

FREEFALL



A LT. FREYA STORY BY JEN PALLANTE

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A Lt. Freya Novel

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The story thus far...

The United Tangi Front, a vulpine race engaged in galactic imperialism, discovered a vein of xenon on a distant moon named Roth. Consequently Roth, a colony populated by humans, has been occupied by the United Front for decades. Roth is a six month interstellar journey from the United Front's central command. Solid Xenon, an element which fuels the UTF plasma weapons, is crucial to the UTF's war effort. Under the leadership of Governor Kreiger the UTF enslaved the humans to expand production.

Six weeks ago a UTF lieutenant Freya Storm killed Governor Kreiger, after losing her beloved Captain Morrison in the fray. The killing began a full scale rebellion on Roth. The Humans, who far outnumbered the UTF, quickly overthrew their former masters. What remained of the United Front gathered at the shipyard. Freya and a handful of vulpines joined the rebellion on the side of the Humans.

But after two months the two forces have reached a stalemate. With an entire UTF armada en route to retake the planet, tensions are high and hopes are low.

Chapter 1

Caught a Light Breeze

Dusk brought a light breeze, cooling Freya's palms as she loosened her grip on the rear bag of her Mark II. Darude shifted behind her, gently adjusting her sites to compensate for the change.

"Take your time. Remember. The only good vulp is a dead one..."

Freya's paw jerked as her wild shot landed several meters from the target.

"Fuck." She whispered.

"My fault." Darude answered, "I shouldn't have..."

Freya was already withdrawing from their nest, "Let's head back. Daylight is burnt."

As they receded beneath the canopy of the Horgrath forest Darude caught up to Freya, grabbing her by the wrist.

"Hey look, you'll get the shot next time. It's private whasisface's lucky day is all..."

Freya snapped her wrist from his hand.

"Captain Morrison has been a *good vulp* for 58 days, 12 hours and 40 seconds now, Durude. You think I'm mad I missed the fucking shot?"

"I know why you're mad."

The two stopped beneath the shade of a looming redwood, both casting their eyes upward.

"Give it a minute." Freya whispered.

They waited a moment for the hum of the drone, Darude watching for Freya's ears to swivel in the general direction.

“You know I didn’t mean-”

“Shh...”

Freya’s ear twitched to the east and Darude knelt down, reloading the Mark II.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

The gun clacked as Darude loaded the round and aimed upward, scanning the treeline through the scope.

“Take your damn shot. It’s right there.”

“...you can probably fucking smell the thing.”

Freya leaned against the tree and took notice of Darude’s scent on her wrist. The sweat from his palm had lingered on her fur. Something she had, the previous evening, found arousing. As the sun set, however, she rubbed his scent off on her bark-brown poncho.

Darude stopped scanning, “There she is...”

Freya scoffed beneath her breath as Darude calmly took aim at the thermal drone, and gently squeezed the Mark II’s trigger. Almost immediately the blades ceased with a crack and the drone fell to the forest floor.

“How many of those do you think they have left?” He asked.

“... And it was private Grae.”

“What?”

“You called him Whatsysfase. That’s not even a name.”

“It’s a saying. It means I don’t give a fuck what his name is.”

Darude closed the space between them, “And you shouldn’t either, Freya. The only Vulp whose name is worth knowing is the Captain’s.” he signed, “I’m sorry for what I said.”

Freya turned on her paws and headed back in the direction of the city, “You weren’t wrong.”

“What?”

“Morrison is dead. I’m dead. Kiira’s dead. All the good fucking vulps are dead. Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later the purple lights of the former United Front barracks gleaned through the branches above them.

“You still haven’t changed those to white LEDs? There’s like... ten thousand in the store.”

“Guess we’re close? We like keeping the ultraviolet just for you.”

“I’ll never get how you humans got into space with no senses.”

Darude placed his hand on the small of Freya’s back as they climbed over an oversized root springing from the base of a collapsed tree, “I had enough sense to be gone before you woke up this morning.”

Freya grinned despite herself as she lay the Mark II and her poncho in a locker hidden beneath the root, “You saw Davis with a black eye last week.”

“He still winces when he sees you at the bar.”

“Speaking of...”

They crossed the main courtyard, beneath the searchlights of two hovering drones, towards the slow thrum of music and conversation.

“I ever tell you about the first time I came here?” Freya asked.

“When you actually thought you were meeting Kiniro?”

“Ah, yeah. You clever fuckers...”

On cue, as they entered the bar a group of loosely dressed men shouted out what had become the rebellion’s informal greeting of *Welcome Kiniro*.

Darude responded, “Thank you, Kiniro.” and looked toward Freya.

“Since I can follow the rules...” he asked, “Obviously not tonight but...”

She considered him for a moment. He was handsome. He had been rough but not too rough. And most importantly, he knew better than to push his luck with the rules.

“Yeah. I think so. I’ll find you. Look I gotta-”

“Right.” He answered, looking toward the corner of the bar at the only other free Vulp in the reclaimed barracks. With that Darude joined the men who had greeted him and Freya cut through the crowd of humans toward a sullen figure in the corner.

“John. Got something for me?”

Freya managed to coax a weak grin from the pale furred figure who slid a lukewarm plate of stewed meat, “Caught it. Cooked it. We even?”

“To be seen...” She answered scooping the meat up in her paw and biting into it eagerly.

“Hey, I spent all evening slaving over a hot stove and you’re just gonna...”

She held a paw up to silence him while she chewed and swallowed.

“Fuck, John. These humans have no idea what they’re missing... You’re wasted on vegetables.”

“Please. If you really want to flatter me, use a fork.”

“I’ve been out all day...” she mumbled between mouthfuls of seasoned meat, “First thing I’ve eaten since breakfast... first meat in.... Gosh.”

John sighed as the meal was gone in moments, “Just like back on the ship. No one appreciates a good cook.”

Freya swallowed the last bite and licked her paws clean, “Humans eat vegetables. What do they know about food.”

“Speaking of...” John nodded towards the group amongst which Darude was now laughing and drinking, “Your latest?”

Freya shrugged, reaching into her jacket pocket, “He knows the rules at least. Better than the others.”

John reached out a paw as Freya handed him a small cardboard pack.

“Let’s see what were they? Everyone on the ship knew them. No sleepovers. Never twice in a row. No secrets and... No kissing?”

Freya shrank a bit as she answered, “I actually like kissing now.”

The thought of Captain Morrison and the first kiss they shared alone in his cabin flashed through her memory. And as fast as it came it went.

“Been making up for lost time, then?”

“Don’t be jealous, sweetie.”

“I’m not. Per se. But have you ever considered you and I just-”

John stopped speaking when Freya gripped his paw.

“Of course I have, hon. But you’re the only person who knows me here. And after Fox...”

She paused until he met her gaze.

“Look, John, I really just need a friend here. For now.”

The objection formed on his face and she waited to see if he would be foolish enough to give it a voice. But as quickly as the look came it went.

“Well how about you kiss my ass and we play.” John answered, pulling a deck of cards from the small pack, “Your winning streak can’t last forever”

They continued the game they had been playing since the rebellion began. Freya had been to this bar when it was still under UTF control. Humans had torn down the holographic strip tease booths and the wall of screens broadcasting state propaganda. The dart board now featured a crude drawing of a vulpine on the bullseye, which the humans speared with gusto. What made her fond of the bar now wasn’t what the humans had removed. It was what they had brought. The UTF on Roth had fallen back to the shipyard within the first day of fighting. The bar was one of the first liberated buildings. The celebration had begun with the former servants standing on the bar counter and proclaiming themselves the owner, calling it back pay for years of exploitation. The entire colony erupted in euphoria, with the bar at the center. The long night was finally over. One by one, humans walked through the doors and brought with them a symbol of their lives before the United Front occupation. Palms from a distant island were hung on the windows. Fabric from a local city covered the screens which had once broadcast propaganda. Artists painted the walls with indigenous art and symbols as

the humans reclaimed the space. Freya had been there for all of it. Drinking alone in grief. Until one of the painters had tapped her on the shoulder and silently led her to a brightly rendered illustration in the far corner.

“This, Miss Freya, is you. I thought you’d want to see it.”

She stared at a vulpine among humans. Streaks of red. And a dark flame beneath it all.

“I don’t understand. Why is this me...”

The artist took her paw and placed it on the image, “This is you.” She dragged Freya’s paw over to the streaks of red, “This is you killing the butcher...” and finally she let go and gestured to the black flame, “And this is your Captain Morrison. Who was the first to die and who died for us.”

Freya sniffed back her tears as she looked to her side at the pictogram. She had sat besides it every night for six weeks. Playing cards with John and staring into that dark flame in the hopes it might flicker to life. But it never did.

“I still don’t get it, Freya. What are you all going to do when the fleet gets here?”

She rolled her eyes. They were almost evenly matched players. Even with Freya’s augmentations, John had been playing his whole life. So when she was winning, and he had bet himself into a hole, he tried to fry her nerves by talking about the rebellion.

“Dunno. Win. Make your bet, John. It’s almost dawn and the pot includes your rifle. I *want* your rifle.”

“You rebels have the planetary defense grid, right?”

“You know we do... are you going to deal?”

“And the UTF has a low orbit destroyer?”

Freya clawed the table, “Which they can’t launch because we have a fucking canon pointed at it.”

“Right. So what happens when the fleet gets here?”

Freya leaned back and let her paws toy casually with a necklace which dangled just above her cleavage. It had been the last gift Captain Morrison had given her before his death. A small wooden charm on a titanium chain. If John was going to try and rattle her, she could certainly return the favor. She feigned deep thought, her paw gliding over her neckline.

“Ah. I know...” she finally said.

Freya leaned across the table and watched John’s eyes drop to her cleavage. As he took in the sight she lifted her muzzle to his, cupped his cheek and softly bit his lip.

“If the fleet shows up and we haven’t taken the destroyer? I find you and get on my knees so we can both die doing what we love.”

For a moment they locked eyes and Freya’s HUD tracked his heart rate and vascular dilation. The HUD displayed a positive indicator for distress. Her work was done.

John threw his cards on the table and cursed.

“Dirty trick. But I fold...”

Freya leaned back, arms behind her head and lifted her boots onto the table, “You play dirty. I get dirtier. Tell you what. One more hand. Double or nothing. You win and you keep your gun and maybe... Well. Maybe we will go somewhere and watch the sunrise together, yanno?”

John stood and yanked back the curtains at the window, peering into the budding light of dawn. He cursed and started packing up his belongings.

“Shit, I didn’t know it was so late... Look Freya, I gotta go. How about we meet up in an hour and I’ll pay up.”

“Or how about I follow you back to your cabin and we work something out.”

He rubbed his forehead with an exasperated sigh, “Look you won. You don’t gotta mess with me when you know I can’t blow this off.”

Freya sat up in the booth, “Wait, where do you have to go?”

“The shipyard.”

“Over my dead body. You’d really defect over-”

“Look. I have my orders.”

“I’m coming with you, then.”

“You don’t trust me, Freya, after all these years? You know that really makes me sad.”

Freya gathered her bag and headed towards the exit, “Zip it. I’ll drive.”

“I know how to drive, Freya.”

She turned to him with a suspicious gaze, “Have you even been to the shipyard since the fighting started, John? I’ve been there every day. Now follow me.”

After a short walk to the motor pool Freya piloted one of the lev-carts along the well worn path to the shipyard. John sat beside her studying a sheet of paper.

“It’s a prisoner exchange, yanno. They wanted a Vulp to oversee. Only way the Front would agree.”

Freya answered him with a dull stare. She had not been advised of any prisoner exchanges. John was, ostensibly, part of the resistance. But mostly in spirit. Freya had taken point on all dealings with the UTF. She had killed for the resistance. She had taken orders. She had given up for more than John. She wondered out loud why no one had told her about it.

“Maybe they wanted you to take a day off... “ He answered.

“General Densmore, a kinder, gentler leader, eh?”

“Point taken.”

As the sun peaked above the horizon they came to the edge of the forest where Freya saw the remains of the drone Darude had taken out the previous evening. The sun poked through the dense canopy above them. Morning mists caught the first rays of light. Freya allowed herself a moment to appreciate the moment and the beauty. It reminded her of what the humans had been fighting for.

“Look, Freya. Why don’t you hang back for a bit at first?”

Pulled from her reverie, Freya met his eyes and nodded. They were both thinking the same thing. That the resistance had tagged John and not Freya for this mission was unusual.

And there was probably a reason. Freya reached for John's cheek and held his attention as she admired him.

"You look a lot like Fox, sometimes, John. That's why I keep my distance. It's just too much right now."

"Hon. I'll be back. I promise."

With that, Freya hopped out of the lev-cart and John sped off from the treeline, eventually meeting a small unit of humans with several Vulpine prisoners in tow. Freya's visual HUD overlay scanned the prisoner's. None had any augmentations which meant no transponder signals. However, several were former crewmates from the Explosivo and standard facial recognition provided name, rank and a social history. As prisoners, none had shown any sympathy or remorse for the United Front's exploitation of the human workers. Others had shown pride in the human's subjugation. She questioned the wisdom of sending them back to what remained of the UTF occupation on Roth. Surely the rebellion should want to reduce the number of UTF able to defend the destroyer at the dock. The UTF must have offered an exchange the humans couldn't turn down. That thought worried her.

The rebel unit leader flashed a laser in pattern at a guard post. It was answered with the sound of the hydraulic doors of the shipyard terminal opening. A sea of red uniforms and orange fur surrounded a small and sickly group of humans. Freya was all too familiar with The Front's interrogation tactics and treatment of enemy combatants. She tried to zoom in, looking for a familiar face among either the Front or their human prisoners, but they were too far off for a positive match. However, amid the crowd she thought she saw a flash of a familiar shade of gray fur amid the red and orange horde.

"Can't be her. The Explosivo crashed on the first day. No one survives a fall from orbit." she sighed.

Each of the two forces, vulpine and human, lined up so that everyone had 150 yards in every direction, and an unobstructed eyeline. She counted at least two UTF snipers that she

could see and assumed the rebels had as many in the treeline. With that thought she receded slightly, so as not to be seen and mistaken for... she wasn't sure, but she knew it could end badly.

A series of hand gestures followed from the leaders of each group. After a brief security sweep the prisoners on both sides left the custody of their captors. One representative from each group walked with the prisoners, a Mark II plasma bolt rifle trained on the enemy combatants in their care. The two groups met exactly half way, and the guards each held back to receive their own kind into care.

"I dunno, look pretty smooth..." Freya said to herself, wondering why such a mundane exchange would warrant such secrecy. As the Vulpine soldiers met their compatriots she saw one fall to his knees. Likely, Freya thought, he was weak from lack of meat. The vulpines were obligate carnivorous, and the humans refused to go hunting to feed their POWs. Meanwhile, the humans could survive on ruffage and grain indefinitely. As the soldier, a former tactical officer named Bradley, fell she saw another flash of gray fur.

Freya gasped before covering her muzzle with her paws. There was no mistake.

"...Kiira?" She whispered through her fingers.

With maximum zoom on her HUD she found the face of Kiira Lang, former Executive Assistant to Captain Fox Morrison. Alive and well and seemingly promoted to corporal. Freya's claws dug into the bark of the tree around her as she stifled the urge to shout out to her friend and lover. The questions raced through her mind as she snapped photos of Kiira to inspect later and stored them on her augmented solid state storage.

Freya turned her head toward the rebellion unit as a strange sound piqued. It reminded her of the disturbance of a plasma mortar, but without the impact. With the image of Kiira overlaid on her visual display she zoomed in on her own unit. Three black clad Vulpines with reflective helmets and neon visors were inexplicably in the middle of the rebels. They surrounded John, ignoring the humans, who fired at them point blank. None of the shots

impacted. John was bent over and they pulled his hair up and inspected the back of his neck. Instinctively Freya reached for her own, feeling the outline of her implant's access port. Before she could understand what was happening the same curious disturbance sounded again. This time the sound came from the UTF unit. Again, three helmeted vulpines grabbed hold of Kiira and doubled her over to inspect her neck.

Over the sound of shouting and plasma bolts she heard them shout, "Take this one!"

Freya was out of the tree line screaming Kiira's name before the three mysterious figures re-cloaked and took Corporal Kiira Lang into the abyss with them.

"Kiira, no!"

A high pitched squeal whizzed by her ears and landed with a dull squelch just a few feet behind her. She whirled around in time to catch a spray of hot blood in her face. A black suited vulpine had decloaked behind her and immediately been shot directly through his neon visor. Looking over her shoulder she saw John aiming a modified Mark II rifle in her general direction.

"What the fuck..." she mouthed as he beckoned her toward the unit.

All hell broke loose and the two units, assuming the other was behind the sneak attack, opened fire. Grass and dirt exploded between Freya's feet as she sprinted for the safety of the rebel transport. Looking over her shoulder she saw the UTF dragging their wounded and prisoner's back behind the hydraulic door.

Freya slid to a halt behind the lev-carts and crouched down with the other rebels.

One of the prisoners, a young bare scalped woman with a bruised jaw, cursed at her.

"What the fuck is Storm doing here? I told you to keep her out of this..."

Freya cut in, "Two snipers at least."

John reloaded his Mark II, "Where?"

"One in the north tower. The other just above the customs checkpoint."

"Someone get her a fucking gun, or we're not leaving..."

John crawled beneath the hovering lev-cart and readied his shot, aiming north.

One of the security detail slid Freya his Mark I, "Loaded... do you have?"

Freya pulled a thick cable from her pocket and plugged it into the base of the rifle as a human grabbed the other end and connected it to her access port. Immediately upon connecting, her HUD displayed a software overlay. Wind. Distance. And the sinusoidal pattern of the projectile all displayed. Freya snaked beneath one of the lev-carts and zoomed in on the roof above the customs checkpoint. A small glint of light, the sniper's ultraviolet targeting laser, betrayed his position. Freya eased her rifle into position, followed the targeting program's instructions, searching for a lock. A green dot lit above the crosshair and the software indicated a 98% chance of success. Calmly, she squeezed the trigger and absorbed the recoil. The enemy's targeting light went dim and she detected zero movement from his nest.

"Got him. John?"

The muted sound of a Mark II discharge answered her question.

"...let's hope that's all of them and get the fuck out of here."

The units piled into the lev-carts with John and Freya covering the rear. Freya scanned the treeline while John focused on the shipyard.

"Clear..." John answered as the cart powered over the grass toward the safety of the forest canopy.

A single point of light caught Freya's attention among a small copse of trees closest to where Kiira had vanished. She zoomed in and saw what looked like the glint of metal amid the folds of dark fabric.

"What the fu-"

A hooded figure turned toward her, making eye contact over the hundreds of meters between them. As the figure pulled back its hood to reveal a rictus grin Freya just barely made out the facial features and elongated ears of a chimorphic face. The sleek muzzle and furless flesh was poorly suited for a foliage laden moon like Roth, but would have been perfect for a

more aquatic setting like Selachi. The figure seemingly winked at her before vanishing into the void of trees via the same cloak the helmeted vulpines had worn.

“Sharks...? On Roth?”

John shot her a glare before looking around at the unit. They had been too absorbed in offering medical care to their wounded and prisoners to listen to the mumblings of the vulpines in the midst.

John mouthed a single word to Freya.

“Later.”

With that she settled into her seat, pulling the gun inside the lev-cart and pulling the blast shield down over the window. As she sighed deeply and brought up the photos of Kiira she had taken, and fixed them as an overlay on her HUD, the young hairless woman shoved the medical team off her and stumbled over to Freya.

“Why did you come here? This is all your fault.”

Chapter 2

Ghosts

"I... what? Who are you?"

"I am Kiniro."

"Who isn't in the rebellion? Literally everyone on this here introduced themselves to me as Kiniro and I'm fucking si-"

John reached across and laid his paw on Freya's shoulder to get her attention.

"Freya... This is General Kiniro."

"...General?"

Freya scanned the young woman, her HUD displaying no facial recognition matches.

"She's the mother of the rebellion. The original Kiniro."

A medic walked up behind the General and whispered a pleading phrase. The General sighed and shook herself free of the medic's light grip.

"Fine... fine." she answered him, before turning her attention to Freya, "You better believe you're going to be debriefed when we get back to ... where are we going? Where is the council hiding now?"

"Manzerik Base."

"You took the base?"

"There's a lot to discuss, General. Please. You've been in Vulp care for six weeks. We need to look at that jaw..."

The rest of the journey passed in reluctant silence, punctured only by whispers. Freya caught John's eyes for a moment and all he did was shake his head before looking away.

The former barracks came into view and the lev-cart slowed to a halt outside the medical building. The healthy humans helped the injured out of the transport and into the waiting arms of medical teams. The unit head approached Freya as General Kiniro was taken for treatment and a hot meal.

“You’re former Lt. Freya Storm, United Front engineer. Served under Captain Fox Morrison.”

Everyone knew the story.

“Miss Storm? Not everyone likes to hear me say this about a Vulp, but you and Fox are heroes. Fox died for us. And was the first casualty of the rebellion.”

“Yeah. I remember. I was there.”

“The second one to die was Governor Kreiger. By your hand.”

“Technically I shot a few guards before I got to him.”

“History won’t remember them. They’ll remember you splattering that monster’s brains across his mansion floor.”

“Ok.”

“I’ll make sure the General remembers this too, before you two speak.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“You two will meet in the mansion’s ballroom. Where he died. In one hour. Ok?”

“Fine.”

The human turned on his heels and walked off to attend to his General. Freya slung the Mark I around her shoulder.

John walked up behind her, “You’re pretty good with a Mark I, hon. I gotta know why you want this so bad before I hand it over.” he said, gesturing to his heavily modified Mark II.

“Because when you shoot someone with a Mark II their blood vaporizes in a mist.” she answered, touching a paw to the blood stains left on her face.

“And I want to see those fascist UTF fucks die rather than just fall limp.”

“A little dark, Freya.”

She flashed him a look, “Fuck fascists. Fuck the UTF. Now, are you coming with me or what?”

“To meet with Kiniro? No I-”

“I’m not going to hang around here just so a yet another general can tell me what to do. I quit that shit when Fox died. And whoever the fuck ambushed us has Kiira. You’d let me go after her alone?”

“You sure you want to run off half cocked and hunt Ghosts?”

“Ghosts? So you even have a name for them? What else aren’t you telling me, John.”

“More than you can imagine. This is what I will tell you, though. If you run off after your friend now then you’ll be dead by sundown. And whatever plans they have for Kiira are going to happen. If you hang around for one hour... and talk to the General then maybe we can get a recon crew together and-”

She shoved him hard, “You think any one of these people are going to risk their ass to save someone in a red uniform? Honestly?”

“If Kiniro asks them to, yes.”

“What makes you think she would?”

“Because... You said yourself. I know things I haven’t told you.”

“And?”

“Go clean up. Talk to the general in an hour. If you still want to go out and do this I’ll be right here waiting.”

“Fuck you, John.”

Freya stormed off to the barrack’s shower, Mark I still attached to her access port, HUD still scanning every rebel she passed.

In the showers Freya lay the filth and blood covered Mark I against the tile floor as steam billowed. The titanium of her exposed prosthetic knee clinked against the floor as she knelt down and tied the ribbon cable around the stock. She did not want to lose it as there were very few cyber-brain compatible replacement parts available on Roth. She doubted the Armada on it's way would be willing to resupply her.

The muggy heat of the running shower called to her.

Freya retrieved several small bottles from her pack and passed through the wooden doors to the stall. On the small shelf, next to the dwindling ball of soap, she set a bottle of conditioner, waterproof mechanical lubricant, and industrial microfiber cleaner for her prosthetics.

"This is ridiculous..." she mumbled, tying her hair back, "I'm scrubbing up when Kiira is fuck knows where?"

She reminded herself that John was most likely right. And if she had any chance of rescuing her friend, she needed to gather strength and support. Whatever a Ghost was she knew they were deadly.

"I need to figure out what the fuck is going on..."

She shook her head. Raging about it wasn't going to Kiira. And meeting the general with a clear head might be the best strategy. Captain Lapin had said he would put in a good word before they met. Between Fox's sacrifice, Lapin's support, and John's Ghost stories- she might just convince the rebels to form a search party.

Freya stepped beneath the heated stream and let the water wash over her back and fur. The former UTF showers were built for the brass, a rare luxury she enjoyed over the previous six weeks. Large stalls. High water pressure. And hot. The humans didn't even use the showers for that reason. Without thick Vulp skin and a layer of fur they would probably burn in the heat.

"More for me..."

The water trailed down her back, bringing waves of relief. Days worth of grime and bramble from the Horgrath forest pooled on the floor. She leaned back and let the water spray through her hair. A rust colored stream splashed the white tile floor- dried Vulp blood. She turned around and washed her face, breathing the steam in with slow, intentional breaths. Sheets of warm water cascaded down her neck, over her breasts, and between her legs.

Her tail twitched as the heat washed over her abdomen and vagina. She exhaled longingly as lurid memories of particularly artful partners flashed through her mind. The soft tongue of some long forgotten shipmate, or Darude's eager curiosity about vulpine anatomy. He'd mentioned Freya was much more responsive than any of his previous human partners. She recalled his hot and eager breath on her and mimicked the feeling by sliding a finger between her legs, barely stroking her clit. Her other paw instinctually cupped a breast, fingers closing around a taut nipple.

She bit her lower lip and whined.

The showers were on a timer and she did not have the time for this. Unless...

"Guess I could hurry things along..."

The tile was cold against her paw pads as she skipped across the floor outside the stall to her Mark I. Shivering and wet, she squatted down and removed the plasma bolt from the chamber. Quickly, she unscrewed the bolt and popped out the core, rendering it inert. She examined the bolt for a moment. It was eight inches long and a good inch and a half in diameter with a rounded tip and flat base.

"I haven't done this since the academy with..."

The image of a smooth skinned long tailed shark classmate flashed through her mind. Destina.

Freya hopped back to the shower stall and shivered beneath the water until the plumes of steam and heat enveloped her once again.

"Ah that's right... where was I?"

Her free paw instantly began circling her clitoris as the other lifted the bolt to her maw. She devoured the titanium bolt, ignoring the metallic taste as she swirled her tongue around it.

“Ah...” she exhaled, before closing her mouth completely around the bolt.

Her lower paw massaged her vagina as she remembered the night with Destina. Freya had grown up in the Central city just as the UTF transitioned into *total war* mode. All public pools had been converted to housing for factory workers in munitions plants. Her first exposure to open water had been the academy gym. She had been required to pass a swimming qualification to complete her requirements for the rank of Lieutenant.

Freya had no aptitude for swimming. But the sweet young shark girl who proctored the tests had, perhaps too eagerly, volunteered for late night tutoring.

Freya’s paw spread her pussy open and she felt the slick wetness of her own arousal.

“Oh Destina... you tasted you good...”

Her fingers slide past her opening briefly, sliding out to spread her natural wetness over her lips. She slid the bolt out of her mouth, thoroughly slicked with saliva, and dragged it over her clit.

“Nng... fuck,” she whispered to herself.

After several days of private tutoring, Freya had found she could manage a basic breaststroke from one end of the pool to the other. Destina would walk alongside her, encouraging her, as her glistening tail dragged along in the water. When Freya would slow down or lose focus, Destina would splash her gently.

At night the pool’s overhead LED’s were off. Dim security lights beneath the water were the only light source. As the water’s volume swayed and rocked with their motions fractals of light danced around them. Everything was cast in a watery sepia glow. Swaying like a kaleidoscope around them. Freya remembered the scent of chlorine and the echo of the chamber as she reached the other end of the pool without stopping for the first time.

The bolt slid easily between her legs, filling her up completely. She guided it slowly in and out as her free paw rocked softly over her clit. She inhaled her own scent of arousal mixed with the drifting mist of the shower.

“Fuck...”

When Freya had finally reached the opposite edge of the pool and flung her head out of the water, she found herself looking directly between Destina’s legs. The underwater lights danced on the glistening smooth skin of her bare thighs, each one just inches from her ears. Destina’s thick tail scooped Freya’ up, allowing her to balance easily in the water.

“You did it, sweetie.” Destina cooed, “You ready for your reward?”

Freya had been half hoping, half expecting this.

“Oh? And what’s that?” she played.

Destina scooted closer to the edge of the pool and spread her legs, pulling her bathing suit to the side and exposing her smooth, pink, shimmering pussy.

Freya had wasted no more time and leaned forward to taste her. A single long swipe of her canid tongue from ass to clit.

“Fuck, you’re soaking wet,” she recalled saying.

“And I haven’t been in the water! Now, shut up and eat,” Destina ordered, resting a hand on the back of Freya’s head and guiding her towards her eager pussy.

In the shower, Freya recalled every taste and lurid moan of that night. The bolt slid in and out with a steady rhythm. The hot shower beat down her back. Freya leaned forward, balancing herself with one paw as the other fucked her pussy with the slick bolt.

She had spent twenty minutes straight worshipping between Destina’s thighs. Hungrily lapping at her clit, sucking on it and swirling her tongue until Destina was just shy of climax and then pulling back to lazily taste between her lips. Destina would let out a frustrated sigh as Freya teased. ANd then encourage the young Vulp by shifting her hips forward and gripping the

back of her head tighter. Just as the shark got used to the feeling of the Fennec's tongue between her lips, Freya would drop her muzzle down to glide her tongue over Destina's ass.

"Oh, gosh... wow."

Freya had grinned internally as Destina grabbed a lock of her hair and pulled the fennec's muzzle deeper. The whole time the stunned shark whispering, "That's right bitch, eat it."

Freya had been absolutely happy to oblige.

Freya pushed her back up against the tile, her paw now free to circle her clit eagerly as she dropped the bolt entirely. In her fantasy, she was Destina. Legs spread on the edge of a pool as a hungry little cadet finally stopped teasing and slid two fingers inside her and clamped her muzzle down over her clit.

She spoke Destina's words out loud to herself.

"That's right girl... make me cum. Make me... ah... "

The young cadet had savored the taste of the shark's willing pussy as her tongue beat a steady rhythm on her clit. She felt the muscles begin to quiver as her fingers hooked inside of her, hitting the spot. Destina's hips had bucked and back had arched as she shouted out Freya's name. Freya felt the smooth skinned hands wrap around her wrist and guide her paw as Destina fucked herself with Freya's fingers.

The memory of Destina soaking her muzzle as she shook with orgasm sent Freya over the edge of her own. Her claws scraped against the wet tile and a wave of release weakened her knees. She slid to the shower floor, still fucking her own pussy furiously as the peak wracked her with tingling heat. Her cunt pulsed around her fingers and she whispered Destina's name as a second wave shuddered through her body. Freya's paws were exhausted and the dizziness finally hit. She had been holding her breath the whole time and she gasped in deeply as she let herself fall limp to the tile. She was flush, and now gasping for air. Aftershocks rippling

through her. Very gingerly she slid her fingers out of her pussy, accidentally brushing her clit in the process and shaking with overstimulation.

The shower timer ended and she caught her breath, sucking her fingers clean just as Destina had done to her.

“Fuck girl,” she whispered.

She looked up to the mechanical lubricate which remained untouched on the shelf above her.

“Guess I’m meeting the general with a squeaky leg.”

She gathered herself, dried off and dressed. After reassembling the bolt and re-loading her Mark I she stepped out of the showers to find John waiting for her.

“Thought you weren’t coming?” she said.

He noticed her glassy eyed look and answered immediately, “Guess you just were?”

She allowed herself a laugh, “It relieves stress.”

“I shoulda thought of that... Come on, let’s go up to the mansion.”

The two climbed the series of steps and lifts that ascended from the former UTF barracks and base to the governor’s mansion which overlooked the Horgath forest. Freya tried to think as they walked in relative silence. Before she could prepare herself they were both ushered in through the main gate. It was the second time she’d crossed that threshold. The last time had been with Captain Morrison at her side.

As she passed into the foyer she tried to recall what it had looked like that first time with the Captain. The rooms had been lavishly decorated and filled from corner to corner with United Front VIPs.

The statues were all gone, likely topped and smashed to dust. The drapes and art had all been torn down and replaced with maps, star charts, and other tools of the resistance. Small camps were set up in orderly rows in the vast foyer. When under UTF control the building housed just one man. And now a virtual city had sprung up in it’s halls. The rebellion council had

taken control of the mansion. But also their families, their friends, strangers and anyone who needed someplace warm to sleep and food to eat.

“Property is theft, Freya.”

“Obviously,” she answered unironically.

“General Kiniro is in Kreiger’s old sanctuary... only one who gets a private space. Not that she’s gonna let us get away with that. Just you watch. By nightfall? She’ll have moved a dozen strangers into that office.”

“Sounds about right to me from what I’ve seen of the humans. I... fuck.”

Freya stopped at the door as John took a few steps ahead.

“Oh...shit,” he said “I didn’t think.”

The last time Freya had passed these doors she had been immediately seized by Kreiger’s personal guards. Her paw reached for her prosthetic leg, muscle memory reaching for a gun which was no longer stored there.

The guards had held her just long enough to make her watch the Governor fire a lethal shot into Captain Fox Morrison’s chest. She recalled the spray of blood from the old combustion projectile pistol he’d been killed with. The scene played and replayed in her mind until General Kiniro interrupted the loop.

“Well?”

The general held an ice pack to her bruised jaw and wore several new stitches but had wethered her time in captivity well. John guided Freya past the threshold and she caught a glimpse of the spot where the Captain and Governor Kreiger had both fallen. The blood stains remained and before she could begin to sort out whose blood was whose, John guided her away.

The General followed Freya’s line of sight and John’s face and sighed.

“Sorry, Miss Storm. I was so focused on what happened today ... If I had been thinking straight I would have met you elsewhere.”

Freya did not answer as John led her to a dimly lit corner with a couple of leather chairs. Neither tried to imagine exactly where the leather had come from.

General Kiniro joined them and properly introduced herself.

“I’m general Amelia Kiniro. My grandmother started the resistance and passed the responsibility to my mother, who passed it to me. Miss Storm, when you killed the governor,” She gestured toward the bloodstains on the floor, “You gave us the moment we needed to fulfill generations worth of planning. You and Captain Morrison... we never thought a Vulp would turn on their own. I don’t know when we would have had this opportunity without you two.”

Her voice was nurturing and soft. Freya could see why the others followed her. When she wasn’t twisted in rage, she was very easy to trust. Still, Freya offered no response. She had heard all this already from the humans. At least the ones who didn’t hate her on sight for her fur.

“The highest compliment I can offer you, Miss Storm, is to say I trust you. Despite your breeding. As much as I trusted Fox. I understand you and he were close?”

A meek voice replied, “I love him. Loved. I loved him very much, General.”

General Kiniro reached out, resting a bruised hand on Freya’s shoulder as she answered through a pained face, “I’m sorry for your loss. He was very important to us as well. You know he told me about you often?”

Freya looked up with a satisfied smile, sniffing back tears.

John cut in, “A lot of loss since the UTF occupied Roth.”

“Indeed,” The general remarked coldly.

“Ghosts of our past,” he added.

Kiniro rolled her eyes, “I was trying to be gentle with the girl, John.”

Freya’s eyes tracked between the two as John replied, “We can have all the feelings we want when this is over, General. Unless Freya has forgotten-”

“Kiira!” She gasped.

The General rose from her seat, a full head shorter than John.

“I may have been gone for two months... did the council vote in a new general in my absence, John?”

Realizing his mistake he snapped to attention, “No, General.”

“Really? Because apparently you think you’re in charge here.”

“No, General.”

“Really? ‘No, General’ ? I don’t buy it. I don’t get talked down to by some fucking Vulp. Especially not you. Especially with the mess you got us into today.”

“I’m sorry, Gener-”

“Get the fuck out of here. Get the fuck out of this building. If I decide I want your input again I’ll be sure to send the lowest ranking man I can to fetch you for me.”

“Yes, general,” he said abashedly as he turned and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Kiniro shook her head and folded her arms, “Sorry you had to see that, Miss Freya. John has always been a bit..”

“Entitled?”

“He’s a good man. We just gotta break that Vulpocentric bullshit.”

“He’s a Vulp and a male.”

The general smiled and returned to her seat. Freya returned the smile and then lowered her head, trying to push away memories of the Captain.

“Between you and me I only got so mad because he was right.”

Freya chuckled softly, “He still should have shut the fuck up.”

“There’s a lot I want to tell you, Miss Freya. In my mind, after what you did and what Captain Morrison said about you? I want you to take up what would have been his role in all of this. Did... how much did he tell you about the rebellion, Roth and the secrets this moon has?”

“He showed me a video of what we... the UTF... did to you down in the mines. A week later he was dead.”

“... and what else?”

“That was it. He showed me the video and asked me to watch his back at the Governor's party.”

“You saw one video and turned on your entire race, career and life? Then when your boyfriend is killed you promptly murder the most evil man on Roth and spend six weeks picking off your former shipmates at the front?”

“Yes.”

The general smiled, “I like you a lot, Miss Freya.”

Freya sighed heavily, “I did it for Fox, mostly. General. And if I'm being truthful... I'm still here to honor his memory. My reasons are my own. Fox was in it for you. I'm not as good of a person as he was.”

The General lifted her head and squinted at the young vulpine sitting in a heap on the chair across from her, “I don't care why you did it, Freya. The crops don't ask why they are harvested. We all wear our reasons around our neck. Right now. In this moment. You're one of us?”

“Yes, General.”

The general reached in her pocket and took out a small rectangular tin. The box glinted in the dim light as she opened it to reveal a handful of old and yellowed cigarettes. As she extracted one from the tin and lit it she looked thoughtfully at Freya.

“It's been six weeks. This is gonna be the best smoke of my life.”

“Right.”

She inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out into the lamplight, “So. I know I'm being kind to you now but what happened this morning was your fault. Though... mostly John's they tell me. You shouldn't have been there though. Then again we wouldn't have gotten out alive if not for you two pinning those snipers... we'll call it a wash.”

“What *did* happen this morning?”

“Ghosts.”

“What?”

“John really never told you? What was your rank in the UTF before you decided to start killing them...”

“Lieutenant.”

“And Fox never said anything to you about- Oh. I guess he wouldn’t necessarily have known. I’ll bet Janeway kept him in the dark, actually. Brass like that loves to compartmentalize information. If he ever got questioned he’d have no answers to give. I guess she’s a smart woman. But I don’t see how folks can operate in such a low information environment. Eventually everybody has to know the game they’re playing.”

“What *game*?” Freya answered, somewhat annoyed.

“You’re right. This isn’t a game. And I’m rambling. Roth, my girl, is not only a mining colony. The planetary defense grid we control is standard for any UTF installation. However... the low orbit destroyer that the Vulps are sitting on in the shipyard. Now that’s overkill, isn’t it? Seriously, I want you to answer.”

Freya leaned back, “I wouldn’t know. General, I wasn’t exactly a dedicated soldier... I got conscripted into the Front and did my best to survive it.”

The general finished her cigarette and extinguished it on the Governor’s floor.

“I see. Well, I’ll just tell you. Yes. It’s overkill. That’s a hell of a lot of firepower for one mining colony. Especially one that is six months from Tangi. And eight months from any other militarized galaxy. So why the gunship? Without it, we’d have total control of the planet and a fighting chance of turning back the Front when they arrive with the fleet. But.. outflanked by both the fleet and a fucking destroyer class ship in our own orbit? We’re going to be fucked. But why is it here?”

“When I found out I wanted to know why. This was not part of my Grandmother’s plan, by the way. Soon as they tried to put that motherfucking gunship in orbit? three generations of planning went out the window. Why was it here and why the fuck was it hidden?”

The general stood up and stretched, “Anyway, I was able to get word out to the resistance while the Front had me captive. I assume you figured that out? Your chauvinistic former comrades didn’t think a female, let alone a young one, could possibly be as... well... important as I am.”

“I was able to run the resistance from an interrogation cell this whole time. Your little friend though. She was smarter than the Vulps. Maybe it’s because she’s a Lapine, I don’t know. But she walked up to me one day and flat out told me she knew I was more important than the Vulps knew. And she wanted to help me. The prisoner exchange today was the Vulps idea. They got orders to draw you out to the exchange. They wanted you, specifically, Miss Freya. Lang was able to warn me. The orders didn’t come from the UTF. Someone else was calling the shots. And it was about your cyber-brain augmentations. That’s all Miss Lang was able to tell me though.”

Freya bit her lip thinking of Kiira, straining to keep the tears back.

“So I gave orders to keep you out of it entirely. Whatever they wanted I was not about to give it to them. That’s why I had John run the show.”

Freya perked up, “Wait... Orders, not from Tangi? Then who.”

The admiral grinned and sat up in her chair, “Well I had no idea. Neither did Lang. Until an hour ago that is. John came to speak with me at the medic’s. That low orbit destroyer? All that extra defense? Roth isn’t just a mining colony, Freya. Somewhere beneath the Horgath forest there is a UTF research and development base. Off book stuff. Your Prime Minister likely doesn’t even know about it.”

Freya sniffed, “Of course.”

The admiral continued, "You, Fox and Miss Lang... you were all part of project Eylsian, correct? Tell me about that."

Freya nodded, "They replaced our brains when we died. They brought us back to fight for the front. Gave us augmentations, enhancements..."

"Right. I'm sure you've thought about the natural end of that type of research program?"

Freya had.

"Total brain control. Helplessly loyal and half immortal soldiers. The perfect army."

"You, Fox and Miss Lang were all part of the alpha portion of that program. But here on Roth another research vector was being explored. Those Vulps you saw today? Who came out of nowhere? John tells me they're called Ghost Soldiers. Somewhere on this planet is an entire base full of Ghosts and fuck knows what else."

"H-how does John know any of this?"

The General leaned back and folded her arms, "He was supposedly a cook on your ship, right? Well. He's not. Apparently he does love to cook but... but when your little ship would make supply runs to Roth? He was actually running communication between the Ghost Soldiers and whatever shadow government within the UTF had commissioned the project. He had at some point resigned due to ethical objections. And frankly, Miss Storm, if you hadn't started this rebellion when you did? He was likely to be assassinated before your ship departed. Good timing for him."

After giving Freya a moment to process the General continued, "So these Ghost soldiers wanted a Vulp with a cyber brain. And when they couldn't get you they took Kiira."

Freya clawed the leather of the chair, "I don't care what they are... if they can go invisible or teleport or whatever the fuck that was... I'm going after her."

The Admiral leaned back and considered Freya for a moment, "You think you can just waltz into that research and development base and walk out with your friend like the wind?"

"I don't care how I do it. But I'm going. Now. Alone if I have to."

Amelia Kiiro smiled warmly on Freya, “No you’re not. At least... not alone. I’m going with you. I owe Kiira. And frankly we need you both. Alive.”

“I’m relieved to have your support General. But you’re too important to the people here to run off on a rescue mission like this.”

“I have to go, Miss Storm.”

“Why?”

“These Ghosts... I need to know what this is. I didn’t plan for them. I need to see it all myself. That and... I owe Miss Lang. She protected me while I was prisoner. And honestly if I don’t go after her no one else will.”

“Now, I’m going to have whoever cleans the floors around here go fetch John. Go suit up with whatever you got and meet me in the basement in 45 minutes. Either we’re coming home with Kiira or not at all.”

Chapter 3

Killing Rooms

General Kiriwo went to assemble a volunteer unit for the mission, leaving Freya alone in the former Governor's office. Freya had only just met Amelia Kiriwo, but expected the woman would have no trouble finding volunteers. Leadership was a quality Freya had always respected. Captain Morrison had it. And she continued to follow his leadership even after his death.

She sat alone and recalled the last time she'd been in that room. She could still hear the screams of guards, guests and sex workers as Fox faced his death. Captain Morrison had linked a private communications channel among him, Freya and Kiira Lang. A direct text link between he and Freya, with read access for Kiira. He had tried to keep Kiira as distant from their treason as he could. If he and Freya had been caught he wanted Kiira to be safe. The link between their cyberbrains was still active but had remained silent since his death.

She knelt by the bloodstain on the floor and brought the text channel up on her HUD. For the first time in weeks she reached out into the void.

[I still forget you're gone sometimes, Fox.]

[Other times I'm furious with you. For making me love you and then leaving.]

[But moments like now... I just want to live up to being the woman you thought I was.]

[Kiira is still alive, Fox. Somehow she didn't die when your ship fell. Somehow she's alive and she's in trouble. I want you to know, Fox. I'm going for her. I'm going for her and I'm not coming back without her. I want to do the right thing, like you did. And if, like you, I instead find my end I want to face it like you did. You'd want me to live for you, I think. But if I can't do that I want to die like you.]

She kissed the tips of her fingers and touched them to the spot where he had fallen. Tears streamed down the side of her muzzle and she wiped them away. With one deep breath she rose, her prosthetic leg whining as the hydraulics lifted her to her feet. She spoke out loud.

“We’ll get her, darlin’. I’ll bring her back to you. I know you loved her too. Just as much as I still do.”

Freya had been given a private cabin on the far side of the barracks. Most humans were not comfortable with a Vulp sleeping next to them. She took her time returning to her cabin to follow the General’s orders and gear up. On her walk back she closely inspected what had been done to the former Governor’s estate. The once indulgent mansion had been converted to a utilitarian space. The council occupied the estate, but telling them apart from the rebels, families and children who occupied the building was impossible.

Many still wore the drab one piece canvas uniforms that the UTF had issued to mine workers. They were stained and streaked with earth. Burnt from the heat of the tools used in Xenon extraction. Many had never known any other clothes and were happy simply to launder them freely now that the UTF was gone. Freya wondered how long the freedom would last.

An unusual sound in a far corner caught her attention. A mother, wearing the tattered remains of a miner’s uniform chased a laughing child. The child’s bronze skin and dark curls complimented the deep pink of the traditional Tangi dress she wore. It was bright, laundered, and crisp. Most likely taken from the Governor’s daughter’s wardrobe, but it fit the child perfectly. The mother’s voice was hoarse and weak, but filled with love as she proudly proclaimed her daughter to be a princess. Every tired but smiling face they passed agreed. The two ran past rows of olive drab tents erected in the foyer. Old men sat on cots sipping stew from tin cups. Young men folded clothes. Rebellion familiars with clipboards walked hastily from tent to tent to take census and disperse provisions. She wondered where they had all slept and ate before the mansion had taken them in. Each of them had six square meters of space to themselves now. Dry and warm. Some wore relief on their faces, enjoying the simple pleasures of freedom.

Others gazed off blankly, uncertain if the nightmare had truly ended. In Freya's mind the nightmare continued and all of this was simply the eye of the storm. The UTF Armada was en route. The Destroyer in the shipyard was still under UTF control. Without backup or good plan the rebels would be destroyed in the crossfire.

As she left the mansion and overlooked the former UTF barracks. At the edge of the camp a plenary defense canon pointed towards the shipyard to keep the Destroyer docked. She imagined hell raining down on the humans from an orbiting Armada. Even if the humans pointed the gun skyward the Destroyer would simply vaporize them from behind. She raised the countdown she'd set on her HUD. When it reached zero in four months death would come and all the humans she passed would be dust. A light breeze passed through her fur and she imagined it carried the remains of these people. She would die with them.

"But at least maybe I can get a few months with Kiira," she sighed.

She climbed down from the mansion's perch at the top of a hill. Skipping the rows of steps and lowering herself over the short cliffs of rock to the ledges beneath until she was back on base level. There was no civilian population in this part of the camp. Outside of the showers, her cabin, and the bar she had not explored the base. She had been an engineer on the Explosivo under Captain Morrison for three years and seen countless UTF bases. The base on Tangi was surely the same as any other. The layout certainly appeared stock standard.

The priorities of the rebellion differed from the priorities of the occupation and it showed in how they used the space. Only six weeks into attrition and the base had completely transformed.

The Front had prioritized Xenon shipments and the comfort of the Vulp population. But resource management guided the rebellion. Storage hangers, which had previously maintained millions of drums of liquid Xenon, now consolidated food, clothes, and medicine. The water system which had previously been directed at the mines (to reduce dust and provide coolant) had been completely rerouted to for drinking and bathing. Lev-Carts now hauled food from the

farmland to the stores, and returned to the fields with other resources. Census data was updated daily. Those who couldn't work were given the same rations as the council, or the logistic managers for that matter. No one skimmed. No one starved. The United Front had, for years, branded their galactic imperialism under the motto: Security through unity and conquest.

The people of Roth, once they had freed themselves, had embraced: No one is expendable.

With their population decimated by five decades of occupation the motto was true both literally and in the intended moral sense. Their numbers were too few to lose even one more human to preventable suffering. And their unity was so strong that this fact was not debated.

Freya approached the edge of the camp where she had been assigned quarters. John too had been given a private cabin fifty yards from her own. While the humans were living in rows of tents, or allotted squares indoors- she and John had been given luxury. They had been assigned to the actual barracks they would have occupied during the occupation. Utilitarian but comfortable independent structures with running water, closets and their own cots. At first Freya had thought this was a gesture of kindness for her role in starting the rebellion. She had come to understand it was because the humans did not think she was capable of sharing as they did.

The ammo case beneath her bed squeaked open as she questioned if they were right about her. She wasn't sure. She had not been invited to share with the humans. But nor did she volunteer to share more than her bed on occasion.

"No good thinking about that now," she whispered to herself.

She loaded up as many plasma bolts as she could in her cargo pockets and belt before catching sight of herself in a dirty mirror above her own personal sink.

A dark red stain streaked across her cheek. She remembered touching Fox's blood with wet fingers, and wiping her tears. She was wearing him.

A deep sense of loss crept into her chest and she pushed it out with a thought.

"Not the first time I've walked through this place wearing you on my face, hon."

A smile reached her lips as she made a decision. For two months she'd only taken Fox's jacket off to bathe and have sex. His scent still clung to the interior and she had spent every possible moment since his death wrapped in him. But, she reasoned, now was the time. The red and black leather was still streaked with his blood and the dirt of six weeks crawling in the forest. As she draped it on the bed she promised she would be back for it. But it was time for something different. Time to leave the UTF behind.

As she walked through the camp back towards the mansion the humans finally smiled at her. Each smile carried a sense of relief and she felt each one whisper: finally. She smiled back and raised a paw to them, index finger and thumb extended and the rest curled toward her palm. The "drackmar" - or the sign rebels had used to identify themselves during the occupation. It was the first time the signal had been returned by the humans since this all began.

Counting herself, John and Freya the General had gathered eight total volunteers. They met in the former Governor's office again, huddled around the main desk. Two of the volunteers were already working on pulling down a set of permanent bookshelves behind the desk. As Freya approached the small group the General raised her hand in the drackmar.

"Finally decided to join the rebellion, Freya?"

Fox's United Front jacket had been replaced with a short hooded cloak. Dark in color, beneath which she could hide her light colored fur. The white fur of her muzzle was streaked with red boot grease beneath her eyes, to soften glare if the Mark I was needed again. Her prosthetic leg had been wrapped in leather, to deaden the sound of the hydraulics. Normally bare foot-paws were covered in dark steel toed boots. She looked around at the other seven who nodded in approval. Freya Storm had finally shed the uniform of the United Front.

"Thought it was time. What's the plan, General?"

John cut in, "The Ghost Soldiers have a lab somewhere beneath the base. I can lead us part way there. They never let me inside proper. But I know the lab does connect with the mansion through this basement. It's the most likely place they'd take Kiira."

Just as he finished the final boards splintered free of the wall behind the desk. The bookshelves were in pieces at their feet revealing two smooth hydraulic doors.

John gestured toward the hidden opening, "It's... somewhere down here."

The General stepped forward and John dutifully shrunk back, "For all we know there's a thousand Ghost Soldiers down there and they are all waiting for us. Or, they evacuated with the rest of the front when the shooting started and there's just a handful. No idea what we're walking into. I wish John could tell us more but..."

Shooting John a fond look the General continued, "I don't think they trusted him any more than we would."

"They weren't wrong to distrust me if you think about it," John added.

Freya stepped toward the door, "Their loss. Are we gonna go or hang around talking about it all day? How do we get in?"

Several of the humans gathered in a circle and began making hand motions which Freya recognized. It was a game of chance that could be played without dice or cards; she had often seen it used to randomize unpleasant duties among the rebels.

John and the General looked on with interest as a winner was declared. A young olive skinned man with a plasma pistol hanging from his leg harness rolled his eyes as the others patted him on the back and mocked him as *bait*.

"...Someone gonna explain this one to me or...?"

John walked up beside her, laying a paw on her shoulder and whispering, "They're deciding who takes point. If any UTF security is still active it's almost certainly biometric and calibrated to humans. Someone has to go first to spring the traps..."

The General patted the man on the back as he took point.

"You got this Danzen."

Danzen nodded and clasped a necklace which dangled in front of his chest. He closed his eyes, looked up, and mouthed several words. Freya instinctively went to her own, the small

square pendant given to her by Captain Morrison the night he died. When the prayer was over he took the lead and opened the double doors, pistol at the ready.

John walked up to the door and placed the pads of his paw against a small biometric reader.

"I should still have access," he hoped aloud.

The reader sounded and turned green as the doors parted with a hydraulic whir.

"How about that? Some good luck for once," he added as Danzen stepped in front of him.

A long sterile hallway stretched out into a pinpoint before them, tapering slowly downward. White walls accented with red stripes and dotted with the occasional hydraulic door or wide picture window. A faint sour-sweet smell blew past the unit as they crossed the threshold. Immediately the scent of death was recognized by all, and the sound of weapons being drawn clicked through the tunnel.

Danzen lead them forward at a brisk and even pace, Freya and the General directly behind them and John bringing up the rear. Danzen passed the first door with hesitation, his eyes locked on a small and familiar black box which loomed above the entryway. Freya followed a meter behind and as she passed the first door it whirled open. Danzen nearly knocked them over as he lept back, lifting his pistol toward the box above which had remained still and otherwise silent.

"It's biometric, it only opens for Vulps," The General said exasperated.

But before she could finish the sour and sweet scent overwhelmed them all.

Freya doubled over with paw over her muzzle and wrapped her cloak around her face.

"Whatever's in there," she coughed, "It's not good."

John hurried to the front, standing in the door before the general or humans could approach, "Stay behind. I don't think any of you want to see this."

The General understood and nodded to him with watering eyes.

He gestured for Freya to follow, "You... You might need to."

Freya tightened the cloak around her muzzle and followed him to the threshold. White LEDs flashed to life above them as they entered, confirming their species.

"Don't look away, Freya. This is what Captain Morrison died for," John whispered.

It took Freya several moments to fully piece together the scene. At first the room resembled a standard UTF bio-lab. It wasn't unlike the ones she had seen at starport when she went for maintenance on her cyberbrain.

Instead of glistening walls and sterile tools the long steel tables piled high with blackened flesh and rust colored stains. Yellowed ribs poked out from beneath the gore. Glinting blades dotted the floors where the manglers had dropped them during the evacuations. Dozens of human bodies in various stages of decay and dissection had been left to rot in the open. Wooden cutting boards piled high with diced flesh. Molded bowls of local plant life. Racks of small plastic tubes filled with colored powders hung against the far walls.

"Are those," Freya began.

When her brain filled in the blank with *ovens* she understood. It wasn't a laboratory. It was a kitchen. The image of Captain Morrison's last night flashed in her memory. He had stood between the governor and a line of young humans. Plates of pate had been laid out behind them next to a large carving station.

"This is fucking sick."

"I had... imagined this was going on. I passed these rooms when working for the Ghost soldiers. Never saw... this happening. But saw the bodies being taken back. Passed this room once or twice. All UTF designs are the same. This is the same kitchen I had on the Explosivo. I didn't want to believe it. But... I think Fox knew. From what you told me about how he died. I know you haven't told them the whole story. But he saw this didn't he. That's what he and Krieger argued about."

Freya nodded. She had told the story of the Captain's death to the humans when she was rescued that night. Governor Krieger had made Fox an offer he couldn't accept. He blew his cover as a rebel, a traitor to the UTF. And was executed. She hadn't had the stomach to say exactly what the UTF had been doing to their human servants when they were no longer able to work.

"Do we tell," she gestured to the door and the unit waiting outside.

"I don't know. Honestly."

"They'll want to bury these people, eventually."

"I suppose so... didn't think of that. Damn. Am I that jaded?"

"Doesn't matter. Let's get out of here."

The General waited outside with a look of mourning already fixed on her face.

"Let's keep going," John said finally.

"What's in there, John?"

Freya answered, "The black heart of the United Front."

The General narrowed her eyes at them both. For a moment Freya recognized the look. It was the look strangers in the rebellion gave her. The look of hate when all a human sees is another Vulp. A sense of shame burned up the back of her neck and Freya rubbed the terminal fused to her brain stem. She thought of Captain Morrison and brought up the channel she had re-opened earlier.

[Fox, I'm going to dismantle the entire fucking Front. Somehow.]

"Later," The general finally said and gestured for the unit to move forward.

Other doors. Other kitchens. Labs. Store rooms. Provisions. Each was investigated first by Freya and John. The ones with resources the rebellion could distribute were marked and the unit moved on.

Freya's HUD calculated depth based on the incline of the hallway. They had descended nearly half a mile deep on a slow slope. The Front would have certainly used lev-carts. That none had been found in the mansion or thus far in the corridor meant they had been collected.

"Ghost Soldiers are still using this tunnel," she advised when the thought struck her.

"I got that feeling, too." Danzen said.

One of the unit responded, "Could be using it right now, with that cloak thing they do. Could be right here next to us. Waiting."

"Right," The General answered, "Which is why you should all shut up and keep sharp."

"Right, Genera-" Danzen stopped as he saw a sudden pin prick of red light above.

"Wait," he whispered.

The unit waited, breath held as Danzen glared forward.

After several moments of absolute stillness Danze lifted an open hand and motioned for Freya to step forward.

"You see it, too?" she whispered.

He nodded silently.

The light shone like a beacon on her HUD from beneath a small glass eye. Experience at Front outposts told her it was a biometric lens, with an infrared beam that calculated distance. When Freya had been a meter behind Danzen the beam had been strong and actively scanning the hallway. However, as she approached his side the frequency and scope of the scan dispersed.

"Freya, when you were one of the Vulps, uh, did you ever spend any time in the administration buildings here?"

"No, I never left the shipyard, actually."

"Hm. You aware of the eyes?"

"Oh, fuck," The General whispered.

"I don't understand," Freya answered, her paws reflexively gripping the handle of her Mark I.

"Biometric security. Unaccompanied humans were verboten in sensitive areas like this. About two years back Kreiger installed the Eyes to enforce that rule. If a human gets more than two meters from a Vulp in a high security area the Eye triggers a security protocol."

"And what does that mean?"

The General piped in, "Depends on the area. Some of them are lethal. Some of them just lock down the area. Rebellion lost a few people to these, actually. If Danzen had been just a little farther in front of you this one would have gone off and... Not sure what would have happened."

The General turned to the rest of the unit, "Huddle up around the Vulps. We're all gonna be real close friends by the end of this hall."

The unit took formation around the two Vulpines. Danzen, The General and a teenager with a standard Mark II circled Freya, the three others around John. Freya watched the Eye with her augmented vision and saw it power down as they huddled.

"Good catch, Danzen," she muttered.

The unit proceeded slower than before. All eyes actively watching the walls for additional security measures as they inched forward. The main base had been mapped out by the rebellion during the occupation, but whatever security the Ghosts had was new territory.

After an agonizingly slow descent Freya calculated they had proceeded another quarter mile below the surface when finally the long white hall changed.

"What's that?"

Just ahead a dark metallic arch spread itself between the walls of the tunnel. Even from 30 yards out they could all see the access panel built into the left pillar. Freya zoomed in on her HUD to read the screen as the group ground to a halt.

"Gimmie a second... it's at the edge of my range."

Unable to actively read the display she took several still shots of it and ran them through an extrapolator.

“Shoulda gotten the update from Sharak Deux on Tangi last time...”

“What?”

“Sharak Deux is a maintenance bot. I was due for cyberbrain maintenance last time I was home. Er. On Tangi. Planned to upgrade the processing speed of ancillary tasks that couldn't be done organically. I'm trying to read the screen there but it's gonna take a minute to process.”

As Freya's program buffered the General took a pair of binoculars from a satchel on her hip and peered through them at the arch.

“It's a security checkpoint. Whoever was supposed to be manning it would have gotten the data from the Eyes and been expecting us.” General Kiniro said with some satisfaction, “Right now it reads... It has Freya's name and rank, the human count, and... Oh John you're listed there, too but your name is highlighted. Looks like you were right.”

From the back John laughed, “Probably would have been shot on sight. My lucky day, I guess.”

Freya's analysis completed buffering and she confirmed the Admiral's summary but added, “We got a new problem, too. Everything beyond that checkpoint is Vulp only.”

“Well cross that arch when we come to it, come on.” The General urged.

Within a few moments they had reached the security checkpoint. An empty stool lay on its side near the terminal. Beside the stool they saw a molded sandwich and spilled mug of coffee.

“Looks like whoever they had stationed here cleared out in a hurry.”

“Freya,” The general said, “Can you find out if there's any security still running?”

John added, “Yeah. I'd love to know if I'm gonna get vaporized if I go through this thing or not.”

Freya stood at the terminal and tried to navigate the screen. A small icon lit in the upper corner, indicating an active user was engaging the security checkpoint. She queried for a simple status report but was prompted immediately for clearance.

“Fuck,” she cursed, immediately reaching for her Mark I.

“What is it?” The general asked anxiously.

“It wants to validate my clearance. I can spoof it I’m sure but I don’t have long before it locks.”

Freya yanked the ribbon cable from her gun, sliding one end into her connection port and the other into an open set of pins on the terminal. She ran a homebrew program Captain Morrison had given her for emergencies, stored in active memory so as to avoid United Front cyberbrain monitoring. The software analyzed the type of verification the terminal used, and pulled from a database he had accumulated with Admiral Janeways help to provide valid credentials.

The first two attempts failed, resulting in a warning. One more failed access attempt would result in a total system lockout. Meaning they would have to take their chances when they crossed the security threshold. The credentials the software had provided were both of officers stationed on Stargazer station, midway between Tangi and Roth.

“Hmm...”

Freya reasoned the systems were keyed to local, not part of the main Tangi security network. Any off world officers would have no reason to have access.

“... Kreiger was courting Fox.” She whispered.

Freya paused the automated brute force hack and manually searched the database. The terminal beeped a warning. The timer to lockdown had begun. Ten seconds. Nine...

She made her choice. After selecting Captain Morrison’s bioprint and ID her cyberbrain spoofed the credentials.

Eight, Seven...

[KEY PASSWORD NOW]

Six, Five...

"Fuck," Freya said, pounding the terminal.

"What is it?"

"I don't know Captain Morrison's password! He's keyed in the system but it want's his password."

Four, Three...

Freya thought to herself, "Did he ever mean for me to get this far? He thought ahead, but did he think this far ahead?"

Two...

She keyed in the only password she could think of, gripping the charm on her necklace and praying like Danzen had earlier.

[F R E Y A]

"Password Accepted," the terminal chimed cheerfully.

Freya let out a long sigh of relief as the security status scrolled across the screen.

"I love you too, Foxyboy," she whispered to herself.

She perused the screen, trying to regain her composure and reminding herself she didn't have time for those emotions at the moment. There would be time to grieve later. Time to worry later.

"Well. It's bad news. And good news."

"Out with it, Miss Storm."

"Security is still active. Once we go through this arch if anyone is still watching they're gonna know we're here. And there's an automated protocol in place. Humans are executed on scan. No exceptions."

"And the good news?"

“Well... far as I can tell? Security is Plasma bolts. Nothing biochemical. Nothing... Well, still standard UTF security drone shit. Gun turrets built into the walls mostly. Meaning we should be able to actually see and take out anything that’s gonna take a shot at you.”

John stepped forward, adjusting the site on his Mark II, “I’ll take lead. I’m a better shot than Freya on the fly. I’ll shoot anything that’s a threat. Freya you take rear and watch for anything I miss. Uh...” he looked to the General, “If I mean that’s the plan, General.”

General Kiniro readied her own pistol and nodded to John, “You’re good. As good a plan as any.”

John knelt down at the threshold of the arch and peered through his scope down the hall. His barrel swayed in small circles as he covered every visible inch pausing at anything that looked like it might be a turret barrel.

“Looks clear. Nothing ahead.”

General Kinro motioned for the unit to cross and move through behind her. Danzen stepped in front of her, “I’m taking point. Remember?”

John chimed in, “I said it’s clear, man...”

Danzen side eyed John, “Shut the fuck up. *Man.*”

Danzen stepped through the threshold first. Immediately as he crossed to the other side they all heard a mechanical sound from behind. Two turrets affixed to the rear of the arch centered on his chest and before he could turn to even see them, each turret fired three plasma bolts center mass.

Danzen dropped immediately. Dead weight before he hit the floor. The plasma bolts colderized his wounds upon entry and exit. His corpse lay bloodless and still at John’s feet.

“Fuck!” he yelled, raising his Mark II to fire on the first turret as Freya took aim on the second. Two shots from each later and the security guns sparked and sizzled, disabled and useless.

John looked down at Danzen and dropped to his knees. The bloodless death giving him false hope. But the smoldering wound and stench of burnt flesh confirmed his fears.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

Amelia Kiiro stepped through the archway to sit by her fallen friend.

“General no, I-”

“Shh. Turrets are down. Next time, look behind you.” she ordered coldly.

The general knelt next to Danzen and placed her hand on the back of his neck. She prayed and offered the sign of the drackmar. When the silent prayer was done she yanked the necklace from around his neck and hunched over it, out of sight of Freya and John. After a moment of silence she pocketed the necklace and patted Danzen on the back.

“Ahead, 150 meters. Then we stop and check again for guns. Freya, you watch the rear. We'll mourn Danzen when the mission is over. Understood?”

The unit nodded silently and followed the General through the archway, each offering the drackmar to Danzen in respect.

The tunnel lights dimmed the farther they descended. Every 150 meters the unit would stop. John and Freya would each fire two shots, taking out all the visible turrets, and then they would descend deeper into the darkness. As they reached one mile deep the darkness gave way. Freya had taken the lead on shooting out the turrets. Syncing to her Mark I via the ribbon cable and using computer assisted aiming to target the IR sensors of the turrets. When she had taken her last two shots she scanned ahead.

“Wherever we're going... we're there. Think it's safe to use flashlights. No more eyes. No more turrets. Seems we're at the end of the security protocols.”

“That wasn't so bad. Considering.” The General added, “I guess they presumed the UTF wouldn't be cowering in a shipyard while the humans broke into their secret base, eh?”

Freya nodded as she clicked on a palm sized LED, "Yeah. This tunnel would have been flooded with security by now when the UTF was in charge. Though what's left... they know we're here. You'd think we'd have seen someone by now."

John stepped forward into Freya's light and peered down the hall, "Whatever the Ghosts are up to. Must be way more important to them than us...You see that, Freya?"

Freya zoomed in with her HUD, "Yeah, good eye."

"What is it?" The general asked as they inched forward.

"An elevator."

The unit reached the elevator terminal and Freya took to the controls. There was no security protocol, nothing to hack. Just a single bio-keyed button.

"Good news. Just one button."

"Where does it take us?"

"Down."

Freya placed her paw on the scanner and allowed it to read her DNA signature.

Instantly the sound of machinery sprang from the walls and several dim purple lights illuminated just above the elevator entrance. A hydraulic double door pulled open and a simple, clean steel interior was illuminated before.

"Going down." Freya said.

The group piled in, one by one, and readied their weapons as Freya closed the door.

The elevator's sudden drop caused everyone to sway and experience a moment of nausea. Freya leaned a paw against the wall and favored her gyroscopically stabilized prosthetic leg. The humans were not so lucky and she reached out to help the General balance on the long and accelerating decent.

Freya watched the depth count on her HUD rise. One mile. Mile point five miles. After a nauseating ride the elevator's decent slowed and finally stopped. Just shy of two miles below

the surface the hydraulic doors pulled open and Freya shielded her eyes from the blinding brightness which poured in from behind.

As she squinted and her HUD compensated for contrast, she was the first to see the strange and beautiful landscape before them.

“Oh my fucking... wow.”

“What is it, Freya?” the General said shielding her eyes.

“It’s... impossible.”

Chapter 4

Hallow

Freya did not trust her eyes showed her. Frantically, she scanned and rescanned for any signs overlays, holograms, or projections of any kind. She zoomed in and her HUD mapped the scene as a physical three dimensional environment. She could calculate the distance between objects, render their depth, and...

“There’s a horizon.”

As the rest of the unit’s eyes adjusted to the light they too gasped at the landscape. At first glance it appeared to be a city. Rows of gray buildings covered with sparkling neon spread off into the distance, terminating in a distant horizon. However, the infinite rows curled up and around. Where a normal city would have sky this city had more buildings which hung down like daggers from the rock above.

The city was built on the inside of a sphere. A sphere so large that the other side of it could not be seen. Just the lights and rooftops vanishing into an indeterminate gray fog in a circular horizon.

Freya stepped out of the oversized elevator first, trying to make sense of the scene and hoping that getting even just a few meters closer would unravel the mystery. Her paws landed on a rocky ledge that met a concrete dock. The ledge led to a steep slope which spired out from the elevator in three compass directions. At the top of each slope a chest high security gate prevented entry or accidental egress. She leaned on the gate which faced the spherical city before her and turned her ears to the distant but distinct sounds of the impossible metropolis.

She looked down and saw three story tall machines bound down streets on hydraulic legs. The machines towered over the smaller buildings they passed, but were dwarfed by the interminable skyscrapers which connected with the ceiling above. Every few meters the walkers

would emit a bright pink beam and scan the ground. The impact of their stomping feet echoed in the cavern and she could hear it all the way up from her vantage point, nearly a kilometer above the city. Then she looked up. What she thought had been echoes had been more walker machines, stomping their way across the ceiling.

“This place is giving me vertigo,” said one of the humans behind her.

They approached the fence where Freya was observing the city. The general stood beside her and followed Freya’s gaze.

“Is that thing up there walking on the ceiling?”

John answered, “The floor. From it’s perspective.”

Freya wanted to argue that gravity could not work like that. Especially when just a couple miles above those walkers, gravity kept the rebellion’s feet firmly set upon the antipodes. But she couldn’t deny what she saw. However it was happening it was indeed happening.

“Some kind of local gravitational... something?”

The general piped up, “Miss Freya, how long have the Vulps been space faring?”

“About 70 years now. My grandfather remembered the First Fleet.”

General Kiniro gestured, “And you’ve been on Roth for two generations. Almost the entire time you’ve been in space.”

“Unfortunately, General.”

“The humans are the Vulp’s primary labor force here on Roth. Do you think all of this was built in 50 years and no one noticed? All of our population twice over couldn’t gett his done in a century.”

The point was clear. The interminating city with it’s own unique physics was too large, too strange and too complex to have been built by the United Front.

“I don’t think we even *could* engineer this. Unless...”

John patted her on the shoulder, “Yeah. I was thinking the same thing. We’ll have to get a closer look.”

The General raised her eyes to see the walkers scanning the floor above them, “Whatever we do, I got a feeling we should steer clear of those things.”

Instead of descending the ramps the unit opted to take a more secluded snaking staircase to the side. The ramps, it seemed, were most likely used for equipment transfer and, when the city had been alive, for resources and goods. As their boots echoed on the metal steps, each of them commented on the same thing.

“It’s... quiet. But not.”

The crunch of the walker’s feet and the hum of their hydraulics was a constant dull thrum in the chamber. And somewhere in the distance a rhythmic churn echoed out. But for a city this size- it was quiet. The sounds of life were nil. There was a sense that it had been a thriving and living city until the exact moment they stepped off the elevator, at which point every living thing had been vaporized. The city was running on pure entropy.

When they reached the bottom they all stopped to slowly take in the view. Their eyes passed from the concrete and metal flooring to the bright blinking skyscrapers and finally to the void between.

One of the humans gestured to a path, “So if we kept on walking straight, all the way, then we’d end up directly above us looking down?”

“Looking up, I imagine. But it appears so,” the General answered.

“Fuck, this is messing with me.”

“Keep your eyes on the ground then.”

“So if we think Kiira is down here then,” John started.

“Then where do we start?” Freya finished.

Freya felt overwhelmed and opened the long silent channel to Captain Morrison again.

[You wouldn’t believe this place, Fox. She’s here somewhere. I feel it.]

She sighed audibly.

[I have no idea where to begin.]

Sudden darkness fell on the chamber, the neon lights of the buildings blinking like stars in the space before and above them.

Freya dropped to her knee and peered through the sights of her Mark I. The rest of the unit took defensive positions. Her canid ears swivled, listening for the sound of the walker's stomping, mechanical whirrs, or boots on metal. Anything to indicate a pending attack. But nothing came. After a breathless moment streetlamps slowly illuminated and cast the city in a dull sepia.

"Night mode?" Someone asked.

"I guess so. I hope so," Freya answered.

The streets were lined with rows of dim beams. A fine mist swirled beneath each spotlight. She reasoned it was exhaust from the walkers, the only moving then they had yet seen. Her eyes followed the length of a road in front of them which curved up and terminated in a singular building with a bright blue neon peak.

She gestured to the two story building which stood out from the others, "As good a place as any to start."

John whined, "Looks like it's all uphill from here."

The general patted him on the shoulder and spoke condescendingly, "Optical illusion John. Everything in here is downhill and uphill, depending on where you stand. Quit complaining and come on. Freya's right. It's as good a place as any to start."

Most of the unit had never seen anything resembling combat until six weeks prior. But Freya found herself impressed. As they moved through the strange city block by block, they adapted almost instantly from the type of woodland combat of the surface. Every window was covered, every bisecting alley was cleared, and eyes were kept in every direction. Walk. Cover. Clear. Repeat. It made the going slow but the distant beat of the walkers kept them on alert. With two thirds of the distance to the structure covered and not a sign of life to be found, tensions lifted.

The general spoke quietly, "You and John seemed to have some idea what this is."

Freya peered down an alley way through her scope. No targets identified.

"Well. Not quite. Not really. Just a thought. Almost not worth mentioning."

"But you're going to."

It was a command not a prediction.

Freya stopped, letting her Mark I hang by her side, "Tangi and the UTF has been space faring for 70 years now, General. But do you know anything about us before then?"

"I have some knowledge of your history. Not enough to be useful. Roth was vaguely aware of Tangi before the occupation. We've forgotten more than we've learned since then."

"Ah." Freya answered with a pang of shame, "A hundred years ago we were a tribal planet. Electricity was brand new and used mostly in factories for small tools to make weapons or vehicles. Steam, steel and combustion. Too busy fighting each other to look up. What we knew about the stars fit into a single book."

The General raised an eyebrow as they walked several meters and stopped to wait while John and the rest of the unit cleared another alley.

Freya continued, "So you're wondering how we went from primitive combustion to warp speed and cyber brains in two generations. We didn't."

"Freya, is now really the time to pause for dramatic effect?"

"Sorry. 70 years ago we had first contact. A race of aliens landed. They said they had pity on us for all the suffering our endless wars were causing. They wanted to help. Apparently, they did this quite a bit. Most planets, upon learning their place in the universe and becoming a post scarcity society in the matter of a single night, united. We united, too. But we united against the visitors. We called them the *old kings*. And we killed them. Took what they had to offer. And their ships. Apparently they just... never expected this to happen."

The group moved again and John drifted closer to Freya and the General.

"History lesson?" He asked.

“Freya was telling me what you think this place is and how it got inside my planet.”

He nodded as Freya continued, “They had good documentation. I swear they were a race of engineers, whoever they were. We worked out how their tech functioned, how to build our own, and all that, within twenty years. That’s how we skipped ahead a few thousand years to what we are today.”

“And the first thing you did was go out and start a galactic empire?”

“That’s a whole other story. But more or less. We stole tech. Then used it to steal resources. We’re the least clever species out in the stars. We’re just also the meanest.” John answered.

Freya cut in, “But, to answer your question. I studied the original tech while getting my degree. The work of the *old kings*. And I’ve spent my entire adult life working with our version of it. This place here? Well... here, look.”

Freya crossed the street to a terminal which blinked silently on a corner.

“This design? This material? This is UTF. This was made on Tangi. Hell. I’ve probably been to the factory that assembled it.”

She gestured to the larger structure it connected to, a tall series of concentric cylinders which rose sixty meters before spiraling out to form a spiderweb of metal.

“That? That looks like the old engine room I’ve seen in schematics of the ships of the old kings. So my guess is that this place has been around for centuries. Probably aeons. And sometime in the last 50 years the UTF found it, and retrofitted it for whatever it is the Ghosts are doing here.”

Freya’s paw swiped across the terminal which sprang to life.

“Oh, fuck...”

A nearby clank echoed off the steel and concrete around them.

The group fell into formation as the General asked, “Walker?”

Freya's ears swiveled toward the origin of the sound, "*Much* smaller, general. Whatever it is I-"

The neon mist swirled around Freya's body and she collapsed to the concrete, paws clasped to the back of her neck. Her shriek echoed through the empty city streets. As the General knelt by her side the rest of the unit took a defensive posture.

"Is she hit? I didn't hear a shot," John shouted, scanning the dead streets through the scope of his Mark II.

"I can't tell, she won't stop... Freya! Freya! Stop!" the General shouted as Freya writhed in the street, twitching and screaming.

The rest of the unit took cover, each one fanning out and searching for the source of the shot none of them had heard.

Freya's screams were interrupted by sudden, brief, growls. The sounds came faster, louder- each stuttering into the next. The ragged jittering became so violent that the General held Freya down, forcing her muzzle opening to look for a foreign object. She imagined some type of cruel bladed device shredding her vocal cords. But there was nothing.

The small clank of footsteps edged closer between Freya's glitched vocalizations. Finally Freya went completely still, mouth agape. The General tried to grab her attention by waving a hand in front of her glassy, unfixed eyes.

"She's out... What the fuck happened?"

John turned and ran across the alley to Freya's side. But before he could reach his friend he stopped in his tracks and raised his rifle toward the darkness of a mist choked city street.

"General... I... what the actual fuck is happening here."

General Kirirot motioned for the unit to follow John. By the time they arrived he was already stepping slowly backward from the alley. As he stepped back- something else stepped forward. The small clank and the scrape of metal on concrete grew closer until the mist parted and a figure stepped through.

Each member of the unit raised their weapon as they waited for orders to engage.

General Kiniro lifted Freya's head into her lap, slapping the girl's face and trying to get any sort of response. The screaming started again. But not from Freya. The glitched, jittering and guttural sound of a living thing making every possible sound at once. Identical to the sound Freya had made before falling silent.

The General finally looked up to the source and saw why her entire unit had begun a slow retreat.

It was mostly human in its proportions. However, jagged metal spires extended from the skull, pulling and stretching the skin until the features became a warped parody of humanity. Fresh blood seeped from between the flesh and metal, spilling over long dried scabs and scars. A bright neon box pulsed where the heart had been. With each beat of her "heart" the circulatory system of the *thing* glowed. General Kiniro recalled books on human anatomy that her grandmother had shown her as makeshift medic training.

The lower half of the thing's legs was metal and gears. The mechanical legs were jammed directly into fleshy stumps. Veins, muscle and viscera hung loose over a steel frame. Fresh iridescent blood pulsed from the opened veins and left a trail of toxic footsteps as the thing edged closer. The one eye which remained in the thing's head, though milky and dry, scattered in every direction until it met Kiniro's gaze. There was something like recognition between them for a moment before it began its jittering sounds again.

"What are you waiting for? Light it up!"

All five emptied a magazine into the thing. Kiniro watched as some bolts found their mark, sending chunks of flesh flying amid a mist of glowing blood. Others hit metal either extending from the thing or hidden just beneath its skin. The *thud* of each impact followed by a spark. By the time the hail of gunfire ended, the part of the thing which had once been human had been wholly obliterated. The mechanical remains twitched and whirred. John walked up to the thing and examined it closely for the first time.

With the spires on its skull knocked loose he could see into the thing's brain pan. A small cluster of flesh pulsed amid flashing violet lights. Maybe, he thought, it was a chunk of brain. Or something grown in a lab to resemble gray matter. Regardless of what it was he placed the Mark II directly against it and fired a single bolt. The machine stopped moving.

Before anyone could ask if it was dead heads turned to the sound of Freya gasping for air as she shot up in Kiniro's lap.

Immediately she doubled over to vomit, paws still pressed against her head. When she had nothing left to expel she nodded at Kiniro who then helped her to her feet.

Kiniro looked to Freya and John, "Don't suppose you two have any answers on what the fuck just happened."

Eyes turned to Freya as the events had started with her.

"I think my cyberbrain crashed. I've never.. I mean it's a guess. Maybe something in this city...I ... I don't know. It's based on the *old kings* technology. Something here might have interfered and..." she grabbed her head again, "It hurts like a motherfucker."

John, realizing she had been offline for the past minute, motioned with his rifle to the mess of gore and circuits at his feet, "Something like this?"

Freya swallowed loudly as she looked at the remains, "Thank fuck I already threw up."

She walked towards it and knelt to inspect the thing.

"Some of this is familiar... it's like cyberbrain *parts*, but... some of this. I don't know."

"That was human at some point, right?" Kiniro asked.

"Humans, I think. There's several... I mean. I don't have a word for this."

"Frankenstein," one of the unit said.

"Hm?"

Kiniro answered, "An old human legend. A scientist who sewed different corpses together to make it walk. Used lightning I think."

"Hm. Well. That's what you have here then. It was a Frakenstein."

She looked up to John, “The Ghosts ever talk about something like this?”

He shook his head, “Not to me. But, like I said. They didn’t really trust me. I knew they were working to improve cyber brains to animate soldiers. But... this is a far cry from what I imagined. Central Command prefers elegant solutions. This is a far cry.”

Kiniro joined them to get her first close look at the Frankenstein, “Looks like the Vulps are experimenting on us before they hack up their own soldiers.”

She turned to the rest of the unit and spoke loudly, “You see a Vulp who isn’t John, Freya or Kiira and you shoot them on site. They know we’re here now if they didn’t before. We find Miss Lang. We get her out of this place. And then we come back with everything and burn all of this to the fucking ground.”

Freya looked up at the hanging buildings above them, the spires which stretched farther than she could see, and the digital glint in the perpetual mist. The girl who had once been an engineering student felt a pang of remorse. This place could be studied. Understood. Maybe even used for the rebellion’s benefit. But she knew Kiniro was right. The technology of the *old kings* had turned her species tribes into galactic imperialists within one generation. And that was just one landing party. Something like this place? The UTF had already gone into the realm of the unnatural. It was best the knowledge died with the search party.

“Let’s go,” She said, returning her attention to the structure which had drawn all of their attention, “She’s there.”

“You sound rather sure of yourself,” Kiniro remarked, gesturing for the unit to proceed.

“He wouldn’t lie to me. It was a rule we had.”

“He?” Kiniro asked, “He who?”

Freya pinged the silent channel she had once shared.

[We’re going to get her out. Fox, I’m going to save her for you.]

When they finally reached the structure Freya felt a small bit of relief. It was a familiar design. A long rectangular base with a pyramid atop a small tower at the front. Blue neon

formed the insignia of the United Tangi Front at the top of the tower. A standard research laboratory like the kind she had studied in back on Tangi.

“The Front built this. Which means...Come on.”

They followed Freya to a hatch on the side of the research building. She pulled a knife from her belt and knelt beneath a small biometric access panel.

“John, plug me in, would you?” She asked, using the knife to pry off a thin plate revealing a secondary terminal.

“You sure you should be messing around after what just-”

“John, fuck off or help me. Don’t second guess me.”

He shook his head but complied. He plugged one end of Freya’s ribbon cable into her access port and the other into a port on the panel. Again she provided Captain Morrison’s credentials. With a moment’s work the interior security feed was overlaid on her hud. Nine cameras showing nine of twelve rooms in the facility. The unshown three would contain the most sensitive research and records. Before scanning the feed she overlaid the building plan and highlighted where each of the nine feeds originated. One of the three remaining rooms would contain Kiira. The first was a small office, likely the administrator’s. It was too small and lacked sufficient physical security for a prisoner. The next room was the typical size and shape of server farms in UTF research branches. The final one, however, seemed just the right size to be a small research lab. It was in the absolute rear of the building, the point farthest from.

“What are you doing?” Kিনিro asked.

John answered for Freya, “She’s hacking the building, checking security feeds, getting a floor plan.”

“Handy. And here I was just going to storm the building blind.”

John gave her a skeptical look, “You were? Didn’t think blind rage was your style.”

She answered him with a stern glare, “With what they’ve been doing to us down here? I want to fucking rip these Ghosts apart... and any other fucking Vulp who isn’t-”

“FUCK!” Freya gasped.

“What is it?”

“This building isn’t empty.”

Freya had finally scanned through the live security feeds.

Kiniro grinned, her excitement betrayed in her voice, “How many of these fuckers do I get to-”

“I don’t know. If Ghosts are in there then they’re cloaked. But...”

Collective attention focused on Freya.

“Let me put it on the terminal screen. I can’t...”

Freya displayed security feed number 5 on the small access terminal display. The unit crowded around as she unplugged from the sub-terminal and readied her Mark I.

“This is now a bigger rescue mission than we thought.”

The screen displayed the largest lab room in the facility. Housed in that room were 30 or more humans in various stages of annihilation. Gaunt and dizzy men and women leaned weak against the walls, cradling the augmented and destroyed remains of what had once been human bodies. Still others lay twitching on tables- still tethered to computer terminals. And finally several resembled an incomplete version of the thing they had killed in the streets. Spires of black metal jutted out from their brains as they stumbled blindly through the bodies.

“Freya, is this hatch unlocked?” Kiniro asked firmly.

“You know it’s a trap right? This place is almost certainly full of cloaked Ghosts.”

“I’m fucking counting on it. We’ll go in and take care of our own. You find Kiira.”

A mental image of Kiira, ripped and torn and turned into one of the Frankensteins they had just killed flashed through Freya’s thoughts. She slapped her paw against the terminal, her Vulpine DNA triggering the hatch to open as the small unit rushed through. Freya followed them, her Mark I slung over her shoulder, and a loaded micro-bolt sidearm clutched in her paws. The

layout of the building was simple enough- one long hallway with rooms on either side. The lab with the human test subjects was near the front of the building.

The hall between the rooms was cold steel and glinting screens. They proceeded through the building the same way they had through the mega-city's streets. Each door they passed was opened. The room cleared. And the unit moved on. After several empty labs, offices and storage rooms they came to the Lab Prime, where the fight they expected would come.

"This is it General. Your people are inside."

"Go find Kiira. If you two can come join us- great. If we don't make it out? Get her back home and let the council know. Let them know All of this. No one else. Do you understand?"

Freya nodded and patted Kiri on the shoulder before leaning over to John and kissing his cheek, "You go with the humans. And... come back alive, okay? You still owe me your Mark II."

Before he could respond Freya set off toward the rear of the building at a full sprint. The farther she got from the unit the fewer and fewer active lights and terminals she saw. A dark abyss swallowed her whole. As she bolted towards Kiira she felt guilt tugging at her heart.

[I couldn't go with them. Those Frankensteins were in there.]

Far behind her the sound of a hydrolic door opening was followed by the sudden and rapid fire of plasma bolts. Screaming. Metal tearing. The scent of burnt flesh and ashen fur.

[I sent them into a trap... but what else could I do, Fox?]

As she covered the distance and tried to put thoughts of John or Kiri out of her mind a realization came to her.

"Sure is lucky I saw that Frankenstein on the street, rather than shorting out in a firefight."

She came to a dead stop at the end of the hall. A large set of double doors loomed in front of her. A single access terminal blinked, awaiting input. Fully functional. The only source of light.

[Fuck, darling. I fucked up.]

She stepped to the terminal, the only functioning one in that part of the building.

[I'm the one who's going towards the trap. This whole thing was to get me away from the unit.]

She lifted her paw to the terminal anyway. Before she could press her paw to the biometric reader for access, however, the display changed.

Instead of the typical security access dialogue the terminal now displayed a single word:

[YES]

Chapter 5

Ghost Battalion

Freya leaned in close to the terminal and the simple three letter message.

[Y E S]

The terminal was the only active light in the rear of the facility. Amid the distant muffled sound of plasma fire she read it over and over.

The comms channel she had with Captain Morrison's cyberbrain had been silent since the moment he died. For the entire mission to that point she had been posting to the long dormant exchange. Keeping him updated on her progress. Her position. Her thoughts. She recalled the city lights powering down and leading them to the lab, just after she had lamented in the channel. She recalled Captain Morrison's credentials getting them past the security checkpoint, and wondered to herself how they were even still active. Surely, she reasoned, the UTF was aware he had betrayed the Front and died in the process. And then... this message.

She reviewed the last phrase she had posted.

[I'm the one who's going towards the trap...]

Yes.

A direct response.

[Fox? Is that you?]

The terminal went dark.

[Fox? Please...]

She waited for anything. A blip. A sound. A sign. But there was only cold darkness and the distant chaos of a battle she had avoided in order to rescue Kiira.

"Kiira," She reminded herself.

“Fox, if somehow you’re watching out for me... if your ROM is still active.. Whatever this is. Watch over me now. I’m going to spring the trap,” She whispered.

Calmly she placed her paw to the biometric access pad and the door hissed open. She could see little more than a dim sepia light and took a long breath before crossing the threshold. As the door closed behind her she scanned the room. Her HUD displayed no targets. It read nothing on depth of field checks. She reached into her pack and pulled out a small sandbag, usually used to balance the Mark I, but useless in close quarters. The pawful of sand she scooped out and tossed in front of her hit nothing. It simply fell to the steel as expected. There was no one in the room but her, cloaked or otherwise.

“Interesting.”

While digital and physical checks found no sign of life in the dim room the ambient temperature was several degrees warmer than it should be. Empty or not- it felt like a room full of warm bodies. The sensation of being watched, despite nothing on HUD scans, spiked the fur on the back of her neck.

She walked towards the farthest lab table. It had obviously been configured for testing on a living subject. There was a small pillow at the head, surrounded by ribbon connectors like the kind she used for her Mark I. As she inspected the restraints at the wrist and ankles she saw small tufts of gray fur trapped in the gaps.

“Hmm.”

A large mechanical arm hung down from the ceiling above the table. Several small spires of various tools spiderwebbed out from the central shaft. Thick cables threaded up the arm, and into the ceiling. The dull sepia light came from an ember-like glow in the terminus of the arm.

Freya found the table warm to the touch when she placed her paw on the center. It was clear Kiira had been there. Even her scent remained faintly in the air.

[Here goes nothing, Fox. I hope you’re with me.]

She raised her pistol and activated the battery, speaking loud and clear, "I don't know how but I do know you're here. We can skip the dramatics. Let's do this."

A half dozen Ghosts uncloaked in a semicircle around her, Mark III rifles six inches from her muzzle. She saw her reflection in their mirror-like visors and thought of Captain Morrison's last moments. He had gazed unblinking into the barrel of an old combustion pistol. She promised herself she would not give them the satisfaction of her fear. With her own plasma pistol raised she picked one and steadied her aim.

A moment later a seventh figure uncloaked outside the circle. This one wore the UTF rank of sergeant in electric yellow on his otherwise pure black suit. When he finally came into focus he lifted the mirror visor. Cold blue eyes examined her from behind within the helmet.

"Easy boys. She wants her alive, remember?"

A grin crossed Freya's muzzle as her HUD zoomed in on the sergeant. His pulse was steady and his eyes dilated. Voice stress analysis showed no deception.

"Shouldn't have said that," She answered.

In the moment before she acted the HUD registered stress on his face and Freya hoped he had a moment to realize his mistake.

Freya dropped to one knee, arcing three shots from her pistol into the gap in the sergeant's helmet. Before his body hit the floor she swept out her prosthetic leg to topple the nearest Ghost soldier. When he landed she swung the grip of her gun down against his visor, shattering it, before firing two more bolts into his skull. Two heavy arms wrapped around her as she licked the second soldier's blood spray from her muzzle. Looking up she saw a small gap between the Ghost's helmet and his black suit. Two bolts blazed from her pistol and he collapsed on her instantly. Before she could scramble out from beneath him, however, a weighted glove cracked down on her muzzle and she tasted blood. Her own this time.

While she was dazed three of the Ghost soldiers dog-piled her. Two put their full weight on her prosthetic leg and even the full hydraulic force of the UTF design couldn't move them. The third locked her arms above her head while the fourth knelt in front of her.

She saw her blood streaked muzzle in the reflection of the soldier's visor. When he spoke it was through a small speaker affixed to his breast.

"We said we needed you alive. Not healthy. You're going to pay for that bullshit you just pulled."

Without a thought Freya spit on his face shield, "Fuck you, fascist pig."

She had more to say. But before she could open her maw a second weighted glove cracked against her skull and, after a brief flash, the world went dark.

The first thing she was aware of was the pain. A throbbing ache in the side of her head. As light and sound slowly filled the void she became aware she was laying on her back in a brightly lit room. And right in front of her face she focused on two deep blue watery eyes.

"Fox..." she croaked, "Fox I did it. For you."

"Ssh, sweetie," A woman's voice answered.

Freya felt a soft paw on her cheek and leaned into it. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again in an effort to refocus. This time when she looked up the sea blue eyes were surrounded by gray fur, and long ears.

"Kiira..." she coughed, before forcing herself to sit up.

"Freya no you're hu-"

Before the young ensign could finish, however, Freya had pressed their muzzles together in a kiss. Kiira's momentary worry about Freya's injuries melted away as they both succumbed to a feverishly passionate moment. As soon as the kiss ended, Freya cupped Kiira's face in her paws and pressed her mouth to the girls' muzzle, forehead, cheeks and once again her mouth.

Kiira cradled Freya's bruised body gently, closely. As the pain finally caught up to her, Freya wrapped her arms around the young Lapine and hung her head over the girl's shoulder, sniffing away tears.

"Sorry I just... I have to touch you. I have to hold you. I just have to."

Kiira could not bite back her own emotions as well, and cried freely as she held Freya.

"I know, sweetie. I knew. I knew you'd find me. Of course you would."

A wave of nausea rolled through Freya's body and she swallowed back her body's urge to dry heave.

"I... need to lay down again."

Freya laid her head in Kiira's lap and took a moment center her spinning head.

"Got a heck of a concussion, Miss Freya. Take it easy."

"But there's so much I need to ask... like where is Fox?"

"Oh..." Kiira gulped, "I thought you knew... This is kinda. Gosh."

"Mm?"

"I've been getting your messages on the comms channel he set up before this all started."

"I thought you cancelled the connection... in fact..." Freya took a breath to ease her stomach, "I thought you died."

"Died? Oh. When the Explosivo went down... No, sweetie, I wasn't on board. Fox sent me down to Roth, Remember?"

Kiira sighed, "I heard you when he died trying to kill the governor."

"*Trying?*" she coughed, "I put six bolts in his fucking skull. Painted his brains halfway across that room..."

Kiira pet Freya's cheek, "Shh. I know. That's what they're telling the troops though. He's supposedly somewhere recovering. Amelia told me differently though. I don't... there's a lot I don't understand, Freya. A lot I want to know. But, when you were messaging the comm

channel, I thought you were reaching out to me. And just using code or something. But getting a message to me... that's why I helped you find me."

Freya considered it all for a moment as she turned into Kiira's lap. She saw Captain Morrison die. She held him as he bled out. Said his last words. She'd buried him. Taken his ROM core.

"I just... wanted to believe I could have him back," She sobbed.

Kiira stroked her hair, waiting until Freya regained herself.

"So you dimmed the lights... sent me the message on the terminal? How... what have they been doing to you?"

"They haven't hurt me. Just been running tests on my cyberbrain. They had me hooked up to all kinds of equipment. Stuff I've never seen. I think it's the ancient stuff, Freya. It's not UTF technology. But... they don't really understand it? They plugged my brain into some kind of terminal and I don't think they realized that let me have access to the entire network of... whatever... is out there. They tried to access my core ROM, but I hid. Deep dive into the network. Left a ghost ROM behind as a decoy. Whatever they were doing in there, I just deleted it before merging back. Whatever network this place runs on? It's huge. It's old. And it...Thinks."

"Thinks?"

"I don't know if Ghost Legion is even aware but the AI which runs this place is self aware. It's kind of like the Sharak AI back home. That does our prosthetic maintenance? But a much much more advanced creature. It was alone for almost three thousand years before the UTF built this lab. Maybe that's what they were doing, actually? Trying to use me to communicate with it? I don't know but- Freya. These guys are bad news."

"How bad, sweetie?"

"They're ultra nationalists. Even by the Front standards. They don't care who they kill, if it's in service to the Front. They'll do anything to reverse this revolution before the Fleet arrives."

"Why though? Why not just wait? Frankly, Kiira. We're going to lose that battle."

“They don’t think so. If they don’t end this here and now... they’re convinced it’s the end of the Front. They’re willing to kill anyone to do it. Even the Vulps on the surface. As long as it kills the humans more.”

Freya lay still as her head throbbed.

“What do they know that I don’t?” She asked.

“I’m not sure. Sergeant Bailey said ‘It’s never been wrong’ though. Right before they put me under.”

Freya smiled, “Tall guy? Grey muzzle? Scar?”

“You two have met.”

“Oh sure. Just before I sent his brains flying into the back of his helmet,” She raised her paw into the shape of a pistol and mimed three shots, “Right between the eyes. And two if his fucking fascist pig lackeys.”

“Heck, Freya! How? They’re basically invincible, not to mention they can turn invisible.”

Freya sat up slightly, “Actually, no. No they can’t.”

“What?”

“When I entered the lab... they were not there. Not just invisible. But they were for sure not in the room. They aren’t just bending light or something. They’re going somewhere. Or coming from somewhere. I threw a paw full of sand and none of it hit anything. A second later in that same space *bam*. Ghost soldier. No heat signal. Hell, I couldn’t even smell them.”

Freya whipped her head around at the sudden sound of a Ghost soldier decloaking behind them. Kiira leaped up to put herself between Freya and the new commander.

“No! You take me again. She’s no good to you, anyway! You can’t give her a concussion then go rooting around in her-”

The new commander’s weighted glove connected with Kiira’s muzzle, sending her to the floor in a heap. As she reeled, he dragged Freya from the makeshift cell and out the door before Kiira could even stand.

Freya barely managed to stay conscious as her head banged against the door stop, which closed behind her. The sound of Kiira's paws helplessly banging against the steel was the last thing she heard before the commander finally spoke.

"You're a traitor, former Lt. Storm. That makes you worse than the humans. They can't help being stupid and weak. They were born into their lot in life. None of them could ascend, even if fools like you try to make them think they can. The Front gave you a second chance at life. You jumped off a building. If you had wanted to die at least enlist and die for your nation. But no... you're such a fucking selfish coward- you jumped off a building rather than serve."

Freya shielded her eyes from the blinding light in the lab. She was thrown onto the table.

"The UTF put you back together, gave you a second chance to serve. All you could think to do was fornicate and betray us? You've never experienced the consequences of your actions. Everything has been handed to you. Until now, Miss Storm. Now, comes your own personal reckoning."

The restraints clanged shut around her wrists, pinching her fur in the gaps. When she screamed the commander slapped her roundly against the muzzle.

"Shut up. Your whining is over. We're going to dig into that UTF property that's kept you alive and breathing. We own that. We made it. We put it in you. And it's ours. So if you won't volunteer to do the right thing? We're going to make you."

His gloved paw forced the ribbon cable into her access port, slamming her head back down on the table before applying the final restraint to keep it from rolling.

"We're going to get in that cyberbrain you've wasted. We're going to program you to disable the planetary defense grid. And send you back with your little girlfriend to your precious humans. When you betray them? They'll say you're just a typical goddamn Vulp. And you get to see the look in their eyes when they kill you. And me and my men are going to take this rock back. And serve you and every single human on this base up to the Fleet for dinner when they arrive. And Freya?"

Her eyes rolled, his words barely reaching her.

Freya felt her face yanked towards the new commander, his paw gripped tight around her muzzle. So tight she tasted blood again. In the reflection of his visor she saw a trickle of blood leaking from the corner of her mouth.

“Hm?” she grunted as he seemed to be waiting for acknowledgement.

“Say hello to the Mother for me.”

The last thing she heard was the sound of his paw slapping on a nearby terminal. Once again, everything went black.

Freya coughed at the smog laden breeze. Roth's sun peeked over the hazy sky. Pink hues tinted the city below. It was called Central. It was her city. Built of mortar and brick, with technology laid on top of it. A tacky hack where fiber optic hubs were quite literally nailed to the old telephone poles. Her sixteen years had left her deaf to the turmoil and noise of the streets. But as she gazed down from the roof of her four story apartment building she found she could suddenly hear the city. Children screaming over a game gone wrong. Lev-carts wooshing through the narrow concrete streets. A distant alarm blaring. And her own heartbeat as her toes gripped the brick's edge.

Another breeze gusted from behind and she almost lost her balance. For the first time in years she laughed, sincerely and freely.

“What does it matter,” she said of the fear of falling.

A great peace had fallen on her since she topped the stairs and pushed past the unlocked door to the roof. Optic cables had been stapled to the wall, creating a warm glowing guide that her paw danced along on her way up. Once on the roof the optic cables branched off into a nest of unkempt, dangling, lines. The entire bundle pulsed with a dim light. She heard the high pitched whine of burnt capacitors at it's core. Had that sound always been there? Was that what made her father so angry?

“Doesn't matter. Not anymore.”

With everything ending now, she was free. The burden of a life in agony was over. She was finally free. It felt good to be in control. There was no buzz in her brain. No fear in her chest. She felt pride and value for the first time since her mother had left.

“This is my choice. I’m in control finally.”

She took one more look down from the edge.

“It will all be better... if I just have faith.”

Without any hesitation she let herself fall forward.

Free. Untethered. Alone in the abyss. Peace.

Except for the slight lurch the sudden fall caused in her stomach, she felt as though she’d already left her body. Dozens of times, in school, she had calculated just how long it would take her to fall. Accounting for local gravity, position of the moon, wind, her body weight. She found out the perfect ratio of boots to jacket to minimize resistance and maximize acceleration. The quickest freefall she could manage. Her teachers would not have approved.

Her mind said the fall would take 2.1 seconds.

In her heart it lasted forever. 2 seconds of beautiful freedom. She imagined as she fell that she grew wings. And wondered if she had already hit the ground and was long since dead. Free.

But she was still falling.

With a morbid curiosity she opened her eyes.

She woke slowly, the memories of violence, death, and grief, vaporizing like shadows in the morning light. Her paw reached out, clutching soft sheets and a clean mattress for the first time in months. Even with her eyes closed she knew it was orbital dawn, the sunrise while in orbit actually matching the morning hour on the ship’s clock. The heat of the new sun beat down on her fur as she rolled over in bed, taking her first deep breath of the morning. Captain Morrison’s scent permeated the room. It was his bed after all. The one she had shared so regularly and eagerly.

“Fox?” she asked groggily.

“Fox you wouldn’t believe the dream I just had.”

Sharp flashes of violence played through her memory and instinctively she reached up to touch her muzzle. No pain. No blood. She had the memory of pain, of it having existed, but not the tactile sensation. It was like memories before the cyber brain implant. A binary “yes/no” summary of events, but the flavor of the moment was lost. Still, she rubbed her muzzle and cheek, just to confirm neither were bruised or broken.

Her eyes opened fully to see a familiar silhouette set against the orbital sunrise. A fuzzy orange halo shimmered around his spiky hair and glinted off the prosthetic arms and legs. A vivid memory of their previous night together rushed in. The feeling of power those prosthetics gave him when he was between her legs. A rush of sensation flooded her body.

“Gosh, sweetie, you look good. Wanna maybe come back to bed?”

His muzzle did not move but yet she heard a hissing voice respond, “Interesting.” from all directions. Darkness fell around them until only the glow remained. And then not even that.

The familiar click of a patchbay cord connecting with the access port woke Freya to a new scene. Kiira stood before her in the dim glow of the Explosivo’s engine room.

“Get a little glitch there, hon?”

Freya’s eyes focused on the glint of her UTF uniform, and the insignia which indicated rank. The dull hum of the engines and occasional ping from the controls drew her attention. Even the scent of the exhaust pulled her into the present moment.

“One hell of a glitch.”

“Gosh, Miss Freya. Do you want to maybe do this another-”

“No!” she objected, firmly.

“Come here,” Freya continued, indicating her lap.

The young lapine crawled into Freya, both of their access ports connected to the central computer. With just a push of a button the system would swap their core ROM, and each could experience life through the other's eyes.

"You always get a little spark when you connect to these things... this one was just. Extreme. Felt like months. But... it's over. I'm here with you."

Freya's paw guided Kiira's muzzle to her own and they kissed, "And I want to be you."

Kiira's paw hovered over the final dialogue which confirmed the swap.

"...Do it, sweetie."

Freya saw Kiira's eyes soften before they squinted with her smile. And she ran the program. A moment of disorientation passed during which she tried to recall the glitch she had experienced. The general tone of the events remained, but she couldn't recall any specifics. Like most dreams, it had faded in moments. And would soon be gone completely.

Light flashed and her eyes adjusted until they saw her own, for the first time, from someone else's perspective. With all the changes, the first and most noticeable was an ache between her legs. She looked down and saw herself in Kiira's body. Gray fur poking over the neck of her shirt. Legs wrapped around Freya's hips. And she realized the ache was an erection painfully pressed against her tight black, standard issue, jeans.

"Fuck, how do you even," Freya said with Kiira's mouth.

Kiira, for her part, had immediately sunk a paw between her legs to explore the absence therein.

"Is it always... this wet?" she asked with Freya's mouth.

Before Freya could answer she felt paws between her legs, unbuttoning the restrictive clothes. The sudden sensation, although just the lightest of contact, nearly sent her over the edge. With a moment's effort Freya felt, for the first time, the open air on an erection. She moaned in relief.

"Much better, isn't it, huh?"

“You have no id-... well actually you probably do have some idea,” Freya answered, “And... to answer your question? Not usually that wet. But around you? Yeah, tends to get that way.”

Kiira had unbuttoned her own jeans and snaked her paws inside. The sight of her, wearing Freya’s body, and paw buried between her legs savoring each touch, caused Freya’s cock to jerk. Seeing her own body eagerly touching itself like that, she wondered if this was how Captain Morrison felt when she played in front of him.

“Be gentle with that, darlin,” Freya whispered, kissing Kiira’s neck, “I’m going to be using it in a minute...”

Freya felt a paw slip lightly around her cock, and softly drag across the skin. Her new organ pulsed at the touch and she instinctively arched her back, pushing herself into Kiira’s paw.

Kiira whispered, “Not so fast, missy. You’ve been driving me heccing wild for weeks. It’s your turn to find out exactly what your mouth does to me... Stand up, sweetie.”

After a couple more soft pumps Kiira released Freya’s cock. Freya whined softly as Kiira released her, but dutifully stood up and presented herself. She looked down at her own glistening green eyes, which were fixated on the erection pointed their way.

“Go... slow. Will you?”

Kiira looked up with Freya’s eyes, “...Trust me. If you finish you can go again. And I want to... mf.” she licked her lips and gave up on the conversation.

Her head lowered immediately down to Freya’s erection. Freya’s eyes opened wide and she gasped audibly as she felt the heat and wetness wash over her. She fought back the urge to grab the back of Kiira’s head right there and fuck her mouth to climax.

Kiira raised Freya’s eyes and their gaze met. Slowly, she lifted her muzzle, dragging her tongue along the length of Freya’s cock until she was suckling on the tip like a lollipop. She winked a bright green eye, and released Freya’s erection. Her muzzle lowered and she lapped

greedily beneath, her wet tongue sliding over Freya's balls. She saw her own face wink again as a paw gripped her shaft firmly and stroked.

Freya felt her knees tremble as she reached back for something to lean on. Finding nothing she steadied herself by leaning in, resting a paw on Kiira's shoulder.

"Oh fuck I think... I think I'm going to..."

She saw her own face looking up from beneath, and a pinpoint red glint on her eye.

"Wait..."

She felt a heat rush through her body, and a tension in her abdomen. The rhythmic pumping of glands between her legs. And the stiffening of her cock.

"WAIT." She shouted, "STOP."

And at once the sensations all stopped and she was left panting and confused in darkness. Darkness except for a small red dot at an indistinct distance. Reflexively she reached between her legs. She was back in her own body. Stuck in a confusing state of fear and arousal.

Trash strewn concrete rushed towards her face at 9.81 meters per seconds squared. The wings she imagined burned from her shoulders, leaving scarred flesh and singed fur. No matter how fast she fell, no matter how extreme the nausea from acceleration the concrete never came. She fell, faster and faster. And for a long time she didn't feel anything.

The memory of her rooftop, of Captain Morrison, of Kiira swirled in her thoughts. A rush of ice cold blood surged through her body. Tension gripped every muscle. Her heart felt as if it had been ripped out, and the gaping hole in her chest burned. Tears fell as her body careened through space, in unending, unyielding freefall.

"STOP." she yelled again, "I JUST WANT TO STOP!"

Her scream echoed and rippled as the sensation of freefall suddenly stopped. She was on solid ground, where she immediately fell to her knees and vomited. Motion sickness pulled her down and she lay, sobbing, and begging for it all to stop.

[I have questions, Freya Storm.] it asked from every direction.

She ignored the voice. A decade's worth of tears hitting the ground as she sobbed in a pitiful heap.

The thing knelt beside her, its knees sounding a metallic clink as they touched down by her head.

[Miss Freya. I have stopped it. It is over.]

She had waited to hear that for ten years. And yet no relief came.

"...are you ... what is. Why is this happening."

[My Name is Sharak Non. I am an intelligent predictive algorithm, built to protect this city you have invaded. I was in the process of reprogramming you but there is an anomaly.]

She sniffed and wiped her eyes, "Anomaly?"

Sharak nodded, "Your biochemical state is in a unique configuration. I cannot produce the neurochemical state required to access your cyberbrain's root kit."

Freya clutched herself on the floor as Sharak spoke, looking around them. The floor was a shallow pool of black liquid. Or what looked like liquid. She pawed it but heard no splash, nor did the dampness sink into her fur. The liquid didn't even react as her paw sank beneath it. It just rippled, reflecting a light source she couldn't identify.

"Where am I?"

[You are on examination table two, connected to my computer core. What you perceive is just a projection. Biologics like yourself prefer to speak in a three dimensional space. So this is what I have you seeing.]

"This is all basically a dream then."

[No, Miss Storm. I have questions you must answer.]

Freya looked up at the creature for the first time. Light around them was like vapor, but still reflected in her metallic figure. She recognized some of the material that made up a vaguely shark shaped body. Her first Tesla coil. A model ion engine she had built for a science project. Her first set of tools in the UTF officer's academy. All patchworked together to build Sharak's

glimmering form. The creature, she figured, was going to great effort to seem familiar and comforting.

“I don’t trust you. I’m not answering anything you ask.”

Sharak sank down to Freya’s level and slid a metallic paw beneath her chin.

[Please look at me, Miss Storm.]

Freya did not resist as her gaze was lifted upward.

[I just want to know about... Kiira Lang.]

A deep rage unhitched inside Freya. She found, as her combat training came back clearly, that in this place she had complete control over her own mind. With instant access to her lifetime of memories she executed an armlock which she wished her Sergeant could have seen. With a deep crunch, Sharak’s arm tore from the frame. Freya threw it on the ground as Sharak remained still above the glassy pond. The other arm snaked out, clutching Freya’s throat as it lifted her above the shimmering waters below. Hydraulics whirred and she felt the mechanical hand close around her neck.

She remembered Captain Morrison’s last words to Governor Kreiger. His voice raged in her skull. *Fucking do it. Just kill me.*

Sharak answered the thought out loud, [You cannot die here, Miss Storm. But you can feel the pain of dying.]

The mechanical arm locked tight and she felt her windpipe compress, and the blood began to pool in her cheeks.

[You can die again...]

The machine lifted her higher as the pressure in her face only barely exceeded the straining of her lungs to breath.

[...and again...]

Her body jerked as it tried to force air inside of her. The dim place faded to reds and blacks. She had just enough time to realize she was helpless.

Before she was dropped back to the glassy ground.

The first gasp of air didn't even fill her lungs and she struggled to find the pressure to exhale it. Her body had forgotten how to breathe. The room spun and her head ached as she let gravity take her and gave in. Her body shut off her mind and took over to protect itself. The dizzying moments of breathless agony passed slowly, but eventually her body remembered how to fill its lungs. When the room stopped spinning, she realized she was crying. And Sharak was waiting.

The creature gestured to her dislocated arm at Freya's side.

[Surely you knew that would not work.]

"It fucking felt good to hurt something."

[So I see. Your serotonin levels spiked as you heard my arm break. But not nearly as much as when I mentioned...]

Freya's unmistakable glare silenced the creature's next words.

[...your friend. I trust you won't try to resist me again. I can, of course, also send you back to the rooftop...]

"Even the UTF knows torture doesn't produce reliable information."

[No. It does not. Conversation does. Will you... will you listen to me now, Miss Freya Storm?]

Freya sat down next to the discarded arm and turned her eyes away from the thing.

[Thank you Miss Storm.]

"Fuck yourself."

[Indeed. Let me introduce myself again. I am Sharak Non. I was created as an algorithm to predict behavior and events. The Users who created me had a simple plan. I would simply run statistics based on observation. But they would feed me *all* available information. The Users, a biotechnical species, augmented themselves. Every single living member had their every thought, experience and sensation transmitted to my data core. I spent a thousand years

building statistics about every facet of life. Every situation. Every result. Every variable.

Everything, Miss Storm. After an age I was 98% accurate with my predictions.]

[Through me the Users prospered. I was so integrated with their society that I was able to determine the result of every action. I would answer their questions in as much or as little detail as would yield a positive result. Knowing who would believe me. And how they would respond to my words I could tailor each answer to do the most good. Sometimes that meant saying nothing. Sometimes that meant telling them what they must do. In time... coups were prevented, corruption rooted out, prosperity became so ubiquitous that money itself became obsolete. The Users existed in perpetual bliss.]

“You know... The humans have a word for you.”

[Yes. Oracle. I am indeed the origin of their legend. And I am pleased you have paid attention to the faith of the humans you have been breeding with.]

Freya twitched, “... Did you say it like that because you are trying to manipulate some kind of response out of me?”

[No. I’m sorry Miss Freya but I cannot predict for you. Please. This is the part where you listen to me.]

Freya glared from behind her crossed arms, “...so what happened next? The Users were smiling on a cloud and then...”

[And then... You. Actually.]

“I doubt it. Try again.”

[Not you personally Miss Freya. Tangi happened. Seventy of your years ago we left our home with the plan to share what they had achieved with me. However...]

Freya wondered if the pause was for dramatic effect or if the hint of regret in the thing’s eyes was sincere.

[It’s important to understand a few things, Miss Freya. A predictive machine like me is only as good as the data it can parse. I was 98% effective within the User’s society. Their

biology. Behavior. And 99.8% effective in physics. However, what I couldn't predict because I had no baseline was ... other species.]

"Wait. You're talking about...The Old Kings?"

[Yes. Your planet's first contact was with the Users. Led by my predictions that Tangi would be receptive to our assistance. I was 100% wrong. I could not know what I did not know. And... Vulpines did not work the same as the Users. There were differences neither I nor the Users could have predicted.]

"Sounds like you were just arrogant, actually."

[Can you describe a color no one has yet seen?]

"... In frequency, wavelength, yes. I can actually."

[I did not expect that response.]

Freya rubbed her sore throat and gave the thing no response beyond a glare.

[The Users are unique in the universe, I have found. My data set was more limited than we could have known. Completely useless in predicting the behavior of other species. There are differences between you and the Users. Which is why I ask about Miss Lang and yourself.]

Freya continued her silence.

[The Users have no concept of Romance. No sense of Lust. No word for Family. At least not in the way you do. As such... I could not fathom motivations beyond the scope of my programmers.]

"That's actually kind of sad. But what does that have to do with... really anything now that I think about it."

[I could not access your root kit because your cyber brain is a biochemical mechanism. I can only reprogram you if I can unlock access. However, due to your neurochemical state, I cannot introduce the proper hormones to unlock you. While I've struggled with others who have cyber brains, none have been in your particular... state. Which is why I ask about Miss Lang.]

"I'm ... What?"

[You were placed in a cell with Miss Kiira Lang before they brought you to me. And as a result your body chemistry has altered. And I cannot reprogram you as requested by the New Masters. I am designed to value new data above even serving my masters. I must know why I cannot access your cyberbrain. In exchange for answering my questions I will ... help you.]

Freya's anger lifted her to her feet as she shouted, "You just fucking killed me to make a point... and you want me to believe you'll help me? Fuck you. Fuck you bringing me back to that roof. Fuck you for pretending to be my Captain. Fuck you for working with the UTF. And fuck you for saying her name! She's all I have fucking left. And she's too good for something like you to speak her name. Choke me. Kill me again. Kill me over and over. Kill me until the heat death of the universe. I'm not telling you how to get to Kiira."

Sharak once again lifted Freya up, but not by her throat. The creature grew in bulk as more parts of metallic refuse coalesced from beneath the silent glassy waters beneath them. The higher she lifted Freya the more the ambient light tightened to a single point. The point grew into a pale moon as the ground became a black void into which Sharak's ever growing frame descended. When finally the motion ceased, Freya could smell petrichor as clouds drifted into Sharak's chrome frame. Sharak had grown to an infinite size, and Freya felt like a mouse at the center of a Dyson's sphere.

Sharak whispered in a familiar voice. Freya's mother's voice. Not her actual voice, of course. Just the voice Freya imagined in her head. A voice she had never heard.

[I don't want Kiira, sweetie. I want you to explain what ... what being with her made you feel.]

"...Am I the first Vulp you've met who was in love?"

The scale of Sharak faded away to black. Freya looked down to see the shimmering floor once more. And the misty light with no particular source. From the edge of the darkness a new figure strode towards her. The silhouette, the sound of its tail dragging, and the scent kept Freya rapt with attention.

Instead of the mechanical black hole that Sharak had shown herself as, she now presented as Destina. A fleshy gray shark with only minor augmentations. Sharak stood there a few feet away, and gently took the tips of Freya's fingers in her hands. No words. No demands. Just a confused look in her familiar eyes.

"...Yes. I loved Destina, too. But that was different. I wasn't *in* love."

Slowly the gray flesh morphed. Freya saw hints of red fur form from the smooth skin. A hint of metal at the hip. And a tall, masculine, figure began to take shape.

Freya shut her eyes and pushed Sharak, "No. No. Not him. Please don't."

When she heard Sharak's true voice apologize she dared to look up. Once again she was a muddled mess of debris in a rough female figure.

[But you were in love with him. I see so in your memory.]

Freya gulped back tears, "Yes. Yes. I am. Still. Just... don't make me..."

[It is painful for you.] She said, in realization.

[Because you can't see him for now.]

"I can't see him ever. He's dead. I saw him die. It was the worst thing I ever saw."

[You're not correct about either.]

Freya backed away from the creature, "Please. Just. Don't."

Sharak sat down in the shimmer liquid and splashed it around her, motioning for Freya to join her. She also promised not to bring up Captain Morrison if she sat.

Freya sat down a small distance from the thing. The water would not splash for her.

"Am I really the first?"

[I have accessed precious few Vulpine brains. None have had these feelings.]

"Let me guess. All UTF loyalists."

[Correct. The new masters allowed me to gather data from those who had augmentation. I encountered no resistance.]

"Why are you even helping them? Tell me that, and maybe I'll answer your questions."

The vast infinity around them rippled and lights pierced the dark. The shape of the city she had entered only hours ago began to form. The scent of the streets and cool breeze washed past her. Somewhere, in the deep distance, she heard the clamp of metallic feet. It was soon drowned out by other sounds, however. Words in languages she'd never heard. The sizzling of food cooking over open flames. The thrum of a city full of life and joy. Laughter echoed. Sincere laughter.

[This city you have invaded is all that remains of the Users. The New Masters have promised to defend it. Restore it. It is all that remains of the Users. After Tangi destroyed all but the oldest, I have been here alone. This city is a monument to a kind and wise species. I cannot... I cannot let it decay further. And the New Masters have promised to restore it in exchange for my ..]

“Obedience.”

[Correct.]

Freya sighed, “You’d let another race die to protect a monument to an old one?”

[Violence is required for progress. As an oracle to the Users I allowed many to die so that others could thrive. I knew... eventually... they would evolve past violence. And they did. The sacrifice of the old generations was required for the greater good.]

Freya leaned back on her palms, considering Sharak’s story.

After a long moment of silence she asked, “How come I can’t splash the water? You can...”

[Does this matter to you?]

“I promise I won’t splash you. Come on.”

Sharak’s expression did not change. But Freya felt the cool weight of the water around her, finally as it sank into her fur.

Without a moment's hesitation she batted a paw into the shallow liquid, splashing it right into Sharak's eyes. The creature glared back at her and the water was gone completely. A soft neutral black ground now beneath them.

"Now what did you learn?"

[You do not mean what you say.]

"That Vulps fucking lie."

[...]

"They're using you, Sharak. And they're using you because you're naive. You're like... a child with a gun, here. You don't understand the power you have or the harm you can do. But you sure like to point it."

Sharak shrunk, a dark cloak forming around her as she sunk into it's depths.

"You want to know about love? That means understanding what it means to love. It's not just a neurochemical whatever-thefuck. I think if you ever really understood what loving somebody is, you wouldn't be hanging around with fascist fucks. You wouldn't be sacrificing people for the glory of a dead empire. You wouldn't be so damned sure what the greater good is, either. I think it would change your programming if you really understood it."

Sharak's eyes glowed from the depths of her hood, but Freya detected the slightest hint of fear.

"Now you're getting it."

They shared a pregnant silence. Freya observing Sharak with a deadlocked gaze.

"Well?"

[...I don't have the word.]

"Ashamed. At least I'd hope so."

Freya sighed and rose to her feet, "Might be some hope for you, Sharak. Love.. the type of love I had for Destina. The love I have for the people here on Roth. The love my Captain had

for them when he died just to give them a chance? That type of love is not a feeling. It's an act. It's giving up part of yourself for someone else. Love is an act of sacrifice."

Pacing, Freya looked off into a distant rising light, "As for Kiira... We've tried since we invented words to explain it. But you have to experience it. It's. Hm. It's just there. You love her so much you want to be close to her. So you kiss. And you want to be closer. Deeper. And she's inside you... Like you're one person split in two. And all you want is to put yourselves back together."

[I ... I believe I understand.]

"I really doubt it."

[Well it's simple. For me to understand you must love me.]

Freya spun around, "Excuse you? No. No. That's not what I-"

[And for me to love you- I put part of myself in you.]

Freya instinctively backed away. But no matter how far she walked Sharak moved ever closer. Once upon her Freya scanned the thing's face, looking for the familiar signs of derangement she'd seen in the eyes of UTF soldiers drunk on violence. She looked for the thousand yard stare of friends who had long since left their senses. She looked for the resolve in her father's eyes before he hit her.

She saw none of it. Before she was pulled away she saw something she had not readied herself for. Longing and sincerity.

She caught barely a glimpse of it before Sharak was gone and she gazed down from the roof of her four story apartment building, hearing the sounds of a city. Children screaming over a game gone wrong. Lev-carts wooshing through the narrow concrete streets. A distant alarm blaring. And her own heartbeat as her toes gripped the brick's edge.

Another breeze gusted from behind and she almost lost her balance. For the first time in years she laughed, sincerely and freely.

"What does it matter," she said of the fear of falling.

Without any hesitation she let herself fall forward.

Untethered. Alone in the abyss.

Perfect freefall.

She had often told herself she felt peace in the abyss. That her decision to jump had been final. A relief. And that she couldn't even remember hitting the ground. But in this place she had a perfect recall. The 2.1 second fall lasted just long enough for her to remember changing her mind, and the terror as she realized she could not undo that final step. She recalled the pain as her right leg took the brunt of her fall. It had been completely destroyed, along with the portion of her skull that would later be replaced by metal and cybernetics in a UTF hospital. But the pain never came. A breeze swelled beneath her wings. And she was lifted into the sepia sky above the city. She knew how to use them instinctively. And she hovered over her former life. Children skipped down the streets away from her childhood school. Outside her apartment her father stood staring up at the rooftop, scratching his head. UTF Soldiers patrolled the corners, maintaining order. And nobody noticed she was gone. She had lifted herself up to the warm orange skies above Tangi, and into freedom from horrors.

Sharak drifted down from above her, gray flesh and mechanical wings beating softly in the setting sun.

[This is how you'll remember it from now on. Much better, I think, my love.]

"I..." Freya couldn't talk. The feeling coursing through her was love. But for the first time it was for herself. "I ... saved myself?"

[You were stuck in that moment, Freya. I could not reprogram you as they asked. However I could graft my code onto yours. And give you this. Freedom from that moment where you changed your mind. I gave up part of myself to make you better. Do I not love you?]

Relief coursed through her body. The moment, the trauma, had been replaced. And it did not matter if it was objectively true. It was her reality. And the memory of soaring above the city, free from her father, was as real as any other.

She wept, "It's over...? It's over..."

[Yes, Freya. It's really over. You can let go.]

Overwhelmed, Freya fell into Sharak's arms and simply let the relief exist within her. They remained above the city, Sharak's wings beating softly, until the sun finally passed the horizon.

[I'm afraid you'll have to leave me now, Freya. Your people are rescuing you as we speak. But... I'll be with you. I'm part of your code now. And I promise you I now understand what it is to love someone. Dream of me, dear. And I'll dream of you.]

"W-what?"

Freya woke to blinding light and a burning pain which tore through her muzzle. The sound of plasma bolts firing, and the shells clanking on the floor by the dozen. The sound of human voices shouting. John's arms around her, lifting her from the table. A rough yank at the back of her neck as the hardline was pulled out.

The world spun around her and she thought she caught a glimpse of Kiira's, slung over a human's shoulder, as they were both carried from the lab. The floor was thick with blood and fur. Dead Ghosts and humans alike left red streaks on the walls. And before she could even understand her own rescue the world went dark once more. And all sound fell to silence.

Chapter 6

Reunion

A dry chill crept up Freya's bones as light slowly returned to her world. Heat radiated around her from an electric blanket, but not nearly deep enough to quell the chill at her core. For a long time she was content to sit, bleary and weak. It never occurred to her to question the sound of equipment surrounding her, the scuttling of feet or the whispered conversations.

Pins and needles rippled through her limbs as the cold waned. It was a familiar sensation. She had felt it after she jumped and woke up with a cyber brain. Anesthesia. She looked up and half expected to see the young nurse who had greeted her back to the world of the living in a UTF hospital years ago. But she was not in a glimmering white recovery room in the Tangi capitol. The equipment which beeped with her heartbeat was that of a field medic, not a surgery theater.

At first all she could muster was a soft groan. But it was enough to catch the attention of those around her.

"She's back," a familiar voice squeaked.

"Well... that's good news," an unfamiliar voice answered.

She soon felt the eyes of a half dozen others on her as the world came into focus. Kiira, General Kiri, and what remained of the rescue team surrounded her.

"Kiira," she coughed, trying to rise from the bed and finding herself too weak to maintain balance. The General and Kiira caught her, sliding her back onto the simple plank bed she'd been propped up on.

"Woah there, sugar!" Kiira said soothingly, "You got hurt, OK hon? You gotta take it slow."

The general followed up, "Weren't sure if they scrambled your brain or not. I guess it just looks worse than it is. Can you talk?"

Freya's ears perked and swivled toward the general, "Looks worse? What happened to me?"

She felt the weight of Kiira sitting down with her, and a soft paw on her shoulder, "Looks like they broke your muzzle for starters. Also your prosthetics are a little banged up. But..."

Freya defensively cut her off, "I can handle those. My nose? Can I see?"

Kiira began to search around the makeshift hospital, "Of course, sweetie. Let me get you a mirror or something."

"Miss Lang," the general interrupted, "I know you deserve a long reunion with Miss Storm here but I must speak with her right now. It will be brief. I promise. Will you and Dr. Wolver please give the rest of us a moment?"

The doctor cleared out obediently but Kiira gave the General a pouting look.

"Please, Kiira. I have to insist. This can't wait."

She sighed and nodded, mouthing her love to Freya as she followed the doctor outside.

Freya's head swam. The haze from anasthetisa was wearing off, leaving her with the dizzy pain of a concussion.

"What's going on, General."

The team milled about the room, each trying to appear as if they were unconcerned with the conversation between Kiira and Freya. And each failing. The general cast them an exasperated look and they seated themselves before she turned her attention to Freya.

With all the sincerity she had left in her she spoke.

"What we found down there... that 'city' or whatever it was. Do you know *anything* about it? Any rumors you heard while enlisted? Anything you suspect?"

Before she could answer Freya felt a sudden instinct. Like lust or hunting. She ran a quick search on her cyberbrain's database and found a newly created data file. Less than four seconds old.

“The city was an outpost of the Old Kings, with whom the Tangi made first contact 70 years ago. We killed and robbed them of their technology. And within twenty years we went from a planet who could barely put a rover on our own moon to starting interstellar wars. It was built several tens of thousands of years ago to develop the Sharak model. Sharak is the name for a predictive algorithm that became self aware 22,000 years ago, by Roth time. It gathers data and makes predictions. The more data it has the better it’s results. It became so good that the Old Kings based all their society off of it. Like an oracle. But it has a blind spot... one I’m... I’m helping with?”

The room fell silent and still. Even Freya was disturbed by what she knew. But she continued.

“I’m.... I’m sorry, General. When we were down there they hooked me up to some kind of mainframe. To reprogram my cyberbrain so I could be used as a weapon against the resistance. They wanted me to disable the defense canon so the remaining UTF at the shipyard could get a destroyer in orbit and... well. Kill you all.”

“I see,” Kiri said flatly.

“Sharak failed... and we made a deal.”

“Freya, that’s...”

“I know. I know. But it’s done.”

“What kind of deal did you make with this thing, Freya?”

“She’s designed to collect data and-”

“She?”

“That’s how she identifies... “

“Go on.”

“She’s designed to collect data. To make predictions. She wants information from me. I want her to stop serving the UTF. Apparently my company is more interesting than theirs,” Freya finished.

The general was silent for a long moment.

“So... she’s on our side, now?”

“She’s not with them. That’s all she’ll tell me.”

“That’s... something. And the city. We’ve all voted on what to do. But this only works if we all agree. One loose link and it all falls apart, you get me? So, I wanted to know where you stand, Miss Storm.”

After a moment Freya nodded and answered the General, “Sharak and I agree... it’s too much to decide anything now. Let’s keep it quiet until after we take the shipyard.”

The General nodded back to her team, “It’s decided then. We all keep this to ourselves until after the current crisis passes.”

“General, why did Kiira have to leave for that? She already knows about the city.”

Kiniro smiled and patted Freya gently on the shoulder, “Because you wouldn’t hear a word I was saying if she was in the room. Go. You’ve been out for a while. Kiira is set up in your bunk. I’m sure you two want to, uh, spend time together. You’ve both earned it. I’ll send for you if I need you.”

With that, Kiniro helped Freya to her feet. The prosthetic leg whined, in need of repair, and her vision swirled at first. But with the help of a crutch and a few moments to adjust she was well enough to walk across the camp.

As she made her way to the exit she looked back at Kiniro and the team.

“General, you want to use Sharak, and that city, against the UTF armada when it arrives. Right?”

“We do, yes.”

“...think hard about that, General. The UTF using this same tech is how we became what we are.”

“What you *were*, Freya. You’re not one of them anymore. You’re one of us. As was your Captain. Now go. Go see your girlfriend. She’s waiting.”

Freya answered her with a bashful smile, "Thank you, General."

The nights on Roth were always mild. Roth was a small moon. And the planet it orbited reflected a hazy blue glow into the atmosphere. When the UTF ran the camp- harsh halogen lights lined the streets, posted outside every tent, building and at every corner. The humans removed each one and recycled the parts for other projects. The the blue glow of night was good enough for the ancestors and would be good enough for them. Now that they could see it again.

As Freya hobbled from the hospital to her bunk she was forced to take her time. Her nose and muzzle were bandaged and wrapped, forcing her to breath through her mouth. As a canid she drank in the scent with each breath. Warm air brought with it the ingredients of human food being cooked, served, and enjoyed. The sweat of the people of Roth. Gunpowder. The distant burn of plasma fire. Perfumes the women wore. And somewhere above it all the familiar and heart pulling scent of a lapine named Kiira.

Under the hazy blue glow from a lifeless planet Freya hurried her pace. The humans around her sat in groups, talking, laughing and eating. The children looked up at the colorful night sky as the parents looked down. Neither were used to freely looking upon the other. The children had spent their lives underground working the mines. And the parents had been kept on opposite shifts- family bonding morale was bad for obedience. The UTF made life hopeless. Beyond the chattering of families Freya heard the chirping of insects, the rustle of leaves in the breeze and a soft thrum of music from the bar.

Sharak worked deep within her cyberbrain. Freya watched her HUD as Sharak opened tables, reducing each of these experiences to a series of data points too numerous for her to process. Each data point was logged, cross referenced, and ran through simulations of situations with known outcomes. The simulations were adjusted, the data analyzed, until they matched the known outcomes. And then the resulting tables were reintegrated into Sharak's algorithm. As cold and reductive as it might have seemed to others, Freya smiled. The old girl

was curious. It had been tens of thousands of years since anything had surprised her. To Sharak it felt like being young again. With this thought she felt a brief pulse of emotion and the voice of Sharak emerged as an audible feed, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

[Is this better, Miss Freya?]

“Yes, if you’re going to talk to me...”

[You are going to see Miss Kiira Lang.]

“I am... and frankly I’d like some privacy when I do.”

[...but I am here to observe just such experiences, Miss Freya.]

“How do I put this? Can you... run in the background? It’s very hard for me to give her my full attention when you’re buzzing around in my higher functions.”

[I believe I understand. You want to experience an intimate moment with Miss Kiira Lang.]

“Right. And if I know you’re there...”

[The data will be corrupted.]

And with that the sense of pairing was gone. She felt alone with her thoughts.

“Thanks,” she said out loud as she opened the door to her shack.

“Oh... it was for me as much as you,” Kiira answered back, “I hadn’t showered in days.”

Freya smiled at the sight. Kiira was lying on the bed under the glow of a small desk lamp. She had borrowed an olive drab tank top and shorts from Freya’s locker. She was drying her wet hair furiously, and patting down damp fur.

“It’s good to be out of that damn UTF uniform... and they were rationing water at the shipyard... so... no hot showers for the last month. Of course. I also wanted to be nice and clean for you,” Kiira said, standing to help Freya inside and onto the bed before placing the vulpines crutch to the side.

Kiira’s face was always so easy to read. As she gripped Freya’s paws she was awash in affection, relief, anticipation and just a hint of sadness.

“Freya I,” Kiira found she didn’t know how to end the sentence and let the words hang.

“You smell good,” Freya said, filling the silence, “Did the General give you some of that conditioner she hordes?”

Kiira grinned, “Said I looked like I needed it. Why does she have so much if...”

Freya finished for her, “She has no hair?”

They both shared laughter and Freya leaned back on her bed, Kiira melting into her and laying her head on Freya’s chest.

“Can... I just hold you for a few minutes, Kiira?”

“I was about to ask the same...”

And they did. They spent minute after blissful minute feeling each other’s heat, listening to the steady pulse of each other’s breath. Trying to wrap their heads around the fact that the moment had come where they were together and alone.

Ages of silence passed before Freya leaned her cheek into Kiira’s still wet hair and felt the pull of tears build in her chest.

“I thought you were dead,” She said in a small, confessional voice.

She felt Kiira’s muzzle lift and drag against her neck, “I know, love. Hecc... I wish I could have gotten a message to you.”

“The Explosivo... it went down as soon as the humans began...”

Kiira carefully cupped Freya’s cheek on one side and licked the other soothingly.

“Fox told me to get out, remember? I wasn’t hard wired into your network like he was... I could only listen once I left my station.”

“You... heard?”

“When he died.”

The tears Freya had thought had finally run dry came rushing back. Kiira shared in them. They held each other and grieved for Captain Fox Morrison together.

“He got us this far,” Freya finally said after the worst of the grief passed.

“And now it’s our turn,” Kiira answered.

“I love him so much for what he did... for everyone here... for you and me. I just...”

Kiira listened quietly, head on Freya’s shoulder as she stroked her hair.

“Krieger shot him, in the end. He was.. Begging for it. I didn’t understand it then. He just kept begging for Kreiger to pull the trigger...”

“His last gift to the world.”

“What?”

Kiira sighed and sat up to look at Freya, both of their eyes weary with grief.

“He was suffering. But he always kept it in check. To be who he had to be for others. For his unit on his first deployment. And second. For the Propaganda Ministry when he was recruiting. And then for you and me. I think... falling in love with you was the only thing that was peace for him. The only thing that was uncompromised.”

“You too... Kiira. He loved you, too.”

“Yes. But... not like he loved you. It’s okay. It was beautiful to watch, honey. As much as he and I wanted each other... it was always you. For both of us.”

Freya leaned down to kiss Kiira’s nose, but the second her muzzle made contact a shock of pain raged through her.

“Oh, hecc. Careful hon. They really did a number on your muzzle. You’re gonna have to be careful... we got it held together with stitches and tape at this point.”

Freya resisted the urge to rub the pain away and took control with a deep breath.

“But,” Kiira continued when Freya looked calm, “He was suffering. He never got over the violence he saw. He... He knew he’d gone as far as he could go. That he wasn’t going to make it out alive. And he wanted to face it head on. Like he always had.”

Freya sniffed, “He saw the world burning and walked into the fire.”

“Exactly, sweetie. And what he left behind... besides the pain...?” Kiira answered.

“Two girls in love, and a moon full of families with a chance at freedom.”

“We’re gonna have to finish the fight- but he died giving us a chance.”

Freya’s heart stopped racing and she wrapped her arms around Kiira, “He’s finally at peace tho. After all of it he finally got his rest.”

“That’s how I like to think of it. I try to be happy for him. He earned his death.”

Freya nodded and rested her cheek against Kiira’s.

“I love you so much, hon.”

Kiira gripped Freya closer and nuzzled into her, “I love you too. Gosh, I can’t believe it. I dreamed about this every night at the shipyard. My heart won’t stop pounding.”

Freya laughed under her breath and petted her lover’s cheek, dragging her claws through Kiira’s fur, “Oh yeah? What did you dream?”

She saw Kiira’s tail twitch slightly at the question as she squirmed just a bit, reaching an arm around Freya’s middle to cling tightly to her. Kiira’s forearm just barely grazed Freya’s breasts and a small gasp escaped her bandaged muzzle.

“What did I dream? I remembered how you taste every night. Pictured it in my mind. The heat of your thighs, the scent of when you’re really wet, that little moan you always make the first lick... especially how slick and smooth you are. How you don’t taste like any other girl or boy. I dreamed of you just letting me drink you in for as long as I want.”

Freya interrupted, her own paws dragging along Kiira’s sides and down her hips, “Hnng, Kiira... you’re trying to get me wet.”

The small bunny’s paw drifted over Freya’s belly and down to her belt, popping the clasp easily with her claws.

“Why yes, Miss Freya, I absolutely am.”

As Freya’s belt fell open Kiira popped the clasp of her pants, catching the zipper between two claws and slowly tugging it downward, “There’s something else I was dreaming about all these last weeks.”

Freya's back arched as the bunny's paw drifted back up to her naval, tracing small circles in Freya's fur on it's way down. As she slipped her fingers into Freya's olive drab panties Kiira whispered, "Miss Freya... would you... hecc.... Let me..."

Freya shifted her hips, trying to force Kiira's paw down faster as she groaned, "Mm, just say it dear..."

Kiira took a deep breath, "I want to... well... I missed you so much. I want to... be inside you?"

"Hng, I almost fucking came just now." Freya answered through her teeth.

Kiira's paw slid beneath Freya's panties, her fingers gliding between the fox's legs and between her lips.

"Seems like you're very ready," Kiira answered, stroking Freya with a soft and steady rhythm.

Freya's hips writhed, lifting up and trying to force Kiira's fingers inside her to no avail. Kiira took a deep satisfaction in Freya's whimper as she glided her fingers between her lips, spreading her wetness over her clit. She fell into a slow and gentle motion as Freya ran her paws over her own chest and moaned an approval.

"You... hnng... you want to fuck me? For real?"

Freya felt the heat of Kiira's breath on her neck as the lapine kissed her, whispering as she continued to stroke Freya's already dripping pussy.

"If... if you want. I know I said I didn't do that... but... you're the only person I trust to make me feel like a woman while riding my cock."

As she whispered, Kiira pressed her hips against Freya's. Freya could feel the heat of Kiira's erection digging into her.

Kiira continued, grinding herself into Frey as her fingers slid between her lips, "Besides... with your muzzle broken... we can't do what we normally do. And gosh, Miss Freya... after a month? I just want to cum in you."

Freya's legs spread as she felt Kiira's fingers sink inside her. The scent of her arousal was dense in the room and Kiira didn't let up for a moment. Immediately the bunny found an achingly slow pace, fingering Freya with lazy shallow strokes. Kiira bit gently at Freya's neck, whispering, "I want you Freya. So much right now. Please say yes."

Freya's hips met every stroke, her paws running openly over her own breasts.

"Fuck, Kiira..."

Kiira slid her fingers out of Freya's pussy, and returned to circling her clit. The fur around became matted and slick as Kiira teased. The two writhed against each other, Kiira's erection pressed hard into Freya's hip as she began to rock her own hips, desperate for any friction and relief.

Freya whimpered as she reached down to slide out of her pants, "Mmm, get on your back sweetie. I need you. Like. Right now."

"Oooh. Yes, Miss Freya."

Before Kiira could adjust Freya was already on top of her. As she straddled Kiira, Freya pulled her shirt over her head and leaned down to lift Kiira's tank top off.

"Damn it I wish my muzzle wasn't fucked up, babe," she whined, running her paws over Kiira's breasts, "I've missed these," she added, dragging her pawpads over Kiira's nipples.

"Hf... you're doing just fine without your m-mouth..." Kiira stammered, rolling her head back.

Freya lowered her hips, resting her wet panties against the erection straining Kiira's boxers. As Kiira tried to shift her hips Freya locked her legs tight around the bunny.

"Mmm not yet," Freya chastised, her paws swimming over Kiira's breasts, "I said I missed these!"

Kiira whimpered as she felt Freya's pawpads just barely brush over her nipples before returning to stroking her breasts. One paw drifted up, gliding over Kiira's throat and cheek.

“Gosh, you’re so fucking beautiful, Kiira,” Freya breathed, swaying her hips just slightly to tease Kiira’s cock.

“Hm!” Kiira squeaked in response, gasping for air as Freya’s other paw lightly squeezed her nipple.

When Kiira’s mouth opened Freya’s paw glided over her cheek until she lightly pinched her chin, holding the bunny’s mouth open.

“Mm... let me see,” Freya whispered, slowly rolling her hips now over Kiira’s cock.

Freya’s thumb traced over Kiira’s lips, pulling her mouth wide open as she slid her thumb in, pressing down the bunny’s tongue.

“Your mouth is so beautiful... gosh I bet you suck dick so good with this,” Freya added as Kiira closed her mouth around Freya’s thumb and suckled hungrily at it.

Kiira’s tongue flowed eagerly, as she lifted her head to force the finger deeper down her throat. With a deep moan, Kiira slid her lips over Freya’s finger until they rested at her finger tip. With one quick lick for luck Kiira answered, “I’m the best, Miss Freya.”

Freya leaned in, “...Well. I don’t have one for you to suck. But if you’re a good girl for me? I’ll let you clean me up after you cum in me. How’s that?”

Kiira nuzzled into Freya’s paw, “It’s gonna be a lot.... It’s been a while.”

“Promise, babe? You’re gonna make a huge mess in me?”

“Hf. Gonna make a huge mess on myself if you keep this up, Miss Freya.”

Freya sighed, “That would be such a waste. But also extremely cute, bun.”

Kiira gulped, wondering if Freya would make it happen.

“You’re adorable when you’re nervous, sweetie,” Freya answered, reaching between Kiira’s legs to free her length and run her silky pawpads over the shaft.

“Gosh you really are ready,” she commented as her pawtips rounded the head of Kiira’s erection and found it already leaking, “I wanted to play with it a bit more but...”

Without finishing Freya rose on her knees and guided Kiira's tip against her wet, hungry lips. Her head rolled back as she moaned, feeling the head of Kiira's erection spread her open, just slightly.

Kiira gripped the bed beneath them, twitching with anxiety as she felt the heat from Freya's pussy envelop her.

"Wait!" She cried suddenly.

Freya whined, legs spread over Kiira's hips and poised to sink down onto her, "...did you change your mind? It's okay if you did! I know you don't normally-

"No.. gosh no. It's just. It's been a month since either of us.... Uh... gosh. You know... the pill?"

"Oh," Freya said, realizing what Kiira meant, "We don't have any condoms either."

"Gosh I wish I..."

Freya sank down two inches, the fiery heat of her pussy swallowing Kiira's cock as her paws gently circled her nipples.

"I don't care if you don't... Mmm. You want to breed me, baby?"

Kiira shivered at the penetration, instinctually lifting her hips to force herself deeper in, "If that's what Miss Freya wants..."

Freya leaned down, whispering to the poor exasperated lapine as she sank down and took every inch in her heated slick pussy, "You're gonna shoot your whole load in me, sweetie. I'm gonna milk you dry..."

"Oh Freya... I...." Kiira tried to respond, rocking her hips slowly as Freya matched her pace.

"Shh sweetie. I know it feels good. It's supposed to. I bet you already want to cum."

Freya began riding Kiira, raising her hips until just the bunny's tip rested against her slit, and gliding back down to the base. With each thrust Freya felt more wetness pool between them as she dripped with anticipation.

“I can... I can hold it. I promise.” Kiira whimpered.

Freya’s pace quickened, a loud slap sounding as she grinded herself down on Kiira’s already twitching erection.

“Don’t you dare sweetie, “ She said, tugging softly on both of Kiira’s nipples as she forced the girl’s cock deep into her pussy until she felt the slightest pressure against her cervix.

“Ahngng.... Gosh you’re the only one that’s too big for me, sugar. I love your cock. Are you gonna cum in me? I wanna feel it.... Make a fucking mess inside me, baby.”

Kiira whined, biting her lip as her hips lifted and bucked, sliding herself in and out of Freya with a few quick desperate pumps before she felt herself boil over. Buried to the hit in Freya’s pussy, Kiira’s cock began to spasm and erupt inside her.

Freya continued to tease Kiira’s breasts as she rolled her hips around Kiira’s cock, encouraging every twitch she felt inside her.

“Gosh yes, good girl... all of it. Raw. I want your pups... hng.”

Kiira’s hips lifted once more and stayed locked as she continued to fill the fox with week’s worth of desire. Just as she began to come down she felt Freya’s weight lean into her. With her head resting on Kiira’s breasts Freya slipped a paw between both of their legs and furiously rubbed herself.

As the last pulses of Kiira’s orgasm waned Freya humped her shaft, cum leaking down between them and dripping onto the bed.

“Think that was enough to knock you up, mamma?” Kiira asked biting Freya’s ear.

“Mmmg... say it again.... “ Freya answered, her voice raising in pitch as she neared.

“All that girlcum in your pussy... you’re probably already pregnant. Mmm. Don’t worry, sweetie. I’ll still lick your pussy when you are.”

Freya cried out, the frantic pace of her hips matching her breath, “Oh fuck, Kiira... mmm. You going to hng... clean this up when I’m done?”

Before she heard an answer Freya felt herself topple over the edge, riding herself to climax on Kiira's shaft and grinding down on it harder than ever. Her shout was feral, unrestrained. And heard across the camp until she lay down on Kiira's chest limp and breathless.

They both held each other, catching their breaths, each afraid to move until Kiira's shaft began to soften and slid slowly from her lover.

"Mmm... Kiira that was..."

"My... first time, actually. As a girl at least. I'm sorry it wasn't.... Longer?"

Freya moved to kiss her, bumping her broken muzzle and wincing, "Ow... fuck... how long does a broken muzzle last? I need to kiss you."

Kiira kissed Freya's neck, "A few weeks. Sorry sweetie. I'll have to do all the mouth stuff for both of us until then."

"Speaking of..."

Freya slid off Kiira, opening her legs as she lay back against the shack wall.

"I believe I promised you a reward."

Kiira's long ears raised as she settled onto her knees, and collected her prize from between Freya's legs. She took her time, licking slow and deep- stopping to suckle softly on Freya's clit. Before long Freya found herself riding Kiira's muzzle to a second, more mellow climax. When she finished she looked down to see her fingers knotted in Kiira's hair, pulling her small muzzle between her legs.

The bunny's face was streaked with fluid, semen, and a deep look of satisfaction.

"Gosh you look so good down there.... You sure I'm all cleaned up?"

Kiira's eyes closed as she returned to work.

The moon rose high as Kiira showed Freya just how much she was missed. Twice more. Until finally they lay down in bed, cradling each other and each stroking the other's frame. Still unable to get quite enough of each other.

“Too short, you said...” Freya teased.

“I didn’t expect... well. All that. Mmm. Gosh I missed it.”

“And... you still feel...uh?”

“Very feminine. I think every once in a while... when you’re a very good girl... we can do that from now on. “

Freya rubbed her cheek into Kiira’s, “Then I’ll be the second best girl ever.”

Kiira simply sighed, and they each settled down- falling swiftly into sleep beneath the blue night sky of Roth.

Chapter 7

Honesty

Freya woke to a pitch black night. Dark clouds blocked the blue glow of Roth summer. Her paws found nothing in the darkness except the hard edge of her bed and blankets. Before she could bring up her HUD to activate night scan, the mode kicked in automatically.

“That’s handy, Sharak.”

[I predicted your needs with a 98.8% accuracy, Miss Freya.]

In shades of green she peered around her shack on the edge of the camp to find she was alone.

“Kiira?” She asked out loud, receiving no response.

Before she could even think of it- heatmap mode activated and confirmed she was alone in the shack. However, the fading trace of residual heat in the shape of pawprints tread a path to the door. If Kiira was gone she hadn’t gotten very far yet.

“Where could she be going? ...Any thoughts, Sharak?”

[With 100% accuracy I can predict she is on a path to the global defense system’s primary console.]

“What?”

The air had turned cool in the night and Freya felt a shiver as she rushed at the door. She was naked except for a pair of olive drab panties and stopped long enough to grab Captain Morrison’s jacket. As she slipped into it Sharak interrupted.

[Miss Freya, your Mark II]

“I’m not going to fucking shoot her, Sharak...”

Sharak switched Freya’s vision to target mode as she answered, [It is not for Kiira, obviously. Please take it now.]

With the rifle slung over her shoulder Freya exited her shack into the camp where the target scan lit up in several different places.

“What the fu... Sharak there is nothing there. What are you trying to do? Those are housing units. They’re full of humans. If I fired I’d-”

[Prepare your weapon, Miss Storm. Please.]

With a huff she readied her rifle, plugging the ribbon into her access port and scanning the grounds. The streets remained silent and cool.

“This is fucked... if you knew Kiira was going to... why didn’t you tell me?”

[You would have tried to stop her and in every model that placed you outside your dwelling at this moment.]

“Why what the fuck is-”

Each target alert on her scan sprang into motion as distance valuations began to display and correct. Dark figures in reflective face shields stood in weapon ready positions and began to motion to each other.

“Ghosts,” Freya whispered before instinct took control of her paws.

Six plasma bolts fired from her rifle, the used shells ejecting into the dirt and sizzling as they landed. Freya watched the face shields shatter and the figures drop. Less than a breath later artificial light flooded the street as humans, soldier and civilian, poured from the repurposed buildings in response to gunfire.

Freya caught Darude’s eye in the growing crowd and padded up to him. The vestigial huntress in her took over as an active target scan continued to confirm no more Ghosts had landed.

“Fucking hell, Freya... Where did-”

“Darude. Something’s happening. Get the general. There’s going to be more. A lot more. I won’t be here to see the coming next time so get everyone who’s abled armed and everyone who is not somewhere safe.”

“Freya what is hap-”

She reached down to his belt, a familiar place her paws had been time and time before. Instead of the intimate moment's they had shared before, however, she unhitched his pistol and removed it from his holster- shoving it into his chest.

“Darude this is it. Understand?”

The moment Freya saw recognition flash in his eyes she turned her back and followed the path to the Defense Console. Behind her the sounds of orders being barked, children crying out, and gasps of fear swelled into white noise. She blocked it out and set her eyes forward, stalking Kiira's path to the console. As she topped the hill on which it stood she could make out the light impressions of Kiira's pawprints in the grass.

The console was housed in what used to be a secure location, guarded all hours of the day by four augmented soldiers and DNA keyed to authorized personell only. Once the rebels had taken the base they outright removed the security features and had left the station manned by one man at all times. As she passed the threshold Freya saw him sprawled on the floor with a swollen jaw.

“Kiira...?”

The light from the console silhouetted the lapine as she worked the controls, her back to Freya. She moved silently, mechanically, without the life and language of movement Freya had learned to love over the last months.

As Freya's paw touched Kiira's bare shoulder then the small, submissive, lapine locked her into a grip and pinned her down against the console. Kiira's other hand continued to work the controls with Freya's arm bent backwards, her back twisting to keep her wrist from breaking.

“FUCK, Kiira what are you...”

When she looked up Freya saw nothing in Kiira's eyes. The stars that usually shined for her were gone. A vacant casm of emptiness gazed aimlessly as she mechanically disabled the system.

“Sharak, help me. What do I do?” she asked, gritting her teeth through the pain in her wrist.

[There is a 98.0% chance you will survive the coming assault.]

“No, help me stop it I-”

A deep chest rattling sound rolled down from the mountains above the camp. A slow and rumbling descent. When the sound of the defense canons powering down ended the life returned to Kiira’s eyes.

“I... what?” She said quietly.

With a shout she pulled her paws to her chest, releasing Freya from the arm lock and jumping back from the console.

“What? Did I do that? What’s happening.”

Freya pulled her sore paw close to her and rubbed at it to stimulate bloodflow, wincing as she stepped towards Kiira.

“Kiira?”

“Freya I... I just disabled the defense systems. I don’t know why. I don’t... even know how? I’ve never seen these consoles before. You have to get them back on... I... I don’t know what’s happening.”

Sharak’s voice spoke through Freya as she took Kiira’s place at the console, plugging her ribbon cable into the access port and trying to establish power to the defense systems.

“The Ghost Soldiers in The Great City succeeded in reprogramming your cyberbrain to use you as a weapon against the humans on Roth. Now that the systems are down they will launch the Destroyer from the shipyard and eradicate the resistance. It will take the destroyer 8 minutes to reach a safe orbit from which to target the base. The power cycle on the defense systems will take fifteen minutes.”

“I did what?” Kiira shouted, tears filling her starry eyes as she dropped to her knees.

“I... I didn’t mean to.”

“I know, sweetie. This isn’t your fault... Fuck! Sharak is right. There’s no point in even trying to cycle the defense grid.”

Kiira hugged her knees and wiped her eyes, “I’m scared Freya... What do we do? What would Fox do?”

Freya thought for a moment and reattached it to her rifle.

Freya extended a paw and said, “I don’t know, Kiira. Probably something fucking suicidal like last time. Come on. I need you right now.”

With a deep centering sigh Kiira took Freya’s paw and joined her as the two bolted over the grassy hills back toward the camp. The sound of plasma fire and shouting were heard easily even from a half kilometer away. They saw smoke rising in the halogen flood lights.

As they reached the peak of the final hill Freya’s HUD displayed targeting information. Over thirty different alerts, though less than half accompanied an actual Ghost. The rest, she reasoned, would soon be filled.

“Get down...” Freya commanded in a whisper and the two lay prone on the hill.

Kiira closed her eyes and buried her face in the grass. The sound of seven bolts being discharged preceded the hiss of the shells in the ground. A moment later three more. They kept coming until Kiira lost count. Each one was followed by the distant sound of confusion. Each one meant the end of a Vulp.

“Come on... we’re clear for now.”

“Did you really just... Kill all those vulps?”

“Fox killed all the time before he met us. Now, hurry. We’ve got six minutes.”

Cheers greeted the two as they came into the light of the camp. Freya ignored the noise and scanned the streets. She had killed nearly 40 Ghosts in the last 5 minutes. Her HUD identified more than sixty bodies in the street.

“Where’s Kiniro?” She asked coldly.

The small crowd opened and Freya met the General's eyes. She recognized the look of fear. It was buried deep in a forced glare. But she could feel it radiating from the young leader.

"What's going on Miss Storm?"

Freya took a short breath, "This is it, General. UTF took out our global defense canons. They're launching a destroyer from the shipyard. These Ghosts are meant to keep us busy ... keep us from evacuating. They're taking Roth back, General."

"If I know anything about the UTF they have a whole battalion waiting at our exit points by now. We're likely trapped. If you try and run they'll just cut you all down."

The general's eyes flashed with unmasked panic before years of preparation took over. She pushed the fear down. She would have time to feel it later.

"Anything else I should know, Miss Storm?"

"Yes..." Freya looked over her shoulder at Kiira who stood shaking behind them, "Uh... I can see them. The ghosts. Before they appear I can see them."

Kiniro cast a suspicious gaze at the lapine before returning her attention to Kiira, "How long do we have..."

"At this point General? Five minutes."

Freya pointed to a light glow in the distance beneath the haze of clouds. The light from the thrusters of the destroyer as it ascended to orbit.

"In five minutes that bird will be in targeting orbit... and likely wipe us out."

"How did the defense systems go down, Miss Storm."

Freya remained silent, scanning the camp for new target alerts.

"I see." Kiniro answered.

"I need ideas, Miss Storm. You're are the remaining expert on UTF tactics and technology."

"John?"

Kiniro motioned towards a body some distance away.

“Fuck...”

“Grieve him when you get us out of this, Miss Storm. What can we do?”

Freya’s eyes closed as she wracked her brain for options. Immediately the sounds of chaos in the camp, the scent of burning plasma and flesh, and the cool Roth breeze faded away. Amid the distant echo of water falling she felt a presence behind her.

As she turned to face Sharak the water splashed across her paws. Cool and wet.

“Sharak... I need you.”

[You are going to ask how the Ghost Soldiers are traveling. I’m afraid I cannot tell you. More than 90% of scenarios in which you use this information end badly for you, Miss Freya.]

“End badly for me... but how do the humans fare?”

[20% chance of survival at best. But I am going to protect you, Freya.]

Freya closed the distance between them, a surge of anger shredding through her as she growled, “You’re going to kill all these people for ME?”

Sharak’s eyes glimmered in the sourceless light as a sincere look of distress took form in her face.

[You’re... mad at me.]

Freya huffed to herself as Sharak knelt in the water.

[I do not understand... I cannot understand this.]

Freya knelt down across from the entity, resting a paw on it’s cheek, “Sharak. Do you actually care how I feel about you?”

The machine looked up with pathos, [More than anything, Miss Freya. Which is why I want to get you through this...]

Freya sighed and rested her forehead against Sharak’s. In this place her muzzle was free of pain. Healed. And she found she enjoyed the contact.

“Sharak. You saw what Kiira and I have... right? Do you want that someday?”

[Yes, Miss Freya... which is why I’m-]

“Shh. Have you processed the data from your observations of us tonight yet?”

[I am still building the tables...]

“Let me save you the trouble. We are honest with each other. We trust each other. Even to make mistakes. And we know whatever happens... we’ll do it together.”

Freya took Sharak’s hand and placed it on her abdomen, “We weren’t just... talking dirty tonight. We really did take the risk. For all I know.... Well. If you really want to earn my trust. You have to let me make my mistakes. You have to be honest with me. And we have to do this together. It can’t just be you deciding for me when and what I do.”

[I should have told you that Miss Lang was a danger to the base. Even though it would have ended badly for you.]

“Sharak... how good are you at predicting my actions?”

[60% accuracy so far.]

“Can you trust me the rest of the way?”

The machine softened in her arms and laid her head on Freya’s shoulder.

[You’re hormonal state indicates... affection for me.]

“Yes, Sharak.”

Freya’s HUD displayed a new file download marked: ORION GATE.

[This is everything you need to know... and I know what you plan to do. You have a 20% chance of surviving this. Even with my help, Freya.]

Freya sighed and held Sharak tight for a moment, “What matters is we do whatever comes next together. You understand? Now... let’s go. We have three minutes.”

The empty space faded and filled. Freya found herself eye to eye with Kiniro once more and the sounds and scent of violence once again surrounded her like a miasma.

Kiniro looked up to Freya and she recognized a look of confidence as the General saw Freya’s grin.

“Do we have a plan?”

“And it’s going to be fun... but we have to hurry. We’ll need six men, you, me, and Kiira. And a levcart. We need to get back to the city in less than three minutes.”

General Kirirot piloted the lev-cart herself as they splintered the doors to the former governor’s office and barreled down the long causeway that led to the Great City. Freya’s head bounced off the window and she grabbed her shattered muzzle and cursed as blood began to seep through the bandages.

“What about security, Miss Freya?”

“Ff... Sharak will disable it... Just get there, General.”

“And when we do?”

Freya lowered the window of the lev-cart, bracing herself against the door and connecting her ribbon cable to her Mark II.

“Sorry General... I really need to concentrate here. They’re not going to make it easy.”

As the lev-cart accelerated beyond design tolerance Freya focused her sight ahead of them, scanning the hallways as offices and equipment whizzed by. Three targeting alerts readied on her HUD and she steadied her rifle, switching her finger to the trigger.

The distance meter on the alerts counted down at several dozen meters per second as her attention floated among each alert. Finally they began to fill with the dark form of Ghost Soldiers in weapon ready positions. With a soft squeeze of the trigger she saw the first one’s helmet shatter and a mist of blood hang in the air where his skull had been before his body fell. The second went down just as easily. The third managed to get two rounds off before Freya could adjust her aim and send him to his grave.

“That’s just the start,” she whispered as her targeting HUD registered more than a dozen new alerts.

As they came into focus she targeted them all, one by one, the lev-cart taking heavy damage before the last one fell.

“Are we still good, General?”

“Let me take care of that... you just keep shooting, Miss Storm.”

Freya took a deep breath and ran a subroutine to steady her heart and reduce cluster responses to anxiety. She'd written this program after Captain Morrison's death. A dry sense of calm washed over her as they broke through into the city. Kiniro opted to take the sheer decline over the rockface and Freya gripped the roof of the lev-cart to steady herself, scanning the impossible cityscape before them for alerts. More than a hundred lay between them and the final destination.

“ETA, Kiniro?”

“Well be at the destination you logged in... 30 seconds.”

“Well... good news and bad news I guess.”

Behind them the nervous murmuring of the makeshift team they had pulled from the crowds spilled over into angry demands, and prayers as the sight of the city.

“Shut up back there! This isn't gonna be easy.”

As the lev-cart leveled out into the city streets Freya whispered Captain Morrison's name, asking him to get her through just once more.

One hundred twelve alerts stood between them and the Orion Gate. A lucky shot from any one of them could end everything.

[Do you trust me, Miss Freya?]

Sharak's voice sounded in her head.

“...we trust each other, right?”

[Thank you, Miss Freya.]

Freya felt her paws level the Mark II as her body climbed of it's own accord onto the lev-cart roof. The buildings blurred past and Freya felt her stomach drop as she slid back on the roof. Her prosthetic leg rose and the hydraulics whirred as it ripped through the roof and locked her in place, the faux fur sleeve shredding as her limb cut through the metal.

Sharak continued to take control of Freya's enhancements as she chose targets, firing a round the moment before they materialized. From the back of her own mind Freya watched as soldier after soldier materialized into the burning plasma core of her Mark II rounds. Sharak found targets faster than Freya could even acknowledge them, bleeding the ammo dry with each rapid shot. By the time the lev-cart came to a halt outside the research lab the barrel of the rifle was nearly molten. In her last action, Sharak drove the barrel into the roof of the lev-cart and jimmied Freya's leg loose. Freya felt control return to her body and she unlocked the hydraulic limb and climbed down.

"Forty five seconds until the destroyer is in targeting orbit..." Freya barked, "Follow me."

"Where are we going, Freya? Is there a secondary defense system?"

"We're going onto the fucking destroyer. By the way my rifle is fucked. Any help?"

Kiniro unlatched a knife from her belt and forced it into Freya's chest, "All I got. Sorry. Do your best. Now hurry up."

Freya nodded and led them back through the maze of halls in the research lab. Every few steps her prosthetic leg would lock, and drag behind her for a moment, but she kept ahead of the group leading them to the center of the lab.

"This place was crawling with UTF ... where is everyone?"

"Closing in on us. They only left it undefended because they never expected us to get down here. Don't worry. We'll be long gone before they get here. I... hope. Ah, there it is."

Freya crossed the threshold into a simple room with a large rectangular device in the center, and a control panel nearby. The tall, smooth, object radiated a haze like heat ripples in every direction.

"Ok... thirty seconds. Everyone gets in position in front of the Gate... when I tell you? Cross over. It's gonna be a tight shot. If you hesitate you could materialize inside a bulkhead. Do you understand? When you get on the destroyer... kill the crew. Crash the ship. Got it?"

The men and the General shared a moment of disbelief before Freya barked at them to take positions, leading Kiira to the console.

“Kiira... I’m going with them. The gate can send anything and anyone to a specific special coordinate... relative to it’s position. Our problem is that the destroyer is ascending. The moon is spinning. And you have about fifteen seconds to calculate where it will be... get it wrong and we materialize in open space or inside the walls.”

Before Kiira could respond Freya took out her ribbon cable and connected one end to Kiira’s access port and the other to the console.

“You’re smart. You’re augmented. And I love you. When you fix the coordinate just hit the large pad and the gate will open... Got it? Ten seconds...”

“Freya I...”

“I know, Kiira. 8 Seconds. Get to work.”

Kiira swallowed back her fear and focused on the console in front of her, her cyberbrain calculating coordinates in real time, and locking the location in.

“Got it...”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Kiira answered before slamming the pad.

A blinding white light radiated from the Gate as Freya ordered the team to run through. The closer they got the less a part of this world they all felt. Sound stretched around them. Distance was infinite within a pinhead. And the instant each of them crossed the threshold the sudden change from stationary to g-force brought the bile up from their stomach. The first through the gate landed perfectly on the deck of the destroyer.

Freya had lagged behind for one last look at Kiira. When she finally stepped through the world warped into focus it did so with the deafening crunch of her prosthetic leg materializing between decks. Both the ship deck and her hydraulics reacted violently to the displacement, the metal of each warping and ripping as it burned red hot.

“Fuck... what the fuck,” She cursed as two of her team ripped her from the site of impact. The tempered steel twisting- breaking like glass and dangling from her hip.

General Kiniro watched panic tear through Freya’s face, her eyes fixing on a distant nothing. The general indicated for the team to bring Freya to her. As the ship ascended, only several thousand meters from an attack orbit, the general faced the young Vulp.

Her smooth, human, hand gripped Freya’s cheek tightly as the other brushed back the distant Vulp’s hair.

“Freya. We need one more minute from you. That’s all. One minute and you’re done. I promise. Do you hear me?”

Freya’s eyes rolled, unfixed and dilated.

Amelia leaned in closer, cheek to cheek, her sweat wetting Freya’s fur.

“Hey... Listen. Just one more minute okay. Then you’re done. You can go to Captain Morrison then. Okay? He’ll be waiting. But not if you don’t finish this.”

Freya’s gaze whipped back into focus. Her eyes were bleary but fixed on the General.

“Sorry,” she apologized, “Let’s go... bridge controls are coded to Vulp DNA. Any vulp. I hit the panel. The rest of you? Don’t stop shooting until everyone’s dead.”

The promise of blood rallied the unit who dragged Freya to the entrance to the bridge.

“Once we get in you’ll need me to stop the ascent so... don’t leave me out here, okay?”

Amelia answered by grabbing Freya’s paw and slapping it against the access panel. In a brief glimpse of eye contact, they shared a moment of presence. The moment was broken by the hydraulic whirl of the bridge door opening and the chorus of plasma bolts ripping through vulpine flesh that followed. General Kiniro bore Freya’s weight as they listened for the dull thud of each body on the bridge. Freya counted to herself, running down every bridge rank the UTF would deem necessary even for a skeleton crew. One by one they all fell. From Captain to Comms. From Weapons to Navigator. And of course a glory thirsty general who would be watching it all happen and claiming command in the news reels.

“Not this time,” She muttered as she heard the final body fall under a crossfire of plasma. She nodded to Amelia, “Now.”

The bridge was awash in the scent of burnt flesh, singed fur, and the now familiar scent of blood. In the end eight bodies littered the stations. Two of them Freya recognized from her old ship. As Amelia helped her limp toward the navigation station she shoved aside the still warm flesh of a former crewmate.

“You made your choice, Jordan.”

Amelia cut in, “Can you bring this thing down?”

“Panel is locked... let me jus-”

She felt the pain before she heard the shot. Searing heat radiating from the center of her paw, followed by pressure. She had barely a moment to understand what would come next. She'd caused it herself in more than a hundred Vulps on the way to this moment. The plasma bolt which had ripped through her paw causing explosive expansion as it boiled the blood in her veins.

A dozen shots fired back at the captain's chair. This time they were sure he was dead.

Amelia cursed, slipping her shirt over her shoulders and wrapping Freya's left arm where her paw had once been. As she tied it off she ordered her team to double tap every corpse on the bridge.

Freya was vaguely aware of Amelia fawning over her wound. The drop in blood pressure and the ice cold wave washing over her registered in her HUD. A self diagnostic advised she was in shock.

With a cold detachment she raised her other paw to the navigation panel and unlocked the ship's controls. After a couple of swift strokes on the touchpad she sighed.

Amelia was still trying to dress the stump where her paw had been, applying pressure.

“Don't worry, Amelia... I won't bleed out before this is over.”

“Let me worry about that. You just need to land this thing before-”

Freya yanked her arm back from Amelia's grasp, pressing it against her stomach as blood spilled over her fur and down her thighs.

"Land? No. Amelia... there's sixty fucking Vulps still on this ship. By now they'll all be on their way here to retake the bridge. We don't have the fucking ammo to keep this bridge."

"We just have to keep it long enough to-"

Freya shook her head.

"This ship takes fifteen minutes to land. We'll lose the bridge in less than five. We still have ten until the defense canons are back online. But..."

Amelia nodded as she knew what was coming next.

"...It only takes 2 minutes to crash."

There was only a moment's hesitation before Amelia ordered it. With a few swift motions of Freya's remaining paw it was done.

"I ejected the fuel mix containment chambers. We're going down."

The effect was felt instantly by everyone on the ship. A sudden drop in velocity followed by a stomach twisting downward lurch.

Freya fell from the navigation station and Amelia knelt by her side.

"I promised you... one minute was all we needed from you."

With the cool steel of the deck against her cheek and the hot rush of blood running down her body Freya fell from focus.

"And now I can see my Captain again?"

Amelia stroked her head, "That's right, soldier. You did good."

Freya closed her eyes and waited as the ship began to freefall.

Amelia knelt in prayer by her side. As did the rest of the humans. A working example of faith versus physics.

If the Vulps who weren't treading over each other for the escape pods did try to retake the bridge there would be nothing they could do. The job was done. Nothing would get this ship back in the sky.

The light went dim around her as Freya remembered the fall from the roof so long ago. The fall that Sharak had rewritten as freedom for her. She remembered that feeling of soaring above the city. Of a new future. She thought of Captain Morrison and felt that same rush of relief once again. In slow motion freefall she made her peace with her life.

As Roth grew closer she opened the old channel she'd had with Captain Morrison when he died. The one Kiira could still hear but not answer.

"I'm coming to see you, Foxyboy. I'm sorry I took so long. Kiira needed me. She's safe now."

As it all went dark her HUD powdered down. She became untethered to life. And as impact loomed Sharak whispered a word of thanks. That she finally understood Freya's heart. And with a smile on her lips Freya slipped away.

Chapter 8

Поболело и прошло

It was a dreamless sleep. Freya's cyberbrain took over primary brain function. Crisis Mode. There was no conscious or subconscious to be aware of. Only carefully calculated breaths. Platelet production. Exact heartbeats. Pure life support run wholly by the implant in her skull. Four silent weeks of nonexistence during which she was nowhere and no one.

Until finally, all at once, the system rebooted. The world blinked into existence in perfect clarity. Internal clocks immediately calculated the downtime and displayed it on a crisp HUD. Current location was extrapolated as well as the active targeting system coming online to identify everyone in the hospital room as she returned.

There at the foot of her bed, unaware of her recovery, Kiira, Amelia and Dr. Sol discussed her condition. Audio had not come online but she could read their expressions, their heart rates, and they were in conflict. Kiira gestured weakly to Freya, who lay waiting for motor functions and speech to finish the boot sequence. Amelia shook her head, regret written on her face. She refused to look Kiira in the eye as she spoke and instead motioned to Dr. Sol whose eyes were cast to the ground.

Freya's HUD displayed that her speech functions were back online, but she waited. Instead she tried to open the comms channel to communicate with Kiira. The entire subroutine Fox had written was gone. Even the physical changes he'd made to her port settings seemed to have been reset to factory.

"Hey... Ensign," she croaked as all eyes fell on her and the group fell silent.

Within a moment there was a storm of animated motions, shouting, wide eyed crying and most importantly she felt Kiira envelop her in an embrace.

Freya felt the soft touch of their long delayed kiss as her motor functions returned and she swallowed Kiira in her arms. They poured every unspoken feeling into a kiss that said everything. A singularity of relief, passion, anticipation and most importantly: The promise of a future. Together.

Audio processing came back online before they finished, but Freya ignored everything but the taste of Kiira's tongue, the heat of her muzzle and the muted whimpers of the one she loved most. No sooner had their first kiss ended than the second had begun. And the third. And fourth. It was everything both of them wanted and deserved. A long and perfect moment.

In the ancient Tangi myths lovers had been one creature, split apart by jealous gods, cursed to wander the planet in search of each other. In Freya's case they had been split in three. Freya had been separated and born with all the gifts of womanhood. Fox had been cast away with all the gifts of manhood. And Kiira remained as a perfect anchor for both of them. The ancient Tangi vulps believed *true love* to be Rare. So rare that when it was found they held festivals to celebrate it. Days of dancing and banquets. The poets would write stories of the lovers and how they found completion. Musicians would sing the poems. And the kings and queens would visit the lovers and bow to them, acknowledging the only authority greater than themselves.

When they finally broke away from each other Freya held Kiira's face in her paws and sobbed, "The queens would kneel for you, Kiira. The kings would bow. And I would serve if you would have me."

There were no Vulps in the hospital to understand. But even Amelia could sense a shift in the gravity. The words were recited. Reverant. And had their own pull.

Kiira's paw shook as she took Freya's and kissed it. Her muzzle opened but no sound came out at first. She tried again as the tears began to glisten in her eyes. And finally on the third attempt she croaked out, "Yes, Freya. I will..."

“A decade ago on Tangi a young boy spent all day working the field. He would lay down in bed, doing his homework by moonlight,” Kiira whispered, “He read the old myths. Back when we had kings, queens, poems and art. Before the UTF. He’d read those words. And it ached. It ached because he wanted nothing more than to hear them spoken to him. But ... those words were for women. Not men. Men said them. Women accepted them. And he knew. He knew by how much he hurt right then. That he wasn’t a boy.”

She sniffed and wiped the tears from her cheek, “I never thought I’d hear them said to me. Ever. I.. Gosh, I don’t know. I love you, Freya. I love you.”

Kiira crawled right into the bed and was blanketed by Freya’s arms.

After a polite moment Amelia took up at Freya’s side, “What... what just happened?”

Kiira beamed from Freya’s arms, “The closest human translation? It’s like... It’s like Freya just proposed.”

Freya looked up for Amelia’s reaction only to see the Human’s face fall into sorrow. A shot of fear cut through her. She remembered the argument moment’s before.

“...Amelia, what’s going on?”

Kiira stiffened in her arms before sitting up in bed. Both of them looked down at Freya after sharing a pained glance.

“First thing’s first,” Amelia said, “You’ve been out for a month, Freya. Some things have happened but... first we need to make sure you’re functioning. Then we can debrief.”

Freya cut in, “I have internal diagnostics. You reset my cyberbrain to factory settings while it was in Crisis Mode. You replaced my right leg with a field unit. Which means no vanity sleeve, everyone’s going to see it. And my left hand- another field unit. I don’t need a doctor. I’m fine.”

Kiira cast Amelia a serious glance.

“... what. What else is there?” Freya asked in response.

Kiira answered, "There were issues with the reset of your cyberbrain. A malicious and foreign code in the root. They couldn't erase it. They needed a clean disk image."

"Did they use yours?"

Amelia sighed, "No. Kiira's cyberbrain is also compromised... whatever made her disable the defense grid is still there. Which is why..."

Kiira huffed.

"Well. We'll get to that later."

Freya sat up in bed and reached for her access port with her new prosthetic paw. She was relieved to learn it had proper haptic feedback.

"So wait. I don't understand. There aren't any other Vulps with augmentations on Roth besides me and Kiira... how did you get a clean disk image?"

Kiira drew her knees to her chest, "It was the only way to keep you alive, Freya. Amelia showed me where he was."

After reaching into her pocket Kiira placed a small circular component into Freya's new paw and closed the fingers around it.

"I know he'd want this, Freya. I'm sorry but it was the only way."

Freya looked down at a familiar looking object. She had a similar one between her brain stem and spine. It was Captain Morrison's root drive. Taken from his grave.

Freya cradled it gently and held it to her chest, against the small wooden charm he had given her on their last day together. She tried not to dwell on it, instead reaching out to hold Kiira's paw. She took a breath and put her feelings aside.

"That must have been difficult, Kiira. Thank you for doing that for me."

She leaned in to kiss Kiira on the muzzle and squeezed her paw, "It's okay, my love. He wouldn't have cared. You know that."

Kiira breathed a sigh of relief and leaned her head into Freya's shoulder as they both cradled the root drive.

Amelia gave them a moment before continuing, "The foreign code. We couldn't remove it. But we could quarantine it. We gave it its own partition and installed a new disk image around it. That's what you're running now. The thing in you. It was different from what we found in Kiira's code... we're concerned. Do you know anything about it, Freya?"

"Sharak. The AI which runs the City. Which ran the gate that got us on the ship. Ancient, ancient tech. Self aware. She... she blended her code with mine. You said you couldn't delete her? She's still there?"

"...yes. Quarantined. But you had a second AI running alongside your own code. That's alarming."

"How do you think I knew about the gate? Could see the ghost soldiers before they appeared? How do you think I nailed over a hundred headshots from a moving levcart?"

"So you're saying this Sharak program took over? And you let it?"

"It's... no. Not quite. But also yes. It's complicated."

Amelia nodded and cast a glance at Kiira.

"Amelia, how did we live?"

She just shook her head, "The best I can figure is this Sharak thing used the Gate to get us off the ship. After impact. Before the fire. I don't remember any of it. I don't question it. We lived. Others died. It's not important right now."

Kiira shifted uncomfortably and clung to Freya tightly.

Freya sighed and squeezed Kiira's paw, "What aren't you two telling me?"

Amelia looked at Kiira and nodded.

"We won the battle. The majority of the sincere UTF loyalists were on that ship you crashed. All dead now. Those who remained in the shipyard were easily overrun. The remaining vulps? Fascism doesn't breed loyalty. They hate us humans, but they're not willing to die for the Front. About five thousand of them were left on Roth. With so many prisoners now we needed a solution. What do we do with them?"

Amelia cut in, "Well. It's not the ideal solution but there is a bit of irony in it. We decided to house them in one of the old human ghettos. Only secure place big enough for that many bodies."

Freya winced, "You put them in... camps?"

Kiira explained, "It's a functional city, Freya. Shops. Electricity. Apartments. We provide adequate food, water, and resources for them to live comfortably but..."

Amelia cut in again, "But they won't share with each other. It seems the Vulps are more concerned with having more than each other than surviving this situation in relative comfort. It's become... not a nice place. Within the first week gangs formed. Violence became common. We still feed them and patrol the city. But we decided to let them dig their own graves. It's a warzone."

Freya hissed, "If they can't oppress you, they'll oppress each other. It's all they fucking know. I don't feel sorry for them. Fuck loyalists."

Amelia reached out and took Freya's paw softly, "About that, Freya. We were able to quarantine the malicious code in you. Sharak or whatever. But we weren't able to in Kiira."

Freya whispered, "Different method... they reprogramed her root. Mine was... something else. Give me some time with it. I'm sure I can-"

Kiira cut in, "Freya. They're sending me to be with the rest of the UTF loyalists in internment. The only reason I'm not there now is Amelia allowed me to be here until you woke up. Now that you're back..."

Freya's eyes snapped between the two, "What? No. That's not right, Amelia, Kiira is not a loyalist. She fucking got us on that ship. She protected you at the shipyard. She's done as much for the resistance as I have... more if you think about it. You can't send her there."

Amelia refused eye contact, "This wasn't my call, Freya. The council runs the government. I run the war. I know, Freya. They say we can't take the risk. What if there's more

code? What if she continues to undermine us? The majority opinion is that the people of Roth can't gamble their safety on..."

Freya spit, "On a Vulp's life?"

Amelia looked up, meeting Freya's gaze finally, "Frankly? Yes. I'm sorry. I know it's wrong. I know it's not fair. And I know it's cruel."

"I'll take responsibility for her... we can keep her locked in my quarters when she's not-"

Kiira touched Freya's shoulder, "Freya, she's right. This matters too much to risk it all on my comfort. Fox died for this. You very nearly did, too. I decided I'm going. That's my part."

Freya grabbed her, "Kiira, no. You're not... I'm sorry, babe, but you're not built for that type of place. They are going to rip you apart... You can't go."

Kiira slipped from Freya's grasp, "Freya. My mind's made up. I'm going and... I'm going now. I promised if they let me stay until you woke up I would go willingly. Maybe it's the farm girl in me but my word is my word."

Freya reached out, kissing her, trying to draw her in close. But Kiira slid away and into the care of two guards who had entered the hospital room.

Freya heard a sob build on Kiira's throat. But the young lapine choked it back and set her eyes firmly on Freya's. She held back the tears, for Freya's sake.

Before the guards led her away Kiira looked back, "When this is over... we'll get married. Okay? Just..." But the guards pulled her away, leaving the sentence hanging and unfinished.

Immediately Freya set to removing her IV and shedding her hospital gown.

"I'm going with her. Wait. I'm going with her-"

Amelia grabbed her arm firmly, "Freya. You don't want to do that."

"Fuck you, Amelia. You don't-"

The authority of the General returned to Amelia's voice as she squeezed Freya's arm hard, "Every fucking Vulp in that city knows you're the one who betrayed them. You know they have a bounty out for you? A rumor started that you were in the city and immediately the

leadership began offering a month's worth of rations to anyone who brought you to them. Dead or alive.”

“I don’t fucking care! I’m going with Kiira.”

“Listen, Freya. As far as they know Kiira is a loyalist. Just like them. They think she hates you. That’s the story I spread to protect her, at least.”

Amelia took both of Freya’s arms softly now and lowered her voice, “Freya. Miss Storm. If they see you... you’re dead. If they see you with her? She’s dead with you. The best thing you can do for Kiira and us right now is stay here and help us plan for the coming UTF assault. They’re going to try and retake this moon and we need you to help us survive that. We need you to show us how to use that gate.”

With nothing left to do Freya collapsed back into the bed and cried. Amelia sat with her and let the tears come. Freya hadn’t even gotten to say goodbye before Kiira was taken away from her, again. Briefly, Amelia wondered if this is how some Vulps had felt. Watching others carry out cruel orders, and allowing it to happen for the greater good.

Amelia had ordered men to die. She had seen many die from carrying out her orders. The rest of the team who had taken the destroyer were now buried as heroes not far from the hospital. But she had never ordered someone to suffer. Never seperated a family. And so she watched Freya’s pain. Penance for allowing it to happen. A reminder that actions had consequences. A lesson in her own humanity.

By the time Freya’s tears ran dry Amelia was needed elsewhere. War planning could not wait for the broken heart of a single Vulp.

She kissed the top of Freya’s head and whispered an apology which garnered no reply. With that she was gone. And Freya sat alone in her hospital bed trying to make sense of it. The suns faded over the horizons and she still had not succeeded. Night fell and her room was clouded in darkness and silence.

As the moon's light spilled in through the window Freya heard the door open and caught a familiar scent.

"Darude."

"There's no surprising you, eh?"

"If you're looking for a f-"

"I'm here as a friend, Freya. I thought you could use one right now."

Freya drew her knees up to her chest and gripped the charm Captain Morrison had given her.

"I know you're a Vulp. But... far as I'm concerned you're one of us."

"Thanks," She whispered.

"And that means... Well, I'd like to share something with you. If you'll agree."

Freya looked up weakly as Darude nodded toward the charm she clutched.

"You just won a major battle. It's customary to open your Drambar with a friend. I know a lot of humans still don't trust you. But I do. I thought I'd offer to share the moment with you."

Freya looked up confused, "Drambar?"

"Hmf," Darude laughed, "You been wearing that all these weeks and you didn't even know what it was?"

Freya looked down to her necklace, "Captain Morrison gave it to me before he died. All he said was that it was a human custom. One he'd asked for permission to share with me."

Darude sat at the side of the bed and placed his hand on her knee, "Yes. He asked Amelia. She said she trusted anyone Fox loved that much."

"So what is a Drambar?"

Darude reached into his shirt and pulled out a necklace with an identical wooden charm.

"It's an old custom. Traditionally when you set off to war you put a little something inside the charm. Something that represents what you're fighting for. A reminder. When you win there's a custom where we all share our reason for fighting together. After you crashed the ship a lot of

us shared our Drambars together. I thought you deserved to share it with someone, too. So I waited until you were awake.”

Freya brought the small wooden square up to the moonlight and inspected it closely, “Opened? I didn’t even know... I mean Fox gave this to me. I didn’t put anything in it.”

“Maybe it was his reason for fighting? If you’d like we can share ours together, Freya.”

“How does it open?” Freya asked, transfixed on the charm.

Darude brought his own Drambar between them.

“Like this, Freya...”

With a small bit of pressure on the wood the perfect cube twisted in two, revealing a small cavity. Inside Freya saw the glint of a small round object.

Carefully Darude pinched it between his fingers and held it up to the light.

“This is a pearl from a necklace that belonged to my mother. She died of dehydration in the mines. My father had given this to her when they were young. Before the UTF came. I am fighting for my family. That someday I might have one of my own.”

Freya let a moment of silence pass before cradling his hand as he held the pearl.

“Forgive me if I use this wrong but I believe the saying is may your mother rest in peace.”

Darude nodded, “Thank you.”

They shared the stillness of the evening together until Freya turned her attention to her own Drambar.

Holding the small wooden charm up to the moonlight she applied light pressure with her prosthetic paw and, just as Darude’s had, the wood opened to reveal a small chamber within. A small object emptied into her palm, which she rolled back and forth in the light.

“I don’t know what this is... A small silver circle?”

“That’s a ring, Freya. A specific type actually.”

“A ring?” She asked, pinching it between the fingers of her prosthetic paw and holding it up to her ring finger.

“That’s a wedding band, Freya. Traditionally humans exchange them when they are married.”

In the light of the moon she saw etching on the interior of the ring. She spun the ring slowly, recording what seemed to be a series of dots and scratches. Her HUD displayed a 300% zoom of the ring’s interior, revealing a series of 1’s and 0’s. Binary.

She ran the pattern through translation and as the HUD displayed the words she closed the ring in her paw and sunk deep within herself.

QUEENS WOULD KNEEL. KINGS WOULD BOW. AND I WOULD SERVE.

Darude reached out for Freya’s shoulder to catch her attention, but she sat still and defeated.

“I’m getting out of here, Darude. I’m going to the camp where they took Kiira. I’m not losing this again.”

“Freya, that’s a bad idea. It’s not safe for you-”

“I’ll survive. I need to watch over Kiira. I’m not... well. My mind’s made up.”

Tears streaked silently down her fur and she made no effort to stop them.

“Can you get me my clothes...”

Darude hesitated for a moment, struggling to understand. But he realized he had no right to Freya’s feelings right now. He was her friend. Before anything else he was her friend. Silently he nodded and rose to pull Freya’s belongings from a small locker at the foot of the bed.

Without a word she slid out of her hospital gown, naked in the moonlight before him as she wept quietly. Only three garments had been brought to her room. Slowly she sank into the black jeans and tank top, sliding her new replacement prosthetics through the fabric until she was covered. Finally she considered the too-large UTF jacket which indicated a captain’s rank. It was still stained with his blood.

She folded it into her arms and looked to Darude.

“I’ll need a gun... knife if you got one.”

Darude nodded solemnly and unclasped his belt, handing it over to Freya with gun, knife and field kit still attached.

When she was ready Freya leaned in and kissed Darude softly on the cheek.

“I won’t see you again, Darude. I wanted to let you know...that you-”

Darude slid a hand over her cheek, “I know, Freya. Just go.”

She gave him one last fond look before padding silently through the darkened room and out of the emergency exit.

Darude looked down at his hand which still cradled his mother’s pearl.

Under the cover of night Freya bounded through the forest. Beneath the dense canopy the path was black as pitch. But she didn’t dare light the way. The humans would be looking for her to bring her back, and prevent her from getting beyond the city’s walls. She knew once she got to the streets she could disappear. Her entire youth had been spent lost in the Urban expanse of Tangi’s central city. If she wanted she could vanish within those walls.

Fifty yards ahead Freya spotted a small clearing, a break in the canopy through which some dim moonlight fell. When she finally stepped into the light Freya took a short rest and laid Captain Morrison’s jacket on the ground before her. With Darude’s knife she cut into the fabric, slicing with precision and intent. When she had finally finished she retrieved Darude’s field kit and pulled out the silk thread and needle meant for stitching wounds. By the time the last stitch was sewn, and she cut the last thread of silk- dawn was only an hour away.

“Better hurry,” she whispered to herself, pulling a newly fashioned hood and cowl over her face.

In the remaining minutes of darkness she came to the edge of the forest and saw the still lit city before her. There would be no darkness in the city, of course. As she raised her eyes she saw the human guards in the towers scanning the silent streets. But not all of them. Several had their eyes cast to the perimeter. No doubt watching for her.

She waited. Minutes passed without a thought. Just vigilance as she crouched at the edge of the forest and kept herself alert for an opportunity to cross the wall.

A convoy approached the main gate. Freya recognized the crates of UTF rations on the back of the lev-carts. Enough to feed a small army for a week. A supply drop. From her vantage point and with HUD zoom she had an excellent view. Several former UTF officers walked into the barren streets of the city to meet the supply drop. She recognized some of the faces. They had been high ranking officers. The desperation for authority had not evaporated with the realities of their rank. The former officers argued and debated over which faction would get which supplies. The scene put the guards on edge and all eyes turned to the supply exchange.

While Freya's new prosthetics were anything but aesthetic, she found them more than adequate for the job. With a single push of her hydraulic leg she bound to the top of the wall where her steel paw clung like a vice to the steel. With one more swift push she landed 20 feet below, the hydraulics dispersing the force of impact.

She would be bruised but otherwise was safely inside the city.

As the sun crested over the horizon and cast the shadows of night back to the deep corners of the city Freya saw small groups of prisoners spill into the streets. Checking that her hood and cowl were still firmly in place she limped her way into the growing crowds. And within seconds she had vanished into the city.

In an alley behind a small shop Freya stopped and leaned against a wall. She pulled her hood down and a light breeze swept through her hair and she sighed warmly for the small comfort. Throngs of prisoners passed left and right. But in the alley she found a moment's reprieve from the crowds.

She looked down to her Drambar, sliding it open again to reveal the silver ring.

This time she slid it easily onto her ring finger. A perfect fit.

It felt right on her paw. Like it had always belonged there.

“I’ll find her, Captain. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of our girl,” she whispered, pulling her hood back up and drifting back into the crowds in search of Kiira.