I don't know what is...'

'There's no lock on the bathroom door...' she protested weakly as his hands cupped her ass, inviting and encouraging. When she didn't immediately take him up on the offer, he changed tack and began kissing her skin again, from between her breasts, moving south with deliberately taunting restraint.

'There never has been,' he pointed out, from somewhere just above her belly button. Her fingers tightened in his hair involuntarily when he deliberately breathed into the dimpled hollow. 'So how quiet can you be?'

Not very, as it turned out, as he demonstrated that wiry strength and helped her as she wrapped her legs around him. Not even a bum leg ever slowed him down when he was on a mission.
But then, she thought, trying desperately not to bite through a muscular shoulder in an attempt to stop from crying out his name so that the stars could hear it, not much ever did.

And yes. She could make the most feared space pirate in the known universe beg. But never for mercy.

Blaze raised a dark, neatly arched eyebrow when they exited the bathroom, both still slightly damp, but dressed and not looking too flushed. 'If that's what you two call a quick shower, remind me not to make plans if you decide to linger,' he drawled. A crystal tumbler filled with what looked like one of Harlock's oldest and best scotches was held reverently in one hand, and someone had stencilled a skull and crossbones onto his black flightsuit, filling the centre of his chest, unlike Harlock's more discreet shoulder-quartering. Kei stuck her tongue out at him and headed for the chamfer dish holding the rest of one of Anita's sterling offerings, and began loading her plate up. Harlock apparently knew better than to offer up an I-told-you-so when she walked back to sit next to him of the chaise longue, but he didn't hold back on plundering her plate every time she gave him even the slightest opening.

Quick fingers snatched another titbit off her plate. 'It wouldn't kill you to fill a plate for yourself' she told him after the fourth raid on her lunch. Slapping his fingers never did any good, as usual he just smirked and helped himself again. But when Mimay glided over with a separate serving for her captain, she scowled at the nibelung. 'Don't encourage him!'

'I'll have it…' Blaze offered hopefully, waving a hand.

Kei snorted. 'Don't take this impersonation to heart, Blaze. It's a slippery slope.'

'So I hear - it starts with waitress service and ends with you sitting in that skull-bedecked throne wrapped in a long black cloak and your own self-pity.' Blaze grabbed another choice tidbit and nibbled on the meat. 'Should I ask what this is? I mean, Anita does wonders, but I saw what we were loading into your stores…'

'Protein.' Harlock replied amiably. 'Lab grown, perfectly innocuous and vacuum packed.' He turned his attention to Nami, who squirmed into his lap and put her arms around his neck. Spotting Freya looking at him with her head tilted to one side and a wistful look on her face he whispered to Nami: 'You mind sharing me?' She gave him an earnest little look, and shook her head. With a smile he patted Kei's knee. 'You can join us, you know…' he told the little nibelung girl. Her shy smile and the resulting scramble led to a lot of rearranging before everyone was comfortable, and both little girls were cuddled up to the two pirates. 'Little girls need no excuses,' he replied in answer to yet another raised eyebrow.

'Never said a word,' Blaze, a doting older brother to several much younger siblings, replied primly, the effect spoilt slightly by a chuckle. 'But if your enemies could see you now…'

'...they should be terrified,' Harlock replied, busy soliciting a giggle from his daughter by means of rubbing noses. 'A man who has something he loves deeply to protect is far more dangerous than one with nothing left to lose.' He smiled across at Blaze. 'Your father was a prime example of that.' He glanced over to Kei, who now had two cats and Freya on her lap, and the little girl was smiling as Kei tried to avoid getting a furry tail up her nose. 'I see Maji got at your flightsuit…'

Blaze tugged at the front seam of the offending article. 'He thought I should look the part, being as I'm one of the crew now. I've been filling in at various stations, but truly I feel like a bit of a fifth wheel at the moment.'
Harlock shrugged. 'Nothing stopping you from taking the helm for a bit. In fact - you should. The more familiar you are with the way Arcadia handles, the better.'

'I thought you'd prefer me to keep my hands off and let the crew and Tochiro handle things?' Blaze dropped into the chair behind the massive desk in front of the leaded windows. 'This ship... it's not like any other. It has a captain, and sometimes I get the feeling it watches me. What if it doesn't want an interloper?'

'Well then I'd be screwed seven ways till Sunday,' Harlock retorted. 'Don't tell me the ghostly goings on the other day got to you as well?'

Blaze just looked at him from under his fringe. 'Anyone it didn't get to was probably already dead,' he drawled. He shuddered at the memory. 'That darkness... I've never felt anything like it. This ship does creepy on a good day, but that...'

'I've felt it,' Harlock said softly. He took a tumbler Mimay held out to him and downed the contents in one swallow. 'Never quite so strongly as yesterday on this ship, but I've felt it before, and recently.'

'The Futatsuboshi,' Blaze stated flatly. He took the tumbler Mimay now offered him. 'What's the connection though? Between that cold dark you said you felt there that killed my brother, and the darkness that brings Harlock back every year? And why this year is it so much stronger?'

'The Mazone.' Kei replied. She shifted in her seat to shoo the cats off her lap, and nestled closer to Harlock so she could share Nami with him, her daughter perfectly happy to share her shoulders with her new friend. 'The explosion Marin spaced right into tore apart the fabric of space/time the same way the Dimensional Oscillators are supposed to work. We think - although we don't know for sure - that it tears a hole into where The Captain went.'

'But we didn't get our souls sucked out,' Blaze pointed out in his most reasonable tone.

'The Arcadia isn't like other ships,' Harlock replied. 'She's not been a thing of metal, ceramic and plastics since she fell into the inferno...'

'Before,' Mimay broke in. She'd taken up position on the over-sized four poster, lounging with her arms resting on the footboard with her chin resting on her hands. 'All of the Deathshadow ships were constructed with materials infused with dark matter. In one sense they were always partly alive. That is how they were able to survive what otherwise would have been utter destruction when they were caught in the maelstrom of Earth's death throes.' She paused. 'It is how the ship protects us. Dark matter is the stuff of life, not death. Our gift to humanity was intended as a blessing, not a curse.'

'Deathshadow Three dragged that dark matter contaminated plague virus along with it,' Blaze pointed out. 'That seems pretty damned cursed. What about the rest of them?'

'We don't know much about One, and Two was destroyed before we found that Loki had torn it apart to get to Verdani,' Kei said. 'One's hardly much of a sample size. It's not as though we're one quarter of the Four Horsemen or something.'

'I always thought of it a bit more like Pandora's box,' Harlock mused. The other two looked at him as though he'd grown two heads. 'What?'

'You do know that this ship... kinda rolls with a serious death imagery, right?' Blaze asked.

'Don't let the skull and bones motif get to you.' Harlock shrugged off the accusation. 'Arcadia is
only terrifying if you've done something to deserve our wrath. For those who need us, it brings hope, not despair.'

'There's an interpretation of that story which suggests hope was locked up with the rest of humanities' ills for a damned good reason,' Blaze replied.

'False hope, maybe,' Harlock shot back. 'Which when teamed with hubris and a massive amount of survivor's guilt, I'll agree, led a lot of us into a very dark place.'

'Dark places like the one said hubris-and-guilt laden captains seem to be popping out of once an Earth standard year?' Blaze finished for him. 'I'm still lost as to how that becomes anything positive…'

'Because he had a second chance, and he took it,' Kei added simply. 'In the end he sacrificed himself to save us - and Earth. He could have simply moved Arcadia out of the way of that blast from Jupiter. He didn't. He unleashed all of the dark matter knowing although the ship would survive long enough to regenerate, he wouldn't.' She glanced over to Mimay, whose tiny green fireflies were barely fluttering around her prostrate form on the bed. 'Although I suspect had he really wanted to, he could have stayed.'

'Earth will one day revive,' Mimay said so softly they all had to strain to hear her. 'But there were other losses that day that can never be undone.' Freya squirmed out of Kei's arms and trotted over to her, scrambling onto the bed and snuggling against the older nibelung. Mimay sat up and wrapped her arms around the child, her face hidden in the little girl's hair. 'The Wheel now turns freely, but for one left behind for so long… to live day by day with a constant reminder of what was lost would have been too much to bear, I think. Better then to let go, to let the future find its own path.'

'Cryptic, much?' Blaze muttered. He reached for a decanter and poured himself a generous measure. 'What constant reminder?'

'Me,' Harlock told him. He glanced over and caught Kei's eyes. 'Us. Family.'

'Yeah? He knew that, right? I mean you're descended from him? And Kei from his ex?'

'Harlock's family were still on Earth when the shield we tried to create devastated it.' Tochiro's voice chimed in over his private channel to the captain's quarters. 'And mine. His brother's wife and two of their daughters. My wife and daughters.' His electronic voice caught. 'Mamoru…' he fell silent briefly. 'He'd probably have forgiven Harlock for anything else. But not that. Not for Miranda. Nor Ellie and Katie.'

'And you?' Blaze asked softly.

Tochiro was quiet for so long the listeners could have been forgiven for thinking he'd gone offline again. When he spoke it was with an uncharacteristic gruffness. 'Their names were Annelise, Mayu and Shizuku. I let Harlock here think that my Harlock never wanted to connect the speech and holographic circuits. The truth is, it took nearly twenty years before I could bring myself to talk to him. And by that time I guess we'd kind of settled into a holding pattern neither of us had the courage to break. We might both have said things you can't come back from.' His voice laughed harshly. 'I saw on the recordings you told Namino that you only have to fear the shadows on this ship if you bring them yourself. But we all of us still drag those shadows with us, even now. You, me… Mimay. That past is still manifest in the present. We're rushing towards a terrible conflict if we're not careful because of those hundred-year-past mistakes. Unless we can find a way to find a beacon in that darkness.'
'Harlock's guilt. The Mazone desire for vengeance. Kei and Yama's love for their children?' Blaze asked. More quietly he added. 'My brother…'

'Just so,' Harlock replied. 'Love… hate… guilt… a desire to see justice done… Even the best of reasons and intentions can lead us into dark places. And there are too many damned variables I can't control. I plan to take my sons back, and try to do it without triggering armageddon - but I've got Hoshino and your damn uncle itching for a fight in the name of your evil aunt - and whilst I'll be doing everything I can to avoid making the same mistakes my forefather did, I'm relying on your mother and a weird-ass half nibelung who claims to be the Guardian of Fate itself to keep the flame away from the tinder elsewhere.'

Across the room, Freya lifted her head and stared past Harlock, towards the bow of the ship.

'What is it, little one?' he asked.

She frowned slightly, then smiled. 'Þeir hafa hætt!' she declaimed in her bright treble.

Everyone stared at Mimay, who acknowledged the request to translate with a graceful nod. 'They have stopped,' she told them. She looked down at the child snuggled at her side. 'Well ahead of the schedule we had for them. Getur þú fundið þau? Can you find them?

Freya stared directly into Harlock's eye and nodded once, sharply. 'Yes.'

Harlock was on his feet only a fraction of a second ahead of Kei, the pair of them colliding as they tried to disentangle themselves from Nami. This left Harlock with his daughter in his arms. 'Kei - bring us out of IN space. I'll meet you on the bridge.'

She took off at a run, and he turned to Mimay. 'You two meet me there. We'll try to get a reading on Mamoru's dark matter trace.'

'And me?' Blaze asked as he placed his tumbler, only half finished, on the table. He looked expectantly at his host and friend.

Harlock placed Nami on the floor and took her hand. 'I wouldn't dream of keeping you out of this one.'

'Papa?' Nami tugged on her father's rolled up cuff. 'Will Mamoru an' Wattaru an' Taro be all right?'

'I hope so, little one. I really hope so.'

He smiled down at her, but Blaze noticed the one thing he hadn't done was promise anything. He walked over and took Nami's other hand when it was offered. 'Tell you what, Nami-chan - why don't you and I follow at our own pace, and we let your papa clear the way by knocking everything down that gets in his way while he charges around like a bull in a china shop?'

Her solemn expression brightened and she nodded. 'Um!'

Harlock huffed. 'I do not…' he protested. Blaze smirked at him.

'Oh - you so do… now go. You know you want to.' Mimay and Freya had slipped away silently already, and with only a brief a guilty backward glance, Harlock took off.
Chapter 44

Mazone Fleet

Every corridor Mamoru was hustled down seemed to be full of blue flames. Cleo bustled him along as quickly as she could, sometimes doubling back on their path when there seemed to be no way through, and to be fair, he thought, she did seem to be trying to shield him from the worst of the fighting.

But she couldn't stop him from seeing the nightmarish twisting and contortion of the walls of the ship. Or the way they bulged in odd shapes that reminded him of female forms trying to pull themselves free of the walls, sometimes frozen in the act of stepping free, their bodies deformed as though they'd grown out of the walls - or the walls had grown into them. Eyes and mouths open forever in silent screams.

He couldn't help but see the uniformed, armed soldiers cutting down their civilian brethren, most of whom could only rely on their ability to throw their vine-like extremities around their enemies in an attempt to strangle them, or to use the various poisoned darts and spines they grew in response to a threat. He saw mazone explode like pines in a forest fire, spitting blue fire for several yards, setting fire to their former comrades. Weapons - mostly blasters and some odd weapons that fired a monofilament wire that tore through the bodies of the vegetative mazone - were freely wielded by the soldiers, who didn't seem to care who got in the way. Several times Cleo had to run, picking him up in her strong arms and carrying him down a side passage to safety, if only for a short time, Hippolyta in her wake leading - and occasionally carrying - his brothers.

It wasn't just the walls that heaved and twisted into grotesqueries. The floors and ceilings were as fluid as the rest of the ship. Several log-like spans across the depths of the ship were already broken, pulled apart by the convulsions that rocked the massive vessel. Others were impassable because they'd mutated into massive female figures, reaching up to grab the unwary.

The soldiers were not their only threat. Several times those freakish passages reached out with arms or vines to grab them. One grabbed his arm and wrapped around it, spiralling from shoulder to wrist and tightening so hard he started to cry. Cleo had to hack at the vine with a knife, and Mamoru saw her crying as pale green sap gushed from the wound, pooling on the floor behind them as she once again picked up the pace. At another junction, a series of human-sized fleshy ovoids emerged from the floor, the glistening red inner leaves oozed with a sticky fluid which almost brought them to a halt when they ran through it, caught like flies on flypaper. The smell that wafted from the spine-ringed interiors reminded him of meat left out in the sun too long, and when Cleo finally pulled him free, he was carried past one that was already engulfing one of the more human mazone.

The legs stopped kicking as they ran past.

Eventually they reached a long, curving corridor which still seemed untouched by the eldritch insanity of the rest of the ship. The bark on the surfaces was papery and silvery-smooth, like birch. Here the soldiers took up their positions, ignoring Cleo as she slowed to a walk, and waved the group through.

It lifted the oppressive lethargy he'd been fighting ever since he'd been brought on board, and he raised his head from Cleo's warm neck with a sigh of relief, although he still had no strength. The air was clear, fresh, like a summer day on Tabito down at the small lake in the woods.
He saw why when he looked around with his one remaining, rather bleary eye. Cleo had come to a halt just outside what looked like a circle of trees - massive trunks soaring at least a hundred feet above their heads, the leaves rustling in the soft breeze of the ship's air-con. Some he recognised from trips to Mistral, or from Tabito. Others - especially what looked like giant ferns - were unknown. In between the great trunks he could make out a green meadow, and the glint of light sparkling off the surface of clear water.

For some reason, it reminded him of a lighter, living, growing green version of the Arcadia's Central Computer room.

'The nemeton,' Cleo told him softly. She too seemed invigorated by the sense of peace and wellbeing in this place. 'Your people once remembered these… creating sacred groves where they could worship something they neither understood or fully remembered. And in some of those ancient groves, we still remained, whilst the great forests covered what was once our world. They called us goddesses. Genius Loci. Spirits of the place. Some part of your race remembered, and feared… but also wondered, and celebrated.' She smiled down at him. 'Would you like to see?'

He didn't see he had much of a choice, but he nodded anyway. 'Are we safe here?'

'As safe as we can be,' she said gravely. 'Here the queen's power can protect the ship. And you should be safer from the effects of the drive.' She set the little boy down upon one of the mossy outcroppings and sat beside him. Not a moment too soon, as the ship was rocked by a massive explosion. His small hand didn't leave hers, and she gave it a reassuring squeeze. 'I am so sorry,' she whispered, as his head drooped again. 'If I can find a way to get you back to your father, I'll take it. This should never have happened.'

'My lady.' Hippolyta sat beside Cleo, her own two charges settled between them. 'The Queen…'

Cleo stared through the undergrowth at the centre of the nemeton, where Rafflesia was seated on a leafy throne at the side of the pool, surrounded by advisors. Most of them, she noted, themselves either corpse flowers, or members of Cassandra's faction. 'It seems she'll be too busy for now to bother with us, my friend,' she told Hippolyta.

'It might not have been sensible to bring the children so close to her. Not with so many of her advisors now being opposed to the peace faction.'

'We're not part of the faction, nor of the rebellion,' Cleo replied firmly.

'You are friends with Tessius, my lady. If the Queen remembers…'

Cleo settled one arm around Mamoru, who now had his head in her lap, dozing fitfully. The other boys were more alert, but looked tired. 'The Queen was friends with Tessius, Hippolyta - what's she going to do? Arrest herself?' The ship shook again. 'Do we know who's firing on us?'

'I heard one of the militia say that it was just shockwaves from other ships' drives nearby. The rebels do not have any of the armed vessels - only transports.'

Cleo bit her bottom lip and stared at the council surrounding Rafflesia. 'Surely she cannot just allow Cassandra to keep firing on our own like this? All they want to do is leave - how wrong could that be?' She shook her head sadly. 'The original argument was that we needed those drives when we reached our destination - so how is destroying them now any better than just letting them go?' The boys stared at her in sleepy confusion, and she realised she'd lapsed back into her own language.
'I assume that was a rhetorical question?' Hippolyta asked. The medic sighed. 'This isn't a good place for us, lady. One of the side chambers will provide just as much protection for the little humans, and be a lot less exposed.' She shot a glance through the trees at the assembled group beyond. 'I'd rather not be noticed, if you don't mind.'

Seeing a sudden consternation in the assembled council surrounding the throne and several pairs of eyes turned in their direction, Cleo was about to reply that it might be a little late for that, when she realised that her little group was not the focus of interest. Cassandra was marching towards her, a large group of her soldiers dragging mazone of several species and genera with them.

The ship, she noticed, had gone very quiet. She couldn't even remember when the rocking from exterior explosions had stopped. And when she saw who was being pushed into the nemeton behind Cassandra's uptight, smug form, she didn't even care.

The battered, torn and barely conscious figure covered with and still dripping her own green blood was Tessius.

'You okay?' Wattaru whispered to his brother when the lady - more of a girl really, he thought - she was small and dainty, and didn't look much older than Meg - stood up and displaced Mamoru's sleepy head. 'You look kinda grey…'

'I'll be fine.' Mamoru sat up a bit straighter and tried to look as though he wasn't about to throw up. Wattaru and Taro exchanged meaningful looks, and he sighed. 'Fine. I feel like shit.'

'Good job mum didn't hear you!' Taro told him, without as much glee as he'd usually put into telling him off.

'I wish she could,' Mamoru whispered. Wattaru reached out and hugged his twin. 'This is bad, isn't it?' All three boys slipped careful glances at the goings on inside the circle of trees. 'That's the lady who was talking to Cleo.'

'It looks like that time dad caught up with some of Hunter's men that time - remember?' Wattaru bit his bottom lip, a gesture he'd inherited from his mother before continuing. 'When they brought them in front of dad. He didn't know we were watching…'

Several of the other mazone were dragged forwards. The conversations were in a language the boys didn't understand, but the intent was clear. The injured women were in big trouble, and many of those guarding them were not being gentle when they handled them. 'Like the bee-atches who stole us,' Taro whispered. 'Same uniforms. And they sorta look alike. Maybe they're like Emmie's mom's clones?'

'Like we need any more of those,' Mamoru snorted weakly. 'Poor Emmie. We're real lucky we have a mom like mom…' All three nodded sagely. 'I think these are the good guys…'

'If they lost, then that's not good, right?' Wattaru asked. Next to him, Hippolyta shuffled awkwardly.

'Not so loudly, little one. This isn't a place to voice such things out loud. The trees have ears.'

Taro's ears almost pricked up visibly. 'Really?' he peered at the nearest soaring trunk. 'Ooh - there's a face in this one!'

'Baka. It's just bark!' Wattaru elbowed him in the ribs.
Mamoru however ran his fingers thoughtfully over the mossy fallen trunk they sat on. 'Actually, I think he's right...' he murmured as he traced the features he could make out in the bark. 'I saw stuff on the way here...' he fell silent, ignoring the expectant looks from his siblings.

'The vessel will absorb those who are a threat,' Hippolyta told them quietly. 'Including little boys if the Queen so demands it.'

'Hippolyta!' Cleo's whispered rebuke lashed out and the other woman subsided. 'We are not Cassandra, to speak to them thus.' She might have said more, but Zinnia approached, her black eyes wide and afraid.

'Lady Cleome,' Zinnia bowed. 'I was sent to fetch you - it is fortunate you're here…'

'Fortunate?' Cleo shot a glance over at the scene within the grove. 'Hardly...' she turned her attention to her aide. 'What happened?'

'Tessius called for the civilian ships to leave the fleet - to find other worlds to colonise. It didn't take much to convince a lot of them - we've had reports that thousands of ships have tried to flee their convoys, despite the military trying to stop them. In truth, they have some safety in numbers, although we can track down the escapees quite easily. There are also reports that some human ships have been aiding one group - a man called Oedo deliberately put his fleet between ours and the traitors…' She sounded awed and astonished by the fact. 'And before this, the convoy with the largest contingent of our aquatic sisters received aid from the water-world humans.' She shook her head. 'I don't understand - why would they help us?'

'Dad's friends with Professor Oedo and we have a godfather who's an admiral from Miraiseria.' Taro's boyish treble piped up. 'We told you he was one of the good guys…'

'Aiding and abetting traitors?' Zinnia's dark eyes narrowed. Cleo swallowed hard, regretting the necessity of what must now be. Zinnia had served her well for a long time.

'Zinnia - enough. What happened here?' she gestured to take in the group of prisoners. She didn't dare look too closely in case she met Tessius' accusing eyes.

'The rebellion did not last long - here at least, Queen Rafflesia's hold over the vessel is strong enough to turn it against those who would sow chaos. Their revolt was doomed from the moment it started. The living Heart of our vessel itself turned against them.'

'Tessius…' Cleo murmured softly. It was, then, as she had tried so often to remind her friend. 'And now?'

'Now,' Zinnia said with no little satisfaction, 'Judgement will be served, as it was in times past. She and hers will be given to the grove…'

Cleo watched helplessly from the edge of the grove as Tessius was dragged into the centre, next to the central tree. Cut, bruised and defiant, she glared at her captors, but did not struggle. She simply refused to cooperate, forcing them to push and pull her into position. Cleo bowed her head.

'Cleome!'

The imperious voice of the queen was impossible to ignore, as well as imprudent. 'Your majesty.' Cleo stepped forwards, into the circle.

'Attend. My court should all be present for this moment. Unless of course your sympathies lie
elsewhere.'

Cleo bent the knee, her hair falling around her face. 'No, your majesty. I am quite clear where my loyalties lie.' She breathed a sigh of relief when she felt the queen's attention shift elsewhere, and risked a glance at Tessius, willing the other mazone to recognise her omission.

Tessius nodded, briefly, then turned her attention back to the queen, holding herself as proudly as she could, given that two of the hamadryads had her arms twisted behind her back and had forced her to her knees.

'Tessius… that you should bring us to this…' the queen said softly, like a mother rebuking a small child.

'I bring us to this, my queen?' Even battered and exhausted, Tessius still spoke out strongly, her voice harsh compared to the queens dulcet delivery. 'I brought us to nothing that your own desires had not already driven us to. You saved us, brought us away from our dying worlds, promised us a new hope, reborn in the ashes - but it was nothing but lies! You told us that we would return to an Earth unsullied by the human plague - that we could unwind time to an era where we would finally be free, and rid ourselves of that carrion infestation - but it was just a deception, playing into the hands of those who would see the entire universe burn - the only thing our immolation will achieve is the return of a darkness so absolute no flower will ever see the light again!

Cassandra stepped in and backhanded her across the face. 'Blasphemy'!

'To speak the truth?' It earned her another slap. Cleo hissed and took an involuntary step forwards.

'Cassandra! Enough!'

Cassandra turned towards her, a sneer on her face. 'Would you stand beside your "friend" then, Cleome, and defy your queen? Betray your race?'

'It never used to be betrayal to voice doubts and debate questions of great importance,' Cleo snapped back.

'But rebellion has always been treason,' Cassandra replied triumphantly. 'And to side with rebels-

'To stand beside a friend is not treason, when I stand here and watch ourselves turn on each other. Rebellion is a last resort, when all other avenues of debate have been stifled. The military has begun to cull the civilian fleet with impunity, and has not been held accountable for these actions. We are now so few who were once so many, and you would have us cut each other to pieces - to maim, torture and kill our own until we become no better than those we profess to despise so much!' Cleo placed her hand on Tessius' arm. 'Look at you now, crowing over your grand military victory over a handful of unarmed ships, and a people who cannot fight back with anything other than the gifts they were born with.'

'Cleome!'

Rafflesia's voice rang out across the nemeton, and all present sank to one knee, heads bowed. Even Tessius, in the hands of her captors, although Cleo felt her tremble with the effort.

'My queen.'

'Your loyalty to Tessius does you credit, but my word is the final word on this matter. Cassandra does what she must, to keep us on course for our revival. When we reach Earth, it must be as a whole, or not at all. I will not - I cannot have - dissension amongst us at this late stage.'
'Then shall I arrest Cleome as well?' Cassandra's voice was exultant at the thought, and she gave Cleo a poisonous look.

'Not if she can demonstrate her loyalty to me,' Rafflesia replied. Cassandra backed down, simmering. Cleo began to feel afraid as she waited. Tessius' strong fingers found hers, and squeezed her hand. 'Cleome?'

'Your majesty.'

'There can be no division in our ranks. Tessius knew the penalty for her actions. All that remains now is to carry it out. Will you be my hand in this? If it must be done, then let it be done by those who understand the consequences of their actions. You are right - for the military to do this would send the wrong message.'

'Your majesty…' Cleo's throat tightened on the words. She had to force out the whisper.

'Cleo.' Tessius' voice was soft and clear, barely above a murmur, wind in leaves. 'You cannot stop this, but let it be done with love…'

Cleo stared into the black eyes of her friend, and Tessius nodded. She raised her head to look past Tessius, at the dozen or so of the surviving rebels, and as one, the all nodded slightly. She lowered her gaze again to Tessius, who smiled slightly. 'Do not throw away your life for this,' Tessius said sadly. 'You may be our only hope.' Tessius glanced over Cleo's shoulder to where Hippolyta still sat with the sons of Harlock. 'Break our bonds,' she whispered, as Cassandra's soldiers pulled her back to her feet and away from Cleo's reaching arms.

'Cleo?' The queen's voice was soft, the tone questioning, but it hid a silken command. Cleo nodded once, and rose gracefully to her feet.

'We will take them,' she told Cassandra. A silent call to her own people called forth her ampeloi and Cassandra's people stood back, as the graceful vine-like mazone led Tessius and her companions, unresisting towards the outer ring of trees surrounding the grove.

Cleo could barely see for weeping, as she watched each of them be stripped and held against the trunks of the massive trees. She caught sight of Cassandra's smug sneer however, and lifted her head with renewed determination.

But the tears still fell as Tessius and her followers were slowly absorbed by the trees, until only the vaguest outlines of their faces remained in the rough lines of the bark. They fell as the screams of those so transformed - their flesh torn and tortured as the trees took them, cell by cell, twisting, changing, penetrating - echoed through the grove. The process was ruthless, inexorable. They were torn apart, and remade. And lost in the doing, forever.

And at last there was silence.

She didn't notice the rest of the council filing past her as they left the grove. A few - a very few, placed a hand on her shoulder as they passed, or took her hand briefly, in a silent show of sympathy.

Zinnia was not one of them.

Cleo stood in front of the silver birch which now held - in addition to several, much older faces - the visage of her friend, drawn in knotholes and rough swirls. She barely acknowledge Hippolyta when the other mazone stood by her side, and reached a timid hand out to the image.
'Lady? We should go. This will not be forgotten by Cassandra - and the queen will wait to see what you do next…'

'In truth, I have no idea myself what that will be,' Cleo replied sadly. 'How far are we from Earth?'

'Maybe six weeks, and three jumps. We've stopped in real space in order to regroup. Cassandra is savagely culling the civilian transports of any remaining resistance. We're several days short of our scheduled stop, so this will take a toll on the fleet. And they say Harlock and that phantom ship are close…'

'The other groups?' Cleo asked, somewhat listlessly. She felt hollow inside, like a rotting oak.

'The same - paused, awaiting orders. Those that have not engaged with the humans, that is. Communications with the rest were cut off some hours ago.'

Cleo stared into the rough knots that had been her friend's eyes, such a short time ago. 'Break our bonds, she said. I do not know…'

A memory stirred, like a summer breeze. Shura's prophecy. *Beware the one-eyed warrior. Death is his mark and he leads the damned. His is the darkness. He is the untameable fury who cuts the thread of fate. Holding all oaths he would sever all bonds...*

'Hippolyta - you speak several of the humans' languages. How would you translate "holder of oaths"?'

'One who keeps a promise, would be one version,' Hippolyta replied thoughtfully. 'It depends on the tongue - it can be expressed in many different ways. To hold, to keep, to protect…'

*To protect...* That elusive memory shifted uneasily in the depths of her mind.

'What about in the language from the time of the Kamiyo diaspora - wasn't Destiny settled in that outpouring from Earth…?'

'Japanese. In which case one way to say it would be "yakusoku o mamoru hito"," Hippolyta told her.

Cleo looked across to where the boys were dozing, clinging to one another. And to one in particular, his damaged face a constant rebuke. 'Mamoru…'

Inside that hollow place, something new awoke. *What if they had mistranslated Shura's words…? What if… what if…* But oh, it was such a slender thread...

She laid her palm against Tessius' frozen face. 'Hippolyta - can you slip away, unheeded by Cassandra's people? As a medic you have the right to move around unimpeded…'

'I can try, lady. But to what end?'

Cleo straightened, and took her hand away from the birch. 'Prepare a small launch. And ask our people to cover for me.'

'Lady… if you leave the fleet and we jump…'

'I don't think it will matter, much,' she replied sadly. 'But I have to try.'

'To try what?' Hippolyta's frantic whisper was thankfully lost in the breeze rustling through the
treetop high above.  

*To wake the Fury... and thereby perhaps to break our bonds and maybe... just maybe, save us...*

But she said nothing, only stared at the boys, wondering if she was contemplating throwing her life away for nothing.

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**Arcadia...**

Harlock took the stairs two at a time - not always a good idea, since an old injury often plagued his right leg. He rubbed his thigh surreptitiously as he strode towards the wheel. Ben turned to nod a hello as he drew level, and a head shake from Harlock was his cue to stay put. Harlock folded his arms and stared at the viewscreen from the front of the gantry. 'Situation?'

Kei looked over from her station. 'We're well out of their known sensor range as far as I can tell. At least, I'm not getting any reaction. Countermeasures are in place, and we're holding our position of the left flank of their fleet. What I am getting though are some serious energy spikes. I think there's a battle going on. The energy levels drop far faster than I'd expect however.'

'That'll be those black-body drives,' Yattaran told her. 'Mopping up the spills. It means we won't be able to rely on our usual tactic of letting the space-time warping of a battle do most of our work for us.'

'How does that work again?' Daiba had made his way to the bridge and stood beside Kei, taking a look at her readings.

'Any warp drives that blow release an energy surge that temporarily plays havoc with the local gravity well,' Yattaran explained. 'It means energy weapons struggle to stay on target, and it makes it harder for ships to get a fix on each other. Even physical weapons can miss by a space mile if you can't get a lock. It's one reason battles tend to get close in, despite conventional wisdom saying they are conducted at literally astronomical distances - the closer you get, the better chance you have of landing a good solid hit.'

'Of course, you then play cat and mouse with a savvy commander, and it can get interesting,' Harlock added. 'Which is why another truism of space combat is both sides have to want to engage...'

'And if you get too close, and your opponent is adept at playing sensor warfare, you can trick a fleet into firing on itself,' Ali added gaily from below stairs. 'The captain's brother fell for that one - twice in the same battle, if you can believe it... took out half his own ships, the moron.'

'Well we all know who got the looks, personality and brains out the pair,' Kei added, with a fond smile at her captain. Sniggers and chuckles from the lower bridge met her comment.

'Well we don't know how dangerous this commander is.' Harlock paced forward until he stood behind the guardrail. He placed his hands on it and leaned forwards with a slight frown. 'I guess if they're fighting each other that'll explain why they dropped out of IN Space early. Mimay - any readings?'

'Freya says she can sense Mamoru - and Tochiro agrees with her.' She trip-trapped her way across the metal floor to his side.

'I sense a "but",' Harlock said softly.
'The ship he's on appears to be in the middle of that fleet…'

Harlock stared at the viewscreen. 'Kei.'

'On it.' She began to magnify the image, until the screen was filled with a mass of lights, rather like a small star cluster. 'That's the best I can to at this range without using the active time radar, and I don't want to tip them off to our presence just yet.'

Daiba pointed. 'There? That large light in the middle?'

'False colour images may appear larger than they are,' Ben muttered.

'Aren't you supposed to be in sick bay?' Harlock asked, his voice concerned.

Ben shrugged. 'Got bored. Besides - I heal fast - even for one of this crew.' He held the wheel lightly, one hand on the twelve-o' clock baluster. 'Allowing for the low resolution though, that's covering about an arc of the screen - so it's what - five klicks long?'

'It's a tree!' Meg had arrived, and Freya was holding onto her hand as she made her way to the gantry front. Behind her, Blaze had arrived with Nami in his arms.

'Getting crowded on here,' Harlock said under his breath to Daiba, who gave him a sympathetic shrug. 'Longer, I think - this one must be the main command vessel, it figures it would be the biggest.'

'Maybe we should ask our prisoner?' Daiba asked nonchalantly, his hand on his pistol. 'I can go.'

'Take a number, get in line,' Ben told him. The two young men exchanged grim smiles.

'Torture and mayhem later, people,' Harlock chided gently. 'You can indulge yourselves once we have the boys back.'

'And how,' Kei asked, 'Are we supposed to do that? Do we have a plan?'

'Apart from "charge headlong into the middle at full speed and shoot anything that moves"?' Ali asked.

'Sarcasm…'

'Sorry, cap'n. Just slipped out…'

'There's something moving towards us!' Meg had taken Kei's place, since the older woman had moved to stand beside Harlock. 'It's tiny, but fast.'

'Heading?' Kei asked, elbowing the girl out of the way unceremoniously to check. Meg took it in good humour. Under the circumstances, no-one was going to take Kei to task on her uncharacteristic lack of manners.

'It'll pass near us - but I don't think they've seen us. Ooh!' The reason for her exclamation lit up the viewscreen. 'That was close! Someone's firing on them.'

'Another ship!' Yattaran called out. 'Chasing them. Captain?'

Harlock watched as another blast missed the tiny craft, now magnified on the screen. One of the small, saucer-shaped craft similar to those they'd seen in the Sol system. The ship behind it was a fighter craft, sleeker, more like those Ali had engaged in Earth's atmosphere.
'Harlock!' He looked down to see Freya tugging at his jacket.

'What is it, little one?'

She pointed at the screen. 'Mamoru!'

He didn't ask for an explanation, and neither did his crew. Before the words 'All ahead' were out of his mouth Mimay had practically sprinted back to the dark matter engine control globe, Kei was shouting orders to the gun crew and Ben was steering the Arcadia onto a heading to intercept the tiny saucer and manoeuvre the battleship between it and its pursuer.

'Meg, Daiba!'

Harlock's eye met the gaze of the younger man, and a wordless exchange was all that was needed. Daiba took off at a run, Meg at his heels, heading for the fighter bay. Harlock took the wheel from Ben and smoothly commandeered the helm. 'Go with them, Ben. Get that ship on board.'

Ben nodded, and followed the younger crewmen from the bridge.

As silently as he could, given the tendency of metal soled boots to clang on the decking, Blaze took up a position at Harlock's shoulder. 'If this is a trap…' he murmured, making sure Kei couldn't overhear.

'Then someone's in for a world of hurt,' Harlock replied curtly. 'It doesn't matter if it is or not. I have to do this.'

'We just announced ourselves to anyone with a bloody optical telescope within fifteen AUs,' Blaze replied. 'If you were hoping to sneak up on this lot, we just threw away that advantage.'

'We still have a few tricks up our sleeves,' Harlock replied grimly. 'You might want to find a seat - this is about to get hairy.'

'Damn straight!' Ali called out. 'Three armed destroyer sized vessels breaking away from the pack and heading this way!'

As three green streaks sped across the viewscreen towards the little dot of light heading for them, Harlock span the wheel hard to port and the ship responded, sliding away from the tiny vessels, and flipping over to come in from underneath the field of view, and between the ship and the fighter pursuing it. Tiny sparks flickered in the darkness outside the Arcadia, red streaks of lightning fluttering along her lines like St. Elmo's Fire, as her dark matter cloud began to envelope her kilometre long form, obscuring the visual screen. The viewscreen switched to the tactical output, and the ship surged into the fray.
'Don't let those ships get too close!' Ben warned as his small group headed to their planes in the hangar. 'We've seen those black body drives siphon off energy - if they're running close to capacity we might be okay, but take no chances.'

Daiba paused on the ramp of the bullet. 'So what's the plan?'

'You keep the bullet between the mazone and Arcadia. Let me and Meg deal with the pursuit - and keep clear of the main guns - Harlock will try to keep the belly facing you and that craft, and the gunners know their jobs, but accidents happen. Keep your eyes on the prize at all times. I doubt Harlock will want any enemy ships hit just yet - we don't know for sure where the boys are, after all.'

'Do you really think Mamoru's on board that ship?' Meg sounded doubtful.

'Freya seems to think so,' Daiba replied via the comms as he sat heavily in the cockpit and began his pre-flight checks. Behind him the ramp eased up and sealed shut with a hiss of compressed air.

'But she's never even met him!'

'She's connected to the dark matter. Apparently so's he…' Daiba shrugged before he remembered they were talking on speaker. 'Not my call. Now if you two don't mind, there's a queue for the door…'

'Fighters first, kid. We've got the speed. Don't want to get stuck behind your fat arse on the way out whilst you lumber up to speed.'

'Ben, you're a total cu-'

'Language!' Meg cut in before he finished. 'The two of you, behave for once. This is serious.'

'We know, pet,' Ben replied warmly. 'It's a guy thing. Meg - follow me in five. Daiba - likewise after Meg. Force field up, ramp down in three, two... '

The faint shimmer of the field holding back the internal atmosphere was a faint blue-green bubble that held back the air, but allowed the ships through without the need to depressurise the bay. The brief fraction of a second it took the fighters and the bullet to pierce it let very little gas out, and was far more efficient than constantly pumping it in and out. It could also be dropped on command if a plane came in hot, to reduce the chances of a fire or explosion - one reason why they were suited, despite the vessels being pressurised.

The bullet sprang free and the Arcadia was left in its wake as Daiba swung the little craft up and over the stern of the ship. He smiled as he passed over the tattered pirate flag that fluttered over the elaborate sterncastle. Then that sight was hidden be a billowing cloud of dark matter, and the Arcadia was sprinting away as fast - or faster - than any of her fighters.

Daiba's display showed a cubic grid with half a dozen dots on it. One large green - that was Arcadia. Two small - Meg and Ben. One blue - their target. And two slightly larger ones bearing down. He took a deep breath, and laid in a course to intercept the small vessel under fire.

'Arcadia's engaging the large ships - keep your eyes on those fighters!' Ben called out. 'Meg - break to port - take out that leading ship. Daiba - stay sharp!'
'How do we let this ship know we want to come on board?' he muttered as they headed out into the black. 'Don't know their frequency, don't know if they even speak our language...' The little craft loomed large on his viewscreen and he slipped the bullet neatly in behind it, and found himself having to pull up sharply to avoid taking fire from the fighter that had darted straight past Ben, the Magellenite's plasma guns barely grazing its wings. Daiba cursed, and took aim.

His second shot took out the cockpit, and the fighter spiralled and tumbled away in a chaotic gyre. No ship at those speeds could take that much torque, and true to form, it tore itself to pieces. Meg almost got hit by a chunk of wing, and Daiba smirked a little hearing the ear blistering talking-to that earned her from the older man.

Another signal however pinged on his console. Thinking it was the Arcadia, he opened the channel. 'Captain?'

'Who is this? Is this Harlock?' A girlish voice, with an unusual accent - she slurred her words slightly. 'I beg sanctuary. I have something of his, I need to give him. Please…'

'Who is this?' Daiba glared at the viewscreen, where the small craft was coming about. Warily he faced it, one hand hovering near his firing button.

'My name is Cleome. I have the boy with me. The hurt one. He gave me this frequency.'

'Put him on.' Harlock's voice came loud and clear, cutting into the conversation. Daiba pulled a face, thankful for both the full visored helmet and for the fact this was audio only. He'd forgotten the Arcadia would be listening in.

'Papa?' Mamoru's voice sounded tired. 'You're here!'

'Right here. Just a little longer. Cleome - is that your name? Follow the snub winged craft next to you. I'll swing the ship around. Daiba - the lower hangar will be open - lead her straight in, and watch yourself - the internal inertial web will be active - you'll have to come in hot and stopping's a bitch. Make sure you're braced for it.'

A massive plasma burst arced across his field of vision as Harlock finished speaking, and a girlish shriek from the mazone vessel suggested its pilot wasn't much of a fighter. 'Captain…'

'Those three larger vessels are closing fast!' Ben called out. 'Fighters are gone, heading back to the barn. Nothing we can do against those things. Captain…'

'Just hold steady, Ben. Megan. Daiba - get up there with them. You two - have you forgotten Yattaran's little present so quickly? You've both got missiles loaded - use them.' Harlock's voice was as ever, mild and calm, but Daiba caught the way the last word almost caught in his throat and the almost infinitesimal clearing of his throat as he finished.

'Mamoru chan, if you're listening in kiddo, we're getting you back safe, okay?' He turned the bullet towards the rear end of the Arcadia. 'Lady - stay close. Hope you can thread a needle - coz getting back on board's gonna be a bit tight.'

'A little less idiom and a little more practical advice would help,' the rather tart reply came back over the airwaves. Daiba grinned. Whoever she was, she sounded feisty enough. If a little frazzled.

'Well I would have said tighter than a virgin's…'

'That'll be quite enough of that!' from Kei overlapped with 'Is that really appropriate?' from the still unseen mazone. Daiba changed to the private channel.
'Captain? Are you sure she can make that landing? I crashed three times in simulation…'

'The alternative is trying to get a lock on with the workboat.' It was Kei who answered. 'Not really practical in a shooting match.'

There was silence after that on the other end for so long, Daiba began to think they'd gone offline. Finally Kei spoke up again. 'Ben - can you get under that thing and bring it in as though it was deadstick?'

'Done it on a Space Wolf before, but that thing hasn't got much in the way of a wing,' he answered. 'Daiba?'

'Um?'

'Support Meggie.'

Daiba grinned. Escort duty was fine and dandy as far as it went but combat? Hell yeah… he turned the bullet around and headed over to join Meg.

On the bridge, Kei turned a worried look to her captain. 'There has to be a safer way of getting him on board. Maybe if I…'

'Trust Ben,' he told her firmly. 'He's almost as good a flier as you or I.'

'Almost…' she muttered, glaring at him from under her bangs. Harlock said nothing, giving his attention to the main screen. 'Yattaran? How are those torpedoes coming along?'

'Almost loaded, captain. Ready when you are.'

'The guns aren't doing much,' Ali called up. The beams are losing their integrity when they get close, at this range. We need to get up close and personal.'

'That goes double for the torpedoes,' Yattaran added. 'Ya need to get us within spittin' distance.'

'We're on it,' Harlock told them camly. 'Just be ready. Daiba, Meg - keep out of our way and don't close with the larger ships. Sensors spot another six smaller craft launched and heading your way.'

'Roger that!' Meg called out. 'Ooh - Benjy - careful with the merchandise sweetie!'

'You try matching velocities out here, kitten!' Kei watched the visual from the rear sensors, before a gloved hand reached over and cut off her feed. 'Front and centre,' Harlock chided her gently. 'One task at a time - those larger ships need to go.' When she opened her mouth to argue he shook his head slightly, and gave her a weak smile. But his hand trailed across hers as he removed it, and retook his place at the wheel. 'All hands to primary battle stations. Close internal bulkheads. Main oscillator cannon crews stand down - we'll be using the optical array. Torpedo crew, ready on Yattaran's mark. All ahead full!' He felt the moment Mimay, stationed at the rear of the bridge, called upon the dark matter engines and the ship sprang forward like an arrow from a bow, dark matter swirling around the exterior view. The screen went immediately to the tactical heads-up as they closed with the three mazone destroyers.

'They ain't shiftin'!' Ali called out.
'They want to close - it's their best tactic - use the drives to power down their opponent,' Harlock replied, giving the wheel a hard spin to chase down the closest vessel. 'Time to give them indigestion!'

*I'm having to compensate for the drag on the dark matter*, Tochiro told him, a soft, mannered voice in his head. *But we're in range of their weapons now…*

'And they of ours,' Harlock replied out loud. 'Yattaran! Ali!'

The Arcadia danced neatly out of the path of a plasma beam, and sent a salvo of her own in reply. The smaller guns covered for the real attack - the vessel slid out of the way of the beams, and straight into the path of the torpedoes Yattaran had fired.

The missiles exploded before they reached the mazone ship, and a groan went up from the lower deck.

'Patience!' Yattaran called out. 'Wait for it, you slimy bunch of radishes…'

On the screen it was impossible to show the payload of the missiles, but seconds later, they did see the payoff as the mazone destroyer broke apart into hundreds of fragments. A cheer went up from the lower bridge, and Harlock exchanged a satisfied, and very nasty grin with his first mate. 'Nice work - remind me to give you and Maji a raise…'

'You pay *those* guys?' Ali called up. A ripple of laughter ran across the bridge.

'We're not done yet,' Harlock called down. 'Two to go. Kei - how are the fighters doing?'

'Two planes left to deal with. Meg and Daiba seem to have it under control. Ben's got under the mazone craft, they finally managed to match delta v and dump some speed. We'll be better off just coming around to pick them up once we've dealt with these fleas - let them come in on manoeuvring thrusters.' She paused. 'Daiba! Pull up! Pull up! What the hell are you doing!'

'Both those ships have changed course and are bearing down on us hard!' Yattaran called out. 'Too close to deploy the monofilament torpedoes - we'll be caught in our own net!'

Harlock closed his eyes briefly, although only one was visible to the world. 'We could probably with stand it - our hide is thicker…'

'Yeah, but we ain't tested it yet,' Yattaran warned. Tochiro's inaudible cough in his head decided the matter.

'Kei - What's happening?'

'Debris from the wreckage, heading for the planes.'

'Talk them through, if you can. Switch navigation and sensors to downstairs. Franz, Martinez - take over Kei's readouts.' Another seemingly wild spin of the ship's wheel brought them in behind and underneath their prey, and both ships wavered, taken by surprise at the Arcadia's speed and manoeuvrability. Instead of splitting up, they moved closer together as they attempted to respond and reposition. Harlock grinned ferally at the sight. 'Gotcha…' he murmured. *Tochiro... where's my ram?*

Outside the Arcadia, a cloud of dark matter coalesced around the red-eyed skull on her bow, and quickly concentrated into a black mass which flattened, attenuated and solidified into an upward curving blade over a hundred metres long.
'Arcadia - ramming speed!' Harlock called out. In response, the ship accelerated in a cloud of darkness.

Even though he was dodging high velocity debris, Daiba caught his breath as he watched the Arcadia speed towards the two remaining mazone ships. Despite her size, she was as fast as any fighter, and as manoeuvrable. Wreathed in black smoke shot through with red lightning, she cut through the darkness like the predator she was, twin red eyes glinting in that grim skull, underneath which the black switchblade glinted like obsidian when the light caught it.

She hit the first ship dead centre, even as it tried and failed to turn, and the force of that impact carried the deadly blade straight into the heart of the vessel. It broke apart as he watched in awe, and the Arcadia's momentum kept her going, the impact hardly slowing her at all - the mazone ship had crumpled and fallen apart like tissue paper under the assault.

'Is it me,' he heard Meg mutter over the helmet comm, 'or is that whole thing just a little too phallic given the two sides in this?'

'I thought it was kinda scary,' he murmured back, and wondered why the hell he felt he had to whisper.

The second ship had no chance to escape - debris from its sister vessel slammed into it a fraction of a second before the Arcadia hit, her blade still extended. Since it was already twisting to escape the Arcadia's blade hit at and angle, and sliced through the already compromised hull. Except this time the mazone ship's contortions had placed the Arcadia's blade next to the black sphere of its drive - and the blade bit deeply into that dark heart.

'Oh, crap…' Daiba muttered under his breath.

The black sphere exploded, and for a moment he couldn't see the Arcadia - just a writhing mass of black smoke, blacker than the surrounding void, lit by green flashes from the Mazone ship, and by its own perpetual lightning.

'Captain!' Ben's voice was anguished, as was Meg's horrified squeak. For a moment, his mouth filled with bile and his heart pounding, Daiba felt a cold trickle of sweat run down his back.

The Arcadia sprang free, the dark matter blade already dissolving back into the cloud, which was already starting to contract, concentrating on the damage the hull had taken. Wisps of dark matter trailed across the hull, crawling with what looked like deliberate intent. Daiba let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

But he'd forgotten the other, more personal dangers of the battle zone. In avoiding the first wave of debris from the ship Yattaran's monofilament had cut to pieces, he'd totally forgotten that he'd drifted into the path of the newest wreckage.

'Daiba!'

Meg's scream was his first warning, before all hell broke loose on the proximity alarms, and he caught sight of several large objects rushing towards him, seemingly aiming straight for his cockpit. Frantically, he hauled on the controls to bring the bullet about, to take the hit on the flank.

Too late. The last thing he remembered seeing before everything went dark was something slamming into the small craft, rocking it sideways, and a horrifying snapping, hissing sound as the cockpit window cracked like crazy paving in front of his eyes.
'Captain! Captain!' Meg's terrified voice shrieked over the comms as Harlock - in a graceful, silent accord with Mimay and Tochiro - brought the Arcadia about and dumped their speed in a manner that most pilots could only dream of.

'Meg?' Kei's voice was starting to rise through the octaves - an impressive feat with only one syllable to work with.

'It's Daiba! He got caught in that last wave of debris. I can't locate his transponder signal!'

Harlock nodded to Yattaran who took the wheel from him without further prompting. He laid a hand reassuringly on Kei's shoulder. 'Let's go,' he told her, and they headed side by side down the stairs to the right of the captain's chair.

Ali met them at the foot and fell in beside them, easily keeping pace with the younger pair. 'Workboat?' he asked as they ran.

'Workboat,' Harlock replied tersely. 'We'll suit up on board with the basics - no time for hard suits.'

As Kei sprinted past them in the final metres before they reached the hangar door, Ali slowed and placed a hand on his captain's shoulder. 'Should we be worried that she didn't call us out on not following proper procedure?'

'I've been worried ever since she started calling me Yama again,' Harlock replied. His gaze was fixed very firmly on the disappearing form of his XO, and not, Ali noted, on her shapely rear. Chewing on his bottom lip and frowning, he followed his captain into the hangar.

Cleo almost sobbed with relief when her craft finally touched down on the hangar deck. Despite the thoughtful, patient guidance from the pirate guiding her in to land, the act of landing on a moving battleship was an awful lot more stressful than exiting one. Especially since she was lacking the guidance beacon which made this a more automated process on most ships.

Now she just had to face Harlock and his entire crew, on board a ship she'd been told since she had first listened to the tales the elders would tell was an abomination to their kind - of the darkness, where they were of the light. Celebrating death, where they were all about life.

No problem. She straightened her shoulders, adjusted her himation - as ever threatening to slide off - and looked down at the boy in the acceleration seat next to her. Pale and breathing shallowly now, any reserves long exhausted, despite his determination and bravery. What was the worst they could do to her? Kill her? It would be cleaner than the death that awaited her back on the mothership, once Cassandra had her way.

Gathering the child in her arms, she made her way to the exit and took a deep breath before commanding the airlock to open, and letting herself be seen standing at the top of the ramp as it lowered. Five very large pistols were trained on her before the ramp even hit the ground.

'Weapons down!'

The order came from the man she'd normally consider the least likely of the motley group facing her. The woman holding two ornate, savage-looking bolters with blades top and bottom was the last to lower her guns, and from the look of fury mixed with both relief and fear in her vivid blue eyes, she just had to be her burden's mother. The other two men were a tall, slim handsome young man with skin almost as blue as the woman's eyes, topped with golden hair. His eyes were a changeable shade in the oddly subdued lighting, but they held a cold appraisal which made her shiver. The man next to him was older, bulkier, and fair-haired, his face scarred by old, white
slashes, and thick but neatly trimmed sideburns. His scowl and the reluctance with which he lowered - but did not holster - his own weapon, suggested he was not a man who either hid his feelings, or took orders with good grace.

The man who'd spoken however showed no emotion on his face. He was younger than she'd expected, and deceptively slight of build. There was a restrained power in the movement of the muscles at play under his flight suit when he moved, and his shoulders were easily as broad as his crewmates' when she looked closely.

Tall, but not excessively so. His hair was a light brown and even in the light breeze of the air on the hangar, brushed the top of his collar and tended to fall over his forehead. His left eye was hazel. A short scar ran from the middle of his left cheek and over a straight, well formed nose, vanishing under the inside edge of a black leather eyepatch covering his right eye. Like his crew, his clothing was plastered with skull-and-crossbones imagery, from the front of his black flightsuit, to the silver belt buckles on the well-worn gun belts resting low on his hips. He had his sleeves rolled up to reveal the undertunic of his suit, and his gloves were brown and scuffed, were folded down to his wrists exposing a fairly large amount of his lower arms, and the scars on both, and they didn't match the smarter flightsuit. Ditto his boots, which although in good condition, had seen better days.

She hadn't expected the terror of her people, the destroyer of worlds, to look so... average...

He alone of the crew facing her didn't lower his weapon - it was aimed at her head, well clear of the child she was carrying.

'Put him down.' The voice was low, soft and melodic, but there was a not unpleasant huskiness underlying it. Like the rest of him, it deceived. The mild tone hid a deeper, darker note that caused her to swallow hard.

'I can't. He's exhausted.' She turned to the child's mother, who glared at her from Harlock's side unmoving, but more as though she were tethered to the man's side, waiting for the order to attack. 'You should take him.' She offered him out to the golden-haired woman.

There was an unspoken accord between the two. She could almost taste it, that fractional instant between her offer, and the woman - Kei, wasn't it? Springing forward and snatching her child from Cleo's outstretched arms.

'Mamoru!' Kei cradled him close, and almost ran back to Harlock's side. Cleo was seemingly ignored as the pair checked him over. 'Oh Mamoru…'

Cleo watched as she traced the edge of his bandages with her fingers. She lowered her head both in shame, and to grant the pair some measure of privacy.

'Mama…' Mamoru's voice was a whisper as he wrapped his arms around her neck and refused to let go. At least, not until his father knelt beside the pair and hugged them both, at which point he changed his death-grip over to his father's neck, and sobbed.

She took an involuntary step down the ramp, and the sharp click of pistols being cocked brought her up abruptly. If Harlock and his wife were currently oblivious to anything but their young son, his crew were not. She faced down the two men - surely as different as they could be, yet united in protecting their captain and his family - as boldly as she could, hastily revising her approach. To appear as a supplicant to these people would not be helpful.

'Whilst we're not unappreciative, sweetheart, I suggest you stay right where you are and do not
make any sudden moves.' The blue skinned pirate nodded to his companion, who shifted his grip on his pistol and grinned at her in a way the reminded her of a predator she'd seen in recordings from the aquatic mazone homeworld. He showed far too many teeth for her comfort. Blue began walking up the ramp towards her, holstering his pistol and exchanging it for a pair of restraints.

'Hands behind your back, kitten. You might be on the level, but after that last couple of times one of your lot came on board, I'm not prepared to take the risk. Mind you, you're a tiny little thing aren't you?'

He wasn't rough, when she complied. He simply clicked the restraints into place gently, and placed one hand on the small of her back to guide her down the ramp.

'Brig?' he asked the blond man as they drew level.

'Sounds like a plan,' the other crewman grunted at him, glaring at her. His gun hand didn't waver.

'Wait!' Mamoru's voice, thin and husky, and with a little hiccup. 'Papa - you can't - she helped us!'

Cleo glanced over and smiled at him. 'It's all right, Mamoru. They're just being careful.' She couldn't help but flinch slightly however when his father stood up and walked briskly in her direction. He had a slight limp, she noticed. Odd, that. She'd thought the dark matter repaired such things….

...apart from also his facial scars… So perhaps it was not so all-powerful after all. She did her best to meet that one-eyed gaze as he towered over her.

'I am grateful, Cleome. But I have a crewmember to rescue, and time is short. This - is a precaution. Nothing more. When I return, we will speak in more civilised surroundings. Ben - put her in one of Doc's isolation rooms for now. That way if she's one of the invasive variety…'

'I'm not!' she wasn't sure why she felt the need to reassure him. 'I am…' she hesitated, not sure how much he knew, or understood. 'I'm human. But my body contains…'

'Microscopic cells of mazone origin?' he smiled as her eyes widened. 'We've met others of your kind. "Corpse Flowers", isn't it?'

'Not a term one uses in polite company,' she muttered before thinking. To her surprise, he smiled, very slightly.

'Your Queen Rafflesia got off lightly. Amorphophallus titanum might have been far too much to swallow.'

The blond pirate started to snigger and turned it into a cough. 'You've just been dying to crack that one, haven't you?' he accused, a smile twitching up the corner of his mouth. Harlock's answering expression she missed, as his head was briefly turned away from her. For the life of her she couldn't understand what they found so amusing.

'If you need anything - except your freedom - Ben will see to it. I have one question, however…'

She looked up at him, and refused to lower her eyes when subjected to a flinty examination by that single hazel eye. His affability may or may not be genuine, but it was clear that it was something he could turn off at will. 'Your other sons are safe, but trying to get them all away would have been foolish, and dangerous. To take Mamoru, however, if challenged I could claim I was moving him
to somewhere less hazardous to his health. The carbon drives…'

'I understand. Are they safe?'

'They are with someone I trust, for now, but things have had a tendency to change rapidly.'

He nodded, accepting her words. 'Thank you.' He turned to leave, and something she'd overheard, nagging at the back of her mind, suddenly registered. 'You said you needed to search for someone?'

'One of our ships,' the surly blond replied. 'Protecting your tiny heiny out there. Lost contact.'

'There was a ship - I saw it hit by debris after you took out the ships sent to take me back or destroy me. My vessel records…'

She didn't have a chance to finish. Her blue captor - Ben? Gave her arm a tug and pushed her back up the ramp. 'You'd better show us then. Captain?'

'If she had a lock on his position when he was hit, it might help. Please.' With that he rushed off, and his fair-haired attack dog followed hard on his heels, heading for a gantry surrounding an odd machine - some kind of grappling vessel, three armed and bulky.

"Ben!"

The woman's voice. She'd forgotten that Mamoru's mother was holding her child. Her captor brought her to a stop, and she almost lost her balance, only to be caught and held close to a broad, muscled chest, her ear pressed against it so hard she could feel the beating of his heart.

'Miss Kei?'

'Untie her. If she came this far to rescue Mamoru, she's risked too much for us to treat her like an enemy. And he says she protected them.'

'But Kei, if it's a trap…'

'Then it's a trap, and you'll shoot her.'

'Fine, he grumbled, as he undid her bonds. 'I thought you'd want a piece of all of 'em, given what they did…' He could have pointed out Mamoru's injuries, but refrained.

'I want the ones responsible for this - especially the redhead who-'

'Cassandra,' Cleo called out loudly. Rather more forcefully than she'd intended. 'Her name's Cassandra.'

Ben looked down at her a slow smile spreading on his handsome face. Males were rare, these days, and kept for the elite for breeding. The best only - perfect physical specimens. That group did not currently include Magellenites. Which, Cleo felt, swallowing hard and trying not to smile back, was an oversight that was obviously long overdue to be corrected… 'Do I get the feeling Kei's going to have to take a number and get in line?' he murmured, as he followed her - one arm still around her waist, pinning her to him - into her tiny ship.

'I have no idea what that means,' she retorted. She had to resist the temptation to push her hair back off her face, irritated with the way her fringe was falling into her eyes. He obviously noticed the tiny aborted gesture, because he reached over and tucked the offending strand behind her ear.

'It means both our lovely executive officer and you, kitten, both want to get your claws into
someone so badly you can both taste it, unless I miss my guess.'

She pushed past him to get to her console, and let the vines twine around her wrists as she tried to ignore him. Although he was difficult to ignore. She was acutely aware of his frame looming over her, almost a foot taller and making her feel even smaller than she was. 'I'm not a kitten,' she told him, as she worked on calling up the readings and visual recordings from the past half hour.

'So,' he whispered next to her ear, 'you do know what cats are?'

'We're not totally isolated from other species,' she told him. 'We even like some of them.' She finally found the footage she was looking for. 'Here - can you show your captain this?'

He peered over her shoulder, his cheek so close to hers she could just feel the rough gold stubble brush her skin. Really… none of their males would be so… so… forward… 'I can't follow your writing system, kitten,' he said softly. 'How about we work on converting this into galactic co-ordinates?'

She sighed. 'I can do that. We know your systems. But it will take me a few minutes?'

Just a few,' he advised. 'Captain's cousin is out there, and we don't know how badly hurt he is.' He stared at the image playing out on the screen. 'But if that shows what I think it does, the bullet took one hell of a hit.'

'Cousin?' the realisation created a cold, hollow pit in her stomach. 'That pilot - was Tadashi Daiba?'

'You've heard of him?'

The reason they'd ended up in this mess to start with, when some idiot amongst the Sol system mazone had decided to keep eliminating anyone who showed an interest in certain Earth legends and the strangeness of certain plant varieties… Dozens of her terrestrial sisters had died pursuing the boy.

She didn't realise she'd spoken some of this out loud until Ben spoke. 'Really? Wouldn't be a Shizuka Namino by any chance, would it?'

'She's the one who also orchestrated the abduction.' Cleo couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. 'But that boy… killed dozens of my clade…'

'Kitten - is that a problem? You murdered his family, if anyone's keeping score - seems to me might be time to start burying these hatchets in something other than each others' backs…'

She took a deep breath. 'No. Not a problem. I saw how he protected my ship. Well, for the boy, I suppose.' She finished making the adjustments to the numbers and sat back to let him get a better look. 'You're right - something has to change. I just hope…'

'Hope?'

'That it's enough. That I'm doing the right thing.'

He placed his lips against her cheek, very gently, and she was startled by the softness and warmth of the unfamiliar gesture. 'Kitten - Cleo - It's always a good place to start. Especially on this ship.' With that he turned his back on her and began speaking quickly and firmly into his communicator.

The insistent beeping from several sensor alarms ringing in the headset inside his helmet gave
Daiba a rude awakening. The momentary panic he felt finding himself restrained didn't help, and for a few seconds he fogged up the inside of his helmet hyperventilating.

A few deep breaths later, he could at least take a look around and assess the situation a little more calmly, although the felt as though his heart was pounding fit to burst.

First order of business - check those alarms... And that alone almost precipitated another panic attack. Not good... seriously not good.

Oxygen - low.

Proximity alert - off the charts. He turned that one off, since the thrusters were also offline and there was fuck all he could do about the fact he was stuck in the middle of a cloud of wreckage. Thankfully he and it seemed to be heading in the same direction, so anything that was going to hit him, by now almost certainly had. So long as he didn't make any moves.

Good luck with that... those thrusters were toast. The hit on the starboard flank that had ripped a hole in the bullet letting out most of his air had taken out the drive on that side. The debris that still stuck out of the cockpit window had also taken out the forward thrusters and his forward cannon.

Oxygen. Very low... the cabin had depressurised, and the emergency bulkhead had sealed off the cockpit as intended. But he'd leaked air through the cracked window, so this left him a two hour reserve at best, and then only via his suit.

He didn't waste time on that - he checked the seals and made sure the tanks would feed through his helmet. Thankfully he was suited up, although the armour might have been a better choice. But that was back in the cabin, so that was out as an option.

Communications. Oh. Great. Guess which side of the bullet the antenna array had been on...

And he was tumbling, he noticed belatedly. At least judging from the state of his inner ears, and the fact that he felt decidedly nauseous. He checked the console. He could correct for that and stop it - or slow it down normally, but with only four out of six thruster arrays working... he thought quickly. Given the rate and speed, it was possible to move the top and underside thrusters to fire forwards, but that would risk bringing him into the path of more of the debris around him.

On the other hand - he'd already blown out the oxygen inside the bullet? How much worse could it get. And he really, really needed to stabilise this rolling... He reached for the console, to calculate the trajectory, and got another nasty shock for his pains.

Power. In the red...

'Fuck' he muttered, very quietly into his helmet. Then because all of a sudden that didn't seem nearly enough of a reaction he slammed his gloved fist into the side of his chair and screamed it instead at the top of his voice.

He only stopped when he realised that it was only using up more air.

Satisfying, but foolish.

Think, Tadashi, he told himself. Think. You're tumbling. You need to stop - or at least get the ship onto a flat spin instead of an erratic one. How hard can it be to work it out? Action=reaction, right? So he needed to stop movement in one direction, therefore he needed to fire in the other... If you're going arse over apex, then...
He tried a small burn with the underside thrusters. With a bit of practice he could angle the remaining thrusters just enough to compensate for the lack of the rest. Tiny, tiny changes. Bottom. Port. Rear. Port. Rear…

He bounced off a large section of what looked like the remains of a weapon's turret at one point. That sent him spiralling slowly into another section of the debris field. But after five minutes of micro corrections that got him nowhere much beyond slowing the rate of tumble, he remembered that he still had a couple of torpedoes up the spout.

And after calculating a rough firing solution in his head, he hit the firing button and sent out a short prayer to any gods listening. And if not stopped at least it was finally slowed down to a bearable level.

One hour and twenty minutes left.

Except the power - the electrical supply to the air pump feeding his suit - was down to seventy minutes.

Fine. Switch off the non-essentials then. Alerts (what was the point?)' Comms (he couldn't send a reply anyway). Internal lights (he could see the console via his helmet light).

Life support.

His finger hovered over the control. Air was a bust, but he needed heat. His suit wouldn't hold out for the full hour.

On the other hand - why was he even worrying? He'd got a bloody great hole in the windscreen. D'uh.

Off.

Seventy eight minutes. And he really, really needed to piss.

At least his suit could handle that. And if not - well, it was the least of his worries.

He settled back in the pilot's chair, and closed his eyes. Maybe if he didn't look outside… or at the bloody dials counting down to certain doom...

Facing certain death before, he'd never felt that seeing your life flash before your eyes was a thing. Usually either his brain went totally blank or he was too busy trying not to die.

He'd never had time to think about his impending death before. Pain, humiliation and torture, yes. Eighteen months locked up inside Hakidame's psychiatric facility at the mercy of those who wanted to punish him for his crimes had taught him to switch off, to go inside his head and shut the doors, to ignore everything happening.

Sadly it didn't always work. Ironically once they'd started drugging him into compliance, that had worked much better. Dickheads.

This time however, he was on his own. Just the darkness. The occasional bump and scrape of wreckage hitting the ship (was that even real? The air had surely leaked out hours ago. Unless it was the vibration he was feeling, through the hull.) Just tiny red lights blinking on the console, that didn't go away when he closed his eyes; afterimages counting down to a cold, lonely death gasping for air…
He opened his eyes. Too much imagination, he told himself sternly. Try using it to take your damn mind off it.

Harlock would come for him. He always came for him.

Not in time, that treacherous demon sitting on his shoulder whispered into his ear. He didn't come in time to save mom five years ago. He didn't come in time to stop you having to drop to your knees in a dark alley and suck off a stranger for enough cash to find food and a bed for the night. He didn't come in time to stop…

Stop. Right. There. He came. It wasn't his fault. Space is so fucking huge, how the hell was he supposed to find you, you ungrateful dick…

Yeah. Nope. don't go there either. Don't think about how large space is. Not when you're floating in it with no way of knowing how far or how long it's been since you were on radar. Or if they're even out there looking for you. Ben… Meg…

Meggie. Sweet girl, once you got past the prickles. He smiled. She'd made it her mission in life on Niflheim to get him used to being touched… being held again. To sleep next to someone without being afraid they'd take too much. Want too much. Bloody obvious she fancied him, mind you, but she never pressed. Seen too much herself from what she'd told him. But he now wished they'd done a bit more than some snuggling, spooning and kissing. Because she had nice little tits, and a firm ass. Tiny, but cute. Pretty, too. Nice eyes. Brave, and bright. Fun to talk to.

And Ben… hot damn… Ben… Now if that had been the kind of guy cruising parks and seedy backstreets for a quick knee trembler, the past few years wouldn't have been quite so unpleasant… Another one who knew his limits, and despite his first preferences usually being towards the distaff side… hell yes, he should have taken the magellanic princeling up on his offer. Offers.

Gaia… he didn't think Meggie would be averse to that either.

Now there was an image to send you off to meet your maker, he thought, drifting and tumbling. Thirty minutes.

He could just open up his helmet and have done with it. Quicker than gasping for air. And really - why string it out?

Hope.

He'll come. He's Harlock. He'll make it.

I'll do my bit, he promised the darkness. I'll hold on. Just let him get here.

Were those flashes of light? Or was he starting to hallucinate?

He laughed, the sound harsh in his ears. Couldn't be anything interesting, could it? Not like in the stories. No - just red flashes, in a regular pattern. One. One two. One. Onetwothree.

Not illusions… a signal. Arcadia's visual code when comms were down… He struggled to sit up, and made the mistake of looking at the countdown. Ten minutes.

He reached for the missile control. There was still one left in the port tube. If he could set it to go off early… if they were close enough to detect it…
Nine minutes, and it was getting harder to breathe. His chest hurt. Burned.

He started tapping out the firing solution. Beeps. Shit. Wrong code. He tried again.

Fired.

Sat back in the chair, and watched it streak away, before breaking up into a shower of light.

He closed his eyes, and listened to the thunder that threatened to deafen him. Like surf, during a storm. Oddly calming though.

Five minutes, and the surf didn't quite drown out a loud clanging. The thud of something very large hitting the bullet on at least two sides.

Shit… must have propelled myself into the damn debris field again, he thought lazily. Still, it's just kind of rocking, now…

Hands lifted his helmet clear, and he stared fuzzily at them. Had he just done that? But no, his hands were resting on his lap, and he couldn't lift them. They were too heavy.

He took a last deep breath, expecting only vacuum...

...and breathed sweet air, and wondered why a tiny hand was brushing his hair out of his face, and someone - a girl? Was crying his name, even as strong arms lifted him up and carried him into the light.
Harlock manoeuvred the workboat carefully, mindful of its cargo. At a nod, Ali released the three pronged claw. The bullet settled onto the deck of the hangar with a noticeable thump as the artificial gravity kicked back in, and Harlock guided the workboat into its dock with a sigh of relief. In the cargo hold of the workboat behind the cockpit, Doc was already tended to her charge. Daiba was alive, but barely conscious, laid out on the floor with someone's discarded jacket under his head.

'Close call…' Ali murmured.

'Too close.' Harlock freed himself from the seat belt and stood up. 'We were lucky we found him when we did - I owe that little mazone girl. Again.' He sighed. 'Just when you think you have a handle on your opponent…'

'Some of them turn out to be nice?' Ali slapped him lightly on his armoured shoulder. 'Kind makes you long for the more clear-cut enemies we've got out here, doesn't it? Promethium, Lazarus, Loki… Doppler, Hechi… Don't know about you, but I prefer my bad guys to be really evil, not just misunderstood. Makes it a lot easier to just shoot the fuckers with a clear conscience, ya know?'

Harlock just shook his head and reached for his semi-conscious cousin. 'You're a simple soul, aren't you?' He managed to slip an arm under Daiba and push him upright. 'A hand here, Ali? He's no light weight in his hardsuit…'

'And you totally overthink everything. It's why we get on so well.' Ali barged past him without a by-your-leave oblivious to his captain's eye-rolling response to his rudeness and grabbed the other arm. 'Up you come, sunshine. Luna! Darling!'

'Get the hell out of my face and let me get him to sick bay,' the ship's doctor snapped at him as she strode up the ramp. 'If you've got nothing better to do than stand around slacking, perhaps you should push the gurney?' For all her snapping like a turtle at Ali, her handling of Daiba was gentle. 'Gently, you ham-fisted numbskulls!' She tutted over the youth as they tried to get him to lay down on the gurney - something of a struggle because despite lolling like a marionette with its strings cut, he resisted being laid back down, mumbling incoherently. It took all three of them to strap him in, and then only after a timely sedative jabbed into the side of his neck. With a sigh of relief Harlock stood back as Ali helped to guide the floating anti-grav gurney towards the exit, Doc still bitching in his ears.

The only other occupant of the hangar was Meg, walking wearily towards the same exit, her helmet retracted to reveal her pale face and red-rimmed eyes. Harlock changed direction to intercept and fell in beside his diminutive ward. 'Good flying out there Meggie - and well-handled grappling the bullet.'

'I should have covered his ass better,' she whispered, her voice husky. She stopped in her tracks and stared up at him. 'If I'd been closer…'

'You were both doing your jobs,' he told her firmly, but kindly. He placed his arm around her small shoulders not just for comfort, but to give her a little push towards the changing room. She fell in beside him wearily. 'If you'd been closer I could have lost both of you. And if anyone's to blame, it's me - I miscalculated the effect of those drives going critical when the monofilament fileted the ships.'
'Probably because the drives are shitty, and over-stressed.' Ben appeared in the airlock hatchway as they reached it. 'Good flying, Meggie.' The girl nodded miserably, and Ben swooped in for a hug. 'Ow - remind me not to do that when you're wearing armour…' he told her as he pulled back again. It only raised a weak smile in return. 'Our little mazone visitor - Cleo - says the whole damn fleet is close to falling apart physically as well as emotionally. The drives are being constantly charged past safe capacity and discharged too fast making these huge IN-SKIP jumps,' he continued as his captain kept walking. He perched on the edge of a bench in the changing room whilst Harlock and Meg shucked themselves out of their armour. 'The whole damn race is in as much danger from their own ships as they are from us.'

'None of which makes me feel any better,' Harlock told him as he stepped off the of the nibelung armour, placed it on its racking and began pulling off his undersuit. Heedless of the company he stripped off quickly and headed for the shower. 'At least Tadashi's in good hands. The only reason I'm not clinging to that gurney myself is that I've seen a lot worse. Dammit Ben - two of my sons are still on that mother ship. And whilst we were out there they jumped again - this time without Mamoru on board to help us get a lock on their trajectory.'

'Maybe Ben's new girlfriend can help?' Meg popped her head round the partition and blushed when she saw her captain standing naked under the running water. 'Oh my… Is it my birthday already?'

'Oi!' Ben snapped his fingers and pointed. 'Eyes elsewhere, little girl! Give the captain some privacy!'

'Why? You don't…'

'That's different. We're both guys.'

'No it isn't - I've seen you ogling his ass…ets. And it's not like I haven't seen naked men before - and although there are a few sights on this ship I wish I could unsee, the captain isn't one of them…'

'The captain would very much like to finish this conversation, put some clothes on and see his son,' Harlock said pithily as he left the shower, the water shutting off behind him. The drying field enveloped him and quickly did its work, fluffing his hair in the slight breeze as it finished. He took the pants Ben held out for him gratefully. 'Meggie - don't linger in there. How many times do I need to remind you water is one of the things that doesn't regenerate ad infinitum?'

'Sorry captain.' She vanished with a squeak. Ben gave his captain a cheeky grin, placed his fingers to his lips and strolled the half-dozen steps needed to stick his head around the corner of the next booth. There was a brief silence followed by an outraged shriek of "pervert!" from its occupant.

Ben sniggered. 'Nice view, Meggie. Of course, being such a cosmopolitan soul you don't mind if I watch…?' He leaned against the corner with his arms folded and twitched his head out of the line of fire as a wet sponge sailed past it.

'Captain!' Meg's outraged wail could have shattered glass.

Harlock pulled on his boots. 'Ben - stop being an asshole. Meg - he's got a point. If you can't take it, don't dish it out. Look up "equality" in the bloody dictionary sometime. Ogle not lest ye be ogled…' He bit back a smile at the half-growled, half wailed "ooohhhhh" from next door.

Ben rolled his eyes. 'Were we ever that young?'

'You, I'm not so sure.' Harlock pulled a sweater over his head and tugged it into place. 'If the girl
trusts you - I hate to ask, given what that red-head just pulled…'

Ben's shoulders lifted and dropped with studied casualness. 'I know it's easy to be wrong, but this one's cut from different cloth. And I think she's just had a really nasty shock of some kind. I can see it in her eyes… the way she seems to look past you as if she's still seeing something she'd rather not. Oh and she's not a girl - I mean, she's tiny, and probably not much older than Meggie here - but she's pretty high up in their hierarchy. Something to do with those symbiotic cells - some kind of ancestral line. I didn't get much more out of her, but she's no foot soldier.'

'You think she'll tell us where they're going?' Harlock took the eyepatch out of his pants pocket and tied it in place. Ben held out his gun belt and he strapped that on, settling the cosmo dragoon along his thigh.

Ben waggled his hand from side to side. 'Maybe. She's probably at a crisis point. Might not take much to put her on our side. Is that how you want me to play it?'

'Well scaring the pants off the other one seems to have been a little counterproductive,' Harlock drawled. 'She's practically catatonic.'

'Huh. I'm still remembering my first encounter with your family "ghost".' His eyes narrowed when his captain let out a decidedly nasty little snigger. 'Was he an equal opportunities prude or just has a thing against…'

'It's the fixtures and fittings being put to nefarious uses he has a beef with. He gets a bit territorial. Nothing personal.' Harlock slapped him on the back. 'Some days I wonder if I need to wander around the place marking it… You should hear the crap I've had to take about sitting on his precious antique desk, coffee rings on his precious antique desk, cuddling my own damn wife on his precious antique desk…'

'Cuddling?' Ben replied drawling the word out darkly and raising an elegantly arched golden eyebrow. 'Is that what we're calling it these days?'

'Shut up, Ben.'

From the shower cubicle behind them, they both heard a choked snigger.

If there was a great leveller in the universe capable of reducing even the most feared pirates to a state of anxious uncertainty, Luna thought, it was parental concern for a child. If you dressed them in ordinary street clothes and they'd been standing in her surgery, Kei and Harlock would be no different to the scores of other nervous parents she'd dealt with in her general practice back on Lar Metal.

Except perhaps that normally, the father wouldn't be the one wincing and shaking his hand to unnumb it when he finally pried it free of the death grip his other half had on it. Kei tended to just waggle her crushed fingers a little less ostentatiously.

Luna poured herself a large whiskey and reached up with her free hand to stroke Mii's soft fur. The cat, draped over her shoulders, trilled softly and purred into her left ear, leaning into a head-scratch. 'Which one do you want first?' she asked.

'Daiba.' Harlock punctuated the reply with a glance through the open door of her office, to where two beds were currently occupied. One by a youth in his late teens, propped up on pillows, stripped to the waist with sensors all over his torso and an oxygen tube under his nose. He was at least awake, and dodging the attentions of a small blonde female who was fussing over him despite
Tadashi's attempts to keep her away from his namesake.

'A day or two of bed rest. Minimum. Luckily you got to him when you did - a few minutes more and he'd have been hypoxic. I can't tell yet if there are any long term effects - he was hallucinating for a while. But he's young, and - well - this is the Arcadia after all.'

Harlock nodded. Without prompting she moved onto the other topic of concern. 'Mamoru's feverish, and a little anaemic. A little malnourished - hardly surprising since I gather although they did their best, Mazone food isn't really suitable for normal humans. Even those "carrion flowers" have some photosynthetic component to their cellular metabolism. The facial injury doesn't worry me too much - the cut was clean and is healing well - and although it will leave a scar, it's nothing I can't reduce when he's fitter - unless he gets a good tan you might not even see it when he's older.'

'But the cellular damage…' Harlock interrupted, barely a breath ahead of Kei's "His eye…"

Luna took a deep breath. And another long swallow of the captain's hundred year old single malt. 'You asked me, five years ago, to save his life using the dark matter. As best I can determine, this repaired the damage done by the bio-engineered plague spread by the Deathshadow "Apollyon".'

She grimaced. 'And the reaction to the anti-virus. Over time as he grows, I expected this contamination to reduce as cells die and are replaced. And that's mostly the case - but there are still reservoirs of it in his system, and those black body drives were yanking it out faster than his body could compensate for it. So he's got some damage, but nothing that won't hopefully reverse now he's back on board. Liver, kidney and lung function are already back to close to normal, and if you're worried about the other two, don't be - at least not on that score. They don't have the same level of dark matter in their systems, even allowing for being conceived and born on board.'

She paused. 'Well, raised, in Taro's case.'

Kei leaned forward and planted her hands palms down on the desk. 'His. Eye.' She ignored Harlock's vague attempt to either pat her on the back or give her a back rub - Luna erred on the side of the former, and mentally raised a glass to his courage in dealing with Momma Pirate. She took a deep breath again. No way to sugar coat this one…

'Gone,' she told them bluntly. 'I don't want you to get your hopes up on that score - the Arcadia doesn't regrow tissue losses of that magnitude when they take place off the ship. You'll remember it healed Yama here's eye way back when, but didn't save his sight. What I can tell you is that there are options - the optic nerve still has some function, and a prosthetic when he's stopped growing will be possible, although he'll have to wear a glass eye for a few years to ensure the orbital socket grows properly. The wound is clean and healed, there's not much I can do apart from keep the site packed and protected for now.'

She paused. 'Honestly, it's not the physical damage that worries me. He's a tough kid, but even tough little boys have their limits, and he's seen a lot and endured much that would have an adult curled into a ball crying for his momma.' She looked past her captain and XO and smiled angelically at the figure filling the doorway. 'Not that I'd name names…'

Ali stuck his tongue out and shifted the bundle sitting in his arms with her arms around his neck, to make her a little more comfortable. 'Why is it whenever you want to make them feel better I'm the butt-monkey?'

'Because when it's you, it somehow feels so much better,' Harlock told him. He held out his arms. 'Can I have my daughter?'

Ali handed Nami over and her arms twined around her father's neck with a vice-like grip. 'You're getting heavy, miss,' he told her. She smiled prettily at him and turned her attention to her parents.

'Can I see Mamoru? Did you find Wattaru and Taro as well?'
'Yes, and no,' Harlock told her. She was wriggling like an eel so he put her down, but didn't let go of her hand. 'I need to talk to Doc for a minute. Maybe you and your mother should go first, okay? I'll be through in a minute.'

Wide eyes stared up at him from under a riot of light brown curls. 'Can he meet Freya? She did help find him, and she's family now…'

Harlock belatedly noticed the shy nibelung clinging to Ali's leg. 'I don't see why not…' He held out his hand. 'But both of you - quietly. He's tired. Just a quick cuddle, all right?'

He waited until Kei - not without a look that promised she'd have part of this out of his hide later - took the girls into the sick bay, to delighted greetings from Daiba, and a more subdued response from Mamoru. Ali came fully into the office and took the only chair in front of Luna's desk before his captain could drop into it, deliberately ignoring the pointed look it earned him. Harlock settled for perching on the edge of the desk instead, ignoring the stink-eye this earned him from his ship's doctor. 'That was so well timed I could be forgiven for thinking the pair of you were in cahoots giving me an excuse to get Kei out of the room…'

'Nothing so elaborate,' Luna assured him. 'But it did occur to me that you might be better hearing this from me and breaking it to Kei.'

'I really don't like the sound of this…'

Luna grimaced. 'I just don't know… but he shows signs of sleep deprivation, and doesn't seem to want to sleep, even though he's exhausted. Now whether it's nightmares, or just the very real fear of losing his sight, I can't tell. Maybe both. I don't want to give him much in the way of sedatives - and anyway, rather like you, he metabolises them oddly. He's worried sick about his brothers, which is natural. It's a lot for a nine-year old, no matter how mature he acts.' She pushed at the leather-clad backside sitting next to her whiskey bottle. 'I don't like how quiet he is, but I'm not planning on keeping him in here. You can take him back to your quarters if you want - and keep an eye on him. However, I'm guessing cuddles will work far more magic than medicine at this point.'

Ali shivered theatrically. 'I wish you wouldn't use that word.'

'Cuddles?' Harlock suggested. Ali flipped him the finger.

'Medicine?' Luna asked.

'Magic. Not on this bloody ship.'

'You've lived on it for twenty years, Ali - a bit late to get the screaming heebie-jeebies,' Harlock pointed out in his most reasonable tone. Ali glared moodily at him from under lowered brows.

'It's not magic,' Luna added. 'Just a really advanced alien science…'

'Same difference,' Ali muttered, staring into the infirmary through the viewing window. Nami was introducing Freya to Mamoru, by the look of it, the two little girls both crawling around on the oversized bed. 'Look at what we're mixed up in - it ain't just the ship, though that's creepy enough. And ghosts. Sorta. Both of 'em. Little elf girls stuffed into glowing balls and used to control this oogie-boogie darkness that's capable of stopping time, opening holes in space-time to some kind of hell dimensions, creating said ghosts… We've now got bloody dryads flying around in space in wooden spaceships, which can apparently feed off the stuff.' He stood up and walked towards the window. Closer to it, Harlock could see the man was staring not at the scene behind it, but at his own reflection, faint and ghostly. 'Compared to that, looking in the mirror every morning and
seeing the same face staring back at you that you've been shaving every day for over twenty years - the same damn face - is just the cherry on top of my weirdness cake.'

Harlock slid off the desk and to his feet in one smooth motion. 'That's what I love most about you Ali - the positive perspective you bring to any situation…'

'Less of the "L" word, captain - the crew might get ideas…'

'They've already got filthy minds,' Luna muttered darkly. 'There's no "might" about it.' She waved a dismissive hand at Harlock. You - go cuddle your boys. And you - she jabbed a finger in Ali's direction, even though he still had his back to her. 'Surely you've got something more important to do than clutter up my office and moaning about the fact you're stuck for all eternity with the wrinkles and sagging ass you came on board with?'

Ali waved a hand over his shoulder in her general direction, not taking his eyes off the scene in front of him. The two beds in the sick bay were close enough together that Harlock could stand between them and reach out a hand to both boys: gently brushing a stray lock of hair from Daiba's forehead - for once not pushed away by the normally reticent youth - and taking his son's small hand in the other hand. Ali, watching thoughtfully, smiled to himself as Daiba said something in reply to his captain's unheard question, raising a half-smile on Harlock's face.

'He looks tired,' he said quietly, as Luna came over to stand by his shoulder. 'Would it kill the universe to just cut him some slack for once?'

'If he didn't get trouble thrust into his face,' Luna replied pithily, 'He'd just go and find it. It's who he is.'

Ali placed an arm around her waist and gave her a quick hug. 'Maybe. But there wouldn't be quite so much of it…' He dropped a light kiss on top of her pony-tail.

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs. 'And yet, you'd follow him into hell, you big lunk. Would you really want to go back to the way it was before him?'

'Hell no,' he replied with feeling. He slid his hand slowly up her thin torso and palmed a small breast so idly anyone else would have been fooled into thinking it nothing more than an afterthought. She slapped the offending article just hard enough to let him know the intrusion wasn't totally unacceptable.

'Ask.'

'That is asking,' he replied fondly. 'Aww - look - is there a collective noun for a cuddle puddle of pirates and their offspring? Coz that's just too cute for words…' He pointed to where Mamoru was in danger of vanishing under a pile of parents, sister, newly adopted nibelung and cousin, since Daiba - in defiance of medical orders, had also piled onto the bed at the small boy's side.

'A murder,' she growled, pushing away his groping fingers and striding into the infirmary, dislodging the cat and bellowing at the miscreants as she bore down on them. Ali watched, a half-smile playing across his face as he watched the guilty parties scuttle out of the way.

A quiet meow at his feet got his attention and tiny claws dug into his pants below the knee as Mii stood on her hind legs, front paws on his leg and stared up at him. He picked up the little cat and held her gently, scrathing her behind the ears. At least until she snaked her little head down and bit him very firmly on the flap of skin between his thumb and forefinger. 'You can go off some cats,' he muttered at her.
Mii just purred and rubbed her head under his chin.

Ben sauntered past the hangar on his way to the brig, and stood for a moment staring at the small mazone craft parked near the inner lock. 'Are we sure this one isn't going to have a sudden growth spurt and start invading the ship?' he asked. The crewman on guard shrugged and leaned on the railing, staring gloomily at the vessel.

'Search me,' Cai muttered. Ben, hearing the weariness in his crewmate's voice, looked at him more closely. Cai was a handsome young man, around the same age as the captain, maybe a year or two younger. About five ten, with black hair worn in a short ponytail. Unlike most of the crew who hailed from a multitude of colonial backwaters and were consequently something of a mish-mash of indeterminate origins, Cai's ethnic heritage was obviously Earth-oriental, China having been one of the few regions that had managed to colonise several worlds before the mass exodus from a worn-out Earth in the twenty-third century. Those worlds had pretty much closed their borders until the Homecoming War, wiping their hands of the folly of other colonies.

Cai had been one of a large number of young men on those worlds who'd grown tired of a restrictive lifestyle on a dying world with no prospects, and had stowed away on board a passing freighter looking for better prospects. Thrown off on a marginal world, he'd been first in line for the very first Machine Empire harvester that came calling, looking for a better life.

He'd found it, and a reason to live, in the form of another like-minded soul called Matthias, the pair of them joining the Arcadia's crew well over a decade ago. Until Matthias had died in the plague, five years ago.

Today.

Ben quickly took in the other man's slightly bloodshot, decidedly baggy eyes and hunched shoulders, and placed an arm around those slumped shoulders. 'Dammit, Cai - why didn't you just get someone to swap with you? The captain and Kei would understand…'

'I prefer to stay busy,' Cai replied wearily. 'Although this wasn't what I had in mind. Staring at that wrinkly little thing? Too much time to think.' Since they were staring at something resembling an oversized walnut that was just sitting on the rails that could catapult it out of the hangar if it so much as poked a green shoot out into the open, Ben had to admit that as distractions went, this one left a lot to be desired.

'There's always the coolant sluices,' Ben deadpanned. 'Oof.' He didn't quite dodge the elbow to the ribs. The least favourite job on the ship involved periodic clearing of the coolant that circulated to keep the plasma cannon from overheating. A specially engineered bio-polymer that had a tendency to plasticise when overheated, causing the pipework to get clogged after a major scuffle. Since the ship's auto-repairs didn't seem to see this as a problem, this meant they had to be manually cleared after a battle, and the smell wasn't just indescribable, it also had a tendency to linger, no matter how hard you scrubbed. 'You have to admit, it takes your mind off whatever ails you.'

'I don't think I'm that far gone,' Cai replied. 'But if you're up for a drink later?'

'That, I can do.' He gave Cai's wiry form a squeeze before letting him go. 'Not sure I really get the idea of setting off into space in a wooden ship… I mean, it just feels wrong, if you know what I mean? I mean, I've seen the work up the captain did of the ship you guys found on Tokarga, but still - wood?'

Cai shrugged. 'Search me. You think building tin cans out of sheets of metal welded together
'When you put it like that…' Ben stared at the shuttle - barely big enough for three people - for a while longer. 'Wonder how far the organic thing goes though? You think their ships might be like the Arcadia or the Phantasm? Sentient?'

Cai glared at him, but the gesture was wasted as Ben was already turning to leave. 'Thanks, Benjy. Leave me alone in here with that thought, why don't you?' he called out to the rapidly retreating back.

Ben smirked as he exited the hangar. 'Look at it this way, didi, at least you won't be wrapped around your own sorrows!'

The reply was in a pithy Cantonese dialect, the invitation only barely physically possible for a trained and very supple gymnast.

The woman in the open cell opposite was an unwelcome sight. Cleo sat on the edge of the "bed" - a metal cot covered by sheets of a fabric made from some silk-smooth extrusion. Some kind of artificial cellulose, from the scent. It carried the faint whiff of the chemical products used to manufacture it. It was, she reflected, very difficult to feign disinterest whilst simultaneously trying to take a good look at her fellow inmate. The red lasers marking the boundary of her cell - the visible vertical bands a courtesy, since the actual force field was only visible in a very restricted range - afforded neither woman any privacy.

Her cellmate sat on the edge of her own cot, hands clasped around her lower legs, her chin resting on her knees, with her face almost covered by a sheath of long red hair. A study in apathetic misery.

Cleo sighed inwardly. Well it wasn't as though the stupid woman hadn't deserved this and more… Papheo - Shizuka - had over-reached herself in trying to play Harlock, and they were all now to pay the cost.

'What in the name of Earth were you thinking?' she asked out loud. 'I expected Cassandra to pull something this stupid, but your line have handled the human worlds for so long and so well…'

Nothing. She might as well have been talking to the walls. 'What in the name of the First flower did they do to you?'

'We didn't do anything.' The door to the holding area had opened so quietly she hadn't heard the crewman enter. He walked towards her and she recognised the blue-skinned Magellenite she'd met earlier. He smiled down at her and it annoyed her that she returned that irresistible smile without hesitation. 'She mostly did it to herself. Attacked her guards - killed one of them and made an attempt to blow up some delicate parts of the ship. Unfortunately for her she picked the worst day in the calendar to do it…' He keyed in a code on the wall near to her cell and the red beams vanished, along with the faint shimmer of the force field. It didn't return when he walked in and stood over her, looming rather gracefully as he held out a large, black-gloved hand. 'I'm to escort you to better quarters,' he added, when she hesitated. 'The captain will want to talk to you soon, and I'm to make you comfortable.'

Her own small hand was almost lost in the large palm she placed it in. She let him help her to her feet with as much grace as she could muster. Managing the few males kept by her kind for breeding duties had never left her feeling this flustered. Mazone men were generally bred for docility, good health and physical attractiveness. The muscular mass in front of her practically
radiated a rough masculinity that impacted on her senses with the subtlety of an asteroid strike. Although tiny and delicately boned she'd never in her life felt as overwhelmed and so aware of her size as she did standing in front of him. The other crew she'd seen on her walk through the ship to these cells had been less conventionally attractive - apart from the captain himself - but the same rugged strength had been palpable in all of them. Some quality long since bred out of the bloodlines in Mazone space.

What perplexed her however as she stood apparently struck dumb and unable to move her hand from the oddly gently grip it was in, was not that strength and controlled aggression she sensed, but the fact that instead of fear, what she felt was a sense that every nerve ending was rubbed raw, acutely aware of his presence. Her throat was tight, making it hard to swallow, and her heart felt as though it was pounding directly in her ears.

'Sorry,' he said suddenly with a grin, his eyes twinkling with some amusement she suspected he would not be sharing. 'I forget I have that effect on people.'

She eyed him from head to toe, taking in the lightweight shirt he wore - a powder blue which accentuated the darker blue of his skin, tucked into tight cream leather pants which hugged his hips and thighs with indecent familiarity. The shirt was open to the waist, revealing a deep v of toned, well defined muscle and a scattering of wiry golden hairs trailing down to his belt buckle from the thicker thatch visible below the ends of his collarbones. Coupled with the knowing look in his golden-brown eyes and that ever-present half-smile, she had to resist the temptation to roll her eyes. As well as other temptations. Men were not supposed to be so… so…

She took refuge in umbrage. 'I somehow doubt you forget that for a moment,' she advised him primly. He smiled warmly, and his only reply was to bow slightly, raise her hand to his lips and press them to the back of it.

They were warm, dry and soft. But he released her hand, stood up and stepped back with such easy grace, she knew the courtly gesture for what it was. This one was no roughneck drifter. She had to spend a moment appreciating Harlock's choice of warder. 'If you'll follow me?' he asked, breaking into her reverie.

She gestured towards the opposite cell, where the former leader of the Solar System mazone sat slumped, wrapped in both her own misery and a red sweater that had seen better days. Ben shrugged. 'She stays. For now. As long as she behaves herself we might even keep the lights on.'

Papheo raised her head sharply at that last comment, and Cleo's eyes met those of her fellow briefly, before the woman let her head drop limply back to its former position, staring abjectly again at the floor.

Now what, she wondered, as Ben led her out of the holding area, along the shadowy corridors of the Arcadia, was so terrifying about the darkness…?

With Mamoru, Nami and Freya relocated with Meg and a slowly recovering Daiba for company to the captain's quarters - or as Ali insisted on calling it "the knocking shop", the impromptu meeting had to take place elsewhere, and Harlock had decided upon the room adjoining the Arcadia's botanical lab. Whether this was an attempt to make his guest feel at home or to establish his credentials as something other than a murderous pirate with serious issues with authority was something of a tossup.

Harlock looked around at the assembly before he started to speak. Kei was twitchy, torn - as he
was, if he was honest - between duty and wanting to glue herself to Mamoru's side until he was at least thirty. Ali as usual lounged back in his chair, his feet up on the table, ankles crossed. Yattaran sat opposite his captain, fiddling as usual with some intricate array of plastic pieces and small amounts of adhesive. Maji next to him was trying to look interested in the proceedings but as usual succeeded only in looking uncomfortable. On the other hand "not much of a people person" was almost a given on the curriculum vitae for any member of his crew… Luna had begged off on account of Sabu almost slicing his foot off with the power scraper used to clean the hull of the workboats, and Anita - here in her capacity as security chief, as nobody else could really be bothered after LeVary had died in the plague, and his cook/quartermaster was universally acknowledged as the scariest damn person on the ship who wasn't a hundred and fifty year old dark matter ghost.

Which left Blaze, whose position on the crew was a little nebulous, and Ben - currently escorting their guest to a seat, whose position Ali usually somewhat caustically described when prodded as "draped around, on or under anyone who doesn't move fast enough".

Well, he thought to himself, *if you'd wanted to be surrounded by uptight professionals, you wouldn't have repeatedly told the Fleet where to stick their amnesty offers…* 'Cleome - welcome,' he said out loud as Ben led the young woman towards him. She inclined her head gracefully and he indicated the seat next to him. 'Please.'

Ben pulled the chair out for her, causing an oddly amusing moment of humour when she stared at her escort in bewilderment before realising that it was a courtesy and allowing herself to be seated. For the first time since she'd been brought on board, Harlock finally had the time to take a good look at her.

Ben was right, was his first thought. She wasn't much bigger than Meggie, and didn't, at first glance, look much older. Her hair was black, very straight, and cut into a single bang across her forehead, falling down to her waist behind. Her eyes had an exotic slant, and were a dark brown - in the low light of the main ship they'd seemed almost totally black - all pupil, no iris - but in the brighter light of the "greenhouse" they were noticeably lighter, closer to a dark sherry brown that reminded him suddenly of his predecessor. Her skin was a pale ivory, never, he suspected, touched by the light of a sun. Her limbs were delicate and to his eye, suggested being raised in a low g environment.

Her apparent youth however was misleading. Despite her shyness - understandable when surrounded by potentially hostile forces and separated from your own people after they'd tried to kill you - there was an appraising look in those dark eyes, and a determined tilt to her chin he found all too familiar. He had to suppress a smile. The law of averages suggested that there were *genuinely* demure, shy and retiring women out there. Somewhere. It was a big universe, after all. It just seemed that they never crossed *his* path…

Or they'd already succumbed to the multitude of dangers that lurked on every single inhabited world in human colonised space. The meek didn't inherit the Earth, unless you counted a six-by-three foot plot of it, or a cold icy spot on an ice world after a long drop out of a cargo transport in low orbit…

'Cleome, huh?' Trust Ali to break into any lull in a conversation. 'Well,' he muttered, with a wink to his captain, 'Hopefully she ain't as green as she's cabbage looking.'

Any hope he had that his guest's command of human languages (and botanical taxonomy) was not up to the task of unravelling Ali's joke was quickly doused by her reply. 'Did you work all night on that one?' she asked witheringly. Her voice was high and soft, but there was a quiet, barely
discernible steel under that quiet delivery.

Harlock smiled. It was that or snarl something decidedly unrepeatable at his resident pain in the arse. 'He thinks he's funny. Feel free to disabuse him of the notion. As violently as you want. We usually do'

'Hey!'

She smiled back at Harlock, ignoring Ali's hurt feelings. On which point alone she'd fit right in. 'I think we can agree most cultures have individuals who, lacking beauty, charm or intelligence make up for it by trying to garner attention by playing the fool. Some of course are more successful than others.' She tilted her head slightly and nibbled on her bottom lip with tiny, perfect teeth. 'Of course, there's also a tendency in potentially tense situations to select a member of the group to deliberately make themselves a target to defuse any possible antagonism before it becomes a problem…'

'Either way, Ali,' Blaze piped up, 'you're busted…' He smiled at her and held out a hand. 'My full name isn't something I'd inflict on anyone, but you can call me Blaze. I represent the organisation known as the Millennial Thieves - and by extension, I can speak on behalf of the Colonial Government operating from the planet Destiny.' He shook the dainty hand offered delicately.

'An odd arrangement,' she murmured, as he released her hand. She turned to Harlock for clarification, as though sensing that despite the selection of alpha males on display, he had seniority. Below the level of everyone else's hearing he heard Tochiro chuckle.

'You sly fox… you deliberately called those two studmuffins in as a distraction, didn't you? Playing that hunch about same-sex cloistered cultures?

Harlock hid a smile, and concentrated on the main conversation as Blaze replied. 'It's complicated. But it is true - if the Millennial Thieves speak, Destiny listens.'

'Ooh, deep…' Ali muttered. Harlock wondered briefly if anyone would notice if he kicked the idiot on the ankle, but settled for a withering glare, which was noted, then ignored.

'Ben you've met, and whilst he's not exactly an official envoy from his people, he can and does on occasion liaise with them when matters here might affect the Greater Magellanic Cloud.' Harlock continued aloud.

Cleo leaned forward, her forearms resting on the table in front of her. 'I have to admit to being surprised - we'd always assumed that as an outlaw…'

'From the Alliance - the former Gaia Sanction merged with the Machine Empire a few years ago. They - despite some territorial claims to the contrary - have no jurisdiction here.' Kei interjected. 'We have our supporters - and friends.'

Cleo bowed her head slightly, accepting the correction. 'Just so,' she murmured.

'From speaking to others of your people I suspect you based a lot of your strategy on my predecessor,' Harlock said quietly. 'In the interests of clarity please note that it makes one hell of a difference to your approach to problems when you have to live in the universe, as opposed to merely moving through it with a view to making it all go away…'

'On that,' Cleo replied, 'I think we can agree.' She sighed heavily. 'If certain members of my own race had taken your view, I suspect we would not be in this position.'
Harlock smiled at her, hoping the effect was reassuring. Since she didn't flinch he went with "yes" and continued. 'You are a divided people, but this doesn't change the fact that your ships are still bearing down on several delicate points in space-time with a view to ripping through the branes - the points we call "the nodes of time". Time is of the essence, so I will be blunt. Is there any way your queen and her advisors will stop of their own accord?'

Cleo shook her head sadly. 'No. She wants revenge, to make humanity - and an uncaring universe - pay for what happened to our worlds. More specifically she wants Harlock to pay - the fact that there are in fact two men bearing that name, one of whom is blameless, is not a factor.'

'And our sons?' Kei asked sharply.

'A group who believed that they could be used to drive a wedge between factions on the Long Journey. The Mazone living amongst you in the solar system worlds like things the way they are - pitting Harlock against us was a gamble, trying to create division and fear. You have to understand - for the last fifty years, your name has been reviled and feared as a destroyer of worlds - merciless, uncaring, a force of nature - cold, implacable, relentless…'

'Him?' Ali jerked a thumb in the direction of his captain. 'The coldest thing about him is his feet - or so Kei tells me…'

'Ali...' The tiniest shake of his head was enough to pull the crewman up sharply, warning that this wasn't the time. 'Shizuka was herself outplayed, I understand?'

Cleo nodded. 'By the commander of the military fleet. Cassandra. Rafflesia hoped to use you to unify the rebellious factions - to give them something to fear, an outside enemy. To that end Cassandra played along with Papheo's - sorry, Shizuka Namino's all too obvious ploy.' She met Harlock's cyclopean gaze calmly. 'I am truly sorry for that.'

'I suspect you have far worse problems to worry about than my sons,' Harlock replied kindly. 'Your queen - and her military - have turned on their own. Fear and desperation are a poor combination in a ruler. Especially an absolute monarch answerable to no-one.'

It might have been her imagination, but she was sure his eye flickered briefly towards the blue-skinned magellanite as he spoke. 'My friend - Tessius - tried to speak out, and when that failed she tried to force a confrontation. She failed. The Military was too strong. Now… Now I have no idea what can be done to stop this.'

Harlock tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him. 'The problem will be stopping Rafflesia without either forcing her hand and setting off those drives, or causing so much damage in a battle that we cause it ourselves. This was never going to be easy.'

'Trying to stop a comet in its tracks would be easier,' Ben muttered.

'Of course it would.' Ali gave him a pitying look. 'We'd just shoot the crap out of it. Which is what we can't do here on account of needing something called "finesse",' he explained patiently.

'I've heard of it,' Ben replied with a cheeky grin. 'We're all just in shock that you have.'

'Sit on it, Blue Boy,' Ali held up his middle finger, a gesture Cleo supposed had to have some sexual connotation.

'Moving on…' Kei interjected frostily. 'Cleome - your fleet went IN-SKIP shortly after we brought you on board. There are some stragglers they left behind, I'm assuming they felt that trying to wipe them out wasn't a good idea with the Arcadia watching over them. There are seventy three ships
out there right now, some of them in a terrible condition judging from the readings.'

'Which leaves us with two problems,' Harlock continued. 'Firstly we can't just leave them here, and it seems no-one on board speaks Standard - so we can't tell them to stop milling around like headless chickens and trust us.'

'I'd be happy to speak to them,' Cleo told him. 'There was a planet close by that would support us, I believe - one Tessius had planned on settling.'

Harlock nodded. 'We'll talk more about that soon. But on a more personal note, the fleet have jumped, and we've no way of tracking them accurately now that Mamoru is no longer with them. I know this section of your armada is heading towards Earth, but that arrival time at their current speed is weeks if not months away. And I cannot let them reach the Sol system.'

Cleo stared down at her hands, pale against the dark wood of the table. *Old oak...* she thought, running her fingertips in tiny circles over the surface. And incongruous, on board such a ship. Someone had used it for potting, at a guess, as the surface had traces of soil ingrained into the wood, along with water stains. Tiny holes attested to some kind of woodworm, long ago, long dead. On some level the thought that she was stroking the mutilated corpse of an ancient giant of the forests of Earth gave her some pause, but then, even the mazone used the non-sentient trees where their living habitats would not flourish.

Oak, however, had proved a difficult export to the stars. Some things had truly died with Earth.

Harlock was still speaking, and she lifted her gaze again to meet his singular regard. If he knew she'd been daydreaming, he said nothing. 'I cannot fight your battles for you,' he finished.

She nodded. 'Nor should you.'

He smiled at her, a warm gesture that she couldn't help responding to. It made him look even younger, a little more accessible. There was a quiet reserve he projected - armour against a cruel universe, she suspected. It was hard, looking at the quiet, almost self-effacing man in front of her, to reconcile what she felt with the bogeyman her people told stories about to terrify themselves in the long night of their journey. And yet...

He was holding out his hand, and she blushed, realising she'd been wool-gathering again. In it lay a device - mushroom shaped, narrower in the middle where it was gripped in his gloved palm, glowing slightly at the top above the spokes that jutted out from under the metal cap. A sharp intake of breath from everyone sat at the table confirmed that this was no trinket. 'Your queen would appear to think this would solve all her problems. One click of a button and all sins are - not forgiven so much as erased. The dead might even be returned to us. Or we might never have existed to begin with, and in that eventuality, well, our pain will never have existed. So my question to you, Cleo, is what kind of person are you?' he tossed the device at her and although caught flat-footed by the move, she caught it easily enough, and held it uncertainly in one hand as though it might suddenly come to life and bite her nose off. Around the table the members of his crew sounded as though they'd all picked the same moment to choke on something. 'Do you move on, try to find a solution to your problems, or do you want to just make them go away?'

Of all the crew, only Kei, she noticed, was leaning back in her chair with her arms folded looking totally unconcerned with the proceedings. The rest of them seemed to have lost the power of speech. Even the fat man who'd seemed to be ignoring the proceedings to assemble some pieces of junk with surprisingly nimble fingers had looked up, peering through thick circles of glass held in front of his face in a baroque assemblage perched on his nose.
The controller for the oscillators. It could be nothing else. Into her hands he'd casually tossed the device which could render the long dark journey from so far away moot. Put an end to her people's suffering. To Rafflesia's insanity. To Cassandra's sadistic cleansing. A gamble with destiny - no-one knew for sure whether such a move would destroy everything, or simply place the universe on a new ring of time, to play out a different variation on the theme.

Tessius… inside her head, she cried. Seeing her hands holding her friend whilst the tree drew her into itself. The sight she'd never ever be able to unsee for the rest of her life.

To make it all go away... Maybe even back to the way it had been before the oscillators had blown. Maybe even back to the time before the first diaspora from a damaged Earth...

Assuming he hadn't of course simply removed the transmitter first.

She threw it back to him, causing another ripple of intaked breath around the table as he fumbled the catch with his right hand, and belatedly she remembered that with only one eye, his ability to judge that catch would be compromised.

'Stop being a jerk,' Kei told him with a poke in his side as he juggled the device. He grinned at her in reply and Cleo realised he'd played them all with that faked fumble. He tossed the device into the air and caught it neatly to make the point, before making it vanish into either a pocket or a desk drawer. Either way, she couldn't see where it went.

'Do you always test people quite so... so...?' Cleo's voice trailed off and she swallowed hard. He smiled at her, with a more relaxed, genuine warmth.

'I like to know who I'm dealing with,' he replied calmly. 'Anita - a little help please? I think Ali forgot how to breathe…'

'He isn't the only one,' Blaze muttered darkly. 'Please tell me that thing is either a fake or deactivated?'

Cleo, with a little insight into the man sitting holding something that might - or might not - control the fate of the universe in his hands, tapped the table in front of her. 'How long ago did you dismantle it?' she asked.

It was the small man in the bandanna who answered. 'Eleven years, five months, seventeen days and eight hours.' When the fat man turned a raised eyebrow towards him he shrugged. 'Took me and Tochiro a while to make sure it could never be used. No-one liked the idea that an accident could set it off…'

'Those things were supposed to be fool proof,' the fat man replied acidly.

'And that's why he asked me to do it. You have a tendency to believe the advertising, and your brand of percussive maintenance does not mix well with delicate electronics.'

'Oi!'

Harlock waved off Yattaran's indignation. 'You also get distracted by the next shiny project. Maji's a little more focussed.'

'The word you're looking for is OCD,' Yattaran muttered darkly.

'That's an acronym,' Maji told him primly.
Yattaran rolled his eyes. 'I rest my case…'

'Moving on,' Harlock interjected smoothly, before he needed Anita to make good on the bicep-flexing he could see out of the corner of his good eye, 'The original plan still stands - albeit with some fine tuning needed on the fly. Cleo - if you will help us by giving us the next location in real space for Rafflesia's fleet, my plan is still to board that main ship and get my boys back. If however that allows you to make a stand against your queen, I'll gladly facilitate that.'

She stared intently at him, judging. 'What about my people here?'

'Not part of any deal,' he replied quietly.

'But…'

He raised a hand to silence her objection. 'I don't use hostages to get what I want, Cleo. Their settlement and safety is not contingent on your help. However we do not have much time to waste, so I have a suggestion you might want to help me with on that score.'

She was taken aback by the affronted denial, but more and more she found herself admiring his integrity. Dangerous… part of her whispered. In that he knows what people expect him to do and sidesteps it, whilst still getting what he wants. That quiet integrity was in its way more frightening than Rafflesia's or Cassandra's violence - it gave you nothing to stand on to fight back.

Which was, she realised, the entire point. She nodded. 'You say you don't want a running battle - but you do know it will be impossible to avoid? Cassandra's ships will defend the mother vessel.'

Blaze took up the conversation at this point. 'That's where I come in - the Arcadia will be running interference for a boarding party, and keeping the battleships occupied. I know enough of Harlock's tactics to keep them busy, and the Arcadia has a few tricks that will keep us out of harm's way whilst drawing out the fleet without causing too much damage. The trick will be to keep the battle fleet away from the main convoy, and to divide them - that was we don't risk an accidental chain reaction.'

'You'd let another fly your ship?' Cleo turned from the young man to the captain.

Harlock looked at Blaze and smiled. 'The ship likes him, and apart from Kei, none of my people has the experience needed. And she'll be with me. As will you - if that's what you want.'

She thought about what he was offering. A slim chance, but surely better than the alternative? 'It cannot be a human who stops Rafflesia - not if you want to have the Mazone halt this journey. It has to be me.' She lowered her head and stared down at the rings and whorls in the ancient tabletop. You do not know what it is you're asking… she wanted to scream the words at him. Once Rafflesia was defeated - if she could defeat her - someone would have to take her place…

'Kei - take over here for a minute?' Harlock stood up, and offered Cleo his hand. 'Walk with me for a little while - I think you might like to see some of what we've achieved here.'

She took it numbly, wondering at the sudden offer. Something of her dilemma had perhaps shown on her face? But she let his larger hand engulf hers with surprising gentleness, and allowed herself to be led towards the brightly lit area of this chamber outside of the smaller room. Here, she was bathed in a friendlier light, the pressure of the dark matter seemingly held at bay by a soft sunlight generated by unseen lamps in the walls. It was, she noticed, a greenhouse of sorts - partly hydroponic, partly well managed beds. She recognised most of the plants as foodstuffs, but they were interspersed by flowering varieties of varying types and at various stages of development.
'We try to be self-sufficient,' he explained as he guided her along one long table upon which several seedlings were being nurtured under cover. 'There's enough to feed the small crew of the Arcadia in this and the other two rooms set aside for the purpose. But I also needed to experiment with other solutions - this, by the way, is mostly just a hobby area - my main laboratories are on a large space station we maintain as a home base.'

She ran her fingers through the soil in one of the raised beds. 'You're using nitrogen fixing plants?'

He nodded. 'A species of legume - edible pods and when in bloom, a lovely scent. Of course here we lack the pollinators, so it's all done by hand. But on Mistral, these plants and others are the first step in restoring a planet deliberately devastated by a dark matter weapon. Which is why I've been conducting most of the research on board - hoping I can find a way for our dark matter to help undo the damage done to Mistral. It was once one of the most fertile planets we ever settled.'

'I know of it,' she replied softly, letting the dark, humus deprived soil trickle through her fingers. 'Our sisters there were badly hurt by the Machinners devices. But you will not get more than two or three harvests this way. It is a shortcut only.'

'You see my problem?' he asked. His eye stared at her intently. 'Our problem, I should say? Humans never succeeded in terraforming a single planet - and now we've ruined several of those that would have supported us willingly. Now I suspect that the Mazone who stayed in human colonised space had a lot to do with that, am I right?'

She nodded, there being no point in denying it.

'You also took care that no-one would notice you - botanists who asked too many questions; anthropologists who noticed old legends weren't as legendary as they should have been… they've had a distressing tendency to have "accidents" over the years.' His tone became darker as he spoke. She knew, all too well, the reason.

'Those who stayed behind were tasked with ensuring humanity would neither become too numerous - nor ever learn of our existence or interference.'

'Your people poisoned my mother, caused the accident that destroyed my family and my life, murdered Daiba's parents…' his hands clenched into fists at his side and she flinched. 'And how many more over the centuries? How much of the Homecoming War is to be laid at the feet of the Mazone? And for what? An ancient enmity between plant and animal? You're both and neither. Some of you were even born human - you live in symbiosis with an ancient life form, but you're human - and you found a way to live together. Why deny us the opportunity?'

She had no real answer for him. It seemed however he didn't really expect one, because he continued: 'The past has to become the past if we're to move forward, Cleome. I do not expect it to be easy - but we have to try. I have people here who will be willing to negotiate with you if you succeed. The rest, I suspect, will be up to you, and them. But something about Rafflesia troubles you. Will you tell me?'

It was such a fundamental part of the mazone, she almost didn't reply.

'It has to do with your control systems, at a guess,' he continued, startling her when he broke the uncomfortable silence. 'I've been aboard one of your ships - all be it an ancient wreck so old it was fossilised in places. You use plants - organic technology I suppose. There were… pods. With mazone inside. Part of a living machine? Like roots running through a forest, there were tendrils running all through the ship, and I suspect - correct me if I'm wrong - there are mazone who act as a kind of living computer? Controlling the environment, the ship's systems… and given the fact
that you never seem to have lost contact with those who remained behind on Earth, my guess is that you're all connected - part of a whole. Because for all the talk of different species, different times you left Earth for the stars, the disparate locations of your populations - I only ever hear talk of one queen… One centre for your entire race. One guiding mind…'

She took a deep breath. Exhaled. Inhaled. 'If Rafflesia is deposed - killed - then someone will have to take her place.'

'In one of those pods?'

She shook her head. 'No. But there is a place… the nemeton. The holiest grove. At present it is on board the mothership. Once there… once she has become queen - if she is accepted - then the queen may never again leave its confines.' She looked up at him, expecting him to trot out some comforting twaddle about duty and sacrifice, but instead he smiled sadly at her.

'I'm sorry. I didn't realise I would be asking you to sacrifice your freedom,' he said. 'Forgive me. That isn't something you request lightly, if at all.'

'No persuasive argument?' she asked.

'Hfft.' the corner of his mouth twitched slightly. 'Far from it. I know all too well where that leads. I allowed myself once to be persuaded to "do my duty" - to sacrifice myself for another. The result was not… healthy.' He stared at her and placed one hand on her shoulder, very lightly. The compassion revealed in that single hazel eye was almost overwhelming. And sincere. 'Only you can make that decision. I will not compel it. Does it have to be you?'

She shook her head. 'No… but it would have to be one of our kind. And the others…'

She didn't need to complete her sentence. He nodded, understanding all too well she realised.

'Someone with the desire for change, with the compassion to save your race - to end the cycle of revenge… it is not easy to step up, to dedicate yourself - to sacrifice all that you are for something so much bigger than yourself.' He turned away from her slightly, and placed a hand on the wall of the chamber, his head slightly tilted to one side as though listening to something only he could hear. 'We all have limits to our horizons, Cleo. Our lives bound to something other than ourselves. I live free, but that freedom can have very real, very narrow boundaries that very few understand or see. For everything worthwhile there is always… a price.' He smiled ruefully. 'Without this ship I'm just another drifter. With it I'm bound night and day to something so terrible and dangerous it both exhilarates and scares me half to death. The responsibility is a heavy burden. In setting me free it also chains me. There are days…' he stared over her head and gave an unpleasant little laugh, 'that I wish I'd just told my predecessor where to stick it. Walked away… no-one would have blamed me.' Then he glanced over to the table where his crew were still bickering, Kei leaning over arguing with Yattaran who was waving a half-completed model in her face that she swatted out of the way like an irritating fly. 'And yet… without it, life would be so much lonelier…' his expression softened.

'You're saying there would be compensations to living the rest of a very long life trapped inside a grove?'

'I'm saying that sometimes, you can make your own compensations,' he replied softly. 'That a cage doesn't have to be a cage unless you make it so. And those horizons can be limitless, or tiny. The choice is ours.' He took her arm and led her back towards the others.

'What if I decide not to enter the cage?' she asked as they walked.
'Why don't we just cross that bridge when we come to it?' he replied, with a reassuring smile. 'One problem at a time, Cleo. One problem at a time...' He paused briefly in his stride, almost causing her to stumble. 'On which note - about our little problem with Shizuka, and how we might solve another we both have…'

She listened, as he laid out his suggestion.

And she had to admit, it was both far more merciful than she would have been to the ambitious cow, and at the same time horribly, perfectly vindictive… 'I think,' she said slowly, a smile spreading across her face as she contemplated Harlock's elegant solution, 'that you just might have hit upon the perfect punishment.'

He looked down at her, a wicked smirk flickering across his mouth. 'Really? Because Kei was leaning more towards eviscerating the bitch.'

Cleo smiled back at him. 'Oh no - far too merciful. For someone like Papheo, this is far more appropriate.' She savoured the solution inwardly. 'Given how terrified she seems to be of your ship, I think she'll even put her own head in the noose…'

Harlock's devilish smile broadened. 'Oh, I'm sure of it. But it's not exactly my ship she's so terrified of…' He pulled out a chair for her as smoothly as his crewman had earlier when they reached the table again. 'Now - shall we give this ship a destination? We have a fleet to catch, two small boys to rescue, a tyrant to depose and a universe to save…'

'Gawd,' Ali drawled, 'Makes me feel knackered already just listening to you…' That got a laugh around the table, before they got down to business, and Cleo was soon bombarded with questions regarding the layout of the mothership, the military fleet, and the next drop-out destination of the fleet.

Less than two weeks, Earth time. And given the time the Arcadia was going to have to take to help the abandoned ships, it was clear they'd be pushing even this ship's legendary speed to the limit.

So they probably didn't need the interruption about an hour into her light-hearted but thorough interrogation, from a blue-haired human sporting noticeable gill-slits on his neck, to tell them that the Machine Empire and the Gaia Alliance had declared war on the Mazone fleet and were even now preparing to despatch two large fleets to intercept the other convoys.
In the crepuscular, candlelit expanse of the captain's quarters, Daiba laid down the tablet book he'd been reading with a heavy sigh, and kicked at the rug under his feet. The replica Persian carpet - over three hundred years old - barely moved, given that Harlock's massive gothic desk stood firmly on the other end of it, and the chaise longue Daiba had planted himself in earlier, beer in hand, held the other side in place.

'You know, I think Mimay drapes herself over that a lot more elegantly than you do,' Meg told him. She lay on her front on the large bed, chin resting on her hands, her legs kicking about behind her, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. Nami and Freya were curled up next to her, fast asleep, Nami's dark head resting on her brother's shoulder, although Mamoru stubbornly refused to close his eye and sleep.

'Mimay's a girl. Girls do elegant. Guys slouch and slurp beer,' Daiba informed her suiting action to word. 'Right, Mamo-chan?' Mamoru smiled wanly at him, and curled up tighter next to his sister, who shoved him slightly with an annoyed mutter and settled back down again, eyes still tightly closed.

'How many's that?' Meg asked Daiba through narrowed eyes.

Daiba shrugged. 'You've got eyes, I think you can count.' He waved a hand at the empty bottles at his feet - three, plus the almost empty one in his hand. 'And don't give me that rolling eyes thing, Meggie - this isn't one of Maji's paint-stripper brews. It's Tabito brewed. From Blaze's cache.'

'I'm rolling my eyes because you're being a grouch and not sharing, you pig,' Meg grumbled at him. Daiba stuck his tongue out at her, reached down to the side of the couch and grabbed one of the last bottles. 'Catch!'

She caught it, but only just, and apologised to Mamoru for almost smacking him on the head with it. 'Aren't you two supposed to be baby-sitting?' he asked, yawning the last word.

'It's traditional, Meg told him primly. 'You lot go to bed, babysitters eat junk food, drink beer and…'

'Snog?'

Meg glared down at him. 'Well you're feeling better if you're cracking wise again, Mamo-chan,' she grumbled at him. She ruffled his hair and grinned at the mumbled "gerroff" the gesture earned her. 'Seriously, brat. Get some shut-eye. You want your mom and dad fussing over you when they get back?'

Mamoru shook his head but didn't settle back down, and Daiba set the now empty bottle down with its fellows. 'Back - from the important meeting to plan the Big Damn Heroes rescue that we don't get invited to, but Blaze does? He's not one of the Arcadia's crew, and we are!'

Meg popped the top off her beer and took a long glug. 'He is so one of us. Captain's always said that whilst anyone's on board, they're one of us. Except skanky red heads who kidnap cute little boys. They don't get a pass…'

'Cassandra's a red head, and she's mean,' Mamoru piped up. 'Cleo didn't like her much, nor the other lady. The one who…' He shivered and wrapped his arms around his small torso. Meg put her drink down and hugged him, and Daiba made his way over to the bed and sat beside them, careful
not to disturb the sleeping girls - although as he sat down he thought he saw Freya's large eyes flicker open, briefly. But it was the little boy who worried him. There was a look in Mamoru's good eye that reminded him all too much of the one he'd seen in his own eyes in the mirror.

'Hey, kiddo.' He rubbed Mamoru's back awkwardly, not sure what to say. 'You know, if something's bothering you, you can tell us, right? Something you saw? Trust me - I know what it likes to see stuff you can't unsee.' He glanced over to Meg and added. 'We both have.'

When Mamoru didn't reply but stared down at the cover of the bed, where his hands clenched tightly, the fabric pulled taut between them, Daiba opened his mouth to speak, but the younger boy beat him to it. 'She was the one in the caves… and on the ship… she tried to hurt Wattaru, and… she… this…' one hand released the cover and brushed the patch covering his right eye. 'And Zeuxine… and her sisters… they were so nice to us, and the ships were so badly damaged, but if they'd just left them alone, or helped them to a planet, they'd have been fine. But she ordered her soldier mazone to open fire. Said the weak had no right to live, to slow everyone else down. Which is wrong, isn't it? If you're strong you're supposed to help people who aren't?'

Daiba though for a brief moment the question was directed to him, then saw that Mamoru was staring at the massive double door of the room, which stood open, Harlock standing framed by the gothic gateway. He strode easily but wearily into the room and Meg got out of his way to let him sit down next to his son. 'I've only ever asked that you try.'

Mamoru nodded, and leaned against his father, his dark head pressed against Harlock's chest. 'The queen's worse. She and Cassandra - they don't care. Cleo's friend wanted to save people, but she got caught. And they made Cleo… Her friend said it was okay, for her to do it, but it really wasn't. She had to hold her, and the tree… the tree…' he stumbled over the words.

'It's all right, Mamoru. If you don't want to…'

Mamoru looked up into his father's concerned face, and shook his head, his own face tearstained. 'No. I want to tell you. So you know. What they do. The tree ate her. But when it was done, we could see her - her face, staring out at us. In the bark.' He shuddered and Harlock held him closer, whilst Daiba swallowed hard, at the mental image.

He'd seen those faces… in the walls of the ancient ship on Tokarga…

'The walls of the ship…' he murmured. He looked into Harlock's eye and saw the understanding there. They wouldn't just be fighting the human-type mazone, it seemed. The ships are mazone… How do you fight that?

'They can move between them. The walls,' Mamoru added. 'I've seen them come out of them. It was scary at first, but most of them just ignore you. Most of them look like trees, or plants, just walking like us. But I think most of them are like the walls - they're alive. Not human. Older. And some of them… their eyes are so black. Worse than space. Colder.' He shivered again and his voice dropped to a whisper as he added; 'They hate us, papa. They hate us so much… But no-one would tell us why…'

Harlock ran his hand over his son's hair, smoothing it gently. 'Because a long long time ago, life evolved on Earth - way back in the dawn of time. And life feeds on life. Animals eat plants, and these plants weren't like the rest. They were conscious, intelligent. They've always been with us, although they sent themselves into space several times when threatened. But they always tried to protect themselves from us. Animals. Humans. And then your great-grandfather destroyed Earth, and in trying to put that right, something else went wrong and destroyed their second homeworlds. Because of us, they have no home now, and these ships are all that's left.'
'Are you going to put it right?' Mamoru asked. Daiba's eyes met Harlock's again, and the weary compassion in that gaze was a knife in his heart.

'It looks as though I have to try…' Harlock replied on a sigh. 'But it seems I need to start smaller. Can you close your eye and go to sleep for me? Doc tells me you really need to, small fry.'

'I can't,' Mamoru whispered. 'I see it when I do.'

'The lady in the tree?' Daiba asked.

Mamoru shook his head slightly. 'The darkness. The one in their eyes. I feel it staring back at me now, when I shut my eyes. If I go to sleep it might not go away when I wake up.' He looked up at his father again. 'I see Wattaru in the trees. And Nami, and Taro… an' Yumi, and you, an' mom…' his voice trailed off with a tiny gulp, and he buried his face in his father's sweater, exposed by his open jacket.

Daiba shuffled uncomfortably, wondering if he should stay or go. 'Captain…'

'It's fine, Daiba. Don't feel you have to leave on our account. You're family.' Harlock's voice was slightly huskier than usual, and he stroked Mamoru's hair with a gentle hand.

Daiba reached out and took one of Mamoru's small hands in his, frowning slightly at the cold, slightly clammy grip as the little boy curled his fingers around it. 'It's just… I know how it feels. From both sides. To see stuff you can't unsee, and to watch someone else trying to cope. Mamo-chan - it's okay to sleep. Dreams can't hurt you. Unless you let them. They're not real. And on the Arcadia, the darkness isn't bad.'

Mamoru raised his teary face and smiled weakly at him, and Daiba gave that cold hand a gentle squeeze.

'You should get some sleep yourself,' Harlock told him quietly, studying his face. Daiba lifted one shoulder and dropped it.

'I'll be okay.' He shifted until he could slip from the bed to the floor, standing, Mamoru releasing his hand reluctantly. 'When do we get to hear what you decided in the meeting?' he asked, casually, as though in passing. Harlock, not fooled for a moment, tugged off his eyepatch and rubbed at the scars under his right eye.

'Tomorrow morning. First thing. There's quite a lot to discuss, and we also have to take care of those refugees first - which promises to be a circus…' Daiba nodded, stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed for the door, only to be stopped by the sound of a throat being cleared. He looked back over his shoulder.

'Captain?'

'Aren't you forgetting something?' Harlock jabbed a finger towards the beer bottles on the floor. Flushing, Daiba scrambled back to pick them up, muttering his apologies as he fled, narrowly avoiding sending Kei flying as he flew past her, the captain's chuckle still ringing in his ears.

Kei strode into the room, and the doors shut behind her with a resounding clang. Since they operated on a silent pneumatic system, Harlock suspected Tochiro wasn't in a good mood either.

'I expect Hoshino to be a first class prick,' she seethed. 'But honestly, Leopard seems to be trying to
steal his crown. How the hell can two brothers be so different? Zero was twice the man that stuffed shirt is.'

Harlock raised a finger and she quieted, her features softening when she saw the children piled on and around him. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be. I had to walk out myself or I'd have called him a few names. But I'm the wrong person to ask, remember?' He patted the bed next to him and shifted over slightly to let her sit down. With a little prompting, Mamoru transferred himself to his mother's lap and settled down against her. 'I take it things deteriorated even further?'

'Destiny's apparently fine with us running point, but then that elusive dirigent Layla seems to have a soft spot for you. Rokuro has started relocating the aquatic mazone to Tiamat, where, as we found out the hard way, they have a presence already. The rest are so happy not to be forced to travel in unsafe, dying ships towards certain death they practically leapt at the chance of settling some of the more marginal worlds - it didn't take much of a friendly hand to persuade them to offer their expertise in restoring worlds like Mistral and Mercia. But it seems Promethium really has a bee in her knickers over the destruction of her old home on Tabito. Rokuro had to fight off one squadron of machinners that appeared out of nowhere and tried to intercept his refugees. He's steaming. Leopard refuses to acknowledge that he was out of his jurisdiction and started posturing about how Destiny was getting too big for its boots claiming space it wasn't entitled to. At that point Blaze jumped in and called him a few names, and Leopard played his genetic superiority card calling him a half-breed mongrel and a traitor. Ben waded in supporting Blaze and when Leopard called him a posturing peacock, that's when Ali lost it. Thankfully I don't think Leopard speaks latin - although Hoshino does and since he was smirking, the only saving grace is that those two testosterone-addled morons can't stand each other.' She heaved a sigh and stroked Mamoru's cheek, before bending her head to drop a kiss on the healing scar. She sent a glare in the direction of her lounging captain. 'All of which you conveniently found an excuse to miss, I notice.'

He ignored her accusing tone, busying himself making Nami comfortable in his lap, and making room for Freya to snuggle between him and Kei, conveniently also close to Mamoru. The little nibelung seemed to have taken a shine to his eldest son, and from his instant accommodation of her, the feeling was mutual. 'After Rokuro's bombshell, I thought I'd better escort our guest back to her quarters. For all the regular military calling me unprofessional, they're the ones who tend to resort to underhanded tactics and name calling... I didn't really want to show her the darker side of life out here just yet.' He grinned. 'Although I suspect that one's not as frail as she looks. She's tiny, but she strikes me as a bit of a scrapper...'

'You like her?'

Harlock shrugged. 'I think she's desperate to find a way out of this mess that doesn't involve genocide - on either side. She's had a rude awakening. Happens to us all eventually. You and I both know that there comes a point when you start to question the people you trust, and follow...'

Kei smiled fondly at him. 'You still need to work on your image, you know - you're still a bit of a softy under that eyepatch and leather routine.'

'Not,' he corrected, 'when it's time to throw down the gloves.' He smiled back, briefly, then turned his attention to the children. Nami was nodding off again, but Mamoru was still painfully wide awake, and Freya was looking at her new friend with a worried frown. 'Now what am I supposed to do with you three? Think you can all settle down and leave me and your mother some space?'

'We don't have to go to our own room, do we?' Nami asked sleepily. Harlock smiled down at her.
'No, you don't.'
'I'm not sure mom will ever let any of us out of sight again,' Mamoru quipped. He yawned.

Harlock sighed. 'Hello - I'm right here as well…'

Kei patted him on the arm. 'There, there. You're supposed to be the big, hard space pirate who lives for freedom, remember? I get to be the clingy one, obviously.'

'Nice, nii-san,' Nami added. 'Insult both mama and papa, why don't you?' Mamoru stuck his tongue out at her, and yawned again.

'Close that eye,' Harlock ordered gently. 'I'm right here. Nothing and on-one will get past me and your mother.

Freya reached out a small hand and laid it gently on Mamoru's cheek, and the little boy smiled at her. 'She's sweet, papa - is she staying?'

'She does seem to have a way of winning people over,' Harlock drawled, but he winked at the pair, and Freya smiled back at him prettily with her tiny, pale rosebud of a mouth. 'I think we can squeeze an extra one in. It wouldn't be the first time.'

But Mamoru's visible eyelid had already closed, and in seconds, he'd dropped into a deep sleep, breathing more easily than he had in the past few years.

Kei stared at her son, narrowed her eyes slightly when she caught Freya staring at her innocently, and then looked at her husband. 'Did she just…?'

Harlock sighed and began to unfasten his boots, being careful not to disturb the children. 'Kei. Take the win.'

Since she didn't seem to have noticed the thin wisps of blue flame passing from Freya's long fingers to wind around his son's small body, he decided to keep his mouth shut.

Þú varst svo nálægt - þú þurfti bara að klára ferlið… You were so close - you just needed to complete the process… Her voice in his head was soft and bell-like. En myrkið mun alltaf vera hluti af okkur…

But the dark will always be a part of us.

He glanced quickly at Kei, busy stripping her own boots off and making inroads on her flightsuit which fitted tighter than a wetsuit and was almost as difficult to peel off.

What the hell, he thought, watching her before deciding whether or not to tell her. She'd relaxed as soon as Mamoru had fallen asleep, and after watching her restless, compulsive fretting for the past few weeks, he hadn't the heart to disturb her fragile equilibrium. What's one more secret on this ship?

Daiba had made his way back to his quarters, but despite turning off the lights and lying on his bed with his eyes closed for over an hour, sleep refused to come.

Every time he felt as though his eyelids were drooping, he'd jerk awake again, in a cold sweat, gasping for air even though rationally, in his quarters he was safe.

But the feeling of being so exposed, so aware of the fact that only some high-tech fabric and a
metal can stood between him and the cold hard vacuum of space refused to go away. Those last few minutes before Harlock and Meg had broken into the bullet had been the longest of his life - even more so than the night Nana had died, and he'd been sitting in a cold prison cell with her blood on his hands...

Eventually he gave up, swung his legs over the side of his bed and fumbled in the dark for his boots, not bothering with the lights.

He'd gone less than ten yards down the corridor - the sconces dimmed as ever in the Arcadia's interior - before he heard another door open behind him, and footsteps pitter-patter to catch up with him when he refused to stop or slow down.

'Where are you going at this time of night?' Meg asked. He did turn around briefly, and noticed she'd just thrown on a short dress, and her feet were bare.

'You'll get cold feet,' he told her. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jacket and carried on.

'Go back to bed.'

She trotted after him and slipped her arm into the crook of his elbow. 'Seriously, Daiba. Doc said you needed to get some rest.'

'I can't,' he muttered. But he slowed down to accommodate her shorter stride. Or to put off his arrival. *Whatever…*

'You're going to the hangar?'

'Umm.'

'Is this about facing your demons or something? Because I think we have a few days. You don't have to…'

'I do.' He took a deep breath. 'I have to face it. Or I'll never get back in the cockpit. Can you understand?'

She gave his arm a squeeze. 'Better than you think,' she told him soberly. 'Niobe, me and Tadashi all had nightmares for years after Harlock rescued us. You took care of me a few times over the past few months when I've had a bit of a flashback. I'll never really be comfortable in small dark places, but I eventually made myself deal with it. Helps,' she added lightly, clipping him around the ear, 'to have friends.'

He turned just far enough to smile down at her. Then he took his hands out of his pockets and squared his shoulders. 'Thanks.' He hoped it didn't come out sounding too grudging. He was trying to not be so damn touchy when someone was being helpful. It just took more effort than he wanted to give it, some days. But she slipped her hand into his and they walked on in a companionable silence.

The hangar containing the bullets and the fighters was deserted when they entered. The cavernous bay was only dimly lit by distant sconces which made barely a dent in the pools of darkness between the spheres of pale light they cast. Daiba had to resist the temptation to scuttle from one tiny island in a sea of night to another, like a child trying to avoid stepping on cracks in the pavement, and for similar reasons: after all - you never knew what might be lying in wait for you… He shook off the feeling, but couldn't shake the trickles of cold sweat forming down his back, and in the pits of his arms. *Pull yourself together, idiot,* he told himself. *This is why you're here.*
The irony didn't escape him - he'd reassured Mamoru not so long ago that there was nothing to fear on the Arcadia from the darkness. He leaned against the cold hull of the bullet, breathing hard.

'Daiba?'

Meg, sounding worried, and staring at him from underneath a riot of golden curls her eyes radiating concern.

'I'm fine. I can do this. It's not as though we'll be taking it outside, is it? I just need…'

…to know I can climb back into the cockpit. After all, one bulkhead or two between me and the cold… If I can't do this much… He took another steadying breath, lowered the ramp and stepped inside the small craft.

A handful of strides took him from the ramp to the cockpit, and he stood for a moment staring out of the viewscreen at the shadowy hangar beyond, his hands gripping the back of the pilot's chair so hard his fingers dug into the tough, artificial leather covered shock foam. Then he slid into the seat with as much confidence as he could muster, and reached for the external light control. The screen went black, and the only light now came from the internal lights of the bullet, none of which were bright enough to cast even the tiniest sliver of light into the darkness.

He shivered, remembering too late that there was a reason most of the crew wore sweaters on board. Here in the hangar the life support was minimal, since it otherwise took far too long to bring the ambient temperature and oxygen levels up to ship's optimal operating levels when the shuttles and fighters were constantly moving in and out.

'I should have worn my combat jacket,' he mumbled. The one he'd picked up was more of an outdoors layer, not space wear.

'I should have worn some clothes,' Meg added, sounding cross. 'Brrr. I forgot in all the hurry.'

He held out a hand. 'Then come and sit by me. Might be a bit warmer?' He smiled. 'Room on this seat for both of us. I'm skinny and you're tiny.' The lower oxygen level was starting to get to him, he thought, as she moved closer. His hand shook slightly when she took it to help clamber over the controls between the pilot and co-pilot chairs.

'Hey. It's gonna be okay, Daiba.' She smiled playfully. 'If it helps, I can provide a distraction…'

Meg settled herself on his lap and leaned forwards to kiss him, causing the scoop neck of her dress to fall forwards, exposing the tops of her small breasts and the shallow valley between them. His breath caught in his throat. 'Meggie…'

Her lips brushed his, soft as a feather, and her tongue flicked between them with no resistance on his part. 'Sweet Gaia, Meg - are you even wearing a bra under that?' The pale lemon dress was made of a whisper-fine cotton, and the lights in the cockpit rendered it translucent, hints of the darker pink of her nipples showing through.

She grinned at him as she sat back, laughing at the groan he let out when she inadvertently let her weight bear down on the increasingly uncomfortable bulge in his now far too tight leather pants. 'Tadashi-kun, I kind of just threw this on to follow you. I'm not wearing anything under this…'

He gulped. 'Way to go a guy's mind off his new traumatic trigger by setting off the old one…'

She leaned forwards again, and this time took his hands in hers, placing them on her tiny waist just as she licked his left earlobe. He almost shot out of his seat. 'Daiba, you haven't triggered a panic
attack with me snuggled against you in weeks… but I'd never make you do anything you didn't want. Just say stop and I will.'

He moved his hands slowly, stroking her through the thin fabric from her waist at her back, round to the front and then inch by inch up across her stomach, tracing the lie of the bottom ribs, then up to cup her small breasts through the fabric, deliberately rubbing the material over her already hard nipples. She sank her teeth into his shoulder to bite back an inarticulate moan and it was his turn to laugh. Her own hands were moving in the opposite direction, fumbling with the skull buckle at his waist and sliding a small, warm hand slowly downwards.

'Fark, Meggie, any lower and you'll find the trigger all right. I mean, you've practically wrapped your hand around the barrel…'

She giggled. 'Silly Daiba,' she whispered into his ear, the warmth of her breath a potent turn on all of its own. 'I don't think I can wrap anything around it easily…'

'Flattery,' he said with mock primness, 'will get you anywhere…'

'Who's flattering?' she deadpanned. 'I've just got really tiny hands…'

'Oooh… burn…' He grinned and slid his hands back down over her body via her shoulders, stroking her back as he kissed her, slipping his tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers, shyly at first - both of them heading into uncharted territory.

She tasted of sharp cherries, and inwardly he smiled. Yep. That was Meg. Sharp and spiky, but soft still, not sour. She wriggled impatiently on his lap trying to persuade him to move his hands back to her front, but he refused to budge.

When his left hand felt the rough edges of her scars through the thin cotton, she flinched, and he paused, surfacing from a deep kiss to look at her, and run his other hand over the soft curls framing her face. 'Meg…'

'They're ugly!' She burst out, tears threatening to form in her wide eyes. He kissed the tip of her nose.

'I don't care. I mean, I care. I care that those bastards used you as a slave in their mines. I care that you got burned. I care that you had to watch so much bad shit go down that no little girl should have to go through. But they don't make me like you any less, if anything, they show me how much there is to like about you. I care that they make you feel bad about yourself, but they don't make me want to stop looking at you, or touching you, or even…' and he tilted his head down so he could touch the curl of rougher, darker skin that peeked out of her dress on her shoulder with the tip of his tongue and lick it gently, 'taste you…' His lips, still touching her skin, curved into his self-mocking smile. 'Cuz I sure as hell can't see you. When did you turn the lights down?'

'Whilst you were distracted. How are you feeling?'

Funny, he thought, listening to her voice settle again, how this distraction thing worked both ways. But then, it helped if that's what you wanted… but still… darkness...

He took a ragged breath and sat up. He forced down the panic that welled up, threatening to choke him, and felt her shift on his lap, until her cheek brushed against his. 'Breathe,' she told him gently. 'It's just darkness. There's plenty of oxygen, and you're safe. And I'm here. Just concentrate on me…'

'Me, me me…' he growled lightly at her, making her laugh again, a bell-like sound that right now,
he couldn't get enough of. 'It's all about you, isn't it?'

She kissed him sweetly, then bit his lip. 'Of course it is, rookie. And you're slacking. I believe your hands were… about… here…' she moved them from the points of her hips, to the point on her thighs were the hem of her dress reached, so that they rested partly on the material, and partly on warm, soft skin. 'If you recall, we'd established that I'm. Not. Wearing. Anything. Under. This…'

The sudden light-headed feeling this time had nothing to do with a lack of oxygen, Daiba thought, unless you counted the fact that his blood supply was being diverted to regions significantly below his lungs…

'Relax,' she breathed into his ear. 'This isn't my first rodeo…'

He forebore from replying that technically, it wasn't his either… but then, the circumstances weren't exactly worth recalling and whilst the pilot's seat wasn't an ideal location, it sure as hell beat some of his previous scenarios. Meggie being both small enough to fit comfortably on his lap and agile and willing enough to do most of the hard work more than made up for the awkwardness in the clinches when they got out of sync...

'Next time,' he whispered a little later, once he got his breath back and his brain re-engaged. 'A bed - and I promise, a lot more practice…' And find out who the hell had made her so frikking self-conscious about those scars and have a quiet word in a dark corner...

Before she could answer there came a loud banging on the hatch to the bullet, and a loud voice bellowed 'Oi! Whoever's in there, this thing's on the maintenance rota - get your arse out here so the rest of us can do our job!'

Meg, struggling in the cramped cockpit to readjust her clothing, blushed - at least, judging from the sudden flush of warmth of her skin against his. 'Oh, crap. Ali…'

Daiba had to wait until she'd disentangled herself - with his help, since extricating her legs from around his, and sliding out from the seat required a little assistance, swallowed hard. 'Shit. Out of interest, was he joking those times he threatened to castrate me with a rusty spoon if I "violated" you? Coz if he was, I'm not leaving here in this lifetime…'

She tapped his arm lightly as he fumbled for his various zips and fasteners and tried not to trap anything vital as he did so. 'Well…'

'Oi! Shake a leg! And unlock this bloody door. Whoever's in there had better have a damn good excuse!'

Daiba winced. 'I'm a dead man…' he muttered. He fumbled for the lights, but Meg beat him to it, and at the sight of her crumpled frock, flushed face, wide eyes and the knowing little smile dancing around the corners of her well-kissed mouth, his heart sank into his well-scuffed boots. 'There is no way he's going to believe a word we say,' he told her. He risked a sideways glance at the chair and breathed a very surreptitious sigh of relief that at least they hadn't marked the upholstery… Or his pants...

She stuck her tongue out at him and shimmied her way to the airlock. 'Oh, relax! It depends what you tell him!' She opened the hatch before he could raise an objection, and Daiba tried to hug the wall out of sight as Ali's blond head appeared around the entrance.

'Meg - mind telling me what -' his eyes narrowed as he looked her up and down, and then flickered unerringly to where Daiba was standing in the shadows. 'Daiba…'
His name came out as a low growl. Meg moved between them and gave her guardian a hug. 'Oh, lighten up. Daiba needed to get over his collywobbles about getting stuck out there. I figured a distraction might help.'

Daiba didn't think a man's eyes could narrow quite so much outside of a cartoon. He gulped.

'Distraction. Is that what you're calling it these days?' He stepped onto the ramp and lifted Meg out of the way, placing her down behind him. He patted her on the rump. 'You - run along. I need to have words with this one…'

'But-'

Daiba warmed to her even more for trying to stand up for him, but enough was enough. 'It's okay, Meggie - I'll catch up.' If I live that long…

She went, reluctantly, but if he was any judge, it wasn't far. Not that it did her much good as Ali closed the hatch behind her. Daiba moved away from the wall and stood his ground with his hands stuffed into his pockets as Ali advanced.

'Look, we're consenting adults,' he began, as the older and considerably larger man moved closer. 'Yeah. I know. Captain just wanted me to make sure you were okay, which is why I was riding herd on the little minx. She doesn't always think this shit through, and you were kinda delicate for a while when you first came on board.'

Daiba had to shut his mouth with a click as his teeth met. 'What?'

Ali turned to look at him and winked. 'Oh, Gaia - your face… I shoulda put the cameras on. That was priceless, when I walked in.' He whooped. 'Seriously. You look like you were about to shit yerself. But since you seem to be lookin' a bit perkier, how about you give me a hand checking over this little baby, since you almost totalled her?' He must have noticed Daiba's legs almost give way in relief because he sniggered. 'Oh man… almost as much fun as when I caught the captain and Kei going at it in turret twelve a few years back… catching the badass Space Pirate Captain Harlock with his pants down, looking like a kid who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar…'

Daiba slid back into the pilot's seat with an audible sigh of relief and a sudden need for a cold shower. 'I thought for a moment…'

Ali's cheerful grin could turn in a split second into what could only be described as a nasty smirk. 'Oh, kiddo - you ain't off the hook, but I figure going over this baby rivet by rivet will be penance enough.'

It was, Daiba thought, his recent endorphin high receding rapidly into memory, going to be a long night…

It took him a few minutes of following Ali through the system checks before he thought to ask: 'Why the urgency? Once we're in IN-SKIP we won't be using this until we contact the fleet again…'

Ali answered without looking up from a panel he was checking. 'She's the only craft capable of taking multiple passengers right now - and the captain's taking her over to the refugees tomorrow.'

'I thought Cleome would be coming with us, to help fight Rafflesia?' Daiba frowned, wondering
what the hell his cousin was up to.

Ali’s sigh could have moved mountains. 'Yeah… well… it ain't Cleo we're dropping off. Seems he's found the perfect solution to deal with that pesky redhead in the brig. You know how he feels about penance and second chances…?'

Ali had to give the lad some bonus points for waiting at least seventy-five seconds before he blew a gasket after hearing Harlock's plans for the mazone bitch. And if nothing else, he thought smugly, it'd take his mind off being back in the bloody cockpit so soon after almost going dutchman out there when they flew the duplicitous cow over to the refugee ships. And frankly, who'da thunk such a nice, well brought up Martian lad knew words like that?
Kei awoke, startling herself awake from a dream that had faded by the time she opened her eyes. She lay on her back, trying to catch her breath, wondering why she still appeared to be paralysed - until she realised the weight on her legs was Nami, and the one on her chest was a combination of small alien and her oldest son, snuggled between her and Yama.

He of course was sleeping like the dead - if the dead snored quietly and had a tendency to grab hold of body parts in the night. At least this time his hands were over his side of the bed. She turned over slowly, careful to not awaken the children, and stared at the image in front of her as she leaned on one hand. In sleep, it was always as though the cares and worries of the last thirteen years had been swept away, and she had her Yama back. With his hair scattered with careless abandon around his face and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly in the gentle smile she'd come to miss over the past few months she could almost - almost - believe that time had stood still. That they had just left Earth one step ahead of Gozo Hoshino and the Mephisto, with a universe to play in and a powerful, fast, self-repairing battleship to do it in.

Before they'd discovered a planet where the empty shells of the victims of the Machinner empire were being dumped by the millions. Before Lazarus and his Mechanical Council and his sick, twisted games. Before the War. Before the plague. Before friends had died, before they'd lost their daughter, before…

Before, before, before…

Before a cold hard universe decided it had more use for a Captain Harlock than it had for Yama, and she'd gone along with it, even encouraged it, thinking it for the best...

She rested her free hand on Yama's cheek, and brushed the hair out of his eye, before running a finger gently down the short length of the blaster scar on his cheek. Then she repeated the gesture on Mamoru's soft cheek, her fingertips flinching as they traced the still sharp line of the knife wound on his face. Mercifully his right eye was pressed into the mattress next to her as he mumbled in his sleep.

She smiled sadly. My poor boys… So alike, father and son. She didn't have to look far to know what Mamoru would look like as a young man. He - and his twin - were so like their father, she struggled sometimes to see herself in them.

Wattaru. Taro.

Tears threatened to fall. I should be glad I have Mamoru back… but…

But… they still have my sons.

And that simply will not do.

Gentle fingers brushed away the cool salty trail that had made its way down one cheek against orders. 'Not long now, I promise,' he said softly. 'What time is it? I can't see from here.'

She took refuge in the levity, even knowing that for both of them, it was a buffer zone. 'Too lazy to turn over?' she teased, although without much conviction.

'I'm kind of pinned,' he replied with a pained expression alternating with his mocking smile.
Oh… we both take refuge in that place… But she looked down to see Nami sprawled across him, her arm thrown over his waist. 'Well, you've been in worse positions,' she quipped, forcing herself to match his levity. 'Seven am, and time we were both up, if we want to get moving.' But she didn't want to move. She wanted to take in this moment and hold it. Father and son, and their daughter, and little Freya (and how do you so readily accept that a two-hundred year old alien kept in a bubble all her life as a living control system is just a child?). And if there were two small-boy-shaped holes in that picture, and fate had cruelly decided to create an even stronger resemblance between Mamoru and his father, it was still a better picture than she'd woken up to for the past few weeks.

And she wanted to hold onto it for a little longer because once he left the bed, once he'd showered, taken the fuzz off his cheeks, ran his fingers through his hair, thrown a mug of coffee down his throat and tied a patch over his blind eye, pulled on the skull-fronted flightsuit, and the matching jacket, and the skull and crossboned buckled gunbelts with their cosmo dragoon and sabre rifle… even if he didn't reach for the gravity cloak, Yama would be gone before he even reached the door and Harlock would walk out to treat the universe with the contempt it deserved.

'Kei?'

His voice broke into her reverie, and she gave herself a mental shake. 'Just daydreaming,' she told him a brightly as she could, trying to ignore the little furrow between his eyes that said as loudly as words that he didn't believe a bloody word of it. One of these days, they would call each other's bluff.

Maybe.

She toyed for a moment with saying something. Anything. Breaking that unspoken accord they had for so long. It would be so easy, and who knew him better than she did? Who knew better just how to find the words that would turn him away from a course she'd helped - encouraged - him to steer for so long.

'Yama…'

The door opened even as he opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong. And the moment was gone, as Mimay trip-trapped her way across the floor, their graceful, lovely, implacable jailer, coffee mug in one hand, lemon tea in the other.

Coffee mug in hand, Harlock stared at Kei over the rim as she brushed Nami's hair. 'Your's is getting that long,' he told Mamoru as his son snuggled against him as though afraid to let him out of arm's reach. 'Stand around here long enough she'll threaten to put it in pigtails.'

Mamoru looked up at him and smiled. 'S'all right dad. I'll wait until she's done with yours…'

Harlock, taking a sip of coffee at the time, spluttered and had to wipe frantically at the front of his sweater. With nothing else around to assist, he picked up the cravat lying on his lap and dabbed at the mess with it, ignoring Kei's tsking at yet another ruined. He balled up the offending article and stuffed it in a pocket to dispose of later.

'He has a point,' Kei told him. She shooed Nami off her lap and turned to Freya. 'So - do I have any other takers?' Freya squirmed into Kei's lap and leaned happily into the firm strokes of the brush, rather like a cat. Since her fine hair was so much longer than Nami's shoulder length cut, Kei indulged herself by braiding the silky mass into an intricate braid from both temples, forming a central plait in the centre and down her back, leaving most of her hair free.
'Which of us would that be?' Harlock asked. He winked at Mamoru and was rewarded with his eldest's sly grin. 'I think the bird's made itself scarce - probably thinks if it hangs around here it'll end up with ribbons in its tail feathers.'

'Instead of around its beak?' Kei asked, finishing tying a green ribbon at the bottom of Freya's braid. 'There. Pretty as a picture!' She accepted a kiss on the cheek from the little girl and smiled as Freya shimmied off her lap and ran over to Harlock for her cuddle. 'Anita caught it yesterday with its beak in the freezer, trying to make off with a frozen herring - and failing dismally since the damned things were frozen together in a block, and whilst trying to smack the package against the side to break it up, the silly thing overbalanced and fell in…'

Mamoru sniggered and Harlock had to hide his own smirk behind his coffee mug at the image. 'Daft thing would have broken its beak trying to eat it - but I thought Anita was quite strict about the doors?'

'One of her new recruits forgot and left it open a crack. You know how he can wriggle that fat feathered butt through some impossible spaces…' She looked over Harlock with a sigh. 'Honestly - look at the state of you. Were you planning on going out of this cabin dressed like that?'

'Like what?' Harlock asked innocently as he cast an eye over his sweater. 'It's clean.'

'It's beige…'

'Nothing wrong with beige.' He finished his coffee and set the mug down on the antique desk he was perched on.

Kei just glared at him, her hands on her hips. 'For a deckhand, no… but if you're going out there to be intimidating, might I suggest something a little more…'

'Piratey?' Mamoru hazarded. He had his father's cheeky smile and wasn't afraid to use it, and at the sight of the pair of them staring at her with matched innocent expressions, Kei found the corners of her mouth twitching slightly.

'Don't encourage him, Mamoru. If we left it up to your father "Captain Harlock" would be -'

'Exactly what he is,' Harlock interjected. 'No-one's looking at my clothes Kei.'

'Beige or grey do not exactly scream "badass space pirate,' she sniffed.

'No. I leave that to my enemies,' he replied evenly. 'I have no problem with people underestimating me.'

'I do,' she replied firmly. 'If they're running away pissing their pants in terror, they're not shooting at you.' She jabbed an accusing finger at his chest.

'If they're only running away from a tall skinny bastard in black, I'm not doing my job properly,' Harlock pointed out reasonably. Kei just glared at him and tapped her foot. He smiled and dropped to the floor, walking over to her with an easy, long-legged stride. He stopped next to her and leaned in closer, to whisper in her ear: 'Who do you keep trying to convince, love? Me, the rest of the world, or yourself?'

'Ya-'

'And that's just it, isn't it?' He kissed her gently, barely brushing her lips with his own. 'It's not armour, Kei. It won't protect me out there, and underneath it, I'm still me. Strip the trappings off
me and most people will still see Harlock. You're the only person who still sees the man behind the skull and crossbones and thinks he's vulnerable…'

'It makes me feel better,' she whispered eventually, staring into his eyes. 'I know it's stupid, but I need to see the pirate, not the man when you have to go out there. I need to know it's what they'll see…'

'They've been the same for a long time,' he told her gently. 'What do I have to do to prove that? Face off against Hunter in my boxers?'

She gave him a little shove. 'Oh, you. Next time we cross his path you'd bloody well do it just to prove the point, wouldn't you?' He said nothing, just placed a chaste kiss on her cheek before picking up his jacket.

Mamoru eyed his mother from under the long, dark lashes of his visible eye. 'Why is it so important, mom? That he looks like a pirate?'

Kei walked the few paces between them and placed her arms around her son, holding him close. 'Because despite what he thinks, people do judge by appearances - if he walked around incognito in scruffy leathers and a tattered cloak, he'd just get challenged by any drunken idiot looking for a fight. But people believe the legends of Captain Harlock - they see a man in black leathers and a long cloak with a scar and an eyepatch, and they hesitate. There aren't many people who'll tangle with a legend of his magnitude.'

'I don't want to frighten the leaves off these mazone, Kei. They're scared enough already - they don't need some macho dick in black looming over them and scowling.'

Mamoru thought for a moment. 'Wouldn't he just be a bigger target, for anyone who wants to make their own name? Maybe if they don't know who he is, then they'll not take precautions…'

'Precautions,' she corrected sharing a smile with Harlock. 'Mamoru-chan,' Kei replied with a sigh. 'There are times I wonder if your father just out and out cloned himself when we made you…' She ruffled his hair, smiling at the way he ducked and muttered a lighthearted "gerroff". She held him closely, a lump in her throat at the way he hugged her back tightly. 'You can ask him one day just how badly wrong things go when he goes off on his own in disguise.'

'What she doesn't tell you,' Harlock told Mamoru, 'is that for most of those I wasn't alone, and most of the jobs that go tits up generally have nothing to do with what I'm wearing.' He paused. 'Or not…' He shrugged himself into the dark brown flight jacket and zipped it up.

Kei slapped his hands away from his collar when he tried to fiddle with it. 'Don't go there. It took me weeks to unsee the footage of that auction block, with you and Ali packaged like a couple of turkeys for the oven,' she said primly. 'Hank was pissing himself laughing when he handed it over…'

'Dad?'

Harlock half choked. 'When you're older.' He glared at Kei. 'A lot older.'

'Cloak?' she asked, handing him his gun belts. He settled first the dragoon and then the sabre rifle on his hips, and said nothing. Loudly. She sighed. 'Fine. Have it your way. You usually do. Just remember whatever you're wearing, blood clashes with everything.'

'Well I can't wear red - Luna tells me it makes it harder to see the bits she needs to concentrate on.'
'Not. Remotely. Funny.'

No, Harlock thought, but at least she'd replaced worry with "pissed off". He'd take the win. 'Let Blaze take the helm for bit whilst I'm over there. The Arcadia needs to take his measure before we hit trouble. I'll take Ali and Daiba up front - and Sabu and Yasu for muscle. Have that pair move the prisoner up to the hangar and meet Cleo and Ben at her ship. We'll need a few volunteers to help move civilians from the damaged ships to the viable ones - three or four, I think we can spare. We're running light but I left some room for losses.'

'Four would take us down to forty men, not counting you and Mimay,' Kei replied, her forehead crinkled into a frown. 'That's a bit too close once we get into combat.'

'It's enough,' he told her calmly. 'I'm not looking for a drawn out shooting war. Your call though. They can hitch a ride with the SDF relief team when they get here, back to Tabito.' He gave the children final cuddles and left the room - not without a backwards glance before the doors shut behind him.

For a ship almost a kilometre long, the Arcadia could be remarkably cramped in places. But then the bulk of her interior was taken up with her engines - both the dark matter drive and her standard thrusters took up a lot of room, followed by weapons, life support systems and sensors - and in the Arcadia's special case, one very large central computer. Her corridors could be enormous, true, the inner passageways tended to run over abyssal depths and tallvaulted ceilings where the lights failed to reach. All of which, he was assured, did serve a purpose - mostly by keeping one volatile system separated from another.

'Could you not have just made the living quarters a bit bigger?' he murmured as he walked, dodging a shoji game in progress, and getting a startled look from one of the crew. One of the new guys, since the longer serving crewmembers were used to their captain wandering around at all hours talking to himself.

You think you can do better? was Tochiro's snippy response that only he could hear.

'Give me a couple of crayons, I'll give it a go…'

Everyone's a critic… It'd help if you'd keep the numbers down.

Harlock smiled as he entered the lift. 'To what? Your old friend's levels? The ship'd be barely functional in a drawn out battle after the first twenty-four hours. I've pared it down too far as it is this time. Another twenty would have been better, but…'

But you went with conserving stores, expecting a long drawn out search, not a long drawn out fight. I get it. I just hope you bet on the right horse, my friend…

'So do I,' Harlock told him. The lift opened and he stepped out into the corridor outside the main hangar. 'So do I…'

Better make sure we make any engagements short, sharp and sweet, hey?

'Better yet,' Harlock muttered as he entered the hangar, 'don't get into them at all.'

'Don't get into what?' Ali asked. He straightened up from where he was coiling one of the coolant hoses to the bullet. 'Kei's knickers?'

'Is that all you ever think about?'
Ali pretended to think about it. Before he could answer Harlock slapped him on the back hard enough to overbalance him. 'Hey!'

'Deal with it. And I wouldn't repeat that where she can hear you.'

Ali snorted. 'Puh-lease. After twenty years of threatening to castrate me, emasculate me, eviscerate me and one or two things I can't even pronounce, I'm still in one gorgeous piece, and I don't think she'll start now.'

'I'll take that bet!' Daiba's head popped up from an inspection hatch, and he grinned up at his captain. 'Hi! Ali - pass me the wrench will you - I can't disconnect the connector on the access hatch for the CO2 scrubbers. I think it's bent.'

'Gawd…' Ali handed him the tool and smirked. 'You should not hand me those lines, kid…'

Daiba let out a theatrical sigh. 'Ali, I think it'd take more than this- he waved the wrench around, 'to straighten you out!' he vanished back down the hatch before Ali could grab him by the hair, his laugh echoing in the underbelly of the hangar.

'Smart-ass little…' Ali growled.

Harlock smirked. 'If you can't take it, Ali, don't dish it out - how many times have I told you that?' He didn't wait for a reply. 'What's gotten into him this morning? He's positively chirpy, which is unusual for any teenager, let alone that one. It's unnerving…'

Ali's grin re-appeared, almost from ear to ear. 'It's not so much what got into him, as who he got into. If you get my drift…' he nudged Harlock in the ribs, soliciting a pained grunt and a growl from his captain. Harlock raised an eyebrow, and Ali nodded. When no further questions were forthcoming Ali dug him in the ribs again. 'Ain'tcha gonna ask who?'

'Not my business as long as it doesn't cause any operational problems. Now where are Sabu and Yasu with my prisoner?'

'On their way. Though why you asked for those two jokers. That pair…'

Harlock leaned against the wall with his arms folded. 'They're good guys, solid, dependable. We'll need some muscle, and I can trust them to not get creative with their orders.'

'They ain't got the smarts to get creative,' Ali corrected. 'It ain't always a good thing.'

'It is when dealing with something as duplicitous as that woman,' Harlock riposted. 'If I tell them to get from A to B, they'll do it.' He waited for Ali to get within reach and gave him a friendly jab in the ribs. 'Time was a lot of people on this ship thought the same of you, Ali. And look at you now… all grown up and responsible, and practically my right-hand man on all those little side-trips Kei hates me making without her…'

'Jab that finger somewhere else, and don't even think about ruffling my hair you bloody sod.' Ali's growl didn't quite work, given that he was struggling to stop grinning. 'Good job she only knows about half of what we got up to.'

'Awww… Is this the part where you grab each other and start frotting up a storm in the alcoves? Because if so, I need to make some calls - and sort out a camera…'

Daiba ducked back down into the observation area as Ali aimed a kick at his grinning face. 'Smart mouth and a filthy mind, that one. I think I liked him better when he was still all sullen temper and
sharp edges.' He hitched up his pants and tucked his sweater back in. 'I'll prep the little bird over there for take-off. Sooner we're done with this goodwill mission, the sooner we can get back on the trail of the rest of 'em.'

'The sooner we can go back to a life of leisure,' Harlock added with some feeling.

'You don't do leisure,' Ali pointed out as they walked. 'Unlike the last guy, sitting with your feet up and a glass of pricy plonk in antique crystal in your hands, mooning about the good old days ain't your thing. I mean, you're not as bad as Kei, who never saw a spare second she didn't want to arrest for loitering without intent, but you always find something to do, even if it's just staring into that posh microscope you had us "liberate" from that science station around Proxima. Or dragging some poor, unsuspecting, innocent schmuck into one of your schemes…'

'And sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong?' Harlock asked archly. Ali pantomimed firing a gun at him.

'Bingo. Got it in one. And that tends to end up with said someone being threatened, shot, spattered, stabbed, crushed, tortured, groped, hanged…'

'That last was once, and in my defence, if a: you'd not gotten that hornet down your shirt you'd have kept your feet on the barrel and b: if you hadn't let that bounty hunter lead you around by the cock we'd not have ended up there in the first place. I thought we were going to have to fish your eyeballs out of her cleavage…'

Ali grinned back. 'Good times… I thought Zero was gonna pop a blood vessel a couple of times, but he was up there on top of that damned space-train keeping pace with us like a pro exchanging fire with those weird-ass dial-heads. Me, I was having kittens about that force-field failing…'

'I noticed,' Harlock said dryly. 'You were clinging to my neck and whimpering in my ear when we reached the atmosphere.' They stopped at the hatch. 'Simpler, isn't it? Good guys, bad guys, a bit of thievery here and there, a spot of old-fashioned piracy and taking out the trash when they get in our faces? Now tell me - you never had that much fun with the old captain, did you?'

'I think I had fewer stitches… And be fair - it's not as though he had as many friends as you do to lead astray.' He smirked. 'Not sure he'd have been up for that train job though… far too much like hard work!' He nudged Harlock with his elbow. 'Well hey, Tweedledum and Tweedledummer managed to find their way here without losing their prisoner at least.'

'Will you stop being such an arse to those two? You've known them and fought with them for twelve years…'

'Well who else can I pick on? Yattaran's got meaty fists and a bad temper, and the rest are either too intelligent, too nice or just too damn pretty. Or female. Your recruitment policy sucks sometimes - I mean, someone has to be the bottom of the pecking order.'

'Oh, Ali - you're such a child. You sound like a prefect at my first prep school.' He didn't argue the point too hard. Sabu and Yasu weren't the sharpest tools in the Arcadia's toolbox, true, but within their limitations they were solid. If he was brutally honest with himself, the main reason he defended them against Ali's griping was more that the pair had been his first recruits as a captain - alongside Anita and Zack - and a tenuous link to his old life. Their unwavering support over the years was sometimes a blessed relief when he was faced daily with Yattaran and Ali's constant carping. And for some reason they'd also taken to Kei and would happily lay down their lives for her without being asked.
'They just don't have enough brain cells between the pair of 'em to be hypnotised,' Ali muttered into his ear as the pair came closer, a manacled and gagged Shizuka between them. 'You found the hangar then?' he quipped as they came to a stop a few feet away. Sabu - almost as tall as Ali, black haired and seemingly built of slabs of beef under a cut-off tee, flipped him the bird. His partner - bald, middle-aged and almost as wide as Yattaran around the middle, just shuffled nervously. Their prisoner stood limply between them, her head down and her red hair covering her face. Her hands were shackled behind her back - after a disastrous encounter some years back Harlock had insisted that no prisoner was ever cuffed in front during transport. 'Give you much trouble?'

Sabu grinned. 'Not when we made sure to walk her through after we dimmed the lights ahead of us. Benjy suggested she might be a bit less ornery if she had to walk in the shadows.'

'Ben's a proper bastard,' Ali replied with a grin. 'Gotta love that guy.' He stepped forward and took Shizuka's arm and pulled her roughly towards him. 'I'll take care of her from here. You two might want to see if Daiba needs a hand - I can hear some swearing from under there so he probably needs a real man to unstick that connector…'

An echoey, distant, "I heard that!" floated up from under the grill they stood on. Ali grinned cheerily. 'See?' Once they'd walked - or waddled, in Yasu's case - away, he looked expectantly at Harlock. 'Gag or ungag?'

'Ungag. And let her have her arms back where she can see them. Cleo's here with Ben. Decision time…'

Ali had the gag removed from their prisoner and re-chained her in front before Cleo and Ben came to a halt next to them. If anything the gesture made their prisoner even more miserable than before. When Ben's tall form momentarily cast a shadow over her as he moved between Shizuka and the light sconce, she visibly flinched. She refused to look Harlock in the eye, but did raise her head when Cleo stood in front of her. Ben stood beside Harlock, both men with their arms folded regarding the scene with similar aplomb. To Harlock's right Ali folded his arms, glanced over, unfolded them and stuck his hands in his pockets.

'Shizuka Namino.' Harlock took a step forwards and let the red-haired mazone take the full brunt of his stare. She blanched, but held her ground, dropping her gaze to stare at something near her toes, which were bare and grubby. She still wore Ali's old red sweater over a pair of pants that had also seen better days. 'Look at me.' Harlock rarely raised his voice, but he did have a way of making it carry - usually under a heavy load of contempt, a trick he claimed to have learned from his brother. Her head jerked up and she looked into his eye briefly, before lowering her gaze again and shivering.

'You were responsible for several atrocities against the human race. A spy and a saboteur. For that alone, you'd stand condemned in any Alliance court. Your actions have come close to causing another war between Alliance and Colonial space, you instigated an attack on a friendly world resulting in the deaths of several friends of mine, and handed my sons over to your people. Thanks to Cleome, I have one of them back, but he'll carry the scars of that experience for the rest of his life. You attacked my crew whilst in my custody and one of them now lies in our morgue. And for those crimes, I'd normally just stuff you into the nearest airlock and open the outer hatch.'

'Why doesn't he?' Ben asked in a whisper behind Harlock's back. 'Why all the talking?'

'Patience, dear boy,' Ali whispered back. 'Patience…'

'Do it,' Shizuka replied, sticking her nose in the air and pulling some defiance from some last hold-out. 'Anything would be better than another night on this vessel. It's so tainted by the darkness I can
almost taste it!' her voice rose on the last note.

'You'll be leaving this ship,' Cleo said softly. She stepped out of Harlock's shadow. 'Papheo. You have a choice. You can die here, or you can take a chance and find your way back to us. Your choices - your rebellion - have caused your own people much grief. Harlock has agreed to spare your life and hand you over to my judgement, but only on the condition that you fulfil the terms I offer you. Should we return and find this is not the case…'

'I'll be back to finish the job,' Ali interjected. He stepped up to stand next to Harlock and laid a hand on the butt on his pistol. 'I love those kids like my own, and you almost killed another who I've practically raised. Hell - most of the crew want a piece of you. Mind you…” he sniggered nastily, 'they might have to get in line. I mean - who knows where our old captain can walk, on the long dark nights…'

'Ali.' Harlock's quiet voice was enough to make the crewman back down. He spoke again to Shizuka. 'There are several ships out there stuffed to the rafters with your people. Civilians mostly, who have been dying by the thousand because of the ambitions of their leaders. Those ships will not make another IN-SKIP jump, but there is a world within reach of your sub-light drives. So here's the deal. You are to get them safely to that world, and protect them. And to act as an interpreter for the men I'll leave with them to help. It will not be easy - you'll have to ditch some of those ships and try to move the inhabitants to more spaceworthy ones before you can even move. There's no guarantee you'll even make it. The planet is compatible, but barren. Once you reach it and land it's unlikely you'll ever be able to leave.'

'If we succeed,' Cleo added, 'We will come back to help. But if we fail…'

'We will be alone…' Shizuka whispered.

Shizuka stared down at her manacled hands. The shackles weren't heavy, but they were well fastened and made of a tectite alloy that would not break. The constant whispering just on the edge of her hearing had worn down her defences hours ago, and every shadow seemed to tremble and reach out for her when she looked at it.

The one at Harlock's booted feet was slightly doubled, as though two men stood there, not one, the second taller than the first. But it was just the overlap from the two sconces he stood between.

The offer wasn't an olive branch, and from the looks on the faces of both Cleo and Harlock, both of her judges knew it. She'd been raised on Mars, in the luxury of the elite quarter of the citadel, and moved to Enceladus with the government, living in a climate-controlled apartment with any luxury she wanted simply a comm-link away. Her brief time on Tabito had been her first walk outside of a controlled environment, and the dusty, windswept, filthy planet had not endeared her to the outdoors.

She was a hothouse flower, and Cleome knew it.

Briefly, she toyed with simply asking Harlock to either just shoot her, or make good on his threat to stuff her bodily into the nearest airlock.

Thankfully he hadn't suggested making her stay on board. She'd have walked willingly into the airlock if he had.

She stared at her hands, the nails - once perfectly manicured - now cracked and torn. Her toenails, she reflected, had fared almost as badly. Her feet were cold, standing as she did on the bare metal
grid of the hangar floor, and she could feel each tiny square digging into the soles of her feet. The low lighting had left her feeling lethargic - in contrast to Cleo who presumably had been given much better lit accommodation. Then again, the relaxed body language between the tiny corpse flower and the blue-skinned pirate hovering next to her was even more suggestive. Despite Harlock being in charge, it was the magellentite that Cleo's eyes kept flickering to look at whenever anyone spoke, taking her cues from him.

He'd been assigned to guard her as well, before she'd make her ill-judged break. She might have written him off as an affable distraction if she hadn't caught a glint in those brown eyes that was almost as disturbing as the cold glare in Harlock's. Between him, the deceptively thuggish blond at Harlock's side, and the pirate himself, she felt as though she was under the gaze of three very large, very angry cats, all staring at a tiny mouse. She felt like calling her two dim-witted guards back for protection.

There was another pair of eyes on her. She stared past the small group in front of her, and met the eyes of a younger man - barely more than a youth - glaring at her from under what she had started to think was the default tousled look a lot of men on this ship appeared to sport as a styling choice. The hatred in those dark eyes was almost tangible, and far less restrained than the open contempt in Harlock's. She swallowed hard, her throat and mouth painfully dry all of a sudden.

'You should just kill her.' Delivered in a soft pleasant tenor, the sentiment somehow felt even more terrifying than a growl or snarl would have.

No-one looked round. They all looked at her, the men with amusement, Cleome with something approaching pity.

'There are worse things than dying.' Harlock's reply was equally soft. 'This isn't a free pass, Daiba. What she's being offered is hard, dangerous and thankless, and there's no guarantee of survival, and even less for congratulations for a job well done…' his mouth quirked into a one-sided smile that of all things appeared to be self-mocking - just for a heartbeat. 'But she'll have to choose it for herself. The path to redemption…' and again with that self-mocking flicker at the corner of his lips 'isn't easy.'

'Someone needs to coordinate these ships,' Cleo said, her delicate contralto a counterpoint to the male voices. 'You have the skills, Papheo. The question is, will you submit to the will of your people, and serve as you should. Without glory, without fanfare. To protect, and guide, as is our remit. This is what we were both born for.'

Cleo stepped towards her, and despite her shorter frame, Shizuka felt as though in looking down into the shorter woman's eyes, she was looking up to her. So yielding to the urge to kneel in front of her and lower her head was both instinctive and right. 'I will serve.'

Cleo lay a hand on her head then, a gentler gesture than she'd expected.

The slight jolt that went through her entire frame - as though every cell in her body had somehow reacted to that touch, was just as unexpected. She stared up into Cleo's face her own features shocked out of her normally carefully schooled composure, and saw the same shock on her compatriots face. Just for a moment.

The acknowledgement came unbidden, shared only between the two mazone.

*My queen…*

Cleo lifted her hand from her gentle benediction quickly, hoping no-one amongst the men would
notice her shock. To no avail, it seemed, since Harlock looked amused and thoughtful, Ali narrowed his eyes at her and Ben, so close she could almost think she could feel the heat of his body, gave her an appraising look-over from head to toe, and then nodded once in acknowledgement, with a reassuring smile.

'Well then,' Ali said eventually, breaking into the peculiar silence. He rubbed his hands together. 'I take it we have a go?' He hauled Shizuka to her feet unceremoniously and gave her a push in the direction of the bullet's ramp, past a still glowering Daiba who had his hand resting on his pistol. 'Sooner we drop this off, the sooner we're out of here.'

Ben offered his hand to Cleo. 'We're taking your little vessel over, my lady. Should reassure your people before the big scary pirates show up.'

She nodded her acquiescence and allowed him to lead her towards her little walnut-shaped craft.

Daiba watched Harlock closely as Ben escorted the tiny mazone towards her craft. If the older man had any misgivings about the decisions made, he wasn't showing them. However it was his lack of attention to Ali's prisoner that really stuck in his craw.

Before he could spit it out, three more crewmen came crashing onto the hangar decking, their boots clanking on the metal grill. A tall crewman he'd seen around but couldn't easily put a name to - though he was hard to miss - the man sported a shaved head and more tattoos visible under a cut-off tee than he'd seen pictures hanging in an art gallery - vivid colours designed to be accentuated by his mahogany dark skin. From what Daiba could see they sleeved both arms, and extended under his tee from both shoulders, suggesting his entire (muscular) chest was covered, and curls of orange-red flames licked sharp cheekbones, with a bright bird of paradise emerging from the flames on his scalp. The effect was striking, and highlighted even further by an array of piercings both external and subcutaneous following the lines of his riotous artwork.

The other two were Tadashi and Meg.

'Val.' Harlock greeted the tattooed crewman with a nod. 'Thanks for stepping up.'

'Captain. Thanks for the opportunity.' The men shared a sly smile. 'I don't get many chances like this.'

'Oportunities?' Daiba couldn't quite keep the incredulity out of his voice. 'For what?'

'Valentine's a linguist.' Harlock's grin grew a little wilder. 'What - you thought I'd place my crew at the mercy of that duplicitous bitch without backup? I've had him analysing every sample of their language we've come across to date.'

Val shrugged. 'Don't pin too much on me, captain - I warned you yesterday, I've not had much to work with.'

'It's a better option than none at all,' Harlock replied. 'Join the others inside - we'll be with you shortly.' He then turned his attention to the younger pair. 'Just what are you two doing?' he gave a pointed look at their hand luggage. 'Tadashi?' Daiba's namesake was porting not only a rucksack, but a small black bag that had a white cross on the outside.

'I'm going.'

'Like hell.' Harlock's reply was instant, emphatic, and final.
'What the fuck do you want to do that for? They tried to kill you!' Daiba's reply was far less authoritative. He stared at the other Tadashi in something approaching horror. 'You almost died!'

'Yeah. That's kind of what "tried to kill me" means...' Tadashi looked at his captain. 'Harlock - this is what I do.'

'Join a lengthy rescue mission for an alien enemy race that could go tits up at any moment?' Daiba muttered before Harlock could reply. The captain's response was an exasperated look at both youths.

'Tadashi…'

'I want to help, Harlock. It's what I decided to do with my life, a long time ago. You saved me, you taught me what it is to be a real hero - now it's my turn to give something back. These people need help.'

'You're a doctor, not a gardener,' Harlock snapped.

Tadashi shrugged. 'So? They have humans there, even if they've been changed. And I can learn, can't I? They're hurt, they're lost, they've been betrayed and abandoned by the people they thought would protect them. They're trapped in space in vessels that are falling apart, and they need our help. So tell me - did you really think I would stand by and not lend a hand?' He hefted his bags in each hand to re-stabilise his grip, and held firm, his homely face resolute.

'You've only just gotten out of sick bay - what does Luna have to say about this?' From Harlock's slightly desperate tone he was down to playing his last card, because from what Daiba knew of Tadashi's history, the little guy had just totally outplayed his captain.

'She thinks I'm crazy, but she understands.' That broad chin jutted forwards, defying Harlock to talk him down. 'It's my choice, captain.

It was the little downward drop of Harlock's shoulders that told Daiba that the pirate had given in. That, and the beaming smile on Tadashi's face. He settled his rucksack's strap on his shoulder and strode past his captain. As he passed Daiba, the younger man couldn't help but mutter: 'You're mental' as he went past. Tadashi's reply was just to give him a little knowing shrug and carry on walking.

Which left Meg shuffling her feet, a delicate little snippet in pink and white. 'And I suppose you feel the same way?' Harlock asked her wearily. She nodded.

'We talked about it. It's the right thing to do.'

'Meg…' Daiba hadn't meant the word to come out the way it did - pleading and needy and whiney, all rolled into one tiny syllable. But he remembered their long talks over the past few months. The nightmares she'd wake from where she'd be back in that tiny cramped container, air running out, food already gone, surrounded by the bodies of her friends who hadn't made it. And he got it. It was just…

'Why don't I take your bag?' He walked past Harlock with his shoulders squared, and took it from her, smiling back when she smiled at him. 'Fuck me, Meggie - what have you got in here? Half the armoury?' He pantomimed a stagger under the weight and grinned when she punched him on the arm.

'More supplies, dickhead.' She took his other arm and led him up the ramp, only hesitating as they passed Ali coming back down it, but he only scowled and said nothing - at least until he reached
Harlock.

'Are we okay with this?' he asked. Harlock just grunted. 'Ah. That bad, huh? You know, I could go up there and chuck 'em off for you. They both expect me to play the grumpy old bastard card, you wouldn't have to be the bad guy.'

'I'm the captain - it's always my call. It's their lives, Ali. They are adults now, and we did kind of teach them to think for themselves and to do the right thing, no matter how hard it might be. Besides - in some ways this might even be safer than taking them into battle. If I thought Daiba would stay, I'd suggest leaving him behind as well…'

'Huh.' Ali stared into the dark interior of the bullet. 'Yeah. Don't think even boning Meggie last night will put a pin in that one's plans…' He shuffled uncomfortably then scratched at his left ass cheek. 'Ah. Better. I see you managed to talk our resident parakeet into coming along. Or was it enough to dangle an entirely new language under his nose?'

'One day you're going to make one of your appalling derogatory comments to the wrong person and I won't be there to save your hide, you do know that? And I didn't have to persuade Val - he jumped at the chance. That he's also one of the best hand to hand fighters on board didn't even factor into my choice…'

Ali arched his scarred eyebrow. 'Nooo… far be it that you'd ever be a manipulative bastard and cover our bets with one of the few people you can spare to stay in charge of things whilst we're gone… not to mention the only other exotic, attractive, distractingly sexy young man apart from Ben who can be trusted not to fall for a pretty face who isn't me, you or Blaze…'

Harlock started walking towards the bullet, forcing Ali to keep up. 'Ali - you haven't been young since before I came aboard,' he replied dryly.

'I notice you don't contradict me on the exotic, attractive and distractingly sexy,' Ali shot back.

Harlock ducked to enter the bullet. 'I didn't contradict you on "man" either,' he said lightly.

He was three paces into the bullets interior before the indignant "oi!" reached him, and made his way through the crowded passenger section to the cockpit ignoring the startled looks he got from his crew at his smirking chuckle. He slid into the co-pilot seat next to Daiba and buckled up. 'When you're ready,' he told the youth. He sat back in the chair and relaxed, turning just enough to be able to see Daiba in the peripheral vision of his left eye. As the hangar was opened to space he spotted a slight stiffening in the boy’s posture, and a hesitation as he reached for the throttle. But Daiba's voice to Kei over the comms as he cleared them to move out, and his hand on the controls were both steady as they cleared the rear of the Arcadia, sliding out from the dark matter cloud around her and into open space.

On the viewscreen the overlay of the energy signatures from the mazone ships blinked erratically as the little craft sprang towards them. In its wake, Cleo's shuttle followed them.
Chapter 49

The argument reached the bridge ahead of the men actually having it. The bridge was a cavernous space, soaring upwards at the rear where the massive control system for the dark matter engine squatted, looking at first glance similar to a brassy cathedral organ. This, as most of the crew tended to quickly realise, had the property of causing even the softest voice to carry.

The most strident speaker in the group trooping onto the lower operational floor of the bridge had never been known for his soft, dulcet tones.

'All I was sayin' Ali whined, 'was that you'd be missin' your soulmate. Why you got to get yer panties in such a bunch…'

'It's what you were implying I don't like. You always gotta make a joke about it, like every guy who hangs out with another is sharin' a bunk. I got a lass back on Tabito, you big jerk. What you think she's gonna say about it if you've been blowin' off yer big mouth claiming I'm bonin' someone else?' The latter speaker was Sabu, and he didn't sound at all happy. Kei - currently discussing the shift changes with Franz and Martinez, rolled her eyes and sighed. The two crew - a pair of the few survivors of the original crewmembers from the previous captain's tenure, exchanged grins.

'I see Ali's projecting again,' Franz told his friend. Martinez chuckled and ran a hand over the shaved pattern to the side of his mohican. 'After all this time you'd think he'd learn. Remember when Bob took umbrage about his teasing?'

Kei laughed out loud. Bob had been large, bald, tattooed, built like a brick shithouse, with fists like hammers, and had totally blindsided Ali that day, to the everlasting amusement of the crew. 'Oh my. Do I ever! Frenched him right in the middle of the bridge right over there!' she waved her clipboard in the direction of the row of consoles in front of the giant viewscreen. 'Even raised a smile from The Captain, and that took some doing…'

The three convulsed further as the crew stomped onto the deck, Ali sporting the beginnings of a black eye, Sabu muttering under his breath as he took up his station.

'Gawd, Ali - you never learn, do you?' Franz slapped his comrade on the back as the scowling pirate strode past him. 'You've been on those guys' backs for years - did it never occur to you one of 'em would lamp you one eventually?'

'You want that lip ferret removed in the middle of the night?' Ali growled at him. Franz stroked the aforementioned luxuriant moustache and grinned nastily. 'You can try, blondie. You can try - but let he who is without mutton chops strop the first razor…' He laughed again as Ali growled something unrepeatable at him. 'Yeah, yeah. Your mother said the same thing… Oi - Sabu - nice one! About time you gave the grumpy bugger what for.'

Martinez strolled over to the hulking pirate and slapped him on the back, wincing and shaking his hand afterwards. 'Yeowch. I really shouldn't do that. Nice one, Sabu.' He peered back down the side of the bridge, past the smaller passage which went past the steps to the upper gantry. 'How come you're back though? I thought both you and Yasu were staying?'

'Thanks, Estaban.' Sabu lowered his head slightly, looking more than a little abashed. Ali having seniority amongst the crew, smacking around a superior wasn't always appreciated. Kei, watching from behind her clipboard, hid a small smile. The blond twat had had this coming for a long time -
and she'd repeatedly tried to tell Sabu and Yasu that a well-placed punch wouldn't go amiss. 'Captain left Yasu for the heavy lifting, brought me back over, since Meggie and Tadashi volunteered.'

'No problems?' Kei asked. The upper gantry hadn't yet been graced with the captain's presence, since a quick glance had shown Blaze still leaning on the upper railing, watching the proceedings with a sly grin.

'Nah. I mean, no, Miss Kei. Those girls are in a mess though, but if they can move them onto the space worthy ships, they'll be fine. He stopped off to talk to…'

'I can't believe you actually let them go!' Luna's voice ran ahead of the speaker, cutting through the air like a knife. Ali found something on his console in need of urgent attention and both Franz and Martinez took the opportunity to check over the communications suite under the gantry, safely out of sight but where they could listen to the fireworks.

'Tadashi told me you understood why he wanted to do this.' Harlock's voice preceded its owner by only a couple of steps as he took the stairs to the upper gantry, closely followed by Luna's lighter footsteps clanking on the metal.

'Understood, yes. I kind of hoped his captain would be sensible enough to actually put his damn foot down and tell them not to be so stupid.'

'Luna - they're both adults. They both felt very strongly about the situation, and made the decision freely. I'm not in the habit of telling my crew how to live their lives.'

'I suppose that's also your excuse for throwing poor Valentine to the cougars?' she snapped.

'Awww, Luna - you're just mad about that coz you'll miss staring at his tats,' Yattaran sniggered. 'Gotta admit though, if you're into that sorta thing it's impressive. He was showing us the one on his back last week…'

Luna let out what could only be described as a smutty laugh. 'Oh that's nothing - you should see what he's got tattooed on his…'

'Doc!' Harlock's voice cut through the chatter with an edge of mild desperation. Kei toyed briefly with going to his rescue, then decided to let it go. Instead she picked up the conversation she'd been having before the interruption. 'Franz - the port wing?'

The mustachioed crewman strolled over to her, a smile peeking out from under the fur on his top lip. 'Sheesh. Is it me, or does everyone get louder the worse things get?'

'It's not you,' Martinez replied. He ghosted over and peered at the readings Kei held out. 'But you really want to go back to the way we were before? All that naval-gazing? I mean, it was quieter but how much of an expert on your belly-button lint does anyone need to be?' He pointed to the readouts. 'The vibration's within tolerances, but you're right, it is a bit off. We did do a number on that part of the structure getting rid of that mazone weed. Need us to take a look, Miss Kei?'

'Can't hurt to check it in person. Grab Maji on your way - he was looking over the optical cannon on that side.'

'Will do.' Franz cast an enquiring look up to the gantry, and waved to Blaze, who was doing his best it seemed not to laugh himself over the edge. 'Shouldn't you go and give the captain a bit of moral support?'
Kei laughed. 'Hell no. He's a big boy now, he can take it. Besides he just lets her run out of steam and shoos her off the bridge when he's had enough.'

The pair departed at a fairly respectable jog. Kei nodded approvingly. At least she could rely on some of the crew to pull their weight… She glanced over to where Ali was standing, glowering at Sabu's utterly uncaring rear. 'Don't you have something more important to do?' she called out.

'My station's just fine,' he growled back.

She walked over and slapped her clipboard down on top of his console. 'I beg leave to differ. If you'd bothered to check, we've had problems with the port side tracking - so kindly get your arse moving in the direction of the main ratchett controls and give Karl and Tanuki a hand. The middle turret track keeps sticking and I want it fixing before we ship out.'

To give him his due, the grumpy bastard could - and did - pull his head out of his arse when needed. He gave her a short, sharp apologetic nod and strode off, breaking into a run as he cleared the bridge bulkhead. Kei lowered her head to let her hair fall over her face to hide a world-weary sigh.

'Anything I need to know about?' Harlock's head now appeared next to Blaze's, both men peering over the gantry railings, in almost identical poses, arms resting on the top rail with deceptively casual disregard.

'A couple of glitches in the pre-flight checks. Nothing major, but since they're all in the area we kind of trashed not too long ago, I've put the guys onto checking them out.'

Harlock frowned. 'What does Tochiro have to say about it?'

'His readings can't nail down anything specific. It could just be the self-repair hasn't quite finished - we did take a lot of damage, and flooded the area with dark matter to boot. It could be interfering with his sensors.'

'Or we might be storing up a problem for later. Go over it - put as many on it as you can spare. Yattaran - I want you on the problem. Get your head together with Maji. Blaze - if you wouldn't mind, take his station for me whilst we wait.'

Blaze nodded and strode over to the station to the left of the wheel as Yattaran vacated the spot. 'You can order me around, you know. The others might think you're playing favourites…'

Harlock leaned on the wheel, idly toying with one of the balusters. 'If anyone tries that one out on you, they're yanking your chain. It doesn't work like that around here.'

'And I thought we ran a relaxed ship or three,' Blaze quipped. His demeanor quickly turned sombre. 'I tried talking to my uncle whilst you were gone - not sure why I bothered, it's always like pissing into the wind. Hard to believe we're related some days.'

'Family can be like that,' Harlock replied, a rueful shadow of a smile on his face. 'Every time his name crops up in conversation I can guarantee someone asks me if I'm sure one of us wasn't adopted. Usually Kei, since I think she worries about the heritability of asshole-ness.'

'Funny. Both my parents used to pull that one on each other when we were growing up. Except it's not so funny when your family tree contains on one side Uncle I've-got-a-stick-up-my-arse-Frank, and on the other my batshit crazy mecha-aunt and my two very scary cousins. The first pair of whom seem determined to escalate this. It really won't take much to push this into a four-way shooting war if we're not careful.'
'If the SDF isn't careful they'll have a tough time keeping the Alliance and Machinner fleets out of this space. Promethium's wanted an excuse to take back what she sees as her territory for years.'

'That's partly why they're hoping you can keep a lid -'

'Me? And by "they" you mean your mother and Commander Layla?' Blaze's grimace was all the confirmation he needed. Harlock leaned a little more heavily on the wheel. 'Oh no. We discussed this, Selen and I. I have one ship - what do people think I'll do if they start hair-pulling in the playground? Come running all guns blazing and giving them a stern talking to every time? That's not happening.'

'One ship that out guns, out manoeuvres and plain old scares the pants off everyone who looks down its gun barrels,' Blaze countered.

Harlock took his hand off the wheel and straightened, staring Blaze in the eye. 'Maybe, but where would it stop? Humanity needs to grow up and fight its own battles.'

'Like the plague ship? Or Loki? Or the Counts Mecha? Or the Machinner War? Or - let me see - the Mazone?' Blaze replied pointedly. He shook his head. 'You're already in it up to your proverbials my friend - I doubt there's a planet in five galaxies that doesn't have a story or three about the great Captain Harlock, Earth's heroic defender…'

Harlock snorted. 'Well there you go - that's not me - I was born and raised on Mars…'

Blaze jabbed a finger at his chest, connecting with the skull motif on the right breast. 'You know what I mean. Stop taking refuge in sophistry.'

Harlock batted the offending digit away with a scowl. 'Taking refuge in the truth. If I keep rushing into every border squabble, they'll never learn. They can't just sit there hoping someone else will run to the rescue - I can't be everywhere, and I won't, legends to the contrary, live forever.'

'Maybe your predecessor was right, and the universe will always make sure there's a Captain Harlock?' Too late, Blaze remembered recent events, and pulled a face, silently berating himself.

'To hell with that,' was Harlock's emphatic reply. 'Any universal "destiny" that wants Mamoru will have to go through me first.'

'That's kind of how these things work,' Blaze pointed out, not without sympathy, and on the basis that if you've already lost sight of daylight, why bother to stop digging?

'Thank you, Captain Obvious,' Harlock replied sarcastically. 'The other Harlock was plain wrong about a lot of things, and frankly clueless even about his own state. Not that he had much help.' he shot a glance back over his shoulder, to where Mimay was standing in front of the dark matter engine, her back to him, the orb glowing faintly under her hands. 'And frankly, he wasn't too stable either. Still isn't if anyone wants my opinion,' he muttered.

Blaze laid a hand on his shoulder. 'I do get it, for the record - so does mom, dad did and Marin. You're not the kind of man who starts falling for his own publicity - or corrupted by the power you have at your fingertips.'

Harlock smiled grimly. 'Anyone can be that kind of man, Blaze. And anyone can be corrupted. That's partly the reason why - for the most part - I pick my battles carefully, when they don't pick me first.'

'Hate to break it to you, but you did just agree with me,' Blaze replied. He patted Harlock on the
shoulder and gave him a slight push. 'It's because of your integrity that you're the one we all look to when things go tits up. You might feel you ought to just walk away and tell the lazy, ungrateful bastards where to shove it, but how often do you actually follow through on that threat?'

'Not nearly often enough,' Harlock told him with some feeling. 'But we all walk a fine line.'

Blaze's mouth curved into a cynical smile. 'At least we don't sit on the fence. Mom's having trouble getting Layla Shura to commit to anything beyond letting us have Rokuro's fleet. We're stretched way too thin for this, if both the Alliance and the Machinners decide to play hardball with the fleets they're intercepting.'

'Layla always sits on the fence,' Harlock replied sourly. 'Whilst I appreciate that being able to see the "gears of fate" means being able to see the outcome of interfering, sometimes her tendency to just let the dice fall where they may is even worse. She paralyses herself into inaction when a timely warning might save lives.'

'She'd argue you can't change fate.'

'How do you know unless you try? I don't like the idea of going quietly.'

'Me, I came into the world kicking, screaming and covered in someone else's blood,' Ali called out as he bounced up the stairs two by two. 'And I plan to go out the same way.'

'You get those out of fortune cookies, don't you?' Blaze suggested. He folded his arms.

'Nah. T-shirts. Amazing what you can find in the right shops. Yattaran said to tell you-' he turned his attention to his captain 'that despite a few niggles, we're good to go. Just don't try to pull any high-speed acrobatics if you can avoid it.'

'Could he be a bit more specific than "a few niggles"? Harlock asked, a note of desperation creeping back into his voice.

Ali shrugged. 'I told him you'd say that and he just said he could tell you, but it'd take a couple of hours, and you'd need Tochiro to translate the big words.' He strolled past the younger men and took up Kei's station. 'Basically I think it's down to force-repairing that section, and ideally we could have used a few more days to let the self repair do its job. Which we ain't got. Tochiro's reply was something snotty about blowing bits off his pride and joy - but since it was that or be completely over-run by that mazone vine, and he shut up when I pointed that out…' another shrug. 'Just treat her gentle for a week or two.'

'Do we have a week or two?' Blaze asked Harlock.

'Not the last time I looked.'

'Oh good. I love it when I'm filled with confidence by the captain…'

'Snarky,' Ali told him. 'And if you're going to be filling in for the Big Y, would you mind very much getting back to your station, yer highness? We'll be jumping the moment the captain here gives the order.'

'Yes sir! Professor Jones, sir!' Blaze snapped off a salute so perfect not even the captain's late and very much unlamented brother would have been able to find fault with. Ali glowered at him. 'Smartarse…'

Harlock muttered something under his breath that might have been "give me strength" and sat
down in the captain's chair. Only to immediately spring back to his feet as a strident yowl split the air followed by an affronted hiss. 'Dammit Mii!' The tortie stared up at him, blinked slowly, turned around twice on dainty paws and settled back down again, tail curled over her black and ginger nose. 'Luna!'

'She left a few minutes ago,' Ali offered in his most helpful tone. 'You know, you really ought to check first…'

'Oh. Of course. On a battleship's bridge the first thing any captain needs to do is look for cats before he sits down?' Harlock's tone was witheringly sarcastic but as usual it was water off a duck's back. Ali beamed at him.

'See. You're getting it.' He pointed to where the captain's bird was sitting on the back the chair, his head stuffed under his left wing, making clacking noises with its beak. 'The rest of us have to keep dodging that daft bird in the corridors coz it's got the wingspan of an albatross and the flight skills of a dodo…'

'Ali…'

'Yes?'

'Why is it I'm going to have to stare at your backside instead of Kei's?'

'It's your lucky day?'

'Stay at the wheel,' Blaze interjected helpfully. 'At least you won't have to look at him.' He smiled beatifically when Ali turned a stink-eye on him. 'I can hear Kei and from the sound of it she's getting an earful from Engineering…' He smiled wistfully as he watched and listened to the crew bustling around. Harlock - naturally - wasn't a bustler: he tended to leave that to Kei, who could be heard giving orders with a rapid-fire staccato that would have done credit to a seasoned drill instructor. Marin - his elder by barely a year - had been inclined to do that as well, and the louder he'd got, the less you had to worry about. For a moment the dials on Yattaran's station swam out of focus. The last five years had cost him his father and three brothers - the oldest and the two youngest. These mazone… they'd almost cost him his mother, his two remaining younger brothers and his baby sister.

Very, very briefly he did wonder who was right… Harlock - who thought they could put a stop to this threat with as little loss of life on both sides as possible. Or his uncle and his aunt, both of whom favoured wiping out the problem completely.

'Vengeance is easy.'

Startled, his head whipped round. The speaker was Mimay, who'd snuck up behind him whilst he was wool gathering. 'I…'

'Anyone can remove a problem with brute force. Isn't it better to persuade the problem to solve itself?' She glided away immediately before he could reply, to whisper something into Harlock’s ear.

With Tadashi and Meg staying with the mazone fleet, Daiba found himself sitting in the canteen on his own, staring into a mug of coffee whilst listening to Anita bustling around behind the scenes and yelling at her team of three to get things stowed away properly prior to the jump. Zach and
Niobe were back on Tabito, and he was acutely aware that he was the youngest - and newest - recruit by far.

A mug clanked down onto the scuffed metallic table next to him, the steam carrying the scent of a coffee far superior to the sludge he'd tried diluting with hot water almost an hour ago and which had congealed into a dark brown mess that reminded him of the contents of a water butt left out in a back alley for too long. A slender, large blue hand reached out and snagged his own mug from his limp fingers, and then deftly placed the new mug next to them. 'Here. You look as though you need this more than I do.'

Daiba twisted slightly in his seat to look at the crewman who was drawing up a chair to sit next to him. A hint of blond stubble graced his cheeks, and his collar length hair looking in need of a comb. 'Thanks.' he took a sip, and heaved a grateful sigh. The captain's coffee was a thing oft-spoken of in hushed awed tones, and Daiba - whilst no connoisseur, had no problem appreciating it.

In point of fact it wasn't the coffee that was the problem, it was the machine - no-one - not even Anita - had ever managed to get the one in the canteen to produce anything even remotely drinkable by anyone who wasn't a masochist, and that was despite regular servicings and several outright replacements over the years.

'It's Yattaran,' Ben said as he sat down, a mug of his own in his hands. 'Anyone who wants a decent brew soon learns to buy their own damned machine and make sure the cack-handed bastard never gets near it.' He took a sip. 'Of course we have to take pity on the new recruits eventually and tell them not to use it - Anita hides the real one in the kitchen.'

Daiba took a sip and let the dark, bitter brew slide down his throat. 'How long had you planned on making me suffer?'

Ben smiled. 'I think they might have gone another week. But you looked like you really needed company, and nothing breaks the ice better than coffee. Or booze - but I don't think Harlock would take kindly to me plying you with that just before a jump. Not with your tender years.'

Daiba leaned on the table, holding the mug between his ungloved hands. The insulated material of the container remained cool to the touch. 'Tender? I've not been that for years,' he muttered.

'Allow him his illusions,' Ben replied quietly. 'Despite the past few years he's a man who still prefers to think the best of people, even if they disappoint him en masse.'

'He was always nice,' Daiba said. 'Even as a kid, I remember the times he'd be looking out for me. Though I kinda wonder why he took all that shit from Isora back then.'

'Family,' Ben said dryly, 'Is a mystery to all of us. My father has so many bloody offspring I would have sworn blind he couldn't have picked me out of the crowd. Imagine my shock when the old bastard sent a damned squad of his bodyguard after me when I left... and he'd talked the only person I thought did give a rat's arse into leading it for the win.' He smiled wistfully. 'That probably backfired, since Tal was more than happy to go back and tell the old buzzard that I was quite happy where I was, thank-you-very-much, rather than drag me back.'

Daiba sized up the other man. It was easy sometimes to think Ben was closer to his own age than Harlock's, and the light cobalt skin tended to make him look younger, but there was something in his eyes that gave a lie to that. There was also the sense Daiba had that this was a man who'd be smiling at you when he ripped your throat out. 'Your father's some kind of king, isn't he?'

Ben's smiled curled into a peculiarly devilish curve. 'Something like that, yeah.' Daiba was left
with the distinct feeling that the older man was laughing at him. 'It's more of a military dictatorship, and last time I looked we only had one challenger in the entire galaxy.' That smile took on an even more dangerous curl. 'They're green, if you can credit that… not a good look on anyone who wants to be taken seriously. Hard to be impressive around the negotiating table when you look like the aftermath of a three-day bender…'

Dishes clattered on the table and delightful smells assailed both sets of nostrils. Anita's large hands pushed two large bowls towards them, steaming and bubbling slightly. Daiba took a long, appreciative sniff. 'Ramen?'

'The pair of you looked as though you needed a pick-me-up.' Anita handed him spoon and chopsticks. Ben got a fork. 'And you too, lassie - no need to lurk in doorways m'dear. The captain says you're a guest and that'd be good enough for me even if you hadn't pulled the little boy out of that nest of vipers.'

Daiba looked up to see Cleo - indeed - lurking in the doorway unsure of her welcome. Ben waved her over and she moved shyly into the room. Ever the gentleman Ben stood up and pulled her chair out for her. 'Can you eat human food?' Daiba blurted out before he engaged his brain.

'We don't normally eat processed foods,' she replied. The bowl Anita placed in front of her appeared to contain a lot more greenery than those in front of the men. 'But my kind are not so different.'

'Mind your own business, young man,' Anita chided him. 'And eat up.'

'Sorry. But I thought it'd be kind of cannibalism - you know… plants…' Daiba muttered, waving his chopsticks about in a vaguely expansive gesture.

'You eat fish and meat from other mammals, but not from your own species, yes?' Cleo asked, a forkful of broccoli on the way to her face. When he nodded she shrugged delicately. 'Same thing. We can live for a few days on the by-products of the photosynthesis our mazone cell bodies carry out, but that does not replace other nutrients we need long term. On our ships, there are plants which produce those products. Here - I have to rely on other means. What did you think we do - stick our toes in some soil and slurp up muddy water?'

Daiba, flushing since that was pretty much one of the images he'd had in his head, found a sudden and overwhelming interest in the convection currents in his lunch. Ben laughed. 'I'd say that was a yes…'

'Oh, leave it. I just...'

'Kill mazone?' Cleo asked with mock innocence.

Ben patted Daiba between the shoulder blades when he choked on a mouthful of noodles. 'Seeing an enemy as something not too different from yourself can be hard, when you've learned to hate.' He handed Daiba a napkin. 'Right, Daiba?'

'Your soldiers I can kind of handle,' he explained when he had his breath back. He made the effort to look her in the eyes - dark pools that he still had the strangest sensation of drowning in. 'I don't think their kind like anyone, especially humans. But your civilians… those like you and the others - the trees and plant-like ones… all crowded into those leaky ships. They were dying in there. Hardly any light, or food, or water… dragged through space and for what? Your queen could have found planets anywhere along your route and dropped them off - if she wanted those drives she could have had her loyal troops pilot them? I didn't want to feel sorry for them… but it's wrong.' He
paused. 'No. It's evil. Not to mention batshit insane'

Cleo smiled sadly at him. 'On that at least we agree.'

'Do you trust that red-haired bitch to do what she's told?' Daiba asked.

'She'll have Harlock's people riding herd on her,' Cleo replied pithily. 'And obedience is hard-wired into us for the most part. It is actually very difficult for us to rebel. She was treading a very fine line with her actions leading up to this, but I think she'll perform well enough. At least long enough to settle them on that world.' She too seemed to find something deeply fascinating in her bowl.

Ben cleared his throat. 'You get the same feeling I do about her?' Cleo nodded and Daiba frowned.

'Did I miss something?'

'She'll not last too long, that one,' Ben replied flatly. He picked up his bowl and drank deeply. 'Something breaks inside people sometimes. Without a purpose, she'll find a way to die, one way or another.' He turned his attention to Cleo as he placed his bowl back down. 'Difficult to rebel, but not impossible?'

'Just so.'

Ben smiled slyly. 'Especially if someone is slowly becoming a potential replacement for that queen of darkness?'

It was Cleo's turn to choke on her lunch. 'I'm not…'

Ben leaned back in his chair. 'Really? I know that brand of denial when I hear it, Cleome. I also saw how both Namino and the mazone on those ships responded to you. Rafflesia's losing her grip on them, and for mazone, I'm guessing that's not a vacuum that can endure for long?' He laid one of his hands on top of Cleo's pale, trembling fingers. 'It's no easy thing,' he continued in a soft, sympathetic tone, 'to consider replacing someone who has been the centre of everything you know for so long. It's close to unthinkable. And sometimes when that thought comes - or is thrust upon you - all you want to do is run, as far and as fast as you can and to hell with the consequences.'

'Is that what you did?' The words were out of Daiba's mouth so fast they passed his foot on its way in.

'Well that would be telling, wouldn't it?' Ben asked slowly, not taking his eyes off Cleo. 'But here's the thing - I'm guessing you're better than me, aren't you?'

'You think so?' Cleo asked him. Daiba, sensing that he really probably should be elsewhere, grabbed his bowl and started slinking out of his seat.

'I know so,' he heard Ben reply. 'Because you're not running.'

Daiba hadn't quite reached the door when the ship lurched into IN-SKIP.
Chapter 50

The star was a sleepy red giant, surrounded by the remains of a once populous solar system, now reduced to its outer gas giants and a few wandering icy relics from its oort cloud. None of the moons surrounding the massive giants had ever been habitable, and so there was no-one to see the black cloud that appeared near the orbit of the inner giant, shot through with flashes of red lightning as it thickened from wispy streamers, to a roiling thick black storm cloud surrounding the kilometre long battleship who's arrival it heralded.

The cloud parted occasionally to reveal a gigantic skull with glowing red eyes. Sweeping back from this the organic curves of the hull were surmounted by the knobbly protrusions of a spinal cord along its top elevation. The flanks bristled with cannon and massive sensor arrays hung below the stern section. Sweeping over the ship from her stern to her bow, two vicious looking prongs, like the pincers of a large insect, curved elegantly around and over her tall bridge, and the yellow glow of her engines lit the rear of the cloud with a sickly glow.

To complete the picture, there should have been a thundering roar deep enough to feel as though it could shake the universe apart. But this was space, and all was silent.

Inside the ship - not so much…

'Nothing on the long or short range scanners, captain!'

'Medium range EM scan negative!'

'Time radar - no response!'

'Gravity distortion - negative!'

Harlock sat in the captain's chair and let the litany of checks wash over him. 'We expected to get here ahead of them. Yattaran - find a nice large rock - there seem to be plenty out there. I want us tucked up nicely in its radar shadow. Kei - all hands prepare for battlestations.'

His voice was quiet, but carried across the bridge with little effort. Kei turned back, nodded once, and placed her hands on her station. 'You heard the captain! All hands to primary battlestations! Anyone not needed on the bridge - find a gun turret and wait for my command. Missile crews make sure you're using the new shells. No-one uses the main cannon unless we absolutely have to - we cannot afford to set off a chain reaction. You all know the drill - keep your fire clear of those black body drives, and only target the ships that fire on us!'

'Keep yer eyes peeled on the sensors, boys and girls,' Yattaran called out. 'We don't want anyone gettin' the drop on us - and these ships is real sneaky.'

Harlock closed his eyes - the right hidden by his patch, but still… and listened to the sounds of the ship. The catcalls and laughter - the latter sometimes nervous rather than humourous - of the crew. The metallic clatter of boots on the deck. Kei's voice rising slightly as someone failed to move as fast as they should. Ali's gruff tones from below the gantry, ordering the targeting crew about. Yattaran mumbling and - ah, don't dwell on that - farting noisily and mumbling an apology when Kei's outraged shriek split the air, to genuine laughter from the crew. The soft clacking sounds near his right ear, from where the black bird was sitting on the finial of the chair, nibbling at its feathers. The soft hum from the dark matter engine behind him, and the softer click-clack of
Mimay's heels on the decking as she shifted position to guide the glowing blue lightning in the globe she (allegedly) used to control it.

Under it all, the creaks and groans of the ship as it shifted in space, the hull expanding and contracting in response to stress and temperature, exaggerated by the ship's computer and converted to the creaks and groans of an old-fashioned wooden sailing ship. And under that, a constant steady thud like a heartbeat, at the very edge of his hearing. For once the voice of the Arcadia was silent, as it often was unless there was a pressing need for his presence.

Those undercurrents began to drown out the rest, as the initial hustle and bustle of battlestations gave way to the quieter murmurs between the crew at their stations on the lower bridge once everyone settled down and found their place. The lightweight banter subsided once the nerve-wracking wait for action began. Only Ali's muttering drifted up from the lower bridge now, counter-pointed by Kei's sighs of annoyance, and the sounds of fingernails scratching with a rubbery sound at thick heavy fabric (Yattaran again, presumably with an uncontrollable itch on his expansive backside, judging from the sigh of relief from Harlock's left just before the noises ceased.)

'Is it always this quiet whilst you wait for the storm to break?' Blaze's voice sounded so like his late father's that it was almost a shock to open his eye and realise the speaker standing next to his chair wasn't wearing sunglasses. 'What's so amusing?'

'Nothing.' Harlock settled back in his seat, his hands resting on the skulls that decorated the arms, a quirky smile playing around the corners of his mouth. 'If I were you, I'd sit back and enjoy it while it lasts. It rarely does.'

'Dad used to say the same thing,' Blaze replied, a wistful note in his voice. 'Mal was never quite so sanguine though. He would fret like a champion before a mission. The boys are the same - can't sit still, mom says.'

Harlock smiled. 'Kanna's another quiet one. Takes after her mother.'

Blaze's answering smile was as wistful as his voice. 'She was so solemn when dad and the littlest boys died. At least until the committee from the town came to take the bodies away. I think holding onto my sister while she sobbed was the only thing that kept mom dry-eyed.'

'And you? You and Marin were both off-world at the time, running supplies of the vaccine yourselves. We didn't catch up until weeks later…'

'When I got the news I was just numb. Mal too, though he wanted to turn his ship around and go gunning for that Deathshadow. Huh. Never did know when not to fight outside of his weight class. That thing would have chewed up his ship and spat it out.'

'We struggled to take it out, and that was with self-repair on full.' Harlock stared straight ahead, and sighed heavily. 'Damned things… That was the first rough fight that wasn't a Nibelung battleship we'd been in. I'd gotten too complacent taking damage we could shrug off and taking ships apart by just ramming them. A tough wake-up call to go against a ship with the same capabilities as ourselves.'

'Like the Mazone ships?' Blaze asked quietly. Harlock nodded. 'Those black body drives are a problem…' Blaze continued. 'I can't target them, but whilst they're running, they power a self-repair function almost the equal of the Arcadia's. It'd be a lot easier if we could just blow the hell out of them…'
'The trick will be to keep the battleships on the back foot. I'm counting on you for that. Just do what we discussed on Tabito - Cleo will help here, if we can cut the non combatants out of the herd. If we can protect them from retaliation, I think they'll run. Cut a couple of the more adventurous battleships down, and the rest will think twice.'

'You think there will be a few "heroes" in the bunch?' Blaze asked dryly.

Harlock smiled grimly. 'There always are. Take out the fighters and most aggressive battleships with the monofilament torpedoes. If anyone gets really close, use an incendiary - it shouldn't trigger a meltdown in the carbon drives if you aim for the forward sections.'

Blaze shot him a curious look. 'You hate those things, and what they do… Are you sure?'

Harlock turned in his seat and met Blaze's calm gaze with his own. 'We'll give fair warning. But given the odds, we were always going to have to make an example or two. We'll be outnumbered by an insane number. And they won't care about what they do to us - keep out of range and dodge anything they throw at you. That vine is a deal-breaker. We can't afford another infestation.'

Mimay's dainty trip-trapping gained the attention of both men. She stopped behind and to the side of the captain's throne-like chair. 'The dark matter cloud could be made more dense, but that would obscure your sensors.'

Blaze frowned. 'I'm not sure that's a good trade-off.'

'It isn't.' Harlock replied. 'We tried it years ago - it's a bit of a last ditch manoeuvre. If you're surrounded though, and it's that or a cluster of weapons fire, it's worth keeping in mind. But not whilst you can still move.' He narrowed his eye and stared at Mimay. 'You know this - why bring it up?'

The soft breeze of the air conditioning on the bridge ruffled her silky fine hair, and she reached up a long fingered hand to brush it away from her face. 'Freya. She has infinitely more experience controlling the dark matter than I - I think she has the finesse required to use the emitter arrays to control the concentration of the cloud around the hull, and keep the bridge and the sensors clear.'

Harlock leaned over and around to spot the small nibelung lurking behind the diaphanous veils which floated over and around Mimay's pale green flightsuit. 'I'm not sure "think" is something I'd want to test in a battle this big.' He smiled at the little girl. 'Would I be right in thinking Mimay here is being a little too distracted by the fact you look about seven?'

He laughed as she tossed her hair back off her face and pouted. 'If your eyes moved the way ours do, young lady, I'm guessing you'd be rolling them about now…' He knelt down and held his arms out, and she smiled back at him and scurried into them. He stood up, holding her carefully, her arms wrapped around his neck and her face buried in his shoulder. 'We've had a few issues with dark matter containment,' he told her seriously. 'I'm counting on you to keep it under control if you have to use it.' He felt the little nod against his cheek and chuckled.

'Don't those carbon drives eat up our dark matter like candy?' Blaze asked.

'In small amounts.' Freya's soft voice was childlike, but authoritative. Everyone on the top bridge however was more startled by her Standard. Blaze raised one eyebrow inquisitively, and Harlock answered it with a what-the-hell shrug of his unoccupied shoulder. But he did place Freya down gently so she was standing on his chair. She regarded the men, Mimay and the curious over the shoulder looks from Yattaran and Kei stoically. 'But they'll be here to refuel, which means they want to bask in the photon streams from the sun - and dark matter can interfere with the spin of the
photons at the sub-atomic level…' She glanced from one incredulous face to another and heaved a
teatrical sigh. 'It'd take too long to explain in Niflung, although your language lacks some of the
subtleties, since you've yet to discover them…'

'Told…' Harlock heard Kei murmur to Yattaran.

'Can't we saturate the area then and cut off their recharging ability?' Blaze asked.

'Hell no!'

'No!'

'Not again…'

The chorused rebuttal from three humans was so emphatic, Blaze tugged at his ear and winced.

'Okay… just wondering.'

'That's kind of how we got into this whole mess in the first place,' Harlock said dryly. He raised a
hand to forestall both of the Nibelung. 'I don't want to hear any suggestions for how you can make
it safe - Mimay should know better and Freya - no offence, but we're just not doing it.'

'But if I concentrate the dark matter around the ship, I can make the shield stronger, deeper,' Freya
said firmly, the statement so at odds with her tiny frame it was hard for any of them to remember
that she wasn't, in actuality, a small child. 'Their weapons are light based, so we should absorb
more of it, and it will also deflect a considerable part of the spectrum.'

'Enough so if we get close enough it might deflect their way?' Harlock asked.

A short nod.

'Like the hologramme The Captain used at the defence line off Saturn?' Kei asked. This time it was
Mimay's turn to nod. Blaze looked from Harlock to Mimay to Kei.

'Enlighten those of us who came late to the party?' He grinned at Harlock 'Oh - and you must be
sick of that implied capitalisation by now…'

'It can get a little tiring…' Harlock replied with a sarcastic drawl. He turned a mock glare on Kei
who just dimpled prettily at him. 'Harlock set up a holo of the Arcadia along with a buoy to
interfere with their sensors to make it look as if we were several hundred kilometres away from
where we were; when the fleet fired, the energy passed straight through and since they'd been
trying to surround us, they took a lot of friendly fire. Granted it was a stupid move in the first place
since only an idiot launches that kind of firepower and puts his ships in a formation that allows that
kind of screw-up-

'It's all right, darling, I do know who got the brains in your family,' Kei reassured him with a
twinkle. 'Especially since your idiot brother fell for it twice…'

'He did, didn't he?' Harlock said with a smirk. 'Damn, the mileage I could have gotten out
of that one if I'd had the balls back then to throw it in his smirking, snide, backstabbing face…'

'It took him a couple of weeks to grow a pair,' Yattaran explained for Blaze's benefit without
looking round.

'Yes… thank you. I always enjoy the tender reminiscences about the time before I was a badass
space pirate…' Harlock replied, his voice almost dripping with sarcasm, which was, as usual,
completely ignored by his first mate.

'It wasn't weeks, you fat dope!' Franz's voice wafted up from below. 'Couple of days tops, so quit being an arse!'

'You do know we don't get pay rises for brown-nosing, right?' Ali quipped.

Blaze couldn't hold back a chuckle. 'I get now why you say you'd never pull off the whole stoic badass routine on this ship…'

'They'd laugh in my face,' Harlock said ruefully. 'Hard to get away with it when half the crew still remember you used to bus the tables, clean the floor and do all the shit jobs they could send in the direction of a clueless rookie…'

'Ah yes - "shit jobs" - or as we like to call it these days: "being captain"," Ali called up, generating a wave of laughter from everyone - and a wry smile from both his target and Kei.

Harlock turned to face Blaze. 'They kvetch, they bitch, they piss around, goof off and often seem to be drifting off-topic, but you would struggle to find a better crew when you're in a hole. They all know their jobs - trust them. Franz and Martinez know the ropes, they'll have your back in Kei's and Ali's positions. And you have Mimay and Tochiro to back you up.'

There was a disgruntled snort from Yattaran's station.

'And the first mate will of course be on hand assuming a pressing engagement with a plastic model kit doesn't distract him,' Kei added with a sniff.

'Now then children,' Blaze murmured reassuringly. Both Kei and Yattaran turned to glare at him and Harlock smirked. 'See, you're getting the hang of it! Kei - anything yet?'

'Still all quiet. When do you want us to go to the hangar?'

'Now, I guess. Daiba's prepping the bullet. He'll take Cleo and Ben. Get your team together and have them on standby - the moment we engage, launch and wait for my signal in the radar shadow of this asteroid we're lurking behind.'

She nodded and strode over to the gantry railing. 'Sabu, Ali, Cai, Takashi, Kelly - main hangar in fifteen. Franz - my station. The rest of you, I'm counting on to keep those mazone off our backs!'

She strode back towards Harlock tugging on the cuffs of her long gloves. He stood as she approached and they stood facing each other, not touching, but within arm's length of each other. 'Be safe,' he said softly, a fond smile on his face.

'You too…' She looked down at the jacket he wore over a black sweater. Black leather, with a pristine white skull and crossbones filling the chest. Gold piping ran up the sleeves and across the bottom of the collar, matched by the same piping up the side of his leather pants, also black. He wore the cosmo dragoon on his right hip, the gun belt for its partner in crime currently hanging from the back of the captain's throne, the long sabre swinging slowly as Freya idly pushed it. This in turn was hanging on top of the gravity cloak, which was draped over the back of the throne, red lining outwards. She gave him a slow, knowing smile and he nodded once in reply.

He staggered forwards awkwardly, since Franz had given him a shove in the small of the back as he reached the chair. 'C'mon captain - what did we say about the macho bullshit?'

Kei, who'd had to field her captain to avoid being flattened, was easily persuaded to change her grip
from pushing against a hard chest, to wrapping her arms around his neck as he lowered his face to hers and proceeded to kiss the breath out of her. When they came up for air she smiled at him. 'Well, that didn't work!'

Franz sniggered and Blaze interrogated him with a raised eyebrow. 'Usually never fails - get into a clinch, along come the enemy.' the pirate told him out of the corner of his mouth, not taking his eyes off his captain and XO. 'Maybe you should take it up a level?' he suggested cheekily. Kei, having reluctantly parted company from her captain, wafted him around the head with her hand as she walked past him. 'Hey! Watch the hair!'

'Watch over my children, Blaze,' she called back over her shoulder as she descended the stairs, with a sway of her hips that had all four men on the bridge staring at her leather-clad ass. Her athletic form wrapped in a dark wine-red flightsuit combined with elbow length black gloves and black-thigh highs was the cynosure of all eyes.

'Hot damn...' Franz muttered. 'That's a sight that never gets old.' He caught his captain's eye, coughed self-consciously and scuttled over to his post. Yattaran suddenly had an urge to polish his glasses, and Harlock gave Blaze a slap between the shoulder blades as he in turn headed for the stairs.

'Wipe the drool, Blaze. That's my wife's backside you were leering at…'

'Then you might consider asking her to wear something that's a little… a little less overwhelming?'

'Now why would I do that? I send her into a nest of bandits ahead of me we tend to get at least a three second headstart on the shooting…'

'That,' Blaze replied with an air of assumed indignation, 'is both sexist and ungentlemanly!' But he was already talking to a black-clad back with a large cloak thrown over one shoulder. A hand holding the sabre rifle was raised in salute as Harlock walked out of his line of sight round the curve of the staircase.

Yattaran snorted. 'Dunno why - she started it one time when they had to take down a really nasty bunch of female pirates - we bushwhacked the strippers they'd hired for the evening and…'

'Yattaran - do you not have a fleet of dangerous aliens to watch out for?' The captain's voice floated back from the foot of the stairs with a distinct air of "do not make me come back up there" in its tone, and accompanied by laughter from the crew. Yattaran turned to Blaze and winked at him.

Blaze took hold of the balusters of the wheel with a grin. 'You are going to tell me the story behind that one once he's gone, right?' On the other side Franz shuddered.

'Oh man… that was Rowena and her band of psychos. Seriously, they even gave Hunter dry heaves when they sent one of his men back to him, or so the story goes.'

'That bastard has a pretty strong stomach - how many pieces did that take?' Blaze asked.

'Pieces?' Martinez called up from below. 'He should have been so lucky. It was more what you'd call "performance art". The guy was still alive…'

'Your psycho cousin went toe to toe with the bitch,' Yattaran added with an evil grin.

'Which one?' Blaze muttered.

'Emeraldas.' Franz gave Blaze a grin. 'She's very good with knives, that girl…'
'It scares me that you find that a turn on,' Yattaran muttered back at him.

Under Blaze's gloved hands, the ship's wheel seemed to twitch slightly, almost as though it was laughing along with the crew. Taking a leaf from Harlock's playbook he let the banter drift into the background, but not so much that he couldn't still take note of the currents of emotion on the bridge. Slightly nervous laughs and jokes from some, trash talk from others. The nervous energy was almost tangible, but despite that, the crew operated as efficiently as any Millennial Thieves ship he'd captained.

And waiting... that was always the hard part. He looked up at the main display, between the gantry and the bridge windows. Currently split into several smaller screens, one for each of the drones they'd seeded earlier in the solar system.

If Cleo hadn't lied, then they'd expected to be maybe twelve hours ahead of the fleet, despite the delay in following, thanks to the Arcadia's superior speed. They'd been in system now for nineteen, and the fleet hadn't jumped in on time, and still seemed determined not to follow the dramatic rules of engagement by arriving according to one of the standard cliches.

'Sooner rather than later would be good,' he muttered. Yattaran turned to stare at him, then nodded and grinned - the latter not a reassuring look on the man's round face.

'Longer we wait the twitchier everyone gets,' the big man said quietly. 'They look to the captain to hold it together.' His grin got even bigger. 'No pressure, lad. Everyone hates the waiting. Gives yer too much time to think.'

'Gravity anomaly detected in sector twelve!' Franz called out. 'Who's on that drone?'

'Me!' a bespectacled young man called out from below. 'No visual.'

'Nobuta, huh?' Franz stared at Kei's console with a frown. 'Could just be a - whoa! Okay boys, hold onto your nutsacks! Here they come!'

'Gravity response increasing sector seven!'

'Energy spike, sector eight, across the spectrum!'

'Mass detected and increasing, energy levels up across the board. Gravitational changes increasing exponentially!'

'Visual sector twel- oh, shit - we just lost the drone!'

Blaze stared at the holo display, as one screen fizzled to static. The others were lighting up as mass, energy and gravity readings came in from the patrolling drones. Two more were replaced by scrolling lines. 'Did they shoot them?' he asked.

'Negative. I think they just got in the way. That's a bloody lot of ships,' Franz replied calmly. 'No energy spike before they went offline.'

'Blaze?' Harlock's voice came through on the intercom.

'Curtain's up, Harlock.' Blaze took a firmer grip on the wheel. In front of him, the visuals finally began to replace the sensor readings as the fleet passed by the sentry drones, the readouts converted into images for the human crew. A dark mass against a dark background was hard to see with the naked eye, but the software converted the data into an image based on the energy profile of the ships. Wave after wave drifted by on the mosaicised screen, different shapes, sizes and
colours. Small saucer-shaped craft quartered by an extended cross with pods at the end of each arm were approximately the size of the space wolves. Larger pyramidal vessels were close to the Arcadia's size and glowed red, with a higher energy signature than most of the ships.

Then there were the trees. Thousands of them, some of them five times the Arcadia's length or more. A forest in space, their roots entangled around their back body drives. And in the middle of them, its artificially enhanced image glowing like a small sun amongst the stars of its fellows, one tree, larger than the rest; not in length, which wasn't far off the largest of its fellows, but in girth and mass, it was almost three times the size.

'Holy shit…' he heard Franz breath to his right.

'Ah… it's just a real big target selection,' Yattaran called out. 'Right, Blaze?'

'That's one way of putting it,' he replied, dry mouthed. 'But instead of standing here with our jaws on the floor, let's get out there and moon these bitches…'

Yattaran grinned nastily. 'All right! Now yer talkin' our language! Ladies - you heard the acting cap'n - time to make a nuisance of ourselves!'

Blaze gripped the balusters firmly, grateful for the gloves which avoided the slipping of sweating palms on the smooth wood. 'Arcadia - let's go!' Under his hands he felt the wheel throb in response, and the ship responded by sliding out from the shadow of the large asteroid it had been hiding behind. For a moment it felt as though the ship bunched and released, like a fast horse given its head. Pale blue lightning arced from the dark matter engine behind him, scattering from the ever-circling device surrounding the dark matter engine which continually dived into and returned from the bowels of the ship like the legendary serpent which ate its own tail, and danced from console to console, briefly haloing each member of the crew.

'Keep 'er steady,' Yattaran advised. 'Took our boy a few months to stop hauling 'er around like a trash scow.'

*I haven't got months…* Blaze thought. He wisely kept that one to himself. 'I've got this,' he replied through gritted teeth. In truth the equestrian analogy was all too appropriate - fully committed, it was like holding onto Gog or Magog back when he'd been helping his father train the pair of workhorses on Tabito. Big, strong, with the bit between their teeth and a nasty tendency to kick their heels up or take off for the hills at the slightest excuse. 'Crap… how the hell does he make this look so easy?'

*Easy there, tiger. I got this. Sorry - got a bit distracted helping the girls out with the dark matter antennae. Should be good to go now.* Tochiro's voice came loud and clear over the speakers with a slightly amused tone. The feeling he was fighting the ship every second was eased, and Blaze straightened up with a relaxed sigh as the wheel became much lighter. *Better?*

'Much.'

'Fighters and boarding party away!' Martinez called up. 'Fuck no, Ali, I ain't repeating that!' he added into his commlink.

Laughter. Blaze smirked. 'Some things never cha-' More than a dozen trails suddenly lit up the screen. 'Evasion!'

'Too late,' Yattaran called back. 'Aaaaaaand off target,' he continued as all of them sailed harmlessly off the port bow. 'They'll have our range with the next salvo, and we got incoming!'
Gnat bites… Tochiro said waspishly. But they sting in large enough swarms. The capital ships haven't reached firing range yet.

'They're hesitating.' Yattaran stepped back from his console slightly and rubbed the back of his head a couple of times before giving his scalp a good scratch, almost dislodging his bandanna. 'Guess our reputation goes before us. Whaddya wanna do?'

'A good old fashioned fly by for a start. Harlock wants a distraction - let's give them one.'

'Start with this bunch.' Franz punched up his display on the main holo screen. 'Must be over a hundred of those small ships coming this way in a swarm formation. Trying to outflank us and surround us.' He stared at the screen and sniggered. 'Awww… cute. The computer's colouring them pink and mint green…'

'Smaller energy signature. Don't they know our guns point wherever we damn well want them to? Yattaran smirked. 'What next, laddie?'

Blaze took a fresh grip on the wheel. 'All gun grews fire at will - you know your drills. On my mark, let's turn this thing around and down - 30 degrees down and 15 to starboard, half speed. Smart fire, pick your own targets and remember to avoid the drives. If the larger ships get within range cut your prey out of the herd and then cripple them!'

Unprepared for the Arcadia's speed and manoeuvrability, the mazone fighters scattered after the second salvo raked through their ranks. One group which held formation in a tight grouping quickly learned the error of its ways when a handful of Yattaran's monofilament missiles exploded in their midst shredding the ships like cabbage. A cheer went up from the lower bridge as the Arcadia span away to come around for the next assault.

Yattaran gave Blaze an approving once-over, tugging his spectacles down and then pushing them back up his nose with a satisfied grunt. 'Well bugger me, you're a natural!'

Blaze shrugged in between spinning the wheel hard to starboard. 'Thief… pirate. Some would say there's not much difference. Though for fuck's sake what is wrong with a good old-fashioned instrument panel, Tochiro? Steering this thing is a full body workout!'

A deep throaty chuckle from the speakers was matched by several from the crew who overheard him. Not bad though, rookie! Maybe we need to check your family tree for some Harlock genes!

'You do know that badassery is not exclusively limited to one damn family, right?' Blaze turned slightly to talk to Franz. 'Where are the boarding party?'

'Clearing the asteroid field any time now.'

'Right. Playtime's over. I see at least two battleship groups heading our way. Let's give them something to think about. Martinez - how many more of Yattaran's little salad shredders do we have?'

'Seventy-eight,' came the reply after a brief pause. Blaze pulled a face. 'If only those were self-repairing…' he muttered.

Yattaran tapped him on the shoulder. 'Maji's on it. They take about ten minutes in the 3-D printers - it's just a thin shell casing, a simple guidance system, a few miles of filament and a small charge.' He smirked nastily. 'Thought about raiding the kitchens for the cutlery, since we're going so old-school but Anita told me where I could stick that one…'
Laughter from below. 'Nothing like a whiff of grapeshot, eh, first mate?' someone called up. More laughter followed.

'Right - then I guess I don't have to add "keep them coming?" Blaze exchanged a feral grin with the first mate. 'Tochiro - hull damage?'

_Eh. Minimal. The weapons did sweet eff-ay - didn't even get through the dark matter cloud - and the ones that tried to suicide dive into us just splattered like bugs on a windshield. Looks like they're pulling the little ones back for now._

'Not totally stupid then,' Blaze murmured.

'Battlegroup in range in ten… nine…' Martinez called up. 'Eight…' Blaze stared dead ahead through the bridge window, over the bank of the three by four oscillator cannon currently on the top elevation, its guns independently targeting and locking on as he watched. '.four… three…'

Blaze smiled. 'All ahead full! Rotate oscillator banks two and three to flanks and forward, but just drive them onto the optical cannon and the missiles. Optical cannon to rear and lower elevations. Missile crews - fire!'

Outside the Arcadia the dim orange light of the dying sun was joined by streaks of light from hundreds of ships, all converging on the lightning-shot black cloud surrounding the Arcadia. Her own guns spat yellow plasma in fast, continuous bursts towards the mazone ships, which held their ground at first.

So concerned with the energy weapons, and relying on their carbon drives to absorb the worst of the fire, warping it away from the bodies of their ships, they failed to notice the small missiles, almost invisible to any sensors since they contained only enough explosives to break open the frail shells the contained miles of tightly coiled monofilament wire. This wire - infused with dark matter - when freed whipped around at insane velocities in unpredictable patterns, slicing through the thin mazone hulls with ridiculous ease. And once they realised what was happening, the scramble to avoid debris and exploding drives sent ships straight into the wire nets, since the filament was virtually undamaged by its activities, and even small lengths could penetrate the flimsy hulls. The tell tale puffs of depressurising ships added to the panic, once they realised what was happening, and in the dash to escape an area of space now totally untenable, the lack of discipline showed, as ships turned into each other's paths, and total chaos reigned.

From his vantage point inside his black and red space wolf, Harlock smiled grimly, and reached for the controls. 'Nice one, Blaze,' he murmured. 'Daiba - Kei - let's go. You can't miss where we're heading - it's the biggest, brightest target in the middle of this pack!'

Afterburners on full, the graceful fighter headed towards the main bulk of the mazone fleet, the bullet and seven smaller space wolves falling into formation behind him.
In the cockpit of his space wolf, Harlock looked out at the ships arranged between his small group of ships, and the massive bulk of the mother tree of the Mazone fleet, brought into close-up by the imaging software that displayed an enhanced real-time image on his cockpit window.

'There's thousands of them…' he heard Daiba's somewhat hushed, awed whisper over the comms.

'Not so much of a problem as you might think,' he heard Kei reply confidently. 'Against a smaller fleet, large ones have a tendency to get in each others way if they aren't careful. We're tiny targets, fast moving, and there are far more of them than there are of us, so if they surround us, they stand far more chance of shooting each other than they do us.'

'Our problem is that if they're smart and engage with similar numbers, they can wear us down by sending multiple waves,' Harlock added. 'That's the danger of being outnumbered. We run out of power for weapons and propulsion. So any engagement…'

'Is time critical,' Kei finished for him. Inside his helmet, he grinned. 'Cai, stay with the bullet. Daiba - hang back - we'll make a path for you. Your job is to get Cleo onto that giant tree-ship. The rest of you - you know the drill. Full speed ahead, get into the middle of that pack before their commander wises up. If we're in the middle of that cluster of ships, they can't fire unless they want to risk destroying their own.'

'Do we really think they care?' Kei asked doubtfully. He could almost picture her nibbling on her top lip.

'That's a risk we have to take - but I don't think if they start firing indiscriminately they'll get away with it. It could be just enough to tip opinion towards protecting their own from their military. We'll see. Now - if Blaze remembers what his dad and Selen taught us both, he should be moving Arcadia right about…'

The imaging software had difficulty rendering the Arcadia onscreen. The best it could manage was a blurry cloud of darkness against the night, occluding the tiny lights that were the Mazone fleet. The Arcadia seen from space, in action, was not something he often got to see first hand, given that he was usually at her helm. The night-wrapped battleship ploughed into the massed fleet, able to push aside smaller, weaker vessels with impunity, and tiny puffs of igniting gas lit her way, followed quickly by long, powerful pulses of light as the optical cannon and the oscillator arrays got to work. One ship, surrounded by hundreds, didn't have a targeting problem - anything she hit was an enemy combatant, and with the density of ships around her, Arcadia didn't have to worry about hitting friendly ships.

The Mazone fleet slowly started to move to defend the mother tree, trying desperately to contain the uncontrollable, as Blaze swung the ship around in a wide arc for another enfilade, raking the assembled vessels with ruthless efficiency, and ramming anything stupid enough to stay in his path. Harlock nodded his approval to himself. 'Attaboys, my friends. Just keep them busy,' he murmured. 'Firefly - this is Enma. Time to slip through the side-door. Stay on my right wing.'

'Always.' Her voice was firm and authoritative, but even over the commlink he could hear the emotion in that single word. He smiled fondly, and then pushed the throttle forwards sending the red and black space wolf hurtling towards the fray.
On board the *Dorcas*, Cassandra stared at the display which surrounded her, the hologram placing her in the centre of a view from one of the gunships near the Arcadia. 'That man must have a death wish!' she snarled. 'How does he think he can prevail against so many? All ships converge on that abomination! Sooner or later he has to slow down.'

'Cassandra!' Rafflesia's voice echoed in the imaging grove. 'That abomination is not just powered by dark matter, it *is* dark matter. No matter how much damage you do to it, it just regenerates.'

'Not immediately, your majesty. We can wear it down.'

'And in the meantime how many ships are we losing to our own firepower? I need those ships, Cassandra. Just not here. Every time one of your gunships misses the Arcadia, it has a greater than even chance of hitting one of our own. Pull them back - there are other ways to deal with this irritating flea.'

'But my queen…'

'Put more sisters on finding where Cleome hid the other two children before she left with the other boy. If we can show his children to him and threaten them, we can make him back off.'

Cassandra trembled, almost losing control of her human form, she was shaking so hard with barely-repressed anger. She'd searched the mother-tree from crown to root looking for the sisters who'd taken Harlock's sons, and had yet to find a trace of them. 'Damn Cleome…' she muttered, punctuating the statement with a fist to the console in front of her. A *melia* next to her jumped and scuttled away. Around her, the battle footage swirled and changed, ships moving so fast it was impossible to keep track in real time - by the time one position had registered, the combatants had already changed.

Multiple beams from the mazone ships lanced into the black cloud surrounding the Arcadia. How many actually made contact it was hard to tell. Occasionally the cloud around the battleship cleared, and she briefly caught sight of the hull, and a trail of dark matter vapourising along the length of a slash in that black hull as it healed. More often than not the abomination moved so fast the only glimpse was of the glowing, demonic red eyes in the skull that was its bow, or the twin yellow suns of the sub-light drives at the rear. Mazone ships caught by the Arcadia's fire drifted, frequently causing problems for their own as they floated helplessly in space along their initial courses, unable to manoeuvre. More charged into the fray, desperate to stop the anathema in its tracks.

'He's not firing on all of them, but ships are being crippled if they get too close.' Cassandra paced within the confines of the hologramme. 'Dammit - clear those damaged ships from the field! They're in the way. Converge on the Arcadia - pin it down!'

'How?' the frustration from one of the commanders was considerably out of line. Cassandra made a mental note to deal with the woman if she survived. 'It's too fast, and too powerful - any ships that block its path, it goes through as though they were made of paper! There's a blade on that bow… I've seen it tear through five ships already and it takes no damage, and they're using some kind of monofilament net that goes straight through our ships but disintegrates when it hits their own dark matter cloud! We're being cut to pieces!'

'Hellebore! Control yourself,' Cassandra snarled. 'Use his own tactics against him. Ram him!'

On board the vessel co-ordinating the eighteenth section of the mazone defence fleet, Hellebore
glared at the screen, blank though it was with Cassandra having cut the transmission. A tall mazone with wine-dark hair and black eyes, her pale green skin was darker where she'd been bruised by a fall in the last attack run. Dark green sap ran down her left cheek and dripped slowly onto the breast of her chiton. 'Ram him?' she asked incredulously. 'Does she not realise that even with the carbon drives at full capacity, there's no way we can take that much damage and survive! Paper I said, and I stand by that. The Arcadia will ignore us like a redwood battered by a fluttering leaf.'

'I think she no longer cares,' her second replied cautiously. 'This Harlock - he's going out of his way to avoid doing more than crippling our ships. He's telegraphing the deployment those mono-nets - only the most fanatical are closing with him and he's only targeting those who directly attack.'

Hellebore stared at the viewscreen. 'Has he made any attempt to engage with the civilian fleet?'

'No. Quite the opposite - he seems to be drawing us away from them. We're now a considerable distance from the main convoy.' She hesitated. 'If you watch the flight pattern he's clearing the path for the civilian fleet of his deployed filament nets with the dark matter. I don't think he wants to damage them. Why would he do that?'

Hellebore gripped the thick bark of her console. 'Because he's not the man we thought he was? Cleome and Tessius were right… this… this is not right. And it is not our way.' She stared at the view, the dark cloud shrugging off the lightning flung by the mazone fleet into the roiling maelstrom of dark matter lit by flickering red and blue flashes.

She straightened, and took a deep breath. 'Lily. Open a secure channel to our ships.'

'Lady?'

'Give the order to retreat to the civilian fleet. I have no idea how many of the other commanders are of a mind with the Queen and Cassandra, but those who are not should understand our intent.'

'And Harlock?' Lily's dark eyes were huge in her delicate face.

'If he's the monster they say he is, we're doomed anyway. Better to die protecting those who cannot defend themselves, than to throw our lives away against that.' Her three fingered, spatulate hand ran over the controls gently. 'I hear he defended the defectors Cassandra sent her ships back for, although they chose to sacrifice themselves. If that is true, then we're fighting the wrong battle, Lily.'

'One section of the attacking fleet just broke away,' Franz called out. He leaned on the console, both hands gripping the edge tightly. 'They're heading for the civilian fleet.'

'Attacking?'

'No. Looks as though they're taking up a position between us and them. But there's another group in pursuit, they're…' He pulled away and looked at the main viewscreen in horror. 'Fuckin' bastards! They just opened fire on their own!'

'Not the first time we've seen that,' Yattaran grunted somewhere near Blaze's ear. 'Dissension in the ranks ain't tolerated…'

'Are we near enough to intercept that group before they do any more damage?' Blaze's tone was quiet, but the crew, used to the same soft but deadly note in their captain's voice, prepped for the change in tactics without being asked. Franz shared a quick nod behind the acting captain's back
before answering. 'Aye, sir.'

'All ahead full. Put us between those ships and that rebel group. A few shots across their bows should make them stand back. Oh - but take out that third ship on the left - either that captain didn't care that an unarmed vessel was in the way, or that shot was deliberate.'

Yattaran checked the viewscreen and saw the debris field expand. On his own monitor he zoomed in and quickly wished he hadn't. 'Shit…' In amongst the shattered remnants of the ship - double *Arcadia*'s draft - thousands of small bodies drifted, cold and lifeless. 'Martinez?'

'On it, First Mate!' came the reply from Ali's station. 'Gotcha!' The culprit exploded, a brief light in the darkness.

The *Arcadia* swept into the space between the military fleet ranged against it, and the civilian vessels and their handful of defenders, her dark clouds billowing in response to Mimay's ever-dancing hands on the control crystal.

In her grove, Rafflesia glared in fury at the scene. 'How dare they… how *dare* they!' She paced furiously around the confines of her own version of the tactical hologramme. 'Cassandra.' Rafflesia's voice was cold. 'What is happening?'

'Hellebore… she's retreating. To cover the civilian fleet. The thirteenth is following her but the *Arcadia*'s taking up a position between them for some reason.'

'Then deal with it, Cassandra. This close to our goal I will not tolerate any further dissension. To disobey is treason. Make an example.'All of them! No-one retreats. Destroy the eighteenth group! Destroy them all! There is no mercy to be shown to traitors!' She cut the connection.

In the command chamber, Cassandra smiled triumphantly. 'Do you seek to hide amongst the civilian fleet, Hellebore?' she sneered. 'Too bad.' She waited until the small battle group was within close range of the nearest tree-ship. 'There is no shelter when any ship is itself a weapon…' she reached for the controls, and her long fingers slid into the cells of the panel, seeking the instruction she required by extending her long vines into the system.

The drive for the three kilometre long vessel did what it was programmed to do. It exploded, taking every ship within reach with it.

Trembling at the side of the commander, the little *melia* watched wide-eyed, as without a single exception, every single battleship in the defence fleet ceased firing and drifted silently in space.

The *Arcadia* rocked in defiance of both her external and internal dampeners, and the blast shield cut off the viewscreen with the swift efficiency it had been designed with to protect the bridge crew. 'What the hell just happened?' Blaze stared at the viewscreen, one hand resting on the wheel. To his left Yattaran shuffled awkwardly and scratched his head. To his right, Franz peered at the gauges on Kei's terminal. Even through the filters the afterimage of the explosion was still dancing in front of his eyes.

'Was that us?' someone asked from the lower bridge.

'One of those drives blew…' Yattaran's thick fingers could dance over his console when they needed to with surprising grace and dexterity. 'Holy fuck… it it would have taken out most of the ships behind us if we hadn't been absorbing the blast!'
'How bad?' Blaze frowned as he stared at the scene. The wreckage of several ships was visible as a cacophony of lights on the viewscreen as the system worked overtime to render the data from the ship's sensors into a visual. 'Any risk of a cascade effect from multiple drive failures?'

'Negative,' Franz replied. 'The battleships were running on empty. But there's some nasty graviton readings coming from there. Navigation'll be a bitch for a while and it's playing havoc with the sensors.'

Then as he watched, as one, the entire mazone fleet had stopped firing on them, and just… waited. An intake of breath between one moment and the next. 'Captain…?'

Blaze let the error pass without comment. And on the normally ebullient bridge, you could have heard a pin drop.

'Do we attack?' Yattaran asked. 'It could be a trap.'

'I'm not so sure…' Blaze looked over his shoulder, to see Harlock's bird staring at him from its perch on the back of the captain's throne. It prrrked at him and went back to smoothing its feathers. 'Where's Harlock and the team?'

'Should be within boarding range of that big tree anytime now,' Franz replied. 'Difficult to get a lock on with the damn thing's carbon drive playing havoc across the EM spectrum.'

'The military vessels are still not moving,' Franz said, his hands moving swiftly over the controls, trying desperately to clean up the signals. With the blast shield still closed, they had no visual reference.

'Tochiro? Can you reset the main screen?' Blaze asked.

'Wouldn't help if I could,' replied the central computer's pleasant tenor. 'Those renderings are based on the sensory input, and that's all over the place right now.'

'Floor screen,' Yattaran called out. 'Tanaka, Inky - get your asses off it! Tochiro - grab the helm for a minute, would ya?'

'Floor screen?'

Yattaran led Blaze towards the front rail of the gantry. Behind him the wheel moved slowly, correcting their course as the central computer took the helm.

A circular section of the bridge floor had irised back to reveal an old-fashioned graphical display, tiny points representing the enemy fleet. One large cluster of lights was presumably the main civilian fleet. A smaller cluster the battle fleet, and to one side, the massive, glowing star that was the mother ship. 'We can still plot movement.'

'They're just sitting there.' Blaze folded his arms and frowned.

Yattaran stared down at the display and gave his arse a scratch. 'Could be they're waiting' for orders. Maybe with us sitting here they don't want to risk firing into the civilian fleet?'

From below, they heard Martinez snort. ' Didn't stop 'em before, did it?'

Blaze didn't catch Yattaran's retort. He stared intently at the simple green display below. 'Keep working on those sensors,' he said eventually. 'And I want three guys keeping an eye on that display - the moment anyone moves, I want to know. First mate?' He twisted slightly to meet...
Yattaran's myopic gaze. 'Do we have an update on Harlock and the boarding party?'

Daiba whistled through his teeth as another shot only just missed them, a stray blast from the battle taking place over half an AU away.

'Just keep her level, Ben murmured next to him. 'Don't be tempted to start firing back. Our job's to get Cleo on board in one piece. Leave the shooting to the professionals.'

'I wasn't…' he replied through gritted teeth.

'Kid - you are so thinking it right now. If I was a telepath I'd be reaching for some brain-muffs to try and blot you out. Relax. You don't need to squeeze the damn controls hard enough to leave your fingerprints in them.'

Daiba looked down involuntarily, at the way his gloved hands were gripping a vulcanised grip on a tectite alloy throttle and pitch control. He forced his fingers to relax, wincing slightly as tense tendons protested around his knuckles. 'Like I could make a dent in these,' he muttered as he forced himself to concentrate on his course again.

'Not for lack of trying.' Ben patted him on the shoulder. 'Ease up. If it's still revenge you're after, I think you'll soon have a target rich environment…'

A quiet feminine cough from behind reminded Ben that perhaps that attitude wasn't best spoken out loud. 'Sorry, princess. But I don't think we'll be able to just walk on board without a fight.'

'Most of my people are obedient and loyal to the queen. To them, you are the enemy…'

Daiba snorted. 'I think there used to be a name for the "just following orders" defence.'

'Captured Bolar warriors used to claim that one,' Ben added dryly. 'My father didn't think much of it either.' He grinned, the savage expression visible in his reflection in the viewscreen. 'If by some horrible quirk of fate I ever inherited, I'll make damn sure I surround myself with officers who know the difference between legitimate and illegal orders and aren't afraid to tell me where to stuff the latter. Harlock's been a bad influence: I think the usual species of court sycophants would bring me out in hives if I ever went back…'

'Would it be so bad?' Cleo asked. 'Would you run from the responsibility for your people?' Neither youth missed the soft emphasis she placed on "you".

'It's not so much the responsibility, more the fact that overnight I'd have "please shoot here" tattooed between my eyes. I need my beauty sleep.'

'Then make sure you surround yourself with those men of integrity before you go back - and make sure they'll follow you into hell,' Daiba twitted him. 'Works for my cousin…'

Ben, on some odd sympathetic instinct, twisted in his seat so that he could look at Cleo, who was staring at her hands, fingers twisting nervously in her lap. 'It's all looking a bit daunting, isn't it?' he asked gently. When Daiba took his attention off the control to look he shook his head sharply and jabbed a finger at the screen. The boy dutifully obliged, although Ben was pretty sure he was listening in intently. 'A couple of minutes and we'll dock, board and you'll be on your own, not knowing which of your people to trust… hoping some at least will rally round, but not wanting to hurt any of them. And with only a handful of foolhardy humans to support you, who have no reason to trust your people, and every reason to hate them. After all - we just want those kids back, don't we? How do you know we won't just leave to out to dry?"
She looked into his eyes, and for all the delicate beauty of her young-looking face, he felt a cold trickle down his spine as he stared into dark pools that held the knowledge of a race which stretched all the way back to the dawn of life on Earth.

He smiled at her. 'Relax, kitten. We're the good guys.'

'Men of integrity?'

He laughed. 'We're as committed as you are, Cleo. Maybe with different priorities, but we want this over as much as you do. And I know the captain well enough to know that if he says he'd prefer a peaceful solution to this mess, he means it. Trust him.'

'I already have,' she pointed out, not unreasonably. But she did relax her shoulders slightly.

The bullet bumped against something with a hollow thud. 'Grapples away, Ben,' Daiba called out, just loud enough to break into the quiet moment between the two. 'You're up.'

'Sabu?' Ben left his seat and made his way aft, where the bulky pirate was already getting the cutting gear out, moving awkwardly in his rotund hardsuit. Ben, rather more elegantly encased in a Valkyrie suit, clicked his gloves into place and helped move the equipment into the airlock. 'Daiba - make sure that seal's good and tight.'

'Not easy,' Daiba grunted as he had to push and coax the bullet into place. 'The hull isn't exactly smooth and it's non-metallic…'

'Well we trained for that,' Sabu replied. He stood patiently whilst Ben check his helmet seal. 'Just hold her steady, kid. We'll do the rest.'

'Wait for my signal before you re-open the airlock,' Ben cautioned Cleo. 'We're counting on you, princess. Wouldn't do to lose you now.' With a playful smile he leaned down and placed a gentle, chaste kiss on her lips, then withdrew to the airlock. The hatch hissed shut behind him, and Daiba, in the faint reflection of the viewscreen, saw her touch her lips with wondering fingers.

'Bullet's in place.' Ali watched the ballet with a critical eye, as the little ship hugged the hull of the giant tree. 'You know, you should have sent me over…'

'I need you out here,' Harlock replied, even as Ali's main cannon lashed out and took down another fighter intent on chasing Kei's tail. 'See what I mean?' He frowned. 'Seems they might have noticed us - there's a group bearing down on us is tight formation.' He brought the visual up on his HUD. 'Damn, that's a flexible formation… A bit too flexible…'

'They don't seem to have noticed the bullet,' Kei replied. 'Let's keep it that way, shall we?'

'I think we might be able to do that.' Harlock dropped the HUD and went back to combat sensors. 'Kei - find me the flight leader for that group will you - you and Ali cut it out and send it my way. Cai, Takashi - up and over. You know the drill.'

'Roger.' Kei and Ali's replies were in perfect harmony. Harlock indulged in a feral grin as he watched their fighters peel off and plunge down, seemingly away from the fray, drawing several of the mazone ships with them. Two other space wolves flipped out overhead, and dived on the group heading towards them.

Harlock waited, biding his time until a stray blast heading in his direction. Turning into it just close enough for the spent energy to wash by the space wolf, he then placed the fighter into a flat spin,
as though hit, drifting slightly towards the main body of the mazone fighter group. As expected, three ships peeled away to finish him off, and he smirked as his wing-wobbles "accidentally" caused havoc with their ability to get a lock on. 'Oops. Someone needs to update their targeting computers,' he tsked.

'Stop playing with them, darling.' He smiled, picturing Kei's frown. Cai swung back towards him and neatly took down his pursuers, allowing him to maintain the limping bird routine.

It was all about pattern recognition… any halfway decent wing commander knew how to disguise the point around which their fighters orbited. The fixed point of reference at the insane speeds and the ridiculous distances of space combat. But command staff by their nature were combative, and competitive, and if you offered them an enticing enough target, you could usually break that formation and encourage the arrogant prick to engage. Kei's precision flying and pin point accuracy rarely failed to piss off an opponent. She might as well have been broadcasting "nyaa nyaa nyaa nah nah" at them…

The wing commander took the bait, and opened fire. Kei dodged with her trademarked grace, and the fighter gave chase. Ali moved behind to cut the pilot off from her team, and the remaining space wolves took care of cutting through the remaining formation with condescending ease.

Not seeing the limping space wolf ahead as a threat, the mazone pilot didn't even hesitate to chase Kei right over the top of Harlock's fighter…

...so the short sharp blast from his forward cannon right into her underbelly must have come as a brief shock. Shields on full he plowed through the wreckage, and rejoined his team. After that, it would only take a few minutes to wipe up the rest of the mazone group, as they scattered, so he sent Ali and Cai back to cover the bullet.

'The Arcadia's behind that fat-assed pyramid galactic north,' he grumbled. 'How's our ship doing?'

'No visual,' Kei replied. 'But if you checked your long distance sensors, you might see something interesting.'

'All caught up in the moment,' Ali sniggered. 'You know how he gets…'

'Blow it out of your ear.'

'Was that blow it or blow me?'

'Shut the ever-loving fuck up, Ali.' Harlock pulled up the long range view. 'What should I be seeing - nothing's happening…'

'Exactly.' Kei's voice sounded both puzzled and frustrated. 'They've stopped.'

Harlock looked again at the readouts. 'What the…'

Kei was right: the frantic field of battle was still. Not a single ship - apart from the giant tree they were attempting to board - was moving. They were frozen in place.

Waiting? But for what…? Inwardly Harlock cursed. Contacting Blaze at this point would not be a smart move. However, everyone's attention seemed to be focused in that direction, which was good enough for him. 'Kei? Ali? I rather think this might be a good time to see if we can join Daiba and Ben. Whatever's got their attention might be just the break we need. Daiba?'

'We're in!' Daiba sounded a little excited over the comms. 'Cleo's got the hangar open for you - just
follow the beacon. Transmitting the codes now.'

Harlock smiled coldly as the computer received the transmission. 'You got those, people?'

'Loud and clear.' Kei took up her position on his right wing, Ali on his left. 'Time to get our boys back…' she continued in a whisper on his private channel.

'Depend on it,' he replied on the same frequency. He put the space wolf on the given heading, and sent it flying towards the five kilometre long tree filling his viewscreen.
Chapter 52

Sabu stepped back from the airlock and gave the section of the mazone hull a good kick. Assisted by the augmented servos of his power armour, the area he'd cut out landed on the floor behind it with a satisfying thunk. Holding the cutter in front of him he swept the open space, the green tinted heads-up-display of his suit scanning and finding no bodies. 'Looks clear, Ben,' he called back over his shoulder.

Cleo laid a hand on Daiba's shoulder as the youth tried to push his way past her to take point. 'Wait,' she advised in her quiet voice. 'Not all mazone are human-form.'

'Listen to the lady, Daiba.' Ben moved past them and tapped Sabu's metal-clad shoulder with a clang, and the big pirate moved back, stowed his cutter and grabbed a heavy rifle with an underslung knife over a foot long with a wickedly curved blade. Ben held a powered axe in one hand as lightly as if it was made of aluminium; the double-bladed weapon was over four feet long and only a handful of the crew could handle them even with powered armour. Ben held it as lightly as a feather. Daiba eyed it enviously as Ben strapped his blast rifle over his back.

'Could I…'

'No.' Ben nodded to Sabu, who fell in behind the younger man and Cleo. 'You get a pistol - you've not trained with boarding weapons. If I thought you'd stay put I'd leave you with the bullet…' He turned to Cleo. 'What can we expect?'

'Once the ship has had time to recognise us as a threat, watch all surfaces. They can come through any of them - and they don't need doors. The ship itself is mazone, and any surface can attack. Mostly with the vines - clinging, strangling, puncturing - given time they can penetrate your armour, so keep moving. And some are venomous, so try not to get stung.'

Ben turned back to Daiba, about to tell him he'd changed his mind, only to see Sabu already handing the boy one of the spare axes, and hefting another in his own large, brass-covered paws. 'Daiba - if that thing connects with any part of my anatomy…'

'I'll watch him,' Sabu told him, his voice sharply metallic through the comms of his bathyscaphe suit. The multitude of glowing green circles on the round helmet was disconcerting, even after all these years. With a grunt of acknowledgement, Ben flicked his own helmet into place, and sighed behind the bifurcated faceplate. Over the comms he heard Sabu giving the youth pointers on holding and swinging the weapon, but resolved to keep his distance nonetheless. At his side he noticed Cleo giving the pair - the large pirate in his stumpy, baroque armour and the boy in the more delicate valkyrie armour, a wide berth.

'Don't worry - he's a quick study, that one,' he told her, earning himself a startled but satisfied grin from the kid before Daiba thumbed his helmet control, the mechanism unfolding with uncanny, alien precision to cover his head. Cleo looked less convinced, but nodded. With a laugh Ben stuck his head out of the opening they'd made in the hull, and still saw a clear space beyond. Not a passageway as he'd have expected on a human ship, but a wide, open hall of some kind, stretching above him to a great height. It reminded him a little of parts of the Arcadia's interior, with massive sweeping branches arching overhead like the columns of an ancient cathedral, forming pointed arches high above the wooden floor.

Branches was right, he realised as his suit's sensors zoomed in for a close-up. The hall was a glade, with trees arching overhead to hold up the ceiling. The Mazone, he remembered belatedly from his
captain's briefing, constructed in living wood, not stone or metal.

He was about to take a step forwards when he remembered to look down first, and instead his feet took an involuntary step backwards, causing him to bump into Daiba. 'Hey!'

'Sorry.' Ben took a breath and steeled himself for a second look. 'By the leader…' he breathed.

The floor - such as it was - fell away on both sides and was in fact a span barely three feet wide that took a sharp turn upwards only a few feet in front of him. The open hall was actually a clever trompe l'oeil, and on closer scrutiny those arching buttresses were revealed as a network of similar pathways. From his vantage point on the bullet, the effect was of an open, cathedral-like structure. A step or two outside and that perspective skewed with dizzying suddenness.

'It's like the structure of that ship on Tokarga,' Daiba said from beside him. 'Only that one was on its side. But they should be safe enough - we only got into trouble because it was old and the planet was a bit frisky.'

'Whereas this one's in space and there's a battle going on outside?' Sabu muttered archly.

'We don't have to go far,' Cleo told them firmly. She moved until she stood beside Ben, and stared up into his faceplate. Since he was about the same height as Harlock, she had to tip her head back to do so. 'Just to the landing area. It's only a couple of sections over.'

'Only?' Sabu muttered darkly. 'What's that in distance?'

'Maybe two, three hundred feet?' She laid a small hand on the wall next to the jagged wound left by the cutter. 'We're quite close, as long as we don't meet with too much resistance.' The wall she touched undulated slightly and tendrils curled around her fingers; tiny green vines forming a fragile lace. She stroked them gently and they returned to the structure, although a few leaves still sprouted from the surface where her fingers had rested when she lifted her hand.

Daiba, who'd witnessed first hand the damage the mazone vines had done to the Arcadia not long ago, shivered inside his hardsuit. He waited until Ben shouldered his axe and strode confidently out onto the arch, and followed with far less confidence behind the tiny mazone girl, Sabu lumbering in the rear.

'Why such an open structure?' he asked as they walked. With no hand-rails he kept to the centre of the pathway and tried not to look down at the sides. The depths below were just as terrifying as their fossilised counterparts on Tokarga had been, and he wasn't sure he trusted the way green shoots sprang up in the wake of the dark-haired beauty. 'So close to the hull?'

'These trees grow in space now, but once they were our homes on our colony worlds,' she replied. 'In space we encourage a shell to grow around them to protect the interior - so this is actually several trees intertwined and surrounded by a carefully grown protective shell. The Dorcas is one of the older vessels, from before the destruction and is rather more complicated in its construction - the newer vessels are simpler and also more fragile. If you're worried about the integrity of the hull with these open structures, don't. Although thin, it's structurally stronger than most metal ships - the nacreous Aquatic ships come closest of your human vessels to their strength. The carbon drives provide more than enough energy to encourage fast regrowth after damage to heal any rifts.' Without looking round she seemed to know that he'd risked a glance back over his shoulder at their bullet, still wedged against the hull. 'Don't worry - your vessel is safe - it can't heal over whilst the ship is attached.'

'That might be the least of our worries,' he muttered. A vine curled around his boot and he yelped,
lifting his foot out of the way wand raising his axe to aim at the waving leaflets. A hand held the shaft of his weapon just above his own hands.

'I wouldn't, kid.' Sabu told him. He released the shaft and Daiba lowered the weapon a little sheepishly. Behind him, Sabu patted his shoulder, the double clang reverberating through his armour. 'Start hacking at this shit and you might make it worse. Remember the clean up inside the Arcadia?'

'I'm not likely to forget,' he muttered. 'Why didn't we bring flame-throwers?'

'He's young, and a bit stupid,' Ben told Cleo, attempting to head off a potential diplomatic incident. 'And he's had a few bad run-ins with your people.'

'Hey!' Ben ignored the indignant interjection. 'If you can talk some sense into your people, we'd prefer to keep casualties to a minimum.'

'Talking is for humans,' she retorted a little primly. 'I've been in contact with the ship since we boarded.'

On the private channel, Daiba pinged Ben. 'Erm... is that a good thing?'

'Concentrate on your footing, Tadashi.'

The dismissive non-reply did nothing for his mood. Automatically, and without thinking, he kicked out at the shoots in front of his right boot, scuffing the ground. 'Watch my footing? The damn thing's three feet wide,' he grumbled, forgetting that he wasn't too fond of the lack of any kind of railings.

He'd also forgotten just how quickly the mazone vines could respond. The damaged plant was part of a greater whole, and reacted to the perceived threat before he could complete another step, the vines shooting out of the ground to wind around his brass-covered ankle, and jerked him off his feet. He crashed to the ground, landing heavily, and fell with his head hanging over the edge, staring down into the green-tinged depth of the ship. Panic forced a shrill scream from his throat, before he realised the vine was still wrapped around his ankle. Panting he tried to inch his way back onto the walkway.

Then the vine unwrapped itself from around his leg.

Ben heard the dull thunk of metal on the organic surface of the pathway but was far too late to reach the armoured figure as it started to slide over the slightly curved surface into the depths below. Thankfully Sabu had been both closer and faster, and had a gauntleted hand wrapped around the ankle of the hardsuit. But even a powered grip could only do so much when your hand doesn't encircle what it's holding - especially when that something is about ten stone of solid teenager wrapped in a brassy suit of armour. Ben's hands grabbed the boy's other leg and between them they hauled him back onto the walkway. The difficulty was in not overbalancing themselves and sliding off the opposite side. Whilst Daiba flopped like a crab on its back, Ben felt his own balance start to go, and grabbed desperately at the far too smooth surface.

His feet slid into a hard barrier that hadn't been there a few seconds ago. Breathing far more heavily than he liked, he looked over to see a small - maybe a foot high - raised lip had now appeared on both sides of their path. He looked across to see Cleome staring down at them, a tiny frown wrinkling the area just above her nose between her eyes. 'Nice trick,' he said quietly, once
he'd got the hyperventilating under control. He got to his feet, a little unsteadily and then helped Daiba to his before holding out a hand to Sabu. 'And nice work, Sabu.'

'Thanks,' Daiba got out eventually, more than a little shakily. Ben slapped him lightly on the back below his rebreathers.

Sabu sniggered. 'I just didn't want to lose the axe... the captain takes those out of our cut,' he deadpanned. The item in question had been attached to its power source on the suit and thankfully hadn't fallen to its doom in the flickering green bowels of an alien spaceship. Sabu picked it up and handed it back to Daiba with a bow.

'I'm rolling my eyes behind here, just so you know,' Daiba shot back.

'If we can get moving?' Ben took point again, laying a hand lightly on Cleo's shoulder as he passed her. The upturned edges of the walkway, he noticed, preceded them by about six feet and were absorbed back into the scenery once Sabu had stomped past. Try as hard as he might, he couldn't shake the discomfort the changing structure caused. He was used to the Arcadia's self-repair, but the Arcadia didn't - as far as he knew - start changing itself on a whim from any of the crew...

'Am I the only one freaked out by what she just did?' Daiba asked on his private channel.

'Freaky is one word - but at least she had our backs. You okay, kid?'

'Uh.'

Ben smiled inside his helmet. If conversation was back to non-committal grunts, he figured the kid would be fine. The resilience of youth... For his own part he couldn't shake an itch between his shoulder blades. A feeling that they were being watched, although looking around his HUD wasn't picking up any unusual activity in their surroundings. He half-expected eyeballs on stalks sticking out of every surface. 'Shouldn't we meet with more resistance?' he asked Cleo as they moved from the open walkway into the (comparative) safety of a tunnel. 'Or even your friends?'

The look she gave him mirrored his own puzzlement. 'We should, but there's an odd stillness aboard. As though the vessel is waiting for something...'

They reached the area she'd indicated was designated as a hangar for their orbital to ground ships and fighters. Currently empty, since most of them were out chasing Blaze and the Arcadia. Two mazone - the small, green-skinned plant-like women - stepped out and Ben had to slap down Daiba's pistol as the boy lifted it. 'Friendlies,' he snapped curtly, as Cleo greeted the pair warmly. They stared at the Arcadia's crew nervously, but demurred when Cleo asked them to open the hangar iris. A green haze flickered into being around the edges of the deck as the atmospheric forcefield kicked in. As the opening in the hull opened - to a startled and decidedly filthy snigger from Sabu as he recognised its resemblance to an orifice generally found on the female of the species - Ben called in the success of phase one to his captain, and settled back to await his arrival, setting Daiba and Sabu to watch their backs, and kept a firm grip on his axe handle. He had a feeling that "waiting" would be quickly over once the captain arrived...

The strange stillness of the Mazone fleet made the spot between Harlock's shoulder blades itch as he inched the space wolf towards the open maw of the giant tree - a space at the jointure of three branches and the main trunk, gaping to show a sickly green glow against the night.

He let out a breath he hadn't even noticed he was holding as the undercarriage touched down on the surface of the "hangar", still on one level expecting a barrage of fire from whatever weapons the
ship had.

But it appeared Cleome at least had kept her word. The large chamber was empty, except for the sleek-winged forms of the rest of his wing taxiing to a stop behind him. With the ease of long practice he popped the canopy, grabbed his gravity sabre and cloak, jumped lightly out onto the wing, then to the ground. It took him only a few seconds to slide the sabre into its holster and swing the gravity cloak into place, the controls slotting into the power ports of his hardsuit with a soft click as its weight settled on his shoulders. Not twenty yards away, Kei was doing the same, and Ali wasn't far behind. Cai had already glided silently to his side and he gave the crewman a brief smile, which was, as ever, returned with a flickering facsimile that still grieved him to see. Since Matthias' death in the plague five years ago, he'd not been able to shake the feeling that Cai was just going through the motions. 'Hold back,' he told the slender pirate, when he moved to take point. 'Ali-

'I know, I know… watch your arse…'

Kei slapped him hard enough for her augmented armour to knock him off balance as she sashayed towards Harlock. It was a constant source of amusement - and not a little discomfort - to the men that she could manage to make walking in her armour a sexual provocation - doubly frustrating to those who had to waddle around in the Arcadia's old-style suits.

'Oi!' she snapped at him. He opened his mouth to object, caught his captain's eye, and shut it again with a snap. 'Why are you all standing around looking useless? We're here to find my sons!' She stormed past without waiting for them, and had to be hoiked back by Harlock's quick hand on the rim of her suit.

'Yama…'

He ignored her half-growled snarl of his old name - a sure sign she was stressed. 'I knew I should have let you bring your clipboard,' he quipped. 'Now stay put. No-one goes off half-cocked, and that includes you.' He stood his ground impassively as she glared at him - a trick he'd learned from their old captain: to stand calmly and just wait for the storm to pass when someone was getting in your face. It had been known to earn him a few additional beatings for being a trolling twat, but thankfully Kei wasn't inclined to start whaling on him, and he could usually outwait her. She gave in with a short nod and a sigh, and he resisted the urge to hug her. The resulting clang of armour on armour didn't tend to encourage such gestures. 'We go together, Kei.'

'I knew she'd blow eventually,' Ali's voice drawled sotto voce into Harlock's earpiece as he drew level with his captain. 'You should have trussed her up and locked her in your cabin.'

'That's such a good idea,' he drawled back, careful to subvocalise in his turn. 'Why don't I get you to do it?'

Ali snorted, causing Kei to turn and eye him suspiciously. 'Do I look suicidal?' he replied quietly out of the corner of his mouth. Harlock flicked his cloak back in lieu of an answer, the heavy black leather rippling to reveal the red lining. Ali eyed the garment up with narrowed eyes, and grunted. 'Remind me to stand a few feet away from you - that thing has a distressing tendency to warp energy beams in odd directions.'

'That was once, before I figured out the settings,' Harlock retorted in his calmest manner. 'Maji and Yattaran fixed that little problem years ago, and it should just provide enough of a field to deflect them away from me, and absorb them.'
They were moving towards the exit where Ben's small group stood waiting, helmets down, all eyes scanning for trouble, which so far seemed to be keeping its distance. Ali, however, was never one to let something go, like a dog with a bone. 'And yet… there's that word - "should". Not exactly confidence-inspiring…'

'And yet… you're still flapping even when you should be concentrating on the situation at hand,' Ben snapped over the comms.

'Blow me, Blue-boy,' Ali snapped back. 'Who died and made you the boss of me?'

'Both of you can pipe down,' Kei snapped before Harlock could tell the pair to shut up. 'Or I'll start shooting off the bits that keep your right hands occupied on those long lonely late night watches.'

'I'm left handed,' Ben called out breezily as she reached his position. The snarl that greeted that quip made all of them flinch. Stress and the high stakes made them all a little cranky, Harlock reflected, but the pissing contests tended to grate on his nerves.

'Enough. Or I'll come out swinging,' he told them firmly. None of them missed the flat tone he delivered the few words in, and all of them knew the unmistakable sound of the calm before the storm. From his position watching the corridor, Daiba smirked, relishing the rare feeling of being on the side of sanity for once.

A smirk which quickly vanished as the wall started to bulge a few feet away. 'Captain!' he called out. A face appeared in the rough bark, then a hand… a foot… a torso…

Vines lashed out from the side, catching him unawares and he only just missed them getting a grip on his throat, swiping at them with a swing of his battleaxe. Even as inexperienced as he was with the heavy, bulky weapon, he couldn't miss the mass of green, leafy tentacles that poured out of the walls, the floor, and the ceiling to writhe in the spot where he'd just stood, blocking his view of the rest of the crew. Sap flew from the wounds of the severed tendrils, but the vines kept coming, as did the green-skinned, blank-faced forms that were pulling themselves free of the walls. Swearing under his breath he didn't wait for back-up - with a scream of pure rage he lifted his axe in both hands, and charged at the mazone about to swarm him.

The silence in the small ante-chamber they'd been hiding in for what felt like weeks was almost deafening. The six Mazone tasked by Cleo with protected them stood silently in the centre of the small round room, staring at apparently nothing. Taro edged closer to Wattaru, and for once didn't object to the taller boy putting an arm around his shoulders and holding him close. 'Why aren't they moving?' he asked in a whisper. The women had been standing in exactly the same position for ever… unblinking, unmoving, not even showing the slightest signs of life, since their chests didn't rise and fall as they breathed. Their dark green veins were clearly visible against their paler green skin, but no matter how closely he'd looked, he couldn't even see the flicker of a pulse. Or feel one, when he'd risked touching them. Their skin was warm, but oddly smooth to the touch. Not plastic, as such, but too smooth, hairless and dry and waxy.

'I don't know,' Wattaru replied equally quietly. 'But I really hope Dad's to blame.' They shared weak smiles, and Wattaru hugged his brother tightly, welcoming the returned cuddle from the smaller boy. 'Grip!' he had to remind Taro eventually. For his size, the kid was a bit of a scrapper and tended to cling a bit hard when scared. Taro loosened his death-grip around his adopted brother sheepishly. 'Sorry.' Then, more plaintively. 'I'm hungry…'

'You're always hungry,' Wattaru grumbled. But he checked the spigot on the wall that dispensed the protein and carb paste that passed for food, and handed the moulded bark container over to the
smaller boy when it was full. 'Here. Not exactly mom's cooking…'

They shared a faint grin as Wattaru filled his own bowl up. Kei had always been notorious on the Arcadia for her (brief) stints on kitchen duty, and not even Selen's (or Anita's) patient instruction had managed to improve things. The boys tended to eat at the ramen shop when on Tabito when Anita wasn't around. 'Remember when Dad ate his way through that entire bowl she cooked one time?' Taro asked, mumbling through a half full mouth.

'Bravest thing he ever did, according to Uncle Ali.' Wattaru giggled. 'Though Yattaran said he'd have been far more impressed if he'd stopped after the first mouthful and just told her it was crap…'

'Mom's scary, isn't she? Think she's here, if Dad is?'

'I know they are,' Wattaru replied forcefully. 'Think anyone else could cause this?' he gestured at the still-silent, frozen mazone. 'Well, apart from Aunt Selen, maybe…' he put his bowl down and stared at the floor suddenly overcome with a wave of homesickness, and another, less general loss. 'I hope Mamoru's okay.'

Taro patted his hand gently. 'He'll be fine, Watt. You know Mamo-chan - he's sneaky that way.'

Wattaru sighed heavily, but nodded. He raised his head again, a determined look on his young face, but quickly changed it to consternation. 'Erm… Taro?'

One of the mazone girls guarding them was reaching a hand out towards them, and the door was opening. 'We have to go - now,' she urged in her bell-like voice. 'They've found us.'

The boys barely had time to get to their feet before they were being bundled out of the door, mazone surrounding them.

And they'd not gone ten feet before boneless, doll-like figures with black eyes were coming out of the walls, three-fingered hands reaching and clutching at them and their guards. Two went down immediately, trying to remove the twisted ropes that their attackers' arms resembled. The others were trying desperately to keep the boys safe, but Taro only narrowly avoided a brown, bark-covered tentacle trying to wrap itself around his throat. In the struggle, he lost his glasses.

'Go!' one of their guards told Wattaru, bending down to whisper in his ear whilst one of her sisters tried to protect them. 'Run - and keep left! When the walls are dark, flaking bark, you'll be in a safer area. Find a chamber and stay hidden.' When he hesitated, she gave him a push. 'Hurry!' Taking Taro's hand in his, he ran, pulling his brother along with him, both of them stumbling in their haste. Behind them, they heard an unearthly shrieking, and the dim lighting was augmented briefly by a bright, blue glow that quickly faded as they rounded a corner.

Every single surface erupted. At least, that was Harlock's impression, as leaves, branches, thick, sinuous lianas with a will of their own all spilled out of the walls, grew out of the floor and trailed down from the ceilings with murderous intent. Green skinned mazone - blank faced humanoids with stygian pools for eyes and lipless mouths, with snake-like vines for hair ran towards them screeching in a register which tortured the ears. Their hair writhed around them and targeted their victim, attempting to twine around their throats and throttle them, whilst those who could spat venomous spines from their skin, most of which bounced off their armour. Harlock ducked as one almost took out his good eye and winced as it left a burning trail across his left cheek and ripped across his ear. 'Helmets!' he called out, hoping to be heard over the shrieking cacophony. 'Helmets!
up! He thumbed his into place and had to hastily order the heads-up to infrared, since the usual green tinge had the unintended effect of rendering his foes somewhat invisible. A thick vine wrapped around his right arm and he cursed as the metal - a nibelung variant of tectite, actually began to crumple.

Ali’s battleaxe whistled down between Harlock and the wall of the mazone ship, severing the tentacle. With a nod of thanks he pulled the dripping remains off his wrist and threw it to the ground, still writhing. A well-placed shot from his cosmo dragoon put paid to it and it crisped to ash in a wisp of blue fire. But he had no time to spare for taking a closer look. They were surrounded, and his small group struggling against not only superior numbers, but the ship itself turning against them.

He switched his pistol to his left hand and drew the gravity sabre as Kei fought her way to his side, her massive pair of blast pistols - baroque, and sporting thick curved blades she’d been known to detach and get to work with - in her hands, blasting away alternately with a quiet, deadly grace he never tired of watching. Back to back they laid waste to the mazone surrounding them, Kei occasionally ducking behind his cloak to avoid taking fire as the hanger was thick with mazone spitting acidic sap and firing all manner of organic weaponry. 'Is there any part of themselves they can't weaponise?' she panted during one brief respite.

He swung around, pivoting on one foot, the black cloak swirling heavily around him and covering Kei's exposed left as he fired at the tangle of six inch thick brambles tried to form a human figure. The blast from the gravity sabre hit it centre mass and it shrieked and twisted in response, lashing out with barbed vines that left deep scores in his armour. A slash from the blade severed several of these and they thrashed around on the ground. Kei's blaster scorched them where they lay and blue flames blinded him for a moment, forcing him to look away blinking as his HUD tried to compensate.

'Apparently not,' was his eventual reply. 'Where's Daiba?'

'Cai went after him. The idiot took off down the corridor yelling and shooting at anything in his way. Ben's got Cleo, she's trying to re-establish contact with the ship.'

'Sabu?'

'Here, Cap'n!' The brassy hardsuit waddled up, battleaxe held casually in both hands, dripping with suspicious substances, the blade looking rather pitted and chipped. He brought it down on a wriggling green tentacle and grunted as he had to haul it back out of the wooden floor. 'These things just don't quit!'

'They're part of the ship. I guess it's using its own mass to form them.' Gravity sabre and heavy blaster both hit the same green-skinned mannikin which burst into blue flames as it fell. 'Pick your own targets, Kei.' Their next shots went in opposite directions, Harlock firing over Kei's outstretched arm. 'We need to move - they're trying to keep us pinned here!'

'I'm open to suggestions!' she called back, another two shots finding their targets. 'Duck!' He dropped and she fired at the mass that had been about to drop onto his head from above. Even with the warning he had to roll to avoid the remains as they went up in flames. She hooked one of her pistols back onto her belt and offered him her hand. 'How far are we from that central core do you think?'

'If it's centre mass, then not far as my bird flies. But the interior of this thing is a labyrinth, if it's anything like that fossilised ship. It'll let its own pass through walls, but us - I'm thinking -' a quick shot snapped off from the hip with his cosmo dragoon took care of one of the last of the first wave,
behind Kei. '-not so much…'

'Fighting all the way…'

'Cleo says she left the boys with her people, with instructions to take them to what she calls "deadwood". Something about areas of the ship that are no longer living?" Ben said over the comms. 'We'll face far less opposition there - just the mobile mazone, and those loyal to Cleo are helping out.'

'Lignified tissue,' Harlock replied off-handedly. 'That makes sense. How is she holding up?'

'It's tough - the queen's aware of her and fighting back, but she says it's as though the queen's distracted by something. The whole fleet's affected - not just here…'

'The ships all stopped,' Kei added quietly. 'If she's trying to force her will on them, she's not able to concentrate so much on us?'

'It's what we were hoping for,' Harlock pointed out. He leaned against the wall, breathing hard. 'Damn… I'm getting old if this is winding me.'

Kei scanned his armour and frowned inside her helmet. 'You're not…but I can't see…'

'I can.' Sabu leaned towards his captain and lifted the cloak out of the way. 'You got some of that weed wrapped around the regulator. Only I can't get me fingers in to get it - they're too big.'

'Show me.' Kei spotted the offending article once it was pointed out, and deftly yanked it clear. 'Better warn the others - this stuff's got a knack for finding weak spots.' With one keeping a weather eye out for more trouble, they quickly check each other's armour over, finding two small strands on Sabu that were squirming their way towards his oxygen recyclers, and one on Kei trying to burrow into the cuff of her left gauntlet.

'Amazing,' Harlock said as he reluctantly ground the last one underfoot. 'They really are a fascinating lifeform…'

'I'm sure you meant to say "disturbing, dangerous and unsettling." Ali strolled back into the hangar with his battleaxe slung over one shoulder and Cai's arm over the other, one arm around the younger, smaller pirate's waist. 'He's hurt.' Harlock and Sabu helped Ali ease Cai to the ground. His armour was penetrated in several places, and blood seeped through two of them; one in his shoulder, another in the small of his back.

'Fuck,' Harlock said under his breath. 'Daiba?'

'Here.' The youth stumbled back in behind Ali, looking miserable and battered. A purple bruise was already forming around his neck, one gauntlet had been torn off and his left arm hung limply at his side. 'He had three on him at one point, trying to get them off me. If not for him…' Harlock took a closer look and noted his eyes were bloodshot and the tell-tale marks of petechial hemorrhaging marked the skin around them. Leaving Ali and Sabu to look after Cai, he got to his feet, strode the few feet over to his young cousin and pulled the exposed hand towards him. The palm was scored with deep lines that had been burned into the skin and tissue. Turning it over he saw the same lines on the back - telltale marks of having wrapped the stuff around his hand to pull them off something. 'Cai?' Daiba did his best to shrug nonchalantly. Harlock pulled him close and hugged the youth as hard as he could with armour in the way.

'Hothead,' he told Daiba as he pulled away, punctuating the observation with a shake. 'But a brave one.' Daiba smiled wanly, and then hung his head. 'I screwed up…'
'We've all done that. Now pull your head out of your ass and go help Ben. I need you to help make sure Cleo gets to the centre of the ship safely.'

'We need an army,' Daiba muttered. He fumbled with his dangling gauntlet, then let Harlock help him put it back into place. It locked into place with a click and he had to bite back a cry when his wrist and shoulder both complained.

'That's broken.' Harlock looked him in the eyes, his helmet having flicked back whilst he worked, the better to see what he was doing.

'I can manage. The suit'll keep it straight if I don't use it.'

Harlock opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again with a snap, and a silent nod. 'Go.'

Daiba set off at a slow lope, and Harlock turned his attention back to the group on the hangar floor. 'How is he?'

Ali looked up and shook his head. 'Not good. I need to get him out of his armour to stop the bleeding…'

'Take him to the bullet. Do what you can.'

'But…'

'Ali - You've got the best field-medic skills out of all of us. And Doc can talk you through anything else. Get him to safety. Sabu - help him and then join us.'

Harlock made his way to Kei's side, where she watched the corridor, guns in hand. 'We could use Ali better than…'

'He's the best chance Cai has.' She didn't reply, knowing he was right. 'I should have brought more men…' he added softly. 'This could be a big miscalculation.'

'Never mind the men,' she retorted. 'I'd settle for Anita and her shoulder-mounted scenery remover…'

'You and me both,' he replied with some feeling. He stepped back as Sabu rejoined them, the big man surprisingly fast, for all that the Arcadia's old armour tended to make the occupants look as though they were waddling. 'All set?'

'He's in bad shape, but whatever those vines secrete seems to reduce the bleeding.'

'Probably to keep their food alive for longer,' Harlock muttered without thinking. Feeling four shocked eyes on him he considered trying to shrug off the observation, and thought better of it. 'From the tissue samples I've been able to examine a lot of the pre-carbonaceous era mazone were partly carnivorous. Makes sense when you evolved before proper topsoil…'

'Oh. Like this just didn't get any nastier,' Kei muttered. She checked the charge on her carbines. 'Ben love - does Cleo have a route for us?'

'Sending now, Miss Kei.' The data appeared on their HUDs. 'We've got a line on the boys - Cassandra's sent her troops after them."

'That bitch is mine,' Kei growled once Ben had cut the connection. Behind her back Harlock
exchanged looks with Sabu. The big pirate risked a quick glance at Kei, then back to his captain and nodded. Harlock smoothly swept past his wife and XO to take point before she could object. 'This way, I think? Before more dryads start crawling - literally - out of the woodwork?' He took off at a run, forcing the other two to keep up. It had the benefit at least of avoiding a tricky conversation.

There was no way in hell he stood a chance of stopping Kei from going for the mazone commander's throat, and truthfully, he wasn't inclined to stop her. But he would, no matter what, make damn sure she had someone watching her back...

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Keep left... keep left... the instruction played out in Wattaru's head like a mantra as they tried to evade the mazone chasing them. They'd not seen any of the odd, blank doll-like creatures since they'd moved away from the well-travelled areas of the ship into an area that was lit by a dull phosphorescent moss on walls that looked like the bark on ancient trees. Now they just had to find one of the small ante-chambers to hide in - although that was proving harder than he'd thought. The corridors... tunnels... whatever you wanted to call them, were devoid of any openings apart from crossroads leading into even dimmer lit areas, none of which he felt comfortable venturing down.

He still had Taro's small hand in his as they ran, even though the smaller boy's shorter legs were struggling to keep up. He tried to slow his own strides down, but it was hard to concentrate on that when it was so natural to stride out. And he was trying, very hard - right up until the point they both fell over the same tree-root.

'Oof.' Wattaru had the wind knocked out of him as Taro went down less than a second after he did, but with a long enough interval to land on him. The pair tried to disentangle themselves, Wattaru more easily than Taro. 'You okay?' he asked, when Taro didn't immediately get to his feet.

'I can't put my weight on it.' Taro tried again but struggled when he tried to stand on his left foot. Eventually Wattaru put out a hand and helped him up - not without difficulty, since for all his shorter size, he was a chunky little kid. 'It's just sprained, I think,' Taro said as he tentatively put more weight on the damaged limb. But Wattaru caught the wince he tried to hide.

'Just rest a minute,' he said gently. 'They haven't found us yet.'

Sounds of the pattering of bare feet on the thick vegetation underfoot gave a lie to that as soon as the words were out of his mouth. 'Oh.'

'You had to say it,' Taro told him with a creditable imitation of their Uncle Ali, trying to lift the mood a little, but failing. 'I can walk on it, I think.' He limped a few steps, and stumbled again, fielded by Wattaru. 'Should be the other way round,' he quipped. 'I can't reach your shoulders to lean on them...'

'Well we'll try,' Wattaru told him. 'I think there's an opening that way...' He led them in the direction of a stronger light, and mercifully the sound of those footsteps faded away as they walked - or limped, in Taro's case.

Right to the edge of a precipice criss-crossed by the ubiquitous arching walkways the mazone were so fond of.

'Oh, fuck,' Wattaru muttered. He stared at the narrow path in front of them. Smooth, open, slightly convex and a good fifty feet to the other side. And absolutely not a stable platform for a kid with an unstable ankle.
And behind them, the sounds of those fast-pattering footsteps were growing louder again. 'Double fuck with knobs on.' His parents would have thrown a fit if they'd heard him, but he felt the expression was justified.

'You have to go,' Taro told him, pulling out of his helping arm. 'I'll just slow you down.'

'Not happening, Taro.' Wattaru glared at him. 'Mamoru would sodding kill me - besides, no Harlock would leave his Tochiro behind, would he?'

'No Tochiro would let his Harlock come to harm either,' Taro told him. 'They're getting closer, Wattie - you gotta go!'

'No.'

They heard a voice call out in that bell-like, rustling language. The footsteps stopped and then began again, faster this time.

Wattaru still hesitated, wondering if it was worth the risk to get them both across. They might not hurt them...

'Run!' Taro screamed at his brother. He tossed the improvised dagger he'd hidden away in his tunic to Wattaru who caught it and stared dumbly between it and Taro.

'I won't leave you!' Wattaru still hesitated, even knowing Taro was right. Then: 'I'll be back for you, I promise.'

Taro didn't reply; he hobbled back towards their pursuers waving his arms and shouting "over here!" at them. With a sob, Wattaru rubbed hard at his eyes with the back of his hand and set off across the walkway as fast as he could, and tried very, very hard not to look down. Or to think about looking down…

He stepped out onto the walkway, and started by shuffling, his bare feet finding better purchase on the rubbery surface than he'd expected. Gaining in confidence, he increased his pace. By the halfway point (or as best he could tell without looking too much at anything other than the surface under his feet - the arches and the abyss had a tendency to look different and swim in and out of focus if he looked around) he was running.

Over-confidence, his parents had said for as long as he could remember, was always his undoing. If he'd been going more slowly he might have been able to slow down to avoid colliding with the small, spiky creature which appeared out of nowhere in front of him. It looked like some horrifying baby, but walking upright, and it's head was almost waist height to him - and he wasn't short for his age. Its skin was a dark green that was almost black in the shadows, and resembled a spiky cactus he'd once gotten too close too out on a trip with some of the construction guys on Tabito, out in the drylands. The eyes though… those were just black pools, almost radiating a malevolence he could practically feel crawling over his skin.

If he'd been going more slowly, he might have stopped. Might even have kept his footing. But he fell at its feet - spatulate, tipped with thorns instead of toenails, he noticed.

But it was moot, since the creature opened its mouth, shrieked at him like a howling banshee, and
bent down to push him off the walkway with unexpected strength.

'Papa!' was all he could think to cry out, as he fell. Knowing it was hopeless. And silently: 'Mamoru…'
Chapter 53

Harlock's small group were pinned down again within a couple of hundred yards from the hangar. The corridor they were in came to an abrupt end at one of the deep abyssal shafts that ran the length of the vessel, and the crossing point was guarded by mazone of varying kinds - the doll-like meliae and epimelids. The more protean hamadryads - the integral parts of the vessel's defence system were thankfully absent in this section, which, as he'd suspected from Cleo's description, was older wood, already "dead". However the lack of choking vines wasn't totally welcome, since they'd been replaced by the human mazone - the "corpse flowers", and they - and some of the meliae - were armed with more conventional weapons as well as their natural defences.

'Not averse to adopting human customs when it suits them,' Kei called out from his right side, in between blasts. 'Can't Cleo get some more of her friends to help out here?'

'Busy elsewhere,' he gasped out in a brief lull. 'It's more important that Cleo gets to Rafflesia.'

'Not to me.'

'To them, love - not us. We're just the distraction.'

'And here I was thinkin' we were the heroes,' Sabu panted out from behind them. 'Shit - how the hell do we get out of here? Across that?'

'Problem with heights, Sabu?' Harlock quipped as he let fly with another blast from his dragoon. The crewman huffed at him.

'Huh. I can still beat you up any rock face you care to mention. You always take risky shortcuts and get caught out wriggling around for a hold with yer arse hanging out in the breeze...' The tide of attackers had finally receded and all three leaned against the walls, desperate for a breather.

'As opposed to pedestrian routes that every man and his dog could stroll up? Where's the fun in that?' Harlock waved his sabre in the direction of the arching walkways ahead. 'Trying to run across those whilst being shot at, though...' He sagged against the nearest wall. 'We should move. Now.' Even in armour, Harlock felt bone tired. He pushed himself away from the wall with an effort. 'Let's g-

A scream cut into whatever he'd been about to say. A child's voice, from high above them. 'Papa!'

'That's dead space - there's no way to get any of our kind to him.' A group of mazone materialised
out of the walls, hands held out in supplication. 'I'm Naia - Cleo sent us. I'm to tell you we have the other boy safe, but we can't get through the walls in there, the structure is already too far gone. I'm sorry.' The gracile, green-skinned figure in the lead bowed her head and then kneeled, her red hair covering her face. The others followed her lead. Harlock and Kei both dropped their helmets and stared at each other in some bemusement.

'Up,' Harlock told them gently. 'No-one kneels to me - nor I to them.' He held out a hand to the leader, who placed her slender fingers on his palm and allowed him to help her to her feet. 'Are you sure? Some of you can send out tendrils…'

'Not on these walls. The only ones of our kind who move in these areas freely are strange creatures, not wholly sentient. They're scavengers - a relic of old times, from the early years of our experimentation with animal forms, when our cells merged with early hominids.'

'Yama…' Kei's voice held a note of censure.

'On it.' He dropped his sabre and pistol to the floor and began to divest himself of cloak and armour. 'Watch our backs, love.'

'Our?' Belatedly she saw Sabu also shedding his armour, stripping down to pants, boots and a sleeveless t-shirt in record time. Under his armour, Harlock was still wearing his black flightsuit. 'You can't just…'

'Can't climb in armour, Kei. And there's no time to lose.' He slipped the cosmo dragoon into its holster, but left the sabre: there was no way in hell he could climb with that dangling between his damn legs...

'But why Sabu? I can…'

'No miss, you can't.' Sabu was a tall, heavy-set man in his early forties, slab-chested and bulky when out of his shell. 'We're the best free-climbers, and if he slips, I've got a better chance of anchoring him.' He checked a pouch tucked deep into his pants pocket and pulled it out with a grin, then handed several small metal objects to his captain. 'The self-firing crammers. We're supposed to keep 'em on hand for boarding actions if we have to EVA, so... But we've only got the boarding cables on the suits to use for belaying…'

'Should be all we need,' Harlock replied quietly. He was already grabbing the thin cable from the containment on his own armour. 'We can use the safety carabiners from the armour. Our belts should hold. Hell - that's what Maji claims - we'll be putting that to the test far sooner than I'd like.'

'But…' Kei's gaze swung frantically between them. 'I should go with you.'

'Kei - you're good, but you haven't put the time in. Just help these ladies keep Rafflesia's mazone off our backs - this is going to be hard enough without being shot at.' He turned to Sabu. 'No time to evaluate this one - what do you think?'

They both stared at the walls of the tube. 'Can't you use that fancy cloak, cap'n?'

'No. It's great for coming down - not so much for getting up. Gets in the way.' He looked wistfully down at his armour, weapons and cloak. 'Kei - I'm counting on you. Keep watch - once we start up, we'll be so focused on our fingertips we'll have no time to watch for an ambush.'

She nodded, just once, and he smiled at her. 'I love you,' he added softly, just loudly enough for her and her alone to hear. Her answering smile was strained and sad. 'And I you, you idiot. Come back safe with him.'
'Depend on it.' With that, he nodded to Sabu, and the two men slipped out of the corridor and onto the walkway, to study the climb ahead of them.

Sabu shook his head and grunted. 'Whaddya think? E2?'

'Closer to an E3,' Harlock replied thoughtfully. 'It's vertical, the surface could be friable, and there's at least one nasty knot up there that will cause us some problems. And we'll need to slide across at about the seventy foot mark. How many of those explosive clamps do we have?'

'Twelve. Can we use 'em on wood?'

'This stuff?' Harlock gave it a thump. 'It's harder than tectite. My worry is that it's not a consistent matrix. What holds in one section might just splinter in another. And I'm not too keen on losing the sight in my good eye… We'll use them sparingly.

'I'd normally say that's more than we need, but we're gonna have to climb up past Wattaru to that overhang, and that won't be easy to get him and us back up onto a walkway…'

'And nothing between him and us where we can exit this damn tube,' Harlock finished for him.

'And the long drop below us,' Sabu added, peering briefly down into the depths. 'No watery landing here, but the gravity gradient is in our favour at least. I put it about point seven Earth normal?'

'Dad?' Wattaru's voice floated down to them. 'Can you please hurry?'

'We're on the way,' he assured his son. 'Just hang on.' He clipped the cable - a thinner variant of the ones they used on the boarding clamps and to tether crewmen working EVA - to his belt, and let it pay out, to be collected by Sabu. The clamps he placed in his pockets. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly and placed his hand on the wall. 'I just hope this wood holds out… last thing we need is rotten hand or footholds…'

And from there on, his world reduced itself to the few centimetres in front of his nose. Once he was committed to the climb, there was no going back. He could feel the cable shift as Sabu took up the slack. His fingers searched for the smallest handholds. His toes jammed into whatever holds they could find, which often led to him braced in awkward positions as he transitioned from one hold to another. Twenty feet up he had to use the first clamp - a small pfft as the tiny charge rammed it into position, shooting a custom-designed crimp into the surface. He clipped the cable to it and tested it carefully. With Sabu belaying him, the climb wasn't the worst he'd undertaken, but as he'd suggested, the difference between rock and wood was huge. The surface was smooth in places, making it hard even for Maji's hi-tech gloves and boots to grip. Where it wasn't, the bark-like surface had a tendency to crumble.

Forty feet up, he slipped as his left foot and right hand slipped from their tiny ledges, leaving him dangling awkwardly by his fingertips with only his toes resting on an even tinier outcrop. He swung back to the wall, making contact and finding his fingerhold, but not before his knee twisted and slammed into the side. It took him a few seconds to refocus once the wave of nausea inducing pain passed. 'Son of a bitch…' The cable wobbled as Sabu began his climb behind him.

'You okay, cap'n?'

'Fine.' He ground out from between gritted teeth. 'Watch yourself here. I'll stick another cramp in.'

A blasterbolt whizzed passed a few seconds later, followed by an unearthly shriek. A small figure wreathed in blue flames fell past.
'Sorry!' Kei's voice buzzed in his ear. 'They're starting to swarm up there. Can you hurry it up?'


*Lather, rinse, repeat.*

He reached the tangle of roots and lianas Wattaru had landed in without further incident, but once there, the next problem presented itself. 'Wattaru - stay still.' As he'd taught his sons, the boy stilled his instinct to scramble over towards him, and wide eyes stared into his.

'Dad?'

'I can't come in there to get you - there's no way it'll hold my weight.' He used another crimp, holding his breath in anticipation until he was sure the device would hold, and the matrix it was embedded in would not give way. 'Sabu - I'm going to have to go above onto the walkway. Can you get Wattaru on your back?'

'Sure thing, cap'n.'

'Harlock?' Kei's voice was showing signs of her fraying at the seams, wavering in pitch.

'It's fine, Kei. I need to get above them, then Sabu can hand Wattaru off to me.'

'You've got company…'

He didn't look up. He didn't have to. Given how long it had taken them to make the climb the problem was never going to be "will they have a reception party waiting?" but "how many will attend?". He smiled at Wattaru, who assayed a teary, fleeting reply, and then thumbed the commlink on his collar. 'I know some of you can understand me - and I'm betting those who do can relay my intent to the rest: I'm coming up there, now, and when I do I expect to take my son and walk away. You know who I am, you know what I can do - and you should realise by now there isn't much I won't do if you stand in my way.' He didn't raise his voice, but between his natural ability to deliver, and the augmentation, it carried. 'Your leaders have put you on a course for destruction. You don't have to let it happen. But kill me here, now, and *nothing* will stop that.' Only then, as the last note faded, did he look up, to see dozens of ancient, black pools staring back at him.

Then as one, they melted away, out of his line of sight.

'It could be a trap…' Kei muttered into his earpiece. He didn't have time to answer, as he was already reaching for the next finger-tip wide crevice.

'If it is, someone's in for a world of hurt,' he replied as he hauled himself up and over onto the narrow walkway. The obligatory ungainly wiggle to get his legs over the edge left him panting and staring up into a featureless green crotch. 'Huh.'

Black eyes stared into his, the face they belonged to surprisingly good at emulating a look of bemused curiosity. 'You don't *look* that fearsome,' the mazone intoned in a bell-like monotone. The half dozen of her clade standing behind her giggled with the same musical tone; high-pitched and bright.

'Give me a moment,' he replied dryly as he got to his feet. 'I'll try and make my next entrance a little more impressive.' He spared a glance down to see Sabu closing in on the little knot where Wattaru waited. 'Sabu?'
'Almost, captain!' Sabu heaved his bulky form closer to the knot where Wataru waited, with more finesse than his slighter captain managed. He had always been far more flexible than his muscular shape suggested - onlookers tended to think of him as a bit of a lumberer, but the man - whilst not the sharpest tool in the box, as Ali often unfairly called him - was a lot fitter and more acrobatic than he looked. A former Gaia Fleet marine wouldn't have lasted long in combat if he wasn't fast and flexible. 'Slowly, Wattie, and careful, okay?'

In hindsight and with the burden of almost ten years of experience, Harlock should have known that "slowly" and "carefully" weren't in the younger twin's vocabulary. Wattaru, in his trademark fashion, flung himself at Sabu with predictable results. His actions shifted the already precarious knot of growth just enough to make it pull away from the wall of the xylem tube, and it crumbled underneath him just before he reached Sabu's outstretched hand…

...which reached out and grabbed him by the waist, hauling him in close as the twisted mass fell into the abyss below, and Sabu hung from the cable, coaxing Wattaru's arms around his neck, before grabbing the cable with both hands and hauling himself and the boy to the safety of the walkway, aided by Harlock, who tried to hide the fact that his son had almost scared another ten years off his life with that stunt. He lifted Wattaru from Sabu's broad shoulders, and let the crewman haul himself onto the platform, letting him find his own handholds, but ready to offer a steadying hand if needed. Then whilst his crewman got to his feet, he gathered his son to him.

'I swear,' Harlock said fervently as he held Wattaru crushed to his chest, 'that you are responsible for more grey hairs than the rest of them put together…' He pushed a tearful Wattaru away gently so he could look into his eyes. 'You always rush into things without thinking first. How many times do I need to tell you that?'

_Hiccup._

Harlock ruffled his hair. 'Are you hurt?' Wattaru shook his head emphatically.

'Just bumped a bit. Papa - is Mamoru…?'

'He's fine. Probably just as worried about you and Taro. And Nami's on board as well - she's been kicking up a storm about you."

'I'm sorry…'

Harlock hugged him close again. 'Don't be. You did nothing wrong. If anyone should be apologising, it's me. I thought you were safe where you were, and I underestimated just how badly someone might want to use you to get to me.' He looked up to Sabu, standing panting over them both. 'Thank you,' he added softly. The big pirate waved it off with a grin.

'Anytime, cap'n.' He ruffled Wattaru's hair and grinned down at him. 'And you… next time I get you on a wall we're gonna have a long talk about doing what yer told, kiddo.'

'Sorry, Sabu.' Wattaru hung his head. A large finger tipped his head back up.

'Oi! None of that now. But yer dad and me won't always be there.' Sabu glanced at the gaggle of mazone nearby and looked down at his captain. 'Are they gonna give us any trouble?' he asked darkly, his hand straying to his pistol. A small dark, spiky-skinned creature that looked like a large baby crawled out from between two of the more human-form mazone, and he took a slight step backwards as its black eyes stared at him. 'Holy…'

One of the mazone urged it back, and another picked it up. 'They're just curious,' the leader said in
a stilted accent.

'One of them pushed me!' Wattaru declaimed petulantly. 'That's why I fell!'

'They… thought you were like us. Formless. We are part of the ship… we… would have become part of it again. It's… a … game?' She knelt in front of Harlock. 'The soldiers… they meant harm. But not these. But if you wish to punish…'

'Not needlessly,' Harlock replied. He held out a hand and she accepted the gesture after a hesitation, moving easily to her feet. 'They do have another of my boys though, and I want him back.'

'Here!' Taro appeared in the entrance at the edge of the walkway, and waved. 'Tessius' people found me again. Cleo's on her way to the nemeton, and all hell's breaking loose back there!' He hesitated for a moment then ran full pelt at Harlock, who sank to one knee to field his adopted son, and hugged him tightly. 'Papa!' then 'Is mom here? Uncle Ali? What about Mamoru? Are Nami, Dai and Rei okay? Kanna?'

Harlock laughed. 'Always talking nineteen to the dozen. Yes, yes, and yes to all. Now give me a moment, you two - your mother needs to get up here and then we have a queen to have a long, intense talk with…'

'You want me to get these guys back to the hangar?' Sabu asked. 'Probably safer…'

'If the mazone will guide you?' The leader of the small group nodded. 'Keep them safe, Sabu.'

'With my life, sir.'

'Papa!'

'Daaaad….'

Harlock knelt in front of the pair - Wattaru - himself in miniature, and Taro - a distant descendent of the Arcadia's builder and guiding light. 'I can't keep you safe and finish what has started here. Your mother and I need to stop something as bad as Harlock's attempt to reset the universe, and we can't do that if we're worried about you two.' He smiled down at them. 'Besides, you two need to keep Sabu safe for me, right?'

Both rolled their eyes at him. 'You were doing so well up to then,' Wattaru told him with all the exasperated world-weariness a boy not quite ten could muster in the face of patronising parents. 'What you really mean is you and mom might need to do bad things to bad people and you don't want us to see it.'

'I'd rather they didn't even think it,' Kei muttered in Harlock's earpiece as he watched Sabu guide them away into the mazone vessel interior. He had to fight the urge to run after them; the temptation to just take them and head back for the Arcadia had never been stronger.

'Your brains and my looks - what did you expect?' he quipped, in an attempt to distract them both. It earned him a stern harrumph. 'I'll join up with Ben - about time we finished this, don't you think? Where are you?'

'About two levels down apparently, according to Naia. You need to go down one and head along the long axis. Cleo's people have bottlenecked the hostiles not far from this nemeton they talk about - might be why we've not met with much resistance so far?'

'Darling, they can walk through walls. I don't think blocking corridors works,' he replied dryly.
'Ben?'

'Almost there!' Sounds of blasterfire could be heard in the background, along with what sounded suspiciously like a certain blood-relative of Harlock screaming "take that, bitches!" Harlock could almost hear the pained wince from his bridge officer. 'I should have brought a damn sword to this fight!'

'Kei and I are on our way. Just hold your position for now.'

'Well if that idiot cousin of yours didn't keep advancing every five minutes, that might be easier.' More fire, more cursing, this time from Ben. 'Get. Your. Slimy. Green. Tentacles. Off. My. Ass!'

'Actually they're closer to scandent lianas,' Harlock murmured, forgetting he had the mike still on. 'I don't fucking care about the botanical taxonomy, Harlock - right now it's a fucking tentacle trying to insert itself into places I'd normally need at least a few drinks bought for me to consider. Get your arse down here and bring a bloody weed-whacker!'

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In a lull between attacks, Daiba brushed his sweaty hair out of his eyes and stared wide-eyed at Ben. The blue-skinned pirate was chopping one of the creeping vines that had erupted from the side walls into kindling. 'Did you just tell your captain to haul ass?'

Ben looked up at him, breathing heavily. Bits of greenery still trailed from his hardsuit, dripping sap onto the floor. He leaned on his battleaxe. 'I might have kind of sorta forgotten the pecking order in the heat of the moment,' he admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. 'But seriously, he does have a tendency to get a bit caught up in the details…'

'Scientist,' Daiba pointed out. 'Runs in the family. He never wanted to be a soldier,' he continued.

Ben laughed. 'Hate to break it to you kid, but he still isn't.' He stuck his head around the nearby entrance to one of the side chambers, where Cleo and a handful of what he'd started to think of as her ladies-in-waiting were gathered. 'How much further?'

'Maybe two, three hundred paces,' Cleo replied softly. 'But there will be more resistance around and inside the nemeton itself.'

'Wonderful,' Ben muttered as he pulled his head back. 'You heard that? Good. Now bloody well pace yourself more - even in powered armour this stuff gets harder as you go on. You will start to feel it if you overdo it.'

Daiba glared at him from under his fringe, but the glare was water off a duck's back to the young gamilan. 'Shouldn't we get moving?'

'Why?'

'Because they know we're here?'

'They know where we're going as well, kiddo. We wait for the captain and Kei. Might as well be here as further on. Won't make any difference.' He looked around at the carnage - bits of plant-mazone - matter that didn't go up in flames littered the floor, and splattered the walls, floor and ceiling. Large gashes and scorch marks from their weapons marred the surfaces, where they'd had to hack at mazone emerging from every surface. The partly humanoid types had given him some pause to start with - he'd never been one to enjoy fighting women, even the ones sent to kill him, but far creepier were the totally inhuman lifeforms that pulled themselves out of the fabric of the
ship and tried to wrap themselves around their prey, or to envelop them with grasping, writhing vines whilst trying to strangle them or pull them limb from limb. 'Damn creepy, fighting the ship as well,' he muttered. 'Now I know why that red-head back on the Arcadia was freaking out. Living ships, huh? Must have given her fond memories of home…'

'Legends and myths,' Cleo said from under his left ear. She'd taken the opportunity afforded them by the brief respite to join them. 'Shizuka grew up amongst the humans - our vessels would have been stories to her - but always with a dark edge. We made sure those who lived amongst you were going to be far more afraid of what would happen to them should they fail us.'

Ben snorted. 'Well isn't that nice? And I thought a couple of my nannies were a bit heavy handed on the bed-time stories of what daddy would do if I misbehaved…' He looked around and sighed. 'However… I'm thinking there wasn't a lot of exaggeration in those stories?'

'No.'

'Yeah. Never good when you find that out the hard way…' He leaned against the wall, after checking it carefully, ostensibly relaxing but constantly scanning the corridor. Daiba took his cue from the older man, but with less relaxing.

'Where are you from?' Cleo asked. 'Who are you?'

'Gamilas - in the Greater Magellanic cloud. My people emigrated very early on from Earth, and futzed around with their DNA - one of a group of self declared "elites" that thought way too highly of themselves. Most of them look a little different from the norm - one lot gave themselves pointy ears for crying out loud. Another bunch are green and have serious issues with facial hair.'

Daiba sniggered at that.

'Hey - they're our mortal enemies,' Ben told him. 'Don't ever underestimate a man whose eyebrows meet in the middle. As to the "who" - well, that depends on who you talk to.'

'I rather thought I was talking to you…' she replied tartly.

He looked down at her and smiled fondly. 'Just a drifter, lady. A long, long way from home…'

Daiba, from his position leaning against his own piece of wall, bit back another snigger. 'Oh brother… you two should just get a room,' he muttered. He straightened as he heard footsteps pounding towards them, then relaxed as he remembered the mazone didn't wear heavy mag-boots. Sure enough, Kei and Harlock jogged out of a side-tunnel, a small swarm of diaphanously clad nymphs in their wake who greeted Cleo with delightful squeals that set Daiba's teeth on edge. 'Like a gaggle of schoolgirls,' he muttered as Harlock drew near.

'Giving you horrendous flashbacks to your school days as well?' Harlock twitted him as he greeted Ben with a nod. 'Sabu's back on board the bullet with the boys. Cai's stable so Ali's taking off back to Arcadia - seems the fleet is still keeping its distance - for now.' He turned to Cleo. 'They're waiting for something… would that be you?'

'The group mind is resisting Rafflesia. She has direct control over most of the military, but even they are part of the whole. When she had Tessius executed many of the older mazone - the stronger minds that guide the group mind - began to question her rule. There's an impasse, however. Neither side has an advantage in terms of influence, so the civilian fleet refuses to obey, and the military fleet refuses to compel them. For now, the Arcadia is safe from attack.'

'Which could change at any time?' Kei shot Harlock a worried glance.
He shrugged, although she knew him well enough to know the nonchalant gesture was mostly a front. 'We're not the problem. The other mazone fleets are facing resistance that won't be quite so accommodating. If they fail to defend themselves, Hoshino and Leopard are not likely to hold back. Those two idiots will open fire.'

Cleo trembled, and Ben laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. 'Oki?'

'He won't attack unless fired upon. Same with Hannibal's people heading up the other task force Selen assembled. None of them have engaged yet, so I suggest we sort this out, now - once and for all.'

'I quite agree.'

Daiba's shot went wide of Cassandra's head only because Kei slapped his arm as he turned and fired. 'Mine!' she snarled. More quietly she added 'Good reflexes, though. No-one else heard her coming.' She turned her attention to the mazone commander. Several of the mazone soldiers were still pulling themselves free of the walls in a particularly creepy fashion that made her skin crawl. First the whorls and lines resolved into the basic outline, then more features became visible as the creatures first became 3-d reliefs on the wall, and then pulled free of it like taffy, until they stood naked in front of the small group. 'Why don't you face me without your harem?' Kei called out in her most challenging tone. 'Or do you only attack when the numbers favour you?'

Cassandra shrugged in a surprisingly human manner, although the gesture went no further than her shoulders - the small breasts didn't move at all, as though they were just moulded from her body. Then she waved back her soldiers. 'If you insist.' She made a show of looking Kei up and down. 'It is time, I think, we sent a message to your kind - and to you,' she added, with a pointed sneer in Harlock's direction. 'Or will you simply open fire?'

He stepped back without a word, allowing Kei to take point, and reholstered the pistol he'd drawn. None of them, looking at his face, could read it, but his attention was wholly on Kei as she stepped towards the mazone commander.

Kei faced Cassandra and felt the anger she'd been bottling up for weeks drift away, leaving a cold, calm void in its place. Very carefully, she placed Harlock's gravity cloak on the ground and just as calmly placed her blasters on top of it.

'Kei...' Harlock's voice was soft and low, with just a hint of concern.

'Just let me have your sabre,' she replied, very quietly. 'I have this.'

'Just shoot her and have done with it. Or let me do it.'

She shook her head. 'Not this time, love. I said I'd rip the bitch to pieces, and I meant it.'

Cassandra sneered. 'Brave words.'

'Shit up. I'm not talking to you.' Kei turned to face Harlock. 'Sabre - or I'll just have to tear her apart with my bare hands.' Inside, in that cold, dark void lit only by pale, cool blue flames, she could almost hear a familiar voice. *For fuck's sake girl, don't forget what I taught you...*

A faint blue spark passed from Harlock to her as she took the weapon he handed her silently. Or maybe it was from the weapon to her hand. Just a faint flicker of blue flame.

*Impossible... it's not even the same weapon...*
...but it does have some of the same parts…

Whilst you're on board my ship you're one of my crew… Words from long ago, and a different life. 'Just don't get in my way,' she whispered. Harlock nodded and took a step back, keeping his good eye on the mazone warrior, and a hand on his cosmo dragoon.

Blue flames… and dark matter...

She smiled, flipped the power switch to "on" and took up an open stance, inviting the mazone to attack.

'Are you just going to stand there and let her do this?' Daiba tugged on Harlock's sleeve to get his attention, which didn't waver from the scene in front of them, as Kei slashed at the tendrils the mazone sent in her direction, and dodged others aimed above her head. In the nibelung armour she sacrificed some of her natural grace and speed for power, but Kei had trained in the Valkyrie suit almost daily for over twenty years, and the trade-off was negligible. There was, Harlock knew, only one person who could equal her skill in the armour - and that was the man who'd trained her.

But not against plant-based lifeforms with abilities no human opponent had ever displayed. No training could compensate for the speed, ferocity and multiplicity of attacks Cassandra launched at Kei, who despite her training, skill and drive, was, it seemed, outmatched.

One sword - no matter how fast the user, could be in seven places at once, and Cassandra was uncoiling her human form and sending wave after wave of green tentacles at her. Kei could barely block half of them in one parry, and dodge maybe two or three at most of the rest. Only her armour saved her from the attacks that landed, her speed and the armour's strength barely enough to prevent the mazone getting a stranglehold on an arm or a leg. And sooner or later, Kei would slow down…

'If she looks like she's going down,' he told Daiba, sub-vocalising over his mike, not the main commlink, 'then shoot the thing. Centre mass.'

'But…'

He ignored the minor protest, and the what-the-fuck look Ben was trying to give him from across the chamber. His attention was on the mazone. Cassandra had abandoned any attempt to keep up the pretense of being "human". The creature now facing Kei still had a nominally humanoid form - although the facial features, once her concentration slipped, actually more closely resembled those of the nibelung race - but her arms and legs were now trunks made up of multiple, entwined vines of varying thickness, all of which she could flick out in the direction of her enemy, uncurling in flight like a time-lapse of a bramble or trailing clematis searching for something to cling to. Likewise her hair, made of thinner, blood-red tendrils which writhed with a life of their own rather like the snake-like locks of Medusa of legend. These even seemed to have small, toothless mouths at the tip, and one, when it landed on Kei's exposed cheek, left a lamprey-like bloodied bruise behind when Kei pulled free.

He took an involuntary step towards her only to stop when she simply raised her left hand to warn him off. The mass moving in front of her now bore no resemblance at all to anything human - it was a nightmarish thicket of thorns and vines, moving of its own volition, a multitude of appendages and tendrils trying to subdue Kei's armoured form.

And before this onslaught, Kei began to retreat. One step at a time, she backed away, keeping the gravity sabre in play, but now only parrying the attacks. Pieces of the amorphous mass flew
through the air, crumbling to ash in wisps of blue flame before they hit the deck.

The "edge" of the sabre now trailed a faint blue flame of its own, something Harlock hadn't seen in years, and then only when using it on board the Arcadia or (briefly) her sister-ship, the plague-bearing Apollyon.

_Dark matter._

He looked down, and realised where Kei was leading the creature. Slowly, quietly, he began to unholster his cosmo dragoon, as Kei lured it with a careful pretence of finally being worn down and forced to simply defend herself.

One step.

Two steps.

Kei parried, stumbled, and dropped to the floor. With a triumphant shriek the creature moved towards her, a flashing tangle of fleshy green and red tentacles….

Directly over the gravity cloak she'd laid on the floor earlier.

Her bladed flashed out, and then down as she used the powered armour to move back to her feet and stab the mass through the writhing tangle - hitting the still-solid centre mass and pinning it to the cloak. Blue fire ran down the blade, and up from the black and red leather pool on the floor. Harlock grabbed Kei with one outstretched hand and pulled her away from the cold conflagration. With the other hand he jammed the cosmo dragoon into the mass and fired.

The ear-splitting screech the thing that had once been Cassandra emitted caused them all to flinch and drop whatever they held to cover their ears, and they all had to turn away from the bright flash of blue that lit up the tunnel.

Then silence, and the return of the pallid green light of the mazone ship's interior. Cleo was the first to step forwards, over the pile of ash that started to blow away in the gentle swish of air caused by her passing, and past the blade still standing at an angle in the large pile of black leather. Harlock let go of Kei's arm and gave her a reassuring smile before stepping towards the small mazone woman, and stood at her side.

As one, the mazone soldiers who'd waited, on their commander's orders, dropped to one knee in front of them and bowed their heads.

Behind them the green light in the ship grew brighter. A voice called out from inside it, or behind it. Just one short phrase, in a deep contralto.

_Let us finish this._
Chapter 54

The tunnel opened out into a wide space that dwarfed even the Arcadia's central computer room. The roof must have been a good two hundred feet or more above them, and the chamber itself maybe - at a rough estimate - seven or eight hundred yards in diameter, and as far as Harlock could see, perfectly circular. That was his first impression. The second was that in some ways, his comparison to the Arcadia's heart was truer than he'd realised. They stood in an open area of meadow which seemed to extend around the perimeter of the chamber, surrounding a perfect circle of trees, rather like the Arcadia's main servers surrounded the central computer core. Or rather, the Arcadia's central computer room resembled this glade, where the trailing cables and power conduits were analogous to the vines and roots that undulated above and across the glade's meadow, to where a massive tree stood, dwarfing its companions, soaring up into the dizzying heights of the chamber, its crown lost against the backdrop of diffuse, artificial sunlight overhead. The lack of a single lightsource meant that the trees cast no true shadows, just a dappled pattern that wandered and rippled across the grass as the trees moved in the equally artificial breeze, rather like being in the middle of a wood in summer on Mistral, Harlock thought idly. The image was completed by the pool Rafflesia had stepped out of, fern-fronded and clear.

The glade held other structures, he noted. A tall monument built of large stones stood to his left, whilst to his right, a large pool nestled at the roots of the central tree. Clear water, the surface dappled by the diffuse shadows cast by light falling through the branches, lapped against a gravelled bank as the low waves caused by a body moving through that water travelled until they hit a barrier. That body reached the bank nearest to them and stood up, the water reaching the tops of her thighs before she walked out to stand on the short grass and wait for two nymphs to towel her dry and tie a diaphanous garment around her that was even more revealing than Mimay's filmy veil. A third nymph placed a circlet of leaves around her head, bowed to receive it, and the woman straightened, and walked towards them, her head held high.

Beside him, he felt Daiba stir and heard a barely audible oath. 'Hold,' he ordered gently, raising his hand to forestall any argument. To his right, Kei moved closer, something he was always aware of, even if he couldn't see her. 'Are we standing at the foot of a slope?' he asked quietly as the woman approached, her still wet black hair covering what her clothes refused to. 'Seems level to me. Damn, she's tall…' Kei breathed. Even barefoot, standing a few feet away from them, it was clear the mazone queen was at least three inches taller than Harlock. The top of Cleo's would head barely reach her shoulder. In the dappled light that passed through the trees, her skin appeared a pale green. She moved, and the faint shadows made it look - for a moment - as though her skin was a light turquoise blue. An illusion only. As she moved out of the glade and into the encircling meadow, she was just normal, fair-skinned woman, her paleness accentuated by her black hair. Despite her height her feet barely left a mark in the springy grass, as though she passed over it rather than through it, not a blade broken or bent in her wake.

Harlock surreptitiously brushed the toe of his boot over the grass, and the left corner of his mouth twitched upwards. 'Really… illusions, even now?' he said quietly. 'Why not drop the pretence, and let us see this place as it truly is?'

'Seems level to me. Damn, she's tall…' Kei breathed. Even barefoot, standing a few feet away from them, it was clear the mazone queen was at least three inches taller than Harlock. The top of Cleo's would head barely reach her shoulder. In the dappled light that passed through the trees, her skin appeared a pale green. She moved, and the faint shadows made it look - for a moment - as though her skin was a light turquoise blue. An illusion only. As she moved out of the glade and into the encircling meadow, she was just normal, fair-skinned woman, her paleness accentuated by her black hair. Despite her height her feet barely left a mark in the springy grass, as though she passed over it rather than through it, not a blade broken or bent in her wake.

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She walked past him imperiously, head high, not even looking at him. She stopped at the piled stones and knelt at the foot of the heap. A pale hand reached out and rearranged the smaller stones around the base, where they'd fallen from the monument.

Not stones, he realised as he watched. They were uniform in size and shape, and a pale green in
colour, with faint striations on the surface. If anything, they resembled a large ovoid pod. Before he could speak, she began to talk, her voice melodic but laden with weariness and bitterness in equal measure.

'Over a hundred years ago… Word had reached us, of the destruction of Earth, and the Gaia Sanction…' She stopped and stood up, the fabric of her gown flowing around her graceful form. 'Gaia. How dare they… How dare they? To defile her name with their actions. Our sisters - those who'd escaped the holocaust by the virtue of being on other worlds in the solar system - told of the lengths they went to to hide the truth. The ships tasked with placing the hologram projectors scuttled in secret, distant locations, their crews slaughtered. Rounding up anyone suspected of having seen the destruction. Anyone who spoke of it, or even whispered of it… And we who had watched, and waited, and hoped for a return to the world we were born on once the plague that was humanity was spent… we were forever exiled from our home.' She turned, knelt, and laid another pod on top of the structure. 'Eighty Earth years ago, a ship arrived at our new home. A ship of dark matter, not nibelung but human.' She placed another pod. 'Fifty years ago, a solar flare launched a plasma stream out into the darkness. One of our worlds was directly in its path, and so we evacuated - a few hundred ships, on their way to safety, were in the void when it hit. But when we dropped back into the real, there was nothing. Five worlds - five solar systems - gone, in the blink of an eye.'

'I've seen the readings,' Harlock said, his voice carefully neutral. 'Five nodes of time so close together that the chain reaction in the oscillators Harlock left there blew a hole in the space-time fabric in that area.' He took a step towards her. 'You had a choice though, afterwards - you built up your population again, you had the ships - you could have settled anywhere - there are more than enough planets vacant after Promethium's pogrom, after all. What you didn't have to do was set yourself a task of destroying everything you'd rebuilt - for what? Revenge? Some half-assed idea that you could pull Harlock's trick and remake the universe - roll back time and start again? Because in case it escaped you, those nodes of time - don't work that way…'

'Harlock…' Both Kei and Ben spoke together, but he raised a hand to forestall any warning.

'Rafflesia - you've driven your own people to the point of exhaustion, both physically and emotionally. They're tired, they're scared and they are raw… And your response has been to slaughter them when they start to become a nuisance. If you started out with the moral high ground, you threw it away. And for what? Your plan won't work the way you think it will…'

'And how would you know, child of an ancient line? Do you still believe everything that nibelung witch tells you? Your line… long prophesied to destroy us. The one-eyed Fury from our ancient legends… Breaker of Bonds, Destroyer of Worlds…' She turned away from him. 'If not for your ancestor, we could have returned home. If not for you, we could begin again. A universe… a paradise… an arcadia, without humanity.'

He shrugged, a gesture he'd refined over the years to just the right side of infuriating insolence, and pointed briefly to his very much present - if inoperative - right eye. 'Laying aside the fact that you just had to escalate this by kidnapping my sons, you might want to take a better look at your prophecies… right family - wrong vintage. But I'm not one to let the sins of my forefathers pass, Rafflesia. There is still time to put an end to this and find another way…'

She stood up, and towered over him, seeming to draw herself up to more than twice his height. Cleo flinched, sinking to her knees, her head bowed. Both Daiba and Ben took an involuntary step back in the face of her anger, as her black hair flowed out around her as though caught in a storm. Her voice boomed in the echoing chamber of the nemeton. Only Harlock and Kei weathered the storm, side by side, calmly staring up at the giant figure looming over them. 'Another way? What
would that be? Would you have us settle on worlds unfit even for your kind? Eking out an existence until humans decide that those worlds, when fertile, would suit them better and this begins again? Would you speak of peace? Look around you and see the only peace left to us. Humans destroyed Earth, they destroyed our second home - and now you would have me put an end to the one thing that has kept us going this far? Look around, Harlock, and see what your "forefather" has left us!

Her arms raised above her head as though in supplication, she turned her back on the small group of humans, and dropped them abruptly to her sides as though ripping aside a veil.

In place of the green glade, lit by soft yellow light and surrounded by trees, they stood in a dark, dank, muddy clearing, choked with weeds and surrounded by decaying trunks that bore no resemblance to any earthly tree Harlock had ever seen. The bark was twisted and flaking, revealing shapes in the murky light that looked like screaming faces, with bodies half-absorbed by the trees, looks of terror and anguish on each one. Branches that reached out in supplication had three fingered hands stretched out towards them. Cleo turned to look, horror on her lovely face, and sobbed as her eyes sought out and found one in particular. Ben reached down and helped the slight mazone girl to her feet, and he hid her face against his chest, sobbing. And the breeze that wafted through the nemeton was rank with the scent of decay, both animal and plant. The clear pool she had stepped out of was revealed as a stygian abyss that reflected no light.

Ben felt Cleo tremble in his arms. "Cleome?"

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. 'It wasn't like this when I left… not like this.' She stared around the glade like a frightened rabbit. Her dark eyes widened when she stared at the black pool, as though seeing it for the first time. Then she turned her head rapidly, searching for something. A small inarticulate sound left her throat when her gaze alighted on one of the nearby trees, the face of a woman staring out of it eyes wide in perpetual terror. 'Tessius…' she whispered sadly. The word seemed to give her strength, because she straightened in Ben's arms, and pulled away from him slightly.

"Gaia…" Kei's soft exclamation went unheard by anyone except Harlock. He reached out and took her hand and gave it a slight squeeze. 'Did you know?' she asked in a whisper.

'Suspected,' was his laconic reply. Sub-vocally he added into his collar mike, 'Are you getting this?'

'In full surround,' Blaze replied over the comms. 'We're broadcasting via the warp at full blast on that frequency you got from that last bunch of refugees, for all the good it might do…'

'Just keep going,' Harlock murmured. He turned his attention back to Rafflesia, now simply a tall woman, staring around at the dank confines of her court where her attendants stood scattered around the grove in something resembling a state of shock, staring at their surroundings with the illusion finally ripped away. 'One last illusion remains, Rafflesia - are you going to continue to cling to it? Even now?'

'Would it please you to see what you already know?' she asked harshly. He shook his head.

'The land is the ruler… and the ruler the land. It's an ancient superstition in human history. But it was never about us, was it? A half-remembered thing from old times, a race memory of the mazone… Keep your illusions, if you wish. I've no need or desire anymore to humiliate you. Just to stop you. This universe is far from perfect, but it's the one we live in. What comes after is not for us, and what came before is inimical to life and light. The mazone are light, Rafflesia, even if living so long in the darkness you've forgotten that. You'll have to answer for your actions to the SDF, but no-one will make your people pay for your mistakes. If you stand down now…'
She laughed in his face, forcing him to take a step back. 'You think you can stop this? Look around you - your wife wants nothing more than to kill me, that young sapling over there stares around with hate in his eyes, and even the young emperor running away from his destiny thinks you should stop talking and kill me. Promethium has ordered her lap dogs to attack, and even your friends will destroy us if we continue. Your words are meaningless if others will not follow through on your rhetoric.' She sneered. 'And they tell me you're dangerous… the dread pirate Harlock, hero of the Machine Wars and the Deathshadow Plague stands before me, and all I see is a boy who would rather talk than raise a gun.'

'I didn't earn my reputation with my gun. And they're free to make their own choices. I won't force anyone to obey me,' he replied softly. 'But you… you lied to your people. You sold them false hope, and drove them out into the darkness in hastily grown ships, crewed by equally hastily grown clones. You fed them on lies and when they questioned, you tightened your grip until they would rather die than live in fear of your military hunting them down.

You could have led the survivors to safety - you knew this. The mazone have always lived among us, in secret. Often not to our benefit, true, but it could be done. Eventually there could have been a balance, had you reached out in friendship.' He stepped back, giving Kei's hand a tug so she followed him, stepping out of the circle of dying trees. 'But this… this isn't my fight. Not now. If I - a human - stop you, then it serves nothing - I'd be the human who forced you to do my will. This… this is something the mazone have to do for themselves. Here. Now.'

He released Kei's hand and stepped away from her with a sad nod, walking past her until he stood next to Ben, who still had an arm around Cleo. He reached out to the mazone, and smiled sadly into her black eyes as she stared up at him. 'Cleome, forgive me.' When Ben opened his mouth to object Harlock shook his head slightly. 'There comes a time in everyone's life when they have to make a stand, not knowing if they will win or lose, live or die, my friend. Sooner or later everyone has to stop running…'

Ben met his captain's eyes. Unless you knew, he thought incongruously, you wouldn't realise the right eye saw nothing… 'Do you know what you're asking of her?'

'Probably better than you do. Or at least as well. But in the end, we still have choices.' He looked down at Cleo. 'You can still walk away.'

Slowly, trembling, Cleo placed her tiny hand in Harlock's. Although over six foot he otherwise was not a big man by any means, his hand still dwarfed hers. 'Some of us,' she said softly, turning to Ben, 'Sometimes have to step forward and to give up our freedom so that others never need to.'

Daiba watched as Harlock walked Cleo over to where Rafflesia stood next to her pile of rocks, or whatever the hell they were. 'I thought they'd fight, or something. Why is he just talking? And what's Cleo doing?' The words tore their way out of him.

Kei laid a hand on his shoulder. 'What she has to, to put this right. Not all battles are fought with weapons or your fists, Tadashi. Killing Rafflesia or even defeating her in combat would change nothing. The mazone themselves have to change.'

'But…'

Ben placed and arm over his other shoulder. 'They're all linked, Daiba. Part of a whole - even the ones like Cleo - the "corpse flowers". Look at this place - with Rafflesia's illusion gone, do you really think this ship - and this grove or whatever it is - can be saved, and continue as the heart of what they are? It's dying, rotting from the inside out.'
'Blaze?' Kei quietly spoke into her comm unit.

'Yeah. The light around that thing just went out. The power readings are still strong though - the drive's using a lot of energy, probably to maintain the hull integrity and ship systems.'

'And possibly a few other tricks,' Kei murmured. 'What's the status of the other fleets?'

'Hoshino hasn't engaged yet; he's got the furthest to go. Mom's trying to talk my uncle down. Our people, Oki and Oedo are in the same stalemate we are - the ships are just sitting there, not talking. If they're listening or not, I've no idea.'

'Keep broadcasting. Even if this goes south they need to know we tried. It might be the only way to head off the disaster.' She tapped her ear comm to turn it off, and kept her eyes fixed firmly on Harlock, as he stepped back to allow Cleo to face her queen alone. The difference in attitude and size between the two women made it look as though it would be an unfair match. But then, she thought, people had a way of surprising you.

Harlock had made a career out of confounding expectations, after all.

Harlock walked a pace or two behind Cleo as she made her way to stand in front of Rafflesia. Compared to the queen she was a tiny, dainty girl, and the tall queen stared down at her with undisguised disdain. 'Out of all of them, I rather expected Papheo to challenge me.'

Cleo met her queen's black-eyed glare with her own, and refused to back down. Perhaps it had something to do with the tall pirate at her back. Or the young blue-skinned crewman. Both of them had a way of offering silent support without being overly obvious, or clinging.

 Mostly however, it was the eyes that stared mutely out at her from the tree behind and to her left. Accusing. Petrified.

'Rafflesia laughed. 'Well at least I won't have to worry about the Hidden Ones. They were always a wild card. But you... Do you really think you can do this? You're little more than a seed.' Her gaze flickered over Cleo's shoulder to Harlock, who weathered the contemptuous regard by simply crossing his arms and staring back.

Rafflesia looked away first.

'So. This is the meaning, is it? To break the bonds of sisterhood? So you are emboldened to the point where you feel you can challenge me?' Rafflesia sneered.

'You broke those yourself,' Harlock said mildly. 'All I did was take back my children. Be thankful I'm willing to let Cleome settle this. Using my sons as pawns in your game was not a smart move.'

Everyone else in the chamber had their back to him, but all of them saw the colour - such as it was - drain from Rafflesia's face as he stared calmly at her, without a single sign of tension in his body.

And again, she looked away. She turned her attention to Cleome. 'Even if you succeed…'

Cleo unfastened her chiton and let it fall to the ground, and Rafflesia followed suit a moment later. 'We are One, let the whole decide,' Cleo said simply. She held back to allow Rafflesia to go ahead of her, and followed in the other woman's footsteps, until both vanished under the surface of the pool, the darkness closing over their heads without a ripple to mark the event.
Kei hesitated for a moment before trotting over to Harlock's side, with the two youths on her tail.

'What just…?'

'No idea, but whatever's down there, I don't fancy following them to find out.'

Daiba knelt at the poolside and reached out a hand. Ben's quick reaction to drop to his knees beside the younger crewman to grab the offending article, and Harlock and Kei's panicked "Don't touch that!" were almost instantaneous.

'There are,' Ben said pithily as he released Daiba's wrist, 'things you stick body parts into, and things you just don't.'

Kei and Harlock exchanged a look. Ben glared up at them as though daring them to say something. Kei's mouth quirked into a sly half-smile and Harlock did his best to look as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

'It doesn't look like water.' Kei leaned over to look more closely.

'It isn't. It's dark matter.'

Everyone who wasn't Harlock took a few steps back from the edge.

'How can you tell?' Daiba peered at the pool again, this time from a position slightly behind Ben. 'Looks sort of oily…'

Harlock held a hand over the surface. 'Watch.'

After a few seconds, tiny wisps of blue smoke appeared, writhing around his outstretched hand, trailing in the wake of his fingers as he wriggled them. 'It's contained in a field I can't see, but I can feel it. Like pins and needles. Doesn't affect matter directly, but it's containing the dark matter, making it tangible.'

'**Liquid** dark matter?' Kei stared at the pool with a frown. 'I didn't think that was a thing - I mean not even the nibelung…'

'That **Mimay** knows of,' Harlock pointed out. 'And as we've found out, there's a lot about the crap her people were doing that she wasn't privy to.'

'Maybe. Could you just… move your arm? What if something grabs you?'

He smiled at her and pulled his hand away from the pool with a slow but exaggerated flourish. 'Don't worry. Safe now.'

'And how much of an effort was it to move it?' she asked, false sweetness in her tone and a tiny, almost imperceptible furrow between her eyes. When he didn't answer she laid her hand on his arm.

Ben stared down into the tenebrous depths. 'Do we understand the first thing about what's going on in there? I mean, I do get the primordial ordeal thing they've got going - but the whole primeval ooze thing is creepy - and how do we even know what's happening?'

'We don't,' Harlock replied in his quiet, slightly raspy tenor. 'We wait. An alien concept to some people, I know…' he looked directly at Ben and Dabia as he spoke, a half smile playing around the corner of his mouth. He placed an arm around Kei's shoulders and rested his head against hers when she leaned into him.
Ben grinned at Daiba. 'Fancy a hug?'

'Not the way your hands wander,' Daiba replied cheekily. 'You're a bloody menace.'

'You just don't know what you're missing.'

Daiba snorted. 'Trust me. I know exactly what you're capable of - why do you think I'm keeping my distance?'

Kei leaned in closer to Harlock and tried to tune them out. Everyone, it seemed, had their own way of coping. She reined in her own impatience and desperation to get back to the Arcadia and her children, and let the sound of Harlock's breathing sink into her, trying to shut out the sounds of the mazine ship; the death-rattle of dead and dying leaves, the overhead creaking of branches moving in a wind she couldn't feel. Here and there she could just make out the high pitched mutterings of the handful of mazine handmaidens, clustered together on the far side of clearing as far away from the humans as they could get. The stick-like figures Harlock identified as leshy were bolder, darting nervously forwards to get a closer look at them, and scuttling away into the shelter of the gove's trees the moment anyone so much as breathed in their direction.

'They're scared of us,' she whispered. She felt Harlock nod, his cheek brushing the side of her forehead. She watched the little twig-men cautiously, noticing how small blue-green leaves sprouted from their brown, gnarled, gangly limbs. 'They remind me of those little centaurs on Tokarga.'

'Not so little,' he murmured back, and she laughed slightly. 'A whole new class of life, with creatures to fill most of the niches animals filled on Earth, long after they had gone. Or rather, a very old class, returned. Makes you think, doesn't it? How very young we are as a species…?'

She nudged him in the ribs, eliciting a pained grunt. 'Don't get caught up. We might still have to run with Plan B.'

'We have a plan B?' he deadpanned. 'Oof.' She smiled sweetly at him as he rubbed the rib her elbow had connected with for the second time in thirty seconds. 'At least the soldiers aren't attacking.'

'You have to wonder what they're waiting for…' Kei murmured.

The surface of the dark pool began to undulate, black waves lapping against the sides as they watched. Slowly, a figure began to emerge from the darkness. Black hair falling to cover a pale back, as the figure strode out of the pool, appearing to walk on the surface as she made her way to the bank opposite to the one the women had entered. A group of handmaidens rushed towards her and halter a few feet away, before sinking to their knees, their heads bowed in reverence.

There was a powerful crack from behind Harlock, and he turned in time to see the giant tree that dominated the glade split in two from crown to root. The light in the chamber dimmed, flickered, and did not return, except around the place where the woman who'd exited the pool stood, still naked, surrounded by her kneeling court.

A chant began, in a language none of them knew, bar one who'd heard it before.

'All hail the eternal glory that is Rafflesia,' Daiba translated, barely loud enough for the rest of them to hear.

'Shit.' Ben's pithy reply was almost spat out. He took a step forwards, his hand on his pistol. Harlock raised his hand and stopped him.
'Wait,' he ordered quietly.

Two handmaids rose to their feet with a graceful fluidity few women ever mastered, and reached for a chiton to cover their queen's nakedness. Then robed in green, very slowly, swaying slightly, the woman turned to face them.

Tall, graceful, filled with a serenity none of them had seen on her face before and illuminating the faces of those around her as she raised a hand, palm upwards to encourage them to stand, the mazone who had been Cleome smiled at them.

'All hail Rafflesia, Eternal Queen,' Harlock said softly. He dropped slowly to one knee, heedless of the muddy ground underfoot, and bowed his head. Ben immediately followed his example, Daiba a little more tardily and only when Kei poked him in the ribs before taking a knee herself as the queen stood before them, a shy smile on her beautiful face. Around the glade, the rest of the gathered mazone did the same. Soldiers stood forward and knelt in supplication. The shy leshy with their dangling limbs bowed awkwardly, almost falling over their own feet.

Harlock stood before Rafflesia reached him, sensing the others do likewise. Kei slipped her hand into his and he gave it a slight squeeze.

'Harlock.' Even her voice had changed. It was deeper, richer, and rang out like a bell. She smiled and inclined her head briefly, then turned to face Ben.

'Cleo?'

'I was,' she replied simply. 'And for your friendship, I thank you. All of you.' She turned back to face Harlock. 'There is still much to do.'

'Can you pull back the armada?' he asked. She nodded.

'Most of them - but you should know, after all that has happened, not all will follow my lead.'

'Most,' he added, quietly. 'It should be enough.'

'As you say. But without a home…'

He smiled, a fleeting, quirky, one-sided smirk that Kei knew all too well, and if she hadn't already been privy to his decision on this matter, he'd have gotten another elbow in the ribs for it. 'I think we might have a solution to that. You could say Sainess showed us what might be possible… and Niflheim.'

'Mind enlightening the rest of us?' Daiba muttered. He stared at the transformed Cleo - Rafflesia - in something approaching puzzled awe.

'Isn't it obvious?' Ben laid an arm around the youth's shoulders companionably, but didn't take his eyes off the new queen.

'Clearly not if you need to me ask the bloody question again,' Daiba snapped back at him. But he didn't shake off the arm.

Ben smiled. 'Earth?' he asked his captain, lifting an elegant blond eyebrow.

'Earth,' Harlock replied with a sly smile.

Daiba stared at Harlock, open mouthed as the penny dropped. 'Bugger me. They're all going to
bloody kill you if you try that!'

Harlock shrugged, and faced Rafflesia. 'I don\'t think this ship has much longer. Perhaps you\'d care to transport the passengers and any other lifeforms that can be saved to other vessels, and we should return to the Arcadia to discuss our next steps in private?'

Daiba stared around, noting the increasing stage of decay that surrounded them. In the few minutes since Cleome had stepped out of the pool, alone, it had vanished, leaving only a dry dip in the surface of the glade, ringed by brown ferns. The smell of wet mulch filled the air, and the breeze that had ruffled Harlock\'s fine hair had dropped. The air was increasingly foetid, and still. In the centre of the glade the towering tree listed awkwardly, split in two, one side already creaking as it leaned ever closer to the far wall. 'Maybe sooner rather than later?' he jabbed a finger at the falling trunk.

'It might be best,' Harlock admitted. 'Your majesty?'

'I will arrange the evacuation,' she replied, her dark hair falling around her face as she inclined her head again in acknowledgment. 'I must speak to my people, and then I will join you.'

On board the *Arcadia*, the bridge crew watched as the light surrounding the *Dorcas* flickered and died, until the massive space-faring tree lay in space, a shadow against a shadow, the black globe of its carbon drive clutched in the talons of its roots. Blaze cut the feed from Harlock\'s transmitter just seconds after its owner cut the feed at his end, and the holo projector went dark. On the bridge, for once, there was total silence.

At least until Harlock\'s black bird, from its perch on the back of the skull decorate captain\'s chair, stretched its impossibly long neck upwards, raised its beak and let out an ear-splitting "caaaaaarkk"

Blaze leaned heavily on the wheel and sighed. Beside him Franz shifted slightly and rubbed his moustache, and Yattaran squirmed and began to scratch his arse, before hearing Mimay\'s tripping heels on the deck, and stopping himself with a self-conscious grunt.

'Franz?' he asked quietly, without turning around. 'What\'s the fleet doing?'

The dark haired crewman peered at the readouts. 'Looks as though they\'re backing off - the civilian vessels are coming back this way - I guess to help with that evacuation. The military…' He punched up the image onto the floorscreen. 'We might have a problem…'

Several ships had powered down and were mingling with the civilian fleet, but one small group broke off and headed at full speed towards the *Dorcas*.

'Mimay…'

Her footsteps were already retreating to the dark matter engine before he\'d even started saying her name. 'All hands - battlestations. Full speed ahead - get us between that ship and those rebels. Full dark matter shield. On my mark - Arcadia - go!' 

He span the wheel to turn the massive ship back towards the dying tree. Several mazone warships peeled off from their support formation, and he pulled a face as he stared at the group heading towards them. 'Tactical!'

'They\'re not attacking' came the reply from the lower bridge. Martinez 'They\'re standing with us!'
'Tell them not to get in the way of the dark matter cloud or our weapons. Hopefully someone over there speaks standard.'

Streaks of energy lanced out from the lead ships aiming at the Dorcas, and Blaze turned the ship into their path, the energy dissipating harmlessly as it encountered the dark matter cloud surrounding the ship. 'Always a few ingrates,' he muttered. 'Kinda like the Machine Wars all over again…'

'You think this is bad?' Yattaran muttered darkly. He took his thick glasses off and cleaned them on his jersey - mercifully unstained for once, and pushed them back onto his nose. 'This ain't over yet, by a long shot.'

The Arcadia's oscillator cannon spoke, sending waves of fire arcing towards the enemy ships as the massive turrets ratched their way along the flanks of the ship.

Knowing some of the principals as well as he did, Blaze could only sigh inwardly. Aunt Yayoi's out for blood, Hoshino's got his nose stuck up her nanotech skirts, and my bloody uncle's an asshole martinet who'll follow his orders off a cliff...

Yeah. This wasn't over by a long way.

And that was before any of them realised what Harlock was planning...
Chapter 55

After-action cool-downs, Daiba reflected as they made their way towards the boarding tube several hours later, were a drag after all the adrenaline-fuelled action.

'Can't be all spine-tingling thrills and spills,' Ben quipped. 'Besides, it'd be exhausting.'

'Yeah, but does it have to be so boring just standing around?' Daiba grumbled. He kicked at the floor, scuffing the toe of his boot.

'Only for those of us who have to stand and watch, I guess. Harlock's not been idle…'

'Huh. A lot of talk.'

'Still pissed you didn't get to blow up the entire fleet?' Ben ran his fingers through his blond hair.

'I get it. Rafflesia's gone, and they're not all to blame. So no, not anymore. But…'

'The thing those warp vids never show you? It's hell cleaning up the bodies after one of those shoot outs, and the blood and body parts? Get into the electronics and any mechanisms they land on, and plays havoc with the self-repair. Last time we got boarded, took the entire crew three weeks to strip down the internal gearing for the ratchet system and clean it. Trust me - any altercation that ends up with the captain doing a lot of talking is an improvement.'

'That or doing all our shooting on someone else's ship,' Kei quipped as she walked past them. 'Boys, we're out of here now that the shooting's stopped out there.'

'About that…' Ben stopped walking, forcing Kei, Daiba, and a rapidly advancing Harlock to do likewise. 'I'd like to go with Cleo, at least until she brings the fleet to Earth. You'll need a liaison after all.'

'I hadn't been going to ask it of you,' Harlock said. Ben raised and dropped one shoulder.

'It makes sense for it to be me. And someone needs to watch her back for a bit until this is a little more settled.'

'And a few other parts of her anatomy,' Daiba sniggered. 'Ow!' he rubbed the back of his head and glared at Ben. 'Just Ben though? No one else?'

'Are you volunteering?' Harlock asked, with a touch of amusement. Daiba actually did think about it for a moment, then shook his head emphatically.

'I just… No, I'm sorry. it's a step too far.'

'I can handle it,' Ben assured Harlock. 'And too many would lay us open to accusations from the mazone that we were putting too much influence on their new queen. One man is a token, or a hostage. More than that looks like we're sticking our oar in where it isn't wanted.'

'You have that portable warp radio?'

Ben patted the side of his hardsuit. 'Trust me, if anything goes wrong, you'll be the first to know.' He looked around at the corridor they stood in, cracks appearing in the wooden walls, dying lianas trailing down from the sagging ceilings. 'This ship hasn't got much longer. Cleo… Rafflesia… is overseeing the transfer on the starboard side. I said I'd make my way over in Kei's fighter, if that's
okay?'

Harlock nodded. 'Yattaran's flying mine back on remote and we'll take the tube back over, since there's no room in the cockpits. Be safe, Ben.'

'Always!' The blue-skinned pirate gave them a half salute, half wave and strolled onwards to the hangar. 'See you at Earth!' he called back over his shoulder.

'Assuming I live that long,' Harlock muttered. 'Hey!' He glared at Kei, who'd elbowed him in the ribs.

'Whatever happened to the power of positive thinking?' she quipped. 'I thought you were sure we could sell this solution?

'It's like selling a three-legged donkey,' he replied dryly. 'Sell it, yes. Persuade it to take a walk afterwards…'

Daiba leaned against the rim of the boarding tube and put his head in his gauntleted hands. 'Oh Gaia… we're screwed, aren't we?

'A bit early to tell,' Harlock replied brightly. 'I haven't had a chance to talk to anyone yet.'

'And what could anyone possibly object to?' Daiba muttered as the pirate strode past him into the boarding tube. With a sigh he followed him, Kei bringing up the rear.

Harlock and Kei both took the stairs to the bridge two at a time, Daiba close behind. Franz was already moving away from Kei's station before she'd even cleared the top step. He wasn't averse to turning to watch her sashay across the bridge to reach it, with an admiring grin which he quickly wiped off his face when he saw his captain's raised eyebrow. 'Sir!

'Stop trying to impress the temporary help, Franz,' Harlock drawled as he walked towards the wheel, still manned by Blaze. 'Any more of that and I'll tell Kei you were ogling her arse again…'

'You do know she's standing right there?' Franz shot a worried glance over to Kei, who just raised her head slightly to stare at the pulleys that adorned the ceiling, and rolled her eyes with a sigh. 'You do remember the last captain wasn't that cruel, right?'

'The last captain wanted to completely render your existence null and void,' Yattaran quipped.

'My point exactly,' Franz replied with a grin. 'He never threatened us with Kei!'

A ripple of laughter worked its way around the lower bridge, punctuated with a huff of disapproval from Kei. Franz left the upper gantry by the simple expedient of sliding down the bannister rail, and Harlock stood patiently behind Blaze, waiting for the other man to finish giving the order to disengage the docking tube. 'What took you so long?' he asked when Blaze turned to face him. 'I could have made the trip to Earth and back in the time you took to cover a few AU to come and get us…'

Blaze pushed his dark hair back from his forehead and stared him down. 'Funny man. We had a few ships that disagreed with the regime change. Seems the military aren't happy.'

'Peace isn't their natural state. Any military gets a little twitchy when they see the pink slips coming,' Harlock replied. 'Any damage?
'Nothing to speak of - the self-repair will be done in about half an hour or so, but we're jump-worthy. The loyal captains seem to be mopping up the rest of the rebels - I concentrated on keeping them off your back.' He looked down at the floor screen with a frown. 'I think you had enough problems without being shot at - the hull is fragmenting rapidly and you really, really do not want to see the readings we're getting off that black body drive…' He stepped back and gestured at the wheel. 'The helm's all yours, captain.'

Harlock smiled but made no move towards the wheel. 'Hold fast for a while longer, Blaze. Just keep looming until Cleo - sorry, Rafflesia II - has got the change of command settled. As soon as those battleships settle down, we can leave. If nothing else I need to get you back to your mother before she tells me off for keeping you out past your bedtime…'

Blaze flipped him the finger.

'Course?' Yattaran asked.

'First back to that last system to pick up Tadashi and Meg. We'll liaise with the SDF commander. Before that - Yattaran, set up a warp conference between us and Carmilla.'

'You want to bring Hannibal in on this?' Blaze's eyebrow almost vanished under his fringe. 'He doesn't tend to stick his nose in much these days…'

'Maybe, but Harlock's good at persuading, and Hannibal's got a lot more influence with the former Lar Metallian crowd than we do,' Kei explained. She didn't look up from her console. 'To them he's still 'The Protector': the Hero of the rebellion against the Holy Queen. Promethium might listen to him where she'd just tell us where to stick it, and Leopard - if Hannibal advises the queen to be prudent - will do what he's told. Otherwise we're in for a world of hurt if he and Hoshino decide to tag team us.' She did look up on that last word, and stared at Harlock, her bottom lip caught very slightly under her top teeth. 'Although I'm still not convinced we can trust a man who still refuses to let anyone see what's under that mantle and hood…'

'You'd rather turn up in the Sol system at the head of a massive fleet of refugees and hope for the best?' Harlock replied dryly. 'If the irony alone doesn't kill me, I'll be lucky to be able to show my face in any system between here and the Greater Magellanic Cloud ever again…'

'That Jovian plasma gun is disabled, right?' Daiba asked. 'I mean, if there's anything that could put a dent in this plan…'

'Oh trust us,' Yattaran replied with an evil smirk, 'it's dead. Ain't no-one using that toy again after what I did to it. If they try they'll most likely turn Jupiter into a second sun.'

'Is it me,' Daiba asked of no-one in particular, 'or is that even more worrying than someone using us for target practice with it?'

Every single crewmember on the bridge - upper and lower - raised a hand. Including Harlock.

'No fuckin' faith, you scurvy space dogs,' Yattaran muttered. 'And you -' he jabbed a finger at his captain, who was busy re-folding his arms, 'are the worst of the lot, since you signed off on that monkey wrench we threw into the workings.'

'I was just trusting my crew of experts,' Harlock deadpanned. 'Though in my defence I'd only been at the helm for two days, we were fighting off the remains of my brother's fleet, I was constantly watching my back to make sure no-one shivved it and I'd been living on nothing but crap coffee and painkillers for fifty-two hours straight at the time, so my judgement might have been a little
impaired…'

Kei leaned over and patted him on the arm. 'Don't worry. I went over the whole thing before it even
got to you.' She shot Yattaran a poisonous glare, and stuck her tongue out in reply to the shit-eating grin the bulky pirate gave her in return.

'...aaaannnd there goes my reputation as the galaxy's toughest hardcase,' Harlock sighed. 'Again.'

'Oh, I dunno.' Daiba turned his own nauseatingly chirpy grin on his older cousin. 'I mean, it takes a
real man to own up to letting a girl do all his thinking for him…'

Harlock dropped his hand to the hilt of his gravity sabre with a mock growl and the youth skipped
out of the way to the accompaniment of another ripple of sniggers from the deck. Blaze leaned
heavily against the wheel and just glared at Harlock. 'Anytime you want to take back command of
these jokers, please feel free to step up…'

Harlock smiled and shook his head. 'I have a couple of errands to run first. Besides, it's good for
you. How can you learn when you command a crew who always do what they're told and don't
challenge you?' He began to walk towards the stairs.

'Yeah. Is that what you tell yourself?' Blaze called out. He caught the sound of a slight cough from
Kei. 'What?'

'Actually… when we started out, pretty much. Though you've had it easy. We've managed to
mostly house-train Ali since then!'

'Oi!' The indignant squawk from below raised another laugh behind Harlock as he headed towards
the rear of the ship, and he smiled to himself as he walked. 'Whilst peace and quiet is occasionally
nice,' he murmured, 'I'd hate it if they changed…'

Me too, though it used to drive Harlock potty at times. Especially once Ali signed up… He used to
say it was like having an annoying whiny kid in the back of your vehicle: "are we there yet?" "why
are we doing this?" "what's this all about?" "who..." "where..." "when..." Tochiro's mental voice
giggled. Your friend's a good kid. Takes it in his stride, for all his bitchin', though I think a lot of
that is like you - playing to the crowd. You know he's taken his brother's death pretty hard?

Yeah. One reason I wanted to keep him busy. Selen suggested he shouldn't get too much time to
brood. He and Marin pretty much had only each other growing up, with both parents running a
major rebellion. They're… they were… both pretty laid back about it, but it leaves a mark.'

You serious about Hannibal?

'Like Kei said: he creeps us out a bit, but there's no-one else to go to. The SDF can't stick their
noses in, so it's down to us - and the Thieves. But Selen's got her hands full, so we need to talk
Hannibal into taking back the mantle. So to speak.' He paused on the threshold of the computer
room. 'Don't you have anything in your databanks about him?' He walked into the cathedral-like
chamber, found the convenient conduit in front of the whirling red circle on the front of the central
column, and sat down, spreading the cloak out behind him.

Not that we haven't already gone over - and trust me, I've done a lot of cross checking over the
years. Turned up about fifty years after the War, so close to seventy years ago. We were hopping
around the galaxy a lot at the time, so only picked up the chatter... Before the Machine Wars,
there was that big uprising on Lar Metal and on the nearby planets they were tapping for slave
labour under the previous Holy Queen, Lar Rarela. Talk was he wasn't a young man even then, so
if it's the same guy, he must be old even for a Lar Metallean by now. As far as we know no-one's ever seen his face. But he's always been on the side of the angels, even if that's not always the winning side. A merc with a conscience, we always figured.

'Maybe. But he's got influence and a reputation, and I'm going to need everything and everyone I can get to pull this one off.'

'We can't start - or even hope to win - a new war,' Tochiro warned, his hologram appearing next to Harlock and sitting next to him. 'Shift up a bit.' Harlock shifted.

'You're a hologram - you don't need to sit down,' he pointed out.

'Just being companionable, so you can just be polite about it,' Tochiro twitted. They both smiled. 'He wasn't around much during Selan's rebellion or the Machine Wars… Though he did help with the vaccine distribution a few years back. Still trying to figure out how, since he was somehow even able to beat our transit times…'

'I know. Bugs me a bit as well. As to the rest - I just figured he didn't want to interfere. He must be well over a hundred - older than Harlock perhaps?' He shrugged. 'Maybe he just wanted a rest…'

'Might not thank you for trying to drag him into this.'

'Maybe. But he's got resources, and dropped a couple of hints over the years that he cares about Earth. It's worth a try, even if all he can do is just keep Frankie off my back.'

Tochiro was silent for a moment. 'You want to draw out his ship, don't you?'

Harlock unfastened the cloak and let it slide off his shoulders with a sigh of relief. 'Don't you? You had to wonder, right? During the plague? But it's not about immediate fire support here - if he does have a dark matter battleship…'

'Deathshadow One…'

Harlock dipped his chin to acknowledge what they'd been dancing around. 'The mazone need all the protection we can give them whilst they deploy and disembark. I - we - can't be in two places at once. And if he is the captain of DS1…'

Tochiro looked down at his illusory boots and shuffled in his equally illusory seat.

'We need it,' Harlock continued. 'Even if we get this mazone issue resolved, we still have the rest of this mess to deal with. It's all connected. The fallout from the mazone homeworld explosion seriously interfered with that sub-space rift Loki created nearly fifteen years ago, and Rafflesia's black body drives have done a lot of damage along the way. If we're going to close that rift before it opens that gate in the hourglass nebula, we need more ships like the Arcadia. You've done the maths, my friend - we can't do it alone.'

'Khalsa.' Tochiro said quietly, after a long pause. 'His name was Khalsa. Served under Harlock for years on the Yukikaze. He was the only one who didn't open fire on us after Harlock blew his stack. Even Kat Komarova wouldn't listen to him. To us. But then again, he didn't exactly rush to our rescue either… And Phantom isn't a forgiving man. If he is Khalsa, he's had good reason to keep his face hidden for a hundred and fourteen years…' He let out a non-existent breath. 'Might explain why he never wanted to get anywhere within reach of my sensors any time he's been lurking… but I dunno. Khal? He was more of the permanent second in command, if you know what I mean? Great in a fight and he had our backs more times than I care to count, but at heart he was a warrior. The sort of shit Hannibal pulls and his organisational smarts? That guy's specialities are people and
logistics… That reminds me more of…’ he trailed off, a look on his face equal parts guilt and sorrow at some long buried memory.

Harlock thought he heard the Arcadia's builder mutter something under his breath, but didn't quite catch it. 'Tochiro?'

The little dead man shook his head and waved a hand dismissively in front of his face. 'Nah. Chasing ghosts. Ignore me. Now. We're gonna have to be smart about how we play this, kiddo. Or we'll be up to our proverbials in shit even you won't be able to talk your way out of…'

'I was rather hoping I could talk my way into a solution for this. It solves two problems and makes sense. Humanity will never be able to return to Earth in anything under a geological timescale - regardless of how it's recovering, it won't happen overnight. But we've seen what the mazone can accomplish on a planet ravaged by a dark matter explosion… and they want to go home, my friend. Why not let them?'

'Because humans aren't logical, they're a territorial ape who won't like letting anyone not them take over something that they see as "theirs" even if they can never use it or enjoy it. We fought a damn war and slaughtered billions to keep our own species from coming back there, and now you want to hand it over to aliens?'

'They came from Earth - long before we did,' Harlock pointed out, not unreasonably, he thought. 'Potayto, Potahto,' Tochiro replied glibly. 'That won't cut any ice with the Council, or Destiny, or Andromeda… And here's another Harlock, they'll say, making dodgy decisions without consulting anyone else. I mean… how dare he? And you haven't mentioned the whole Mars thing yet… what if Zera Sender and the Counts Mecha launch an attack on the mazone and we get into another tit-for-tat? Not even the Home Fleet can respond fast enough to a Martian assault on Earth.

'I rather think the mazone can defend themselves against that rabble, and I did explain that whole mess to Cleome, before we left.'

'All of it?' Tochiro asked archly.

Harlock coughed. 'I might have left out the bit about Lazarus being my brother's digi-clone… Besides, he's been in the wind for the last four years.'

'You were looking for Daiba during that period. Kind of took your eyes off him, huh?'

'He's the least of my worries. Lazarus can wait a while.' Tochiro's electronic snort didn't need the "yeah, right" tag Harlock mentally supplied. 'Those AIs and their lackeys are a small concern in the grand scheme of things. Too busy with their own problems right now.'

Tochiro sniggered. 'Weren't most of those of your making?'

Harlock grinned. 'I might have encouraged a few of them…’ He sighed. 'I'm juggling far too many interested parties, and I never wanted to get us this deeply involved, beyond stopping Rafflesia from destroying the universe. But she just had to make it personal, and now no-one else seems to have a solution… I'm open to anyone else stepping up here. So far, only Rokuro's been able to help, and that's only because he can offer the water-mazone a habitat…’ He stood up with casual elan and reached down for the heavy cloak which he draped over one arm, taking the weight with a grunt. 'I'm open to suggestions.'

'I'll have a think, but I'm an engineer - you know what they say… when you give a man a hammer…'
'Every problem looks like a nail,' Harlock finished for him. 'You sell yourself short - you're one of the smartest guys I've ever met.' He headed for a gap in the sever banks surrounding the main column. 'If anyone wants me I'll be in sick bay checking on Cai.'

He knew without looking round that the hologramme had vanished before he was through the gap in the servers.

What he couldn't figure out was why it had sounded earlier as though that barely heard word Tochiro had muttered under his breath had sounded like his son's name.

The heavily mantled figure on the holoscreen managed to convey amused admiration with a simple shrug of black-shrouded shoulders. 'So your plan is to just jump several thousand ships into the inner solar system? Past the Pluto Defence Line, past Enceladus and the Home Fleet stationed in-system to protect the New council there, past the Mars Interdiction Fleet in the asteroid belt, and past the AIs' warning buoys and somehow manage to firstly not get wiped out in the first half hour, but also disembark several hundred thousand alien lifeforms and their biosphere onto a planet with planet-wide dark matter storms and an unstable surface? Does that about sum it up?'

The dead, flat delivery of a voice hidden behind so many levels of masking tech and distortion that no intonation stood a chance of getting through still managed to convey a level of sarcasm that rivals Harlock's own.

'You know, when you put it like that…'

'And whilst thinking up this plan, did it ever once cross your mind that the last time a group of ships entered the solar system with Earth as its goal, things didn't exactly end well? For either side?'

'You know, if I wanted a lecture on my shortcomings, I'd call up the bastard who thinks he's my brother. Yes, I have thought it through - and if anyone wants Earth habitable again, the mazone might just be the ones to do it. It's worth a shot. And we're not moving all of them - several groups are more than happy to settle elsewhere out in colonial space - several hundred ships are already en route to Mistral to help with the clean up.'

'Young man, you have always had eyes bigger than your stomach. And the balls to match. But this time… The Alliance might not be able to live on Earth, but it symbolises humanity for so many - what you're proposing is close to opening up the Vatican as a bloody homeless shelter.'

'The what?' Harlock shook his head at the unfamiliar reference. 'Never mind. We have to move past all of this. Earth can be green again - who wouldn't want that?'

'Do you want a list?'

'You know, I'm definitely hearing sarcasm,' Harlock retorted. The black-shrouded figure didn't so much as shrug a shoulder in reply. 'I'm doing this with or without your help, but I could really use someone yanking Leopard's chain to keep him off my back. The Alliance Fleet I can handle - most of them won't get into a fight with us.'

'Hoshino would.'

Harlock shrugged. 'Him I can take.'

'And the other two thousand ships of the line he could bring to bear? Even if you get the mazone to Earth, you can't guarantee their safety. Once you leave…'
'I've got a couple of ideas on that front.'

He almost thought he heard an exasperated sigh from behind the figure he was talking to, as though someone else was in the room with the founder of the Millennial Thieves. 'As long as it doesn't involve trying to bring down the government,' Hannibal replied.

Oh yes. Definite "tone"… 'Trust me,' Harlock replied amiably. Behind his back he crossed his fingers.

There it was again. This time, a snort. 'That wasn't a denial.' A pause. 'I'll speak to Promethium, and I'll even yank Leopard's leash personally if I need to. Like his father he's a bit of a prick, and not above exceeding his orders. Hoshino however… if he engages with that last group whilst you're trying to one-up yourself with your own cleverness…'

'Now you're starting to sound like my father,' Harlock ground out. This time he could have sworn the hooded figure only just caught itself from looking back over its shoulder and stifling a snigger. 'As soon as he hears we're on the move he won't wait for a group of refugees to shoot at. He'll follow me.'

'There are days I'm never sure whether I ought to applaud you or shoot you,' Hannibal replied. 'I'll be in touch.'

The holo winked out and Harlock let out a breath he'd not been aware of holding. 'Well that went better than I hoped…' he murmured. Ali stuck his head round the corner and peered into the comms suite.

'The Unfriendly Ghost giving you some lip?'

'Don't pretend you weren't eavesdropping,' Harlock snapped back.

'Ooh… tetchy. Someone needs to cut back on the coffee…'

'Someone else needs to shut the fuck up before he finds my "Galaxy's Greatest Pirate" mug shoved where only a brave proctologist would venture.' Harlock turned on his heel. 'I'll be in my quarters.'

'Getting laid, I hope!' Ali called out. 'For all our sakes?'

Harlock raised a hand above his head without looking back and extended his middle finger.

The massive double doors to the captain's quarters opened soundlessly as Harlock stood in front of them. Made of a dark, ancient oak they were totally at odds with the Arcadia's internal aesthetic, which trended more towards a brassy steampunk baroque than central european gothic as a rule. And in some ways, they formed a literal threshold between the high-tech excesses of the ship, and the oppressive luxury of the former captain's quarters, which were dominated by the faux leaded window overlooking the stern of the bridge, and a series of ornate, heavy furniture upholstered in thick brocades in rich dark colours.

In all his time as captain, he hadn't felt much of an urge to change the furniture - or the lighting. The low level glimmers of a multitude of ornate (but for safety reasons totally artificial candelabra) were more than adequate, and since his damaged eye gave him a headache in bright lights, this suited him just fine. As for the furniture… it suited the room, which looked like something out of an ancient hunting lodge; old oak and pewter, with a massive four-poster one side, and a huge solid desk the other. Harlock had grown up with the tasteful minimalism of his mother's quiet, but contemporary tastes in their expensive Capital apartment on Mars, and whilst that was still his
personal preference, he had his rooms on Deathshadow Island to indulge that. In this room, they would have looked small, mean and ill at ease, threatened and cowed by the gloomy shadows.

And he'd never have been able to find a modern bed capable of holding the current occupants in as much comfort. He stepped through the doors, bare registering them closing behind him with a tiny sigh of compressed air, dropped the cloak onto a nearby armchair, and stared across at the occupants, wondering briefly why it felt so hard to swallow.

All three boys were curled up together under the covers, fast asleep. Nami was snuggling between the twins, her dark curls hiding her face. Freya had fallen asleep with her pale head on Mamoru's shoulder, and his eldest had one arm protectively around the little nibelung girl. The two cats were curled up together in a hollow between Wattaru and Taro, and at the foot of the bed the black bird had stretched its impossibly long neck out with its beak resting on Nami's foot.

From the bathroom he could hear water running in the shower through the door, open a tiny crack. A quick glance showed Kei's flightsuit neatly placed in the cleaning basket, and after a moment's hesitation, he began to undo his gun belts, stowing the weapons in the armchair, the pistol hanging over the back and the sabre propped up against it on the seat. Boots were pulled off and placed - for once - quietly on the floor and he had the top half of his flightsuit off before he reached the bathroom door, hopping slightly to pull the rest of it clear of his lean frame and dropping to the floor before shutting the door behind him.

The door to the shower cubicle opened at his touch and he slipped in, closing it behind him, and letting the water cascade over tired muscles, and start to wash away a little of the fatigue, sweat and strain of the past couple of days. And without even being asked, Kei leaned back against him, her bottom curving nicely against his groin and her back - hot and slick from the water - pressed against his chilled chest.

'Not a moment too soon,' she said, after a theatrical sniff. He laughed and wrapped his arms around her. 'And if that was your onesie hitting the floor, you can pick it up and put it in the laundry before you go to bed…'

'I'm not sure there's room. It looked as though we'll be sleeping on the couch…' He kissed her wet shoulder, and stroked the length of an old, wide scar with his lips. Her skin shivered under his touch and she leaned back into him, until he had to brace slightly to avoid the pair of them toppling backwards. 'Want to give me a hand here?'

'What? You can't wash yourself these days?' she teased. Her breath caught when he ran the tip of his tongue over the slightly rough skin of the dark scar on her shoulder blade.

'It's far more fun when you do it,' he murmured into her neck a moment later.

'The children are just the other side of the door,' she pointed out, not turning.

'So you'll have to be quiet.'

'Sleeping.'

He nipped her earlobe gently. 'So we'll both be quiet…'

She was only three inches shorter than he was, so to lean her head against his shoulder when she twisted in his arms to do so, wasn't the most comfortable pose, and he gently repositioned her so that they stood cheek to cheek under the hot water jets. Eventually he pushed her away slightly so that he could kiss away the salty trails that ran down her cheeks from the corners of her eyes.
'You got them back,' she said eventually.

'I promised, didn't I? When have I ever broken my word to you?' His lips brushed hers and as she parted her own in response to the gently hungry caress of the tip of his tongue, his hands wandered down to cup the firm muscle of her backside, and pull her closer, even as she sighed softly and wrapped her arms around him.

A little later, he ran his fingers through his hair, still warm and fluffed from the drying field, and watched her button up one of his shirts over a pair of blue shorts. Concessions to modesty, with a room full of small children, in deference to which he'd hauled a pair of boxers out of storage. He perched on the edge of the hot tub, one leg swinging idly, and watched as she opened the door and just leaned against the side, not entering the room, but staring at the bed, a faraway look on her face. He stood up and moved to her side, placing an arm around her waist when she leaned against him again.

'I can't decide whether to just run over there and hug them, or watch them sleep,' Kei said eventually.

'Do you remember the first night we spent in this room?' he asked. He didn't wait for her answer. 'I'd taken one look at it my first day, and turned around and headed straight back to my old cabin. There was something just so wrong about it. Gaia - the man's chair was barely cold on the bridge, and I was just standing there in this doorway, looking at all this from both sides - the luxury, the difference between this room and the rest of the ship… and all this for a man who never really seemed to care what was around him. Hell, I'd assumed he lived in some bare cabin with a bunk and a closet. It would have fit better with what I'd seen. And somehow I was supposed to lock myself away in it, away from the crew and make like nothing had changed? I turned around, walked out and shut the door behind me.'

'Now I think about it, you did kind of get a bit spaced out when I suggested you should sleep here later on,' Kei said gently. 'What changed your mind?'

'You. The look on your face when you saw that damn hot tub I think was what did it. You looked around and you didn't see the false, oppressive comfort, or the luxurious barrier between the world outside and the man inside; you saw beauty, and maybe also a little of a life you'd like to have. It made me think that whilst all of this - and the ship, and everything else that came with being Harlock might be too much for one man, it might just be do-able if I had someone to share it with. I didn't want to take this, and all its baggage, and somehow set myself above and beyond a crew I'd lived amongst and fought with, but I could give it to someone else, and just maybe make something out of myself and the situation.' He kissed the back of her head. 'And look at them, Kei. We made something incredible, between us.'

She let out a soft, laughing sigh. 'We might have also saved the galaxy a couple of times along the way…' She shivered slightly and he held her closer. 'By rights, we should have crashed and burned. I mean: post-near-death sex, both of us betrayed by those we loved and trusted. Alone, hurt, and just plain lost, clinging to each other in the night for dear life.'

'Well, I was smart enough to do whatever it took to hang onto you…' He tapped her arm to get her attention. He whispered loudly into her ear: 'Someone's faking it. We're being watched…'

Mamoru, realising he was rumbled, sat up sleepily and grinned at them. 'Mom? Dad?' His stirring woke the others, and they were quickly buried under a tumbling mass of small children mostly talking over one another, and dragged over to the bed where two cats and a bird found themselves at least temporarily displaced, whilst everyone jostled for hugs, and tears, questions and
explanations filled the air.

Harlock, watching Kei stroke Freya's silky hair whilst she had Nami in her lap with her arm around her small daughter, smiled at the sight. He was buried under the boys, Taro already snoring slightly, and the twins nodding off whilst trying desperately to stay awake.

'Doesn't look as if either of us will get much sleep tonight,' he said softly. Kei rolled her eyes.

'I think I can live with that,' she replied. She reached over and snagged Wattaru, giving Harlock a little more room to shuffle further down and get comfortable, and without prompting both girls made room for the boy, who happily snuggled against his mother. 'And I wouldn't miss this sight for the world,' she added with a giggle.

Harlock looked down to where a small ginger cat was wriggling its butt in preparation for pouncing on his toes where they poked out from under the covers. 'I've faced tougher enemies than you today,' he told Trouble with mock severity. He wiggled his big toe provocatively and the cat lashed his tail once and pounced.

Inside the hollowed out asteroid that was Carmilla, the black robed figure turned away from the holo suite and pushed back the concealing hood. Silvery blonde hair cascaded out from confinement to fall down to below narrow shoulders as she let the mantle fall to the floor. Pale blue eyes set in an angular face stared at the man who'd stayed carefully out of shot during the conversation, and the girl - barely into her twenties - reached up to take an earpiece out of her ear and pull a vocal modulation collar away from her throat. 'Don't you think you were a little hard on the boy?'

The real Hannibal removed the mike from his face. 'Hardly a boy. He's thirty seven.' He started to stand up, wavered slightly and sat back down again heavily. The girl ran to his side and knelt at his feet, looking up into his face, her expression radiating concern.

'You should rest more, Grampy.'

Hannibal waved her concerns away. 'I'm old, Estella. Happens to all of us eventually. Even me.' He coughed, the effort shaking his body, which to the girl's eyes was looking more frail by the day. A once handsome face was now lined and thin, and three pale but long, old scars marred his right cheek, narrowly missing his eye. A charitable estimate of his age would have placed him as a reasonably well-preserved seventy. In fact, he was more than double that. 'And how many times do I need to remind you that I'm a little further back in your family tree than that?'

Estella giggled. 'Well "honoured ancestor" sounds a bit formal and I just don't have time to add all those greats…'

'Cheeky minx.'

'I can deal with Promethium for you, Grampy. You don't need to strain yourself over that. She'll not be able to tell the difference. She never does.'

Hannibal shook his head, and his silvery hair, threaded through with only a few strands of his original wet-sand colour, fell over his forehead to be pushed back with the minimalist gesture born of long practice. Hazel eyes as piercing as a hawk's stared down fondly at the girl. 'You'd think she'd be wise to that trick, but some people never learn. Not this time, Estella. Our Young Harlock's over-reaching himself this time, but damn the devious, manipulative little bastard, he's counting on me knowing that and on me not leaving him flapping in the wind.' He sighed. 'And
although I'd like to administer a well-placed kick to his annoying behind, he's right. So: in order: get me Selen, get the long range warp radio up and call Andromeda, then send a message to the fleet.'

'Saying what?' Estella asked, a little tartly.

Hannibal smiled. 'Showtime…' he replied with a tiny quirk of the corner of a still generous, well-shaped mouth. 'Tell them to get their asses to Proxima and we'll rendezvous there. I'll explain en route.'

'En route to where?' she asked, exasperation creeping into her voice as she helped the old man stand up.

'Prep the Miranda for travel,' Hannibal replied. He patted Estella on her arm, then disentangled her elegant, slim fingers gently from where they were solicitously helping him. 'My dear child, I'm still capable of walking unaided.' He smiled to take the sting out of the slight rebuke. 'Earth, Estella. He lifted a scarab-shaped locket from out of his breast pocket, opened it and stared for a brief moment at an old, flickering holo, before snapping it shut and putting it carefully away. 'It seems we're going to Earth.'

'Oh goodie,' Estella replied acidly, with a flip of her head that caused her fringe to fall over her right eye. She pushed it out of the way with an irritated sigh. 'Why do we never visit nice, warm, hospitable worlds?'

'Probably because the universe hates us,' he replied with a wink.

'Hmmpf. And we're taking that old wreck why, when we have a whole fleet of the new Blackstar class?'

They stood on the gantry of the main hangar, staring down at the old ship lying in the dry dock. 'That old wreck suits this old wreck just fine, my girl. We've been through a lot together.' Hannibal placed his hands on the railing and leaned over to look at the ship, battle scarred and dented, the curving horns above her pointed prow giving her the look of a giant beetle. 'Our journey isn't over yet, is it, old girl?' he whispered.

In the bright lights of the hanger, he was the only one who noticed the faint nimbus that surrounded the old battleship, and curled in tiny wisps of blue smoke around his hands.
Chapter 56

Harlock sat back in his chair and reached for the coffee mug in front of the holoscreen. One sip of the cold coffee was enough to make him pull a face and place it back with a scowl. He sighed and reached for the touchscreen on the desk, to ask the computer to re-run the simulation.

*Doesn't matter how many times you run it, you won't change the figures.*

He shook his head, wishing immediately that he hadn't since his throbbing headache got worse.

*Take a break* Tochiro advised.

'I can't afford to make a mistake,' Harlock pointed out. 'One slip, and I'll be vilified in the same breath as the last guy.'

Tochiro's electronic voice snorted. *Oh please - ever since you agreed to take the name you've been putting up with that.*

'But it still means the death of thousands of sentient beings,' he pointed out.

*Under the circumstances, it's the best solution to a thorny problem. You know it, and Cleo knows it. She can't let those rebels - the mazone loyal to the former queen - run loose. They hate humanity, and they'll eventually turn on her and on us. But she can ride the wave of uncertainty and self interest whilst they recover from the change in management. She'll never get a better chance to be rid of them, and offering them an opportunity to fall on their swords - so to speak - is better than any other alternative. Besides - they don't see death the way we do - for them it really is part of a cycle. The was a brief pause. So… do the numbers work for you?*

Harlock picked up the mug again, stared at the dark brown sludge lurking in the bottom and put it back down again with a wistful sigh. 'So far, no simulation we've run causes anything dangerous. Released in the atmosphere in sequence, the energy in the black body drives will combine with the biomass of the ships and the mazone, and should drift down to eventually cover the planet. The bio-matrix theoretically should start by producing those gigantic lichens we saw on Niflheim, which will slowly begin to absorb the dark matter. It should be a self-sustaining reaction.'

*But?*

'It'll take millennia. Everything really depends on being able to protect the planet - both from the Alliance and any other invested parties. Although at least the prospect of another Homecoming to a restored Earth won't be my problem…'*

*Doesn't seem to be stopping you worrying about it...*

Harlock laughed harshly. 'If I wasn't worrying you ought to put a bullet through my head.'

*Nah… a wrench to the back of the head. Only thing that gets through those hard Prussian skulls.*

'Why does that sound like the voice of experience?' Harlock stood up and stretched. 'I need something a lot stronger than a coffee.'

*You might want to put a pin in that* Tochiro answered before he'd reached the door to his lab. *There's a ship coming out of IN-SKIP on the edge of the system.*
'IDF?'

Millennial Thieves. Not a Blackstar class though. Weird readings - its mass is less, but the energy readings are totally out of wha...

'Tochiro?'

The only reply from the speakers was a wordless cry buried in static. Harlock took off for the bridge at a run - almost barrelling into Mimay halfway there running in the other direction, looking as though she'd seen a ghost. He stood for a moment in the corridor, watching as she vanished in the direction of the Central Computer room. 'Now what the hells has her panties in a bunch?' he murmured. At a more sedate speed, he made his way forward.

A goodly proportion of the crew were gathered in front of the main screens, staring at the ship coming towards them. To one side, the planet they'd left Meg and Tadashi on loomed, a kind of sickly yellow-green. Harlock bulled his way to the front of the crowd with the aid of sharp elbows - although most of the men moved as soon as they realised who it was. Maji and Yattaran however, were both staring at the screen with looks of enraptured awe on their faces.

'Just look at her… I mean, the lines…' Maji said in a hushed tone. 'Look at those curves…'

'She's seen some action - check out that hull,' Yattaran added. 'She's gotta be the last of her kind… I mean, I heard they were all decommissioned before the Homecoming War, but lookit that girl! She's a beauty…'

'I'd say she's too old even for you aging slackers,' Ali joked from the sidelines, his arms folded over a tight fitting cream sweater. 'But what's the fuss over some old rusting hulk?'

'What he said,' Harlock added, standing behind the two gushing engineers. 'It's a weird looking thing, isn't it?'

A quick glance over at Yattaran's console revealed the stats of the ship - something under 150 metres in length, with a blocky, polygonal engine at the stern, and a pointed prow surmounted by two curving "horns". In between he could see a cannon array that looked similar to the Arcadia's top battery, and the bridge was also similar in design.

He wasn't sure the rest of the crew could see it, but he did: wisps of blue fire flickered around her cannon and antennae like the ancient St Elmo's fire.

Dark Matter. Well, that explained the odd energy readings...

'Do we have an ID?'

'She's listed in the 'Thieves' inventory as the Miranda,' Blaze offered, moving to stand next to Harlock. 'She's Hannibal's personal ship. I've never seen her outside of a dry dock though, on Carmilla - I always thought she was decommissioned…'

'That, my friends, is a pre-war Admiral class battleship,' Yattaran said, with the proprietary air he had whenever he saw something he wanted to get his hands on. 'She's at least a hundred and fifty years old, so she ought to be in our database…'

'Yeah… good luck with that,' Franz called up. 'I've got all eighteen ships of that class listed and none of them match that configuration. That girl's had one hell of a makeover, and I'd bet good money her ID's been switched out.'
'Mimay hightailed it out of here looking as though she was about to throw up,' Kei added. She clicked her way to Harlock's side and stood beside him. One hand on her hip. 'Anyone think those two might just have something they don't want to tell us?'

A forest of raised hands greeted her question.

'Captain? We're being hailed!' Franz called out.

'Put it on the main screen,' Harlock ordered.

The bridge of the ship appeared, rather more brightly lit than the Arcadia's gloomy interior. A standard configuration, Harlock noted. Not too different from the floorplans of the Arcadia before its catastrophic makeover, complete with floor screen. A tall figure sat in the captain's chair, and for once not covered by a concealing mantle. 'Looks like the masquerade's over,' Harlock whispered to Kei.

The man facing them was elderly, which surprised Harlock. Used to the longevity and youth of the Lar Mellaians, he'd expected someone a lot younger looking. He looked to be in his seventies, and had the air of someone who'd seen far too much in a long lifetime. Greying hair curled down to the collar of his flight jacket, and a weatherbeaten face sported a cynical smile which looked oddly familiar, as did the keen gaze from eyes the colour of Harlock's own under a slight epicanthic fold. He'd been a bit of a bruiser in his youth, judging by the broad shoulders and chest, and the still trim build under the leather.

'The real Hannibal?' he whispered to Kei. 'Damn, he looks familiar…'

'Try a mirror in about a hundred years,' Ali replied sourly. 'I put it down to in-breeding meself… I've seen that mouth before - swallowed the crap it spewed out for ten years…' he finished, with a sour look at the screen. 'Fuck me… just when you thought we'd reached the bottom of that gene pool…'

'Hello. Standing right here,' Harlock replied pointedly.

Hannibal sighed. 'Cheeky bastard - I don't look that old yet. Even if I hadn't seen your arrest warrant, I'd know you for a Jones with that attitude. I served with your great grandfather.' Those piercing hazel eyes returned to Harlock. 'We got your call about needing a taxi service and since we were the last to take off, I thought I might as well sort out two problems. You wanted someone to take that Namino woman off your hands, I believe? Something about your ship upsetting her?'

Harlock smiled. 'She had a nasty encounter with our resident ghost… I felt it better if someone else transported her back to Earth - she's the Director of Internal Security after all - I'll need her functional.' He returned that steady gaze with his own, noting in passing the tell-tale markers Ali had spotted. Yeah… no mistaking it. The mouth, with that full cupid's bow over that thinner lower lip. The nose… eyes…

'He does look a lot like you,' Kei whispered in his ear. 'Only older.' She jabbed an elbow into his ribs. 'Nice to think you should age well…'

'Yeah - but who the hell is he?' Louder, for the mikes, he said 'Nice of you to finally take the hood down, Hannibal… You know we always figured that for a nomme de guerre… I don't suppose you're willing to share your real name at last along with your face?'

'My parents had a little falling out over that when I was born, so it kind of depends who you speak to.'
Kei leaned over the railing and gestured to Franz, who touched his commlink. Over it, Kei asked him briefly to check the database for a voice ID.

'I'll save you the effort, Kei,' Hannibal said with that oh-so easy-on-the-eyes smile as she made her way back to Harlock's side. 'You'll find me listed under the list of MIA officers for the Second Fleet, commanding officer, attached to Near-Earth Security and Logistics, 2875 to 2877. Admiral Mamoru Okita, captain of Deathshadow Zero.'

Both Yattaran and Maji were making choking noises, and Harlock had to tuck his hands into his armpits to try to hold onto his trademarked impassive mein.

'Admiral who?' Kei asked.

'Okita…' Harlock finally remembered to breathe. 'The Admiral Okita? Hero of El Alamein? The man who single-handedly broke the blockade at Proxima? Led the remnants of the Solar System fleet to protect the inner planets during the final wave?' He swallowed. 'And according to family legend, my mother's great grandfather…' He looked over at Daiba who stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

'Don't look at me. Mom never talked much about that side of the family.'

'I thought you were Harlock's great-great-wotsit?' Ali asked, as he jabbed a finger at his captain.

'I am.'

'So why's he look like The Captain?' Another jab, this time at the hologram, standing insouciantly with his arms folded. Harlock, giving his own rolled-up cuff a tug, noticed idly that Hannibal also rolled his sleeves up.

There was a chorus of babbling around Harlock as he watched the screen. Yattaran had Maji by the arms and was gibbering "Deathshadow Zero… Zero! It's a bloody myth! It wasn't supposed to exist!" into his face whilst the more stoic, goateed engineer nodded enthusiastically.

**His brother.**

Tochiro's soft voice reached Harlock over the cacophony. *He's Harlock's half-brother.*

'**That** Mamoru?' Kei spluttered slightly, her eyes wide. 'Huh. His full name wasn't in The Captain's files…'

'Why don't we take this in my quarters,' Harlock broke in. 'Hannibal?'

'I've got a better idea,' Hannibal replied. 'I'll come alongside and we'll dock.' He smiled at the figures on the Arcadia's bridge. 'Though you might want to restrain your engineering crew - I get the impression they'd be all over my ship given half a chance.'

'I'll keep them on a leash,' Harlock promised, over their protests. 'You said "two problems"?'

'Well there's also the elephant in the room about just how you protect Earth from her lost children. I suspect promising that idiot in charge of the Alliance a planet-sized personal golf-course won't cut it even if we could stomach the compromise.'

'Elephants. Oh my sides… that was old when I was still in nappies,' Ali drawled. Hannibal's mouth twitched slightly. When the rest of them just looked at him blankly he sighed. 'Oh for f… do any of you have anything resembling a decent education? You can put your hand down Captain Smarty-
'And you, short-smarty-pants,' he told a smirking Daiba. He narrowed his eyes and scowled at Franz and Martinez. 'You two slackers on the other hand…'

'OTC,' Franz replied blithely. 'Required reading in Tactics and Strategy…' Martinez nodded and shrugged. 'Same here.'

'Dear god,' Hannibal groaned. 'Are they still teaching the same course?'

Harlock stuffed his hands in his pockets and smirked. 'Funnily enough that's what my father asked Isora in his cadet year… I guess they don't mess with the classics.'

'Explains why they would have lost the Machinners War if we hadn't waded in,' Hannibal snorted. 'Still teaching 2D tactics for a 3D environment.' He sat back in his chair. 'Just to be clear: this isn't a family reunion. I'll want Blaze there as well. Selen's asked me to make sure he gets a little present which should be arriving in the next hour or so - so please don't open fire on it when it shows up…'

'Hey!' Ali punched Blaze on the arm once the display went dark. 'Mummy's giving you a new ship, huh?'

'Need a gunner?' Harlock asked Blaze. 'Please?'

'Not,' Blaze replied evenly, 'If you paid me.'

'Hey!' Ali's indignant retort was lost in the laughter.

'You sure?' Harlock stage-whispered in Blaze's ear with an arm around his shoulders as they walked towards the stairs. 'Because I am a pirate, so I have an obscene amount of money put by…'

Blaze ducked out from under that comradely arm and patted it, adding a smirk for good measure. 'I love you like a brother, but you don't have anywhere near enough money to make up for the fun I get watching you deal with the idiot.'

Behind them the disgruntled whining continued. 'Why is everyone always picking on me? Yattaran is a lazy twat, but you don't hear anyone threatening to sell him down the river…'

'Probably because Yattaran's occasionally useful,' they heard Kei reply over the first mate's indignant splutter.

'Yeah? Well I'm way prettier,' was the fading retort as they reached the foot of the stairs.

'See?' Blaze said brightly, as Harlock groaned. 'Worth. Every. Penny.'

Hannibal stood staring out of the leaded window of Harlock's quarters, looking through the glint of a golden wine swirling around in the crystal bowl of his goblet. 'I always suspected Albrecht had made off with a substantial portion of my damn wine cellar,' he said dryly. 'We laid down this Riesling the year my eldest daughter was born.' He took a sip. 'Surprisingly, it's travelled rather well considering all it's been through.'

'Now I'm feeling guilty about treating it so cavalierly,' Harlock said as he topped up the offered glass. 'Albrecht? Harlock asked.

Hannibal shrugged. 'Our father saddled both of us with traditional accumulations of ancient family names, for reasons best known to himself, and both of us rebelled. Seriously - no one needs six names; Mars dropped family names in the aftermath and I don't think you ever had problems
remembering who you were. I went with the name my mother chose, and my brother… well. Never was one to do what others expected. I used to use his real name whenever he did something monumentally stupid.'

'So - most of the time then?' Ali quipped from his perch on the desk. 'Kei does that with the captain.'

'Why are you even here, Jones?' Hannibal asked.

Ali beamed. 'Indispensable member of the crew, Admiral Okita, sir!'

'Stop that,' Harlock snapped at him. 'It's this or he'd be listening at the keyhole. He's the ship's worst gossip. It's just easier to indulge him.'

Hannibal chuckled. 'There's another apple that didn't fall far from the tree. Your ancestor was an irreverent bastard as well, but one of the best men I ever served with. He helped us escape in the aftermath… But that's one hell of a long story.'

'Can't you tell it now?' Ali asked.

'Ali… hardly the time…' Harlock warned. Ali jabbed a finger at Hannibal. 'Yeah… but if he croaks on this job, I'll never get to hear it!'

'Ignore him,' Harlock advised. 'He does shut up eventually…'

'There's one in every crew,' Hannibal replied sagely. 'Though why my brother didn't chuck him out of the nearest airlock I've no idea. He couldn't even handle Con's chirpyness.'

'Something we all wonder,' Harlock added with a heartfelt sigh. 'I've been tempted.'

'Ungrateful bastard. After all we've been through together…'

'I wouldn't go there,' Hannibal advised. He finished off his glass. 'I've heard all about MetaBloody. And Grand Technologia…'

'Was that Millennial Thieves, or Millennial Gossips?' Ali sniped back. Hannibal just smiled, and if Harlock had had any doubts about the family connection, they vanished seeing that. He'd seen it too many times in the mirror.

'What I'm still trying to work out is why I can't shake the feeling we've met before. Your real voice especially…' He shook his head. 'It's been nagging at me ever since you appeared on the holo.'

Hannibal offered his glass for a refill. 'Try adding a really bad beard, a lack of a haircut, very scruffy duds, a bit of putty and a battered hat…'

Harlock still looked blank. Hannibal sighed. 'You really weren't paying much attention to anything but your own misery back then, were you?'

That was you?' Harlock gulped down his own glass, hardly tasting the sweet white wine. 'Heavy Meldar, huh?'

'Translation?' Blaze asked from the chaise longue.

'I spent six months on MX-201 - Heavy Meldar - waiting for the Arcadia to show up. There was an old guy - always kept himself to himself, drinking alone in a corner… bought me a drink my first night and told me to keep my chin up.'
'I've seldom seen a sorrier sight. Wrapped up in your pain so tight I'm amazed you could function. You looked as though your entire world was falling around you.'

'I'd kind of figured Isora had finally found a way for me to volunteer to get myself killed, so yeah, pretty much. You persuaded that guy to offer me a job as well, didn't you?'

Hannibal shrugged. 'It kept you busy.'

'You were watching over me?'

'Always. Unlike Harlock, I didn't abandon my family. Aurora - my eldest - escaped the destruction of Earth because she was on Mars. I didn't dare return and draw attention to her, but I did keep in touch as best I could given the upheaval of the years after the war, and her descendents after that.'

'About that… you were there, weren't you? During the destruction? Your ship is giving off a whiff of dark matter. And you…'

'I was too late to stop him,' Hannibal said bleakly. 'It's another long story, and a painful one. For another day. Short version: Deathshadow Zero was caught in the backblast, but we weren't as badly affected as the Deathshadow fleet itself. And she isn't powered by dark matter, she's just got a few enhancements that Tochiro and the nibelung tested on her prior to installing them on the new fleet. I renamed her much later.'

'Pretty name,' Kei said from the doorway. 'Miranda…'

'My first wife.' That was all he said, but the look in his eyes and, the almost strangled edge in his voice was enough for all of them to leave the subject alone. And the look on his face as Mimay moved out of Kei's shadow to stand in a pool of light cast by one of the chandeliers was anything but friendly. 'Mimay.'

'Mamoru.' She stood with her head bowed, her hands clasped in front of her stomach, and you could, Harlock thought, have cut the atmosphere with a knife.

Hannibal broke the silence. 'You could have stopped him.'

She said nothing.

'You should have stopped him.'

She flinched, and bowed her head.

Seeing the look on Hannibal's face - raw pain, sorrow and a tranquil fury that chilled him to the bone, Harlock quietly reached for a whisky bottle and topped up his empty glass with something that advertised itself a Speyside single malt, bottled in 2845.

'Now you know the look that makes people step back from you when you lose it,' Blaze murmured. 'I wouldn't be her right now…'

'I am so sorry,' she whispered. She raised her eyes to Hannibal's, but within a heartbeat was forced to look away.

'I really don't care.' He turned his back on her, walked over to the desk and silently accepted the whisky bottle Harlock offered him. No-one dared look at Mimay as she almost tip toed out of the room, the door shutting behind her.
Hannibal filled the wine glass almost to the rim, and then downed the amber liquid in one smooth motion. He placed the glass on the desk with exaggerated care. 'Now. Why don't you tell me what you've got planned?'

'Plausible deniability will not get you out of this.' Hannibal now had his feet up on an upholstered pouffe, and the remains of the single malt swished in the bottom of his glass. Only Harlock and Kei now remained in the room. 'If you were dealing purely with the military mindset, you could maybe fight your way clear, but your problem is the corporate mindset, and that is something your usual methods won't work on.'

'Hitting them in the pocket book usually gets their attention.' Harlock pointed out.

'But it doesn't keep it.' Hannibal's quiet voice had a slight accent, very similar to the one he'd sometimes heard lurking in the back of Harlock's controlled tones. A tendency to clip his vowels and sharpen the consonants.

A relic of the long lost Earth culture they'd been born into?

'I never thought I'd have to do this again, but I practically cut my teeth dealing with the breed, as CEO of Arcadia Engineering. Frankly this current crop are a faint shadow of the crap we were dealing with before the war - the heads of Doppler Corp and Zone Industries would have eaten those morons on Enceladus for breakfast. Leave Enceladus and your nervous Director of Int Sec to me and mine.' His smile widened. 'Between us I suspect we know where the bodies are buried.'

'If you can get her to cooperate,' Kei pointed out.

'The Arcadia isn't the only thing that can terrorise that woman,' Hannibal replied dryly. 'Whilst my brother was gallivanting around the universe drowning his guilt in my wine cellar, I was building up a network of spies, informants and agents and creating an organisation that would be able to do what governments could - or would - not do. It started as a means to protect our family. When I settled on Lar Metal it became something more, and under Selen and Zero it became something great. Let our people do what they do best, Harlock. You do what you do best.'

'Which is?' the younger man asked.

Hannibal raised his glass. 'You protect them. Get the new queen to Earth, and I'll do the rest.' He smiled at Harlock over the rim of the antique crystal. 'We're a lot alike, you and I. We do our best work in the shadows, not with guns and battleships. If things had worked out differently, I'd have tried to recruit you to the Thieves… I almost offered on Heavy Meldar… Except… you also have a lot of him in you: too much the romantic to be comfortable getting your hands dirty in this business. Your heart was never really in your role as Isora's stooge. But you have the Arcadia, and that needs to be brought to bear in the right place, at the right time. This ship was created to defend the Earth - time for her to do what she was born to do…' He stared around the room. 'Though she's had one hell of a makeover… this room wasn't in the original specs.'

'There's a lot that wasn't.'

'Those doors…' Hannibal mused. He shook his head. 'I can't even begin to wrap my head around what happened to this ship. The other three weren't warped this extensively. But then, their captains lacked my brother's somewhat flamboyant flair for the dramatic, I suppose. You do know those are a replica of the doors to our home?' When Harlock shook his head, he sighed. 'So much lost. You'd have loved Heiligenstadt, I think. I have some files you need to see, one day.' He reached into his pocket. 'On which note, I have something for you…' He held his hand out to Kei, who peered into
It suspiciously.

'What is it?' She picked it up, and Harlock saw a delicate, skull inscribed scarab on a gold chain. Two rings hung next to it, clinking softly as she held it up to the light. One simple gold band, the other a large solitaire of impressive size and clarity.

'This was Maya's. Your great-great grandmother's. Harlock gave it to her when their oldest son was born. The rings... those were the rings he gave her. Her wedding and engagement. They'd been his mother's, before that...' He smiled sadly.

'But... shouldn't you give them to Yama?' She looked from one man to the other, puzzled. Harlock, who knew she tended to get a little trembly over gifts, closed her hand over them.

'I'd only give them to you anyway,' he said softly.

'Maya would have wanted them to go to you, I think,' Hannibal replied. 'You're both her descendants. But Richard and Stefan didn't want them, and our daughters didn't think it right, at the time since they came from Harlock's mother, not mine... but they belong in the family, and you're so like her. You have her eyes...' he finished softly. 'We tried so hard to find the transport, when your parents - my great-granddaughter and her husband - vanished. Until I saw you on that news spot after your arrest, I had no idea anyone had survived, and if I'd known where you were and what you'd have to endure, believe me, I'd have torn apart anyone in my way to recover you.' He smiled at her. 'I should have come forward sooner, perhaps, but lurking in the shadows is a hard habit to break, and I'm a man who's lived long past his time. I wasn't sure you'd...'

She almost knocked the breath out of him with a hug. 'You're as big an idiot as your damned brother,' she informed him when she released him. 'Family is all I ever wanted.'

'In that case you're in for a treat. One of your cousins is on board the ship Blaze will be taking charge of - you'll like her - she's as sharp as a tack, that one.' He turned a mock glare on Harlock. 'Unlike that belligerent red-haired sociopath you dropped in my lap - I don't think I ever really thanked you properly for that...'

Harlock merely smirked. 'I don't know what your problem is - you managed to palm her off on the Andromedan arm of your organisation, didn't you?' he asked innocently. 'How is Emeraldas anyway?'

'Raising three kinds of hell for her mother, last I heard.' Hannibal shook his head. 'Shot two of her clones just last month and decapitated another. And I thought our family was dysfunctional...'

'We have our moments,' Harlock opined. 'And only the odd bad egg.' he stared into his empty glass. 'Any word of Maetel?'

'Hell, no one has any idea what that girl's up to,' Hannibal replied. 'She did pass on a lead about Dan and Hank a while back, but the facility turned out to have been long abandoned. After this is over we're going to have to make an effort to make Doppler's life a misery. Never did like those entitled pointy eared supremacists...'

'Really?' Harlock's ears almost pricked up. 'I've got just the crewman to help you out...' He glared at Kei and rubbed his ribs. 'Seriously?'

'You'd miss Ali, and you know it,' she told him primly. 'Although I'd take it as a favour if you could stop snogging him in rat-infested alleyways... It's not that I don't trust you, it's more that he never bloody shuts up about it.'
Harlock's comm pinged before he could frame a suitably pithy reply. 'Harlock.'

'Captain? The Miranda just called. The shuttle's docked, they have Namino on board. Meg and Tadashi send their love, and they'll be staying on with the Thieves' team to help out.'

'For the best,' Kei said when he cut the link. 'I'd send the children and Daiba away if I thought they'd be safer…'

'If you want to send them back to Tabito, I can arrange that,' Hannibal offered quietly. He smiled at the way they immediately looked at each other. 'But I don't think I'd be able to do it, either. Hell - if they aren't safe on this ship, nowhere's safe.' He stood up gracefully, and both followed suit. 'After we're done, I definitely want to meet my namesake and his siblings. I was planning on visiting Selen anyway.' He offered a hand to Harlock which was clasped firmly. 'Until then, we'll see you in the Solar System.'

'I'll walk you back to the tube,' Harlock offered. 'Unless you want to detour to the Central computer…'

Hannibal shook his head. 'Not this time. I need a little time to process, and I suspect Tochiro does too. I would like a tour when we have the time though - assuming you can turn the lights on… how the hell do you see where you're going?'

'Practice,' was Harlock's laconic reply.

'Anyone else getting a sense of deja vu?' Franz stage-whispered to Ali. The senior bridge crew were standing on the gantry, with Harlock standing in front of the wheel, where he could be seen by those on the lower bridge.

Ali looked around, noting Kei to the captain's right, Yattaran on his left, Mimay almost touching his left shoulder and the rest scattered to the sides: Ali, Franz, Martinez, Maji the only other survivors from the old crew visible, and the newcomers were standing behind the captain, looking a little more awkward than the old hands… 'Well no-one's holding a sub-space transmitter capable of blowing up the universe this time, so that's a good thing, right?' He gave his captain's frown a shit-eating grin in reply, and smirked inwardly at the tiny sigh that escaped the younger man.

'You all know that we're heading to Earth,' Harlock began.

'Again…' Ali added. 'Oof.' He turned a glare on Franz and rubbed his abused ribcage. 'Oi!'

'Thank you,' Harlock said to Franz. 'Next time feel free to gag him.' Ignoring Ali's injured sniff he continued: 'The mazone have jumped ahead of us, but they'll take longer to get there, which has given a time to arrange for reinforcements. For those of you who slept through the events of the last couple of weeks, with the mazone fleet under the command of a new queen, the immediate threat is over: the bulk of the mazone civilians are heading to various planets designated by the SDF as safe havens. Abandoned worlds where they can use the energy collected in their black body drives to fuel terraforming efforts. Destiny has offered the mazone these worlds in return for their expertise, and hopefully, that's the end of it for the bulk of the vessels.'

'So why is the main fleet still going to Earth?' A voice called up from the lower deck. Harlock leaned over the railing.

'Yasu?'

The crewman, bald and beefy, nodded. 'Aye sir.'
Ali spoke up before anyone else could. 'In the interests of getting to empty my bladder sometime this week: because Cleo's got shiploads of very pissed off loyalists who will soon start wondering why they should support this new upstart queen, and the best way to deal with 'em is to persuade them to self-immolate over a planet that could really use the help getting rid of a nasty dark matter contamination.' Meeting his captain's what-the-fuck look he shrugged. 'What? You'd take half an hour to explain it in flowery language, and everyone falls asleep during your Captain Exposition speeches.'

Yattaran had to turn a sharp barking laugh into a cough. Ali beamed a beatific, totally innocent smile at Harlock.

'If anyone has a problem with that plan, I won't stop you leaving. The Blackstar Twelve is willing to take anyone who has any qualms back to Tabito.'

No-one moved, and Harlock's mouth quirked slightly in a tiny half-smile. 'Thank you. For trusting me. Now this won't be a cakewalk - once the Alliance realise what we're up to, we can expect some resistance.'

'Understatement, much?' Ali asked. He dodged Franz's elbow. 'Hey! Cut that out! It's a legitimate observation!' He pointed to the floorscreen, currently displaying the last known disposition of the Home Fleet. 'Pluto Defence Line. Early Warning system. Enceladus base with the Outer System Fleet. Inner System Fleet on "someone sneezes on the time radar screen and it's HomeComing War #2" alert…'

'We've jumped past all of those before,' Kei replied evenly. 'Twice. Don't get your knickers in a bunch.'

'With one ship,' Ali retorted. 'And that was before Mars went tits up. Not a whole alien fleet.' He folded his arms. 'Well, Captain Expo? Gotta speech to cover this one?'

Harlock smiled slowly. 'No… but we do have help.'

Hearing her cue, Kei changed the floor and the heads-up display to show a different view, from Earth orbit. 'Our job is to keep the mazone fleet safe enough to disembark. Our friends in the Millenial Thieves however will be taking care of a longer term solution.' Pictures of Destiny, Daido-Andromeda and Enceladus - and a small brown planet none of the crew recognised - appeared next to Earth. 'I think it's safe to say that if Hannibal and Selen and Ben can deliver, then we'll have everyone's undivided attention…'

He shared a quick look with Kei, and smiled when he saw that like him, she was also standing with one hand behind her back with her fingers crossed.

Gotta hand it to Mamoru… he thinks big.

'Oh - now you contribute to the talks?' Harlock tried to keep his exasperation out of his voice. Tochiro's reluctance to engage with a childhood friend hadn't gone un unnoticed. 'We could have used your input earlier…'

You were all doing fine without me - and I'd not have thought of this… takes a thief to come up with this one.

'A pirate and a thief, huh?' Harlock murmured. Part of his attention was on the ripples of conversation running around the bridge, which apart from some carping about risking their necks, was mostly positive. 'Well if nothing else, the next few weeks are going to make an interesting
footnote in history, if we survive it.' He laid a hand on the baluster of the wheel, and waited for silence to fall in the wake of Kei’s call for silence. ‘Gentlemen - ladies - prepare for IN-SKIP.’ He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. 'To Earth!'

Fists shot into the air in a salute. 'To Earth!' the crew called out as one.
Chapter 57

On board the *Miranda*, Hannibal settled back in the captain's chair with a sigh. 'Is our guest secured?'

His second nodded from his post to the left of the command post. 'Aye sir. Somewhat relieved not to be escorted back to the *Arcadia*.' He smirked. 'What the hell did Harlock do to her?'

Under his breath Hannibal just murmured: 'Which one…?' Out loud he simply replied 'That ship gives me nightmares, and I was there when she was built… I doubt it's a forgiving environment to an enemy, Farah.'

'No sir.' A pause. 'Seriously sir? I mean… my father said you'd been around a bit, but…'

'My family's company built her, so yes.' He snorted '"around for a bit…" if your father hadn't made the mistake of pissing off Promethium I'd give him hell for that one.' Farah's answering smile was a little weak.

'It wasn't Promethium who killed him in the end though, was it?” he said softly. 'Bloody Ban. Why the hell you let that saintly image stand I don't know. He was just as complicit in the machination plan as Promethium.'

'Until she made the mistake of threatening their daughters,' Hannibal finished. 'Because it serves no purpose. And because one day, that's something I might be able to use.' He smiled at the young man - and god, they got younger every year… this one looked about twenty. 'Never reveal all your hand on the first call, Farah. Some information you might have to sit on for decades, but when you need it, it'll be waiting for you. Hell, sometimes it's like a fine wine - you have to let it mature…'

'Like now?' Farah asked. 'Just what have you got on the Alliance government anyway?'

'All in good time, Farah. All in good time.' He looked at the chronometer, which kept Earth time and Galactic standard. 'Take us into IN-SKIP - full immersion. We need to get to Enceladus at the same time as the Arcadia. Have Blaze take the Blackstar fleet to inside the asteroid belt - power down and await orders.

'Sir.' Farah turned away to his console, and then swivelled his chair around again to look at his leader. 'But sir - if you've got the means to take the Alliance out of this, why do we need that woman? I mean - she's one of them, isn't she? Mazone?'

'That,' Hannibal replied with a hint of amusement in his voice, 'is precisely why we need her…' He smiled at his second's puzzled expression. 'Don't worry, Farah. I'll explain en route.'

'Really?' Farah muttered, turning back to his post. 'That'd be a first…'

'I'm starting to think mixing with Harlock's crew is a bad influence on you all,' Hannibal replied dryly.

'That's funny,' Farah shot back. 'I think that rather scary XO of his said something similar about us…'

Hannibal settled back deeper into his chair and closed his eyes. 'Rather a good job they don't know how many people we've slipped into his crew over the years isn't it, really?'
On board the young treeship selected to carry the new queen and her entourage to their final destination, Cleo stared at the sight that greeted her eyes when Ben walked into the small grove in the ship's heart. The trees were barely saplings, and against their scant height the six foot plus frame of the young blue-skinned pirate seemed far larger than it should. And the dark blue flightsuit he wore made him seem even bigger - the ensemble completed by a half-cloak of a lighter blue thrown back over one shoulder.

'You made contact?' she asked. She handed a large goblet to him, and smiled when he took the glass with a graceful bow.

'We can go. Yes, it's all agreed. Frankly he jumped at the chance - despite who was making the suggestion.' He took a long sip from the glass. 'Nice. Very light.'

'Elderflower,' she told him. 'An Earth plant, it doesn't thrive in many worlds.'

'What does?' he replied. He smiled at her over the rim of the glass. 'I'll have words with my bloody captain for this though… Six years I've been able to put this off, and now I'm jumping through hoops to make his damn plan happen.' When she wrinkled her forehead in perplexion, he laughed. 'Relax. I owe Harlock far more than I can ever repay. And damn the man, he's right… it has to happen this way.' He sat down on a convenient root and patted it until she sat beside him. 'My father's more than happy to offer you a home - for a price.'

'The restoration of your homeworld?'

He nodded. 'It was damaged by a series of seismic events caused by problems with a twinned planet, as well as our sun going temporarily nuts. Radiation polluted the entire surface centuries ago. Like Earth, it's a symbol - the symmetry here is rather disturbing…' He took another appreciative sip. 'Are your ships ready to move?'

Cleo nodded. 'I just hope I'm doing the right thing… we spent so long on our journey with only one goal in mind… to choose a new path this late in the journey…'

'Harlock once told me that we're defined not by adversity so much as how we react to it. To learn, and grow and overcome what's put in our path is far better than to refuse to move because "it's always been this way" or to wallow in helplessness to the point where you're unable to see your way out of the cloud around you. He's a man who's been hit hard by fate along the way, but he refuses to stop looking forward, even when he also says you shouldn't stop looking back - you just need to limit it to quick looks over your shoulder in case there's anything there about to sneak up on you…' At her inquisitive look he shrugged, the gesture causing the cloak to slip slightly over his shoulder. 'I was feeling more than a little hard done to at the time. But the one thing I've always been sure of is that he's a man who lives what he preaches. He's made mistakes, and suffered some losses along the way, but he doesn't give up. Which tends to make you not want to disappoint him. He does like to lead by example.'

'Yet he's leaving so much of this in the hands of this man Hannibal. So much dependent on a man I know nothing about…'

He patted her knee. 'He's got a hell of a rep in this neck of the woods. One of those names spoken in the same hushed, awed, please-don't-let-him-hear-me tones in seedy dives that Harlock's is. From what I saw during the plague he's a brilliant facilitator and fixer. And that, by lovely queen, is what we need right now, not firepower. Harlock's a pirate, not a politician, and anything he can bring to bear would be short-term at best. You can't expect him and the Arcadia to lurk in the shadows of Earth's slightly chewed-looking moon and growl at any intruders for the next few thousand years. His and Hannibal's plan will hopefully yank the rug from out of the interested
parties for the foreseeable future, and that is what we need.'

She smiled, and lifted his hand off her knee by the fingers, replacing it on his own thigh with a pat. 'And just what, princeling from another galaxy, will be your role in all of this?'

'Me?' He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it gently, his lips barely brushing her skin. 'Apart from negotiating the resettlement of several hundred ships? Or being extremely decorative?' He laughed at her tiny sigh. 'As the duly recognised representative of the Gamilas Empire, I'll be there to ensure that the Alliance knows that you have friends in high places. One thing neither the former Gaia Sanction nor Andromeda want to do is piss off my father. Promethium wouldn't dare launch her mechanisation crusade in the Cloud - and if she got past us, well, there's another three governments that would happily chew her to pieces. And we're all that stands between them and the Milky Way, so that means both Destiny and Enceladus don't want to get on his bad side either. Frankly, it's win-win…' He grinned. 'Hannibal's other plan is just the icing on the cake…' his grin widened into a smirk. 'When we get out of IN-SKIP, I can't wait to watch the news…'

Earth's moon had an arc missing thanks to a passing plasma beam several years earlier. From the distance the Arcadia arrived outside its orbit, in a black cloud of dark matter shot through with red lightning, it was as though it was permanently eclipsed.

Ali badgered Yattaran into finding the nearest warp news feed and replaced the screenshot of the battered silver satellite with the pretty brunette news anchor reporting from Enceladus.

'...the sixth scandal to rock the government in as the last two weeks has left the Prime Minister isolated and without an operating majority on the council. The defence minister's resignation over repeated complaints from female staff of sexual misconduct could well be the final blow for the Alliance, which is currently teetering on the edge. An emergency session in closed chambers has been called, beginning tomorrow. Our political correspondent on Titan has this to say…'

'What's the final tally?' Kei asked from next to her station. She stood with her arm around Harlock's waist as he rested one hand lightly on the topmost baluster of the wheel, the other holding her gently around her tiny waist. Her thigh high black boots contrasted starkly with the white flightsuit she wore adorned with a black skull and crossbones over her left breast, and she'd replaced her long gloves with a shorter pair that just covered her wrists. Over this she wore a long black duster lined in white. Kei had swapped one of her blasters for a gravity sabre; like Harlock's, skull-hilted in a brassy alloy.

Harlock, at her side, was scarcely less smartly attired in a black flightsuit with gold piping up the seams and a white skull and crossbones filling the chest, over which he wore the heavy black gravity cloak. Twin gunbelts crossed on his waist, twin skull buckles one above the other, his sabre riding low on his left hip, the cosmo dragoon on his right. As usual however the effect was slightly marred by the fact that - as ever - he'd rolled up his sleeves to the middle of his forearms. He sneaked a look at Yattaran's console before answering. 'Well we'd already taken care of IntSec, with Namino. That's now seven departments and their heads, plus most of their closest advisors: Defence, Diplomacy, Finance, Internal Affairs, Judiciary, Publicity and Internal Security. By the time Hannibal shows up on his doorstep he'll be grateful for whatever hand offers to help him out of the mess he's in. And the best part…' he really could not hold back the smirk that spread across his face at this point, 'is that no-one can point a finger at either of us - or any other external agency - for the mess.'

'And so far we've not been spotted either. Namino's goons took out the satellites on their way out last time we were here, and with her away and out of contact, no-one's bothered to replace them,' Yattaran called out with a gleeful chuckle. 'The silly cow outsmarted herself there…'
'Don't get overconfident, first mate,' Harlock advised. 'There's always Mars, if they've got any sensors pointing inwards. 'Keep a weather eye on the horizon for the natives. What ETA do we have on the mazone fleet?'

'Seven hours,' Kei replied, after a quick glance at her console. 'Cleo's new mother ship will be in the first wave. Ben says they'll drop out early and meet Hannibal on Titan Base.'

'I've not been back there in years,' Harlock mused. 'Are we sure they'll not have any problems?'

'Hannibal assures us Namino is cooperating, and IntSec will be in charge of the emergency summit. All we need to do is make sure everyone shows up on time. Blaze will be in-system in the next three hours, and Rokuro's en route with Director Shura on board.' Kei smiled up at him. 'All we need now is the Andromedan representative…'

Yattaran, after a pregnant pause, checked his console. 'Sorry cap'n - doesn't look as if they're going to pop out of IN-SKIP at the correct dramatic point!' Laughter from the lower deck and fleeting smiles from both captain and exec greeted his declaration. Harlock tssked. 'Typical - you just can't get good help these days.'

He turned to Mimay, hovering in the vicinity of the captain's luxuriously upholstered, skull-bedecked chair. 'I'll need the dark matter array deployed and a full shield at all times,' he told her. She inclined her head in a minimal, graceful gesture. 'Anyone not needed on the bridge, get some sleep. Section heads first. All stations on full alert. Remember - our job's to prevent a fight, not to cause one, so we're going to get between any hostiles and the mazone ships until they can do what they do. Those engines blow in a node of time - especially this one - and we risk the very thing we've spent the last year or so trying to stop. Cleo will be sending the ships in only a handful at a time, to prevent just that.'

'And us?' Kei asked.

'You and I have a meeting to prepare for. Since we can't be there in person, we'll be using the main holo suite. Should be entertaining,' he added as he stared at the main screen, now displaying Earth's tormented red and black clouds beyond the partly-eaten surface of the moon. He sighed. 'Looking at it like this, I almost wish we'd left that holo-grid in place…'

'Zera Sender would have just plundered them anyway. They took everything that wasn't nailed down from the Inner System,' Kei replied quietly. She gave his hand a quick squeeze. 'Thankfully they're not looking inwards, physically or metaphorically. They're a crime syndicate, and there's just no profit to be made out of a dead planet.'

'Isn't there?' Harlock asked as they descended the stairs, boots clanking in harmony. 'Holding it to ransom comes to mind…'

She snorted scornfully. 'You credit that bunch with far too much intelligence. Besides - who'd pay?'

'Point.' Under the gantry, which extended over the lower bridge, the communication suite lurked, open to both sides. Kei, well versed in the vagaries of the Arcadia's ancient communications system, began to programme in the links needed to project their images and voices to the council chamber on Titan. 'Are we sure they won't jam us?' she asked. As she worked, she had a habit of letting the tip of her tongue stick out between her full pink lips.

'Our array is powerful enough to get past whatever they can throw at us - and besides, they've never been able to keep us out, now have they?'
'Genius at work!' Yattaran called down proudly and loudly, before she could reply.

'And so modest with it,' she muttered. 'Bloody hell… this is going to take some organising… you'll need to take this in the war room, I think - more room for everyone's holos to move around, otherwise they'll be moving in and out of the walls…'

'The *Thetis*, *Blackstar Twelve*, *Miranda*, *Demeter* and Titan base, then if the *Mephisto* or the *Queen Mother Urs II* show up to the party…' he listed, unfolding a finger for each item. 'Can we handle that traffic?'

'Not a problem,' Kei replied as she programmed in the relevant codes. 'We've got the power and the range.' She leaned out of the right hand opening and yelled up to the main bridge 'All set at this end, Yattaran!'

'Got it!' the first mate's reply was accompanied by a thoughtful grunt. 'Shit… that ship's bandwidth is almost as large as ours, for all it's so tiny… what the fuck were they using that for?'

*I was testing the nibelung comms system we use*, Tochiro replied huffily over the comms. *And good job I did too - if Mamoru hadn't had that to hand, he'd never have got word to us about the deployment of the Jovian Blaster…*

'The warning that ended up making Harlock think he had to deploy the entire dark matter output of four capital class battleships in order to create a shield around the Earth against an attack? That message?' Harlock asked.

You know, when you put it like that… Tochiro's reply sounded suspiciously as though it was being delivered through gritted teeth. *But there wouldn't be even this pitiful remnant of a planet left if we hadn't tried to stop that last ditch attempt to deny the planet to the Homecomers…*

'I'm sure that was a great solace to the three billion who died,' Ali snarked coldly from his station. 'Captain - I have to ask - are we really sure we want to do this? There's still time to put a stop to it. Before we break something and get the blame?'

'It's not as though there's anyone left down there who'd be in danger,' Harlock replied, his voice calm. 'The planet's practically dead, apart from those tiny scraps of life we found. And the mazone are already there, in a way. All we're doing is giving a boost to the recovery process.'

'Like anyone could object to that?' Franz asked.

Ali's replying snort didn't really need any clarification, but Ali being Ali, it was given anyway. 'Seriously? There are politicians involved, mate. They'll object to anything!'

'Especially if they're not the ones who thought of it,' Harlock added pithily. 'Kei?'

She snapped the control panel she'd been fiddling with back into position. 'All done. We can take a break whilst we wait for the rest of our friends to arrive.'

'A break? Honestly, I don't know how the hell you two manage it sometimes. If I go back to me bunk I'll be lying there going over everything that can possibly go tits up on this one for the duration.'

'Then don't go back to your own bunk.' Harlock stuck his head around the side to smirk at his gunnery chief. 'There's your problem right there…'

'Oh. Great. You do remember that Cai's still in sick bay so Luna's otherwise engaged for the
duration, right? We can't all go chill out with a nice blow job whilst we wait…'

'First, some of us can relax without needing to bring sex into it. Second? Good job she is, Harlock informed him with a sly smirk. 'Or you'd be nursing a cracked skull about now…'

'Really, Ali?' Kei's head appeared next to Harlock's, sporting a cheeky smirk of her own. 'What's your problem? I know at least three guys on board who'd be happy to help you relax and while away the hours…'

'Yeah?' He fell in step beside them as they left. 'You do remember that I'm not batting for that team, right?'

'That's not what I hear,' Kei replied, with a wink at Harlock. 'What with all those close encounters in dark alleyways…'

Daiba leaned on the balcony railing and looked down on the trio as they laughed and walked off, with Harlock's heartfelt "give me strength…' echoing back in reply to yet more crap from the brawny gunner. 'How the hell do they manage it?' he muttered, leaning his head on his crossed arms. Yattaran waddled over and gave him a slap on the back that almost pitched him over the railing onto Franz's head.

'Nowt we can do til the cavalry arrives, so best thing is either to find something to take your mind off it, or just chill out. Captain's been in these spots a few times, kid. Him being so calm keeps the crew from gettin' skittish. Though mostly he does it to stop Kei from overworkin' herself, if we're honest. Rest of us can get along just fine, so long as Ali's off either gettin' laid or pissed. '

'He steps up when it's time,' Franz called up, 'But dear sweet gods of Earth, does he ever bitch and whine if he's got too much time on his hands…' He stood in front of the gantry and stared up at Daiba, hands on his hips. 'Say, kiddo - you planning on staying up there? Didn't think you'd be going back to your berth, given Meggie's still on that planet with Tadashi…'

'Well, I…'

'Splendid! Kei's station then? I'll send Takemitsu up to spell Yattaran, and Sabu can take the helm.'

'But…'

Yattaran slapped him on the back again. 'Good of ya, lad. I've got a sweet little model I'm half way through… might even get 'er finished before we need to move. Can't glue bits together when the captain's throwing her around like it's going out of fashion!'

'Why is it,' he muttered as he took up Kei's station and started to keep a weather eye on the readouts, 'That I keep feeling as though I'm being played?'

This just earned a "huh?" from Sabu as a big pirate lumbered towards the wheel to his left. Daiba sighed, and pushed his hair out of his eyes. 'Never mind.'

Shizuka huddled in the corner of the room they'd put her in when she'd been collected. In the few short weeks she'd been aiding her sisters settle and begin the long task of bringing the barren world to life she'd actually begun to find some peace after the unnerving horror of the Arcadia. This ship… just as ancient, from the look of the bridge she'd seen briefly, held some of the same aura as the Arcadia, but more subdued. Like a candle compared to the sun.

Its captain… him she hadn't expected. Tall, wiry and far, far older than she would have expected
for such a position. And his eyes…

He watched her with them now from the doorway of the room. Hazel - like the young Harlock, and for all the aged face they were set in, still piercing. And there were other tell-tale markers in that time-worn face that made her want to bury her head between her knees. 'Just how many of you are there?' she blurted out when the oppressive silence finally wore her down. 'It was my job to see your line wiped out, but you pop up like weeds…'

'Not something you want to confess to a man whose great-grandsons you kidnapped - one of whom will be maimed for life.' Somehow the quiet, calm delivery of that statement was all the more terrifying for the total lack of threat in it. 'Hate to be the one to break it to you, but your game of genetic whack-a-mole is an out and out failure.'

'What do you want from me?' She stood up on trembling legs, and tried to muster some semblance of the attitude that had earned her the Directorship. Hard to do in a crumpled dress that hadn't had much more than a cursory wash in cold water for two months, and no shoes, but she gave it her best shot. The corners of his mouth quirked in amusement, briefly, but his sharp gaze never left her eyes, or drifted south to view her other assets - unconstrained and moving all too freely as she breathed. But for all the notice he paid her as a woman, she might have been carved from stone.

'For you to do your job,' he replied. 'The one the government pays you to do, that is, not the one your Mazone superiors gave you - although in this case, the two are one and the same.'

She sat down heavily on the edge of the bed she'd previously refused to make use of and stared up at him dumbly. 'What?'

He did smile then, and it took close to two decades off his age. In his youth he'd been a handsome man, she judged. He hadn't lost that much to age. 'It's so gratifying, even after all this time, to watch someone who prides themselves on their manipulation and erudition reduced to monosyllables…' he mused. 'You're the director of Internal Security, Miss Namino. And right now, one of the few members of the Prime Minister's inner circle who isn't either already compromised or running scared of becoming so. Now as we both know, that also includes the incompetent chief weasel himself.'

'I fail to see…' she trailed off, already going over the angles in her head. 'You've isolated him?'

He inclined his head once. 'Not enough to back him into a corner - that's never wise. But enough to leave him... shall we say... a trifle amenable to suggestions... Your queen has been replaced, and the new queen has a new plan.'

'Earth.' If there was one thing no-one had ever accused her of, it was being slow on the uptake. 'They'll use the ships to reclaim the planet…' she stared down at her hands - once so well manicured and now with cracked, dry skin, calluses and chipped, bitten fingernails. Anything to stop what she was thinking appearing on her face in front of this wily old man. 'That was the original plan, or so we were told, when they set out.' She smiled sadly. 'Things changed… But how will you make this stick? Surely…'

'In the short term, there are a few options. We need a long term solution, and that my dear is where you come in. IntSec controls the inner fleet, and sets policy for security for the Alliance security. The Prime Minister should turn to you, and hopefully you can advise him accordingly. That, at least, is your queen's suggestion.'

'And if I refuse?' She tried to meet that sharp-eyed gaze, and as with the younger Harlock, she failed.
'You can explain yourself to Harlock. In person.'

She flinched.

'After you've explained yourself to me.' He smiled down at her, a gentle, fatherly expression that for some reason turned her mouth to ashes. She tried and failed to swallow, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. 'Most of the participants in this little drama know me as Hannibal…'

'Oh, shit…' the words slipped out of her in a whimper. Even in the solar System they'd heard of the Millennial Thieves organisation and its reach in the colonies the Gaia Sanction had abandoned. Her spies had never been able to breach the inner sanctum of that shadowy organisation - or determine the identity of the man who'd created it to fight the previous despotic ruler of that crazy ice planet.

'..but a long time ago, I was born on Earth. Harlock - the one you call the Destroyer of Worlds? That was my little brother. The one I taught everything I know - not that the impetuous idiot paid much attention…'

'Brother?' She thought back, furiously rifling through the inherited memories of her predecessors.

'Oh, shit…' The words couldn't even raise to the level of a whimper this time. 'Mamoru Okita…'

Protector… the words of Layla Shura's vague prophecy crashed into her head with the force of a small tsunami.

'You really, really ought to read the small print when talking to Layla,' he said, as though he'd read her mind. 'She's part nibelung and they never, ever tell you the whole story.' His smile twisted into a smirk she'd seen on two other faces lately - the brother, and the younger inheritor. 'I failed once to protect my home and family, Namino-kun. I will not do so again.' He strode into the room and placed a tablet on the cot next to her. 'The current situation, and the suggested solution. Please familiarise yourself with recent events and our plan - and then on the way down to Titan base, you can tell me how you will make sure it works…'

She picked it up and took a look at the first page. Eyes wide, she stared up at the lanky figure still lurking in the doorway. 'This… relies on having the undivided attention of the Prime Minister - how were you planning on getting him to Titan?'

'Oh, didn't I say?' he said, as though it was an afterthought. 'He's in a very nice room on one of my other vessels. He thinks he's on his way to open a new virtual golfing facility on Titan base…'

She snorted. 'His security would never fall for that.'

His beatific smile dropped yet another decade off his age. 'Oh, it's not a lie. It's amazing how quickly you can install these things with the right money in the right palms, and a PM with a serious boner for the most boring game ever invented…' He sauntered off, hands in pockets, before she could even begin to frame an answer.

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'He did what?' Harlock ran his hands through his hair - overdue for a cut according to Kei - and tried his best not to clutch handfuls of it. Rokuro Oki, on the other end of the holo-stream, was quite obviously fighting an urge to laugh out loud.

'Strictly speaking, it isn't kidnapping,' Oki pointed out. 'The Prime Minister did go willingly, and it's not technically even under false pretences…'

'Spare me the sophistry, Rokuro - we both know the wily old bastard set this whole thing up.'
'And so quickly, too,' Kei murmured from the chaise longue. 'Stop grinding your teeth, darling - you'd have done the same if you'd thought of it. And you have to admit it's elegant…'

'Outplayed by a man who was playing this game over a hundred years before we were even born,' Harlock replied grudgingly. 'Selen always said he was the best - I'd thought that was just loyalty speaking.'

'There are reasons Destiny plays nice with the Millennial Thieves,' Rokuro added with a grin. The aquatic admiral's blue hair floated around his head in a soft halo; that, and the slight reverberation in his voice caused by the comms adjusting for sound underwater, the only signs that he was in his true element. 'We're in position - how are things your end?'

'The first mazone ships are already in orbit,' Harlock told him. 'So far no reaction from the in-system forces.' He checked his incoming messages, and saw one waiting. 'On which note, I'd better get to the bridge. I think the Millennial Bandit wants my attention.'

'Showtime?' Rokuro asked. Harlock sighed.

'Make or break. I just hope everyone else can hold up their end.'

'Leave it with us, Harlock - nobody attending this is wet behind the ears…' he broke off and laughed, as Harlock raised an eyebrow. 'Yeah, yeah… don't bother. I've only heard that one a million times…'

'And yet,' Harlock replied just before he cut the connection, 'You still keep walking right into it…' he didn't manage to hide the tiny smile from Kei however. 'Cleo and Ben are in orbit around Titan, Rokuro's about to ferry Layla down, Blaze is playing dodgems with the asteroid belt and we're about to take delivery of fifty-two ships with unstable black body drives…what could possibly go wrong?'

'The Mephisto shows up with two hundred ships and start raining down fire and brimstone?' she replied with such quiet deliberation, that he eyed her suspiciously. She sat up from her position leaning on the curled wooden armrest and got gracefully to her feet. 'Relax, I'm joking.'

'Well that's something. I thought for a moment his dramatic timing had improved…'

'…it's forty ships, and they're coming in on an attack vector from Venus.'

'Kei…' At his warning tone she brandished her tablet under his nose. 'Fifteen minutes out, and trying to outflank us by coming in on the other side of the planet.'

'And you didn't speak up earlier?' he shot back as he sprinted for the door.

'One problem at a time,' she advised, hard on his heels. 'And to be fair we got the alert just seconds before you cut the connection to Oki.'

'The mazone?'

'Arriving in system even as we speak. First ship will arrive about five minutes before Hoshino, and no, we can't warn them - the comms take a few minutes to reset to real space.'

'Blaze?'

'Yattaran's talking to him now. But we've got to find a way to defuse this…'
'Tell that to Admiral Faust out there,' Harlock replied grimly. Arriving at the bridge he took the stairs two at a time. 'All hands to battlestations! Run out the main array and prep the oscillator banks for firing. Plot firing solutions and stand by.'

'Main torpedo tubes primed and ready, captain,' Franz called out just as Kei nudged Daiba away from her console.

'All turrets manned and on standby!' Ali called up from below.

'Internal bulkheads sealed. Dark matter engine on standby.'

'Mimay?' Harlock asked.

'Full shield achieved and maintaining full penetrance,' came her quiet voice from her station in front of the soaring pipework of the device in question. 'External array deployed.'

The dark matter array outside the ship normally curved over the top elevation of the Arcadia like forward pointing prongs running most of the length of the ship. Fully deployed, Harlock knew, they untwisted to form a peculiar pair of antennae not unlike the strands of DNA. The last time they'd been used in Earth orbit had been to deflect and absorb the plasma stream from the massive Jupiter-based Accelerator. 'As soon as they first ships arrive, Put us between them and the Mephisto. We'll use the dark matter to screen them - even a low density cloud should confuse the Mephisto's sensors, and those of the rest of Hoshino's ships. Mimay?'

'It'll be thin, but wide. Better if we start now…'

'I'll get onto the mazone captains the moment their comms are working,' Yattaran interjected. 'Tell 'em to keep us between them and anyone shooting at them!'

'Admiral Dickhead on the warp comms,' Kei interjected. 'Are we home?'

'Put him on.'

Hoshino appeared on the bridge, the hologram flickering slightly, since the Arcadia's main comms systems were currently routing through Titan. 'Just what the hell are you playing at?'

'Testy, testy…' Harlock replied, crossing his arms. 'What's the problem this time?'

Even covered by a thick beard Hoshino's face radiated his displeasure. 'Don't play games, Yama. I'm here only minutes ahead of an invasion fleet that you appear to be coordinating!'

'Red-lined your drives doing it as well,' Harlock replied laconically, peeking across to the display on Yattaran's station. 'Which since your engines power your weapons isn't the smartest move you could have made.'

'I still have enough to blow you and those mazone out of the sky,' Hoshino snarled. 'But I'll settle for the vegetable medley. Get out of my way, or…'

'Or what?' Harlock unfolded his arms and leaned on the ship's wheel, idly toying with one of the balusters. 'I'm disinclined to obey orders or threats - especially when you're promising a physical impossibility…'

Hoshino shook his head. 'Impos… what are you blathering about this time?'

'Sky. You can't blow me out of the sky,' Harlock explained with the patient air of a man used to
dealing with small children. 'We're in space…'

Behind him, Daiba choked back a snigger. Hoshino, however, looked as though he was about to burst a blood vessel.

'You might want to watch your oil pressure, Gozo… these new bodies take a bit of breaking in, I'm told…'

'You're a real prize aren't you?' Hoshino replied, sounding as though he was grinding his teeth to do so. 'Always a quip or a sarcastic comment. Stand down, Lieutenant - that's an order.'

Harlock laughed. 'You still think I'm in the bloody navy?'

'No - I just hoped to remind you of your supposed loyalties. More fool me for thinking you'd see sense for once. Leading an invasion force…'

Harlock raised his right hand. 'Let me stop you right there.' He glanced quickly to Yattaran again and his grubby first mate nodded once. 'I'm not leading anything - I'm here to protect an experimental terraforming process that the government is in the process of agreeing right now with the other interested parties. Perhaps if you opened your mail every once in a while…'

'I'm opening fire on those ships the moment they're in range,' Hoshino growled. 'If you're in the way, so be it. I have my orders.'

'You can't fire on those ships, Gozo, and any glance at your sensors will tell you why. Those are all black-body drives, charged to full capacity. Deployed correctly, they'll enter the atmosphere and disintegrate the ships, releasing a bio-matrix capable of absorbing the excess dark matter and kick starting the process of restoring our homeworld. If you engage them you'll cause an explosion far greater than anything Harlock was planning in this region of space, ripping apart space-time in this area and destroying the entire solar system - especially since we managed to forget that last dimensional oscillator when we left the first time. Do you really want to be responsible for that?'

Communication with the Mephisto went black.

Daiba sidled up to Harlock's side. 'Was that good or bad?'

'He just received the communiqué from Titan we were expecting him to get. Give it a moment,' Harlock replied quietly. On the main screen, the first of the mazone ships were coming out of IN space in orbit around the Earth, and moving into an atmospheric orbit. 'If Hannibal's done his job, this will be over quickly.'

'And if he hasn't?' Daiba asked.

'Then it'll be over real quick,' Yattaran replied before his captain could. 'These girls are real tight, cap'n - most of the ships are already in position. Real nice piloting…'

'Hoshino?'

'Not moving,' Ali called up. 'I've can get a target lock on the Mephisto, if you want me to go live…'

'Wait,' Harlock told him. 'Plot solution and hold.'

'Dark matter shield holding,' Mimay called out in her soft voice. 'Attenuated, but enough to confuse their sensors.'
'Hold at current levels - no sense in making matters worse.'

'Admiral Hoshino back on line!' Yattaran called out.

'Put him on,' Harlock ordered. This time Hoshino was using the main screen not his holosuite. Since this suggested he'd had to tie it up to Titan's systems, almost as one the crew let out a collective sigh of relief.

'Harlock? I don't know what shit you pulled this time, but I have my orders. The Mephisto and the fleet have been ordered to stand down.'

'Not my doing this time, Gozo.'

'Hah.' He jabbed a black gloved finger at Harlock. 'Whatever's going down on Titan with Destiny's representative and the Millennial Thieves, you're in it up to your scrawny, piratical neck. You're as thick as thieves with that bunch of rebels. But we're holo-linked into the warp feed, and I'm told no-one will talk until you arrive.'

'Nice of them,' Harlock murmured sweetly. 'Tell them I'll be online in a couple of minutes, and save a couple of pastries?' he signalled Yattaran to cut the connection as the admiral started spluttering.

'Was that sensible?' Daiba asked. 'Pissing him off?'

'Sensible? No. Impossible to resist? Always.' Harlock spun on his heel, the gravity cloak swirling around him as he did so, causing Daiba to skip quickly out of the way of the heavy garment. 'Want to see this one through to the end? He asked, as Sabu slipped back into place at the helm, and Franz slid into place replacing Kei. 'You've earned it.'

He thought for a minute and shook his head. 'All that talking? I think I'll stay on the bridge. I mean - if Hoshino disobeys his orders…'

'He won't. Not with what's on the table,' Harlock assured him. He laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. 'Personally I'd like to skip this bit as well, but I do have a reputation to maintain.' His hand dropped back to his side. 'All of you - you know the drill. Stay alert.' He swept off the bridge with Kei in tow.

The watery-eyed little man currently holding the title of Prime Minister - though not to any monarch his government would acknowledge as such publically - sat in a high backed chair far too big for him and tried his best to glare down the length of an ancient boardroom table at the man sitting at the far end of the twenty foot expanse of solid oak, who seemed infinitely more at ease than any other occupants of the room - and that included those only there via the miracles of modern technology. When his piggy-eyed glare failed to elicit any response from the figure wrapped in a hooded black mantle, he shuffled again on the well-preserved upholstery and reached under the table to touch his golf clubs for what must have been the hundredth time in the past hour.

'Mister Hannibal…' he began in a reedy voice.

'Hannibal. No mister.' Hannibal reclined easily in his own chair and spared a glance at the rest of the room - Harlock and Kei present in hologram form, but the rest were there in person - Layla Shura accompanied by three fierce looking aquatics and her - allegedly - favourite admiral, Oki. Ben sitting casually next to the new Mazone queen, looking rather regal in an unfamiliar uniform and a half-cloak. Hoshino's hologram slowly forming as the rest waited patiently.
And at the minister's right hand, looking more dyspeptic by the second, the red-haired Director of Internal Security.

By the time Hoshino's six foot four frame had materialised in virtual splendour, draped in a floor length black cloak with a lining displaying a disturbing tendency to invoke a whirling star map, the minister had gathered some composure at least to look around and sneer at the gathering. 'Sabres and cloaks? A little passé these days, don't you think?'

'Only if you can't carry off the look,' Ben replied from his seat close to Rafflesia, eying the balding, pot bellied politician from head to foot with a look that clearly dismissed him. However the poisonous little creep hadn't reached his position without developing a thick skin. He pointed at Ben, jabbing his finger in the direction of the gamilan.

'What's he doing here? He's from a totally different galaxy - and barely human at that, judging from that skin colour - and you brought amphibians as well…'

Hannibal, his face hidden by the deep hood, winced and glanced at Harlock, thankful that the younger man wasn't here in person. His hand had dropped to the hilt of his sabre, and Kei's wasn't far behind. In truth he rather fancied a crack at the annoying little twat himself, but… He sighed inwardly. So much for hoping that certain strains of idiocy would have been selected out of the gene pool by now…

'All of us around this table have a stake in current events, minister,' Layla spoke quietly, but firmly. Hannibal hid a smile. The woman was young in appearance, with long black hair held back from a deep widows peak cascading down the back of her tight-fitting blue SDF uniform, but the planetary dirigent for Destiny was even older than Hannibal, and her origins were, as his first wife would have said: "Bol'shoy sekret - znayet ves' svet..." Big secret: the whole world knows…Though perhaps not the Prime Minister, who seemed unsure where to look - dismissive of the women and oddball humans around the table, his options were limited to a pirate and a self-professed Chief Thief…

In time-honoured fashion the minister picked on the younger man as the easiest to bully. Hannibal sat back to watch the fireworks.

'You - Harlock, you call yourself these days? Why was I brought here? I have nothing to say to these people.'

'I think you'll find they have plenty to say to you,' Harlock replied genially. 'And I wouldn't be quite to high-handed when your career's on the line. It's an election year, after all - for what little it's worth.'

'If I might interject,' Hoshino's hologram took a step forward. 'Harlock and his companions here have colluded to bring an invasion force of aliens into the Solar System - they're currently landing on Earth - a planet which will provide them with a base from which an attack against the Alliance could be launched with little to no warning whatsoever. If I'd been permitted to arrest him and remove his ship from its position protecting this force…'

'A peaceful settlement that is actually an advanced, experimental terraforming process,' Layla added, with a sharp look at the dark admiral. She smiled at the minister, whose eyes looked about ready to pop out of his skull with alarm. 'Really, Admiral - you should pay more attention to your briefings.'

'I don't answer to you,' he ground out.
'No,' she replied sharply. 'You take your orders from Andromeda these days - as does the nominal government here.'

'If I may?' Shizuka, showered, dressed in her best suit and perfectly groomed, laid a delicate hand on the Prime Minister's arm. 'Sir. although the timing and the presentation of this information is unfortunate, the fact remains that despite the admiral's hyperbole, this is actually a superb opportunity for your administration.'

'It is?'

Harlock had the distinct impression if he could, his ears would have pricked up.

'Certainly. At the moment the government has been weakened by a series of terrible revelations, and although we're busy finding new candidates for the affected departments, this does leave us looking vulnerable, and the press fallout…'

'You don't need to tell me,' the minister broke in, glaring around the table. 'Terrible. Never a moment's peace from those journalists! What's the world coming to? Hmm? Nothing but criticism and lies, and no-one appreciates how hard I'm working!'

'On your handicap…' Harlock muttered. Hannibal had to bite back a laugh.

'Which is why we've brought this to you, and to Earth,' Shizuka continued. She placed the file containing Hannibal's expertly spun explanation of the whole mess in front of him. 'I won't bore you with the details, but the Colonies - who love our homeland as much as you do - feel that the mazone - whose leader sits at this table today, making you the first official contact with an ancient race - have offered their tremendous skills with planet-forming to you. My apologies for springing this on you in this manner, sir, but I was delayed by circumstances beyond my control,' she added smoothly. Even Hoshino had a raise an eyebrow in Harlock's direction at that blatant bouncer, but he said nothing.

The minister flicked through the file, his eye almost visibly glazing over at page after page of graphs, tables, charts in a presentation expertly designed to suggest to the reader that admitting you didn't understand a word would make them look like a total moron.

Hannibal was rather proud of it. He hadn't managed to turn around his family's engineering company by sitting on his arse with a glass of bourbon welded to his hand, after all. Although he noticed almost every other human around the room let out infinitesimal sighs of relief when the minister closed it again with a well-practiced decisive snap.

'Very impressive.'

Hoshino rolled his eyes at Harlock at that one, and took a couple of steps back.

'First contact, you say?' the fussy little man asked Shizuka. She nodded.

'Yes sir. The queen is delighted to meet you, as the representative of Earth's government. And I don't need to remind you that announcing such a flagship project - the decontamination of our homeland - will…'

He rubbed his hands in glee. 'A guaranteed vote winner. Yes, yes… my dear girl. Surely we need to get our press office in here and arrange a proper, formal welcome for Queen…?'

'Rafflesia,' Ben offered.
'Yes. A pleasure and an honour, my dear. A real pleasure.'

It was, Harlock thought, a reflection on Cleo’s manners and strong stomach that she didn’t flinch, or wipe her hand on her dress after taking that damp, limp handshake.

'There is the matter of alien occupation,' Hoshino added, with a sharp look at Harlock. 'It won't go down well if we show an alien fleet in orbit, surely?'

Harlock wondered if it was possible to throttle a hologram.

Cleo rose gracefully to her feet, and took Ben's offered arm. 'I will leave,' she stated quietly.

'Eh?' The Prime Minister looked to Shizuka for clarification, then back to the small queen.

'I will leave. The ships currently in orbit are part of the process. Their sole purpose was to reach their destination, and to be reduced to their constituent biological matrix, in order to begin the process of re-seeding the planet. The Mazone came from Earth, millions of years ago. Our goal is to restore life to our shared homeworld. No lifeform higher than the simplest plants or insects will remain of our fleet, I can assure you. Having delivered them, I - and those who travelled with me - will leave.'

'Coaching her in using the big words worked,' Kei murmured into her sub-voc mike so only Harlock, at her side in the Arcadia's war room, could hear. 'And totally true…'

'Good job he doesn't know his entire organisation's riddled with the corpse flowers,' Harlock replied equally softly.

The minister pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and mopped his forehead. 'But… but… where?'

Ben bowed to him, a fluid gesture that caused his cloak to swirl dramatically as he straightened. 'Sir - on behalf of the Emperor of Gamila - my father - I have offered the mazone fleet sanctuary, and they have accepted. Destiny has also offered homes to those whose environmental needs differ from terrestrial norms, and those mazone requiring an aquatic planet are already negotiating with Miraiseria's government.'

'Gamila? Gamila you say?'

'Indeed.' Shizuka slid another file towards the minister. 'Whilst on assignment away from Enceladus, I was able to make contact with their representative.'

'Loosely translated: almost cracked his skull…' Harlock murmured off-mike to Kei.

'I think you'll find a trade deal - and a proffered summit - should also provide some much needed good publicity.' She nodded, and Hannibal gave the signal for one of his people to let in the two women waiting outside the room. Mazone, presumably. He didn't ask. Shizuka had requested them from the department for public affairs, and their credentials were impeccable. 'Perhaps, minister, if we cleared the room of those who don't have security clearance…'

'Yes, yes…' he waved a flabby hand in their direction. 'Wouldn't do to be seen consorting with thieves and pirates, now would it?' He glared at Harlock in particular. 'Why are you still here anyway?'

'Just making sure I can keep my word to protect the mazone,' he replied smoothly. 'On which note, I will take my leave.' His and Kei's holograms vanished.
'Good riddance,' the minister snapped, with a dismissive wave. 'Annoying young man. No manners. And why doesn't he get those dreadful scars fixed? So unsightly…'

Unacknowledged by anyone other than Cleo and Layla, Hannibal very quietly got to his feet and left the room via a discrete side door. Outside, he was met by Farah.

'Well?'

Hannibal pushed back the deep hood of his cloak and took a deep breath. 'I'd forgotten why I hate dealing with that breed,' he muttered. 'Racist, sexist, venal pig… But we have him at least - hook, line, sinker, waders and bait box…'

'Huh?' Farah's face went blank at the obscure reference. Hannibal patted his shoulder. 'Never mind. I've never seen so many people lying by omission with such straight faces. The miserable little bastard will end up with all the credit, but I think we can live with that, for now.'

He started to walk along the corridor, back to their shuttle. Farah, a little shorter, had to trot to keep up with his leader's longer stride. 'Shouldn't we wait for the outcome?'

'No need. This place was once Grape Valley Base, and that's the old boardroom for Arcadia Engineering - it's wired to record the whole thing and since it was my system, I still have the codes. If there are any issues, Layla or Rokuro will let us know.' He stumbled slightly and placed a hand on the wall to steady himself. Farah reached out a hand and placed it just above his elbow.

'Sir…'

'I'll be fine, Farah. Just tired.' He straightened up and took a deep breath. 'Time to let the dice fall where they may. We've done all we can for those inside now.'

'Back to the ship?' Farah removed his hand but hovered at the older man's side as they walked.

'Time to meet up with our young Harlock,' Hannibal replied with a fleeting smile. 'And since we went to all this trouble, I rather think I'd like to set foot on my home soil again.'

Harlock strode onto the bridge and unclasped the cloak with a heartfelt sigh, dropping it onto the captain's chair as he passed. The bird, startled, flapped up briefly from its perch on the back and carked at him, before dropping awkwardly onto his shoulder. By the time he'd reached the wheel, it had settled down to preen and balanced precariously on his shoulder as it stuffed its oversized beak under its wing, muffled clacking noises accompanying the activity right next to Harlock's right ear.

'Is it just me, or does little that cretin taking the credit for this stick in the throat?' Several hands went up, including Kei's. 'Anything to report?' he asked.

Ali looked up from Yattaran's station. 'The Alliance ships have withdrawn. Mazone still holding position in orbit. All fifty two ships have reach optimum placement for coverage, we're assured. Ready when someone gives the word.'

Harlock nodded. 'Mimay? Draw back our dark matter, but stand ready. We'll retreat to a safe distance but keep us between the Earth and Hoshino's people. Send the message to the mazone ships - as soon as we're clear, they can descend. Are the drone cameras deployed?'

'Aye sir,' Franz replied from Kei's station. For once she hadn't elbowed the person deputising for her away, but stood close to Harlock, at his left shoulder. 'On screen now.'
A series of images appeared on the front viewscreen, a dozen views of the twisting gyres of red and black winds; rising, falling and turning in the tortured atmosphere.

On the floorscreen, the mazone ships began to move, gently falling into the atmosphere. As they entered the hellish upper reaches, the drives separated from the main vessels and began to drop. On the main screen the huge black spheres began to appear in range of the drones watching their progress. They fell swiftly but surprisingly lightly. The twelve drones followed the descent of several, as they hit the ground raising clouds of the dry red dust of the once verdant world.

'Vey avoided most of the white flower meadows,' Ali called up. 'Power readings starting to increase.'

Yattaran clanked his way up the stairs, still fastening his pants zipper. He tugged his striped sweater back down over his massive girth and stood next to Kei. 'Moment of truth, eh?'

'He has his fingers crossed,' Kei added brightly, tapping the offending hand Harlock was holding behind his back.

'Given my track record and this ship, does anyone blame me?' he muttered. He kept his eye fixed firmly on the main screen as the ships began to break up. As with Sainess' ships weeks ago, they appeared to dissolve into a shower of particles, that reminded him of snow - although a snow that blanketeted most of what had once been the northern hemisphere.

'It'll take days to settle through the atmosphere completely,' Ali said. 'But the readings are steady.' He stood back to let Yattaran take his place. 'Damn… after all that hassle, and it's all a bit tame, isn't it?'

'You'd prefer explosions and the Earth heaving and buckling in anger?' Harlock asked. 'Tame, in this instance, is a win.'

'It's oddly peaceful,' Daiba added, moving to Harlock's right side. 'And beautiful.' He pointed a finger at the screen. 'Hey - look!' A flash of multicoloured light lit up the dark sky for a moment. A murmur of awe ran around the lower bridge. 'For a moment…'

'The clouds parted,' Kei said softly. She reached down and picked Nami up so she could see. At some point, the children had made their way to the bridge, and Harlock turned to see Luna with Taro's hand in hers. The twins and Freya ran to the front of the gantry so they could get a better view. Harlock, with an instinct born of long experience strode forwards and grabbed Wattaru by the back waistband of his pants before his vanished headfirst over the rail. With his son's hand in one of his, and Freya's slipped slyly into the other, he stood watching as the sun slowly rose over the curve of the blackened world.

'No explosions today,' he said softly. He looked down into Freya's delicate face and smiled in response to the delighted little grin she gave him.

'Give it time,' Ali opined from behind him. 'Ow!' He rubbed his arm and glared at Doc. 'Enough with the elbows!'

'Then enjoy the bloody moment and stop bitching,' she advised sweetly. She pulled a hip flask out of her pocket and took a long swig, ignoring everyone who eyed it up hoping for a share. 'Not bad, Captain,' she added softly. 'Not too shabby at all…'

'Hannibal's on line,' Franz called out. 'Wants to come aboard.'

'Tell him he's welcome,' Harlock replied without taking his eyes off the screen.
Watched by the Arcadia's drones, the first tiny flakes of the bio-matrix that had once been their ships and thousands of their kind began to alight on the barren ground. Tiny wisps of dark matter near the the former drives twirled and danced like dust devils before fading away as the black spheres absorbed them, and the little flecks of life falling from the sky glowed in the dark winds that carried them like a swarm of tiny fireflies.

Ens

Author's note:

It's always hard to bring something to a close - especially when it's taken you three years, far more words than you planned and ended in a place that although you planned it (being the attempt to bring the story of Space Pirate Captain Harlock into Yama's timeline...) still seemed a struggle to get to! If I've made any omissions or mistakes along the way - well, that's what re-writes are for! (And I'm under no illusions - I've looked back at the early chapters and half the time completely forgotten what I'd written! This does need, and will get, a proper edit once I've recovered!)

I'd like to thank the usual suspect, Pollywantsa, for encouragement, beta-reading, ego-stroking, laughter, tim-tams, hunky firemen, and just generally keeping me in touch with the human race. And to those of you who've commented, PM'd or just read quietly and only been visible through the stats page, thank you. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed nicking everything from the Leijiverse that wasn't nailed down and stuffing it into this unintended epic! You all know who you are - and if you want to let me know, then PM me by all means - I'd love to hear from you!

Yama and company WILL return - after all, I still have the plot of Endless Odyssey to take a crack at! Whilst you wait however, there will be assorted side-stories and prequels coming, so please watch this space!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!