

Her First Time

Commander Yelma Mendez's shipboard office was exactly like her: cold, hard and uninviting. I never cared for Commander Mendez, but I could learn to be a good officer from her, just don't do anything the way she would do it.

I stood at attention while I watched Mendez work at her terminal. I noted with a little satisfaction that there were light streaks of gray in her long black hair. She kept it tied back in a tail, I kept my blonde hair in a pageboy cut, long enough to look good, but not enough get in the way in micro-gravity. She was carrying a little extra mass too, must be getting too used to desk work and skipping her exercise, I'll never be like that when her rank.

"The cracker is almost ready, Minou," She said to me, her one good eye locked with mine, it was dark brown, almost black, and stood out in contrast from her fair skin. I imagined her missing eye had been the same color, but I would never know. Militia can't afford the best medical care.

"Yes, Ma'am." I made sure to keep my tone level and respectful; she wasn't going to pull me off this operation.

“Sit down, Ensign.” That wasn’t an invitation, damn it. I sat down, keeping my back straight, perfectly at attention. I had three missions chalked-up, all of them four-oh, and she was still treating me as if I were green.

“You’re not combat officer yet, Minou,” She said as she sat back from her terminal.

The hell I’m not!

“If the Commander would be kind enough to educate me, I’m sure I could be.” I tried to keep my anger out of my voice; I was tired of her riding me and waiting for me to make a mistake.

This is what I hated most about life in the militia, the politics. Politics had ruined everything I had ever cared about in my life, it had driven Seth away, it constantly interfered with my career, but I’d make a blind jump before I’d let it kill that career.

“Cut the crap, Minou!” Mendez slapped her hand down hard, had the *Judge Wilson* had been in micro-gravity she would have floated off her seat.

“With the Commander’s pardon,” I said. “I know this op like my tongue knows my teeth. I could run it flawlessly, with one eye.”

Mendez bit her lip. “You’re too smart to be so stupid,” she growled.

Damn it, I shouldn't have said that. I could run the op better than anyone on-board, but a slip like that could cost me everything.

Her terminal chimed, pulling her single, glaring eye away from me. I was thinking frantically how could I save this. A bad review from the operations officer could put me ashore, or worse. Extralegal militaries didn't always use the most respectful ways of decommissioning an officer.

Mendez took the chip out of the terminal's writer and held it out for me.

"Here's the cracker," she said. "It's set for the freighter's network; screw with it and the mission's trashed."

Screw her! This mission was going to go perfectly.

I snatched the chip from her hand.

"Understood, Ma'am" I didn't say anything more, I was too angry and nothing that came to mind would have been good for me, or my career.

I stood, saluted, and got out of there as fast as I could without looking like I was hurrying. Outside, I closed and dogged the hatch, my hands shaking as I tried to control my anger.

A perfect mission was the best, and only, revenge I could have on that vacuum queen.

“Chief, what’s the status of our target?” I asked as I ducked into the ready room.

Lockers opened and closed as the five members of my cutout crew checked and donned their gear. They were a great bunch, Chief Kline the best of a very good lot.

“Cruising smooth and easy. They ain’t got a peep we’re in their wake.” Chief Kline replied as he sat looking at a display. His pale skin attested to that Kline was an old spacedog with lots of years in the service, I don’t think the man had spent any serious time planetside in years, but on him it looked good. With rust colored hair, in a clipped crewcut that suited his square face, I imagined officers for centuries had relied on men exactly like him, I certainly did.

I peeked over his shoulder at the display, a decrepit two-dee model, but it got the job done, we were sliding up, stealthily, behind the freighter. That was going to be an impoverished freighter soon, and we would be a bit richer; it’s a shame we weren’t in this for the money.

“Suit up, Chief. We have a payday coming.” I slapped him on the back. He got up from the display and went to check on the rest of the team. I loaded the cracker into the terminal and settled into the seat. Yelma Mendez might think it was perfect, but I wasn’t going to trust it unless I checked it myself.

I had to admit that she was a pretty skilled hacker. Grudgingly, I even admitted that she was better at it than I was, code was always too mind-numbing to hold my interest for long.

Satisfied that the cracker was four-oh, I rechecked the separation to the freighter, we were closing, but not too fast. As long as the helm kept us in their drive-wake, this would be as easy as a ballistic orbit.

“What sort of payday are we looking at, Ensign?” Towne asked as he wriggled into his hard-suit.

“Manifest says she’s carrying food stuffs.” I switched off the display and went to my locker to pull out my own hard-suit.

“Real food? That’ll pull a fast buck.” Towne’s hazel eyes sparkled with greed; not everyone was in this for a better America.

“The money ain’t real until they’re in your pocket.” Kline shot back as he sealed his boots to his leggings. He was a great chief, but the man could be just too damn pessimistic.

“Nothing’s going wrong on this op.” Towne cleared and checked his rifle. “Ensign Shippen has it wired tight.”

I turned away so Kline wouldn’t see me smile, I sure as hell didn’t want him thinking I was just another cocky ensign. Mendez could take a long walk without a pressure-suit, but Kline’s opinion mattered.

I slipped the chip into the socket of my hard-suit and watched as the onboard lights lit up green, as the cracker installed itself.

“Chief, check the sled. We’re flying,” I ordered.

Kline left the ready room as I called up Captain Jorgenson.

“Cutout crew ready for operation, sir,” I reported.

“Very good, Ensign. Make us proud out there.” His rich baritone voice echoed in my ears.

“You’ll wonder how you got along without me, sir.” I switched off the com and turned to the rest of the team. “Suit-up you deck apes! You’re not getting paid to skylark.”

They didn’t really need the extra prompting, but it pays to let them know you are watching. I left the ready room and joined Kline in the boat-bay.

The boat-bay was like a cavern of battleship-gray metal, along the port side of the bay, the *Wilson’s* two ships boats were secured, and in the center, ready for launch, was my command, a sled.

Kline was finishing the preflight on the sled as I entered the boat-bay.

“Is she going to fly straight this time?” I joked as I bent down and double-checked the preflight myself.

“As long as we don’t let a woman do the flying.”

I ignored his jibe. He hadn't been anymore serious than I had.

"Are you ready for the op?" Kline's voice lost its joking tone. I looked him dead in the eye, his were chestnut-brown with little flakes of gold in them, they narrowed, just slightly, as he judged how prepared I was. It's a foolish officer who doesn't listen to her senior noncoms.

I knew the op, I knew my crew; this was going to go perfectly.

"Absolutely, Chief. Those civvies will never know what hit them." I stood up and looked at the sled; six empty seats stared back at me. Soon, the six of us would steal a couple million dollars worth of cargo. I was so excited; the blood pounded in my ears.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Kline said as he shut the access panel on the sled.

"Go wake-up those flatfoots, Chief. I want to make sure they know the op before we launch."

Kline left to get the team, leaving me alone with the sled. My command, not much of a command, but not my last either; someday it would be a ship and crew of my own.

"Chief's got the notion you want to go over the op again, Ensign," Shore announced as she climbed through the hatch into the boat-bay. "I told him we had this done solid, but he won't listening."

“Convince me, Leslie.” I sat down on the sled as the rest of the team entered.

As the team gathered around me, I searched for any small clue or signal that they were starting crack under the pressure.

Leslie Shore, no problems there, she was relaxed, but holding herself ready and confident. She ran a hand over the growing stubble of sandy-brown hair that was peeking up through her scalp. A measure that seemed was a little extreme to me for problems of hair in micro-gravity, I’d stick with my pageboy, thank you. Her brown eyes, with hints of fold at their corners, watched intently, she was on top of everything, four-oh.

Carmichael stood next to Leslie, towering over her, his rifle slung comfortably on his shoulder. With his teak colored hair and olive skin he was a good looking man, not my type, but a good looking man just the same. This was his ninth cutout mission, no signs of cracking up there.

Jimmie Towne, was the youngest of the team, and seemed terminally unable to stand still. I could see that he was simultaneously excited, greedy, and scared, but I had him teamed up with Carlisle; she would anchor him. He might be green, but he was working hard to prove himself.

That left Sakita Carlisle, as tall as Carmichael and as black as space, she was more like an Amazonian warrior than seasoned spacer. As cold as ice, she could handle herself in any situation, I had no worries there.

“Okay we launch in ten. Anyone got any problems with the op ?” I looked each of them in the eye; no one flinched. Good.

“Carmichael, Shore you’re on hatches, weld them closed fast. She’s carrying only cargo pods, so once the two crew hatches are sealed no one is crashing the party.”

I turned my attention to Carlisle and Towne. Towne bounced from one foot to another, eager to get going, Carlisle, she simply focused on me and listened.

“You two cover the crew hatches until they’re sealed. Any sailor pokes his helmet outside for a peek; you pop it.

“Chief, you’re driving the getaway car. Once I’ve ejected the cargo pods with the cracker, you pick up the teams and we’re back on the Wilson before you can say ‘prize money.’”

“Prize money,” Kline said flatly.

“See, Chief? We’re already back.” I turned back to the team. “Let’s show the Ops Boss how a cutout is supposed to go!”

We mounted the sled and strapped into our seats. I turned to Kline, he winked once and smiled like the cat that ate the canary. A quick scan of the boat-bay one last time, everything was stowed and secured tight, time to get this operation moving.

“Cutout crew ready for launch,” I reported to operations.

“Confirm, standby, Ensign.” It sounded like Domingo was on the board. He was a good man. Hell, The *Wilson* had a great crew. Including me.

The scream of atmosphere being pumped out of the boat filled my ears, and then quickly dropped away as soon there wasn't enough air to transmit the sound, then the lights switched from white to red. It wouldn't be long now.

“Sixty seconds to launch,” Domingo informed us.

Kline confirmed the countdown and energized the drive circuits on the sled.

The front of the boat-bay split from overhead to deck as the clamshell doors started to open. Beyond the sky was black, the stars invisible in the harsh contrast, except for one, our target.

In the false-color display of my heads-up the drives of the freighter sparkled in colors from red to umber to emerald, and shifted back down again. It was gorgeous. On sensors, I could read

background radiation shooting up, no one said this was the healthiest way to approach a ship in space, just the stealthiest.

“Arrg! Boarders across me lads!” Kline shouted as he engaged the drives and shot us out of the boat-bay. In a flash the *Wilson* was behind us and disappearing; ahead the freighter swelled into detail.

The sled had a very limited drive life, this high-speed run was going to use more than three-quarters of it. Afterwards there would just be enough to match orbits with the *Wilson*; of course, the ship could match orbits with us if they had to, but that would look very bad.

With an expert touch, Kline sped us over the drive section of the freighter, the spine of the ship stretched out ahead of us. Affixed to the keel-side of the spine were the seven cargo pods that we had come to steal, forward of them were the command and control spaces. All of it very standard, if they ever started spending real money on freighter designs my job would get a lot harder.

Kline matched velocities with the freighter, bringing us to a relative stop near the aft crew-hatch. Shore and Towne unstrapped quickly from their seats and with short bursts from their suits’ thrusters moved over to the ship. Kline was moving again before their boots had locked onto the hull; speed was the key to pulling this off. Once these two hatches were secured, the only other way for the crew

to come out to us was through their boat-bay, by the time they pumped it down to vacuum, we, and their cargo pods, would be gone.

Carmichael and Carlisle shot over to their hatch assignment as Kline checked our velocity once more. On my heads-up camera, I could see Shore's welder arcing as she sealed the aft hatch. This was going as easy as pie.

Not that I had ever baked a pie.

"Last stop, all ashore!" Kline called out as he brought the sled to a relative stop. I unstrapped and with a low powered blast from my thrusters, moved to the hull of the freighter, my boots locking on with a solid thump.

Kline was the best, I was just a meter from the access panel to the ship's network. In seconds, I had the panel cut open and tossed the cover away. With a lead from my hard-shell I connected directly to the network terminal, launched the cracker and watched as numbers sped past on my heads-up.

"Hatches sealed, Ma'am," Kline reported. Good, because now the crew knew there were hijackers aboard, once the cracker started the assault on the ship's network there would be no more sneaking and hiding. With the hatches sealed, the crew wasn't a factor, as long as the cracker performed, this was a done deal.

“Carlisle! Towne! Pod One, NOW!” Kline’s voice didn’t have a decibel of panic, but it was filled with urgency.

Damn it! That pod wasn’t standard! A hatch flipped open as I watched, and a suited figure popped up, rifle at the ready. With a flash of white gas from the muzzle, the figure fired.

From the edge of my vision I saw the slug hit home, and Kline’s helmet exploded, exposing him to hard vacuum. He wasn’t hit; I saw his shocked expression as he lost all breath. Thrashing about in a panic, he fired the drive on the sled, shooting it right at me.

I tried to pull myself into a ball, to make myself a smaller target, but you don’t do anything quickly in micro-gravity. Just before the sled struck, I fired my tether line to the hull, the magnetic grapnel taking hold as I felt the sled clip my hard-shell, sending me flying off of the freighter.

The blow knocked the wind out of me, but that was all. I watched as Carlisle and Towne fired at the crewman, jets firing from their suits, to compensate for the recoil.

The sniper’s helmet exploded with a cloud of gas as the rounds hit home.

“Shore! Seal that hatch!” I barked the order fast. Damn the intel!

For the money we paid dirt-side you’d think we’d get accurate intelligence on these targets.

“Ensign! We’ve lost the sled!” Carmichael shouted, panic in his voice.

“I have eyes, Carmichael.” I fired my jets and started back towards the freighter. “Forget the sled, it’s not coming back.”

Kline was dead.

With my boots locked again to the hull I could feel the slight vibration as ejection charges started firing. The cargo pods were, one by one, propelled away from the freighter, the cracker having finally gained the upper hand.

“What do we do now, Ensign?” Carlisle asked.

“Everyone lock onto the hull. And keep sharp for anymore surprises.” Without the sled, there wasn’t any hope of matching orbits with the *Judge Wilson*. I had to think.

Kline was dead. That was all I could think of. He was dead, and it was my fault.

“Maybe we should jump for the pods,” Towne suggested.

“We might make it,” Shore agreed. “It’s a sure thing the Wilson will match orbits with them.”

“Lock on,” I repeated. “That wasn’t a suggestion; it was an order.”

This was no time for the team to turn into a debating society. I started breathing again as they complied, they were following me.

Kline had followed me, look at what it got him.

“The suits don’t have the juice to match orbits with those pods.”

As I spoke I watched the pods disappear into the blackness of space. I didn’t want to look at my crew; the people I was getting killed and captured.

What options did I have? Without the sled, we couldn’t get to either the *Wilson* or the cargo pods. It was out of the question calling the ship for help. I was missing something, just like I had missed cargo pod one. Now Kline was dead and we were headed for a Euro prison.

The stars wheeled about as the freighter spun on its axis and began thrusting on a new vector.

“They’re rabeting,” Shore said.

“We can’t stay here.” I was playing for time. Waiting for an epiphany to strike. “We stay, we end up in prison.”

The *Wilson* wouldn’t chase us, so we had to get to the *Wilson*. Not with our suits that was suicide, and I had already gotten too many killed. We were going to have to steal more than just cargo today.

“You deck-apes get over to the boat-bay.” I started moving back to the network access panel. “I’m going to blow the hatch.”

The team moved over the lip of the hull and disappeared from sight. I bent down and reconnected my hard-shell’s system to the ship’s network. I was going to have to hack the network on the fly and override the ship’s controls to discharge the explosive bolts on the boat-bay hatches. Of course, if any of the freighter’s crew was in the boat-bay when the hatches blew they were going to be as dead as Kline.

Good.

As I worked the code, another part of my mind worked the operation again. What could I have done differently? What did I screw up? This op hadn’t been fundamentally any different from any other I had commanded.

Except that I had gotten Kline killed.

“We’re in position, Ensign.” Carlisle’s voice was steady and strong.

“Standby,” I answered. I could feel sweat beading on my forehead as I worked the cracker, trying to program it on the fly. If I couldn’t pull this off, nothing else would matter. Not that I felt it mattered anyway.

“And make sure no one is in front of those hatches,” I added. It wouldn’t do any good if I blew someone else into deep space.

Every second was adding delta-vee to our new course. This tub was supposed to have two ship's boats, if one were charged, it would have more than enough juice to get us to the *Wilson*. If there weren't a charged boat, I was just wasting time.

A shrill alarm from the speaker in my helmet jerked my attention back to the cracker. It had worked!

"Standby, it's going to blow!"

I looked over to port just as the ship shuddered, two large hatches went flipping soundlessly away from the freighter, a cloud of frosty-white atmosphere expanding around them.

"We're moving in," Shore commented, then nothing as the ship's hull blocked all communication.

If there were suited and armed crew in the boat-bay it would most likely end here, if not, then we had a chance of getting out of this with our skins intact.

Tears welled up in my eyes, clinging stubbornly in micro-gravity, making my vision watery and blurry. This had all been a mistake. I had been fooling myself, as I had been my entire life.

This wasn't a game. This wasn't a heroic fight against enormous odds; this was war. I had spent too many years of my life fantasizing

about joining the movement, fighting for the cause, I had no idea what it was really like.

It was ugly, it was dirty, and there wasn't anything noble in it, only stupid waste. Kline had followed my orders and now he was dead. Was this what I had destroyed my life for? I was a fugitive from my own country, I had alienated the only man I had ever loved, and now all I had to show for it was bloody hands. What a stupid bitch I was. It was time to face facts, to resign.

"Ensign! Boost out, we'll catch you!" Carlisle's voice was loud and clear in my helmet. As the stolen boat came thrusting towards the bow of the freighter, I cut the tether and fired my jets.

Carlisle was as good as her word, matching orbits with the precision of a practiced flight, soon I was through the airlock and inside.

"I've hailed the Wilson, and told'em we're coming home in a hot shuttle," Towne said as I pulled my helmet off.

"Very good." I could hear that my voice was dry and empty. "Make for home, Carlisle." I collapsed into an empty acceleration couch, feeling as though we were already accelerating three-gees or more.

Which circle of hell was reserved for officers who get their men killed?

It was a very quiet ride back to the Wilson, Kline was well liked, no one was taking this well. From the corner of my eye, I kept catching the team looking at me, another green ensign, that's all I was. Another stupid know-it-all ensign who was only good for getting her men killed.

Not anymore, I'm wasn't going to do this again, time to grow up.

"We're locked alongside, Ensign." Carlisle's voice sounded distant and far away, looking up I saw the boat's airlock mated to the Wilson's. I got up, shook off Carlisle's attempt to steady me, and walked back aboard.

"Ops Boss wants to see you, Ensign." The Officer of The Deck announced as I stepped across the quarterdeck. Wonderful, another meeting with Commander Mendez. There was nothing to do but march to the Commander's office, let her crow, and end it.

"The Chief ate vacuum," someone said as I walked away from the quarterdeck. The news would be from bow to stern before I even reached her office. Did you hear? Minou got Kline killed. Poor bastard got stuck with her in command.

"Sit down, Minou."

I did as I was ordered. Just going through the motions. Nothing really mattered.

Kline was dead.

That was all that mattered.

Yelma debriefed me, fast and clinical, we started with the moment the sled left the *Wilson*, finishing with the stolen boat locking along side. They were just cold facts, not the truth at all.

“Do you have anything to add, Minou?”

“Yes, ma’am. I got Kline killed.”

“How is that Ensign? Sounds like we were all the victims of bad intelligence.”

“Kline was the only victim, ma’am. He followed me over there and I got him killed. I want to resign.” I could feel the tears welling up again in my eyes, but I was not going to break down. Not here, not in front of her.

“We’ll talk about that later, Minou.” Her voice was soft, almost friendly.

“You were in charge, and so you are responsible.” Yelma stared at me with her one good eye. “That is the bad, hard truth, but that doesn’t make it your fault. You did good out there, when the operation went sour you didn’t panic, you saved your team, and yourself. That doesn’t matter to you right now, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

She pulled a chair over and sat next to me, leaning in, speaking very softly, her black hair falling off to the side in one long braid.

“And why you joined? That doesn’t very important either does it?”

No, I wanted to say, but I couldn’t. It didn’t feel important, but, damn it, it was! Maybe I was a washout, maybe I didn’t have what it took, but somebody had to.

“Why did you sign-on Minou? Was it the excitement, the money?”

Yelma leaned back in her seat, baiting me with her look.

“No, damn it!” I leaned forward and buried my face in my hands.

“I wanted to be a part of the solution, not the problem.”

“And you still do,” she said as she got up from her chair. Slowly, she sat on the arm of my chair; it creaked softly under the pressure. Her hand touched lightly on my back, nothing forward, just reassurance.

“So now you’re going to find out if you are a military officer or not, Minou, ‘Cause this is the business we are in. You go back out there; this is going to happen again. Maybe not the next mission, or the one after that, but it is going to happen. Lots of times.”

“How many have you lost?” I looked up into her face.

“Fifty-seven.” Yelma’s expression didn’t change, her voice didn’t waiver, but her hand tensed; it was a burden she didn’t carry lightly. Yelma was a survivor of the *Philadelphia*.

A European corvette had shot the crap out them and left them adrift in an outer system. Out of ninety-six, five had survived.

“How do you do it?” I asked. How could anyone make it from day to day with that memory playing over and over in your head?

“I really don’t know, Minou.” She stood and paced to the far side of the compartment, a compartment bare of holos and memories. “Some nights I can’t sleep at all, other nights are better. All I really know is that this is what I want to do. What I need to do. It hurts like hell, sometimes, but that’s the drill.”

Why was I here? I knew the answer, and Yelma had known it all along too. No one, who was serious, joined the resistance for any reason except one, to help make the America a better place again, to end the tyranny of the bureaucrats and meddlers. We couldn’t do it inside the system, so we went outside of it.

“You can’t make a difference by running away!”

That was the insult I had hurled at Seth when he joined the Euro-space forces, and now I was on the verge of running away myself.

But, if I stayed -- that was the trouble-- if I stayed, Kline wouldn't be the last, but the first, the first in a line that only God knew was how long.

"Go get some sleep, if you can, tell me next shift if you want to resign, or the shift after that, or never." Yelma said softly.

I stood up and moved to the hatch, my mind a blur of thoughts and emotions. If I quit now, Kline died for nothing more than a few dollars, and that wasn't worth a man's life, certainly not Kline's life!

If I stayed he would still be dead, but maybe I could make it count for something, maybe I could be the officer he had thought, and Yelma as well, I could be.

"I've got work to do, Yelma," I said as I opened the hatch. "There's time for sleep later."

I stepped through, closing and dogging the hatch behind me. The sled was the key; it had been too damn close to the freighter. It was standard procedure to have it close for a fast escape, but that had just made it a juicy target.

If we beefed up the power plant, the sled could hold station further out after it dropped off the cutout crew, then zip back in to pick them up after the op was over.

I headed aft, I wasn't an engineer, but I was certain the sled could be rigged for a longer burn.

A sled wasn't a big command, but it was a command, my command.

There would be time for tears later.