

Remnants of Humanity

Volume One: Fall of Independence

ISBN: 9789083717418

Chapter One:

The intercom crackled in his left ear, dry and fragmented, as much from his suit as from the ship. The first numbers followed. “Bkrrr... twenty-five. Twenty-four.”

“Bkrrr... twenty. Nineteen.”

Arton squeezed the fabric of his gloves; his heart was pounding. To his right, the others stood helmeted and still, shoulder to shoulder, every movement held in check—each of them facing the doors, bracing. He knew the expressions behind the visors: the same hard focus, the same taut anticipation, a shared stare fixed on the massive gray docking doors ahead.

“Twelve. Eleven. Ten. Hold tight and wait for the green light.”

The captain’s voice sounded through the intercom, clipped and threaded with interference. The shaking of the Independence intensified.

“Bkrrr... seven. Six. Five. Hold tight!”

“Three. Two. One—bkrrr—”

Metal slammed against metal as a violent jolt tore through the ship. Even braced, he dropped a hand to the deck to steady himself, fingers splaying against cold plating while the shock rolled up his arm and into his shoulder. He could only hear the faint ringing in his ears and the sound of his own breath, suddenly loud inside the suit. A soft beep broke the quiet, and artificial gravity shut off, so that weightlessness took him in the gut just as it always did—an inward lurch, the last thing he heard in the bay was the air being sucked out.

After that, there was no more atmosphere to carry sound. The light above the gray doors moved to green. At that exact moment, the doors began to slide open. This was it. Beyond them stretched a dark corridor where loose wires drifted in weightless arcs, ceiling plates hung motionless, debris floated across the shadowed floor, and the metal chassis warped and twisted. Held together by whatever forces still kept the hulk intact, it served as a graveyard of derelict ships crushed

together and torn apart, too mangled to tell how many there were or what classes they'd once been. But the signal was unmistakable.

Somewhere within this tangled mass of steel lay an intact fusion core—a prize worth the risk, worth the way his stomach had gone hollow the moment the docking clamps bit. Sold on the black market, it would buy the crew a year of freedom. Maybe more.

“Bkrrr... activate torches!”

In unison, they hit the switches on their right shoulders, and brilliant beams of focused light stabbed into the darkness ahead, cutting clean paths through the dark.

“One final transmission before we go dark,” the captain said. “Entry looks successful. All systems are shut down to avoid detection. Comms are for emergencies only—or when you have the core. Good hunting, men. Bkrrr...”

The channel went dead, and without hesitation, they all advanced forward as one, vanishing into the dark wreckage. He pushed off into the corridor as well.

Then everything became a rush of momentum: hands pulling forward, boots pushing off. He twisted and rolled his body through floating debris as he hauled himself along by whatever edge he could catch.

Jagged hull plating slid past him, broken vent shafts spun end over end, and countless unidentified shards of metal knifed by, threatening with every sweep. One careless brush would be enough to pierce his suit and puncture the airtight seal.

At every intersection, the team split up, vanishing down separate passages, and their lights broke apart into faraway, narrowing beams until the voices fell away and the movement around him thinned—until, finally, he was alone. He didn't slow. Pushing off the right wall, he flung himself into a side passage that turned sharply left, and as he cleared the turn, something new filled his vision: the outer hull of another vessel, rammed deep into the tangled wreckage and lodged there like an arrow driven deep.

Compared to the surrounding ruin, this hull was almost pristine. He switched on his hand pad and watched the signal trace pulse—still strong, still clean—straight ahead. Without hesitation, he thumbed the plasma torch and set to work. *Military*, he thought as the cutter bit into the metal and the torch's pale heat made the edge glow; the hull was strong and thick, armoured, built to take punishment, and still he only needed a small opening—because even reinforced plating wouldn't hold him for long, not against patience and a tool meant to melt the hardest metals. *Just give us enough time before they detect us.*

The thought of the Independence being forced to pull back without him—or worse, being destroyed before he could return—sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the cold.

Arton checked his hand display. Suit power was dropping fast.

When the energy failed, the oxygen would follow. But even before suffocation took him, the warming layer of heated air between suit and skin would collapse. He pictured himself drifting in the dead hull, counting down breaths while slowly freezing.

His hands kept working.

The cutter completed its circle, carving a clean, precise opening—just wide enough to move through without scraping the edges. He pushed back, braced himself, then hurled himself forward feet-first to strike the center of the cut section; the disk of hull plating drifted inward, spinning away in the zero-gravity. He followed it smoothly, gliding through the glowing ring of the opening without touching the still-hot metal. Inside, he found himself in a corridor.

This one was different—remarkably intact—and the debris that floated here came across as almost gentle by comparison: papers that fanned and curled, polymer sheets that wavered like pale fish, fragments of insulation and fabric that brushed past his arms instead of threatening to slit them open. That was a good sign. If there were an intact fusion core anywhere in this graveyard, it would be here.

He pressed deeper into the corridor, maintaining speed while forcing himself to scan every junction for signs—anything that might point toward Engineering, toward the fusion core—and by now he was

certain this vessel was of human origin, which narrowed the possibilities. He searched for familiar conventions. Human signals. Human logic. His eyes moved to his hand terminal. Fifteen minutes in. Five more, and the callback would go out whether he liked it or not. *I'm close*, he told himself, he had to be.

He pushed harder and faster now as adrenaline rushed through his system, sharpening his focus and dulling the creeping awareness that time was slipping past—until the corridor opened onto a half-ajar sliding door. The letters above it caught his torchlight.

ENGINEERING

He exhaled, a thin cloud briefly fogging the inside of his visor, and his shoulders eased a bit as the tension slipped from his muscles. Without slowing, he shoved himself through the gap and into the room ahead. His shoulder torch swept across the room in a wide arc: terminals, control panels, dead screens, dark consoles lining curved walls.

The space itself, vast—spherical, almost cathedral-like, so that the darkness seemed intentional. Everything was dark. Everything was still. He drifted left to right, methodical despite the haste, the beam of light crawling over switches and indicator lights and inactive systems which once hummed with power. Then the light spotted something directly ahead.

A helmet. He recoiled instantly, pushing himself backward in a sharp, panicked burst, as the darkness consumed the figure once more, he waited for a shot that never came. No sound followed. No movement. Only his own breathing. He steadied himself and raised his shoulder torch again, forcing the beam to remain steady. It caught the object in full: a helmet still attached to a suit, floating motionless in the air, with puncture holes torn clean through the dark fabric and spiderweb cracks splintering the visor. *Not a recent visitor*, he thought. A remnant of its original crew.

“Shit,” he muttered, and he hated how thin the word sounded inside the suit. *I'm wound too tight. Almost losing it over a corpse that had been dead for hundreds of years.*

He forced his breathing to slow—long in, longer out—until the panic drained back deep into its hiding place, and he resumed his scan of the chamber. And then he saw it. A massive section of thick reinforced wall lined with consoles, switches, and dead displays. At its core, in square white letters, were the words:

CORE CONTAINMENT

Relief hit him, sharp and sudden, as he pushed off with his boots to drift toward the structure; the layout was familiar—he'd opened similar units before, at least half a dozen like this one, always hoping for an intact core, usually finding disappointment. His hands worked with practiced precision, removing the cover plate. He reached out and pulled the large red lever underneath into the open position. He locked his boots against the wall, grabbed the metal handles, and pulled. The hatch came free with a thud he could feel through his arms, the hatch drifting outward into the vacuum.

Behind it, perfectly centered in its cradle, was an intact cylinder, humming with a clear purple glow. He froze for a fraction of a second, not because he didn't believe it, but because his body still needed a moment to process the victory. He thumbed his comm.

"Arton reporting," he said, cutting in with a steadier voice. "Core's secured. On my way to the bay."

He released the cylinder from its mount, locked it against his harness, and pushed off. His hand pad lit up, projecting a precise return path—every junction, every turn mapped from his entry route—so that the maze that had taken him fifteen minutes to penetrate now unfolded cleanly before him, still not an easy route but manageable. The way back was clear; he wasn't going to waste a second, so he pushed off and began on his route.

"Core secured. Heading for extraction."

The gamble had paid off. The crew might see another sunrise. Urgency drove him back toward extraction. A core. An intact fusion core. Against all odds, they had actually found one.

The callback signal was transmitted to all scavengers. He hoped that they had all survived the entry and were already making their way

back in time, but there was no way to tell. Silence was intentional. They kept every signal and spoken word to an absolute minimum to buy themselves as much time as possible before the Tzylaxians detected them, because the Tzylaxians were always scanning—ships sweeping the void and the debris field for radio noise, thermal traces, stray light, radiation, anything out of place. And once one of their vessels picked up a trace, it always came closer. No exceptions.

Chapter Two:

On the bridge of the Independence, Brian was hunched forward to his monitor. The data refused to settle as lines of numbers flickered. All around, beneath the steady humming of life-support, the bridge crew held their breath.

Multiple generations of engineers had connected his display to a larger integrated system, which had been patched and upgraded multiple times over the years. The system was built to detect Tzylaxian ship activity within a twenty-minute radius. It was their one chance to see the Tzylaxians coming before they were targeted.

The way the data now crawled across the screen, however, made it feel more like a coin toss.

A ring of wreckage circled the gravity well of the dead planet, a halo of broken hulls and shattered frames. Space out here had become a slow, grinding field of wreckage. Signals scattered through it, bounced off jagged metal, drowned in clutter, disappeared behind a thousand false returns.

A Tzylaxian ship could be sliding inside the debris right now, engines powered, in short bursts, hidden inside the noise. Brian didn't blink; he couldn't afford to look away. If something appeared on that screen, they would have very little time to react, and time was the one thing the Tzylaxians never gave back.

"Anything on the screen, Petty Officer Turner?"

Captain Anders' voice reached him from behind, heavy and controlled. Anders didn't soothe; he commanded.

"No, sir. Nothing yet," Brian replied, eyes still locked onto the data map. "But with all this wreckage around us, it's hard to tell exactly."

He looked up because Anders was close enough now that Brian spotted his shape in the reflected screen light. The captain was a

middle-aged, broad-shouldered man, his dark beard spotted with gray, his face worn by hardship and harder decisions.

Anders didn't waste time. "We're depending on you. Spot them in time."

A pulse beat at Brian's temple. "Sir, I'm doing the best I can," he said, sharper than he meant, but not by much. "We're floating in a battle graveyard. Thousands upon thousands of wrecks—human, Tzylaxian, and half a dozen other races—all torn apart in this fight." He gestured toward the display, where the returns smeared together into an ugly, flickering fog. "The whole field is a ring of metal debris, and you want me to pull one real signal out of all that?"

Anders's response was short. "Easy, Petty Officer."

"I know the job's impossible. We're all on edge. And I know you're doing everything you can."

His gaze shifted to another screen on the bridge, the one showing the radiation readings, the rising numbers. "That core is bleeding heat and radiation now that it's out of containment. It's not a question of if they come looking—only when."

Anders turned to the rest of the bridge, voice easily projecting. "What's the ETA on the men?"

"They were eighteen minutes in," someone answered from the pit. "With a hard return, they should make it back in ten."

"Then that's our window," Anders said. "Officer Sanders, Officer Brim. Grab a PCU and meet the scavengers in the docking bay. I want that core into the containment the moment it's on board."

"Yes, sir," they both answered in unison.

Brian turned back to the numbers. Arguing didn't change physics. Only the data mattered now.

Then there was a flicker at the outer edge of his sensor field, a thin trail of noise, and a slight radiation spike.

"Probably debris," he muttered, mostly to himself. "Wreck collision, maybe something broke off..."

Then another trace appeared. Closer this time. Brian's spine stiffened. He pulled up the data history, filtering through the clutter,

but nothing resolved. Then he overlaid the last seconds, ran a quick extrapolation, and plotted a line—straight through the chaos. The data was finally revealing something it didn't want to volunteer immediately.

"Captain," he said. "We've got incoming."

Anders was at his shoulder before the last syllable finished. "How long?"

"Sixteen minutes," Brian answered.

Sixteen minutes before contact, they were getting close.

Brian kept track of the propulsion noise; it was the only reliable indicator of direction, every time the unknown vessel dodged a wreck or altered its course within the debris field. They fired the engine, and it showed up as a short, pulsing flash on the screen.

That was all he knew for certain. Something out there was actively maneuvering, deliberately cruising in their direction.

Military or scavenger, it made little difference.

A Tzylaxian patrol would erase them simply for scavenging and being human. Another scavenger crew would kill them for the core.

Brian stripped another layer of false returns from the display. No heroes in this sector. No rescue. Only wreckage, hunger, and whoever fired first.

The Tzylaxians had taken everything from humanity. Once, there had been hundreds of colonized worlds, trade routes stretching across systems, cities that lit entire planets.

Now there was nothing left of it.

Humanity was scattered across the empire, surviving on scraps. No worlds. No home. Just ships like the Independence—picking through what remained.

It was still a better life than piracy or cheap labor, sold wherever it was needed, or worse, far worse. In too many places, human lives meant nothing.

That's why Brian hated them.

His fingers moved across the keypad as he adjusted projections and narrowed margins. He shaved precious seconds off his predictions;

seconds could be the difference between destruction and slipping away in a situation like this.

Every so often, a muted metallic creak traveled through the hull, low and rhythmic, like something moving deep in the ship. It came every thirty seconds, yet each time it sounded was a slow reminder that time was ticking. With every adjustment, he measured his efforts against that pulse, trying to be faster.

If he was honest with himself, beneath the anger and the rush was fear. Not for himself. For the others, for his friends. For the scavenger crew racing back through twisted corridors and dead ships.

Their suits draining, hearts thumping, carrying the one prize that made them light up on every sensor possible—people he'd grown up with, people he called friends.

If he missed even a single sign... They wouldn't get a second chance.

"Ten minutes to contact, sir," Brian reported.

Captain Anders didn't hesitate. "Plot a course through the wrecks of the debris field. No propulsion—air vents only. I want as much wreckage between us and the incoming vessel as possible. Give them no chance for a clean scan of our hull. When the scavengers are aboard, on my signal, we disengage the locks and thread the Independence through the wrecks. Leave nothing to mark our passing."

Brian nodded while his eyes never left the screen. Brian projected a path through the moving clusters of wreckage, a chance for escape.

As he sent the calculated course to navigation, he looked around the bridge. The outer hull seemed thinner now; old bulkheads, tired systems, the quiet moans of a vessel so old it had no business still moving at all. If they were lucky, the debris would hide them.

Ten minutes to vanish, or ten minutes to die.

Chapter Three:

Metal scraped beneath Arton's glove. He pushed himself harder, hand and boots pushing along the corridor walls as he hauled his body forward, pull and shove and twist, again and again, until his arm burned and his shoulder trembled inside the suit.

The metal under his glove felt like sandpaper through the synthetic fabric, while his other hand held the core. Ahead of him, the others moved, silhouettes moving fast through the narrow passage while their shoulder lights glided over dents, loose wiring, and broken wall plates.

They were in the entry corridor now. The surroundings were familiar again: the angles, the way the passage opened up ahead. He could almost taste the stale air of the Independence on his lips.

He let himself believe it would work. *Just a little farther*, he thought. They could reach the Independence within moments.

He clung onto that hope; he knew exactly what he was carrying—and what it was broadcasting into space ever since he cracked it free of its containment; they all did, and that shared knowledge reflected in their movement—fast, sharp, and efficient.

They all knew a scavenger run was never safe. This one less than most.

Being born human didn't leave many occupational choices in this system; it was a wonder being born at all. Scavenging was a dangerous life, but closest to something resembling freedom, better than cheap labor, better than piracy. It was better than disappearing into someone else's empire, no name and no future.

Yet fear crept up on him all the same, thin and persistent. It jolted up along his back, traveled up to his neck, and set his heart to race in his chest.

Worse was the fear he had for the others, the men and women racing to safety beside him through this very corridor, his friends, the

closest thing resembling family, all bound by the same thin sliver of hope and the same unspoken longing for freedom.

Then the passage widened, and the familiar shape of the Independence's docking bay filled his vision—gray bulkheads, hard lines, the two big metal doors resting to the side, the familiar white numbers: 5 on the left door and 7 on the right.

Relief spread through him. He had made it. It relaxed his muscles and loosened his grip, almost slowing him. He had to focus his last bit of willpower to push forward.

Two officers stood waiting inside the open bay, one on each side of the tall coffin-like metal structure, the Portable Containment Unit.

He recognized them as officers by the stripes on their collars. The Portable Containment Unit stood upright, its lid already opened, its interior light casting a white glow over the two men. *Hold steady*, he told himself.

He guided the glowing cylinder straight toward the waiting containment unit, correcting his angle with small adjustments by pressing his fingertips lightly against the bay frame as he passed, trying to slide it home without bumping the lip or scraping the seals. Arton eased the fusion core into its containment. The moment it seated properly, the light turned green, and the officers snapped the lid shut. Heavy locks clamped down with a thud he could only feel.

They paused for a few seconds, then the indicator lights along the casing stopped blinking and turned green as well. It was contained, the radiation bleed stopped, and the core was secure.

Arton turned immediately, scanning the bay looking for the others, hoping for a complete count and a good outcome. One. Two. Three... Shit, did he already count that one? He started counting again, slower, forcing himself not to skip a shoulder light. Nine.

“Shit,” he breathed.

One short. They had gone in with ten. His eyes shot back to the corridor, searching the darkness for a moving beam or a flicker of torchlight, anything that could tell him the tenth wasn't gone. Yet he saw nothing but drifting debris and the black opening of the wreckage.

Above the bay doors, the status lights glowed red as a warning. Radio silence. They had incoming. The docking officer was already moving toward the control console to confirm the return of at least the majority.

“Wait,” Arton said inside his helmet. “One more minute.”

Of course, no one could hear him. The intercom was dark, and even if they could, it wouldn’t matter—no single scavenger was worth risking the Independence and everyone aboard her, not with a crew count of seventy. He knew the protocol: the bay doors would stay open until the very last possible second, but they would not wait another second beyond that, not once the undocking signal went out, and the ship started preparing to slip away.

Arton stared into the wreck.

Searching for a beam of light. A signal. A body moving toward them through the dark.

The docking officer reached for the console.

Then, deep in the corridor, a shoulder light flickered.

Arton was already moving.

He put his boots to the wall and kicked off hard, grabbed a dangling docking cable, and hurled himself forward—headfirst—back into the dark corridor.

He shot down the passage at full speed, angling his body to slip past the worst of the debris, and when he couldn’t avoid it he used his helmet to bat dangerous shards aside, the impacts ringing through his skull in blunt, echoing knocks; sharp scrapes tore along his arms and legs—some shallow, others biting deep—and warning icons flared inside his suit. Seal compromised! Isolation gel administered! He ignored them. If he made it back, he’d be needing stitches, and if he didn’t, well, it wouldn’t matter anymore; it was that simple, do or die.

Then he saw him. The tenth man.

Arton reached him in a heartbeat, fingers locking around the other man’s gloved hand, and without slowing, he grabbed the docking cable with his free hand and gave it three hard yanks—short, violent pulls that sent the line trembling through his grip. A silent prayer, hoping

that they had understood his intention. For a fraction of a second, nothing happened. Then the cable went taut.

The pull hit them both at once, snapping their bodies around as they were dragged back through the corridor, speed building fast; they tucked in as best they could, shielding heads and torsos while jagged metal tore past them and shards slammed into their suits, glancing off helmets, throwing shards in every direction. And then—suddenly—they were clear.

They burst free of the metal hulk and into open space, and ahead of them, the Independence was already moving, accelerating away from the wrecked hulk; the ship's momentum and the crew hauling the cable pulled them in so fast that Arton's stomach seemed to lag behind the rest of him. Seconds stretched out, sharp and painful. Then the docking bay was there. Hands grabbed them, hauled them inside.

The moment they were clear, the massive gray doors slammed closed behind them, sealing with a deep, final clang.

Chapter Four:

Brian's pulse throbbed in his neck as he scrolled through the data. His eyes flew over the readouts as fast as the system could compile them, as the Independence slowly slipped past drifting hulks and debris. He kept track of the fragments between them and the unknown vessel at every moment.

All calculations were fed directly to the pilots in a live, closed loop. No outgoing signals, no active communication. The ship kept its signals internal as it threaded through the metal impact zone, which never stopped moving.

The Independence was flying dark. The other ship almost certainly was not. It would be running full instruments, sweeping scanners across the debris field, hunting for anything that didn't belong. Brian could only hope there was enough wreckage between them to blur their signature.

Every crew member focused on a screen, each locked into a specific task. In this focused silence, every detail was more vivid than usual: Brian saw the pilot's thumb drumming the control stick once again, then froze against its side. Her knuckles whitened around the control stick while she veered the Independence through space.

The captain stood in the center of the bridge, still and controlled. His hand was suspended just above the key on his console that would send the full-thrust signal. The instant they were detected, they would ignite the thrusters and try to outrun whatever was closing in.

Then a signal broke through.

A communication signal. It was clean, unmistakable —a general broadcast pushed to everyone in this region of space, spoken in the harsh clicks and clipped tones of the Tzylaxian language.

"Show it on the main screen," Captain Anders ordered.

The features of a Tzylaxian drone came into view: the insectoid sharp features, chitinous plates layered across its face, brownish-green, strong mandible limbs framed its mouth. The image stopped at its scrawny neck. “Unknown vessel. You are in restricted space. By authority of the Empire, you are ordered to transmit your location for inspection.”

Brian released his breath. This message meant one thing. They had no idea where the Independence was; if they had known, there would have been no warning. Only weapons fire.

The only conclusion was that they hadn’t detected them, so they tried to broadcast blindly and hoped someone answered. *You’re underestimating us*, Brian thought to himself.

He sent a new set of data to the pilot; he could see Officer Hensley's hands adjust the direction. He was glad Officer Hensley was the pilot on this shift; she was the only one who immediately understood his factors and could adjust trajectories immediately.

Slowly but steadily, the distance between the Independence and the Tzylaxian patrol ship grew. And after a few minutes, the distance was at least ten kilometers.

“Lieutenant Steuberts,” the captain called out to his second in command, “make sure we keep increasing distance and give the signal to restore atmosphere in the docking bay.” The captain turned towards the bridge door. “You have the bridge, Lieutenant.”

In the docking bay, everyone was working. From the moment Arton had glided into the bay with the tenth scavenger, the medical crew had rushed forward. Gloved hands had caught him in mid-air, stopped his movement, and turned him gently as they began their work, while Arton tried to study their faces through dark visors that reflected their motions. When focusing his eyes, he could almost see through them.

They cut his skinsuit open.

Blood lifted from him in dark, perfect spheres. One drifted past his visor, close enough to touch.

Is that mine? he wondered; the thought was somehow far away.

The medics moved around him without sound, boots locking and releasing, tools flashing through the air. Someone was working on his arm. Someone else pressed a clamp into his thigh.

Arton tasted metal. Whether it was blood or imagination, he couldn't tell.

They were all trained for this, he knew.

He noticed the pain. Then the tugging and pulling at his limbs and a sharp sting of a needle piercing his skin, but he couldn't see the source; was it an anesthetic syringe or a suture needle closing wounds? Cold began to spread through him, as the bay lights faded at the edges of his vision.

The dark helmets made it impossible to tell who was who.

He didn't even know which man he had dragged back through the corridor. Not that it matters, among scavengers, everyone is family. Some closer than others, of course, but family all the same. Arton had his own circle aboard the *Independence*: his friends from the scavenger crew and Brian, all around the same age, people who had become part of his life growing up together.

And through the shared risk they took to survive a hostile galaxy, they shared more than just the risk; none of them had parents waiting or siblings left behind on distant worlds. They only had each other to rely on.

And in moments like this, drifting in zero-g while gloved hands worked over his wounded body, that bond was more real than any pain.

The intercom crackled back to life.

“Bkrrrr... restoring gravity and atmosphere in five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

When the indicator lights shifted from red to orange, haste spread through the room, and everyone moved fluidly and practiced towards an upright position. Hands released walls, as magnetic boots snapped on the floor plates with soft clicks.

Then, only a moment later, gravity returned in stages. First, Arton was pulled down with the others, guided firmly but gently toward the deck by a medic as his boots locked in place. The docking bay began to feel like a room again, as air and warmth rushed in. Then the familiar weight of full artificial gravity returned, and suddenly the pull on his wounds hurt like hell. Pressure equalized in a roaring wave that drowned out every other sensation.

Then, just as suddenly, it stopped.

The bay lights shifted to green. Helmets were unclamped and lifted away, seals releasing with soft pops. Magnetic boots were released. Voices burst into existence all at once—overlapping, urgent, and alive—until the noise became a wall Arton had to push through. It took him a moment to filter it, to separate what was meant for him from what wasn't.

“Arton, please respond?”

The medic directly in front of him moved closer. “Arton!” He snapped fingers in front of Arton's eyes.

“Yeah, I—wait—” Arton blinked, voice slurring at first before sharpening. He looked up, unfocused. “Sorry. Zoned out for a second.” He squinted at the medic's face. “You're... Riley? Or, uh, no—yeah, Riley. One of the recruits we picked up at Rendal Station a few months ago.”

The medic's face relaxed at once.

“Yes. Junior medic Sean Riley,” he said. “We sutured three major lacerations on your right arm and leg, plus several minor ones elsewhere.”

“Any parts of your skin that have a burning sensation?”

“No,” Arton replied.

“Any pain right now?”

Arton shook his head. “No. Nothing. Did you give me something?”

“Local anesthetic on the serious wounds and antibiotics. Nothing more.”

“How's the guy I pulled out?” Arton asked. “And who was it?”

Riley stepped aside. “Go ask him yourself.”

Behind the medic, a small group clustered around someone sitting on the deck, and as Arton moved closer, they parted to let him through. Jimmy. One of his friends. He looked pale, or at least paler than usual; his left arm hung limply at his side, clearly badly injured. But when he saw Arton, his face broke into a grin nonetheless.

“By the galaxy,” Jimmy said hoarsely, “you’ve got balls the size of planets.”

Arton broke out in a smile while Jimmy laughed. It was shaky, at the edge of exhaustion, but it was real. And they needed it. In moments like this, every shared grin was their way of telling each other they were still here, together, no matter the danger.

The door opened, and Captain Anders entered the docking bay. Every man and woman—except Jimmy—snapped to attention and saluted. *It was almost absurd*, Arton thought. The Independence wasn’t a military vessel. Of course it wasn’t. There hadn’t been a human military for a long time.

Yet, Captain Anders still ran his ship with discipline, ranks, and order. In a universe that had taken almost everything from humanity, structure was something he refused to give up.

The bay fell completely silent as the captain moved forward.

“Petty Officer Third Class Johney,” Anders said evenly. He still maintained the old Federation command structure. “Report. Who was it that located and secured the fusion core?”

The dock officer straightened. “Scavenger Arton, sir.”

“Well, that warrants a bonus,” the captain said.

“And who,” Anders continued, his tone unchanged, “pulled that insane stunt of re-entering the wreck during extraction?”

Johney hesitated.

“Also, scavenger Arton, sir.”

Captain Anders exhaled through his nose and shook his head. “And there goes his bonus.”

For a heartbeat, the tension broke—a ripple of laughter spread, stifled and fleeting as those nearest Arton let out shallow, nervous breaths.

“He did save scavenger Deagal with his actions, sir,” Johney added quickly.

“Scavenger Deagal,” the captain called.

Jimmy straightened as best he could. “Sir!”

“Why were you late for extraction?”

“Sir, I had to torch through a blocked corridor. It came down behind me, sir. I had to cut my way through again on the return as well, sir.”

Captain Anders turned slowly.

“Scavenger Arton.”

“Yes, sir,” Arton replied, standing as straight as his battered body allowed.

“Why do we not wait during extraction?”

“Sir, because the safety of all seventy men and women aboard this ship outweighs the life of any single individual, sir.”

“And if you understand that,” the captain said sharply, “why did you act so recklessly?”

Arton didn’t hesitate. “Sir, my life is less important than the lives of this crew. I accepted that risk for myself—just as you have commanded us all to do, sir.”

“And what happens,” Anders said after a long pause, “if everyone starts acting like you? Discipline is the very foundation of safety for the crew.”

He studied Arton, and when he spoke again, his volume lowered, sounding a little less angry. “You do have my gratitude for saving scavenger Deagal,” the captain continued. “And I am truly glad we did not lose anyone today.”

Then his tone hardened again.

“But for disobeying the extraction protocol, I am docking you one week’s pay.” Captain Anders held Arton’s gaze.

“Dismissed.”

Chapter Five:

Brian left the bridge with his nerves still on edge. The sharpness he'd needed on the bridge was still there, but it was overextended now. Every thought dragged, and true focus came hard. For now, everything that could have been plotted had been plotted, and the pilots had enough data to keep them drifting safely across the debris field for the next few hours. If they had to run again, he would have to be sharp, so it was time for a break, but still, the constant voice in his head spoke, reminding him how little margin the Independence really had.

So he headed for the mess hall, because his body needed food and his mind needed something else—proof, in familiar faces, that the people he cared about had made it back from the wreck. He needed to know that his friends were alive. He needed to know Arton was alive.

As the door glided open, a wave of noise and warmth met him. The smell of freshly roasted Print meat clung to the air so thick he could almost taste it. A low growl tore through his stomach.

The crew's voices overlapped, getting louder with every voice added, the racket of aluminum trays, the trickling of drink dispensers—and in the shifting bodies of the crew, he immediately picked out the people he'd been looking for. Some of the tension left him when he saw them, laughing and drinking. He made his way toward them at their favorite table with a tired but certain step. He was halfway there when Arton noticed him.

“Well, Galaxy be damned,” Arton said, already grinning, leaning back; he'd been waiting for the moment to land the joke. “Did the captain finally let you go, Brain?”

Brian sighed, the sound coming out heavier than he intended; Arton had been calling him that for years, always claiming it was because Brian was the smartest person on the ship, and Brian had never been sure whether it was admiration or a way of keeping the world

from getting too serious for too long. He'd stopped caring which long ago.

He offered a tired smile. "It's good to see you, too," Brian said. He pulled out a chair from under the table. The relief in his voice shifted into something more concerning as he looked Arton over, taking in the set of his shoulders and the way his movements carried that familiar, reckless ease. But there was more, a tightness in his movement that wasn't normal, a slight twitch on his face as he moved, pain Brian detected immediately. "Please tell me it wasn't you who went back in."

Arton's expression answered the question before his mouth did.

Brian shook his head. "If you continue like this, the captain is really going to leave you at some random station."

He sat and looked around the table, looking over who was here and who wasn't. Arton sat opposite him—young, fearless, a touch of arrogance, still carrying that stubborn confidence that made danger look like just another challenge. Next to him was Chaney Bellof, a little older than Arton and the only woman among the scavengers.

She looked relaxed, but her big blue eyes were alert, like an animal ready to spring. Next to her sat the Harden twins, Jack and John, nearly identical except for slightly different scar patterns on their faces, and the way John was always the one to lead into hard conversations before Jack followed.

Brian frowned; he was missing someone. "Wait... where's Jimmy?"

"In Meds," Chaney said. "He's the one Arton pulled out."

Brian's eyes snapped back to Arton. "He got hurt?"

"Broke his left scapula during extraction," Arton said, casual on the surface, as if listing injuries were the same as listing a mission log, "And picked up some nasty cuts."

Brian breathed slowly, letting the air out in controlled measures. "Thank eternity you got him out. You're still insane, but..." He paused; it was awkward to thank him when Arton could have easily killed himself but he finally did so anyway. "Thank you."

Arton shrugged, a confident smirk forming at his mouth, the expression he had shown so many times to pretend his reckless actions

weren't a big deal, because admitting the risk meant admitting he should change. Arton leaned in; this was his opening to ask questions, and the shift in the table's energy was immediate—chairs scraped the metal floor as the others scooted chairs forward, not wanting to miss any news on what had happened on the bridge.

“How close did they get?” Arton asked. “It took me nine minutes to secure that bleeding core locked into its containment.”

“They got within a few kilometers,” Brian answered, and he could still see the screens in his mind when he said it—the engine pulses, the vector readings, the way the unknown ship had moved closer and closer. “But they just headed towards the last signal and never got close enough for a clean scan or any scan at all. We can safely assume we made a clean getaway.”

He looked around the table, meeting each of their eyes in turn, because this was the part he wanted them to hear as much as he needed to say it.

“We're still navigating the debris field on low-noise protocol. It'll take at least two more hours before we reach the edge.”

Brian allowed himself a thin smile, but the strain of what still lay ahead killed it quickly.

“Let's just hope we find a patch without those overgrown crickets trying to kill us while we jump back into open space.”

He leaned forward and set his cup down; he again noticed a flash of pain on Arton's face—a wince, gone almost before it registered, the kind of tiny tell that only a close friend could notice.

“How badly did you get hurt?” Brian asked immediately.

Arton's expression turned serious, and something more mature moved behind his eyes. “Right arm and leg took a pretty bad scrape,” he said. “Thirty-four stitches, the Meds said.”

Then his eyes lit up again as his bravado returned. He couldn't resist turning injuries into trophies. “Gonna leave some pretty cool scars.”

Brian buried his face briefly in his hands, fingers pressing into his temples. “Can't you ever be serious?” he muttered.

Arton chuckled. “You’re the brains of this group, my friend. You’re doing the serious for us. While we take the risks.”

Brian wasn’t sure whether Arton meant it or whether it was just another thin attempt at humor to cover fear of serious injuries or doubt or some other emotion. He’d never been good at reading moments like this—it had no equations, no vectors, no probabilities to guide him—so he simply nodded and let the subject pass by without addressing it, avoiding anything that resembled an honest conversation on true feelings.

John used the moment to lean forward and smoothly change the topic, like someone who’s used to avoiding emotional conversations. “Think we’ll get a good price for this core?” he asked Arton. “You held it in your hands. Did it feel valuable?”

Arton leaned back and put on an exaggerated thinking face. “Hard to say. I’ve never really known what valuable feels like.” He shrugged. “All I know is it was active. Shining bright purple. That should fetch a lot of creds.”

“Why is a core so valuable?” Jack asked, brow knitting as he tried to understand the logic from the conversation.

Brian answered this one without hesitation, because explanations were far safer than feelings. “Because it’s lost technology. All lost technology is worth a lot.”

John frowned. “Lost technology? We just found one, so how is it lost?”

“Not that kind of lost,” Chaney said, irritation etching her tone; she’d heard too many silly attempts to explain away difficult topics.

Brian continued. Facts were easier than feelings. “Not the core itself, but the knowledge to produce them is lost. Just like a lot of technology from before—and during—the Century War.” He gestured all around them, pointing through the hull and into the ring of wrecks surrounding the dead planet. “Those wrecks out there were once all state-of-the-art warships. Powered by those same fusion cores. Some even had multiple.”

“Phewww, would love to get my hands on one of those wrecks,” John interrupted.

“They had energy shields,” he went on, because listing things gave him a feeling of control. “And beam weapons instead of magnetically accelerated shells like the ones we use now. All of that is worth a fortune if you find it intact.”

This time, Jack interrupted, “So they destroyed a lot of ships, what does that have to do with producing fusion cores?”

“It wasn’t only ships,” Brian paused a moment. “Even the Tzylaxians lost the ability to make most of it when their core worlds fell. Yes, they won the war. And humanity lost almost everything.”

Brian looked down at his cup, at the small ripples in the liquid as the ship shifted, and a feeling of bitterness began to rise, mingling with the hate for the Tzylaxians.

“But they lost more than they like to admit to.”

John looked at Brian, frowning slightly. “Sorry, I’m not very smart with these things,” he said, “but why don’t they just learn how to produce them again?”

“If they could, they would have already,” Brian replied, and there was no softness in his certainty, only history.

He motioned again. “You’ve seen the planet these wrecks are orbiting.”

“It’s a dead yellow rock now. But the fact that thousands of ships fought a massive battle here tells you something important.”

“What? That they wanted sand or something?” Jack said.

He paused, choosing his words carefully, because this truth was far larger; it had shaped the galaxy to what it was now.

“No, not because of sand! In the past, this was a living world. Active. Industrial. I don’t know if it belonged to humans, Tzylaxians, or one of the other races—but I’m quite certain it was destroyed during the war. And worlds like that weren’t lost one at a time back then.”

He looked around the table, making sure the point landed where it needed to. “Take out a hundred worlds. Two hundred. Shipyards. Research centers. Data vaults. The people who knew why things

worked, not just how to use them, but to produce those tiny specific parts needed to assemble them.”

Brian’s voice darkened, and the mess hall noise seemed to quiet down. “Lose all of that in a few terrible moments, and suddenly the knowledge chain breaks. The technology survives—but the understanding of how it was manufactured doesn’t.”

John nodded. “Okay... thanks, Brian. I think I understand now.” Then he added, “It’s hard to imagine the scale of the Century War.”

He stared down at the table, fingers tracing a scratch in the aluminum surface. “I’ve lived in this system my entire life. I’ve been to five space stations, traveled on a few different vessels... and I’ve never once set foot on a real planet. Felt real gravity. Real ground underneath my boots.”

Jack snorted, sharp and humorless. “And you never will, John.”

John looked up at his brother.

“There are two colonized planets left in this sector,” Jack continued, blunt as ever. “Neither allows humans on the surface. And the Independence isn’t an interstellar vessel.” He shrugged. “Not that it matters. Humans aren’t allowed to own one—or even board one, or even enter the jump gate—in the first place.”

He leaned back in his chair. “So this is it.”

“Stations. Ships. Dead planets. A ring of wreckage.”

Jack’s voice was flat, resigned. “No point wondering about things that are never going to be.”

“Not if we don’t take back our freedom.”

Conversation halted. Every head at the table turned toward Arton.

“What?” he said, lifting his hands in a half-shrug, but there was a stubborn light in his eyes that didn’t feel like a joke. “It’s true. I’m just saying—if we do nothing, nothing is ever going to change.”

Jack opened his mouth to respond, but before a word could leave it, the intercom cracked sharply.

“Bkrrrr... this is Captain Anders. All essential personnel report to your designated stations immediately.”

The warmth of the mess hall vanished with the alert.

Brian was already on his feet, pushing his chair back as he turned toward the doors, the old reflex snapping into place before thought could catch up. "That'll be me," he said.

As he passed through the opening door, he heard Arton call after him.

"Good luck, Brain."

Brian just walked on, duty pulling him forward. The door slid shut behind him, cutting off the last traces of laughter as he moved into the corridor.

Chapter Six:

Brian stepped onto the bridge while Captain Anders was already in the center, giving orders. The captain was in his usual flow, voicing his commands, short, precise, and controlled.

Brian looked past the captain to the monitor screens. The forward monitor showed the tumbling wrecks in the debris field, while several other screens were full of movement, maps shifted, trajectories updated.

“We didn’t expect them to be here,” the captain was saying, “but now we deal with it.” He glanced up as Brian approached. “Ah, Petty Officer Turner, good, we need your expertise. We’re almost clear of the debris field, but several Tzylaxian vessels are patrolling open space. I want all possible scenarios modeled. Five minutes.”

Brian didn’t answer right away. He just went straight to his station. As soon as his hands touched the controls, the ship’s data flooded his senses: vectors, infrared patterns, patrol patterns, probability spreads. It came in fast, but it didn’t feel like information arriving; to him, it was more like the natural world. This was the way he preferred to take in the world around him. It wasn’t just numbers or text. In his mind, space unfolded in a clear image: angles, distances, and trajectories layered into a three-dimensional map.

And what he saw was bad. He didn’t need five minutes.

Barely a minute later, Brian cleared his throat, and the small sound seemed to cut through the bridge. “Captain Anders. There are only two viable scenarios.”

All around the bridge, the crew listened intensely to what Brian had just found.

“We either turn back into the debris field and wait,” Brian continued, “or we push the Independence to full speed and try to outrun them.”

The captain stopped mid-motion and turned to face him. But before he could speak, Officer Hammel interjected. She was the senior data analyst and, on paper, Brian's senior. Brian didn't trust her or her calculations. "There have to be more options, Brian. You still have time—keep running calculations, and find more ways."

Brian tensed; he hated being questioned, especially by Officer Hammel. Brian wouldn't report two options if there were more. If he weren't certain, he would not speak. "Sorry, sir." He addressed the captain instead of Officer Hammel. "All possible calculations are already accounted for. Those are the only two paths. Every other option ends the same way: the Independence is destroyed or captured."

Brian transferred his screen onto one of the bridge monitor screens without waiting for the order. Captain Anders stared at the displays for a long moment, eyes moving over Brian's calculations. They meant something different to him than they did to Brian, but still, the years of experience brought an understanding of data with it. Then he said a single word.

"Shit."

"Send Brian the O₂ and H₂O status," the captain said at last.

Brian received the data a second later and opened it on his screen. He only needed a second for the clear pattern to settle in. Now their options were reduced to only one.

Brian reported his calculations. "Maximum wait time is three-point-four hours before we run out of oxygen, only station in range will be Duran Station," Brian said. "We can electrolyze the water and stretch that by a maximum of two more hours—but after that, we're done."

The captain nodded grimly. "We didn't have the creds for a full resupply. So we stocked bare minimums. The maneuvering through the wrecks cost us any spare we had."

Brian inclined his head, "Understood, sir."

"Then the only logical option we have left is to wait for the optimal moment in the allotted window of time... and make a run for it."

He could sense the crew's resistance to the plan; fear and doubt seemed to stiffen their muscles, making movement more staggered. *The*

plan made sense logically, Brian thought, but emotionally, they clearly found it terrifying.

Captain Anders looked around the bridge, feeling the same increased tension. “I hate it, just like all of you,” he said calmly. “But he's right. We have no better options.”

He straightened, the decision settling onto him.

“Crew, listen up,” the captain called out. “We move to the edge of the debris field. On Brian’s signal, we floor the Independence. We head straight for deep space. Once we lose their trail, we plot a course for Duran Station.”

“Clear?”

The captain demanded.

A unified response rang out, louder than it needed to be.

“SIR, YES SIR!”

Everyone waited for Brian’s signal. No one moved or spoke. Even the usual background whispers faded, leaving only the ship’s systems and the repeating sound of breathing. Brian just focused on his screen.

His eyes darted constantly as he watched the situation unfold. Five ships patrolled the open space ahead. He was tracking their course and speeds, watching every bit of data that might help him find the right moment to act. They were at the edge of the debris field. Behind them drifted wreckage. Ahead, open space. Time kept ticking. The tension tightened further.

Looking at the data, Brian had already come to a conclusion. Of the five Tzylaxian ships, only two could probably match the Independence’s top speed. The others were slower, but that didn’t make them any less dangerous. Speed wasn’t their only weapon. If the timing was off by even a few seconds, any of them could still get a clear scan of the hull. And a clean scan meant exposure.

Once their hull profile was cataloged, every Tzylaxian patrol they met in the future would recognize them. Changing that profile would require a construction dock—a construction dock where humans were welcome—only one place in the system—Yuntow—and that kind of modification on a black-market station costs more creds than most

crews ever earned in a lifetime. Still, they would take the risk. Better that than being caught, and much better than running out of oxygen.

Still, the Independence had no armour. She was built for speed, endurance, and freight capacity, not combat. Brian didn't need to imagine what would happen if they took a direct hit. The walls were thin, so the outcome was simple: one lucky shot would tear the ship open, and the vacuum of space would come rushing in. Brian clenched his jaw and kept watching. Waiting. Calculating. Searching for that one moment, that one-in-a-million chance where their survival tipped in their favor for a brief moment. Then Brian saw it.

A brief alignment. A gap in overlapping patrol vectors, the faster ships, both at the opposite edges. A sliver of positive probability offering just enough assurance to act.

“Now!” he shouted.

As soon as he spoke, the Independence pushed forward. Acceleration slammed through the hull as the pilot pushed the old ship to its limits. Metal groaned, the deck shook under their boots as the strain ran through every part of the ship. She seemed to be protesting the effort.

Brian only had eyes for the tactical display. He watched as the closest Tzylaxian vessel reacted instantly, rolling to bring its sensors to bear.

“Sir,” the radio officer called out, “they’ve directed a scanning beam toward our location.”

For a fraction of a second, it seemed like it would all go wrong, but then Independence tore past the edge of the scan envelope, momentum carrying her clear before the beam could fully lock on.

“We have no ships in direct pursuit, sir,” Brian reported, hardly daring to breathe.

“They had their scanners on our hull for one point two seconds,” the radio officer added. “Not enough for a complete scan.”

Brian kept his eyes on the data for a few moments longer, watching the metrics for anything out of order. “Let’s hope they didn’t catch any unique identifiers,” he uttered.

The ship kept accelerating, putting more and more distance between them and the Tzylaxians, enough distance to avoid a trace.

As they rushed forward, the debris faded behind them into a large ring around the planet, like some planets have rings of rock; this one had a ring of metal, a permanent memory of war that just wouldn't go away.

Chapter Seven:

Hours after their escape, the Independence approached Duran Station. Now that the direct danger of the run had subsided, the crew relaxed a bit, but a sense of unease hung in the air, as the crew remained on edge. Some light banter had returned as they hoped for safer travels from now on.

Systems were functioning normally, crew members moved around, and everyone knew just how close they had come—and how easily it could happen again.

On the central monitor screens, Duran changed from a scatter of lights to a solid shape, its rotation slow and steady in the deep dark of open space. The dead planet, its closest planet, was at their back, yellow and lifeless. By the time the station's docking field took hold, most of the crew had filtered into the mess hall, including Brian. It was the closest thing to neutral territory, where rank and station were less important, a brief pause in the routine where everyone tried to ease their nerves before the next command.

The mess hall was quieter than usual, except for the steady noises of the Independence as she finished her approach. Even the vibration underfoot had changed, now steadier and heavier, no longer the restless shake of open flight but the firm pull of the station's docking field.

Brian sat at the table with his hands loosely touching, listening to the ship as much as to the room. His mind, as always, searched for patterns; the ship's engines and tremors were another data set to analyze, and he could hear the difference between the vibrations in the deck plating. He waited until the engines settled into that familiar tone, the one that meant the moment had come, and only then did he speak.

"We're docking at Duran," he said.

Arton looked up immediately. "Why Duran? We shouldn't be here."

John, one of the twins, straightened. "That wasn't the plan."

"It wasn't," Brian agreed, and he saw how the table's attention focused on him, all expecting him to explain, as he was the only one among his friends who had the information straight from the bridge.

Jack frowned. "We broke contact with the patrol. Why don't we just keep going, Rendal Station or maybe even Yuntow would be a better option than Duran."

Brian returned his gaze, then nodded slightly. "That's what we thought too."

There was a moment where no one spoke, but it wasn't truly quiet; fingers lightly tapping the table's surface, eyes drifting to other faces studying reactions. It was a moment full of knowing that Duran Station wasn't an ideal place for humans. Duran meant Tzylaxians, and Tzylaxians meant rules. Rules that didn't favor human beings, rules meant surveillance, and surveillance was the last thing they needed while harboring an illegal fusion core in the cargo hold.

"Back on the bridge," Brian continued carefully, because he didn't know how to deliver bad news, so he broke it into pieces, "before the run, I saw the limits we were working with."

No one interrupted him.

"We didn't have deep reserves," he said. "The captain knew it. I knew it. Waiting at the edge of the debris field used up the small margin we had."

Arton leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasping and unclasping. "So pushing past Duran—"

"About two hours out, we'd all be choking," Brian finished. The oxygen was not something you gambled with when you couldn't replace it. "And that's never an option, of course."

The deck vibrated more deeply now as the ship made its final correction, a subtle, heavy shift that made cups tremble and made everyone hold their position. It was clear what was happening without anyone saying a word: docking was initiated.

"So this stop was inevitable," one of the twins said quietly.

Brian nodded. “We just reached the end of our supplies sooner than we hoped. RENTAL would have been a better option.”

A heavy, final tremor ran through the mess hall as the docking clamps locked into place.

“Docking complete,” the intercom announced.

No one moved.

“Think we’ll be allowed to leave the ship?” Arton asked at last. His tone was casual, but his eyes weren’t. “I can’t imagine they welcome seventy humans just walking in.”

Brian shook his head slowly. “I doubt it. The captain’s going stationside himself—with two lieutenants. That should be enough to handle resupply without advertising who we are.”

He kept his volume low as he went on. “You all know this station. You know the Tzylaxian presence here. We need a refill—but to get a refill, we need Tzylaxian creds.”

“Why not just sell the core? There must be interested parties here; you yourself said these things are special,” Jack replied.

“Selling a fusion core on the black market here,” Brian continued, his irritation flaring, his hand grabbed the edge of the table and squeezed. He had little patience for things that should have been obvious, “would be like announcing to the Tzylaxians that we’re illegal scavengers—and then personally escorting them to our docking bay?” It came out harsher than he meant. Jack leaned back to create some distance.

“The Empire runs a strict operation here on Duran,” he said, softening his tone. “Legal scavengers only. Under imperial rules, of course, and all the really good salvage,” he gave a humorless shrug. “That’s already claimed by the Empire, even if you don’t know it yet.”

Brian stared into the distance, unfocused, the way he did when his mind replayed something frame by frame. He saw the telemetry reading of the hull scan again, that split second when the beam that almost became a lock. He shook his head. “I’m more concerned about whether the Tzylaxians got a clean look at our hull during the run.”

John looked up, surprise on his face. “They scanned us. Are you sure?”

“They tried,” Brian said. “But we were only in the beam for about a second. Not long enough for a full scan.”

He paused, then added, “and hopefully not long enough to tag any unique features.”

No one spoke after that.

On the other side of the hull plates, Duran Station waited. It was familiar, hostile, and unavoidable. After the conversation in the mess hall broke apart, Arton didn’t linger. With the Independence and shore leave clearly not an option, he had no excuse left to keep putting off the thing he usually avoided. And almost at the top of the list were medical checks. Not because he didn’t understand their purpose, but because sitting still while someone examined you required a kind of trust he didn’t like giving. It meant he was vulnerable.

He walked through the ship toward Meds. The familiar corridors were stiller than he expected, now that the immediate danger had passed; he’d expected more to head this way. His arm and leg pulled with every step, like he could sense the stitches under their bandages, reminding him why he was here, and any movement beyond the basics sent a sharp pain through his body.

The doors to Meds slid into the adjacent wall with a soft whss. Sean Riley was already there, standing near one of the exam stations with a datapad in hand, and when he looked up, he gave a brief, professional nod that made him seem older than he was.

“Ah, Arton. Good—you came,” Riley said. “Go ahead and take a seat. Uncover your arm and your leg.”

Arton hesitated, half turning toward the inner corridor, hoping he might still talk his way out of it. “Uh... sure. But I was actually hoping to check on Jimmy first. I mean, Scavenger Deagal.”

Riley glanced at his datapad. “Scavenger Deagal is asleep at the moment. Sedated. No complications.” He set the pad aside and gestured him toward the chair again. “No harm in checking your stitches first.”

Arton sighed and sat down, fingers picking at the fastenings on his jacket with fidgeting impatience.

“I closed those wounds in zero gravity. It’s a shame I had to resort to stitches, but the captain ordered that we only use the gel for emergencies now, with the reserves so low.” Riley continued as he moved closer, voice plain and candid. “You and I both know setting stitches in zero gravity is not exactly ideal working conditions for Meds. Now that we’re docked, I’d prefer to make sure nothing’s pulled, reopened, or gotten infected.” Arton tensed, annoyance rising; he wasn’t comfortable with being vulnerable. “Look, I’m a scavenger,” he said irritably. “The fact that I even showed up here is a miracle. So spare me the caring mommy remarks.”

Riley didn’t rise to it. He simply lifted an eyebrow and began examining the stitching with a clear, experienced routine, moving with confidence and ignoring the jab.

“Then consider this professional courtesy,” Riley replied calmly. “Miracle or not, I’d rather not have you bleeding all over the deck later.”

Arton snorted under his breath but didn’t pull away, letting the medic work. Riley replaced a few of the stitches that he thought hadn’t closed the wound tightly enough. Each adjustment sent a sharp sting through Arton’s arm or leg, hot and biting. Arton didn’t flinch. He was a scavenger, and scavengers didn’t show fear or pain if they could help it.

Riley trimmed the last suture and glanced at his datapad. “I was looking over your medical record while I logged the new injuries,” he said.

Arton grunted, noncommittal.

“There’s... not much there,” Riley continued. “Other than a long list of injuries, I mean. Just a first name. No last name. No date of birth. No age. No station or ship listed as your place of birth.”

Arton's irritation rose, a familiar feeling when this topic hit, the old reflex of bracing for questions he didn’t want to answer, because he really didn’t feel like having this conversation again.

“Look, Riley,” he said flatly, “I know you’re the new medic, and medics like stirring things better left alone. So did all the others.” He shifted slightly, then stopped as the stitches tugged, sending a slight gasp through his body. “Read their notes. That’s all I’m going to say now.”

He paused, then added, quieter, more tired than angry, “I was found in a stasis pod. Alone. As a kid. Wearing an overgrown space suit with the name Arton printed on it.”

He gave a humorless shrug. “I’ve been wondering all my life what my real name is.”

He exhaled sharply, the edge in his voice finally breaking through. “And no—I really don’t remember anything. Not even if I try. Not even if I really, really try. Hard. Okay?”

Riley raised one hand, palm out, in a clear gesture of surrender. “No harm intended, Arton. Just professional interest. I won’t push it any further.”

He glanced at the monitor beside the bed, watching the vitals scroll. “Scavenger Deagal should be coming around about now,” Riley said, indicating a curtained section of Meds. “Let’s go check on him.”

Arton pushed himself up carefully, testing his weight before committing to it. A dull pull along his stitches reminded him they were fresh, but he ignored it and followed Riley toward the next curtain. Arton stepped behind Riley. Jimmy was already awake; he was in the middle of a clumsy attempt to sit upright, clearly relying far too much on his right arm while his left hung stiff and useless at his side.

Riley moved forward at once. “Easy there, scavenger Deagal,” he said, placing a steady hand against Jimmy’s shoulder. “We are here to help.”

He supported Jimmy’s left side, assisting him upright until he was sitting in a more comfortable position against the raised section of the bed, and once he was satisfied, Riley stepped back slightly.

“You have a visitor,” he said, then shifted aside to give Jimmy a clear line of sight.