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Everett

*To: 8915::starsend::
Sender: JSheldon::UTFhc::*

Mr. Nadel,

Greetings, old friend. It seems you have finally overstretched your resources, allowing the officials of the law to catch up with you. I suppose it was just a matter of time. Sabotaging that research station caught too much attention, did it not? Even though it was considered so heinous a crime that any prison on Earth was too good for you, I have pulled a few favors in order to keep this line of contact open.

More to the point, I believe you have some information I want. In fact, I would say that you have two major pieces of intel that I desire. Given our tattered relationship, I do not expect you to simply hand them over. In an effort to maintain some courtesy and formality, I will address only one subject, the less sore of the two.

This Atlantis project of yours has struck my interests, especially its tragic end. I only have the barest of details, so I encourage you, former partner, to enlighten me in its purpose. And please, remember, the same contacts who arranged this line of communication can do much to sway the parole hearings.

*Formally yours,
General James Sheldon*

Each finger landed rhythmically after the last, letting out a series of hollow taps. Gunther looked down and to his right. A post-middle-aged man sat in a padded chair, overlooking a team

of specialists and scientists who had earned officer ranks. His hair was white with a few, faint streaks of black remaining from younger, brighter years. He slumped to the side in his chair just as his career had in recent years. On the contoured arm of the captain chair, his hand rhythmically serenaded the plastic molding at a rate which seemed to contradict his composition. Captain Parks did this when he was nervous.

Each tap delved deeper into Gunther's patience, forcing him to slightly shift his stance.

"Sir, we are flying towards a dangerous situation. I assure you that much," said Gunther, moving on from the subtle hints he had been dropping for the past hour.

"Be patient, young man," replied the captain. Young man. Gunther had turned thirty-four last week. His face tightened.

Gunther caught a quick glance from the communications officer, who then looked back at his screen, as though he could help the situation.

An uneasy silence crept over the bridge as Gunther's comment shot through the officers. He noticed that most were not looking at their screens, but rather farther past them. In their heads, they imagined a fleet of militia bombers raining down on the *Everett*, turning it into a hollowed space furnace. Gunther had the instinct for commanding-- the instinct his officers knew to follow. Captain Parks, however, only had foolishness and empty desires.

Gunther felt the bridge caving in on him. He was trapped. He suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to escape-- to change his situation. Impatience had finally overcome him; now was his time to act.

The debilitated mining docks remained in sight on the main viewscreen. Fragments of scrap metal lazily drifted in space around them, as if underlings to their equally inactive masters.

A few of the officers would look at the docks for a second or two, but then turn their attention back to their own station. Anxiety filled the air. Gunther inhaled deeply.

Parks must have sensed the uneasiness, as he began to speak, "These docks have been abandoned for decades. They completely mined this area out. The only threat to us would be large enough to be seen. There's nobody out here."

"Sir, it's not their strength I'm worried about. It's our weakness. We're cut off from the main force and any hope of reinforcements, and our fighter squadron is tied up in the repair bays," Gunther strengthened his voice, "Sir, we're vulnerable."

There was more to his request than that, though. He had read the reports of ship boardings throughout the Cerbera Minor system. Militia tactics echoed through his head, informing him of the opportunity they now had. The *Everett*, after all, would make a grand addition to the militia's growing fleet. He regretted his lack of time to act-- the bureaucracy that his actions required.

Suddenly, an officer quickly stiffened at his station, "Three corvettes!" He stuttered slightly, "Three militia corvettes!"

Damn. While it was a small task for a normal UTF Destroyer, Gunther knew this was different. This particular destroyer had the honor of hosting the venerable Thomas Parks as the commander.

Parks opened his mouth slightly, as if in disbelief. Gunther's eyes narrowed as he used all the energy in his being to keep quiet. Put up the shields.

"Get me a visual," said Parks. Stumbling with the buttons, the officer complied.

A visual would do them no good if they were dead in space without shields. Precious seconds had been wasted. Surely enough, a bone-wrenching vibration shuddered through the ship's bridge. Gunther noted that the attackers had executed the plan well, but were sloppy in the timing of it. If it had been a competent UTF commander, the shields would have been up long ago. Tightening his fists, Gunther readied himself to change the situation.

"We've lost shields!" shouted the weaponry officer.

“Execute escape pattern beta,” commanded Parks.

“Belay that order,” Gunther said, with an undeniable certainty in his voice.

Running would only get them killed.

As though he had suddenly slammed on the brakes of an auto on a crowded highway, every crewman on the bridge looked at the second-in-command in awe. Any acts of insurrection were treated very harshly according to the laws. This particular act could warrant long-term imprisonment.

“Roll towards port,” commanded Gunther.

Confused, the pilot glanced between Gunther and the captain.

“Do it now!” shouted Gunther, forcing the officer to comply quickly.

The mining dock on the viewscreen slowly rotated out of view as the large ship grudgingly followed the maneuver. Gunther felt a small grin form on his face as he imagined the corvette pilot speeding towards the hangar, only to have the target move out of the way with little time to react. After a slight jolt, a damaged corvette followed by a trail of hull debris soared onto the main viewscreen.

“Fire.”

Without regret, the rail guns ripped into the smaller ship, followed by a vibrant explosion.

“Reroute shield power to the defense cannons,” said Gunther.

“Stop this mockery now!” shouted Parks, whose pale face had now turned a deep red. Gunther could not tell if it was anger or embarrassment that had caused the rosy complexion. The older man’s hands were shaking as he tried to regain control of the situation.

“Sir, I-,” Gunther was cut off.

“Guards, apprehend this man now,” said Parks, looking to the back of the bridge.

Gunther quietly looked behind him. Two men, dressed in full UTF body armor, sans helmets, looked at each other in confusion. After a glare from the commander, they reluctantly

stepped forward.

“Sir,” said the first, with a degree of uncertainty, “Please come with us.”

Silence once again overtook the bridge. The unspoken conflict that had existed so long between the two top commanding officers was finally coming to fruition. Officers were not torn between commander and underling, but rather with the underling and the command system that had dominated their way of life. Indeed, whispers heard frequently in the ship quarters always agreed with the second-in-command, or had at least disagreed with the aging captain.

Fists tightening, Gunther prepared himself to answer. Now was not the time to make a scene. Too much was at stake; his crew’s lives depended upon his next action.

“Of course,” he calmly muttered, with a false smile and curt nod towards the captain.

He solemnly passed countless shocked faces on his walk out of the bridge. He quietly hoped that their looks were based in admiration; he quietly dreaded they were based in pity.

Once out of the bridge, he dropped his façade of passiveness. His mind focused only on the path that lay before him. He had to save his ship. He had to save his crew.

“Your gun, private,” he said calmly to the closest guard, as though it were not an outrageous request.

With a baffled look, the guard handed it to his commanding officer without question. He began to speak, but Gunther cut him off.

“I know. We’ll save the rest of my arrest for later.” He thought he saw a small smirk of relief appear on the guard’s face. “Right now, we have to take care of the boarding crew.”

“Boarding crew?” asked the two guards, nearly in unison.

Gunther knew, without needing any viewscreens, what the two remaining corvettes were planning. He knew that one would have only a pilot, serving as a distraction for the corvette full of NGM soldiers. As the *Everett* fruitlessly fired at the empty

corvette, the boarding party would slip in unnoticed. They were trained not to set off alarms in the process. A tremor crawled up Gunther's spine as he imagined militia boots landing on his ship.

"There's no time to explain," said Gunther, as he turned and walked briskly down the hall. The two guards deftly followed.

"You," Gunther motioned at the unarmed guard without breaking pace, "Go tell Fire Team Alpha to deploy to engineering, and then move towards the docking point."

He regretted the fact that officers depended upon the equipment on the bridge for intraship communications. Their response time would be cut in half because he had no short-range comms device.

Well-lit hallways and corridors flew by the second-in-command as he rushed to the portside barracks. He could hear the guard keeping an even pace behind him. What was he thinking about as he rushed through the ship with his insubordinate superior? Surely, he felt torn between his two commanders. Did he stay because he genuinely felt that Gunther could save the ship? Gunther wondered if the guard would have followed him if he had been given the order in front of Commander Parks.

Hastily rounding a corner, Gunther was surprised to see a corridor filled with soldiers. For a fraction of a second, the most doubtful parts of his mind filled with alarm. Militia soldiers here? No- Friendly UTF soldiers. Moreover, it seemed they had been waiting for him. The answer clicked. Starboard barracks had been warned by the guard that he had dispatched. Portside was just a comm signal away at that point. Gunther would have to learn the name of that guard and commend him on his performance. He had understood what Gunther had intended to do and carried it out well past his given orders. Of course, commendations would come only after Gunther survived- not just this battle, but Parks' inevitable legal retaliation. Trying not to outwardly show distress at these thoughts, Gunther addressed the Fire Team Beta leader.

“Sir.”

“Your comm, please,” requested Gunther.

“Yes, sir,” replied the soldier, handing over a communicator.

Tied to the communicator was a large amount of relief; and Gunther took possession of both. Communication’s importance at a time like this was not to be understated.

“Fire Team Alpha,” said Gunther, not bothering to identify himself to the man on the other end of the comm, “sweep back towards Engineering and attempt to secure the docking entrance from the rear of the ship.”

Surely, the infiltrators were already past the docking point. Which way they had planned to go, however, was always a mystery. Trapping them in the smallest area possible would be best, although with the current delays Gunther expected the enemy to capture Engineering.

Answering Gunther’s unstated concern, the soldier replied through the comm, “Engineering is secured, sir, we’re making way to the docking entrance.”

Their responsiveness was utterly surprising. After standing on the bridge for so many years, the reluctant responses and long travel times of spacecraft had become the norm. Had he lost touch of what inner ship battles were like? Regardless, it was certainly a shame that Parks was going to let this disciplined defense force go to waste.

“Let’s head out,” said Gunther, pressing his rifle against his shoulder.

Leading a team in a command uniform was completely unorthodox, but it would be a small offense in the eyes of a judge. UTF command never seemed to worry about enforcing personal safety.

Every corner presented a new, possible danger. It was like Russian Roulette, thought Gunther. Eventually, the bullet would find its way to the firing chamber.

It did. At a T-shaped intersection, Gunther caught something out of the corner of his eye. Steadying his weapon, he turned

and prepared to fire. Gunther paused. Before he could count, he knew there were seven of them. Before he could time it, he knew that he had less than a breath to avoid fire. Before he commanded his muscles to move, he had ducked and rolled to the opposite corner, separated from his team by a stream of hot, airborne lead.

His body was tense and strong, but still allowed for a calm hand. His breathing was as steady as his concentration, which calculated the path for his body to follow. He could hear his slow, strong heart pumping strength and warmth to the rest of his body in powerful, controlled bursts.

In the face of an insurmountable danger, his battle instincts had come back to him. Or had they always been there, and he had simply gone back to them? He could not tell.

Against the deafening sound of the opposing squad's oppressive fire, he focused. Looking to his left, he saw expressions of confusion and surprise among his squad. He held his hand up, motioning for them to wait. The front soldier's expression narrowed into one of understanding.

All at once, the melodic roar of the guns died down. The battle dove suddenly dove into an eerie silence. Both teams waited in an uneasy anxiety of the next stage of the battle.

A few dozen wasted bullets lay on the ground between Gunther and his squad. Above the bullets existed a space which no sane man would dare enter while wearing UTF colors. There had to be a way to get some men across, turning Gunther from a useless single soldier into a tactically viable half-squad.

He listened for it. No untrained ear could have possibly heard it. In fact, he was sure that none of his squad heard it. But there it was, in the distance, almost infinitely faint. A militia soldier, perhaps poorly trained, perhaps just careless, let out a barely audible click when switching out his magazine. Now was the time. Gunther quickly motioned for three men to cross the gap upon his action.

Without wasting a moment, he dove into the corridor

intersection, facing the enemy squad in a prone position. He ignored the pain from his shoulder, which had borne the weight of his roll earlier, and his abdomen, which was being bluntly bruised by the warm lumps of lead which lay underneath him. He immediately opened fire, taking aim at nothing in particular. After he felt three distinct motions in the air above him, he rolled back into his safe spot. Relief, thankfully not pain, shot through him.

To his right stood the three soldiers that had previously been on the other side of the contested point. To his left, the other part of the squad, larger but less organized, waited for orders.

As he contemplated his next move, he heard the familiar explosions of UTF grenades rock the enemy's position. The other squad had come through.

"Fall back!" he shouted to the disjointed portion of his squad.

"Follow me." he said to the three wary soldiers who had crossed the gap, as he ran to the next hallway over.

A militia soldier dragged a comrade who had been injured as he ran away from the shouts and explosions of the UTF force chasing him. He was followed by an array of disheartened soldiers, aiming to defend their backs. After a suspicious lull in pace, they looked backward to see Gunther, a uniformed officer, aiming at their leader.

"Halt."

A rash of heroism flared in the leader's expression, but was flooded out as he remembered the situation. He looked down at his comrade's freely bleeding wound with regret. After he threw down his gun, his squad followed suit. A mass of UTF colors, weapons drawn, filled the other side of the hallway.

The Everett would be okay.

* * *

Ten men stiffly entered into the room from a hidden back area, filing into the positions in which they had sat for the past four

days. None of them made eye contact with Gunther. He rested his elbow on the arm of his chair and propped his head on his hand, waiting for his fate.

"We, the jury, in the case of Parks vs. Gunther, find the defendant, William Gunther," the lead juror paused to swallow, "guilty, in all counts."

The word came quietly, but nonetheless as heavy as a shout. Gunther straightened his posture and awaited his sentence of punishment from the judge. Saving a destroyer, capturing an enemy corvette, and avoiding UTF loss of life? Surely, there'd be no punishment for that. The real crime here was the undeniable aggravated assault in the first degree of a UTF-brand ego. Or perhaps, even murder, since it was done in front of so many spectators.

Glancing to his right, he saw Captain Thomas Parks smiling smugly and shaking the hands of his team of lawyers.

No, it wasn't murder.

* * *

Gunther waded through the crowd outside the Neo Terran courtroom. He had chosen to waive his right to a lawyer, so now he was without a protector from the swarm of carrion reporters.

"Please, I would like some privacy in the lift," he announced to the crowd of interrogators as he reached the end of the corridor, summoning the turbolift.

He turned around as the door opened, to see a tall, stout figure waiting for him. Privacy was not to be granted on this ride.

Stepping in with a curt nod, he addressed the man, "Evening, Father. I see you decided to make an appearance after all."

"Well," Father paused slightly, "I didn't think my presence would be needed in the courtroom. After all, you didn't need a lawyer, did you?"

"Would he have been able to intercept all of the bribes that

those jurors had received?" asked Gunther, wavering slightly when the turbolift jumped into motion.

The gentle hum of the lift continued while their conversation lulled.

With a hefty sigh, Father started, "Son, I'll admit that it's not a level playing field. You could have at least tried."

"Tried? For what?" exasperation entered Gunther's voice, "To serve with that fool for another decade, before he finally lost the battle against senility?"

Father looked at his boots.

"The corruption that's tying up our whole chain of command is losing this war." Gunther swallowed, "I can't make a difference in that chain of command. They want to demote me? Just fine. I'll make a difference as a flight squadron leader."

"Son, you--" Father hesitated, "You're right. Not about losing the war, but about everything else."

"What?" Gunther turned his head, "You agree?"

"I've been doing this longer than you, you know. By your age, I had your mother. I had stability. I couldn't possibly step outside the system of command. It was just as corrupt in my time as it is now. Every day I thought of leaving, of refusing orders. If doing that makes you happy, then it makes me happy." Father attempted a genuine smile, but was perhaps held back by the mention of his deceased wife.

The lift jarred slightly as it reached the top of the courtroom building. Gunther pressed a button to keep the door closed.

"Thanks, I'm just happy to be removed from that situation," he said. "Anyway, I've got to get back to the Everett. They've finished up the repairs."

"They stationed you back on the Everett?" asked Father, not trying to hide his surprise.

"Judge Shancy decided that my crew's loyalty was better used that way. I guess it was his way of somewhat acknowledging the outstanding heroism in my acts."

Father chuckled, then replied, "Son, don't let it go to your head

too much.”

Gunther smiled, then added “Maybe it will help counter the G-force, now that I’m a pilot.”

He hit the button to open the door, causing a rush of chilled, fresh air to flow into the lift.

Stepping out, he asked, “Going down?”

“Of course,” replied Father, with a stern look of admiration in his eyes.

The two men struck a salute and the door closed between them.

* * *

Gunther sat uneasily between the two broad side windows in the small shuttle. To his right, the metropolis-ridden Neo Terra filled the view. To his left, a blanket of stars served as a backdrop to the UTF’s fleet of warships. Trying to escape a sudden feeling of vertigo, he moved to the leftmost seat to get a better view of the space around him.

As if his move had caused it, the ships jumped to life in unison. After silently moving into formation, they hung in the dead vacuum of space for just a moment. A bright expenditure of light signaled the firing of their engines, and they disappeared towards a single star, a small constituent of a constellation he remembered from his younger years. Gunther’s diaphragm tightened as he calculated which system it could be.

“Aethra,” he said quietly to himself.

He tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and waited for the shuttle to dock.