

ALL THESE LIVES ARE FIT TO RUIN



BY HJALTI DANÍELSSON

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This was a hospital. That much was certain.

Parien, lying in a soft bed, had been slipping in and out of consciousness. Sometimes there had been people in here, talking in low tones and checking on the machines that stood next to his bed. Everything was white. The machines had fuzzy outlines, though that might have been his eyes. There were tubes everywhere, gossamer strands affixed to his body as though he was a string puppet at rest.

Whispered words had drifted into earshot. “Accident” was one. “Battleship” was another. And “capsuleer,” though even the whispers seemed to find themselves too loud.

At one moment Parien closed his eyes for barely a second, and when he opened them again he saw a man towering over him.

“My name is Silat Enfour,” the man said, in a tone that implied this was both grand news and something Parien should have known all along. “You are going to give me answers, crewman.”

Parien tried to say something but found his voice had dried up. There was a small hiss, and the parched skin in his throat suddenly felt softer.

“That was the rehydrator,” Silat said. “It administers chemicals based on your body’s needs. You had a nasty turn, Parien. A lot of people did not survive the cataclysm you went through.”

Silat leaned in closer and said in a dark tone, “I certainly didn’t.”

“What can I do for you, sir?” Parien said, his voice raspy and frail despite the rehydrator.

The capsuleer took out a small datapad and inspected its screen for a while, ignoring Parien. At last, still not looking at him, he said, “Do you know me, crewman?”

“No, sir.” Parien said. “But I know your name.”

The capsuleer gave a mirthless smile at that. “And what does that name mean to you?”

“You are the captain. You were the captain... of the Arc of Defiance,” Parien said. His throat stung. “The battleship. That I served on. Sir.”

“Which makes me...?”

“A capsuleer.” This was the first time Parien had seen the captain, or any other capsuleer for that matter. He found himself hoping the man would turn around at some point so Parien could see the top neural socket embedded in his neck. It was a strange, silly hope, and thus seemed entirely appropriate to the situation.

“What was the Arc’s last mission?”

“You took us into deadspace. Word had it you’d found another ancient gate that led to some ruins.”

“Some ruins.”

“Some ruins now occupied by Gurista forces, sir,” Parien said. “I expect your aim was to relieve them of their valuables.”

“Do you presume to know my thoughts?”

“I doubt anyone does, sir,” Parien said, regretting it immediately. The words were an insult, and only his weak voice with its supplicant tone carried it through with apparent acceptance on the capsuleer’s part.

The capsuleer stepped closer and leaned in slightly, regarding Parien with the kind of gaze one would a backwards student. “Do you know why you are here?”

“The Arc exploded, sir. We were ripped to shreds.”

“That is what happened, yes. But that is not why you are here, in this place, at this time.”

“Sir?”

The capsuleer said, in a perfectly even tone, “I have taken it upon myself to pay for your care. There are some questions I want answered. If the information I get is satisfactory, you will be released soon enough. If they are not, then this” — he pointed at the rehydrator, whose myriad tubes were connected to Parien in places he preferred not to contemplate — “this will pump something else into your system, and you will be extinguished like a candle. No one will ask any questions. The money I’m funneling into the upkeep of this equipment will merely be put to a slightly different use. You will become someone’s two hours of paperwork, and then you will be expunged from this world.

“Do not disappoint me, crewman.”

Parien swallowed. It still stung, but he welcomed the feeling, reminding him as it did that he was still alive.

“What do you want from me, sir?” he said.

“I was in the middle of dismantling the Gurista fleet, and had already targeted their colonial base when my guns failed to reload. All of them. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, my drones decided to develop free will at that precise moment, rocketing off to fight separate ships in some brief, suicidal ballet. I sat there, surrounded by these little Gurista flies with their tiny little poisonous stings, and I was held fast there while they sucked the life out of me.”

Silat began to pace the room.

“When one thing goes wrong, Parien, everything goes wrong. I’ve learned that, out there. Your guns don’t reload, alright. What’s going to be next? Oh, it’s the drones!” He raised his hands in the air, a mock expression of surprise on his beardless face. “Whatever could be the matter? Nevermind, I’m sure we’ll be right as rain from now on. No, hold on! What’s this?” Silat lowered his hands and glared at Parien. “Care to guess what went wrong next, crewman?”

Parien closed his eyes and leaned back on his cool, soft pillow, letting it swallow him. “The escape pods.”

“The escape pods,” Silat repeated after him, as if they’d shared a minor epiphany. “Not my own capsule, Parien, not right away, though some people with a grudge against me took care of that two systems later. But for the ones on that ship — those six thousand people who worked with you, Parien — those pods didn’t even last that long. Do you know how long they lasted, Parien?”

Parien, still lying on the pillow, was quiet. He stared at the ceiling, seeing the capsuleer only out of the corner of his vision. In that faint edge of nothing he saw Silat raise his hand and press something on his datapad.

Parien’s throat began to burn. Then his stomach, and his intestines, and his veins and his limbs and his face. He started to cough and thrash, gasping for air while trying to shake off the pain. It was as though liquid mercury had been poured into him. He tried to tear out the tubes that stuck out of every part of his body, but either he didn’t have the strength or they were simply too well affixed. Through the haze of agony he heard Silat say, “Wherever this path leads, crewman, you will find it much easier to traverse if you go with me. Answer the question.”

The burning subsided a little. Parien caught his breath again. He said, “I heard ... I heard that a lot of the pods were destroyed right away. They were buffeted away from the ship when it exploded, but instead of heading off-grid like usual, many of them disintegrated. Not the outlying ones, though, with the crew and the families that had been working on nonessential tasks; those got out safe. It was the other pods, the ones at the core that can only leave a few seconds before the ship literally falls to pieces.”

“The ones where you work,” Silat said.

“The ones where I work.”

“Your pod survived,” Silat added. “So did a few others. But many hundreds of people working in the core of the ship lost their lives that day.”

Parien, still waiting for the burning poison to slowly flush out of his veins, did not ask Silat whether he cared about the fate of his crew.

“Here is the next question, and you will want to answer it honestly,” Silat said. “What did you do to cause this?”

“I ... I ...” Parien began. He fell silent, thought for a moment. “Can I ask a question in return, sir? It’ll help me answer your own.”

“Do it.”

“What possible reason could you have to think that I had anything to do with this terrible, terrible event?”

Silat moved over to Parien’s bed. His head blotted out the light, casting his face into shadow. “Because I was suspicious. Because I had your books audited, yours and everyone else’s. Because I paid a fortune for every life that survived the Arc’s explosion to be canvassed for clues of sabotage, and eventually, as I knew they would, they led me like beacons to you.” He took out his silver planner, that instrument of truth and pain, and held it aloft. “Because the Guristas paid you for your work, you little worm.”

Parien was speechless, first in amazement, then in agony.

“I disabled the reload procedures.”

Parien’s senses began to return. He still saw stars twinkling in his vision, and the room spun slowly like a dark grey moon. He was pretty sure he’d crapped himself during one of the pain spasms, but his body was too numb to tell and he didn’t dare check lest he discover a wet patch in the soft white sheets or, even worse, that the gossamer tubes that extended from his body had been installed there as well and taken care of the problem.

He said it again, like a ward against more pain. “I disabled the reload procedures. I’d worked the gun section often enough to know how it functioned, and it doesn’t take a genius to override them so long as you’ve got access.”

“How did you get access?” Silat asked in a calm tone.

“I used a datakey from a crewmember. He’d been reassigned to drone control and I told him I needed to check up on shell integrity.”

“And the disabling?”

“It’s easy enough if you’ve got the timing,” Parien said. “If you know what shells are going to be last out and first in, you just damage both of them. Make the last spent shell leave something in the barrels that doesn’t get cleaned up properly, and make the first reloaded shell catch on it.” Parien took a deep breath. “The drones are even easier.”

Silat stared at him for a while. The machines in the room hummed, a faint sound with a throbbing undertone like a heart beating in secret.

At last the capsuleer said, “There wasn’t much to be analyzed from the wreckage, nor from the recorded signals that I received in my pod. Some anomalies, but there are always anomalies, and they take you down a thousand paths of guesswork.”

He walked around the bed, hefting his silver datapad. “This tells me all there is to tell, but not everything I need to know. A capsuleer’s ship is not like other ships; it is an incredibly complex collection of activities, bound in constant motion. It is more like an organism than a machine. There are safeguards and more safeguards, but those can’t protect you forever. If someone comes along who is inventive enough — and you were, though you murdered hundreds as a result —” Silat said, not with rancor in his voice but with a tired exasperation, as if his best student had failed him again, “if someone manages something like that, then it is because he had honestly set himself to the task. It calls for a unique clarity of vision. A clarity to be had only by someone for whom the task has become the very purpose of his being. A life is usually at stake.”

Silat looked at Parien, with eyes that had seen more death than Parien ever would, and asked, “You’ve said how you did it. Now tell me the why.”

“Drugs,” Parien said. “I was in deep.”

Silat raised the silver device, then hesitated. “You know what this will do.”

Parien kept his gaze on the capsuleer. “It was drugs.”

Silat made as if to press something on his datapad, then hesitated, sighed, and sat on the chair beside Parien’s bed. “If you had been a drug user, you’d never have gotten on my ship. Drugs are part of the eligibility scans I run before you’re signed on, and those same scans are continued throughout your service to me. I know that some pilots don’t care about that kind of thing, but I do, and I keep a tight ship. If the Guristas had somehow leveraged you into what you did, either to keep your supply line open or to pay back a drug loan, it’d have to mean you were so deeply mired that you were still an active user. And on my ship, under my command, a junkie

couldn't take a piss without it being checked, analyzed, and flagged to the monitoring officer at once. Do you understand this?"

Parien said nothing.

"Do you understand, crewman?" Silat asked again, in an angry tone.

"Yeah. Yes, I understand."

"So drugs had nothing to do with it. Despite that, I know the Guristas were involved, because I have records that show you contacted them well before the crash. That was a mistake on your part. Whatever you were cooking up with these people, you managed to keep it remarkably secret, except for that one particular message. Even the payment you received from them after the crash was almost undetectable, with only the barest traces of a connection to your own finances. You would have noticed it, I'm sure, when you started receiving interest notifications, but nobody else would have known where to look. If I hadn't been hunting specifically for something like this, I'd never have found it."

Parien, who had not blinked, stared at Silat. He said, "Do you know who sent it? Who within the Guristas organization?"

"You know, that's the one last piece of mystery," Silat said, with poison enthusiasm. "It didn't originate from the Guristas military section. It came from their mining ops people. The colonists."

Parien, unblinking, gazed open-mouthed at his torturer.

"That is the end of my information," Silat said, unheeding of the patient's stunned reaction. "You're working for the enemies now, but I'm quite honestly stumped."

He leaned in again and said, in a whisper, "There is a point where your brain knows it is about to die. Everything passes in a flash, like a dream played at hyperspeed, the whole experience tinted with that quivering fear your subconscious vomits up: That this is the last, this is the end, this is the final run before the infinite nothing. I have been cloned more times than I can recall, and this is the one part of the process that I will never, in my life of lives, get used to. So you come along and bring it on me, along with hundreds of others on my ship; you, with your cottonball mystery, your little life that'll be extinguished with just the hint of a flame, that's light as a speck of dust, and that nevertheless refuses, refuses to unravel."

He leaned back and caught his breath. "I need to know, Parien. There's something hidden here, behind your glazed and bloodshot eyes, and I want it to appear. If I do not get this, then you will not even be permitted to die quietly."

Parien thought about this. He looked at the tubes that snaked out from the machines beside him and led underneath his sheets. He looked at the white room he was in, and even at the soft white pillow he rested on. He looked back at Silat in wonder. "I really am nothing to you, am

I? No more than those people who died. Just this one mystery. I bet the money that went into this whole setup could feed a family for a year.”

“Your last chance,” Silat said. He did not bother to heft the remote.

Parien stared at him. Then he took a deep breath and said, “I was on your crew the day we found the first ancient gate. It took us to a Guristas mining colony that was guarded by their forces. We destroyed those ships, and anyone of theirs who didn’t make it into a rescue pod was not a concern of ours. They were pirates, we thought, and deserved no better.



“Then we turned to the colony. It would have been enough to disable the turrets. It really would. Just destroy the military cache located at the back of the complex, because that’s the only one that held anything you could take. The rest of the place, all it had was people doing their jobs. But you targeted every building, and you fired the hybrids, and you blew up the colonies with everyone on them, and no escape pods, and nobody having a chance. I saw it all, from the core of your ship; me and all the others who were in charge of the reloading, and in charge of the drone control, and when God’s hammer came down we were just as much at fault as you.

“Something gave way for me. Some barrier I’d erected came crashing down. I’ve been a crewman for a long while now, and there was nothing special about this trip. We merely found a good location, destroyed the opposition, erased all that remained on a whim from our pilot, took the loot, and left. It never does matter, when you’re on a capsuleer’s ship. You go where he takes you. You load and he locks. Even a colony full of workers and families, whose sole

misfortune was to be on the other side. They forfeit their existence through happenstance. By the sheer dint of falling under the gaze of an immortal, they do not deserve to live any longer. All these lives, fit for nothing but death and ruin.”

Parien stopped, swallowed. The gossamer threads moistened his throat. There was no other sound in the room but the thrumming heartbeat of the machines.

He continued, “I wanted to kill you for it, Silat. But you are just one person, and I didn’t think I would ever reach you. If I had the strength right now, and the bravery, I would reach out and I would throttle you.

“But even if I went after you, there would be revenge. My entire family, distant as they may be, and anyone I’ve ever befriended. They would all die.

“And besides ... you’re just one crazy leaf on the tree. You’re like a child with a toy. I’m not even sure you know what sanity means. Everyone like you is a frightening mystery, beyond love and respect. I hope you know that.

“But the people who enabled you, the ones who kept everything running and went out drinking afterwards, bragging about the destruction — the crew I worked with who did not benefit in the slightest from this and did it anyway, allowing you your crazy stunts — they were the ones who were truly culpable. They needed to die.”

Silat said, quietly, “You know there were many of your crewmembers who had nothing to do with the attack or its mechanics.”

Parien closed his eyes, breathed deep, then continued as if there had been no interruption, “When we got in from that mission I felt like a ghost. I talked to some criminals, and I asked that a message be relayed to someone with the Guristas, a person who would know the colony we’d just destroyed and could relay the stupid, empty words I sent them.

“It was an apology, Silat. I sent a brief message telling them who I was and who I worked for, and I said I was sorry. I did not give them any other information, not about my financial accounts, nor about the ship’s movements, nor anything else. They must have tracked me, and the money they paid speaks for itself, but I did not do it for them or anything they could offer. In the end, what happened on the Arc’s last trip — and I was supposed to be one of the losses, but somehow my pod escaped — was simply me, trying to make amends to the world.”

Silat sat and stared at him. “So you sabotaged the pods and led the ship to destruction.”

Parien nodded.

Silat got up. “I was going to kill you, but that’s no longer a role I can play. If you had truly meant to make amends, you would have ensured you would die in the crash. The fact that you did not may mean something, or nothing. Perhaps you wanted to play a vengeful god. Perhaps you merely wanted to know how it feels to be one of the immortals. I’ve no interest in finding out.”

Parien leaned back on the pillow. “Just end it,” he said.

The capsuleer ignored him. “Since you took it upon yourself to be judge, jury, and executioner on the behalf of the Guristas, it’s only proper that the ones who lost their own loved ones due to your actions get a say in your fate.” He pulled out the silver datapad entered a brief message, and then said, “So your stay here is at an end. I suggest you start removing those tubes. It’ll be painful, but better than what awaits you if you dither.”

“What?” Parien said.

“I don’t associate much with your kind, but I’m told that spaceship crew are a tough bunch of people. I’ve just sent the gist of this conversation to one of the crew heads. He doesn’t waste time during missions, so I imagine he’s already making calls and rounding up people.”

Silat put the datapad back in his pocket and headed for the door. Before leaving, he turned to Parien and smiled. “The acolytes are coming, you little god of destruction,” he said. “You will want to run now.”