Chapter IV - Jayrock II

If you're caught, you're on your own! Sandywick's voice still rang inside Jayrock's head. So, you'd do better to either pull it off successfully... or die.
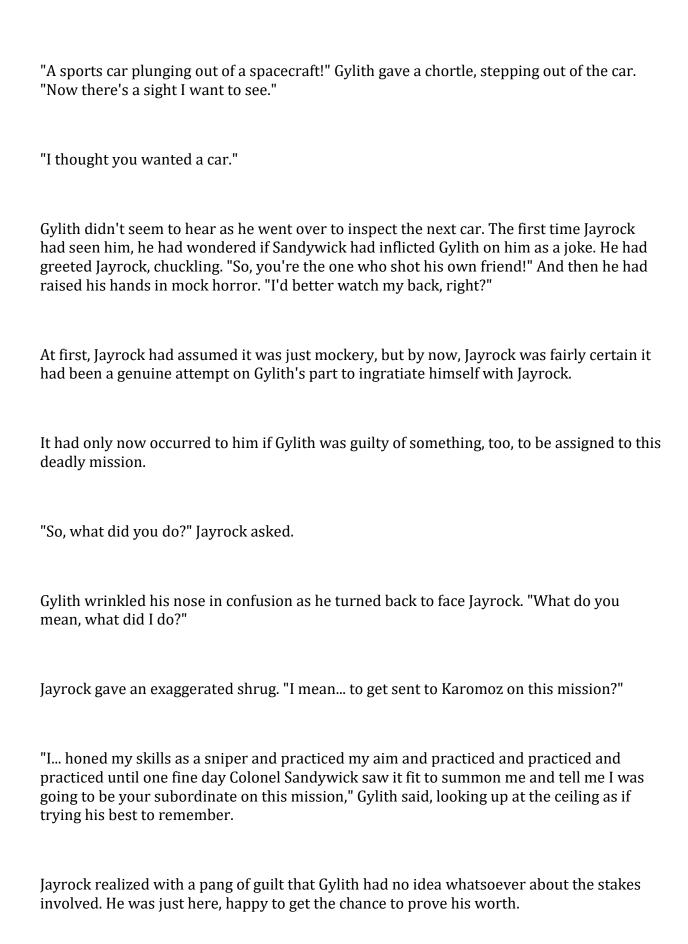
Jayrock placed his hand on the hood of the car he was sitting on, as turbulence caused it to shudder in its place. He was in the massive cargo deck of the Miracle, a freighter spacecraft transporting cars manufactured by an automobile company based on planet Zapstrom. Rows upon rows of exotic cars occupied the dimly lit cargo deck, chained to the floor. The cargo door, large enough for a dozen vehicles to enter through side by side, was some distance away to Jayrock's left. Behind him, set in the wall a few feet above the deck, was the airlock hatch.

With the mission being a covert operation, Jayrock had dressed in civilian clothing. He wore a loose, teal shirt over a dark-red camp shirt, charcoal tactical pants with slate-blue slash pockets, and blue-gray sneakers with white soles. His VBP lay in the breast pocket of his camp shirt.

"I have half a mind to take one with me," quipped Gylith.

Jayrock looked up to find Gylith sitting behind the steering wheel of a yellow car he had somehow managed to unlock. He was a lean commando with neat, brown hair and playful, amber eyes.

"I suppose you could shove one out before we jump," Jayrock replied. "Although then you'd have a tough time convincing people, it's a car you own."

"A sports car plunging out of a spacecraft!" Gylith gave a chortle, stepping out of the car. "Now there's a sight I want to see."

"I thought you wanted a car."

Gylith didn't seem to hear as he went over to inspect the next car. The first time Jayrock had seen him, he had wondered if Sandywick had inflicted Gylith on him as a joke. He had greeted Jayrock, chuckling. "So, you're the one who shot his own friend!" And then he had raised his hands in mock horror. "I'd better watch my back, right?"

At first, Jayrock had assumed it was just mockery, but by now, Jayrock was fairly certain it had been a genuine attempt on Gylith's part to ingratiate himself with Jayrock.

It had only now occurred to him if Gylith was guilty of something, too, to be assigned to this deadly mission.

"So, what did you do?" Jayrock asked.

Gylith wrinkled his nose in confusion as he turned back to face Jayrock. "What do you mean, what did I do?"

Jayrock gave an exaggerated shrug. "I mean... to get sent to Karomoz on this mission?"

"I... honed my skills as a sniper and practiced my aim and practiced and practiced and practiced until one fine day Colonel Sandywick saw it fit to summon me and tell me I was going to be your subordinate on this mission," Gylith said, looking up at the ceiling as if trying his best to remember.

Jayrock realized with a pang of guilt that Gylith had no idea whatsoever about the stakes involved. He was just here, happy to get the chance to prove his worth.

He had already proven to be surprisingly capable, though. They had been on Qragenyal, one of the many asteroids surrounding Grebros, orbiting the sun. They were waiting for a spacecraft, bound for planet Karomoz, to pass. Sandywick had ruled out deploying one from Fort Pedralt, reasoning that it was much more feasible to sneak aboard a civilian spacecraft, preferably not Grebrik, which would safely take them past Karomozian surveillance systems. They would then parachute out of the airlock hatch just before it landed on the planet and enter the spaceport as civilians.

The Miracle had arrived on Qragenyal for refueling. The asteroids surrounding Grebros, often erroneously called the "moons of Grebros," had been developed into fueling stations and were a popular site for this purpose owing to their sheer number — spacecraft never had to venture far off course to reach one for refueling.

As the spacecraft had begun to descend, from ten-thousand feet above their vantage point on a cliff, Gylith had launched the seismic charges at the door of its cargo deck, a feat requiring a staggeringly accurate aim. Once stuck to the door, the charges had emitted vibrations strong enough to disengage the hefty locking mechanisms. Gylith had then proceeded to launch the grappling rocks — cables which sprouted rock at their ends to latch onto the door. As the cables reeled in, they had first yanked open the cargo door and then pulled the commandos in.

The two of them had then shut the door behind them, albeit not perfectly now that the locking mechanisms had been compromised. The Miracle had descended, refueled, and taken flight once more, with its crew being none the wiser about the infiltration.

Jayrock averted his gaze away from Gylith, clicking his tongue. "Oh, I see."

"No, wait a sec!" Gylith put a hand up, frowning. "Do you mean you are serving a sentence? Weren't you acquitted by the court-martial?"

Jayrock absentmindedly ran a finger along the metallic body of his perch. "Oh, they did acquit me — on Sandywick's behest."

"Sandywick's?" Gylith stuttered, ever more confused. "But he was the prosecution, I thought he was trying to..." His voice trailed off as realization dawned upon him.

"To make me pay dearly for my crimes," Jayrock finished, hopping down onto the deck floor. "I don't know what he told you, Gylith, but make no mistake — this is not an officially sanctioned mission. If the Karomozians discover who we are or what we are up to, the Grebrik Commandos will not pull any strings to get us out of a fix — they will simply disown us. We will just be commandos gone rogue, and we will be left at the mercy of the Karomozians." Jayrock sighed. "And the Karomozians have no mercy."

The mission on planet Karomoz was deceivingly simple. The Karomozian customs had stopped a freighter spacecraft carrying building material in bulk, bound for Grebros, under some thin pretext. This was not the first such incident. Since the Grebrik asteroids had been developed into fueling stations, Karomoz's monopoly over this income source had been threatened. The Karomozians' favorite targets were spacecraft carrying fuel, but they regularly intercepted other freighters as well in an attempt to acquire the cargo at ridiculously low prices. In the usual course of action, the Karomozians offered to buy off all the shipments from stranded freighter owners so they would just reverse course instead of heading onward. After constant harassment, the freighter owners were usually eager to make up for lost time and money and had no choice but to accept the offer.

The commandos were tasked with blowing up some fuel tanks at the Karomozian spaceport to serve as a distraction before helping the stranded freighter escape, essentially killing two birds with one stone.

"We will not be captured," Gylith was saying resolutely. "We will do it and go back home, and then maybe you can return to your life in peace."

Small chance at that, Jayrock thought. Just last night, he had dreamed himself stabbing Cliff over and over again while he begged for mercy. Jayrock had woken up sweating. Aloud, he said, "Yes, we will."

Just then, they experienced more turbulence, this time so jarring that Jayrock struggled to keep his balance. "Looks like we are entering the Karomozian atmosphere," he suggested.

As they moved toward the airlock hatch to have a look, Jayrock heard some generators whirring to life. All of a sudden, he felt as if he weighed a hundred tons and collapsed to the floor. He hit his face against the floor, hard.

He groaned and shook his head, trying to make the pain go away. He put his palms against the floor, struggling to get up, but his newfound weight kept him pinned down.

"What's happening?" Gylith winced, sprawled down on the floor. "I can't get up!"

As Jayrock managed to move his head around, he noticed how the chains holding the cars lay motionless, stretched against the floor. It took him a moment to register the trouble they were in. "They have dialed up the artificial gravity in the cargo deck!" he managed to speak.

"But we've got to jump before they land!" Gylith grunted. "Darn these paranoid Zapstromiss! They already have their cars chained, don't they?"

"Thanks for stating the obvious, Gylith, but the next words out of your mouth better be a plan to get out of here!" Jayrock snapped, straining with all his might to get up.

Meanwhile, he knew the spacecraft was descending toward planet Karomoz's surface. The airlock hatch was out of reach, and time was running out.

Jayrock spoke after what seemed a long, long time, "We can forget about the airlock hatch, given we can't even get up. The door, however... extends all the way down to the floor. We could do something about that. Think."

"Alright, so we sort of roll over to the cargo door and open it somehow," Gylith said between heavy breaths. "Then, we just dive out, right?"

"Gylith, did you or did you not happen to notice all this artificial gravity pinning us to the floor? Yeah, it's much stronger than Karomoz's gravitational force at this point, and it's not gonna let us fall down to the planet's surface. So, no, the trouble doesn't end there," Jayrock explained wearily, with his mind torn between roasting Gylith further for his lack of knowledge of how physics worked and getting them out of the predicament they were in.

"OK, then maybe we punch a hole in this hold's back wall and try to head deeper into the spaceship toward its bridge?" Gylith pointed toward the wall at the back, separating the cargo hold from the command center.

"And complain to the ship's crew how our experience in their cargo hold was most unsatisfactory? Gylith, no! We are going to jump out of here!" Jayrock said, exasperated.

"But you just said—"

"Flint Shotgun!" Jayrock articulated.

In a flash of light, a weapon appeared in Jayrock's hand resembling a pistol with a horizontal, slit-like barrel — it was deep saffron with swatches of amethyst. As Jayrock fired it at the latch next to the cargo door, a wedge-shaped, amethyst flint shot out. It tore through the lock, sparking violently on contact.

The door's motors kicked in, whining and straining against the artificial gravity to form a ramp that started to flap in the air. The spaceship began rocking more turbulently than ever as a powerful gust of wind began beating at Jayrock's face, making it hard to keep his eyes open. He tapped the screen on his VBP, and the Flint Shotgun disappeared.

"Yeah, and they won't notice that?" Gylith shrieked.

"Well, now we have really got to get out before they land, so they never find out who or what caused this. If we don't, well, we are screwed either way. Now come on, roll toward the door."

From the prone position, Jayrock dug into the floor with the right half of his body to raise the left. Then he rolled over to plop down onto his back. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he now dug his left elbow and heel into the floor and rolled over onto his stomach, edging toward the door of the cargo hold. Another couple of rolls later, he felt like all the breath had been knocked out of his body.

"OK, now what?" Jayrock heard Gylith's shout from somewhere near the cargo door. He looked up. Gylith had surprisingly already reached the edge and was staring down into the air. Well, he's lighter, that's why, thought Jayrock, embarrassed.

"Wait for me!" Jayrock shouted back. "I have all these muscles to bring with me."

As he proceeded to roll further, he heard Gylith shout again. "Yeah, did all those muscles slow you down when you were trying to search for that bomb?"

It stung so bad Jayrock had to stop for a moment. "Be careful! I have already killed a friend!" Jayrock grunted as he rolled once again.

"Sorry. That was... my bad."

Soon enough, Jayrock rolled right next to the edge. The sound of the wind and the rumble of the spacecraft here was deafening, and the wind felt like it would push him all the way back. He squinted and peered out into the abyss beyond the flapping door.

Even though the artificial gravity had him safely glued to the floor, Jayrock found himself recoiling back at the sight that awaited him. The spacecraft was still at quite a height, so that what looked like fields of greens and browns and grays rushed underneath at

breakneck speed. Above, the clouds swirled calmly except in the spacecraft's wake, where they were agitated before slowly reforming.

"OK, now tell me I didn't roll my butt all this way just for the sightseeing," Gylith shouted once more over the noise.

"So, we try to leap out, and this gravity is going to pull us right back in," Jayrock muttered, trying to sound as calm as he could.

"What? Can't hear you!"

"We could only leap out if somehow Karomoz's gravity were stronger..."

"Look, do you have a plan or not because I'm going to bust that wall behind us right now if—"

"Gylith!" Jayrock shouted. "Leap onto the ramp and when the gravity pulls you, make a handhold and grab onto it! Then leap again! Now!"

"And when we run out of ramp?"

"Then whip up a platform fixed to the edge of the ramp, and extend it as far out as you can. Then leap out onto it."

"But how do we jump from here?"

"We will need rock behind our feet as launch pads."

"Right! Let's hope this works!"

Jayrock flexed his feet to redirect his enertrons toward them. Then he created blocks of rock behind his soles, as did Gylith.

"Alright, jump!"

Jayrock flexed his legs, jamming his feet into the rocky footholds behind. I've always had sturdy legs, Jayrock thought. I can do it. He straightened his knees and propelled himself forward as far as he could. The strength he spent might as well have catapulted him into outer space under normal circumstances, but here it only landed him a few measly inches out onto the ramp.

On top of that, he had barely landed when he felt the artificial gravity trying to claim him back. Not so fast. Jayrock reached out for the ramp with his hands and drew up rocky handholds from it before he grabbed onto them and saved his hard-earned progress. He felt as if his shoulder joints were going to be pulled apart as he floated in midair, his lower body flailing toward the cargo hold.

Mustering all his strength, he gathered his legs, fixed his feet to the ramp, and leaped once more. This time he landed on the edge of the ramp, and again, he grabbed onto it with handholds. Next, he drew a hand free and created a rock platform, as long as he could, extending out from the ramp.

He heard a grunt behind him. He turned to see Gylith clinging onto his own handholds a few inches behind Jayrock. Not so fast now, are you, with your spindly arms and legs? He did not have time to rub it in Gylith's face, however.

He pulled onto his own handholds, dragging his entire body weight with him. He leaped out onto the platform he had just created. To his surprise, this time, he almost felt like he could have stumbled overboard and had to form handholds to save him from Karomoz's gravity instead of the artificial one. We can jump from here. He turned again and spied Gylith just shy of the edge of the ramp.

And then he looked beyond the Miracle, onto the planet's surface. To his horror, looming far ahead on an artificial island was the Karomozian spaceport with its milk-white towers thrusting into the sky, domed terminals with their shimmering blue glass, sprawling runways, and concourses with interspersed green expanses. The island was surrounded by calm, blue waters of the Great Unzayi Lake, and it had no access to the mainland other than shuttle aircraft and ferries. This made it easier for Karomozians to trap the passengers on the spaceport for as long as they wished.

The spaceport seemed big enough from this distance, and yet it was growing bigger by the second. Jayrock knew they were already too late, but staying on the Miracle while it landed would not do any favors either.

"Gylith!" he called out over the deafening roar of the spaceship and the wind. "I think we can jump off here!"

Apparently, Gylith did not hear and was still preparing himself to leap from the edge of the ramp. The spaceport was alarmingly close now, and Jayrock could now even faintly make out people milling around on the aprons and concourses.

Gylith took an agonizingly long time to reach Jayrock, who could not jump before Gylith did and risk landing too far from him. They would need each other on the ground.

"Is this where we jump? The artificial gravity doesn't seem to be much stronger here," Gylith shouted.

As if answering Gylith's question, a chunk of rock underneath Jayrock broke off. Jayrock plummeted fast, overjoyed over the fact that Karomoz's gravity had finally claimed him. He spread his arms and legs as he fell as the wind beat at his face, threatening to pull the skin off his bones. He struggled to open his eyes, only to discover once again that the spaceport was much closer than he would have liked and that the ground underneath had given way to the deep blue waters of the lake.

Jayrock fumbled for a small device fixed to his back. It was a gray cube with a blowhole on either side. As Jayrock pressed a button, tendrils of white, foamy, gaseous material emanated out of the blowholes and curved in two arcs to join above Jayrock's head. The material polymerized and solidified into a white canopy and caught air, jerking Jayrock to a slower descent. A few seconds later, the water came up to meet him with a hard splash before pulling him into its depths.

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