

18 - Misaki

In a news clip playing on the screen in Engineering a reporter was hurrying up to an older man in a UNSEC officer's uniform. The man, and a black woman with a brace over one leg of her uniform, were at the glass doors of a building. Misaki was familiar with Lieutenant Colonel Compton. Eric had a problem with authority, and Compton represented *the man* on Martian soil. She spent many nights in his dorm room listening to him talk about a better Mars and how UNSEC was the only thing stopping them from making that happen.

Eric was troubled. She hadn't seen it during those fevered nights so long ago. Realization hadn't come until she was in neck deep.

Misaki turned from the screen and checked the seals on her vac-suit. Being back aboard the *Sadie*— back in Mat's presence— had done what she knew it would— given her some measure of clarity. She didn't need the memory of Eric Prator thrown in the mix of contorted dreams that still tried to invade her mind late at night. Clamping her helmet down she palmed the airlock's control pad and stepped inside. By the time it cycled Eric was just a sneering face in the back corner of her mind.

Opening the maintenance hatch she stared out across the emptiness between the *Sadie's* docking slot to the ships docked at the arm some three hundred meters away. She looked up, then down, letting her brain absorb the *infinite* for a moment, then she pulled the safety line from the leader beside the hatch and clamped it on her belt and stepped out onto the hull.

"Mat," she said across the commlink.

"*Yeah? Everything okay?*" Came the immediate question. He still thought of her as porcelain, she could hear it in his voice.

"Yes. Send me the sensor data from Yuri's terminal."

"*Oh, sure. On its way now.*"

Her HUD flashed with the incoming data and she used the keypad on her wrist to call up the location of the hull strike. An outline of the hull shifted on the HUD and settled on a blinking plate on the Engineering Deck, about ten meters behind the hatch. A short walk.

What would Mat think if he knew that Haydon wasn't teaching her self-defense, but something more lethal ... like a soldier would learn? After the first two lessons of learning to block and twist away from someone that outweighed her, she realized that it wasn't enough. Haydon had resisted her request for real combat training, but by the fifth time they met in the cargo hold he agreed— thinking that he understood her reasons why. He thought of her as emotional porcelain too. From then on the training turned brutal, Peterson's coveralls hiding most of the bruises and her own will hiding the soreness.

Your secrets are piling up, her conscience giggled. She was not a person that Mat could love.

Focusing on the blinking HUD she turned and headed forward. The *Sadie's* hull stretched out to the depot's docking arm. The access tube's exterior was scuffed, ice formed around plate seams, and at least one two meter plate was missing, exposing frost covered pipes. During her time aboard the *Pendleton* she had seen her share of remote depots, but Captain Pendleton never brought his family to a place like this. Though, if it had been in search of his wife or son he would have stopped at them all.

Mat could not have refused Yuri's request even if it had brought the *Sadie* to the gates of Hell itself, and Misaki, perhaps most of all, understood Yuri's need to find his son. After all, they were still counting the number of people she had killed to get her mother's surgery. She didn't know what had happened between the Russian pilot and his estranged son, but she understood very well why they were here.

One day her sins were going to come back to haunt her. Maybe she was there, back aboard the *Sadie*, to confess everything to Mat. The look of pain and disgust on his face would be like a physical blow. How could he have ever had feelings for someone like her ... he would ask himself that.

Misaki stood over the spot marked on her HUD, where the antenna from the departing ship had lashed the *Sadie's* hull and scored the plate. She hunched down and rubbed the surface with her glove. *Sorry girl*, she thought, then felt a tight smile on her lips. Mat's euphemisms had crept into her mind. That smile, clipped though it was, had been an unconscious reaction ... she had a life, it had been sometime before Mars. She had smiled then.

Her face relaxed and she looked up from the hull to starboard, where a glint, just a flicker of something, caught her attention. The ship in the slot over was a bare twenty

meters away. It was a small freighter, missing its cargo pods it wasn't much larger than the *Sadie*. Misaki counted three cameras aimed in their direction, then she saw what had drawn her attention. There was an aft ventral turret, almost shoved up against the main thrust assembly. A thin, red beam of light shot from it, disappearing up the curve of the *Sadie's* hull out of her line of sight. The turret barrels were lined up with the light. *The Crew deck*, she realized. By the angle of the turret it was aimed amidships ... the Crew deck.

Misaki straightened, turned, and calmly headed back to the maintenance hatch. She didn't know if it was her time aboard the pirate tug that kept her heart rate steady, or if it was the murderous actions she had committed later, but she didn't feel ... afraid ... and not one drop of sweat was on her forehead.

"Mat," she said.

"*Yeah? I'm here.*"

"I'm sending you some footage from my helmet cam."

"*Okay,*" he replied. "*That bad, huh?*"

"No. There's something I want you to see when I get inside."

She entered the hatch and cycled the airlock and took off her helmet. Not bothering to get out of her vac-suit she pulled herself up the access tube to the Flight deck. Mat was seated at his command station, staring that the screen running the footage she had sent.

"What am I missing?" He asked as she walked to the station and tapped the screen.

The footage zoomed forward under her finger, then she stopped it, showing the freighter in the starboard slot. She pointed to the cameras.

"They're watching us," she told him. Then she nudged the image until a thin red line became visible, stretching from the freighter's aft section toward the *Sadie*.

Mat leaned forward, squinting.

"It's a turret," she clarified for him. "Mounted against the thruster assembly."

Mat immediately went for the optical controls but she shook her head.

"We can't see it, our cameras are off angle."

He frowned and sat back, rubbing his mouth and chin with one hand before folding his arms across his chest.

For a moment Misaki studied the lines of his face; his knitted brow, the shadow of a beard he constantly wore. *It's because he forgets to shave*, her own voice whispered. How did she know that ... when did she learn it? Was it on the long trip from Saturn ... before she blew up the Apex plant and Harmony dome?

"I think it's time to leave," he said. "Get us prepped, I'll call Haydon."

She took a seat at her usual terminal and called up the propulsion systems. As the diagnostic program went down its checklist she accessed the optical controls.

"Haydon, it's getting uncomfortable up here," she heard Mat say. "I think you and Yuri should come back."

Misaki wasn't interested in the turrets of the freighter, but the ship itself. Running an image of it through an engineering database produced what she expected, so she took pictures of as many ships as the camera angles would allow for and ran them through the database as well.

Yuri's voice came across the comm but she wasn't paying attention to the conversation.

"The ship in the slot over has cameras and guns on us. This is not looking good. Get back to the ship."

Her database scan was starting to produce results, all of which she expected. She busied herself with the startup sequence for the drive while Mat talked to Haydon. When he banged his fist on the console and cursed, she took that as a sign that the conversation was over.

"Mat?"

"Yes?" The ire in his voice wasn't aimed at her. It was rare that he used that tone when she was within hearing. He didn't want to hurt her by sounding angry. The animals aboard the pirate tug had yelled at her sometimes ... but they laughed, mostly. Mat could never be one of them.

"I mean, yeah?" He corrected himself, and looked over at her, his eyebrows raised.

She wanted to tell him not to worry about her feelings, but this wasn't the time for that repeat discussion.

"Look at this," she said, and sent the image scan results from her terminal to his. "All of the ships around us are of Martian design. Look at the freighter in slot fifteen."

Mat studied the images for a moment, then it came. "That freighter's carrying ore canisters ... *Apex* canisters."

The freighter's hull had been reconstructed to facilitate carrying canisters.

She knew he now realized what this place was, but as if to be sure he asked, "Are their transponders active?"

"No."

"None of them?" He asked again, incredulous.

"No," she repeated.

He activated the comm again.

"*Boss, I'm sorry about ...*" Haydon said as soon as he answered.

"Haydon, we have to go *right now*," Mat told him. "Get Yuri and let's go."

In the background Yuri was talking, and then he yelled. Mat sat back in his seat and rubbed eyes.

On the aft dorsal camera Misaki watched as a hauler with a giant thruster assembly came in from the port side, lined up, and began moving slowly toward the depot. Something ... something seemed odd. She switched views and what she saw brought back the smell of the tug from her memories. A freighter had dropped out of its slot and was less than a thousand meters below them. Another ship was coming in overhead.

"Mat, we're being boxed in!" She yelled.

Mat looked at her, eyes wide.

She yelled again, "Pull us out now!"

"We can't leave Haydon and Yuri," he said, his face flat and eyes steady.

"We're not leaving them," she told him. "But if you don't get us out of this slot now none of us will ever leave." There wasn't time to explain that she would never leave any of them behind, they were ... family.

He finally started moving, unstrapping and stumbling across the deck in the light gravity. As he turned and sat in the cockpit he said, "Call Haydon ... they've got to get somewhere safe until we can pick them up ..."

"I'm working on it." She said quickly and opened a channel to Haydon's comm while using her other hand to flip through images of the depot.

The navigation thrusters kicked in and the *Sadie* jerked back from the depot's access tube. Mat wasn't the pilot that Yuri was.

"*Misaki?*" Haydon's voice came from the comm speaker.

The *Sadie* jerked again, throwing her against her straps. "They've got us on three sides!" Mat yelled. "I'm going to drop us under ..."

"*Misaki what's happening?*" Haydon asked, a mix of curiosity and rising tension in his voice.

"You and Yuri need to go ..." She began.

"*Yuri won't go anywhere, I left him at a bar. He wants Mat to cash out ...*"

"Haydon!" She yelled. "This is a pirate base ... they're trying to block us in ..."

He started cursing.

"You have to get out ..." She finished.

"*Okay, okay ... I have to go get him. Where ...*"

Suddenly it went from microgravity to being pushed up against her straps as the *Sadie* rolled and dropped away from the depot.

The hull *rang*. It was like someone hit it with a hammer. Misaki knew that sound.

"What was that!" Mat yelled.

"Turret fire, they hit us," she told him. To Haydon she said, "Get to a safe place until we can pick you up."

"Copy that." He was panting now.

"Where can we go?" That was Mat. "I won't leave them there!"

She couldn't answer him, it was requiring all her concentration to watch her sensor board and pull up the turret controls. Once she had the controls up she didn't hesitate. On the screen she used her fingers to pivot both dorsal turrets to starboard and up, and fired blindly at the ship that fired on them.

There was a *tapping* sound in the hull as each turret released twenty rounds, which was the lowest automated setting in the controls. On her screen Misaki watched as Mat's vector pulled them away from the freighter and flashes of fire peppered its thruster assembly and went in a line up the port side. Something blew in the housing where the thruster met the aft portion of the ship's deck. Hull plates popped off as white gas jetted out.

They weren't expecting this kind of fight, Misaki suspected. Otherwise they would have holed the *Sadie's* own thruster assembly. Or maybe they wanted the ship intact. She was just guessing, but now, whatever their reasons, they would be out for blood.

The *Sadie* shifted and dipped, Mat had found an opening. "Misaki, where am I going?" He asked, the stress coming through.

"Just a second ..." she said, linking the proximity sensors with the turrets and tagging three remaining ships that were trying to box them in.

"I don't think we have a ... now they want to talk. We don't have any cans, they must want the ship."

Out of the corner of her eye Misaki saw the comm alert flashing on her terminal.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "They won't let us leave here." The tug ... that wasn't going to happen again. She would die first. "Turn to heading thirty, bearing one-ninety, at mark sixty."

The hull thudded with a tapping sound, someone got too close and the turrets fired again. Then it rang as they were hit by return fire. A small part of her had time to become irritated at the prospect of her repair work being ruined.

"Mat, get us under!"

"I'm trying! The basic course didn't cover combat maneuvers ..."

She was thrown back in her seat as Mat took the opening too fast and the asteroid surface of the depot zoomed by on her screen.

The pirate ships were not reacting quickly enough, with their trap having failed the *Sadie* was proving to be more difficult prey than they expected. The ship below them opened up on its turrets, bolts of fire shot past a camera on the starboard quarter and hit the depot's rocky underside.

"The silos ..." she told Mat. The *Sadie's* mining sensors were picking up traces of hydrazine around a cluster of the silos sitting below the depot's terminal. Fuel storage.

"I see them," he said. "What are we doing ..."

The channel to Haydon's handcomm suddenly beeped and flashed. She tapped it but said to Mat, "Change to heading forty-five." Then, "Haydon?"

"Yeah, chief. They're after us now ... they're dressed in security uniforms, but they're not security. We're in a tunnel outside Reclamation, on level two."

"Almost to the silos," Mat called out. "Misaki, what are we doing?"

She watched two camera views on the screen. On one, the silos were approaching, on the other two pirates were coming under the terminal to follow them. "There is a refinery. Access should be somewhere behind the terminal," she told Haydon. She had seen it on the way in. "Get there."

"Got it, we'll find it."

He would figure out the rest.

"Misaki ..." Mat said again.

"Bring us behind the silos and cut speed to one-quarter."

"What're we going to do?"

"The same thing we did to the Martian freighter in the Belt, but with hydrazine." It wasn't an inspired plan, it was the only plan. The *Sadie* was a mining ship, not a UNSEC cruiser, they couldn't fend off the pirates forever, and they couldn't leave Haydon and Yuri on the depot.

"Okay, I got it ..." His voice trailed off as he said something about the course to himself.

The *Sadie* slowed and Mat and began a slight arc around the approaching silos. This close, on her screens she could count them ... five in all. They were old, covered in dust, each over thirty meters tall, and the sensors were picking up high concentrations of hydrazine around the maze of pipes at the cluster's base.

Behind them the pirate ships were lining out in a tight Y converging behind them. Misaki didn't know if they were being cautious of the *Sadie's* turrets, or if it was poor piloting skills that kept them at such a distance. She reset the turrets to manual.

"Mat, we need to give them more time, they're not close enough."

"Okay."

The *Sadie's* velocity slowed another ten percent ... a crawl. Now their pursuers were closing in.

Misaki didn't hear it hit the hull but the sensors reported damage to the main thruster, just a scrape from turret fire. The silos slid by to starboard and Mat leveled out his turn, keeping them directly aft. The camera view was blocked by the thruster assembly, so all she could do now was watch blinking lights on the small plot on her screen.

"Mat," she began. "When I say, brake and turn hard to starboard."

He said okay and she put her fingers on the turret controls outlined on her screen. Five seconds later she said, "Now." Then twisted her wrist.

The braking was hard enough to knock the wind out of her as she was flung against her straps. There seemed to be no time between the vibration of the turret fire and the explosion of the silos on her screen. It was a flash of brilliant orange, then it was gone and the *Sadie* was shaking.

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(sample chapter)

Misaki used the bulkhead to push herself upright in her seat, as the ship slewed and Mat fought the controls and accelerated. On her screens the silos were gone, and the pipes at their base were slagged. One of the pirate ships had veered off, a section of its hull glowing red and gases spewing out between plates. The other ship was nose down on the asteroid's surface, plowing a trench through the dust and rock.

"Do you know where the refinery is?" She asked Mat.

"Yeah ... it was starboard of the terminal."

"Okay, let's go pick up Haydon and Yuri."

Misaki sunk back into her seat and took a breath.