

Chapter Fourteen

Sketch figured it would be easy enough to catch the young man, and moved to place himself in the path the thief was attempting to barrel through, running along the streets, a bundle beneath his arm that he assumed was the part for *The Praeteritus* that he needed, if not had already paid for.

The young man was running at full speed, and so Sketch prepared to get run into, bracing himself by sliding his right foot back behind him, digging it into the rock floor. ‘This is going to hurt,’ he thought to himself, as he braced for the hit that never followed.

Instead, the young man agilely leapt over Sketch, vaulting above him, planting his free hand atop of Sketch’s head before soaring past him, a leap far behind that of what Sketch had expected, but as the young man passed overhead, Sketch caught a glimpse of metal through the ripped holes in the man’s pants, cybernetic legs on display. He tried to reach up and grab at the young man, but he was already past him before Sketch could grab at the young man’s shabby clothes.

He spun to see the man not stop or look back, and that meant Sketch needed to chase after him. He shifted his weight to use the back foot he’d had as a brace as a launchpad instead, and started bolting after the young man, the two of them heading into the residential areas of the Station. That meant Sketch didn’t have long. Another minute or two, and the kid could just disappear amongst all the dorms and apartments, and then he’d be damn near impossible to find.

The area was filled with civilians sitting on stoops, laundry hanging from lines draped between narrow corridors, children playing ball in the middle of the street.

Using his abilities as a Storm would be cheating, but using his skills from his mercenary days? That would be just fine. He grabbed a thin throwing knife from its concealed position strapped to the outside of his thigh and threw it in front of them, aiming right for one of the laundry lines, slicing through it, letting the heavy rope with all the clothes attached to it fall directly into the young man’s path, where his ‘only forward’ strategy worked poorly for him, as the clothes and rope began to wrap around him, the more he struggled, the tighter it all worked to constrict him. A few more debilitated steps and the young man fell down onto the ground, completely tied up.

“Lemme go, man!” the bundle of trouble shouted. “This doesn’t concern you!”

Sketch sighed as he moved over to sit down on top of the bundle that was the young man, pushing the Calm at him to make the guy stop panicking some. “That’s where you’re wrong. See, that’s a part of my ship you’re stealing, and whether or not it gets installed, Mawake’s going to charge me for it. So letting you go would be bad for my business.”

“You’re not Tropage!”

That, however, took Sketch off guard. “No I’m not, but how the hell do *you* know what a Tropage vessel looks like?”

“I’m guy Mawake has leading his team when it comes to repairs on Tropage vessels, well, Tropage vessel, singular. Yours is the only one that ever comes through, which is why he keeps gouging you so much on repairs, you idiot,” the kid sneered up at him in an attempt at a grin, which Sketch reached down and slapped off his face.

“Explain to me what your plan was, here, and maybe, just maybe, I’ll consider getting you out of this mess,” Sketch said. “But you’d better talk fast, because Mawake’s gonna be here any second.”

“Tropage repairs shouldn’t be costing you so much, since almost all the parts are off the shelf, with the exception of the interface adapters, which you could be hardprinting yourself,” the

kid said quickly. "I was going to offer to be your on-board mechanic for a year for nothing more than room and board for me and my sister, although you'd have to buy her out of her contract."

"Her contract at what?"

"Courtesan."

"Those contracts don't come cheap, kid. How much are we talking?"

"A hundred and twenty thousand ectash."

"That's not nothing, kid. And probably far more than a mechanic is worth for a year."

"Two years," the kid offered, the desperation starting to seep into his voice as both of them could hear Mawake closing in on them.

"Four years," Sketch countered.

"Three, and that includes my sister's services as well."

Sketch suddenly realized that in the tussle, one of his sleeves had been hiked up to his elbow, revealing a patch of his tattooed forearm, as he quickly tugged the sleeve back down, concealing the flesh once more just before Mawake walked up to them, heavily panting, completely out of break. He hoped like hell nobody'd seen that, or that he'd been in line of any cameras when his arm was exposed. "Don't make me regret this, kid."

"I see -wheeze- you caught -gasp- the little bastard," Mawake said, pointing at the wrapped-up body beneath Sketch.

"Let's have a talk about bastards, then, shall we, Mawake," Sketch stood as he stood up and walked across the hallway, bending down to pick up his knife before sliding it back into its concealed spot on his thigh. "The little bastard says you've been drastically overcharging me for off-the-rack parts, taxing me heavy because you think you can get away with it."

The look on Mawake's face told Sketch everything he needed to know about just how true it was, as the older mechanic blanched and started stepping back a little. "Now, Sketch, don't go doing anything stupid..."

"Mawake, Mawake, Mawake... relax," Sketch said, stepping over towards the mechanic, patting him on the cheek. "What I *ought* to do is gut you like a fish for thinking you could steal from me and get away with it, but you've also inadvertently provided me with a solution. So here's what's going to happen... I'm going to take this kid here and add him to my crew. He's going to be released from your employ and be taken under mine, and in exchange for you kicking up zero fuss about that, I'm going to kick up zero fuss about how you have been price gouging me for the last few years. We'll just call it a nice even exchange."

"He owes me two weeks back pay," the kid said, as he was slowly untangling himself from the clothesline he'd gotten wrapped up in.

"Gonna have to let that one slide, kid," Sketch warned him. "There's a point to negotiate and a point to *stop* negotiations, and we passed that about a mile back there."

"You little shit, you been nothing but trouble for me," Mawake spat. "You want the brat, Sketch, you take him and you get him the fuck off my station. And you better not bring him back around again!"

"Oh, I'm *definitely* going to bring him back around again, Mawake, so I can see what my prices *should've* looked like each time I was coming here, when he's buying parts from you," Sketch said. "Because it's the only way we can guarantee this little *détente* we've got going on holds. Now fuck off and head back to your shop to load up the parts onto my ship, charged at a *fair* rate rather than the robber baron bullshit you've been pulling on me, while I go sort out the tail end of this kid's sister's deal before we get off this rock."

"You two fucking deserve each other," Mawake said, spinning on his heel before he

stomped back off in the direction he approached from.

“I truly hope I’m not going to regret this, kid,” Sketch said. “Considering I haven’t even caught your name, or your sister’s, or had any real proof you know what you’re talking about.”

The young man finally got himself disentangled, and Sketch could see the scruffy look was mostly just because the young man was covered in grease and oil. He was a little older than Sketch had first thought, but still couldn’t be any older than twenty-five. He looked like he came from a combination of old Earth Middle Eastern and African heritage with the sort of straight black hair that Sketch envied, his own going into curls at the slightest bit of freedom mixed with any moisture. He had a neatly kept goatee around surprisingly well-kept teeth. “I’m Loz. Lawrence Howell, if we’re being formal about it. My sister’s Immy, Imogen. And you are?”

“Sketch. You can call me Sketch or ‘Captain,’ until I’ve figured out just how far I can trust you and your sister,” Sketch sighed. “Speaking of which, we should go figure out how much trouble it’s going to be to buy your sister out of her contract.”

“It really depends on how much the owner wants to be a pain in the ass about it,” Loz said to him, “but I think when you assure her that you’re taking Immy off the station, they’ll be less difficult about it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There’s been someone who keeps coming by that Immy’s refusing to serve any more, and the guy doesn’t like taking no for an answer,” Loz sighed. “And the guy’s the younger brother of the station’s mayor, so he thinks he should be able to get whatever he wants whenever he wants it.”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

They headed back towards the red-light district, and this time Sketch could take the time to appreciate how ornate all the shopfronts were, compared to the sort of utilitarian look to every other place on the station, glamorous and eye catching. There were men, women and everything in-between in the windows and sitting on the porches. They weren’t allowed to touch anyone in the streets, but they could certainly get aggressive about the sort of attention they were pushing at people as long as they didn’t come in contact with anyone and didn’t show anything illegal.

The storefront they approached had a highly decorated sign above the front that read ‘All The Belles And Whistles’ in fancy brushstrokes, with colors of pink and blue splattered all over it. There was a tall, perhaps too tall, blonde woman sitting in a rocking chair on the front. “C’mon, Loz, not again with this shit,” she said. She was dressed in a bikini and a pair of shorts that really only covered the top of her hips to the bottom of them.

“Don’t worry, Clarabelle, after today, you won’t have to worry about seeing me again,” Loz said to the woman as he walked up towards the front door and just strolled on inside, looking to find the proprietor of the shop. “Paulina! Where are you?”

“Lawrence Howell,” a large rotund woman with breasts that Sketch was fairly certain could hold an entire serving tray atop of, “if you are here to bother your sister while she’s working *again*, after we had a talk about it last time, I’m of the mind to ban you from the premises!”

“I’m here because this man’s going to buy out Immy’s contract, Paulina,” Loz said smugly, his hands on his hips like he’d been waiting to do this for some time. “He’s hiring me as a mechanic and as part of the terms of that, he’s buying out my sister’s contract with you and bringing her on the ship, where she can be an independent contractor.”

Paulina, the brothel’s madam, turned her eyes to look at Sketch and her entire tone changed, as money in hand was always better than money on prospect. “Oh, you’re willing to

buy out one of my crew, are you? Well, Imogen Howell's a popular face around here. I couldn't possibly let her go for anything less than two hundred thousand ectash."

Sketch smirked, as he'd wondered how much the brothel madam or mister would try and jack up the price beyond what the woman actually owed in terms of her debt. People who held loans in the more remote portions of the galaxies tended to adjust interest rates liberally and without warning, and when someone tried to buy out a debt, they would overestimate the amount remaining on the slate. "Now now, ma'am, Loz here told me she only owed a hundred and twenty thousand, which means, by my estimate, she's probably got only about a hundred grand on her ledger and you're trying to price gouge him for twenty and me for another eighty. I'm going to give you an option here. I'll pay the agreed upon price I had with the kid, which means you'll get to pocket a nice little twenty grand profit, no fuss, no muss and no more of this kid coming around to check on his sister constantly. You'll be down a courtesan for a while, but you and I know there's always a steady supply of people coming in who are willing to trade their bodies for cash, food and shelter. The other option is I'm going to walk into your office, open up your ledger, pay what the girl *actually* owes and then buy out two or three other contracts with my remaining cash, which I'm sure it'll do, and you're going to be left holding the bag of a half-empty brothel because you decided to get large-scale greedy instead of just a little greedy. A little greedy I can tolerate; a lot, I can't."

Paulina sneered at him, as she reached down behind the counter and pulled up a scattergun, resting it on top of the bar. "What makes you think you'd make it into my office with both your legs?"

Sketch's eyes took a quick glance down at the scattergun and then back up at the woman's face, seeing telltale spots of perspiration on her face near her hairline. "Quit embarrassing yourself, Paulina," Sketch said to her. "That's a Cartian 4-80, except you haven't done a day's worth of upkeep on it since you bought the thing, best guess eight to ten years ago, and that thing was vintage even back then. You've never fired it – you've never *had* to. You just flash it around, and all the local yokels get nervous and back down. But you've never waved that thing at anyone who knows weapons. The range you're at? You'd be lucky to get a couple of flechettes into me out of that whole load."

"You're fulla shit," the madame growled.

Sketch reached and drew the sidearm from his holster and levelled it in her direction. "This, on the other hand, is one of the legendary thirty-five Itagaki precision flesh shredders. You've heard of him, yeah? A hundred years ago, a gunsmith named Hironobu Itagaki made exactly thirty-five side arms, designed to be precise to a metal shaving within a 500 meter range. I could blow your trigger finger off before you even got a chance to get a round off. I *could*, but I don't *want to*." Sketch kept his voice cold and even toned, never once wavering, just talking as calmly as if he'd been talking about local sewage problems or what he'd had for lunch. "So I'm going to repeat my offer to you, madame. I'm offering to pay a hundred and twenty thousand ectash to buy out Imogen Howell's contract, and then me, her and Loz will be out of your hair, for good, and you won't have to worry about the mayor's brother coming in here drunk, threatening to bust your place up if you don't let him treat your girls how he wants to. You could even use the twenty grand extra to go take your scattergun there and get it tuned up, reconditioned and make it into a reliable threat, rather than one that might just blow your own finger off if you tried to pull the trigger. But the longer we stay with our guns pointed at each other, the higher the chances this is going to end a *lot* less good for you. What do you say?"

He could watch the thoughts running through her head, debating how much of what

Sketch said was true and how much of it could she afford *not* to be true, weighing all that against what she thought the girl's employment was worth, and finally he saw the resistance die behind her eyes, as she lifted her hand off the scattergun, pushing it back across the bartop. "Fine. Fine, stranger. Come over here and I'll give you the account to transfer the ectash into," she said. "It'll get that damn jackass Stevie out of my place, anyway, and that's probably worth the temporary loss of income."

Sketch tucked his pistol back into its holster and walked over to the bar, as she passed the account number to him wirelessly. He opened up his account and transferred 120,000 ectash, as agreed upon, to the account, and then watched as the woman opened up her digital ledger and zeroed out what Imogen owed her. "Now upload it to the city's ledger," Sketch said, having seen this kind of trick before, as the woman sighed, then hit the button to pass on the zeroed-out debt to the station's central ledger system, ensuring the debt was permanently erased. "Good. You want to send her out now?"

"She's finishing up with a client – she's got her booked for the next ten minutes," Paulina said. "I can send her on as soon as she's done."

"Nah," Sketch chuckled as he moved to sit down on one of the plush chairs in the open lounge area for the waiting room. "I've got an investment now, so until it's handed off to me, we're just going to sit here and wait, aren't we Loz?"

The young man looked at him nervously before looking back at Paulina, but then moved to take a seat, as if deciding that since he'd hitched his wagon to Sketch's, he needed to follow the boss's lead, even as crazy as it might seem.

The three of them sat in relative quiet for a few minutes before a woman walked out of the back and headed to the front of the establishment, glancing quickly at the two men seated on the couch before trying to shuffle off as quickly and quietly as she could. A minute or two later, a beautiful young woman, obviously Loz's sister Imogen, came strolling out, dressed in billowy satin pants that were semi-translucent, a thicker thong on beneath them, and a fluffy white top that only covered her breasts, leaving her toned stomach on display, a ring with a large teardrop ruby hanging from the piercing. "You bringing me clients now, Loz?"

"Get your shit together, Immy," Loz said. "He's buying out your contract."

Imogen narrowed her eyes at Sketch before looking back at her brother. "I've never seen him before. Why would he do that?"

"It's part of the terms I negotiated when I agreed to become his mechanic. He's the owner of that Tropage ship that's been coming through for the last year," Loz said. "You know, the one I keep telling you Mawake's overcharging. I negotiated for us to go work for him on his ship. I'll be his mechanic, and you can control your own courtesan business wherever we're going."

"Gods within," Imogen sighed, closing her eyes in frustration. "And you did all this without talking to me first?"

"It wasn't like I had a big window to discuss things with him, sis," Loz grumbled. "And I think I did pretty well."

"It was a crap deal, wasn't it?" Imogen asked Sketch.

He shrugged in response. "It wasn't terrible, considering the debt you had here, and Paulina's tendency to flex her costs and interests on debts, you're probably getting off light. And since I hear you've had a john who refuses to take no for an answer, I can imagine you want to get out of here as soon as possible."

"You heard about Jacen, huh?" she sighed. "But I suppose you're going to mandate who I do and don't take as clients?"

“Only that you service the crew,” Loz said before Sketch could get a chance to speak. “Had to throw it in as a sweetener.”

Sketch rolled his eyes a little. “You can say no to anyone you want, and that includes the crew,” Sketch said. “Any money you make is yours to keep, unless you start accruing costs around the ship or at harbors. Your room and board is part of the kid’s salary, which also covers his room and board for the next three years. After that, we’re square and we can renegotiate. You two want to hang around past that, and I’m happy with the kid’s service, we’ll put down a new contract. If you two want off, that’ll be your chance.”

“And Loz’s *entire* salary is going to room and board?” He could see her moving a little closer to him, trying to employ some of the tricks of the trade she’d no doubt learned over the years, trying to make him more pliable, placing one hand on Sketch’s shoulder, something he had to work very hard not to visibly react to.

“Well, that and paying off the debt he accrued by buying out your contract,” Sketch said. “You had quite a bit of debt built up. A little surprising if you ask me.”

“Yeah, our debt’s been kicked around from person to person for the last couple of years, but I’m sure you’ll hear all about that in time,” she sighed. “Alright, how much of our things can we bring with us?”

“You’ll each have a relatively large cabin on the ship, so as long you’re not bringing five times your own bodyweight, bring whatever,” Sketch told them. “Why, you have a lot to bring?”

“A courtesan likes to have attire for any occasion,” she teased him, seeming a little annoyed that he seemed to be ignoring her flirting.

“That’s fine,” Sketch said. “We’re not leaving the station for a couple of days, so you don’t have to rush. Just start bringing your stuff over and it can sit at the loading dock until they finish the repairs to the ship, which you’d better be overseeing, Loz, because if anything’s wrong, it’s on you and you’re going to have to fix it.”

“That’s what you hired me to do, boss, so I’ll make sure it all gets done.”

“Including the component you’re holding there?”

Loz laughed, lugging the part up to his chest. “I’d almost forgot I was hauling this around, but yeah, I’ll make sure it’s in place and your ship’s in better condition than it’s ever been. But you’ll need to register me and sis on the crew so that the ship’s AI doesn’t throw a hissy fit.”

Sketch smirked. “She might do that even if I do, but I’ll get it done. I’ll also let the rest of the crew know about you, but I’ll keep it to just the bare minimum in terms of details, so you can make your own first impressions.”

“All humans, boss?”

“We’ve got a P’Nox on the crew,” Sketch said, glancing over at Loz. “That gonna be a problem?”

“Hey, just asking, boss. That’s all. You want to bring Niadras on board, I’m gonna be fine with it – I’m just gonna wear thicker soled boots,” Loz said, trying to smile as casually as he could. “Cause sooner or later, I’m gonna find out how you got your hands on a pristine Tropage ship without having an Tropage crew.”

“It was a gift from them to me, and I’ve taken good care of her since then,” Sketch said. “I’ve just realized as of the last few months that I need an actual crew, because me and the AI alone aren’t gonna cut it, so we’ve been staffing out.”

“What else do you need?” Loz said. “I could check and—”

“Mechanic was the last thing on my list for right now, but we’ll see,” Sketch said. “I’m

sure there's going to be other things we'll have need for at some point.

"Got it, boss," Loz said. "A'ight, me and Immy are going to get our shit together, and we'll swing by the ship tomorrow to start getting ourselves loaded on. C'mon Immy, let's go."

"You go ahead, Lawrence," Imogen said as the three of them walked out of the brothel and back out onto the street. "I want to talk to our new captain for a few minutes first."

"You sure?"

"I'll be fine. Now go."

Loz picked up his pace and started jogging off back towards the docks, presumably to put the component he'd taken back into the ship where it belonged, as Imogen looked over at Sketch with a soft smile, her hand reaching out to rest on his waist. "I swear, if that boy doesn't get me killed, I'm going to strangle him myself one of these days. Now that he's gone, I feel it only prudent that I share with you an important detail he's likely neglected to tell you. We're survivors of the *Yokixola* crash, and as such, the debt that I've been paying off has been our rescue fee. I took the debt with Paulina to get the majority of it wiped clean, but there's still a minority stake held by the Waverly Syndicate, and they're eager to get their hands on the money we still don't have. I hope that isn't going to be a problem, Captain, but I'd understand if you wanted to wash your hands of us because of it."

Sketch couldn't help but smirk a little bit. "So you've got a problem in your back pocket. That's fine. That makes you just another member of the crew at that point," he said to her. "We're a ship full of misfits, oddballs and pieces that don't fit into any other puzzle. If the Waverly Syndicate comes to take a run at you, then I'll handle them. You're my crew, and if they've got debt, they can talk to me, and I'll negotiate and settle it."

"And if they don't want to settle it?"

He offered her a little dismissive shrug to show exactly how concerned by that he was. "Then I'll settle *them*. It's not that tricky."

"Now you know *my* secret, Captain," she said, sliding her hand along his back soothingly. "You think you might feel comfortable sharing with me yours?"

"My trust can be earned, Imogen, but it's not given freely, nor lightly," he said. "I meant what I said – you don't have to tend to anyone you don't want to, and I'll do what I can to make adaptations to our schedules to include time for you to have clients when we're in between jobs. I'd say you could work them during jobs, but you'd have to bring your clients with you, and I'm not sure I'm quite at that level of trust yet."

"That's fine, Captain. I'll get your buy-in a bit at a time. For now, I'll take my leave of you, if that's alright, so I can go start packing up my things."

"Of course that's fine. I'll see you soon, then. Don't forget. Two days and we're heading out."

"We'll be there, Captain, I assure you."

As the woman walked off, Sketch could sense a bit of frustration lingering around the woman, as if it had bothered her that he seemed to be immune to her charms. She was quite a beautiful young woman, but Sketch's ship already had plenty of those on it, and the last thing he wanted was more of them in conflict with one another.

He tapped the communicator on his wrist and called back to the ship. "Helen, how's it going?"

"There was a bit of commotion earlier, boss, but it seems like it's fine now. Something about one of the mechanics stealing a part," her voice said into his comm. "Why, what's up?"

"That mechanic who stole the part? His name's Loz Howell. He and his sister need to be

added to our standing crew registry.”

“You sure that’s a good idea boss?”

“Kid seems to know exactly what he’s doing with you and the rest of the ship, and I’d rather have that skillset with us instead of against us,” Sketch sighed. “Besides, he seems like he’s going to be easy enough to keep in line.”

“Starting to feel like a real ship again, boss.”

“Now don’t you start in on me too,” he laughed.

“I’m just saying, boss – you were lonely a lot before this.”

“Yeah, well, doesn’t seem like I’m going to get a lot of alone time moving forward.”