

REMAINS OF THE DEAD

A STAR TIGERS STORY

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I

The tip of Thomas Firefly's tongue poked pink out of the corner of his mouth. He looked up from the sketchbook, squinted at the liftloader Meka, then penciled in more detail on the machine's arm. He used a finger to smear some of the graphite, roughly matching where a leaking hydraulic line had splashed dark fluid. When he looked up again, the Meka had vanished into the freighter's hold.

Alicia plopped herself down on the packing crate beside him. "Not bad."

"Thanks."

"I still don't get the *why*."

He glanced over at her. "I like the feel of the pencil scratching on the paper. It adds tactile to the visual, makes it more real."

"Not that, dummy." She frowned, which somehow still didn't diminish her cuteness. "And don't give me the 'action and adventure' crap. That might work for Captain Hudson."

"It's not because I'm running away from you."

She dug an elbow into his ribs. "Nice try, but not all clips have abandonment issues. The 301st, really?"

Thomas sighed and closed the sketchbook. "First unit, third planet ..."

“Which is wrong since scientists have figured out that life actually began on the fourth planet. Mars, right?”

His brown eyes tightened. “And you a navigator.”

“Not like the Qian let us any closer than the far edge of the system.” She scratched at the back of her head. “You’re too smart to be doing something this stupid. You owe them nothing.”

“What *them*?” He shook his head. “You’re blonde-haired, blue-eyed, just like the folks back on Terra. If they dropped you in Iceland or Scandinavia, no one would look twice.”

“Until I opened my mouth.”

“Sure, we all have *that* problem, but look around you.” In the spaceport’s docking area, countless non-humans wandered, chatted and loitered, just as he and Alicia were doing. Thomas studiously avoided thinking of the others as *alien*, both for politeness sake, and on the basis of seniority. Humanity had been in the stars for nanoseconds compared to some of the species lurking around the landing pad.

“I’m looking.”

“You and I, even though we come from different Terran stock, are tons closer to each other and Terrans than we are to any of the species here. Just because the Arwarzhy clipped us from our home planet and sold us as pets doesn’t mean we’re not human.”

“But that’s not how the Terrans see it, is it?” She raked fingers back through her pixie cut. “They don’t want to acknowledge we exist.”

“Half the people in my enclave don’t want to acknowledge *the Terrans* exist.”

“Point.”

“Our people are furious that once Terran leaders made contact with the Qian, our brethren didn’t demand our immediate return. But, really, they couldn’t. It took them fifty years to prepare humanity to realize that there was life outside our solar system, and that we were going to be slowly worked into the Qian Commonwealth. Bringing us back, after generations of us had lived among the stars, would screw that plan up. I also think that lots of Terrans would have thought that we looked down upon them, since our people have been raised with Qian technology for centuries.”

Alicia stared at him openly. “You’re making my case for me. They’ve not done anything for us, and now you’re going to join a fighter squadron calling itself the Star Tigers? You know what most folks call it.”

Thomas sighed. “The Suicide Kitties.”

“That’s the polite translation.” She shook her head. “And they’ve already lost a pilot, even before their roster is full.”

“I heard.” Thomas looked down at the black, pebbled cover of his sketch book. “When the Qian cracked down on human trafficking, then took us and sorted us out, and put us in our own little preserves, my forbearers did their best to reconstruct our culture. We’d been clipped from all over the North American continent, but the Qian tossed us all together; so I was raised in mismatched stew of dozens of Native American traditions.”

“And according to Terrans, I speak Nor-Dano-Swedish with a Finn’s accent.” She raised an eyebrow. “And despite that mix, we don’t have a word for ‘you’re not making your case.’”

“Nor one for patience.”

“Ouch.”

“My case is this: my people have reconstituted a culture out of the half-remembered beliefs of kidnap victims. Most of them were outsiders anyway—the Arwarzhy knew enough to pick off folks who wouldn’t be missed or believed—so their grasp of traditions was weak at best. Or extreme. Sum it all up, though, and you get a culture that believes that some Great Spirit lives in the universe and is tightly tied to whatever rock you’re standing on.”

Alicia glanced at her chronometer.

Thomas chuckled. “So my point arrives. I got my surname, Firefly, when I became a man because I was smart, and I studied things like astronomy and because I wanted to fly. Really it was because I didn’t want to be tied to a rock. Some of the Elders understood—that about me, and what the reality of space meant for their beliefs. If I’d not run away to the spaceport and hired onto the first freighter that would have me, those Elders would have driven me there and paid for passage.”

“So, among your own people you’re an outsider, too?”

“Yeah. But with you and Captain Hudson, other spacers, I found my place.”

“And now you’re leaving it.”

“Because the 301st is something bigger than Terra or the clip colonies.” Thomas nodded toward one of the diminutive, large-headed, grey-skinned humanoids sitting across the hangar. “You think that Arwarzshy wouldn’t take us away and sell us to a collector if he had the chance?”

“He would.” Alicia nodded. “And there are collectors who would pay.”

“There are collectors that still have their collections. Likely have all the forms right, too, showing how they are paying humans to be test subjects, or actors in some slowly-unfolding drama. Point being, for a lot of these beings, we’re just pets that have slipped the leash.”

“And you think getting vaporized in the cockpit of some Shrike fighter is going to convince them otherwise?”

“*Them*, no. Those who turn a blind eye to what they’re doing, you bet.”

“That’s incredibly brave, or incredibly stupid. Maybe both.” Alicia checked her chronometer again. “Cap needs us back at top of the hour.”

Thomas tucked his pencil into a slot in a leather case, then rolled it up and tied it off. He tucked it and the sketchbook in a satchel and looped it across his body. “Might as well head back now. Traffic is light enough we can get quick exit clearance for the shuttle.”

As they started across the spaceport, a couple of the Arwarzhy began to parallel their journey. Thomas would not have given it much thought save for the conversation just ended, and the fact that the Greys had one person on each side and two trailing behind them. *If two more come up in front, we’re going to have trouble.*

“Think they’re buying or selling?”

Alicia shrugged. “That or spying?”

Thomas considered the third option. Rumors were rife about this species or that straddling the line in the Qian-Zsytzii war. Many individuals played for immediate reward, while governments looked at long-term gains. The Qian Commonwealth was meant to benefit all, but species like the Arwarzhy chafed beneath regulations that stopped profitable things like trafficking in sapient species.

For them to be watching us means they believe that knowledge that I’m joining the Star Tigers is valuable. He didn’t think that was very likely. It wasn’t much of a secret that the unit had been formed, or that members were being recruited from among clips. *And anyone smart enough to be spying would know that my value would be nothing until after I join the unit.*

His dismissal of spying as a motive didn’t mean they were in any less danger. “Selling, I would bet.”

“I’m not inclined to take chances.”

He smiled. Her earlier shrug had dropped one end of a short, dense metal rod into her hand from within her flight jacket's sleeve. Alicia might have grown up in the colonies, but whenever she tangled with Greys, she treated all of them as they were the Arwarzhy who clipped her ancestors.

And given those buggers' longevity, any of them could be.

Four more of the black-eyed humanoids appeared to cut them off. Granted the shiny domed top of their bulbous heads would barely reach Thomas' chin, but the Greys had a wiry tenacity that made them hard to put down. Four to one odds would give the Greys an edge. *And experience will even things out.*

Thomas and Alicia had fought with Greys before, together and separately. What the Greys had a hard time understanding was that in some colonies, martial traditions often centered themselves around preventing more kidnappings. Plenty of disobedient human children shivered to tales of Greys coming to get them and, later on, took deep interest in learning how to kick what passed for Arwarzhy ass.

He tightened his grip on the sketchbook. No species willing to call itself sapient was going to feel threatened by the book, but Thomas understood it for what it really was. In size and weight it compared well with a block of wood. Grey skulls were hard to miss and the book was heavy enough to deliver a nasty blow.

The Greys started to tighten the circle. If any of the other species noticed, they gave almost no sign. Those who did shifted to where they could watch the battle, or huddled together to place bets. Thomas might have thought them callous, but for many years, man-fights were popular amid the sporting classes within the Commonwealth.

Yet before the Greys could close and engage, a piercing scream echoed through the docking bay. No throat could have made that sound—and every spacer knew it well. Somewhere, deep in the bowels of a ship, an engine pod had overspun and was ripping itself apart. Right on cue, as the scream rose up and out of Thomas' hearing, pinging and popping triggered banging and clanging. His head snapped around. Back from over near where he'd seen a Grey lounging beside a ship, a dark curl of black smoke began to rise.

The Arwarzhy saw what he saw, their dark, unblinking eyes growing even larger. The eight of them froze.

Thomas cut to the left, getting out of the line between the Greys and the damaged ship. Alicia followed tight in his wake. He rushed at the lone Grey on that side. The Arwarzhy gave way, darting back