

## Blood Among the Stars

“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 his name was, 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 neat cut across his throat, no obvious signs of a struggle, not even a hair out of place.

This wasn't good, it would certainly postpone our mission, and the paperwork for a death on board. How was 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 opening into a darkened room, I flick the light on and take in the surroundings. It's a tidy room, very much like the medics to keep everything organized, except for the strange herbs sitting on the counter in Montjoy's area. I walk over and waft the area around it, it smells faintly of mint and dried grass, I would need to inquire later.

Next was the junior engineer's quarters, much less organized than the medics, diagrams and schematics littered the room to the point I could hardly even see the floor, not my business for its cleanliness. The room is uninhabited, and I surmise that Eucaly is probably somewhere off with the quartermaster.

Then the assistant quarter master, Karasu. The door is locked, unusual for this crew, but not unheard of, and you can't keep the captain out anyways. I scan my access card and the

door slides open with a hiss, the room beyond is covered in feathers and a sleeping Karasu. I make a mental note of the morphine syringe sitting on the counter and close the door, making sure to lock it. I forgot she was molting, and pissing off a cybernetic harpy didn't sound like fun to me.

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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 crew of the Arcturus.

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 department heads for assignments, and no one, that means no one, goes anywhere without notifying at least 2 other people, if not 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 was 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 on the Arcturus for years now, I’ve seen worse happen in these halls and we’ve survived, I refuse to allow it to fall apart like this”.

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, “Department heads, 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.

Keener takes a sip from the mug in her hand. 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 departments within the next two hours. Del Rio, 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 ship’s 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 one off to carry out their own assignments. Keener grabs an energy drink and a can of instant coffee from the drink fridge and tosses the coffee to Devall, “Looks like we’re not sleeping tonight,” she smirks.

“As if that’s anything new” Ylena says, catching the drink and giving a wry smile.

With that I’m left alone in the mess hall, my mind racing with possibilities. 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 end**

I walk back to my own quarters, my mind ablaze with possibilities, there's too many people with the capability of killing without leaving a trace, I need to look at all angles and leave nothing unturned. Reaching my quarters and locking the door behind me, I pull up a large display, quickly pulling up all of the available crew files. I need to at least isolate who has the obvious ability, along with those who might have the motivation to kill Blight.

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.

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.

Reed, I don't suspect her of foul play, but she has the capability, and the 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.

Devall, she's a medic, the kill was clean, calculated, and it isn't out of the question. The organic damage caused by Blight during problematic failures couldn't be ignored. 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, former PMC and the weapons officer, he can get his hands on any type of weapon, even using objects in their place.

Osiris, I don't know if he had any grudges against the kid, but it was worth investigating, especially since he has James, who wouldn't leave any prints, 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, it was unfortunately not out of the question.