All Hands on Deck

By C. Randall Nicholson

*Knock, knock.*

 “Captain Sommers?” calls my first mate, Wilco. “Twenty minutes to landing.” He’s clearly nervous about interrupting my leisure time, even though I ordered him to.

 “Thank you,” I call back. “I’ll be out soon.” With a sigh, I open my eyes. This is my favorite place in the world – a scented bubble bath with a damp book of poetry and glass of champagne at my side, the strains of Mozart’s “Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen” echoing through the perfect acoustics of the bathroom. This aria was among the musical selections chosen to represent Earth aboard the Voyager 1 probe over a century ago, and still somehow provides a fitting backdrop for the blackness of space.

But as always, it must come to an end. I sigh again and stand up.

 I towel off and zip up my jumpsuit. I spend little time on my hair or makeup. I’m not out to win any beauty contests, though I flatter myself that I look decent anyway. Then I pick up the most important part of my simple wardrobe – my helmet. Before putting it on, I stare at it and think long and hard about how far I’ve come.

 Two major evolutionary innovations enabled humans to rule over planet Earth (some pretentious people call it “Terra”, but I’m not one of them) and then the entire solar system. The first, of course, is our brain, though I do think its novelty has been overstated. We have unmatched communication abilities, yet we refuse to listen to each other. We have an unparalleled capacity to plan for the future and learn from our mistakes, yet we frequently refuse to do either. And so on along those lines. When all is said and done, our civilizations are still driven by the same instincts and desires of any other beasts.

 But its sheer size entails a great deal more ambition, and the other innovation lends the power to bring it to fruition. The other innovation is even less unique – not only do we share it with our closest living relatives, but they have twice as many – yet it has enabled us to build and operate cities, starships, and of course, weapons. My father did a lot of manual labor on our farm on Io, and he always told me that there’s nothing quite like the power in human hands.

 That is the power I have taken unto myself, have incorporated into the helmet I’m holding now. Fourteen hands, perfectly preserved with modern technology, still warm; some soft and smooth as baby powder, others rough and calloused as cliff faces, depending on the occupations and predilections of their previous owners. They are joined together into a shape that fits snugly over my head so that I can display them for everyone to see. They see my power, and they fear me.

 “Ah, good evening, Captain,” says Wilco as I step outside to where he’s waiting. He refuses to make eye contact with me. He fears me, as does my entire crew. I would rather they respected me. But the simple reality is that I must take what I can get, as long as it works.

 “Good evening, Wilco,” I say, striding past him toward the bridge. “I trust everything is in order.”

 “Of course, Captain,” he says, rushing to keep up with my pace. “Down to the finest detail.”

 “Good.” As we stride through the freighter’s white, sterile halls, I hear almost nothing – no speech and no laughter, though we pass a few other crew members. At times, when I really focus, I can make out the soft steady thrum of the engines, but I don’t focus very often. After classical music, silence is my favorite sound.

 We step onto the bridge. “Oh, hello, Captain,” says Sykes, the navigator, as I enter. “We’re just making our approach to Ora.”

 His words are redundant; I can already see the miserable little dust speck coming up through the screen of the cockpit. It glows in places, not with any light from the sun, but with the lights of human settlements. Only mankind’s obsession with owning everything accounts for their presence all the way out here, on the farthest known object in our solar system.

 “Man,” mutters Daniels, the pilot, as I take my seat behind and to the left of him, “if I lived there, I’d kill myself after a week.”

 “But if you made it past that, it should actually be good for your longevity,” Wilco replies. “Not many birthdays.”

 Maybe if he weren’t so scared, he would tell better jokes. I get his point, though. The last time Ora’s orbit brought it to this particular spot, mankind hadn’t even invented the steam engine.

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 After ten seconds on the dust speck, I agree with Daniels’ assessment. The artificial atmosphere and heating beneath the massive dome of this settlement do little to make it less forlorn and depressing. One step sends enough dust into the air to choke a German shepherd. Fortunately, we won’t be staying here a week, or anywhere near that. Our mission should take a couple hours at most.

 I look at Daniels, Sykes, Wilco, and the others moving cargo from the ship to our little transport. Rough, desperate men, all of them. Many have been imprisoned for crimes they didn’t commit; others, or their loved ones, have been the victims of crimes and received no justice. Some of them are just anarchists. In any case, all of them are fed up with the impotent legal system beyond Earth and have taken it into their own hands. Like me.

 Oh, people try to enforce laws, of course, but the sheer immensity of space makes it impossible. We’re often stuck relying on people to be decent and honorable of their own volition, and three guesses how often that works.

 “Right,” says Wilco as the final crate is set in the transport, “that should be it. We’re right on schedule.” He was the first to join my crew, and perhaps the only one of them that I really trust. He doesn’t have big problems like the others, though. I don’t know why he sticks around.

 “Good work,” I tell him. “Let’s go.”

 It only requires two people to operate, but I climb in along with him, Sykes, and Daniels. Then we’re off, crossing the small stores and houses on our way to someplace larger and wealthier.

 I’ve been fortunate to do so well as a cargo hauler, when that was never my primary objective, and I’ve selected jobs with more regard to location than finance. The man we’re delivering to has moved around a bit, but finally he settled down here, as far from Io as he could get, apparently realizing that he couldn’t evade me forever. When one of his employees contacted us for this job, I was sure of it. He wants to meet and get it over with.

 For my reputation has preceded me, on purpose. Every time I took the hands of a pirate or a slave trader or a sex trafficker, he heard of it, and knew I was moving closer. He undoubtedly feared me. Does he still fear me, or is he confident that he will come out on top? In the latter case, he will be in for a rude awakening.

 It would probably take an hour to circumnavigate this planetoid; it takes only five minutes to reach our destination. The manor looks like a twisted black palace, as ugly as the ground it sits on. When I was young and played princess with my sister Carrie we dreamed that we would live in a palace someday; but not like this one. It looks like the haunt of some mad scientist. But this man has neither the brilliance nor the instability of a mad scientist. He’s just a sleazeball.

 Daniels stops us at the gate, where a guard holds up his hand and walks over to the window. “Hiya,” he says. “You here with the produce?”

 “Sure are,” says Daniels, pretending not to know that the vegetables are merely a front for less healthy substances.

 “Bring it around the back,” says the guard. He does a double take as he notices my helmet. He recovers quickly, but fails to hide his fear as he moves off to open the gate.

 We follow his direction and pull into a wide open garage. Then Daniels cuts the engine and we all step out, churning up as much dust as we did outside.

 “Now,” Wilco mutters, “the trap springs in three… two… one.”

 On cue, the garage door slams shut and guards pour out of the dark recesses of the room, firing at us, but we’ve already ducked and rolled under the transport and taken out our own guns. All, that is, except for me – I prefer a more elegant, more refined weapon, and I prefer to fight in the open. I leap into the fray with my double-bladed knife, jumping and swinging it in a fashion that must look random to an outsider but is, in fact, under the utmost control.

 The artificial alloy in my knife is sharp enough to cut wood – or bone – with hardly a flick of my wrist. I don’t cut off their hands. These are just low-level mooks working for the highest bidder, and not in need of that kind of humbling. Indeed, if there was any chance they would listen to reason, I wouldn’t hurt them at all. But they won’t stop until they’ve killed us or been killed, so I oblige them. I aim for their necks and hearts. They aim at where I was moments ago. I leave a trail of corpses in my wake.

 When silence falls, I have more kills than anyone. Wilco crawls out of hiding, inspecting his shoulder where he’s taken a glancing shot. “Wow,” he says, trying to cover his fear with admiration. “You’re in great form tonight.”

 “There were more of them than I expected,” says Sykes, inspecting his ankle.

 I roll my eyes as I wipe the blood from my knife; it will wash out of my jumpsuit easily, as it always does. “This is just the beginning. There will be even more inside the –”

 I stop as my ears pick up a hissing noise. The others hear it too; faint, but growing louder by the moment. Recognition dawns one by one in their eyes.

 “Flesh-eating gas, no doubt,” I say. “Typical.”

 A moment later, the garage door explodes, and the second transport with the rest of my crew flies in. I smile. I knew I could count on them. With the room no longer sealed off, the gas doesn’t pose an immediate threat, and we have time to think. The crew members pile out and head for the crates in the first transport, which hold not only vegetables and drugs but also weapons – a free bonus on our part. We could just take the weapons from the dead guards, but better safe than sorry.

 “I don’t like this,” says Wilco. “We’ve come too far to risk you, Captain. Let me go first.”

 He’s just done something very difficult; he’s surprised me. “I beg your pardon?”

 “Let me go first,” he repeats. And then, for the first time since I met him, he looks me in the eye, and I see something else besides fear, though I don’t believe it. “Please, we can’t lose you, not now.”

 Have I really inspired such loyalty and selflessness from him? How? But there will be time to wonder about that later. I shake my head. “Thank you, but no. Ladies first.”

 “But –”

 “That’s an order, Wilco,” I snap.

 He looks away. “Yes, Captain.”

 I find the door to the rest of the manor. It’s locked, of course, but that poses little difficulty for us. We make our way into the next hallway and fan out. “Now, remember,” I tell them, “they’ll try to pin us down and outflank us from both sides. If you’re in the rear, keep your eyes pointed that way.”

 Then we’re off. I don’t know the floor plan of this place, but it shouldn’t take long to figure out. I’m in no particular hurry anyway. I want this done right. I’ve waited too long for this moment to mess it up.

 Even in the dim lighting, one can see that the halls are lined with hideously tacky paintings and artifacts. With no aesthetic value for a normal person, their obvious purpose is just to show off the owner’s wealth. I grimace at them. Blood money, every penny. Then I note that one of the paintings’ eyes is beginning to glow.

 “Everybody down!” I yell.

 As they comply, I rip the painting off the wall, flip the manual switch on the back, and swing it around so that the lasers bursting from its eyes incinerate the other paintings before they can come online. A more cunning trap than I had anticipated, but still easy enough to deal with. Guards are already arriving at both ends, apparently expecting to find us full of holes, but they are disappointed.

 The resulting firefight nearly obscures all visibility, but that’s more of a disadvantage to our opponents than to us, because we have me on our side. I’m moving even faster now, driven by our proximity to my goal. I see a flight of stairs up ahead that I have a good feeling about, and I move toward it, nimbly sidestepping or jumping over the bodies that fall before me. Behind me, Wilco cries out as he is hit, but there will be time to worry about that later. He knew the risks.

 I take the stairs two at a time. Up here is a mezzanine, at the other end of which is a door that I know must be my destination. There are more guards up here, of course, and this time, without my crew backing me up, I can see the fear in their eyes and know for sure that it is caused entirely by me, by my helmet as much as the fact that I’ve made it this far and clearly have no intention of stopping. I don’t relish their fear, but dispatch them as quickly as I can.

 Then the floor opens up beneath my feet. Thinking quickly, I sheath my knife and grab two of the guards – one of them recently deceased and the other one very much alive and distressed – and move them under me to cushion my impact. The impact, as it turns out, is on a bed of spikes, which skewers them and barely scratches me. Then the floor closes above me again, and all is dark.

 I smile. Well played, my friend – but not well enough.

 My crew could get me out, but that won’t be necessary. My quarry isn’t going to just leave me here to die, though that would be the smart thing to do. He’ll need closure. He’ll need to see me face to face. And when he does, he’ll regret it immediately. My eyes have already adjusted to the dark so, carefully avoiding the spikes, I set to work building a pyramid of bodies. It only reaches halfway up, in the end, but that’s enough.

 It’s only fifteen minutes, in fact, before the floor – or ceiling – opens up again, and there he stands. “Well, well, w –”

 In an instant, I’ve jumped out, and he’s flat on his back with me standing on top of him, his gun sent scattering across the floor.

 “–ell,” he squeaks out, his eyes widening.

 He’s horribly bloated, like an engorged tick ready to burst, bloated off the spoils of his illicit activities. I could take him in a fight or a race with my hands behind my back, my ankles tied together and a paper bag over my head. He may have been confident enough to lure me into his inner sanctum with all its traps and its guards, but up close and personal he realizes his error, and it terrifies him.

 Though I haven’t felt any emotions worth speaking of for years, I allow myself to feel one now, and it feeds off of his. I see his fear, and it makes me happy. I see him seeing my helmet, and the recognition in his eyes that his hands will soon be the next to adorn it.

 But not yet. I get off of him and allow him to get to his feet and catch his breath.

 “Okay,” he says, nearly too afraid to speak, “okay…” He doubles over with his hands on his knees, and glances back at me. “What do you want?” he finally says, in an unsuccessful attempt at bravado.

 I sigh, unsure whether his memory is really that short or he’s just playing stupid to buy himself a little more time. “Come now,” I say. “You’ve known for years now that I was after you, and never realized why?”

 “No,” he says. “I’ve racked my brains for all those years trying to figure it out. I’ve never met you in my life, I don’t know anything about you –”

 “Oh, but you have and you do,” I remind him. “Of course, I looked a little different then. I was only five years old.”

 “I don’t know who you are,” he insists. “Elizabeth Sommers. Why should that name ring a bell?”

 “The ‘Sommers’ part should, at least. Maybe you’d remember better my father Jacob, or my older sister Carrie? She was ten.”

 “No,” he says, shaking his head, and backing away slowly, as if it would do him any good. I let him back as far as he wants to. I can cover that distance before he can blink.

 “Then perhaps,” I say, “you’ll remember a mutual acquaintance of ours – a lovable rogue named Dwayne Draper?”

 His corpulent face, already pale, now becomes entirely drained of color.

 “Ah. I thought so.”

“Now hold on a minute,” he says, putting up his hands and backing away more, “hold on just a –”

My happiness was just the beginning; now the floodgates have opened, now the time is right, and everything that I’ve suppressed all these years can come free. “No, you listen to me, you little scum-sucker,” I say, pointing a finger as if I’m disciplining a recalcitrant schoolchild. “You know how much he cost our farm? Did you get a cut of that, or do you shirk your duties for free?”

“I didn’t –”

“‘Beyond my jurisdiction.’ ‘Nothing I can do.’ Your jurisdiction was where you wanted it to be, and you knew it, and my father knew that you knew it. It was entirely up to you whether to do the right thing, or to be a coward, and you chose poorly.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” he says, not sounding sorry at all. “If you want to be compensated for your troubles –”

“Yes, you could certainly take care of that, couldn’t you? I see you long ago shed any pretense at standing for truth and justice. You know the saying ‘All that is needed for good men to prevail is for good men to do nothing’? I don’t believe it. I say that if they do nothing, they’re not good men. And you’ve proven me right.”

“The drugs?” he says, gesturing around at his spoils. “The hookers? Is that what this is about? You tracked me to the edge of nowhere to cut off my hands because I like to have a good time, is that it?”

“No,” I say. “If that was it, I would let you be. If that was it, I would never have embarked on this journey.” I gesture at my helmet. “I would never have built up this collection.”

“Okay, then I don’t –”

I cut him off, speaking on autopilot as the suppressed memories come flooding back. Draper kept us in terror for years. Not only did he show up after every harvest to demand his tribute, but we never knew when else he’d show up to drink and swear and stomp around. I guess he had nothing better to do. I’ll grant him one thing, though – he taught me that fear is an effective way to keep people in line. Maybe the only way.

“These hands send a message,” I tell him. “To the people I take them from and the people who see me wearing them. And that message creates order and stability where the laws of Earth have utterly failed to.”

“See, it’s not just me,” he says. “The whole system –”

“Because *you* wouldn’t do your duty to help us,” I say, and continue. After a few years of this reign of fear, which basically ruined the rest of my childhood, my father took matters into his own hands. He decided that enough was enough, and we weren’t going to live like this, and he stood up to Draper. I remember the yelling, almost obscured by the sound of my own heartbeat as I listened from another room. Then a gunshot, and then silence.

Finally, this man is silent as well. Realization dawns alongside the fear in his eyes.

Then Carrie’s screams as Draper raped her, hard enough to break her pelvis. I tried to stop him, but I was only twelve, and he backhanded me across the room and I couldn’t move. Then with another gunshot, her suffering was over. I was fortunate to be able to escape in time when he burned down the farm on his way out, though I was so traumatized that I didn’t speak again for two years.

“But, you know,” I finish, “not your jurisdiction, nothing you could do.”

He’s trembling now.

“I got a job in town,” I continued. “A job on a freighter. I worked my way up. I came back. Death was too good for him, so I cut off his hands, took his power. Those were my first.” I think of the helmet perched on my head, and almost imagine I can feel some parts of it twitching. “And now, don’t you see, I’ve come full circle.”

I draw my knife.

He turns and bolts for the far door. I let him go, and follow at a walking pace. He closes the door behind him, but I kick it down. This is his office, apparently, judging by the even tackier décor and the large desk covered with pornography. Some people still prefer the printed stuff, even in this day and age. He pushes the desk over behind him, as if it will shield him, and heads for the window.

I hurl my knife and hit him between the shoulder blades. He doesn’t pop, as one might expect, but grunts in agony and stumbles to the ground. He grabs at the curtain and tries to pick himself back up, but then I’m there, in front of the window. He shrieks as I plant my foot on his back and retrieve my knife; then he flops backward and crawls on his elbows, away from me, fueled by fear, backed into the corner.

“Come now,” I say. “You said you would compensate me, didn’t you?”

“Please!” he says, as blood soaks the carpet beneath him. “I didn’t know – have mercy –”

“Fear creates order,” I tell him. “Mercy does not.”

I’ve given this moment and its aftermath a lot of thought. Will I continue to collect hands after my vengeance is taken and my life goal realized? The entire criminal underworld knows about me, and knows that I’ve been after him; after today, they will fear me like never before.

But why stop there? There’s always room for improvement, and the work of policing the solar system will never be done. I could make an entire suit out of hands, perhaps. I could wire them to move, to obey my telepathic commands. Maybe – and this thought comes to me just now, out of the blue – I could cut off *different* body parts, depending on the crime.

I glance at his desk again. I wouldn’t cut out his eyes just for looking at pornography, of course. But suppose he were a peeping Tom –

I shake myself. I’m getting distracted. I want to savor the moment, but really, if I take too much pleasure in it, I’m no better than him, no better than the others whose hands I’ve taken. I’m only human, and can surely be forgiven for having strong feelings about my family, but moderation in all things is key. I need to just do it and get it over with.

I raise my knife, already wet with his blood. “Hold still,” I say, “unless you don’t mind me making mistakes.”

“Please, no!” he screams.

And then I sense someone in the broken doorway behind us, even before a scared, confused voice says, “Daddy?”

I turn and see a small boy standing there, probably six or seven years old. Heaven knows who the mother is, but he clearly bears the genetic stamp of the man groveling on the floor. He’s in his pajamas, and has probably been awakened by all the shooting and yelling and crashing around.

“What’s going on?” he continues, his voice trembling a little. “Who is she? What’s that on her head?” His eyes are filled with fear now, too. I’ve stayed away from children with my helmet. I didn’t know there was a child here. My sources never mentioned that.

His father doesn’t answer his questions. What can he say?

“Go away,” I say to the boy, but he doesn’t budge. He’s afraid of me, but he doesn’t budge. He just keeps staring at his father.

There’s nothing for it again. I’ve wasted enough time already. I turn away from the boy, back to the task at hand. To the man, to my knife – to his pleading eyes, to his hands – back again and back again...

And I hesitate.

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 As I watch the crew pack themselves into the transports once more, Sykes comes up to me, looking battered and dirty but otherwise none the worse for wear. “You were up there for a while,” he says. “I was starting to get worried. But then I figured, hey, this is Captain Sommers we’re talking about.”

 I smile, though my thoughts are elsewhere. “Thanks for your vote of confidence.” I survey the wreckage. “How many killed?”

 “Seven. Not bad, really, considering…”

 “We’ll get them a proper funeral, of course,” I say. Something else is nagging at my mind now. “Wilco?”

 “Yeah, he was one of them. I’m sorry.”

 “Nothing to be sorry about,” I say. “He knew the risks.” I do feel a twinge of regret – he was the most loyal first mate I could have asked for – but I can’t let that show.

With that I leave him, get into one of the transports, and wait for us to head back to the ship. We’ve made good time, even with my delays. We’ll be off this miserable planetoid within twenty minutes. But something is still nagging me about Wilco. Did fear motivate him to put himself in harm’s way, to risk himself in my stead, or was it something else? I suppose I’ll never know.

 Everything is a blur until we’re on our way back to Sedna, where we’ll try to find another job. It doesn’t matter where, now. In any case, we have a couple days to kill, so as soon as Ora has faded into the void behind us – and may I never see it again – I stand up to leave the bridge.

At the door, I take off my helmet and look at it as if seeing it for the first time. Will I still wear it? Will I try out any of the other ideas I had? I don’t want to think about any of that right now, so I stop looking at it. But I can’t stop things from nagging at me, more intensely and more insistently than Wilco’s strange behavior. I’ll have to stop and figure them out, but not here, and not now.

“Ah, Captain?” It’s Daniels, daring to interrupt him. I turn, and see a curiosity in his eyes crowding out the fear. “Beg pardon, Captain, but I’m dying to know – what exactly happened back there, with you and him?”

I should chastise him for his impropriety, but instead I just sigh. “Ask me some other time,” I say, hoping he won’t.

Then I leave, helmet tucked under my arm, headed for the refuge of my chamber. The water in my bath will be cold, of course, but I can easily reheat it, and the scented bubbles should be as strong as ever.