

Stars in Our Sails

Epilogue

'Captain Ibolya, Sir!'

After this announcement petty officer saluted and hastily made her exit, leaving said captain Ibolya eyeballing the closed door. 'Aight, I prefer keeping my people in a short leash, but that lass was genuinely scared,' thought Ned, turning his eyes to his new employer.

Lights in the cabin were dimmed, but the man himself was quite visible. That is, his back was, as the commander was gazing through a window; perhaps star-spotting, perhaps just admiring the passing of twirls of dust and ice. Indeed, dust and ice were more abundant and definitely more radioactive than yesterday. 'With some cap'n Ibo and his merry crew on the side, had the worst come to the worst,' Ned pondered without any real joy.

Hadn't they been so hard-headed, resourceful and lucky, the nightmare named Cornucopia would have claimed them all. 'And that was just the easy part,' he continued his silent stroll among memories. Of course, out here, being tough and resourceful was only to be expected. It was the sheer amount of good old-fashioned dumb luck that, with the five of them being civilian and all, had probably bought them some leeway.

Ned pushed the face of the petty officer from his mind. He wasn't going to waste that leeway on anything as futile as questioning in any way the command of the man he now worked for. Ned just stood silently and relaxed, waiting.

His wait was short-lived. The commander nodded slightly and turned his eyes over to Ned. 'Captain, how fare your crew and ship?' His military boots made no sound on hard floor.

'No red carpet? I never needed any!' thought Ned, then voiced 'My gut tells me that you already know more about that than I probably ever will,' only to be countered with a soft inevitability. 'I still need to hear it from you.'

'That antidote sure took,' Ned shrugged. 'And your med bay ain't half-bad. All of them are literally up and running.' This was quite true; almost immediately after being released, the crew had stormed flagships gym and claimed it their base of operations. Treadmills and such were in use with such ferocity that ships officers and enlisted men were steering away, especially after a couple of them had made the mistake of hitting on the ladies. 'The ship herself is now just a big mess!' complained Ned. 'Your goons have done their best to fuck her up! Those little turds have mangled her! Scorched her! Shot her with a low-yield railgun!' Ned grasped for air. 'They have actually broken things and made a half-assed job of fixing them up again! That ship was NEW! Now she looks like...'

'More of her age, agreed?' the commander picked up. 'She is a "Shiloh"-class corvette. She was manufactured decades ago in the Re-United Kingdom by Dare and Stratton. Out of total 38 ships there are only two that survived. Both of them are accounted for.'

The commander seemed unaffected by Ned's little outburst and continued. 'From here on to all eternity your ship will be US ACS09 "Martha Washington". The original was damaged beyond repair in battle and got scrapped. Apparently, there has been some kind of mistake with inventory,' the commander made a small, almost apologizing gesture with his hand. 'There was some actual paperwork to be done. Navy can be so very traditional at times.'

Encouraged by this, Ned made his move. 'Now that we are talking an' all, the new kid, Yao, found something interesting before his ass was kicked out of the ship with the rest of us. It seems like good ol' "Martha" was rigged to self-destruct if poked around by US forces. Now, what would you make out of that?'

The commander fell silent for a moment. Then he reached for a drawer, pulled out a bottle and a thin tulip glass and poured some of the mahogany liquid in it. A rich universe of aromas wafted throughout the cabin. Ned felt his nostrils widen. 'Damn, that's some fine bourbon. And some vanilla notes, too. It's definitely been inside a real oak-barrel. Stuff's almost priceless out here.'

The commander made no effort offering him any. Ned didn't mind.

'Early day colonists were brave but untrustworthy people,' the commander noted, sipping his bourbon. 'Problem youth ready to stick it to the man, outsiders, all sorts of unsavory folk. And some very intelligent minds, which actually made things worse, to top it off. It was clear from the beginning that there would be problems. So, among the crew of every US colony ship there were placed some true patriots, sleepers if you like, just in case. And it came to pass that the crew of "Cornucopia" also rebelled, making their declaration of independence. After their mutiny the crew set a new course and to conserve resources most of them retired inside palanquins,' the commander's voice no longer bared signs of disinterest. 'They were running on a skeleton crew and sleepers took action. They secured some antidote, destroying the rest. Made certain that infection would run through the entire ship and broke the cylinders that contained the weapon.'

'The leader of the mutineers understood that they were done over and set the ship and everything on it to self-destruct. She also tried to turn the ship around, back to... Well, that doesn't matter, she died while at it. Back then the weapon was very potent, it hadn't lost any of its... charm.'

The commander was once again looking outside, into the endless void. 'The ship landed on Sedna instead. You have been there. That place was like cotton candy! The moment "Cornucopia" set down she literally sank. Surrounding terrain caved in, completely covering her up. The best damn camouflage I have ever seen, I give it that. And even after all this time, her reactors packed quite a punch. We wouldn't want any of that going off at our face.'

Unspoken word "again" spun around the cabin, took temporary refuge in bourbon and was gulped down without giving any resistance. 'We needed some neutral boots on the ground for direct mainframe access. Hence the mercenaries. Then things started to go a little sideways. The officer responsible made some unfortunate calls of his own. We lost valuable assets, time and good taxpayers' money. Said officer no longer makes any calls, he is just answering them. At least he didn't pay the mercenaries in advance.'

Ned rubbed his chin. That certainly explained a lot, however, 'Aight, then why are your guys loading my ship with something that looks awfully like canisters of deuterium? Just like prepping her for another fuel run? I thought...'

'Quite correctly, that our little run-in at Sedna and your original mission had nothing to do with each other,' the commander snatched initiative once again. 'Moreover, most of that fuel is reserved for you. Your full... ah... instructions are here,' the commander placed a little chip on his table, then returned to the window. 'And something we managed to secure from Cornucopia, just in case the captain of the ship you are to join forces with gives you anything but her full co-operation. When together, you are to procure more fuel and proceed to the theater of operations.'

'And exactly where and how is that?' voiced Ned, pushing the envelope. The answer was toneless. '"Strider" knows the way, your job is to keep her on it. As to how, you no longer command a freighter but a warship.'

'Sounds peachy, hopefully the crew of this "Strider" is more capable than those mercs were,' Ned replied in kind. 'Those fucktards got a drop on us TWICE and still had their asses handed down to them.' The sleek man by the window raised an eyebrow. 'Now, the second time was actually us. At that time we had total control over "Cornucopia" and the weapon systems of the late captain Milosh were riddled with malware.

'That lousy bushwhacker nearly blew Tamara's head off!' Ned objected.

'She lives. You are welcome.' Admitting defeat Ned shrugged taking a careful look at the glass his boss was holding. There was just a drop of bourbon left. 'And with it gone... come to think of it, old bastich has been surprisingly talkative so far, almost out of character,' Ned kept this thought to himself. It could be nothing, it could be a symptom of something nasty*. While he was at it, he checked the hand holding the glass: nothing suspicious there!

'Are you considering changing the name of your ship?'

The question took Ned completely by surprise. 'Eh? Yeah, "Martha Washington" is a bit too long for my taste,' he managed to stutter. 'I figured as much.' Was there now some actual warmth in that voice? 'Then you might find it interesting, that after they lost the contract to the Thai, the Brits built five more ships of the same class for their own Special Space Service. They didn't keep the name "Shiloh" though. Renamed their ships...'

The pause was too short to be overly dramatic, yet Ned's heart made a leap of anticipation.

"Dauntless!" Ned grinned. The commander turned over, facing him. 'And how are you, captain Ibolya?' Ned made his answer re-assuring. 'Frostbite and a level two radiation spike. Made the bone, didn't make the marrow. Infected parts are removed and re-growing.' Ned's foot chose that moment to act up, stinging. He sucked it up with gritted teeth, mimicking a scant smile. 'No problem there,' he lifted the chip from the table, sizing it up in his hand. The glass of bourbon was empty. Ned felt he was already over-staying his welcome, but chose to perform a heroic last stand: 'Those guys on Cornucopia, what became of them?'

The commander put the glass down. 'They died. They had the antidote all right. It just wasn't the right kind.' Ned was staring at him in disbelief. 'You see captain, sometimes the most loyal patriots are not necessarily the smartest ones. Now, I believe your ship is ready. Good luck.'

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Captain Ibolya didn't salute. After he had left, the commander took interest in his view. His fleet was on formation and ready to set out. A green hue was forming, building up on the sides of warships. It was the remains of Sedna, gathering together like schools of algae, creating a kind of sea phosphorescence one could find on Earth. The ships, big enough to create sufficient gravitation to suck tiny particles in, were now gaining mass on a steady pace. To top it off, there was enough friction for a curious phenomenon akin to St. Elmo's fire, sending arcs of light flashing from antennae to antennae. 'There is always more to see. Always,' voiced old man softly. And despite being in a vastness of surrounding death ever-present, no, perhaps exactly because of it, there was a rare expression on his face.

Like a ghost of a faint smile.

The End

***EUGEN SYNDROME, (MED.) A MULTI-SYMPOMATIC PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDER CAUSED BY EXTREMELY HARSH CONDITIONS (RADIATION, CONSTANT FEAR OF DEATH ETC.) OF LONG-DISTANCE SPACE TRAVEL.**

AND QUITE CONTRARY, THE EXCESSIVE AMOUNT OF BOREDOM-BASED STRESS SUBJECTED TO PEOPLE DURING LONG FLIGHTS.

MOST COMMON PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT IS A SLIGHT YET HIGHLY DANGEROUS CHANGE OF PERSONALITY, WHEN A SUBJECT WOULD PREFER RISKY OVER SAFE AND CHANGE OVER STABILITY. THE PHYSIOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS HAVE A WIDE RANGE. CURIOUSLY, THEY SEEM TO COMPLETELY DIFFER DEPENDING ON WHETHER A SUBJECT IS INSIDE OR OUTSIDE (SEE ALSO: HELIOPAUSE VARIANT) THE SOLAR SYSTEM.

SYNDROME CAME TO LARGER AWARENESS RIGHT AFTER THE EARLY COLONY WARS (SEE ALSO: THE FIRST COLONY WAR [SEE ALSO: NEPTUNE MOON RUSH], THE SECOND COLONY WAR, THE THIRD COLONY WAR [SEE ALSO: WORLD WAR PLUTO], THE FOURTH COLONY WAR [SEE ALSO: THE BIG LEAP]. IT IS THEORIZED THAT THE ERA OF THE EARLY COLONY WARS WAS VERY SHORT-LIVED COMPARED TO THE SHEER MAGNITUDE OF THEATERS OF WAR BECAUSE ENTIRE CHAINS OF COMMAND WERE COMPROMISED BY EUGEN. HIGH MILITARY RANK AND A TWISTED THIRST FOR ACTION AND NEW FACES OF REPLACEMENT SOLDIERS WERE A COMBINATION THAT OFTEN REACHED CATASTROPHIC PROPORTIONS.

Afterword

I wrote this epilogue because if you want something done, you better do it yourself. With this the universe Jakub made is not done. But I am.

At least for now!

Anssi L