

Void Noir:

**Timestamp: 2300 hours, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2492**

### **Captain Marcello Virgil**

The bridge was never truly silent, but this is about as close as it's going to get, the shift rotation has yet to happen, and 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 corridor. The halls are quiet and empty, not uncommon for the time of night, but it is always an 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, and quickly click onto PA system through my comms device.

“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 is, 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 has died on my watch, she’ll have my skin unless I find 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, their 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. Their feathers and plumage look uneven, patchy, molting.

Her breathing is steady but shallow, legs twitching faintly in her sleep. They stir slightly, but don'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 or waking you up” 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 an incident” I continue, keeping my tone firm but calm, “One of our own 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 Arcturus 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, Osiris and of course Devall. Each wearing a different expression: concern, suspicion, determination, worry, anger, but all of them are focused on me.

Aryxovexs towers over the rest of us, still expressionless. 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-N3” I say, addressing the quartermaster. “Do a full inventory of all supplies, weapons, tools, doesn’t matter, make sure everything is there. If anything is out of place, I want to know about it.”

The quartermaster nods its mechanical head 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.

“Osiris” I say turning to the Chief Technical Officer, “You’re not going to like this, but I need you to give yourself some time”.

His jaw drops, “You expect me to sit around-”.

“Not what I said” I cut him off, “As your captain it is my concern that you may act rash due to raw emotion, just sit tight for the time being.”

He takes a deep breath before crossing his arms, “Yes sir” he replies defeatedly.

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 not 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 office. 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-N3, 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-N3, 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, a 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 nonetheless.

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, kitchenware 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**

My eyelids begin to droop as I stare across the minimal information I have, I should have gotten caffeine from the mess hall. Better late than never I suppose. Pulling myself away from the screen I blink and clear the haziness from my vision. I check the time, how is it already 0045, if I'm going to stay awake through all of this, I need caffeine or sleep, and one isn't a possibility, I'm not sleeping while there's still a murderer on the loose. Making sure my pistol is loaded and safely strapped in its holder, one can never be too careful, especially now.

I enter the corridor once more, looking around I spot Doctor Devall moving with purpose towards my quarters, correcting her course once she looks up from the papers holds in her hands.

"Captain-" she says the can of coffee in her left hand, a medical report in her right.

"Doctor, I need caffeine before you tell me anything" I snap, and her expression changes immediately, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean it that way, walk with me to my quarters?" I flash a smile at her.



“Of course, sir” she replies, a soft smile breaking out across her face.

The walk to my quarters is silent, a mutual understanding for the caffeine dependency the navy and this job seems to breed. We pass through engineering, not seeing a trace of the chief engineer, not unusual, if you could find her on the first time something is really broken. I note that I don’t see the junior engineer either, but she had been waiting for the quartermaster after the meeting in the mess hall, so I assume she ran off to help them.

We reach the door to my quarters and I unlock the door with a tap of my ID, stepping in and dropping my datapad on the counter.

“Oh, come on in Doctor take a seat” I say to Devall a smile crossing my face, “Always so formal with you”.

She steps into the threshold almost timidly before moving off to the side and sitting down in one of the chairs adorning the space.

“Coffee? tea?” I ask, walking over to the small kitchenette, “I know that canned stuff can’t be too good.”

“Coffee would be nice” she replies, looking up from the documents again, “Milk, but no sugar please.”

“As per usual” I say in acknowledgement, before busying myself with the coffee maker. I make myself a hot chocolate, dropping in a caffeine pod just for good measure.

“What type of milk do you want?” I say over my shoulder, surveying the small fridge.

“Almond if you have it” she replies, her voice not at the same strength it usually is.

“Is something wrong Ylena?”, I decide using her first name might make her a little more comfortable.

“Yes, everything’s perfectly fine” almost stumbling over the words in her rush to get them out, with a brief pause before asking “why do you ask?”.

“Don’t play with me Ylena” I sigh, turning around with a mug in each hand, “I can read people about the same as you can read medical documents, I can’t make head nor tail of those, but they make perfect sense to you.”

She keeps her expression professional, always closed off to those around her, but I swear I see a flicker of something like gratitude skip across her face.

“I’m sorry...” she starts as I hand her the coffee mug.

“Don’t be, if it’s something that you don’t want to talk about here or now, then it can wait” I cut her off, taking a sip of the hot chocolate, my mind almost immediately lighting up with energy. Goddamn that’s a way to wake me up, probably just the caffeine pod doing its job.

She sips her coffee almost gently, as if trying not to break the mug, I don’t know why she’s acting like this, but I shouldn’t press either way, it is her business, and if it’s important, we can talk about it later, we have bigger problems to deal with.

Devall shifts around and makes herself a little bit more comfortable, setting the documents on the coffee table, I sit myself down in the couch across from her. Glancing downwards at the documents, I can’t make any sense of it, it’s a mixture of temperatures, pressure charts, levels of various types.

She must see my perplexed look and as she moves herself over to the couch sitting next to me, taking the documents from my hands.

“No offense captain” she quips with a faint smirk “it’s like you said, can’t make head nor tail of it, I can.”

“We found the body at around 2300 hours, we took temperature measurements at 2315” she says pointing at a temperature reading, “we use Algor Mortis to get a relatively basic idea of when he could have died, roughly a rate of 1.5 degrees Celcius per hour is lost.”

“English doctor, please” I reply rubbing my temples before smiling at her indicating the joke.

She rolls her eyes, “Basically we can determine a time frame by taking body temperature,” taking a breath before continuing “And Blight’s tell us that he had died within about two to three hours to the time we found him.”

The information hits me like a railgun slug, two maybe three hours, whole hours before anyone noticed something, that already wasn’t good information, whoever it is had plentiful time to find someone for an alibi, cover their tracks, do everything in their power to throw the trail off them.

“Please tell me there was something, anything on the body that’s helpful” I’m almost pleading, I need something to work with, the smallest piece of evidence, hell I’m practically begging for the senior staff to get information back to me.

“The weapon used was likely manmade, it’s not a natural blade,” she says, and I perk up a little, that means it wasn’t Aryxovexs, one name crossed off the list.

“I’m still waiting on blood tests to come back” she continues, “We still don’t know if any type of drugs or alcohol were involved or in his system”.

“That’s... that’s better than nothing” I manage, taking another sip of my drink, “about how long before those tests come back?”

"It really depends," her eyes darkening, "if there was a lot going on in his system, painkillers, alcohol, recreational drugs" she shrugs at my questioning look to the last one, "It's a possibility, and could impair our ability to determine true cause of death."

I slump over, the spread of the situation growing ever more gargantuan, my head beginning to throb with pain. I pull myself off the couch and stumble over to the counter, grabbing the bottle of basic painkillers.

"Are you okay?" she asks, worry lacing her tone, the doctor will probably question everything.

"Yes, I'm fine, just a headache coming on" I reply, keeping my voice steady, I don't like lying to her, but it's necessary for the moment.

"If you'd like, I can grab some of the stronger pain meds from the medbay", she offers, luckily not pushing too hard about anything else.

"No, no thank you, these are already kicking in" I lie through my teeth, anxiety becoming a mountain ready to crumble, there must be something I'm overlooking.

"Would you like me to go?" she asks timidly, standing up.

"No." I quickly snap before adjusting myself, "please stay, I will need another set of eyes when reports come through."

*I'm sorry Ylena, I plead internally, you're an anchor right now, I can't let you leave.* She softens, a knowing smile playing across her face, walking over to the kitchenette, the empty mug in her hands.

"You won't mind if I get another cup of coffee then" gesturing towards the machine, the full pot underneath.

"Please, help yourself" I reply returning the gesture, "I don't drink the stuff quite frankly, just a fan of the froth" I finish, grinning with a child like glee.

She smiles softly before filling her cup again and mixing a bit more milk into the coffee, turning it a creamy brown.

"So we don't have much to work off" I sigh softly more to myself than to Devall.

"That's where we're at," she replies disappointed, shuffling the papers in her hands.

My datapad dings softly from the counter and I nearly trip over my own feet moving to grab it.

"Captain!" Devall yells, startled, nearly dropping her cup of coffee.

"I'm fine doctor" I say, steadying myself on the counter, "just moved too quickly."

She eyes me for a moment, clearly unconvinced, but doesn't push.

The datapad's screen is still glowing when I pick it up, a report direct from the quartermaster.

**INVENTORY AUDIT SECURITY STOCK**

**Timestamp: 01:05**

**Missing Item(s):** 1x Standard Issue MultiPurpose Knife

**Personnel Access: Restricted**

**Last Known Entry: Steon Blight**

A cold weight settles in my gut.

I read it again, hoping I'd somehow misread the document. One knife. Last accessed by Steon Blight. The same Steon Blight who was currently lying dead in the medbay, throat cut with a knife.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath.

Devall frowns. "What?"

I hesitate, then hand her the datapad so she can see. Her expression darkens as she reads. "That's-" She stops herself, setting her coffee aside, suddenly alert. "That can't be a coincidence."

"No," I agree, my voice tight. This was planned. Someone had taken that knife and used it. The only question was whether it had been stolen, planted, or handed off intentionally.

I push off the counter, the tension in my spine mounting. "I need to talk to security."

Devall doesn't move, still staring at the report. "And what if security is the problem?"

That gives me pause.

It's a valid concern. The security team should have caught this immediately. A missing weapon, an unsanctioned access log.

Someone either wasn't doing their job, or was deliberately ignoring the signs.

I exhale slowly. "Then we have a bigger problem than just one dead crewman."

A voice crackles over the comms.

"Captain, you're needed in Blight's quarters. We've... found something. Dr Devall, please head that way as well."

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. Devall and I exchange a glance.

I shove the datapad under my arm and walk out into the hallway, Devall in tow. Time to see just how deep this goes.

### **Chapter 3**

Ylena and I make our way down the hallway, luckily passing no one as we leave my quarters, don't want rumors floating around. My mind begins to race, what could they have found, what is so important that both the doctor and I need to be there.

Turning the corner to Blight's quarters Del Rio and a member of the security crew come into view, gloved hands, medical masks covering faces, the entire 9 yards. In a short few strides I close the distance to Del Rio with Devall a couple paces behind me, the chief of security is tapping away like a mad man on his data pad.

"Del Rio!" I call out, causing him to jump slightly before he snaps to attention.

"Captain!"

"At ease, please tell me you found something."

"Just take a look at these sir" he replies, relaxing a little and turning the datapad so I can see its screen.

Several dozen photos of the room crowd the screen, some are just standard pictures of the room, others are in the UV spectrum, and a couple thermal images. Nothing stands out to.

"Please tell me what I'm supposed to see here Del Rio" I scoff, frustration at the lack of obvious information.

"Sorry sir" Del Rio stammers scrolling across the massive spread of photo's, "You see sir, we couldn't find anything, nothing on UV, no fingerprints, nothing immediately stands out."

“Cut to the chase” I snap, growing impatient.

“It’s too clean” he huffs, “it’s like no one was ever here, we even checked the vents and everything.”

“So then, what’s your hypothesis” I question, there has to be something rattling around in his brain.

“If the information from the Medbay is correct” Del Rio glances at Devall, “and we didn’t find the body for at least two hours, then they had time to clean the entire area”.

Del Rio returns his gaze to the room, where Otani and Dallmann are still photographing the area in multiple different spectrums, trying anything they can.

I feel a light tap on my side and turn to Devall, who’s jerking her head to a little ways away.

“You’ll have to excuse me Del Rio”, nodding at the security officer before walking away from the door, Devall following shortly behind me.

“Captain” Devall starts, her eyes narrowed, voice laced with suspicion, “Unless one of the junior medics sent that medical report, you should be the only one who knows that piece of information.”

The statement leads to several options.

One of the junior medics sent the report, unlikely, Devall would have their necks if that information was sent without her knowledge.

The security team also used algor mortis, impossible, the body wasn’t there anymore.

Did they guess? Incredibly unlikely. The security team wasn’t stupid, but they weren’t lucky either. I’d seen Del Rio and Sprite Olm gambling before, Olm always won, either by cheating or sheer luck.

The last option, a Freudian slip. That would imply Del Rio already knew how long it has been since death. Possibly implicating Del Rio as a part of the murder. A heavy assumption, but not entirely impossible.

“Captain?”

Devall’s voice slaps me back to reality, I blink a couple times before noticing her perplexed look out of the corner of my eye.

“Captain are you alright” she continues, moving into my line of sight.

“Yes Doctor I’m fine”, snapping my gaze onto her, “You’re more concerned than usual.”

"I'm always concerned sir, that's kinda my damn job" she scoffs crossing her arms before muttering, "besides, you rarely see when I am concerned for you".

Electing to ignore the secondary half of the statement although it was audible, that is a talk with a Navy therapist, not the captain, I will need to recommend her for a visit.

"Del Rio" I call out, advancing back over to Blight's door, "Go ahead and clean up here, take your team and wait for additional information."

He nods and quickly gives orders for the other two security officers to pack up and get going.

"Devall" turning on my heel to face her, "check in with the medical team, see if either of them sent that file to Del Rio."

"Aye aye sir," Ylena replies before walking off towards the medical bay, the distaste in her voice not hidden by any means.

With that the hallways grows quiet, Blights door being locked by the security team, Devall walking off to the medbay, leaving just me and my thoughts, and almost a faint whispering, but that's impossible, I'm alone in the hall, or am I?

Glancing up at the ceiling I take careful stock of the cameras covering the hallway and the angles they can see, noting that at least one of them had to have caught movement in this area, and if Keener would get back to me with an engineering report, there might just be something to work off.

Spinning on my heel I begin the walk to the bridge, the camera recordings are stored on a server somewhere on the ship, but the easiest access to them is from the bridge, and at this moment, it might also be the safest place on the ship.

The walk is quiet, not a single speck of noise. Good, meant that the crew was following orders and remaining in their quarters unless instructed otherwise.

The door to the bridge slides open, stepping inside the warm air of the bridge is a stark contrast to the relatively cold hallways. My eyes sweep the room, landing on Aryxovexs, their massive form standing behind a custom built console.

"Oh, good evening Captain" their voice is calm and collected, despite everything that has gone on in the past 24 hours.

"Good Evening Aryx" I respond, walking over to my own console and taking a long sip from my hot chocolate before asking "Where is Reed?"

"She went to get some rest Sir" they respond without looking up from the console.

"Understood," my response is short and sweet, no need to bug her when we have hands on deck already, plus, she deserves some rest.

Sitting down in the chair behind the console, I relish the feeling of not being on my legs for a minute. While it's on my mind, I send a message to Keener, as I haven't heard from her, or received a report from engineering yet, setting the datapad aside for not more than a second before a response comes through.

It's just a picture of her middle finger in front of a terminal covered in red error logs.

Rolling my eyes, making a mental note that she'll get an earful about that later, before logging into the camera system and starting to scroll through the camera system's recordings before reaching 1900 hours, around 4 hours before will be a good place to start.

The nearly mindless scroll through hours of camera footage beings, the first 30 minutes of the recordings are negligible, no one moving through hallways, likely in the mess for dinner.

2000 hits, and the crew begin to trickle through:

The first group includes Otani, Dallmann and Del Rio, moving as a group as always, Olm following shortly behind.

The second grouping contains Meyer, Songcliff and Keener, moving quickly and with purpose to their respective areas.

Then the third group comes, Devall, Montjoy, myself, Aryxovexs, Reed.

Noting that there are still people missing, I flip to the camera in the opposite hall and run the same time period.

Counting everyone leaving the mess hall, I mark Cremour, Elguahz, Blake, Eucaly, HIND-N3, and Osiris as accounted for.

Leaving, Lukas, Ava, Karasu, and... Blight.

Checking the time marker again just to check that my mind is playing tricks on me, it's 2050 on the time mark, I'm not going crazy. Blight didn't show up for dinner, Lukas and Ava are kitchen staff, and Karasu is molting. Leaving Blight's last known location unknown.

I let the recording play ahead a little more watching both sides now, no sign of Blight, he never left the mess hall, hell, he never went in, so where in the fuck was he seen last.

The situation grows more and more impossible by the minute, more options, more problems, no solutions to be found. If we can find Blight's last known entryway ping, either from his badge or otherwise, the entire situation would unravel, even if slightly, but for that, I'd need to head towards engineering and find Keener.

Before I can step away a camera notification beeps, movement, main cargo hold, right next to the bridge. Clicking over to the camera nothing jumps out at me, no movement, no people,



nothing, but I'm not one to take things at face value. Rewinding the tapes a little, witnessing two cloaked figures sneaking into the cargo hold.

"Aryx" my eyes snap to the arachnid across the room, "watch the cameras, main cargo hold".

"Yes sir", they respond, immediately pulling the main camera view onto their console, "shouldn't we call security?"

"Negative Aryxovexs, I am more than capable of handling this." I say curtly, pulling my pistol free from its holster. Bracing myself before stepping into the cold hallways of the ship.

My movement is slow, precise, calculated, no sudden movements, reaching the cargo bay doors, I tuck myself off to the side, steadying my breath before triggering the door with my access card and moving into the room in one swift motion.

The room is pitch black, the only area illuminated by the light flooding through the doors, small breaths and whispering betraying whoever's in the room.

My steps click quietly down the catwalk, moving slowly towards the source of the noise, hidden behind one of the storage crates with mission critical supplies.

"Hush, someone will hear us"

"No one knows we're here"

Two voices arguing back and forth, a masc and a femme voice, I can't discern whose.

Taking the corner and clicking the flashlight attached to the pistol on my eyes land on two figures, both in grey night clothing, neither have weapons, but their faces are covered.

"You two, drop the hoods, now!" I yell, keeping my pistol steady, "no sudden movements or you'll both end up in body bags".

They do as I say, moving slowly and pulling the hoods from over their heads, it's Exodus and her damn husband.

"What in the fuck are you two doing" my voice comes out as a low growl, slowly growing into a shout, "you could have gotten yourselves killed!"

"Sorry I-" Exodus begins before I cut her off.

"No, there is no sorry here" there could be steam coming out my ears and it wouldn't be out of place, "you two are disobeying a direct order."

"You're civilians for fucks sake." I continue without missing a beat, "I could simply drop you off at the next habitable planet and not face any charges for it, do you understand that?"

They both nod sheepishly standing before me like children caught out of bed.

“Go back to your quarters, I do not want to catch you out again” I snap, holstering my pistol and motioning for them to get going.

They scamper out of the room, presumably towards their quarters, but I make a mental note to check the cameras to see if they had done this before, and if they go back to their quarters.

Rubbing the bridge of my nose I walk back up the catwalks towards the door to the cargo bay, silently praying that Keener has something more than a middle finger and a bunch of error codes, otherwise there will be hell to pay.

## **Chapter 4**

The door to engineering opens with a hiss, the room beyond is bathed in red light. The smell of smoke from Keener’s cigarettes hitting my nose, a telltale sign that the chief engineer was nearby. Stepping through the doorway I don’t have a moment to take in the surroundings before being pinned against the wall, feeling the cold barrel of a pistol being held under my chin.

“Fucking hell” Keener mutters, letting me drop from her grip and onto the floor gasping for air.

“What was that for Keener?” I sputter, steadying myself against the wall, spotting the engineer standing before me and shooting a pointed glare.

“Apologies Captain” her voice conveys no emotion as she keeps the pistol drawn, “I’ll explain in a moment, just follow me, and stay quiet.”

She turns on her heel without another word and walks deeper into the engineering bay, the only noise coming from the click of my boots against the steel floor. Finally finding myself in front of a console, the same one she had sent an image of. Red error codes still sprawling across the screen, and a singular light blue line.

“Can you explain what I’m looking at” my voice cutting through the silence settling into a low growl, “and why did it require me being pinned to the wall”.

“Is that disgust or discovery I hear” she quips, glancing up from the console with a wry smile, “to each their own”.

“Cut to the chase Keener.”

“Short form, a shit ton of system errors that weren’t there 12 hours ago” she explains as if nothing happened, scrolling through the sea of red error codes, before reaching the light blue line, “and someone attempting to access camera logs with a mismatched access code.”

“Do we know whose code it is,” my response comes shakier than I expect it to, desperate for any piece of vital information.

“Del Rio’s”, Keener responds, expanding the access attempt log, revealing a whole slew of information that I can’t make any sense of.

“Unknown device, likely a personal datapad or maybe one that’s jailbroken,” she takes a long sip of an energy drink before continuing, “same device bounced about 150 attempts off the login system using various access codes, all within 5 seconds”.

She pauses, turning to me and staring dead into my eyes before continuing, “the kicker? All the attempts were trying to get into the same spot, the camera recordings”.

Camera archives, an unknown datapad trying to access camera archives, several hundred times in one day, all while using seemingly stolen access codes, the pile continues to grow into a disproportionate scale. This all falls under Del Rio’s duties, why is it being delegated to Keener?

“You still haven’t explained why I was pinned to the wall” I state, returning the conversation to the initial interaction.

She changes the console over to a door log before turning to face me

“Another attempt was made” she pauses, tapping her leg absent mindedly, “they used your override code, the system bounced it because you were already logged in on the bridge”.

The words slam into my chest, another attempt, and whoever it is has a second access code, mine. How they got it is unknown, but it makes the entire situation dangerous.

“The only way that they can get in now is through this console directly, and that would mean coming in here” her voice becomes deadly serious, “My apologies but I’m not taking any chances.”

Nodding solemnly, I understand her logic, and it stands on solid ground, even if it did leave me with a slight bruise. Another light blue line appears on the console as the newest entry, waiting for a manual override this time.

“Del Rio’s access code again, but not his PDA.” Keener snaps turning back to the console.

“Keener” a thought crossing my mind as I watch her move to block the access manually, “is this the only location this data is stored?”.

“No, there’s a backup server that scrapes all new data every 10 minutes” she replies tilting her head slightly, “why do you ask”.

“Couldn’t we just... let them into the main system and observe” my question is simple but her eyes light up.

"I didn't think of that" she mutters, rapidly tapping away at the console, locking down certain components and pausing the automatic server scrape before allowing the access request through.

We watch in interest as the account accesses camera logs from March 6<sup>th</sup>, and then into the subfolder containing camera footage from the security room, opening the file and remaining there for some time before the file closed, not deleted, just closed.

"That's not what I expected to happen" Keener's voice is soft, as if questioning herself as to what she just saw.

She opens the change log, and a green line is visible in the change log, not different to that of when the file was added to the archive.

"Sneaky son a bitch edited the file" she mutters, quickly logging into the backup data dump, "knew someone was watching, and instead of deleting it outright, just edited it."

Keener proceeds to access the unedited file, sending it to the secondary display on the console for viewing. Someone wanted something removed here, and I want to know what it was.

The video starts, showing the inside of the security offices, the security team is around a table, along with Sprite Olm, cards are scattered around the table, the time mark shows 2250.

"I don't know about you all, but I think I'm unbeatable this time" Dallmann states coolly, splaying his hand out on the table, a flush of diamonds: a King, Jack, 10, 9, and 5.

"I'm starting to think that this deck just hates me" Otani whines, tossing his hand onto the table, revealing what appears to be two aces, a 10, 6, and 7.

"Luck of the draw Otani" Del Rio quips, tossing his cards on the table as well, "I didn't do any better", a straight, strong, but nothing against a flush.

The attention turns to Olm and silence hangs in the air as they wait for her to reveal her cards as a wide grin spread across Olm's face.

"Olm wins!" Sprite Olm yells triumphantly, tossing four aces onto the table, a cacophony of groans follows.

"How the fuck does the fungi keep winning!" Otani shouts, slamming his fists on the table, sending cards off the side.

"Wait, Otani, didn't you have two aces?" Dallmann whirls around to look at his fellow security officer.

"I fucking thought I did" Otani scrambles to pick up his cards, "apparently not, two fucking Jacks" he growls.

"I smell something fishy" Del Rio stands from the table, pulling his pistol from its holster.

"It can't be Sprite Olm, she's a plant!" Olm responds innocently, oblivious to the threat.

"That doesn't mean shit Olm" Dallmann growls, standing up from his chair, the legs scraping across the floor.

Del Rio sighs, holstering his pistol and returning to his seat, pushing the pile of winnings towards Sprite Olm much to her pleasure as she picks out a silver coin and chews on it happily.

"Look at her, she's too stupid to cheat, plus, it's already established that you're blinder than a bat Otani" Del Rio lets out a defeated groan, rubbing his eyes slightly.

The PA comes on at that moment, my voice ringing across the ship in the recording:

"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".

The three security officers go rushing out of the room, leaving Sprite Olm behind.

"That does explain where the security team was, but it still leaves the question of what was changed?" I ponder out loud.

Keener shrugs as the footage continues to run, Olm proceeds to shove every piece of her winnings into a small bag, restacking the cards before turning to leave.

"I don't see what they were after here-"

A small glimmer in the footage catches my eye.

"Keener, rewind the footage, 5 seconds."

She arches a brow at me before zipping 5 seconds backwards on the recording.

"There!" I spot it immediately, the footage stops at Olm stacking the cards, "watch, I swear I saw something."

She resumes the footage, this time at half speed, and there it is, plain as day, Olm switches the deck, almost impossible to see while watching at 1x speed, but there it is.

"It's a trick deck..." I mutter almost to myself, "can you rewind the tape back to when Otani put his cards on the table, her eyes light up, understanding what I'm getting at and pulling the tape back to that point."

We watch, and as soon as the cards hit the table, the two aces in Otani's hand become two Jacks, the shimmer of the card face giving away the change in the footage.

“So we know Olm cheats at cards, surprising but not exactly unreasonable” Keener comments, to which she receives a tremendous amount of side eye.

“Hey, all I’m saying is that those three have a horrendous gambling problem” she huffs defensively.

Rolling my eyes and returning my gaze to the monitor, letting my mind wander to the possibilities, before one pushes its way to the surface.

“Keener, when does this footage run from?” The question is simple, but if my hunch is right, then there might be evidence to find.

“From 2330 to midnight” she responds, pulling the footage to the beginning.

“We should be hearing their comms go off then” the gears turning as my mind tried to comprehend the insanity that has apparently taken my ship hostage “I called out to them twice during that time period, why don’t we hear that?”

“Given the size of that prize pool, they’d been playing for some time, probably about 2 or so hours” Keener chimes in, pulling up the edited footage off the main storage array.

“So we may as well watch this now to see what they were so desperate to hide” her voice growing into a soft purr of intrigue.

We watch with great interest as the situation unfolds for a second time, as I suspect the cards changing in real time and the deck switch itself are masterfully masked in the edited footage, showing two jacks in Otani’s hand from the get go.

“That still doesn’t explain why their comms couldn’t be reached” my voice drenched in exasperation.

“No, but we do have the footage from the hours prior, untouched and unedited” Keener replies, calm and collected, a reminder of what I am supposed to be.

She pulls up the file, skimming the footage quicker than I can follow, searching for something...

I can’t concentrate on the footage, the events of the day weighing heavily on my mind, a murder, edited footage, possible implications of other crew members, all in the span of 6 hours, toss in the rest of the work that still needs to be done, it feels like everything is crashing down around me

“There you are” Keener purrs softly snapping me from my thoughts and back to the monitor, where she had stopped mid frame, Sprite Olm visible with a small black box in her hand, which she sticks to the underside of the table.

“And there’s why the security team couldn’t hear your calls” she proclaims before muttering “aside from not doing shit anyways.”

"I'll ignore that comment if you can explain what I'm looking at Keener" I reply, giving her another obvious helping of side eye for the comment.

"I would wager that's a jammer, probably short range, enough to hit that room and that room alone" she replies, a sly smile across her face.

"What are the chances that it's still there?" a flicker of hope entering my voice.

I wait with baited breath as she scans through footage up until present time, time seems to move slower as I watch the engineer work.

"Almost 100%, I don't see anyone coming to get it, and Olm didn't grab it on her way out" she replies confidently, closing out of the video feed and locking down the console, "if we move quickly we can get there before anyone else has the chance to".

"And if they know we were watching the footage-" I start, glancing at the terminal as she shuts everything down.

"Whoever it is might be on their way to get it now" she completes the sentence for me, turning on her heel, and moving towards the door in short order, "So either we get there and have a lead, or they do and it's back into the can."

I'm quick on her heels, following out the engineering bay doors and towards the security office, making sure that the safety on my pistol is off, at this point, any lead is a good one, and this could break the geode of insanity wide open.