

Blood Among the Stars

Timestamp: 2300 hours, June 6th, 2492

The bridge was never truly silent, but this is about as close as it's going to get, the shift rotation had yet to happen, all that remains of the first rotation is the commanding officers. I feel exhaustion seeping in and note that I have been awake for almost 28 hours at this point, pulling double duty given the myriads of issues with various systems, but that always came with the territory of being the captain, everything is my problem, no exception. I glance around the room, First Officer Amelia Reed is with me, the Second Officer would be switching duty with her in a short bit, or if I could barter with her for some sleep, I might be relieved of duty for at least a couple hours.

The comms unit on my shoulder buzzes before a voice comes through, "This is Keener, can a member of the technical staff please come to engineering, the computer system is not responding. If you're not here within the hour I'm fixing it myself." The Chief Engineer sounds irritated, and I don't blame her, something was always breaking aboard the Arcturus, and there are always too few hands to fix it, and at this late at night, she could be a little impatient.

About thirty minutes pass, reports begin adding to the growing pile of paperwork that will need to be done, some concern the area of space we were passing through, a small asteroid belt surrounding our next planetary objective. Others read out electrical diagnostics and reactor temperatures, always so much to do, and never enough time to do it before the next flood of reports and papers.

The comms buzz again and Keener's voice comes through, "When someone finds a member of the technical staff, give them my thanks for all the help" her voice drips with sarcasm, she probably fixed the computer herself, technical wouldn't be happy, but if they didn't show up, then oh well, they knew the risks. I note that I hadn't heard a response from the technical staff over the comms, checking the schedule on my datapad shows that Steon Blight should be on duty right now.

I click my comms over to the security teams frequency, "This is the Captain, can I have a member of security look for Steon Blight, he isn't answering on comms despite being shown as on duty." The radio remains silent, no response from security. Five minutes pass, something is going on I can feel it, and if they are sleeping, or worse, drinking on duty, well, it will be the last decision they make on this damn ship.

"Reed" I say, turning to the first officer, "Can you keep things under wraps here, I'm going to see what the hell our security team is doing".

“Hm? Oh yea, of course Captain”, she responds, slower than her usual response time, she may be fully cybernetic but that doesn’t stop her processes from slowing from time to time, especially without time to restart.

I stand up from the chair I was sitting in, cracking my back before walking out the doors into the main concourse. The halls are quiet and empty, not uncommon for the time of night, but it is always and eerie sight to behold. Blight’s quarters are closer to the bridge than the security office, I make the decision to just go there before figuring out what the hell security was up to, if you want something done, better to do it yourself I guess.

I reach the junior technician’s quarters, finding the door locked I wave my badge over the scanner, the lock clicks open and the door slides open, the room is dark, but the faint smell of smoke wafts out. I find the lights and stop dead in my tracks, I click onto PA system with my comms access.

“All medical staff report to the upper level quarters ASAP, all other crew please report to the mess hall and remain there until further notice” my voice booms over the PA system as I crouch down to examine the body in front of me, Steon Blight, young man, 20 years old, had no enemies that I was aware of, at least not on this ship, but here he was, sitting lifeless in a pool of his own blood, a cut across his throat, no obvious signs of a struggle.

This isn’t good, it will certainly postpone our mission, and the paperwork for a death on board. How am I going to explain this to the admiral, a crew member had died on my watch, she’d have my skin unless I found the culprit.

Doctor Devall barges into the room, pulling my attention away from the body, Songcliff and Montjoy on her heels, coming to a stop just inside the door.

“Oh fuck-” her eyes land on the body, and the static pool of crimson, Montjoy retches behind her before quickly stepping out into the hallway.

“That is-unfortunate” Songcliff says, her voice strained. The smell of the electronics in his arm sparking fills the room, the smell of death isn’t strong yet, whoever did it may still be nearby.

“Devall, can you and the junior medics bring Mr. Blight’s body to the medbay please” I say, my voice steady, glancing up from the body, “note every person you see moving towards the messhall that you come across”, I quickly add before moving into the hallway, Karasu, Eucaly, and the junior medics had quarters here. I walk over to the junior medic’s door, I’ve already seen both of the junior medics, but it never hurt to check.

The door slides open, revealing a darkened room. I flick the light switch, and the surroundings come into view. It’s tidy, very much like the medics to keep everything

organized. My attention is immediately drawn to something unusual on the counter in Montjoy's workspace: a cluster of strange herbs.

I step closer, wafting the air above them. A faint scent of mint mingles with the earthy aroma of dried grass. Not standard medbay supplies, not by a long shot. I make a mental note to ask Montjoy about them later and move on.

Next, I check the junior engineer's quarters. The contrast is immediate and almost overwhelming. Diagrams and schematics are scattered everywhere, covering the desk, walls, and even the floor. It's chaotic to the point of absurdity, but that's Eucaly for you, always more interested in creation than cleanliness. The room is unoccupied, and I quickly surmise that she's likely off somewhere with the quartermaster. Nothing suspicious, but still, the disarray lingers in my thoughts as I leave.

Finally, I approach the assistant quartermaster's door. Karasu. This one gives me pause. The door is locked. On this ship, locked doors aren't the norm, though they're not unheard of either. Still, it's enough to make me hesitate.

Of course, no one locks the captain out.

I swipe my access card, and the door slides open with a soft hiss. Feathers. They're everywhere, soft, pristine white, like scattered snowflakes. The room is quiet, except for the faint hum of the ship's systems.

Karasu is curled up in a ball on her bed, her natural wing folded neatly against her side while her cybernetic wing stretches out awkwardly, rigid and metallic, its sharp edges gleaming under the dim light. Her feathers and plumage look uneven, patchy, molting.

Her breathing is steady but shallow, her legs twitching faintly in her sleep. She stirs slightly, but she doesn't wake.

My gaze shifts to the counter near the door. A capped syringe rests there, its label catching the light. Morphine. It's not strictly prohibited, but it's definitely something that requires documentation. Seeing it sitting out so casually makes me frown.

Then it clicks. The molting. I'd forgotten. It's a harrowing process, pain like most humans would never experience. The morphine and the locked door suddenly make sense. She's sealed herself away to endure it in peace, and I can't fault her for that.

Carefully, I step back into the hallway, making sure not to disturb her. The door slides shut behind me, and I take a moment to lock it again. The last thing this crew needs is someone stumbling in and waking her up. Pissing off a molting Zencho, even one with only one natural wing, is not something I plan to experience today.

Devall and the other medics walk out of Blight's quarters, his body on a collapsable stretcher between the two junior medics, Devall checking the body over for something-anything to go off.

"Take him to the medbay" I tell Devall, my brow furrowing, "then head to the mess hall, we'll figure it out from there", we didn't have a lot of time to figure this out, and there are too many people aboard this ship with the ability to kill and get away with it.

I walk in through the mess hall doors and the cacophony of chatter stops dead in its tracks, all eyes shift to me.

"Good evening crew, my apologies for pulling you away from your duties" I address the crewmembers.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself as I meet the eyes of the gathered crew. Their expressions are a mix of curiosity, suspicion, and unease, but no one dares to speak.

"As some of you may have guessed, we've had been an incident" I continue, keeping my tone firm but calm, "One of our has been attacked, and this was no accident. This wasn't a misfire in engineering or a stray blade during training. It was deliberate." I pause, letting the weight of my words sink in. "We have a murderer aboard this ship."

A wave of murmurs spread across the mess hall, some of the crew exchange nervous glances, others, like Lt. Commander Aryxovexs, keep their gaze locked onto me, expressionless, unreadable. I hold up a hand to silence the room, and the murmurs die down as quickly as they began.

"I don't need to tell you what this means," I say, my voice dropping slightly, "The Arturus may be a warship at the end of the day, but we're also a team. Our survival and success depend on trust and unity. We can't afford to turn on each other, unless you'd like the Admiral to come in and deal with this herself."

I take a step forward, scanning the room. "Internal Security will be reviewing the scene and questioning those who were nearby, but I'll be honest with you, we're not dealing with a novice. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. They knew how to kill and how to cover their tracks."

The tension in the room thickens, the air charged with unspoken accusations. Devall enters quietly behind me, taking her place near the back of the room. I give her a quick glance, noting the subtle shake of her head, no new updates from the medbay.

"Here's what's going to happen," I say, my tone sharp enough to cut through the silence. "Until further notice, all non-essential activities are suspended. You'll report directly to

your senior officers for assignments, and no one, that means no one, goes anywhere without notifying at least 2 other people, if not being with someone else. I don't care where you're going, what you're doing, notify someone or take someone with you, no exceptions."

A voice pipes up from the crowd, sharp and challenging. "What about the murderer?" It's David Osiris, the Chief Technical Officer, "Do you really think they're just going to pair up like nothing's wrong?" I understand his anger, it is his junior officer who was now dead, I'll have to keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't do something rash.

"I don't expect them to," I reply evenly. "But I do expect the rest of you to watch each other's backs. If someone steps out of line, you report it. If someone refuses to follow protocol, you report it. The murderer may think they're slick, but they'll slip up. And when they do, we'll be ready".

Osiris doesn't look entirely convinced, but he doesn't argue further. I return my focus back to the crew as a whole.

"Lastly I want to remind you all, this isn't just about catching the killer. This is about keeping this ship together. I've been with the navy for years now, I've seen way worse happen and continued to survive, I will not allow this ship to fall apart under my command".

The silence that follows is heavy, but I see a few nods among the crowd. Some of the tension eases, though the air is still thick with suspicion.

"Dismissed," I finally say, stepping back to allow the crew to disperse, "Senior officers, stay behind".

The mess hall empties, leaving just the key figures of my crew, Aryxovexs, Reed, Keener, Del Rio, HIND-N3 and of course Devall. Each wearing a different expression: concern, suspicion, determination, worry, but all of them are focused on me.

Aryxovexs towers over the rest of us. Reed is tapping her fingers together nervously. Del Rio already has his datapad open, tapping away at crew files.

"We need to move quickly and thoroughly," I say, addressing the group. "I want a full report from each of your sectors within the next two hours. Del Rio, I will talk to you later about your people and their lack of comms response".

I sigh rubbing my temple before returning my gaze to the internal security officer. "For now prioritize the interrogation of everyone in the crew, I want to know where everyone was before being called to the mess hall, anyone who was near the attack is to be taken aside."

"Understood," Del Rio replies, quickly tapping away at his datapad, already taking notes.

“Keener,” I continue, turning to the chief engineer. “I want a full status report of all systems, any anomalies in the ships systems are to be investigated, locks, doors, camera’s, anything that might have been tampered with, do what you do best.”

“Affirm” She responds, nodding curtly.

“HIND-D3” I say, addressing the quartermaster. “Do a full inventory of all supplies, weapons, tools, supplies, doesn’t matter, make sure everything is there. If anything is out of place, I want to know about it.”

The quartermaster lifts its head, mechanical head nodding in acknowledgement. “I’ll have the report ready within the hour.”

I turn to my first and second officers, “Reed, Aryxovexs. I need you two to help maintain a sense of order, everyone is going to be on edge, ensure that everything goes smoothly.”

“Yes sir” they respond, exchanging glances.

Finally, I turn to Devall. Her expression is calm, but I can see the tension in her posture. “Check in with the medbay, make sure all of your supplies are accounted for” I tell her, “And if you find anything new on the body, fingerprints, a stray hair, anything that you can find, document it.”

“Understood,” Devall replies, her tone steady.

I take a step back, looking at the group as a whole. “This is going to be easy,” I say. “But if we work together, we can get through it. We need to find the killer before they strike again.”

With that, the group disperses, each heading off to carry out their assignments.

Keener makes a beeline for the drink fridge, grabbing an energy drink and a can of coffee. She tosses the coffee to Devall with a smirk. “Looks like we’re not sleeping tonight.”

“As if that’s anything new,” Ylena says, catching the drink with practiced ease, her smile just wry enough to border on exhaustion.

I turn to Keener, narrowing my eyes at her. “How many hours have you been awake?”

She cracks open the energy drink and grins. “Closing in on thirty-eight, sir!”

I let out a slow breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. “And how many of those have you had?” I nod toward the drink in her hand.

She takes a long sip before answering, “More than you want to know.” Then, without waiting for a response, she strides out toward engineering, practically buzzing with artificial energy.

The mess hall falls quiet, I stand there for a moment, my thoughts spiraling, piecing together possibilities. Too many people aboard this ship could kill without leaving a trace. I need to look at all angles, leave nothing unturned.

Exhaling, I turn and make my way back to my quarters. The halls feel colder than usual, the silence pressing in as I walk. Once inside, I lock the door behind me and pull up a large display, my fingers moving quickly across the interface. Crew files flicker to life, faces and names washing over the screen.

I need to narrow this down. Who has the skill? Who has the motive?

The answer is here, buried in the data. I just have to find it. Sorting through the names I pull them aside one by one.

Keener, Devall, Aryxovexs, Del Rio, Otani, Dallmann, HIND-D3, Meyer, a lot of names, all of them more than capable. I add Reed and Osiris, just in case, just because they didn't have open issues with Blight, doesn't mean they didn't at all. I quickly add Sprite Olm as a final thought, she is a wildcard, it could have been her without any motivation other than she wanted to.

I send the list of names to Del Rio, removing the security team from the list for now, I will come back to them later, no need to cause more issues. Adding the comment to question senior staff last, let them work on finding anything in the system first.

As an afterthought I send a message to Devall and the medical team, reminding them that Karasu is currently molting, and that it might be smart to check in on her from time to time. They know how to do their jobs, and I trust them, but a reminder never hurts, especially with the chaos unfolding.

Returning to the suspect board, I begin going name by name and adding notes for motivation.

Reed, I don't suspect her of foul play, but she has the capability, and some motive, Blight has been a perpetual pain in her side concerning paperwork.

Aryxovexs, the damage could fit his mandibles, but his size complicates things. He has the same motivation as Reed, the stack of paperwork steadily building from Blight's experiments.

Keener, former recon element, black operations, she's dangerous even without a weapon. Damage caused by Blight being the main motivator for her, sleepless nights spent fixing broken panels and vents along with electrical systems.

Devall, she's a medic yes, but the kill was clean, calculated, and it isn't out of the question. The damage to crew caused by Blight during problematic failures couldn't be ignored. And with Devall, the entire medical team came into proxy.

Del Rio and the security crew, the thought scares me, if any of the security crew are in on this, it will be nearly impossible to get it out of them, tight knit, with the skills to pull it off without anyone noticing.

HIND-D3, the quartermaster was more than capable, and had the means to cover it up, make something missing from the inventory, push the investigation to someone else.

Meyer, PMC and the weapons officer, proficient with any type of weapon and capable of using objects in their place. He mostly keeps to himself, but his skills add him as a suspect none the less.

Osiris, I don't know if he had any grudges against Blight, but it was worth investigating, especially since he has James, who wouldn't leave any prints, or any trace that he was even there.

Sprite Olm, the wild card, notable issues with Blight's use of fire around her despite warnings, kitchen ware for the weapon, her involvement is unfortunately not out of the question.

Stepping back from the board I let my eyes roam across the scale of the incident I am facing, there are too many unknowns, too many people aboard this ship who could kill and get away with it. But I'll find them. One way or another, I'll find them.

Chapter 2