

A Near Escape.

The cargo ship affectionately named *The Reason*, sat quietly clinging to the side of an asteroid. Its not-regulation-but-still-very-legal camouflage was hard at work blending into the gouged side of the rock that hung in the asteroid belt between the outer solar planet of IJ45TD and its moon. The window of the small bridge showed the mess of debris tumbling around in the gravity-less expanse between the ship and the planet below. In amongst the asteroids, a large, sleek spaceship prowled, searching for the prey that now watched them from their hiding place.

‘How long until you think they’ll give up?’ Kale said, lounging back in his seat. He propped his feet up on the dashboard before quickly removing them at Mandy’s frown.

‘No idea. If they know what we’re carrying it could be a long time. Otherwise...’ Mandy shrugged.

‘Pirates,’ Kale said with disgust as the large ship disappeared from their view. A huge chunk of rock floated by them, smaller asteroids bouncing off it. Mandy glanced down at her radar; nothing coming their way yet.

‘Captain?’ Lucas’s deep voice came through over the intercom.

‘Go ahead, Lucas.’

‘I need you to come down to the engine room; we might have a situation.’

‘Might have?’ Mandy was not impressed--now was not the time for her mechanic to start fussing over something trivial that could wait until they were back safe in Trinity territory.

‘Just come down please,’ Lucas answered shortly. Rolling her eyes, Mandy got up and stretched.

‘Keep an eye on both ships,’ she ordered Kale.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ He gave a lazy salute.

Mandy inspected her ship closely as she made her way down the maze of corridors and stairs until she reached the engine room. Located at the bottom of the spacecraft it was the hottest room to be in, given that it was also right next to the thrusters. At the moment though it was quite cool, cold even. Mandy frowned.

‘Ah captain, good, you’re here.’ Lucas dropped a wrench into his toolbox with a clatter and wiped some grease onto his overalls.

‘Lucas, we’ve been a team for nine months now. I don’t want to tell you to call me Mandy again.’

‘Right, yes.’ Lucas took a deep breath and rubbed his hand over his face, smudging it with grease. ‘Mandy...there’s a problem with the ship.’

‘What *kind* of problem?’ Mandy folded her arms.

‘Look, I know I might overreact sometimes, but this is serious. Since we powered down something in the life support system hasn’t been functioning correctly.’

Mandy frowned and strode over to the series of dials and readouts, standing next to Lucas she looked over the displays. The temperature was dropping rapidly. Quickly she did the calculations, at the rate the numbers were going down they would freeze to death in little over three hours.

‘Why is this happening?’

‘The bastards got a few shots through our shields before we hid. They must have hit one of the solar conversion panels on the hull of the ship. Without that panel, and with the engines off, the ship has no way to generate heat.’

‘Can you fix it?’ Three hours was not going to be enough time, the pirates would search for them for at least another five, and there was no way to get a signal out to her superior in the Cosmillitare without giving themselves away.

‘I would have to walk.’ Lucas scratched his chin. ‘Go outside and assess the damage to the panel, but even then I don’t have a replacement.’

‘And walking would allow you to show up on their scanners,’ Mandy added smacking her fist into the palm of her hand. The ship’s camouflage only worked on the metal and glass hull, it wouldn’t cover anyone outside the ship. ‘What other options do we have?’

‘I don’t know Cap— Mandy,’ Lucas looked down at his scruffy boots, frustrated. ‘I know how to fix something that’s broken but not how to make something out of thin air.’

‘So there’s no other way to bypass the systems, generate heat another way?’

‘Sorry. I’ve been down here thinking since I first noticed it. Without a source, we can’t generate heat.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ Mandy muttered to herself, but Lucas caught it.

‘I can’t just make heat out of nothing.’ Lucas gestured wildly around the engine room. ‘Anything I do will compromise the other systems, and then something else will kill us. The only choice we have is to turn on the engines.’

‘But we won’t be able to outrun them.’ Mandy had already calculated the odds of their ship being able to make it out of the asteroid belt while being chased by the pirates. They were outgunned and outmatched. She sighed and rubbed her hand over her eyes pinching the bridge of her nose. ‘Options?’

‘I’m pretty sure the answer is obvious,’ Lucas mumbled miming steering the ship.

‘I said that won’t work.’

‘Why not?’ Mandy narrowed her eyes at Lucas, and he looked away quickly.

‘Just keep working on the problem.’ Mandy snapped at him and started to leave the room. ‘I’m going to see if anyone has any *other* ideas.’

‘We have a situation.’ Mandy threw herself into her chair and explained the situation to Kale. As much as she hadn’t wanted to admit it, Lucas was right.

‘I think we can make it,’ Kale mused. ‘I’ve been watching the area around us. There are a lot of narrow gaps between rocks that the pirates won’t be able to go through.’

‘There’s no way we will make it out in one piece.’

‘Of course, we will, we will have the great Captain Keen piloting.’ Kale’s face was serious. Mandy’s eyes went dark as she thought over her options. Stay on the asteroid and risk freezing to death or make a run for it and risk capture. The answer seemed obvious, but Mandy had a bad feeling that sat on her shoulders making her rub her neck involuntarily.

‘It’s not like we have much of a choice,’ Mandy sighed.

‘No kidding, if we don’t get the cargo to its destination on time we can kiss our careers goodbye.’ Kale stood up and stretched, flipping a few switches on the panel.

‘No, not yet. I want to wait a little longer, see what the pirates do. Maybe they will give up.’

‘Yeah right.’ Kale muttered glaring out the window.

Mandy pounded her fist against the arm of her chair before slumping in the seat.

‘Inform the rest of the crew. It’s going to get a little chilly. Also, check on the cargo--her Imperial Highness should be made aware of our situation.’

Kale nodded, his mouth set in a determined line as he left the bridge.

‘They gone yet, Captain?’ Lucas startled Mandy where she stood observing the slowly drifting belt. Mandy shook her head irritated. Lucas frowned, twiddling a few knobs on the control panel.

‘Stop that,’ Mandy barked before clearing her throat. ‘Sorry, I’m just a little on edge.’

‘No kidding.’ Lucas mumbled under his breath. Mandy pinched the bridge of her nose before turning to face him.

‘Look, I know you think the answer is obvious, but I’m not ready to risk it just yet. If I make the wrong call and we end up in the hands of these pirates...’

‘It won’t be any worse than allowing the *Empress* to freeze to death.’

Mandy raised her eyes to search her mechanic’s face. Surely he wasn’t serious. If the pirates got their hands on the ruler of the galaxy... no, it would be better to suffer the cold than allow the *Empress* that fate.

‘Do you trust me, Lucas?’

‘What?’

Mandy looked back out into space, sometimes she hated being the one in charge, the one that had to make the call, the one who could never get it wrong. She was no longer shielded by a commanding officer. There were no orders to hide behind here. If she made the wrong choice, she, and all the crew would be executed, if they weren’t dead already. Not to mention their families would be cast out, sent to live on the outer solar planets where work was scarce and supplies even scarcer.

‘Please, give it another hour, see if you can come up with something else. If we are still stuck then...’

‘Then you will pilot us all out of here to safety,’ Kale butted in as he arrived back on the bridge carrying blankets. He passed one to Mandy and tossed Lucas the other. ‘Everyone is holed up in their bunkrooms. Blue is in with the Empress to make sure that she remains safe through all this.’

‘Good idea.’

Kale wrapped his own blanket around his shoulders and sat back in his chair.

‘Well, I’m going to try and come up with a brilliant plan,’ Lucas nodded to Mandy, who dismissed him with a gesture, her eyes distant. Mandy and Kale sat in silence, staring out the window of the bridge looking at the breathtaking view of the planet below. Mandy sighed and reclined her chair back running over her options for the hundredth time. She couldn’t send out a signal for help, not that backup would arrive in time to prevent them from hypothermia. She could try and run, but she seriously doubted her medium-sized galaxy-freighter was going to be able to outrun the giant moon-sprinter gun-ship that hunted them. As long as they were undetectable and the Empress was secure, she could risk waiting a little longer. So far her very short military career had taught her that some things, like respect, and waiting for pirates to give up, need time. She shivered and clutched the blanket tighter around her shoulders. It wasn’t her usual game to wait. Her typical tactic was to go out, guns blazing but this was different. Becoming captives of space pirates was the worst way to go, especially for a young crew like hers. She had no doubt that if the pirates caught them, it would be a long slow death for all of them in the Trinnium mines of GF4T67.

‘You know we’re going to have to make a run for it sooner rather than later, right?’ Kale sighed and turned to Mandy.

‘I know,’ Mandy replied through clenched teeth.

‘We won’t be able to take much more of the cold before it affects our reaction times.’

‘I know.’ Mandy avoided Kale’s gaze. He knew her well enough to read the expression on her face. He kicked her gently with his foot, captain be damned. Mandy glared at him and jutted her chin out.

'Don't question me, Kale. This is hard enough as it is.'

'You're scared.' Kale's eyes widened. 'You're afraid that you're going to stuff up and we'll get captured.'

'No.'

'Oh come on. We've been friends our whole lives. I can tell when you're afraid.'

'You know what will happen if I screw up, what will happen to our families.'

Kale winced then looked sympathetically at Mandy. Growing up they had both witnessed the midnight exile of families whose relatives had angered The Imperial Family.

'You're in command, you can't let fear for others cause you to not take action. Sitting here will kill us just as much as flying this damned ship off this rock will get us out of here.'

'What do you know about command? Nothing.' Mandy lurched out of her chair and paced up and down the bridge.

'Neither do you.' Kale shot back. 'We are your first team. We knew what we signed up for when we joined.'

'What if I make the wrong choice? What then?'

'Then we deal with it. As a crew. I shouldn't need to tell you this to get you to move your arse and make the right choice already.' Kale was breathing hard by now. Anger flared in his eyes as he shook Mandy's shoulders. 'You're in command so act like it.'

'I can't afford to stuff this up, Kale--'

'So? People stuff up, you've stuffed up before, and you'll stuff up in the future, it doesn't matter.'

'I matters to me!'

'Then do something.' Kale got up and gripped Mandy's shoulders forcing her to look in his eyes. 'Making no choice is as bad and making the wrong one.'

Fire flared back into life in Mandy's eyes. Kale was right. She shouldn't second guess herself just because she had the Empress on board. She knew she could fly them out. It was her pride that was stopping her. She would rather freeze than be proven mediocre by a ship full of radiation-drunk pirates. The risk of capture was real but not as real as the cold creeping into the blood of every single person on board the ship, the Empress included.

'Get ready for a wild ride.' Mandy strapped herself into the pilot's chair and flipped the intercom on. 'Lucas, we are making a run for it. I need full power as fast as possible, I'm going to be overclocking the drives.'

'Roger that.'

'Kale, make sure everyone is safely secured in their bunkrooms.' Kale left at a run.

Mandy watched the dials, and the ship powered up. There wasn't going to be much time between getting the engines ready and the pirates detecting them, and she wanted to get off the rock before that happened.

'Everyone's secured,' Kale informed her as he strapped himself into his chair.

'Let's do this.' Mandy gripped the controls and was pushed back into her seat as they took off from the rock faster than they should have. The ship blasted straight up before performing a tight turn and heading out of the asteroid field dodging rocks as they few pass the hull. Inside *The Reason*, the crew was experiencing the effects of g-forces stronger than what the internal dampeners could compensate for.

'Here we go,' Mandy cried looking almost manic as she weaved in and out of the asteroids. Rocks of all shapes and sizes burred past as she lightly touched the controls in an effort to keep them from ending up a smashed wreck on the side of an asteroid. She tried to steer the ship in a direct line through the asteroid field to the open space beyond adjusting her course each time they overcame an obstacle. Through the rocks, she glimpsed the gleam of another ship as it turned itself around and started to follow them.

'They're right behind us.' Kale was watching their radar and the blip that was closing in. Laser fire blasted overhead, blowing an asteroid to smithereens.

'No kidding.' Mandy didn't bother looking anywhere but ahead. The ship dodged and weaved through the debris like a graceful dancer. Kale flipped their shields to an even higher setting drawing power away from all non-essential systems. The ship lurched as a few well-aimed shots struck them directly but the energy was dissipated by the force field wrapped around the hull. Warning lights flashed red all around them. *The Reason* shuddered again, and Mandy's thoughts jolted into overdrive thinking up every worst-case scenario in her repertoire.

'Nearly there.' Kale could see the edge of the belt in front of them. 'Push it, they're on us.' Mandy gritted her teeth and pushed the engines even further.

'She can't take much more.' Lucas came on over the intercom.

'Just a little further,' Mandy yelled back. In front of her, a monstrous asteroid loomed in her path. Gritting her teeth and clenching the steering she took them into a steep climb, skimming the ship over the surface of the giant rock before they finally burst out into open space. 'Punch it!'

Kale didn't hesitate to follow the order and quickly punched in the commands sending the ship into O-Drive. The stars seemed to brighten and then shoot past them as space folded around them before abruptly they were drifting quietly towards a planet surrounded by twin moons of almost equal size.

'The Trinity,' Mandy breathed in relief. 'Let's get the Empress home.'