6587

Prologue:

*[beep]* “Captain Murdock. Come in. Captain Murdock.”*[beep]*

The noise wakes me from my deep sleep. I sit up in bed, rub my eyes and pick up the noisy little comm badge. “Captain Murdock here. What’s up?” I say in a groggy voice. “This is Ensign Natasha Tucker, sir” the comm badge replies, “You are to report to the bridge of the *The Harbinger* immediately.”

I put my feet on the cold floor, and gulp down two PainEx pills from my cabinet to ease the hangover from last night’s celebration. “There must be a mistake, ensign,” I say, “My shore leave doesn’t end until tomorrow.” “No mistake, sir,” Tucker says, “The orders come directly from Commodore Fâché.” “Oh,” I say, suddenly awake after hearing the name, “Tell the Commodore I’ll be right there.” Thibault Fâché isn’t the sort of man you want to disappoint.

I jump into the shower chamber and let a blast of cool water and sanitation chemicals wash the gunk from my body and the fatigue from my head. The air from the drying chamber blasts the moisture from my body as quickly as the shower chamber cleaned me. I slip on my captain’s uniform as quickly as I can. I put my officer’s cap on my head, pull on my grey trousers and button the brass buttons of my grey captain’s shirt. This is the first time I’ve worn this shirt, with its U.T.S. insignia on the left side of the chest and the three red stripes on the shoulder that identified my rank. I can’t help but feel proud to wear this uniform, the very one that my father had worn before me. I strap on my sidearm, quickly salute myself in the mirror, open the sliding door of my cabin and hurry down the hall towards the hangar.

If I’d had even the slightest warning that Fâché was going to be here, I wouldn’t have spent last night at “The Lotus Club” with the guys. Of course, getting command of my own ship was something to celebrate, but it wasn’t worth risking the commodore seeing me intoxicated. Any captain who got on that pompous frenchman’s bad side was likely to lose his ship before the night was over.

Fortunately, he didn’t see me last night, so my career was safe, for the time being. As I walk down the hall, I glance out the windows. Commercial space stations like Montpellier often try to attract business by treating their residents to stellar views of the galaxy outside. At the moment, the only view available was off the great purple gas giant Janus that Montpellier is currently orbiting. I can’t see much else, but the planet’s deep purple hue is beautiful enough on its own.

As I approach the doors to the hangar, the two troopers guarding it salute me. I nod to them and enter move walk through the doors to my ship, “*The Harbinger.*” Everything about the sleek vessel is beautiful, from its rear thrusters, to its torpedo banks, to its port and starboard thrusters, to its titanium hull, to its bridge and cockpit to its Alcubierre drive. She’s the latest model of a StarTech battle cruiser, measuring over a hundred meters in length. She’s new, she’s powerful, she’s fast and, best of all, she’s mine.

I walk up the gangplank into the hull. A pair of deckhands set aside the supply crates that they’re loading to salute me. “Welcome aboard, sir” they say, standing at attention. “At ease,” I tell them and they continue with their work. I walk down the hall and open the door to the bridge.

Fâché is there waiting for me with that warm and inviting frown of his drilling into me. He’s a man of short stature. He may even be getting fat. But no one would ever dare to tell him this. Three strangers clad in civilian corporate attire stand next to him. One is a short, aged, asian man with a trimmed mustache. The second is a bespectacled fellow in an automatic wheelchair. The third is a pretty young woman with high cheek bones and bright blue eyes behind thin glasses. “You’re late, captain,” Fâché snarls, “Another moment late and you’d be spending your next voyage scrubbing the ship’s latrines.” “Pardon me, sir,” I reply, doing my best to sound apologetic for sleeping during shore leave, “I wasn’t informed that I’d be on duty-” “Save it,” Fâché snaps.

The commodore turns to three strangers. “I apologize for this man’s incompetence. It won’t happen again,” he says, throwing me an angry glare. “Now, now, there is no need for apologies,” says the man in the wheelchair. He rolls over to me and extends his hand and smiles warmly, “Dr. Thales McMillan. It’s a pleasure, captain.” “Likewise,” I say, shaking his hand, “Welcome aboard.” The asian fellow approaches me next. He bows politely and says, “Dr. Mao Chang. It’s a pleasure.” I return the bow. Lastly the pretty young woman extends her hand. I shake it firmly and look into her light blue eyes. “I am Dr. Darya Malakov,” she says with a slight Russian accent, “It’s very nice to meet you, Captain Murdock.” “Welcome aboard ma’am,” I respond. I hope to God that I didn’t blush.

Fâché pipes up in his French voice, “Now that the introductions are through, we can get down to business. *Oui?”* “Yes, sir,” I respond courteously. “*Très bien*,” Fâché continues, “High Command has selected this ship for a very special and very delicate assignment.” “Command itself?” I asked, surprised, “But wh-” “Captain Murdock! If you interrupt me again, I’ll have you courtmartialed before you can say ‘chocolate croissant.’ Am I clear,” Fâché barked. “Yes, sir,” I said regretfully, “Sorry, sir.” Fâché cleared his throat and continued, “The task that we are about to undertake is of great importance. Its secrecy is of equal importance. For that reason, every man or woman, military or civilian, that is involved in this operation will be expected to sign the Official Secrets pact and take an oath of absolute secrecy. Will there be any trouble with that?” Everyone in the room shakes their heads. “*Très bien,*” he said, “You will be briefed momentarily. But first...” He motions for us all to follow him.

He leads us out of the bridge down the hall and down the gangplank to where a pair of troopers have set up a cubicle. “A neural scan will be required,” Fâché explains, “The nature of this mission requires all involved to be of a sound mind. This will only take a moment.”

The suggestion seems to disturb the three scientists. I’m not sure why they seem so uncomfortable, but even I am perplexed. A neural scan? What’s he talking about? I’ve never heard of any such protocol at the academy or in my three years of service. Regardless, I'm not about to argue with Fâché.

Chang goes first. He enters the cubicle. There is a small whirring sound, a flash of light from inside, and then he exits. McMillan follows him. I hear the same noise, the same flash of light and then he leaves. Dr. Malakov goes next. She looks at me for a moment and then enters the cubicle. After the sound and flash, she too leaves.

Finally it’s my turn. I can’t help but feel slightly nervous. There’s nothing frightening about a neural scan, but the scientists’ obvious discomfort and the fact that it’s somehow required for the mission I’m undertaking unsettle me. When I enter the cubicle, I see the scanner. It’s unlike any neural scanner I’ve ever seen. It consists of a head brace with a goggle-like structure for the eyes and a few needles that looked like they would be inserted into my spine and ears.

I don’t like the look of this, but I place my head in the brace anyway. The machine goes to work. I feel a pinch as the needles insert themselves. I see a bright light....

“*Containment breach! Containment breach!*”

I shook my head, trying to banish the strange disorientation I was feeling. The room seemed to be spinning. I wobbled, back and forth, trying to stabilize my footing.

I took a moment examine my surroundings. The windowless room I was in was completely white, without a a trace of clutter or dust. Apart from myself, its only contents were a steel operating table, with a deactivated technician droid and an array of strange tools hanging above it, and computer with a glowing monitor sitting on a white plastic desk. The alarm kept blaring in its shrill voice, “*Containment breach! Containment breach! Breach in Section 3A!*”

As I start to regain my footing, I stumble over to the monitor and take a peak. One window is still open, but it contains only some sort of instructions in binary code that I can’t understand. All I can comprehend is the message at the end:

Download Complete

File: Augustus Murdock

Date: February 15, 2726

Recipient Unit: 6587

Wait. There was something else: a minimized window next to the toolbar. I clicked it and a short audio recording begins to play. “Hello, Gus,” said a female voice, “I understand that you probably feel lost and confused. I’m sorry for that. I wish I could explain more, but there isn’t time.” I recognized the voice: Dr. Darya Malakov, one of my coworkers. “We need you,” said the voice, “Humanity needs you. Every living creature in our galaxy needs you, even if they don’t know it yet. You’re the only hope we’ve got. You just don’t remember. Find me. I’ve left you bread crumbs. Find me.”

I wipe my face, struggling to absorb the chaotic nonsense that was happening around me. “Take a moment, Gus,” I whisper to myself, “Gather your thoughts. You’re no good if you can’t think.” I sit down in the desk’s chair and let myself relax. Slowly at first, then quickly, my memories come back to me. Soon my mind is flooded with recovered thoughts and memories.

My name is Augustus Murdock. I was born on Alpha Centauri on September 12, 2695. I was accepted into the Federal Aeronautics Academy when I was twenty-three. That was eight years ago. Just a week ago, February 8, 2726, my dream had come true. I was granted the position of captain and given my own ship: *The Harbinger*. I remember the pride I felt while looking at my new cruiser for the first time. I remember spending shore leave celebrating and drinking with my friends on Montpellier space station. I remember being woken up by my comm badge. I remember Tucker telling me that I was to report to my ship’s bridge. I remember finding Commodore Thibault Fâché there waiting for me with some strange people I didn’t know and telling me that he had a special assignment for my crew and I, straight from Command. I remember shaking hands and exchanging introductions with each of the strangers, one of whom had been Dr. Malakov. I remember her pretty face. The last thing I remember was the neural scan’s bright light.

My mind is overflowing with question. Nothing makes sense. I take the time to examine myself and my surroundings. I’m clad in a white hospital gown. The panel to my room’s only door glows red, letting me know its locked. I rifle through the upper drawer of the desk and find a small mirror. I take a good look at myself. At first, everything seems to be in order. I look like I’m in perfect heath. My dark blonde hair is even still in the same short military haircut that I love so much. I smile quickly to make sure my dashing good looks(if I do say so myself) are in tact.

That’s when I notice something. The scar I received on my left cheek in survival training; it’s gone. I touch the spot where it used to be to make sure I’m not imagining things. My eyes don’t deceive me, it’s not there.

I take off my hospital gown and examine my body. I thank God, when I see that nothing appears to have been tampered with. All I notice is a strange tattoo reading “6587” on the palm of my right hand. 6587, like “Unit : 6587” from the screen. What did that mean?

Suddenly, the door’s panel turns green and a pair of men in blue security uniforms walk in. I stand up and say, “What the Hell’s going on!? Where am I? I demand to speak to your supervisor immediately.” The guards ignore my words. They pull black shock sticks from their belts, power the weapons up and start closing in on me. “Easy there,” said one, “There’s nowhere to run. Just be hold still and this’ll be over before-”

I’m not about to let two goons touch me before I get an explanation. I seize the man’s stick before he can finish his sentence and yank it from his grip. His friend lunges at me but I dodge his stick’s electric tip and strike him in the chest with mine. He shakes as 900,000 volts go through him and then he falls down, stunned. His friend jumps on my back and pulls a strange syringe out of his pocket. Before the needle can touch me, I jerk him off my back and hurl him through the doorway and into the wall of the hallway beyond, effectively knocking him out cold.

I’ve no idea how I managed to do any of the things I just did. I mean, sure, I’ve been hitting the gym lately, but even the genetically enhanced commandoes I’d seen had never been as fast or strong as that. No time to think. The alarm is still sounding, “*Containment breach! Containment breach!*” and I could hear steel-toed boots heading towards me. I run out the door, lift the unconscious guard’s body over my shoulder and head off down the hallway.

As I turn a corner, I see the door to a storage room on the left. I press the guard’s thumb into the identity panel and the door opens. As I enter, I almost run into a little man in a white lab coat. Before his shock can wear off, I jab him in the ribs with my shockstick. He jitters and then collapses.

The door slides shut behind me and I lock it. As quickly as possible, I strip the guard and don his blue uniform. I’m lucky we’re the same size. But there’s still one more thing I need from him. “Sorry fella,” I say, taking a scalpel from a nearby tray. A moment later, I walk out with the man’s thumb in my pocket.

I don’t know how, but, by some miracle, I manage to reach the main entrance unnoticed. The guard’s thumb has gotten me through every door so far, but, of course, the facility is on lockdown, so I can’t leave. The fortified steel doors are locked shut and a pair of security drones had rolled up on either side to guard them.

It looks like I haven’t run out of miracles just yet. For some reason, the alarm stops blaring and a computer voice over the intercom says, “*Lockdown over. Security restored.*” The drones roll back to the corners of the room and the doors unlock The attendant behind the glass at the front desk looked as confused as I was. She starts speaking into her comm badge, asking anyone she could reach if the threat was really neutralized. I’m not going to wait for her to find out.

I run to the doors and, just as I’m about to press the “open” button on the side, a voice yells, “Hold it! What d’you think your doin’?” I turn to see a security guard, a supervisor judging from his tone, slouching towards me. I tap my shockstick, although I know it’ll be over if I assault a superior in front of these security drones. They’d have me stunned and detained in a fraction of a second.

The guard approaches me and holds out a black begoggled respirator mask. “You wanna fry your lungs?!” he barks, “Don’t you forget these again. And don’t you forget to bring ‘em back tomorrow either.” “Yeah sure, boss” I say letting out a slight sigh.

I strap on my mask, push the doors’ button and walk through the doors without another word. I find myself in a decompression chamber, which opens into a world that seems to be enveloped by a great yellow fog. The fog isn’t so thick that I can’t faintly see the landscape that surrounds me. Most of the land consists of rocky mountains and canyons, with just a few patches of vegetation here and there. The buildings, including the one I’ve just exited, are mostly built into the rocky structures. Crawlers and hovercrafts move about the terrain like strange insects. Apart from a couple of monorails running throughout the mountains and canyons, the structures are linked only by tunnels. Some are clearly visible and some, I guess, run through the stone.

I recognize this place as Rackham City on the planet Terminus. I’ve been stationed here once before. The city was built around the mines that supplied much-needed ore to other worlds. Despite the methane that rendered the planet’s atmosphere unbreathable, the city had grown into one of the sector’s largest colonies. The nightlife isn’t bad either. But what am I doing here? How did I get from Montpellier station to this chunk of rock lightyears away?

I look up at the building I’ve just escaped from. The sign above the entrance reads, “F.S.I.T.R.D.,” which I know stands for “Federal Institute of Technological Research and Development.” I’ve seen their facilities a few times before but never once been allowed inside. Even the smallest of F.S.I.T.R.D.’s secrets are heavily classified. All I’ve heard is rumors, the kind I’d rather not believe.

I spot a monorail station just a few meters down the walkway and take a seat to wait.