



The Seams Between The Stars

A short story by

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We came down on the edge of the warfront proper of Old Lucifer on the guidance – that is, command – of Birdit so Alhamin of Faleen, some city on some rock we'd never heard of until we got pressed into service. Birdit, like all the officers, was big: big in the shoulders, big in the hips, big in the hands. Even her eyes were big. Her freckles were a clotted map across her bronzed face. She had scars and liked to show them. She'd been rebuilt three times, she told us proudly – as if she'd only been punched in the face - and later taken out all three attackers, not all of them human. "Always meet violence with violence," was her first lesson to us, followed closely by, "If they don't bring violence we bring it." She didn't read texts, because she thought too many written words warped the mind, but she knew how to read palms and scars, and she asked me once, if I could choose to live long or die well, what did I want?

I opened my mouth to say something brave, and she just laughed.

"I've seen eight legions die on me," she said. "I'll go on long after you're char. You won't live long enough to know what you want."

We loved her very much.

I first joined her command with a dozen other doughy boys, not one of us with a face that looked like any other. We were all from New Kinaan, so it was strange not to run with a group that looked just like you, but at least we had a lot in common – we were all castemates, all warriors. The other boys weren't like us. They didn't even take a copy of the Good Book with them into combat, and instead of talking about God, the seven hells, and devotion to Word and caste, they were more likely to sit over a game of cards and play for locusts or scarab beetles or whatever else the rock we pounded down on was using for currency. The day they started talking about how they were going to swap out katcreepers, I heard we were going to Old Lucifer.

Birdit gathered us all up into the warship's cortex and gave us the script. Us New Kinaan boys made up a quarter of crew. Of the rest, half were raw hash from Salem, and the others were Birdit's old regulars, most from some dead city on the world she came from, a lost relic she called Umayma that stirred at the far edge of some unnamed galaxy. Her guys were big, just like she was. They had jagged scars and melted faces and leg braces and rebuilt skulls and spines and they told stories about the great things

fire ants could do to help mend infected flesh. They thought they were pretty funny, too, and didn't know why we didn't laugh at their jokes about house mothers and frolicking with house sisters. Birdit was the first woman I ever saw. Boys on Umayma were trained as soldiers when they were teens, not just born into a warrior caste, like us. It made us wonder, sometimes, how scary all the people on Umayma must be, if these were the ones that hadn't been able to cut it there. If these were the ones Birdit had rescued.

"Here's what we have, boys," Birdit said twelve hours before the drop on Lucifer. "We've got a civilian population all fucked up on their own terrafirma drones. I want this clean and quiet and I don't want any contamination. You got your vaccinations. We go by the regular rules. You take off your slicks and get contaminated, we don't let you back on board."

"We running a clean sweep then, Sir?" one of the Salem boys asked.

"There ain't no other kind," she said. "This world is dying anyway. No reason we can't learn something from it before we set fire to the whole thing."

I suited up with the other New Kinaan boys and waited for the drop in the cattle car. Mostly, I know better than to walk out of our sector alone, but I figured the others were right behind me.

Inside the cattle car, there were a few boys from Salem, but nobody who'd ever given me much trouble. I belted myself in along a row of pincer panels, and hung on for the long wait. Around me, the whole ship breathed softly, like being inside the belly of some drunken beast. It had fits and starts, too, sometimes, like the nav folks were constantly trying to bring it to heel. Birdit said it was a new ship, only twenty or thirty years old, and still needed some house training. If that was so, I didn't know why in the seven hells we were flying it into a contaminated combat zone. I liked going into combat with old war birds like Birdit, not young hot things like this space-sick carrier.

"You're in my row, thumper," somebody said, and I looked up. Already a bad idea, I knew. Only the Umayma boys called us thumpers.

Four of them had come in after me. There were no other New Kinaan boys there yet, and the ones from Salem would be no help. Nobody liked to take sides, one world squad with another. Just made more trouble.

This was my fourth drop, and I was still whole. Not like the Umayma boys. I knew the one who spoke. His name was Ghazi so Dasheem, a grizzled little runt with a twisted left arm and one milky blue eye paired with his one good brown one. Birdit had picked him up on her first round of recruiting missions back on her world, trading some bit of organic grit or contaminant from the worlds we purged in exchange for broken soldiers. I knew he was one of her favorites... just not enough of one to have what I'd gotten from her.

If there had been some of my own boys around, I might have made a show of it and put him off, but two of the boys with him were old vets, too. The younger one was my age, with some green organic plating on his right cheek and skull from some other grievous wound. All the Umayma boys had seen more combat than we had, and I wasn't stupid. Not being stupid is how I'd survived four drops.

"Sorry, didn't know it was yours," I muttered, and started unhooking the straps.

But Ghazi leaned right into me, geared in close so he could peer at me with his cloudy blue eye. Somebody said the eye had been grown in the vats, and it wasn't properly human, but some sheep's eye. I'd made fun of the Umayma boys about it for a while, but none of them knew what a sheep was. Best I could tell, all they ever did on Umayma was fight and die, like us. Anything that happened off the battlefield aside from Paradise wasn't worth looking into.

"I heard you have something of mine," Ghazi said.

"Don't know where you heard that," I said. I was almost free of the harness. Like I was, he could do whatever he wanted. I was breathing too hard; felt as loud as the damn ship. Yes, I was bigger than him. In a fair fight, I might even get in a few swings - but I had seen him fight. It wasn't fair. Birdit said Ghazi fought just like his sister, and the way she said it, it was a compliment. The Umayma boys said the women on their world were all like Birdit. Some days I was glad there were no women in our unit.

Ghazi shoved his good hand against my sternum, pushed me back against the seat. I met his look this time, tried to stare him down.

"I don't have anything of yours," I said.

Some New Kinaan boys came into the cattle car then, a dozen or so, and Ghazi's little group hissed at him to pull back. He did, reluctantly, as the other New Kinaanites came over to fill the row.

"I'll see you on the ground," Ghazi said, and he and his boys found another place to sit.

My squad fell in a little later, just before the drop. Efraim, my squad leader, slid in beside me, and jabbed a thumb at Ghazi and his squad. "I heard he was giving you trouble again."

"Nothing serious," I said.

"Is this about – "

"It's not that," I said quickly. We hadn't fought about who was last in Birdit's quarters for a long while.

And then the doors were closing, and the pressure warning was going off, and we all sat up straight in our seats and leaned back for the long drop.

Falling out of the sky never gets any easier, mostly because you can't see anything. There are no windows, and the hull was opaque; nothing to give you any sense of direction but the shove of the propulsion followed by the extreme pull of gravity, like your guts are going to come out your toes.

It's all black chaos after that. Orange lights, the tangy stink of slicks as they eat up sweat and piss and power up hard to regulate changes in body temperature and decrease anxiety. I know what they're supposed to do, but Birdit says it's even more than that. She says they drug us up so we don't feel anything either, so we're more like machines than boys.

I wish that were true.

We came down hard. Efraim was squad leader, so he started the yelling, and the five of us in my squad were out and up before even the Umayma boys. All of us were born to do this, but it didn't make the drop more fun, and it didn't make lifting my weapon any easier as the walls of the cattle car fell open on all sides and we poured onto the rocky terrain of Old Lucifer.

Birdit was already on the ground – our rally sensors were on, and we moved toward her without any real conscious effort, like this caste of farmers I once watched

herding sheep with their dogs. It was an old memory, one of those hazy ones from the time before intensive off-world training, but it bubbled up every time we rallied.

The air out here was thin and cold; the bugs in our slicks pumped up the heat, and we started steaming in the cool air. Every planetscape was different, and with the name of this one, I expected a lot of brimstone and hellfire, not this incredible vista of towering red-gold peaks, fuzzy with the bold amber crowns of willowy trees. Wind thundered down between the mountaintops, buffeted us like some live thing. I kept my head down and pushed toward the rallying point behind Efraim, Paul, and Jeshua. Behind me came our fifth boy, Hadar, already struggling to keep up. This was only his second drop.

Birdit's voice came in over our com – a calming presence in an alien landscape. Beneath our feet, chunks of soil peppered with holes like some kind of airy volcanic rock crumbled and crunched. Tiny insects and bulbous, mobile ground flora scattered out of our way.

Ours was one of the first squads to arrive at the rally point. Birdit was there, tapping coordinates into the misty aura of her battle stat. As we approached, she gestured it off, and the cloud dissipated.

“Good boys!” she yelled, and smacked the shoulders of the six squad leaders she had rallied – including Efraim and Ghazi. I stood up a little taller, but she didn't seem to notice me.

Around us, the mass of the unit was headed northwest on pre-programmed combat routes.

“Two hops north,” she said. “I rallied you lot for extraction work, you understand? Efraim, you're leading this one. The rest of you, fall in under his command until I release you. We've got confirmation of bodies on the ground, and mutations in a little settlement up here. Run clean and quiet. I have a med unit coming in right behind you, and I need the entire area secured and perimeter clear for them to get in and do their shit. Understood?”

We understood.

Birdit compelled us to go forward, and we followed our squad leaders. As I passed, Birdit thumped my shoulder. “Don’t die out there, runt,” she said, “might need you later.”

I beamed.

We went in neat and quiet. The locals were mostly already dead, just ragged bodies smeared across the orange-brown landscape. They were spilled along a rutted track of road. Efraim told us to pick off any that still moved. Though he was leading, Ghazi kept pace with him, and Paul and Jeshua tagged along up front with Ghazi’s squad. The names of Ghazi’s squad all sounded alike to me, so I couldn’t place them, but in combat we were generally just numbers, and it was easier that way. Hadar got lost behind us somewhere with the others.

We killed what was left living, and cleared the way for the med unit, the same as Birdit had done on half a hundred worlds, she said. I felt like it got easier the more I did it. We were saving the universe from slow contamination. We were the only ones who could do it, Birdit always said.

“Your worlds think you’re dead,” she said. “They gave up on you. I won’t.”

Once everything was secure, we settled in to wait for pickup. It got dark fast here – the bright yellow sun sank quickly behind the mountains, bathing us in blackness.

The first return transport arrived well after dark. Efraim’s squad had to wait to load last. Ghazi volunteered his squad for the next ship, too, and the others managed to squeeze into the carrier. Efraim got Hadar in early, last kid in. Sometimes Hadar didn’t eat unless he got to mess first.

When they were well up and gone, I heard a shot. It may not have been the first one – probably not the first one – but it was the first I heard over the soft drone of the cattle car.

Jeshua and Paul were crumpled on the spongy ground behind me, balled up near one of the piles of steaming bodies. Ghazi’s squad stood over them. Efraim had his hands raised, and Ghazi turned and jammed the butt of his weapon into Efraim’s face. Efraim fell, and then Ghazi turned the weapon to me.

I didn’t hesitate. I held up my hands, slow.

Ghazi stalked toward me. He shoved his weapon into my face and said, “Turn it over or I blow you up, too.”

Efraim clutched at his bleeding face, tried to sit up. “Let him alone!” Efraim growled.

“Give it to me,” Ghazi said.

I looked from Efraim and my dead squad, then back to Ghazi. “I can’t,” I said.

“Why?”

I tugged at the sleeve of my slick, peeled the glove away and held up my hand. The orange glow from my palm lit up the hard planes and angles of Ghazi’s face.

“Fuck,” Ghazi said.

“It dies if I do,” I said.

I saw Efraim’s eyes go round as bug lights. “When did she give that to you?” he demanded.

“I don’t remember,” I said.

“Catshit,” Ghazi said. “Who else has them?”

“It’s supposed to be covert,” Efraim said. “How did you know he had one?”

Ghazi snorted. “You should see the way he looks at her. And the last two drops, your squad’s been called to rally. Never was before. I know a key when I see it.”

“I didn’t ask for it,” I said.

“But you’ve got it,” Ghazi said. “Sit the fuck down.”

He gestured for his squad to secure me. I released my weapons, deactivated my slick, and didn’t protest. I have seen the Umayma boys fight when they want something.

They dragged me over to sit next to Efraim, then went back and conferred quietly near one of the termite-like mounds of the settlement. The dead were starting to rot hard now, and massive swarms of insects were collecting around the bodies.

“What the hells is he going to do with a key?” Efraim muttered. “It’s not like it does any good unless Birdit is dead.”

“Well,” I said, and nodded out toward the battlefield.

“Not even his balls are that big. If Birdit dies, we’re sucking brimstone. And somebody will find him out. They’ll kill him. And you.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

Efraim narrowed his eyes. In the gloom, his face was a knotty crag, already so dark that in the black, he was a mere shadow. His eyes were flinty gray, and seemed to reflect the light. We were better at seeing in the dark than the ones from Umayma and Salem. On New Kinaan it was dark forty hours a day.

“When did she give it to you?” he asked. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought she would tell you.” I kept watching Ghazi and his boys. To my eyes, they were dim outlines, but still perceptible. I wondered if they remembered we could see in the dark. Then I realized it didn’t matter. We wouldn’t be alive long enough to make much use of it.

“She should have chosen a squad captain to carry the key,” he said. “If there’s a catastrophic event and somebody needs to power all systems, she needs a competent squad commander.”

I shrugged. “I guess she figured it was more likely a grunt would make it.”

In fact, I did not remember much of the night she injected me with the key. I knew there were others - always at least three more, in case something happened to her – but I didn’t know who had died to put me in his place. And I didn’t know why she chose me. Sometimes I wondered if she chose us at random, if we were just so much offal to her.

No, of course not.

I squeezed my eyes. More bleeding memories bubbled up from that other world, the world before all this, and I fought them. I hated them. They were just dead things, dead like us.

“I should have expected Ghazi would find one. Just never knew it’d be on my squad,” Efraim said. “You should have told me. I’d have been better prepared.”

“Birdit said I couldn’t.”

Efraim snorted. “Birdit isn’t going to be the one to die down here.”

I heard the soft drone of a cattle car up high, coming nearer. Efraim looked away. “Seven hells, now what’s he going to do with the ship coming back?”

Ghazi walked over to us. He casually shot Efraim in the head. It wasn’t loud – few of our weapons were – and Efraim’s body lolled back quietly next to me, the whole back of his head blown out.

I looked straight into the barrel of Ghazi's weapon and said, "It doesn't work if I'm dead."

"You told me that already," he said.

Ghazi and his squad stormed the cattle car when it landed. It was fully automated – no pilot. It just rallied to us. Still, the squad did a full search before they brought me on board.

Ghazi shoved me toward the nav board. "Unlock it," he said.

I had seen Birdit do it a hundred times, but I still didn't think it would work. I pressed my hand to the nav. Nothing happened.

"Take your glove off," Ghazi said.

I separated the slick at my forearm and put my hand onto the nav.

The cattle car responded immediately. The doors folded back up and sealed. The pressure alarm went off.

Ghazi pushed me out of the way and took the helm. But it locked up as soon as I stepped away. He swore.

"Put your fucking hand back," he said. I did like he said. The other Umayma boys were fidgeting, and the tangy stink coming off the slicks increased. They must have been thinking this up for a while. I wondered how long it would take for Ghazi to pilot us into the ground.

But Ghazi didn't keep us planetside. Instead, we piloted straight back to the warship, right into the green, bulbous hangar where the long-range shuttles were housed.

The whole squad surged behind me as we landed, pushed me forward toward one of the shuttles while proximity alarms went off.

Ghazi shoved me at the shuttle nav. I'd only been in a shuttle once. It was after I thought I was dead, after they rebuilt me.

I was on Babel, one of the moons around New Kinaan. The fighting there had been fierce for days and days. I was in some trench covered in blood maggots and dead, mutant foals that had rained out of the sky and promptly begun morphing into fantastic fighting monsters. They were horrific. We killed them in droves, but they kept coming, these small horses that grew great claws and mandibles and shed mucus and

bloody snot and crushed us whole in jaws the size of military lockers. I'd been shoved in enough lockers to know the size, so when one of them grabbed hold of me and bit and shook, it was like being a know-nothing runt again, a caste-born throw off with one purpose, so worthless I was forgotten inside the cavernous darkness of our semi-organic locker space and left for dead when the mutant foal spit me out.

I remembered how quiet it was in the trench. Quiet and blood-red with pain, while the insects came to devour me and the battle raged off elsewhere. Three of my castemates found me there. They peered into the trench a long moment, shrugged, and moved on while I gurgled and screamed at them. I wasn't any use to them anymore.

Not to anyone but Birdit.

The battle was long past when a shuttle like this came down. And a battered old warrior stepped out.

Now it was Ghazi who shoved me into this shuttle, forced my hand to the nav, and took the controls. The projection screen popped open automatically, but he was navigating purely with the chemical bubble of the nav that gave him the full 360 around the shuttle, and his gaze stayed locked on it.

The shuttle jumped up and forward. I saw the tail end of a squad of MP's entering the docking bay.

Then there was a juddering lurch and the shuttle... was no longer in the bay. I found myself sprawled back on top of Ghazi's squad, dizzy and more than a little disoriented. But Ghazi was already up, dragging me back to the nav. "Keep your fucking hand there!" he yelled.

I pushed my hand back onto the nav. There was a subtle hum, then a burst of scent – vanilla and oranges, and then the stars outside were no longer pinpoints of light, but something else, something other. The whole universe, our whole existence, twisted, bent, and came free... somewhere else.

The first time I traveled like this, it was with Birdit.

She had dragged me out of the trench and got me stabilized in some steamy vat. There was a med tech on board, and two more castemates from the field. I recognized their type. We were seeded and grown in batches, and there were only so many

different faces on a field like the one she pulled us off. I didn't understand the words she was saying, but the med techs did, and they translated.

"You've been chosen to be part of a great cause," one of them told me. "Birdit so Alhamin has personally selected you for a great purpose."

Then everything bent for the first time, and an hour later we were in some far corner of some far system I had no name for. I hadn't even known something like that was possible. The closest system to us took three years to get to, and it was just some dead place, housing our refuse, and the terrible contaminants our people had created and seeded across the stars.

"Where are we?" I asked. The projection screen had gone down during the flight, and Ghazi was still frantically loading things into the bubble of the nav.

He glanced over at me, frowned. He flicked the screen back on.

"Home," Ghazi said.

The screen flickered, then cleared, giving us a bleary view of a violet-blue world blanketed in a warm, dusty haze. There was only one jagged continent that spanned the globe from pole to pole. I could see two enormous satellites, great dusty red moons with black craters and regular lines and angles that looked like roads or some other type of artificial structures. Did they live on the moons here, too?

It looked nothing like the home I knew, the giant, lush world of eighteen continents, eight moons, and azure-blue skies. "That's Umayma?" I asked.

The Umayma boys behind me were all crowding close to the screen. A couple of them laughed.

Ghazi was already on the com, broadcasting the same message across multiple channels. "Nasheenian nationals. Permission requested to set down in Faleen."

I moved closer to the projection panel. There were objects circling the world. As we approached, they began to take on definite forms. Twisted communication satellites, hunks of debris, and there, something far-off, too big for a com satellite. It was a while before I realized it was some kind of ship, bigger than our warship, dark and derelict. The closer we got, the more of the debris turned out, on closer look, to be full, intact ships of all sorts. Spherical objects, like tiny worlds; jagged spires; core-oriented ships

with double helix orbiters; blocky squares like pieced-together puzzles; and one horizontal plane that looked like an entire city had once thrived on its surface, powered by some globe at the other end that looked like a fish bowl. There must have been a hundred wandering ships there from a hundred types of worlds.

Our proximity warning went off; something careened by, dangerously close, and Ghazi swore and took the controls again, steering us clear of some of the nearest derelicts and settling into orbit around the lavender world.

“Nasheenian nationals on board. I repeat. Nasheenian nationals. Request permission to land in Faleen docking bay.”

I could see a thin sheen of sweat on Ghazi’s face now. I looked around at the other boys, and wondered why none of them had said what was so obvious to me, staring out at this world surrounded in dead ships.

“Can they shoot us down, like these ships?” I asked.

“We’re nationals,” Ghazi snapped. “Full Nasheenian citizens. It’s only outsiders they blow up and leave to rot.”

“We’re Nasheenians,” one of the others repeated, like he was trying to convince himself, too.

Time dragged on. Now that we were settled in orbit, I risked pulling my hand from the panel. Ghazi was too intent on the screen to notice. The ship continued to circle. I sighed and slid down onto the floor to wait. The air was already hot and close in the shuttle.

“Why don’t you just land?”

“Look around,” Ghazi said. “You need permission.”

I considered that. “But how did Birdit get you, then?”

Ghazi grimaced. “How do you think? She had permission. Probably exchanged us for some of that shit you and your fucked up people made to kill all your neighbors with.”

I shrugged. “You should know why they don’t respond, then. It’s not like they miss you.”

Ghazi glared down at me. “We’re Nasheenian nationals.”

“You’re war fodder. Same as me. Why don’t you Umayma boys get that? We’re born into it on New Kinaan. It’s my caste. But there’s no caste on Umayma is there? So you can pretend you’re something else. But you’re not.”

“Fuck off,” Ghazi said. “It’s not all like that.”

“Just this Nasheen place?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. That Birdit bitch pulled us away from the Plague Sisters. We were on the mend. Every last one of us. It was her carted us up here to fight some bloody wars on other worlds. I didn’t ask for any of it. None of us did. I just want to go home.”

I shrugged. “It’s all the same. You’ll just go back to fighting.”

“I don’t care,” Ghazi said. “You fucking thumper maggots don’t know the difference. You just point and shoot. I know what we’re fighting for, and it isn’t anything Birdit can point to on her fucking rocks.”

When Birdit first told me to point and shoot, I had a working torso again, like nothing had ever happened. She put me in a squad with other New Kinaanites, all the same caste like me, but hardly a similar face among them.

“I collect all the castoffs,” Birdit said. I could understand her now, though I didn’t know why. Somebody said it was a bug they put in you, some virus. “Especially the brave ones.”

But I did not feel brave. I felt broken. I told her so.

“Oh no, my boy,” she said. “These things I find in the seams between the stars, they are not broken... they are just gently used.”

When I first told Efraim this story, he had grimaced and said, “Of course we weren’t broken. She wanted to break us herself.”

Time drifted. After a while, the shuttle did, too. Ghazi powered down the belly of the beast, but avoiding the wreckage got precarious. We were losing orbit. The air was going bad.

I slept for a while. Maybe asphyxiation wouldn’t be so terrible, I thought. I’d just drift off, not wake up. I hoped that was what it was like.

“What are we fighting for?” I asked one of the New Kinaanites before the first drop.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean... why are we fighting? To what purpose?”

“What are you,” he said, “some Umayman? We fight because Birdit tells us to. Who cares why that is. Or where. Dying is what we were meant to do.” His eyes got bright, then, that faraway look I would come to recognize in all of us as we traveled back to the bloody field Birdit pulled us from. “It’s what we should have done,” he said, “If we knew what was good for us.”

It was the rally that woke me.

I raised my head. Everything was dark. Only the blue indicator lights for life stabilization were still on. Ghazi sat at the console still, staring at Umayma. The rest of his boys were sprawled in the hold, sleeping fitfully. Ghazi’s gaze was fixed on the world - that dusty, dull little world and the void beyond it. No visible stars out that way. Just dead wreckage and darkness.

The tug was subtle, still, subtle but consistent. I wondered if Birdit could feel us, too, sense us way out here in the dark as she drew nearer. Perhaps that’s how she found us. Surely Ghazi felt it? He must know she was coming for us.

But his face was unmoved, barely visible in the glow from the screen. He had finally given in and recorded his message, and now it was playing softly, muted. The audio player emitted a lemony smell that told me it was still running, still on repeat.

“She’s coming,” I said.

“I know,” he said.

I climbed into one of the spongy seats next to him. It easily conformed to my body, the way the vat had when Birdit first laid me in.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“What would you do?”

“I wouldn’t be here,” I said, and shrugged. “There’s no home for our people to go back to.”

“That’s because you’re a bunch of maggots.”

For some reason, it burned more now when he called me that, burned because he knew nothing about us, so assumed we were just the same.

“It’s because I have no home to go back to. We don’t have families like you do. Just faces. Castemates. And by now, all mine are dead. We don’t last more than a few waves. I lasted longer with Birdit than any of us were expected to on New Kinaan. Why would I go back there?”

“On Umayma,” he said, “we weren’t just... things. Not like you. We weren’t like you at all.”

I watched the breathy lemon mist near the com console. “Then why don’t they answer?”

Ghazi let out a long breath. He nodded toward the nav. “Put your hand back on there.”

I obeyed.

Ghazi poked something into the nav. The shuttle came alive again.

“Are we going home?” I asked.

Ghazi looked at me with his milky eye. “We are,” he said. “We’re programmed for hard descent.”

The whole shuttle was reorienting itself, turning toward the planet, dipping out of orbit.

There was nothing for me down there.

I scrambled to the back of the shuttle before he could grab me and pulled on a space hood. The slick could only make about twenty minutes of oxygen, and the hood would supply four hours more. It would have to be enough. The hood automatically sealed to my slick. I stepped to the pressure door, palmed it open, and stepped inside. We were going down fast, far too fast. I had only a couple more seconds. No time to strap myself in. I slid into the pod, slapped the pressure door closed and yanked on the emergency eject handle at the same time.

Burst of movement. Pain. Blackness.

When I came to, the pod was suffused with a gentle orange glow. The autopilot systems hadn’t come on yet, though. It was going to take me straight down to the planet

if I let it. And I knew that if its own boys weren't welcome there, I'd be just so much trash.

I overrode the hatch. It popped open and sucked me into the open space.

The sudden expanse, the black void, was oddly comforting after the closeness of the ship. I flailed, tried to orient myself, but there was nothing to hold onto, nothing to push, and the suit had no nav source. I turned my head and caught a brief glimpse of the empty pod hurtling planetward.

Hulking wrecks of debris hovered at the edges of my vision, all too far away to close in on without any kind of propulsion. I was at the mercy of gravity. Still, I twisted and turned, tried to see a ship that wasn't dead. Some shuttle. Some pod. The rally was still strong within me. Birdit was there, coming closer. Ever closer. Wasn't it closer, now?

My body settled into orbit, moving along with the rest of the wreckage. I floated free, and, after a time, was able to see the bright burst that was Ghazi's shuttle, the propulsion full on, moving purposefully toward the surface of his world.

For a moment, I wondered what he would do when he landed there, who he would become.

Then there was a blue-green flash of light from the planet's surface. A blinding flare. The shuttle burst into fiery fragments, a long tail of lovely atmospheric stars.

The darkness, then, was complete. Nothing moved out here on the edge of this world now, nothing alive, nothing but me.

I had four hours and ten minutes of air left.

I wondered if it would be enough. Wondered if it mattered. One more dead boy, circling another dead world that did not want us.

It was that, then, that finally made my throat close and my gut clench. They did not want us. We were just bodies to them, so much star dust. Another bellyful of dead boys on a shuttle. A boy's corpse, lost in deep space. Just one more.

The rally beat slowly inside of me. It was not fading, no, it wasn't. It couldn't. Perhaps it was not as strong, but that was some trick of the atmosphere, of my body in the suit, of the gravity of the world.

Birdit would come for me. Birdit would want me. She was the one who always came for us – the derelicts, the unwanted, the nameless. She knew we were still useful objects, still lovely things, useful bodies, waiting for her forever out here - in the seams between the stars.

END



Chop off some heads.
Save the world.

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