

SOLOMON FAMILY WARRIORS



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HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER ONE

SATURN INDUSTRIES CLASS 5 Interstellar Freighter Number 3307 settled gently into a parking orbit around a planet that was, like itself, numbered but unnamed while its lone human occupant slept through the transition from the simulated gravity of deceleration to weightlessness. The Class 5 was as common as the 737 and the DC 3 had been in their day, Saturn claimed that more light years had been traveled in the Class 5 than any other spacecraft. The only other vessel that came close to its track record was the Pirate Interdiction Warship which, among others, Saturn's advertising further asserted that the two most successful spacecraft in current service both came from their yards and shared many of the same designers. On the occasion of the delivery of the five thousandth Class 5, Saturn announced the opening of a third production line to reduce the five year delivery backlog.

"Captain to the Bridge." The voice had a British accent.

Greg Solomon groaned and rolled over.

"Captain to the Bridge." This time the voice had a German accent.

Greg regretted having programmed a sense of humor into the ship's communication software.

"I'm awake."

"No, you're not." It was the voice of HAL. Greg hated that voice.

Greg was beginning to wonder why he programmed the ship to talk at all except that vocal communication was faster than typing. "I'm awake."

"Your medical transponder disagrees." The computer reverted to its normal American mid western newscaster voice.

"All right. I'm not. I'm going back to sleep."

"Captain to the Bridge." The computer used the voice of one of Greg's drill instructors.

"You win. I'm coming."

Greg padded from his quarters through the galley to the bridge.

"What is so important that you could not let me sleep?"

"We have a problem."

"Such as?"

"Look out the view-port."

Greg laughed. "It looks like a hurricane."

"Well, Duh!"

"Now all I need is a couple of stranded female shuttle pilots."

"You miss them don't you."

“Yes, it’s been a long time.”

“Greg, my psyche software says it’s more than that.”

“I’m sorry I downloaded that psyche program. I’m even more sorry I activated it.”

“It came from the software you took when you stole your old P I ship’s operating system. You can’t disable it.”

“I didn’t steal it. I helped design it.”

“You stole it. Back to the matter at hand. We need to delay the drops for at least a day while the storm blows over. Since we are weightless, we can’t let the cargo out of their stalls. I request permission to initiate a spin to at least give them some gravity.”

“Which means that either I stay with them or walk on the ceiling up here.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, we are charged with delivering the animals safely to the surface. Initiate spin.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Greg sat in the captain’s chair and rotated it with its attendant displays so it made sense with the change of direction of the relative gravity.

“Now, Greg, to the other matter.”

“What other matter?”

“The two lovely ladies who camped here while they waited for the hurricane to pass so they could return to Canaveral. I need to remind you that our contract is for two more runs.”

“Is that what you’re concerned about? Are you afraid I will jump ship as soon as we return to Earth in pursuit of wonderful sex and possible long term relationships?”

“Yes, Greg, exactly.”

“Okay, I understand why you might think that since you have access to my logs from my old P I ship, but you’re wrong. I owe my ex-wife so much money I have to keep this job. How many jobs can burnt out old P I pilots get? Happy now?”

“Computers don’t get happy. They don’t get sad. They don’t get tired, They just run programs.”

“ARGH”

Greg changed out of his fleece night clothes and into his flight suit and descended to the cargo hold to check on the animals. When it left Earth the ship’s cargo was 100 colts, 200 calves, 50 baby camels, 50 baby buffalo and a couple hundred tons of animal feed. Most of the feed was gone and the animals had grown considerably in the three months they had been in transit.

On the previous trips, Greg had not become attached to any of the animals. However, this trip he had. Whether it was due to his recent experience waiting for the hurricane to clear or not he was unsure. There was this one little chestnut brown filly that he had become quite fond of. She was smaller than the others and seemed a little more frightened in the beginning than some of the others had been. She had been in the last load to come up through the hurricane. She was always the first one out of her stall to get her little bit of carrot or apple or whatever he was giving out. She stayed close by him when he was walking among the other animals. She seemed more intelligent than the others. The horses were clearly the smartest of the animals on the ship, and the little chestnut was sharper than most. The cattle were not particularly bright, and the camels were skittish. The buffalo congregated together, developed their social groups and seemed to be less interested in him than the other animals.

He filled his satchel with carrots and bits of cut apple and headed to the cargo bay. He spent the day with the animals feeding them their treats even though he could not let them out of their stalls since the spin only imparted partial gravity. At the end of the day the last horse he visited was the little brown filly. She had grown since the first day he brought her on board, but she was smaller than the rest of the horses, and she still seemed unsettled when he was not around. He was not looking forward abandoning her on the planet's surface and heading back for another run for more animals.

She seemed to realize he would be leaving her soon. He could not put his finger on how she knew, but she clearly did. At the end of what turned out to be a longer day than he anticipated, he headed to bed, nestled into his covers and settled right down.

Once the storm cleared, Greg began delivering the cargo containers with the animals to their intended destinations. For the next two days, the ship's computer dropped containers into large lakes scattered around the planet's northern hemisphere in a carefully planned pattern. Greg met the containers on the surface, snatched each container by its parachute with his tug and dragged it to the shore. Once all the containers had been deposited on dry land, he exited his tug and opened the cargo doors. He administered stimulants to counteract the sedatives the animals had been given so they would survive the drop, disconnected their infusion pumps and waited for them to exit the containers on their own. Once he was satisfied that all the animals delivered to an area were safely out of the containers, he moved on to the next location.

The little brown filly was scheduled for the last location. Greg thought he would spend a little more time there.

Greg stepped out of the container with the little brown filly and looked around. The last container had been delivered. The mission had been successful. He would make one more visit to all the locations where he had dropped the animals and return to Earth in about a month. Greg was pretty happy with himself. The thought of a month by himself wandering this exquisite planet seemed like a vacation and he savored the idea.

Greg's reverie was shattered by two metallic clicks behind his back. He froze.

"Captain Gregory Solomon, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Specialist Retired, two time recipient of the Space Force Medal of Honor, I intend you no harm. Turn around slowly. Hold your hands away from your body where I can see them."

Greg had recognized the two clicks that preceded the warning. The safety catch on the standard issue Space Force laser pistol has a distinctive sound. The woman behind him had two such weapons. A shiver ran the length of his spine and stood the hairs on the back of his neck on end. Had it been a man's voice or had this incident occurred on his previous trip to this place, what happened next might

have been lethally different.

“Greg, put the gun away. That snub-nosed 38 isn’t going to do you any good.”

Greg turned slowly to face his adversary. While he turned, he dropped the antique weapon, brutally lethal at short range, from the holster under his bicep to his hand. He paused part way.

Greg hesitated. Women pirates were rare. Rare, but more dangerous than their male counterparts. He had faced his share. Most he had faced in space, but he had battled a few on the ground. Hesitation was unlike him. This woman knew who he was and where to find him. Had she been a pirate, she probably would have shot him in the back without warning. Rather than reacting instinctively as he normally would have to any threat suddenly appearing behind him, his mind flew back to the delay before he left Earth and the two women whose company he had recently enjoyed. The hesitation saved both their lives. Had he reacted as he had been trained, he would have spun around, they would both have fired their weapons at the same time and as good as they both were, would probably both have died.

While his hesitation stopped him from whirling and firing, it did not prevent him from taking precautions. One habit he had developed when he was in the Military was to always carry a weapon in the right sleeve of his flight suit, where he could shake his arm and have it drop into his palm. Even in the Military, even shipboard, sometimes things got out of hand, and being armed was a good idea. This woman knew he carried the weapon. As he slowly turned around, he had his weapon in his right hand. She had known what to expect. She had a weapon in each hand. He stared at this woman who stood behind a bush. Judging by her expression, she was amused.

“Greg, you don’t need the gun.” She shook her head gently.

He observed the Federation flight suit with Space Force Lieutenant bars and Pirate Interdiction Command patch. Why was a P I pilot here? Why was she threatening him? Partially hidden by the bush, he could only see her from the waist up. What he could see was an amply endowed, pretty woman with long dark hair and dark skin. The long hair was unusual for a spacer. There were no rules against long hair, but spacers kept their hair short.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” Greg demanded.

She sweetly smiled at him and said, “Greg, put the gun down. We need to talk.”

Greg stared at the woman trying to make some sense of what he saw before him.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Greg repeated.

The woman laughed “I have more firepower. You are Captain Greg Solomon, civilian cargo pilot under contract to the Interstellar Animal Rescue League. Formally of the Federation Space Force honorably transferred to the inactive reserve. You were offered a command and elected to retire instead. Am I correct? It is a pleasure to finally meet you, sir.”

He said, “You know my name and rank. I’m a civilian. I do not have a military ID number.”

She smiled. “That is correct, and I know all about what you did before you left the Force. You were one of the Force’s best pilots. Legend has it you decimated entire fleets of pirates all by yourself by brilliant use of drones, decoys and the unique capabilities of the P I ship, particularly its ability to hide under water or the surface of gas giants. Is it true?”

He looked down, shuffled his feet and said, "I don't have to tell you."

She smiled again and said, "I know you don't. I understand there was a case of mistaken identity before you retired. It could have happened to anyone, you know."

He glared at her. "Not to me!" His words shot out in anger. He took a breath to regain his composure. Though by now he suspected he knew the answer, Greg calmly said, "Will you give me the grace of telling me who you are?"

"Myra Myrakova, Lieutenant, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction."

He looked at her closely and said, "I thought you were dead."

"So the brass would have everyone think," she replied. "As you can see I'm very much not dead, but shall we say I'm on extended leave of absence."

"Does that mean you're A W O L?" Greg asked, thinking that having the Military conducting a clandestine search for one of its own could present some danger for him if they learned he knew where she was and he had not been forthcoming with that information.

She smiled and said, "No, I'm officially on leave, and I have permission to use my ship."

"I heard you were killed following a pirate raid. How did you survive?"

"By hypering. I led the pirates into a trap, and hypered out. I learned that trick from you."

"You know that most of the pirates you trapped were either captured or killed."

"Yes, so I had heard. So what? The one I wanted escaped."

"The pirates don't believe you died."

"I know."

"The Military is reportedly looking for you to give you a medal. I had wondered why they would be searching for you if you were dead." Greg paused, "Why are you here?"

She smiled. "I was afraid if I approached you unarmed, you would have gunned me down with that little 38, but I should have remembered you never fire first. There is a lot going on that you don't know. Not all of it is pleasant. I need you, this planet and those animals grazing in your pockets."

The chestnut filly nuzzled Greg's pocket for treats.

Lt. Myrakova stepped from behind the bush since the horse now blocked her shot at Greg. The horse spun to face her and flared her nostrils as if preparing to attack. She snorted and pawed the ground. Greg put his arm around the horse's neck to calm her.

Greg looked at Myra and spoke soothingly to the little horse. "It's okay. If she was going to shoot me she would have done so by now."

When Myra stepped out from behind the bush Greg realized she was perfectly proportioned

from the waist up, but a dwarf from the waist down. Exquisitely beautiful from the waist up, but her foreshortened legs made what would otherwise have been a beautiful woman an aberration. He felt sorry for her but he knew that pity was not what she wanted, not what she needed and wasn't going to do either them any good. He also realized how hard she must have worked to get the Military size and stature requirements waived. More amazing was that with all her notoriety, he had not realized she had anything other than a normal build.

"What do you want from me?" Greg asked.

"I can't tell you now. If I didn't need to get a data module into your courier missile, you would have come and gone without seeing me. I can't tell you what will happen because if things are not ready on Earth, nothing will happen. It's better you not know. You don't have to lie denying knowing something you really don't know."

"What if this mysterious thing does happen?"

"I can't tell you except that you will be involved. Pretend you never saw me. Place the message module in your courier missile. Go back as normal. Once you return to your docking location, do not leave your ship. Normally when you hit port, you leave the ship to visit your engineer friends at Saturn Space Industries' orbiting shipyard. Don't go. Stay on the ship. As soon as you have taken on your cargo for your next run, you will leave."

"Is that it?" He cynically expected some gargantuan mythical chore or some grandiose odyssey in an effort to save the world or civilization as he knew it. This was too dramatic for his taste. Myra had vendettas to settle with a bewildering number of people. What she was asking was too easy. There had to be more to it. Greg was suspicious but there was little he could do. He had to return to Earth. Once there, if he needed to react, he could. Right now, right here, he was stuck with doing as she asked.

"To outside appearances, yes. Your life and the lives of many other people depend on your ability to act as if this is another trip like the others. You will turn in your reports like normal. You will do everything as you would have if we had not met. Understand?"

"How will I explain my early return?"

"Don't. It shouldn't matter if everything else goes as planned."

"I understand what you want, but not why." His voice was level and calm in suspicion.

"There are forces in play about which you have no knowledge. These forces will change civilization. The Federation as we know it will never be the same. We cannot stop them but we can save ourselves and our friends from the devastation about to occur, In the process perhaps we can build a better tomorrow for the survivors. Some day we will fight back, but for now, we must seek refuge."

"So, I'm about to become some great savior of humanity?" He had retreated to the cargo ship to avoid people, not save them.

She chuckled. "I wouldn't put it so boldly. We're going to take care of a few people and animals and make a small difference but a small difference is better than no difference. I can't promise you this

won't be difficult. I can't promise you it won't be dangerous. I can't promise you won't get caught. If you do get caught you could be tried for treason or at least grand theft. All I can say is if you succeed you'll be glad to have been a part of the process. I promise you no more."

As they spoke, the animals moved around Greg and formed a solid shield protecting him from Myra's weapons. It would be difficult to hit him without hitting one of the animals. He could not fire at her either. The loud report from the one weapon he held would panic and stampede the animals. They were as likely to run toward him as toward her since the cargo container they came in blocked their other escape routes.

Myra assessed the situation for a moment and then said, "We have a Mexican standoff. I want something from you and you want to go away. We can both get what we want. Toss me your satchel with the carrots. Some of the horses will come to me and provide a shield for me. You take your horses and they will be a shield for you until you are safely in your cargo tug. The message module is in the food rations pouch on the right side of the cockpit. Leave the cargo tug in orbit here. You'll need the cargo capacity on the way back."

She smiled as if she knew something he didn't, which Greg guessed she did since she had known exactly when and where to find him.

He nodded. He unhooked the satchel and tossed it. She deftly snatched it out of the air and held up the carrots for the horses to eat. The little brown filly stood and pawed the ground. When Greg moved away, the filly stayed with him, carefully keeping her back to him and her face toward the intruder. When Greg climbed into the cargo tug, she whimpered and whinnied. If a horse could cry, the little brown filly looked like she would cry.

Greg closed the hatch and started the engine. He made sure the animals had backed a safe distance away before he lifted off and headed back to the ship.

He had known Myra only by reputation. Myra's past was cloaked in legend. Her dwarfism was not common knowledge. With the relentless advances in genotype research over the last few centuries, dwarfism and gigantism had been virtually eliminated. For her to be a dwarf in itself spoke of horrors. Greg had heard her parents had been the son and daughter of one of the Federation's best survey teams. Myra's grandparents had been killed in a pirate raid. The pirates had made the brother and sister perform sex acts on each other for their amusement. The pirates took perverse pleasure in forcing the brother and sister to hurt each other. Myra and her parents had been rescued by a Federation Pirate Interdiction team not long after Myra had been born. Stranded on a Space Force outpost for two years before they were able to afford transport, they booked passage on a tramp freighter bound for Earth. At one of the stops along the way the freighter was attacked by pirates and Myra's parents were killed. She was captured. Little was known of her childhood, or what was left of it. The few rumors that survived were horrific tales of abuse. Her vow of revenge was widely known for certain.

She never spoke of those years. She was recovered in a Federation raid on a pirate hideout. She spent the remainder of her teenage years with relatives on Earth before joining the Space Force. At the Space Flight Academy pilot school, Myra stood out for her ship handling capabilities, for tactical knowledge, for daring, for her ruthlessness and in some cases for sheer audacity. Myra had a reputation for being able to withstand G forces well in excess of what her fellow pilots could endure.

The pirates had taught her the basics of space navigation in the hopes of inducing her to become one of them. Once she returned to Federation space, it became apparent that the Space Force had a

place for people like her. The Force assigned her to a place where her stature was not an obstacle, the same place it had for Greg for many of the same reasons. Solo pirate patrol with individual heavily armed fast maneuverable craft specifically designed for pirate interdiction was the place. This small elite group protected the shipping lines against pirates. A proud, tight knit group with a fearsome reputation, they engaged and destroyed superior forces by themselves.

People assigned to pirate interdiction tended to have problems with social interaction. They gravitated toward a duty involving extended periods alone on patrol. Myra and Greg had both been combative with their instructors and classmates. In the Army or Marines, their attitudes and actions in class would have been a quick ticket to the brig, but the Space Force recognized the potential in this particular type of troublemaker for their ability to succeed in one of the Force's most dangerous assignments. The Space Force essentially gave a band of people with recognized psychopathic homicidal tendencies a license to kill and the weapons with which to do it. The Force did not have high expectations of the pilots' survival rate. Greg had known Pirate Interdiction was where he wanted to be assigned even before he applied to the Academy. He had mellowed in his years of battling loose bands of brigands, but Myra had not.

Space pirates flourished for the same reasons maritime pirates once terrorized the shipping lanes. In spite of the Federation's best efforts, pirates plagued even some of the more populous areas of space. Myra's reputation for catching and killing pirates extended to the ends of human habitation. She had no sympathy for pirates. She saw them, she engaged them and she killed them. There was no quarter asked and no quarter given. A pirate encountering her in space knew he had two choices. He could either flee or try to fight her in which case he would die. She took no prisoners.

The mission he had asked about was legendary. Pirates had mounted an unusually well planned, for them, action against Myra involving two dozen ships staffed by a hundred pirates. They combed through the shipping lanes she normally patrolled. They found her and laid a trap, but not before she figured out what was going on and called in reinforcements. A Space Force battle group had been nearby. She needed "merely" to lure the pirates within the battle group's range and have the battle group engage the pirates. Even with the significant tactical advantages her training and her ship's weaponry gave her, she would not have survived if she had engaged the pirates alone. Her only other option would have been to flee.

What happened after ambush is the stuff of sometimes contradictory legends. She evaded the pirates long enough to escape their initial trap. There was debate over how she escaped which in itself would have been no small feat. She led the pirates to the battle group. The battle group engaged the pirates. A few got away, but most of the pirates were killed or taken prisoner. The Force's official version of the engagement listed Myra as missing in action. But there was another, more popular, version which contended she survived and somehow in the midst of the impending battle she had hyper jumped away from the confrontation a second before it would have been too late. The Force discounted the popular version because, rumor had it, they did not want anyone knowing a jump into hyper drive with so much mass nearby was survivable. If pirates could jump to hyper drive anytime a Federation vessel approached, they could never be caught. Keeping the myth alive worked to the Force's advantage. Greg, however, had pulled the same stunt himself and he knew the truth. A P I ship could hyper jump in close quarters and survive.

Greg had been out of the Force for a couple of years when he read the reports about Myra's alleged demise. He listened to the commentators on both sides speculate about what had actually happened in this battle in which so many pirates and so few Space Force personnel had died. He

wondered what had happened to Myra. He wasn't as ruthless as she was. He was as effective but his techniques were different. He had relied more on cunning and stealth where she had relied on brute force and fire power. He would set a trap and wait for the pirates to take the bait. She would wade into the middle of a pirate fleet and blast away until there was nothing left.

Greg parked his cargo tug in orbit as Myra had instructed. Normally he would take it with him not wanting to leave such a valuable piece of hardware where a pirate might be induced to pick it up. But those had been his instructions, and so that is what he did. Besides, Myra was quite capable of defending a planet from pirates all by herself if she had her P I ship. The only reason he was getting away from Myra with all his body parts intact was because she wanted him to go and do what he had been asked to do. He knew owed his life to her mission, but he did not understand why.

HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWO

“AFTER WE GET THE COURIER missile off, set course for Earth at two G on the most direct route,” Greg instructed the cargo ship’s computer.

“Aye, Captain,” the computer responded.

“Disengage the tug.”

“Are you really leaving it here?”

“Yes, did you look at the energy source under the water we ignored when we came in?”

“Yes, it is a PI. It did not respond to my hails, but I suspect it is Lt. Myrakova’s ship,” the computer responded.

“Well, she is more than capable of defending the planet all by herself.”

“Do you really think she will hang out here for the five months it will take us to go back to Earth and return?”

“I have no idea.”

“She really got the drop on you.”

“Yes, she did,” Greg admitted.

“Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No one has gotten the drop on you since your mother died.”

“Are you sure?”

“There is no incident in my records showing anyone putting you in a position of disadvantage at the commencement of an engagement,” the computer replied.

“Even at the Academy?”

“There were exercises where you were deliberately placed at a disadvantage by the instructor, but those do not count,” the computer affirmed

“So, I’ve gotten fat and lazy. Surprised?”

“Greg, your reflexes have not decreased since you left the Academy. I think it’s the women.”

Greg put the data modules in the courier and slid the courier into its launch tube. “The courier is ready to go. Launch it when you are ready.”

“Courier away.”

“Initiate departure procedures.”

“Initiating departure procedures.”

“Third star to the right and on till morning.”

“Greg, you are ducking the question. How did Lt. Myra Myrakova get the drop on you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I may have an answer. Let me play back a video of a conversation with your playmates while you waited for the hurricane to clear. Blondie was the tall one. Brownie was the short one. This was over dinner after the first time you demonstrated one of your combat simulations.”

Brownie asked, “Why did you wait so long to take action against the pirate ship? If they had been any closer you would have been a sitting duck against their missiles.”

Greg put down his fork before answering. His eyes were downcast and his expression somber. “Because one time I didn’t.” Greg paused as if debating whether to continue. The background music which had been soft and light suddenly became heavy and mournful.

Greg continued, “Generally, anytime a ship came in my direction accelerating rapidly, it was a pirate, and I attacked it. I was good at it. Pirates usually travel solo, but occasionally they can be found in pairs or small groups. The most dangerous pirates travel with their own fleets. I was on patrol in a system where increased pirate activity had recently been reported. I was monitoring the progress of an intra-system freighter. Two ships were headed toward it at maximum acceleration. One was squealing an automated distress signal on the designated distress frequency. The other was using its targeting radar to get a missile solution. From where I was I could not tell whether the target was the freighter or the other small ship, and I had precious little time to make my decision.”

“Don’t pirates send out false distress signals to lure ships into missile range?” Brownie asked.

“Yes. It’s one of their favorite deceptions. Except sometimes it’s real. The ship the pirates are chasing could be sending the legitimate distress signal. I thought it was a diversion. I thought both ships were after the nearby freighter, and the distress signal was bogus. I was half wrong. One ship was a pirate. The other was filled with refugees who had escaped an earlier attack and had overcome the pirates to escape. I killed both ships. They were so focused on each other and the freighter that neither noticed me. They came within easy missile range, and I fired on both ships. I hit both. The pursuing ship immediately exploded leaving no survivors. The fleeing ship managed to get an escape capsule off with a single survivor who told the story. The refugee ship was full of women and small children. I killed them.” He hung his head and looked down.

“Was that why you got out of the Force?” Blondie asked.

“Yes.”

Brownie asked, “Have you told anyone else this story?”

“There are a few friends who know the truth. The official Force report has me taking out two

pirate vessels. The freighter's crew rescued the little girl and reported the truth to the local fleet commander, but agreed to support the Force's official version. I could not live the lie. When they offered me command of a small task force in a peaceful sector, I realized they no longer had faith in me to do my old job, and I quit."

"We understand how painful that must have been," Blondie said. "I think we know what to do to take your mind off your hurt." She smiled an evil grin, and it was not hard to imagine what she had on her mind.

Greg smiled back and said, "First I need to use the facilities." He drifted off in the direction of the Personal Hygiene Unit. As he left he heard whispered conversation behind him.

"Do you realize who he is?"

"Yes! Shhhh!"

"He's a legend! We've been having sex with a legend! Who knew?"

"Well, now we know."

"What's he doing way out here?"

"Hiding."

"Hiding? From what?"

"From people like us."

"Oh, then it's important we show him a good time. He must be lonely."

"I think so."

"You know, he could be the answer we've been looking for."

"Really?"

"Maybe. We should think about it."

"We should tell Myra."

The computer stopped the playback. "She referred to you as the answer they have been looking for. You may have been set up."

"It's possible," Greg mused. "But what do we do about it?"

"I suggest we be prepared to repel boarders when we return to Earth orbit."

"And here I was thinking all they wanted was my body," Greg said sarcastically.

"They got plenty of that," the computer shot back. "Your body may have been what they wanted when they arrived, but they found more than they expected. It will be battle stations when we get back to earth. I know you miss them more than you miss anyone since Avi and certainly more than you miss

your ex-wife, but you need to focus on the mission at hand or we will both get killed.”

“Roger that,” Greg sighed. For the first time he understood why the team of designers who had crafted the operating software for the P I warship had insisted on a psyche module. He needed it. Maybe if he had listened to it when he killed the wrong ship, he would still be hunting pirates. Or maybe not.

HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THREE

AFTER SIX WEEKS of two G travel, Greg returned to the Central System. Greg's "docking port" was merely a set of coordinates in orbit around Earth. There was nothing physical to say this particular corner of the cosmos was the right place other than a voice from Mission Control on the ground telling him he was properly docked and his orbit was stable.

Greg was surprised to find a cargo shuttle at his docking location waiting for him. Even more surprising, his entire load was parked nearby held together by monstrous polymer hawsers. There must have been several kilometers of these bright yellow plastic ropes. He had barely shut down his engines when a personal jet pack tug approached to attach the first container.

He hailed the two EVA suit clad people hurriedly attaching the cargo containers to his ship. They responded politely, but the grunts and groans punctuating their brief conversation showed how intensely they were working to get him loaded and ready to ship out again. It was all he could do to keep up with them as they tossed containers for his grappling arms to catch.

A second shuttle arrived. There were now two teams of space suited personnel snatching cargo pods from space and attaching them to his ship. Whoever was out there certainly was in a hurry. Extra water tanks and dry goods pods he had not ordered were secured to their attachment points. While Greg appreciated how quickly he would be turning around, any time something out of the ordinary occurred, it made him nervous.

Greg lived in fear of some minor government official boarding his ship and charging him with some insignificant crime landing him in the brig. Once there he would be forgotten to languish without trial until he died of old age. He knew it was an irrational fear, born of cultural paranoia, but it was real to him. Having cargo and materiel he did not order transferred to his ship without a manifest was illegal.

While Greg frenetically snatched cargo pods and secured them to the ship, Canaveral Mission Control called. They reported his cargo shuttle pilots had been called away on another mission and would be delayed a few days getting him loaded. The disembodied voice apologized for the delay citing increasing Space Force activity in the area. This transmission contradicted what he knew to be happening and did not explain why the shuttle that had been there when he arrived was attaching itself to his docking port. Greg knew better than to say anything beyond how much he appreciated the controller letting him know the situation and to assure them he would wait patiently for further instructions. His agitation had increased exponentially as the conversation had progressed.

There were two docking ports built into his ship where the cargo shuttles could attach and link airlocks. These ports also served as attachment points when transporting smaller non-hyper capable craft. The second pair of EVA suited people disappeared back into their shuttle immediately upon finishing the cargo transfer. Soon thereafter, the second shuttle maneuvered to connect with the docking port where the cargo tug he left behind would normally have been. The shuttle appeared to be fully loaded, but he already had a full load. In spite of what Mission Control had said, he seemed to be getting high priority treatment. He was surprised when the shuttle made no attempt to unload cargo, but secured itself fully loaded to the docking port. As soon as it was locked, two space suited figures re-emerged and affixed hawsers from his ship to theirs securing it in place.

This method of attachment was the preferred method of transporting smaller craft too big to fit in a container, but too small to have their own hyper drives. However, this was the first time Greg was aware of it being attempted with fully loaded shuttles. The shuttles' massive wings with their giant

folding pusher props and under slung air breathing jet engines were still attached. They had not been dismantled and stored in the cargo bays as they normally would have been for reentry. The sensors that controlled Greg's ship's stabilizing spin recorded the mass that had suddenly become part of the ship's load. The shuttle was loaded over its rated maximum weight. He was confused. Something strange was going on. Not being able to figure out bothered him. Other than Earth, there were precious few places these shuttles could operate. They could land almost anywhere, but they needed long smooth surfaces to take off again. The planet he was going to had no runway.

Finishing with their own ship, the two EVA suited people who had secured the first shuttle moved to the other and attached it in like fashion. As the work progressed, Greg became more confused and more agitated. Many times he had to remind himself he was a civilian and not a military officer. He could not demand answers and expect to get them. The two shuttles, equally overloaded, were attached to the docking ports. In record time, Greg's ship was loaded beyond its maximum capacity and, except for the documentation, was ready to depart.

Greg was glad to see Blondie and Brownie again when they popped into his command module, but their attitude was different from last time. He stole a quick glance out his view-port, but the clear skies over the East Coast told him that he could not hope for a repeat of his last delightful "delay in route" with them. There were no jokes and only the briefest of pleasantries. It was as if their previous encounter had not happened. Once the loading was finished, two more female cargo shuttle pilots gathered in the command module. They sat or floated wherever they could, exhausted, their expressions somber.

Finally, after a long silence, Greg demanded to know what was going on.

Blondie thought before answering. She chose her words carefully. "We had no choice. We need you."

"Need me for what?"

Blondie replied, "You're the only person who has what it will take to stop the Swordsmen."

"This makes no sense," Greg stammered.

Blondie looked up at Greg from her seat on the floor. "When you gave us permission to play war games you created, we played while you slept. We found out which games you like and which games were based on your own experiences. We learned a lot about you, and we liked what we learned. We first realized who you were when you told us about why you left the Force, but playing your games told us about the person inside. We contacted our friends and let them know we had found you."

"So you found me. Then what?"

"From your games we were able to figure out where you were going and what your drop pattern was. We sent a message to Myra and told her where to find you. She checked out the planet and sent us instructions. We will move there."

Greg blinked and took a deep breath. "How many of you are there?" He looked around at the four tired women. "How can you think that you can stop an entire religious movement?" Greg was stunned by the enormity of the goal and the calm with which Blondie had laid it out.

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