

ABORT

A Novel

C. D. Hulen

Abort

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To Christ my King

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Day 1

He breathed, and according to Cecilion Civil Code 19.73-RW, he was alive again. The chamber hissed open, and he floated out. A cold gleam stung his eyes like white hospital lights.

Rust speckled the surrounding pod. Knobs and gauges glowed on the command center, one flickering. The engines hummed and stars glimmered through a porthole in the sealed door.

He blinked, adjusting to the lights. His arms ached, and his tongue stuck to his mouth. Through his mind's eye, a blurry crowd roared in ovation. Many smiled, some laughed, some stared like stone soldiers. He recognized only two, but they all knew his name and shouted it between cheers and hoorahs. Mason. Mason. Mason. He squeezed his eyes shut, fantastical colors flashing, but no memory after the crowd. No mission or objective or reason for the gathering.

Mason squinted in the white lights. Why was he there? A black uniform clung to him with openings only for his hands and head. The insignia of Cecilio was sealed over his heart; a silver *C* surrounding a crimson star. The emblem of the Federal System shimmered beside the *C* with four other stars, two red and two yellow.

Mason nodded. Another mission for Cecilio. But alone?

An egg-like chamber stood behind him, bolted to the deck; a black screen embedded in its open door. An identical chamber stood next to it, open as well, with its young passenger spinning and reaching in the weightlessness. An enemy? The kid wore the same black uniform, but with a Kisasi pistol fastened to his side. Cecilio's insignia was engraved in the handle. A partner. Age

twenty? Maybe twenty-one? Mason recognized his face, but the name—what was his name?

The kid's dark gaze flashed. "What do you want?" he slurred.

Mason scanned the pod. No other chambers. Just him and the kid. "Mission." His tongue ached forming the two syllables as he approached the porthole. Stars burned like muzzle flashes, and a great black sphere eclipsed thousands of them. Another ship—the objective. A ring revolved around its middle and twin engines burned blue. No other light shone from it. Mason turned back to the pod. White suits hung on the bulkhead, billowing like ghosts in the weightlessness. Two helmets shimmered above, strapped to the bulkhead.

"What's going on?" his partner mumbled.

Mason's tongue loosened. "We have a job." He peered through the porthole as the pod approached a docking station on the black sphere, jolting and locking into place.

Mason floated to the command center and pressed his thumb against a scanner. *Welcome Commander Wyatt, M.* flashed across the screen and files blinked onto the display. He scrolled past *Standard Procedures*, *Coordinates*, and *Emergency Protocols*, stopping at *Orders*. He opened the file. Nothing. His eyes narrowed and after scrolling through more files, he returned to *Orders* again. Still nothing. Perhaps there was a mistake? He shut off the display, searching the console for the communication systems.

Nothing. He sighed and squeezed his eyes shut again. No recent memory.

The spacesuits—they would have short range comms.

He pushed toward the suits. The helmet's visor mirrored his face, rough from decades of service and marred by a pale scar down

the left side. His fingers rose to touch it but jerked away as his partner crashed into the ceiling.

“Careful,” Mason said. The kid frowned. Mason eyed the pistol and seized the white suit from the bulkhead. A zipper split the front and a small oxygen tank hung from the back. The fabric seemed to glow in the white light as he slipped his legs in, shrugging the rest on like a jacket. Gel insulation conformed to his body as he rolled his shoulders and zipped the front of the suit. It sealed like a cold embrace. A commlink settled in his ear as he secured the cap and helmet. He kept his eyes on the kid, snapping a tube from the oxygen tank to his helmet and pressing the call button on the side of his glove.

“This is Captain Wyatt...” his voice trailed off. Old habits. “Commander Wyatt to Cecilio. Call for instruction.” He twitched as static blared. No answer. He pressed the button again. “This is Commander Mason Wyatt to Cecilio Command Center. The pod has docked. Requesting further instruction.” The static droned and his finger drummed his leg. No orders—no contact. He ended the transmission.

“Where we at?” the kid peered through the porthole to the larger ship.

“Out of range,” Mason activated the black screen on his hibernation chamber. “Nine months...” His new longest trip. “Nine months away from Proxima B.”

“Space?”

Where else? “Nine months.”

The kid wrapped his arms around himself. “That’s a ways.”

“The question is where?” Mason brushed his hand along the bulkhead. Orange corrosion dusted his gray glove. “And why?”

“Ain’t it pretty obvious?” The kid’s eyes darted around the pod. “We’re uh...” he scratched his black curls, brow furrowing.

“You’ll clear up in a bit,” Mason pushed the remaining suit toward his partner.

The kid caught it. “Not soon enough.”

Mason opened a compartment below the empty suit hangers, and his neck stiffened. Two hollow slots for Kisisis. Cecilio’s insignia flashed on the grip of the kid’s gun as he fumbled with his suit. That made one. Where was the other? Mason narrowed his eyes and closed the compartment.

After three failed attempts, the kid stuffed himself into his suit and clamped the gun to his thigh. The helmet slipped from his fingers and Mason winced. It spun midair until his partner snatched it and locked it into place on the second try.

“Check?” Mason faced his partner.

The kid furrowed his brow.

“Check?” Mason said louder.

“What’re you talkin’ about?” the kid’s voice crackled in Mason’s commlink.

“Good enough,” Mason double checked his suit and triple checked his helmet. “You ready?”

The kid rubbed his elbows. “We’re in space, man. How ready are you expectin’?”

“*Sir*,” Mason corrected. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, sure. Ready...sir.”

Mason monitored the kid and pressed the panel on the bulkhead. The door hissed aside, and they lurched on a wave of oxygen out of the pod and into the dark, airless ship. A green gauge flickered up on Mason’s visor. 7 hours of air. Should be enough.

Frosty bulkheads glimmered in the dim glow of their suits. Doors on either side guarded the other docking bays and pipes ran along the ceiling. “Have you ever been up here?” Mason asked.

The kid shrugged. “Not sure.”

“That’s the hibernation getting to you.” Mason grazed his hand across the bulkhead, slowing his flight to the end of the corridor.

“I remember a whole lot. Just nothin’ tellin’ me why I’m here. We could be headed to Earth for all I know.”

“Haven’t seen a ship from there in fifty years.”

“Who’d know with my muddled head?”

“It’ll wear off in...” Mason ran the numbers. “61 hours.”

“That all?”

“It is.” Mason glanced back to their pod, spilling light into the passage. It resembled the modules he’d studied in history. By some marvel, it still held together. But why would Cecilio use an antique before an Interceptor? And why no four-man team? Mason grimaced. 61 hours without answers—normally there’d be a debrief. Why not this time? He turned to the kid. “Name and rank?”

“Carter.”

Mason brushed the bulkhead, activating a panel. “Rank?” He pressed the screen, and a door moved aside, allowing them to float into a dark chamber.

“Came in second,” Carter muttered, the door closing behind them.

“Second officer?” Mason lifted his eyes to a door in the ceiling. A panel gleamed beside it. The exit.

“Somethin’ like that.”

Mason extended his hand. Carter hesitated but shook.

“Commander Wyatt.”

“So I guess you came in first?”

“I did once.” Mason pushed toward the ceiling and pressed the panel. The room lurched up and their boots collided with the deck. After the initial burst, they floated again.

Carter swallowed and braced himself in a corner. “What’s this thing?”

Mason turned parallel to the exit in the ceiling and leveled his feet against the bulkhead. “It’s a gravity chamber. We’re matching the ship’s rotation.” He closed his eyes and sighed at Carter huddled in the corner across from the exit. “You may want to come down.”

“Down?”

The chamber accelerated. Centrifugal force glued Mason’s feet to the bulkhead as it became the deck, and Carter tumbled from his corner as it became the ceiling. Mason closed his eyes, grimacing.

“Down,” Carter grunted, rolling onto his back. “Cause now there is a down.”

Mason nodded, exhaling a controlled breath as blood rushed to his feet. The artificial gravity grew stronger and his head grew light. The door they entered by lay to his right and the exit stood ahead.

Sweat beaded on Carter’s forehead as he gasped.

“Breathe slow,” Mason clasped his hands behind his back, “and hang tight. We’ll be here a while.”

“Right,” Carter closed his eyes and hours ticked by. Every ten minutes, Mason jumped and counted the time to reach the floor, falling slower than on Proxima B. Weaker gravity. Clasping his hands, he faced the exit, but his gaze drifted to Carter’s Kisasi and his fingers twitched to his side.

A green light flashed on the panel next to the exit and the door slid open. 4 hours and 52 minutes of air remained. Mason breathed softer.

“On your feet,” Mason said. The kid lay motionless. Mason tapped him with his boot. Was he sleeping? He knelt and jabbed him. “On your feet!”

Carter launched like a spring, gripping his gun. Mason held his glare. “Right.” Carter nodded, his breath heavy. “Still in space.” He nodded again, as if reassuring himself, and his hand slipped off the grip.

Mason straightened, his back tight from age and the new gravity. “Keep your eyes open and your breath soft. You’re wasting air.”

“Course,” Carter’s legs wobbled. “Why we here anyway?”

So many questions. Mason marched out of the gravity chamber into another passageway. “It’ll come to me.”

“Course it will.” Carter followed.

Mason opened his mouth to retort, but closed it again. It’d be a waste of air.

The passageway opened to a vast hall, rising in the distance like the inner rim of a wheel. Frosted windows rose on either side, casting a cool blue glow onto the grated deck. High above, the windows curved toward the hub of the wheel where an axle turned the ship like a centrifuge. Metal doors stood like sentries next to each window, numbers gleaming upon them. “2500,” Carter read as he passed. “2499...2498,” he glanced back at Mason. “What is this place?”

Yet another question. Mason approached the nearest door and melted ice off the panel with the palm of his glove. It glowed green; he pressed it, and the door scraped aside. Mason’s neck

stiffened. Blue light shimmered from hibernation chambers. Thousands, rank upon rank, like soldiers in formation. “It’s a cargo ship.”

2

Carter peered past Mason. Blue light glowed from icy screens embedded in the door of every chamber. Mason stepped back into the hall, eyeing the thousands of windows, each guarding countless chambers.

“That’s a lot,” Carter whispered.

The door slid closed and Mason tore his eyes away from the windows, tapping his leg. Why did Cecilio send him to a cargo ship? He shook his hands to stop the twitching. 4.5 hours of air remained. “We need to get to the bridge.”

“What?”

“The cargo’s in stasis.” Mason marched toward the upward curve of the wheel in the distance. “It’s a long-range transport, which means there’s long-range communications.” He glanced over his shoulder. The kid still stared at the door. “Come on.”

“You know, you’d think they’d leave somethin’ to jog our memory. Not leave us all jumbled.”

“They usually do,” Mason replied.

“So you missed it, didn’t you?”

Mason tightened his lips. “It won’t matter once we get to the bridge.” They’d call Cecilio, sort everything out, and resume the mission. Simple. He marched on, rolling his stiff shoulders and scanning the shadows. Why would Carter need the gun with everyone in hibernation? Why didn’t Mason, the superior officer, have one? He shook himself and continued.

Windows rose on both sides, marking where one deck ended and another began. Scaffold platforms led to the higher rooms with support beams rising every two hundred fifty meters like spokes on

a wheel. Beneath each spoke, doorways opened to ladders leading to the higher decks.

Every five minutes, as if timed, Mason eyed Carter slinking in the dark. Was he avoiding a spotlight? Mason's earpiece crackled with huffing and his own feet ached with hibernation sickness. On the seventh glance, the kid hunched, resting his hands on his knees.

Mason sighed. "We're not here to sleep," he called over the comms.

"I care for me; you care for you. How 'bout that?" Carter pushed off his knees and continued.

Mason's fingers twitched at his side, but he pivoted, and pushed on, boots silently striking the deck.

As minutes marched into an hour, a dark spot appeared where the rows of windows ended. To the left, a faint panel gleamed beneath a sheet of ice. "I found something," Mason said.

"Well, that's good for you, right?"

Mason melted the ice and pressed the panel. The door opened to a compartment with a rail around its circumference. A dim screen with a map of the decks glowed on the bulkhead.

Mason stepped inside and turned to face the vast passageway. It resembled the alleys between dorms at the academy, with windows reaching to the sky. A smile pulled at his lips but vanished as if behind a cloud. He gripped his hands behind his back and studied the kid creeping along, moving more like a cat than a person.

Carter nodded to the room as he approached. "What's this supposed to be?"

Mason released his hands and scrolled through the numbered decks on the screen. "It's a lift." His finger drifted to *Deck 19*, but he pulled away, pressing *Bridge* instead. *Crew Sector* shone on the deck below.

"Man, I tell you my head's all muddled still," Carter muttered.

“You will refer to me as Commander or sir. It takes time.” The lift ascended and Mason stood at attention, clasping his hands again. Gravity vanished for a moment, but returned before the kid could ask more questions.

The door slid aside, and Carter caught his breath. A grand window curved around the bridge, opening to the abyss. A Navisphere. The kid gaped at the expanse. Beyond the glass, the stars revolved as the bridge generated gravity, and the glassy deck reflected their dance like a grim mirror.

Mason edged away, brushing his fingers along the captain’s chair. Frost dusted the...was that leather? He prodded it—real leather. No Cecilion ship offered that. He lifted his eyes and approached a long console, spanning the curved the deck. The command center. Black screens and empty chairs lined it, white frost dusting every surface, and a microphone rising at one end.

Mason slid into a chair, tapping the console. A screen sprang to life, and a keypad lit up beneath his hand. *Scan Key* blinked on the display. Mason rose and found a card scanner. How old was this ship? Cecilion vessels wouldn’t waste money on old tech.

Carter placed his hand on the window, his visor reflecting the stars. One star glowed crimson. Proxima Centauri. Mason still couldn’t see Proxima B in orbit, let alone Cecilio shining in her northern hemisphere; but they were out there somewhere. “Let’s move.” Mason marched back to the lift. “We need the captain’s key.”

“What kind of ship we on?” Carter asked.

“The kind that needs gravity.”

“Man, can’t you just say you don’t know?”

“I have suspicions,” Mason entered the lift. “It’s bigger than anything I’ve seen.”

“You said it’s a long-range transport, right?”

“Doesn’t tell us enough. It’s probably from one of the other Centauri systems.” Would the other Centauri colonies waste money on old scanners? “Maybe its damaged. You an engineer?”

Carter shrugged and joined Mason. “I’m whatever I need.”

Mason eyed the Kisasi as they descended. “Whatever you need?”

Carter’s gaze dropped as well, then locked on Mason’s. “Yeah.”

Mason’s visor faded to yellow as the lift opened into a room glowing blue with egg-like chambers. “You take left, I’ll take right.” Mason pointed as he marched toward the first row of chambers. “We’ll meet back here.”

Carter meandered out of the lift. “What do you think you’re lookin’ for?”

“Well, who would have the key to the bridge?” Mason locked eyes with his partner. “The...” Mason began, drawing out the word, “captain.” He scrutinized the kid. “Is it hibernation or just you?”

“I ain’t stupid,” Carter grunted.

“Then go left.” Mason veered right and melted the ice off the first screen. “We’re running out of air.” Carter hesitated but obeyed.

Mason brushed the melted liquid off the screen before it froze again and read the display. He narrowed his eyes, reading again, and a third time. “Fifty years...”

“What’s that?” Carter asked over the comms.

“These chambers are fifty years old.” Mason melted more ice away. “It’s a Haven Ship.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means it’s from Earth.”

“So now you start rememberin’?”

“Now we start using our heads,” Mason examined the chamber. “What are we doing on a Haven Ship?”

“Oh, a globeship. My gramma said she rode one of them,” Carter said over the comms. “She said it was the biggest thing she ever did lay her eyes on.”

“The standard is about sixty million.” Mason approached another chamber, clearing the screen and reading the occupation and cabin number of the cargo.

“Sixty million what? Inches? Meters? Freight cars?”

“Chambers.”

Silence.

“You’re tellin’ me there’s sixty million passengers here?”

“Cargo. Interstellar travel isn’t cheap. They try to get as much on one ship as possible.” Mason continued clearing panels, finding mechanics, navigators and engineers.

“Still, though,” Carter muttered, “sixty million.”

Mason eyed the kid and cleaned another ten chambers, drying the melted frost with his forearm. Still no captain. His oxygen gauge faded into orange as he shook out his arm and approached the last chamber of the third rank. The ice melted away, and he smiled. Success. “I got him.”

“The captain?”

Mason brushed more frost off the panel. “His baggage is in cabin 40.” He jogged back through the chambers and Carter followed. The lift descended, shot left, and gravity receded as they slowed to a stop ten seconds later. Mason’s orange gauge darkened as the door slid open.

Carter gripped the railing spanning the circumference of the lift. “Why we floatin’ again?”

“No need for gravity in storage.” Mason glided into a passage. Numbered doors stretched into the distance and grated deck panels covered wires and tubes, like snakes in the shadows. “Why waste the money?”

Carter nodded, still clutching the rail.

“Cecilio didn’t send me to babysit,” Mason said.

The kid glared but pushed off the rail, gliding toward Mason. “Are these cabins or lockers?”

Did the kid know anything? “The cargo’s in hibernation. No need for living space.” Mason shot toward cabin 40 and pulled at the door. It wouldn’t budge. He yanked at it again and floated back. “The captain should have the key.”

“What, you gonna open him up?”

“We have to get in there.”

Carter frowned. “Your gauge is red, right?”

“More orange.”

“Then we ain’t got time to crack eggs.” Carter drew and fired a crimson bolt. The door snapped from one hinge and Carter drifted from the kickback.

Mason shoved the broken door out into the passageway. It swayed on its single hinge as he floated past into the cabin. Carter followed, clipping the gun to his side. The glow of their suits revealed plastic crates strapped to shelves.

“What we lookin’ for?” Carter examined the crates.

“Some kind of keycard,” Mason made a rectangle with his fingers. “About that big. Should have his rank and serial number.”

Carter nodded.

Mason unstrapped a crate of clothes, ironed, folded, and stacked. An organized man. Respectable. He slid the crate back

and popped open another, finding a photograph. A man—the captain—saluting before the Federal System’s banner.

“Heh,” Carter chuckled. “He’s prepared. He’s got a stash of tape and freeze dried somethin’. That’s cool.”

Mason rolled his eyes. Did it matter? He pulled out another photo; the captain smiling down at a woman.

“Hey, and a box.”

A wooden box—a record player? Did Earth still have those? He examined the photo again. The woman gazed into the captain’s eyes; her face bright and her smile brighter. In the dim glow of Mason’s suit, she almost reminded him—

“Got it!” Carter held out a keycard.

Mason dropped the photo, staring at it before he shook himself and shot toward the door. “Come on.” His eyes drifted back to the photograph, and the unhinged door swung behind him, snagging his oxygen hose and whirling him into the passageway. He caught his breath and crashed into the deck, his hands shooting to the tube, feeling the damage. It held, but for how long?

Carter sighed. “Man, I haven’t seen somebody hit that hard since—”

The hose snapped; Mason exhaled. The gauge went black and escaping oxygen hurled him through the passage. He clawed the tube, but his grip slipped, and his remaining air spewed into the emptiness. The kid sprang to his side, jabbering, but Mason shoved him toward the lift. He shivered, his head spinning. Protocol—remember protocol. He closed his eyes, keeping out the cold. His teeth chattered. Everything went dark.

15 years before

“I like that one.”

Mason opened his eyes at the sound of her voice. Cool lush grass cushioned him as he gazed to the night sky, counting clusters and constellations.

“Which one?” He squinted at the speck in the sky. “I can’t even...Pick a different one!”

“No.” she smiled.

He faced her. “Pick another. One I can actually see.”

“Well, I like that one.” She pointed. “It’s beautiful.”

He crossed his arms and squinted again. “You can hardly see it.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you even know what it’s called?”

“Nope,” she laughed.

He laughed as well. “So how can you like it?”

“I guess, even though you can’t see it, it’s still there, bright as the rest.” Her blue eyes sparkled in the starlight. “But it just takes faith to see,” she smiled. “Open eyes see past the dark, they see the light from just a spark.”

“Did you just make that up?”

“Maybe.” she turned back to the stars. “Which one do you like?”

He shrugged with a sigh. “I don’t know. It’s all the same, isn’t it? That white speck, or maybe that white speck. Or over there, look, another white speck.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Why do I need a star up there when I’ve got one right here?”

She jabbed his shoulder.

“What?” he laughed.

Her smile faded, and he stopped laughing. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Any time.” He leaned back in the grass, gazing at the specks.
“But let’s bring a telescope next time.”

Day 1

Mason shielded his eyes from blinding light and froze at the sight of his bare hand. No glove—no space suit. His head throbbed, and he closed his eyes. He still saw her—Laura.

He'd hit something—he'd lost oxygen. His gaze darted to a helmet on the deck. The space suits lay in crumpled heaps next to it, with a small bag of...was that jerky?

Mason pushed himself up onto his forearms, aching from hibernation and his tumble in the passageway. The black floor, like an obsidian mirror, reflected his face and pale scar. He grimaced and turned away. Computers on the command center displayed trajectories, charts, and air pressure gauges. Jumbled clusters of stars shimmered beyond the Navisphere, and a cloud hung in the distance.

“Man, if you died on me that soon,” Carter snickered, leaning against the window with Mason's helmet and a tangle of tubes on his lap, “not sure what I'd do.”

Mason rose, his head spinning. He eased into the nearest chair, shivering at the icy leather. The captain's chair stood empty. “Did you contact Cecilio?” His lungs burned from having the air sucked out of them.

Carter raised the helmet. “I've been workin'. Almost got her fixed up too.”

“I thought you said you weren't an engineer?”

“I said I'm whatever I need.” He wrapped black tape around the tube.

“You still had time to make contact.” Mason rose, gripping the command center to keep steady, and stumbled toward the microphone stemming from the console.

“I figured out how to get the air turned on, dragged you back here, then got to work fixin’ your cap. Figured that was enough. I hope the captain won’t be missin’ his tape,” Carter chuckled, “or his jerky.”

The jerky next to the suits. The kid stole it? Not something he’d learn at the academy.

Mason dropped into the chair behind the microphone and tapped the console. The screen blinked to life and two call buttons shone beside the keypad: one blue—short range—and the other green. He pressed the green and leaned toward the microphone. “This is Commander Wyatt to Cecilio Command Center, requesting mission briefing.”

Static hummed from amplifiers around the bridge. Mason glanced left and right; the floor curved up with the bridge’s gravity wheel. He leaned forward, peering further up the arc. A corridor opened on the port side and a docking bay on the starboard. His head throbbed, and he leaned back, pressing the green button. “Commander Mason Wyatt requesting mission briefing.”

“Hold up, your name ain’t just Wyatt?” Carter snorted. “Okay then.”

“I answer to Wyatt.” Mason pressed his lips together, listening to the rumbling static and watching the bright screen. He could send a written message, but it’d take weeks for Cecilio to reply. The mission didn’t need to wait.

“Maybe she’s just old.” Carter wrapped more tape around the tube.

Mason shook his head. “Communication hasn’t changed much.”

“Well, maybe it takes a while.”

“It uses APC.”

Carter stared. Did he really not know? “Accelerated Photon Communication.” Mason said.

Carter continued staring.

Mason rubbed his eyes. “They designed it way back for interstellar communication. You’d think they’d bring you up to speed.”

Carter looked down at the helmet. “I ain’t a kid, you know.”

“I never said you were,” Mason replied.

“Didn’t have to,” he tossed the finished helmet next to the other. Mason winced as it clattered and rolled to a stop.

“Look, I just don’t understand...” the tube flashed in the bridge lights, black tape holding it together. The kid had fixed it. Mason tapped the console. “I don’t...” He sighed. “You know what, thanks. Thanks for watching my six.”

“Mmm, I can really hear it in your tone,” Carter scowled. “You seem to know how the ship works and I want to find out why I’m here. I can’t do that alone.”

“Why not—” Mason began, but a chipper voice cut through the static.

“Officer Murphy of Cecilio Command Center to HS10. Report.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed. She sounded more like a pharmacist reminding him of medication than a Cecilion Officer. He cleared his throat. “This is Commander Wyatt. My partner and I—”

“I know who you are, Commander. Are McCord and the others there?”

Others? McCord? Mason eyed Carter and leaned toward the microphone. “I requested a mission briefing.”

“Of course, Commander,” she said. “Waking up after prolonged hibernation can be taxing, but we have protocol.”

“There were no orders.” Mason said. “I searched, but—”

“Pardon me, Commander, could you repeat that?”

“The orders weren’t there.”

Silence. The static didn’t return, so the line remained open. A few clicks of a keypad and she spoke again. “I’m sorry, but our records say that the orders were sent in your pod. Are you sure there was nothing?”

Mason closed his eyes. “Yes, I’m sure.” He leaned on the console. “Look, Murphy. I know the protocol. I know where to look. The orders weren’t there. So, please refresh me or send me to someone who can.” Laura wouldn’t have wasted his time.

Carter edged away from the window, approaching the console with his heavy gait.

“I’m connecting you with the CO. Stand by.” The line went dead a moment. Static buzzed through the bridge and Mason leaned back.

“I don’t like it,” Carter muttered.

“We’ll have answers in a minute,” Mason replied, his lips tight and his chest heavy.

Carter snorted. “Answers? Orders maybe, but answers?” He scowled and returned to the window.

Mason drew in the cool air, soothing his lungs.

The static cut short after five minutes, a fresh voice sounding over the APC.

“Commander Wyatt.” A woman’s voice. He recognized it but couldn’t place the name.

“Yes.” Mason leaned toward the microphone. “Is this Murphy’s commanding officer?”

“This is the director.”

Mason furrowed his brow. The director of Cecilio Command Center. He cleared his throat. “The director?”

“Commander?”

“I, um...I requested a mission briefing.”

“Of course,” she replied. “Are the others there? I would rather not repeat it. Again.”

“Others?”

“They’re not with you?” she asked.

“It’s just me and Carter.”

The director exhaled. “You all knew the risk when you launched. Two pods were sent.”

That explained not having a four-man team. “What happened?” Mason asked.

“They likely got caught in the Belt,” the director replied. “It keeps getting closer. The old instruments cannot always track it. We are here now, though. Is McCord there?”

Mason frowned at Carter. McCord? He waved the kid over. Carter declined. “I can hear from here,” he paused, then chuckled. “Hear from here.”

Mason turned back to the microphone. “We’re both here.”

“You and McCord are aboard the HS10. Your mission is to claim the contents of Cell 81 and return.”

“Why’s that?” Carter asked from the window.

Mason watched him for a moment, then leaned toward the microphone. “May I ask what the objective is?”

“That is the objective. Cell 81.”

“She couldn’t have left a note? Left us somethin’? Maybe scratched it on the rust bucket she sent us in?” Carter snorted.

Mason covered the microphone, grimacing at his tone, then uncovered it to speak. “Director, there were no orders in our pod,” he said.

“They were left in the ship’s files.”

“They weren’t there.”

“We’re looking into it. Meanwhile, you have your mission.”

“Roger that,” Mason nodded. Static hummed before he turned off the APC, rose, and checked the ship’s atmosphere. Two hours to full pressure. They’d have to breathe hard.

Carter pushed away from the window. “So, we go down there and do the job?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Mason paused. “McCord.”

“It’s a family name. McCord. We don’t go tellin’ everybody. It ain’t how we do it.”

“Well, from now on, you tell me. We have a job and now we’re shorthanded.”

“Maybe you don’t need to know everything,” Carter shrugged. “Ever think of that?”

Mason’s face hardened. “No more secrets.”

“Fine.” Carter turned to the Navisphere. “Not that it’s a secret though, but I don’t think everybody down in Cecilio likes us bein’ up here.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cecilio don’t make mistakes like this. If there weren’t orders in that pod, somebody stole them.”

Day 1 on the HSI0

Stolen? Who would steal from Cecilio? The applause of the crowds thundered again in his memory—a blurry mass of people, some waving with smiles and staring with grim faces. Others dabbed their eyes, and another looked on in disappointment. It was possible, but Mason shrugged. “Stolen or not, we have orders now.”

“Not even a second thought?”

“We have orders.” Mason pulled the ship’s map up onto a monitor and projected it. The view of space through the window vanished, and the map took its place.

“Woah, man, what’d you just do?”

Mason closed his eyes. “*Sir*,” he corrected. “It’s a map.”

“Yeah, I see that. Where’re the stars?”

“It’s a Navisphere.”

“A what?”

Mason glanced at Carter. “Please tell me you’re not serious?”

Carter stared. Mason sighed. “Usually it’s controlled by the captain’s hand motions. But...well, actually, we should probably set that up.” He scanned the keycard and pulled up the Officer Recognition Program, adding his name to the list and authorizing it with the keycard.

“Welcome, Commander Wyatt,” the computer’s voice echoed over the amplifiers. “I am AIAIS, your Automated, Integrated, Advanced Intelligence System. Please rise and state your name for body and voice recognition.”

Mason rose. “Commander Mason Wyatt.”

“Thank you, Commander. You can now access me on any deck by stating my name or a name of your choice.”

“Herbert,” Carter chuckled.

“We’ll stick with Aiais.” Mason eased back into the chair.

“I don’t like it,” Carter said.

“You’ll learn to. Anyway, the Navisphere.” He motioned with his hands, splitting the screen into five displays. One showed the map, two others showed the outside of the ship, and the final two displayed sectors filled with chambers. “A plain window would be a waste, so they installed cameras around the hull to help the crew see when navigating out of Earth’s solar system.” The designers also mounted cameras in the sectors and storage units to monitor construction, but the kid didn’t need a full history lesson. He swiped the four extra displays away, so the map filled the entire screen. “Clear as mud?”

Carter frowned. “Just about.”

Mason nodded and inspected the decks on the display. Each contained labeled rooms, some with storage units, others with cargo. He opened a file for Cargo Sector 81. Nothing but the tags of the thousands of units stored there. He moved on and scanned through more decks, his eyes locking on Deck 19.

“Okay, so maybe we got orders, but why? What’s so special about Cell 81?” Carter asked.

“We’ll find out when we’re done.” Mason clicked Deck 19 and searched the cells, selecting Cell 81.

“Further authorization required,” Aiais said.

Mason clicked another cell, but again the AI denied him.

Carter leaned toward the computer. “We can’t see anything on that floor?”

“We should. I’m in the system.” He scanned the captain’s keycard, but Aiais denied him again. Mason frowned, swiped the map away, and marched to the lift.

“Where’re you goin’?” Carter followed.

“To see what’s on that deck.”

The kid hesitated, but joined, and Mason pressed *Deck 19*. The lift arched downward, gravity receding.

The door slid aside, a wave of thin, icy air rolling in. Mason breathed, the lighter atmosphere cooling his sore lungs as they entered a cramped steel compartment. The entrance to Deck 19 waited, melted frost glittering on the metal. Mason tapped the panel beside the door and scanned the keycard. *Enter Additional Authorization* flashed across the screen.

Additional? “We need more clearance,” Mason said.

Carter inspected the door. “They didn’t protect the cargo, or even the bridge like that.”

Mason drew his fingers along the edges of the door. What to do...? He pushed away, shaking the liquid from his hands.

“Man, what’s more important than the bridge?”

“*Sir*,” Mason corrected, analyzing the entrance. “Haven ships only use the bridge when leaving the solar system. After that, there’s no reason to guard it.”

“Somebody could steer the ship off course if they got onboard.”

Mason froze. His neck tingled at the thought.

“Right?” Carter asked.

“They have contingencies,” Mason replied. “Only old pods have the right docking mechanisms.” His thoughts drifted to turning the ship, but he jerked his head to toss the idea away. It didn’t move, but settled like a blanket. “It’d take half a mountain to pierce the hull. There’s no breaking in.”

“How do you know all this?”

Mason chuckled. “How do you not? I still remember basic training.”

Carter’s lips tightened, and he nodded. “So, the ship’s a fortress?”

“There’d be no cargo if it wasn’t.” Mason pushed away from the door.

“So, we used an old pod?”

“We used an antique.” Mason checked the captain’s keycard and tossed it to Carter.

Carter stashed the key in his belt and approached the door, feeling the edges of the frame. “We could blow this off its hinges if we had some powder or something.” He pointed to the crevice where the door slid into the bulkhead. “We could strap some along here. Crack it like an egg.” Carter shrugged. “I’m sure they’ve got explosives somewhere.”

Mason studied his partner—the kid knew more about demolition than the mission. He glanced at the Kisasi, then the door. “We may damage other parts of the ship. We don’t know what’s in there.”

“Well then, what’s your plan? I for one kinda want to see what’s in there.”

“Aiais, who’s authorized to open this door?” Mason asked.

“The captain and three senior officers must be present for Deck 19 to be accessed,” Aiais replied.

“Four people?” Carter whispered.

“It would seem.” Mason studied the door, motionless. Carter eyed him, then crossed his arms and examined the door as well.

“What if we break it?” Carter asked.

“What?”

“What if we break it?” Carter shrugged. “We just need the right tools. We don’t have to blow it up, just break it.”

Was there a difference? Perhaps. “Come on.” They reentered the lift, shooting back to the bridge. Mason darted to the command center and projected the ship’s specs onto the Navisphere before Carter could gape at the stars again. Storage units filled Decks 1–15. Most contained nonperishable seeds and supplies for the inhabitants of Proxima B, but some carried industrial equipment and technology. Mason glanced at Carter’s gun and scrolled further into storage. No other weapons onboard. It was a cargo ship, not a military transport.

Carter tapped the Navisphere. “Man, I don’t need weapons. Is there any of that cold stuff? Liquid nitrogen! Any of that here?”

Mason shook his head. “Not that I know of. They don’t need to keep anything cool. Space does...” he furrowed his brow. “Although,” he whispered, “maybe I’m wrong.”

“Fire away.”

“Before the ship launches into open space, the crew is awake making sure everything goes to plan, which means they needed air pressure, which means they would have needed a backup system to keep the cargo cool—”

“And likely that backup’s runnin’ now that we have air,” Carter said.

“You want to freeze the door?”

Carter shrugged. “I want to see what’s behind it.”

“You ever done something like this before?”

“It’ll work.”

Mason nodded and smiled. One step closer to...his smile faded. “This entire ship is designed for temperatures well below liquid nitrogen. The ship has to hold together in the vacuum of space. Nothing’s turning that door to glass.”

“It was worth a shot,” Carter muttered.

Mason dropped into a chair, studying the Navisphere. They needed access to that deck.

“What if we cut it?” Carter exclaimed.

Mason narrowed his eyes. “Explain.”

“Well, she can take the cold, right?” Carter smirked. “Let’s hit her with some heat.”

“Tools are on Deck 10.”

“What’re we doin’ here then?”

Mason leapt up, but swayed, his lungs burning. He gripped the console and regulated his breath to ease the pain. He’d exhaled fast enough to avoid destroying his lungs when the tube snapped, but that didn’t always work. His breath shook. No point dwelling on the past.

“You okay, man?”

“I’m fine.” Mason rose, and they returned to the lift again. Gravity faded, the pressure on his lungs subsided and the door opened to a dark hallway lit by numbers along the bulkhead. No other lights—no one would see them in deep storage.

Mason marched in, counting off the units. The outlines of shovels and other primitive handheld tools hung in the darkness. He closed the door and moved to the next, finding tools and machinery for farming, but nothing that could cut open a vault. Unit 21 contained seeds and other farming goods in crates strapped to shelves; Unit 24 held only fertilizer.

Carter shouted and Mason floated toward the sound, finding the kid thirty units down with something like a rifle in his hand, wired to a backpack hovering over his shoulder. A tinted mask floated in his other hand.

“What’s that?” Mason asked.

“A laser cutter. I think it’s industrial or somethin’.”

“And how do you know that?”

“How do you know everything about this ship?” Carter pushed toward the lift. “Am I not allowed to know things too?”

“I’m just waiting for you to know protocol.”

Carter turned. “Man, I may not know much about space, but—”

“Then why are you here?”

Carter lowered the laser. “Why you here? I ain’t got no reason to trust you. I don’t even know you.”

“I’m not the one holding the gun.”

Carter’s face hardened. “Maybe they sent it with me for a reason.”

“I better not be that reason.” Mason set his jaw and Carter shifted. “We have a mission to complete.” Mason flew into the lift.

Carter followed, clutching the laser to his chest as he stared at the grated floor. Mason pushed out of the elevator before the door finished opening to Deck 19. “You’re up.”

Carter slipped the mask over his face. “Yeah, yeah.” He flicked the safety off and pulled the trigger. A blinding blast of red cut into the door—Carter scrambled to shut it off.

“Heh,” he chuckled. “Forgot to dial it down.” He grinned and spun a dial on the side to narrow the beam.

Mason grimaced at a dripping red blotch on the door and bulkhead. The kid had missed and melted the metal at three points. Why couldn’t Cecilio send someone competent? “You know we *need* the bulkhead, right?” he snapped.

“Bulk-what?”

Mason rolled his eyes and tapped the bulkhead. “Bulk head.”

Carter furrowed his brow. “Man, I’m not sure where you come from, but we call that a wall.”

“Just don’t melt it.”

The kid shrugged, aiming at the door. Mason turned away. Thunder cracked as blinding light cast Mason’s shadow across the deck. Sparks scattered and bounced, smoke slinking up into the air vents.

Mason pressed his sleeve over his mouth and closed his eyes, covering them with his hand, and wishing he could cover his ears as well. Warnings blared, lights flashed red, and a siren screeched above the thundering.

After seven minutes, the roaring quelled to ringing. Sweat dripped from Mason’s temple and the hot air stung his aching lungs. He turned, rubbing his ear, and squinting through the smoke. White metal shimmered like a picture frame dripping from the door. Carter tossed the glowing laser aside, whipped out his sidearm, and fired twice. The metal piece shifted and blew off its molten hinges as Carter drifted away from the kickback.

“Warning: Security Breach,” Aiais said.

“Override,” Mason silenced the sirens.

Smoke drifted onto Deck 19. Dim lights reflected off grated decking, and in the distance, a white glow framed a door. Mason’s calf stung in the wave of heat as he floated through the melted entrance, eyes fixed on the shining door. His memory faded like breath in the cold.

Carter crept behind, knuckles white as he gripped his weapon. He nodded to the glow. “What’s that?”

Mason’s eyes watered in the smoke. “That’s a door.”

“And what about the rest of these?”

Mason scanned the other cells. Numbers shone on panels embedded in the bulkhead, like dreary eyes waking. He tapped the

first one and jerked his finger away as it flickered and sparked. The laser had damaged it, but he made out the label. *Navigation*.

Cells five through fifteen concealed data banks and the next fifty read *Oxygen. Oxygen. Oxygen*. Mason smiled. All in good working order. Cargo coolant filled cells 78...79...80...

He froze before the white-framed door, ten meters high and wide. Cell 81. "This is it." His fingers twitched and he tensed. "This is it."

"What's inside?"

Mason approached the sealed cell. Memory felt so close he could nearly touch it. Why were they there? Why Cell 81? He reached for the door panel and it sprang to life. The same four-level authorization. Mason floated back. "Break it down."

"Course," Carter eyed the door and glided back for the laser. He returned, dropped his visor, and red flashed. Warning lights blinked again.

"That's enough," Mason raised his hand and Carter stopped firing. "Aiais, override those sirens."

Molten metal dripped from the door as Carter fired the Kisasi. The piece warped, and light from the cell sliced the darkness like a white dagger. Mason shielded his eyes and Carter dropped the mask over his face, firing three more times. The piece snapped and clattered away. Mason squinted at a wave of brilliance as Carter drifted from the kickback, lifting his mask. "What is that?"

"I don't..." Mason's eyes watered, "...know." He blinked several times, testing his sight. Maybe they heard wrong? Maybe they weren't supposed to enter Cell 81. Perhaps it was Cell 82 or 181?

Carter chuckled, shielding his eyes. "Good one." he tossed the laser aside. "Come on, man, what is it?"

Mason entered, eyes fixed on a chamber in the heart of the cell.

“Mason?”

It rose from the floor like a stem—like a tree trunk, five meters high. Rivers of white etched down its surface to tubes, sinking like roots into the deck.

“What is that?” Carter floated in.

“This...” Mason brushed his hand along the side, his fingers tingling over the grooves of shimmering white. “This is our mission.” Steel clamps secured the chamber to the ceiling, and a panel gleamed upon it, showing temperature readings. Around the rest of the cell, dozens of monitors and gauges displayed pressure within the chamber, stabilization, and radiation. “This is the mission.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This is what we’re supposed to bring back.”

“Warning,” Aiais echoed, “collision imminent.”

Mason examined the metal clamps. How did they disconnect? “Reroute navigation,” he said.

“What is it?” Carter approached the chamber.

“It’s—”

“Navigation systems damaged.” Aiais interrupted.

Damaged? Mason’s gaze shot to the doorway. They damaged the navigation while breaking onto—

“Brace for impact,” Aiais said, “in five, four, three, two—”

“Carter, get down!”

“One.”

The ship jolted, and Mason crashed into the chamber.

422 Days before the HS10 Mission

“You and your team—”

“I don’t have a team.” Mason leaned back in the cold metal chair.

“You will for this mission.”

Mason studied the tablet showing the blueprints for the HS10. A basket of fruit rested in the middle of the table before him, filled with apples, oranges, and bananas. He turned to her. “Go on.”

“You will arrive after nine months of hibernation. I’m sure you’ve trained to function after such a trip?”

“I’ve never gone that long, but I’d be fine.”

“Your mission is to retrieve the contents of Cell 81—the Deogen System—and turn the ship around. A briefing will be left in your pod, as usual. The accompanying pod will also be provided with the same orders.”

“Turn it around?” He glanced up from the blueprints.

“Send it back to Earth.” She rose from her chair and straightened her uniform. “Am I understood?”

Mason examined the blueprints. “Why can’t we take an Interceptor?”

“Interceptors cannot dock on Haven Ships. You will be sent in escape pods recovered from the HS7.”

“Aren’t those a bit old?”

“They have been modified to take the trip and been equipped with hibernation chambers,” she paused, and her face softened. “You do this, and you will have your life back. Your rank, your ship. Perhaps even your crew.”

Mason twitched. "I don't have a crew."

"You could have one again."

Mason's lips tightened, and he studied the blueprints. "What about the cargo?"

"It's better this way."

He tapped the table and nodded. "When do I start?"

Day 1 on the HSIQ

Mason breathed. Thin air chilled his lungs. Red flashed; sirens blared. He pressed his hand against his throbbing head. Blood stained his fingers. He flung the crimson droplets and faced the white light of the Deogen System. Why did they need it? His memory drifted like smoke.

Carter gasped, clutching his shoulder. "What happened?" his eyes drooped.

"Aiais." Mason flinched at the ringing of his own voice. "Analysis."

"The hull has been breached, sir."

"Man, you said it'd take a mountain!" Carter yelled.

Mason winced at his shout. "Then that's what we hit." He pushed out into the passageway. Red lights flashed as he scooped up the laser and found Carter spiraling, grasping his shoulder. "Come on." Mason caught Carter by the boot and shoved him toward the lift. "Stay awake."

"I ain't got no reason to sleep."

"We're losing atmosphere. I wouldn't blame you." Mason shoved Carter inside the lift and pressed *Bridge*. Gravity returned. Carter slumped against the bulkhead, shivering. Cold closed in. "Hang tight," Mason said between controlled breaths.

The lift opened, and Mason dragged Carter across the glossy floor. Bits of rock and ice battered the Navisphere. “Seal off all damaged sectors,” Mason ordered.

“Sector seals damaged. Atmosphere no longer contained.”

Mason leaned Carter against the command center. “Seal the bridge and focus all oxygen here.”

“Bridge sealed. Pressure stabilizing.”

Mason dropped into the chair, his breath billowing in the cold.

“How’d we get hit?” Carter pushed himself up.

“We...” Mason grimaced, trying to think. “We damaged the...Aiais, show damaged sectors.” The ship’s schematics flickered up on the Navisphere. Most of it shone blue. A sector on Deck 19 gleamed crimson—the navigation systems. Cargo Sector 17 flashed red as well, along with several docking bays. Files for individual units of cargo cluttered the display as chambers failed. Mason swiped them away. “Analysis.”

The display zoomed in on Sector 17. “Major hull damage. Hibernation chambers critical. Atmospheric seal no longer operational.”

At least they could seal off the bridge.

Aiais continued. “Oxygen being diverted to the bridge; automated navigation systems and beacon no longer operational.”

Beacon. Cecilio couldn’t track them anymore. Carter must have hit it when he damaged the navigation systems. “And the gravity?” Mason asked.

“Gravitational ring still in rotation.”

Mason nodded. “Thrusters?”

“Deceleration thrusters operational. On course to Proxima B.”

Still on course. That needed to change. He rose and slipped into his suit.

Carter frowned. “Where you goin’?”

“To finish the mission,” Mason said. “Come on.”

Carter rose, wincing as he released his shoulder. “Man, I don’t like it.” He shoved himself into his suit and winced as it sealed.

Mason scooped up both helmets, handing one to Carter.

“What about the cargo?” Carter secured his helmet.

Mason locked his on as well. “What about it?”

“Shouldn’t we go give it a check?”

Those weren’t the director’s orders, but the director didn’t consider hitting an asteroid, did she? “You’re probably right. Come on.”

They entered the lift, and the doors opened to the dark Chamber Hall. Seven hours of air showed on Mason’s visor with 0.1% oxygen outside. Blue windows stood in an unbroken line for two hundred yards. Beyond, red glowed from Sector 17. “There.” Mason jogged toward the cracked scarlet window. The number flickered on the bulkhead and the warped door bespoke the vacuum of space wrenching it from its hinges. His hand hovered over the screen and he breathed a sigh. “Brace yourself.”

“What?”

Mason pressed the panel; the door snapped against a surge of remaining air and he lurched forward, skidding toward the void. The icy deck scraped along his suit as he scrambled and braced against a hibernation chamber. His eyes darted to his visor. No cracks.

Carter tumbled past and shoved himself behind another chamber. “You could’ve said a bit more than ‘brace yourself!’”

“You’re not dead, are you?” Mason peered around the edge of the chamber. The deck panels twisted toward the breach. Beyond the shrapnel, emptiness. Severed tubes spilled liquid nitrogen into frozen spears, reaching into the abyss. Chambers bent and

crumpled around the gash, flickering blue and red. Mason braced as the air raged past. 0.05...0.03...

Metal creaked at his back. He steadied himself. 0.02%...

The chamber snapped from the deck and Mason tumbled toward the fissure. He reached out, his gloves slipping and his heart pounding. No point panicking...no time to panic. His fingers locked around a loose nitrogen cable and he jerked to a stop. The remaining oxygen poured into space. 0.01...0%.

“You okay?” Carter’s voice sounded in his earpiece.

“Fine,” Mason grunted, pulling himself up the hose to a broken chamber. “We have to seal the breach.” He faced the fracture, drawing in a deep breath. Surrounding chambers flickered, and the icicles shimmered red, white, and blue in the changing light.

“The nitrogen,” Carter said.

“What?”

“Use the nitrogen to make a cork. Freeze the hole over.”

Tubes supplied and circulated liquid nitrogen to the failing chambers. Broken hoses slithered toward the tear like snakes spilling ice into the void. The kid was right.

Mason snatched the nearest tube from a red shining chamber and turned to Carter. It wasn’t safe to cross the icy deck with the breach open. “Toss me the gun!”

Carter eyed the sidearm and shifted.

Mason held out his hand. “Come on.”

Carter drew and took aim. “I can take the shot from here.”

“Just toss it!”

“Keep still.”

Mason stared down the barrel trained on his head and held the nitrogen hose at arm’s length. The barrel lingered on him—what was the kid doing? It shifted to the tube. A silent flash stung Mason’s eyes and liquid nitrogen gushed toward the breach. He

tossed the hose to the abyss as the liquid froze along the fringes of the gap. He held up another tube, and another, ducking out of Carter's line of fire. Nitrogen cascaded toward the emptiness, freezing and plugging the hole.

Mason whirled to face Carter and flung the last tube aside. "I told you to toss me the gun."

Carter stepped out from behind his chamber, grasping his shoulder. "It all turned out alright, didn't it?"

"You could have missed."

"I didn't."

Mason opened his mouth to berate the kid, but his visor faded to a light green. They needed to finish the mission. The sooner the better. He marched for the exit. "Come on."

Carter followed, but paused, staring at the dozens of red chambers. Some bent toward the breach; some stood, their wires snapped and reaching for the void. One overturned chamber with a cracked window flickered between red and blue.

Mason spun around. "We're wasting time."

The chamber gleamed red but flashed back to blue. "This one ain't goin' out."

"It will. Don't mess with it."

"It's a hibernation chamber, right?" Carter replied. "We slept in these things. The captain was in one too."

Mason nodded.

"Then there might be somebody in here, right?"

"It's just cargo. You're wasting time." Mason climbed over the twisted doorframe into the dark hall. "Cecilio's counting on us." He drew his fingers along the cracked scarlet window. They wouldn't be able to turn the air back on outside the bridge until

they could seal everything off; the door, the window, everything. The nitrogen wouldn't last ten minutes in an atmosphere.

Mason peered back into the room. His partner still gaped like a child. "Carter, we have a job. Leave it."

Carter knelt beside the cargo, brushing his hand over the flickering screen. He stared, then gave it a shove. It scratched silently across the deck in the airless ship.

"Don't worry about the cargo!" Mason called, and Carter pushed it again. The kid just didn't seem to get it.

Carter scraped the chamber closer to the door. Mason glanced upwards and jogged back to his partner. "We have a job."

Carter pointed to the cracked screen. Mason made out two words: *charge* and *June*. The expiration date? He didn't bother trying to read the rest of the flickering display.

"We can't leave her here, man." Carter shoved and winced, gripping his shoulder. He lifted his eyes to Mason. "I need your help."

"This isn't the mission," Mason turned.

"Come on, man."

"It's not the mission." Mason reached the door.

"Sir!"

Mason stopped.

"I need your help."

The kid's eyes pleaded as he gripped his shoulder. Mason furrowed his brow—why did he care? Why couldn't he just leave it?

"Please."

Mason sighed and took hold of the chamber. "On three, okay? One, two, three—"

They heaved the chamber across the sector, leaving silver scratches on the white deck, and hoisted it into the dark

passageway. The kid watched the chamber as though *it* were the mission. He'd snap out of it soon enough.

The cargo bounced along the grated floor of the Chamber Hall, the blue glow glinting off it. Mason held the lift open as Carter pushed it inside.

"We'll lose gravity for ten seconds," Mason said as the door closed. "Hold it steady."

The lift ascended, and Carter kept the cargo from jostling. Mason kept the door open again as Carter hauled the chamber onto the bridge and it screeched across the deck.

"That's far enough." Mason's back tingled from the shriek as he slipped his helmet off and eased into a chair.

Carter removed his helmet as well, placing it on the deck. He ran his hand along the chamber, drew his gun, and fired at the hinges. Mason cringed as the melted hinges dripped, marring the glassy floor.

Carter knelt and heaved the chamber open.

7

The chamber door clattered to the deck, cracking the smooth surface. Mason closed his eyes. Could the kid be *less* careful?

“Mason?” Carter stared into the capsule.

Mason pushed from the chair and peered at the cargo suspended in blue gel.

“It’s a person,” Carter said.

Mason furrowed his brow. Perhaps he could say that—but it wasn’t really a person. It couldn’t be. He dropped back into the chair.

“You said this was a cargo ship.”

“It is,” Mason replied.

Carter cut his eyes as he reached into the gel. “It don’t look like no cargo to me.”

Mason grimaced. He wasn’t taking it out, was he?

Carter winced, adjusting his shoulder as he lifted the cargo out of the chamber. A black suit covered it, like the suits Mason and Carter wore.

“What are you doing?” Mason asked.

Carter gestured to the doorway further up the curve of the bridge. “What’s that?”

“Crew quarters.”

Carter nodded and carried the cargo like a child toward the door. He fumbled for the keycard and it clattered to the deck. “Could you give me a hand?”

Mason jogged over and snatched the card, glimpsing the parcel in Carter’s arms. Blue gel dripped from its hair.

Mason waved the key, and the door slid aside, revealing a long corridor following the curve of the bridge wheel. Entering the

closest cabin on the left, Mason found a windowless compartment occupied by a low cot, a nightstand, and an overhead light. Plenty for a single unit of cargo.

“Looks really homey.” Carter kicked the door on the opposite side of the passage. It wouldn’t budge. He kicked it again.

Mason chuckled at the kid’s predicament. “Aiais, open the door.”

It swung open, and Carter stumbled into the cabin. “This one’s got a window.”

It looked identical, but with a porthole. Mason glanced back at the windowless room but followed Carter as he lay the cargo onto the cot. It seemed to hold on to him as he pulled away and took its hand, pressing his fingers against its wrist.

“You won’t feel a heartbeat,” Mason said.

“She dead?”

Mason crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe. “It’s not alive.”

Carter turned to him. “So she’s dead?”

“No, but it’s not alive. At least, not like we are.”

“But she will be?”

Mason shrugged, pushing off the door and returning to the bridge. Carter trailed behind. “Will she?” he repeated.

“I don’t know.” Mason dropped into the chair facing the APC. The cargo probably wouldn’t survive the night. Until ten minutes ago, it was totally dependent on the chamber.

“So what do we do?” Carter asked.

Mason tapped his leg. “We still have a job.”

Carter’s face dropped. “Yeah. I guess we do.”

Mason leaned back. “Aiais, check for any structural damage outside Sector 17.”

“Minor damage along the hull near the port side docking bay,” Aiais replied.

“Start diagnostics.”

“Diagnostic system ready: state your query.”

“Determine if releasing Sector 17 in the standard landing sequence would enable atmospheric stability,” Mason replied.

“Releasing Sector 17 would not enable atmospheric stability.”

Carter frowned. “Release?”

Mason rubbed his eyes. Did all the kid’s memories get wiped in hibernation? “Haven ships are too heavy to land, so each sector breaks off as its own landing pod.” He faced the Navisphere again. “Aiais, show the damage on screen.”

A map of the ship blinked onto the glass. Red surrounded the docking bay and their pod.

Mason’s lips tightened. “Can the pod detach?”

“Docking mechanisms damaged.”

Mason rubbed the back of his head, wincing as his fingers grazed a knot from the collision with the Deogen System. “Alright,” he leaned back.

“We can’t take off, can we?” Carter asked.

Mason shook his head. “No.”

“Could we get the pod out manually?”

He shook his head again. “If we’re not careful, we could lose our only way back.”

Carter nodded. The Navisphere faded, revealing the stars. “This thing has escape pods, right?” Carter asked.

Could that work? Mason rose, aiming for the starboard arch of the bridge. “This way.” Carter’s heavy footsteps followed.

Another corridor leading to twenty escape pods. Mason peered through the porthole in the nearest door. A cramped room with

five seats and three levers for steering. The Deogen System would never fit unless they removed the seats.

“I ain’t spending nine months in that thing,” Carter muttered.

“We couldn’t fit enough food to last three.” Mason returned to the bridge. Another string of mistakes, and the mission would fail; they wouldn’t make it home. He glanced to the captain’s empty chair. Giving up wasn’t an option. He activated the APC, leaning toward the microphone. “Commander Wyatt to Cecilio Command Center, reporting.” Static hummed and Mason waited. Three minutes passed.

“Officer Murphy of Cecilio Command Center to the HS10. Report.”

“Murphy, this is Commander Wyatt and Second Officer McCord on the HS10. The mission has been delayed. The autopilot and beacon were damaged in an attempt to access the objective. There was a collision. We lost cargo. The breach has been sealed, but the docking bay is damaged. It may be a while before we can take off.”

“Okay,” she paused. “Okay, yes. I’ll put in a request for an extension?”

“Please do,” Mason said. “I’ll debrief the director when she’s free.”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“No. That’s all. Over and out.” He turned off the APC.

“So what’s the plan?” Carter asked.

Mason tapped the arm of the chair and gripped it. “First priority is to fix the autopilot. We can’t afford another collision. Then fix the docking bay, then we can figure out how to get the Deogen System into our pod.”

Carter chuckled. “Deogen. What’s it do, anyway?”

Mason took in the overhead lights, the Navisphere displaying the stars, and the computers displaying trajectories and charts. “It makes all this possible.”

“So we’re just takin’ it out?”

“And turning the ship around.” Mason crossed his arms and leaned back.

“Turning it around? Like, back to Earth?”

Mason nodded.

“What...what about the girl?”

Girl? Mason’s gaze darted to the passageway. “I don’t know.”

“What do you usually do?”

Mason shrugged. “I’ve never had cargo wake up.”

“I thought you were the professional.”

“I’ve never been on an *HS* before, but I’ve...I’ve had a few run-ins with this kind of cargo,” he frowned. Run-ins. The kid probably heard about those run-ins during the protests. “A few times before,” he muttered.

“So, I guess we fix her pod then?” Carter asked.

“I won’t stop you,” Mason said. “It’s not the mission though.”

Carter nodded, but frowned. “Why we turnin’ the ship around?”

“I’m not sure. Yet.” He pushed himself from the chair.

“Where you goin’?”

“To get some sleep. We’re going to be here a few days.”

“You just finished sleeping for nine months.”

“That wasn’t sleep.”

“But what about the autopilot?”

Mason glanced at the stars. “There’s nothing we can do. It’s too risky for us to steer at this speed. We’ll just have to hope we don’t hit anything else.” He walked up the curve to the crew’s quarters and peered in at the cargo, its eyes closed and breath imperceptible.

He entered the windowless room across the passage and closed the door. The cot creaked as he sat and removed his space suit. It smelled of sulfur. He folded it and placed it on the floor with a sigh. "I'm getting too old for this," he muttered. "First no orders and no weapons. Now? Just a mess." Cargo awake, navigation systems damaged, the beacon broken, a breach in the hull plugged by nitrogen and the docking mechanisms jammed.

He pressed his palms into his eyes and lay back, wincing as he knocked his head against the backboard. He bit back a curse and lay his throbbing head on the mattress. A few hours, then a plan. It would take days to fix everything, which meant survival needs, which meant more work.

Find water.

Find food.

Fix the navigation systems.

Fix the pod.

Retrieve the Deogen System.

Go home.

He exhaled through his teeth and closed his eyes. So much to do.

Day 2 on the HS10

Beeping. Incessant beeping. Mason sat up and rubbed his eyes. More beeping. The cot creaked as he pushed off and stumbled to the bridge. The noise blared. He slid into the chair before the flashing APC, gagging as he breathed in a waft of rotten air. His eyes darted around the bridge, settling on the broken chamber, the gel stagnate and crusty. That needed to go. He swallowed and answered the APC. “This is Commander Wyatt.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Reporting from the HS10.”

“Commander.”

The director. Mason straightened his back and held his breath.

“I understand you ran into problems?” she asked.

“We did.”

“We have a team looking into what happened to your orders.”

“Thank you.”

“What is the extension for?”

“Well,” Mason sighed. Where to begin? “The docking bay is broken, so we can’t launch. That’ll take time. We also need the autopilot fixed so we don’t hit anything else. Then there’s the cargo awake—”

“Cargo?” her voice sharpened.

“There was a unit of cargo that...it woke up.”

“It just woke up?” she asked.

Mason shifted, glancing toward the crew’s quarters. “The hibernation chamber malfunctioned in the collision. I’ll take care of it.”

Silence, then she spoke again. “I’m giving you a three-day extension. Get the docking mechanism fixed and complete the mission.”

“And the cargo?”

“The mission is the priority. Bring back the contents of Cell 81—”

“The Deogen System,” Mason said.

“Then turn the ship around and come home.”

Mason nodded. “I’ll keep you updated. Over and out.”

The line went dead, and Mason turned off the APC. Silence hung in the bridge. Three days. “Carter!” He leaned back, peering up the wheel to the corridor. “Get up.” Mason jogged to the passage, bursting into the second cabin on the right. “Up!”

Carter leapt out of his cot and stumbled forward. “This some kind of test?” He pressed his hand to his head.

“We have three days. I’m going to find water.”

“What’s that gotta do with me?”

“We’re the only ones here. You have my back if something goes wrong.”

“The girl’s here too,” Carter yawned.

“Hardly.” Mason reentered his own room and snatched his suit.

“You gonna fix her chamber?” Carter followed.

Mason shrugged the suit on. “That’s not the priority. First, we find out how to stay alive. I want you to read up on the navigation systems. Fix whatever you broke.”

Carter scowled. “I got us onto that deck.”

“And multiplied our problems,” Mason zipped up his suit. “I’ll check in every hour,” he pushed past the kid into the corridor. “We shouldn’t need much food.”

“What else is new?” Carter’s face contorted as they stepped onto the bridge. “Man, what died in here?”

Mason scooped up his helmet, nodding to the chamber. “It spoiled overnight.”

“Oh, did it?” Carter snorted, shaking his head.

Mason frowned at the chamber. They could have gotten water from it if they kept it cool. He secured his helmet. “I’ll be back in five. Get rid of that thing if you can.” The lift descended to the storage decks, and Mason drifted into the first compartment, dumping a crate of tools. He stashed the crate under his arm, found two larger buckets, then reentered the lift and ascended to the Chamber Hall. The blue windows reminded him of the photographs of Earth he studied at the academy. Laura used to love studying the planet’s history and customs. She painted a mural on her dorm wall of the oceans and blue sky.

Mason shook himself and marched to Sector 17, clambering past the twisted door. The nitrogen cork still held, and the chambers no longer glowed red, but stood dark and cold. The collision had shattered the overhead lights, but a few chambers still cast a dim blue ambience.

Mason ran his hand along a fallen chamber. Frost dusted his glove. The gel inside would still be insulated; they could extract the water. He tapped the screen, and it flashed red, testifying to the expired cargo within. The deactivation button glowed beneath his palm. His eyes darted to the dark corners of the room as if someone watched. No one. “Okay,” he pressed the button.

1 Day before the HSIO Mission

“What about the cargo?” Mason stepped out of his apartment building toward the cab, his black uniform juxtaposed against the bright buildings reaching up to the scarlet sky.

“It is not your concern, Commander,” the director replied. Buildings reflected off the cab’s glossy black shell as a guard opened the door and she slipped in.

Mason ducked into an empty seat across the cab, facing the director as the door closed. “Not everyone saw it that way last time.”

“You are still here, are you not? You did what you had to do.” Her lips tightened and her medals gleamed. “For the greater good of Cecilio. For all the colonies of Proxima B and the Centauri System. Expansion is inevitable. We need what is on that ship.”

“Why not let it land?”

The director peered out the window as they passed through Cecilio’s historic district, drab old buildings, and mass of people swarming like locusts. “There is never enough space to go around, is there? Never enough resources. Never enough.”

Mason nodded. “Turn the ship around and bring the Deogen System back.”

“We have been given this planet. We will take care of it.”

The cab slowed. Cheers and thunderous ovation rang through the door. Last time he’d seen so many people cheering, it didn’t quite feel like a victory. “I do this, and I’m captain again?”

“Yes.”

“Then theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why,” Mason whispered. Laura loved her poetry—maybe it rubbed off on him. His smile faded, and he set his jaw. “Not to reason why.”

“Commander. Today Cecilio celebrates you and your mission. Not the past, but the future.” She nodded to the doorhandle with a smile. “Let’s remind them what they’re celebrating.”

Mason peered through the window at the crowds and opened the door.

Day 2 on the HSI0

The top of the chamber swung open like a coffin. Mason heaved the cargo from the gel, feeling nothing but a stiff shape through his gloves. Its black suit froze to the deck as he lay it aside and sealed the empty chamber to keep the gel from freezing too. The screen flickered out and Mason pulled the frost-covered-form into his arms. Three days more, and none of it would matter, anyway. Back to the cheers of Cecilio; to an Interceptor, and a new mission; back home.

He clambered out into the Chamber Hall and veered left, away from the lift. For five minutes he marched through darkness, at last descending a broad staircase to an airlock. The initial door opened and sealed again as he tethered his suit to a spool on the bulkhead. The second door slid aside. No air rushed out—just emptiness.

He stepped to the brink of the abyss; stars pierced the blackness. The cargo grew lighter, and he lifted off the floor, weightless, bearing a weightless form. It felt like letting go of nothing.

The airlock closed; he jogged back to Sector 17, filled the crate with gel, stashed the buckets under his arm, and returned to the bridge, humming the rhythm of the Light Brigade.

Day 2 on the HS10

The chair creaked as Mason hunched over the laser pack on his lap. He pried at the metal plating to access its power cell; wires and tubes from it splayed across the deck. Two empty buckets stood by the command center next to a crate of gel and his suit and the helmet lay over the front of the console, smelling of sulfur.

“You sure got back quick.” Carter jogged down from the corridor.

“I found what I needed.” Mason reached to disconnect the power cell but jolted as his hand brushed against it.

“Here, hand that over.” Carter snatched the laser pack. “I got a knack for breakin’ stuff.”

At least the kid knew it. Mason leaned back. “We need the power cell to heat the gel.”

“Cell for the gel,” Carter chuckled as he disassembled the laser. How could he do that yet not understand space travel?

“Where’d you get it?” Carter asked. “The gel stuff.”

“The hibernation chambers.”

Carter jolted; his finger slipped on the cell. He jerked his head toward the open chamber on the bridge. “From the girl’s, right?”

“You were supposed to move that,” Mason said, examining his fingernails, somehow dirty in space.

“Couldn’t do it alone,” Carter muttered, then lifted his eyes. “So, you...you just cracked another open?”

“The chamber shut off in the crash. It couldn’t support the cargo.” Mason cleared his thumb nail.

Carter nodded and focused on the laser. “I...you doin’ okay, man?”

Doing okay? Mason narrowed his eyes. “I thought you said, ‘you care for you?’”

“Well, yeah.” Carter spun one of the other chairs around and sat down. “I guess I...I know how it feels,” he disconnected a few stabilizing pieces around the power cell.

Mason furrowed his brow. “How it *feels*?”

“To see somebody die.”

“Oh,” Mason chuckled. “No, no,” he paused. His smile vanished. “No.”

“What do you mean?”

Mason raised his voice. “Don’t really mean anything. The cargo didn’t need the chamber anymore, so I took what I needed. It is what it is.”

Carter frowned. “Cargo. I guess that’s a way of lookin’ at it.”

Mason stared blankly at the laser—the kid almost had the power cell removed. Perhaps he was good for something after all.

“But you feel nothin’? Nothin’ at all?” Carter disconnected the cell with his sleeve covering his hand and pulled it out. “That was a person in there.” He offered the cell to Mason.

Look at that, he got it. Mason slipped his hand into his glove. “It’s not like anyone will miss it.” He reached for the cell, but Carter pulled back.

“It?”

Mason held out his hand for the cell. “Well, you know, we come here, we take out the Deogen System, turn her around and go our separate ways.”

Carter nodded and lay the cell in Mason’s hand. “I see what you mean,” the kid said. “They head back to Earth.”

“They’ll drift that way at least.” Mason slid out of the chair, placing the gel crate in the larger of the two buckets.

“What do you mean, drift?”

Mason propped the smaller bucket upside down above the crate inside the larger bucket. “We’re taking out the Deogen System.”

Carter fell silent while Mason positioned everything in his contraption and sunk the power cell into the gel.

“What does she do?” the kid asked.

Mason leaned back, folding his suit. “Well, the cell heats the gel, boils off steam which this upper bucket will catch and cool, and then we’ll have water—”

“No,” Carter interrupted, “the Deogen System.”

Mason lay the suit on the console and glanced up at the Navisphere. “Should I make you a list?”

“Well, what is it? Is she the brain of the ship, the heart? The nervous system? What does she actually do?”

Mason faced his partner. “You really don’t know?”

Carter shook his head.

“It’s everything.” Mason watched the gel simmer. “Makes it all work. The lights, the Navisphere, the lift. From life support to thrusters.” He caught Carter’s bright eyes. “I guess you could say it’s the heart. But it’s full of potential. Possibility.”

Carter frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. “So you take that out, and...and all the chambers. They all...they all...?”

Why was he stuttering? “They can’t die. At least, not legally,” Mason said.

“What?”

“You’re thinking about it too much.”

“Too much?” Carter scratched his head. “There are sixty million people here, right?”

Mason kept his eyes on the bubbling gel. “Theirs not to reason why.”

“So just shut up and don’t ask questions? Is that what this is?”

“Orders are orders.”

“Orders?” Carter rose, grimacing. “I don’t like it!”

Mason rubbed his temple and exhaled. “Doesn’t really matter what you like.”

Carter swallowed. “We’re gonna kill sixty million people, aren’t we?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Not like that?” Carter asked. “How is it not like that?”

Mason shrugged. “It’s just not.”

Carter turned, his face contorted.

“Where’re you going?”

The kid seized the chair behind the APC and pressed the green button.

Mason rose. Who was he calling? “Carter, what are you doing?”

“Gettin’ to the bottom of this. I ain’t doing no mission that kills people. We’re supposed to be better than that!” He wrenched the microphone close as static blared through the bridge.

“Carter,” Mason approached. “We don’t always get to know why.”

Carter’s face hardened. “This is Carter McCord, put the director on.”

Mason set his jaw to avoid cringing. No one ordered the director to talk.

Static buzzed.

“This is Carter McCord, I said put the—”

Mason jerked the kid back by his collar. “That’s the director you’re talking to!”

Carter pulled away, holding his shoulder. "I know."

"That's a good way to get yourself arrested."

Carter paused, then faced Mason, opening his mouth to speak.

"McCord?" A voice echoed over the APC. "This is the director."

Carter spun to the microphone. "What are you doin'? There're people on this ship. You're takin' down life support!"

Silence. Mason exhaled and closed his eyes. "Theirs not to reason—"

"If they ain't got no reason," Carter glared, "they can find somebody else to follow with their eyes closed."

Silence filled the bridge, except for the bubbles of gel popping. Mason thought he could hear his own heartbeat. The kid could end his entire career if he didn't tread lightly.

Carter leaned toward the microphone. "You can find somebody—"

"Alright," the director interrupted. "You deserve to know."

Mason furrowed his brow. Know? He lowered himself into a chair and pulled it closer to the APC.

"Globeships are...they are difficult," the director hesitated as if deciding how to continue. "The HS9 did not go as planned. We sent a team up and they found an infection. A ship-wide epidemic. No one made it back. No one made it out. Ever since we have kept precautions. We cannot risk infected cargo coming to Proxima B. It cannot take care of itself for months. It would swamp our medical staff. The cargo would spoil within two weeks and the few survivors would spread the infection," She paused, sighing. "Proxima B would become just another rock in space, lifeless, with billions of bodies where life once thrived, in just a few months."

Mason nodded. He'd studied the epidemic at the academy decades before. Laura had been there. He shook himself as Carter spoke.

"Why Cell 81?"

"Because what is inside can help build a new world here. A better world for everyone on Proxima B," she replied.

Carter swallowed. "So..." he peered up to the corridor. "They're all contaminated?"

"Yes."

Mason followed Carter's gaze to the passageway and examined his hands. How was it transmitted? Did Cecilio even know? Carter wore a spacesuit when he carried the cargo—no infection could get through that, right? "Is there a cure?" Mason asked.

Silence.

"No. The cargo you pulled out—"

"We were wearing suits the whole time." Mason said, his gaze darting from Carter to the microphone. "That's enough, right?"

"Yes. Any more questions?"

Mason glanced at Carter, who stared at the floor.

"No," Mason said. "I think that's all."

"Then continue with the mission as planned. It is for the greater good, Commander. The greater good for all of us." The line went dead. Static buzzed, but Carter didn't turn it off. Mason reached over him, clicked the button, and leaned back again, watching the kid stare at the steaming gel.

"What's wrong?" Mason asked.

Carter rubbed his forehead and drew his hand down his face.

"Carter?"

"I...I felt her pulse again today."

Mason's eyes widened. "You did what?"

“I wanted to make sure she was alive. I couldn’t tell if she was—”

Mason tensed. “You couldn’t just leave it alone? You couldn’t just leave it? It’s not your patient, Carter, it’s not alive!”

Carter cowered. “What if she is?”

The kid just didn’t get it.

“What...” Carter whispered and swallowed. “What do we do?”

“We continue,” Mason rose.

“You heard her. There ain’t no cure for it.”

“We don’t need a cure to complete the mission,” Mason spat. “We can use an escape pod to send the package.”

“What about us?”

“We can’t risk it now, can we?”

“So what, we just die here, is that it?”

Mason shrugged. “Theirs but to do and die.” The words chilled his spine. He’d never be Captain again if he died. He’d never have a ship again.

Carter’s lips tightened. “I ain’t quite ready for that.”

Mason snatched his helmet and marched into the lift. “You should have thought of that sooner.”

“Two weeks, though,” Carter said. “The passengers will be dead within two weeks. If we wait, we’ll know if she’s infected and if we are too. It’ll take what, nine months to get back home? They won’t know we delayed.”

Mason stopped the door from closing. “That’s directly disobeying orders.”

“I know, believe me, I know. But if we don’t, how do we know if we’re infected?”

Mason set his jaw. But to do and die...but to do and die...

Carter furrowed his brow. “You’d rather die here? I ain’t doin’ that. I didn’t come here to die.”

“We can’t.” Disobeying the highest authority in Cecilio Command Center wasn’t an option...was it? But if he died in space, he’d never get his life back.

“If we don’t, we die. What’s there to lose?”

Mason shook his head. He couldn’t, could he? But what was the alternative? Dying? “We do this, and we get sick, we will have disobeyed for nothing.”

“What are they gonna do, execute us?” Carter chuckled, but his smile faded.

“Two weeks.”

The lift closed. Mason leaned on the bulkhead and exhaled. “Two weeks,” he whispered. What was two weeks to nine months? Cecilio wouldn’t know. Besides, he’d never be captain again if they didn’t wait.

He pushed from the bulkhead and directed the lift to a storage deck. Gravity receded and his stomach churned. Could he defy Cecilio? What if he failed? He shook the thought away. Not an option; neither defiance nor failure. Perhaps the mission would be delayed, but he *would* complete it. Until then, they needed food.

But someone *had* defied. Someone dared. Whoever stole the orders opposed Cecilio.

1 Day before the HS10 Mission

“Wave, Commander Wyatt,” the director said through her smile as she stepped out onto a red carpet. Crowds cheered on either side and cameras flashed like a lightning storm. Mason slid out of the cab, straightening his tight back as he followed the director. A shuttle waited at the end of the carpet, white against the scarlet skies of Proxima B. Bits of gray with orange tints peeked out where the paint chipped away. It reminded him of the museum exhibit of the HS7—the last Haven Ship to reach Proxima B. The HS8 went to the Alpha Centauri system and HS9 would have arrived, but the epidemic made it unsalvageable. Mason smiled at the memory of the academy, learning history with Laura. The smile faded.

A young man—a kid—approached the shuttle from the other side, escorted by a hunched old woman in a faded uniform.

“That him?” Mason asked.

The director nodded. “Carter McCord. Not that you will remember. He has visited Braen Station once, but no major experience to speak of.”

Mason tightened his lips. A fresh recruit—perfect. A second shuttle rose from the crowd two hundred meters away. “And there’re the other two.” Winston should have been with them; Laura should have too.

The director nodded again, waving. “Ryder tried to join. We turned him away. The case did him no good.”

“Good riddance.” Mason plastered on a smile and shook hundreds of hands as he walked by. The citizens grinned; some blew kisses. His eyes fell upon a woman, an oxygen mask over her mouth. Laura. Mason held her gaze, unable to look away. His muscles tensed and he stepped toward her. What would he say? What could he say?

The woman shook her head, her eyes grim. Mason let out a heavy breath and ascended the gangplank, glancing back at her—it’d been so long.

The director stepped into his view. “Commander?”

Mason blinked. “Director?”

“Meet your partner. Carter McCord.” The director pointed, and Mason turned. The older woman led Carter onto the shuttle; his head twitched like a pigeon.

The director approached the pod’s command center and plugged in the orders. “We will see you in eighteen months.” She smiled and ventured out to talk to the press. An old round technician led the way up the gangplank; a square-shouldered technician followed, his eyes cold and his beard speckled with gray.

Mason eyed the bearded man before the old technician spoke.

“Right, now you watch your head.” He tried to push Mason toward a hibernation chamber, but Mason shook him off.

“I can handle it.” Mason stepped up into the chamber. “Help the kid.”

The old technician frowned but obeyed. The bearded man seemed to hug Carter, then stepped aside, allowing the older one to take over. Mason pressed the internal activation button on his chamber, and it sealed around him. Watery gel bubbled up at his feet and needles stung his arms, injecting him with a sedative and life support.

Mason watched Carter through the porthole as he stepped into his chamber. The hunched woman scrutinized every move, while the bearded technician edged away from the command center, hand in his pocket. His bright green eyes flashed in a sharp glare as gel filled Mason’s chamber, and he slept.

Day 2 on the HSIO

Four suspects: two technicians, the old woman, and Carter. One of them took the orders—one of them didn’t want the mission to happen.

Mason floated before a *Flora* storage unit. Shelves of boxes and crates lined the bulkhead, labels gleaming. He unstrapped one crate reading *Black Beans* and pushed it toward the door.

He unstrapped another crate and paused. If Carter removed the orders, why? What motive did he have? And when did he find the chance? Then there was the gun. Perhaps that had something to do with it? Mason sighed and continued searching. After a half hour, and searching several more storage units, he pushed a crate of rice and a jug of honey out into the passage. They knocked into the bulkhead on the far side and Mason entered one last storage unit, pulling a bottle off the shelf. *Grindstone: Corn and Rye Whiskey*. That’d be helpful. Mason stashed the bottle under his arm, floated out into the passageway, and gathered the supplies.

The crates settled in the gravity as the lift ascended, and he dragged them onto the bridge.

Carter jogged down from the cabins. “You find anything?”

Mason removed his helmet, gagging at the rotten odor. The chamber still lay on the floor. “Beans, rice, honey. That’s about it.”

“That’s it?” Carter nodded to the bottle tucked under Mason’s arm.

The glass clinked as Mason set it on top of the crates. “It’s for emergencies.”

“Course.”

Mason approached the chamber. “We can’t live with this for two weeks.” He wrapped his arms around one end.

Carter chuckled “Yeah.” He grabbed the other side. “I tried to move it, but my shoulder’s all messed up.”

They heaved the chamber into the lift. Mason secured his helmet again and descended to the Chamber Hall, dumping the chest. He returned to the bridge, holding his back. The gel boiler steamed, half empty. Droplets formed on the top bucket and spilled into the bucket below. “Have you taken a look at the navigation systems?” Mason asked, placing his helmet on the console.

“Yeah. I’ve gotta seal up the breach first, though. We kinda ruined the seal on Deck 19, so we can’t hold air there unless the air is in the whole ship, and if we do that—”

“Our nitrogen plug vaporizes.”

“Yeah.” Carter glanced at the crates. “There’s some living space up past the bunks,” he pointed to the cabins. “We can store stuff there. There’s some old couches. A bar. Seems like the crew had a nice place before they went under.”

Mason nodded. If only he could find out what really happened when *he* went under. He shoved the rice crate under his arm and

snatched the frozen whisky. The smell of sulfur from his suit overpowered the residual stench of spoiled gel.

Carter grabbed the last crates, leading Mason through the corridor and jerking his head toward the cargo's cabin as they past. "She seems to be doin' okay. As okay as she can be, I guess."

Doing okay? It would take another two weeks after hibernation for it to be doing okay. And by that time, with the ship-wide epidemic, it'd be dead. Not just *'not alive'* with hibernation sickness, but dead.

Mason continued, and the passageway opened to a large sitting room, half the size of the bridge. Three couches sat in the center, arranged in a U shape facing a large porthole. Mason slid the crates onto a bar behind the couches. He smirked at the icebox behind the counter—like a ship at absolute zero needed an icebox.

"Check this out," Carter called.

Mason turned as the kid pushed a button on the table between the couches and a chessboard rose from it.

"How cool is that?"

"Do you play?" Mason asked.

"Man, me and the boys played all the time," Carter dropped onto the couch. "You wanna go?"

Mason tapped the crates. "We have to put this away."

Carter chuckled. "Man, we've got two weeks to kill...or to die, if we caught whatever the girl's got."

Mason knelt before the icebox to stash away the supplies, but paused. If the kid stole the orders, Mason had two weeks to find out. Would he have another chance? He left the crates and eased onto the couch across from Carter. It creaked as he leaned back. "White first."

Carter examined the board; his hand hovered over his pawns. The Kisasi hung at his side as if mocking Mason's lack of memory. Why did the kid have a gun and he didn't?

Carter moved his queen's pawn two squares. "You're up." He rested his hands on his knees.

Mason mirrored Carter's move. "How's your memory?"

Carter's hand twitched. "It's so-so. My grandma was there—led me up to our pod." He placed the king's pawn beside the queen's.

The old woman at the launch. Mason developed his king's pawn as well. "You didn't volunteer?" Mason forced a chuckle. Perhaps it would help the kid relax.

Carter snorted. "Nah. Not much of a choice." His hand lingered over his knight.

"Why's that?"

Carter moved the knight. "You didn't have a choice either, did you?"

Mason advanced his knight as well, aiming for the center, but keeping his finger on the piece. "They need me. I have experience." He released the knight.

Carter stared at the piece. "I guess I just have different experience." He scanned his side of the board.

"Like what?"

Carter moved his bishop, and Mason's knight fell. "Not breaking my helmet on day one." he smirked and met Mason's eyes.

Mason held his gaze. Although the kid smirked, his eyes pierced. "Thanks for helping me out." Mason examined the board, then moved his queen, hovering over several squares before settling on one. "I still can't figure out the orders. We know why we're here. Why we can't land—the epidemic. But when and why the orders were taken? I can't put my finger on it."

Carter developed the queen's knight. "I didn't push through those two techs to double check."

Mason's fingers twitched as Carter studied the board. "I thought it might have been you, but..." he forced a laugh, advancing his queen to put Carter in check.

Carter blocked with a pawn. "That's quite the thought, I guess."

Mason moved back his queen and Carter castled kingside. "Who took the orders?" Mason asked.

Carter flinched, but focused on the board. "I don't know."

"Why the gun?" Mason moved a pawn toward Carter's king.

Carter advanced his queen, his knee bouncing. "Maybe because my gramma knew the kind of people I'd be dealing with."

Mason's neck stiffened as he examined the board. "What people are those?" He moved a knight to challenge Carter's queen.

Carter pushed the white queen closer. "I ain't the best out there, but I never killed anybody."

"So you figured you'd bring a gun to make me your first?" Mason advanced his pawns toward Carter's castled king.

"When you get back, they'll be cheerin'." Carter's hand hovered over his kingside pawns. "They won't for me."

Mason lowered his voice, peering into his partner's downcast eyes. "I'm sure they'll cheer for you."

Carter shook his head. "Man, they sent me 'cause they won't bat an eye if somethin' goes sour. And 'cause I'm not the type who'd care about what they're doin' here."

"So who are you?"

Carter shrugged. "Two years in rehab makes that a bit fuzzy. They knock that stuff out of you. They put you in a place where they make you fit. I landed workin' on engines. Once you're in

the system, you're in. It's in your blood. That's strike one. Hit two, and you're done. Guess what I hit?"

Mason stared at the board. The kid had been to rehabilitation already. "This was your way out."

Carter chuckled. "This was a shot. My grandma pulled half a dozen strings to get me in. That's why she walked me up to the shuttle. They said I'd get another chance."

Mason scrutinized Carter's king, castled in the corner. "It's your turn."

Carter rubbed his nose. "I'll be honest. I've dealt with mobs and run with the roughest, but you? You're different." He advanced the white queen again. "Even the boss wouldn't do what you're about to."

Mason lifted his eyes from the board again. "I'm following orders." He developed his pawns.

"Mason, what this is...I just ain't sure. It just don't feel right." He moved his rook, peeking at Mason's king from behind a pawn.

Mason moved a bishop to block. "What we do here defines the future of Cecilio, of Proxima B. Of the entire Federal System. The Centauri Colonies have survived against all odds. Letting this ship land? It destroys all that."

Carter shrugged and moved his bishop to challenge Mason's. "I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"Find out?" Mason took the bait. White bishop down.

Carter's rook took the pawn. Check. "Whether or not this whole epidemic thing is real," Carter said.

Mason moved his king away. "It is."

"We'll know in two weeks, won't we?" Carter's queen moved. Check again.

Mason rose. "We'll know I'm right." He moved back to the crates.

“Where you goin’?”

“There’s work to do.”

Carter studied the board as Mason pulled the crates around the bar and opened the icebox. A wave of cold chilled his face, and he pushed the crates in, stashing the whiskey bottle under his arm.

“Mate in two,” Carter muttered.

Mason turned to the kid and narrowed his eyes. Carter stared as if waiting for Mason to push his king’s face to the board and resign.

Mason closed the icebox. “We’ll see.”

9 years before the HS10 mission

“Alright, open!”

He opened his eyes to the night sky. Stars shimmered, seeming brighter than normal. Perhaps his eyes were more adjusted to the darkness.

“You see it?” Laura pointed to the sky. “Right there!”

Mason squinted. “Not really.”

“It’s right there.” She pointed to one star amid billions.

Mason shrugged and turned. Her eyes glimmered in the moonlight. “I can’t.” he said.

“Just try.”

“I told you we needed a telescope,” he laughed. “Come on, it’s late. We’ve got a mission tomorrow.”

She nodded, and he put his arm around her shoulder. “You really can’t see it?” she asked.

Mason smiled. “I can see you.”

Day 12 on the HS10

Gray bulkheads. A gray deck. A gray ceiling. Mason rubbed his eyes and threw his feet over the cot. On the far bulkhead, 11 tally marks glowed in the fluorescent lights. 5 marks to go. He scratched his stubble and pushed himself up. Maybe he could find a razor in storage.

The bulkhead screeched as he etched another tally with a piece of shrapnel from Sector 17. He placed the steel shard on the nightstand and turned to his row of clothes, stacked against the wall. The black hibernation suit, followed by his space suit and helmet, followed by a blue uniform Carter found exploring the

ship. He pulled on the uniform trousers. Years in storage made them stiff. He buttoned up the white shirt, tucked it in and threw the jacket around his shoulders. The rough collar itched his neck as he smoothed out pin holes on the lapel.

Carter's snores echoed through the corridor as Mason marched to the common room, opening the icebox. The leftover rice seemed less than the night before—a common theme of his mornings: less food than he remembered leaving.

Carter was still snoring by the time Mason finished breakfast and set foot on the bridge. Sector 17 shone blue on the Navisphere; the product of two days of labor and study. He and Carter had worked together to weld a sheet of steel over the breach. The Navigation Systems also gleamed blue; the product of another five days. No point in hitting another mountain on their two-week trek. They left the beacon broken; Mason lacked both the tools and the desire to fix something that would inform Cecilio of their position.

“Aiais, how are things looking?” Mason eased into a chair.

“Navigation System repairs holding, breach still sealed, life support systems functional. 59,999,432 units remain,” Aiais replied.

Mason sighed, his knee bouncing as he waited for any systems to fail. Any excuse to leave the bridge. He couldn't remove the Deogen System—they needed the life support—and he still couldn't fix the docking mechanism. Cut the wrong wire, and the pod could release and leave them stranded. Cut a different wire, and the whole mechanism could blow. The ship's manual dedicated 513 pages to the docking bay, so that took some time. Turned out it didn't mention being hit by an asteroid.

Mason eyed the gel crate, a crusty film along the bottom. He washed down a mouthful of cold rice and scooped up the crate, scraping out the crust. At least he could fetch water every few days—what an adventure.

He marched back to his room, passing the door of the cabin where Carter stowed his cargo. Light streamed from beneath it. Mason lifted his space suit. Did he need it? They already fixed the breach and the navigation systems. He lay his suit back on the deck next to his other clothes and marched to the bridge.

“Where you headed?” Carter descended from the passageway.

“We’re out of water.”

“I can get it for you,” Carter reached for the crate, but Mason pulled away.

“I got it. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I...” Carter began. “I can hear her breathe.”

Mason stopped the lift from closing. “Surprised you could hear anything over your snoring.”

“I don’t snore.”

Mason chuckled and shook his head. “If the thing is breathing, we’re getting close.”

Carter nodded. “She doesn’t look sick.”

“It will,” the door closed, and the lift descended.

* * *

Hours marched along, and Mason passed them by reading the ship’s manuals or scrubbing the bridge to keep bacteria from growing. After finishing the manual on the docking bay specifications, he moved on to the Deogen System Manual to find out how to remove it. Apparently they didn’t need to cart the five-meter-high casing across the ship, only the core. The outer shell served to contain and divert the energy.

Carter spent most of his days monitoring the cargo. He spent hours at a time with it. Mason sometimes overheard his partner talking to it as if attending a therapy session. He tried giving Carter work to do, but settled with warning him not to touch the cargo. No need risking infection.

When the kid finally dragged himself away from the cargo, he helped Mason where he could, burgling a few more storage units to retrieve dishes, utensils, and clothes. Breaking into things appeared to be his best skill, being a criminal and all. Once or twice, Mason turned to find Carter staring, his fingers twitching near his gun. He never left it behind. Mason remarked about repairing the pod, and Carter chuckled and hurried away. Most times, the kid seemed fine. He read up on the APC, claimed to find several typos, and laughed it off. But the times when he stared, he seemed like a different person.

Mason's eyes drooped, but he shook it off and studied the damaged docking bay displayed on the Navisphere. How to fix it? The crash had fried half the circuitry. Could he manually detach it? Mason leaned his face on his hand, eyes heavy. "Aiais, start diagnostics."

"Diagnostics ready: state your query."

"Determine if external override switch could be accessed to detach the pod. Run multiple scenarios. I'll be back in the morning." He pushed himself up, stretching his back.

"Goodnight Commander." The Navisphere flickered off and Mason stumbled up to the passageway. He paused at the door to the cargo cabin. Was it really breathing? The doorknob chilled his palm, and he peered in. The cargo lay beneath a bundle of blankets as breath billowed up from her in the cold. He shook himself...*it*. Not her. Breath billowed up from *it* in the cold.

The door clicked shut. “Four more days,” he whispered and eased onto his cot. “Four more.”

Day 16 on the HS10

Tapping. Tapping. It wouldn’t stop tapping. On and on, the frantic beat grew louder. Mason’s fingers twitched, and he rose, rubbing his back, and scratching another tally mark onto the wall. Completion day—time to go home. The tapping started up again. He threw the shrapnel onto the nightstand and wrenched the door open.

Carter pointed across the passageway to the cargo cabin. “Her eyes.” He said.

Eyes? Maybe the infection caused bleeding? Was the kid squeamish around blood? “Just leave her...leave it be.” He pushed the door closed, but Carter stopped it.

“They’re open.”

“Open?”

“Her eyes!”

Mason furrowed his brow, then nodded. “Give me a minute.” He closed the door. Open? How could its eyes be open?

He threw on his uniform and entered the cargo room, pressing his sleeve against his mouth. The cargo twitched and its eyes fixed on him. His neck stiffened, but it looked past. It couldn’t see. His muscles relaxed, and he stepped back into the passageway, closing the door. It couldn’t see. He turned to the lounge, shaking his head. Perhaps the infection caused blindness?

“Where’re you goin’?”

“Breakfast,” Mason muttered.

“She’s awake, man.”

Mason yanked open the icebox. “Hardly.” He snatched a bowl and filled it more than usual. The last day on the HS10 warranted

it. The cargo would be dead by the time he detached their pod. They'd be off soon.

"Mason!"

Mason took a bite of his rice.

"Cecilio said she'd be dead. She's wakin' up. She ain't gotten worse, she's gotten better. Every day she's gotten better."

Mason nodded. "You would know." The kid spent half his days watching it and...

The missing food.

"You've been feeding it," Mason said.

"'Cause she ain't sick."

The icebox shook as he flung the door shut. "You don't know that."

"I know she'd be dead by now if I hadn't fed her," Carter said. "She ain't gettin' sicker."

Mason waved him off and strode to the bridge.

"Mason!"

Mason glanced up at the Navisphere and pulled up the damaged docking bay. "I don't know what to tell you," he scooped beans into his mouth. "Aiais, show the calculations for a manual launch."

"Of course, sir." The Navisphere blinked with statistical probabilities of the success of manually detaching the pod, showing a green wire he needed to cut. Or was it red?

"You know what this means, right?" Carter asked.

Mason clinked his spoon on the rim of his bowl. "Means I'm going on a spacewalk." He hadn't done one of those in years. Too long.

Carter scowled. "Cecilio lied."

Mason rubbed his temple. Was he serious? "About what?"

"About what?" Carter asked. "They said she'd be dead."

“Didn’t we just finish this conversation?” Mason tossed his bowl onto the console.

“Man, she’s alive. And if she’s alive, so are all the others.”

“That’s an assumption.” Mason rose and strode back to his cabin to retrieve his suit.

“I think it’s a pretty good one,” Carter said.

Mason folded his blue jacket, stashing it next to his other clothes. “Maybe—maybe it’s alive, but that doesn’t change things,” he shrugged on his suit.

“Why not? If she’s alive, the rest—”

“They’re not,” Mason zipped his suit.

“What if I’m right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mason snatched his helmet and marched back through the passageway.

“Why not?”

“Cecilio has a reason.”

“A reason to kill sixty million people?”

“It’s cargo.”

“What? No, man, don’t you give me that! They’re people.”

“Not legally,” Mason said.

“Not legally? Not legally? That’s what you’re basin’ this on?”

Mason entered the lift and faced the kid. “I’m certainly not basing anything on the opinion of a criminal.”

Carter caught the door as it slid closed. “Man, why can’t you just listen to me! Just admit that they’re wrong and we can figure this out.”

“They’re not wrong,” Mason set his jaw. Why couldn’t the kid understand?

“They lied to us. They said we had to set this thing adrift. Send people to die. Why can’t you say they’re liars? Why can’t you see that? She’s a person—they’re all people. Why can’t you—”

“They’re all I got!” Mason snapped. “They’re all I’ve got. If I can’t trust them, then who? My feelings? You? You’re a criminal, Carter. You’re here on parole.” The kid flinched. Mason’s face hardened. “Stop pretending to be some kind of saint and do your job.”

Carter’s shoulders slumped, and he released the door.

Mason sighed, catching it. “Look, this is your last shot. If you mess this up, you’re done. Don’t waste it. We have to trust they know what they’re doing. That’s how the job works.”

“I ain’t here on parole,” Carter grimaced and stormed back up the bridge.

Mason released the door and snapped his helmet into place. The kid just didn’t understand. Mason stood at attention until the lift opened, and stormed through the Chamber Hall. He tried to help the kid see, and he spat in his face. Why couldn’t he understand? Ever since they arrived, he’d been a fool.

Mason entered the gravity chamber on the far end of the ship and hit the activation button with his fist. No one understood the concept of orders anymore.

Mason glided from the gravity chamber into a corridor. Their old pod waited at the end. Red lights flashed and a panel on the bulkhead hung open with wires reaching out like tentacles. A toolbox floated beside several wire cutters and drills. Mason shoved the tools back into the box, snapped that to his suit, and entered the nearest airlock. The first door sealed, and the room depressurized. He tethered himself to the bulkhead and the second door opened to the abyss.

Mason pushed off into the darkness and the tether jolted, reaching its full length. He pulled himself back to the hull and unscrewed a panel, exposing the manual override lever and a

twisted mass of wires. If Carter hadn't busted the autopilot, the pod would have detached fine—they would be on their way home.

Mason sifted through the wires, seized a red one, and cut it. If things had gone to plan, he'd be Captain again.

His fingers wrapped around the manual detach lever. One step closer to fixing this mess. One step closer to winning his life back.

He pulled the lever and fire flashed.

1,974 Days before the HSIO Mission

Guards rushed Mason down the marble steps of the courthouse. Cameras flashed and reporters clambered to shove their microphones into his face.

“Captain Wyatt! Captain Wyatt! Will you address the concerns of extremist violence over this case?”

“Captain Wyatt is not taking questions at the moment!” one guard shouted, shoving reporters aside. Behind police barricades, protesters leaned on their signs—a few waved them and shouted as the guards hurried Mason to a black cab waiting on the corner. Hundreds more protesters had swarmed the streets the previous days, weeks, and months before. Not anymore.

The lev-train hummed to a stop high above. If the guards left him alone, he could run for it and shoot across the skyline of Cecilio; like old times. Instead, the guards shoved him into the cab and the door slammed. Cameras filled the window as the guards moved away.

“You’re doing quite well, all things considered.”

Mason turned to his attorney sitting across from him. His black suit blended in with the pleather seats and a tablet lay face down beside him, Cecilio’s seal shining on the back. “That’s comforting,” Mason said as they jolted and zoomed down the street.

The attorney nodded, grasping his tablet so it wouldn’t fall. “More comforting than a cell.”

Mason watched the city flash by. “Is that where I’m headed?”

“You’re certainly not a captain anymore, that’s for sure.”

“Same time tomorrow?” Mason asked.

The attorney nodded again. “They’ll come to a verdict. They’re split at the moment. Some want to hear you testify again. They want more detail. But soon—certainly by tomorrow they’ll come around. You have good people fighting for you.”

Mason peered out the window. “And what about the people against me? They’ve been out there for weeks,” Mason turned back to his attorney. “I don’t get it.”

The attorney grinned. “They’re rather idiotic, I’ll grant that.”

The cab rounded a few bends, then slowed behind the courthouse. The attorney opened the door and stepped out, the tablet under his arm. “No one has found your apartment yet?”

“No.”

“Good,” the attorney tightened his lips and extended his hand. “Until tomorrow?”

Mason shook the man’s clammy hand. He needed to get outside the courthouse more often. “Thank you, Harold.”

“You won’t after you get the bill.”

Mason smiled, eyeing the floor. “So, I’ll testify again tomorrow?”

Harold waved his hands. “No need to worry. You have no obligation.”

Mason nodded, Harold closed the door, and the cab sped off. The same four blocks flashed by three times as they circled the city, ensuring that no one followed. Finally, the cab settled on Rose Way. Mason stepped out onto the sidewalk, thanked the driver, and pushed into the crowd. Skyscrapers, smooth and shimmering, reached for the top of the atmospheric field. Cecilio would need to expand it soon. The atmosphere outside couldn’t sustain life yet.

He rounded a few blocks and jogged up the steps to a 58-story building. “Evening, Ms. Hindson,” he nodded to the receptionist behind the desk, his boots squeaking on the glossy floor.

“Captain, I say, if one more officer swings by saying how I can’t tell nobody you’re here, I’ll...I’ll...”

“It’s all over tomorrow.” Mason entered the lift, pressing floor 57. “All over tomorrow,” he leaned against the wall. No one else entered; the doors chimed 56 floors later, opening to a long corridor. Mason aimed for the furthest apartment, but another swung open, and Bob rolled out in his wheelchair.

“Hey there,” Bob smiled, toothless. “I saw you on the broadcast this morning. Seems the case is finally closing.”

Mason stood to the side of the hall to allow his neighbor to pass. “Tomorrow should be the last day.”

“How’re you holding up?”

“I’ll manage,” Mason said.

Bob smiled. “There’s a reason for all this. You’ve got to put one foot in front of the other while you can.” He tapped his legs and grinned. “After that, you get wheels. That’s when the fun begins.”

Mason smiled and unlocked his door with his fingerprint.

“Hey, Mason.”

Mason opened the door, glancing back to his neighbor.

“We’ve been praying for you.”

Mason smiled. “I need all the luck I can get.” The door closed behind him. All the luck he could get. He tapped his leg and turned to face a large gray room. A window spanned the far wall and the city lights beyond drowned the constellations in neon splashes of scarlet and green. He dragged a beer from the icebox and dropped onto the couch before the window, grimacing at the scar in his

reflection. It still stung. The doctors had promised his nerves would heal in a couple months. That was a couple months ago. Whatever the case, the damage should fade soon. “What’re things looking like?”

The window blinked to life with news casts from around Cecilio. Counter-protestors waved signs high above their heads as guards led a broad man out of the courthouse. Words like *Our Planet, Our Rules* were scrawled across many signs.

Mason sipped the beer, and someone knocked at the door. A camera feed displayed on the window. Laura, her oxygen mask covering her face. Mason smiled, but it faded seeing her like that. He rose. “You know it’s unlocked.” The screens receded back into the window as she opened the door. The diamond ring on her finger gleamed in the white lights and her oxygen mask hummed.

“Do you want to come in?” Mason smiled and entered the kitchen. “You hungry? I haven’t eaten since this morning.” He pulled a leftover sandwich out of the icebox.

The door clicked shut, and she pulled down her mask. “I’m okay,” she rasped.

Mason swallowed and peered over the counter. Okay? She’d be okay when she could speak again. “You want to sit down?” he nodded to the stools.

She shook her head and stared at the floor.

“Laura, what’s going on?” he set the beer and sandwich on the counter.

Her mask wheezed, but she didn’t look up.

“Is this about the case?”

She drew in a deep breath.

“I figured,” he said.

The mask gave a sharp hiss, and she pulled it away. “I don’t want to say anything,” she whispered. “I just want to leave it be.”

She shook her head, looking down again and taking a breath from the mask.

“Then leave it,” Mason said. “It’s okay,” he gestured to the couch. “You want to sit? I’ve been at the courthouse all day and—”

“I know.”

Mason nodded. “Everybody knows. We drove around for forty-six minutes today so nobody would follow us.”

“I...” she began. “I was there today. At the courthouse.”

Mason furrowed his brow. “Why didn’t you say something?” She didn’t look up. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She fingered her ring. The mask hissed as she glanced out to the first stars of the evening. Her face fell. “I can’t...” he hardly heard her through the mask.

Mason narrowed his eyes as her hand drifted to the ring. “Can’t do what?”

She pulled the ring from her finger.

“Wait.” Mason held up his hand. “Just tell me what’s wrong. You know it’s better when we *talk* about things, right?” he chuckled, but his smile faded. She couldn’t talk like she used to.

“You...” she began and took a breath. Mason waited for her to continue, but she settled on the one word.

“What happened?”

“You know what happened!” her voice cracked.

Mason inspected the bottle. His jaw tightened, and he nodded. “Ryder allied himself with radicals to hit me with every charge he could scrape up. That’s what happened. And you didn’t say a word in my defense.”

“Mason, please—”

“You want me to pull out? To not win? I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Mason, I...” she took another breath. “I can’t.” her eyes glimmered.

“Hey.” Mason took her hand, but she pulled away. “Look, I’ll pull out if you want. I’ll tell Harold to stand down.”

She shook her head. “It’s not about the case.” She pulled the mask away. “You still can’t see it.”

“I did what I felt was right.”

“So did I,” she took a breath, glancing down at the ring.

“Laura.”

She placed the ring on the countertop. Her lip trembled as she pulled away. “I hope...” she whispered, “I pray you’ll see.”

Mason swallowed. She came to leave. He couldn’t have changed her mind. The door clicked shut and Mason dropped onto the barstool. There was nothing he could have done. He stared into the bottle and set it next to the ring. “I did what I felt was right.”

Day 19 on the HS10

Mason opened his eyes and bolted upright. His head pounded, and he collapsed back onto his cot, squinting in the florescent light. He’d been on the HS10—outside, tethered to the ship. He rubbed his eyes. Brilliant orange flashed in his mind. Fire?

He eased to the edge of his cot, noting his space suit in a crumpled heap. Chills bit from the steel deck as he stumbled to his suit, folding it into a square and placing it beside his other clothes. He leaned against the bulkhead, staring at his reflection in his helmet. There’d been an explosion—he squinted—at the docking bay. Leaving the helmet, he stumbled into the passageway, his head

throbbing as Carter peeked out from his cabin. “Hey, look who woke up.”

Mason staggered to the bridge and collapsed into a chair; his head spun.

“You took a nasty hit,” Carter followed with his heavy footsteps.

“Aiais. Damage report,” Mason said. The Navisphere blinked to life. He’d been trying to fix the pod so they could go home—so they could finally leave this bygone mausoleum.

“Starboard docking bay sealed off for safety protocols,” Aiais said.

“Mason,” Carter began, “before you—”

“And the pod?” Mason examined the crimson docking bay.

“Pod undetectable,” Aiais replied.

Mason gripped the arms of the chair and hissed a long breath. The only way home—the lifeline of the mission, gone. His knuckles whitened; a curse hung on the tip of his tongue. A curse to the mission, to the cargo—to himself for messing it up. If he hadn’t slipped and snagged his oxygen hose—hadn’t let Carter burn the autopilot—hadn’t listened and saved the cargo—

He slammed the console.

It would all be over.

He drew in a deep breath, his head throbbing. There were still options, right? There had to be. “We have a mission.”

“What?”

“We have a mission!” Mason rose, his head spinning, and Carter stopped him.

“You’re not in any shape to go out there.”

“Well, you sure don’t seem to be helping me out, do you?” Mason pushed past him, stumbling toward the lift.

“Where you goin’?”

“There are still escape pods,” Mason paused, swaying. His eyes rolled back, but he snapped back to attention. “We can still send the Deogen System.”

“That thing ain’t gonna fit.”

“The inner core will. We can still win this,” Mason said.

“What about us?”

“We’re here to finish.”

“I’m startin’ to think maybe we’re here to die.”

“It’s an eight-and-a-half-month trip. We wouldn’t make it in one of those pods.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I’m not leavin’.”

Mason turned to his partner. “I guess it is.”

“You know, I used to look up to people like you.”

Mason veered to the lift. If he could get to the Deogen System and finish the job.

“I thought I wanted to be just like you. A spaceman with Cecilio at his back,” Carter scowled. “I’d rather be in rehab. At least things made sense.” He blocked Mason’s way.

“Move,” Mason growled.

“It’s like you lost your head and they screwed it back on all twisted.”

“Move!”

“Man, why can’t you think!”

Mason set his jaw. “I think. I think just as well as you. But I know that what goes on in here,” he tapped his head, “gets messed up. And when you listen to that mess, you get people killed.”

“People are gonna die, Mason. People are gonna die if you do this.”

“Cargo.”

“People.”

“Even if they were, they’re nothing like us,” Mason swayed and stumbled.

“Why not? The girl’s awake. She’s just like us.”

“Maybe, but the rest aren’t.”

“Then when do they become like us? When are they people?”

Mason stepped around him. If he could get to the lift...

“Mason, when are they people?”

His eyes grew heavy. His feet dragged.

“Mason?”

He collapsed.

1,973 Days before the HSI0 Mission

Mason straightened his coat before the looking glass, the gray lines pressed and sharp for the final hearing. Cecilio’s crest shimmered next to his medals. Upon his right shoulder, an embroidered Federal System flag and the banner of the Centauri Colonies. Upon his left shoulder, his captain’s insignia. He clipped his belt and snapped his hands to his side. One more time, and it’d all be over.

Proxima Centauri glittered off the ring on his nightstand. He straightened the coat again, exhaling. The scar marred his face. He gripped his cap, Cecilio’s emblem upon it. One more day.

He descended in the lift and marched out through the lobby. Bob waved with a smile and Mason nodded back, his face like flint. His pleather boots clacked on the pavement and he slid into the black cab waiting on Rose Way. Buildings flashed by until they reached the white pillars of the courthouse.

Reporters swarmed as Mason stepped out onto the sidewalk and secured his cap; the guards stumbled to keep up. Protestors waved their signs as he past, some calling out and pleading, others

spewing obscenities. His boots scuffed the marble staircase, and the guards rushed ahead to open the great iron doors.

One more day.

He removed his cap as the closing doors echoed behind him. A hush swept over the hall—he nodded to the security guards and pressed his hand to the scanner. It chimed, and he proceeded through the metal detector and into the foyer. Harold hurried to his side. “Bad news. Not good at all. Not good,” the attorney hissed, his whisper echoing in the domed room.

“Spit it out.” Mason strode through the hall toward a broad staircase. People pointed and stared as he marched past.

“They’re going to ask you to testify again, as I said yesterday. But word is that it could hamper the verdict if you don’t,” Harold jogged after him.

Mason’s feet snapped to attention before the mahogany door to the supreme courtroom. He exhaled. “I did the right thing.”

“Of course you did, what else would you have done? What would anyone have done in your shoes?”

Mason gripped the doorknob. “I did what I thought was right. What I *felt* was right.”

“And that’s all we can ask, isn’t it?”

Mason stared at the metal door, etched to look like aged wood. “Is it, though?” he shook his head. “I don’t know, Harold.” The scar stung, and he set his jaw. “I don’t know.”

Harold’s eyes widened, and he lifted his hand, but drew back, then placed it stiffly on Mason’s shoulder. “Leave it to the judge. He’s there to know the law. To determine what is right.”

Mason gripped his cap and opened the door. Some voices hushed and others hissed as he entered. In the corner of his eye, Laura stood in the stands behind Jackson Ryder and...

Winston wasn’t there. Why would he be?

The gavel fell to begin the proceedings. The white-haired chief justice straightened his tablet with his slender fingers. “Counselors, we begin our last day of *Ryder v. Wyatt*. The defendant is accused of wrongful death...so on and so forth. Let’s drop the formalities. We all want the same thing,” he eyed the surrounding panel of judges. They nodded, and the chief justice turned his gaze to Mason. “The *Principium*.”

A cold weight dropped in Mason’s stomach. He shook himself and raised his chin.

The chief justice called Harold up to the stand. He stood straight and defended the right to remain silent with a prolonged soliloquy. Once Harold returned to his seat, the plaintiff’s attorney rose, straightening his navy blue tie: “The defendant may plead silence,” he said. “A child is silent when he’s broken a vase or stolen sweets. Silence is born of guilt and guilt, born of fear. What man who’s done right has anything to fear?”

All eyes turned to Mason. Laura’s oxygen mask wheezed, and he frowned at the floor. He’d done nothing wrong. Nothing to deserve punishment.

He gripped his cap and rose. “I will testify.” Harold hissed a long breath and Mason marched to the stand. Once sworn in, the plaintiff’s attorney approached, his hands clasped.

“You would say Malum’s Belt exists as an asteroid field, correct?”

“Objection!” Harold rose. “Leading the witness. Furthermore, the defense does not concern the Belt or its existence, but only as it pertains to the *Principium*.”

“You heard him,” the chief justice said to the plaintiff.

The attorney’s lips tightened, and he turned back to Mason. “Well then, what happened on the mission? Details this time.”

Mason drew in a deep breath. He'd told them before. He'd told them what happened. So had Ryder. They wanted him to slip up—to implicate himself—but he'd done nothing wrong. He squared his shoulders, facing the attorney. “Where would you like me to start?”

The attorney's eyes narrowed, and he glanced back at his client. Ryder nodded, his green eyes gleaming in the courtroom.

The attorney turned back to Mason. “Perhaps the beginning?”

Mason looked at Laura. She turned away, and he exhaled, setting his jaw. “We got the call later than usual...”

Day 19 on the HSIO

Mason's head throbbed. Even behind his eyelids, the lights stung. His body seemed to creak as he moved. “Theirs not to reason why. Theirs but to do and die,” he whispered. “But to do and die.” Cecilio gave him everything—food, water, a job. The city already stood as the beating heart of the Centauri Colonies, but with the Deogen System it would become the immortal soul. Neither time nor war would crack its foundations. He opened his eyes, squinting. Carter leaned on the doorframe, eyeing Mason with his hand on the Kisasi.

“You considering it?” Mason muttered.

Carter's hand slipped off the grip. “You said they weren't legally people. What'd you mean?”

“Where were you five years ago?”

“Gettin' arrested.”

Mason ached as he sat up and nodded to the cot. “I'll only tell you once.”

2,092 Days before the HS10 Mission / 119 Days before Ryder v. Wyatt.

My boots rang on the gangplank as I entered the Interceptor docked at Braen Station. Five hibernation chambers gleamed in a semicircle beneath the white lights, and the scent of sulfur hung in the air. The command center lit up as I walked past. Pathways gleamed behind the chambers leading to a door to the engine room. I ran my hand over the smooth pleather of the captain's chair. Another day, another mission.

"In this heart I..." Laura said to herself as she ascended the gangplank. "In this heart I find, no good or..." she paused, glancing up.

"Can't quite get it?" I asked.

"I'll get there." She entered the ship, her ring twinkling in the lights. "You ready?"

I nodded and tapped my chair. "Are you ready?" I glanced at her abdomen—nothing visible yet. I smiled.

Her lips tightened. "We should be fine." She closed her eyes with a sigh, then smiled. "Ready."

I shouldn't have brought it up. But she was the one who resolved to see it through. I peered down the gangplank. "You think they'll show?"

Laura forced a laugh and approached her chamber. "Winston's got to make his rounds."

"Every time." I grasped the pleather and steel armrests, feeling the embedded controls, and sat down. It felt like home.

"Did you see the HS1 exhibit? I think it's new—at least, it wasn't here last time," Laura said.

I shook my head. “At what point does this place stop being the HS1?”

Laura shrugged. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

“It really is.” I leaned back, tapping the armrests. “I, uh...” I peered down the gangplank. All clear. “What do you think about summer weddings?”

Laura shook her head. “Too warm. Everyone gets all sweaty. How about spring?”

“That’s in two weeks.”

“So?”

I chuckled. “Don’t you need time to plan it?”

She shrugged and her brow furrowed. “I don’t know.”

What did she want? Did she even know? I smiled. “Well, you think on it and let me know, okay?”

Laura nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m booked next Tuesday, though. Wednesdays usually aren’t great either.”

She cracked a smile.

“We’ll figure—” I began, but stopped as Winston marched in, his silvery hair glimmering in the white lights of the Interceptor. Ryder followed, square-shouldered and clean shaven like the ancient captain of the HS1.

“Oi, did you notice they’ve got a new exhibit for the HS1?” Winston grinned. “It’s a thing of beauty, I tell you.”

“I do believe I heard that.” I smirked at Laura.

“It’s a cutaway model of the ship. It’s fascinating, really. Looks nice next to the monuments.” Winston approached his hibernation chamber and primed it. “Very nice.”

“Marco’s statue got defaced again,” Ryder muttered. “They had some people cleaning it off.”

“Every time,” I said, closing the gangplank from the command chair.

“Aye. You know, I never much liked the fellow, but he’s still history, I suppose.” Winston shrugged and stepped into his chamber. “Off we go, then. I’ll catch you in the stars.” His smile twinkled, and his chamber sealed. Ryder’s chamber closed as well, and I turned to Laura as she repeated her usual pre-mission prayer.

“Time to make Cecilio proud,” I interrupted.

She nodded and sighed.

“You okay?”

Laura opened her chamber. “In this heart I find, no good or light to see. I cannot but resign and cling to Him who set me free.”

I chuckled. “I like the rhythm.”

“Thanks.” She stepped into the chamber.

“Don’t worry.”

“I’m not. See you soon.” She smiled, and the chamber closed.

I smiled and faced to the Navisphere. “Off and away.” The thrusters rumbled as I navigated out of Braen Station. The station’s turrets reflected the crimson light of Proxima Centauri as I put the Interceptor into auto pilot and entered the last hibernation chamber. Through the porthole, the stars drew near. I closed my eyes and slept.

2,078 Days before the HS10 Mission / 105 Days before Ryder v. Wyatt

I breathed and floated out of the chamber. My gaze darted. Laura. She floated outside her chamber next to Winston and Ryder. They oriented themselves and began pulling on their space suits. I hovered into my chair and activated the Navisphere. “Mission briefing.”

“Welcome, Captain Wyatt.” The Navisphere blinked to life. A small passenger vessel skirted the fringes of Proxima Centauri’s solar system. A long gravity cylinder spun around its center, but its engines were dark. “You and your team have been assigned to investigate vessel 1495B, the *Principium*, registered to Wilbur Collins. The ship was on course from Alpha Centauri to Cecilio when systems failed due to a power outage after a collision with Malum’s Belt. Your mission is to restore power to the ship and direct it to Cecilio safely.”

Simple enough.

“Is the ship still in the belt?” Winston asked.

“The ship is adrift outside the belt, on course to reenter at 0200 hours.”

I nodded. 45 minutes.

“I’ll prep the tethers,” Winston approached the command center.

I shook my head and swiped the Navisphere back to a window. “We’ll assess the situation first.”

Winston turned to me. “But shouldn’t we—”

“We have plenty of time.” I drifted from my chair, my boots clanking onto the deck as the Interceptor docked to the gravity ring of the *Principium*. I slipped into my space suit, fastening a Kisasi to my side. The suit conformed around me, and I secured my helmet, turning to my team. “Check?”

“Check,” they each said one by one, their voices crackling in my earpiece.

“We have 43 minutes. We should be out in 30. Ryder, check the hibernation chambers. Make sure they’re functional and fix them if they’re not. Winston, you come with me and Laura to diagnose the problem.”

The Interceptor depressurized, and a gauge blinked up on my visor. Seven hours of air. The hatch opened and the four of us entered a short passageway, ice glimmering in the lights from our suits.

At the end of the passage, Ryder pulled ahead, several tools in hand. He snapped a computer panel off the bulkhead beside the door, clipped two wires and measured up a third.

“Not that one,” Winston said. “You’ll need that one to carry the current.”

Ryder pulled the clippers away. “Thanks.”

Winston nodded, and Ryder locked two wires together and attached a third to his suit’s power cell. Sparks flashed; the door slid aside, revealing a corridor. Crimson panels gleamed, marking hibernation sectors, and an archway led to the bridge.

“You know where to go.” I aimed for the bridge, Laura and Winston following as Ryder broke away and entered one of the crimson hibernation sectors.

A Navisphere displayed stars and debris from Malum’s Belt and a crack etched across the glass.

“Analysis.” I took the captain’s chair.

“Authorization needed.”

Winston typed in the Cecilion override code.

“Analysis,” I repeated.

A display flickered up on the Navisphere. “Structural damage to the hull, primary power generators offline, backup reserves at 13%, 39 minutes until reentry into an uncharted debris field.”

Uncharted? “What caused the outage?” I asked.

“Impact from debris,” the ship replied.

Laura pulled up the ship’s log and course, stretching from the Alpha Centauri system across empty space until it neared the belt. “It...” she began, tracing the ship along each log point. “It looks like the ship just dove in.”

“At that speed, it’s no wonder the power went out,” I replied.

“Why, though?” Winston reviewed the ship’s log. “Why didn’t she fly out of the way?”

“Better question.” I pushed up from the captain’s chair and turned to the passageway. “Can we get her back online?” I jogged down the passage, peering through one of the open doors as Ryder surveyed the passengers.

“All good here.” Ryder nodded, and I moved on, slowing at the engine room.

I activated the panel, and the door scraped aside, revealing a reactor flashing red and showering sparks. Near the ceiling, shards of metal cut through the hull, piercing the reactor’s shell. “Winston!”

Winston peered through the door, and his face contorted. “Not good.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, she’s not dead.” Winston crossed his arms, the red light shimmering off his visor.

“So, why’s the power out?”

Winston examined the room, the bulkhead dented and pierced. He prodded a twisted piece of shrapnel. “It’s metal.”

Metal? “Maybe part of the ship?”

Winston squinted. “Perhaps? But it’s over there too,” he nodded to another shard piercing the bulkhead. “And there. There, and there. It’s not the same alloy either.”

“So, what’re we looking at?” I shielded my visor as sparks showered from the reactor.

Winston squinted. “I don’t know.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Can I rewire the entire engine room? Oh, give me a spool of wire and some clippers and I’ll be right to it.”

“So, what can we do?”

Winston pursed his lips. “Well, I don’t know. We could get those tethers and tow her back to Cecilio. Depends on the chambers though.”

I tapped my comms. “Ryder, status on the chambers?”

“Stable, but the reserves won’t hold more than an hour. We need that reactor.”

I turned to Winston.

He scratched his thin hair. “We can siphon power from the Interceptor to keep the chambers stable. We’ll dock her at Braen.”

I nodded. “Get to it.”

“I’ll need someone to shut off the reserve power when we connect the Interceptor. We can’t overload the chambers.”

“Now?”

“I’ll let you know.”

We darted out into the passageway, and Winston split off toward the Interceptor.

I pressed the commlink on my glove. “Laura, run a scan for metal debris—”

“I think I found it.”

Found it? Already? “Be right there.” I jogged back to the bridge. “What’re we looking at?” I inspected the screen showing the ship’s trajectory.

She pointed through the Navisphere. A great cloud of jagged metal hung in the dark abyss, gleaming in the light of Proxima Centauri and blocking out the other stars. “What is this?”

“I...” Laura shook her head. “I’m not sure.”

“Those aren’t asteroids.”

“No.”

“Then what are they?” I asked.

“I, um...” Laura began. “It looks like wreckage.”

I looked to the port and starboard—jagged chunks of twisted metal filled the belt. “From what?”

“I don’t know.”

My fingers twitched. “How long ‘til impact?”

“Twenty-six minutes.”

I set my clock and tapped my comms. “Winston, how close are you?”

“I’ve only just started, sir,” his voice echoed in my ear.

“Get to it.” I stepped back from the Navisphere, my eyes trained on the wreckage. Where’d it come from? “Keep me posted. If we take another hit, we’re done.” I jogged back through the passageway to Ryder. “How’re we looking?”

“They’re lucky, Captain. They’ll make it.” Ryder stepped back, glancing at me. “You said it was wreckage?”

“We’ll hit again in the next twenty minutes. Help Winston.”

“Yes, sir.” Ryder snapped his toolbox closed and darted to the Interceptor.

I glanced back to Laura on the bridge as she monitored the wreckage. Red numbers counted down on my visor. 24 minutes, 32 seconds.

I tapped my comms again. “Winston, status?”

“We’ll be ready to connect in ten, sir. You’ll need to shut off the reserves.”

“You have five.” I approached the engine room and paused, eyeing Laura. The wreckage closed in. I exhaled. Sparks showered from the primary reactor, bouncing off my visor. 20 minutes, 9 seconds. “How’re we looking Winston?”

“Almost there, sir, just give us time.”

The reactor’s outer shell trembled. I edged around to the backside. A rod of steel had pierced it. “We don’t have time,” I said, sparks flashing. The ship rumbled, and I peered down to the bridge, my fingers drumming my palm. The fringes of the debris field strafed the Navisphere. “Laura, get out of there.”

“But—”

“Get out. Back to the Interceptor.” The primary reactor shook, and sparks seared my visor. Red numbers glowed brighter: 14:21...20...19...

I stepped away from the reactor and eyed the kill switch to the power reserves. I wrapped my fingers around it. “Winston, give me the mark.” The reactor casing rattled silently in the airless ship. The floor trembled. 13:17...16...

“Alright, in five,” Winston began. “Four...” the reactor vibrated, cracks etching across its black shell. “Three...”

“Winston!”

“Now—”

Red flashed, metal pierced, glass cracked. My hand slipped off the switch and I flew into the bulkhead. Shrapnel from the

generator embedded into my helmet—my face stung as air hissed into the emptiness. I exhaled and pressed my hands against the crack to hold in the air. It slipped through my fingers and I closed my eyes to keep out the cold. My lungs burned—the earpiece vibrated without a sound.

Arms wrapped around me and hoisted me off the deck. I didn't dare open my eyes in the emptiness as they dragged me along and laid me on an icy surface. I winced as someone tore my helmet away, the embedded metal gashing my face. Another helmet slipped over my head and I gasped for air. One of my eyes opened. The other wouldn't. "Captain! Wyatt, talk to me!"

Ryder.

"Come on, lad, wake up."

Winston.

"Laura," I whispered.

"She's, well...sir," Ryder stammered.

"Where is she?" my lungs ached as my suit pressurized.

"I'll get her." Ryder darted back into the *Principium*.

I pulled myself to my feet, my head spinning. "How long 'til..." I muttered, but my mind couldn't keep up. After a few more breaths, it cleared. "How long until we hit?"

Winston peered back through the *Principium* as wreckage closed in around the Navisphere. The engine room trembled and Ryder lifted Laura from the deck. I took a step toward her but stumbled.

"About twelve minutes. We still have time. We can still pull her out," Winston said.

I shook my head, leaning against the bulkhead. "Laura."

"Come on, lad. We've got this."

Ryder held Laura's arm over his shoulder and charged back to the Interceptor. Her feet dragged. Why didn't I tell her to run sooner?

"Sir?"

I turned to Winston, still unable to open my left eye. Searing pain all around it.

"We're not finished yet." Winston stepped out into the passageway. "Listen for my mark, lad. Listen for my mark." He darted off. "Get those tethers ready!"

Ryder dropped Laura inside the Interceptor and raced to the command center. "On your mark, Winston!"

I pulled Laura close, her suit pierced in the shoulder by shrapnel. Oxygen hissed, stopped by frozen blood. "Laura," I whispered, reaching to touch her face, but her visor stopped my hands. She stared upwards and shivered, fractals of ice clinging to her face as she gasped. Air escaped, collapsing her lungs.

I snatched a repair kit and scrambled to seal her suit around the shrapnel. "Laura, it's okay." I pumped oxygen to her. "You're going to be okay." My voice shook. I clenched my jaw to stop it and glanced at her stomach. I didn't know, so I held her close. My eyes darted for something to help her and settled on her chamber. Blood stained her shoulder and mouth. She'd never make it without treatment.

"Winston, eight minutes!" Ryder called.

"Almost there, lad! Get those tethers locked on!"

Wreckage pummeled the Navisphere of the *Principium* as tethers from the Interceptor reached out. I turned to Laura, my breath shaking. "You're going to be okay," I pushed myself up.

"7:30!" Ryder shouted.

Sparks showered into the *Principium* as I approached the door. The deck rumbled, and a crack snapped across the Navisphere.

“Captain, what’re you doing?”

I activated the door panel. The cargo wouldn’t feel a thing. Winston would, but not for long.

“Mason, he’s still got time!”

Did he?

A wave of sparks shot from the engine room, casting Winston’s shadow across the deck. Shrapnel pierced the Navisphere. No time...

I pressed the panel, and the door slid closed.

“Mason!”

The Interceptor lurched from the *Principium* and drifted back.

“Activate reverse thrusters,” I whispered. The *Principium* drew away, like a dark island entering a mist of wreckage. The passengers wouldn’t feel a thing. They were asleep. As close to dead as the living could be.

“Winston!” Ryder yelled. The tethers reached into the emptiness.

The Interceptor pressurized, and I floated to Laura’s side, removing her helmet. Her breath rasped and blood stained her mouth. I snatched an oxygen mask and secured it over her face. It wheezed, giving her air. After treating her wound, I pulled her close, kissing her forehead. “You’re going to be okay,” I whispered, my voice trembling. “You’re going to be okay.”

Blinding light flashed, and the Interceptor shook; shrapnel from the *Principium* battered the porthole.

“Wyatt...” Ryder’s voice cracked. “Wyatt, what...?” he turned away from the Navisphere, his shoulders hunched.

I held Laura close. She would make it. She had to. I lifted her into her chamber.

“Wyatt!”

“We’re going home,” I activated the chamber.

“Winston was on that ship.”

The blue light blinked onto her chamber and I sighed. It would keep her alive until we got back.

“We had time. There were three hundred people!” Ryder stammered. “Three hundred and one.”

I pushed to my chair, running my hand along the back of it. Chills pricked my spine, but they dissipated and I removed my helmet.

“Mason...people...Winston?”

“Cargo,” I whispered, setting my jaw. “Three hundred units of cargo.”

“Winston wasn’t cargo.”

My eye stung, but still wouldn’t open. “He was a good soldier.”

“He’d still be one if you gave him more time!”

“There was no more!”

Ryder floated back. “We could have saved them.”

I shook my head.

“We could have saved them!”

“No,” I whispered and faced Ryder. “We’re going home.”

“Mason!”

“That’s an order!”

Ryder’s jaw clenched, and his fingers curled into fists. He opened his mouth to speak, but hissed a sigh, keeping his cold green eyes locked on mine as his chamber sealed. Blue lights gleamed and the hum of hibernation filled the ship. I floated into my chair and turned to the Navisphere. Debris swirled in the distance and hibernation chambers flashed in the red glow of

Proxima Centauri. I dropped my head into my hands, my breath shaking.

They had no memories. They'd hardly be able to breathe alone. My eyes burned. No. They weren't alive. They couldn't have been. Even if they were, Laura was too. I was too.

I drew my hands away, blood staining them. My left eye opened, and my face throbbed as I waited for the bleeding to stop.

I did what I thought was right.

I closed my eyes. I did what I felt was right.

1,973 Days before the HSI0 Mission

Mason fell silent at the stand. What happened, happened. Nothing more to it. He made a choice and followed through.

The plaintiff's attorney glanced back at Laura, her eyes downcast. Mason waited for her to look up, but she didn't. Ryder, however, never broke his glare into Mason's eyes.

"Is that all?" Mason gripped his cap.

"What happened after you left the *Principium*?" Ryder's attorney asked.

"I waited. Got back in my chamber," Mason replied. "Once we got back, Laura was rushed to the hospital. None of us remembered the mission, but when we noticed Winston was gone, we knew something went wrong," he faced the attorney. "We went home. I was with Laura at the hospital and started remembering. Remembering that it was my choice. She remembered, too." He pursed his lips. "I trusted my conscience." He lifted his eyes to the panel of justices. "Now, I trust you and your justice. I submit to your judgment."

Mason stepped down from the stand and returned to his seat beside Harold. He caught Laura's gaze on him and turned away.

The day dragged and closed, and the guards escorted Mason from the courthouse. Crowds erupted in applause and praise as the doors swung wide. The last protestors heaved their signs above their heads, but the cheering mob cast them down.

Mason ducked into the cab—away from the flashing cameras and ravenous reporters. He closed his eyes as they sped off. Rose Way came too soon, and he marched to his apartment and leaned

back on his sofa. A message from Harold waited for him and he pulled it up on the window.

“Good news, Mason, but there’s a catch.”

Mason leaned forward and read on.

“On the charge of the wrongful death of John Winston, you have been demoted to commander and may no longer captain any Cecilion vessel. You are also on a temporary leave of absence for one year. After that, you will be reassigned out of the public eye until everything is settled. Probably around three or four years. After that you may return and take your place as a commander. No rehabilitation, no further disciplinary action.”

Mason stared at the floor. One year of doing nothing—five years waiting to take his place again.

He nodded and continued reading.

“As for the incident with the *Principium*, Cecilio has ruled in your favor. The cargo was in your possession and under your care. It was your choice to make. You are fully acquitted of any charges brought against you for your decision. Furthermore, new laws are being drafted as we speak. 19.73-RW, I believe they called it, will protect anyone else who finds themselves in your situation. The cargo was under your care. So, I suppose, congratulations. I’ll send an invoice when I get the chance. Drinks on me tomorrow.”

Day 19 on the HS10

“But,” Carter began, sitting on the cot next to Mason. “Cecilio was wrong about the infection. Couldn’t they be wrong here too?”

Mason shook his head. Could they be wrong, though? “They’re not.”

“You gonna bet your life on that?” Carter asked. “You gonna send away life support on a feeling? Somethin’ you *want* to be right or somethin’ that is?”

Mason's lips tightened. Could he bet his life on a feeling?

"You ain't gettin' captain unless you make it back."

"Successfully," Mason corrected.

"Dead men don't get promoted."

The kid was right.

"You ain't sendin' the Deogen System away. I won't let you. 'Cause no matter what Cecilio tells me, there are people here."

"The director won't approve," Mason said.

"Then let me tell her. If you're so worried about losin', let me take the fall."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yeah," Carter pushed himself up. "But I will."

Mason narrowed his eyes. Why was he helping him? What game was he playing? "Tell her about the pod. That it's gone."

Carter's hand rested on his sidearm. "I will." He opened the door and glanced back, cold eyes resting on Mason.

Mason met his gaze. "Something wrong?"

Carter shook himself, and a smile masked his face. "Nah." He left, closing the door.

Mason leaned back, his head throbbing and back aching. The sooner he could get up, the better. But what to do for eight months with a gun at your back?

Day 42 on the HSIO

The days crawled. Mason circled a full month of tally marks. Each day, he stood a little longer and took a few more steps, pushing his body further than he probably should have. By the fifth day after the explosion, he resumed the chore of fetching water, which took several hours of stumbling. Whenever he returned to the bridge, Carter sat or stood by the command center watching

the oxygen gauge, a glint in his eye. At times, his hand lingered near the atmospheric controls.

Mason tried shaking off the feeling, but it closed around him. Whenever he tried to address it, Carter laughed it off, making zero eye contact. Mason began wearing his space suit, even in the oxygenated ship. Twice he inquired of what the director had said, but both times Carter replied with a cryptic joke.

“Oh, you know her, she’s...she’s got a soft spot for me, I think.”

Perhaps he spoke to a different director.

On day 42, Mason retrieved more gel, having disposed of another unit of cargo. The lift opened onto the bridge. Carter’s hand slipped off his gun and he knelt beside the boiler.

“Just making sure it’s clean,” the kid smiled, focused on drying the top bucket.

Mason’s lips tightened. The top bucket didn’t need cleaning—it only held water and dripped down into the second bucket. Mason’s gaze darted up the passageway, then fixed on Carter. The kid’s hand quivered as he wiped out the bucket. Liar. But how to get the truth?

“You up for a game?” Mason asked.

Carter stopped and raised an eyebrow. “How’s your head?”

“It’s cleared up.”

Carter nodded. “Okay.”

Perfect. “Bring the boiler.” Mason marched to the lounge and dropped the gel crate on the counter. Carter crept behind with the boiler.

“What’s goin’ on with you?” Carter placed it on the deck.

Mason grunted—what was going on? The kid wouldn’t leave the gun. Mason gestured to the couch and pulled up the chessboard. “Sit.”

Carter adjusted the Kisasi, so he didn't sit on it.

Mason moved the white pawn one square in front of his king and eyed the sidearm. "You really need that? It's a game, Carter."

His partner hesitated.

"Something bothering you?" Mason asked. The kid kept the pistol close every day—a weapon meant to kill. If that was Carter's mission, guilt was Mason's lever.

Carter shook his head and placed the gun on the couch. "You sure you wanna play? You hit your head pretty bad." He moved his king's knight toward the center.

"My head's fine." Mason advanced his queen's pawn.

Carter shrugged and moved up a pawn as well.

"How's yours?" Mason developed his queen's knight.

Carter's head tilted. "Fine."

Mason nodded. "You remember everything?"

"Yeah, most of it," Carter studied his pieces. "What about you?"

"I told you everything," Mason put on a smile. "We're partners."

Carter swallowed. "Yeah." His finger twitched as he moved a pawn.

Mason took the pawn. "Partners have each other's backs. You've had mine."

"Yeah, well..." Carter rushed another pawn to the center. Mason took it, the kid advanced his queen's bishop, and Mason put the black king in check—right where he wanted him. The kid sighed, shoving his hand through his hair.

"What's on your mind?" Mason asked.

Carter shrugged and moved his king. Mason put him in check again and studied his partner—his downcast face and hissing sighs. “You doing alright?”

Carter’s face contorted. “You still don’t trust me. After all I’ve done for you? I saved your neck. Twice.” He moved his king out of check.

Mason crossed his arms. The kid caught on. Change of tactics. “It’s just us here, and I’m not the one with the gun.” He advanced his kingside pawns.

Carter’s face hardened. “There’s more than just us.”

“This isn’t about the cargo.”

A faint sound echoed through the passageway. Carter peered over his shoulder but turned back to Mason and moved his queen out. “You know, when I was in rehab, I met a guy a bit like you—set like stone in his ways. He told me I didn’t have to act like an animal, just ‘cause Cecilio treated me like one. That I was better than that. I’m just tryin’ to prove him right.”

Prove him right? What was he talking about?

Another sound echoed from the passageway, louder than the first. Carter looked back.

Mason moved another pawn and glanced down the hall. “Prove him right?”

“My mama’s sick.” Carter turned back to the game. “I gotta take care of her. Sometimes that means that I have to...” he sighed and closed his mouth.

“Have to what?”

“I don’t know.”

Mason paused, his chin lowered. “If you disobey Cecilio, you won’t see her again.”

Carter nodded. “That’s why it’s so hard. On the one hand, I gotta obey. I gotta get home and on the other...”

The kid was just trying to save his mom. “You didn’t call the director, did you?”

Carter averted his gaze.

“Because then she’d know that you disobeyed.” Could he call? Would the director see it as failure?

“I’d never see my mama again,” Carter muttered.

“What’s—”

Another sound piqued Mason’s attention—a person cried for Carter?

Carter furrowed his brow. “Is that...?” he turned to the passageway.

Mason shrugged, and Carter rose, jogging to the door to the cargo’s cabin. Mason followed and peered into the cabin. A girl—he shook himself—the *cargo* lay beneath blankets on the cot. Her eyes—*its* eyes fell on Carter and *it* smiled.

“I thought,” it rasped, “you would...” it spotted Mason and fell silent.

Mason’s lips tightened. It could speak.

Its eyes drifted back to Carter, but it didn’t continue.

“What’s wrong?” Carter asked. The cargo’s gaze darted between Mason and Carter, but settled on the floor. Did it not want to say? Was it hiding something?

“Where are you from?” Mason asked.

Carter frowned. “What do you mean, the ship’s from—”

“What?” it asked.

“What planet are you from?” Mason repeated.

Its brow furrowed. Perhaps it couldn’t answer. Perhaps its mind turned to mush in hibernation. “Earth, I think.”

Mason set his jaw. She remembered.

“Where...” she whispered, “where am I?”

Short-term memory would take a few more months to return. Mason opened his mouth to reply, but Carter shook his head, his eyes wide. Had he not told her?

“You’re on the HS10 en route to Proxima B,” Mason said.

“What?” her voice strained and cracked. “I...” her breath quickened.

“It’s alright,” Carter offered a smile. “You’ll be fine.”

“But—”

“It’s okay,” Carter shot a glare and Mason excused himself to the passageway, taken aback. The kid spent hours in that cabin, yet somehow failed to inform the cargo of her situation? Perhaps she couldn’t ask, but still. Seemed cruel. He moved toward the bridge, but paused.

“I want to go home,” she trembled. “I want to go home.”

Her home existed half a century ago, on a world light years away. Even if she returned to the planet, her world—her home—would be gone.

“Why am I here?” her voice cracked. Probably from the fifty years of silence.

“I, uh...” Carter began. “I’m not sure. Did you have family?”
Silence.

“I...I don’t think so.”

Don’t think so? Mason left the door. She had no family. No home. He wavered before entering the bridge. Nothing.

Day 45 on the HSIO

“June.”

Mason stopped wiping the command center. The black surface gleamed from the soapy solution. “What?”

“June.” Carter stopped cleaning the deck and leaned back. “It’s her name.”

“Her name?” Mason continued scrubbing, then paused. “Her name.” He shook himself, dunking his rag back in the solution and wringing out the excess.

“You okay, man?”

“I’m fine.”

Carter nodded and continued washing the floor. He didn’t have his gun.

Day 72 on the HSIO

“That’s it. Now you’re gettin’ it.”

Mason peered up to the corridor. Did they drop something? He sighed and continued scanning the Deogen System Manual displayed on the Navisphere. To break up the endless reading, the engineers had provided no more than seven videos and narrated each with a terrific dose of monotone scientific jargon.

“Now, just take one step. Just one.” Carter said.

Thud. Mason turned at the sound of Carter scrambling, probably to help her up. Of course, she couldn’t walk.

“Not quite like that,” Carter chuckled. “You okay?”

“I can’t.” The girl rasped.

“Maybe not yet, but give it time.”

“You know, you’re the most persistent nurse I’ve ever seen,” she sounded like she was smiling.

Mason stared at the Navisphere, then swiped the text away. “Give it time,” he whispered, grimacing.

2063 Days before the HSI0 Mission / 90 days before Ryder v Wyatt

The smell of ammonia stung Mason’s nose as his head bobbed and his eyes drooped. Every second, another beep...beep...beep. He rubbed his eye—a bandage covered the other—and leaned forward. The ventilator hissed, feeding oxygen into Laura’s lungs. What happened? What did he do wrong? He still couldn’t remember it all. An explosion? Yes, definitely an explosion; eighty stitches held his face together because of it. The surgeons had mentioned something about nerve damage.

The door slid open. A nurse stepped in, her feet silent on the floor. “Mr. Wyatt?” she whispered.

Mason rose, tearing his eye away from Laura. “How’s she doing?”

The nurse clutched her tablet. “She’ll be okay, but give it time. Have you slept?”

“What about the...” he glanced at Laura—the bandage around her abdomen. “Have you...?”

The nurse shook her head. “We tried. It was all we could do just to save her.”

Mason swallowed and nodded. She was conflicted from the beginning anyway, right?

But if he’d convinced her not to go. If he’d told her to run sooner. He closed his eyes. Winston. They’d lost Winston, too. He tightened his lips and eased back into the chair. Could he have done anything different?

“Mr. Wyatt, you should go home. Get some sleep,” she persisted. “Give her time.”

Mason nodded. He did everything right, yet it all went so wrong. “It was my call.”

Day 72 on the HSIO

Carter smiled. “She’s gettin’ better all the time.” He dropped into another chair and eyed Mason, frowning. “What’s up?”

Mason tapped the arm of his chair and sighed. “I’m fine.”

He’d gone home, like the nurse said. But Laura never got better. Losing Winston, losing the *Principium*, losing the—

Mason rose and marched back to his cabin.

Day 134 on the HSIO

Mason paused outside the door, a crate of fresh gel in his arms. The odor hung around him as he peeked through the door.

“I can’t do it!” she stared at the deck.

“Come on, you got it.” Carter held out his hand.

“I can see them just fine through there.” She watched the stars through the small porthole. “It’s alright.”

“Yeah, you can see that two feet of space just fine. Come on.” He held her hand and gazed into her eyes. “Please?”

“I can’t.”

“June,” Carter said. “You can.” He pulled her arm around his shoulder. “You need to see it.”

She eased her feet over the edge of the cot and let out a long breath. First time walking in half a century? Mason chuckled. Not a chance. He’d have more luck convincing twenty civilians to join a ruck march.

Carter offered her a smile.

Her feet touched the floor, and she shivered, her knees buckling. Carter held her steady. “That’s it. There you go.”

Mason stepped away from the door as Carter opened it and led her out. Her feet dragged, but she persisted, clutching his arm for support.

“There we go.” Carter paused before entering the bridge. “Now, I know you’ll thank me later, but right now I just want you to see it, okay?”

June smiled and nodded. Mason stared.

Carter opened the door and pulled her along with him. She focused on the deck, but her gaze wandered to him every few seconds. Mason followed.

She stumbled, but Carter caught her. “Take it easy,” he said.

She nodded, and they stopped before the Navisphere.

“Okay,” Carter grinned. “Now that’s a window.”

June’s eyes lit up. Her hand drifted to her mouth and her eyebrows knit together. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Was it really? Mason squinted. Were they really different from the stars they noted months ago? From the stars he watched with Laura? He sneered.

“We could hardly see them back home,” she said. “All the lights drown them out,” she beamed at Carter. “Thank you.”

Carter smiled again, his eyes not straying from June. Not for one second.

Mason stepped back toward the passage, the crate heavy in his arms. The stars reflected off the black deck. Proxima Centauri was a pinprick of red amid the dark canopy; Proxima B, still nowhere in sight.

June approached the Navisphere with Carter’s help and placed her hand on the glass. “Amazing,” she said. “Amazing.”

Open eyes see past the dark, they see the light from just a spark.

Mason set his jaw and marched to the lounge, replacing the gel in the boiler. He leaned on the counter, pushing from it three times to clear his head. He still hadn't contacted the director. Maybe it was time? He gripped the countertop. She'd mark him as a failure. The months of waiting would have been wasted. He scooped up his helmet and strode back to the bridge.

"Where you headed?" Carter tore his eyes away from June as Mason opened the lift.

"We still have a mission," Mason glanced at June. She smiled and Mason turned away. "I'll be back." The door closed, and he secured his helmet, clasping his hands behind him. Carter couldn't keep his eyes off her. If her presence compromised his ability to complete the mission, she could not stay.

Mason marched through the Chamber Hall to Sector 17 and knelt beside the water chamber, half empty. Not enough to sustain a passenger. Dark, broken chambers surrounded him. One stood upright; its nitrogen hose and Deogen connection severed—should be an easy fix, right? He could replace the hose with parts from other damaged chambers and research the Deogen connection. Maybe work something out. The chamber was still connected to the gel tanks below the deck, so that didn't need fixing. He tapped the screen, and it displayed an overview of the cargo inside. A former baker, Stephan Marge. *Charge: Existential Threat.*

Mason snorted. Existential Threat? A baker?

He shrugged. Whatever the case, the man was a criminal, stored on the ship as punishment. June's chamber had a charge too, but the screen flickered too much to read it. Carter wouldn't care about that though, would he?

Mason pressed *Open* and for five seconds, the gel drained into reservoirs beneath the deck. The chamber opened, and the cargo

slumped forward. It seemed to fall for an eternity. Mason twitched, catching it half a meter from the deck, and lay it on the icy white surface. After double checking the drainage systems, he closed the chamber, lifted the cargo, and stared into the frost covered face of a wrinkled old man.

Mason drew his fingers over the face, closing the eyes. June's eyes were open. She could see and smile. Feel. Mason slung the passenger over his shoulder and strode out into the Chamber Hall, broken glass crunching beneath his boots. The gel from the passenger's hibernation suit froze to Mason's space suit, but he pried it off as he approached the airlock. More frost veiled the pale face, human only in general form. From a distance, one could have mistaken it for an animal. Could have...

They wouldn't feel a thing—they wouldn't know. He leaned back and sighed. Earth sent the ship to Cecilio; Cecilio reserved the right to choose to accept it or not.

Mason tethered his suit, approached the abyss, and released the cargo. His arms ached from carrying it across the Chamber Hall, but one chamber stood empty and ready for a new occupant.

One step closer to finishing the mission, returning June to where she belonged, and saving Carter from himself.

* * *

Mason disconnected the severed nitrogen hose and tossed it aside. Beneath the chamber, wires twisted into a vibrant bird's nest. He'd need to read up on how to reconnect them all.

After two hours of searching for a new nitrogen hose from the other broken chambers and connecting it wrong four times, Mason returned to the bridge.

“Where’ve you been?” Carter called from the lounge as Mason entered the corridor. He removed his helmet and placed it next to his cot.

“We need to talk,” Mason called as he removed his space suit, folded it, and slid it beneath his helmet.

“Why’s that?”

Mason drew a long breath and entered the lounge. Carter stood behind a makeshift stove boiling rice on the bar.

“What’s goin’ on, man?”

Mason leaned against the counter. “The girl.”

Carter’s face lit up. “She’s somethin’, isn’t she? You know, I didn’t actually think she could do it, but—”

“She has to go back.”

Carter’s smile faded.

“Carter—”

“No,” he shook his head. “No, we can’t do that! Not—”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“Don’t have a choice? ‘Course we have a choice. We always have a choice!”

“This,” Mason tapped his finger on the counter, “this is why we don’t have a choice.”

Carter glared. “No.”

“You’re compromised. You’re not thinking straight.”

“I’m thinkin’ just fine.”

“The mission is why we’re here. That’s it.”

“Why can’t we take her too? Why can’t we take her with us?”

“She’s not a citizen of Cecilio. The world will be watching when we land. And when they see that girl, the people will wonder: where are the others? And Cecilio? You think they’ll let

you keep her? You've disobeyed orders. For the director, that's the last straw. That girl will be left alone."

"So, I just gotta send her to die?"

Mason folded his arms. "She won't feel a thing."

"How do you know? You ever died?"

"Cecilio determines who eats its bread."

Carter frowned. "I thought you were comin' around."

Mason pushed away from the counter. "You have your mom to take care of. Think of her." he walked back to the corridor.

"And who do you think of, hmm? To help you sleep at night."

Mason paused, running his hand along the doorframe. "I know when I get back, the Deogen System will save lives. And that I'll get my life back." Maybe he could get Laura back too. He tapped the doorframe and moved on. She died on the *Principium* and left the ring as her epitaph. Returning as captain would have to suffice.

Carter carried his Kisasi from that point on. The strange stares which Mason noted in the early months returned, but with fire behind them. He watched his back whenever he left the bridge to fetch water or fix the chamber.

Each morning he rose and read about hibernation and all the inner workings of the chambers. By midday he would venture to the Chamber Hall to utilize his new knowledge. The sooner June went under, the better.

But each time he fixed one problem, another arose. Whenever he soldered wiring in place, the energy from the Deogen System sparked and set him back a few more days. Weeks dragged on. Stars flew by and Proxima Centauri became clearer through the Navisphere.

Day 152 on the HS10

Something crashed. Mason's eyes shot open, and he pushed off his cot, peering into the shadows. Faint outlines of his clothes and the nightstand cut through the darkness. A dim glow outlined the door as he opened it, studying the passageway and the bright lounge at the end. Carter probably forgot to shut off the lights.

Mason crept out into the corridor and eased his door shut. His feet scuffed the deck as he ambled toward the light, pausing. Another sound—feet shuffling—lighter than Carter.

Mason stepped closer to the bulkhead and edged closer to the lounge. The couches stood empty and chess pieces battled on the table between them.

More shuffling. Mason turned to the bar and reached to his side, but his fingers wrapped around air.

He approached the bar and whirled around the corner. The girl stared, slumped on the floor on her way to the icebox.

“You should be in bed.” Mason’s hand still tensed at his side.

“I...I’m sorry.”

Mason glanced at the icebox and the crates of rice and beans.

“You’re hungry.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Didn’t Carter bring you something?” Why couldn’t she just stay in that cabin until he finished the chamber?

She shook her head. “I...he...I didn’t want to wake anybody.”

“So, you’re a thief?”

“No!” she looked down. “I didn’t want to be a burden or...” her voice trailed off.

Mason’s hand dropped from his invisible gun. His gaze drifted to the icebox, and back to June. “A burden?”

She nodded.

He sighed and stepped around her, snatching a bowl of leftover rice from the icebox.

She stared as he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her up. “Come on.” He eased her onto a couch and placed the bowl on the table. She surveyed it, her eyes narrowing as she turned to him.

Mason sat across from her and motioned to the bowl. “Go on.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m telling you to eat.”

She examined the food, then Mason. “Is this a test?”

“Maybe.” Was it? Mason crossed his arms and kept his eyes on her.

She reached for the bowl, glancing between him and the rice three times before taking a bite. Laura’s eyes. They resembled Laura’s, though June’s were brown. Mason dropped his face to the chessboard—he sat on Carter’s side; the pieces stood around his

own king, putting him in check. His hand moved toward the piece but paused. It would lead to checkmate. He lifted his gaze to the girl; her eyes bright. Eyes that once beheld Earth—that opened weeks ago, but now carried memory within and pain behind.

“What was it like,” Mason said, “back on Earth?”

She stopped chewing and looked up as she swallowed—Mason couldn’t tell if it was food or something else. “How do you picture it?”

Mason shrugged. “I know the Federal System, Cecilio, the Colonies. The stars.” Maybe he hadn’t studied the stars as well as Laura, but—

“I hope they’re different from Earth. I hope you never have to see it.” She stared into her bowl. “They give up God for a lie and follow every whim and wish.”

“Sounds irresponsible.” Mason studied the chessboard. One way to stop checkmate. His hand hovered over his queen, the second most valuable piece on the board. He’d have to sacrifice her to continue the game.

“They silence us in the name of safety. They say they love people, then send us off. Round us up like animals.”

Mason narrowed his eyes. Her charge. Like the old man from the chamber? “So, you weren’t sent alone?”

She shook her head but smiled. “But that means we’ll all be in Cecilio together, right?”

“Maybe.” Mason studied the chessboard. Did he really want to give up his queen?

“I...” she ran her spoon through the rice. “I was wondering. Could I see them?”

“Hmm?” Mason arched an eyebrow.

“My friends.” She paused, lifting her eyes. “May I see them? I know we can’t wake up anybody else now. It’s not practical, but...I just want to see.”

See them? He didn’t even know where they stored her friends. “I don’t—”

She nodded. “I understand. Carter said we needed another space suit to go outside. He said you wouldn’t give up yours. But I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you—”

Mason shook his head—the kid lied to her. “No, the atmosphere’s...” he paused. “Online.” It made sense.

“So,” she said. “We don’t need a space suit?”

“They put you all in the same sector, didn’t they?” Mason asked.

She nodded again. “Yeah. I can’t remember which, but—”

“Sector 17. Your friends didn’t make it.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “What do you mean?”

“It happens all the time. The *Principium*. The HS9. They never arrived...” His voice trailed off. Carter didn’t want her to know. That’s why he lied to her about the atmosphere.

“What happened?”

Mason shifted. “I...”

“Mason?”

His lips tightened. Why would Carter hide it from her? “The crash that woke you up. They didn’t make it.”

Her hand covered her mouth, and she leaned back. Mason’s black queen weighed down his fingers. She remembered them.

“I’m sorry,” she rose, rushing to the passageway. Her legs gave out, and she fell to the deck, her breath shaking.

Mason glanced at the queen, then at her as she clasped her hand over her mouth and closed her eyes tight, trying not to make a sound. Her sharp inhales cut through the silence.

Carter's door opened. "June!" He dropped beside her. "What's wrong?" He put an arm around her, and she pushed him away, shaking her head and glancing back at Mason. Carter glared and Mason turned away.

He flipped the queen over in his palm.

"Come on," Carter helped June to her room and the door clicked shut.

Mason analyzed the board; his king surrounded—a rook stared down from the other side. Pawns closed in. He sighed and positioned the queen between his king and the white rook. She was lost.

He pushed from the couch and returned to his cabin, pausing before he entered. Carter's voice murmured from behind June's door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't...I didn't know what...how to tell you."

June didn't answer.

Mason closed the door. The cot creaked as he lay down and stared at the silver ceiling.

Her charge. Did all the passengers have one? She said they rounded them up like animals. She was a criminal, and so were her friends. Why wouldn't Carter take a fancy to her?

Mason closed his eyes. How could he sleep on a ship, unarmed, with two criminals? He needed the gun and June needed to go.

Mason crept out of his cabin and slid into a chair on the bridge. "Aiais, reduce volume to 15%," he whispered.

"Of course, sir."

"What percentage of the passengers are here on criminal charges?"

"Shall I include the passengers lost from Sector 17?"

“Use the registry from the launch,” Mason peered up to the corridor. June’s door was closed, and Carter’s still stood wide.

“97%,” Aiais said.

97%? “Is this a prison ship?”

“The HS10 is the tenth Haven Ship built by the Federal System for the exploration and colonization of distant planetary and solar systems,” Aiais spewed the scripted jargon.

“Aiais, why is this ship full of criminals?”

“The Federal System found it advantageous for the creation of a safe and moral society.”

At the expense of Cecilio? No wonder they didn’t want the ship to land. 97%. Were there really 60 million criminals on Earth? “What’s the most common charge?”

“Existential Threat make up 74% of the convicted population.”

Millions of existential threats? He peered up to the passageway. Carter’s door still stood open. The APC button gleamed on the command center. Calling Cecilio would alert them to his failure to complete the mission on time. He needed full control of the ship first. He needed the gun. “Aiais, close down for the night.” The chair creaked as he rose and crept toward the corridor. The lights of the bridge faded behind him. He exhaled, his feet chilled by the deck.

If he could get the gun—

June’s door opened. Mason straightened his back, and Carter stepped into the passageway. His heart pounded. He missed his shot.

At the sight of Mason, Carter’s face hardened. “I kept that from her for a reason.”

“I suppose you kept the reason we’re here from her, too.”

Carter glared. “I told her why I’m here and that’s why you’re still here.”

Mason furrowed his brow. What? “She’s a criminal, Carter.”
“Even if you’re right, she still lost everything.”

Day 161 on the HS10

Mason leaned back in his chair, arms crossed as the camera feed displayed Carter floating through the hall of storage units. The kid eased past the broken door where Mason tore open his oxygen tube months before. He didn't wear his suit, but his shirt snagged as he entered the captain's cabin.

Mason rose and pulled up the atmospheric controls. Decreasing air pressure wouldn't kill the kid, but could knock him out for a few minutes. Long enough for Mason to claim the Kisasi and seize control of the ship. His hand hovered over the screen.

"Hey," June's voice echoed through the bridge.

Mason jerked his hand away, facing her. "June." He swiped the display onto one of the smaller monitors. She didn't need to know about his feud with Carter.

"Mason, I..." she approached the command center and glanced at the screen. "Is this a bad time?"

Carter still rifled through the captain's luggage—what was he doing? Mason tapped the console and turned to her. "What's wrong?"

She faced the floor. "Thank you. For telling me the truth."

Mason shifted. She still wasn't aware of the mission. Did she need to be? "It's nothing."

On the display, Carter exited the captain's cabin with a wooden box under his arm—the record player. Mason's hand twitched near the controls. He'd miss his shot again.

"I..." June began. "How do you move on?"

Move on?

“Carter told me you lost your rank—your life. Everything,” her gaze dropped. “I don’t know. I guess I…”

Mason furrowed his brow. That wasn’t Carter’s story to tell. He eyed the camera feed, his hand inching toward the controls. Carter neared the lift. He couldn’t shut off oxygen with June watching. She needed to go. “I don’t know.” He faced her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She swallowed, nodding. “But, I…nevermind.”

Carter entered the lift and ascended. June turned away and Mason gripped the controls. He could still shut off the oxygen, but with June—

The lift opened. Mason spun from the command center, swiping the controls away as Carter had done weeks before.

Carter froze, the box under his arm. “What’re you doin’?”

“Nothing,” June answered, stumbling back toward the corridor.

Carter tore his gaze from Mason and jogged after her. “Wait!”

June turned, wiping her eye.

“I…” Carter stared at the box. “I’m not sure how it works, but my gramma had one a long time ago. Makes music. I… I thought you might like it,” he placed the box in June’s arms.

June ran her hand along the smooth wood. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Carter smiled. “I wanted to.”

She swallowed. “Thank you,” she whispered and forced a smile, then walked back to her cabin with the box.

Carter turned as her door clicked shut, a smile on his face.

He’d lied to her, yet still tried to make her love him. “Congratulations.” Mason muttered.

Carter smirked and dropped into another chair. “I didn’t see you tryin’ to comfort her.”

Music drifted from her cabin—a stringed overture with a familiar melody.

“No,” Mason turned from his partner as the lyrics began with *grace*, closing with: ‘*Twas blind, but now I see*. A trembling and muffled sob. Mason glanced up to her cabin as the second verse began: ‘*Twas grace that—*

A crash echoed down the passageway. Carter darted to the cabin and threw the door open. Mason followed. The box lay dashed against the bulkhead and June huddled in the corner, her hand over her mouth. “They’re gone,” she whispered. “They’re all gone.”

435 Days before the HS10 Mission

“Breaking news: for the first time in history, the people of Proxima B are taking to the polls to decide the fate of the oncoming HS10...”

Mason hunched on the stool and stared through his glass, warm light fixtures glinting off the whiskey. The glass clinked on the steel bar counter as he set it down and straightened his back. Patrons seated behind him hissed opinions between swigs. Liquor poured, fists thumped on tabletops, and the smell of alcohol wafted through the crowd.

The bartender nodded to Mason’s glass, the overhead lights shining through his white hair. “You thinking about another?”

The television flashed with lines of voters waiting to cast their ballot. “You think they’re going to turn it away?” Mason asked.

The bartender shrugged. “Back when I was a kid—not too long ago,” he chuckled, his wrinkles trembling. “HS7 landed here on Proxima B.” He snatched a bottle from the assortment behind the

counter. “Sure, some cargo went to other cities, but Cecilio took the brunt. Overnight, my family had two more mouths to feed.” Whiskey sloshed onto the counter as the bartender refilled Mason’s glass. “I don’t know much, but I’m sure I’d be a bit more than this,” he gestured to his apron, “if my old man gave his own son the time he gave those aliens.”

Mason sipped and tapped the glass. “Makes sense.”

“That’s what I say. It’s just not loving, right? To put that on your people.”

Mason nodded. “It’s a lot to ask.”

“Yeah. A whole lot.”

Day 235 on the HS10

Mason reached beneath the chamber to solder the last few wires. Again. The wire gleamed white as he pricked it with the iron. Bits of metal jutted out from the weld as it cooled. After a second jab, the metal dripped, melting the red wire casing. Smoke curled and Mason pushed up from the deck as the glow faded. He activated the panel and jumped as sparks shot from beneath the chamber and the screen blacked out again.

He waved away the smoke and sighed. Attempt 57: failure.

Something moved at the door. He turned. “June?”

She peered into the room and mouthed something he couldn’t hear through his helmet. He didn’t dare leave the bridge without it with Carter there. But the kid wouldn’t turn off oxygen with June outside, would he? Mason removed his helmet. “What are you doing here?”

“Is this it?” she asked.

Mason nodded.

She stepped over the twisted doorframe and approached the first dark chamber. Her brow furrowed at the screen.

Mason knelt beside his work again and unplugged the tangled wiring. Carter probably learned more about welding in rehabilitation. Maybe he could help. Mason rose, tucked the wires under his arm, and faced June.

She stared at a black screen. “How do you make it work?”

Mason tapped the screen to life and smiled. “It’s that easy.”

“Thank you.” She forced a smile in return.

Mason’s gaze drifted to the hundreds of dark chambers. “I, um...” he began. She didn’t need his words. “You know the way back?”

She nodded.

“Mind the glass.” He motioned to the shrapnel, clambered past the twisted door, and returned to the bridge.

Carter rushed to him. “Have you seen June?”

“She’s taking a minute.”

Carter darted to the lift, but Mason caught his arm. “Carter—”

“Get your hands off me,” Carter growled.

“Okay, look, I’m sorry,” Mason said. “I’m sorry I told her the *truth*.”

“You didn’t tell her everything. You can’t. Just like I can’t.”

“You have a shot. Don’t blow it,” he shoved the wire bird’s nest into Carter’s hands.

“What’s this?”

“I can’t fix it. I figured you could,” Mason placed his helmet on the command center.

Carter turned the wires over in his hand. “Have you looked at her file?”

“No.”

“She’s from another world. She’s been through a lot more than you know.”

“I tell you what,” Mason dropped into a chair. “I’ll look at her file, if you fix those,” he pointed to the wires, “and think about why you’re here.”

Carter glanced at his Kisasi and cut his eyes back to Mason. He snapped out of it, tossing the wires onto the console and entering the lift. “I’ll fix them later.” The door closed.

Mason turned to the command center. “Aiais, pull up the display of Sector 17.”

“Of course.” The Navisphere blinked to life, showing a flickering feed of the sector.

“Is this the only one?”

“The other cameras were damaged in the collision, sir.”

Of course they were.

Mason watched the display. June moved from one dark chamber to another, placing her hand on them, waiting, then moving to the next. She paused at the chamber Mason was trying to fix and cocked her head at it when it wouldn’t turn on. After a few seconds, she moved on, stepping over shrapnel and glass until she reached a blue chamber. She read the name and her hand covered her mouth.

“Aiais, what’s she doing?”

“I am unsure, sir. Shall I ask?”

“No.” Mason leaned back. “Let’s pull up her file.”

“Of course, sir.”

A file blinked onto the screen next to the feed of Sector 17. A photograph of June and her full name—June Michelle Stewart. Age 20, from the District of California. Charge: Existential Threat.

“Aiais, how was she brought to the ship?”

“The footage may contain potentially sensitive content, sir. Are you sure you wish to proceed?”

“Proceed.”

Another file opened with footage and news articles.

Anti-government religious extremists arrested, December 16th, 2382.

Silent footage flashed across the Navisphere from the body cams of twelve law enforcement officers. They bashed in a door and fired into a house. Tear gas curled around the chairs, people panicked and darted to and fro as the soldiers charged. Muzzles flashed and a man raising a book crumpled, clutching his chest. Soldiers dragged a woman from him.

In silence, they rounded the extremists up like sheep.

In silence, they shot anyone who resisted.

In silence, a soldier bashed June’s head and dragged her and a little girl from the house, throwing them into a black prison transport with two dozen others. Crowds cheered outside; a few stared at the ground.

June held the crying girl close as the transport sped off.

He read the article. *Public safety restored as radicals are brought to justice.*

Mason leaned back in his chair, the camera feed showing June in Sector 17. She finished walking among the chambers and moved to the door.

Mason drummed the console. Radicals? They didn’t seem to resist. He turned to the feed again. Carter stood behind June, watching as she moved from one chamber to another.

“Aiais, can I listen?” Mason asked.

“Of course, sir.”

Crackling audio echoed through the bridge.

“...how to cook. And this,” she moved to another chamber. “This is Mr. Kenneth. He and his wife took me in. They took me in when my family didn’t. And over there. That’s Kate. I tried to

give her what I was given. What Sue and Stephan and the Kenneths gave me,” she placed her hand on the chamber and stared into its blue light. “I...” she stepped back from the chamber. “I don’t...”

“Hey, they’re alive. That’s good, right?” Carter approached her.

She collapsed to her knees.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. They’re alive!” Carter wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She lifted her eyes to the chambers. “I don’t deserve it.” she whispered.

“What?” Carter asked. “June, if anybody deserves it—”

She shook her head. “I’m so blind, Carter. I’m so blind. The grace that I lived. The grace that they’re not gone. Any sector could have been hit, but God chose mine. To take His people home and to bring me here.” She stared at the deck and drew in a deep breath. “Carter, I’m here for a reason. And I couldn’t see it.”

Mason swiped the camera feeds away and stared at the stars. Grace? Amazing grace, the song had said. But where was grace when her friends perished? When they tore her away from home and shipped her across the galaxy? Under what rock did grace hide then?

Mason sat in silence as the stars burned in the abyss. Perhaps June saw something he couldn't—either that, or he saw something she couldn't.

He glanced back as Carter entered the bridge. The kid flashed a smile, but it faded to confusion.

“It’s like another language,” Mason said.

Carter scooped up the wires. “You were listenin’?”

Mason nodded. “A bit.”

“I told her about my mom a while back. Told her my life. She said God had a reason for it all,” he chuckled. “If it helps her sleep at night, I guess.” He fiddled with the wires and wandered to the lounge.

Mason turned back to the Navisphere, Proxima B like a scarlet puncture in the black canopy. The lift opened again, and June stepped onto the bridge. She smiled.

“They’re not all gone.”

Mason glanced up at the Navisphere. He could ask her anything. About grace? Maybe knock some sense into her head. But did she need that? He turned to her. “An Existential Threat?”

She tensed; her smile faded.

“That’s what the charges said.” Mason held her gaze. “74% have that conviction.”

June set her jaw. “Truth divides. Turns a mom against her kids, a son against his dad.”

“Carter told you about his life. You know the truth about him?”

She nodded.

“You want to tell me?”

She glanced at the deck as if choosing her words. How much did Carter tell her? She lifted her eyes. “Be careful, Mason.”

Careful? Mason opened his mouth, but closed it again; his fingers twitched. She wouldn’t say—maybe she feared Carter. Maybe she protected him. “He’s in the lounge if you need him.” He faced the Navisphere. In the corner of his eye, she paused, then walked up to the corridor and entered her cabin.

The smell of melting metal wafted from the lounge. Carter coughed and Mason sighed. June knew about Carter’s past, and she chose not to say.

Mason couldn’t get the Kisasi and couldn’t put June back into her chamber without facing Carter. He ran his hand around the green APC button. If he called, Cecilio would know he hadn’t left when they ordered him to. The lack of a beacon kept them in the dark—they couldn’t track the ship to find it still on course. But if he called, they’d know he failed. He pulled his hand away. If they knew, the promotion could slip through his fingers. The mission needed to be completed, but how? Could he kill Carter? Could his conscience carry that? He stared at the deck. Few alternatives remained. “Aiais, reduce volume to 15%.”

“Of course, sir.”

Mason pressed the APC. Static hummed, and he waited.

“Officer Murphy of Cecilio Command Center to the HS10. Report.”

Mason smiled at the familiar voice. “Murphy, this is Commander Wyatt from the HS10.”

Silence.

“Commander, you were supposed to leave months ago,” she said.

“I know, comms were down.” He lied. If Cecilio knew he failed, that’d be it. “I couldn’t make contact. Our pod was destroyed. We can’t get off the ship.”

“Coms were down for months?”

Mason shifted. “Yeah.”

Silence. Why didn’t he contact them sooner? It’d all be over. He could have finished the mission and become a captain again.

434 Days before the HS10 Mission

“And the vote is cast, 70/30.”

Mason glanced at the television in the lobby of his apartment building. Bob rolled by and watched as well.

“A team will be deployed to the HS10 to retrieve materials and send the cargo back to Earth.”

“Wonder who they’ll get for that,” Bob muttered, turning away from the screen.

Mason shrugged as he walked toward the lift. “Someone the people trust.”

Day 235 on the HS10

“I’m going to request an extraction team. It’ll take time to be approved,” Murphy said. “And more time to prepare. In the meantime, all I can say is that your orders are still in place, Commander.”

Mason nodded. “Do you need the beacon fixed?”

“We’ll find your location from the coordinates of this call.”

“Thank you. Over and out.” He tapped the console. He could give up. Surrender the cause to the extraction team and face the charges for failure. He needed to continue. Never give in.

Carter wouldn’t like it. But it wasn’t about Carter. It never was.

4 Days before the HSI0 Mission

Mason packed his bag. The diamond ring refracted light onto the countertop. It wouldn’t take up much space and its weight wouldn’t hinder the launch, but he couldn’t bring himself to lift it into the bag. Laura would never go on this mission; why should he drag her memory along?

He continued packing, and a knock sounded at the door.

“It’s open,” Mason called, shoving a pair of shoes into his bag—did he really need them? He glanced down at his uniform boots. He’d only be at Cecilio Command Center for a few days before launching.

The door swung open and Harold pranced in. “Good morning, Mr. Wyatt. I tell you, few people could be more elated than I at your fortune. I felt bad when you lost your rank. It reflects on my record and all, but see how things can turn around!”

Mason removed the shoes from the bag and placed them next to the ring. “You think she’ll be at the launch?”

Harold lifted the ring. “Mason, my third marriage only lasted a week,” he emphasized his point with the diamond, “and the fourth started a week after that.” He flicked the ring in the air and scrambled to catch it again. “Look, you have your entire life ahead of you.” his eyes darted to Mason’s graying hair. “Well, maybe two fifths of it. Let’s not waste it in the past. You did what you felt was right.”

“I did.”

Harold nodded. “And Cecilio backed you.”

“They did.” Mason grabbed his bag and strode out into the hallway.

Harold followed. “Well, whatever the case, the people get to choose, right? And the people have spoken. Who knows, maybe Laura voted for it too. You have no idea.”

Mason locked his door. “Always for the people.”

Day 239 on the HS10

Mason scooped beans into a bowl and wandered to the couch, scratching his beard. The wire nest sat on the table; smoke curled from the soldering iron with no sign of Carter. White light streamed from the kid's door. Mason slid the bowl onto the table and crept closer. Through the slight opening, he saw Carter sitting on his cot, his head in his hands and the pistol gleaming at his side.

Mason knocked, and the kid jumped, looking up with blotchy eyes.

Mason's gaze dropped to the deck. Perhaps it wasn't the best time. "How are the wires coming?"

"Yeah, they're comin' along." Carter wiped his nose and swallowed. "Comin' along."

Mason placed his hand on the door to close it.

"What're they for?" Carter asked.

Mason stopped.

"It's for her chamber, isn't it?" he turned to Mason. "Isn't it?"

"It is."

"You saw her file?"

"I did."

Carter glanced at his sidearm and shook his head. "You know I can't do it."

"I do."

Carter nodded and sucked in his lips. The door creaked as Mason pushed it open and sat next to his partner. He opened his mouth twice before settling on the words. "Your mom would be proud."

Carter rubbed his eyes. “I promised her. I promised her I’d take care of her. That I wouldn’t fail her.” He drew his hand over his mouth. “And that’s all I’ve done.”

Failure. It seemed to be going around. Carter failing his mom, Mason failing Cecilio. “You can still make things right.”

“It’s all messed up. This mission. My job,” his hand drifted to his side, but dropped.

Mason narrowed his eyes. His job?

“I just don’t know, man.”

Mason pushed off the cot. “Don’t miss your shot. You can still make things right.”

Day 247 on the HSI0

Mason reconnected the wiring and crossed his fingers. The display flickered and turned white. He stepped back, staring at the Frankenstein chamber, fitted with pieces from dozens of others. The screen stayed lit.

“Yes...yes!” He laughed, fingers trembling as he activated the diagnostics check. The chamber hummed, coming alive and displaying the final pieces of the puzzle. The Nitrogen fitting wasn’t perfectly sealed, the structural integrity of the base needed a few more welds and the tube which connected the gel tanks to the chamber melted in one of the many showers of sparks.

He smiled, his beard scratching his neck. Just a bit more work.

Day 255 on the HSI0 / 13 Days before Extraction Team Arrival

Mason ended the transmission with Cecilio. The extraction team launched in record time from Braen Station. He leaned back and grinned with a long sigh. Things finally were turning around.

The call had woken him up—he hadn’t even bothered tucking in his shirt—he hadn’t bothered shaving either. If anyone saw him, they’d send him to the homeless shelter. But if he landed with the

Deogen System, they'd know—they'd see past the scruff and sunken cheeks to the captain within.

He straightened his back, easing to the edge of the chair and pushing himself up. After slipping into his suit and taking a victory sip from the bottle stowed beneath his cot, he continued repairing the chamber.

Day 267 on the HS10 / 1 Day before Extraction Team Arrival

The nitrogen tube snapped to the chamber and Mason straightened up. After months of work and hour and hours of reading the manuals, he finished.

One last piece. One final problem: how to return June to hibernation?

The screen awakened, running final diagnostics. After five minutes, it flashed blue, and the chamber prepared for activation, counting down from three hours.

Three hours. Mason sighed and smiled. Almost there.

He stacked his tools and strode into the Chamber Hall. The walls stood tall, and the windows cast a dim glow on the floor. Mason closed his eyes, hearing the cheers of the crowd left in Cecilio—cheers he would hear when he returned. They would shout his name. They would regard him as the man who succeeded. Once again, he would be worthy to sit in the chair he'd lost. A smile pulled at his lips and he stepped into the lift. It rose and scarlet light bathed Mason's eyes as the door slid aside.

"Surprise!"

Mason leapt, his hand flying to his side.

Carter held up his hands. "Woah, man, we're cool."

"What on—" Mason set his jaw.

"Look, June had this idea, 'cause it's Christmas and all and she thought it'd be nice to—"

“Christmas?”

“Yeah, man, you know that time when your grandma gives you stuff?”

Mason’s muscles relaxed. “Christmas.”

“Yeah, come on,” Carter beckoned Mason to follow.

Mason removed his helmet. “Have you checked the navigation systems recently?”

“Checked yesterday.”

“Cleaned the command center?”

“Also yesterday.”

Mason nodded. “The boiler still running?”

“Yeah. I’ve been checkin’ it, cleanin’ out all the crusty stuff,” Carter turned, “what’re you gettin’ at?”

Mason peered into his visor, part of his scar covered by the beard. He smiled. “I did it.”

Carter furrowed his brow.

“I fixed the chamber.”

Carter blinked. “You fixed it?”

“It’s running diagnostics now. We’ll know for sure in a few hours, but we’re about to stop playing ‘catch-up.’”

Carter nodded. “Yeah,” his lips tightened, but he managed a smile. “Well, come on,” he led Mason to the lounge. They’d moved the chess board and covered the table with...was that a sheet? Three steaming bowls of rice drizzled with honey sat on the table. Hardly a feast, but enough to make Mason smile.

June approached the table with a few glasses.

“I found some wine in storage a while back,” Carter motioned to the glasses. “Figured it would be a, uh...nice change,” he glanced at the floor, his lips still tight.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” Mason said.

“You’ve helped me. Watched over me,” June placed the glasses on the table and sat on the far couch. Carter sat next to her. “I just...I don’t deserve any of what you’ve done.” Her voice quivered, and she exhaled. “It was a mercy that you were there to pull me out. This is the least I could do.”

Carter gave a forced grin. “I told her she didn’t have to.” he fixed his gaze on Mason. “Anybody would have pulled her out.”

Mason tensed, easing himself onto the couch across from them and setting his helmet aside. “Thank you, June.”

June forced a smile. “I’ll pray for us, if that’s alright?”

Before Mason could answer, she bowed her head and spoke as Laura did before every mission—before she stood by and watched him claw his way through the trial. Mason shook the memories away. He didn’t need them. Not with being so close to finishing.

What would Laura say about him finishing?

“...thank you for all you’ve provided, Father,” June said. “For the new home waiting for us. Thank you for who you are and all you’ve done, and we ask that your will be done. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

June opened her eyes with a sigh, picked up her bowl of honey rice and leaned back on the couch. “I almost forgot!” she jumped up and darted to her cabin.

Carter scooped up his bowl and stared at Mason.

“What’s bothering you?” Mason grabbed the last bowl, warm in his fingers.

“You’re gonna do it, aren’t you?” Carter asked.

June darted back into the lounge, a patched box in her arms, and dropped onto the couch. “I...I tried to fix it.” She handed it to Carter.

He brushed his hand over the box, his fingers catching on the jagged surface. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” she said. “For everything.”

Carter smiled at her and turned to Mason. His smile vanished, and he focused on his food.

The smell of honey mixed in the air with the charred odor of Mason’s suit. He took a bite. It melted in his mouth—light years beyond anything he or Carter threw into a pot. And far better than anything he’d given to her.

Mason stared into his bowl, holding the rice in his mouth. Did she deserve better?

“So, is that Proxima B?” June broke the silence, pointing to the scarlet star through the window. “I asked Carter, but I don’t think he knew.”

“I knew.” Carter stared at his bowl, stirring his rice. “I just didn’t want you to quote me on it.”

Mason swallowed, his stomach hollow as he sipped the bitter wine. She gave him a gift as he prepared a cell for her.

“Mason?” June asked.

“It’s Proxima Centauri,” Mason gripped his bowl. “The planet’s Proxima B.”

June smiled and Carter chuckled. “I try.”

“Yeah.” She glanced at them. Neither looked up.

They each took a few bites, their forks clinking on the glass.

“What’s wrong?” June asked.

“I’m sure he’s just tired.” Carter glared at Mason, masking it with a smile.

Mason shifted, eyes darting to the deck.

Silence.

“Look, we...” Mason began, lowering his bowl. “What are we pretending? Your friends are gone, and all you’ve got is us,” he

faced Carter. “And you don’t even know what you want. You’ve carried a gun every second just waiting to shoot me in the back and I’m...I...” his gaze dropped and he shook his head, shoving rice into his mouth. It stuck in the back of his throat. He’d fixed the chamber—he’d won. That’s all that mattered, right?

“I’m not pretending anything,” June held her bowl close. “I don’t pretend life isn’t hard. It is. It’s horrible sometimes, but God gives us grace.”

The next bite sat in Mason’s mouth. What grace? She survived because Carter pulled her out and liked her. There was no grace on the HS10.

“We’re breathing. Soon my friends will be too. I don’t pretend it isn’t hard. But I know,” she smiled. “I know there’s a reason.”

A reason? What reason?

“There’s joy here, too. You’ll see your mom again,” she said to Carter. “And you’ll see Laura an—”

Mason shot up, knocking his knee against the table. “Sorry.” he stilled the glasses from tipping. “I—”

“I’m sorry.” June rose. “I shouldn’t—”

“No, it’s...it’s not...” He snatched his helmet and strode to his cabin. The door clicked shut, and he pressed his fist against it, his breath shaking.

Soon my friends will be too.

He set his jaw and pressed his forehead against the door. She would go back to the chamber. Back to hibernation. No discussion—no questions. That was the job. That was the mission!

Not to reason why.

But she was a person—

Not to reason why!

He scrambled under his cot for the whisky. The cork popped, bouncing on the deck as he tipped the bottle back, his hands shaking. She'd feel nothing. She wouldn't know. Who would miss her? Who would miss any of them?

Carter stepped in and closed the door behind him.

"I know what you're thinkin'." he hissed.

Mason took another swig.

"Can't you see she's a person?"

"Of course I see."

"When you plannin' on tellin' her, huh?"

Mason lowered the bottle. "She doesn't have to know."

Carter's face hardened. "Doesn't have to know?"

"Oh, come on!" Mason spat. "Don't try to cover up the lies you've fed her."

"I protected her!" Carter snapped.

"You protected yourself. Protected the way she saw you. You look at her like she's some angel. It'd hurt if she saw you differently."

"Maybe she is an angel."

"Maybe to you," Mason muttered between swigs.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Mason shrugged.

Carter wrenched the bottle away. "You know where she comes from? You know what they did? Her family sold her out. Soldiers took her and her church. Killed who they wanted. They put her on this ship because they didn't want her. You know how that feels? To be treated like dirt?"

Mason scrutinized the bottle.

"You know, I was sent here with this," he drew the Kisasi. "To kill you."

Mason smirked. The truth at last.

“Life for life—my mom’s for yours.”

Mason eyed the gun.

“June’s the only reason you’re alive. That angel in there is the only reason you’re not dead!” Carter’s voice broke. “That’s it.” His breath trembled. “That girl Earth sent away like garbage...she’s kept you breathin’!”

Mason shook his head. “You said it yourself. You don’t know how to run this ship. You need me—don’t pretend she’s some saint giving me life support. She’s a criminal! Cecilio doesn’t deserve to have more people like you on the streets. And people like you—”

The bottle shattered against the bedframe and Carter stormed out.

“...don’t deserve it either.” Mason finished and lay his head back on the mattress, dripping with the wasted whisky. He closed his eyes. Cecilio—the people—deserved better than the HS10. Better than criminals, thieves, and threats. And the passengers didn’t deserve to suffer in Cecilio’s slums. It would be a mercy to turn them away.

That was it...mercy. The passengers didn’t deserve the hardship of landing, and Cecilio didn’t deserve the hardship of dealing with them.

Compassion. Pure and simple.

Day 268 on the HS10 / 9 Hours before Extraction Team Arrival

Glass shattered. June yelled. Perhaps she wasn't an angel after Carter told her about the mission. Mason lay on his cot, listening.

"You lied!"

"June, wait!"

June's door slammed. Her sobs trembled as Carter pounded at her door. After fifteen minutes, he left. An hour later, the kid stormed past, his boots clanking on the deck, making Mason's head throb. Hours dragged and Mason stared at the ceiling. The extraction team would arrive, and everything would fall into place. They'd find him ready—they'd find him successful.

June left her room once but returned to it after three minutes. Carter returned after three hours. He slammed his own door and Mason waited. After twenty minutes, he rose, tucked his helmet under his arm and walked to the lounge. Shards of glass and bits of rice littered the floor. Mason returned the chessboard to the table. The final pawns guarded their kings into the endgame.

Mason forced down leftovers and paused at June's door—her breath slowed, but still trembled. Soft music played, her faint voice carrying with it. "Twas blind but now I see..."

He touched the cold door but pulled away. His boots scuffed the deck as he secured his helmet. The lift closed around him and descended to the Chamber Hall. He stepped out and paused on the dark floor; blue lights gleamed all around.

Mercy. All in the name of mercy. Mercy for the passengers—mercy for Cecilio. For Carter before ruined his last chance. Mason lifted his eyes and continued. The kid would thank him when they

landed. Perhaps Mason could recommend him to the academy—help him find a better life.

He drew his hand along the twisted doorframe of Sector 17 and entered. The dark chambers stood cold, and—

Mason froze. The totem of his labor lay torn up by the roots; wires snapped, tubes severed, and the Deogen connection gone. Blue and brown burns marred the steel surface and cut through the screen. He cursed and his heart sped as he approached the chamber. His fingers caught on the warped and burnt metal. Kisasi bolts. He hissed through his teeth. One weapon onboard.

He stormed back to the bridge, tossed his helmet onto the console, and burst into Carter's cabin. The kid leapt out of the cot, scrambling to the gun.

"Carter McCord," Mason said. "Under Cecilion Civil Code 1.78-C, you are under arrest for interference and gross insubordination."

Carter's knuckles whitened around the pistol grip, but he pointed it at the deck. "Man, you—"

"That would be Commander."

"I can't stand by this."

"Then stand down."

"Man, I—"

"Commander."

"I can't do that!" Carter yelled. "I can't stand with you on this. I can't let—"

"I'm not asking your permission. I am ordering you to stand down. We have two hours before the extraction team arrives. If they find I failed, it's over for both of us."

Carter stared at his hands. "Man, in my gut, I just know."

Mason's face hardened. "If you want to pretend to be a nurse, I don't care. Your patient isn't leaving with you. She can't."

"You gonna kill her?"

"No."

"Then what do you call it?"

"Mercy," Mason said. "I call it mercy to spare someone a life of suffering. To spare them pain. You've met with suffering. You want them to go through that?"

Carter shook his head. "I—"

"Do you really want June to live like that? You want her to suffer?" Mason asked. "You think you care for her, but dragging her through that? That's not love."

"What if you're wrong?"

Mason shifted. Proxima Centauri shone through the porthole, eclipsed by the black planet. No one in Cecilio cared, and those who did back on Earth were dead. "Who's left to care?"

Carter raised his Kisasi, his finger trembling on the trigger. "Me."

Mason raised his hands and stared down the barrel. "You had the chance before." he said.

"I should have taken it right when my head cleared up. Knowin' what you were gonna do."

Mason's face hardened. "And what would your mom say knowing what you did to save her?"

Carter scowled, and red flashed from the gun. Fire bit into Mason's leg and he hit the cold deck. Carter leapt upon him and pressed the searing barrel into the back of his neck. "Who would care?" Carter hissed.

Mason swiped back, catching Carter's arm. A second bolt bored into the deck next to Mason's head as he rolled out into the

corridor. His leg burned and his neck stung as he scrambled to the bridge. A bolt sizzled past as he dove behind the command center.

Sparks showered over the console as Carter fired again; Mason scrambled and ducked. June darted onto the bridge. “Carter!” she cried.

“You know,” Carter said. “You know why he’s here.”

Mason pressed against the back of the command center. Through the Navisphere, stars cut through Malum’s Belt. The extraction team would arrive—whatever happened, Carter would lose.

He just needed to survive long enough.

“You know what he wants to do, June!” Red flashed twice. Mason scrambled and June screamed. Carter rounded the corner of the console and Mason dove for his legs. They toppled, and the Kisasi clattered across the deck.

Mason darted for the gun but grunted as his leg gave out. Carter leapt on him and his fist slammed Mason’s head against the deck.

Day 269 on the HS10

Fluorescent lights drove a spike through Mason’s head. He squinted, noting a porthole and the door welded shut. No space suit—no helmet. He winced as he touched a crude bandage binding his leg. “Aiais, open the door.”

The door vibrated, but the welds held it. “Unable to open, sir.”

“McCord!” Mason yelled, his head pounding. “McCord!”

He bashed his fist against the metal, but no one answered. His leg burned, and he collapsed. The stars gleamed outside; the fringes of Malum’s Belt peppered the glass. Beyond the belt, Proxima Centauri burned scarlet-white.

He closed his eyes and leaned back, gripping his leg. “McCord!” he yelled, looking down. “McCord.” The kid sent to kill him—to stop the mission.

The bearded technician hugged Carter, slipping a pistol into his hand.

Mason clutched his leg; his heart beat faster.

The bearded man moved away from the command center, stuffing a chip into his pocket.

He stole the orders. Why? Mason’s own bearded face stared up from the glossy deck. He looked like a different man, except his eyes...

Mason’s fingers rose to his face and his lips parted. His eyes.

His sharp green eyes glared.

Mason blinked. Ryder. It was Jackson Ryder. He sent McCord as vengeance.

Vengeance for Winston.

Mason hissed. Winston chose his fate on the *Principium*. He chose to throw his life away.

Mason rose, pressing his fist against the cold glass. “I won,” he whispered as the belt drew near. Cecilio sided with him in the court. Cecilio validated his cause. “I won!” He slammed the glass.

You still can’t see it? Laura’s voice echoed in his mind as he stared into the wreckage of Malum’s Belt.

“I see,” he spat, bits of metal striking the glass, like the wreckage tearing into the *Principium*. His brow furrowed as a hibernation chamber floated by. Probably from the *Principium*. Another drifted in the distance, amid the wreckage. And another...and another. Some intact, some broken open with their cargo frozen in the abyss. Thousands. Millions. The *Principium* only carried three hundred. He closed his eyes and shuddered. He would see—he would prove them all wrong and be a captain again. Cargo filled

his view, and he shook a chill from his spine. He would be captain again.

An Interceptor cut through the wreckage. Mason smiled and pushed back to the door, running his finger down the weld. “Aiais, continue opening the door. Don’t stop.”

“Yes, sir.” The door vibrated, and the metal groaned. Mason unscrewed the nightstand from the deck and rammed the door. Thunder echoed through the passageway. He glanced back through the porthole—the Interceptor drew nearer. Metal rung as he rammed again, denting the door and sending a ringing spike through his head. He bashed the door again; his back burned, but the weld cracked. A grin masked his pain, and he continued ramming, his sweaty hands slipping along the metal. The Interceptor vanished around the curve of the HS10. Mason gripped the nightstand tighter and threw his weight into the door. It snapped and he stumbled into the passageway.

June stood in his way, eyes glistening.

“Where is he?” Mason asked.

“Please don’t kill him.”

“He wants to kill me.”

“And I’m the reason he hasn’t. I stopped him, time and time again. Mason, there’s—”

“Commander,” he corrected.

“You’re not my commander.”

His nostrils flared.

“You’re my friend.”

Mason furrowed his brow. Friend? “You stopped him.”

She nodded. “Jackson Ryder offered to pay for his mom’s treatment. To save her, he had to kill you. I kept him from doing

it. Maybe he stopped because he was afraid of what I'd think, but either way, he stopped because of me."

Mason pushed past her onto the bridge. "It's him or the mission."

"Didn't you see? Didn't you see the wreckage? The chambers!"

He froze.

"You said the HS9 didn't make it."

Mason's lips tightened. "Things happen."

"But should they?"

"I have a job. To uphold the rights of Cecilio!" he jabbed his finger toward the deck.

"What about mine?"

Mason grimaced, facing the command center. No time for debate. "Aiais, show me the Interceptor."

The Navisphere blinked to life. The Interceptor hovered over the hull and opened fire. Red bolts battered the black metal, shooting sparks into the emptiness. They couldn't dock, so they targeted the Deogen System directly.

"Mason, the road you're on will lead you to hell."

Mason narrowed his eyes and turned back to the Navisphere. "Aiais, where's McCord?" The display split to show Carter floating on Deck 19, waiting in ambush. A tether locked him to the bulkhead and the laser's power cell gleamed in his fist. What was he doing?

"Mason, what you're doing is wrong."

He turned to her. "Why?" If Carter couldn't answer, neither could she.

"Because God said so."

Mason clenched his teeth and breathed. He faced the emptiness beyond the glass. What did it matter to the abyss who lived and who died? If the universe didn't care, why should he?

And what a cold universe was that? A universe, void of meaning. Of purpose. Of love. How could anything matter at all? “I don’t care.” Yet, being captain mattered, right? Completing the mission—having the cheers of Cecilio again. Getting his life back and proving Ryder wrong.

“Mason, truth does not rely on you to believe it. God will judge and nothing you do can change that.”

Mason turned to her. “I am showing mercy to your people. If they land, they will suffer.”

“Then let it be.”

Mason cringed as Proxima Centauri varnished the bridge in crimson. How could she be so blind? “Once you’ve seen pain, then come talk to me about God. Once you get a little wisdom in your head. On Proxima B, we’re not like Earth. We offer mercy. We ease suffering.”

“Cecilio may claim to be wise. To be different. But you’ve become fools—just like the people on Earth,” she said. “You cry out ‘mercy!’ while holding a gun to our heads!”

Mason watched Carter on the display. Why couldn’t she understand? “Aiais, contact the Interceptor.”

“The intruding vessel is blocking transmissions.”

“Mason, open your eyes.”

“They are open,” Mason stepped away from the console. “They’re trying to figure out a way to stop your friend from murdering four people.”

“He’s not any better, Mason.”

“You seem to like him,” Mason stared at the Navisphere, half showing the Interceptor cutting through the hull, and the other half displaying Carter.

“Because he showed me kindness. And because he’s a person.”

At the bottom of the screen, an oxygen gauge shone. “He left the oxygen on,” Mason whispered. Carter waited, his helmet reflecting the reactor’s light. Why did he have the suit on? Mason glanced at June. “What’s he doing?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Mason studied the display. “The atmosphere’s only on Deck 19; what’s he doing?”

In a flash of crimson, the Interceptor cut through the ceiling of Deck 19. Carter lurched on the wave of oxygen, hurling the power cell through the breach. Mason’s eyes widened. The escaping oxygen threw the Interceptor away from the HS10 and the reactor made contact. Blinding light burned in emptiness. June gasped, the smoke cleared, and the wreckage of the Interceptor joined the graveyard of the HS9.

June's hand covered her mouth. Mason stepped away from the command center. Silence rung. He killed them. The entire team, without hesitation. Mason blinked—no more extraction team—no more options. The sparks fizzled out and Carter floated back through the deck, the Kisasi at his side. He entered the lift and began his ascent to the bridge.

“Stay back,” Mason ordered, stationing himself beside the lift.

“Please,” she whispered. “Don't.”

“You saw what he did.” Mason's leg burned, his heart pounding. “You know who he is.” He regulated his breath. No more options...

The lift opened, and Mason plowed into the convict, slamming him against the deck. The gun clattered away.

June closed her eyes and Carter headbutt Mason with his helmet. Mason stumbled as his partner scrambled up. Their eyes locked on the pistol beside the command center. Carter dove and snatched it, but Mason kicked it away, gripping the kid's collar and cracking his visor against the console. Carter lashed out, but Mason caught his arm and bashed the visor again. The glass shattered and Mason seized the gun, training it on Carter. “Stand down!”

Carter swayed on his knees, blood staining his face. “Ain't no team comin' for you. Ain't nobody comin'!” he pushed to his feet.

“Stand down!” Mason limped back.

Carter stared at June through the shards of his visor. “He wants to kill you.”

Her face fell.

“Stand down, McCord,” Mason felt the trigger.

“June, he's a killer!” Carter spat.

“So are you!” Mason yelled.

Glass clattered onto the deck as Carter removed his helmet, his breath heavy. “Man, I should’ve killed you.” his shoulders trembled. “I should’ve killed you!”

Mason eyed June. She turned away, and he faced the convict, adjusting his grip. “Ryder should have come himself.”

Carter charged. Mason struck his temple, dropping him to the deck. Mason stumbled and his leg gave out. The scarlet light of Proxima Centauri bathed the dark bridge. June swallowed, her eyes glistening as she approached Carter.

Mason took the kid’s space suit. There wasn’t time to fix his own. The job remained.

June knelt beside Carter. “Mason,” she whispered.

“I have a job.” No more backup—no more options.

“Mason, please,” her breath trembled, and her eyes darted to him. “Why can’t you see?”

Mason stopped, and the lift opened. “There’s nothing to see.” He secured his helmet.

“Mason, wait!”

The lift descended and June’s cry was silenced by the airless ship. Only the sound of his breath echoed in his helmet. Just him and the mission. Isn’t that what he wanted?

He limped beneath the blue lights of the Chamber Hall to Sector 17, edging past the warped doorframe. Dark chambers stood, bent and broken; months of work lay in a twisted heap. No time to fix it. He approached a blue chamber and exhaled. A gauge for the ship’s oxygen level flickered onto his visor as his hand hovered over the deactivation button. June needed to go, and the cargo would feel nothing. Who would care?

His jaw set, the chamber opened, and the cargo thudded to the deck. He closed the door and peeled the cargo up into his arms. It

felt lighter than the last one. He stepped over the twisted door, June's shout echoing through the Chamber Hall as the lift opened. Mason turned away, his face like stone. The cargo twitched, but he grasped it, marching beneath the glare of a thousand windows. It clung to his suit, but he pulled away and lay it beside the airlock.

"Mason, wait!" June sounded faint outside his suit as the first door opened and he lifted the cargo again. "Mason—!" The airlock closed and June's fists pounded against the window. He tethered his suit, and the room depressurized. The cargo convulsed, but Mason gripped it. It stopped as the second door slid open and the residual air blew into the darkness. Mason limped toward the edge of the abyss. Stars burned. *Don't you feel anything?* Carter's voice rang through his mind. The burden in his arms grew light as his feet lifted from the deck. *Why can't you see?* June echoed. He floated into the void.

There was still time. Ryder.

We trust you will not fail.

He wouldn't—he couldn't. Cecilio depended on him. The people depended on him. There wasn't anyone else. Not after what Carter did. He couldn't fail. Not after everything.

He caught sight of the cargo in his arms, and the tether jerked to a stop. His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. It couldn't be. He looked back to the stars. Could it? She stared up at him. He blinked, shaking his head again. Frost covered her face—the face of a child—a little girl. He exhaled. Theirs not to make reply...

A child.

Theirs not to reason...

He'd killed a child.

Theirs but to...

She could have been his, if the *Principium* hadn't gone wrong. If he'd made a different call.

You really can't see it?

Her small hands clutched his suit—his breath echoed in his ears. “You’re going to be okay,” his voice shook as he gazed into her eyes, wide and white. He brushed a trembling hand over her face, her hair snapping between his fingers like glass. “You’re going to be...” his voice broke, “okay.”

Ten minutes ago. Ten minutes ago, she was fine. Just ten minutes... “Come on. You’re okay...” He pulled her close. “Come on!” he shook her, but she didn’t move. His breath trembled, and he lifted his eyes to the heavens. The stars stared back as he held the girl close, hiding her in his arms, alone in the emptiness.

Alone.

The tether drew him back to the ship, and gravity pulled him to the deck. The door opened behind him and June pulled the body from his arms, her shoulders trembling. She cradled the child, and he moved away. There had to be a reason.

He pushed himself up and watched her a moment before limping back through the Chamber Hall. A thousand blue lights glared down on him. He paused at Sector 17, staring at the chamber. Was there a reason? He entered the lift, and it opened onto the bridge. The shards of Carter’s visor flashed in the crimson starlight. Dark craters of steel and melted plastic scarred the console, and Mason dropped into a chair. His helmet clattered to the deck.

Could there be a reason?

Proxima Centauri’s light cast the APC in red. The entire glassy bridge glowed like hot iron. He pressed the button, static hummed

a few minutes, and Murphy answered. “Cecilio Command Center, this is—”

“I need the director.”

“Commander, we’ve been trying to—”

“Put the director on,” Mason ordered.

“But—”

“That’s an order.”

“I—I’ll see what I can do.” The line went dead for several minutes. Mason didn’t bother tracking the time. Instead, he watched the stars outside, shining and burning in the abyss as a black mass began eclipsing Proxima Centauri. Proxima B.

“Commander,” the director’s voice crackled over the APC. “We have been trying to reach you. We lost contact with the Interceptor an hour ago. What happened?”

“Director,” Mason leaned toward the microphone. “I...” he began, but closed his mouth again.

“What happened, Commander?”

“They didn’t make it.”

“What?”

“McCord. He...” Mason sighed. He hadn’t called about Carter. “Look, I...” he closed his eyes, the girl frozen in his mind, like the passengers of the HS9.

“Commander, we are missing an Interceptor. What happened?”

“You said there was an infection on the HS9.”

Silence.

“Where is the Interceptor?” she asked.

The rubble of the Interceptor joined the wreckage of the HS9 and the *Principium* in... “Malum’s Belt,” Mason paused—the

deck turned black as the planet veiled the star. “There’s no asteroid in that belt, is there?”

Silence once more. Mason stared at the microphone, then lifted his eyes to the planet.

“The world was a different place, Commander. What was done was not always understood,” the director replied.

Mason nodded. “Director, I’ve spent months here. I’ve moved a dozen bodies. They’re people. They’re just like me or you.” Theirs not to reason why.

“Commander—”

“Why am I here?”

“You,” she paused. “You have orders, Commander.”

“I know. But why?”

Silence. Cold and empty silence.

“Director?”

“We have a wonderful life here in Cecilio,” she said. “A wonderful life. We are blessed. Hunger is gone—crime is buried. Your partner was one failure among millions of good people. One among tens of millions. The life we have in Cecilio is perfect. Your life—everything you have is because of the sacrifices that others have made for you. And your sacrifices have brought you here. On the verge of getting your life back. Getting your ship back.”

Mason stared at the deck; was it perfect?

“Cecilio has been built on the sacrifices of good people like you. It is hard sometimes—but we cannot risk losing our right to choose, can we? Are we even human if we give that up?”

“So it’s all for your dream? Your perfect city?”

“Our dream,” she said. “Our lives and the lives of everyone in Cecilio.”

“And the Deogen System?” Mason asked. “We’re willing to kill sixty million people?”

“To save us and them from suffering? Of course. Mason, they will be debilitated for six months! It will be a year before they can make their own ends meet. And that is just the adults. What about the children? Five years. Ten. You want people to open their homes to those who cannot give back? You have cared for that cargo—you understand what it takes. The rationing. The emotional strain, and for what? I will not ask the good people of Cecilio to give their lives for passengers who are...are hardly people. They are not alive. They are asleep. Fifty years, a hundred, a thousand, what is it to them? They do not feel anything. They do not know or remember anything. They are not alive.”

June felt pain. She knew where she came from. She knew those she loved. Maybe she didn't remember at first, but eventually she did. Could her life be judged on that? “Director, they...” the little girl felt fear. She had clung to him, afraid to die, “they're alive.”

“They are no more alive than dust.”

Mason shook his head. “I've spoken to her. She's like you or me.”

“She is nothing like me.”

“How do you—”

“Because she's not!”

Her voice echoed through the bridge. Mason glanced up the passageway, but his gaze fell to the deck.

“Commander, this planet. This city. It belongs to the people here. Do they deserve to live with parasites? The people of Cecilio have a choice. The right to choose who eats their bread.”

“But what about June? Doesn't she have a choice?”

“It is not her home on the line. It is not her property—her li—”

“Her life,” Mason whispered.

Silence.

“This is our home.”

Mason’s heart sped.

“The people have the right to choose,” she said.

“She’s alive!”

“Why?” the director asked. “Why is it wrong?”

“Because, it’s—”

“Who says so?”

Mason shrugged. “I just...I know.”

“Why? Four billion people disagree with you. You felt you were right on the *Principium*. When you took this mission.”

“It’s not a question of feeling. It’s a question of what’s right.”

“And how many people does it take to make it right? There are four billion on this planet who think you are wrong, Commander. How many does it take?”

“None,” he said. “No one.”

“Then who are you to tell me what I am to do? To tell Cecilio what to do?”

Mason’s face fell. “I murdered one. I murdered a child. She could have been mine—she was someone’s. If there is any justice—anything, anyone who is good,” he paused. “If there is a God, then I—”

“We are talking about fact, Mason, and the fact is that this is not their world.”

Mason lifted his eyes as Proxima B moved away from the star and the bridge gleamed red. “I don’t know.”

“Alright,” the director said, “you have 7 hours to figure it out and get off that ship. Am I understood?”

Mason nodded. “You are.”

“Then I will see you tomorrow, as a captain.”

The line went dead and Mason leaned back. 7 hours to get off the ship? Tomorrow, as captain? He chuckled, halfhearted, and let out his breath. He'd defied Cecilio. Dared to reason why. And Cecilio would reply.

Day 270 on the HS10 / 2 hours to go

Alem Braen. The first officer of the HS1, second only to Captain Marco Cecilio, in whose honor the colonists named their settlement. They left the shell of the ship orbiting the planet, naming it for the first mate—Braen Station. Years passed and the former HS1 welcomed every future ship to come to Proxima B. Great and mangled from over two centuries of use and aimless expansion, Braen Station hung in the abyss as a guard to the black planet.

Mason rubbed his eyes and stared at the chessboard. His untucked shirt stuck out beneath his unbuttoned jacket; his hair hung in a tangled heap, and his beard no longer itched. Carter's door remained closed and hours ticked by.

He blinked back the image of the girl, but it settled. His shoulders slumped, and he gripped the Kisasi, knuckles whitening around the handle. It felt cold—everything felt cold. He lowered the gun, facing the chess pieces. The queen was gone. A dozen pawns had fallen in the opening. No more rooks—no more bishops—no more knights. One king and one pawn on either side. A loss in three moves if he guarded his black pawn. A loss in four if he advanced on the white pawn, two squares from becoming a queen.

“What’s it look like?” June asked from the door, her face flushed.

Mason swallowed, placing the gun aside. “It’ll be a draw.”

She sat on the opposite couch. Mason stared at the board, his muscles tense as his hand lingered over the black king. Maybe he could just follow Cecilio? His fingers curled into a fist and he pulled

his hand back. Could he? He swallowed again and opened his mouth. No words formed. No words could. He turned to his pawn.

“I forgive you,” June whispered.

Mason looked up. She met his eyes. “June—” he averted his gaze.

“I forgive you.”

He shook his head. “What I did doesn’t deserve forgiveness. It deserves justice, but I,” he sighed, pressing his fist to his lips. “I was brought to justice. And they didn’t give it. They said I was right.” His breath shook. “They said I was right.”

“Were you?”

Mason leaned forward, clasping his hands together. “It’s all wrong. But who am I to say? I murdered a child, June. Who am I to talk about justice?”

“You’re nobody,” she said. “But God. He is justice. He is good, and any evil calls for His wrath. It calls for a price, and the only price you can pay is your life. You killed my friend. Kate,” her voice cracked. “You sinned against her and me, but you don’t know the half of it. It doesn’t matter what you did to me. God made that girl. She was His.”

Mason nodded.

“What you did, you did against Him. Him alone. And I’ve done it too. By justice, you and I both are damned. By justice, we’re all damned. We’re hypocrites. Murderers, liars, thieves. Criminals.”

Mason stared at the board.

“But God, rich in mercy and grace, sent His Son, Jesus, to pay our price,” her eyes glistened. “God sent His Son to die on a cross for your sins and for mine, so if we cling to Him...if we trust in

Him, we will be saved. He died so that you and I might live. If you trust Him, let go, and cling to Him.”

Silence filled the air. Mason stared at the deck. She waited a moment with him, then rose, wiping her eye. “I forgive you and I love you, Mason.” She walked to Carter’s door, knocked, and entered.

Mason watched Cecilio and the station. “I’ve done so much,” he whispered. His gaze dropped and his breath trembled. “I’ve...I’m sorry.”

He rested his head in his hand and exhaled. “I can’t...” he whispered. How could anyone forgive him? How could anyone not kill him for what he had done? He closed his eyes. How could someone who saw his heart—his hate—not kill him where he stood? What impossible measure of grace...?

The white king guarded the last white pawn, marching it to the end. Two squares away. His hand trembled over his king. He could try delaying the inevitable. His hand dropped to his side.

“I don’t deserve it,” he whispered, his eyes downcast. Yet, He gave it. *In this heart I find, no good or light to see. I cannot but resign and cling to Him who set me free.* He drew in a deep breath and rested his hand upon his black king. *I cannot but resign.* He pushed it over.

It rolled and clattered onto the deck.

The black king blended into the dark floor and the shadow of the table. Mason sighed and leaned back. The stars shimmered. He tapped the couch, then clipped the gun to his side, gathered the space suits and tape and limped onto the bridge. Glass crunched under his shoes as he lay the suits and helmets on the console. “Aiais, kill power to thrusters. We’ll drift in,” he removed his jacket, easing into the chair behind the APC. “This is the HS10 to Braen Station, requesting to dock.”

Silence.

June opened Carter's door and peered down the passageway.

"This is the HS10 to Braen Station, requesting to dock," Mason repeated. June edged down the corridor.

"Mason?"

The HS10 drifted closer. Lights peaked out from the thousands of windows along the dark side of the ancient station. Cranes and scaffolding covered the port side, and turrets gleamed in the crimson blaze of Proxima Centauri.

"This is the HS10 to Braen Station, we are requesting to dock immediately."

Carter's door opened in the passageway. Mason rested his hand on the gun and pulled the microphone closer. "This is Commander Wyatt from the HS10, is anyone receiving this transmission?"

They drifted closer.

"Anyone?"

Silence.

"What's going on?" June asked, approaching the command center.

"You really think they're gonna let us land?" Carter scoffed from the passageway, but his eyes softened.

"Aiais, bring us to a stop," Mason said. The thrusters pulsed, and the ship hung in the emptiness.

"What're we doing?" June asked.

Mason rose from the APC, his eyes trained on the station. "Aiais, are we on the right frequency?"

"The frequency is correct. Transmissions blocked."

Mason furrowed his brow.

"I don't like it," Carter grimaced.

“Prime reverse thrusters,” Mason stepped around the command center—stars glowed, dim in the brilliance of Proxima Centauri. Braen Station loomed above the planet, dark and still. What were they doing?

The turrets turned—Mason’s eyes widened. “Aiais, pull back!” Red flashed and a dozen shining bolts cut across the emptiness; the ship rumbled. Sirens wailed and a red stained map of the ship flickered onto the Navisphere. The port side storage units shielded the chambers from fire and spilled into space.

Mason darted to the side of the captain’s chair, activating manual controls and pulling the ship starboard away from fire. “Aiais, get in contact with ground control!”

“Yes, sir.”

Mason turned to Carter. “Get those sirens taken care of.” He banked the ship further starboard, dropping into the exosphere to place the planet between them and the station.

Carter raced to a control panel, wrenching out a clump of wires to stop the ringing. June dropped in front of the APC. “Cecilio, this is the HS10; they’re shooting at us!”

Another volley battered the port side, and the station vanished around the horizon. The stern of the HS10 sank, caught by gravity. Mason spun the thrusters to the planet to keep them in orbit.

“Is anybody there?” June asked. Mason kept his hand on the controls. Carter eyed the screen, wires clutched in his fists.

“Anybody?”

“Cecilio Command Center to the HS10, this is Officer Murphy,” the familiar voice cracked.

“Murphy, the station’s shooting at us!” June said.

Silence. Carter leaned closer to the amplifiers.

“There’s nothing I can do.” Murphy said.

“Nothin’ you can do?” Carter wrenched the microphone to himself. “You listen here, lady. There are 60 million people on this ship and if you don’t get that station to stop firin’, those people won’t make it!”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Don’t you give me that. Look, this here’s June. She’s one of the people here. One of the people you’re tryin’ to kill.”

Silence. Mason increased the thrusters to 90% as they drifted into the thermosphere.

“June?” Murphy asked.

“Yes?”

“Do you...where are you?”

“I’m on the HS10,” she said, and paused. “There are people here, Murphy, besides me. They’re alive. They breathe, they laugh, they love. At least they did, and they can again. They have souls.”

“Do you remember Earth?”

“I remember the blue skies. The cool breeze in the fall, the leaves changing to every palette of red. I remember my family, my friends,” June smiled.

“I...” Murphy began. “I—” Static cut her off.

Mason’s face fell; he increased thruster power to 95%.

“Where’d she go?” June asked.

Carter looked away.

“Mason, where’d she go?”

Mason set his jaw. “Shut it off.” He increased the thrusters to 100% and lifted the suits and helmets and tape. “Here.”

“What’s that for?” Carter asked as Mason shoved a suit into his arms. He met the kid’s eyes and nodded to the escape pods. Carter frowned and glanced at the pods. “Mason, you...”

Mason held the kid's gaze until he nodded. He understood.

June rose. "What's going on?" she asked.

Mason handed her the other suit. "The escape pods are up there." Mason pointed to the starboard curve of the bridge wheel. "Go."

June's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Go," Mason drew the pistol. Carter took June's hand.

"Mason," she whispered.

Mason nodded to Carter, and he pulled June toward the pod.

"No," she kicked and tried to pull away, dropping the suit and helmet. "No!"

Mason scooped up what she had dropped and followed; his finger tucked away from the trigger. The escape pod opened, and Carter pulled her inside.

"Please!" she yelled. Mason dropped the gun and suit into the pod and smiled at her.

"I see, June."

She stopped, and her brow furrowed. Mason nodded to Carter again. The kid nodded back. The door sealed, and the pod dove into the atmosphere, falling toward the planet. Mason jettisoned the second...the third...fourth...and all the rest until a cloud of pods shot across the sky.

Mason turned to the empty bridge. Braen Station drew closer, gliding along its orbit, and the HS10 sank toward the planet.

He limped down to the command center and glanced up at the lounge where the chess games began and ended. Red shone through the bridge, and glimmering light danced across the shattered screens as the ship entered the stratosphere. Feeling the leather beneath his fingers, he ran his hand over the back of the captain's chair and eased into it.

“Aiais, send all power reserves to thrusters.” He activated the panels on the arms of the chair. The metal rim of the Navisphere glowed orange.

“Yes, sir.”

“Direct all nitrogen reserves to hibernation chambers.” He pulled the straps over his shoulders. “Shut off gravitational rings. Divert power to thrusters.” He gripped the chair as the ship trembled and the bridge stopped spinning. Glass rattled as the thunder of the engines shook the deck. Beyond the Navisphere, the fleet of pods vanished into the clouds.

“Power diverted to—” Aiais’ voice sputtered and cut off.

Mason took the helm. Sweat beaded on his brow as the Chamber Hall flashed on the failing Navisphere, and he engaged emergency departure protocols. Thousands of sectors shimmered, some red, most blue. He selected them all and pressed *Launch*.

The sectors shot from the ship in all directions, filling the sky. Light flashed from Cecilio off the port side. A cloud of black missiles cut through the atmosphere. Mason closed his eyes as they battered the hull, and the deck shook. A thunder crack rippled through the bridge and the ship tilted left. One thruster gone. Mason gripped the steering, driving the ship starboard for balance. More missiles pierced the hull; flames licked around the Navisphere and it flickered out.

Beyond the scorched glass, black parachutes billowed from the sectors, lowering them toward the planet. But missiles ripped them from the sky in flames. Thousands of chambers spilled into the air. Parachutes caught fire, and sectors crashed to the surface. Some settled in the dust, only to be blown to pieces. Some hardly made it out of the ship before missiles ripped them apart. Millions of

chambers—people—rained down, lighting up like stars amid the smoke and ash.

Like stars. They were always like stars. Bright and beautiful.

Mason smiled, eyes stinging and Cecilio rising before him. A few sectors settled in the dust beyond the gates. A few made it.

He leaned back. The bridge lights faded, and he released the steering. A crack snapped across the window. Sweat dripped into his eyes and shrapnel flew past. “In this heart I find,” the deck quaked, “no good or light to see,” brilliant white shimmered off every shard of glass. “I cannot but resign,” he drew in a long breath, his fingers slipping from the chair, “and cling to Him who set me free.”