

Into the Black

by Jeremy Kerr

“Ching, why do you think it is that I captain this ship?”

She squinted her eyes and looked deep in thought. Finally, she shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I guess it’s because you’ve got bigger balls than me.”

“No,” I said, “It’s because—wait, what?”

“Your balls: bigger than mine.”

For a while I simply stared at her. “Is there something you should tell me?” I finally asked.

Ching Shih grinned at me. “No, sir. Please continue.”

“With what?”

“Why you captain this ship, sir.”

“Ah. Ah, yes.”

The question wasn’t exactly an easy one. I’m not sure what I had intended to answer when I started this conversation, and now that my first mate and friend of seven years had made me question her gender, I was really at a loss.

“Never mind. I’ll tell you later.”

“Suit yourself,” she said and grinned again.

Ching Shih sat on the floor across from me, handcuffed to a large bomb. I, myself, was in a similar position. I say similar because my arms were above my head, and Ching Shih’s were off to her left side. Other than that, however, our situations were the same: both of us handcuffed to large bombs, both bombs located in the cargo bay of my ship, the *Matador*, which just happened to be heading through space, coordinates set to a large moon...Cemar, I believe. I don’t know; I didn’t set the coordinates. I heard a humming sound behind me rise to a mumble and finish with an “amen.”

“Jensen!” I called out, surprised. “You still with us?”

“Yes, sir,” my pilot answered.

“Hadn’t heard from you in so long I thought you were asleep.”

“No,” Jensen answered. “Praying.”

“Ah. Well, you might as well have gone to sleep then. At least sleep is real. Besides, how is a god from Earth going to hear you on this end of the galaxy?”

“Rude to the end,” Ching Shih said and closed her eyes. Was *she* praying? Was she *sleeping*?

“I’d say about thirty minutes to impact, sir.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t, Jensen.”

“Wouldn’t what?”

“I wish you wouldn’t say it.” I closed my eyes, too. Not to pray or to sleep, but because I had nothing else to do with them. Thirty minutes to live, I thought. That sounds so ridiculous. *Thirty minutes?* I asked myself. “Thirty minutes?” I asked Jensen.

“Give or take, yes, sir.”

“Man, that’s hardly enough time for a decent flashback.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” said Ching Shih, eyes still closed. And, of course, as those who are clones and therefore living a second lifetime so frequently are, she was right.

“I wouldn’t start too far back, though,” offered Jensen. “Maybe just the last week.”

Just the last week. I couldn’t believe it had only been a week since this all started. In only seven days, I had been wrongfully arrested, sprung out of jail by my crew, and lost my ship’s doctor in the ensuing gunfire. Why he wasn’t on the *Matador* instead of carrying a gun was a question I had no answer for. I’d carry the guilt of that man’s death to my grave...which, if Jensen’s calculations were correct, was only about twenty-eight minutes away. Oh, and after the prison break, which was only on day two of this week, I’d also had my ship stolen from me while crew and I were onboard, which brings us to the handcuffs and bombs. Where did it all go wrong? What was the one thing that started it all heading this way? Discovering I had an older brother sits high on my list of possible answers to those questions.

*

Seven days earlier Jensen brought the *Matador* to a landing dock on Cuv VI, a watery planet on the 3rd Arm. Jensen’s three webbed fingers flew over the dials and buttons as he landed the ship with the faintest whisper of a bump.

“Nicely done,” I said as I looked out the main portal.

“Szwak,” he answered in his native language.

“You’re welcome. Now finish shutting us down and start enjoying your week off.”

My pilot’s reptilian skin suddenly changed from dark green to a dull red with his excitement. I knew he would be spending most of his week vacation somewhere on the bottom of Cuv VI’s never-ending ocean. He probably wouldn’t even take an elevator to the lower level of the floating island; he would be off the ship and off the side of the landing platform before an elevator would even respond to its call button. Over the comm I announced that everyone was free to disembark, reminding them that after seven days the *Matador* would be leaving, no matter who wasn’t on it. The cargo we would be picking up on Cuv VI had a delivery date that wasn’t very flexible.

By the time I reached the loading dock door, all of my crew was gone except Outis. He sat squatting just inside the door.

“No big plans?” I asked.

“No.”

“They all run off without you?”

“Guess so,” he mumbled. “But I let them. Don’t like it here. Too small.”

I laughed. Cuv VI is an enormous planet, but sure, there wasn’t much of it anyone besides Jensen could use. The floating islands that provided land for homes, businesses, and life in general added up to about point zero zero one percent of the planet’s surface. Besides, not many human-built places provided enough space for Outis, anyway.

“Well, you can join me. We’ll get a drink or twelve. How’s that?”

“ ‘kay.”

We walked across the platform, looking at the vessels moored there. The other ships were newer, nicer, more expensive. The *Matador* looked like a homeless man standing in the middle of black-tie affair. I glanced longingly at a golden ship on the dock beside ours.

“Nice,” Outis said, seeming to read my mind.

“Yeah, but the *Matador* has something none of these fancy-pants ships do,” I

smiled.

“Wuzzat?” he asked.

“Our very own ten feet tall Cyclops.”

I would swear Outis blushed a little, but with his head a full four feet above mine, I couldn't be entirely sure. His one huge eye closed halfway as he grinned.

“And those fancy-pants ships will never have that, either,” he told me.

Both of our smiles faltered slightly as we realized the double meaning to his oath of allegiance. Sure, he meant he would never leave the *Matador*, but he had also unknowingly referenced the fact that he was the last of his kind. *Whenever Outis dies*, I thought, *no ship will ever have another Cyclops, the Matador included.*

“Hey,” I said, slapping him on the thigh to break his train of thought, which was probably going down the same tracks as mine. “I think it's time for those drinks.”

After taking the freight elevator to the lower level, we eventually came to The Rich Earl, a sad-looking saloon with only about three lights burning inside. Before I even put a hand to the batwing doors, the barkeep was at them.

“Hey,” he yelled, “his kind can't come in here.”

“You won't serve a Cyclops?” I asked him, immediately angry. Most of the outer planets on the 3rd Arm probably hadn't heard the news that Cyclopaia, the Cyclops home planet had been destroyed ten months ago. This bartender didn't know he was discriminating against the sole survivor of a once mighty race, but he knew he was discriminating, all the same.

“What's the matter? His money's no good here? Humans only, huh?” My volume was rising steadily, my mind already made up that there would be a fight.

“No, I mean he can't come in here. The ceiling's too low. You'll have to sit outside.” He shook his head at me, his eyes reflecting my ignorance.

“Well...well, yeah. Fine.” I said this with a bit of defiance, as if I had just won the argument. “Start us off with three pitchers of beer.”

*

An hour later the only crew member of mine that I had seen was Skyler, the ship's mechanic. She had joined us for a few rounds of drinks, but then had gone her own way again. Ching Shih, I assumed, had been at a brothel since we landed. I had never really

put much thought into who she visited at brothels, guys or girls...maybe both? It was none of my business what my crew did when they weren't on business. The doctor's present location, however, I was sure of. Dr. Anthony Jefferies had a speaking engagement at the local hospital. He had offered for me to join him, but sitting through one of his ten minute lectures in the galley was bad enough; I had no desire to sit through an hour of his notes on the newest procedure to remove a...well, hell, I really have no idea what it is he lectures on, whether onboard the ship or in a lecture hall at the hospital. I'm sure he had told me the subject of his talk, but I'm also sure my eyes and ears had glazed over when he did so.

I looked at Outis with a slightly wobbly turn of my head. I had lost count of how many drinks we'd had, but I knew he was probably putting them down three to my every one. His eyelid drooped with drunkenness and we both smiled a stupid smile.

"Well!" I proclaimed much too loudly. "Howz about we go find sum trubble?"

As I reached for my glass to finish off my last beer, a hand grabbed my wrist.

"Looks like you've already found some trouble," the hand's owner said, and I felt a muzzle press against my neck, the revolver's hammer cocking near my ear.

In my stupor I simply stared at my last glass of alcohol. The remainder of beer sat just away inches from my hand. Sure, there was a bullet waiting to come flying down a barrel and into my neck, but that beer was getting warm and that upset me, too.

"Isambard Tims," the voice called my name, "you're under arrest."

Before Outis could do anything that might make that bullet start its course a lot earlier than I wanted, I told him to sit still.

"Mr. Tims, I'm Sheriff Fenton Jones and you are under arrest for the murder of Brunel Tims."

"Never heard of him," I told him, confused.

"Considering he was your older brother, I find that hard to believe. Now come with us."

As Outis and I stood, I saw the sheriff's men behind us. We were covered by about ten men and I'm sure there were more on the rooftops that I didn't see.

"Bard?" Outis looked confused, too. "You never mentioned brother before."

"That's because I didn't know I had one."

*

The surprise of having a revolver put to your neck will only sober you up for so long. Sooner or later (usually sooner), the alcohol will remind your body and mind who is in charge here. *I make the decisions*, it says. *And right now there's nothing I'd rather do than wander around in this brain for a little while. You know, keep things fun. I think everything would look nicer a bit...fuzzy!* And fuzzy it was. *Okay*, I thought, *let's figure this out*. I was being charged with committing a crime I knew nothing about, involving someone I knew nothing about. As I laid on my little cot in my little cell, that was as far as I could get in the Figuring Out Department.

“When did I kill thiz guy?” I asked the deputy sitting at his desk on the other side of my bars.

“Shut up,” was his reply.

“No, seruzzly. I juss landed on my crew here.” The alcohol was having a heyday. “I juss landed here,” I corrected myself, with some effort. In my head, the small part that wasn't drunk promised that if I ever got out of that cell, I would give up drinking forever. The drunk part of my mind said that if I ever got out of that cell I knew good and well the first thing I would do to celebrate would be drink a shot of whiskey.

“Is true,” I said aloud, conversing with myself. “A shot of whizkee.”

“I said shut up!”

A thought crossed what was left of my sober mind and I sat up quickly, not caring what it would do to my drunk mind.

“Where's Outis?”

“Never mind your giant,” the deputy laughed from behind his magazine.

“He's not part of this. Hell, I'm not part of this! But he's not, even more. I swear, if anything has happened to—”

Suddenly the deputy was at the bars, shoving a rod through. It crackled with electricity and the last thing I remember before he hit me with it was, “I said shut—”

*

“Mr. Tims.” A hand slapped me across the face. “Mr. Tims,” the voice implored. The voice of...whom? *Why do I know that voice? Where am I, and why does my chest hurt so much?*

“Mr. Tims.”

The sheriff. Now I remembered. I opened my eyes and, sure enough, saw Sheriff Fenton Jones sitting beside me. I was sober now, but aching. I tried to sit up but his hand held me down.

“I wouldn’t recommend that. You’ve had a bit of a...shock,” he smiled.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

The sheriff sat back, looking at me.

“It’s as I told you before, Mr. Tims. You’re under arrest for the murder of your brother, Brunel.”

“And it’s as I told you: I don’t have no brother.”

“No. No you don’t,” he said, glaring at me. “But you did before you killed him.

It seemed that Brunel Tims had lived on Cuv VI for two years and had been killed six months earlier. It also seemed that the Honorable Sheriff had it in his head that I had not only known about my heretofore unknown brother, but had been the one that had killed him.

“Well, if you didn’t do it, I’m sure you have a very reliable alibi, Mr. Tims.”

“Please, for Hell’s sake, stop calling me that. It makes me think my old man is in here with us.”

“Fine,” the sheriff conceded. “So, Bard,” he said, mocking me, “what’s your alibi?”

“Six months ago? Simple, I was...well....” Well. Now that *was* a problem, wasn’t it? During the time in question, I had been involved in what some would call ‘illicit dealings.’ Others, say, Lawmen, such as the one sitting on my cot, would call what I had been doing ‘stealing.’ It was my assumption that one illegal act wasn’t much of an alibi for another. “Well, I can’t exactly tell you where I was.”

The sheriff winked at me and said, “I thought as much. Your trial will be in two days. You can use that time to mount your defense.”

“Do I get a lawyer?” I asked, hopefully.

“We don’t have much call for lawyers on Cuv six.” With that he rose and left my cell.

*

The next day I was awoken by a deputy saying, “Mr. Tims. Visitor for you.” In my sleep-confusion I looked around the cell, expecting to see my father. Before I could remark that Mr. Tims seemed to not be in the cell at the moment, Ching Shih was standing in front of the bars.

“Oh,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she smiled. “We’ve got a plan to bust you out of here.”

Before the deputy could even complete his eyebrow raise, Ching Shih reached down the front of her pants, pulled out a small pistol, and shot him just above his left eye. I shook my head, glad there are some places guards just won’t frisk a woman, even if they should.

“What’s the rest of the plan,” I asked once Ching Shih opened the cell. I knelt down and robbed the deputy of his weapon then went to his desk to retrieve my own revolver.

“Well, the plan mainly centered around coming in here, shooting the deputy, and leaving with you.”

I nodded. “And the rest of the deputies outside?” There had been quite a few when I was brought in and I assumed there still were.

“Outis is taking care of them.”

And that’s how the plan was supposed to happen. Ching Shih rescues me while Outis distracts/attacks the other deputies, then we all high-tail it out of there. But Dr. Anthony Jefferies....

*

When I was arrested at The Rich Earl and Outis and I were lead away, I passed out somewhere on the way to the jail. Sheriff Jones had made Outis carry me but then sent him on his way once we got there. Like I had told the deputy, Outis was not part of it. Besides, the sheriff probably realized early on that he had no where large enough to keep the Cyclops. Once on his own, Outis had done exactly what he was supposed to: he went back to the *Matador* and sounded the alarm. One push of a button inside the cargo bay door alerted all of the crew by means of a radio signal to a communicator we all wore. When the alarm goes off, you return to ship. It was as simple as that. The alarm wasn’t something we used carelessly or without essential need. There was no boy-who-

cried-wolf on my crew.

When the crew returned, Outis told them all what happened. Ching Shih was the one who devised the ‘plan’ by saying, “Let’s go get him. I’ll kill the guards inside while you take care of the ones outside.”

*

Ching Shih and I raced out of the small police station, passing two more bodies on our way out.

“You know, Ching, you probably just raised the bounty on my head quite a bit more.”

“Yes, sir, I know. You can thank me later.”

As we approached the open door, sure enough, there was Outis tossing deputies in the air with a beastly roar. I’ve never been able to figure out if the Cyclops race were animals who gained human traits or if they were humans who gained animal tendencies. Either way, they weren’t fully either and the situation had a lot to do with which side you saw of them. At this moment Outis was full beast. He was screaming with an intensity I had never heard before. Not only were the surviving guards backing up, but I also felt a bit afraid. Even Ching Shih faltered a little in her run to the door.

“Let’s go!” I yelled at my monster-friend as we passed him.

His roar turned into the word “Nooooo!”

“That’s an order!” I was still running towards the landing dock.

“Not without him! We can’t leave him! I won’t leave him!”

As I ran, I turned my head to look at Outis. In his left hand he dangled a deputy by the arm but with his right hand he was pointing. I followed his outstretched finger with my eyes and saw Dr. Jefferies lying in a pool of blood fifteen feet away. At that same time, I heard Ching Shih gasp.

Outis carried the body back to the ship and Jensen had the *Matador* in the air before the loading dock door even finished closing. *Good to know the alarm works under water*, I thought. Counting the three deputies Ching Shih had taken care of, thirteen or so bodies laid in our wake. One of them was Sheriff Fenton Jones himself, and I didn’t expect those who remained to come after us, but I appreciated Jensen’s eagerness.

“Where to, Captain?” he asked over the comm.

“It don’t rightly matter, I don’t think. Just get us into the black.”

Outis placed Dr. Jefferies on the floor and squatted down beside the body. He placed one of his large hands on the doctor’s leg and closed his massive eye. There seemed to be only one bullet hole in the doctor’s chest, but then, if it’s in a bad enough place, one is all it takes. Dressed all in black, his clothes didn’t show much sign of blood, but the ground where Outis picked him up had. Without even having to look, I knew what the wound would be. Small hole in the front, huge hole in the back. A large tear dropped from the Cyclops’ eye and onto the doctor’s stomach.

“Ching, why don’t you see if there’s anything Jensen needs.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” she answered quietly.

Another tear fell, and I placed my hand on Outis’ shoulder. The giant and the doctor had always been close. Outis seemed to have been the one person onboard who didn’t mind Jefferies’ medical ramblings. Hell, he seemed to enjoy them. In turn, the doctor was fascinated with working alongside another species of humanoid. Any chance he got, he would find an excuse to examine Outis. It was from an excited Dr. Jefferies that I found out Cyclopes have two tear ducts, one on each side of the eye. “Of course! It makes perfect sense because...” I had glazed over when the doctor explained and now I was watching those dual tear ducts work overtime on my friend.

“He saved my life,” Outis said. “I looked and he was there. Shooting. I didn’t know what to do. So I kept fighting. I didn’t see the sheriff. Doctor screamed my name. I looked up and saw the sheriff’s gun looking at me. I dodged the bullet. Doctor shot him.”

“He was brave,” I told Outis. “I don’t know what he was doing there, but he was brave. And for your sake, I’m glad he was there.”

Outis turned and looked at me, that huge eye red and glistening.

“And what about *his* sake?” he bellowed. “No one saved *him!*”

“He knew what he was getting into when he went out there. Same as you. When you get done here, put a sheet over him and we’ll find a place to set down and bury him later today.” With that, I went to my quarters, laid down on my bunk, and shed my own tears for the doctor.

*

Thirty minutes later I was standing on the bridge beside Jensen. We had decided that a nearby moon, Azo, would be where we buried the doctor. Normally I would have opted for a burial “at sea,” jettisoning the body into the black cold of space, but somehow that didn’t seem right for the doctor. Maybe it’s because he was well educated; we all felt that he was above us in some way. Sure, we were each skilled in our own rights, but the doctor seemed to be better somehow. He wasn’t usually dirty or covered with grease, and when he was covered in blood, as Ching Shih and I sometimes found ourselves, it was because he was doing good, restoring lives, not taking them. Because of this, a burial at sea felt more like throwing him out with the trash, and I couldn’t do it.

We landed on Azo the day next day, what should have been our third day of vacation, and when I walked down to the cargo bay, I was surprised to find Outis and Skyler dressed up. As a fighter and a mechanic, they had never really had occasion to dress nicely onboard the *Matador*. The Cyclops wore a dark suit over what had once been a snow white shirt but now showed signs of age in its slightly yellow hue. He had even managed to find some cloth to wrap around his neck in a sort of ascot style. Skyler had forgone her usual black coveralls in favor of a black shirt and skirt. I looked down at the shabby green shirt and brown pants I was wearing, feeling slightly ashamed. Ching Shih was with them, wearing a formal robe of purple silk that I had seen her wear on special occasions in the past. Jensen walked past me, his skin almost as black as night with sadness.

We walked out into the Azo night as a group, Outis carrying the crate that served as a casket in his arms. Jensen carried two shovels. As captain it would be my duty to first say something over the burial. All I could think about, though, was my frustration with the doctor being at the rescue in the first place. I didn’t want to chastise the dead, however, especially someone who had saved my right-hand man, so as we walked, I practiced my speech.

About a hundred yards away from our landing site, we stopped in a clearing. The low Joshua trees and scrub grass were fewer in this area. Outis placed the coffin down with care and took a shovel from Jensen. I took the other, feeling it was my responsibility, since Dr. Jefferies had been killed while helping rescue me. The others remained silent. My “help” turned out to be very little compared to the digging of the

massive giant beside me. In no time at all we had a grave about two feet deep. My four crew members grabbed a corner of the coffin each, and lowered it into the ground. I cleared my throat, realizing the time had come.

“Dr. Jefferies....Anthony was a good man.” I coughed again, uncomfortable. *I’m no good at these things*, I thought. *The sentimental has always been beyond my words unless I’m drunk*. “Anthony spent his life saving others, and in some ways, it only makes sense that he died doing the same...in a broad...cosmic sort of sense of it all, you know? I don’t mean that I think he shoulda...you know....” *Okay, Bard, wrap it up before you start sounding like an idiot*. I laughed a little at that thought. *You’re called Bard and you butcher language in the times that count, the times that need a true bard to pen his feelings*.

“Anyway, what else there to say? He was a good man who did good. I don’t think there’s anything better that we can wish to be said about us once we’ve shuffled along.”

“Peace of Christ to him,” Jensen said.

“Well, yeah. I guess that, too. Whatever.” And with that I picked up a shovel.

I’m guessing that it was sometime during all this that our stowaway was re-programming the *Matador*’s control sequences, but I couldn’t say for sure.

*

Days four and five of what was our cancelled vacation went by without a hitch, if somewhat quiet. The loss of a crew member takes its toll on an entire ship, and the *Matador* was no different from any other ship in the sky in that regard. Our meals together were infrequently sprinkled with mild laughter where, in the past, there was a full buffet of delight and merriment. Storytelling and jokes had given way to polite requests for a bowl or dish to be passed. Skyler went about her work in the engine room with none of the singing I had found so irritating in the past. *What I wouldn’t give for her to break into song now*, I thought as I watched her working with her tools. Our usually jovial giant was the most obvious sign that something was wrong on the ship. Once we returned from the burial, Outis remained in his quarters the rest of the day, not even coming out for meals. The next day, he came out for our evening meal without a word, ate wordlessly, and returned to his quarters the same way, his massive eye never raising

to look at anyone else.

But yesterday, I thought, my fingers still trying to find a way to remove the handcuffs, yesterday was really interesting, wasn't it?

*

Yesterday started the same as all the others, and for the most part went fine. Until dinner, that is. We had sat down to our evening meal in the galley, Outis not only joining us, but talking some.

“So where we headed?” he mumbled quietly.

“Well, since we didn't get the cargo from Cuv six, we can't go back to Cuv two for a while, seeing as how the buyer is likely to be a might...upset. Once he's found another freighter to carry it for him, I'm sure he'll cool down. Until then, he'll be a little dangerous. Anyway, Ching and I've talked about it and we're thinking—”

“What was that?” Jensen stood up from the table.

“What?” Ching Shih asked, her face showing everyone's confusion.

“We turned. Maybe only three degrees, but we turned.” His sharp teeth reflected the overhead lighting as he frowned.

“Are you sure?” I asked, not actually doubting my pilot's statement. Sometimes I felt as if the *Matador* was an extension of Jensen. It was like asking, “Are you sure you just raised your arm?” after he scratched his head.

He was looking up at the ceiling, as if trying to see our location in space, and he lowered his eyes to look at me, those bright, golden eyes with tar-black slits for pupils.

“Oh, I'm sure,” he whispered.

*

Jensen and I practically flew up the stairs to the bridge. There was no visual sign of a disturbance and I was beginning to think we were overreacting, until I heard my Christian pilot whisper an extremely strong curse in his own language. That's when I knew we had a problem.

“What is it?”

“I...I don't know. Something's...” His hands flew over dials and buttons. I knew what they all were and could pilot the ship myself, but I couldn't move over the controls with the speed Jensen could. Piloting the ship was more of a natural talent for

him, where it was a learned skill for me. I was an amateur compared to him.

“Something’s...something’s wrong.”

“What? Jensen. What happened? What’s going on?”

“I no longer have control of the ship, Captain.”

“Well who the hell does?”

“Ah, that would be me,” a voice said, behind us.

I turned and found myself looking into a small, black hole. Above that hole was the black dovetail of the front sight of a Smith & Wesson Single Action .38 Super with a five inch barrel, and I thought, *What a beautiful weapon. What a gorgeous way to die.*

“Can I help you?” I asked the man holding the gun. “You seem to have gotten yourself a bit lost, mister.”

The man on the other side of the gun chuckled a little bit. “Nah,” he said. “I’m on the bridge of my new ship. I ain’t lost.”

“Well, mister, there’s where your problem lies. I’m afraid this—”

“You *should* be afraid,” he said with a smirk.

“Mister, you really don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, I do. I really do.”

I couldn’t see much of his face because the pistol was so close to mine. I prayed to Jensen’s god that my pilot would just sit there, not giving the man any reason to squeeze that trigger. *Didn’t I just go through that same thing with Outis? This is becoming a habit.* At some point my hands had gone into the air. It wasn’t so much of a surrender position as it was a ‘hey man, we can talk about this’ supplication.

I tried to plead with what I hoped was his own sense of safety. “Look, man, there are a lot more people on this ship than just the two of us. You don’t want to—”

“Please,” he scoffed. “I hope you ain’t referring to the mechanic, the giant, and the black-haired woman.”

“Well....” Nervously, I shifted my eyes to Jensen, who had gone yellow. He gave a slight shrug, knowing there was nothing he could do.

“You might want to talk to your crew about sleeping at the table, Captain Tims. That ain’t very polite.” His laugh turned his mouth into a wide, toothy grin. “Of course, I imagine the gas anesthetics may have been part of that.” He laughed harder.

I gambled. Most people, when they laugh hard, squint their eyes a bit. I gambled that this man was like most people in that regard. The moment he laughed, I grabbed his pistol with my right hand, twisting it up and back, bending his wrist in a way evolution or Jensen's god never intended. My move was lightening quick, but so was his kick to my knee. He dropped the gun with a grunt of pain, but at the same time, his left hand pulled another pistol from the back of his waistband. My body dropped from the kick to my knee. Before I could make another move, my face was pressed to the metal grating of the floor by the pressure of his second gun.

He looked to Jensen. "Lizard boy, if you move, you've signed your captain's death certificate. Do you understand me?"

"*Acchc*," he said, nodding.

"Plus, I'd have no problem shooting a squama between the eyes, same as a human."

The man picked up his other pistol and also aimed it at my head.

"I guess I should introduce myself, huh? Well, Captain Tims, I'm Brunel. Your older brother. Now get your ass off the floor, and don't try any fancy-pants moves again. Got it?"

*

Brunel walked us down the hall and into the cargo bay. As we passed the galley, I saw Outis and Skyler face down on the table. Ching Shih was on the floor, her plate still in her hand.

"Don't worry," Brunel said. "They's just sleeping."

While I was being arrested and Outis was carrying me to the jail, Brunel had come aboard the *Matador* bearing gifts. Two medium sized crates, to be exact. The first crate held two neutron bombs, the second held his temporary cryo-freezer. After hiding the crates among the others already in the cargo hold, he climbed into his little hibernation tank and went to sleep, probably waking every twenty four hours.

"Now, if you'll be so kind, retrieve that crate with the purple markings. You'll both want to do it. Probably shouldn't be tilted too much. Or dropped, come to think of it."

I looked at the crate and then back at Jensen. He seemed to read my thoughts.

“None of us saw it, Captain. There was too much going on and we were distracted, to say the least. Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

“Or me,” Brunel said, laughing. “Don’t beat me up, either!” He had a pistol trained on each of us and seemed twitchy enough to let lead fly at any moment.

Jensen and I removed the two neutron bombs from the crate.

“Good. Nice work, little brother.” Brunel tossed a pair of handcuffs to each of us. He must have taken them off his utility belt when we were moving the second bomb, knowing he had all the time in the universe as long as we were holding it. “Now you two lock yourselves to a bomb. And I’m gonna check your cuffs, and if I find that you aren’t secured right or you try to make a move, I’m gonna shoot the bomb. Got it?”

Again, neither of us doubted his resolve to do as he threatened, so we locked ourselves up tightly. After he had checked our cuffs, Brunel went back to the galley. Neither Jensen nor I spoke. What was there to say? Brunel returned with Ching Shih over his shoulder. He dropped her body to the floor unkindly and handcuffed her to the bomb across from me. He made another trip for Skyler, cuffing her to the same bomb as Ching Shih. He was sweating now with the exertion and stood for a while, catching his breath.

“Now,” he finally said, “that giant. He’s gonna be the problem. How tall is he? Six cubits and a span?” He walked off, laughing.

*

Which brings us to now.

*

“Jensen,” I said. “I need you to do something for me.”

“You done with your flashback, sir?”

“Yes. Now I need you to do something. Can you reach either of my hands?”

I could hear Jensen struggling for a little bit, before finally saying, “No.”

I sighed. “Look, I’ve thought this over. Do not argue with me. I’m about to give you an order as your captain and I want no discussion. Do you understand? There’s no other way.”

“What are you talking about,” Ching Shih asked, her eyes finally open again.

“Jensen,” I said, ignoring her, “can you reach either of my hands with your

head?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Again, there’s no time for debate once I tell you this. We’re all locked up here and there’s no telling how soon he’ll be back.

“There’s only one way out of these things,” I said, my decision already made.

“You want Jensen to headbutt your hands?”

“No, Ching, I want Jensen to bite off my hand. Right below the wrist.”

*

In 2517, I was in a bar fight and was hit in the crotch with a two-by-four, wielded by an angry squama. I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same to him, had I been the one with the lumber in my hands. Until today, that was the worst pain I had ever felt. Jensen biting my hand off was a pain that made that bar fight feel like a lover’s caress. His teeth easily pierced the skin and muscles and made extremely quick work of the bones. If I hadn’t been screaming, I would have marveled at and been thankful for evolution’s gift of powerful jaw muscles and razor sharp teeth in his race. I also would have found it ironic, I’m sure, that the two most painful attacks on my body had been delivered by the same race of lizard-men. But I didn’t have time for any of that because I was screaming too much.

“Shut up! Captain, shut up!” Ching Shih was yelling at me, trying to get over my volume. In my head I heard her, and mildly understood her, I just didn’t give a damn.

“He bit my hand off!” I screamed, and then kept screaming.

The amazing thing though, is that it had worked. I refused to stop screaming, but I did slide my right arm out of the handcuff and then with my left hand, I slid the cuff out from behind the bar that held me in place. I was free. Now I only had to—my right hand? I screamed even louder, part pain, part surprise, part anger, another three parts pain.

“My right hand?” I screamed.

“You didn’t say which. I couldn’t remember which hand you use most, but knew it had to be done quickly.” Jensen’s voice had no apologetic tone to it. He was merely stating facts.

The pain at the end of my right arm, where my hand had sat for thirty two years,

was immeasurable. It felt like it was on fire. Someone was holding my arm below a jetpack and the flames were licking it, burning the skin and muscles and blood vessels. My mind reeled at the pain and I just wanted to curl up on the floor and cry.

“Captain,” Skyler said, from her place beside Ching Shih, “I know it’s not really my place to say this, but you really need to get your ass in gear and start saving us. You need to either find Outis or find that other guy.”

I knew she was right, and with tears in my eyes, I screamed at her. No words, mind you, just volume and pain. Holding my right arm to my chest, I stood up and looked around. *Okay, first things first. Find a weapon of some kind.* Brunel had taken all the guns that we had been wearing, but there were plenty more stashed around the ship. *You’ll have to move fast, though, because he’ll be here soon because YOU’RE STILL SCREAMING! Yes I am,* I told myself. *And I’ll keep screaming as long as I want, thank you. For days, if I feel like it.* Even with my screams echoing in my head, I could hear Brunel running through the ship, his boots clanging on the metal grating. He would be armed, and again I told myself to find a weapon. There! My eyes caught the pry-bar Jensen and I had used to open Brunel’s bomb crate. I ran across the cargo bay to it and reached to pick it up. My, how old habits die hard. I slammed the bloody stump of my right wrist into the pry-bar and my screaming rose in volume. My voice cracked every few seconds and I could feel something scraping in my throat. I was tearing my vocal chords and didn’t care one bit. In pain, I slumped to the floor, the end of the pry-bar cutting my left cheek as I fell on it.

“What the Hell is this?” Brunel was standing beside me and I looked up into the barrel of that beautiful, shiny gun again. The confused look on his face turned to surprise and a bit of disgust when he saw my right arm. I could feel warm blood flowing down my stomach and onto the floor.

Brunel was smiling, but it was a terrified smile. He no longer knew who was crazier, himself or me.

“Little brother,” he said, “I have seen a lot of things in my life—”

I placed all my anger, pain, and volume in my left arm as I swung the pry-bar out from under me and into his knees. That beautiful Smith & Wesson sounded like an explosion as he pulled the trigger, his whole body clinching. The bullet went through my

right shoulder and into the floor but I could not scream any louder. My voice was already beginning to go, and now his screams picked up where mine were leaving off. He fell to the floor, the gun clattering away as he grabbed at his knees. I stood, my right side covered in blood. I swung the pry-bar into the side of his head, and instantly his screaming stopped. Whether he was dead or unconscious, I didn't know or care. I reached into Brunel's pants pocket (*Left hand*, I reminded myself) and found the handcuff key. I threw it in what I hoped was the direction of my crew and then I passed out, still screaming as I fell.

*

I opened my eyes to discover I was lying on my bed in my own quarters. When I moved my eyes around the room, the walls wobbled and drifted. I opened my mouth slightly.

"Don't try to speak," Ching Shih said. "You're pretty heavily doped up and I won't be able to understand you, anyway."

I raised my right forearm slightly and saw an IV tube going into my stump. At the end of my arm, where a wrist should have led to a hand, the skin was ugly and black. I raised an eyebrow towards Ching Shih.

"I'm sorry, Captain. We had to cauterize it. If there had been a doctor..." She trailed off, her eyes glancing at the floor. "Anyway, Skyler used a propane torch. We figured she was the one with the closest understanding of sealing up something like that." Ching Shih smiled at me. "We kind of all took turns on your shoulder, though. Even Outis. Luckily, the bullet mainly went through muscle and tissue. Though I'm sure it still hurts like Hell."

I nodded my head towards the cargo bay, trying to ask her about Brunel.

"He isn't well," she answered, understanding my concern. "Frankly, I don't care if he dies, but so far he hasn't and he hasn't woken up, either. He's handcuffed to the bed in the doctor's—the empty quarters. We switch out being on watch with you and him."

I wanted to ask her how long I had been out. How long I was unconscious and how long they had me under sedation. Instead, I only saw an image of a clock in my mind with a big question mark on top of it. I closed my eyes, dizzy with medicine. I would have to ask her tomorrow, or next week, or a year from now, whenever it was that

I would wake up again.

*

It turns out I did wake up a day later and was able to speak that time. Skyler was on watch with me and she rose from her chair when I opened my eyes.

“Good to have you back, Captain. Ching said you were awake yesterday, but I almost didn’t believe her.”

“How....” My lips were dry and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I worked my tongue around in my mouth until I had built up some saliva. “How long have I been out?” I finally managed to ask her.

“Six days. We thought we’d lost you a time or two along the way. I was going to make Ching and Outis arm wrestle to see who got the ship.”

“Oh?” I smiled weakly at her.

“Yeah. Whoever lost was going to have to take it. I think they would have fought hard.” Skyler grinned at me and placed a hand on my leg. “Seriously, though, I’m glad you made it through, Captain.” With that, she leaned down and kissed me on the forehead, an uncommon show of affection.

“You’re still tired. You should get some more sleep, Sir.” She went to sit down, but I waved her back with my stump.

“Sky?”

“What is it?”

“Will you sing me to sleep?”

My mechanic laughed and shook her head. “You hate my singing, Sir.”

I smiled, realizing I was already getting better. My hand, or, where my hand should have been, hurt like Hell. My shoulder ached and was wrapped tightly. I would have to learn to do everything with my left hand from now on, including firing a gun, something I had been doing right-handed for twenty three years. My throat hurt from the screaming and I felt sick from the meds, but yeah, things were going to be okay.

“I do hate your singing,” I told her, “but it’s the drugs talking. However, I’m still your captain, and I gave you an order. Sing me to sleep.”

“Whatever you say, Bard. It’s your ship,” and as I slowly sank back into deep sleep, she opened her mouth with song.

*“I see beauty here alone
say my heart is calm and free
but it won't ever feel like home
until you're here with me.”*