

ABORT

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Chapters 1-6

1

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. Clasp 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 HSIO

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.

6

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 HS10

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.

From the Author

Hello reader,

Thank you so much for reading the preview of *Abort!* I do hope you enjoyed it and will consider preordering the book and sharing the word with your friends!

Preorder: <https://amzn.com/B0913K52WL>

God bless,

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