

## Chapter Eleven

The idea of having a baby in transport was something that had happened countless times over the span of humanity, but it never got any easier, and Sketch didn't care for the idea of being short-handed on the ship as he was.

"I'm going to induce labor now, if you don't mind, Captain," Jez said to him over the intercoms. "Assuming everything goes nice and normal, I should have the baby out by the time we reach Reltbex, and we should be able to deposit the baby with her family and get the mother back to Jeratine before anyone's the wiser."

"Roger Jez," Sketch said back to her from his place on the bridge. "Get that started and we'll start moseying on over."

"Remember, Captain, no using ring gates until after we have the newborn off the ship," Jez said. "Prenatal and neonatal humanoids don't react well to the gates."

"Not my first rodeo, Jez, but thank you for the reminder nonetheless," he chuckled. "Give a holler if you need anything else. Sketch out."

"You're not worried about Dominion ships, boss?" Lara asked him.

"Why?" he laughed. "If anything, we're doing the least number of illegal things right now than we have been in months. Sure, we had to smuggle her off Jeratine, but the Dominion's not going to give a shit about that. As it stands, right now we're basically operating in the clear in terms of legality. This is basically just a chartered voyage right now. Plenty of opportunity to gauge you and your wife's skills at work."

"You don't need to worry about us, boss," Lara said. "We're rock solid."

"You're not the one I'm worried about, Lara," Sketch said. "It's the carabel addict I'm concerned with."

"She's not that bad, boss."

"Again, it's not *her*, I'm worried about. It's the carabel addict *inside* of her," he sighed. "That shit's insidious. I understand the usefulness in making sure you have steady hands and aren't plagued by nightmares of soldiers dying around you, but it's all too easy to get trapped and addicted to the soft, pillow fort life that carabel gives you. No real anger, no real fear – just an entire existence of mellowed out, middle-of-the-road, worriless daydreams. They're blissed out zombies. Of course, they have the reflexes of an antique telegraph machine playing chess by mail, and less ability to defend themselves than stoned koala bears, but hey, what's the harm in that, right?"

Lara nodded quietly. "I know. Believe me, I know. That's why I've been trying to keep her under a tight leash for it, but she's gotta fight that demon off herself. She knows exactly how addictive it can be, but she's using it responsibly, just when she's having hard attacks."

"Time will tell if you're right, Lara."

"Captain," Helen's voice said over the intercom. "Perhaps you should look ahead on our long-range scanners."

"Alright, Helen, put it up on holo," he said as a three-dimensional image of the ship, the system and their flightpath appeared, taking them through a large gray stripe in the middle. "Ah, bollocks, yeah, that's not ideal."

"Where the hell did this comet come from?" Lara said.

"Somewhere else in space, obviously," Sketch said. "Besides, where it came from is least of our problems. We're going to have to go around it, aren't we?"

"I mean, I could *try* and fly us through the wash of the comet, but it'll be a lot safer to fly around it."

"How much slower?"

"Another day? Maybe two?"

Sketch blanched. "And how much riskier to fly through it?"

"Call it 50/50 we come through unscathed, 20% chance of a major accident."

“Sounds like a good test for a potential pilot then, don’t you think?” Sketch said with a grin.  
“Or are you—”

“Game on, oh Cap’n my Captain!”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Sketch said. “Steady as she goes, Helen.”

“As who goes, Captain?”

Sketch let out a very deep sigh, almost certain she was kidding, but with Helen one never could tell. “It means—”

“Gotcha!” she giggled.

“If you had an ass, Helen, I would kick you in it.”

“If I had an ass, Captain, I would make it look *good*.”

Half an hour later, they were doing something Sketch himself would’ve never dared try if he was piloting – flying through the wake of a comet. It was similar to flying through an asteroid field, except all the asteroids were on the move at a much higher velocity. It meant lots of micro adjustments and a constant shift and drift philosophy, one which took up all of Lara’s focus, and much of Helen’s as well, the two working in tandem to keep the ship on a line that steered them clear of any debris large enough to cause problems by piercing the hull. Sure, there were minor bumps and scrapes, but as long as they didn’t hit anything big enough to do damage, that was just fine by him.

The two were so intently focused on their work that Sketch felt it best to leave them alone, and headed down to see how Jez was getting along with her delivery. He could hear an infant crying, which meant that the delivery had happened, something which let Sketch relax just a little bit over.

Relaxing was the mistake.

As soon as he came around the corner, he noticed Pertixi lying in his medical bed, her child in one arm. That part was fine. The part that wasn’t was the sidearm she had extended, pointing over in Jezebel’s direction. “Tell him! Or I swear to high heavens I’ll blast each and every one of you before I take over this ship myself.”

“She doesn’t want to go *back* to Jeratine, Sketch,” Jezebel said to him. “She wants to stay on Reltbex with her sister.”

Sketch sort of looked at her, not comprehending. “And?”

“And?!” Pertixi said. “And I know you bastards were contracted to take me over Reltbex, strip my baby from me and then haul me back to Jeratine and dump me there without my son!”

“That was what was the client requested,” Sketch said, his hand keeping as far from his sidearm as he could. He did, however, start tapping into the Ashaka, pushing her down the path of The Calm, trying to ease her out of the fight-or-flight response she was locked into. He could feel the tension threading through her body, but it was difficult to manage it, because she still had all the hormones and adrenaline from giving birth flowing through her body, placing her in a heightened state of awareness. “If you’ve got a different—”

“Fucking hell! Yes! I have a different request!” she shouted, still shaking the firearm in Jezebel’s direction. “I do not want to go back to Jeratine! I do not wish to abandon my son to my sister’s care! I want to raise him on my own, and if that means I need to never return to Jeratine, well, then by God’s even eye, that is what I aim to do!”

“That’s *fine*,” Sketch said, waving his hands calmly in her direction. “I wish you’d have told us before we left Jeratine, because it’s going to be more of a pain in the ass to get my people off and convince people you’re still there *now*, especially since we’ve had contact with you, but we’ll make it work, I promise you. But you gotta lower that weapon. I can’t have anyone shooting at my crew, can I?”

“I thought you said she was ‘auditioning’ to be your crew,” Pertixi said cautiously at him.

“She *is*, but she’s kept her cool so far while the person I was assured was a milk run has had a gun leveled at her for a minute or two now,” Sketch said. He’d tapped into the The Calm now, and was flowing her into it, and he could feel it starting to take root in her, starting to lull her into security. “Can

you please put the gun down now?”

“You swear you ain’t gonna take me back to Jeratine?”

“As far as I’m concerned, whoever the passenger is decides where they get off, and seeing as I’m the Captain, my concern’s all that really matters,” he said, trying to keep his voice as level as he could. That newborn child in her arms was complicating all sorts of things – emotions, logic, deduction – but if he could get her to put the weapon down, they’d be fine. He pushed harder with *The Calm*, finding it a little more challenging than he’d remembered, but he attributed that to how long it had been since he’d had an Ashaka reliably under his control, and the fact that the Ashaka he was using belonged to someone else before him, an unusual arrangement, at least as far as he’d known. “You have my word, Pertixi. Nobody’s splitting you and your baby up.”

Pertixi lowered the gun and rested it on top of the bed just off to the side of her leg, atop the blanket. “You best be a man of your word, Captain, or I will hunt and kill every last one of your crew, ending with you.”

“I am, I assure you,” he said, gesturing for Jezebel to come out of the room and over to join him in the hallway. Once the two of them were out of earshot range, he leaned in and lowered his voice. “So, other than the firearm we should’ve found earlier, how’s she doing?”

“She wasn’t even *hiding* the sidearm, Sketch, so you’re just as much at fault for that as any of us.”

“I didn’t expect her to go all Mother Gunner on us,” he chuckled. “But yeah, that one’s on me. Still, answer the question.”

“Perfectly healthy boy there, although I had to give him a stabilizer shot, to cure him of some of the backwoods stuff his momma picked up living in Pioneertown,” she snorted derisively. “Should I strip her of all the germs and other shit she’s picked up living among the dirt people?”

“Your bedside manner can definitely use some work, but yes, get her clean and healthy,” Sketch said. “Especially if we’re not taking her back there. Fuck those people and their insane attitudes towards medicine. I want to make sure she and that baby are the best possible condition when we get to Reltbex, because I don’t think *we’re* the ones she’s got an argument with.”

“Oh yeah?” She glanced back into the room before looking back at Sketch. “You think the sister’s got ulterior motives?”

“I think it’s rather suspicious that the sister didn’t have any contingency plans that involved the mother and child sticking together,” Sketch said. “I thought it was odd when your mom gave us the pitch, but it was on drop call, so obviously I couldn’t discuss it with her. To me, it feels like we got two levels of client here – the mother, who contracted us through the sister, and the sister, who may or may not have her own agenda. Which means the drop off may get a little dicey.”

“Aren’t they always?”

“Didn’t use to be,” Sketch grumbled. “I liked it when things were nice and simple, and I could drop off packages away from people. Money was always there, and I never missed a drop.”

“Ah, back when you didn’t have to worry about *people being people*,” she chuckled. “God, your life sounds like it used to be so boring.”

“Boring was fine,” he said. “Boring was stable. Boring was survivable.”

“But it wasn’t any *fun* now, was it?” she laughed as she walked back into the room and Sketch turned around to head back up towards the bridge.

“Helen, this new crew is going to drive me insane in the end, aren’t they?” he asked quietly as he stepped into the elevator.

“Only if you let them, boss,” she said, amusement layered in her vocal patterns as the elevator began to lift upwards. “But you’re a smart man. I’m sure you’ll keep them in check when it’s really important.”

The elevator shook a little, as the ship must’ve brushed against something slightly larger in the meteor’s wake. “And when it’s only *kind of* important?”

“Then they’ll keep your life interesting,” she giggled.

The ship shook again, nothing too severe, but enough that Sketch wasn’t especially pleased. He’d brought on a pilot to avoid crashing into things and he was willing to make allowances for flying through the wake of a comet, but his tolerance only extended so far. He set foot on the bridge, glancing at the holoscreen to see if they were through the comet field yet. “You know if I wanted a pilot who could bump into everything, I’d go back to doing it myself, and drink more.”

“Sorry Captain,” Lara grumbled, pointing towards the display. “I was trying to avoid attracting their attention, but it looks like we got spotted anyway.” On the screen he could see a Y’bari cruiser headed their direction. “They’re hailing us.”

Sketch made sure his sleeves were rolled all the way down to his wrists, straightened himself up and moved over to sit down in the captain’s chair. “Helen, put them on screen.”

“*Praeteritus*, this is the Y’bari patrol *Upper Cavern*, hailing for routine inspection,” a Y’bari officer said on the other side of the screen, dressed in that battle armor that Sketch had found rather intimidating until he’d gotten used to seeing Aliara in it. “What is your business, and what the hell made you decide to take it through the backwash of a comet like a medrevnick?”

“Captain Sketch of *The Praeteritus* here, *Upper Cavern*, and we’re just hauling a mother and her newborn over to Reltbex to meet up with the mother’s sister,” Sketch said, hoping like hell he could talk his way out of this one. “There’d been reports of pirates along this line, and the last thing I wanted was my passengers to get hijacked and sold into slavery. Not exactly good for business. And I figured if we could duck them instead of fighting them, the better it’d be for all involved. I’m testing out a potential new pilot right now, and it seemed like the kind of thing that would be a decent skill test without putting the ship into too much trouble.”

“Manifest has you as traveling with three humans and a P’nox, plus yourself, Captain, but bioscanners show you’re a P’nox and a human light,” the Y’bari said to him. “Care to explain the discrepancy?”

“They’re off on a bit of R&R and I figured I didn’t need to update the traveling manifest for a few days of shoreleave.”

“Where at?”

“Jeratine, where we picked up our passenger from.”

“Isn’t Jeratine home to that Exovite colony?”

“It is,” Sketch said. “Our passenger decided she didn’t want to stay an Exovite once they told her she couldn’t have drugs during childbirth, so she left.”

“Can’t imagine that went over well with the Exovites,” the Y’bari commander chuckled.

“They were none too thrilled, but it isn’t like a bunch of dirt farmers had much in the way of weaponry to threaten me with,” Sketch laughed, playing along. “They’ll spit and holler when I go back to get my crew on R&R there, but hell, they ain’t got anything bigger than a rock to throw at me, so I’m not worried about that.”

“Still, sounds like more trouble than I’d want to put up with in letting some folks have some R&R.”

“You gotta let your people enjoy their time away from the ship when and where they want, otherwise it’s not R&R, is it?”

“I suppose that’s true, *Praeteritus*, I suppose that’s true. Anyway, since your manifest and your bioscan numbers don’t match up, I gotta send someone over there to do a sweep of your boat, make sure there’s nothing that isn’t supposed to be there, and then I can send you on your way.”

That, of course, was the *last* thing Sketch wanted. He knew his old Lingham sob story had too many holes in it to hold water now, so he needed to think of something else, and quick. Between the Y’bari battle dart, and the ring scanner blocker, he had more than enough things that were risky under the best of circumstances, and that was with *some* preparation.

This was a flyer and a pipe dream.

“Well, I—”

“Oh thank the *Dominion*,” Lara said with a laugh, getting up from her chair and moving over to sit down on top of Sketch’s lap. That wasn’t at *all* what he expected, but she obviously had some kind of plan, and so he was just going to roll with it. “You can wander all over the ship as long as you don’t mind the sounds of us *fucking*,” she said, running her hand against the back of Sketch’s neck, snuggling up against him. “Me and my wife decided that if we going to guarantee ourselves a place on this ship, we were going to have to give the Captain another reason beyond our impeccable skills, so we’re going to spend the *entirety* of your search banging him within an inch of his life.”

“Er, what?”

“My wife’s a much better cocksucker than I am, but she’s not half the fuck I am,” Lara giggled. “And I found out from one of his partners that he likes a talker, so we’re gonna make a ton of noise on this ship, which’ll prove that I have no shame when it comes to putting on a good show.”

“If—”

“You want me to punch you in now, or you want us to come meet you in the docking bay? I can get my wife to suck him off while he’s answering questions if you don’t mind.”

“Y’know what, I’m just going to give you a flyer on this one, *Praeteritus*,” the Y’bari commander said. “It sounds like you’ve got your hands full, and the last thing I need is one of my soldiers poking around while you’re, ahem, evaluating potential staff. That kind of thing should best be done in private. Anyway, you have a good one, *Praeteritus*.”

The feed cut off, and as Sketch turned to look at Lara. A few seconds later, she began to laugh and crawled off his lap, shaking her head. “You really have gotten complacent with whatever you used to do when it was just you on this ship, haven’t you?” she said as she moved to sit back down in her pilot’s seat. “One thing you apparently don’t know about the Y’bari is that they are *terrified* of public displays of affection. They’ll do damn near anything to avoid it, for fear of being ‘contaminated.’ The rumor is that if a Y’bari sees or encounters too much intimate contact between individuals, there’s a chance of ‘corruption’ and that’s where P’nox come from. That where *our* P’nox comes from?”

“It’s something like that.”

“Anyway, if you need to, you can usually steer them off with a bit of hot action, or even just the threat of having some,” Lara said with a playful wave.

“And if they’d have called your bluff?”

“Oh, I wasn’t bluffing,” she said confidently. “I’d have had Jez on her knees sucking you off while you were talking the officer through the manifest before they’d even started looking at the storage bays. They wouldn’t have lasted two minutes.”

“I won’t tell your wife you were offering her up like a sacrifice to buy us some time, but that was good thinking on your part.”

“Oh, you *should* tell her,” Lara said smugly. “She’s itching to take a run at you. Not saying I wouldn’t mind having a go myself.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Look, Sketch, I understand you’ve got an old code and a set of ways but Jez and I, we’re polyamorous, and getting some dick on the side?” she scoffed. “Until you get another cock on this ship, you’re the only stand-in we’re going to have on the regular, so you’d better get used to the idea that one or both of us are going to want to take a turn on it every now and again.”

“Don’t I get a say in the matter?” Sketch asked, cocking his head to one side.

“Sure, you can throw us off the ship, or you can say that’s fine,” Lara stated calmly. “Those are your two options.”

“I wasn’t aware that me putting out was a deciding factor.”

“Well, if you get another dude on this ship sooner rather than later, it won’t be. As much. But it’ll still probably be at least some. But c’mon. Nothing wrong with a little free love here and there.”

“What kind of ship am I running?”

“A successful one, it seems,” Lara laughed. “We should be at Reltbex in a few hours. If you want to snag a nap between here and there, Cap’n, it might be for the best.”

It was a good enough idea that when Sketch went to rest, he found himself surprisingly exhausted and just blacked right out on his bed, falling into a deep slumber. He stayed asleep for longer than intended, because when he finally felt Lara’s hand shaking him awake, it was because they were arriving at Reltbex, and they needed him to navigate the complexities of the handoff.

Reltbex was a transit hub planet, meaning that it functioned as a port of call for lots of long haulers, but there were also loads of businesses dedicated to buying and selling goods, and more than a handful of large open marketplaces where shippers could try and unload their goods at the best possible prices they could get.

That made it something of a smuggler’s paradise.

The handoff meeting was supposed to take place in a suite at a hotel called The Borderline, something Sketch had always found funny, although no one else ever had. Pertixi was still paranoid, but she seemed to at least respect that Sketch had promised he would do his best to solve the problem between her and her sister.

As soon as they walked into the expensive room, Sketch noticed that Kialla, Pertixi’s sister, had brought with her a couple of local bruisers to try and act intimidating, while Sketch had shown up just with Pertixi and the baby, leaving Lara and Jezebel back on the ship. The thugs weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, but he imagined that had he been someone else, he might’ve found the sight of them somewhat discouraging.

“Captain Sketch of *The Praeteritus* here to make delivery of Pertixi and her son to Kialla Nailost,” he said as they entered the room, the door closing behind him.

“That wasn’t the deal, Captain,” Kialla said in a cold tone of voice. He had a hard time imagining the two being related, but he supposed if he squinted a little, he could see it. “The deal was you were to deliver the baby here, and then relay my sister back to her quiet life on Jeratine.”

“I’m not going back there, Kialla,” Pertixi said. “After Brant died, there was nothing left for me among those people. So you can take me and my baby—”

“You mean *my* baby,” Kialla said. “Nobody’s going to believe you had a child on Jeratine and somehow got it off the planet. It’s going to be my child, and you’re going to be a footnote in our family’s history book. But you needn’t worry, sister of mine. I’m going to raise her as my own.”

“Over my dead body.”

“If that’s what it’ll come to,” Kialla sighed, as if she was already bored with the conversation. “Go on then. Kill them both, but don’t harm the baby.”

The two goons looked over at Kialla, then over at Sketch, then back at Kialla. “You weren’t paying us to handle the smuggler,” one of the two thugs said.

“Fine, I’ll double your fee. That should cover it, yes?”

One of the thugs narrowed his eyes, as if trying to do some risk versus reward estimates, and that was all the opportunity Sketch needed. He started shoving everyone except Pertixi down the path of The Fear and began moving using his mercenary training to charge at the thugs.

He knew the two were just hired help, and as such, he resolved to only knock them out, moving with enough speed and precision that neither men saw the strikes coming, one to the throat, the other to the back of the neck, both men tumbling unconscious to the floor before Kialla even had time to gasp in shock. And at the end of his two strikes, he was holding his sidearm, drawn and pointing straight at Kialla’s head.

“Whatever nonsense is going on between you and your sister, that ain’t none of my business, lady, but when you decided you didn’t want to pay *me*? Well, that just made my fee triple, and you’re lucky that’s all it did, because otherwise we’d be obligated to head to your home and loot it dry after killing you,” he said, keeping the firearm just a few inches from her temple so even if she moved, he could track her with it. “There’s only one rule in life you need to follow, Kialla – you always pay the

people you do business with. Even if your half-rate rent-a-goons *had* somehow gotten the drop on me, that'd left my fixer to come after you, and she's got people for that, and those people? They're a *thousand* times more ruthless and cutthroat than I am. They would've slowly tortured you for days before they finally killed you, because at that point, your death is less important than the message it sends in *how* you die for daring not to honor a contract."

"It's just business, Mr. Sketch," Kialla said coldly.

"Well, you 'falling' out of this hotel window might be 'just business' if you don't see about getting my funds transferred," Sketch said.

"Are you really the type of man who—"

He brought the weapon to full charge. "Let me stop you there, lady. Yes. I will kill a woman in cold blood. I've killed a dozen women in cold blood. Most of them deserved it. Probably a couple of them didn't, but I did it anyway. Before I was a smuggler, well, I was something else, but before *that*, I was one of the most ruthless mercenaries in existence. So if you're asking me if I'm really the kind of man who'd kill a defenseless woman over some money, I'd like to ask *you* if you're the kind of woman who so lightly values her own life."

That hung in the air for a moment, and there was no mistaking that Sketch wouldn't hesitate to put this woman in the ground. So she grabbed her tablet, pulled up her banking information and transferred triple his fee (and that included Cola's cut, which was more sizable than he'd anticipated) before she tossed the tablet onto her desk.

"There," she said. "You're paid."

"Not so difficult now, was it?"

"What's to stop me from just dealing with Pertixi after you're gone?" she asked coldly.

"Well, two things... the first of which is that I'm going to give Pertixi a series of instructions on how to leave a drop message for me every six months. If that message *isn't* there, I'm going to come back and investigate, and if I don't like what I find, well, then we'll make a point out of you."

"And the other?"

"Oh, I expect your sister knows how to take care of herself pretty well," he said with a small chuckle. He holstered his sidearm and strolled over to Pertixi, handing her a shard with instructions on how to leave him messages on dropsites. "Sorry about the hassle, but I'd still keep an eye on that one," Sketch said, gesturing over to Kialla. "She's not to be trusted."

"Mmmm," Pertixi agreed. "I can't wait to see how mother reacts to hearing that her older daughter attempted to knock off her younger daughter in order to steal her baby. That'll play real well around the dinner table."

"Happy to have helped."

"One last ask?" Pertixi said, placing her hand on his shoulder. "I intend to name the boy Dwaliel, after his late father, but I wouldn't mind giving him a middle name after the man who helped him live. Is there something else other than Sketch?"

"Miles," he said with a smile. "Try on the middle name Miles and see how it takes you."

"Take care, Miles," she said. "I'm sorry I complicated your job."

"Don't be," he laughed. "It wouldn't be a real job without complications."