

Dreadnought

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The two men sat across from each other at a table placed to give the best view out of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The blue glow from the world far below fell softly into the room, far brighter than the bar's own dim lighting. Stars dotted the heavens, filling the whole sky before a diaphanous nebula which hung like a painted backdrop behind it all. Three hundred years ago humanity could only dream of having a such a view, yet the two men sat before it never gave it a second glance.

The older of the two, tall, wiry yet capable, grey hair cut regulation short in a manner which suggested he'd had the same hairstyle most of his life, took a long draught from the glass set before him. Luyten beer, known throughout the galaxy as the drink that fuelled a thousand fights. Of course this didn't worry the drinker, he was no stranger to drunken bar brawls. He never set out to start a fight, they just seemed to happen, at least that was what he told the man sat across from him. The beer he had consumed so far appeared not to have affected his bearing other than giving him a slight hint of perspiration on his forehead and a barely noticeable redness rimming his steely grey eyes.

The other drinker was enjoying something a little less explosive. He sat straight in his seat, the tan uniform he was wearing pressed sharp, the wings on his chest marking him out as a Terran pilot, the several rows of bars below them marking him out as a hero and, more importantly, a survivor. A casual observer would have seen the similarities between the two drinkers, the one in the uniform looking younger, his face less lined, the hair a little longer and jet black with a hint of grey at the temples. Slightly closer examination would have revealed faint scarring on the right side of his face. In the right eye there could occasionally be seen something like iridescence over the grey iris - if the light fell on it right and if viewed from the correct angle - that would bring to mind the rainbow patterns of oil on water.

The casual observer might have taken them for father and son, and a second later had this impression confirmed when the elder spoke.

"Son, it kills me to see you drinking that piss-weak stuff."

The son smiled for a second, his mind clearly elsewhere.

"I don't think newly promoted Lieutenant Commanders are allowed to meet Fleet Admirals smelling of Fight Starter, dad. It might make them regret giving me one of their precious squadrons."

Dad snorted derisively.

"I remember when 'Fireball' Adams was a snivelling Ensign who managed to crash his crate into the hangar door on his first jag. You shouldn't let too much brass dazzle you. I shudder to think I've raised an arse kisser."

"Given I spent the last two years watching a shipyard from behind a desk, no amount of arse kissing was too great to get me in the air again."

"If you wanted to fly so bad you could've come back to work for me."

Now it was the pilot's turn to snort.

"We've had this discussion before, dad. There are few things worse than flying a desk, and one of

them is pounding a fifty-year-old freighter to bits on the Polaris run."

"Oh well if that's how you feel..."

"C'mon dad you know what I mean. I joined up 'cos... Well, y'know." He waved his hands vaguely. This was a well worn argument between the two of them. It never seemed to make sense to the younger man, his father had been a pilot before signing up with the Merchant Fleet. He was a highly decorated veteran of the Great War, he'd seen action across half the galaxy before quitting aged twenty-five and enrolling in the damned Pony Express. He could never grasp how anyone could volunteer to drive what amounted to a glorified target in times of war and a tedious, rusty tugboat the rest of the time. Perpetually puzzled at his father's bloody-mindedness, he pulled a cigarette out a carton in his breast pocket and lit it with a solid silver lighter. Orange flame flared for a second, dancing across the image of a rearing lion embossed on the side of it.

"You don't mind smelling of smoke though."

The pilot gave another brief laugh, smoke blowing around his head.

"Nobody ever got a UTF from smoking too much." He offered another cigarette to his father. "Never stopped you either."

The older man accepted the proffered cigarette with a grunt and lit it with his own lighter.

"Well, these things are the least of your worries when an alien species wants to wipe you out."

"Yeah."

A silence fell. Both sensed this was neither the time nor the place to trade oft-told war stories. They had before, over vast amounts of Luyten's and even more of the potent firewater Dad distilled aboard his own ship. Battles fought, bloody victories and crushing routs. Friends lost... Tears and laughter and roaring tales and the bond those who wore the tan uniform could find nowhere else.

The pilot took a sip of his own drink, mind wandering back to the memories of his war, seeing the same things going on behind his father's eyes. He waited patiently, at times like this, he knew who would be the one to break the silence.

"Huh. Anyway, I can't believe they gave you a squadron in the arse of the galaxy."

They'd had this discussion too.

"Its peacetime Dad, you know as well as I do how slow promotion is." That wasn't the only reason, but it was the only one the pilot was willing to discuss. "I'm bloody lucky to get this posting as it is, so I'm not going to complain even if it is ten thousand light years from anywhere."

"The last survivor of the 70th. The last man out of Capella, The least you could've got is a squadron on a Hecate."

"Nothing wrong with an Orion." The pilot took a hard drag on his cigarette.

"There was nothing wrong with them in the Great War. But that was forty years ago. There is a reason they use Orions to collapse jump nodes."

A ten-year old memory surfaced in the pilot's mind. The two kilometre bulk of the Bastion vanishing in a cataclysmic explosion that had damn near blinded him and obliterated two of his squadmates in a tidal wave of coruscating blue fire. He shook it off, feeling the chill of recollection let go of his spine.

"A squadron's a squadron Dad, I would've taken a posting on a bloody Aten to get out of that office. Besides, four years from now I could be up for ACO somewhere and then I can think about a command of my own. Then you can finally realise your ambition of ramming a Fleet cruiser and not get hung for it."

This wasn't particularly funny, but his father seemed to find this hilarious. He let out a loud laugh, only partially exacerbated by the five pints of Luyten's he had consumed in the last ninety minutes.

"Like I'd wreck the Franklyn just to prove you Fleet boys can't keep station for shit!"

The pilot let out a laugh himself. It was an article of faith in both the military and civilian fleets that their opposite numbers couldn't navigate their way out of a paper bag. Any convoy was always enlivened by talk of how that damned Fleet/bloody Merchies had the station keeping skills of drunken cattle.

The PA boomed into life. Finn Greenash watched his son's hand tighten around the glass he was holding. He very much doubted that anyone else would have noticed, but then again he had known his son for thirty years.

"NOW HEAR THIS. NOW HEAR THIS. LAST CALL FOR GTT TRELAWNY. ALL PERSONNEL FOR GTT TRELAWNY MAKE YOUR WAY TO DOCK TWO. REPEAT, DOCK TWO. THAT IS ALL."

"That's my ride," the pilot said. Stubbing out his cigarette and finishing his drink in two economical movements, he stood up quickly.

"Break a leg, Kris," Finn said, getting to his feet and sticking out his hand. Lieutenant Commander Kristian "Maverick" Greenash looked at the proffered hand for a beat, then shook it briefly. His father's grip was firm, as always. He used it often, negotiating cargo with the cutthroat merchants of the galaxy's many backwaters.

"I'll do you proud, Dad." He reached down to pick up his kit bag and slung it over one shoulder.

"Yeah, well." Finn looked away for a second and cleared his throat. "Keep in touch. You know what your mother gets like if you don't wave her every day."

"Every day is probably pushing it a bit."

"Keep us posted anyway. I'm never too busy to get a message from the last of the 70th."

There it is again.

Greenash turned to go.

"No problem, Dad," he said, then left the bar without a word, the cold blue glow of the world below them illuminating his back as he strode off. Finn watched the tall figure until it vanished amongst the crowds of the busy promenade, then drained his beer and got up to order another. He didn't

realise it, but that would be the last time he would ever see his son.