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WHEN THE CRONQUIST BLOSSOMED

Commander X'xir Trang, victor of the battle of Drass, bearer of the crimson distinction, hero of the Confederated Forces, was excited. After almost an entire Galactic Standard Year of waiting, *The Fargesia* was soon to be his to command.

It was the first of its class. The plans showed that it was trans-atmospheric, and its speed was high for such a heavy coating of armor. *The Fargesia* was large enough to hold both a complement of Confederate marines, and a squadron of the new *Abrus* fighters.

The finishing touches were being applied and soon, it would be ready for launch. Trang was determined to be there to christen it.

He just had to get to it first.

While his ship had been under construction, Trang's rank had been altered to 'Commandant of the consulate wing'. He had been shuffled from system to system, inspecting other officers, offering advice, and learning a few things along the way. Then, just two days ago, the orders had arrived to return to dry-dock, and his rank of Commander was reinstated.

It felt good to have power back.

There was a knock on his office's door. His aid stood in the doorway, a cup of Ceylon tea in one hand, and a Data-Slate in the other.

Sleath was, like him, was a tough-as-nails Drizzbit. When they had first met, Trang had thought that he was going to have trouble with her, even though she was more than two decades his junior, because Drizzbits

were matriarchal. Since Sleath was raised off-core, she did not have the sexist views of others of their race though, and Trang had found Sleath's company a pleasure, and her opinions, although sometimes abrasive, were often valuable.

Acknowledging her presence with a slight twist of his head, he bid her to enter.

As Trang sipped at his offered brew, Sleath began the morning briefing.

"Captain Bleth thanks you for your advice, and wishes you the best in future endeavors." She read aloud, using the Standard dialect only. "Lieutenant Commander Liles requests an update on the crew roster, and our ride is due to arrive in moments."

"Good." Trang said, elatedly, as he handed his empty cup back to his aid.

The two made their way to the landing pad where their cargo sat upon a skid. Trang's eyes spotted the tell-tale sign of the incoming shuttle. The Hellcat landed with finesse and grace that was uncommon with such vessels. Whoever was behind the stick handled the craft well. That was why Trang was so stunned when the rear hatch opened, and the pilot was revealed to be a human.

Trang did not consider himself bigoted or racist, but he had not had a good experience with any humans so far in his life. Each one had left him with a bad taste on his palette afterwards.

His first experience had been with some traders. The human crew had been unknowledgeable about local customs, and had barely applied themselves to building relations with their clients.

The other time Trang had encountered humans, they had volunteered themselves into servitude to the beloved Confederacy, but their constant complaining and demands had forced Trang to send them off to another world. He hadn't bothered to follow their progress since then.

His distaste was so severe that he had put forth a request on his ship's staffing log. It read: *No Humans allowed.*

The pilot snapped to attention and placed her right arm across her chest before she bowed in the customary greeting to a senior officer.

“Commander Trang?” The pilot asked.

Trang replied by thumping his chest, once.

The pilot righted herself. The planet’s orange sunlight enhanced the human’s olive skin, accented her tied back ebony hair, and glimmered in her dark eyes, which seemed to look everywhere at once.

“Specialist Lynn Lesard, sir.” Her voice was gentle, but sturdy and without waver. “Courier unit, fifteen fifty-three. I have orders to bring you the Denear system’s dry-docks.”

A slight nod was all the affirmative she was given. Snapping her heels together, Lesard indicated that Trang and Sleath were free to enter, but Trang had already begun walking towards the luggage skid.

“Please leave that for me.” The pilot called out, which stopped Trang’s march. “I like to load my own.”

Wanting to throw his hands up in defeat, but indoctrinated otherwise, the commander found a seat in the area behind the cockpit.

“Are you okay, sir?” Sleath asked as she secured her harness. She knew about Trang’s ‘recruitment’ policy.

“I’ll be fine, corporal. Our pilot bears our insignia on her uniform.”

“Do you trust that?” Sleath asked with mirth in her tone. “Sir.” She added, as an afterthought.

Trang hoped his look made it clear what his opinion was.

The pilot returned to her seat by the direct hatch to the cockpit. Her voice rang through the passenger area as the engines, already hot, picked up in pitch. *“We are ready for liftoff. Please confirm status?”*

It was short and to the point. Trang and Sleath both radioed in their acknowledgements.

The Hellcat began to climb into the sky.

“Flight plan is as follows,” The pilot continued, her voice was smooth and unbothered. *“Once we break atmosphere, we will rendezvous with The Cronquist who will then take us to the Denear system. Any questions?”*

“ETA?” Trang spoke, already studying a Data-slate instead of worrying about their flight or enjoying the scenery.

The Hellcat tipped its nose and began to apply thrust. *“If you mean The Cronquist? Then about twenty minutes. If you mean to Dry-dock, then two days, sir. Good to have you aboard.”*

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Trang said casually, surprising himself with the honesty of his own words.

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The Cronquist was an older vessel, a former troop transport that had been retrofitted for cargo.

Once they had landed in the aft bay of the ship, specialist Lesard had taken her charges on a brief tour. It was not her base of operations, but, like any good trooper, she had performed reconnaissance and knew the starship inside and out.

It didn't surprise either Trang or Sleath that they were sharing quarters with the human. Space was at a premium, and they were lucky that they each had a small closet with a bed to themselves.

There was no point to familiarize themselves with the few crew aboard, even if *The Cronquist* was a Confederate vessel, so Trang and Sleath kept to themselves for the remainder of the first day as they continued preparations and paperwork. They did not see trooper Lesard until she joined them for dinner.

The meals had been basic rations, protein sticks, carb plates, and veg' chips, but the three had eaten without complaint. Lesard had been respectful in conversation, and had even warmed up enough over time to share a few jokes.

Trang awakened the next morning. Although he was still inundated with paperwork, he took breaks once in awhile just to give his mind a rest. During such moments, he wandered the ship. On one such occasion, he found himself in the small gym, where he found that Lesard and Sleath were in the midst of a physical battle against each other. It turned out they were only practicing their close-quarters combat. His fears that the two women's drives would turn them into enemies dissolved as he saw a bond of respect form between his aid and escort.

Later, taking a break from the tedious chores of administration, Trang found himself in the aft bay. There, his escort talked to her Hellcat as she performed maintenance. Her affection for the inanimate craft both amused the commander and reminded him of his upcoming command. He wondered to himself if he would, like her, grow a relation to his own vessel.

That evening, Lesard challenged the others to a game of cards. It was a diversion she had learned during her time growing up as a harvester in the Praxian Hegemony. Trang retired to his bunk once he had lost a week's pay.

His rest was short-lived.

The commander was deep in meditation when the ship screamed like a wounded beast and his bunk shook beneath him. He was on his feet in an instant and opened his door to the common room to check on the others.

Lesard stepped from her closet. She was dressed in her under-suit and the cybernetic enhancements all bipedal pilots received, in order to push blood out of their extremities, glinted in the pale light. She hurriedly slipped into her over-suit with practiced motions and was almost dressed before the klaxons began to sing.

Sleeath emerged from her room a moment later dressed in her soft-suit.

"All hands to battle stations!" The order rang from the speakers and datalinks that were tied into the ship.

Another shudder ran through the vessel, and the trio steadied themselves.

"Weapons fire." Trang observed, calmly. Biting down on his cheek, he triggered his implanted communicator. "Captain?" Trang asked of the bridge.

"We've been ambushed." The Ziz in charge of *The Cronquist* admitted. *"We're out-"*

The report died in a burst of static.

Lesard slapped her helmet on. The opaque gear hid her face from view, but her voice came through their communicators as she made sure that her two charges' suits were sealed. *"It looks bad."*

A new set of sirens joined in. It was a call to evacuate the ship.

"Wait here." She ordered and then opened the door to the hallway. She had to brace herself as the metal barrier slid sideways and the atmosphere of the room was sucked away by the vacuum of space. The hull had been breached.

Through a portal, Trang saw brilliant lights as las blasts passed through dust and debris, and the short lived explosions as missiles detonated, and the sudden crimson glow as radiant heat weapons melted through material.

A lifeboat launched from a nearby hatch, drifted through the maelstrom of destruction, and died as it was holed by a myriad of deadly beams.

All was accompanied by silence, such was the nature of space.

"We won't have a chance unless we can maneuver." The escort had seen the same thing as the commander. *"We have to get to my Hellcat."*

She motioned for the other two to follow.

The corridor that led to the aft section of the ship vanished before their eyes. Instinctively, the pilot stepped in front of her charges and shielded the other two, whose suites were lighter armored.

“Well, guess we can’t go that way.” Trang observed dryly.

The ship shuddered again, and the dampener system died, and with it went the artificial gravity. Sleath anchored herself to a rung in the wall as she grabbed her companions and held them secure.

“We can’t stay here!” The aid said with an edge to her voice.

The commander almost sounded bored as he reminded her that: “We can’t continue.”

The human removed a grappling gun from her belt. *“What’s your general mass?”* She asked her charges.

“Ninety-nine in suit” Trang responded, but Sleath hesitated. Such questions were considered rude by her people’s etiquette, but she fought back any comment as she answered. *“Sixty-four.”*

Lesard punched the numbers into her Data-pad and made a quick calculation. *“We’re going to push the envelope.”* She warned. *“Hold on!”*

The tether fired. The fine wire spanned the void, and latched to a ruined strut mid-way. The cable pulled taught and yanked the trio out into space.

Behind them, their quarters exploded as a torpedo pierced the hull.

They passed where the tether was anchored, and Lesard released the grapple. She took aim again, and fired for a twisted and puckered opening at the far end of the gap.

A glint of light caught Trang’s attention. The glowing orb of a particle projectile rapidly grew in size as it headed straight for them.

The grappler’s motor was too weak to pull the three much faster, but it had aligned them. Grabbing the cord, Trang yanked them towards the opening at several times the speed they had previously travelled at.

“Brace yourselves!” The pilot reminded her companions.

They passed out of the hole just as the particle projectile smashed into the center of *The Cronquist* and broke the ship in two. With no dampeners to slow them down and unable to stop, Lesard positioned herself so that she was between her charges and the decking.

When they hit the wall, their mass, combined with the sudden deceleration, was focused onto one small area, where Lesard and the hallway met. The wall absorbed some of the impact, but Lesard and her suit took the brunt of the blow as Sleath stopped the gang from bouncing back out of hole that they had entered by.

The human's cry of pain was loud in her companions' ears.

Released from his aid's grasp, Trang knelt and took the pilot by the shoulders. He tried to look through Lesard's visor, but all he saw was a reflection of his helmet, and the destruction as the severed bow of *The Cronquist* was hammered into oblivion.

Lesard's next comment was in neither Standard nor Basic dialects, but its connotation was clear. She gasped before she reverted back to the more familiar, and intergalactic, language.

"I think I broke a few ribs." She said, weakly.

Trang felt guilty for the trooper's injuries, but he buried his thoughts. There was no point to let his emotions get in the way. "Can you function, Trooper?" The commander asked. His voice was level but authoritative, having been trained by years on the frontlines.

"I could walk on broken legs if I needed to, sir." Lesard made her comment with bitter humor, and Trang felt like her words were sincere. *"We need to keep going."* She continued. *"Help me up, please."*

The three made their way through the dying vessel. They passed the corpses of crew members who had been caught unaware in the opening salvo. Personal belongings floated about, and cargo, knocked free in combat, filled the halls.

By the time that they made it to the hanger, Lesard's breathing had become labored thanks to the pain, but she straightened herself, and limped for the cockpit.

"I can fly-" Trang began, but he was cut off by his subordinate.

"No offense sir, but I know my Hellcat." Lesard grunted as she climbed into the hatch. *"Besides, ugh, you two are still under my protection. If you want to help, there's a fold module over in the skids. Without it, we will be forced to travel at sub-light, if we escape."*

"Understood." Trang and Sleath hurried to bring the module over as the aft section began to shake under various impacts.

The attackers had turned their attention to the remaining portion of *The Cronquist*.

It only took moments before Trang and Sleath found their seats.

Lesard's voice was even thinner over the com system than it had been before she harnessed herself in. *"I've got the engines hot. We don't have enough firepower to go toe-to-toe with anything out there. We're going to have to play dead once we escape."*

"Understood." Trang spoke evenly, despite the adrenaline that was flooding through his system.

"Dampeners online." The familiar press of gravity sunk them into their chairs. *"I've transferred control of weapons to your consoles."* Lesard reported.

"Running hot!" Sleath stated, energizing the two turrets.

"Make an exit." Trang ordered.

The las blasts slagged a wall before the molten metal instantly hardened in the cold of space. With a quick burn, Lesard flung the Hellcat towards the opening.

No sooner were they out of the ship than the desperateness of their situation became apparent. Three raider vessels had jumped *The Cronquist*, and despite the valiant resistance of her crew, it had been a one-way struggle from the beginning.

The aft reactor's casing breached, and the remains of *The Cronquist* blossomed in a bright and sudden explosion. Debris flew about and hammered the Hellcat. Some pieces pushed the ship further, others pinged off the armor or buried into the plating. If it wasn't for the dampeners, the three would have been thrashed into a pulp, but no sooner was their spin established than Lesard killed the Hellcat's power.

"What is she doing?" Sleath asked.

"Looking like junk." Trang answered, when Lesard remained mute.

Mixed within the cloud of debris, the Hellcat rolled along in the chaotic fragments. Disguised by *The Cronquist's* death, they floated past one of the raider's vessels.

"Are the nose camera's recording?" Trang whispered, as if he was worried that the attackers would hear his words. Sleath checked her console, and acknowledged with a hand signal. The three attacker's logos and names had been hurriedly painted over, but Trang swore that he could make out an insignia through the ship's camouflage.

"It wasn't a raid, was it, sir?" Sleath asked.

"No, it was a massacre." Trang replied bitterly. He wondered if they would be spotted, but one-by-one, the attacking ships stretched, disappeared, reappeared in the distance, and then vanished from sight as their fold engines warped space and allowed them to travel faster than light.

The Hellcat drifted in silence until they were certain that no one had been left behind to pick off survivors. Only then did Lesard break her silence.

"I need, a path, to the closest common shipping lane." She gasped.

Worried, Trang undid his harness and peered through the observation window. A shard of debris had shattered the cockpit, and had impaled Lesard through her stomach. Only the cold of space had saved her, as her blood had frozen about the spike and sealed her suit.

Trang called the human's name, concern thick in his voice.

"The route please, sir." The pilot begged.

"Got it." Sleath answered and the Hellcat was slowly pointed into the fold-solution. The module that the two Drizzbit's had attached to the shuttle, drew power from the Hellcat's reactor, and the stars coalesced into one bright pinpoint as space collapsed

Lesard coughed, and her rattling breath could be heard by her companions.

"Fifteen units, ETA." Sleath observed.

"What's your status?" Trang commanded.

It took her a few moments to study her Data-pad, and when Lesard spoke, her words were slurred in a combination of pain, blood loss, and falling internal temperatures. *"Suit's primary battery damaged. Thermal control system, compromised. Pressure system, inoperable. Massive internal damage and trauma. At least, I'm not leaking atmosphere."*

"That's good trooper." Trang encouraged. *"Hold yourself together."*

"Ten." Sleath stated.

The pilot's vision began to double, and Lesard found it hard to focus as she tried her best to keep the ship on course. An alarm engaged on her Data-pad and warned her that her bio-signs were falling below critical levels.

"Don't die on me, trooper." Trang ordered.

"No offense sir," Lesard tried to laugh. *"But you could have given me an easier order."*

Her attempt at humor was painful to the commander, and the hurt he felt in his chest at her response was no longer unexpected.

Her life became a single focus, not on the light in front, but in the icy hot pain of her intestine. Trang's voice felt far away, distant. Sleath counted the moments, and each number was harder and harder to hear.

The light ahead grew as they came out of fold. It was too much for her, and Lesard passed into darkness.

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The smell was the first thing that woke her. It was the odor of seared meat and burnt metal combined with the sickly sweetness of disinfectant. It was rank, and it clung to the inside of her nose and stayed there.

Next came the sounds. Beeps and whirls, clicks and hisses became clear. Then, the warmth on her face, and the numbness in her hands and toes.

Lynn Lesard opened her eyes.

It was dim in the room, but her eyes adapted. She lay on a bed. Wires and tubes snaked about her, some fed her fluids, others gasses, while others removed waste. The beeping came from monitors that constantly fed her bio-data to the medical cloud.

“Welcome back.” A familiar voice said. It took effort, but Lynn slowly moved her head until she saw who had spoken.

Trang sat at the side of her bed. The black and gold uniform of the Confederate Navy glittered brightly in the dim light.

“Sir.” Lesard croaked, weakened still. “Good to see you’re okay. I take it that I completed my mission?”

“Yes.” Trang smiled. “We were picked up within minutes. I must say, I didn’t think you would make it. If you had not been hypothermic, you would be dead right now.”

“I’m tougher than I look.”

“Obviously.” Trang laughed, honestly. Then he stood, and gently placed something upon Lesard’s legs. “When you have time, look over my report please.”

“Yes sir.”

The commander walked to the exit, but stopped in the doorway. His voice was gentle.

“If you’re interested, *The Fargesia* needs a few top-notch pilots and I need good helmsmen who know what we’re going up against. Thanks to your Hellcat’s recording, we’ve identified who destroyed *The Cronquist*. We plan to teach them a lesson.

“I read your file and I see that you’re approved for large craft piloting. I talked to your CO, and he agreed that you’re free to work with me if you desire.”

“I take it I made a good impression, sir?” Lesard’s words were both happy and tired.

“Read the report when you have some more strength.” Trang whispered, and then left the room.

Sleeth waited patiently for her commanding officer in the hallway. Adjusting his uniform, the commander handed his aid a Data-slate.

“Please see that this gets posted to the company net as soon as possible.” He requested.

Sleeth read the words.

Commander Trang, captain of The Fargesia, requests volunteers to crew his new vessel. Looking for dedicated, tough personnel who can work both independently and in group environments and who are not afraid of a little adventure.

P.S.

Humans Wanted.

