

UNDER THE SEA, THE CITY

BY HJALTI DANÍELSSON



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My father...

... well, never mind.

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The Gallente smiled when I hit him. I had him up against a wall, hands pinned by the two provisional officers I'd brought with me, and I'd already cracked his ribs and beaten out a few teeth. He smiled. It wasn't that weird rictus, either — the one where they're in so much pain their faces tense all up.

"Enjoying this, eh?" one Prov said.

"Shut up," I said. I didn't like baiting, never had. What you gave the mark was clarity, a purpose to his pain. You made him understand that, yes, you enjoyed this and would gladly do it forever unless he made it stop, but that he could make it stop, too. Not right away, necessarily, but if he changed and found himself a new focus in life, there would be hope. The mark could never be made to feel like the entire thing was merely a heartless joke.

He was exhausted and his head lolled down. I put my hand under his chin, lifted it back up so he'd look me in the eyes.

"Why did you do it?" I said. "We're here to stay. You're not changing that. All you're doing is making trouble." I raised my other hand and hit him hard in the solar plexus. Air and blood gushed out of his mouth. I would have to clean my jacket before going on the day shift tomorrow.

This time he lifted his head of his own accord. And he smiled again. One eye swollen shut, mouth a bloody mess. There was no defiance in that smile, none of that stupid attitude you get from someone who's trying to hide the pain. No taunting, that weapon of the weak and the powerless. He was somewhere else already and I hadn't put him there.

“Let him go,” I said.

The Provs were stunned. I sighed and, not for the first time, wondered where the hell the force had gotten these guys.

“Next person goes deaf gets twelve weeks on the tundra,” I said.

They dropped him like a bag of rocks.

We left him there, coughing blood on the scuffed snow.

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I was twelve when I was accepted into the Caldari Army. I was strong for my age and I had long since learned what the world did to people.

I wasn’t running away, though it was an escape. I had learned many things already, and one of them was patience. So I trained hard and I studied as much as I possibly could, though I knew that I’d never go as far as I’d like. What mattered to me was serving the State.

Some people, when they joined, seemed to have nothing to do but complain. Not loudly, and sometimes not even in words, but they resented their place and easily forgot just how much the army had done for them. It took us in, all of us, no matter how broken we were. It forgave, in its fashion. It gave rules and discipline, which was nothing new, but it never strayed from them, and that amazed me. If you screwed up, you paid the price and were usually allowed to carry on, and if you kept yourself in line you were left alone. You did what you were told.

I couldn’t bear the standard, not always. I lost my temper. Something in me needed to lash out at the world. What I got from the army wasn’t a cure — the anger was a part of me that couldn’t die without leaving me diminished — but an environment where I could take it to the edge without jumping off. I could be myself as much as was possible without the threat of failure.

So while I didn’t exactly race upwards, I crawled in a slanted, sideways path, rising moderately through persistence rather than brains or kissing ass. That was all right. I accepted that. And when the time came they needed people to take care of our new world, this smoking crater of a homeland, this ice world named Caldari Prime — they didn’t come to the ones who had brains, for brains go remarkably soft on frozen tundras, and they didn’t come to the ass-kissers, for their lips would’ve chapped in the cold. They came to the ones who knew damn well how to survive.

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Morning after, and another meeting of the city overseers. I paid the best attention I could, but I was still tired from last night's dark round and kept zoning out.

I did appreciate the necessity of these meetings. We needed to hold an entire planet using a force half staffed by thugs. Equal measures of peacekeeping and intimidation in which I'd happily taken an active part had kept a lid on the angrier locals, but that wouldn't be enough for the average man on the street. Life had to be kept going, rolling on from one day to the next. It was a supreme irony that in a society whose governance had been torn from the hands of one power by another, our greatest efforts went into convincing people that nothing much had changed. They needed to stay indoors late at night, and luxuries had been restricted, but this was nothing new on a planet largely covered in ice. What they really needed was to be left alone, to not be reminded of how much had changed now that they seemed to be settling into some kind of normalcy.

So we had evacuated one of their underwater cities, a massive place encased in a polyglass dome. Then we had taken all the major troublemakers, those whose absence would be less a diplomatic problem than their continued presence, and we had put them down under.

Nobody knew what went on in that place. There were plenty of guesses, and everyone knew someone who claimed insider info, but talking about it did little more than generate rumors. The higher-ups didn't mind. We'd even subtly been given leave to spread some rumors of our own. I think the way they figured it, the more people talked and worried about the place, the less of a risk any of the locals would want to go there. We already had hundreds of thousands, but the dome could hold millions.

We were scrolling through the list of new recruits — we call them "recruits" because it sounds so much better than "abductees" — when a face caught my attention. It wasn't bruised and had a conspicuously full set of teeth, but it was unmistakably the man I'd been working on the night before.

"Stop, hold, wait a sec," I said. "What'd this one do?"

The presenter checked his records and listed a series of crimes against the State, nearly all of them ideologically motivated. Most sounded familiar enough, given that they were the reasons we'd had our little talk with him in the first place. There was, however, a spate of offences that would absolutely have marked him for down under but that I had nevertheless missed when going over his records before the beatings. I found this very uncomfortable and asked when he'd committed those crimes.

The presenter checked the data again and raised an eyebrow. "Quite recently. He got through three of them yesterday, between eighteen hundred hours and evening call."

Which put it after the time I'd last checked his records, but before we'd caught him. He knew he was going down under.

I thought about him. That smile.

My ears heard my mouth say, "I'm going with him." The presenter blinked. "In the shuttle. The shipment he's on when he goes down under. I'm going to be on it."

In the silence I felt an explanation was called for, but the best I could muster was, "I want to be sure he doesn't make trouble."

I kept quiet for the rest of the meeting, but I had some friends of mine do a little data mining afterwards.

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The shuttle had several dozen individual cells, each of which contained one prisoner, one bunk bed and one vidscreen embedded in the wall. It also had a small area reserved for the accompanying guards.

The underwater trip would take us a little over twelve hours. It could be made faster, but expenses were kept to a minimum with these guys. Their cells were soundproofed, and the vidscreens, which were cheap and kept behind unbreakable barriers, were voice-activated. We could have drugged the prisoners for the duration of their trip, but that would have brought us into, well, you might say "muddy waters." You were only supposed to administer drugs to prisoners if you had a clear reason to consider them a threat, and in doing so you brought the whole process one step closer to barbarism. Strictly speaking we didn't have to provide them with any kind of way to pass the time — there was a clause somewhere that allowed us to call this a temporary solitary confinement, much as the one in regular prisons — but leaving a civilian in an empty cell for twelve hours with nothing to do but think would not make for a nice disembarkment down under.

Besides, there was one person I wanted to keep awake.

When I entered his cell, he was sitting sideways on the bunk bed, looking pointedly at the wall. His bruises were dark purple and yellow.

He didn't seem to recognize me at first. When he did, he visibly stopped breathing for a few seconds, then let out a long exhalation and smiled. He was afraid of me, but he knew something I didn't, something he thought would keep him safe. That was good. That could be worked with.

I went to the wall across from him and sat on the floor. Our interrogators believed in taking on a dominant position; I didn't. I believed in starting small, from a weakened position, and letting the subject build an image of you in his mind far greater than the real you.

There was something about his smile. They'd fixed his teeth up a little, but there was something more. It was almost as if I'd seen it before.

When it hit me a few seconds later, it hit like a hammer, and I was glad I was already sitting.

He noticed me gasp, and his smile faded. "What?" he said.

"I know you," I said.

"You beat me up a few days ago," he said.

I leaned my head to one side. It was there; it was definitely there. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before.

"I knew someone once," I said. "A kid. Tough one, as it goes. He'd had a rotten time of it, been smacked around and plenty worse, but he had that look. I still remember seeing a picture of him, taken when he enlisted. It said, I am free. I've gone beyond. Nothing you do will matter now, nothing you say will reach me now. I belong to something greater."

His eyes narrowed and I knew I had him.

"You've joined the rebels." I said.

The smile returned.

"You're on your way down below by your own goddamned intention," I said. Not in a tone of surprise, but annoyance. "Nobody does that. So you have a plan. But you couldn't do it alone, not if you want to make a difference. So you've joined the rebels, and you have someone waiting for you down below."

He kept quiet. I had not asked him a question, nor given him an order.

"You have no idea what you'll be in for down there," I said. "Nobody does. So you couldn't possibly be planning a coup, or a disruption, or anything that requires a reasonable degree of forethought. And you have no specialties; I've checked. All that you have is a life like everybody else."

"Not anymore," he said.

"Well, no," I conceded. "Not anymore."

"Not after you came."

“Let’s not get into the whole occupation business. It wasn’t my call any more than yours,” I said. I waited a beat before adding, “I’m sorry for your family.”

“That’s alright,” he said with complete equanimity. He was leading me on. He didn’t care about any of that. The moment we’d moved away from down below, he’d gotten more comfortable with answering me.

He’d given up his old life, and he had no reason to believe he could make anything constructive of his new one. Time to push him.

I got up, brushed myself off and said, “I’m turning this shuttle around. Have a nice day.”

I had not even taken a step before he let out an outraged, “What?”

“You heard me. I can’t let you get anywhere near that place. You’re a security risk.”

“You can’t do this,” he said. “I have to get down there. I demand you take me down there.” The smile was gone. His hands trembled.

“Well, that’s a first,” I said. I felt for him. I truly did. Had my dream been snatched away from me like this, it would’ve been the end of my life, too.

He got up. I thought he was going to attack me, but instead he backed himself into a corner. “Don’t come any closer,” he said.

“Hey,” I said, “I wasn’t planning to. I’m going to leave this cell now, and—”

“I’m carrying a bomb,” he said.

Some words change everything. Sniper is one. I’m told love is another. Incoming is pretty big these days, being the bastard child of invasion.

“You were strip-searched and scanned before you came aboard. Anything conspicuous in your system would’ve been flushed out on the spot. You’re lying,” I said, more out of hope than any real conviction.

“Transfusions,” he said.

I was stunned.

It was possible, in theory, to replace certain bodily fluids with explosive counterparts. You could alter a person’s glands to produce the new type, so long as you ensured his body had enough raw materials to draw on, or you could swap out the old type for the new along with an agent that would keep it from breaking down too fast.

It was hideously expensive, extremely unreliable, and utterly destructive. Even if he never set off the explosive reaction, a person who underwent something like this would die of massive organ failure within a few days. The body was not happy being turned into a chemical weapon.

“You were going to blow up the city,” I said. I couldn’t believe it.

He stared at me, silent and defiant.

I’d had my agents do some digging, and we’d uncovered connections between this man and ten others on this very same shuttle. Even worse, all of them were loosely connected to an earlier transport that just yesterday had brought a lot of fresh people to the city. Political affiliates often acted in groups, and we hadn’t thought much more about it. Gods knew how many of them were now walking bombs.

“It wouldn’t be enough with just one of you, but with everyone you know on this shuttle and all your friends who got in there yesterday. You...” I simply could not get my head around this. “There are hundreds of thousands of people down there. Your own people.”

“They’re dead to us,” he said. “Everyone is, once they’re sent down under. For all we know it may be an empty husk.”

“But you’re hoping it’s not,” I said, the realization dawning in merciless light. “You’re pulling a Nouvelle Rouvenor. You’re going to find some spot and you’re going to goddamn detonate yourselves, in the hope you can crack the dome and destroy the entire city. And then you’re going to blame it all on us.”

He smiled again, and I remembered feeling that smile on my own face, all those years ago.

“So now you have a choice,” he said to me. “You can let the shuttle dock and send me off. You’ll leave. I’ll stay. Whatever happens is no longer your concern.”

“Or we turn this thing around and you blow it to bits.”

He shrugged.

“Those friends of yours that arrived yesterday?” I said. “They’re still in the investigation lounge. But you knew that. What you didn’t know is that I had them tagged, which means they’ll be held there until I give the go-ahead.”

“You’re lying,” he said.

I was. “Maybe I am,” I said.

He got to his feet.

“This shuttle is turning around,” I said.

He lifted his hands and looked at them, as if he were seeing them for the first time.

I told him, “I knew someone once who thought he had all the answers. Took a while before I realized he didn’t; he just stayed in control of the questions.”

He looked at me now.

“Last time I saw him was through a bulletproof pane of glass. I was leaving and he wasn’t. I’ll never forget that expression. I was going somewhere he wasn’t, I had become something he would never be, and he knew it.”

“You’re a vicious thug,” he said to me.

“I’m a part of the State,” I said. “And you are not. No more than he was. And his gutted expression, all those years ago, is the same one you have now.”

I raised my own hands. “He would have taken you up on your offer. I will not.”

As he started to move, I lunged for him.