

“Nothin’ here in th’ official records of the complex,” Kris said as she stared at the readout on the panel in front of her. After the discovery that they had lost samples of the raw Pax from the Reaver crash, Scrap and Jin had worked together to lead them to one of the complex’s many control rooms. There everyone began working to see if they could find anything.

“They can’t just move this stuff to change a whole world without some record,” insisted Lori.

“I have the shipping manifests,” said Jin. “Machinery, raw materials, supplies... nothing out of the ordinary.”

“When they brought it here, they marked it as somethin’ else, if at all,” Patch said as he double checked Jin’s finding.

“Anythin’ off the record?” asked Lori.

“Then it wouldn’t be here – on the record,” Kris answered.

“But it might be on this!” said Scrap with triumph.

Everyone gathered around him as he unrolled a large sheet of smart-paper designed to display blueprints. He moved up and down through the layers of the structures, occasionally stopping to zoom in on a part of the level before resuming the search. Eventually, on a level that looked similar to the one they were currently on, Scrap stopped.

“You see it?” asked Lori.

“Maybe...” he muttered. The kid cycled through the blueprint’s various overlay options until Kris spotted it too.

“There’s nothin’ connectin’ that room to the rest of the complex,” she said. “No power... no water or sewage... it’s like an island.”

“An island built for secrets. Can we get there?” asked Lori.

Scrap picked up the blueprint and studied it with Kris looking over his shoulder. “Yeah! If nothin’ blocks our way.”

“And nothing’s waiting for us,” said Jin.

The crew filed out of the room, all of them with their weapons ready except for Scrap, who was holding the blueprint and Patch who carried his doctor’s bag of equipment and an EMF reader.

The emergency power wasn’t enough to operate the elevators so they had to climb down the metal emergency stairs, their footsteps echoing about the empty halls.

“I think I’d prefer for there to be a few ghosts around,” Kris said, tightening her grip on the fully automatic M8Z rifle.

“What ghosts?” Lori replied, her revolver still in its holster. “Everyone died peacefully.”

“The Pax made them die at peace,” said Patch.

“Died *of* peace,” Jin said with a sarcastic tone.

“We’re here,” said Scrap.

He opened the door and they followed him into another hall identical to every other. The crew gathered around Scrap as he oriented their position to the blueprint. Finally he led them to the left, around a corner, down another hall, then left before another right.

As they traversed the last hall, nobody needed his directions any more. Even in the low, emergency lighting they could make out one door that looked different from the others. A door that, as they grew closer, they realized was damaged and burnt from fire. Jin and Patch worked together to force it open, and found beyond a room devastated by an explosion and fire. Melted piles of slag were all that remained of any computers that had once been there.

“They destroyed it when they were done,” said Jin.

Patch slowly collapsed to the floor.

## The Supernatural 'Verse

*This is what happened:*

*Some brave folks found out about a secret the Alliance was keeping and they broadcast it to the rest of us. Only problem was, the secret was so horrible many questioned its veracity. We did. So our captain, after finding enough clues, hatched a plan.*

*My name's Jin. It was my flying Echo Trail that got us dirtside on Miranda. Now we just have to find the truth, and figure out what to do with it.*

---

### *Episode 4: Bird Mad Girl*

---

\*

Day 1

\*

The view on Miranda was stunning, which made the atmosphere of death that hung over everything so much worse. The oppression of all the lost lives hanging in the air aggravated Kris's agoraphobia, such that she had to stare down at the ground while walking lest she become paralyzed. Still she saw the bodies scattered about the streets out of the corner of her eyes and it took all her strength not to vomit.

Eventually, she found the church that had been built in the midst of the largest city on the planet. It wasn't hard to find, a bell tower rose from the peak of the three story building. Three arched doorways beckoned with a beautiful stain-glass rose window above the center one. Squinting in the noon-day sun, Kris could make out the image of a heart with a torch rising from it and the middle encircled by thorns. She looked around and sighed. There were no bodies near the church, making her wonder if the Pax robbed faith from the people too or had the deaths not happened on a Sunday?

The door creaked a bit as she entered. Inside were tall columns and archways with more images of Jesus' heart. It was all still desolate though, not a single body in any of the pews. No one had come to pray or seek guidance? Kris walked to the confessional and checked that no body had been left in there on either side. Then she knelt.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned," she said. "It's been... too long since my last confession." Kris wished she had some water for her suddenly parched throat. "Sheng's soul is trapped this side of the veil and others suffer... all because of me. Father I..." Her voice trembled as she sought the proper words. "...I don't know how to save him." She took a deep breath. "I've found a crew that can help. They're smart and strong but... the 'Verse is so large. I... I feel despair gnawin' at my heart. I don't know what to do."

Kris sat among the silence until, drying the tear streaks on her cheek. Exiting the confessional, she saw the church's votive rack by the statue of Saint Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio. There were only a few empty spots where a candle had been burned and not replaced. Kris picked up one of the five centimeter tall candles. Holding it, she considered lighting it and leaving it on the altar in prayer for Sheng. But in the end, all she could do was to stuff it in her pocket.

Heading out, Kris saw the dedication plate by the door and paused. She looked closer. Much of the church was old fashioned in its design and construction but this was a touch-sensitive shift-display that was currently set to look like a traditional bronze plaque, even the raised lettering though her touch confirmed that it was an illusion – the surface was completely flat.

“*Pax tecum*, brothers and sisters.” The plaque vanished and was replaced by the image of a smiling, fifty-ish priest smiling on the steps of the church. Kris jumped and pulled her former husband’s gun, pointing it at the screen. “I would like to welcome you to the church of Saint Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio in the newly formed Diocese of Miranda,” the recording continued. “I am also pleased to announce that after centuries of stellar wandering, we will establish on Miranda a new terrestrial home for the Holy See. *Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos – misericordes oculos ad nos converte; – Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui, – nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.* Please stand by for an update from the Bishop of Blue Sun on the planned construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica.”

The recording was replaced by a screen that read ‘NO CORTEX CONNECTION FOUND’. Kris stared at it a moment before running out of the church as fast as possible.

The capital city’s largest hospital wasn’t too far from the church, so Kris was there in two minutes. The main doors remained open in mockery of what happened, as if the building knew patients needed to come there, but none ever would. Kris checked and there were no bodies or objects obstructing the doors. They were just... open.

The receptionist’s skeleton was still in her seat at the front desk where she had put her head down on her arms and never lifted it again. Two other bodies were in the foyer. One looked like he had fallen asleep in a chair then fallen out of it; the other was stretched out on the floor.

The doors back into the hospital proper were not locked, so Kris wandered down the halls, shouting for anyone’s attention. There were a few bodies here, but not as many as she expected. Sometimes one would be in the doorway to a room, another would still be in its bed. On a gurney in the hall she saw one body that was misshapen and hunchback-like. But when she drew closer, she realized it was the remains of a mother clutching a newborn child to her chest.

Kris ran down the hall as fast as she could, heedless of her surroundings and right into Patch’s arms.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Kris only just realized that she had been screaming the entire way. “This... place. Wrecks my agoraphobia.”

“Understandable,” Jin said, standing next to the doctor. He was wearing one of his usual, long-sleeved flannel shirts, but it was unbuttoned in the front and sleeves, showing his heavily bandaged chest and arm. “My darkest nightmares were never this bad.”

Patch steered her into the room he and Jin had been in. It was a wide, spacious cafeteria with numerous tables and chairs. Many said chairs were filled with corpses.

“What’re ya’ll doin’ here?”

They took her back to the kitchen area where she found a bag on a prepping table.

“He put me through a few tests,” said Jin.

“Had to make sure you’re all shiny,” said Patch. “Now we’re gettin’ supplies.”

“You’re robbin’ the dead?” Kris asked, letting a bit of contempt into her voice.

They exchanged a glance.

“Come here,” Patch said, leading her to a large window that looked out over the cafeteria. “See her?”

Kris looked where he was pointing at a table close to the kitchen, a corpse slumped on it.

“She died first. He,” Patch said, pointing to a second body two steps away, “was second in this room. Then it was those two, him, her, her, and him. That guy,” Patch said, pointing at the only body laying completely on a table, “was the last to die in here.”

Kris stared at the room. “They were... minutes apart?”

“No.”

“Hours?” she asked, looking at him.

He shook his head. “Days. From the first death to the last here, were ten days.” Patch grabbed a disposable cup and grabbed some water from a standing dispenser that was still three-quarters full. “Jin, what’d we figure?”

The pilot was lost in thought a moment. “Judging from patterns on the planet... everyone here died over a year.”

“A... year?”

Patch took a sip of water and held the cup out for Kris. “A year of watchin’ everyone die.”

She took the cup in shaking hands. “They saw... and did nothin’?”

“Some did,” said Jin. “We call them Reavers.”

She could only stare at the two of them.

“We think it’s why they go preferin’ live prey,” said Patch.

“Superstition, instinct, *Mi Tian Gohn* maybe they even have a gorram culture about it. The Reavers eat the living to transfer that life to themselves. They don’t bother the already dead for the same reason these here are untouched,” said Jin.

“They’re afraid,” said Kris. “They’re afraid of stoppin’.”

“Even rapin’,” said Patch. “Procreatin’ defies death; it creates new life. They act it out in violence to keep distance from... this.”

“Everything in defiance of laying down,” said Jin.

“To prove they’re alive,” said Kris.

They all stood there in silence – an understanding they didn’t want weighing upon them.

“This ain’t grave robbin’,” Patch finally said. “This is inheritance. Vengeance.”

“To prove we’re alive,” Kris said in a rueful tone.

Jin grabbed an arm full of preserved foodstuffs from a cabinet and shoveled it into the bag.

“Their ghosts ain’t objecting.”

“Don’t seem right,” said Kris as she hoisted herself up to sit on a counter, “even their spirits bein’ denied anger. Ya’ll think anyone did last rites?”

“Who would’ve?” asked Patch.

“There’s a church here. Catholics were lookin’ to make a new home.”

“You spotted any bodies with a collar?” asked Jin.

“No.”

“If they’re not out there, priests and bishops must be up there,” Jin said, pointing up. “Among their new kin.”

“Jin... I’m needin’ your help.”

The pilot gave her a questioning look.

“I found somethin’ and need your help gettin’ it.”

“Go,” said Patch. “I can finish up and carry this first haul alone.”

Jin nodded and started to leave.

“Kris!”

She stopped and turned around.

Patch tossed a coin at her and she barely caught it.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Our bet,” he answered. “Demons are real.”

Kris and Jin looked confused.

“The Alliance went and invented them.”

\*

nightfall

\*

Everyone gathered in the bridge around Kris's console with Scrap arriving last. Kris didn't bother sitting but pushed her chair out of the way so she could stand.

"We're here, what did you want?" asked Lori.

Kris took a deep breath, steadying her nerves so she didn't blurt everything out. "Jin, could you try callin' your son, please?"

Jin, standing behind her console, leaned over and punched in the commands to contact someone. After a few seconds working, the monitor at the end of Kris's station, closest to everyone else, read: 'NO CORTEX CONNECTION FOUND.'

"How's that... possible?" asked Scrap.

Kris pointed to a screen on the wall behind her where a section of jungle on the planet was blackened and scarred (although much had grown over the impact site). "The cortex satellite was shot down."

"CORSATs are designed to be durable," said Lori. "It should take a fleet to bring one down but neither side did durin' the war because they're too valuable to both."

"Exactly," said Kris. "So why's this world ain't got no linkage to the rest? Jin and I found out."

She gestured and Jin lifted up a knee-high blue and orange box.

"The CORSAT's memory dump?" asked Lori.

"Yes. Let's ask the CORSAT itself what happened." That was when everyone noticed the half dozen cables running from the box to the ship's systems. Kris hit some keys and a table of numbers and letters filled the screen before them.

"What are these?" asked Patch.

"As everyone is supposed to know, but often forgets, CORSATs provide more than a connection to the Cortex, they also provide flight telemetry," said Jin.

"That, is the list of every ruttin' boat that's been to Miranda and back," said Kris. She pointed at a column of numbers. "The ship's NAVSAT ID, date of contact by the system calendar, trajectory by galactic coordinates."

Lori leaned over to better study the scrolling chart. "These are all goin' to Miranda?"

Kris nodded. "And the ID matches colony ship registration with the occasional terraform supply."

"Consistent with a new world," said Jin. "Six weeks of activity, followed by a fortnight lull. Then another six weeks."

"Until here."

Everyone looked at the line Kris was pointing at.

"The last colony ship. Look closely at the next line."

"Over one-thousand days later. That next ship has a science ID," Jin explained as everyone examined the chart.

"The science boat Malcolm Reynolds fetched the Miranda Message from."

Everyone was silent.

"You're sure?" asked Lori.

"After we took your shuttle to the CORSAT crash site, we found that vessel," said Jin. "It's ID matched and was registered to the woman in the message."

"Plus... other signs."

"There's other numbers after it," said Patch.

Kris got that smile she always did when someone picked up on the point she was trying to make. "*Dui*. Almost four-hundred days after our science friend. Three boats arrive."

"Rim-world boats," Jin added. "What one might call, 'Independents.'"

“Two were from Shadow, the third from Verbena.”

“You’re sure?” asked Lori.

Kris looked at Jin who said, “The NAVSAT registry is simpler than most think. The first three digits represent what world it was registered on. Each world’s number is based on when it was finished terraformed and declared habitable. The next ten hexadecimal digits describe the ship itself with four digits for class, two for marks, and four digits for—”

“Jin,” Kris said, interrupting. “We get it. Yes captain, we’re mighty sure, though lookin’ to confirm when we re-git a Cortex connection.”

“What’s the next-to-last entry?” asked Patch.

“Alliance,” said Kris.

“Warship,” said Jin. “Same day as the others.”

“The last entry,” said Lori. “It’s one of the rim-world’s.”

“You notice the date,” Kris said as Lori’s expression hardened.

Patch checked the data line and his face became grave. “2506. When the unification war began.”

“The last ship sent a message home,” said Jin.

“The warship destroyed this CORSAT trying to stop the signal,” said Kris.

“Where did the message go?” Lori asked, though it was clear she already suspected.

Kris took a deep breath. “Shadow.”

“The world bombed by the Alliance,” said Patch.

“The ‘Verse’s only man-made blackrock,” said Lori. “Tell me you have a copy of it.”

Kris tapped a few keys.

On a screen on the wall, the image of a man in his late thirties appeared with bits of static sometimes distorting his features. “Pumpkin, I don’t have long,” said the man. “There’s a world out on the edge of the ‘Verse: Miranda. The Alliance has... done somethin’. I can’t explain but you have ta get the word out. They’re gonna kill us but everyone’s gotta know—”

On the screen they could see an explosion a split second before static ended the message.

“They started the war, to keep the secret,” said Lori.

Nobody felt like saying anything more.

\*

Day 2

\*

After a night’s rest, Scrap and Jin went to work with Lori fixing the ship. The two shot, cracking windows were replaced as well as some dents and missing panels on the ship’s underside, but the missing landing strut could only be partially fixed, they would have to get it repaired properly at a shop somewhere.

While they helped Lori on the ship, Kris and Patch returned to the hospital for things they needed inside. They grabbed what processed food was still preserved and edible along with drugs still potent. One entire crate was filled with only bandages and instruments. Despite her protests, Patch dragged Kris through the upper floors of the hospital where they found specialist sections as filled with corpses as any other part of the city, though even he refused to enter the area marked “maternity ward.”

“Were the sick the first to die?” Kris asked as she watched Patch push a corpse out of the way to raid a nurses’ station.

“Looks like,” he answered, pulling out the drawers on the equipment cabinet and tossing everything of value into the current container they were hauling. “No tellin’ how Pax affects the body’s healin’ – if it suppresses the immune system. They might have cried out and the staff no longer cared. They might have drifted off in silence.”

Kris shivered in the oppression of the hospital's silence. "This is what we fought, isn't it?"

Patch gave her a confused look.

"Us brown coats."

He looked down and seemed to notice the leather jacket he always wore for the first time.

"Right. Sorry, focused on the job."

"I don't know why you joined the fight but I... I didn't like the thought of faraway pols dictatin' the lives of those they've never seen. Sheng... my husband, thought they had more nefarious plans but I teased him as being paranoid. Yet even he didn't think the Alliance would be... this..." she trailed off, no longer able to find words.

"How did ya'll meet?"

A smile tugged at Kris's face as she remembered. "I was a technician in the war; he was in logistics. Which meant he ended up being a soldier just as often as he supplied them. The nature of our roles meant we kept intersectin' and..."

Patch gave her a moment of silence before he asked, "Did he die in the war?"

Kris shook her head. "No. We survived and so did our love. He was..."

"Taken by the things of the dark. The reason why you hunt."

"Somethin' like that."

Patch pulled out a drawer and chuckled. "A whole ream of disposable smart-paper," he said, holding up his find. "Scrap will appreciate that."

\*

Day 3

\*

*Echo Trail* rose up from the world on the dayline terminus, the light of Burnham glistening off its black hull. On the bridge, Kris monitored the systems, breathing a sigh of relief as the Black welcomed them back into its fold. Out here her agoraphobia wasn't a bother. She wasn't sure why; after all, it was nothing but infinite openness around them, but something about the sameness of the view made it feel closer to her. Sometimes when looking out at the stars, she could grasp how the ancients might have thought it was aether beyond the sky, not a void.

"We have a bite," Jin said, his eyes fixed on the radar.

"Big?" asked Lori.

"Little. Maybe... half a dozen bodies, maybe a dozen if they don't care about personal space."

"Kris, let Jack know we'll be runnin' late," said the captain. "Then join us in the back to prep. Show off again, Jin."

Kris typed out the message, hit send, and then headed back to the common room where Lori, Patch and Scrap were preparing weapons on top of the metal crates they had brought back from the hospital. "Preference?" Scrap asked as he loaded a semi-automatic pistol with hollow-point ammo that would tear a body apart but not break the hull.

"I'll take the rainin' special and machete," she answered, referring to the M8Z rifle they rarely had a need for and a blade as long as it.

Lori passed Kris the weapon then resumed checking on her favorite semi-auto shotgun, setting aside the magazine of salt shells for regular buck shot. Likewise her ammo sash was filled with regular buck shot and Kris bet her revolver in the holster on the sash was similarly loaded. Strapped to her thigh was a heavy knife.

Kris confirmed that the magazine on her weapon was full then started loading additional magazines. As she did so, she glanced at the rest of the crew.

Scrap, who hadn't trained enough for them to be comfortable with him armed, was left the pistol and his iron wrench.

Patch, as usual, had only his med kit and a black, thirty-eight centimeter stun baton. Kris had to admit that his pacifism to other people could be admirable, but right now it seemed suicidal.

The ship shuddered as Lori finished her third magazine and Kris ran out of ammo halfway on her second.

“That’d be Jin acceleratin’,” said Scrap.

“Scrap, guard the bridge, protect Jin. Don’t be shootin’ any of us,” ordered Lori. “Kris, take the hall cover, I’ll take engine cover, Patch, you’ve got the last.”

They barely got into position when the ship shuddered and there was a loud thunk sound from the ceiling.

“Got them in place!” Jin shouted over the intercom.

Sparks fell from the ceiling as a cutting tool bit into *Echo Trail* and Kris could see Lori visibly wince at the sight of her ship being damaged. The circle was roughly completed and that segment dropped to the floor with a Reaver behind it.

“Fire!” shouted Patch.

Kris switched her weapons to a three-round burst and squeezed the trigger, hitting the intruder center mass. The Reaver staggered back and fell down. It would be another minute before it died but its organs were damaged enough to keep it from threatening them.

They thought another would immediately follow but instead a small cylinder dropped. The three of them ducked behind their respective covers. Instead of an explosion, they heard a hissing sound.

“Gas!” Lori said as the white smoke spilled out.

“On it!” Patch replied. His cover was near the wall panel devoted to the atmo system and the melted slag of the shroud. He slid back the transparent plastic cover and set to work.

Kris watched the smoke as it billowed out, giving their visitors adequate cover. Her finger tightened on the trigger. Should she lay down some cover fire? Her ammo was thin with only seventy-two remaining rounds.

“Hold!” said Lori.

By now the smoke had reached the ceiling and was spreading out. Kris thought she saw a shape move within. Lori, thinking the same thing, fired off a round from her shotgun but there was no sound of impact.

“Patch...” Kris said before coughing as the smoke started to reach them, confirming that it was tear gas.

“Why am I in charge of this?” he asked in exasperation.

The captain also started coughing, and Kris could see the line of the aiming laser she had affixed to the gun shining through the smoke. It stopped on something solid a second before a large Reaver, wider than Jin, lunged from the cloud. Lori fired but the buckshot only hit its leg before its tackled her.

Another Reaver, just a little smaller than Kris, barreled into Patch’s back, stabbing the back of his leg with a wicked dagger. She tried to shoot it off him but the doctor’s falling body precluded it.

That was when she saw the shape looming toward her. Kris wasn’t able to bring the gun around before the Reaver knocked her back. She held the gun crossways, keeping its knife just out of reach when she felt teeth bite into her leg, just above the boot. Grunting in pain, Kris felt for the machete, as she tried to hold back the Reaver whose weight was winning over her adrenaline fueled muscles. Her hand closed around the grip and she brought up the weapon, but the angle and her watery eyes kept her from proper leverage and she succeeded in cutting the left side of the Reaver’s face down to the skull.

The blow seemed only to encourage it as the creature let out a strange mix of laughter and howling as it began rhythmically thrusting against her – its roughened clothing doing an adequate job of slowly tearing hers.

“Got it!” shouted Patch and the ship shook as the vents engaged and cycled the tear gas away from the upper deck. A second later she heard the screams of him and what must have been a female Reaver and she knew he was out of the fight.

Kris shut her eyes and let go of the gun, feeling it fall on her chest. With her left, she reached up. The Reaver was leaning towards her and she felt her fingers strike its eyes as it tried biting her thumb. Neither of them cared. Her fingers felt a metal ring that had been set around its cheekbone and she grabbed it and pulled with all of her might at the same time her right hand swung the machete as best she could. Using both hands, she drove the blade into the Reaver’s neck, its warm blood spilling on her chest, until she felt it hit its spinal column.

She rolled the Reaver to the right, off her, as its body shook with death throes. Picking the gun back up, she kept her eyes closed, aiming blind by the other one’s biting of her leg. She squeezed the trigger, firing three rounds. The biting sensation stopped, but she could still feel its grip on her boot, so she fired again.

Her boot was released as the ship violently shuddered as if caught in a sudden earthquake.

“Scrap, now!” she heard Lori say right before the roaring air of a deck decompression filled their ears. Kris pressed herself flat against the deck, feeling the tug of the escaping air a second before it all suddenly stopped.

“Hey *Echo Trail*, I hope we didn’t miss the party!” said a voice over the intercom.

Kris sat up, rubbing her eyes and coughing. Scrap was in the middle of the bay, under a plastic emergency sealant covering the hole the Reavers had cut in. Near him Jin had a body pinned under him, its skull crushed between his left fist and the deck. Lori was leaning against the port wall, the gory remains covering the deck and crate in front of her. By the atmo controls, Patch lay partially entangled with another Reaver, both of them convulsing a bit from the electrical force of the stunner in the doctor’s hand.

Lori reached up to the intercom on the wall above her and brought the mic down to where she could talk. “Jack Paper,” she said, her voice hoarse from the tear gas, “you are a beautiful human bein’.”

“Heat regs showed a few more guests waiting in that boat stuck on you. What did you let them in for?” asked the voice they assumed belonged to Jack.

“Come on over, let us thank you proper, and you’ll find out,” Lori said with much gratitude.

“I’ll bring the beer.”

Jack Paper’s ship was a modified Bernard class boat he christened the *Rascal Puff*. It wasn’t quite as long as *Echo Trail* but was taller with three decks and heavier with more mass devoted to greater fire and engine power. The airlocks for both ships were on their starboard sides, so in order for their engines to work together, the captains opted to rotate the *Rascal Puff* upside down relative to the *Echo Trail*. Though it made for a bit of a challenge when the crews had to visit the other ship.

Jack ran his ship with only two other crew. His medic, Claudia Fong refused to work in *Echo Trail* so Kris found herself being hauled over to the *Rascal Puff* along with Patch and Lori. Jack joined them while Kim volunteered to stay and help clean up and repair *Echo Trail* with Scrap and Jin.

Lori had only superficial wounds and was cleared after a quick cleaning and shot of anti-infectives. She stayed and watched as Kris was similarly treated after her wounds had been washed and bandaged. It took a bit longer before Patch was awakened and when he was, Kris was actually surprised he didn’t make a corny joke about Heaven as Claudia seemed to be his type (that is, female and alive).

“I’ve given your right leg a paralyzing agent and you the full range of infection blockers. You’ll need to keep weight off that leg,” Claudia said as Patch sat up.

“Beauty and medical trainin’? If I weren’t in love with you I’d swear we was siblings,” Patch said, his best charming smile on display while Kris and Lori rolled their eyes and Jack laughed.

“Mikey, don’t know if you’ve met them yet, but this is captain Jack Paper and his medic, Claudia Fong,” said Lori.

“What brings our paths crossin’?”

“They regularly work in Reaver space. I asked them to cover our backs.”

“A pleasure and *pleasure* to meet you,” Patch said to Jack and Claudia respectively. “We got any word on our prize?”

“She’s bound and restrained in the Chop Shop,” said Lori. “No harm beyond the shock you both suffered.”

“Consequence of usin’ a stunner while they’re touchin’ you,” said Patch. “Well, Ms. Fong, care to join my efforts?”

“And they are...?” she asked.

“Let’s go cure a Reaver.”

Claudia shook her head but she helped him stand up, handed him a crutch to use, and then accompanied him towards the airlock.

“Lots of eyes watching this sky nowadays,” said Jack once the three of them were alone. In his late twenties or early thirties, the other captain was a handsome man with black hair cut into a flat top. His attire was a bright, hunter-orange EVA suit custom close fit enough to show his body well-muscled yet thin and honed. “First I play *Xin Shi* for Reynolds, then babysitter for you. What’s going on?”

Neither lady said anything.

“You found it too, didn’t you,” said Jack. “The message Reynolds shoved down everyone’s throats.”

“We vindicated him, yes,” said Lori. “And worse.”

Jack looked at both of them. “Something that made both of you nearly kill yourselves just to get a *Ri Shao Gou Shi Bing* Reaver to play with?”

They both nodded.

“Show me.”

“Bring your beer,” said Kris.

After repeating the same spiel that she had given the crew, Kris left the two captains on the bridge to talk things over. Stopping by her quarters, Kris grabbed her Bible and rosary before heading out. She passed by Scrap and Jin who were standing around the remains of the shroud, talking with the *Rascal Puff*’s pilot, Kim Lu. She was a petite woman of Asian ancestry her height and age appeared to be close to Scrap’s. From the look of it, he was trying to impress her and Jin was doing his best as Scrap’s wingman. Kris chuckled to herself and quietly wished the boy luck as she descended the stairs and walked to the Chop Shop.

Inside Patch was leaning back against the counter (to keep the weight off his leg), reading through files the other doctor had loaned him. Claudia was leaning forward on the counter, Patch’s own work spread out before her. Strapped by its arms and legs to the main operating bed, a leather gag over its mouth, lay the captured Reaver – a set of chains also tying its limbs to the deck. Kris quietly sat down on a stool tucked in a corner on the opposite side of the room from them.

“All this time ya’ll never did any work on ‘em?” asked Patch.

“We didn’t know what caused Reaverism,” said Claudia. “When we first started, I made sure they had nothing transmittable.”

Patch looked at her with a questioning look.

She shook her head. “Nothing beyond the usual germ mix. After that, I worried more about helping people. The Pax... I never even...”

“Thought the Alliance might do somethin’ like this,” said Patch.

Claudia stared at the files in front of her. “Lot of you Browncoats must be preparing the mother of all ‘I-told-you-so’s.”

Patch glanced up at Kris. “Right now let’s just focus on findin’ a cure. Though that’d be easier had I gotten a pure Pax sample.”

“You couldn’t?”

“Atmo complex wrecked. Records fried. Nothin’.”

“Guess we’re doing this the old fashioned way.”

“Can I help?” asked Kris.

Claudia turned around, noticing the newcomer for the first time. “She your nurse?”

“Justa concerned crewmate,” answered Kris as she washed her hands and forearms.

“Put this on,” said Patch, handing her a surgical mask.

“What’s that smell?”

“A menthol rub,” Patch answered before putting on his own mask.

“Trust us,” said Claudia, “the stench will be horrific.”

They began the examination, Patch taking the Reaver’s right side while Claudia stood on its left. Its shoes had been removed before it was strapped down, revealing calloused and scarred soles, and its toenails were worn down to nubs. Using scissors, the two doctors cut the Reaver’s pants, working upward on the leg, exposing various scars and festering cuts.

“Stapled open wound on the right thigh,” said Patch.

“It’s... stapled open?” Claudia asked in disbelief.

Patch nodded to a pair of pliers on the tool tray and Kris handed them to him. With a bit of effort, he pulled out a large, metal staple. “It’s an incision about... thirty-eight, thirty-nine millimeters. Skin’s tore up from the cut and folded back.” Patch fell silent as something caught his eye. Taking the pliers, he leaned over and began digging into the wound. Second later, he straightened up, pulling out a scalpel dripping with bodily fluids.

“It... concealed a weapon inside its own flesh?” Kris asked, doing her best not to throw up.

“Do we need to amputate?” asked Claudia.

“Wound’s infected, but looks like with so much the diseases are hinderin’ each other,” answered Patch.

Claudia handed him a bottle of disinfectant and he sprayed liberally on the wound as he removed the rest of the staples holding the skin away from the wound. “We need a stem culture,” he said as he worked.

“But living in the radiation of those ships has damaged its cells too much,” Claudia said, moving the Reaver’s leg so they could see some of the sores covering it. “We could desiccate its entire body before we found a viable cell group.”

“We’re lackin’ in rad-drugs. You got some in your fancy lab?” Patch asked as he finished removing the staples, brought the skin together, and applied a liquid bandage.

“Is that enough?” Kris asked about the leg wound.

“For now.”

“I brought some with me before we started,” Claudia said as she pulled out a vial from her med bag.

“We’ll be needin’ to treat this a few more times,” answered Patch. “With the radiation compromisin’ its immune system, we’ll be weeks fixin’ the body, much less undoin’ the Pax.”

Claudia injected the drug into the Reaver's neck and they resumed their examination. The belt holding the pants on the creature seemed to be made from a mix of dried human entrails and a variety of wires. It was nearly a minute before they were able to sever it.

"She's a girl," remarked Kris.

"Lack of hair consistent with radiation poisonin'," said Patch.

"Defecations confirm gastrointestinal distress brought on by radiation exposure," said Claudia. "There also appears to be severe vaginal tearing."

"Think it gave birth?" asked Patch.

"*Rung Tse Song Di Ching Dai Wuo Tzo*," gasped Kris. "A baby in... that hellhole."

"Which would be worse?" asked Claudia. "Killed in... their manner seconds after birth."

"Or actually survivin' and bein' raised by them," Patch finished.

Kris had to go stand by the sink as she felt like her stomach couldn't survive much more.

"Look at this scar on the abdomen," Claudia said, presumably once she also got her nausea under control.

Patch moved the Reaver's shirt up to get a better look. "Left hip to right waist. Could be self-inflicted."

"Self-administered c-section?" asked Claudia.

"Battle wound?" Patch leaned over and examined it closer. "Shallow cut – healed on its own."

"Think we should reopen it?"

"I'd vote after we got the rest of it healed."

They fell silent as Kris heard them resume work, this time cutting the shirt off. Confident she could handle it now, she returned to the middle of the room to see that by now the only clothes remaining on the Reaver were a few tatters stuck in the restraints.

"Right breast mutilated," noted Patch, "skin pulled in a six-sided... looks like a tribal pattern."

Claudia gave a hollow laugh. "You really think Reavers have tribes?"

Patch considered it. "Maybe their version of ship insignias?"

"Or faith," said Kris.

Both doctors looked at her not as if she was crazy, but as if she was right – and that was scarier.

"Other scars on the torso. May be self-inflicted; may be from battle," said Patch.

Claudia looked back down at her work. "Another wound held open – on the left forearm."

"That bone?" asked Patch.

"Down to it," Claudia answered. Pointing at her bag she told Kris, "Can you get out my magnifier?"

"What's that holdin' it open?" asked Patch.

Claudia leaned down for a better look. "Small metal bar or rod. Going by its jagged point and gleam I bet it tore this off something recently and stabbed it into the muscle tissue here. Judging from the scars on the pronator quadratus muscles, it's done this several times."

"Why?" Kris asked as she handed the magnifier to Claudia.

"Maximize the pain," the doctor answered. She then used the glass to examine the wound in more detail. "As I thought, the radius bone near the wrist here has been broken and set multiple times as well."

"How do you want to do it, doctor?" asked Patch.

Claudia stared at the wound. "We'll have to rebreak it and properly set it. ...Let's remove the foreign objects and set up total parenteral nutrition. After a day or two of the body being nourished, it should be capable of proper healing."

"Alright, let's take a look at its head before it wakes up."

"Doctors..." said Kris. "She's been awake."

Both of them looked at the Reaver's face for probably the first time since they came to the infirmary. A cut ran from above its right eye down the left side of its nose almost to its mouth. The skin had then been peeled back, one bit stapled above its left eye. At another point, a large metal ring wrapped around its cheekbone and through the skin. Its red-rimmed eye glared at them, not with raging fury, but predatory patience.

"Why'd she blind one eye?" asked Kris.

"All the Reavers we've run into and it's rare to see any reason or pattern to their self-mutilations," said Claudia.

"It's right-handed," Patch said as he shined a light into the Reaver's eye.

"What?" asked Kris.

"Pupil reaction is... Answerin' your question, Kris: this Reaver's right-handed. Shoots and attacks from the right. It damaged what it could reach best, but left what it needed to hunt."

"Parts of its left ear have been cut off," Claudia said as she finished her side of the examination. "Doctor, what were you saying about the pupil reaction?"

"It's there but... off," Patch said, rubbing the front of his face-mask in thought. "Partial brain damage or side effect of the Pax?"

"A good question," Claudia said as she removed the staple above the Reaver's eyebrow and then looked for a tool to cut the ring. "Miss..."

"Argento," Kris answered when she realized Claudia was talking to her.

"Miss Argento, do you have a small rotary saw on the ship? Something for close, precision cutting?" asked Claudia.

Kris nodded.

"Help me clean this exposed tissue," she heard Claudia tell Patch as she left the Chop Shop.

Kris dashed to the room next to her quarters that they had converted into her workshop, shedding her operating gloves as she went. By the time she returned, it looked like the doctors had cut out most of the gangrene tissue and were disinfecting the exposed areas of the Reaver's face.

"Shouldn't that hurt?" Kris asked, handing the tool to Claudia before going over to the sink to wash again.

"Like Hell, but not even a twitch from our guest," Patch answered, handing her another pair of gloves. "Its nose is messed up too. We'll be needin' to fix it at some point."

Claudia swabbed the tool with alcohol and plugged it in. "You two hold its head still."

"I don't reckon she'll hurt us none," said Kris.

"No, we don't want it hurtin' itself," Patch said as he handed a cold, wet towel to Kris before grabbing the Reaver's chin and forehead.

"Put it on its face," said Claudia.

Kris lay the towel on as best as she could and held it in place as she gripped it and the sides of the Reaver's head.

Sparks flew from where the tool cut into the ring, a few hitting Kris's bare arm but she ignored them, thankful the towel was at least keeping their patient unsinged.

Once Claudia was finished cutting, Kris asked, "Is there any way..."

"Nope," the doctor said, taking the towel and dabbing the ends of the cut to cool the metal. "This will not be pleasant."

Kris turned away and shut her eyes. So close to the end, she tried not to let the the sound disgust her, but her stomach could take no more.

After what felt like hours throwing up everything she had ever eaten, Kris felt a cool, wet cloth pressed against her forehead and a gentle, soothing rubbing on her back. “How long?” she asked once she was reasonably assured she had control of her guts.

“Less than a minute,” said Patch.

Kris groaned.

“No worries. We all went through it the first time.”

She let out a laugh that collapsed into a coughing fit. “Even you?”

“First dissection? I threw up so much I had to be put on a fluid drip for a few hours.”

“No foolin’?”

“No foolin’.”

Kris smiled and straightened up. “Any other way for me to help?”

“Claudia’s just about got the total parenteral nutrition set up. Then we’ll clean, disinfect, and bandage all the smaller wounds on our patient.”

Claudia had just finished setting up the IV stand when they entered the infirmary. She nodded at a wash basin and disinfectant soap sitting on the counter.

“I’ll do this,” said Kris.

“What?” asked Claudia.

“I’ll do the minor stuff. Ya’ll need to be workin’ on curin’ the Pax.”

The two doctors looked at each other and Patch shrugged.

“Clean as much as you can, safely,” Claudia said as she and Patch removed their masks and gloves. “Once it’s scrubbed, fix what minor scrapes and cuts you can.”

“Disinfectants and liquid bandages are here,” Patch said, pointing to a tray he set up on the counter. “Call us when the TPN bag runs out.”

Kris nodded as the two doctors left the infirmary. They closed the door behind them and when Kris heard it lock, she realized: of course they couldn’t risk the prisoner overpowering her and escaping. She was stuck, inside, alone with a monster. A monster they barely had any hope of fixing. One that might take a few lives as they tried.

\*

Day 4

\*

“How are you doin’?”

“Captain!” Kris jumped to her feet, the rosary still in her hands.

“Easy,” Lori said, smiling as she put a hand on Kris’s shoulder. “Have you slept in your room since we picked up our guest?”

Kris noticed more than a few strands of Lori’s hair were disheveled. “Have *you*?”

The Captain’s face darkened. “Jack and I lead dangerous lives.”

“And he’s not unhandsome.”

Lori chuckled. “Surprised you’re not lecturin’ me on my sinful ways.”

Kris turned toward the bed in the Chop Shop. “One battle at a time, ma’am.”

They had covered the Reaver in a white sheet for a bit of modesty, though blood and bile from a few of her still-healing wounds stained it here and there. She remained restrained, but her eyes watched them.

“Has it slept?” asked Lori.

“She.”

“What?”

“The Reaver is a she.”

Lori looked at their prisoner. “I’m not so sure, yet.”

“Maybe not, but I’m hopin’ treatin’ her like one’ll help the process.”

“Let’s talk to ‘her’ then.”

They approached the head of the bed.

“What happened to her ear?” Lori, standing on the Reaver’s left, asked.

“One of her self-mutilations,” said Kris.

The gag had been tied around the headboard so the Reaver couldn’t move her head either. Kris carefully unbuckled the leather strap and pulled it out of the Reaver’s teeth.

Even with the restraint gone, the Reaver lay there, her eyes shifting from Lori to Kris and back.

“You have a name?” asked Lori.

Silence.

“Can you understand us?”

“Can you speak?” asked Kris.

Silence.

“I’ll help you reapply the gag,” said Lori.

“No I… want to give her a chance,” said Kris.

Lori nodded and gestured for Kris to follow her outside.

Once out of the infirmary, Lori shut the door and whispered, “You don’t have to do this.”

Kris shook her head. “Yes. I do.”

“It may not be curable.”

“*She* deserves every chance.”

“We’ll give them to her,” Lori said before hugging Kris. “Just wish you’d keep your gun in there.”

Kris shrugged and went back into the Chop Shop. She sat down on the stool she’d set up in the corner and pulled up a map of the entire ‘Verse. Starting in the distant quadrant they currently flew through, she began running infection simulations.

Kris jolted awake and grabbed the pistol she hung on her wall over her bed. The gun was a Moses Brothers Self-Defense Engine Warzone Model D that her husband had picked up during the war. He grew so fond of it he eventually got a custom molded grip for his own right hand. Though his hands had been larger than hers, she always felt a bit of comfort when she held it, like their fingers were interlocked again. Except this time it felt… wrong, like the finger grooves were sized perfectly for her instead of a bit larger. In fact, she wasn’t quite sure how she had ended up in her own bed, or when. Keeping the gun in hand, she slid out of bed and pulled on her pants.

In the hall, *Echo Trail*’s internal lights flickered while the sad groan of an overworked atmo system echoed through the hull. There was no sign of anyone on the bridge so she headed aft, noticing that the doors to each room were ajar. When she reached the upper cargo bay, Kris gasped.

On her right, Jin’s cut up body was hanging from a noose over the stairs to the lower deck. To her left, Lori’s body was draped over the dining table with her head resting upright on the floor. A few steps in, she found what remained of Patch and Claudia mutilated and entangled like some cruel mockery of lovers’ embrace.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Kris tried to cry out but couldn’t. Across the bay, stood the Reaver. She was wearing clothes pulled from the corpses of her crewmates. Her left arm held Scrap against her, while her right held a wickedly curved Reaver weapon.

“Wha shoul’ I ‘o to tha boy?” she said with effort as if her tongue was missing. She brought the weapon close to his neck. “Kill him?” She leaned close as if to seductively kiss his ear, only to bare her teeth and tear it off. “Make him a man?” she said over Scrap’s screams of pain.

“Stop it!” Kris shouted as she pulled the trigger. The gunshots echoed through the ship, but the Reaver remained standing. Kris wondered a moment whether it had ignored her bullets or if the gun somehow had none.

“None will save you,” hissed the Reaver, suddenly close to her.

Kris tried to attack but her legs were racked with pain and she collapsed. Looking down, she saw her right foot was gone, and her left leg ended at the knee.

“You’ll ‘ie slow,” the Reaver said as she leaned over Kris’s fallen form. “Watch what I ‘o to tha boy. Then you’ll ‘ie.” She spread Kris’s legs apart and knelt suggestively between them, moving the weapon’s shaft closer. “*Or maybe we’ll make you one of us...*”

Kris awoke, nearly falling from the stool she had dozed off on. She was still in the infirmary and on the operating bed, so was the Reaver, who was staring at her with bared teeth.

“Were you tellin’ me what you’re plannin’?” Kris asked as she got up and went over to the sink.

As she was washing her face with some cold water, Kris heard a raspy voice say, “All will fall.”

Kris spun around, beads of water clinging to her face. “You can talk.”

The Reaver lay there, staring with her bloodshot eye.

“That was you, wasn’t it? Speakin’ while I slept, steerin’ my dreams.”

The Reaver lay there, staring with her bloodshot eye.

“Say somethin’!”

The Reaver lay there, staring with her bloodshot eye.

Kris turned back to the sink. Had the Reaver interfered with her dreams? Or was it just a nightmare cooked up by her strained mind? Had she really heard the voice or was it also a falsehood constructed from her exhausted brain?

She turned on the water, again washing her face.

“Lie ‘own.”

“No!” Kris cried, slamming the water off and stumbling back. She turned around but the Reaver just lay there, staring with her bloodshot eye. Maybe... Kris had mistaken the sounds of the water spilling into the drain as something like words.

She looked at the infirmary door. Lori had locked it back when she left. Kris could maybe call someone on the ship’s intercom to let her out, so she could go to her own quarters and get some rest...

Kris looked at the girl laying on the operating chair. This time not at the single eye that stared unceasingly at her, but at the other side of her face. At the flap of skin loosely placed back so healing could start, yet not ready to be fitted and sewn properly into place. At the chunk of cartilage that hung from the side of her head in a mangled mockery of the ear. At the patch placed over the left eye while it healed. Kris looked at the head which had been rendered bald from untold years soaked in radiation and the tiny nubs of hair that were starting to grow back as her body received medicine and nutrients.

Somewhere under there was a soul that needed saving. Maybe this time she could succeed where she had failed with Sheng.

\*

Day 5

\*

The two crews were seated around *Echo Trail*’s table since it was the only one big enough to accommodate them. Both captains sat at the heads of the table. Claudia and Kim sat on Jack’s right and left respectively. Patch was sitting on the other side of Claudia, papers and books cluttered between them, while Scrap was next to Kim, so they could talk to each other quietly. Beside Lori, Kris and Jin filled out the rest of the table.

Once the main course was consumed, Jack leaned back from the table and asked, “How goes the cure effort?”

Claudia's sigh answered him before she spoke. "Terrible. We haven't yet isolated the Pax from the Reaver's blood or any of the soil and plant samples Patch brought."

"And even if we did," Patch said, removing his glasses, "we'd still be needin' to figure the molecular structure of it and why that interacts with point-one percent of the population while anesthetizin' the rest."

"Then we should move onto the other factor," said Lori.

"The truth," explained Jack.

"The CORSAT data?" asked Scrap. "What we doin' with it? Beam it all over the 'Verse like Captain Reynolds?"

Kris stared at her plate of barely touched food. "Ain't gonna work."

Everyone at the table looked at her.

"Why?" asked Lori.

"They'd call it a fake – a lie set up by the Independents," said Kris.

"Why wouldn't they do that with what we have now?" asked Jack.

"The data'd be verified as untampered and from a CORSAT."

"How?" asked Lori.

Kris took a deep breath. "Every CORSAT has a unique digital signature – it's like a fingerprint."

"And what we have... has the fingerprint of the downed satellite?"

Kris nodded.

"How would they know we didn't tamper with it?" asked Jack.

"Corruption in the fingerprint shows up in specific patterns if the data is tampered with."

"Can't we broadcast this with its 'fingerprint'?" asked Jin.

"Because..." Kris picked up an uneaten food cube from her plate. "This is a simplified analogy, shiny? I'm here at one end of the 'Verse. Over there, at the other end, is Jack." Kris held up the food cube. "Pretend this is somethin' like a message I'll be sendin' to him. So I 'broadcast' this to Lori, who is my nearest CORSAT." Kris handed the cube to her captain. "That message's now got her 'fingerprint' on it. Jack ain't in range so she passes it to the next closest CORSAT: Jin." Lori handed the cube to her pilot. "When it passed, the message lost her fingerprint and gained his. When he sends it to Scrap..." Jin handed off the cube. "Same thing. Until it reaches Jack."

"So if we sent it out," said Jack, "it wouldn't have the 'fingerprint' of the lost CORSAT we recovered, but that of the last CORSAT which processed the message."

Kris gave him a thumbs up.

The table was silent as everyone processed this information.

"Why did the Alliance destroy it?" asked Scrap.

"What else'd they do?" asked Kris.

"Wipe its memory? Leave it floating in space?"

"Wouldn't do any good," Kim said, the first time Kris had ever heard the pilot's voice.

"Right. What makes the Cortex... the Cortex is its resilience," Kris added.

"Should anything happen to a CORSAT—" the pilot continued.

"Virus, data corruption, solar flare," said Kris.

"They just command the satellite to wipe everything and reboot."

"After it's back up, the satellite connects to every other CORSAT it can and get the operatin' protocols."

"With this, a new satellite can be developed to replace an old one with minimum system prep. The Cortex just installs the protocols as soon as the new satellite is deployed, just like if somethin' happened to the old."

Lori held up her hand for a moment of silence. “How then could they maintain the ‘fingerprint’ system?”

“It’s created by the CORSAT’s physical structure,” said Kim. “Anything reaching its system will end up with that fingerprint. To change the fingerprint one would have to dismantle and rebuild the entire thing.”

“Wait... someone can command this “wipe and restore” from anywhere?” asked Scrap.

“It’s common and easy enough the process is almost always automated,” answered Kris.

“Fascinating, but what does it all have to do with destroying the Miranda CORSAT?” asked Jack.

“Had they done so,” said Kim, “its systems would have been restored in minutes.”

“Records ain’t gonna matter then,” said Kris. “Miranda would’ve stayed connected to the ‘Verse and people could see for themselves it ain’t no black rock.”

“They could also see for themselves the truth about Reavers,” Jin noted.

“*Her Pung Tuo Chu* it all makes sense,” said Jack.

“What?” asked Lori.

“Why... I had to play relay for Captain Reynolds to reach Mr. Universe. Why nobody ever sees the Reavers coming. Why the Reavers seem to pick their prey at random. This corner of the ‘Verse is blind, you can’t see anyone not right in front of you.”

“Reavers have to wait on pickin’ a target until they get in more civilized areas,” added Lori.

“What if they’d erased the CORSAT and then shot it down?” asked Scrap.

“The restoration window is too small,” Kim answered. “The copying CORSATs would have been in the middle of the restoration process when the signal would be lost, triggering an alarm.”

“They couldn’t wait ‘til the restoration sequence was finished neither,” said Kris. “After such the Cortex maintains active monitorin’ of the satellite for a while just in case the incident causin’ the mishap happens again.”

“And had they waited even longer until after that, their chances of gettin’ caught would have increased,” noted Lori.

“No, it was perfect,” said Jack. “Bury all records of what happened on a planet surrounded by the most insane, bloodthirsty guards of the Black. Who could get them?”

“They may have even hoped the Reavers might destroy the remains of the CORSAT and science ship,” said Jin.

“So now what? We goin’ around to every person in the whole gorram ‘Verse to show ‘em what we found?” asked Patch.

“Not exactly...” said Kris. “We can copy the drive. The fingerprint will transfer, but be corrupted a bit.”

“If we copy those?” asked Patch.

“Each generation will corrupt the fingerprint more and more. It’s how experts can authenticate it and how far it is from the original.”

“How many ‘generations’ can we get from the CORSAT drive?” asked Jack.

“Depends on the CORSAT,” answered Kim. “Probably four to six.”

“*Tian Di Wu Yohn* it’s the great-’Verse-chain-letter,” said Jin.

“Worse,” said Kris. “I’ve been runnin’ simulations of handin’ off copies of the drive like if it were an infection.”

“An ‘infection’ that could spark a war,” noted Patch.

“And that’s been the usual result.”

“So it’s war or ignorance and injustice,” Lori said, raising her glass of alcohol. “What do we choose?”

The table was silent.

\*

Day 6

\*

“Wha ‘o you pray to?”

Kris snapped out of her thoughts. Had she been praying? On her lap, her Bible was open on the Psalms and her rosary was clutched so tightly her white knuckles shook. She had been reading, but only the same passage over and over as if her mind refused to grasp the words. Or had her new “roommate” meant in the general instead of just now? “God.”

The Reaver, both of her eyes fixated on Kris, laughed in a hollow, raspy tone, her gaze never wavering. “Why? He never answers.”

“Oh but He does,” Kris said as she stood up and stepped over to the operating bed. “We just ain’t always seein’ them.”

“You pray for me?”

“I do.”

“Weak. Shoul’ kill me now.”

“We ain’t gonna,” Kris said, placing her hand on the Reaver’s shoulder. “We’re gonna fix you.”

“Why?” the Reaver screamed, straining at her shackles and causing Kris to yank her hand back.

“Because...”

“Not for me. Is for yourself. Cut ‘n shape ‘n make the way you want! Not about me. You! All about you! ‘ike ‘god!’ ‘ike Alliance!”

Kris trembled with rage and shame as she shut her eyes, unable to bear the Reaver’s unrelenting gaze. She tried to calm herself with her rosary, only to realize she had left it back on the counter next to where she was sitting. “We want to fix you.”

“The Alliance wante’ to ‘fix’ us too! More of the same! More of the same! Toys for you to play with!”

Kris took a deep breath. Opening her eyes, she stared right back at the Reaver. “This ain’t what you’re supposed to be.”

“How do you know?”

“God don’t want you like this!”

“Then where was he!” the Reaver screamed at the top of her lungs.

Kris paused.

“Where was he when the child wouldn’t wake from her desk? Where was he when the husband and wife no longer loved? Where was he when his priests fell on his altar? Where is he when we cull the weak? Where is he when we tear families apart? Where is he WITH YOUR CURE?”

“He gives us freedom to make choices,” Kris said quietly. “It’s not His fault if we abuse His gifts.”

“Toys. We but toys to an angry kid.”

Kris rubbed her eyes. “Don’t worry. When you’re well I ain’t gonna hold this against you none.”

“Not broke.”

Kris looked at the Reaver.

“You broke. We fixe’.”

“How?”

“Miranda show truth. She kill the weak. She wake the strong. Miranda is god.”

A timer in the infirmary started buzzing loudly, causing Kris to jump. She turned her back to the laughing Reaver and began preparing a dose of radiation treatment like the doctors had showed her.

“‘on’t lie ‘own,” she heard the Reaver say. “‘on’t lie ‘own. ‘on’t lie ‘own.”

She repeated the mantra over and over as Kris injected the drug, changed the TPN bag, and went back to her Bible. Kris started to mutter the Ave Maria but found herself saying “Don’t lie down,” in unison with the Reaver. Setting her rosary on the counter, Kris searched for a passage to read, the Reaver’s voice droning on.

\*

Day 7

\*

All they ever had were the protein/vitamin mix. Kris stared at the rows and rows of process, preserved and canned foods they had in store. She was so sick of the *Feh Feh Pi Goh*, what she wouldn’t do for some fresh fruits and vegetables... or meat. That’s what she really wanted. Some cow or dog or almost anything else would do, just something where she couldn’t taste every gorrain preservative in it.

At the dining table in the upper bay, Scrap and Kim Lu were sitting next to each other, talking quietly. Kris momentarily felt a pang of jealousy that her admirer had found someone else, but the two “kids” were cute together. The way he was so slowly inching closer while she kept tucking her hair behind her ear, exposing her cheek as if inviting a kiss. It reminded Kris of long gone happier times.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs was like a hammer striking her brain. Kris closed her eyes and took a few calming breaths. Something about the smell or sound told her that it was Lori that had climbed to the top deck. She opened her eyes and saw that she was right. “Barely seen ya. Jack wearin’ ya out?”

Lori gave a dismissive laugh as she pulled out a can of Blue Sun coffee and started a pot of it. “We’ve barely... I mean, he and I have been too busy figurin’ out what to do with that info you found... We just fall asleep after workin’. In the same room but... nothin’ more.” Lori turned around and saw her tech for the first time in day or two. “*Wo Bu Shin Wo Dah Yan Jing*, Kris. Have you slept at all?”

She shook her head as she ran her fingers through her hair. “I try but... keep seein’ things.”

“Get out of the Chop Shop. Leave the Reaver to itself.”

“It’s not jus’ her,” Kris said, refusing a cup from Lori. “Alone in my room I see... the bodies. And then I don’t want to lie down.”

“I understand. Do you, now?”

Kris nodded. “Those who did this, should be hunted down like any other ghost or monster. I’m goin’ to see how the doctors’re doin’,” Kris said as she left the bay for the *Rascal Puff*.

Her headache seemed to ease as she left other people behind and the eerie quiet of the ship docked against them surrounded her. Adjusted to the flipped gravity, Kris exited the ship’s airlock, entering the ten meter square cargo bay.

She walked out to the middle of it, looking around for a sign of the med lab she heard Claudia operated. There, next to the airlock, partially transparent doors admitted entrance to the lab from the cargo bay.

Through the window she could see the lab was in use with equipment and samples all over the place, but Patch and Claudia were slumped over asleep. Kris decided she should let them rest.

“*Shi’ung Zhu Pi Yi Yung*, what?” Patch asked in anger as he opened the door. “What’s the emergency?”

Kris blinked. Her hand was raised and her knuckles were red signaling that she had been furiously knocking on the door, even though she had just decided to leave them alone. “How’s it comin’?”

“Horrible,” Patch said, yawning as he stepped back into the lab with Kris following.

“We’ve autopsied the Reavers killed and the records I’ve kept of autopsies and... still no clue as to what’s turning these people insane,” said Claudia.

“Or rather: too many clues,” said Patch. “Too much in common between ‘em all.”

“Make a cocktail,” suggested Kris. “Cure all the ‘clues.’”

“With drug interaction that’s... even harder,” said Claudia.

“How’s the patient? Need anythin’?” asked Patch.

“Drugs and treatment, fine,” said Kris. “We’ve been havin’ such wonderful talks,” she said with a bit of laughter.

“Sorry you have to suffer in such silence,” Claudia said with sincerity.

“What... do ya’ll mean?”

“The exam showed a tongue partially removed and her throat’s damaged right good,” said Patch. “We’ll be fixin’ those last.”

Kris muttered something about luck and left *Rascal Puff*.

\*

Day 8

\*

“You can’t escape Miranda.”

“We did and gorrarnit you’re gonna too,” said Kris.

“All... will... fall...”

“You can’t even be ruttin’ talkin’ right now!”

Was she pacing? No, Kris found herself sitting down. The Reaver was looking at her, laughing with a hoarse sound like a drowning cat. Had she slept? When was the last time she had?

“‘on’t lie ‘own.”

“*Bi Jweh*,” said Kris. She was standing by the bed. When? She didn’t remember standing up.

“The others are weak,” said the Reaver. “Let them lie ‘own.”

“They ain’t sleepin’, they’re tryin’ to save ya!”

“I’d rather ‘ie than be one of you!”

“And we’d rather die than be one of *you*!”

The Reaver started laughing even harder. “No. You want it. Free’om. Kill. No gui’t. Eat. No remorse. Kill them all.”

“QUIET!” Kris screamed as she slapped the other girl as hard as she could.

Her hand connected to the left side of the Reaver’s face, turning her head away. The Reaver slowly turned back to face Kris, pus and blood seeping from the edges of the healing wound that covered half her face. The patch had been dislodged and now Kris saw both of her eyes: the usual one bloodshot, the other a pale green with a milky, scarred center that felt like it bore into her soul.

Kris took a step back and tried to breathe. Had the other girl been talking? Or was she imagining it? Her hands were shaking, her whole body trembled as if it would break with tension. She looked over at the corner she had been sitting in, where her tattered old family Bible rested on the counter beside her rosary. Supporting herself against the counter, she stumbled down and grabbed the sacrament. The crucifix seemed to stare back at her. “We... we ain’t left Miranda.”

Darting over to the intercom on the wall, Kris contacted every place of the ship listed on the connection row.

No one answered.

She hit the pair of buttons that engaged a ship-wide address and called out.

No one answered.

She hit a button sequence that she knew would send out a blaring alarm over the ship.

No one answered.

Swearing several choice phrases as she went, one by one Kris opened the drawers in the Chop Shop until she found a key. As she hoped, it worked on the locks securing the chains holding the

Reaver down. Once they were free, Kris undid the leather straps holding the Reaver's legs down. She was surprised as the other girl didn't react, but remained still as her wrists were undone.

Freed, the Reaver pulled the IV feeds from her arm and stood up, the sheet falling from her as she did, but she showed no shame. From the drawer Kris had found the key, the Reaver withdrew a scalpel, the grin on her face like that of a child getting their favorite candy.

Kris gripped her rosary tight – ready for the attack – but the Reaver turned and left.

That's when Kris realized she had entered the room alone. Nobody had been there to lock the infirmary door on the outside, behind her.

Kris followed her and saw the Reaver heading aft, seeking out prey. She turned and ran to the fore, through the airlock into the Captain's shuttle.

With her head down on her table, Lori was asleep, with Jack Paper passed out on her bunk. Gorammit how could they sleep at a time like this? Kris grabbed her captain's shoulder and shook her.

Lori mumbled something but barely stirred.

Kris started shake the captain so hard, she nearly banged Lori's head against the table.

"What *is* it?" Lori demanded, jumping to her feet with eyes half shut. "Why can't it wait for mornin'?"

Kris grabbed Lori's head in both hands and screamed an inch from her face, "The Reaver is loose! And the Pax IS ON BOARD!"

The captain's eyes opened fully. Shoving Kris from her, Lori grabbed her gun belt before slapping Jack awake.

"How can the Reaver be free?" he asked, once he was awake and the situation repeated to him.

"Later!" said Kris. "She's there," she said, pointing behind her with her thumb. "We'll go up, and ambush whichever stair she comes up."

"Where's Patch?" Lori asked as she pulled down the ladder and started opening the hatch to the bridge.

"Other ship."

"Jack, you get the doctors, Kris and I will get those on board my boat."

By the time Jack had all but dragged the doctors from *Rascal Puff* onto the upper bay of *Echo Trail* Lori and Kris had literally dragged Scrap and Kim from the engine room.

"Where's Jin?" Patch asked in a groggy voice.

"We can't wake him," said Lori. "He's alive, but barely."

"These ain't much better," Kris said, lightly slapping Scrap who looked about to fall asleep as he leaned on her shoulder.

"Less organic parts means less time for anything to spread and affect," Claudia said as she straightened her tie.

"How'd the Pax get here?" asked Patch.

Lori closed her eyes in an expression of self-frustration. "The ships' air tanks are designed to automatically cycle and fill when surrounded with breathable atmosphere. We were on Miranda for days."

"*Rascal Puff* has been docked with you for a few as well with the joining airlock wide open," said Jack. "It's undoubtedly spread there."

"Reaver about..." Kris said, but nobody seemed to hear her.

"Why's... ain't it be takin' less time fer us than the Randa-ites?" Scrap asked, everyone barely understanding him.

"Concentration," said Patch.

“The ship’s systems versus an entire world... we must be breathing more parts per million than anyone on that planet did the entire time,” said Claudia.

With the *Echo Trail*’s engineer leaning against her, his arm around her shoulders, Kris couldn’t adequately express how frustrated she was getting but slapping him back awake every few seconds was kind of helping. But why wasn’t anyone listening?

“Didn’t the *Serenity* crew land and breathe the air?” asked Jack.

“It’s a buildup effect,” said Patch. Judging from his and Claudia’s expression, they both just realized something they’d been missing.

“We need to reach the nearest planet, now!” said Lori.

“If we can get our pilots to coordinate a simultaneous speed increase,” said Jack.

The figure slammed into Lori first.

Still holding onto the other ship’s pilot, the captain was knocked off balance, tumbling to the floor. By the time she hit the deck, her gun was already missing.

The Reaver raised the revolver, not bothering to aim since, with nearly everyone clustered in front of her, it couldn’t miss.

Scrap let go of Kris and threw himself at the Reaver even though he was a bit shorter and scrawnier than her. It was enough to move the gun such that when it fired, the four-ten buckshot only scraped Jack’s right shoulder and part of his face.

The Reaver twisted around as they fell, biting its teeth into Scrap’s shoulder, neck, wherever she could reach.

Lori was back on her feet by now and she rushed the Reaver along with Claudia. Each of them grabbed an arm and hauled her away from the kid. The Reaver violently kicked and screamed but they held on and Lori pried her gun out of its hand.

As soon as the gun was free, Lori noticed the scalpel the Reaver had concealed, just in time to feel it cut into her. She reflexively let go and the Reaver swung at Claudia who managed to let go just in time for a few of her dreadlocks get severed.

While the two of them were fighting, Patch, who had gotten the first aid kit in the bay, finished stabilizing Jack then made his way over to Scrap. Kim, who had been tending to the kid, backed away when the doctor arrived and picked up Scrap’s large iron wrench.

Without even a shout, Kim charged the Reaver, as it managed to cut Claudia just below the jawline. It spun around, raising its arm as the pilot swung. The wrench hit its left arm and a sickening crack echoed through the bay followed by the Reaver’s laugh. It punched Kim with its broken left arm seemingly out of spite before head butting her four times.

Kim fell to the floor, her nose crushed and bleeding. Before it knelt Patch, now helping Lori with his back to it. With an animalistic war cry, the Reaver leaped onto his back and started stabbing. Reflexively Patch straightened his nearly two-meter body, grabbing as much of the Reaver as he could and bodily tossed her across the bay.

It hit the deck on its side, tumbling and rolling back to its feet. One by one the crews stood up as best they could, arranging themselves opposite of the Reaver even as blood poured from their wounds. It brandished the scalpel and grinned.

Kris, standing unnoticed behind the Reaver, withdrew the stun baton she had managed to pocket when they were gathering up here. The Reaver either didn’t notice her, or didn’t care as Kris approached and drove the stun weapon into the back of the Reaver’s neck.

It fell to the ground, convulsing and Kris hit it again with a shock. Then again. And again. It was easy since the Reaver had never bothered to dress after leaving the infirmary.

A hand caught her wrist in mid swing. Kris swung her left hand as hard as she could, connecting with a jaw before she realized it was Patch’s.

He stood there a second, moving his jaw. "Feel better?" he finally asked.

"No," Kris said as she let go of the stun baton and rubbed her burning eyes. "We can't lie down. You were all lying down."

\*

Day 10

\*

Kris looked up as the door to her room opened and Lori entered, moving carefully thanks to her still healing wounds. She stood beside Kris's bed, not bothering to take a seat to look her in the eye but towering over her instead.

"Everyone still on *Rascal Puff*?" Kris asked, staring at the captain's boots.

"Thanks to your efforts at gettin' them to realize how the Pax worked and that it interacted with adrenaline, the docs have got everyone awake and almost completely healed." Lori's voice took on a slightly sardonic tone, "*Ai Yah Tien Ah* even Scrap seems to be finally hittin' his growth spurt thanks as a side-effect."

"*Deo Gratias*," said Kris. Once they had reached Deadwood, found a desolate place to land, and done an emergency air cycle, Kris had been locked in room to let the Pax out of her system the hard way. Claudia had come by yesterday to run tests ensuring that Kris was recovering before locking the tech back in her room.

"In a few hours Jack will be returnin' with some spare CPU drives. When he does, you're going to make copies for him of the Miranda CORSAT."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Once you are done, you'll come straight back to your room to stay until I've found one of your priests to dispense penance, or I feel you've served enough."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Until Jack returns, you have a chore."

Kris looked up at her captain's face.

She followed Lori down to the lower deck and to the Chop Shop. Lori opened it then went in, stepping to the side.

Kris couldn't believe it. She entered hesitantly, wondering if she was actually awake. There, laying unrestrained on the operating bed, a young woman smiled and waved at her. Kris looked at her captain in befuddlement.

"Rehabilitation," answered Lori. "You're going to instruct her while we supervise."

Kris nodded. Grabbing the stool she had used so much over the last week, she took a seat next to the girl on the bed.

The scar on her face was much improved and even her eye had been mostly fixed while the other was no longer shot with blood and madness. Her left ear was still mostly gone but strands of red hair were starting to sprout all over her scalp and would probably soon cover it. She smiled at Kris with an innocence Kris had only seen from children.

"Hi."

The young woman waved again saying, "hi? hi. Hi!" over and over again. Her voice was raspy and barely intelligible, but was soaked with enthusiasm.

"Can you... understand me?"

The young woman just smiled at her.

"Do you know your name?"

"No," said Lori. "The treatment may have restored her mind, but it seems to be at the cost of her memories. Poor thin' has amnesia."

Kris couldn't help but smile even as a few tears escaped her. "That's ok, sometimes it's best to forget." Taking the girl's hand in hers Kris said, "Welcome aboard the *Echo Trail*. We save people."

\* \* \*

"So. All of you 'ave had your chance to verify the shiny, a few quick rules before we let the bidding begin," said Badger. "You're in my 'ome, so let's keep it civil. Winner takes the toy, and if you want to steal it or fight 'im over it, you do so outside."

Niska hadn't bothered showing up to this party, but two of the other most powerful criminal organizations in the 'Verse did. Their representatives were sitting in the second rows of two dozen folding chairs neatly arranged. An aisle had been made down the middle so both reps could sit on opposite sides to reduce frictions. On Badger's right, the *Padri del Cerchio's* representative sat with two aides. On his left, the *Nine Dragons'* representative sat with an accountant and a body guard. An enforcer from both groups stood at the door at the back of the room while the rest lined the walls on their respective sides of the room. Badger had four of his own guards standing by him on the little stage he had set up.

He lifted the auctioneer gavel he'd gotten for this occasion and was about to bring it down to start bidding the when the door flew open.

"I have a deal I think will make us all happy."

Badger looked up. A bespectacled man with a very fancy white cowboy hat, striped dress shirt, navy-blue slacks and black shoes was standing at the door with a taller, slightly balding man in a business suit with pale blue hands on his right. Around the room stood kids, anywhere from fifteen to twenty years old, that weren't there a moment ago. Some were armed and it took a second before Badger realized that every gun the kids were pointing had been taken from one of his guards. The rest of the kids were unarmed, but judging from the crumbled bodies of the guards they stood over, they were no less lethal. At the moment, the stage he was on seemed clear, the pair of bodyguards covering his back were still conscious and armed. They took a step forward but he waved at them to wait. "Who are you?" asked Badger.

"Names are the most dangerous words," said the bespectacled man, removing his wide-brimmed hat to reveal a mess of red hair. "I think it best we keep them from others' ears lest untowards fates strike us." He reached the end of the aisle and pulled out a banana that he tossed to the *Padri del Cerchio* man on his left. With a wink the stranger said, "Besides, who I am is of minor consequence as to *what* I am."

Badger surveyed the room. It was all unlike anything he'd ever seen, but the air was unmistakable. "Alliance."

The stranger grinned and pointed at him in affirmation. "And all here are of unsavory law status. Were all things good and proper I'd be binding the lot of you by law."

"You would be dead," the *Nine Dragons'* representative said, jumping to his feet.

Neither the stranger nor his retinue reacted. "Someday. Perhaps today. But many of you would die too... or worse. I think few of us would desire either status. What *is* to be done of this conundrum?"

"Your deal?" Badger answered uncertainly.

"At last! I was beginning to doubt the appropriateness of calling you, 'the King of Deals'," the stranger said as he climbed the stage.

The guards took another step forward but Badger waved them back.

The stranger withdrew a sheet of smart-paper and tapped on it, bringing up a photo of a tall, dark-skinned man. He placed it on Badger's podium. "Have you seen this man?"

Badger looked at the picture then back to the stranger. "This a joke?"

The stranger looked at him. "I am not known for my hilarity."

"I thought 'e and 'is captain were one 'o you!"

"For neither the first, nor last time in your life, Badger, you're wrong. Where are they?"

Badger shrugged. "Sent one 'o me boys to their boat to blow it up."

The stranger's smile grew as he took back the smart-paper. "Then our deal's improved. You tell me everything you know about them, and I'll ensure your boy succeeded." He looked around the room.

"Then we'll vacate quietly and everyone can forget each other's faces."

Badger smiled and held out his hand. "Mister, you've got more sense than the entire Parliament."

The stranger took Badger's hand and shook it. "You have no idea."

Next Episode: Rolling the Dice