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A PASSAGE TO OXOMO

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR MANSOURI

PROFESSOR KOENIGS

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One night in a bar by the docks on Amun, a spacefarer named Cory sat glued to a barstool, oblivious to the raucous crowd around them. They swayed side to side with the music, the words of the fussily-dressed representative echoing around their brain.

“...offer a navigation position... assume these terms...See you on Oxomo next month.”

The crush of spacefarers behind them pulsed and shouted under the dim lights. They’d swelled past the berth they’d been giving the Naven rep the moment he’d left, shoving Cory into the bar, but they felt the pinch like they were watching someone else. Nothing could penetrate the golden haze around them.

“...a navigation position...”

Cory ran their fingers through their cropped hair, and grinned. After seven years of menial entry jobs, they’d finally be on the bridge! They reached across the bar for a drink. A nice middle-priced one, they decided with a rush. They could afford it.

The red sunlight faded from the windows, the crowd grew wilder, and Cory’s one drink segued into three. They swayed on their barstool, their awe still growing. *Cory Jacque, Navigator for the Kalt, first of the next generation of starships.* Based on Oxomo, no less – between the revolution attempts and the Hestian blockade, they’d never been to a Minervan moon before. But this ID chip zipped inside their pocket would get them through without a protest!

Most of the crowd was dancing, bunched in small groups from gangly teenagers to carved-looking veterans. Cory watched them all vaguely, humming to himself. Their gaze meandered past a circle of men passing around a bottle, two rather young nonbinary kids dodging the soldiers by the entrance, to a tall woman with wavy black hair and brown skin stepping through the door between them. Cory reached for another drink – then shot back around. Rapidly scanning the entrance, they found the woman – and recognized her.

Cory sprang off their seat and rocketed into the crowd. The floor bounced with the music as they pushed past person after person, leaving grumbles and slurred shouting in their wake. Icy jolts ricocheted inside their skull: *Not her, it can't be her, not today!* But they knew it was – Vi Talwar was right there, with her plastered-on haughtiness and luxurious hair and lying and backstabbing and razor-sharp jawline...and with a head-splitting *thud*, they broke through the crowd and slammed into the wall.

Reeling, they spun around. Over the chaos of the dance floor, they could just see the tip of Vi's hair getting closer. They turned and fumbled until they found the back doorknob, wrenched the door open, and slipped into a dusty hallway. Deadened music thumped through the walls as they stumbled along, following the emergency light strips past dozens of abandoned-looking businesses. They tried doors to two pharmacists' offices, a discount attorney's, and a furniture store with no luck, cursing themselves for getting drunk and the war for closing all these hiding places and Vi for popping up after two whole years just when they'd finally gotten a break. They rounded a corner and pushed on the

next door, which swung open. Almost whooping with relief, Cory dashed through.

The door eased shut behind them, plunging the room into a restful silence. Panting, Cory looked around their shelter. It looked like an abandoned office: behind a reception desk covered in dust, rows of empty shelves and broken cabinets stretched out past the feeble blue aura cast by an auxiliary light to their right. Cory crept down the brightest row – or at least, the least dark one. The comfort systems didn't extend this far; they could see their breath wafting into the shadows above. They shivered.

“Back here!” whispered someone behind them.

Cory whirled around, their hand reaching for their gun but catching an open drawer. A woman within a centimeter of Cory's height emerged from the shadows, her hand outstretched.

“Good you came,” she smiled through a Minervan accent, “I was getting worried.”

Cory just stared, the room spinning from their sudden turn. The woman looked about their age, with tied-back ginger hair, pale skin, and an earnest expression that clashed with her young-sounding voice.

“Worried?” they choked out around the lump in their throat, wracking their brain for where they could've met.

“Course,” she said, lowering her hand smoothly. “Leora saw there were secs in the bar, so we knew you’d have to slow, but still... always the risk.”

Cory squinted, completely lost now.

“I know,” she qualified. “You’re Hestian, so it’s not as much trouble, but you know they’re getting wise.”

A slight suspicion started to creep into Cory’s chest, a suspicion they did not want to confirm.

“Hold on...”

The woman laughed amiably. “Wiser, I mean. Learning not every Minervan’s a revolutionary and not every revolutionary’s Minervan.”

Confirmed.

“Anyway, you got the access?” asked the Minervan revolutionary.

Cory nodded slowly. *Just stall, you’re not in danger yet, you don’t even know her name—*

“Oh yeah!” she exclaimed. “I’m Sasha.”

Shit.

Just as Cory concluded this was the worst moment of their life, the door behind Sasha swung open, and in strode their ex.

Their eyes locked.

Vi froze, openmouthed. “Cory.”

Cory stood rigid, waiting. The blue light was shining through Vi's hair, teasing out soft highlights –

“The hell are you doing here?”

Cory inhaled. “Nice to see you too.”

“You must have missed me,” Vi shook her head, and smiled coldly. “What have you been up to, drudging between loaders?”

“Oh!” Cory fired up, “You’re one to talk about drudging –”

A gun safety snapped off on their left. They turned to find Sasha glaring at Vi, her hand clenched at her hip.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

Vi blinked, and her eyes flicked to Sasha for the first time. “Vi Talwar,” she recovered, “I assume you’re Sasha.”

Now it was Sasha's turn to look confused. “No, that's Vi,” she said, jerking her head back at Cory.

“I am not!” Cory protested without thinking.

“That's Cory Jacque,” Vi spat. “The most...”

“The most what, exactly?”

A look of horror was growing on Sasha's face. “Wait,” she said quickly, turning to Cory. “You're not Vi?”

They shook their head once, glaring at Vi.

“But how...the hell're you doing here, then?”

Vi snorted under her breath.

“Trying to avoid *you*,” Cory shot at Vi, and felt gratified to see the smirk fall off her face. Somewhere far away, Sasha swore softly.

“Whelp,” shrugged Vi, and with an ugly gleam in her eye, reached for her gun. Fury surged through Cory and they drew theirs too. Lightning-fast, Sasha stepped in front of them.

“What're you doing?”

“Shooting them,” Vi said matter-of-factly. “Now move.”

“Hold!” Sasha protested. “No need to kill them, they don't know any important...”

“You two are shipping with the Minervan revolutionaries, that's what I know!” shouted Cory, reckless fury surging through them. Sasha swore again.

“See?” Vi pointed triumphantly, “They know we're here, we can't risk them interfering.”

“I... there's no “we,” you're no Miner, you don't decide risks...” Sasha stalled.

“Well I've got the access, so hired or not-”

Cory laughed wildly. “Oh, that explains it! You're still flying after money, who cares about morals-”

“You’re not helping!” Sasha hissed at them.

“See!” Vi exclaimed. “They’re clearly mad enough to talk, can *you* think of another way to stop them?”

Sasha looked from Cory to Vi and back. “Look, we can’t...” she stammered, glancing around as though hoping to find answers in the shelves, “this isn’t...” Her hands started to fall. Cory gripped the trigger tighter.

Suddenly, Sasha’s eyes widened, she whipped her gun upwards, and an explosion shot over Cory’s head. The blast reverberated around the room, and something behind them crashed to the floor. Vi shouted, Cory whipped around, and their chest constricted. A station surveillance drone wobbled on the floor, its triangular frame punched through the middle, its camera blasted to shards.

“How long,” whispered Vi, “has that been watching us?”

“Don’t know,” Sasha whispered back.

Why are they whispering? Cory thought through a gray haze, watching feeble sparks crackle from the drone. *The whole bar must’ve heard that shot...* They glanced back. From the fear in Sasha’s and Vi’s expressions, they’d realized the same thing.

“Go!” Sasha barked with sudden authority. “The *Meir*. Now!”

She and Vi turned and dashed for the exit, leaving Cory staring after them. Vi’s footsteps echoed down the hallway as Sasha paused at the door, and glanced over her shoulder at Cory.

“Follow me,” she waved them forward, checking around the corner. Cory opened their mouth to reply something to the tune of “no fucking way” - then their jaw snapped shut. They were lurking in deserted back hallways, the remains of a wrecked drone at their feet! The camera was busted, but if someone found them there...

“Come on!” Sasha commanded, and took off down the hallway. Cory stood frozen, then swore violently, and sprinted after her.

The *Meir* turned out to be a light cargo transport in the trapezoidal style – old, but not out of place in the spaceport. Cory had barely cleared the hatch when its thrusters roared to life. They clung to a handle on the wall as it lurched its way into orbit, swinging with the movements of the ship until the antigrav whirred on and their feet slammed to the floor. Before Cory could do more than glance around the empty hold, a door across from them burst open and a dozen people spilled through and engulfed Sasha, shouting greetings and questions.

“I’m good, I’m fine!” she hushed. “Listen...” As she recounted the events, one by one the crewmembers glanced at Cory, suspicion etched on their faces. When she finished, silence rang through the hold. Vi stretched, her boots scraping the metal floor.

“Well, back to my solution?” she stood, and Cory tensed. But out the corner of their eye, they saw Sasha scowl. Gesturing her friends to the side, she stormed up to Vi.

“Right,” Sasha snapped, thrusting out her hand. “Hand over your gun.”

“What?” Vi recoiled. Sasha stepped closer, glaring up at her.

“You’ve proven you can’t have a gun without shoving it in someone’s face soon as you have a problem,” she growled. “I’m not risking us or our mission over your pride. Hand it over.”

She laced the command with such animosity that Vi flinched. She looked like she wanted to argue, but after a moment, sighed, handed her gun to Sasha, then turned and walked with projected confidence past the Miners and through the door. Cory felt a surge of admiration for the revolutionary, until she pivoted and marched up to them, her hand outstretched.

“You too,” she ordered.

“What?” Cory protested. “She was the one trying to shoot me!”

“Yeah, and you drew your gun and shouted at her until a surveillance drone came knocking,” Sasha said, stepping closer.

“But I don’t even want to be here!” they staggered back. “What does it matter, next moon you hit, I’m hopping off!”

Sasha froze mid-step. “You think we can stop?” she said, incredulous. “They’ll have a dragnet across every moon around Hestia by now ‘cuz of that drone. We’re stuck.”

A wave of unsteadiness swept over Cory. “You made me get on this ship when you knew it couldn’t land?” they shouted. “You just said you were on my side, you said Vi...”

Sasha closed the distance between them, her eyes boring into Cory’s. “Listen,” she snapped, so close Cory felt her breathing. “I don’t care what bullshit feud you and Vi have. I’m not on your side, you’re both the same, and I’m not letting your bickering fuck us over again.”

Cory’s jaw dropped, but no sound came out.

“Give. Me. Your. Gun.”

For a moment, Cory just stared. Then, without breaking her gaze, they slowly lifted their gun from its holster and pressed it into her palm.

Sasha nodded curtly, then spun around and strode back to the remaining Miners. “There’s two unused rooms on first level, down the left,” she called. “I’ll tell everyone you’re here.” And without looking back, she followed her friends out the door. Cory stood rooted, feeling vaguely nauseous. Fury cracked their voice as they whispered, “*both the same?*”

Cory barely registered the stark room as they flopped onto the bunk. The corners of their eyes prickled. Just when they’d gotten *their* job - how were they supposed to get to Oxomo now? Assuming, of course, none of the revolutionaries killed them first, nor any security forces who mistook Cory for

one of them - which any rational person would, since Cory was cruising on their ship – and when they got there, if they got there, then Naven...

A speaker bolted to the ceiling crackled and spat out a garbled voice.

“Crossing into Inter-*olakhshksrZZZZ-*”

They clapped their hands to their ears against the shriek. Wincing, they wondered how that ramshackle setup had gotten out that much, until it let out a sharp *POP*.

“...there you go!” the voice cheered. “Crossing into Inter-Planet transit lane, come to bridge if you wantttt-”

The speaker clicked off. Footsteps rang past the door, down the corridor. Cory listened vaguely. Finally, the silence enveloped them again, broken only by the low rumbling of the engines. They sighed. The circulating air dried their skin, scratching their lips and eyes. Their thoughts spun. The sterile room felt heavy, unbearable. They leapt off the bed and into the dim hallway. They paced left until they remembered that led to the bridge, then paced back, past their door, to the next, where they halted. Vi'd be in there. A lightheaded recklessness seized them, and they flung the door open.

“Why are you helping them?” they demanded of the room. Vi glanced lazily from her open bag.

“Guess we're talking, eh?”

“You never supported them before,” they pressed, “don’t expect me to believe you do now. Why wreck your chances with every company that’d hi... that’d be stupid enough to hire you?”

To their extreme irritation, Vi looked more amused than offended.

“Like I said,” she explained, as though to a child. “Money. It influences people.”

Cory bristled. “I don’t need you to - ”

“– including!” she spoke over them, standing up. “Including. Me. And everyone knows it, so I think they’ll keep finding jobs for me.”

She stepped towards the door, her condescending smile fading.

“Now, since we can’t settle this for real,” she snapped, “Stay away from me.”

Before Cory could retort, the door slammed in their face. They forced themselves to laugh. “‘They’ll keep finding jobs for me’?” they shot through the door. “Are you really that - ”

As the silence rang around them, something else Vi’d said struck Cory.

‘Including. Me. And everyone knows it.’

They stopped laughing.

‘Everyone’ – including Naven?

Cory stared at a torn-out panel in the opposite wall, the stale air tingling against their skin. The idea assembling in their brain was mad – but so was their whole situation. *If I do nothing, I'll look suspicious.* But if they did something, if they showed up at Oxomo with proof they were still on the right side...

The dozen or so crewmembers scattered around the bridge gazed skeptically back at Cory.

“Really? You want to help us?” the woman whose voice had crackled from the speakers repeated.

“Not help you, exactly,” Cory clarified. “I just figure I should be, you know, crewmate-like.”

They glanced around the bridge, trying to gage everyone’s reactions, careful to stop before meeting Vi’s eyes.

“How would you help us, without helping us?” asked a boy sitting next to the comms, more curious than suspicious. They blinked, surprised by his Hestian accent.

“I’d just help out around the ship,” they said. “Fix stuff and... things.”

Murmurs circled the bridge, ranging from skeptical to suspicious. But when Sasha spoke up from Cory’s right, she sounded almost excited.

“If they want to help, we should let them!”

Several crewmembers voiced disagreements at this, most loudly Vi, who yelled, “And what if they’re planning to sabotage us?”

“Flimsy plan, since I wasn’t planning to be here,” countered Cory, who’d anticipated the question.

“Still!” protested Vi. But though some nodded with her, to Cory’s immense relief, no one else argued.

They’d treat the morning as a typical first day, they decided. *Just act normal. Make them think you’re putting yourself out there.* They positioned themselves on the side of what they judged to be the busiest hallway, just outside the bridge, and waited. The revolutionaries trickled through the doorway and along the hallway, some alone, most in pairs or trios. Cory tried to make eye contact with a few of them, but quickly gave it up: everyone passing was either locked in conversation, rifling through a toolbag, staring at a tablet, or otherwise too busy to look around. Cory watched them instead, trying to guess what they were doing, but as everyone seemed to be doing routine tasks, they found it harder and harder to focus, until eventually, heels aching, they trudged back to their room.

They spend the next few days wandering around the corridors, which generated as many tasks, and was about as revealing, as standing still. *You’d think someone would be wiring a grenade,* they sighed, watching yet another group rush past them without a glance. *Or need one wired, or want help wiring one.*

They told themselves they weren't bothered: they'd expected hostility. And their aimless wanderings taught them fragments of the *Meir's* layout, which the revolutionaries had convoluted by tearing out or repurposing nearly everything that could've marked a location. But after learning nothing more useful than which levels had broken lights, Sasha's sudden request to help her clean an air duct almost made Cory cheer – a reaction they'd never before associated with that task.

“Coming down!”

Cory ducked as a cloud of debris sailed from the open tube above them onto the already knee-high pile down the corridor. Across from them, Sasha flicked her remote, and the little drone dislodged itself from its quarry and whirred back up into the duct.

“So...” Cory cast around for a topic, “do you do this often?”

They cringed, but Sasha just shrugged.

“Not much,” she said. “We clean them twice a week, so I do them... once a month? Ish.”

Cory glanced up from their remote. “You don't do this normally?”

“No!” Sasha snorted.

“But - coming down!”

They both ducked, and another clump flew onto the pile.

“But why are you doing it now then?” Cory continued, flicking the switch in the middle of their remote. The drone sailed back over their head, and Sasha straightened up.

“Someone has to,” she said. “You know how polluted Minervan near-space is.”

Cory’s pulse quickened. “So we’re going to Minerva then?” they asked, as casually as they could.

“Nah, one of our moons,” Sasha said, glancing down at her remote. “Oxomo.”

Cory’s fingers twitched. *Oxomo? No way it’s that - !*

“So did you grow up on Hestia?” Sasha asked. Cory responded automatically.

“Yeah, why?” *They’re heading right to - !*

“Your parents worked for a company?” Sasha said, yanking Cory’s thoughts back to the corridor.

“No,” they said, confused at the strange gleam in her eye.

“How’d you feel about the companies, growing up?”

Cory stared. “I... pretty good. I mean, they’re basically everywhere, a couple did presentations...”

“Did you resent that?” said Sasha, and Cory laughed.

“What, no, they were fun! One time they passed out little flashlights...”

“I meant their presence in your daily life.”

“Oh.” They glanced up as the duct shook, but nothing fell. They looked back at Sasha, and found her still gazing expectantly at them. They shook their head.

“I never resented them or anything. They’re just, you know, another thing, like ads, or toothpaste, or antimatter.”

“But didn’t you ever wish they weren’t?” Sasha pressed. “Didn’t you wonder what it would be like if they weren’t there?”

A red light blinked through her fingers.

“No,” Cory shook their head, wondering why she was still going on about it.

“But...” Sasha glanced down as the light blinked again. “But if you thought about it, how do you think life would be without them?”

She stared them down with the imperiousness she’d worn while demanding their gun, and Cory clipped, “I don’t know. How do you think life would be without toothpaste?”

They felt an irritated satisfaction as her mouth gaped. Then her remote dinged, and a cloud of dust exploded over both their heads.

By the time they finished scrubbing the duct and themselves of debris, the pile in the vacuum chute had risen to Cory's waist. Sasha passed them a toolbox without a word, apparently absorbed with the drone in her lap. Cory mirrored her; silent work suited them just fine. But as the silence dragged on, they felt a flutter of worry. What if this was their only chance at talking? They scoured their brain for a topic.

"So, what did you do before this?" they asked, glancing up surreptitiously. Sasha continued examining her drone's motor, her expression unchanged. Suddenly, she grinned at them.

"Going way back, I only graduated eight years ago!"

Cory wrung out a towel, disarmed but relieved. "I mean what was your old job?" they clarified.

"Nothing," shrugged Sasha. "I've been here since."

Cory dropped the towel.

"You've never had a job before?"

They ogled her as she grabbed a screwdriver and repositioned the drone on her lap. How could someone their age not...

"What about you?" Sasha asked suddenly. The gleam in her eye sparked again, and Cory groaned silently.

"Internal Electronics Tech,' officially," they said quickly, trying not to give her latch points, "but a lot of it was random stuff like this. So have you..."

“Did you like it?”

They groaned out loud this time.

“Look, let’s talk about something else.” *Something not personal...*

Sasha leaned forward. “Why do something you don’t – ”

“Because it got me a job I do want, which I am not going to since I’m stuck here with you!” Cory snapped, their drone clattering to the floor. “Now please stop trying to... convert me or whatever, because it’s not going to work.”

“If you just listen - ”

“You’re the one who’s not listening!”

“Think!” Sasha gestured expansively. “If you and your spacer friends organized - ”

Cory stood up.

“That,” they stated, “would require spending time with them.”

They trudged down the corridor, suddenly exhausted.

Cory tripped on the cracked floor seam for the third time, and finally admitted they were lost. They leaned against the wall, frustration boiling inside them. They’d wasted so much time, they’d learned nothing beyond their destination, and the one person who’d talk to them wanted to turn their conversations into combination prying and preaching! They could see why spying

had gone obsolete: inefficient and unrealistic and as confusing as these idiots made their ships...

“...settle down, bud, settle down...”

The soft voice echoed from around the curve ahead of them. Before they could stop themselves, they rounded a bend to find the woman from comms, her back to them, her arms entangled in the wires protruding from an open panel. Cory froze midstep as she pushed the wires aside.

“Just let me...” she muttered in that soothing voice very unlike her voice on the announcement, and reached behind the panel. With a clunk, the wires contracted around her wrist.

“Aw babe, don’t do that,” she sighed. The device clunked again, and Cory realized they’d heard it before. They inhaled sharply, and the woman spun her head around.

“What’re you...” she yelped, then saw Cory and deflated. “Oh. You,” she grunted, and turned back to the panel. Cory watched her attempt to tug her hand free, struggling with herself.

“Is... is that a ripstop panel?” they stalled.

“Yeah,” she said shortly, bracing her free hand against the wall. “I’m fixing it.”

She yanked her hand back, and sparks shot from the wires.

Hesitantly, Cory stepped forward. They didn't want ... but she obviously couldn't...

What the hell. She doesn't like me anyway.

“Do you... would you like some help?”

“What?” she muttered, kicking at a spark.

“Do you want any help?” they repeated, louder this time. The woman whipped around.

“Sorry!” Cory blurted. *There goes another chance.* Then they realized she looked more confused than angry.

“Sorry?” she repeated, “Why...?”

She glanced back as the thing clunked again, then refocused on Cory.

“You know how to get these off?”

Cory crouched next to her. “I think so,” they said, peering into the panel.

“Can I...?”

“Course,” she shifted her hand aside. Cory brushed their fingers along the sidewall. After a few worrying moments, they felt a raised groove, eased their nail under it, and released the latch inside. With a click, the wires loosened. Cory yanked their hand back, the woman did the same, and with another click, the wires snapped back into place.

“How'd you do that?” she yelped, then reddened, “er...Cory, right?”

“Yeah,” they nodded. “You are?”

“Leora.”

“One of the ships I worked on had the same problem. Happened about eight times before anyone figured those shits out.”

“Don’t call them that!” Leora protested. Cory remembered the boy’s eyeroll.

“Anyway, er, thanks,” she continued, looking curiously at them, “Good to see you helping.”

There was an awkward pause, then she reached back for the panel cover. Cory, recognizing the dismissal, continued along the corridor.

But when they turned the corner, confusion slowed their steps. *‘Good to see you helping’?* Hadn’t they been standing around all week, ready and waiting? As they wandered past a row of cracked gauges, a strange idea flitted into their brain. *No way, they snorted. Even these people wouldn’t...*

They stopped.

Sasha did.

Cory glared at the last gauge, thinking. Sasha said no one had told her to clean that air duct. Which meant...

Absentmindedly, Cory tapped the gauge. So. The revolutionaries expected people to jump in on tasks without being asked. How exactly that was a good idea, they thought, they had no idea. They traced the gauge’s webbed cracks.

Seemed like a good way to do the same thing twice, and to screw over the person whose job it actually was - they winced as their finger slipped along the glass.

Whatever, they resolved, drawing their hand back. Maybe it would help them fit in. And in spite of the sting, they smiled as they continued along the corridor. The *Meir* really was taking them exactly where they needed to go.

The bizarre ordering system seemed to work. Each time Cory forced aside their discomfort and jumped in on tasks, the others became more and more friendly – and Cory, reveling in the benefits of these conversations, talked more too. Eventually, they even worked up the courage to carry their dinner onto the bridge. To Cory’s surprise, Leora waved them over to sit with her and Sasha – who, to Cory’s even greater surprise, moved over for them.

“Hey, sorry I pushed on you earlier,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Cory shrugged, nearly upending their plate. As they scrambled for it, Leora launched back into her earlier conversation.

“So I told her, the drone detected a hull breach...”

Cory scanned around the bridge. Most of the crew was there, the ones they remembered at least. Across from them, a blonde woman they recognized vaguely from their hallway was sharing a tablet with a redhead about a foot taller than her.

“...it’s great, no one will suspect it!” she grinned.

“Got that right,” they leaned over the tablet. “But we’re low on flour...”

“One going our way,” a woman behind them shrugged, “but it’s safe, it already passed us.”

“Military or company?” the man next to her asked.

The woman laughed. “Does it matter?”

“...but it wasn’t a breach!” Sasha argued. “It was an exhaust cover, and if Nayeli hadn’t seen the welding light...”

What surprised them most as they immersed themselves with the crew was how *normal* it all felt. There was more talking, sure, and the lack of leadership caused some chaos. But once they accepted the nebulous layout and patchwork technology, the overall day-to-day routine followed an oddly familiar structure.

Even Vi, their biggest worry, antagonized the others so much, she actually helped Cory.

“She is...” Sasha gestured angrily after her, “the most... *how* you two got together...”

“I thought you said we were the same?” Cory muttered.

“You were,” she shrugged flatly. “But you’re trying. That counts.”

She smiled, and they decided not to argue. It was a start.

They could almost forget everyone around them was a revolutionary – or Miners, as they called themselves – until the announcement of a transit crossing drew everyone into a tense migration to the bridge.

“Inter-system Transit Control, state your purpose.”

The bored voice crackled from the bridge speaker into the hallway. Cory peered around the crowd in front of them to see Sasha perched at the helm, watching a boy named Dex lean into the mic.

“Hey ITC, this is *Hollis*,” he said, his Hestian accent casual. “Looking to exit the trans-planet lane here.”

Cory blinked, but the controller recited, “Description and ID.” Leora tapped a few keys on her console, and glanced expectantly at Vi, who was standing behind her. Silently, Vi passed her a chip. Leora nodded, spun around in her chair, and a moment later, text blinked onto the screen between her and Dex.

“Alrighty,” Dex read, brushing a coil from his eyes. “we are a freight crew of 12, hauling a cargo of lithium batteries, registered to Rex Corporation, ID R2794.”

The static pause laced through the crowd, and Cory stiffened. What would happen if ITC didn’t...

“Cleared for exit, *Hollis*,” the controller drawled, and Cory sighed as the static clicked off. The engines rumbled, and they leaned with the ship as it banked smoothly out of the transit lane.

The crew broke into chatter the moment the engines leveled off. Cory listened as they dispersed, nagged by uneasiness. Finally, Sasha appeared in front of them.

“So what would’ve happened if that hadn’t worked?” they asked in what they hoped was a throwaway tone. Sasha shrugged.

“We would’ve gone into hyper.”

Cory gaped.

“What?” she waved to the back of the corridor. “The seats are right there.”

Like it’d be another lane merge! “They... we’re not sitting in them!” Cory spluttered.

“Yeah,” Sasha laughed, “cause then ITC’d know we’re more than 12! Just dash, you’d make it.”

As she grinned and walked away, Cory found they completely understood the Miners’ relief.

The bridge was buzzing with conversation that night. Cory took a seat in their usual corner, their nerves still frazzled.

“Do you ever get tired of taking risks like that?” they blurted as Sasha approached. They thought they knew her answer, but asking felt better than ruminating on it. Sasha shrugged, her mouth full.

“What’d’ya think?” Leora cut in front of her. “She let you on, didn’t she?”

“No offense,” Dex added quickly. Cory nodded as he jumped down. For not the first time that afternoon, they wondered why he’d been the one on comms. Finally, Sasha gulped.

“You’ve got to take risks,” she said. “It worked, yeah?”

“Yeah, but...” they trailed off as they noticed Vi crossing the bridge, heading straight towards them. Their jaw locked.

“Speaking of risks?” Vi asked without preamble; Leora and Dex whipped around. “Why was he on comms?”

“Dex?” Sasha asked smoothly. “Why not?”

“Not ‘why not,’” Vi shook her head. “Why? He’s obviously not a leader.”

Dex turned back, frowning. Sasha inhaled.

“What makes you think that?” she asked.

“What do you think?” Vi demanded, “He can’t have earned any authority, he looks like a high schooler...”

“I’m right here, you know,” he muttered.

I wasn’t thinking that part, Cory reassured himself. Not that rudely.

“He...” Vi continued, but Leora cut her off.

“That’s why!”

“What?” paused Vi.

“You hear him just now?” Leora said. “Voice that smooth would distract anyone.”

She elbowed him, and he looked up.

“Not as smooth as yours,” he said, then grinned.

“What’s that have to do with anything?” Vi said.

Leora pulled something out of her pocket and held it out to Dex, who smiled for real. Sasha groaned.

“Want to test?” she prompted.

“Sure!” Dex took it. Cory peered at it: a small, unmarked cube.

Sasha waved her arms. “No, you don’t –”

Dex raised his hand, and the cube hissed like a tiny, underwhelming kitten.

He dropped the cube and collapsed, laughing hysterically as Leora doubled over. Cory gaped, confused. They looked from Vi’s bewilderment, to Leora and Dex shaking with laughter, and finally at Sasha clutching her forehead, her eyes furrowed. And then they laughed, an unfamiliar, uninhibited cackle they didn’t know how to stop. Squinting, they saw Sasha’s mouth twitch, and doubled over, shaking with laughter.

“It is because of his voice,” Sasha said over them; Dex cheered. “Your actual voice!”

She rolled her eyes.

“A Hestian accent gets less scrutiny,” she explained. “So Dex takes comms with authorities.”

Cory sat up.

“Wait, why?” they asked. “There’s tons of Minervan spacers.”

The look Sasha gave them was almost pitying.

“The big trans-planet companies are almost all Hestian. On top of the System Guard.”

Cory opened their mouth, then paused. Of the few spacefarers they’d met who worked the interplanetary routes, they couldn’t remember one Minervan. Seeing their confusion, Sasha shook her head.

“They don’t tell you that,” she said. “Take Naven, they’ve got what, 6 Minervans?”

She addressed Vi, who nodded.

“Plus 20,” muttered Dex, and Sasha and Leora snorted.

Cory tensed.

“What do you mean?” they asked, shocked at how level their voice sounded.

“None of your - ” Vi began, but Sasha cut her off again.

“Vi got us a Naven ship pass,” she explained. “So we can land on Oxomo.”

Vi grumbled loudly, but Cory ignored her. They nodded to Sasha, hoping she didn't notice them clenching their teeth.

This is great, they repeated to themselves that night. They're interfering with Naven directly. The company'll definitely want that info.

But the no Minervan workers thing...

They shook their head.

It's not true, it'd go against the whole spacer ideal.

But why would Sasha lie?

The ceiling light blinked, washing the room in green, then fizzled off. They closed their eyes.

She's still trying to convince me. That look she gave me... I don't need pity, she's the one whose planet's been in chaos for a decade!

But has she ever lied before?

They listened to the grumbling of the ship.

They tried desperately to banish their doubts as they neared Oxomon space. The Miners' friendliness meant their plan was working, they reminded themselves – they just had to continue with it. When the speaker finally crackled on to announce the transit crossing, they threw down their wrench with relief. Finally, instructions. They joined the throng winding to the bridge behind Meas, who was deep in conversation with Shep.

“...enough time to fully mix?” they fretted..

“Relax!” Meas laughed. “We're not actually eating it...”

They turned the corner and collided with the pileup in front of the bridge, and Cory lost track of their conversation as Sasha squeezed around them. They waved.

“Dex make it in time?”

“Just,” said Sasha. She froze in front of them as the comms clicked on.

“Inter-system Transit Control,” droned a voice, indistinguishable from the previous controller. The crowd silenced as Dex's voice filtered through.

“Hey, ITC...”

“I'm going back,” Sasha muttered, then glanced back to them. “Want to come?”

Cory followed her through the crowd, apologizing under their breath. They squeezed through just in time to see Leora take a chip from Vi, who looked almost bored. “Professional,” they remembered she liked to call it. They snorted.

They heard mumbling in their left ear, and turned to find Sasha staring at the screens, completely entranced, tracking every blip.

“... H3947,” Dex finished. A circle on his console blinked, and Sasha’s eyebrows leapt almost to her hair. Cory chuckled, then quickly dodged Sasha’s eyes.

“Pardo, could you repeat that code?” the controller said through the static.

“What’s funny?” Sasha whispered.

“Nothing,” Cory shook their head, grinning.

“Alright,” said Dex. “H3 –”

“Hey!” Shep whispered behind them. “Sasha, Cory!”

“– 94 –”

“What?” hissed Sasha.

“You think 2 hours is enough time to mix waffles?”

“– 7.”

“What the –?”

Sasha whipped around, Cory burst out laughing, and the nav screen flashed red.

Alarms blared from the speakers, and chaos exploded. Cory spun as everyone scrambled around them, crashing into them and each other.

“Hyper!” someone shouted.

Cory swayed. Seats. They had to get to the hyperseats. They turned, then someone slammed against them and they crashed onto the deck.

“30 seconds!” yelled a distant voice.

The engines shifted to a high-pitched whine.

Cory groaned. Their vision spiraled.

And then Sasha was above them, yanking them up.

“Pardo, you’ve got a problem with your ID, stand by.”

“Will do!” chirped Dex, as the engines screeched.

Cory stumbled, trying to focus. Every seat they saw was occupied.

“Back here!” called Meas.

Cory spun around, started towards the vacant seat. Then the ship vibrated, and they tripped into Sasha, and their stomach dropped. They weren’t supposed to be there – there weren’t enough seats.

“10 seconds!”

Cory searched wildly. The corner. Rumor said they could brace themselves in a corner. They dashed past the seat, but the engines were spooling up.

Then someone grabbed their shoulders and yanked, and Cory shot backward. They fell sitting, and arms reached around them, tugging a belt over them both. Cory realized what Sasha was doing, reached forward, and clicked the

harness in just as the engines screamed and the *Meir* shot forward. The air crushed them back, their head smacked something hard, their ears roared, they felt their lungs compressing into Sasha's ribs – then the engines cut out, and they slammed into the harness as the ship dropped out of hyper.

“Well, this is not ideal.”

Dex had a skill for summary, Cory reflected wryly, looking at the dejected crew circled around the bridge. An hour of brainstorming, and they'd found exactly zero ideas what to do next.

A few of the Miners glared at Vi with the same undisguised distrust they'd once shown Cory. But Cory recognized Vi's constricted tone when she told them, and her locked elbows now: she had no idea how the code had gone wrong. Which offered no comfort, since it meant the Oxomo landing code might be compromised as well – and though Shep had suggested it, they couldn't exactly hyper onto a moon.

“We could call in a guest landing?” tried Sasha. She rubbed the cut on her forehead, and Cory felt another stab of guilt.

“For who?” said Vi. “You're all known Miners, and Cory and I aren't authorized.”

Cory leaned back, tapping their foot against the wall.

“I could check my drives,” Leora suggested. “Might have a doc that says Leo buried somewhere.” But she said it without enthusiasm, and when no one responded, sat back down. The bandage in Cory’s hair snagged an exposed wire, and they winced. In the back of the room, Jaina tore open more gauze.

“Look,” Vi said finally. “Our plan’s gone. We have no options. We have to give this up.”

Sasha shook her head.

“We’re not giving up. We’ll... we’ll hold our flight path, take time to think...”

“Because we’re coming up with so much,” Vi muttered.

Leora shifted. “We... can’t go slow that long,” she admitted. “If the engines stall, they might not restart.”

“Exactly!” Vi said. “So, we follow the actual flight plan...”

“We’re not running to Minerva!” Sasha insisted. “We need those plans!”

Cory’s foot froze.

“Maybe we could hack them?” Meas asked.

“Would Naven leave the *Kalt*’s blueprints in reach of our servers?” Sasha said. “No, so unless we want the only group sharing that tech to be the System Guard, we’re not running!”

She turned towards the nav screen.

“Hey! What happened to secrecy?” Vi pointed to Cory.

Slowly, Sasha turned back.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered to Meas, who shrugged.

“It’s ok.”

“No, it’s not ok!” Vi protested. “You just told them the whole plan!”

Sasha glared at her. “So what? They’ve been damn nicer company than you have.”

“What’s that supposed to – !”

Cory’s churning thoughts tuned the bridge out. So this was the Miners’ mission. They wanted the blueprint for the *Kalt*. The ship whose name was typed on Cory’s new hire form. From the company whose rep had handed it to them. On the station...

On the station whose landing instructions were zipped in their pocket.

“ - nothing except shut yourself up all day!”

“And has anyone ever asked me to help?” Vi raised her arms. “No!”

It’s wrong, thought Cory. It’s so wrong...

No one will find out. Hundreds get those chips.

It’s still wrong...

“ – don’t care you’re not helping,” yelled Sasha. “but shouting off everyone you meet –”

No one will ever know...

Vi leapt up. “Are you threatening me?”

“No,” Sasha said. “But I’d be justified if I did!”

Vi stepped forward.

“I have landing directions for Naven!” Cory blurted.

Silence fell. Vi and Sasha whipped around.

“I have the personnel code,” they continued. “And directions for ships carrying new hires. We can use them to land.”

Something was buzzing in their ears. Everyone around the bridge stared at them. They suddenly felt defensive.

“They won’t ask for anything beyond the personnel code,” they explained. “It’s designed for efficiency, to not waste training time waiting...”

“How, the hell,” Vi said, “did you get the Naven personnel code?”

Cory inhaled. “I have a job with them.”

Vi forced a laugh. “Naven did not hire you!” but Cory heard the uncertainty under the jeer. They pushed down the urge to retort – this wasn’t the time. A few people nodded, following the plan. But Sasha looked down.

“Why are you just telling us about this now?” she asked.

Cory hesitated. “Because I knew you had a plan,” they said. “I didn’t think you’d need it.”

= “So you said nothing,” she said quietly.

Cory’s stomach twisted.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference until we reached the Naven station.”

“Would you have said anything then?” Sasha asked. “If this hadn’t happened now, would you ever have told us?”

Cory stuttered. “I don’t... that’s not...”

Sasha finally met their gaze.

“If we tried a broken code at a dock, know what’d happen? These injuries would look like nothing!”

Her eyes blazed.

“When we’re nearing a plan, we do everything that might help, share everything. So if something goes wrong, we survive it!”

“You think I don’t care about that?” Cory said, stung. “I didn’t think you’d want to change plans, I didn’t think you’d want to risk that!”

“We take risks all the time, we’re Miners!”

“But I’m not!” Cory snapped, “So how was I supposed to know?”

“It’s part of life!” Sasha shot back, and Cory shook their head.

“No it’s not,” they said quietly. “Not mine.”

They reached into their pocket.

“The directions are here,” they held out the chip. “We can use them to land. I’ll help wherever I can, then show up for training the next morning, make it look like a normal worker transport.”

Sasha took the chip without speaking.

“Hopefully,” Cory said, “once anyone catches on, you all will be long gone.”

They had nothing to pack, nothing to distract themselves with. They perched on the edge of their bed, dread pounding their skull.

What do I do? I have everything laid out. Will I do it? Can I do it?

They shook their head, then winced as the bandage yanked their hair. They lay back, then shot up as the door hissed open. Their eyes met Sasha’s.

“Here,” she held out their gun. “You’ll want this back.”

They lifted the gun; she’d reloaded the bullets. “Thanks,” they muttered.

Sasha nodded. “Course.”

Cory hesitated, then twisted and adjusted their holster. After a moment, Sasha’s footsteps echoed around the room.

“Good luck,” Cory called.

They stared down. Their forehead pounded.

“You too,” Sasha said quickly, and the door slid shut.

A charge filled the hold as the last Miners closed the door. Cory stared towards the exit, where Sasha stood next to Leora, her eyes fixed on the hatch. Her face was pale in the dim light. The speaker Leora had funneled from the bridge hiccupped static as Dex relayed Cory’s instructions to Oxomo Control.

“... transporting new hire, landing code C36...”

Cory rubbed their forehead; each burst of static reverberated through their temple. They realized they were tapping their heel again.

“Cleared for landing,” the controller relayed. “You’ve got 30 minutes free, then we’re charging your ID.”

“Sounds good.”

The little talk in the hold faded as the ship descended. Cory held their foot still. Eventually, Jaina’s quiet voice cut through the engines.

“Checks.”

Cory shuffled next to Vi, who avoided their eyes. *30 minutes*, they reminded themselves, turning to the hatch. *30 minutes to input the Meir’s fake ID, then we never see each other again.*

“Sasha, Leora,” Jaina called. “Ready?”

“Ready,” said Sasha. Leora patted her toolbelt. “Meas, Shep?”

“Ready!” Meas recited. “Cory, Vi?”

The ship bumped, then stabilized. Cory forced himself to nod.

“Ready.”

The docking sensor outside the hull beeped twice, then chimed. Everyone stared at the hatch. Cory’s heart pounded.

Nothing happened.

Leora sighed, shuffled to the hatch, and kicked it.

Very, very slowly, it squeaked open.

The moment the ramp touched the dock, Sasha sprang through the frame and out of sight. Cory blinked, and in the time it took them to open their eyes, Leora vanished after her.

“Come on,” Vi muttered as Meas and Shep dashed through. Cory breathed deep, then ran with Vi through the hatch.

They nearly froze at the magnitude of the docks: rows and rows of ships stretching under the massive roof into darkness. Their footsteps echoed through the cavernous space, but no one met them as they dodged from ship to ship. When they reached a wall, Cory glanced back, but the *Meir* had vanished among the rows. They looked up as a faint circle of light spiraled open over the far side of the docks, followed by a whirring as a ship slid into the docks. A soft hiss sounded behind them. They turned, and followed Vi through the exit.

Her map labelled this as a service corridor, and its twists and turns matched the lines they'd traced. But even under the orange emergency lights, Cory noticed the immaculate floors and walls, which rose tall enough that even Vi didn't have to duck. Heated air brushed their arms as they ran, praying that Leora and Sasha had managed to shut off the security drones.

Just as their side stitch started pinching, Vi threw out her arm. Cory stumbled to a halt, and peered with her around the corner. A solitary brown door marked the hallway: the dock security office. Vi crept forward.

"Wait!" Cory gasped.

"I know!" Vi hissed, but stepped back.

The moment she ducked behind the corner, the door slid open, and a harried-looking guard rushed the other way down the corridor. Cory waited till his footsteps faded, then with Vi on their heels, darted around the corner and through the door.

They found themselves facing a solid wall of triangular drones plugged into charging nooks. They sighed: all were off. "Come on," they whispered: Shep and Meas had only guaranteed them a few minutes. They surveyed the rest of the office, until, with a rush, their eyes arrived at the tan box Sasha had described.

"Here!" they waved to Vi, crossing around a chair. Up close, the top of the file prickled with thousands of tiny dots. They flicked the switch in the middle, then leapt back as it unfurled into a spindly lever. The base dinged.

“Er... landing, tonight, 3:02 local time,” they whispered, and the arm extended toward the corner nearest them. “Space 416,” they finished, and the arm selected one of the dots, poked it, then retracted, a bean-like info pod stuck to its tip.

“Here,” the reached back, squinting at the miniscule port glinting in the pod’s center. They hovered there, then looked back.

“Vi?”

Vi stood in the doorway, her mouth slightly open, spinning the ID chip between her fingers. She glanced at them as though surprised, then inhaled sharply.

“I won’t,” she muttered, and her fingers closed. Slowly, Cory straightened up.

“What do you mean you won’t?”

Vi slid her hand into her pocket. “I mean I’m not plugging this chip in,” she said, “Almost got arrested getting it, nearly died bringing it here, and now I’m just supposed to stick it back like it never left?”

Cory felt their pulse rising. Vi was talking rapidly, staring through them.

“Besides, how much’s it worth? They wanted it, there’s bound to be others who do. Yeah. I’m keeping it.”

She nodded slightly.

“They need it,” Cory whispered. “In 10 minutes, the file’ll search for an ID and find nothing.”

“10 minutes,” Vi justified. “They might be gone by then. They might be gone already.”

Cory shook their head. “You know they’re not. Guard’s still gone, drones are still off, you know they’re still here.”

The idea was strangely comforting, so different from everything else around them. They clung to it, as Vi finally focused on them.

“Ok, so maybe they’re not gone,” she conceded. “So what? You see how they’ve been acting? I’ve had... none of them talked to me, they didn’t even look at me if they could avoid it, which they did, a lot! Take a moment and imagine how that felt!”

She looked down, and Cory’s stomach twisted: they didn’t have to imagine.

“Anyway,” Vi shook her head, “they’re Miners. Who knows what they’re going to do with those plans?”

She looked pointedly at them. Cory’s thoughts felt blocked. They struggled to break through.

“I know,” they admitted. “I know. But... we can’t just ditch them like that. It’s...”

They hesitated. Weren't they planning to do exactly the same thing? Hadn't they felt the same things Vi was feeling, used them to make the same decisions?

No.

"It's not right."

A block evaporated from their chest. They resolved it: they weren't telling Naven a word.

Far outside the office, something clanged. Vi sighed.

"Think what you will. I'm going." She turned for the door. Without thinking about it, Cory stepped forward. The floor creaked, and Vi whipped around, her gun in her hands. Cory drew theirs too.

"Leave the chip, Vi," they said quietly.

"Or what?" Vi taunted, her eyes narrowed. "You'll shoot me? Draw every guard on the station?"

"You shoot me, you'll draw them here too," Cory gripped their gun tighter. "I'm not letting you take it."

"Again, how will you stop me?"

"How will you stop *me*?"

Cory held their gun steady, their mind whirring; Vi mirrored them. They glared at each other. Suddenly, they heard footsteps in the hallway.

“...all resolved,” reported a muffled voice. “Some idiots trying to compress waffle batter...”

Vi’s eyes widened; Cory felt dunked in ice. The footsteps reached the door, Vi’s hands wavered, and finally, Cory’s brain hit a light.

“Gun away!” they whispered. Without waiting, they spun back to the file and whipped the *Kalt*’s ID chip from their pocket into the port. They flicked the power switch, then stepped in front of the collapsing arm, then took a deep breath as the door slid open.

“Hey! Are you the hiring manager?” they asked the guard from before, whose grey hair was now splashed with waffle batter. His jaw dropped.

“No?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must have misread the map!” they rambled. “See, I just got hired as a navigator for the *Kalt*, and the rep said I’m supposed to come early for onboarding. He gave me this packet...”

Cory held up the now-empty envelope. They glanced at Vi, who was determinedly examining the drones.

“My name’s Cory Jacque, and this is Leora Dex. She’s with the ship dropping me off.”

Vi blinked, but otherwise, she held her expression.

“Holy...” groaned the guard, rubbing a fleck of batter from his eyebrow. “You,” he pointed at Cory, “come with me. You,” he pointed at Vi, “just go.”

He turned right and trudged down the hallway. Without speaking, Cory followed Vi out of the office. She turned to go left, hesitated, then met Cory's eyes.

"Good luck," Cory mumbled. Vi opened her mouth, closed it, then nodded stiffly, and strode down the corridor. Cory watched her for a moment, then hurried in the opposite direction.

They walked in silence for a few hallways, with the guard's muttering a background for their rapid-fire thoughts.

It's not too late. I could claim I had no idea, I could say the Miners stole it...

"How'd that rep give out a map of my office?" he grumbled at they passed under an air duct. Cory shrugged.

I could say...

The guard glanced down at them.

"How'd you get into the security office?"

Cory stumbled. "I..."

The guard halted.

"It's 4 am!"

Fuck it.

They yanked their gun out, aimed it straight up, and squeezed the trigger. The corridor exploded with pressurized air. Cory closed their eyes as dust and debris blasted from the air duct, stinging their skin and plunging the corridor into darkness. An alarm shrieked, the guard yelled, and Cory sprinted back the way they came.

“Wait up!”

They tore through the docks toward the *Meir*'s open hatch.

Inside the hold, Sasha whipped around, then jumped aside as they barreled past.

“Cory, what-”

Cory doubled over, gasping, and she abandoned questions.

“Let's go!” they heard her shout, then stumbled against Leora's legs as the ship lurched from the dock.

“What happened?” Leora shouted as she guided them to a handhold. They grasped it, panting.

“Had to go,” they choked out. “Vi. Kept the code. Wouldn't plug it in. So I plugged in mine.”

“You're joking!” Sasha swore next to them.

Cory glanced up to find Leora gaping at Sasha.

“You’re surprised at that?”

Sasha leaned around her. “What happened?” she repeated. “Are you hurt? Why are you covered in dust?”

The ship shot up, and Cory braced themselves. “Blew out an air duct!” they yelled over the engines. “Guard walked in on us, I distracted him but he figured me out, so I shot the vent and ran.”

They breathed deep, the stitch in their side fading.

“So what happened to Vi?” Leora asked tersely. The ship’s acceleration eased, and Cory pulled themselves up.

“Left,” they said finally. “She got away. She’s ok.’

As their feet floated from the deck, they pictured Vi walking away, code in hand. They kicked around. They weren’t sure what that thought made them feel, but whatever it was, it didn’t stick in their mind that much. The gravity drive whirred on, and they stood.

“So no job then, huh?” Sasha asked, sounded genuinely apologetic, and Cory turned, surprised. They shook their head.

“Nah,” they said. They felt regret there, mixed with a strong dose of uncertainty. But more than either of those, they decided, they felt relief. They marveled at that for a moment, then remembered.

“Did you get the plan?” they asked.

Leora turned to Sasha, who beamed, and held up a chip.

“Hell yeah!” she said, and Cory laughed.

“I’m happy for you,” they told her, and meant it. They all glanced across the hold as laughter rose from the crowd around Meas and Shep, whose overalls were completely drenched.

“So,” Sasha turned back to them. “Guess you’re stuck with us again.”

Cory chuckled.

“I guess I am,” they said, then grinned. They could live with that.