THE SHADE OF AN OLD OAK TREE

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"What? You didn't think anyone would tell *me* about it?" Rurik asked.

He and Ilya were alone on the bridge of *Dasher*. *Dasher* was not the oldest *Union*-class DropShip in the Com Guard fleet. Nor the newest; no matter how hard the technicians tried, they couldn't get the smell of old grease and older socks out of the ventilation system.

"After all," Rurik said, "I'm not only your commanding officer, I'm also your brother."

"Half-brother," Ilya said.

"But a transfer?"

Attached to a docking berth of the troop cruiser *Vision of Truth*, and less than an hour from orbit around Terra, *Dasher* waited for the rest of her crew to board. The recall had been sounded, so the crewmen and combat pilots that had been stretching their legs in the relative comfort of the WarShip were making their way back.

One of *Dasher*'s three berthing crews had already checked in, as had the pilots of the 'Mechs in bay two.

Ilya glared at him.

Rurik was sure Ilya had learned that glare from their mother. That was where he himself had learned it. After he was given this command, he had perfected the glare by practicing it in a mirror,.

"Am I ever going to get my own ship, staying here?" Ilya said. "Waiting for you to die or retire?"

"I'm going to retire soon enough." *Not likely.* They would have to drag him, kicking and screaming, out of the service. And if he spent the rest of his service time in command of *Dasher*, that was just fine. "Got a place picked out on Tall Trees, a few hundred acres—"

"Yeah, yeah. Rolling hills covered in trees, with a hammock under this big spreading oak all alone on a hilltop. I've heard the story. Over and over."

While the ground-pounders in the bays below were running last minute checks on their machines, at the moment *Dasher*'s flight

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crew had no actual duties beyond keeping watch. Their command helmets still hung on the back of their seats.

"So, where are you going to go, if they approve the transfer? Someplace where Mom won't beat my butt if you get in trouble? She told me I was to watch out for you."

"Somewhere where I can get my own command before I get to be as old as you are."

The two men were ten years apart. Rurik's father had been killed when Rurik was eight, before their mother married Ilya's father.

"You still could have told me first."

Ilya snorted. "Would it have made a difference?"

"I would have felt better about it. We are brothers, after all."

"Half-brothers."

"Explain the difference to Mom."

Rurik stared out at space through one of the small ferroglass windows. Billions of stars out there, thousands of inhabited worlds. When the rigors of the service seemed too much, Rurik consoled himself that there was still that one hill on Tall Trees, where the shade under that lone oak was cool and dark, the sharp smell of crushed acorns in the grass scented the air, and there was little more to hear than the quiet whisper of wind. His refuge when things went bad, those memories of his one trip to Tall Trees.

"We're losing pressure," Ilya said. He leaned toward the console on his right, where several red lights had lit among a field of green.

As Rurik looked, another green light turned red. "How bad?"

"Not very. Not yet." Ilya tapped some keys. Rows of numbers started scrolling up a small display.

"Where?"

"I'm trying to find out."

A bell started ringing on the bridge. Multiple lights on Ilya's right turned red.

"Blow-out!" Rurik roared, jerking forward and slapping the emergency switch for the lock to *Vision*'s berth. *Dasher*'s berthing

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doors would slam shut, isolating her atmosphere from *Vision*'s. Whether the blow-out was on *Vision* or *Dasher*, one was protected from the other.

"Close the bulkheads," Rurik growled, while trying to get a comm channel to *Vision*'s bridge.

Sirens sounded throughout *Dasher*, including one on the bridge, warning of the lockdown. Vibrations in the command chair told Rurik that the bulkheads were slamming into place, isolating the various sections from each other. If the blow-out was in one of *Dasher*'s sections, the other sections should be safe from it.

In theory.

If it wasn't structural.

Or a major impact.

But then, he hadn't felt anything, so an impact seemed unlikely.

Rurik tried to commlink to *Vision*.

Nothing.

Not even an ACKNOWLEDGED from the automatics.

Ilya tapped at keys, trying to determine what had happened. But past him, Rurik could see the telltales turning back from red to green, slowly, one at a time.

"It's *Vision*," Rurik said. "I think we're OK. But verify it and make sure we're not venting anywhere."

"What's with *Vision*?" Ilya asked.

"I don't know. Gone dark."

Rurik leaned to his left and pressed several keys, bringing up numbers on power and consumable feeds routed through the berthing collar. All zero.

"*Vision*'s dead. No power." He tapped some more keys. "I can't get water, flush sewage, or pump fuel. They're completely gone over there."

Ilya leaned back in his chair. "We're good. Integrity in all compartments."

One telltale still shone red on the console.

"What's that?" Rurik asked.

"Berthing collar," Ilya said, without looking. His face was very pale. "There's hard vacuum on the other side."

"There would be hard vacuum if *Vision* had closed off their berthing doors."

Ilya pointed a finger at a small vid display on his console. Rurik leaned over to look at it.

The camera was in *Dasher*'s berthing collar, usually used as an aid for docking.

It looked directly into the berthing bay of *Vision*. *Vision*'s berthing doors were *not* closed. It meant that section—at least—of *Vision* was open to space.

No comm. Hard vacuum. Berthing feeds down.

Vision was dead. The grim silence aboard *Dasher* lasted all of a minute when the Word of Blake ships appeared.

Lots of them.

And then *Swift Justice* started firing on *Vision of Truth*.

The flash order came from *Blake's Strength* to start the landings.

Rurik slammed himself back into his command chair and yanked the command helmet down from its mounting, all but jamming it on his head, slapping the side panels in place. The helmet covered his eyes and ears and planted microphones and chin controls in place on his skin. His scalp tingled.

Tapping into a ship-wide channel with his chin, Rurik said—calmly, as he always did when things got tight—"Prepare for maneuvers. Grab hold of something, kids."

He clicked to an internal channel, the one direct to the engine control station, where Benny, a long-toothed acolyte, watched over the ship's fusion engines. "Warm 'em up, Benny. We're dropping early."

"Aye, aye, Skipper." Too cheerful, as usual. Nothing ever seemed to get to the old man (A year younger than himself, a small voice in the back of his head reminded him.)

Switching back to the bridge channel, he said, "Ilya. Disengage and back us off." He watched the pre-ignite status for the fusion engines. Sometimes, the engines were balky.

"No disengage." Ilya's voice was sharper than usual, thinner. Only part of that was the comm circuit. "*Vision*'s systems are not responding."

"Hell's bells," Rurik grunted. "Everything's dead over there. Crap."

"Manual disengage of power and comm?"

"Affirm manual disengage."

DropShips rode tightly clamped to their transport, to prevent vibrations from damaging the berthing rings and leading to material failures. The heavy clamps required power from the transport side to release.

But for just such an emergency as this, provision had been made for the DropShip to be able to break away on its own. Ilya engaged the manual system. Strong rams extended from *Dasher*'s side of the berthing ring, which pressed into a pair of pads on the transport ring that not only disengaged the locks on the clamps, but also physically pushed the clamps free. Each step in the disengage was duly reported on one of Rurik's displays.

"We're loose," Ilya almost shouted. The comm systems automatically squelched voices that got too loud. It made Ilya sound calmer than the almost-panic his voice carried.

Rurik tried to ignore the sharp smell of his own sweat. He didn't have time for fear.

"Thrusters in five—" Rurik put a finger down on the emergency Klaxon: the only warning that *Dasher* was about to move. "Four."

At zero, the thrusters gave a small push, enough that everything loose on the bridge lifted into the air.

Including Rurik, who had forgotten to buckle himself into place. Blinded by the helmet, he felt around for his straps and pulled himself back into his seat. He fixed himself into place.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. "How are we on fuel?" Rurik asked.

Vision had not yet made its orbital insertion burn, so *Dasher* would have to do it herself, in addition to setting down on Terra.

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Even though they were fully fueled, insertion would put a big dent in their supply.

Numbers scrolled across one of his views, most of which he ignored. He carefully noted the one number outlined in green. After insertion, they would be right on the edge of getting down in one piece and getting back up into orbit again, without tapping the combat reserve.

It would have been nice to have more fuel, in case they needed to duck and dodge.

It would have been nice to have a place to come back to, for a refuel.

It would have been nice to have retired last year, to a hammock under an old oak tree.

A lot of things would have been nice.

Since all of the DropShip's gunners had still been on *Vision* when *Dasher* broke free, ducking and dodging would be all they could do against ground defenses. They did not have the pilots for the two aerospace fighters *Dasher* carried, either, so those weapons sat useless in their bays.

He and Ilya set up the insertion burn and turned it over to the computer to execute. Deceleration pushed Rurik back in his command chair.

As they hit the atmosphere tail-first, fusion engines blazing, Rurik could only hope that the Blakists on the ground would be surprised when *Dasher* dropped out of the sky.

Somehow, considering the battle that had to be happening above him, he doubted that. Where could all of those enemy ships have come from?

"Rurie?" It had been a long time since Ilya had used that old nickname.

Nothing on this mission seemed to be going to plan; but Ilya was right to be scared.

Rurik was. More scared than he had ever been before.

And not just for himself. He and Ilya were Mom's only kids, and suddenly it seemed much too dangerous to have both of them in the same ship.

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He scanned the expanded view he had set up on Tactical Two, watching for the rise of missiles or the intersecting lines of fighters.

Or any other surprise he could not guess at.

"Yeah?"

"Did you see all those ships up there? We're not getting out of this, are we?"

What a time to fall apart. "If you don't keep your attention on Tactical, we won't."

The descent was quiet, unopposed, all the way down.

Because he was so much older than Ilya, Rurik's mother had made him responsible for his younger brother. Which meant that every time he turned around, there was Ilya, tagging along. Growing up with this constant shadowing, Rurik had felt everything from irritation to fury at his baby brother, at one time or another.

But once he had joined the service, he realized how much everyone depended upon each other. That as an officer, his duty was to protect his subordinates.

Then Ilya had been assigned to *Dasher*. Normally, relatives were not assigned together, but Ilya and he had different last names.

At first, it was annoying, but then he found that his baby brother was a very interesting person, now that both of them had grown up. Unlike in their earlier years, Rurik found he enjoyed their time together.

And now they might just die together.

The operational plan had been to ground their stick of 'Mechs about two hundred klicks inland from the ocean, in the middle of some piece of dirt called "Old Texas," the southern end of an arc of landings that ran from the ocean southwest to the edge of a desert. Their landing zone was just off the edge of a fairly sizable city, forty klicks from the next LZ in the line.

On *Dasher*'s other side, the nearest unit was some four hundred klicks to the west.

They were the end of the line.

And still no opposition.

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Not even a radar painting them.

After all the other cock-ups, it seemed much too good to be true.

Still, gift horse and all.

Rurik was not sure how long ago he had last taken a breath. So, when *Dasher* settled on her landing struts, he took a deep one, before going back to his constant scanning of the Tactical displays, waiting for that red speck that meant Death was on its way.

And the displays were still empty.

In the lower right corner of his vision, a counter ticked away the seconds they had left on the surface.

Unlike loading—which was a slow and careful process when multi-ton 'Mechs were in too-close proximity to his ship's precious skin—unloading was scheduled for a mere thirty seconds on the ground.

While other DropShips acted as fueling and rearming stations for their 'Mechs, *Dasher* was detailed to return to the fleet, to act as a reserve.

If there was a fleet left.

Rurik gazed at the long-range display, the one showing the situation in space. At least, as much as *Dasher* could gather from IFF beacons and weapon flashes.

Green dots represented Com Guard ships.

There were a lot fewer dots than before.

When the counter hit five, Rurik sounded the Klaxons and let his hand hover over the manual control for the fusion engines, in case the computers failed to lift them off on schedule.

But the computers worked and he felt himself being pushed back into his chair again. He let himself relax just a little tiny bit.

He still had no idea what was waiting for them in orbit above. All of the radio frequencies were filled with static. A tone sounded in his ear, calling attention to a channel from bay two.

"Skipper," the voice said. Rurik thought it was Bailey, a cute little brunette that—were he not her commanding officer—it might

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have been fun to take a run at. Between the vibration of the ship under full power and the stress in the woman's voice, he could not be sure. "We have one still in the racks."

"So?"

"Well, it was just a stuck gripper and we've got him loose. The kid inside really wants to join his unit."

"Crap."

"We've got the fuel, Rurie," Ilya said on the bridge circuit.

"Who are you kidding? You already told me we'd be down to the combat reserve."

Beat.

Rurik squeezed his eyes shut for a second. "OK. Forget I said that." What point was there in having a combat reserve if you didn't use it in combat? "But we've unloaded our stick and we're on the elevator back to orbit. That last chicken will just have to ride along with us."

"To where, Rurie? Look at Tactical One."

There were no green blips on the display. No friendly ships still functional in orbit within *Dasher*'s horizon.

"Maybe the fleet is beyond the curvature." They *had* to be up there.

"No relay satellites?" Ilya snapped. "Even if those were picked off, they should have left a trace on our tracking."

He was probably right. The complete lack of relay satellites for over-the-horizon communications was a very bad sign.

"Not our problem," Rurik said. "We get to orbit and run, hope to meet up with stragglers at the assembly point." When Ilya did not say anything, Rurik continued, "Those are our orders."

"Sure."

But where would they run? The fleet had flown into a trap. Their only real hope now was that the two opposing fleets had completely wiped each other out; otherwise, they would just be running right under the enemy's weapons.

And even if *Dasher* made the assembly point, they would have to find a jump-capable ship to get out of the system. *Dasher* did

not carry enough supplies to give them more than a few weeks of hiding out as a nickel-iron asteroid.

At least the 'Mech pilot had some options, assuming the machine could get out of the DropShip's bay.

Assuming Rurik gave the kid back his options. "Oh, crap," Rurik said. "Let's do it. I must be out of my mind." And there was one more option being on the ground would open up, as much as Rurik hated thinking about it.

"Good," Ilya said. "I was thinking I was the only one here that was scared silly."

Rather than comment, Rurik maneuvered a cursor over the ground map in a new display he had popped up, watching the numbers at the edge of the view. When he found the point on the ground that would take the least amount of fuel, he selected it and turned things over to the computer again.

Almost immediately, he went weightless as the engines cut out.

Selecting ship-wide, he announced, "We're going down to unload this last 'Mech. Prepare for grounding. Alert! Ten seconds after grounding we are going to burn and head back to orbit."

Clicking back to the circuit to bay two, he said, "Ten seconds. Any parts that chicken still has inside the bay doors is going back up with us right at ten seconds, clear?"

"Aye, aye." It was Bailey. Without the engines rumbling everything in the ship, her voice came through clearly. Bloody shame he would never find out what the woman thought of hammocks.

The displays still showed no enemy traffic anywhere near them, as *Dasher* fell out of the sky, the fusion engines flashing on and off at odd intervals, changing *Dasher*'s speed and trajectory. In theory, that would make it harder for enemy forces to predict where the DropShip was, where it was going to be, and when it would finally touch down.

In theory.

Memories swam past his vision. Ilya running after him and his buddies, all smiles and laughter, even with the rough handling Rurik and his mates gave the kid. Mom kissing Rurik on the cheek, after he had pulled Ilya, half-drowned, from a pond that the kid should not have been anywhere near.

Twenty seconds before touchdown, Rurik's attention snapped back to his displays, where two red blips appeared at the far edge of Tactical Three.

Sirens and warning buzzers came to life the instant *Dasher* was painted with radar.

Distractions that Ilya must have muted almost immediately, since they went away on their own, while Rurik's brain focused on what to do.

Full speed on the fusion engines would shoot them toward space.

Unfortunately, unless these were air-only fighters, they would be followed all the way up. No way out that way.

Land and surrender?

Not *my* ship. Not *Dasher*.

Certainly no point in dodging.

So, land the lone 'Mech and *then* run for it. Hope for the best.

But run to where?

He had good people in his crew. Letting fighters shoot them up or forcing them to starve in space made no sense. Neither of those options was worthy of these people.

Or Ilya.

Only that one ugly option was real.

As soon as they touched down, Rurik opened the ship-wide channel again.

"Abandon ship! Abandon ship! All personnel! Abandon ship!"

He could imagine the bay crew standing there, unable to believe their ears.

He switched to the bay channel, just in time to hear Bailey shrieking at her people to get out the bay doors. Telltales on his displays showed all of the bay doors open, not that they were really necessary. There just weren't that many people aboard.

Not when most of them were still on the *Vision*, somewhere in space above them.

Some might have found havens of air. They might be waiting for rescue.

He could not think of them right now.

Rurik tried hard not to think of them, but their faces rushed into his mind and his stomach clenched.

Over the command channel, Ilya said, "Everyone's clear. Bay doors are closing. Ready to lift in five."

Rurik did not have time to grieve over people already lost.

Even though he could not see Ilya through the command helmet, Rurik turned his head toward where his brother sat. "What are you still doing here, Adept? 'All personnel' means *all personnel*."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Ilya," he began, then choked up.

"What about Mom?" he managed to croak. "She can't lose us both."

"Then we both have to get out of this. The crew is out of the blast radius of the engines. Let's get out of here."

"Screw that," Rurik roared. "Let's get off this bucket before they blow it to pieces."

"Go ahead," Ilya said. "If I don't get away, tell Mom I was thinking about her. At the end." Brave words. Rurik might have believed them if the unevenness of Ilya's voice had not betrayed him.

"You're not staying."

"I'm not leaving."

Rurik relaxed back into his seat. Ilya was just as stubborn as he had been when he was six. "I don't suppose an order would make any difference?"

Ilya did not answer.

"Yeah." Rurik switched to the engine control station channel. "Benny, you better bail out, too."

No answer.

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"The smartest guy on the ship," Rurik muttered. Back on the command channel, he said, "OK, light her up and let's get out of here."

The tactical displays showed the fighters well beyond weapons range, but closing fast. *Dasher* had no chance to get away, not from fighters, but what else was there to do? He would not leave Ilya to fly the ship alone.

Not that he wanted to let *Dasher* go without at least the attempt at a run.

Thrust shoved hard as the engines lit, full power.

Even with all of their gunners, they would have been vulnerable to the nimble fighters. As it was, all they could hope for was to stay in one piece long enough to run up enough speed to pull away. In the long run, the fighters could not keep up with DropShip's fusion engines.

It was the short run that was the problem.

Within a minute, Rurik knew it was futile. The upsweep the fighters made showed they were not light, atmosphere-only fighters, but full aerospace fighters, with plenty of power and fuel, well able to run down the defenseless *Dasher*.

The words curdling in his mouth, he opened a wide-spectrum external channel and said, "This is the Com Guard DropShip *Dasher*. We surrender. Repeat. We surrender. We are not able to fire on you. Please direct us to where you want us to land."

Over the command channel, he could hear Ilya sputtering, too surprised to speak.

But one of them had to live, to go home to Mom. If Ilya was too stubborn to get off the ship, then Rurik had no choice but to sacrifice *Dasher*.

Before Ilya could get past his surprise and say anything, though, the fighters took away their last options.

They opened fire on *Dasher*, the moment their weapons were in range.

Red telltales appeared all over his displays, one view after another popping to the top for attention, as system after system reported damage, as critical systems overrode the reports of other, less important systems.

Dasher was hurt.

Rurik slashed engine power, spun the ship on her thrusters, and opened the throttles again, jigging and dodging as he tried to get *Dasher* out of the way.

The ship shuddered as missiles tore at her insides and beams ripped her hide open.

Dasher was dying.

The fighters continued to fire, even though it had to be clear to them that *Dasher* was mortally wounded.

Rurik didn't even have the breath to curse them.

Then it hit him.

There were two fighters in the bays right below them.

And the telltales for the fighter bays were still green.

He was not a fighter pilot and neither was Ilya, but they could fly.

It was a better chance than they would have with *Dasher*, which was falling apart around them.

"Ilya. Take the fighter in bay three starboard. Let's get out of here before those bastards finish us."

"Oh. Yeah. Crap."

Rurik pulled the helmet off. The bridge was as full of red lights as his displays had been. Plus Klaxons, sirens, and shrill emergency tones.

Ilya was already clear of his seat and heading for the hatch.

Rurik tickled the controls on the arm of his command chair, turning control over to the computer, setting it for evasion.

At least the computer was still undamaged.

So far.

If it stayed that way, it would jig and swirl the ship to the limits the damaged systems would allow, sounding a warning before each maneuver to give the two of them a chance to grab something before the ship jinked.

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And time between the maneuvers for the two men to move toward their last hope of survival.

Rurik yanked at his harness. The pressure across his chest released just as the external bulkhead caved in.

He did not feel his left leg come off.

He barely noted the smell of smoke and fire.

Vision blurred and reddened, he could not move.

All he could do was watch as the ship floated for a few moments, then lurched to one side.

Dasher could not avoid the fighters, though, and a thump and a surge from somewhere below shook the entire ship.

There were no more red telltales to light.

They were *all* red.

Through the hole where the ferroglass window had been, Rurik could see the sky, then clouds, then tan, rough ground, then the sky again.

The ship was spinning. Only the thrusters on one side were working and the computer spun the ship to be able to jink in all directions still.

The fusion engines sputtered, roared, then, one by one, quit.

And the ship shook from another explosion somewhere in her torn hull.

Blood sprayed from his severed leg. He knew he should do something about it but he had no idea what.

The fighter bays.

There *was* still one green light. It went out as the doors of bay three starboard blew out.

Ilya.

Would he get away?

The ship rattled and shook again as *Dasher* took more fire.

The ground swept across the window again, then steadied, as the ship went into free fall.

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The computer had finally given up.

Or lost its last controls.

Dasher fell like a stone.

Wind whipping through the bulkhead hole made his eyes burn. He could still feel that, even as his life flowed from the stump of his leg.

Through his tears, Rurik got a glimpse of a lone hill, an oak tree standing at the top, casting a wide swath of shade on the hot desert floor.

Then he retired from the service.